

Ezekiel 14:12-15:8
Psalm 80
John 15

“The Faithless City, the Useless Vine”

August 22, 2010

“The God *I* worship would never...”

Do you recognize that sort of argument?

“The God *I* worship would never...”

When you hear that, the next phrase usually asserts that
God would *never* command the slaughter of innocent children,
or God would *never* condemn “loving” homosexual activity.

But before you dismiss these people – pay a little more attention!

Because if you look a little more closely,
they are usually not making arbitrary claims.
They are arguing, based on *other* passages of scripture,
that the church has been mistaken about its interpretation
of *these* passages of scripture.

And that is precisely what Ezekiel is facing.

Ezekiel is answering those who want to make God sound “nicer” than he is.

There is nothing new about this.

From ancient Babylon to the present,
people in every generation have tended to use their favorite parts of scripture
to get around other parts of scripture!

Is God being fair?

Surely not everyone in Jerusalem is that bad!

Surely there is a righteous remnant!

Remember Noah – Noah was a righteous man,
and because of his righteousness, his children were delivered from the Flood!

Aren’t there enough righteous individuals to spare Jerusalem from judgment?

After all, remember what God said to Abraham
about the destruction of Sodom:

the LORD said that if ten righteous men were found in Sodom,
then he would not destroy the city!

If God said that he would spare such a wicked city as Sodom
for ten righteous men,

then surely a God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger,
abounding in steadfast love,
surely such a God would spare his own city, Jerusalem –
and the temple, where his name dwells –
for ten righteous men!

The Psalms teach us how to respond to God.

The Psalms are honest with God – without being hostile toward God.

In Psalm 80 Israel comes to God, pleading that he would come to their aid –

Psalm 80 recognizes that *You* have put us here –

you have brought judgment upon us –

and therefore you alone can restore and save us.

Psalm 80

John 15

The two oracles in Ezekiel 14:12-15:8 are linked together in several ways:

- 1) by the expression “to act faithlessly” (14:13 and 15:8)
- 2) by the expression “how much more/less” (14:21 and 15:5)
- 3) by the consequences of acting faithlessly: desolation of the land (14:15, 16, 15:8)
- 4) structurally, by opening with a hypothetical situation, and concluding with a “thus says the Lord GOD” resulting in judgment (14:21, 15:6).

Ezekiel starts in 14:12-23 with a hypothetical discussion of God’s justice.

1. A Lecture on Divine Justice (14:12-23)

a. Four Divine Judgments and the Three Righteous Men: the Problem of Faithlessness (14:12-20)

The context for this oracle appears to be a challenge to the fairness of God.

Through Ezekiel, God has said that judgment is coming upon Jerusalem.

Jerusalem will be utterly destroyed and left desolate.

Ezekiel’s answer takes the form of a hypothetical case study:

12 And the word of the Lord came to me: 13 “Son of man, when [or “if”] a land sins against me by acting faithlessly, and I stretch out my hand against it and break its supply of bread and send famine upon it, and cut off from it man and beast, 14 even if these three men, Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in it, they would deliver but their own lives by their righteousness, declares the Lord God.

There is no dispute over who the identification of Noah and Job –

but the reference to Daniel is more difficult.

According to Daniel 1, Daniel and his friends were carried off to Babylon around 604 BC.

This means that he would have been in Nebuchadnezzar’s court for about 15 years before the time of Ezekiel’s oracle.

It is quite possible that Daniel’s reputation for righteousness was already firmly established.

But it does seem a little odd that the ancient heroes, Noah and Job, neither of whom were Israelites,

should be paired with a contemporary Jewish political hostage.

There are several references in ancient literature to another Danel –
including one Ugaritic reference to an upright King Dan’el,
who judged the cause of the widow and the fatherless.

And this Danel fits the illustration better –
because the point here is how God deals with the nations.

Yes – we are headed towards Jerusalem –
the point in the end will be “how much more” Jerusalem –
but let’s not skip over the nations.

God is here affirming that he is Lord over the nations.
The judgments of famine, war, plague and wild beasts
are God’s judgments upon wicked nations.
So when you hear about the invasion of bed bugs – that is God’s judgment.
When you hear about disasters, famines, wars – that is God’s judgment.

(Of course, remember Jesus’ point about the Tower of Siloam –
the floods in Pakistan do not demonstrate that Pakistan is worse than the US –
rather, the floods in Pakistan demonstrate that unless you repent,
judgment will come upon you as well.
We should recognize that there is a “common wrath” that comes upon all nations
as a sign and warning of the coming judgment.)

And even the righteous cannot deliver others by their righteousness –
they can only save themselves.

But how can God say this?
In the Flood, Noah’s righteousness saved his family as well!
Likewise, with Sodom, Lot’s whole family was saved.
How can God say that they would deliver only their own lives?

Ezekiel is not just talking about a “wicked people” –
but a people that is “acting faithlessly” (or treacherously).

The idea of “acting faithlessly” presupposes a covenantal bond.
You cannot be “faithless” – you cannot be guilty of “treachery”
unless there is something to betray!

The idea is that God is in covenant with this people,
and that as a part of this covenant, God has required something of these people;
and they have willfully and unrepentantly violated this covenant.

Think about that for a minute.
Ezekiel will be talking about Israel soon –

but right now he is articulating a general principle –
and the principle is that all nations are in covenant with God.

And Ezekiel even reminds us of why this is:

Noah.

Think back to Genesis 9.

In Genesis 9 God made a covenant with Noah –
all humanity is descended from Noah,
and therefore *all humanity* is in covenant with God.

There is no nation in all the world that can escape this.
All people were created in God’s image – and all people *are* in covenant with God.

And therefore, all peoples are capable of “acting faithlessly” –
of covenant treachery.

If a land sins against me by acting faithlessly,
if they betray my covenant,
then it will do no good to have a few righteous men.

Think back again to Leviticus 26.

There are at least 10 phrases in these 9 verses that are borrowed from Lev 26 –
starting with this phrase “acting faithlessly” (ma’al ma’al) – from Leviticus 26:40

You hear the same four judgments of Ezekiel 14 in Leviticus 26:21-26:

21 “Then if you walk contrary to me and will not listen to me, I will continue striking you, sevenfold for your sins.

22 And I will let loose the wild beasts against you, which shall bereave you of your children and destroy your livestock and make you few in number, so that your roads shall be deserted. 23 And if by this discipline you are not turned to me but walk contrary to me, 24 then I also will walk contrary to you, and I myself will strike you sevenfold for your sins.

25 And I will bring a sword upon you, that shall execute vengeance for the covenant. And if you gather within your cities, I will send pestilence among you, and you shall be delivered into the hand of the enemy.

26 When I break your supply of bread, ten women shall bake your bread in a single oven and shall dole out your bread again by weight, and you shall eat and not be satisfied.

Likewise, in Ezekiel 14, the result is that the land will become a desolation (v16) –
a phrase used in Leviticus 26:33.

*“And I will scatter you among the nations, and I will unsheathe the sword after you,
and your land shall be a desolation, and your cities shall be a waste.”*

In the second and third judgments (wild beasts in verses 15-16, and the sword in verses 17-18)
we hear that even these three righteous men
could not deliver “sons or daughters.”

15 *“If I cause wild beasts to pass through the land, and they ravage it, and it be made desolate, so that no one may pass through because of the beasts, 16 even if these three men were in it, as I live, declares the Lord God, they would deliver neither sons nor daughters. They alone would be delivered, but the land would be desolate.*

17 *“Or if I bring a sword upon that land and say, Let a sword pass through the land, and I cut off from it man and beast, 18 though these three men were in it, as I live, declares the Lord God, they would deliver neither sons nor daughters, but they alone would be delivered.*

Why does God say this?

Noah’s righteousness delivered his sons and daughters-in-law from the Flood.
Job provides a little less hope – as his children all died in spite of his righteousness!
If Daniel is Ezekiel’s contemporary, then the verdict is still out –
if he is the ancient pagan monarch, then his example is somewhat unclear.

But Ezekiel’s point here is that the elders and prophets in Exile
do not understand the justice of God.

The faithless actions of Israel – the covenant treachery of Israel –
has broken down the wall.

And there is no one on earth who can rebuild it.

A righteous man could save his own life – but not another.

Think of Psalm 49:7-9

“Truly no man can ransom another, or give to God the price of his life,
for the ransom of their life is costly and can never suffice,
that he should live on forever and never see the pit.”

Psalm 49 and Ezekiel 14 are setting up the problem of the atonement.

It may be that the Sons of Korah and Ezekiel
had figured out the fundamental problem of the temple system of sacrifices.
The cycle of sacrifices in the temple demonstrates that the blood of goats and oxen
cannot fully cover our sins.

The wages of sin is death.

And only man can pay for man’s sin.

In terms of justice before God,

the righteousness of one man can only result in the salvation of one man.

And so in describing the fourth judgment, God concludes:

19 *“Or if I send a pestilence into that land and pour out my wrath upon it with blood, to cut off from it man and beast, 20 even if Noah, Daniel, and Job were in it, as I live, declares the Lord God, they would deliver neither son nor daughter. They would deliver but their own lives by their righteousness.*

In terms of justice – in terms of what they deserve before God –

the righteous have no “treasury of merit” that could be applied to others.

As Block puts it,

“the sins of Israel are so monstrous
that the flood of divine fury upon the nation cannot be stayed.” (450)

But what do we do with all this?

b. Divine Justice and Inscrutable Mercy (14:21-23)

In verses 21-23 God applies these principles to Jerusalem:

21 “For thus says the Lord God: How much more when I send upon Jerusalem my four disastrous acts of judgment, sword, famine, wild beasts, and pestilence, to cut off from it man and beast!

“four disastrous acts” – literally “four evil acts” –
God does not sin – but he does send evil upon us.

And if these principles are true in general,
how much more are they true when they are applied to God’s own city?

We shouldn’t be surprised when we face “evil” – when we face “disastrous acts judgment”!

The surprise is that God has mercy on us when we don’t deserve it!
But that is the whole point of mercy!
We don’t deserve it!

In our text today, the surprise is found in v22

22 But behold, some survivors will be left in it, sons and daughters who will be brought out;

God will have mercy and deliver *some* from bondage!

Now, when you hear this, you could think,
“Ah, there *are* some righteous in Jerusalem, who will be saved!”

But the next “behold” dashes this:

behold, when they come out to you, and you see their ways and their deeds, you will be consoled for the disaster that I have brought upon Jerusalem, for all that I have brought upon it. 23 They will console you, when you see their ways and their deeds, and you shall know that I have not done without cause all that I have done in it, declares the Lord God.”

God never said that they would be “saved” by their righteousness.
He said there would be “survivors” who would be “brought out.”

Remember how Ezekiel enacted the siege and the remnant in chapters 4-5?
There were random survivors – like a few pieces of hair,
some of whom would immediately be tossed back into the fire!

The newcomers who join the Exiles in 586 BC
will be just as incorrigible as those who perish in Jerusalem.
And the Exiles will be consoled when they realize that God’s judgment against Jerusalem
was just.

Verses 21-23 show us that God is not going to treat Jerusalem according to strict justice.
If God dealt with Jerusalem as their ways and deeds deserved,
then *none* would be left alive.
Those who come and join the exiles in Babylon
will demonstrate that God’s judgment was deserved –
and yet that God has not treated them as their sins deserved!

Normally, we would expect to hear,
“then you shall know that I am the LORD”
but instead we hear:

and you shall know that I have not done without cause all that I have done in it, declares the Lord God.

You could paraphrase this:
“then you will know that I do not threaten in vain,
neither do I threaten without reason.”

If you are going to know who God is –
then you need to know that he is just!
You need to know that he does what he does for good reason.

The answer that we need to give to those who say “my God would never do that” –
is *not* that God is inscrutable and his ways are beyond our comprehension!

If you go through the scriptures, the statements about God’s “inscrutable ways”
are all talking about his *mercy* and *grace*.

The classic passage is Isaiah 55:6-9

6 “Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near;
7 let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts;
let him return to the Lord, that he may have compassion on him,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.
8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord.
9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

That God would have mercy on those who have sinned against him –
that is mysterious!

That God would not give us what we deserve –
that is inscrutable!

But there is nothing mysterious about God's justice.

All of humanity has sinned against God –
and the stain of original sin contaminates everyone.

The four judgments of Ezekiel 14 are part of this:
famine, sword, wild beasts, pestilence.

And you see these markers of divine judgment in the news every day.
And God brings them from time to time into your lives.

And there should be nothing surprising about this!

Someday – if I live long enough, I will get cancer, heart disease, or diabetes –
maybe all three!

Some of you have been attacked by dogs, stung by scorpions –
some of you have been mugged, robbed, raped –

and these things are *evil* –
but they are part of ordinary common wrath of God
against the faithless rebellion of humanity.

But there is nothing “inscrutable” about God's judgment against human sinfulness.

Because if you say that God's justice is inscrutable and his mercy makes perfect sense –
what do you get?

You get a god made in your own image –

a god who is as puzzled and bewildered by war and famine as you are –
a god who does his best to prevent or avoid trouble,
but is impotent to do anything about it.

If you are honest with yourself,

then you must admit “that a God who is not moved to anger by what we have done
cannot be a good being!” (Duguid, 198)

Do you want to know where we went wrong?

We went wrong when we started talking about famine, war, and pestilence
as God's “inscrutable providence.”

We went wrong when we started talking about the universe
as a place where everything is “normally” good and orderly and peaceful –
and so things like famine, war, wild beasts, and pestilence
became hard to understand.

But when Paul says

“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” (Rom 11:33)
He is not talking about the “bad things” that happen –
he is talking about God’s mercy in salvation!

Famine, war, pestilence, wild beasts –
these are the things that normally happen to sinners.
This is the normal lot of man under God’s wrath and curse.

Mercy – salvation – grace –
these things are inscrutable!

That God would send his only begotten Son –
that one who was in the form of God would humble himself
and take to himself the form of a slave –
that he would endure the cross for us –
this is unsearchable!

2. The Lecture Illustrated: The Useless Vine (15:1-8)

Chapter 15 then illustrates God’s point,
using the image of the vine.

The “how much less” of verse 5 connects with the “how much more” in 14:21.
And the concluding reference to the “desolation”
because Israel has “acted treacherously” or “acted faithlessly” in verse 8
connects back to the previous oracle.

The vine was a familiar image throughout the scriptures.
Psalm 80 spoke of Israel as a vine which God transplanted from Egypt
by his mighty right hand –
but which was overrun by the nations.
Isaiah 5 had spoken of Israel as God’s vineyard,
which he loved and cared for –
but it only produced “stink fruit.”
Ezekiel goes one step further.
He uses the familiar language of the vine –
but with no positive associations whatsoever.

a. What Good Is a Vine Branch?

15:1 And the word of the Lord came to me: 2 “Son of man, how does the wood of the vine surpass any wood, the vine branch that is among the trees of the forest?”

Daniel Block points out that this would be better translated:

“of all the trees, what becomes of the wood of the grapevine, that is,
the vine branch that was found among the trees of the forest?” (453)

In other words, we are not talking about a living vine.
We are talking about a branch that has been cut off,
and is lying on the forest floor.

The word “vine branch” here is *never* used for a branch
that is currently attached to the vine.
It is *always* used to refer to a branch that has been pruned or cut off.

Not surprisingly, the noun comes from the verb that means “to prune”!

And what can you do with a vine branch?

3 Is wood taken from it to make anything? Do people take a peg from it to hang any vessel on it?

No!

It is useful only to be burned.

4 Behold, it is given to the fire for fuel. When the fire has consumed both ends of it, and the middle of it is charred, is it useful for anything? 5 Behold, when it was whole, it was used for nothing. How much less, when the fire has consumed it and it is charred, can it ever be used for anything!

The vine branch – severed from the vine –
is useless.

Think back to Jesus’ statement in John 15:

15:1 “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser.

*2 Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away,
and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.*

3 Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.

4 Abide in me, and I in you.

*As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine,
neither can you, unless you abide in me.*

5 I am the vine; you are the branches.

*Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit,
for apart from me you can do nothing.*

*6 If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers;
and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.*

Jesus is building on Ezekiel’s use of the vine branch.

But he develops it in a couple of *very* important directions.

For one – Jesus claims to be the vine.

In Psalm 80, the vine was Israel.

Jesus claims that he *is* Israel.

He is the life-giving vine.

If you are in him – if you abide in him – if he is your life –
then you will bear much fruit.

If you are severed from the vine – if you do not abide in Christ –
then you are useless – except to feed the fire.

b. What Good Are the Inhabitants of Jerusalem?

And that is Ezekiel's point about Jerusalem in verses 6-8:

6 Therefore thus says the Lord God: Like the wood of the vine among the trees of the forest, which I have given to the fire for fuel, so have I given up the inhabitants of Jerusalem. 7 And I will set my face against them. Though they escape from the fire, the fire shall yet consume them, and you will know that I am the Lord, when I set my face against them. 8 And I will make the land desolate, because they have acted faithlessly, declares the Lord God."

Judgment is coming upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem because they have acted faithlessly.

As one commentator has said:

"The claim to divine election is no substitute for covenant faithfulness.

This oracle disputes Israel's false claims to security based on their being the royal vine,
the privileged people of God."

It is interesting to think about Jesus as the true vine in this light.

We usually think about this in terms of how he is the life-giving vine.

But we should not forget that our Lord Jesus Christ was first sent into the flames.

But whereas the fire of God's wrath consumed the inhabitants of Jerusalem,
and destroyed all those who perished in the Exile,
the true vine passed through the fire of God's wrath –
he passed through death and destruction,
and was raised up to eternal life.

The reason *why* our Lord Jesus Christ is the life-giving vine,
is because of his resurrection from the dead!

And because he was raised from the dead,
he now gives life to all who are united to him!

And if you are connected to the vine –
then you should bear fruit.

If you do not bear fruit, then the Father – the vinedresser – will cut you off.
If you do bear fruit, then the Father – the vinedresser – will prune you!

In other words, both fruitful branches and useless branches will experience suffering.

For the fruitful branch, suffering (pruning) will make you hate sin and cling to Christ.
For the useless branch, suffering (pruning) will harden you towards God.

You need to see wild beasts, famine, disease and war
simply as the normal course of life in this age –
don't view them as inscrutable providences!
Don't think of them as strange and inexplicable.
Ever since the Fall, these things are just the normal course of life in a fallen world.
They are evil – they are bad – we shouldn't like them –
but war, famine, disease, and wild beasts should not be considered unusual!
Rather, they should drive us to pray all the more "thy kingdom come!"
As our Shorter Catechism says it so well:

Q. 102. *What do we pray for in the second petition?*

A. In the second petition, which is, "Your kingdom come," we pray that Satan's kingdom may be destroyed; and that the kingdom of grace may be advanced, ourselves and others brought into it, and kept in it; and that the kingdom of glory may be hastened.

Even so, come quickly, Lord Jesus!

Close with Psalm 126