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**— September 2003 —**

DATE	READING TOPIC	SCRIPTURES
1-2 Sept	TWO-DAY BREAK	
3-4 Sept	Deportation portrayed; God's judgment not postponed	Ezekiel 12
5-6 Sept	Prophecy against false prophets	Ezekiel 13
7-8 Sept	Message to idolatrous elders; Judgment on persistent unfaithfulness; Wood of the vine	Ezekiel 14-15
9-10 Sept	God's love for Jerusalem, the faithless wife; An everlasting covenant coming	Ezekiel 16
11-12 Sept	Two eagles and the vine; Transplanted twig	Ezekiel 17
13-14 Sept	Everyone responsible for self; God is fair; He commands repentance that all would gain a new heart and spirit	Ezekiel 18
15-16 Sept	Lamentation for the princes of Israel	Ezekiel 19
17-18 Sept	Israel punished for idolatry and Sabbath breaking; Future restoration; A fire in the forest of the South	Ezekiel 20
19-20 Sept	Babylon as God's sword against Judah; Three overturns of the Jewish crown; Sword against the Ammonites	Ezekiel 21
21-22 Sept	Sins of Israel and its leaders to be judged	Ezekiel 22
23-30 Sept	FALL FESTIVAL BREAK (Continues through October 31)	

## Highlights to Think About From This Month's Reading

### TWO-DAY BREAK

**September 1-2**

*We are breaking for two days at the beginning of the month due to a production delay. We apologize for any inconvenience.*

### Deportation and Devastation—Soon (Ezekiel 12)

**September 3-4**

Chapter 12 begins a new section in the book of Ezekiel. This new series of messages, extending to the end of Ezekiel 19, apparently follows soon after the vision of chapters 8–11: “Ezekiel always gave specific dates for new visions or oracles. Since no new chronological notice was given, and since the speeches of chapters 12-19 were closely related thematically to the foregoing vision, it can be assumed that these messages were uttered shortly after Ezekiel’s explanation of the vision in chapters 8-11” (*The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, note on verses 1-2).

Thus, the exiles had watched Ezekiel’s symbolic acts and heard the rarely spoken prophecies of this normally mute man of God for more than a year. They had seen his acts with their eyes and heard his words with their ears, but it had no impact on them; in fact, they rejected God’s message (12:2). Other prophets experienced the same reaction (see Isaiah 6:9-10; Jeremiah 5:21).

The exiles did not grasp the seriousness of Ezekiel’s messages. They still believed they would be allowed to return to their land in the near future because Jerusalem still stood and most of the Jewish people continued in the land. Surely, it was only a matter of a little more time before they would be permitted to go back home. Throughout chapters 12–19, several reasons are presented as to why they believe this way. In chapter 12, it is apparent that the people either don’t believe prophecy or reason that even if judgment really is going to come on their homeland, it won’t happen in their lifetime. It just doesn’t seem possible to them—but, of course, it should have.

“Ezekiel’s next visual demonstration [of the process of deportation] warned the captives already in Babylon that they should not expect a quick return to Jerusalem. He had already shown that the city would soon fall ([chapters] 4; 5); those not killed would be led into exile. These exiles should have understood Ezekiel’s meaning, for they had done what he was displaying only six years before, when they had been brought into exile” (*The Nelson Study Bible*, note on 12:3-7).

After pantomiming Jerusalem’s siege, lying on one side and then the other over the course of 430 days, and shaving all his hair, Ezekiel was no doubt drawing larger numbers of onlookers. For this next demonstration he probably packed a bedroll, water container, staff and a few clothes. He was to pack them outside his dwelling during the day with people watching him. “In the evening he would dig a hole through the mud-brick wall of his house. Leaving through the hole, Ezekiel carried his bag like an exile (vv. 4b-6a). Next he would cover his face [essentially blindfolded so he couldn’t see where he was going] (v. 6b) and go to another place while all the people watched. Ezekiel’s act was a sign that God would bring additional exiles to Babylon (v. 6c)” (*Expositor’s*, note on verses 3-7).

The onlookers asked what this meant, and God told Ezekiel to respond that besides the rest of the nation, it particularly concerned the “prince,” the ruler, in Jerusalem (verses 8-14). Indeed, leaving through a hole in the wall by night indicated a secret escape. This is exactly what the nobles and political leaders of Jerusalem tried to do six years later during the siege of 586 B.C. They attempted to escape and run but were caught by the Babylonians. King Zedekiah was blinded and carried off to Babylon where he would die (see 2 Kings 25:1-7; Jeremiah 52:1-11). The rest of the nation was also carried away captive, just as God foretold through Ezekiel.

God is clear as to the reason for allowing many of them to go on living. Despite the judgment He is bringing, this is another example of His great mercy. While enslaved, they will come to acknowledge their sinful ways and come to better understand Him (Ezekiel 12:15-16). “They will know that I am the LORD,” He states repeatedly. This will also serve as a powerful witness to all mankind. God wants to emphasize that no one should think He wasn’t strong enough to prevent the calamity that came upon His nation. Rather, their downfall was due to His power, a fulfillment of the curse He promised. God understands human nature and the depth of evil to which people can sink. People need to know who God is—including what He stands for, His likes and dislikes, His expectations—before they can learn to properly worship Him. And for those who refuse to heed Him initially, they will ultimately come to know Him in a more ominous way—through judgment.

Using the family analogy He inspires in the New Testament, God has expectations for His household, like any wise father does. Even a physical family fails poorly without mature household

rules. On the other hand, proper parental guidance helps children succeed in life. Said succinctly, fatherly love includes laws—not harsh, not without mercy, but rather rules that protect his children from harming themselves and others. How does a wise father ensure that his children respect his rules for their good? He disciplines them. So it is with our heavenly Father’s approach to His children (see Hebrews 12:5-11).

In verses 17-18 of Ezekiel 12, God gives the prophet another pantomime to perform. Ezekiel is instructed to tremble and shake as he ate his food and shudder in fear as he drank water. This would test his acting ability, but the message from God is clear: This is what the nation is going to experience. He then explains that this is to serve as punishment for the incessant *violence* between people (verse 19)—which probably includes not just physical but emotional violence as well (compare Malachi 2:16).

In verse 20, the chilling warning of Ezekiel 6:6 is reiterated: The inhabited cities are to be laid waste. Many elements in chapters 12–19 harken back to points made in the earlier chapters of Ezekiel. Recall that in those earlier chapters, Jerusalem was often used to represent the whole house of Israel in the end time. The same can be said of this section. While the message is obviously directed to Ezekiel’s immediate audience, there are, as we will see, indications throughout the section that the message is for all of Israel—and more specifically, since the northern tribes did not receive Ezekiel’s message in ancient times, for Israel’s descendants in the last days.

In verse 6 of chapter 12, Ezekiel was to be a sign to the “house of Israel.” Yet in verses 8-9, this could conceivably be limited to the Jews in captivity, as God asks, “Has not the house of Israel, the rebellious house, said to you, ‘What are you doing?’” However, we could perhaps imagine people of the modern nations descended from Israel reading Ezekiel’s prophecy and also wondering the same thing—and Ezekiel answering them through this preserved written record rather than his ancient utterances. In verse 10, God says, “This burden concerns the prince in Jerusalem and all the house of Israel who are among them.” This verse might seem limited to the Jews of ancient Judah. But, while it clearly does apply to them, it may also have a broader meaning. Again, we have clear precedent in the preceding chapters of Ezekiel for understanding the ancient destruction and captivity of Jerusalem and Judah as typical of punishment that is to befall all of Israel in the end time. The end-time Jewish monarch resides among the Israelites (as we will see more about in Ezekiel 17).

It only makes sense to see Ezekiel’s warning of deportation as applying to not only the Jews still in Judah when he spoke, but also to all Israel and Judah at the end of this present evil age. As other prophecies also show, the cities of the modern Israelite nations are going to be destroyed and the survivors will be marched off into foreign slavery. And again, violence among the people is part of the reason for this punishment. God must be grieved continually at the terrible murders and violent crime that are so common in the lands of modern-day Israel. How we are repeating the experience of our ancestors! At times it seems that the only lesson we learn from history is that men do not learn lessons from history.

In verse 22, God quotes a proverb of the people: “The days are prolonged, and every vision fails.” A “proverb” is a popular saying summing up some common wisdom. But this wasn’t wise at all. Such statements are still common today: “People have been saying that for centuries and it hasn’t happened yet.” And the Bible warned of the pervasiveness of such sentiments in the end time: “Scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts [physical wants], and saying, ‘Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation’” (2 Peter 3:3-4).

“The belief the proverb [in Ezekiel] expresses is, simply, that the message of judgment delivered by Ezekiel and other prophets like Isaiah simply was not true. The argument underlying it is basically, ‘It hasn’t happened yet—so it can’t happen!’ That notion is foolish, whether it’s held by a Californian living in an earthquake zone, or a non-Christian hearing about Christ’s Second Coming! God’s patience in delaying judgment is evidence of grace, not evidence no judgment lies ahead!” (Lawrence Richards, *The Bible Reader’s Companion*, 1991, note on 12:22).

Others accepted that Ezekiel’s warning was true and inspired, but believed it concerned the distant future and not the here and now (verse 27). This is also true of many believers in the end time. Jesus warned of Christians who would adopt the attitude of “My master is delaying his coming” (Matthew 24:48). Even many who believe Christ’s coming is relatively soon lose any sense of urgency regarding it—seeing it as still far enough off not to concern them. “Maybe someday. But not now. Maybe someone. But not us. God’s response through Ezekiel was, ‘Not someone...you!’ And, ‘Not someday...soon!’ The attitude of the people of Ezekiel’s day is still pervasive in the church.

Only if we truly believed judgment was coming to *us* and *soon* would we break the bondage of our materialism, and live completely for the Lord” (note on Ezekiel 12:26-28).

Once God accomplishes His proclaimed punishment, no one will be able to contradict it! There were false prophets in Jerusalem with whom Jeremiah was contending at this time (Jeremiah 28:1-5). There will also be false teachers and prophets in the end time. Even though they persuade many people with their words, God’s Word stands sure and will pass the test of time. The chapter ends with this message: “Therefore say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: “None of My words will be postponed any more, but the word which I speak will be done.”’ In less than six years from this prophecy Jerusalem would fall to Nebuchadnezzar and be destroyed.

Similarly, the judgments of the end time are coming swiftly. We don’t know how long. But we know they are coming soon. At some point in the not-too-distant future, what the apostle John foresaw will come to pass: “The angel whom I saw standing on the sea and on the land raised up his hand to heaven and swore by Him who lives forever...that there should be delay no longer” (Revelation 10:5-6). Until then, the end for each of us could be minutes or even seconds away, as we are all mortal and subject to death. So we should live each day with that reality in mind—and direct our lives accordingly.

### **False Prophets and Prophetesses (Ezekiel 13)**

**September 5-6**

This oracle is a poignant summation of false prophets and prophetesses, serving as a vivid warning for everyone. The first point—and perhaps the most crucial—that God makes is that these people send themselves. He did not and does not send them. They follow their own heart and appoint themselves, although they typically claim a special “anointing” or calling of God. Have we not seen many do this in our own time? Self-appointed ministers, prophets and evangelists have been a curse to the Church and to the world for thousands of years. Indeed, Satan the devil, the father of lies (John 8:44), has ministers who masquerade as ministers of righteousness (1 Corinthians 11:14-15). The Bible lists the righteous characteristics of God’s true servants (e.g., Exodus 18:21; Titus 1; 1 Timothy 3). False ministers or prophets can give the appearance of godliness, but, as Jesus Christ warned, they are wolves in sheep’s clothing and will be revealed in time by their fruits (Matthew 7:15-16).

Notice that in Ezekiel’s account they begin by saying, “Hear the word of the LORD!” (verse 2). They feign righteousness and pretend to have a legitimate message from God. This provides an opportunity for examining one of their most revealing fruits—that is, the truth of what they say. Too often, people focus on charisma and personality rather than on substance. God specifically addresses the issue of a person who “packages” himself in strong appeal—even performing “miracles!”—in Deuteronomy 13. Focus on his message, God says, for he likely is leading you away from God’s Word and law (verses 1-4). God adds through Isaiah: “To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word [*God’s Word*], it is because there is no light [no truth] in them” (Isaiah 8:20). A false minister will often use the Bible, just as Satan used Scripture in tempting Jesus Christ (Matthew 4:3, 6). But the discerning Christian meticulously checks the preacher’s words against the Bible (Acts 17:11).

Again, what these men described in Ezekiel 13 have to say comes from their own reasoning—not from God. The Almighty states clearly the truth of the matter: the foolish prophets follow their own spirit and have seen nothing. The word “foolish,” *nabal* in Hebrew, “implied more than our concept of stupidity. It was a broad term that encompassed spiritual and moral insensitivity contrary to the nature of a wise man. The word was used to describe people who blasphemed (Ps 74:18), who were arrogant (1 Sam 25:25), who were atheistic (Ps 14:1), and who lacked self-discipline and humility. Ezekiel described the basic cause of their foolishness as their reliance on their own hearts and failure to seek God’s revelation (cf. Jer 23:16-22; ch. 29)” (*Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, note on verses 1-7).

All the while that Jeremiah and Ezekiel were preaching God’s warning to the Jews—these self-appointed false prophets were proclaiming a different message. Their message was that God would not punish, things were going well and would continue, and there is no need to listen to these two prophets. This is a pattern we see repeated in Scriptural history. The sorcerers of Egypt tried to discredit the warnings that God gave through Moses. Others opposed Joshua, Nehemiah, many if not all prophets we have record of, and later Christ and the apostles. In the time of the end, God will have His two witnesses preaching a final warning (Revelation 11), but Satan will have the Beast and False Prophet who will deceive by miracles (Revelation 13:14). And until then we must expect that false prophets will always be with us. The apostle Peter warns us, “There were also false prophets

among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies” (2 Peter 2:1).

God’s description of them in Ezekiel 13 is very appropriate for any time, but especially the end time before Christ returns. Indeed, the “day of the LORD” is explicitly mentioned in verse 5. While this term may in some sense signify times of God’s triumph against His enemies in the past, it mainly denotes the final triumph of God at the end of the age, when He pours out His wrath on a cataclysmic scale never before seen. We should understand that the calamity of Ezekiel and Jeremiah’s day was a forerunner of the world-shaking events that will accompany the time of the end.

God says the false preachers are “like foxes in the deserts” (Ezekiel 13:4) or, as the NIV renders it, “jackals among ruins.” “They scavenged for themselves while causing, ignoring, and profiting from the human wreckage surrounding them. They were racketeers instead of reformers” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verses 2-4). These false prophets found themselves a place to prosper among people who were in the process of decaying. The reason they were accepted among the remnant of the people was that there was a foreboding atmosphere, and the people wanted to hear optimism. People prefer to hear good news or a soft, easy message—one that makes them feel good (see 2 Timothy 4:3-4). This is why so many churches today preach a “feel-good” message instead of a call to repentance. Reader boards or signs on churches often proclaim that churches are “empowering” or “uplifting” or “celebrating” people. Building a following and making people feel good about themselves is apparently the most important goal.

God describes the job of a true prophet or minister as figuratively going up into gaps in a wall to rebuild and repair it so that people are protected (compare Ezekiel 22:30; Psalm 106:23). This can be understood as the responsibility to warn people of their spiritual gaps—areas in which they are disobeying God and need to change. It can also refer to the nourishing care of a pastor, who prays for, listens to and counsels his congregants, helping to heal wounds in their lives (see 1 Thessalonians 2:7). Christians, being human, will make mistakes. When they know they have, they need help and encouragement to overcome the results of their errors. A true minister is there for them, neither judging nor whitewashing them for what they did, but rather helping to build them back up spiritually. In essence, the requirement is to do what needs to be done in the service of God and others. True prophets would have seen the need to warn the people of the coming danger and show them what was required to avert it. A true watchman operates on the principle of 1 John 3:17: “Whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?” One who knows the truth has a responsibility to provide warning and direction for those who don’t.

Instead of protecting and caring for the people, these charlatans seduce the people with false assurances of “‘Peace!’ when there is no peace” (verse 10), a message decried earlier in the book of Jeremiah (6:14; 8:11). Instead of giving the people the truth, which will always stand firm, these false teachers were giving them lies, which can never stand under the weight of testing. The people thought they were doing a good job—creating, in a figurative sense, a solid wall firmly cemented together—because of what they were told by men who claimed to be God’s representatives. A more accurate figure of what they were doing, however, was piling stones into a heap and having the false teachers put a layer of plaster or whitewash over them, so that it looked solid. When the day of testing comes, the lack of strength in the wall will become evident (Ezekiel 13:10-16).

The false claim of being God’s instruments wasn’t limited to men. In this message God specifically includes women who are false prophetesses (verse 17). God says they “hunt souls” (verse 18) or, rather, “‘lives’—the whole person; the idea [the word soul often connotes today] of disembodied spirits was completely alien to Jewish thinking” (*Eerdman’s Handbook to the Bible*, note on verse 18; compare 18:4, 20). Essentially, the goal of these women is to trap or ensnare people.

The prophetesses are portrayed as fortunetellers or witches. Notice this paraphrase in the Contemporary English Version: “Tell them they’re doomed! They wear magic charms on their wrists and scarves on their heads, then trick others into believing they can predict the future. They won’t get away with telling those lies. They charge my people a few handfuls of barley and a couple pieces of bread, and then give messages that are insulting to me. They use lies to sentence the innocent to death and to help the guilty go free. And my people believe them!.... They do things I would never do. They lie to good people and encourage them to do wrong, and they convince the wicked to keep sinning and ruin their lives” (Ezekiel 13:18-19, 22).

The grain here, however, may be more significant than just payment: “Hittite practices and later Syrian rituals demonstrate that divination was carried out with barley bread either as part of the

pagan sacrificial ritual or as a means of determining whether the victim would live or die. The prophetesses, therefore, profaned God by misrepresentation” (*Expositor’s*, note on verses 17-19).

Even though witchcraft was forbidden in the covenant God made with His people (Leviticus 19:26), it was practiced, and primarily by women—just as in Egypt and Babylon. “Despite the strong warnings of the Law, the people turned more and more to these occultists during the days preceding Jerusalem’s fall” (*Word in Life Bible*, note on Ezekiel 13:18-19). Witchcraft and other forms of occultism are certainly on the rise in our day as well—and their popularity will likely further increase as times worsen.

Yet it should also be recognized that these women probably symbolized the penetration of the Babylonian Mystery religions into the worship of the true God. Veils or scarves were worn by pagan temple prostitutes as part of their garb when they were working to ensnare a customer. Once taken, the victim was then enticed further with occult mysteries. In this sense, pagan religion, harlotry and witchcraft or sorcery all went together in an unholy mixture.

In prophecies of the end time, this false religious system that sprang from Babylon is actually portrayed as a temple prostitute involved in harlotry and sorcery, condemning God’s faithful servants to death: “[Concerning] the great harlot...the inhabitants of the earth were made drunk with the wine of her fornication.... The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet.... And on her forehead a name was written: MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH. I saw the woman drunk with the blood of the saints.... [By her] sorcery all the nations were deceived” (Revelation 17:1-6; 18:23). The same system is referred to in Nahum 3:4 as the “seductive harlot, the mistress of sorceries” or, as the King James Version has it, “the mistress of witchcraft.”

Today, this great false mystery system masquerades as the world religion known as Christianity. Its many false churches throughout the nations of modern Israel may well be pictured by the women in Ezekiel 13.

God ends this prophecy against the false teachers by stating that He will deliver His people from them. In ancient times, that was accomplished to a certain extent by the destruction of Judah and the Jews being taken into captivity. Most of the ruling politicians and religious leaders were killed by the Babylonians, while most of those who were still trying to obey God were among those who were spared and taken to Babylon. This group formed the core of the faithful community in exile, later members of which would return to Jerusalem decades afterward with Zerubbabel or with Ezra to rebuild the temple.

Of course, the heart of Babylon was not an ideal place to escape from pagan religion—and many Jews succumbed to its enticements either completely or in part, with various Babylonian ideas and concepts entering into the practice and beliefs of Judaism just as other erroneous pagan concepts later would enter Christianity. Again, we should understand that the ancient destruction of Judah was merely a forerunner of the greater calamity that still is yet to come—to be followed by the ultimate deliverance of Israel and all mankind from the evils of all false religion into the glorious light of God’s wonderful truth.

### **Idols in the Heart; Judgment on Persistent Unfaithfulness (Ezekiel 14–15)**

**September 7-8**

As chapter 14 opens, “some of the elders of Israel”—leaders among the Jewish exile—come to see Ezekiel. *The Interpreter’s Bible* gives this description: “We may begin by imagining the scene. The prophet is sitting in his house when the leading men of the community enter.... Quietly and reverently the visitors take their seats on the ground before him at his request. Their whole attitude is one of deference to the man of God. Then their spokesman steps forward and reveals the errand on which they have come. There is some event—we are not told what it is—on which they would have the prophet throw light, some difficulty in which they need his advice. So they wait for an oracle.... When it comes the insincerity of the men before him is mercilessly exposed. It pierces through their deferential exterior to what is in their hearts.... These men profess one allegiance with their lips while their hearts cling tenaciously to quite another. They have not the slightest intention of accepting an oracle from Ezekiel unless it chimes in with what they have already made up their minds to do” (note on chapter 14). Thus, they were hypocrites.

God reveals to Ezekiel what these men are really about, explaining that they have “set up idols in their hearts, and put before them that which causes them to stumble into iniquity” (verse 3). This does not mean they were literally worshiping idols. Rather, they set up idols *in their hearts*. This could certainly *include* devotion to pagan gods. But, as the New Testament explains, mere “covetousness...is idolatry” (Colossians 3:5; compare Ephesians 5:5). Essentially, *anything* that

people set up in their affections and devotions as taking priority above the true God is an idol in the heart—be it a pagan deity, false ideology, money, personal prestige, selfish pursuits, allegiance to other people or some cause, an addiction, etc. Indeed, these leaders, who are shown to represent all Israel, each had a “multitude of...idols” that “estranged” them from God (Ezekiel 14:4-5).

“Should I be inquired of at all by them?” the Lord asks (verse 3). He tells Ezekiel to state that those who have idols in their heart will receive an answer according to their idols (verse 4)—that is, appropriate to their idolatrous spiritual condition. As Psalm 66:18 says, “If I had cherished sin in my heart, the LORD would not have listened” (NIV). James adds in the same vein, “You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures” (James 4:3). God isn’t about to give counsel to people regarding every this or that they might seek Him about if their whole life is oriented against Him and His way. His response to any such inquirer is going to be the same: Repent!—and then we can talk (compare Ezekiel 14:6). This sharp response is intended to “seize” people “by their heart”—a wayward heart in need of dire warning (verse 5).

The same applies to “anyone of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who dwell in Israel” (verse 7). Note here that while Ezekiel was proclaiming this warning to Jewish leaders in Babylonia, the wording of verse 7 speaks not of the exiles, but of strangers dwelling with Israel in Israel’s land. It should be clear, then, that this prophecy was meant to apply to more than Ezekiel’s immediate audience. “House of Israel” in this passage can easily refer to all 12 tribes of Israel in our own day. Indeed, the principles of the prophecy are universal.

Those guilty of idolatrous rebellion in the heart who seek God’s counsel for the wrong reasons—demanding a certain answer, refusing to repent—will receive His answer in the form of severe judgment to serve as a wakeup call to them and others (verses 7-8). A wise father does not respond to a child’s brusque demand for some benefit—even if the father would dearly like to him to have it. Likewise, God knows that showering benefits on those in a surly and ungrateful frame of mind will only hurt them. And it would certainly set a terrible example for everyone else.

Verse 9 states, “And if the prophet is induced to speak anything, I the LORD have induced that prophet, and I will...destroy him.” In place of “induced,” other translations have “deceived,” “seduced,” “enticed” or “persuaded.” What this verse seems to be saying is that if one of the above-mentioned people with idolatrous hearts manages to entice or persuade a religious teacher representing God to give a false message—to tell the inquirer what he wants to hear—that circumstance is ultimately from God, as He allows it as a test for that teacher and as a means to give the people over to false teachers as they desire. Furthermore, it also provides an opportunity for God to bring judgment on both prophet and inquirer as a lesson to everyone—the goal of which is actually to lead the people to repentance and deliverance (verses 10-11).

Starting in verse 12, Ezekiel receives another message from God. It is unclear if it was given in the same context as the early part of the chapter or at a later time. The subject is a land that sins against God by “persistent unfaithfulness” (verse 13). His judgment will bring it to ruin. The end of the chapter makes it clear that this message concerns the ancient fall of Jerusalem and that it was intended for the Jews already in captivity. Yet it likely has a broader, dual application, as so many of Ezekiel’s prophecies do—applying also to all Israel in the last days.

In this section God separately lists four punishments: famine (verse 13); wild beasts (verse 15); the sword of warfare (verse 17); and pestilence (verse 19). In each case, He states that even if three men, “Noah, Daniel, and Job,” were in the land, “they would deliver only themselves by their righteousness” (verse 14). “The allusion is to Abraham’s intercession for Sodom (Gen. 18). God promised to spare the wicked cities of the plain if only 10 righteous men could be found within them (v. 32). The story generated the belief that God would not judge if a few righteous men could be found to pray for the rest. But the presence of three of history’s most righteous men could not save Judah” (*Bible Reader’s Companion*, note on Ezekiel 14:12-20).

The righteousness of *Noah* delivered him and seven of his family, but could not preserve the rest of humanity from the Flood (Genesis 6:9). *Job* was spared from death, but was unable to save the lives of his children even though he was a man of outstanding integrity. *Daniel* was spared when he refused to defile himself with Nebuchadnezzar’s food, and he rose to prominence and saw to the promotion of his friends after he interpreted the king’s dream—but though by this time he had become a high official in Babylonia, he was unable to end the Jewish exile or to prevent more Jews from joining it. “Though his prophecies mostly were later than those of Ezekiel, his fame for piety and wisdom was already established, and the events recorded in Daniel 1 [and] 2 had transpired. The Jews would naturally, in their fallen condition, pride themselves on one who reflected such glory on

his nation at the heathen capital, and would build vain hopes (here set aside) on his influence in averting ruin from them” (*Jamieson, Fausset & Brown’s Commentary*, note on Ezekiel 14:14).

Note that “Daniel was already a legend in his own time...! This supports the traditional view that the Book of Daniel was written in the time of the Exile, not the second century B.C. as critics claim” (*Bible Reader’s Companion*, note on verses 12-20). It should be pointed out that some commentators think the name in this chapter should be rendered not Daniel but Dan-El, referring supposedly to a now-unknown person. But that conclusion, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* explains, is not justified (see footnote on verse 14).

God then makes a cumulative argument in verse 21. “If Noah, Daniel, Job, could not deliver the land, when deserving only *one* judgment [of four], ‘how much more’ when all four judgments combined are justly to visit the land for sin, shall these three righteous men not deliver it” (*JFB Commentary*, note on verses 15-21).

“But to vindicate his justice before the exiles, the Lord would spare a small remnant of unrepentant Hebrews and send them into exile in Babylonia (v. 22). Some commentators view this remnant as a righteous remnant, but the context and the consistent use of the term ‘actions’ (*alilah*) in an evil sense throughout the O[ld] T[estament] when referring to mankind argues for an unrighteous remnant. This was strictly a manifestation of God’s grace. When these unrighteous people would go into exile in Babylonia, the exiles already in Babylonia would observe their deeds and see how wicked the Judeans had become. Through this the exiles would be consoled that God was perfectly just in his judgment on Jerusalem (vv. 22-23). As the exiles saw that the Judge of all the earth did right (Gen 18:25), they would be comforted in their sorrow over what had happened to Jerusalem” (*Expositor’s*, note on Ezekiel 14:21-23).

And again, Jerusalem here is probably also typical of the nations of modern Israel, which has likewise proved persistently unfaithful.

### **The Wood of the Vine (Ezekiel 14–15)**

### **Sept. 7-8 Cont’d**

On the night before His death, at His final Passover with His disciples, Jesus told this gathered group that would form the core of His Church, spiritual Israel: “I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away, and every branch that bears fruit He prunes that it may bear more fruit... Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire” (John 15:1-6).

When Jesus said these words He may very well have been thinking of the 15th chapter of Ezekiel. Many times in the Prophets and Writings sections of the Bible, God had referred to Israel as His vine or vineyard. The “Song of the Vineyard” in Isaiah 5:1-7 describes how God cultivated Israel in order to produce fruit. Jesus used the same imagery in the parable of Mark 12:1-12. An examination of these and other references shows that Israel was a cultivated vine, not a wild one. God had lavished His care on it. He had planted, fertilized, watered and protected it. But it failed to respond and produce fruit. Instead, God’s message through Ezekiel is that Israel went back to being a wild vine “among the trees of the forest”—that is, figuratively, the nations. So Israel was not content to be close to God. They wanted to fit in with all the other nations around them. That’s why they adopted the religions and customs of other nations.

God states that apart from her spiritual mission, Israel has no significance and no hope for survival. Without God, as Jesus told the disciples, no person or nation can produce fruit that is pleasing to Him.

The Jews had evidently come to think that because Israel was God’s chosen people, Jerusalem would not be allowed to fall into gentile hands. After all, God had compared Israel to the choicest vine (Isaiah 5:2; Jeremiah 2:21). However, as this parable goes on to show, the only value of a vine is in bearing fruit. The vine now referred to is, again, the kind that grows wild in the forest—the fruit of which is typically small, bitter and useless. Israel had become such a vine. Its fruitless condition actually made it less valuable than other nations.

So what purpose could it serve? The *wood* of a grapevine is worthless. It is too thin and flexible for making any useful items—it can neither support weight nor supply strength. Old vines were dried and burned as fuel. John the Baptist carried this message as a foundational part of his call to repentance: “And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Luke 3:9).

Since Israel was not producing fruit, it could no longer be viewed as a choice vine. Both ends of the vine that made up the 12 tribes of Israel had already been consumed in the destruction of the northern kingdom, the Assyrian ravaging of Judah soon afterward, and the recent deportations of Jews to Babylon in 605 and 597 B.C. All that remained at the time of this message was Jerusalem and the rest of the kingdom of Judah. Jerusalem and the remainder of the Jews were now surrounded by gentile nations, since the other tribes were all gone.

God says that they are now sentenced to be burned. Jerusalem had escaped twice from the fire of Nebuchadnezzar, but it wouldn't survive the third time. They had "persisted in unfaithfulness," a phrase tying this prophecy to the previous one (see 14:13). Their lack of repentance was the reason God would not spare the city.

The lesson for all of us today is sobering. We must stay close to God the Father and Jesus Christ so that we can produce fruit. The modern nations of Israel should certainly take warning—but all Christians should also consider the lesson and take heed. The Church of God today, as stated earlier, is spiritual Israel. Galatians 6:16 refers to it as "the Israel of God." In Romans 2:29 the apostle Paul tells us that "he is a Jew who is one inwardly." Those of spiritual Israel are now being judged as to how much fruit God is able to produce through us. Judgment is now upon the house of God (1 Peter 4:17). We are to spiritually come out of the world (the wild) and not return to it—being instead a people cultivated by God to produce much good fruit, setting the example of persistent *faithfulness*.

### **Rescued Child Turned Murderous Harlot (Ezekiel 16)**

**September 9-10**

Ezekiel 16 shows God as a devoted, loving, generous, ideal husband married to an adulterous wife, reminiscent of other passages such as Jeremiah 3 and Hosea 1–3. Here the wife is Jerusalem, representative of the Jewish nation, the remnant of Israel. At Mount Sinai, God was married to the entire nation of Israel. The city of Jerusalem was then no part of this union. Later, however, the city was incorporated into the nation and its divine covenant relationship as the capital of all 12 tribes and center of true worship. Later still, the kingdom of Israel split into north and south—Israel in the north (symbolized in this chapter by its capital Samaria) and Judah in the south (symbolized by its capital Jerusalem). God eventually put away the apostate northern kingdom of Israel—sending its people into captivity. This left Judah as the remnant of Israel still in covenant with God. Yet Judah now stood even guiltier than the northern kingdom.

God tells Ezekiel to "make Jerusalem see her abominable conduct" (verse 2, NIV) and later in the chapter warns of coming invasion. This is perhaps an indication that Ezekiel's message reached the citizens of Jerusalem before its destruction. The prophet could have sent them a letter, as Jeremiah, who was in Jerusalem at the time, sent a letter to the captives in Babylon (see Jeremiah 29). Yet, as with other prophecies in this section, it also seems likely that the message of Ezekiel 16 was intended for Judah and Israel in the end time—to reach them through Ezekiel's book being part of Scripture and through God's true servants in the last days announcing the warnings contained within it.

In verse 3, God's message to Jerusalem begins, "Your birth and your nativity are from the land of Canaan; your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite." Jerusalem was originally a city of Canaan, populated during the Israelite conquest of the land by one of the Canaanite tribes, the Jebusites (Joshua 15:8, 63). The Amorites and Hittites were two leading Canaanite tribes (see Genesis 10:15-16; Deuteronomy 7:1). Their names were sometimes used generically of all Canaanites (see Genesis 15:16; Amos 2:10; Joshua 1:4). However, we should note that "the Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites" were specifically grouped together as inhabiting the mountain region (Numbers 13:29), where Jerusalem was built.

Yet we should also consider Jerusalem as representative of the nation of Israel—of which, as mentioned, Judah was now the remnant. The mention of heritage then becomes a snub and rebuke. While the nation's forebears—Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—sojourned in the same highlands of Canaan, they were not physically of Canaanite descent. Neither did they adopt Canaan's spiritual traditions. But their descendants, who later settled in Canaan, did. The Israelites thus became cultural descendants of the Canaanites. Jerusalem, corrupted with paganism and all manner of immorality, effectively reverted to its Canaanite parentage.

God recounts the life of Israel and Israelite Jerusalem as a tragic allegory. Three stages of life are presented: 1) a foundering, helpless, outcast baby who is rescued (verses 1-7); 2) the grown maiden who is betrothed and married to the one who saved her (verses 8-14); and 3) the wife who has turned into a harlot and baby murderer (verses 15-34).

She starts as a totally neglected newborn infant, deprived of all the care needed for survival. This baby was not “rubbed with salt” (verse 4), an ancient custom done to harden and strengthen an infant’s body. The *Soncino Commentary* explains: “As soon as the navel is cut, the midwife rubs the child all over with salt, water and oil, and tightly swathes it in clothes for seven days; at the end of that time she removes the dirty clothes, washes the child and anoints it, and then wraps it up again for seven days—and so on till the 40th day” (note on verse 4).

This vulnerable child is abandoned in the open field and despised. This was the condition of Israel as the people grew into a nation in Egypt—despised slaves (see Exodus 1). The Pharaoh had commanded the death of all boy babies, which eventually would have led to the extinction of the nation. God rescued them as they were “struggling.” The Revised English Bible has “kicking helplessly,” and the Jewish Tanakh translates this as “wallowing.” The Israelites were doomed to die in their own blood, but God provided them a savior in Moses, who led them out of Egypt. However, the imagery in Ezekiel 16 could also apply to the early years of the city of Jerusalem: “She was a foundering city, uncared for by...Israel in the conquest of the land, for the Hebrews failed to conquer the city of Jebus (Josh 15:63). In fact, they allowed this city to lie as an unwanted child throughout the period of the Judges (vv. 4-5). It was a widespread custom in the ancient Near East to eliminate unwanted children (esp[ecially] girls) by exposing them” (*Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, note on Ezekiel 16:4-5).

Under God’s direction this child “grew, matured and became very beautiful” but was “naked and bare” (verse 7). Israel was physically developed in numbers while in Egypt, but was lacking in true religion and morality. When the end of the period prophesied to Abraham about his descendants becoming slaves and then being delivered (Genesis 15:13-16) came to an end, God says that Israel was “old enough for love” (verse 8, NIV) or ready to enter into a relationship with Him. He says that he then spread his “wing” (NKJV) or the corner of his garment (NIV) over her. To spread a garment over a woman was an idiom for betrothal (Ruth 3:9). As noted earlier, Israel was married to God at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19–20).

God then recalls that he clothed and decorated her like royalty. Most of the symbols mentioned—embroidered cloth, leather sandals, silk and costly garments—were also used in the tabernacle. The fine linen referred to the righteousness symbolized by the law God gave to Israel, which He had not given to any other nation. This was the same material used to clothe the priests (Exodus 39:1-2). God spared nothing in making His bride the showcase of nations. She is described as being decorated with costly jewels, gold and silver. These items are also used later in the Bible to describe the character of true followers of God (Malachi 3:17; 1 Corinthians 3:12; Revelation 3:18). God says that she rose to be a queen among the nations.

Again, the imagery can also apply to the city of Jerusalem itself: “The Lord visited Jerusalem and claimed her in marriage by spreading his garment over her (v. 8; cf. Ruth 3:9). He entered into a marriage covenant with Jerusalem [by incorporating it into His relationship with His people] (cf. Prov 2:17; Mal 2:14) as described in Psalm 132:13-17. She became the Lord’s city where he dwelt when David brought the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem and purchased the threshing floor of Arunah, the Jebusite (2 Sam 6; 24), in preparation for the temple’s construction. As a groom to his bride, God lavished marriage gifts on Jerusalem (vv. 10-13; cf. Gen 24:53; Ps 45:13-15; Isa 61:10): ornaments, cleansing, anointing, costly garments, jewelry, a crown, and fine foods. She was made exceedingly beautiful and advanced to royalty under the reigns of David and Solomon. Her fame and beauty became renowned throughout the ancient Near East as the capital of the leading nation of that day (v. 14; 1 Kings 10; Lam 2:15)” (*Expositor’s*, note on verses 8-14).

How could God be married to Israel on the one hand and to Jerusalem in another sense? The New Testament affords us a parallel. Spiritual Israel, the Church of God, is the New Covenant Bride of Christ (see Ephesians 5:22-32; Revelation 19:7-9). Yet in Revelation 21:2 and verses 9-10, it appears that the coming New Jerusalem is the Bride. This makes sense when we realize that the New Jerusalem will be the eternal home of the glorified Church and that, even now, it is the place where Christians’ citizenship resides. For this reason, the Church is sometimes referred to as Jerusalem or Zion in prophecy.

Continuing in Ezekiel 16, how soon the Israelites forgot God! They became worshipers of idols. God says they played the harlot with all passers-by (verses 15, 25), entering into relationships with foreign nations and foreign gods. They built pagan shrines on every street, as Jeremiah also attested (Jeremiah 11:13). Translated literally, God says to the nation: “Thou...hast opened thy feet to every one that passed by, and multiplied thy whoredoms” (Ezekiel 16:25, KJV). God laments the fact the people took the gold, silver and jewelry He gave them and used it to make “male images” (verse 17).

The Tanakh version has, “You took your beautiful things, made of the gold and silver that I had given you, and you made yourself phallic images and fornicated with them.” This is rather graphic imagery, showing God’s utter disgust with the nation. Representations of the male member were rather common in ancient Middle Eastern paganism, including not just explicit statuary but also large-scale symbolic representations such as upright stones, pillars, obelisks and slender temple towers.

It might be surprising to learn that, even today, the nations of Israel are still polluted with pagan shrines and even phallic imagery. The world religion known as Christianity is essentially a modern form of Baalism—with its churches topped with steeples, spires or bell towers. One source explains: “There is evidence that the spires of our churches owe their existence to the uprights or obelisks outside the temples of former ages.... There are still in existence today remarkable specimens of original phallic symbols...steeples on our churches...and obelisks” (S. Brown, *Sex Worship and Symbolism in Primitive Races*, 1916). McClintock and Strong’s *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological and Ecclesiastical Literature* confirms that “even the spires of churches are symbols retained from the old phallic worship” (1895, “Phallus”). In his book *Ancient Pagan and Modern Christian Symbolism*, Thomas Inman writes that ancient fertility rites and phallic worship resulted in the setting up of various architectural structures such “as we now see towers or spires before our churches, and minarets before mosques” (1915, p. XXII).

As mentioned, ancient Israel and Judah gave the precious things of God to pagan idols. The *most* precious thing they offered was their children, whom God called *His* children: “And you took your sons and daughters whom you bore to me and sacrificed them as food to the idols. Was your prostitution not enough? You slaughtered my children and sacrificed them to the idols” (verses 20-21, NIV). Just as God condemned idolatry, He also condemned human sacrifice (Leviticus 18:21). Ahaz was probably the king who introduced child sacrifice in Judah with the offering of his own son (2 Kings 16:3). Manasseh also sacrificed one of his sons (2 Kings 21:6). The total number of children destroyed by this practice before Josiah put a stop to it (2 Kings 23:10) is unknown. In all this, the nation failed to remember that it and its capital began as an outcast, dying infant rescued by God (Ezekiel 16:22). The people expressed no heart of feeling about their own children—God’s children.

Today millions of innocent babies are killed every year before they have a chance to live outside their mother’s womb. In almost every case, the reason for this heinous practice is “convenience”—the children sacrificed to the false gods of sexual hedonism and selfishness. Of course, the majority of children are not so murdered. But most who live are “offered” over to this world’s false religious system and perverted values, thereby setting them on a path leading ultimately to death.

When God punished Israel and Judah in relatively minor ways it apparently did little good. They had forgotten that their very existence was due to God’s care for them. They refused to learn from the curse that came from their sin. Instead they sinned more—thinking the cure for the curse was to increase their distance from God by drawing closer to other nations. God viewed Israel’s idolatry as encompassing more than just their adoption of other nations’ religious practices. “By making alliances with foreign powers, they came also under the influence of their ideas and customs” (*Soncino*, note on verse 26). God’s true followers must never “copy the behavior and customs of this world” (Romans 12:2, Living Bible). We are to come out and be separate (Revelation 18:4).

God continues to describe the nation as an adulterous wife who even bribed strangers to consort with her. He foretells the destruction of the nation in the sight of all the nations with whom she had played the harlot—at the hands of these same nations (Ezekiel 16:37, 39). Jerusalem will be judged as a woman who has broken wedlock or shed blood, the penalty for which was violent death (verse 38). Interestingly, the former allies mentioned included not just the Chaldeans (verse 29) but also the Assyrians (verse 28). The fact that all such former allies would come against the nation perhaps suggests an end-time parallel since the Assyrians, their empire gone when Ezekiel wrote, will rise to prominence again in the last days in conjunction with the Chaldeans.

Again, the root cause of all the calamities goes back to the nation’s forgetfulness and ingratitude (verse 43). In Deuteronomy 8:10-11 God warned: “When you have eaten and are full, then you shall bless the LORD.... Beware that you do not forget the LORD your God by not keeping His commandments.” Prosperity is often a greater temptation for evil than adversity is. In adverse times people often engage in soul-searching and turn to God. Prosperous times result in arrogance and self-reliance.

**Worse Than Samaria and Sodom (Ezekiel 16)****Sept. 9-10 Cont'd**

In the next section of Ezekiel 16, verses 44-59, Jerusalem is declared to be worse than Samaria and even than Sodom—which are declared to be her “sisters.” For some, this is strong evidence that “Jerusalem” in this chapter refers exclusively to the city of Jerusalem and the southern kingdom of Judah—not in any sense to the nation of Israel as a whole. For why would Jerusalem represent all Israel when it is said to be sister to Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel? But consider again that in Ezekiel’s time Judah was the *remnant of Israel* (Israel being the name of the nation in covenant with God). The northern tribes, symbolized by Samaria, had once been part of that relationship but were no longer. Thus, when the chapter describes the allegorical history of Jerusalem, it is giving the history of the whole covenant nation (and the city’s part in that history).

God again refers to Jerusalem as a Canaanite daughter (verse 45). The analogy of Samaria and Sodom being Jerusalem’s “sisters” is fairly easy to follow when considering the cities themselves. Sodom was a Canaanite city (Genesis 10:19). And archaeology has revealed that Samaria was originally a Canaanite settlement. The Hebrew phrases translated “your elder sister” and “your younger sister” (Ezekiel 16:46) “mean literally ‘your great sister’ and ‘your small sister,’ respectively. Though these two constructions are idiomatic for ‘older’ (greater) and ‘younger’ (smaller), Ezekiel used the idioms properly within the figure, but with an emphasis on the literal meaning of the words. The play on the idioms stresses that Samaria was greater than Jerusalem and Sodom smaller than Jerusalem” (*Expositor’s*, footnote on verse 46). The term “daughters” refers either to the other towns included in the territories of the major cities mentioned or simply the individual citizens.

But again, the cities are also representative of the national populations over which they ruled. Jerusalem was, again, symbolic of Israel—in Ezekiel’s day of Israel’s remnant, Judah. Samaria stood for the former northern kingdom, cut off from Judah and now gone. It is easy to see the peoples of the northern and southern kingdoms as “sisters,” as they shared the same Israelite ethnic heritage. But Sodom did not share in that heritage. Some have suggested that the reference perhaps concerns the fact that the Ammonites and Moabites descended from Abraham’s nephew Lot and his daughters, who dwelt in Sodom for some time. These people, however, had no physical kinship with the people of Sodom. But there was a cultural relationship, as Lot and his daughters were influenced by Sodom’s ways. The Ammonites and Moabites later embraced Canaanite religion and had an influence on the people of Israel and Judah. In any case, there was certainly a *spiritual* kinship between the people of Sodom, Samaria and Jerusalem.

The wealth and prosperity of Sodom had plunged it into such spiritual laxity that the people fell headlong into an utter rejection of morality and restraint (verses 49-50). Crowds tried to gang-rape men visiting the town or young women who lived there (Genesis 19). Yet according to God’s judgment, Sodom wasn’t as evil as Judah. Judah had become so depraved that it allowed homosexual prostitution at the temple as a form of worship. Moreover, the real measuring stick here was *accountability*. As Jesus Christ stated, “For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required” (Luke 12:48). The people of Jerusalem and Judah—the center of true worship—because they should have known better, were much more accountable for their wicked conduct than the pagans of Sodom who were totally cut off from God. Likewise, the northern tribes were more accountable than Sodom, but not as accountable as the Jews, who had more access to God’s truth.

Despite the terrible record of idolatry and evil, God—in His incredible mercy—promises a time of forgiveness and restoration in the future. Verses 53-55: “When I bring back their captives, the captives of Sodom and her daughters, and the captives of Samaria and her daughters, then I will also bring back the captives of your captivity among them, that you may bear your own shame and be disgraced by all that you did when you comforted them. When your sisters, Sodom and her daughters, return to their former state, and Samaria and her daughters return to their former state, then you and your daughters will return to your former state.” This may refer in part to the return of Israel and Judah to the Holy Land at the time of Christ’s return. However, Sodom was utterly destroyed and seemingly has no descendants to return—unless the Ammonites and Moabites are meant, as some have suggested. The prophecy seems to point mainly to the time when all those who died in ancient times are resurrected to life again 1,000 years after Christ returns (see Revelation 20:5). Paralleling the above verses in Ezekiel, Jesus told Jews of His day, “It shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you” (Matthew 11:24).

Yet God would provide atonement upon repentance. He had decreed in His covenant with Israel that He would be faithful to all He had promised, which included restoration (Leviticus 26:40-45). In

the relationship at the restoration of the future, all must become Jews spiritually (see Romans 2:28-29), and all peoples will come under the rule of Jerusalem—symbolically making them her daughters. This relationship was not promised in the covenant at Sinai (Ezekiel 16:61). But it will be part of the New Covenant (verse 62).

Ezekiel 16 contains some important lessons for all Christians. In the allegorical account of how God rescued the outcast child Israel from certain death, and made her His nation and His wife, there is a personal message for each one of us. God has by intention called the weak of the world (1 Corinthians 1:26) and every one of us was lost in our sins and on the path to eternal death (Romans 3:23, 6:23). We have all gone through the rescuing process just like ancient Israel. They were a nation in bondage, as we all are in bondage to Satan's society before God calls us (Galatians 4:3). They were given life when they were almost dead—the same process that Paul describes for all Christians in Ephesians 2:1. We now have a choice of whether to remain faithful to God or commit spiritual adultery with the world around us and its evil ways. Let us remain vigilant and stay the course. And on the occasions when we fail in this and sin, we should remember that God is always there to forgive if we will repent.

### **Parable of the Eagles and God's Judgment on Oath Breaking (Ezekiel 17)      September 11-12**

Chapter 17 is a message concerning Jewish royalty and the world powers of Ezekiel's time. It is first presented as a riddle or parable of two great eagles, a cedar tree and a vine (verses 1-10). The exiles with Ezekiel are evidently given some time to make sense of it, but they are unable to (compare verses 11-12). So God directs His prophet to make the meaning plain (verses 11-21). Jesus would later use this type of teaching technique.

The first eagle (verse 3) represented Babylon under King Nebuchadnezzar (verse 12). The eagle was used to symbolize both the tool God used to punish as well as the speed at which the punishment was carried out (compare Deuteronomy 28:49; Isaiah 46:11; Hosea 8:1). The large, powerful wings enabled the eagle to fly long distances and symbolized the extent of the territory under the eagle's power. "Full plumage" (verse 3, NIV) represented a populous empire. "Various colors" revealed the empire to be composed of different peoples from various nations.

"Lebanon" denoted the entire area at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea (the Levant), the region of Israel and Syria. As God had told Israel in Joshua 1:4, "From the wilderness and *this Lebanon* as far as the great river, the River Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, and to the Great Sea toward the going down of the sun, shall be your territory" (see also 2 Kings 14:9). Jerusalem was the chief city of this region. Moreover, as noted in the Bible Reading Program comments on Jeremiah 22, another passage in which Jerusalem is referred to as Lebanon, the Phoenician area of Tyre and Sidon commonly referred to as Lebanon was the source of the cedar wood used in the construction of the royal buildings of Jerusalem in the time of David and Solomon. Thus the cedar of Lebanon in Ezekiel 16:3 symbolized Judah and the Davidic royal family. The cedar's "highest branch" (verse 3) and "topmost shoot" (verse 4, NIV), which the eagle broke off and carried away, were the king who was removed from the throne and his princes (verse 12). They were taken to a "city of merchants" in a "land of trade." Even without the explicit interpretation, this was clearly Babylon, as the previous chapter of Ezekiel referred to "the land of the trader, Chaldea" (16:29).

The riddle should not have been hard to unravel so far. This had already happened in 597 B.C., when Nebuchadnezzar deported King Jehoiachin or Jeconiah to Babylon along with most of the nobility. Indeed, this is when Ezekiel himself and the exiles among whom he lived went into captivity. Continuing the parable, Nebuchadnezzar then "took also of the seed of the land" (17:5, KJV) a particular seed and planted "it" in a fertile field, setting it up as a willow tree. (The New King James interpolation of "*some* of the seed of the land" is evidently incorrect.) The seed here was a reference to "a member of the royal family" (verse 13, NIV) who replaced the topmost shoot. The fertile field was simply the Promised Land. God had earlier described it as "a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs" (Deuteronomy 8:7).

The new king was set up as a "willow by abundant water" (Ezekiel 17:5, NIV), illustrating his prosperous life as king but also his total dependence on Babylon for his rule, just as a willow is dependent on water. This too had already happened when Jeconiah was removed. Nebuchadnezzar set up Jeconiah's uncle, Josiah's third son Mattaniah now renamed Zedekiah, as ruler over Judah. The "spreading vine of low stature," with its branches turned toward the Babylonian eagle and its roots firmly planted under it in the soil of the Promised Land, pictured Zedekiah and the people of Judah under him continuing to flourish—but only as a subject vassal kingdom under Babylon.

Another great eagle enters the scene in verse 7, which, as God explains, represented Egypt and its pharaoh (compare verse 15). Egypt was also a populous empire of “full plumage” (NIV). The roots and branches of the vine now stretch toward this eagle, seeking to be watered by it instead of Babylon, symbolizing the entire nation reaching out to Egypt for help to gain independence from Babylon. God explains, “But he [Zedekiah] rebelled against him [Nebuchadnezzar] by sending his ambassadors to Egypt, that they might give him horses and many people” (verse 15). Yet, as God proclaims, this effort would fail.

The Jewish ruler was a fool. His throne was safe and he was protected by Babylon. His kingdom would be strengthened and the throne passed to his children if he remained faithful to Babylon. But he would not. The vine, king and nation, would not survive because of his foolish actions. It would be uprooted to wither when touched by the “east wind”—symbolic of destruction from Babylon in the east (verses 8-10).

This mention of Zedekiah’s rebellion was prophetic, as it had not yet happened. Ezekiel 17 falls within chapters 12–19, a section dated to 592-591 B.C. (compare 8:1; 20:1). Yet it was not until 588 B.C., when Pharaoh Hophra came to the throne of Egypt, that Zedekiah rebelled against Babylon. And this rebellion did indeed prove to be the historical impetus for the destruction of Jerusalem (2 Kings 24:20–25:1). In response, Nebuchadnezzar sent an army and laid siege to the city. In the summer of 586, the food supply was gone in Jerusalem. The wall was breached and the city fell to the Babylonians, who destroyed it.

In verses 15-21, God decries Zedekiah’s betrayal of his oath of loyalty to Nebuchadnezzar (see verse 13). Psalm 15:4 gives God’s standard for giving one’s word: “he who swears to his own hurt and does not change”—i.e., does not go back on it. Why should there be different standards for nations or kings? In fact, this wouldn’t even have been to Zedekiah’s hurt. The relationship with Babylon guaranteed peace in the region due to Babylon’s powerful army. The vine was “planted in fertile soil and placed ...beside abundant waters.” Zedekiah ought to have realized that his position could not be improved by rebellion. But even if it could, he had sworn his loyalty to Nebuchadnezzar.

This covenant was not an international treaty freely entered into, but one imposed on him by a conquering king. Nevertheless, Zedekiah had publicly agreed to it. Most importantly, the oath was made in God’s name (2 Chronicles 36:13), and God considered it binding. In fact, God considers breaking a vow made in His name to be *treason against Him* (Ezekiel 17:20). Ezekiel relays God’s message that those who break their oaths and covenants will not be delivered. As a personal judgment against Zedekiah, God says, “Because he had given his hand in pledge and yet did all these things, he shall not escape” (verse 18, NIV). God was true to His own word. As already pictured in Ezekiel 12:12-14, Zedekiah would attempt an escape at the time the walls of Jerusalem fell, but would be caught, blinded and taken captive and his troops killed. And that’s exactly what happened (Jeremiah 52:7-11).

### **Transplanting of the Davidic Throne (Ezekiel 17)**

**Sept. 11-12 Cont’d**

Continuing the imagery of the parable mentioned earlier in the chapter, the last three verses in Ezekiel 17 relay a remarkable prophecy. It begins with God stating, “I [not Babylon this time but God Himself] will also take of the highest branch of the high cedar...” (verse 22, KJV). The New King James Version says “one of the highest branches,” but that is incorrect. God is taking *of*, something *from*, the highest branch. The highest branch is of course the king. And what does God take that is *of* this king? “A tender one from the topmost of its young twigs” (NRSV). The young twigs of the branch would be the king’s children. A “tender” one would seem to signify a female, especially when we consider that Zedekiah’s sons were all killed. This tender twig is then planted in “a high and prominent mountain.” A mountain often signifies a great nation in Bible prophecy—this one being apparently one of the foremost nations in the world. God then specifies what he means: “On the mountain height [the very top of the nation, the throne] of *Israel* [not Judah!] I will plant it.”

Most commentators misinterpret the meaning. Some see the prophecy as signifying Jeconiah’s descendant Zerubbabel, who later returned to Judea from the Babylonian exile as a governor. Yet he was only a governor under the Persians, not ruling in majesty as a king over “birds of every sort”—many other peoples. Furthermore, he was not cut out from Judah when the nation and royal family stood as a tall Lebanon cedar, but long after the nation had been carried away into captivity. The planting of the twig in the high mountain of Israel in this interpretation is seen as the return of Zerubbabel to Jerusalem. But Judah was not then or anytime afterward a great nation that came to rule over many other peoples. In fact, the Jewish state remained mostly subjugated to foreign powers

and eventually ceased to exist once again. The bringing down of the high, fruitful tree (verse 24) is said to be the fall of Zedekiah while the exaltation of the low, dry tree is claimed to be the restoration of the lineage of Jeconiah. But his lineage was never really restored, as none of his descendants were ever to occupy the throne (Jeremiah 22:30).

Recognizing the problems with Zerubbabel in the interpretation, many commentators see the prophecy as messianic, as the Messiah would come from the line of David. Yet there are problems with this too. When Jesus Christ lived, neither Judah nor its royal family could in any way be symbolized by a tall cedar, as the area was then occupied by the Romans and no Davidic king had ruled there for more than 500 years. And the bringing down of the high tree and exaltation of the low tree does not fit such an analogy. So the explanation is given this way: The cropped off young twig was a member of the Davidic family at the time of Ezekiel from whom Jesus descended, Himself a branch from the replanting in Jerusalem. Often this twig is understood to be the lineage of Jeconiah through Zerubbabel continuing on to Christ. But whereas Jesus' adoptive father Joseph came from this lineage, He Himself did not physically descend from Jeconiah and this Zerubbabel or else He would not be a legitimate heir to the throne. Jesus, through His mother Mary, sprang from the Davidic line of Nathan, which was nowhere near the "highest branches of the high cedar" at any time. And again, the high and low trees don't fit.

So what does the prophecy mean? As explained in our online publication *The Throne of Britain: Its Biblical Origin and Future*, it concerns a transfer of the line of David in the days of Ezekiel and Jeremiah from Judah to Israel. The tender sprig of the highest branch taken by God and planted elsewhere represents one of the daughters of Zedekiah who was under the protection of Jeremiah (compare Jeremiah 43:5-6), God's instrument used for pulling down the throne and planting it elsewhere (compare Jeremiah 1:10)—moving the Davidic lineage from Judah to the British Isles. (See our online publication just referred to at [www.ucg.org/brp/materials/throne/index.html](http://www.ucg.org/brp/materials/throne/index.html) for a much more thorough and detailed explanation.)

All of northern and western Europe at this time was dominated by the northern tribes of Israel—taken into captivity by the Assyrians years before, but now a large, migratory nation long on the move after the collapse of the Assyrian Empire. Eventually, the leading tribe of Israel, Ephraim, would settle in the British Isles, come under the Davidic throne and expand to become the greatest empire in history, ruling many peoples over a vast portion of the earth (send for or download our free booklet *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy* to learn more.)

"And," God says, "all the trees of the field [other nations of the earth] shall know that I, the LORD, have brought down the high tree and exalted the low tree, dried up the green tree and made the dry tree flourish; I, the LORD, have spoken and have done it" (Ezekiel 17:24). Judah was the "high tree" and Israel the "low tree" from the time the two kingdoms split in the days of Rehoboam, due to David's throne ruling over Judah and not Israel. Judah had been a "green tree," fruitful with Davidic royalty, and Israel a "dry tree" throughout that period. God would reverse the positions, resulting in a major mark on world history.

### Personal Accountability (Ezekiel 18)

September 13-14

Perhaps as we are reading through the prophets and hear all of the judgments against Israel, Judah or surrounding nations, we may be tempted to think of it as only so much history—history that doesn't really concern *us*. After all, the judgments are for the evil deeds of people who lived more than 2,500 years ago. The reader might ask, "How can they apply to me?"

In this chapter God clearly lays down the rule of judgment that applies to everyone at all times. This is the principle that He will use with all people in determining their final reward or punishment. It agrees with that very ancient rule God spoke to Cain: "If you do well, will you not be accepted?" (Genesis 4:7).

After hearing the warnings of coming destruction given by God's prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the Jews apparently began to talk among themselves, essentially saying that God was unfair. They felt that they were going to be punished for the sins of their forefathers. They didn't see their generation as all that evil when compared to the previous ones. So they resentfully came up with a saying: "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, but the children's teeth are set on edge" (Ezekiel 18:2) or, as the New Living Translation renders it, "The parents have eaten sour grapes, but their children's mouths pucker at the taste." As we earlier read, God also used Jeremiah to confute this false proverb (Jeremiah 31:29).

It is obviously illogical that one person would eat something sour but another have the sour taste in his mouth. And by this they meant to symbolize something they considered just as illogical. Their

real complaint: It isn't fair for one generation to be punished for the sins of previous generations! This was the response of the people to the warnings of the prophets—concluding that God was obviously in the wrong, justifying themselves. They were perhaps twisting the meaning of the principle God mentioned in Exodus 20:5—“visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me.” God meant that children are negatively affected by their parents' sins—that sin can have far-reaching consequences, especially when children learn their parents' ideas and emulate their behavior. He did not mean that even though the children are innocent, they must be punished for their parents' mistakes.

God tells the people to stop using the proverb and that their reasoning is completely off base (Ezekiel 18:3). He points out up front that He certainly has the *right* to punish. All people—parents *and* children—belong to Him (Ezekiel 18:4). He is the Creator of all things. People are accountable to Him, not the other way around. He then explains that every individual is held responsible for his own conduct. “The soul who *sins* shall die” (Ezekiel 18:4, 20). “Soul” here simply means a living, physical being or person (compare Genesis 2:7, KJV). (As a side note, this helps to demonstrate that the Bible does not teach the concept of an “immortal soul.” Rather, we see here that a “soul” is simply a person—and is quite mortal.) Conversely, “But if a man is just and does what is lawful and right...he shall surely live” (Ezekiel 18:5, 9).

Personal accountability was clearly established in the law that God had already given. Deuteronomy 24:16 stated, “The fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor shall the children be put to death for their fathers; a person shall be put to death for his own sin.” God does not punish the children for the fathers' sins unless they follow in their sinful ways and “fill up the measure of their father's guilt,” as the Pharisees of Jesus' day did (see Matthew 23:32).

In emphasizing the point, the example is given of a righteous father (Ezekiel 18:5-9), an unrighteous son (verses 10-13, 18), and a righteous grandson (verses 14-17). Not only is the point clearly made by using these relationships, but for Ezekiel's Jewish audience the personal examples of three well-known kings of Judah would probably have come to mind—Hezekiah, Manasseh and Josiah.

In the description of the righteous man and his grandson, it is evident that a just man *does* what is *right*. The list of characteristics includes not worshiping idols and not “eat[ing] on the mountains” (verses 6, 11, 15; 22:9)—that is, not partaking at high places, not participating in pagan worship at pagan shrines. The list further includes not defiling another's wife, not committing robbery and not “approach[ing] a woman during her impurity” (18:6) or, in today's terms, not having “intercourse with a woman during her menstrual period” (CEV). This last item, also listed as a sin in 22:10, might appear to modern sensibilities to be out of place in a list of moral prohibitions, but it should be remembered that this was included in the Mosaic law's list of sexual abominations (Leviticus 18:19) and was punishable by death (20:18). (See the Bible Reading Program's comments on these passages for more on the issue.) The point about not exacting usury or increase—lending money at interest—should be understood as not charging interest when giving personal loans to others in need. (It does not prohibit lending at interest as part of business or banking, as Jesus Christ spoke approvingly of this practice.)

Of course, righteousness is not just following a list of don'ts. It is important to notice in Ezekiel 18 that God points out the *positive* actions of one who is righteous. Not only does a righteous man obey the Eighth Commandment against stealing, but he is careful to watch out and provide for the needs of others. He practices the give way of life! He takes care of the hungry and covers the cold with a garment. Is this not “true religion” as taught by the writers of the New Testament? A righteous man has internalized God's commandments and lives them outwardly as well as internally.

The unrighteous son, on the other hand, does not live as God commands. *Matthew Henry's Commentary* notes on this passage, “It is...no uncommon case, but a very melancholy one, that the child of a very godly father, notwithstanding all the instructions given him, the good education he has had and the needful rebukes that have been given him, and the restraints he has been laid under, after all the pains taken with him and prayers put up for him, may yet prove notoriously wicked and vile, the grief of his father, the shame of his family.”

Down through history fathers have desired to have their sons follow after them in their offices or accomplishments. But God is clear: A good father *does not* pile up “merit” for his son. How often in history and modern times have we seen a son promoted to a high position of responsibility under his father or to his father's office only to find that the son proves to be an evil man who lacks the character necessary for the job? Such was the case with several kings of Judah, most notably

Hezekiah's son Manasseh. He perpetrated all of the evils listed in Ezekiel 17 even though his father was one of Judah's most righteous kings.

Yet recall that Manasseh eventually came to repent of his evil ways. This principle is also addressed in Ezekiel 17. God shows that He will reward or punish according to the change made in a person's life—if that change is permanent. If a wicked man repents, turning from his sins, God will not bring punishment on Him (Ezekiel 18:21-22). Repentance means that a person's entire state of mind has changed from one of disobedience to one of obedience. He now walks a new path that leads in a new direction—and this is reflected in his actions. God desires repentance, not punishment. The point is made that God takes absolutely no pleasure in the death of the wicked. As the Giver of life, He does not want to destroy *anyone*. He hates sin because of what it does; He does not hate the sinner. We do not truly turn from sin unless *we* come to hate it too. We must set our affection on that which is lawful and right and agrees with the Word of God. If we do this, God promises to forgive our sins and give us eternal life.

Herein, we see a truly "New Testament" concept in that a repentant person could find forgiveness for wrongdoing and have the opportunity to start over. Of course, we have a much greater understanding of this whole process today. Jesus Christ has been sacrificed and given His life in atonement for the sins of the world. The Old Testament sacrificial system looked forward to this fact. It is through the acceptance of Christ's sacrifice that our sins are forgiven—yet, still, only if we repentantly determine to live our lives according to God's commands from now on.

Thankfully, regardless of how evil someone may have been throughout life, if the mind is changed or converted and one begins truly seeking and obeying God, God will forgive and forget his past transgressions. The way of God involves mercy, forgiveness and grace. That's not to say that this passage buttresses the idea of "a deathbed repentance," for repentance involves both a change of heart and then the followed appropriate change of action. That takes time.

But what of the opposite situation, where a person who has been living righteously turns to a life of evil? Will his past make up for his present? Human reasoning concludes that all deeds should be placed in a balance—good on one side, bad on the other. Then, if the good deeds outweigh the bad, you win the prize. We hear this idea even today as people refer to themselves as "pretty much a good person" or say of the deceased at a funeral that "his good outweighed his bad." God's perfect judgment, however, requires the right state of mind and behavior be maintained *to the end* (see Matthew 24:13). This does not mean that a righteous man will never slip up and sin. He will (1 John 1:8). But when he does he repents, relying on God's promise to forgive the repentant as in Ezekiel 18, and continues to seek God's Kingdom and His righteousness (Matthew 6:33).

A warning is given to people to not turn from this way of righteousness. God's words are clear that a person who turns from the truth will die in his sins. The New Testament explains in stark terms that ultimate rejection of God will lead to eternal death. We need to understand that for God's true servants, this life is a judgment period (1 Peter 4:17). The time of evaluation lasts for the duration of our lives after we come to understand what God has done for us and what He expects of us.

God points out that the only way to be ultimately saved from death is to have a change of heart—a converted one made possible only by a *new spirit*. The final point of many of Ezekiel's and Jeremiah's messages is the necessity for us to have a new spirit and a new heart. Human beings need the Spirit of God working in them to truly have the transformed heart and mind that God requires. (To help you better understand, send for our download our free booklet *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion*.)

### **Lamentation for the Princes of Israel (Ezekiel 19)**

**September 15-16**

Chapter 19 follows right on from chapter 18. God directs His prophet to bewail the uprooting of the nation. "The exiles' last hope was that Zedekiah could be trusted to throw off the Babylonian yoke. Ezekiel now demolishes that in a funeral dirge chanted over Judah's leaders" (*Bible Reader's Companion*, chaps. 19–21 summary).

That the term "princes of Israel" (verse 1) refers to Judah's leaders in Ezekiel's time is apparent from the details given about particular individuals, though it is possible that there are dual references here that could also apply to the end-time fall of Israel and Judah.

In the imagery of the first part of the lament, the "mother" of the people is portrayed as a lioness. Israel as a whole had been pictured as a lioness: "It now must be said of Jacob and of Israel, 'Oh, what God has done!' Look, a people rises like a lioness, and lifts itself up like a lion; it shall not lie down until it devours the prey, and drinks the blood of the slain" (Numbers 23:23-24; compare

Micah 5:8-9). The tribe of Judah had been similarly portrayed in the context of it possessing Israel's royal lineage: "Judah...your father's children shall bow down before you. Judah is a lion's whelp; from the prey...you have gone up. He bows down, he lies down as a lion; and as a lion who, shall rouse him? The scepter shall not depart from Judah..." (Genesis 49:8-10). Jerusalem, the nation's capital, was referred to as Ariel ("Lion of God") in Isaiah 29:1.

In verses 3-4 of Ezekiel 19, the lioness (i.e., the nation) sets up one of her cubs as a lion, a national leader. As *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* explains: "The first whelp was Jehoahaz (vv. 3-4), who had been placed on the throne by the Judeans following the death of his father, Josiah (2 Kings 23:31). Jehoahaz learned, as a young lion, to tear and devour mankind, doing evil in the sight of the Lord (v. 3; 2 Kings 23:32). Becoming world renowned for the violence in his reign of three months, he was seized in 609 B.C. like a hunted lion and brought bound to Egypt where he ultimately died (v. 4; 2 Kings 23:33-34; 2 Chronicles 36:1-4; Jer 22:10-12)" (note on verses 1-9).

The lioness then sets up a new lion cub. The next king of Judah was Jehoahaz's brother Jehoiakim. But he was set up as ruler not by Judah itself but by the Egyptian pharaoh. And though Jehoiakim was brought before Nebuchadnezzar in chains as described in verse 9, he was not removed from office or taken from the Holy Land as described here. Rather, "the second whelp was Jehoiakim's son, Jehoiachin [or Jeconiah, who became king upon his father's death and not by foreign appointment] (vv. 5-9; cf. 2 Kings 24:8-17; 2 Chronicles 36:8-10); Jehoiakim [a foreign appointment] was bypassed...[Jehoiachin's] reign was not substantially different from his father's, for Jehoiachin too learned to devour mankind. Jehoiachin destroyed cities and desolated the land (v. 7). Yet he also did not escape the snare of the 'lion-hunting' nations that trapped him in their 'pit' and brought him to Nebuchadnezzar in a 'cage' in 597 B.C. Later he was released (2 Kings 25:27-30; 2 Chronicles 36:9-11). No longer would he 'roar' in Judah" (same note).

For the second part of the lamentation (Ezekiel 19:10-14), the imagery shifts to that of the vine, another symbol of the nation as we've seen in chapters 15 and 17.

Where Ezekiel 19:10 says, "Your mother was like a vine in your bloodline," the word translated as "bloodline" in the New King James Version literally means "blood" (KJV). The exact meaning here is debated. *Jamieson, Fausset & Brown's Commentary* prefers the meaning of "'in the blood of thy grapes,' i.e., in her full strength, as the red wine is the strength of the grape" (note on verse 10). The Ferrar Fenton Translation says "vigorous vine plant."

The nation, explains *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* in its note on verses 10-14, "had grown large and fruitful during the kingdom period with many branches for ruling scepters (or kings) (vv. 10b-11). Yet this vine was finally plucked up and cast to the ground, where its exposed roots withered under the blasts of the east wind (Babylonia) (cf. 17:6-10, 15). The vine (or nation) was transplanted into a desert place—into captivity (v. 13). The 'fire' that 'spread from one of its main branches' [NIV throughout quotation] was the destruction that Zedekiah, Judah's current ruler, had brought on Judah ('consumed its fruit') (v. 14a). Judah's present condition was the responsibility, in part, of Zedekiah. Ezekiel had answered the exiles' question (in this chapter) by demonstrating the foolishness of trusting in Zedekiah, for he was partially responsible for the imminent judgment. In fact, there was not a 'strong branch' in Judah at all—no one 'fit for a ruler's scepter' (v. 14b), not even Zedekiah, who would be deported in 586 B.C. There was no hope! Judgment was coming!"

### **A History of Rebellion, a Future of Redemption (Ezekiel 20:1-44)      September 17-18**

Chapter 20 begins a new section of the book of Ezekiel. The starting date in verse 1 equates to August of 591 B.C. The section continues to the end of chapter 23, as 24:1 gives a new date, January of 588 B.C. Our current reading encompasses the first 44 verses of chapter 20. "The chapter division in the MT [Masoretic Text, the authoritative Hebrew version] is between v. 44 and v. 45 in the English text. This division best follows the argument of the book at this point" (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, footnote on verse 44). This fact becomes even clearer in our next reading.

Again "certain of the elders of Israel" among the Jewish exiles come to Ezekiel to seek information from God as they did in chapter 14. Yet it is clear that when God addresses them, He is speaking not only to them—as they were probably not passing children through the fire at this time—but to the "house of Israel," the nation they represented (verse 31). Moreover, since the latter part of the chapter concerns "all the house of Israel" (verse 40) being purged of sin and returning to the Promised Land from captivity in the future, it is likely that the message is intended not just for the Jews of Ezekiel's day but for all Israel in the last days.

As God answered before, He says He refuses to be questioned by these elders or the nation (verse 3, 31). Instead, He has Ezekiel proclaim to them the "the abominations of their fathers" (verse 4).

Israel's history has been one long series of rebellions against God. The point is not that the Jews of Ezekiel's time or Israelites of the future are to be punished for the sins of their forefathers (as Ezekiel 18 made clear). Rather, God recognized in the Jews of that day, and all Israel today, the same rebellious spirit that had characterized the nation historically. Evil cultural traditions were passed on from one generation to another. It is likely that the Jews of Ezekiel's day were relying on their "noble heritage" to preserve them. God's retort: Let's take a hard look at that heritage—it's not so good; better think again! Indeed, the actions of the people had many times brought severe judgment from God. Yet included here was a message of hope. While God purged rebellion through punishment, He never completely wiped out the nation—and never would.

The accounts of rebellion begin with Israel's time in Egypt. In verses 7-8, "God spoke of something not explained in the Book of Exodus; that is, the Israelites had engaged in the idolatry of the Egyptians during their sojourn there. Thus, though not mentioned elsewhere, there was the threat of divine retribution against the people before the time of the Exodus (which is mentioned in [Ezekiel 20] v. 10)" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verse 8).

In verses 9, 14 and 22, God explains that He acted "for My name's sake." God's name carries His reputation and signifies all He stands for. When the Israelites sinned, they, as His representatives, essentially profaned His name before other nations (see also 36:20). Their unfaithfulness is labeled as "blasphemy" (see 20:27). God consistently upholds the honor of His name, so that all will be sure to take Him seriously. This necessitated punishment for disobedience—but also the preservation of Israel as a nation to fulfill His promises.

Profaning or blaspheming God's name was a violation of the Third Commandment, against taking God's name in vain. Israel also broke the First Commandment, against worshiping other gods, the Second against using idols or images in worship and the Fourth, against breaking God's Sabbath. The first four of the Ten Commandments outline man's duty to God—and the fact that all were transgressed clearly illustrates Israel's *rebellion* against God. Indeed, the focus of Ezekiel 20 is Israel's idolatry and Sabbath breaking as the primary basis for past judgment—as it would be for coming judgment (see Ezekiel 22). This was according to the specific terms of God's covenant with the nation. In listing the blessings for national obedience and curses for disobedience, He began with a specific mention of idolatry and Sabbath breaking (see Leviticus 26:1-2).

The seventh-day Sabbath was to be a sign to show that Israel acknowledged Him as the one true Creator God and that they were His chosen people (Ezekiel 20:12, 20; Exodus 31:12-17). It continues, in fact, as the day God commands for rest and holiness—it is still a sign for distinguishing God's people (see Hebrews 4:9-10, which states that the Sabbath rest remains, and our free booklet, *Sunset to Sunset: God's Sabbath Rest*). It is not the only identifying sign, of course, because many keep the Sabbath without really knowing why or obeying God in all other areas—but it is nonetheless an important one and certainly one of the most visible. Sadly, the modern nations of Israel—those of northwest European heritage, chief of which are the United States and Britain—stand guilty of idolatry and, especially, of Sabbath breaking, which they do not even recognize as sin. It is partly because they don't recognize and honor God's Sabbath that they cannot truly understand and know God (see again Ezekiel 20:12, 20).

In verses 11, 13 and 21, God quotes Leviticus 18:5, which explains that God gave the people statutes and judgments that would enable them to *live*, and states that the people had rejected these. This verse in Leviticus had introduced laws of sexual morality, forbidding adultery, incest, homosexuality, etc. The clear implication is that Israel had sunk into sexual depravity (compare Ezekiel 22:9-11).

So, God says, He "gave them up to statutes that were *not* good, and judgments by which they could *not* live" (20:25). Some theologians gravely misinterpret this verse as meaning that, because of the Israelites' disobedience, God imposed on them "bad laws," such as sacrifices, tithing, the Holy Days, etc. Of course, God does not give "bad laws." This verse has nothing to do with any laws that He gave—whether ceremonial laws instituted for a time or permanent statutes such as tithing and the Holy Days. Rather, as Psalm 81:12 explains, God gave them over to their own stubborn hearts' desires and reasoning. In other words, He let Israel reap what it had sown. Romans 1:18-32 mentions how people who rejected God and His truth were given over to lewd and evil practices such as homosexuality—an exact parallel with Ezekiel 20. The Israelites descended so far as to burn their children in sacrifice (verse 26). In short, God allowed the Israelites to depart from His system of law and morality and embrace that of the world around them—to their great detriment, so they would ultimately learn a powerful lesson.

God decries Israel's participation in pagan worship beginning not long after the nation came into Canaan. In verse 29 God says: "Then I said to them, 'What is this high place to which you go?' So its name is called Bamah [high place] to this day." The Israelites had worshiped at pagan high places (hill shrines) so much that "high place" became a generic term for any place of worship, still in common usage in Ezekiel's time.

In verses 30-31, God warns the people of Israel—the Jews of Ezekiel's time and all Israel of the end time—that they are following the wicked example of their ancestors. The modern Israelite nations are, as mentioned, replete with idolatry and Sabbath breaking. Sexual immorality is commonplace and widely accepted among them. And, as mentioned in the Bible Reading Program commentary on Ezekiel 16, their people are guilty of child sacrifice—that is, through abortion or "offering" children over to society's ultimately lethal values.

God will not allow the nation to cross-examine Him (20:31). Instead, its people will be punished. Still, "judgment isn't a sign God has abandoned. It is evidence that He keeps on being committed to us [compare Hebrews 12:5-11]. Israel *wanted* to desert God and serve pagan deities ([Ezekiel 20] v. 32). God says 'Never.' His love is greater than all our sin. We can stray, but God will bring us back to Him" (*Bible Reader's Companion*, note on verses 32-38). Of course, whether an individual remains faithful to God is ultimately that person's choice. But, knowing the human heart, God is confident of saving the vast majority of His people.

God will ultimately deliver the Israelites with an outpouring of fury on the unrepentant among them and on their enemies (verses 33-34). Verse 34 shows that God planned to regather the Israelites even as He was determining to scatter them. As in the original Exodus, God will again lead the people through the wilderness in a journey of return to the Holy Land (verses 35-36). The passage here refers not to the Jewish return from Babylonian exile in ancient times but to a future return of all Israel.

But there is a warning here. God says, "I will make you pass under the rod" (verse 37). This terminology is used in Leviticus 27:32 in reference to a shepherd counting His sheep with respect to tithing, where one out of ten is devoted to God. This could mean an enumeration or the indication that many Israelites will die and that God will start over again with a "tithe" of those who go into captivity (compare Amos 5:3). This certainly fits the imagery of the purge God says He is conducting—to get rid of the rebels (not allowing them to return to the land of Israel) before bringing those who are left back to the Promised Land and into His covenant (Ezekiel 20:37-38).

Verse 39, in the New American Standard Bible, states, "Go ahead and worship your idols for now, you Israelites, because soon I will no longer let you dishonor me by offering gifts to them." God will put a stop to their idolatry—through bringing the people to repentance and removing those who refuse to repent. God's "holy mountain, on the mountain height of Israel" (verse 40) is here a reference to God's future Kingdom, in which Jesus Christ will reign over Israel and all nations from Jerusalem (see Isaiah 2:2-4; Micah 4:1-3). At last, the Israelites will understand the evil of their ways and come to hate them. They will finally come to know the true God and embrace His ways in genuine repentance.

### **Fire and Sword Against the South (Ezekiel 20:45–21:32)**

**September 19-20**

As noted in the previous reading, the authoritative Hebrew text of the Old Testament has a chapter break after Ezekiel 20:44, making verses 45-49 part of the next chapter. This makes sense, as there is a clear thematic break from the previous section. God goes from the promise of future national restoration to the call again for judgment. Verses 45-49 contain a parable in this regard that is interpreted in the first seven verses of chapter 21.

The message of this section is for the "south." In fact, Ezekiel 20:46 uses three *different* Hebrew terms translated "south." "The three words used for 'south' in this verse are (1) *temanah* which basically means 'right,' so that when facing east in the normal orientation of that day, the 'right' would be 'south'; (2) *darom* is Ezekiel's normal designation for 'south,' used only for geographical directions in all O[ld] T[estament] occurrences; and (3) *neghebh* [or Negev], a term that denotes a 'dried-up land,' normally the region south of the Judean hill country from Beersheba south, though it is also used for geographical direction (especially here combined with the word 'forest')." (*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, footnote on verse 46). "The southern forest referred to the southern kingdom of Judah, a forested area in biblical times, even into the upper Negev" (note on verses 45-49). The point is to emphasize whom the prophecy concerns—the Jews of the land of Judah in Ezekiel's own day.

The “forest” is also a figurative reference to Jerusalem and its royalty, the royal buildings having been built from Lebanon cedars—the national armory even named the “House of the Forest of Lebanon” (see 1 Kings 7:2; 10:17). Through Jeremiah God had foretold the fall of Judah’s royal family this way: “They shall cut down your choice cedars and cast them into the fire” (Jeremiah 22:6-7).

Ezekiel complains to God that those hearing his message dismiss his words as too mysterious to understand (Ezekiel 20:49). So God directs him to explain matters more clearly.

The message is for Jerusalem, the holy places of the land and all those in “the land of Israel,” which, in context, meant Judah of that time (21:2). The “fire” that would spread “from the south to the north” (20:47-48) represented a “sword” of warfare “against all flesh from south to north” (21:3-4). “From the south to the north” *may* simply mean everywhere throughout the country. But it could also indicate the direction of destruction. Later in the chapter, the sword is referred to as “the sword of the king of Babylon” (verse 19). While the Babylonian invasion of Judah would initially come from the north, it is interesting to note that the Babylonians would withdraw from their siege of Jerusalem to march south to face oncoming Egyptian forces—and then turn around, wreaking devastation from south to north, in a final onslaught against Jerusalem.

God says to the land, “I will draw my sword...and cut off both righteous and wicked from you” (verse 3). “This pairing shows that God was going to allow the dreadful temporal consequences of sin to affect everyone in the land, both faithful and unfaithful” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verses 3-5). Yet it should be pointed out that if the faithful are allowed to die, that does not mean they are being punished as the wicked. Indeed, since they will be resurrected later, this could well be a way to spare them further suffering (compare Isaiah 57:1-2). There are many examples in Scripture of God allowing His true servants to be killed. However, the cutting off of the righteous from the land by the sword does not necessarily mean their death. This could also mean that they are deported—physically taken away from the land—as a result of military invasion. Indeed, this must at least be included in the meaning, as verse 4 says the sword is against “all flesh” in the land, and yet we know that many people were not killed. In any case, the removal of the righteous, through either death or deportation, removes the possibility of God preserving the nation for their sake (compare Genesis 18:16-33).

God tells Ezekiel to make a big display of emotion, sighing in great agony and distress, to illustrate what the reaction of the people will be when they receive news that their country is invaded and being destroyed. The phrase “breaking heart...translates words that literally mean, ‘breaking loins,’ suggesting great emotional upheaval” (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verse 6). The feeble hands and weak knees of the people (verse 7) are also foretold in Ezekiel 7:17—in a passage representing ancient Judah’s destruction as typical of end-time destruction (which may be a hint of some duality in Ezekiel 21 even though the message was primarily for Ezekiel’s own day).

There are five sword oracles in chapter 21: verses 3-7, 8-17, 18-24, 25-27, 28-32. Again, the sword signifies the military power to make war. God says the sword belongs to Him (verse 3) but He gives it “into the hand of the slayer” (verse 11)—revealed in verse 19 to be the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar. God says this sword is set against “the scepter of My son” just as it is set against “all wood” in the country (verse 10) or, put better, “every tree” (KJV), bringing in again the figure of the forest that was to be cut down and burned. God had earlier explained that the nation of Israel was His “son” (Exodus 4:22; Hosea 11:1). And the “scepter” was the symbol of the nation’s rulers. “The sword has no more respect to the trivial ‘rod’ or scepter of Judah (Gen. 49:10) than if it were any common ‘tree.’ ‘Tree’ is the image retained from ch. 20:47” (*Jamieson, Fausset & Brown’s Commentary*, note on Ezekiel 21:10).

Indeed, verse 12 explains that the sword will be against the people and princes of the nation. For this reason, Ezekiel is told to “cry and wail”—either as a lament or, perhaps more likely, as a further demonstration of the future reaction of the people to “terrors.” He is to “strike his thigh,” a sign of deep anguish and grief, “because it is a testing” (verse 13)—that is, a “trial,” as the word has been alternatively rendered. And if the trial of this invasion is directed against the scepter, would the scepter survive? This is a crucial question, as God had promised in Genesis 49:10 that the scepter would remain with Judah until the time of the coming of the Messiah to claim it. He had promised King David an unbreakable dynasty that would rule from a throne in all generations (2 Samuel 7; Psalm 89:4). The Davidic throne’s survival is addressed later in the chapter.

In Ezekiel 21:14, God tells Ezekiel to strike his hands together, perhaps clapping to gain attention or making a gesture of anger or readiness to fight similar to the modern fist punched into an open palm (compare Numbers 24:10). “Let the sword strike twice, even three times” (Ezekiel

21:14, NIV) may be idiomatic for the intensity of punishment (compare Proverbs 6:16). Yet it could signify an actual number of strikes. Ezekiel 21:12 had stated that the sword would strike the people and the princes (two strikes), and many who went into captivity would be struck later (a third strike to finish the job). It is also conceivable that the three strikes meant the three periods of destruction against the Jews in the Holy Land—the Babylonian invasion of Ezekiel’s day, the Roman destruction in apostolic times and the end-time destruction the Bible foretells. Of course, it may be that something else is intended. Commentators have offered a number of possibilities.

In verses 18-19, God tells Ezekiel to represent two possible routes of Babylonian conquest. This probably means he “drew a map, perhaps in the dirt or on a brick, on which he made a road from Babylonia toward Canaan. He placed a signpost in the road where it forked, one branch leading toward Rabbath-Ammon, the capital of Ammon [known today as Amman, Jordan], and the other branch descending to Jerusalem (vv. 18-20). Damascus was the normal junction where the road divided. The king of Babylonia, Nebuchadnezzar, was shown standing at the fork in the road, using all manner of magic and divination in order to determine which nation he should attack first (v. 21). The combined conspiracy of Judah and Ammon against Babylonia in 589 B.C. undoubtedly precipitated this coming of the Babylonian army. Shaking arrows inscribed with personal or place names (belomancy) was a form of casting lots. Each arrow was marked with a name, the arrows placed in the quiver, the quiver whirled about, and the first arrow to fall out was the gods’ decision. Household idols were intimately related to ancestral inheritance. Perhaps also they were consulted as mediums, representatives for their forefathers, who were supposed to give guidance (necromancy). The liver, being the seat of the life, was commonly examined with a decision of divination being determined from its color or markings (hepatoscopy). Nebuchadnezzar used all three means of divination with the same result. Though God did not condone divination in any form, he was the sovereign God who controlled all things. He could control these pagan practices to accomplish his will (cf. Jer 27:6)” (*Expositor’s*, note on verses 18-21).

God says the signs will point to Jerusalem, so Nebuchadnezzar will give the order to besiege the Jewish capital (verse 22). Verse 23 in the New Living Translation reads: “The people of Jerusalem will think it is a mistake, because of their treaty with the Babylonians. But the king of Babylon will remind the people of their rebellion. Then he will attack and capture them.”

Verses 25-32 are written against Zedekiah. He is to “remove the diadem and take off the crown” (verse 26, KJV). Some see diadem here as a reference to the miter of the priesthood, but that would not apply to Zedekiah. Rather, the imagery here is of stripping Zedekiah of the Israelite crown—of the kingship. Yet what of God’s scepter promise?

God continues in verse 26, “This shall not be the same” (KJV). There was a change occurring in regard to the national crown. Then notice: “Exalt him that is low and abase him that is high” (KJV). The abasement of the high is easy to understand: Zedekiah being brought down. But what is meant by the exaltation of him that is low in the same context? It must refer to crowning someone else with Davidic kingship. As explained in our online publication *The Throne of Britain: Its Biblical Origin and Future* (at [www.ucg.org/brp/materials/throne/index.html](http://www.ucg.org/brp/materials/throne/index.html)), the Jewish monarchy continued through a daughter of Zedekiah who married into Israelite royalty, transplanting the Davidic scepter from Judah to Israel in ancient Ireland. As was noted in Ezekiel 17:22-24, the abasement of the high and the exaltation of the low concerned not just the rulers themselves but their nations—Judah, losing the Davidic monarchy, was brought low and Israel was raised up.

Where the New King James version repeats the word “overthrown” three times in Ezekiel 21:27, other versions repeat the word “ruined.” The King James Version has “overturn”—a toppling or pulling down to be sure but allowing for a shift and replanting elsewhere. Jeremiah’s commission was to pull down but also to plant and rebuild (Jeremiah 1:9-10)—and he was the key figure in transferring the throne.

Verse 27 then seems to say that the throne would “be no more” (KJV)—i.e., cease to exist—until centuries later with the coming of Him to whom it belongs, Jesus Christ. But remember that God had promised that David would have a descendant reigning on his throne in every generation. So it seems that a better translation of the verse would be: “I will overturn, overturn, overturn it; and it shall be no more [overturned] until He come whose right it is.” The mentioning of overturn three times would seem to imply that the throne would be pulled down and moved three times. As our online publication explains, the first transfer was from Judah to Ireland. The second was from Ireland to Scotland. And the third was from Scotland to England. The monarchy of Great Britain is the chief monarchy of David.

Finally we see that Nebuchadnezzar's decision to destroy Jerusalem had not gotten the Ammonites off the hook. They were still slated for punishment by the sword of invasion and slaughter. The first part of Ezekiel 21:30 is clearer in the King James Version: "Shall I cause it to return to its sheath?" The answer is no—not without first destroying Ammon.

A number years prior, "while Jehoiakim was king (608-598 B.C.; 2 Kin. 24:2), the Ammonites joined other nations east of the Jordan in raiding Judean territory, in return for protection from Nebuchadnezzar. Later, during the reign of Zedekiah (c. 593 B.C.), Ammon, Moab, Edom, and others conspired against Babylon, but with false hopes of help from Egypt (Jer. 27:3-11)" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on Ezekiel 21:28). The people of Ammon mocked the Jews, delighting in the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple—happy that they were not the subject of Babylon's conquest. Yet "the fall of Jerusalem meant only that Judah would be judged first. Some Judeans took refuge in Ammon (see Jer. 41:1-3). God remembered Ammon's animosity and foretold its future as a place that shall not be remembered. The events of Jer. 41 led to a Babylonian expedition against Ammon in which the capital city Rabbah was sacked and many inhabitants deported (see 25:1-7). Ammon was later invaded by Arabs and its autonomy ceased. Eventually it was absorbed into the Persian Empire" (note on Ezekiel 21:31-32).

Again, it is possible that there is some duality here regarding the end time, when Ammon will initially escape devastation at the hand of the future Roman/Babylonian dictator (see Daniel 11:41) but will later suffer judgment (see Amos 1:13-15; Jeremiah 49:1-6). Another prophecy against Ammon is given in Ezekiel 25:1-7.

### **The Bloody City; Dross in a Furnace; Standing in the Gap (Ezekiel 22) September 21-22**

Chapter 22 presents us with three messages from God. The first is a record of national abominations as the basis for judgment (verses 1-16). The second is metaphor of metal smelting to demonstrate that God's judgment reveals the entire nation to be spiritually worthless (verses 17-22). And the third decries the wickedness of every stratum of society, from the nation's religious and civil leaders to the average person (verses 23-31).

The first section concerns "the bloody city" (verse 2). It is not stated here what city is meant but the context shows it to be Jerusalem as representative of the entire Jewish nation in Ezekiel's day—and probably of all Israel and Judah of future ages, especially the end time. That Jerusalem of Ezekiel's day is intended is clear from the fact that when the Babylonian siege against the city begins, God tells the prophet to proclaim "woe to the bloody city" (see 24:1-3, 6, 9).

This is a horrible designation, given previously to the Assyrian capital of Nineveh (Nahum 3:1). The Assyrians had received this distinction for brutalizing other nations, but Jerusalem "sheds blood in her own midst" (Ezekiel 22:3). One way this came about was in connection with the nation's terrible idolatry. The Valley of Hinnom was a renowned place for idol worship, where children were sacrificed to Molech. The nation's leaders used their power to have others murdered (verse 6). Many people made false accusations against others to have them put to death (verse 9). In later centuries, Jesus Christ explained that Jerusalem was guilty of the blood of the righteous, putting many of God's servants to death (Matthew 23:34-37). Indeed, Jesus Himself was killed there.

Throughout the nations of Israel today, murder rates are high—and the guilty are not justly punished. A million and a half unborn infants are murdered in the United States alone every single year—through the determination and ruling of many of our national leaders and judges. And the entire culture is taught a way of life leading to personal destruction and, ultimately, national suicide.

A whole host of sins, particularly among the nation's leaders, are listed in this section. "Whenever the attitudes detailed here appear in a society, it is near collapse. What are the signs? The undermining of parental authority (v. 7a). Injustices that take advantage of the poor and helpless (v. 7b). Indifference of leaders to the best interests of those they rule, as well as indifference to the things of God (v. 8). A legal reign of terror, including murders (v. 9a). Leaders engaging in sex sins (vv. 9b-11) and seeking illicit personal profit (v. 12). When any society forgets God and strays from its spiritual foundations, its leadership will become corrupt and the nation will ultimately fall. Where is our society today? Apply Ezekiel's criteria and decide for yourself" (*Bible Reader's Companion*, note on verses 7-12).

As in chapter 20, Sabbath breaking is shown to be a big reason for national punishment, being mentioned in both Ezekiel 22:8 and verse 26. Eating on the mountains in verse 9—as in 18:6 and verse 11—refers to participation in pagan worship.

God concludes that He will scatter the people of the nation in line with other prophecies of national deportation. This certainly happened to the Jews of Ezekiel's day. It had already happened

to the northern kingdom of Israel more than a century earlier. In early Christian times, it would again happen to the Jewish nation. And at the time of the end, it will happen to the nations of Israel and Judah together. Notice that God says that through this he would remove the nation's filthiness, its spiritual defilement of sin, "completely." While the removal of sinful behavior was accomplished by degrees through previous captivities, the *complete* removal of the nation's sins would seem to point mainly to the captivity of the end time, in which the severe humbling of the people will pave the way for their acceptance of Jesus Christ. For only the acceptance of Christ's sacrifice provides a true atonement for sin, and only His life within a person through the Holy Spirit enables that person to truly obey God as God requires. The Jewish people obviously have yet to accept Christ. But so do the supposedly "Christian" nations of modern Israel, as they have not really submitted to the true Christ and His ways.

The next section of Ezekiel 22 concerns the "house of Israel" being placed "into the midst of a furnace." This applied on one level to the invasion and destruction of ancient Judah by the Babylonians. But as with other prophecies in Ezekiel, it also seems to point to the fire of the terrible Great Tribulation that will engulf Israel and Judah shortly before the return of Christ.

The focus of this section is the parable of the metal in a furnace being revealed as all dross. That is, the impurity is so pervasive that there is nothing of value left. Similar imagery was given in Jeremiah 6:27-30, where Jeremiah, as an "assayer," was to label the nation "rejected silver." In Isaiah 1:21-22, God had likewise lamented: "How the faithful city has become a harlot! It was full of justice; righteousness lodged in it, but now murderers. Your silver has become dross."

Trials leading up to final destruction served to reveal the widespread corruption. "Judgment displays the people's impurity ([Ezekiel 22] vv. 17-22)... Just as the hot fires of the smelter's furnace cause the dross to come to the surface and reveal the purified silver, so in times of divine judgment human beings are driven to act according to their character. The selfish become more cruel and self-centered; the godly more compassionate and caring. Remember this when troubles come to you, and let the fires of God's judgment on society bring out the best in you!" (note on verses 1-31).

Indeed, besides the focus on the destruction God would ultimately bring, the verses here "also point to the fiery ordeals and trials that force all of us into a more perfect relationship with our Lord (see v. 22; Ps. 66:10; Jer. 9:7; Dan. 11:35; 12:10; Zech. 13:9; Mal. 3:1-3; James 1:2-4)" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on Ezekiel 22:17-22).

Verses 23-31 show that corruption pervades the entire society. The civil rulers use their positions for harm and personal gain (verse 27). The prophets and priests—the religious preachers and teachers—are causing the people to be destroyed (verse 25-26). They violate God's law, setting an evil example. Moreover, they fail to distinguish "between the holy and unholy" or "between the unclean and the clean." They do not teach the people of God's Holy Days or of His holy tithes. They do not teach what God declares food fit for human consumption and what he forbids to be eaten. God even says that they have "hidden their eyes" from His Sabbaths—refusing to even look into the possibility that they should be observed. How true all of this is today throughout the churches of the nations of Israel!

Verse 28 repeats a theme from Ezekiel 13—prophets falsely claiming to be relaying God's teachings or message, whitewashing over the sins of the nation and giving the people a false sense of security. The results are apparent. "The people of the land" (22:29)—the common people, average citizens—stand guilty of severely mistreating others, oppressing and robbing them.

Verse 30 reflects God's continual hope that His wrath may be diverted. He does not rejoice in punishing even those deserving of punishment. So He looks for those who might "stand in the gap" for the people. This also repeats imagery from Ezekiel 13, where God said of Israel's prophets, "You have not gone up into the gaps to build a wall for the house of Israel to stand in battle on the day of the LORD" (verse 5). This gives us further reason to see an end-time application of Ezekiel 22. Again, as pointed out in chapter 13 and 22:28, rather than repairing the gaps in Israel's moral condition, which would give the nation real security, the false prophets effectively plaster over the gaps with a thin whitewash, leaving the people defenseless but deluded and complacent.

Standing in the gap is the mark of a man of God. It involves trying to protect others through interceding for them in prayer and seeing to it that they are told what God really wants them to know. Sadly, God says He cannot find anyone to fill this responsibility. Yet when Ezekiel wrote, did not he and Jeremiah both fit that description? And in the end time, will there not be true Christians with the proper mindset? Yes, but "a qualified leader is useless if the people refuse to be led" (*Nelson Study Bible*, note on verse 30). What God must be saying is that He is not able to find anyone to

repair the society's spiritual gaps because anyone who might actually be able to would be rejected by the people.

So God says He will pour out His fury on the nation (verse 31). Tragically, people today do not even conceive of God as ever being wrathful and righteously indignant. They make fun of that concept as backward and unenlightened. So many today see God as always gentle, always forgiving no matter what—never judging or punishing people for even the greatest crimes. People have forgotten about the God who flooded the earth, rained destruction on Sodom and Gomorrah, slew the firstborn of Egypt and brought famines, diseases and military invasion on ancient Israel and Judah as punishment for sin. The same God stands ready to justly punish our evil society today—not to punish for punishment's sake, but rather for the sake of turning the collective hearts and minds of people away from the sin that destroys them, to lead mankind into a lawful way of living that will bring rich and abundant blessings for all who will submit to Him.

**FALL FESTIVAL BREAK****September 23–October 31**

*We are breaking for the last week of September and for the month of October to allow time for the study and observance of God's autumn festivals, which symbolize the time of Jesus Christ's return to this earth—also taking into consideration time needed afterward to travel home from the Feast of Tabernacles, catch up on errands, and settle back into routines. (For any who would like more information on God's annual festivals as recorded in Leviticus 23, please send for or download our free booklet God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind.) The Bible Reading Program resumes November 1.*

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