

Act II: Love scorned (a tale of callous betrayal)

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 14 August 2011

Preacher: Rupert Hunt-Taylor

[0 : 0 0] Now, would you please turn to your Bibles and the Visitor's Bible on page 702. We're going to have the reading in two parts, and I certainly am very much looking forward to Act 2 of the drama which Rupert will be leading us through.

Rupert began this series on Ezekiel 16 last week, and will be continuing this evening and the next two evenings. It's a great privilege to share with him in this service together.

So I'm going to read verses 1 to 12 of chapter 16, and then later on Rupert will read the rest of the passage that he's going to be preaching on. Again the word of the Lord came to me.

Son of man, make known to Jerusalem her abominations, and say, Thus says the Lord God to Jerusalem, Your origin and your birth are of the land of the Canaanites.

Your father was an Amorite, and your mother a Hittite. And as for your birth, on the day you were born, your cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to cleanse you, nor rubbed with salt, nor wrapped in swaddling cloths.

[1 : 1 3] No eye pitied you to do any of these things to you out of compassion for you, but you were cast out on the open field, for you were abhorred on the day that you were born.

And when I passed by you and saw you wallowing in your blood, I said to you in your blood, Live! I said to you in your blood, Live!

I made you flourish like a plant of the field, and you grew up and became tall, and arrived at full adornment. Your breasts were formed, and your hair had grown.

Yet you were naked and bare. When I passed by you again and saw you, Behold, you were at the age for love, and I spread the corner of my garment over you, and covered your nakedness.

I made my vow to you and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Lord God, and you became mine. Then I bathed you with water, and washed off your blood from you, and anointed you with oil.

[2 : 1 8] I clothed you also with embroidered cloth, and shod you with fine leather. I wrapped you in fine linen, and covered you with silk. And I adorned you with ornaments, and put bracelets on your wrist, and a chain on your neck.

And I put a ring on your nose, and earrings in your ears, and a beautiful crown on your head. Amen. May God bless to us that reading from his word.

Well, turn with me back to Ezekiel chapter 16. It's page 702 in the Church Bibles. And we'll take up the story again from verse 13.

Verse 13. Thus you were adorned with gold and silver, and your clothing was fine linen and silk and embroidered cloth.

You ate fine flour and honey and oil. You grew exceedingly beautiful and advanced to royalty. And your renown went forth among the nations because of your beauty, for it was perfect through the splendor that I had bestowed on you, declares the Lord God.

[3 : 35] But you trusted in your beauty, and played the whore because of your renown, and lavished your whorings on any passerby.

Your beauty became his. You took some of your garments and made for yourself colorful shrines, and on them played the whore. The like has never been, nor ever shall be.

You also took your beautiful jewels of my gold and my silver, which I had given you, and made for yourself images of men, and with them played the whore.

And you took your embroidered garments to cover them, and set my oil and my incense before them. Also my bread that I gave you, I fed you with fine flour and oil and honey, you set before them for a pleasing aroma.

And so it was, declares the Lord God. And you took your sons and your daughters, whom you had borne to me, and these you sacrificed to them to be devoured.

[4 : 44] Were your whorings so small a matter, that you slaughtered my children, and delivered them up as an offering by fire to them? And in all your abominations and your whorings, you did not remember the days of your youth, when you were naked and bare, wallowing in your blood.

And after all your wickedness, woe, woe to you, declares the Lord God, you built yourself a vaulted chamber, and made yourself a lofty place in every square. At the head of every street, you built your lofty place, and made your beauty an abomination, offering yourself to any passerby, and multiplying your whoring.

You played the whore with the Egyptians, your lustful neighbours, multiplying your whoring to provoke me to anger. Behold, therefore, I stretched out my hand against you, and diminished your allotted portions, and delivered you to the greed of your enemies, the daughters of the Philistines, who were ashamed of your lewd behaviour.

You played the whore also with the Assyrians, because you were not satisfied. Yes, you played the whore with them, and still, you were not satisfied. You multiplied your whorings also in the land of Chaldea, and even with this, you were not satisfied.

How sick is your heart, declares the Lord God, because you did all these things, the deeds of a brazen prostitute, building your vaulted chamber at the head of every street, and making your lofty place in every square.

[6 : 24] Yet, you were not like a prostitute, because you scorned payment. Adulterous wife, who receives strangers instead of her husband. Men give gifts to all prostitutes, but you gave your gifts to all your lovers, bribing them to come to you, from every side with your whorings.

So you were different from other women in your whorings. No one solicited you to play the whore, and you gave payment, while no payment was given to you.

Therefore, you were different. This is the word of the Lord. May he bless it to us this evening. Well, if you've allowed your Bibles to close, then please open them up again.

It's page 702, Ezekiel 16. And once we've found that, we'll have a moment of prayer. Our good and gracious God, we come to your word now, confident that it speaks powerfully and purposefully.

But we also know, Lord, that we have stubborn hearts, and that my human words will struggle and fail to express the glory of your living word. So we ask, Lord, for clarity.

[7 : 43] We ask for conviction. And we ask, Father, for courage in applying this difficult message to our own lives. And we ask it all for the glory of your Son, Jesus, our Lord.

Amen. Well, our passage tonight is certainly not one I've ever come across in a children's picture Bible.

I think it's fair to say that Ezekiel 16 has not yet been considered as bedtime reading in the Hunt Taylor household. And if the language was difficult for you to listen to, then believe me, it was harder to read out in church.

So let me say right at the start that if you're shocked, even angered, by the passage we've just read, then you are right where Ezekiel wants you.

In fact, if you have a look at some other English translations, you'll see that our church ESV Bibles are pretty tame. But if you're uncomfortable with it, or you're concerned about whether we should be studying a passage like this at all, especially with children present, then I think you have a right to ask why the prophet resorts to such shocking tactics.

[9 : 03] Well, to answer that, we have to remind ourselves how we got here. Tonight we're in the second act of a gripping story. The whole history of God's ancient people, his Old Testament church, told as an epic parable.

It's a tragedy about the Lord God's unrequited love for Israel. And as we saw last week, Ezekiel's tragedy opened with Israel represented as a little, unloved, destitute, baby girl.

An unwanted daughter, literally thrown out on the scrap heap. But act one of this tragedy was a tale of extravagant grace, of love lavished on Israel.

God rescued that little girl and brought her up in luxury and made her his princess. It was a rags-to-riches story, an unlovable wretch with nothing to offer.

He became the queen, a people God chose above all others to be his bride. And then came the shock.

[10 : 18] That young princess returned the scandalous love shown to her with cold, callous betrayal. But why the need to tell the story of her betrayal like this?

Why all the shocking language and the frankly quite pornographic imagery? Well, because I suspect the truth is that as we pick apart the allegory tonight and delve into the history behind the story, most of you who know your Bibles fairly well will learn little new.

You see, the Bible already has history books. We could learn about Israel's idolatry, about her rejection of the covenant by turning almost anywhere in the Old Testament.

But Ezekiel is not simply trying to teach us ancient history. If he was, I'm sure he'd have been quite capable of doing it in all the dry and polite and slightly dull language of a textbook.

There is, though, something which polite history books don't always manage to get across. And that is what the prophet wants to do. The purpose of this story was to expose the shocking reality that God's smug and complacent people would rather gloss over.

[11 : 41] You see, as much as Ezekiel's original listeners, sitting in exile in Babylon, might have preferred to hear the PG-rated version of this story, Ezekiel refuses to be polite about sin.

Israel's rejection of God's covenant, her refusal to faithfully love her God in spite of all he had done for her was utterly disgraceful. And in act two of this tragedy, Ezekiel wants us to see our disgraceful behavior for exactly what it is.

verse 30 is a key verse here. How sick is your heart, declares the Lord God, because you did all these things, the deeds of a brazen prostitute.

So the graphic language here is a little bit like an echo scan that a doctor might do to assess the state of our hearts. It exposes exactly how sick our hearts really are in a way that polite spin never could do.

That's just what graphic means, isn't it? It's putting the hidden reality into visible images. But just like that ultrasound scan, we also have to be very careful how we interpret those images.

[13 : 08] The shocking story makes this chapter a very powerful tool for getting Ezekiel's message across to God's smug and self-confident church. but it also means it can be misused to cause alarm where it isn't intended.

I know, for example, that for some of us here, the sexual nature of the imagery drags up painful reminders of past lives, lives we'd rather not think about.

In any gospel church, there will be members recovering from damaged and broken sexual backgrounds, perhaps even one not so far removed from the woman in our story.

So let me just say that if that is you, and you're living now under grace, in a humbled and repentant lifestyle, then you are precisely not who this story is aimed at.

the people coming under fire here are the exact opposite. They're the proud and complacent church who haven't recognized the perilous state they're in.

[14 : 16] So while he may use graphic sexual language, this story is not about sex. It's a story about idolatry, about spiritual infidelity to a God of boundless grace, and it's about looking for meaning, or security, or satisfaction anywhere else than in the God who first rescued us.

And it's a story that we will misunderstand and misuse so long as we continue to apply it to someone else. It will be so easy to simply apply this story to our denomination and stop there.

But the harlot in this story is not simply the church of Scotland. Neither is she the woman walking the streets outside or simply the church goer in an adulterous relationship.

The harlot at the center of this tragedy is not the person sitting in front of you or beside you. The harlot is not someone else.

The shock of this story is that the woman at the heart of it didn't represent the Philistines or the Egyptians or any other Gentile nation but God's own people.

[15 : 41] The very people God chose above all other nations had betrayed his love and shared their beds with the idols of those nations.

The harlot was precious, respectable, presentable Judah. And so long as we as a church continue to fall into the same traps as them, and I think we'll find as we go on tonight that we can do just that, then the harlot is you and me.

So having established that, let's subject ourselves to Ezekiel's examination and we'll find that as Ezekiel exposes the ugly reality of sin, he gives us three things to watch out for.

three hallmarks of a church tumbling from grace. It's as if after the beautiful romance and tenderness of last week's rags to riches story, we see our heroine falling off a cliff tonight.

Just as soon as we saw God's ancient church chosen in sheer grace and washed of her murky past and crowned as his bride, she begins to spiral downwards into madness and betrayal.

[17 : 00] And by the time she hits the rocks below, our beautiful young woman, rescued from nothing, will be nothing again, from rags to riches and back to rags.

It's as if we're watching her fall tonight in slow motion and before she crashes to the bottom of the cliff, we get three horrible frozen images, three terrifying and grotesque pictures of the church's fall from grace.

And the first hallmark of a church in free fall is this, our rags are quickly forgotten. Our rags are quickly forgotten. It doesn't take us long, does it, to forget what we've been rescued from.

I'm sure many of you will think back like me to the days of your conversion with relief. Remember the relief and the joy with which you embrace the gospel. But as the years tick by and our scandalous past fades into the background, we become comfortable with grace.

What we once recognized as radical and liberating becomes familiar, even cheap. And the warning from Judah's example is that the church, as a whole family of believers, can suffer the same collective amnesia.

[18 : 25] Our rags are quickly forgotten, and when that happens, we've started to stumble over the edge of the cliff. I think the great genius in the way this story is told is the shock of verse 15.

We're left stunned, aren't we? Wondering how any plausible character could be so cruel. We're left to ask how any husband who's given so much in love for his bride could be betrayed so callously.

Well, many people have described this book of Ezekiel as a picture gallery. The whole book is like a string of powerful images, and at this stage, some writers imagine the Lord going over and over those pictures in his mind.

First, that little baby girl at the start of the story, unloved, unwashed, undesirable. But for his own mysterious reasons, he desired her.

The next memory is the adolescent romance. She's flourishing and growing tall, but she still needs a husband. And despite the huge gulf in their status, he loves her and pledges himself to her in marriage.

[19 : 41] The next memory is the honeymoon years. She's beautiful. She's dressed in the silks and jewelry that he's delighted in giving her. She's holding her head high, and on it sits the crown.

And she can't believe her luck. But then suddenly, the next memory comes, and it's the one which haunts him. Something is terribly wrong.

Her eyes are cold, and she's distant, and the marital intimacy has been irreparably broken. And then it all comes out. Despite all that he's done for her, all that he's given her, she has violated his trust and ransacked the marriage for the sake of her own appetite.

And Ezekiel's listeners are left to ask, why? Well, it's not until verse 22 that we're explicitly told what went wrong.

you did not remember the days of your youth when you were naked and bare, wallowing in your blood. You forgot what I did for you.

[20 : 52] But the clues of that forgetfulness come much sooner, don't they? That's the force of the great shock of verse 15. How could she possibly act this way after everything we've just read? Well, Israel simply forgot how hugely privileged she was as the covenant people of God's grace.

No sooner was the crown on her head than that grace grew cheap and she began to grow fat on the royal flour and honey. She forgot what we saw last week, that all her riches and beauty were nothing but God's sheer gift.

So although verse 14 reminds us that she was beautiful simply through the splendor that God had bestowed on her, by verse 15, we see her acting as if that beauty was hers by right, hers to pride herself on.

She trusted in her beauty and played the whore. Grace is forgotten and pride always replaces it. Well, how do we see that same mistake in the New Testament church?

Of course, it's easy, isn't it, to point the finger to other churches who've forgotten their roots. Clearly, when God's people forget what they were rescued from and lose their focus on grace, all sorts of other issues begin to crowd out the gospel.

[22 : 18] Perhaps good issues like a concern for social justice or the environment or equality or tolerance. But what about us? I wonder what concerns crowd out the gospel and allow pride to grow in an evangelical church.

I would suggest that when we meet together, either on a Sunday or in small groups or in CU groups, and our chief concern is something like, what will the music be like?

Or will we catch up with our friends tonight? Or will I find someone nice to talk to? Perhaps even a nice Christian partner? Anything other than, will I be faithful to the God who plucked me out of the muck?

Then we've already begun to lose sight of our roots. Our rags are quickly forgotten and we're teetering towards the edge of the cliff. But there's a second trait here of a church losing its way that is very prominent in these verses.

And that is that God's riches are quickly abused. You must have noticed, as we read through verses 16 to 29, the constant repetition of the same refrain.

[23 : 36] You took my gifts and gave them to them, to your adulterous lovers. We saw last week, didn't we, that everything Israel had, she had by grace.

She was the pauper who married the king. And so all of it was a gift. And now all of it is squandered. The very tokens of love and grace that God had showered his bride with in Act 1, she now showers on other men.

His beautiful silks and linens, she turns in verse 16 into shrines for her idols. She took his precious gifts, verse 17, of gold and silver and modeled them into make-belief gods to use as playthings.

The fine palace food with which he had fed that little abandoned child, the flour and oil and honey on which he had thrived through his generosity, she takes and offers to them.

But it's in verse 15 again that we hear the real cry of pain, the agonizing betrayal. You lavished your whorings on any passerby, on any old person you could find, and your beauty became his.

[24 : 55] She gave away the most costly thing she had, the trust and the intimacy of her covenant relationship. Israel's beauty was God's gift.

She was nothing special, but as we saw last week, he made her very special. And even that beauty which belonged to her God, she gave away as if it were a cheap box of chocolates.

Her rags were quickly forgotten, and God's riches, his gifts, were quickly abused. And what's left is a complete breakdown in the relationship.

Gone is all trust, and all intimacy, and all meaningful communication. So even in verse 27, when the Lord disciplines her by giving away some of her land to the Philistines, she can't respond, she can't turn herself around.

Trust has been breached, and communication is gone, the marriage is shipwrecked. Well, just for a moment, let's step outside Ezekiel's allegory, and ask ourselves again exactly what he's charging his listeners with here, and then work out how that applies to us in today's church.

[26 : 09] And let's start by reminding ourselves about the people Ezekiel was originally aiming at, the people of Jerusalem, that royal nation of huge covenant privilege, who've now been humiliated by the Babylonians, and are very soon facing complete exile.

In a sense, of course, as we've said, this tells us nothing about them that we couldn't have learned already from the history books, from 2 Kings and from Chronicles. The problem was that God's people had abandoned true worship and fallen for foreign gods, for idols.

So it's a matter of historical fact that long before the exile came, from where Ezekiel was writing, Judah was awash with the shrines of the pagan gods of Egypt, verse 26, the Assyrians, verse 28, who'd conquered Israel, the northern kingdom, and by verse 29, even the Chaldeans, the Babylonians, the very people who would soon destroy them.

And the reason was simple. Jerusalem was desperate for an insurance policy. She was a small nation, surrounded by strong enemies, and she needed protection.

She needed security. Of course, if she could just remember how God had rescued her in the first place, then she would have trusted him, wouldn't she, to do the same again.

[27 : 34] But her rags have long been forgotten. So instead, her kings made deals and political treaties with their pagan allies, and to seal the bargain, they added their impressive foreign godlets to their own religious shopping bags.

So in the allegory, she sets up brothels and shrines. That's the vaulted chambers of verse 31 in every public square. That would be much the same as us opening up an embassy in the middle of Buchanan Street to our latest foreign ally.

So for example, in 2 Kings chapter 16, we read of how King Ahaz struck a deal with the Assyrian ruler in Damascus, and then demanded that a pretty little Damascus be built right in the temple.

Simple historical record. But what Ezekiel adds to the history books is how that looked to God. And to God, it was as if Ahaz had not only taken an adulterous lover, but had moved her in to the marriage bed, to the place where God met his people.

And so if you work through Ezekiel's tragedy, his allegory, point by point, you'll see that what Israel doing was systematically undermining that exclusive covenant relationship with her Lord.

[29 : 01] Even the gifts of flour and honey that she offered to these useless idols were part and parcel of her covenant with Yahweh. They were the fruit of the land which God had promised to Abraham.

Gifts of his grace thrown away. And worst of all, verse 21, she took even the children which God had promised to her, to Abraham.

And in the dark days of King Manasseh, the darkest days of all, she sacrificed them to Molech, to the Canaanite God. And so the rescued child becomes a murderer of children.

But you see what's happened. Her offspring and the fruit of her land, the two most precious covenant gifts which God had promised to Abraham and to Moses, had been thrown away as an insurance policy.

So you see what's really being said. When a woman takes the loving gifts of her husband and gives them to others, it tells you what she thinks of her marriage vows.

[30 : 08] And Judah's marriage vow, her covenant promise to be faithful to the God who rescued her in the first place, is in tatters. But what about us?

What about today's new covenant church? You might not find colourful pagan shrines up here in the pulpit, or little altar places at home in your kitchens. But just as we are in danger of forgetting our rags, this passage warns us that we too can quickly abuse God's riches.

Idolatry still means taking God's good gifts and abusing them. In his grace, God blesses mankind with wonderful provision, with food, with families, with financial security.

And that's his bride, his church. We are surely blessed above all. Think of the wonderful heritage of the church in this nation.

That is surely a marital gift, a beautiful thing given in love. But if we take those good things, family, finances, the kirk, and we begin to treat them as possessions rather than privileges, then we're abusing God's riches.

[31 : 29] None of those things are possessions which can give purpose to our lives. No, they're gifts of the king. Privileges, which he wants to bring pleasure to our lives.

And he wants us to use in a way that honors our marriage, that honors our relationship with our God. But when more of our time, or our money, or our affections are spent on those gifts, rather than on the giver, then we're allowing our marriage beds to grow cold.

If our heart is more excited when we buy a new car, or in my case, a new coffee machine, or a new pair of shoes, then we are scorning his grace and his love for us.

If you're anything like me, and addicted to behavior which treats our God like that, then each one of those little, idolatrous choices probably seems very small and very inconsequential.

But God is saying in Ezekiel 16 that it is like betraying a marriage. It's behavior which we can't afford to be polite about. And it's behavior which isn't simply someone else's problem, because the harlot in this story is you, and it's me.

[32 : 51] But lastly, that sort of behavior simply doesn't make sense. Because there's a third trait which we can learn from the fall of this Old Testament church, and that is that sin never satisfies.

Sin never satisfies. So far the story has followed Ezekiel, Ezekiel's subject, Israel, from foundling child to queen, and then from queen to adulteress.

And now, after that first adulterous betrayal, just notice over these verses how her life spirals out of control. How her behavior becomes more and more desperate.

A frantic bid to numb her appetite. Really, our translations are pretty tame. The point is that what she's doing isn't simply shocking, but it's ludicrously craven behavior.

Look at the footnotes in your church Bibles for verse 25. And you'll get a sense of the real tone here. She literally spreads her legs for any passerby.

[34 : 00] But of course, it's never enough. Now that doesn't mean that sin doesn't feel good. Of course it does. We all know that. But it absolutely cannot satisfy.

satisfy. A dead idol simply cannot deliver the goods. And so we fall into a sickening spiral of madness and stupidity.

It's a pattern that's so desperately familiar, isn't it? The story of countless other heroines of literature and of celebrity. Think of the young musician who rises to success and seems to have it all, but she could never find contentment.

She turns to drink and then to antidepressants and then to narcotics and then with increasing desperation to whatever she could find to fill the void.

And in the end, the tabloids rejoice as the beautiful young girl they once courted is found looking haggard and broken and bitter.

[35 : 05] But surely, if we're honest, that is behaviour which all of us can recognise in our own hearts. Lusting after more and more, caving in to our appetites and crossing more and more boundaries to get what we want.

But whether it's success or a nice home or pornography, it's never quite enough. We all know that, don't we?

However appealing our idol is, it simply cannot deliver what it promises. It's a lesson of Proverbs 27. Death and destruction are never satisfied and neither are the eyes of man.

Never satisfied. Well, verse 30 diagnoses the problem, doesn't it? How sick is your heart because he did all these things, the deeds of a brazen prostitute.

The real sickness and insanity lies here. You see, this woman is not simply a prostitute. She's the queen for goodness sake. She had no possible need for any of this.

[36 : 16] She was well fed. She's loved unremittingly by her king and she's under the protection of his royal status. She can't explain her actions either emotionally or financially.

You see, a prostitute might be driven to the streets. But look at verse 33. She paid her own clients with the Lord's good gifts. It's ludicrous behavior.

It's behavior that is utterly irrational. If Judah had simply looked to her history and how God had rescued her in the past and promised to be faithful to her forever, then she'd have known she didn't need the support or the security of nations like Egypt and Assyria.

Offering money for their protection and offering sacrifices to their gods might have made her feel secure, but neither their army nor their gods could deliver the goods.

At the time it looked prudent, but to us it looks desperately stupid. Yet we do just the same thing. We're constantly looking for security and for love and for comfort and for status outside of the gospel.

[37 : 34] And just like Judah, the idolatry of family or finances or simply filling our lives with nice things can feel very good.

It can even convince us that we're investing in something worthwhile, but there is no lasting love or security outside of Christ, outside of our true lover.

We can invest in all those things as desperately as this adulterous queen paid her lovers. But a dead idol simply cannot deliver the goods.

And in the end, as we'll see next week, our own idols will drag us down. And all the while, her true king looks on in pain as that young girl who he gave so much to rescue repays him with bitter betrayal.

the message here is brutal, but it's simple, isn't it? Don't scorn God's grace. Remember your rags and love him for the riches he's given us in Christ.

[38 : 49] The alternative is three missed steps towards the edge of a cliff. Step one, our rags are forgotten. grace grows dim and pride replaces it.

Step two, God's riches are abused. His good gifts are turned into idols. We worship and serve the created things rather than the creator.

And step three, a downward spiral frantically searching for satisfaction and security outside of Christ's gospel. people. But there is no step four.

The next act of the tragedy doesn't come the way we might expect, but come it must. And the next act brings judgment.

Amen. Let's pray. Amen. Father, we know that we, your people, are truly blessed above all the peoples of the earth, that you have loved us and known us and called us by name to belong to you.

[40 : 07] But we confess, Lord, that all too often we have scorned your love and provoked you to your face. We confess, Lord, that time and again we have forgotten your grace and abused your gifts and played the whore.

Forgive us, Father, and help us to stay true to your Son who died to win us as his bride. For we ask it in his faithful name.

Amen.