

Act IV: Love's last surprise (a tale of scandalous mercy)

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[0 : 00] I'm going to read Ezekiel 16 down as far as verse 14 just now. And the heading is the Lord's Faithless Bride.

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. 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.

No, I pitied you to do any of these things, to do 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 : 07] I made you flourish like a plant of a field. And you grew up and became tall and arrived at your full adornment. Your breasts were formed, 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, 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, covered you with silk. I adorned you with ointments 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. And thus you were adorned, gold and silver. Your clothing was of fine linen and silk and embroidered cloth.

[2 : 12] You ate fine flour and honey and oil. You grew exceedingly beautiful and advanced to royalty. 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.

We'll break there and come back to it shortly. Now turn back, if you would, to Ezekiel chapter 16, page 703. I'm going to read selectively from verse 15 down to about verse 51.

But I'm going to miss out some parts. But it gives you the thread. It's a long chapter, but we're trying to just get the main gist of it. So verse 15, But, says the Lord, the answer to all the marvelous and gracious adorning of God for his bride.

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 you played the whore. The like has never been nor ever shall be.

[3 : 33] You also took your beautiful jewels of my gold and of my silver, which I had given to you, and made for yourself images of men. And with them played the whore.

Verse 22, 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. Verse 30, 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 you a lofty place in every square.

Yet you were not like a prostitute, because you scorned payment, adulterous wife who received strangers instead of her husband. Verse 35, Therefore, O prostitute, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God, Because your lust was poured out, and your nakedness uncovered, and your whorings with your lovers, and with all your abominable idols, and because of the blood of your children that you gave them, therefore, behold, I will gather all your lovers with whom you took pleasure, those whom you loved and those you hated.

I'll gather them against you from every side, and will uncover your nakedness to them, that they may see all your nakedness. And I will judge you as a woman who committed adultery, and shed blood are judged, and bring upon you the blood of wrath and jealousy.

[5 : 07] And I will give you into their hands. They will throw down your vaulted chamber, and break down your lofty places. They shall strip you of your clothes, and take your beautiful jewels, and leave you naked and bare.

Verse 48, As I live, declares the Lord God, your sister Sodom and her daughters have not done as you and your daughters have done. Verse 51, Samaria has not committed half your sins. You've committed more abominations than they, and have made your sisters appear righteous by all the abominations that you have committed.

Amen. May God bless this solemn word of his to us.

Well, at last we come to the final act of Ezekiel's tragedy. So turn with me back to page 703, Ezekiel 16. And we'll be studying the last ten words tonight, ten chapters, verses, ten verses.

[6 : 18] Otherwise, it'll be a very short or very long sermon. It's somewhere in the middle tonight. We're reading from verse 52. Bear your disgrace, you also, for you have intervened on behalf of your sisters because of your sins in which you acted more abominably than they.

They are more in the rights than you. So be ashamed, ashamed. You also, and bear your disgrace, for you have made your sisters appear righteous.

I will restore their fortunes, both the fortunes of Sodom and her daughters, and the fortunes of Samaria and her daughters, and I will restore your own fortunes in their midst, that you may bear your disgrace and be ashamed of all that you have done, becoming a consolation to them.

As for your sisters, Sodom and her daughters shall return to their former state. Samaria and her daughters shall return to their former state, and you and your daughters shall return to your former state.

Was not your sister Sodom a byword in your mouth in the day of your pride, before your wickedness was uncovered. Now you have become an object of reproach for the daughters of Syria and all those around her, and for the daughters of the Philistines, those all around who despise you.

[7 : 57] You bear the penalty of your lewdness and your abominations, declares the Lord. For thus says the Lord God, I will deal with you as you have done, you who have despised the oath in breaking the covenant.

Yet I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish for you an everlasting covenant.

Then you will remember your ways and be ashamed when you take your sisters, both your elder and your younger, and I give them to you as daughters, but not on account of the covenant with you.

I will establish my covenant with you and you shall know that I am the Lord, that you may remember and be confounded and never open your mouth again because of your shame.

When I atone for you, for all that you have done, declares the Lord God. Amen. And may God bless to us this his word.

[9 : 09] I'll turn with me back to the end of Ezekiel 16, that's page 703, and we'll have a moment's prayer. Lord God, help us to come to your word now with humility, humility to listen and an eagerness to learn.

Give us clarity, Lord, concerning its message and conviction to apply it and help us to leave tonight more confident in the gospel promises of your son, in whose strong name we pray.

Amen. Well, how do you bring to an end a story like this one? What more can possibly be said when we've already travelled from the glorious tale of Act 1, that beautiful romance, to the dark depths we found ourselves in last week?

And can God salvage the story of his people? Ezekiel's tragedy started with so much promise, that beautiful romance of Act 1, as the Lord stooped down to rescue his newborn Old Testament church

from the muck and the filth, and pledged himself to her in love.

And I suspect all of us wish the story could simply finish there, with the undying devotion and gratitude of his new queen.

[10:39] And yet throughout this series, we've been calling Ezekiel's drama a tragedy. Just like those star-crossed lovers of Romeo and Juliet, there were clues very early on in the tale that there was pain and grief to come.

But a tragedy is not simply a sad story. A tragedy is a drama in which the leading character must die.

And so it seems as if when we turn to this final act, we know what's coming. Verse 59 seems like the inevitable end to the story.

For thus says the Lord God, I will deal with you as you have done, despising my oath in breaking the covenant. Simply from the perspective of natural justice, that ought to be the last word.

God's adulterous people have betrayed his love and his trust and shown their marriage vows to be a fraudulent sham. And now God has exposed the sham and judged this harlot of a wife.

[11:54] And the curtain has come down. The drama which began with so much promise and beauty seems to have petered out in darkness and despair.

You see, God's covenant with Israel, the covenant is over now, utterly violated on Israel's part. That is what adultery does to a relationship.

Adultery violates the trust and the love between two parties and leaves behind a hollow sham. By chasing after false gods and trusting in foreign human powers for her security, Israel has eviscerated her relationship with the Lord.

The whole thrust of this book of Ezekiel has been making that point so far that Israel can no longer rest in false security because of her covenant with God, because her own actions have annulled the relationship.

That's why, as Ezekiel has been spelling out in this chapter, her land, that supreme marital gift, the symbol of the covenant, is to be taken away.

[13:07] Just as the woman in our story was stripped of her clothes, stripped of her beautiful jewels and stripped of her royal status, Judah will now be stripped of her land.

And back in chapter 10, we had Ezekiel's equivalent of the divorce papers being served, the glory of God departing from his temple in Jerusalem.

that was a final, emphatic, and terrifying moment, which demonstrated to Israel that her once beautiful relationship with the Lord had been irreparably severed by her own infidelity.

And so we've witnessed God's love for his ancient church lavished, scorned, and then apparently lost altogether in judgment.

But, wonderfully, Ezekiel's tragedy is not over yet. The story does not end with verse 59, and instead, this final act brings one last surprise.

[14:19] And, incredibly, this is the most scandalous of them all. It turns out that the real scandal of the tragedy of chapter 16 is not the rescue of that little pagan baby girl back in Act 1.

In fact, the real scandal is not even the shocking betrayal we witnessed when that child grew up and turned from treasured bride to treasonous whore in Act 2.

No, the real scandal of this chapter is that God was prepared to take this woman back.

And so, this final act confronts us with the surprising and scandalous mercy of God. Ezekiel presents his listeners with love's last surprise, a tale of scandalous mercy, to a people who natural justice insists simply don't deserve it.

But nothing about this mercy is what we'd expect. It isn't simply the soppy and sentimental mercy of a God who rolled over and turned a blind eye to his adorable people.

[15:37] No, there is nothing, absolutely nothing adorable about an adulterous bride. yet even though her marriage vows were now forgotten and futile, God insists that he will be faithful to his.

And so, after verse 59 comes verse 60. Yet I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish with you an everlasting covenant.

The God speaking those words is not the sort of weak, smiling, benevolent old man that much of the world likes to imagine today.

He is simply a God insisting on being true to his own word, for his own sake, and at his own cost.

So just as Ezekiel opened this tragedy with God's extravagant grace in electing Israel, his people, he ends it now with God's scandalous grace in taking them back.

[16:49] And it's this final act which begins to answer some of the questions we might have as God's New Testament church as to how we fit into Ezekiel's story.

We might be tempted sometimes to look at the church in our own nation and wonder if she is in the same state as God's ancient people, under his wrath and without hope.

Just like the woman in the tragedy, it does seem as though much of today's church has simply forgotten the redeeming love of her king. By verse 56, 57, Israel has become a byword among her pagan neighbors for immorality and excess.

And if we're honest, much of the world today sees the very same thing in us. On every street corner you'll find a crumbling church and a bursting light club.

And so across the country people begin to wonder if God has simply turned his back on his adulterous and ungrateful church. We're left to ask whether the church in our nation has any future at all.

[18:05] Well, the scandalous mercy of this closing act has three surprising lessons, not just for ancient Israel, but for the church in every age and every nation.

Three scandalous things about the mercy of God. Firstly, and briefly, God's mercy has a scandalous scope.

His mercy has a scandalous scope. verses 52 to 61 don't begin in a very promising way. We're right back where we were last week, reminded that Israel's sin cannot be overlooked.

She must bear her disgrace, the disgrace, verse 52, of being exposed for what she really is, more perverse and more proud than even those ugly sisters, the pagan city of Sodom and godless Samaria.

And so, verse 58, it's time for Jerusalem to bear the penalty of her lewdness. That means that however much God's people felt beyond judgment, exile, exile in Babylon is now inevitable.

[19:20] Justice will be done, but it's not the last word in Ezekiel's story, and the scope of God's merciful plan is more staggering than Ezekiel's listeners could have possibly imagined.

You see, not only will God rescue and restore his own people to their land, but, verse 55, those ugly sisters, even they, have a stake in God's promise.

They too will be returned to their former states, and more shocking still, they will be grafted in to God's gospel plan to bring all things and all peoples back under his rule.

Those very nations before whom God's proud people had been humiliated in judgment will now be invited into the covenant family. Verse 61, Jerusalem will take her ugly sisters, Sodom and Samaria, and God will give them to her as daughters.

The scandalous scope of God's mercy was to go well beyond restoring Israel. It was to extend his gracious calling even to people like us, formerly pagan peoples like the Scots and the English, once marked out, just like those ugly sisters, by pride and godlessness.

[20:48] So at the very beginning of the tragedy, the Lord had stooped down to rescue that one little destitute girl, one among many, baby Israel. But now, at its close, it's as if he is scouring the landscape for every single miserable wretch and offering his home to all of us, offering to make us part of his new people, bound together through this everlasting covenant that he would establish in Christ.

Now, something about the scope of this covenant is breathtakingly new. Verse 61, it was not on account of God's covenant with Israel, the covenant which they had scorned and torn up.

And yet, at the same time, this everlasting covenant is founded upon God's ancient promises to Abraham. The promises, verse 60, which God swore to remember, which he made to Israel in the days of her youth, those promises which had included all along the blessing of all peoples of the earth, and were to be included in this new covenant by standing on the shoulders of Israel, God's ancient people, were given to her as daughters.

So this everlasting covenant is at the same time ancient and new, because it's the fulfillment, the consummation of all God's promises.

It's an everlasting covenant open to all peoples to save them forever through Jesus Christ. God's mercy has a scandalous scope offering to take back not simply his adulterous Old Testament church, but to welcome in all of us, his New Testament people, people.

[22:46] But secondly, and this is overwhelmingly where Ezekiel puts his emphasis, God's mercy has a scandalous goal. And according to Ezekiel, the goal of this extraordinary promise of restoration is something we don't often talk about.

It's something so remarkably small that it should have come naturally. But the scandal is that it would take the wholesale judgment and restoration of God's people to achieve it. That scandalous goal of God's mercy was simply that Israel finally remember her past, God's extraordinary grace and her appalling ingratitude, and that she be ashamed of herself. Look at verse 61. Then you will remember your ways. again, verse 63. I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall know that I am the Lord, that so that you may remember and be confounded and never open your mouth again because of your shame. Israel is told the scandalous goal of God's scandalous mercy.

[24 : 09] Bear your disgrace or be ashamed. According to Ezekiel, God saves his proud and complacent people to shame those proud and complacent people, to shut their mouths and never again allow them to forget his extraordinary and undeserved goodness.

And that's a key theme in Ezekiel's teaching, that there is such a thing as a godly sense of shame. God will stop at nothing to take back this bride, but when he does, things must be different. What's happened cannot be undone and God's new covenant bride must never again forget her roots. So that word ashamed pops up in two very big clusters in this book of Ezekiel. One is here and the other is towards the very end of the book. And both times it's in connection with the salvation of God's new covenant people. Listen to the other cluster from chapter 36. Ezekiel's famous new covenant passage. I will sprinkle clean water on you and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness and from all your idols I will cleanse you.

[25 : 31] I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put in you and I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh and I'll put my spirit in you and cause you to walk in my statutes.

You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers and you shall be my people and I will be your God. Well so much we often like to quote don't we? But how does Ezekiel carry on?

It is not for your sake that I will act declares the Lord God. Let that be known to you. Be ashamed and confounded for your ways O house of Israel.

You see there is no gospel. There is no salvation without repentance. repentance and there can be no repentance without a true sense of shame.

The gospel tells us that our sins are forgotten by God as far as the east is from the west. But for God to forget we have to remember.

[26 : 36] We blush now as we think of the truth that the woman of this story has exposed about our own hearts. hearts. But far better for God's New Testament believers to blush now as we look back to the cross than to grow proud like Judah and be exposed in judgment.

Now that godly shame does not mean that his church should constantly be in sackcloth and ashes outdoing each other and trying to look miserable. I know some of us do give that impression but it just won't cut it.

What God wants is far more radical than that. What this scandalous mercy deserves is that we live as his queen should have responded at the start of the story deeply aware of our own enormous privilege as that undeserving wretch whom God has set his love upon.

I know this chapter has left many of us feeling fairly heavy hearted over the past few weeks and to a certain extent that is right. But godly shame is not despair or some sort of emotional blackmail.

Think of that beautiful moment in Luke's gospel chapter seven. The sinful woman who washed Christ's feet with her tears. Remember what Jesus saw in her?

[28 : 04] He saw a woman who had been forgiven much and who loved much. Her tears weren't tears of guilt or tears of despair.

They were tears which looked up to the man who had made an end of all her sin. The tears of Ezekiel's godly sense of shame welling up not from crushing guilt but from God's scandalous grace. tears which remembered and showed a lasting love for her king. It's that sort of godly shame that allows Christians to sing a hymn like amazing grace with so much genuine joy.

Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now I'm found. Was blind but now I see. none of us who rejoice in singing that hymn were once brutal slave traders like John Newton, his author.

But all of us recognize that the true states of our hearts when exposed by a story like this is just as dark and just as wretched.

[29 : 19] And that sort of godly shame is the complete antithesis of the pride which marked Israel's downfall isn't it? That is the goal of God's scandalous mercy that finally his people will remember his grace with a sincere love and shame that keeps them faithful to him.

Finally there will be fidelity on the part of God's adulterous bride. Love which looks back to the cross and love which lasts.

What a scandal that we need a story like this to remind us how much we owe him. But how merciful of God to give it to us. And how merciful to provide the Lord's Supper, that great sacrament of this new covenant, to reinforce it.

Do this in remembrance of me. To remind us every time we take it. Yes, of our shameful infidelity. But even more, to remind God himself of the great promise of verse 60, of his great faithfulness to his everlasting covenant.

God's mercy has a scandalous scope and a scandalous goal to finally shame us, his church, into fidelity.

[30 : 52] mercy. But lastly, God's mercy has a scandalous cost. You see, a marriage cannot simply continue on after the sort of betrayal that we've read about over the past few weeks as if nothing had happened.

Just as adultery breaches a marriage and kills the trust between a husband and a wife, idolatry breaches the trust of our true God.

it has a deadening effect on the intimacy and relationship. And when that has happened, it cannot simply be overlooked. Sin has to be dealt with.

It has consequences which we cannot simply sweep under the carpet. Well, God is determined to win back his bride, not for her sake or because she deserves it, but because his faithfulness is at stake.

and he will stop at nothing to preserve that faithfulness. These verses aren't simply making vague predictions. They're promising that God's faithless people will finally belong to him.

[32 : 05] You will remember your ways. I will establish my covenant with you and you shall finally know that I and I alone am the Lord.

but for those promises to be kept, the sin of God's adulterous church must be dealt with fully and finally.

Verse 63, look again, it must be atoned for. I will establish my covenant with you. You will be mine and you shall know that I am the Lord, that you may remember and be confounded and never open your mouth again because of your shame.

when I atone for all that you have done, declares the Lord God. You see, Judah's exile, her banishment from the promised land was the consequence of her covenant breaking.

But even exile, even slavery in Babylon was not enough to atone for what she had done. Simply facing the consequences of our actions is important, but it is not enough to rescue the relationship.

[33 : 20] It can't put right what's been lost. The only person who can do that is God himself, the very one who's been wronged. Well, it's only verse 63 which makes this story a tragedy.

So far, it has certainly been a powerful story, and Israel's rejection of God's love has certainly been tragic. But it's not until verse 63 that the story reaches its painful climax.

We've said that a tragedy must end with the death of a leading character, and death is what it will take to atone for a betrayal as scandalous as this.

We saw last week, didn't we, that the ugliness of our sin and idolatry demands an ugly solution. But the last surprise of Ezekiel's tragedy is who it is that will pay that cost.

To win back this bride, God himself will atone for all that she had done. In his determination to be faithful to this covenant, the wronged and betrayed husband, will pay the punishment for the cheating wife.

[34 : 42] One day, that very same bridegroom who stooped down to rescue a baby girl, who washed her of her blood and cared for her tenderly, and gave her the crown of his kingdom, that very same bridegroom whose love was scorned so cruelly, would go to the cross, to atone for her betrayal.

The jilted and betrayed husband would again subject himself to humiliation, to put right the offence by which he himself had been wronged.

that is the scandalous cost of God's mercy. The cost of presenting us, his church, as Paul puts it in Ephesians 5, in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and

without blemish.

God's mercy is the father's love for us, how vast beyond all measure, that he should give his only son to make a wretch his treasure.

God's mercy is scandalous. It's scandalous in its scope, stretching even to you and me, if we're willing to humble ourselves and accept it. It's scandalous in its goal, leading not to pride, but to a deep and proper sense of shame.

[36 : 14] And it is scandalous in its cost. It would take the death on the cross of the son of God to atone for the sin of his faithless bride.

It's the mercy of a God who is relentlessly determined to remain faithful to his word, even at unthinkable personal cost.

And it's that faithful mercy which guarantees a future for his true church, even here in Scotland.

Which leaves us with just one final question.

And that is simply, what sort of bride we wish to be? I hope all of us who trust in Christ and belong to his church have recognised ourself in Ezekiel's tragedy.

I'm sure over the past few weeks we all felt that wave of sickness as we saw how our own longing for false satisfaction, false security, looks to Christ, our true lover.

[37 : 19] But the question is, will the scandalous mercy God showed to his Old Testament bride shame us into forsaking our own pride and loving our king on his terms?

Will Ezekiel's exposing tragedy soften our hearts enough to ask him for help, help battling to keep our love faithful and undivided and forsaking all others?

Keep us only unto him so long as we shall live. Will we be the bride that God's scandalous mercy deserves?

Let's pray. Those words of Samuel Rutherford we sang earlier, the bride eyes not her garment, but her dear bridegroom's face.

I will not gaze at glory, but on my king of grace. Father, thank you for the relentless mercy you've shown us in Christ, our king of grace.

[38 : 33] Thank you for the way this passage has helped us to see it more clearly, just as it's exposed our own fickle and divided hearts. Help us, Lord, your church to remember your redeeming love with a godly sense of shame, not crushing despair, but loving gratitude which binds our wandering hearts to you.

We dare to ask it, Lord, with boldness in the strong name of our Lord and King, Jesus Christ. Amen.