

Act I: Love lavished (a tale of extravagant grace)

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Preacher: Rupert Hunt-Taylor

[0 : 00] Well friends, let's open up our Bibles to Ezekiel chapter 16. That's page 702 in the church Bibles. 702. And we're going to spend the next four weeks in this long chapter of Ezekiel. And tonight we're just reading the first 15 verses.

Ezekiel 16. 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 in 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 with swaddling cloths. 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.

[1 : 22] And 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're 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.

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

[2 : 33] 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. But you trusted in your beauty and played the whore because of your renown and lavished your whorings on any passersby.

Your beauty became his. Well, amen. And may God bless to us this powerful word. Well, let's turn back to that passage in Ezekiel chapter 16, page 702.

And once you find it, we'll have a moment of prayer. Heavenly Father, we thank you for the powerful way with which your word speaks.

We thank you that it points us so wonderfully to our king and our bridegroom, the Lord Jesus. And we thank you for the way it holds up a mirror to our own hearts. And reveals the truth about human nature.

[3 : 52] We pray, Lord, tonight that we would meet you in your words. And we would learn about ourselves. And you would teach us to love you and serve you more clearly. We ask that, Lord, in Jesus' name.

Amen. Well, a well-told story can be incredibly powerful. Sometimes a story leaves such a mark on a nation or a culture that just the opening lines can instantly grab our attention and set the pulse racing.

Think, for example, of those gripping first lines of Romeo and Juliet and how they draw you into the story. Two households, both alike in dignity, in fair Verona, where we lay our scene.

From ancient grudge break to new mutiny. Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean. From forth the fatal loins of these two foes.

A pair of star-crossed lovers take their lives. Who's misadventured, piteous overthrows do with their death.

[5 : 04] Bury their parents' strife. It's powerful stuff, isn't it? And buried here in the book of Ezekiel is a story as powerful, I think at least, as has ever been told.

The poetry may not be quite Shakespeare, but this story is as heart-wrenching and as gripping as Romeo and Juliet. And yet the imagery is as vivid as any modern film.

And it's a story with razor-sharp barbs that stick in the flesh of the contemporary church. So that it speaks to us as powerfully as it spoke to its first hearers.

Yet somehow this story of Ezekiel 16 is not one that's often told. Perhaps because we write off prophets like Ezekiel as bambots from ancient history.

And we cheat ourselves out of listening to their message. Perhaps it's because this story alone is as long as many of the minor prophets. Or perhaps it's simply because this message is a little too uncomfortable.

[6 : 15] The graphic language is certainly designed to shock its hearers and make any preacher blush. Well, whatever the reason, we're going to spend the next four weeks letting the story of Ezekiel chapter 16 be told.

And just like so many of the most powerful dramas, this one is a tragedy of unrequited love.

It's a tragedy about the extraordinary and passionate love of the Lord for his ancient people. And her equally extraordinary and cruel scorning of that love.

And it's a tragedy which takes place in four clear acts. So we're going to take our time over the next month to savour each one of those acts in turn. But before we begin tonight with act one, we have to ask ourselves one important question.

And that is, why does Ezekiel tell this story? What's this long chapter doing in the middle of this strange book? And who did the prophet want to hear it?

[7 : 25] Well, as we've said, sometimes a good story can get under people's skins. And the first half of this book of Ezekiel is aimed at a people with very thick skins indeed.

Ezekiel is writing to the smug and complacent and overconfident people of God. You'll see in verse two of our chapter that the story is addressed to Jerusalem, the city which represents all that is left of ancient Israel.

But just as we see today, those who called themselves God's people were in terminal decline.

They'd long ago abandoned the true faith and turned to the trendy beliefs of the cultures all around them.

But they were complacent. Jerusalem thought that she was above the reach of God's law, that she was beyond judgment or punishment. She banked on her impressive history, her religious past, and her powerful military allies to keep her safe.

And Ezekiel is writing to show these complacent and rebellious people just how foolish that is. His message in the first half of the book is simple.

[8 : 48] God will, and God absolutely must, punish sin and idolatry. So no matter how safe they feel, those who are claiming falsely to be God's people are simply deluding themselves.

Now that ought to have been a fairly easy message to sell. By the time Ezekiel writes, God's ancient people were just a sad shadow of their past. So Israel, the southern kingdom, was conquered years ago.

And yet that warning had only seemed to make Judah, the northern kingdom which survived, even more complacent. But now judgment has come even to Judah, to the city of Jerusalem.

Already by this point, the powerful Babylonians have struck and carried off the cream of the city into captivity. Now Ezekiel himself was a priest in training.

Chapter 1 tells us that he was a young man, roughly my age. He'd probably just finished the Jerusalem Cornhill course and was about to begin his priestly ministry when Nebuchadnezzar, the brutal king of Babylon, struck.

[10 : 06] And he carried away both Ezekiel and half of Jerusalem's aristocracy into slavery in exile. Yet even then, those who remained in Jerusalem didn't grasp the consequences of their rejection of

God.

So Ezekiel, sitting in a refugee camp by the Kaba Canal, somewhere between modern-day Baghdad and Basra, was commissioned by God as a prophet with a message to a people clinging on blindly in the last chance saloon.

Perhaps you can picture Ezekiel sitting there and scratching his head and wondering just how to get this desperate message across to his stubborn and overconfident countrymen.

And so, inspired by the Holy Spirit, he decides to tell the whole history of God's people as one tragic and shocking story. That's chapter 16.

It's an epic allegory or an extended metaphor which more or less summarises the whole message of this book of Ezekiel. The story is a parable aimed at that smug and overconfident people of God.

[11:24] A people not too unlike much of the professing church today. And it's a desperate attempt to teach them the shocking truth about God's unrequited love for his bride.

So that's enough context. Let's get on to Act 1. And Act 1 is about love lavished by God on his ancient church.

It's a tale of extravagant grace. And the story begins like Romeo and Juliet with a pair of star-crossed lovers. But right from verse 3 we can see where the tension in this story is going to come from.

You see these lovers are not equals. One is the king the Lord God himself and the other is a complete nobody.

In fact she's worse than that. She's a pagan nobody. You see Jerusalem prided herself on her past her origins under King David and the glorious tales of her history.

[12:35] But here's the truth says Ezekiel your origins and your birth are in the land of the Canaanites. You see God picked a nobody. The allusion here is to the city of Jerusalem in the days before it was conquered by David.

And the truth is that Israel's royal capital started life as nothing more than a little pagan backwater town. possibly there's even a reminder here of Israel's patriarch the mighty Abraham and he's remembered isn't he as a great hero of the faith but even Abraham was just a sun worshipping pagan before God reached out to him.

So you may be proud but Jerusalem's background was nothing special until one thing made her very special.

She was loved by the king. So there are two paragraphs here in verse 6 and 8 beginning with God passing by and seeing her and loving her.

And these two paragraphs show why that nobody church was in fact very special. And there are first two points marked out by God passing by and reaching out to her in grace.

[13:57] So firstly verses 1 to 7 the life of God's church is miraculous. The very life of God's church is a miracle. When we first meet Jerusalem in this story it's as if the camera focuses in on a little helpless abandoned baby girl.

We've already had the opening credits if you like which have hinted darkly at some scandal in this baby's background. A shameful pagan conception story. And this baby girl with her murky pedigree simply wasn't wanted.

So just as nowadays unwanted children are shamefully aborted then they were simply abandoned in a field left to die. Verse 5 Her pagan parents showed her no pity.

They didn't even bother to cut her cord or wash her little body. They simply left her to wallow there in her own blood. So in verse 6 when the Lord passes by for the first time he doesn't simply find a pagan nobody but a disgusting sight a disgraced destitute nobody.

Verse 5 No one had compassion on her for she was abhorred. And horrific though that is it was as common a thing to come across an abandoned baby girl in the ancient world as it is in some parts of the globe today.

[15:27] Yet rather than hurry on past that grim sight as people might have expected the Lord sees this little foundling girl wallowing in her blood and he says to her live.

Now you see the point here the sheer fact that there was life in God's ancient church that the nation of Israel existed at all was an act of grace on God's part.

There was absolutely nothing special about this particular child. Nothing special about even Abraham just one helpless and unlovable wretch among many.

But the Lord chose her and made her live. life. The very life of God's church is miraculous. My wife and I had our first child just a few months ago.

Many of you know that. She was a strong fit baby born into a loving and privileged home and with the very best medical care the world has to offer. Yet as a new dad you soon learn that a baby is utterly dependent on you for absolutely everything.

[16:41] As a newborn Phoebe our daughter couldn't even turn her head. So if we hadn't helped her she'd have spent the whole first week of her life looking at the same dingy wall of a hospital ward. The first night you take your baby daughter home you're alert to every snotty gurgle and snuffly sound that child makes.

She needs you, utterly dependent on you. So just think of this little girl, abandoned, freezing cold and left prey to wild animals she didn't have a chance.

Completely helpless and with nothing to offer. And that in Ezekiel's story is proud Israel. The birth story of the mighty Old Testament church of God.

And the birth story of each one of us here in his New Testament church. Unattractive, unwashed, and unable to do a thing to help ourselves until God passed by and reached out to us in grace.

So God called Abraham out of darkness and into light. He reached out to us seven and made helpless Israel flourish like a plant in the field. And so that little unloved orphan girl grew up and became tall and arrived at full adornment.

[18:08] And yet the story is just beginning. You can already imagine a whiff of scandal as this little child is taken home and brought up in the home of a kindly stranger.

Perhaps if this was a Dickens novel, you might expect her to work as his servant girl or be hidden away in an orphanage on the instructions of her kind benefactor.

But the extravagant grace of Act 1 goes well beyond that. In verse 8, the Lord passes by again and seeing that she's at an age for love, he takes Israel to be his bride.

Now just think what the neighbors would have made of that. She had no dowry to pay him, no status she could lend him. In fact, there was absolutely nothing this little girl could offer to benefit him.

But he takes her and makes his covenant with her and makes her beautiful simply as a gift, an act of grace.

[19:13] Everything that she has, she has as a gift from him, a free, scandalous gift. So secondly, verses 8 to 14, the beauty of God's church is his gift.

And just look over these verses what an extravagant gift that is. First we have the romance and all the drama of a royal wedding. Verse 8 is the language of a marriage ceremony.

I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness. That's just like Boaz in the book of Ruth. It's a symbol of a groom taking his bride and placing her under his name, under his protection.

The shame of her birth, never to be mentioned again. And then the marriage vows, the sealing of the covenant with Israel. I made my vow to you and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Lord, and you became mine.

And then with the tenderness of a husband, washing away the stains of her past, bathing away the blood and anointing her with oil, wrapping her in fine linen and beautiful silks, choosing necklaces and earrings to show her just how treasured she was.

[20:35] And then the final touch, the crown on the head of his new queen, from rags to riches. Now just think what an extraordinary thing Ezekiel is teaching us here.

Step outside the allegory for a moment of the king and his bride, and God is searching for a way to teach his proud, wayward people just what an extraordinary privilege they had in their relationship with him.

He's thinking back, isn't he, to the promises he made to Abraham and to the people he rescued from slavery in Egypt and the covenant he made with them. That was a relationship based on his passionate love for them.

And it was a relationship that called them in return to intimate, lifelong, and exclusive love for him. And so the closest human picture, as Ezekiel can muster up to teach them about God's covenant love, is the lifelong, devoted, and exclusive love found between lovers in the trusting sexual intimacy of marriage.

[21 : 58] Now that's not the only picture the Bible uses to talk about God's love, but it's the picture that Ezekiel dares to use here. And it's one strand which runs right the way through the Bible, the image of Christ, the faithful and devoted bridegroom, and his covenant church, a loveless, unwashed bride who he stoops down and picks up and makes beautiful.

Now that story is just the same, isn't it, with the New Testament people of God. In fact, it's this very chapter of Ezekiel which Paul alludes to when he writes most clearly about the great marriage between Christ and his new covenant church.

Listen to how Paul puts it in Ephesians 5. Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her that he might sanctify her having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word so that he might present the church to himself in splendor without spot or wrinkle or any such thing that she might be holy and without blemish.

Isn't that just the husband we see described here in Ezekiel? Look what he says to Israel, his bride. You grew exceedingly beautiful and advanced to royalty.

Your renown went forth among the nations because of your beauty. You became perfect. But, verse 14, it was all through the splendor that I had bestowed on you.

[23 : 37] from rags to riches, but simply by sovereign grace. Nothing God's church has is earned. Everything Israel ever was, even here in the heydays of King David and Solomon, she was simply because of what Christ had given her.

Now, this becomes incredibly important in the next few acts of the drama. the beauty of God's church is his gift. Yes, the church is an incredibly beautiful thing, but it's not made beautiful by anything other than God's gift.

It's beautiful because Christ has showered his bride in tokens of grace and affection. But nothing we can do can improve on that. we could build an impressive church building here.

We could paint the ceiling like the Sistine Chapel, but it wouldn't make us any more special. We could pride ourselves, couldn't we, on our sound doctrine, but it won't make our king go weak at the knees.

Neither will our sacrificial giving nor our impressive history of five evangelical ministers nor the numbers who turn up here on a Sunday.

[25 : 03] Our beauty comes because the king has taken us to be his bride. Because he's given himself up for us, that he might set us apart and cleanse us and wash us through his word so that in the end he can finally present us to himself in splendor.

Well, so far so good for Ezekiel's listeners sitting there in exile in Babylon, but still thinking back with pride about Jerusalem's security. Yes, the prophets had some fairly uncomfortable words about her background, but so far it's panned out okay for that little unwanted girl, hasn't it?

Love lavished upon her, a tale of God's extravagant grace in choosing and electing Israel. But how would we imagine his new queen to respond?

Her fame and her beauty are talked about across the nations because of what her king has done for her. This is my fair lady meets Kate Middleton, isn't it? So surely now she'll throw herself into serving her king.

Well, verse 15 comes as quite a shock, doesn't it? So we've got one last point, which we'll come back to next week. We saw first that the very life of God's church was miraculous, and secondly that the beauty of God's church was his gift.

[26 : 31] But finally, verse 15, God's church is no princess. Verse 15 again, 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. It doesn't take her long to forget her roots, does it? You could hardly imagine the story taking a more shocking turn than that.

From abandoned and unloved baby to a queen in just two paragraphs, and then from treasured bride to treasonous whore in just one verse.

Despite all that he had done for her, rescuing her life and showering her in redeeming love, she turned from her true God and king and gave her heart to any passerby, to any false god or idol which tickled her fancy.

Well, there's much more to say about Israel's infidelity, and next week we'll see it painted in the most shocking and lurid language you'll find in the Bible. Acts 2 of our tragedy will teach us the reality of idolatry in terms that even this complacent, thick-skinned Old Testament church would find scandalous.

[27 : 56] But for now, let's simply notice the horror of what Ezekiel's tragedy is teaching us. The true horror of what happens when God's people become proud and forget their roots.

love lavished on them in grace. And by verse 15, to his desperate pain, God sees this thankless bride repaying him with a lavishing of her own.

She lavishes her whorings on anyone she could find. How devastatingly heartbreaking. Friends, the sting in the tale of this first act is pretty obvious.

God's church is no princess. We were rescued from our wretched, sinful states by his sheer grace and promised Christ's hand in covenant love.

Now when we take that hand, we are given the crown belonging to his bride. And with that crown comes the full rights and privileges of royal status.

[29 : 06] But when we forget our roots, when we cease to wonder at our king's incredible covenant love and begin to look to other things to satisfy us, then we're treating our marriage vows in a shocking way.

When we spend more of our time, more of our money, more of our affections on things other than the king who plucked us out of the muck, then we are not acting like royalty.

Instead, we're scorning that love lavished on us in the most hurtful and heart-wrenching of ways.

We're forgetting when we do that, that as God's church, we have royal roles acting on his behalf in his world.

world. But we didn't earn those roles. They were given to us as a gift. Together, all of us have been rescued from sin and pledged to Christ forever.

And he offers himself to us on the most costly and intimate terms that we could possibly imagine.

Surely, at his precious church, we owe him our whole, undivided hearts.

[30 : 29] Surely, those covenant vows of faithfulness, which so many of us pledge to each other in marriage, should be pledged by all of us to him, to take him as king.

From this day forwards, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, cherish, and obey.

Till death unites us in glory. Amen. Let's pray. Let all the world, in every corner, sing, my God and King.

Our dear God and King, we praise you for the extravagant love you've poured out on us, your people, in Christ. We know there was nothing in us worthy of that love, and yet you freely gave it.

And we pray, Lord, that as a church, you would keep us from the awful ingratitude of forgetting that extraordinary grace. Keep us, Lord, from looking elsewhere, for our contentment or for our security.

[31 : 42] And keep us faithful in love and obedience to our true bridegroom. for we ask it in his strong and faithful name. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.