

Indecent Exposure

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Preacher: William Philip

[0 : 00] But we're going to turn now to our reading this morning, and we're in the book of Ezekiel. So turn with me to the book of Ezekiel. If you don't have a Bible with you, we have plenty of Bibles at the side, at the back.

Please do grab one of the visitor Bibles if you need one. And we are in Ezekiel 16 and 17 this morning, and we'll be reading all of chapter 16.

And chapter 17, I'll give a brief summary of, which you can perhaps read later on during the offering. But Ezekiel 16. It's a lengthy reading. It's a difficult reading, so brace yourself.

Chapter 16, verse 1. 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.

[1 : 10] 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.

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. And I said in your blood, live.

I made you flourish like a plant of the fields. 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.

[2 : 13] 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 of 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 have bestowed on you, declares the Lord God.

[3 : 24] 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 of 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 : 34] Were your whoring so small a matter that you slaughtered my children and delivered them up as offerings 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 also played the whore with the Egyptians, your lustful neighbors, multiplying your whoring to provoke me to anger. Behold, therefore, I stretched out my hand against you and diminished your allotted portion and delivered you to the greed of your enemies, the daughters of the Philistines, who were ashamed of your new behavior.

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 whoring also with the trading land of Chaldea.

[5 : 55] And even with this, you are 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.

Yet you are not like a prostitute because you scorned payment. Adulterous wife who receives strangers instead of her own 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 are different from other women in your whorings. No one solicited you to pay the whore and you gave payment while no payment was given to you. Therefore, you are different. Therefore, they prostitutes.

Hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God, because your lust was poured out and your nakedness uncovered in 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, all those you loved and all those you hated.

[7 : 16] I will 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 women who commit adultery and shed blood are judged and bring upon you the blood of wrath and jealousy.

And I will give you into their hands. And they shall 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.

They shall bring up a crowd against you. And they shall stone you and cut you to pieces with their swords. And they shall burn your houses and execute judgments upon you in the sight of many women.

I will make you stop playing the whore. And you shall also give payment no more. So I will satisfy my wrath upon you and my jealousy shall depart from you.

I will be calm and no more be angry. Because you have not remembered the days of your youth, but have enraged me with all these things. Therefore, behold, I have returned your deeds upon your head, declares the Lord God.

[8 : 31] Have you not committed lewdness in addition to all your abominations? Behold, everyone who uses proverbs will use this proverb about you.

Like mother, like daughter. You are the daughter of your mother who loathed her husband and her children. And you are the sister of your sisters who loathed their husbands and their children. Your mother was a Hittite and your father an Amorite. And your elder sister is Samaria, who lived with her daughters to the north of you. And your younger sister, who lived to the south of you, is Sodom with her daughters.

Not only did you walk in their ways and do according to their abominations, within a very little time, you were more corrupt than they in all your ways.

As I live, declares the Lord God, your sister Sodom and her daughters have not done as you and your daughters have done. Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom.

[9 : 32] She and her daughters had pride, excess of food and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty and did an abomination before me.

So I removed them when I saw it. So Mary has not committed half of your sins. You have committed more abominations than they, and have made your sisters appear righteous by all the abominations that you have committed.

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 in the right than you.

So be 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 Mary 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've done, becoming a consolation to them.

[10:42] As for your sisters, Sodom and her daughters shall return to their former state, and 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 days 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 you despise you. 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 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.

[12:01] 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.

Well, in chapter 17, there is another allegory this time. Israel's rebellious kings, represented in verses 1 to 11 as trees and vines, surrounded by empires, represented as great eagles, who subjugate them and punish them when the kings rebel.

And then verses 11 to 21, then explain that God is using them to punish Israel and her kings for their real rebellion, which is against God himself. Yet it ends with a ray of hope about God himself, planting a tiny twig, a new king, whose kingdom will grow into a great and fruitful tree, and whose branches every kind of bird will find a nesting home, and through whom all will come to know the Lord as God.

So there is hope. But perhaps read over chapter 17 a bit later, as we come to the offering. But that is the word of the Lord. May we submit ourselves to it this morning.

Good, well done. Good. Good. Well, would you turn with me to the passage that we read there in Ezekiel chapter 16?

[13:47] There can be few things, I think, more shocking, more shattering, than to discover what others really think of you. Or perhaps you think that they view you favorably.

You discover actually the reverse is really true. Perhaps you see an email that you're not meant to see, or you overhear a conversation that you shouldn't have heard.

And that can be a very sobering thing, can't it? Of course, there are some people who have so little self-perception that even those things don't have any effect.

Some people are so thick-skinned that even open criticism can be like water off a duck's back. And it may take a full-on, a frontal, extreme assault of truth, brutal truth, to break through their defenses, to make them face up to the reality.

Be shocked out of, well, what is only delusional thinking about themselves. And the sad truth is, you see, that the human heart is almost infinitely capable of self-protective delusion.

[15:05] Especially when it comes to seeing ourselves as God really does see us. Even as Christians, we can create our own self-justifying narrative.

Not really so bad, am I? Certainly not compared to him or to her or to them over there. We can even sanitize words that we use to describe our self-understanding in a way that sort of helps us to live with the concept of being sinful as something that's tolerable, that's manageable.

Not really too distressing. Because after all, God's dealt with all of that, hasn't He? But imagine the shock of God Himself turning around with His faith, etched with fury, and shouting at you, you're not just a sinner.

You're not just a wayward person who's fallen short of what I created you for. You're not just guilty of the sins that you've committed. No, more than all of that, to your very core, you are depraved. You're perverted. You're worse than the worst pagan you can think of. You're a dirty, lascivious, disgusting whore. And that's what God does in this chapter of Ezekiel and in others like it.

[16:33] Chapter 23, for example. As Chris Wright says, these are deliberate shock tactics on a scale unsurpassed in the whole arsenal of prophetic assault and battery weapons.

And the language is very coarse, very vulgar, so much so that our English translations tone down a lot of it with euphemisms. It invokes images of coarse sexuality, of depravity, of graphic violence. And if we find that shocking, living in our vulgar world, our hyper-sexualized society, goodness, think what it must have been for Ezekiel to have to utter these words. A priest in 6th century B.C. Israel or the people to hear that word.

But God deemed it necessary. As one scholar says, the language is deliberately repulsive and coarse to convey the depths of the ungrateful infidelity to which Jerusalem had sunk.

Ezekiel's people, you see, were still thinking that they had rather a raw deal from God. They were the church of God. They had glorious promises and privileges. The gates of hell surely would never prevail against them.

[17:53] They were indestructible. Jerusalem was unassailable. They were the elect of God. His covenant was absolutely unbreakable. God would surely soon turn things around and restore them and get their lives back on track under His blessing.

But how wrong they were. And the truth was, you see, to quote Anselm's famous words again, they had not yet really begun to consider the greatness of the weight of sin.

So the shocking language, the images of this chapter were needed to make these Israelites in the 6th century begin to understand the truth about their own hearts, the sheer weight of the abominable evil deep at the core of their very identity.

Verse 1, Son of man, make known to Jerusalem her abominations. Face them with it in all its foul depravity and force them to swallow it until they are ashamed, until they bear their disgrace.

They realize that above every iniquity, every transgression of God's law was a deeply perverse and personal rejection of God's love for them.

[19:16] If that was needed for the people, the people of God in Ezekiel's day, then the New Testament tells us that this and other chapters are preserved by the Spirit of God also for us, for our instruction, living in these last days as Christ's church.

Shall we provoke the Lord also to jealousy? He says to the church. Try to two-time in our relationship with our God and Savior.

Prostituting ourselves with idols today, other loves of our hearts. He says to the Christian church, doesn't he, we need to be very careful not to be proud and presumptuous ourselves to think of ourselves today as the unassailable elect church of God.

Let anyone who thinks he stands, says Paul, be careful. Take heed lest he fall. And we too need to learn to consider the greatness of the weight of sin, the ugliness, and indeed the sheer infidelity of sin.

And that's what this chapter shows us so clearly by showing our relationship with God in these nuptial terms. It shows us that sin not only incurs guilt, but it breaks the heart of God.

[20:43] It spits in the face of a lover. And that is why sin is such a terrible thing for human beings. So let's brace ourselves and look at what this chapter teaches us about God, about His people, as the Lord faces them through Ezekiel, retelling their story, but according to a true narrative from God's perspective.

And it amounts really to a thoroughly indecent exposure. It begins with a story of rescue, but it becomes one of rejection and then an inevitable reckoning.

And yet it does end with a quite astonishing glimpse at a hope of restoration. Look at verses 1 to 14 first, which tell the story of a unilateral ennobling rescue.

These verses describe an utterly gracious, a generous rescue and restoration. It's a deeply moving picture, isn't it? of a wonderfully beautifying love. Some think that the story may be drawn on a folk tale, maybe, can certainly recognize echoes of these sorts of stories, can't we?

The pauper who becomes a princess, the foundling baby who becomes a queen. There's something Cinderella-like about it. But even if that is so, God has appropriated this so specifically for His clear purpose.

[22 : 15] Actually, C.S. Lewis, who Bob will be speaking about on Wednesday evening, would tell us it's the other way around, that every story like that is actually an echo of the great story of Christ and His church.

But verses 1 to 7 tell a story of sheer grace, don't they, in God's choice of Israel. Some think He's speaking here just specifically about the city of Jerusalem and its origins, but I think it's probably better to see Jerusalem as representing Israel from the very beginning as God's people.

Her roots were totally pagan, just like the Canaanites. Your mother was an Amorite, your father a Hittite, despised enemies. The point's not really a geographical one, it's a moral one.

There was no merit at all in Israel's election by God. Abraham was a total pagan, a moon worshiper, when God called him out of the Kaldis into Canaan.

In fact, the image here is of an unwanted female baby that's thrown out, that's exposed, left to die. That's happened very often in ancient culture, especially to female babies because it was males that were wanted as heirs.

[23 : 25] Of course, that still happens today, doesn't it? In many, many places and many cultures. It's hidden, it's sanitized, of course, because it's done through sex-selective abortion today. But the point's absolutely clear.

The election of God is by sheer unilateral, undeserved grace, lavished on something, verse 5, that is abhorrent. We maybe missed something of this because I suppose we naturally feel horror at the whole idea of exposure, but not in the ancient world.

The surprise in the ancient world here, reading this, is that God should even look at something so abhorrent. No eye pitied this unwanted outcast.

But God should have something to do with this dirty, bloody mess out in the wilderness. That's the extraordinary thing.

And he did. He made her live. And he nurtured her to full growth and maturity. Absolutely nothing in her, everything from God.

[24 : 26] And that is the true story of Israel. Go back and read Deuteronomy chapter 9. God repeatedly tells Israel, it is not because of anything in you, no righteousness in you that I've chosen you.

You're a rebellious people, a stubborn people. And of course, that's also the story, isn't it, of God's dealing with the Gentiles who've been brought in to the people of God, the people of the true Israel through the gospel of Jesus.

You also were dead in your trespasses and sins, he says to the Gentile Ephesians. You were disciples of the devil. You were children of wrath. But God, being rich in mercy because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.

It's just verse 6 here, isn't it? I said to you, live. And I made you flourish. And verses 8 to 14 tell of that story ongoing, lavish generosity as God woos the mature girl of the age for love, as he marries her, as he pours wealth upon her.

So that verse 13, she grew exceedingly beautiful, advanced to royalty. And her renowned, verse 14, went forth among all the nations with the splendor of Jerusalem under David and Solomon.

[25 : 53] Think of the queen of Sheba coming to find wisdom, to be dazzled by the sheer glory of Zion. God's city under David and Solomon gave a glimpse, didn't they, of God's purpose for his people as a light to the world, as a beacon for kings, for rulers, for all nations.

Indeed, a glimpse of God's true purpose for mankind. Psalm 8 uses the very same word of splendor. Man is crowned with glory and splendor, honor.

And Israel's beauty, her renown, verse 14, literally her name in the sight of the world, was all from God's generosity. Literally, it's my splendor that I bestowed on you in order that God's name would be magnified among the nations through them.

Interestingly, the clothing described in verse 10 there isn't just beautiful clothing, it's also priestly clothing. Israel was to be a kingdom of priests telling forth the name of the Lord, the one true God to the whole world.

This is a beautiful picture. And of course, it's the same picture, isn't it, that the New Testament gives us of the church of Jesus Christ in these last days, the bride of Christ, chosen in him, adopted through him to be for the place of his glory to make known to the world and to the heavens the manifold wisdom of God.

[27 : 27] God's renown, God's name, was and is always to be made known through his people spreading that renown to the nations in a way that brings light and life to those who are dead in their sins.

that's what the mission of the church is. The quote from our Bible notes on this, when we proclaim the message of God's riches in Christ, the living God passes by to say to those who are dead in their trespasses and sins, live.

And a life emerges that owes absolutely everything to God. What an extraordinary and gracious and generous and glorious calling it is to be rescued like that, ennobled, beautified by the living God.

And yet, in the face of all this, Israel, just like Adam and all men, despised, rejected her lover.

And verses 15 to 34 tell that story. It's a story of unprovoked and evil rejection. In the face of all God's grace, it is a disgraceful rejection of God.

[28 : 52] It's an utter betrayal of His love and His trust. It's a descent into utterly degenerate religion and into the power of politics of a ruthless world.

But you trusted in your beauty, you played the whore and lavished your whorings on any passerby and your beauty became His, not God's.

And verse 15 sums up what is then expounded ever more graphically and shockingly all through the chapter, exposing the depth of the indecency, the extreme nature of Israel's degeneracy.

Whore and whoring. That's the overwhelming word, 21 times and more through the chapter. It's pictured not just as a single act of adultery, but as Chris Wright points out, prolonged, addictively repeated, insatiable promiscuity with multiple partners.

That's the picture. Israel is pictured as literally, verse 25, spreading her legs to every passerby. verse 26, playing the whore with the Egyptians, literally your neighbors with their huge organs.

[30 : 09] Verse 36, pouring out her juices, exposing herself to all, and more, and more. I'll stop there. And it's not because, perhaps like many a sad and reluctant prostitute, not because she's desperate and doing it for the money, no, look at verses 33 and 34, you don't get paid, you pay.

You're bribing them to come from every side to engage in your whorings. Like a spouse, watching their spouse going out and paying people to have sex with them, and then paying them to put the videos on porn sites on the internet.

That's the disgusting nature of the picture here. An utter rejection of the Lord and your relationship with Him. Instead of living for the praise of God's glory among the nations, which is what your calling is, you become proud of your name, verse 15, your renown.

Instead of humble and penitent faith, you're filled with pride, with haughty presumption, pursuing your own glory, by flirting with the world's religions, the pagan religions, and the world's powers, the pagan powers around you.

Verses 16 to 22 describe that turning to the same worship as the corrupt pagan world around. The idolatry, which was very much tied up with prostitution, with fertility cults.

[31 : 48] That's why the language here is so stark and reflects that. their spiritual infidelity was marked, at least in part, by sexual license, by degeneracy.

And we should note that, that those two things go together. And worst of all, verses 17 to 19 describe them taking the gifts, the blessings that God himself had adorned them with in his covenant grace and turning it into idolatry in the most perverse of ways.

It's what we were speaking about last time, wasn't it, in chapter 13. Do you remember covering falsehood and lies with a whitewash of spiritual language, to dress up as though it was decent and good, things that were utterly perverse and sinful.

But sadly, the history of the Christian church has not been devoid of these things, has it? There are plenty charlatans calling themselves Christian leaders today who use the language of good, who use the language of God's blessings to exploit people in order to just enrich themselves.

And of course, so much of what sadly goes for mainstream Christianity today does take the language and the beauty of the things that God has given and corrupts them, like marriage.

[33 : 16] Wants to use that embroidered garment of God's beauty cover over something that's absolutely sinful and abhorrent to God.

You see, very little changes, does it, in the centuries? And even worse, look at verse 20. If the perversity of sex was not enough to deface true worship, they stoop even to child abuse and infanticide.

Your sons and daughters, who you bore to me, sacrificed to be devoured. You slaughtered my children, not just yours, but mine.

Well, that is a salutary word, is it not? For a culture like ours that doesn't just tolerate abortion, but promotes it relentlessly, and wants to spread it all around the world, wherever possible.

As though the 40 million aborted babies in the world every year, 40% of human deaths, wasn't enough. And, of course, in our society, where any protest against that is increasingly censored and silenced, in fact, even silent prayer is now criminalized in our culture, if you're anywhere near an abortion facility.

[34 : 41] And even Christians are reluctant, aren't we, to go there, to talk about it, for the sake of upsetting people, because we want to be compassionate.

Well, I don't expect Ezekiel would get onto many Christian convention platforms today, do you? Verses 23 to 34 describe the same unfaithfulness to God, in the same lurid terms of whoredom, but here with a focus on Israel flirting with the world's power and politics, in order to, as she thought, further her fortunes in the world.

And that was just as scandalous, just as abhorrent to God. God's covenant with Israel was exclusive, and that meant there could be no alliances with any other powers, either spiritual powers, divine powers through idolatry, or other earthly powers and empires.

And that would lead to inevitable spiritual compromise. And yet, Judah had courted Egypt, verse 26, and Assyria, verse 28, and Babylon, the Chaldeans, verse 29.

You can read in the books of Kings all the disasters that came from these various alliances. But the latter one of these with the Chaldeans, the Babylonians, probably speaks about Hezekiah's total folly.

[36 : 02] Do you remember? He invited envoys of Babylon and proudly showed them all the riches of his palace and the temple and his nation. And Isaiah the prophet, in Isaiah chapter 39, said, you fool, one day everything you've shown them is going to be carried off to Babylon.

And that may well be what verses 30 to 34 here are about, an open invitation for other world powers to invade them, to impoverish them, paying to be raped.

Well, political folly, that kind still abounds all over, doesn't it? Nations today squandering their own national wealth, making themselves far too dependent for others on their commodities, their energies, their technology, and so on.

But the church also can so easily seek alliances with the world in just the same way, in vain attempts to be more successful, to be more relevant, to be more engaged with the culture in what it thinks is mission.

You see, so often these things actually rob the church of its true mission. It gets bogged down in all kinds of compromises, conversations.

[37 : 26] It just becomes a plaything of governments, and so on. How many once gospel ministries have ended up becoming nothing more than just social work agencies?

How many churches little more than soup kitchens because of that folly? It's dangerous for God's people to seek alliances with this world's powers to further their fortunes.

It's dangerous as well as treacherous and adulterous. Because the world will just use and abuse such alliances for their own ends, always.

These verses here are further elaborated in chapter 17 in that allegory of these great eagles, which also represent the world empires of Babylon and Egypt and others. And God says to His people there, you're playing with fire by seeking to make and break alliances with the world like that.

Can anyone escape who does these things? He says in chapter 17, verse 15. And that's a pertinent warning, isn't it, then and now to God's people? When they hanker after the world's alliance is to grant them success.

[38 : 42] The world will use you and then the world will turn upon you and destroy you without mercy. And that's what happened to Judah.

Babylon would come and vent its wrath on her for breaking the covenant with Nebuchadnezzar that they've made and rebelling. And yet, says the Lord in chapter 17, verse 19, it is really my covenant that Israel's kings broke.

Israel's kings, just like its prophets and its priests and all the people, the leaders and the led, they're all unfaithful to the Lord. They're all seeking alliances with the world that hates God.

And God will use those enemies as the rod of His punishment and anger upon His people. That's the message. God will.

God does. Use earthly powers. Even ruthless pagan powers. To judge evil in this world. And in history. And even to judge His own people.

[39 : 45] Even His own church. Read Hebrews chapter 12. And the apostle there tells us that sometimes very painful discipline will come to God's people through persecution, through suffering.

To yield the fruit of righteousness in their lives. And certainly here in chapter 17, verse 19, God says, I will return this covenant infidelity on Judah's head.

And that is what is described in grim detail in chapter 16, from verse 35 to 52. An unavoidable exact reckoning. These verses describe God's jealous wrath and His just retribution against His people's adultery, their idolatry, their murderous abuses.

Verse 35, Therefore, O prostitute, hear the word of the Lord. Because of your whorings and your lovers, your abominable idols, and because of the blood of your children, therefore, I will judge you.

Verses 3 to 34, you see, have been reciting a case for the prosecution, because this reads like a courtroom scene. But now, the judgment is announced from the bench.

[41 : 03] And it is unequivocally a just judgment. The case is beyond all doubt. Israel deserves punishment. And it's an exact punishment. She will receive more of what she's craved.

Verse 37. All the lovers that she's lusted for will come again. But, this time, in a humiliating and ferocious attack.

The whore who's paid for her own promiscuity is now going to be brutally gang raped. It's a horrible image. It's a brutal image.

But it's what Israel asked for. It's what they lusted for. And it's going to come back and bite her with a vengeance. She sowed the wind and is going to reap the whirlwind.

And there's a very clear warning in these words, isn't there? Chris Wright again. When the people of God woo the world and seek and sell their soul for political power, for financial profit, social influence, or other temporal gains, the end result historically has been that at best they become pathetic and scorned and treated with contempt.

[42 : 16] And at worst, the world turns with ferocious power on the church itself. And that's true, isn't it? And that is a very real warning to the church today.

Take heed that you do not fall in that same way, says Paul. What Ezekiel describes in verses 40 and 41 is the military reality of what Babylon would do to Jerusalem.

And it was entirely a misery and a disaster of her own making. That's what happens when we become unfaithful. They withdrew themselves from the range of God's protecting grace.

Remember when the glory departed from the city. Well, the city's left defenseless. And this is real history. The Babylonian kings did unleash on their vassals their wrath for daring to rebel.

But notice verse 41. It is ultimately God's doing. I will stop you playing the whore. I will satisfy my wrath on you and my jealousy will depart from you.

[43 : 26] We may have difficulty, I think, with this idea of God's jealous wrath. But we shouldn't because when we remember that God is speaking about his people as his precious lover, his bride, his covenant partner, his wife.

And jealousy is right and proper. It's essential, isn't it, for a healthy marriage. Jealous, zealous fidelity to that exclusive bond, to the purity of the marriage bed is essential.

That's not selfishness. It's the opposite. It's love for your spouse expressed in absolute fidelity. Jealousy. If, as a wife, your husband is not jealous for your honor, well, he may well end up being unfaithful to you to gratify himself and vice versa.

If God's people are not angry in the face of infidelity in marriage, then marriage itself will become demeaned and harmed, won't it? That's why, in Hebrews 12, when we're told we're to worship God in reverence and awe, it immediately goes on to say that one of those things included in that means we must guard jealously marriage and sexual fidelity, the marriage bed kept pure.

Why? For God will judge the sexually immoral and the adulterous. And yet, human marital faithfulness for all its preciousness, for all its honor, that is but a picture of the far more solemn and far more precious covenant between God and his people, between Christ and his church.

[45 : 13] And that's why this adulterous people must face God's wrath. Behold, verse 43, I have returned your deeds upon your head. An exact judgment, inevitable and unavoidable.

And verses 44 to 52 just underlines how utterly deserved it was. We've got two new characters introduced here, an elder sister and a younger sister, Samaria and Sodom.

Very ugly sisters indeed. And yet, Israel, far from being the beautiful Cinderella in the midst, is even worse than both of these loathsome creatures.

Samaritans, Sodomites, Israelites, you all share exactly the same DNA is the message. But you, Jerusalem, remember, chapter 5, verse 5, set in the midst of the nations to be my light to the nations.

You, verse 47, are more corrupt than they. Verse 51, you have committed more abominations than they. It's not elaborated here what the sins of Samaria, Israel's northern kingdom neighbor were.

[46 : 28] Verse chapter 23 spells all that out and it was courting the world's powers for gain and abandoning the Lord. Exactly what God has said Judah is doing here.

But we are told in verses 49 and 50 about Sodom. Well, we know, don't we? We know all about Sodom's sexual depravity, the abomination that they did before God as it says here. But notice that added to that sexual perversity is her pride.

And consumption and prosperous ease. All of that, apparently, was part of the outcry that Genesis 19 says, rose up from that society to God.

And as someone has said, these are the classic combinations that are the ruin of nations. I think it makes very uncomfortable reading, don't you?

Living in our Western culture today, looking around at our society with its so-called values, not least, the veneration of pride and all that that connotes.

[47 : 37] We're a virtue-signaling society today, aren't we? And we, in the West, we arrogantly demand of poorer nations around the world that they, too, will buy to our values, however corrupt and immoral they are.

They want our aid, they want our trade. Well, we don't care, do we, that our fashionable zero-carbon boondoggles, our solar panels and all these things are made from slave labor in China, child slavery down the mines in Africa and all the rest of it.

How long can God delay judgment on our society? Apparently, Billy Graham once said, God must either judge America or apologize to Sodom.

Or we could hardly think our nation was any different, could we? And indeed, the churches as an institution in the Western world. God says to His people here, you have managed something near impossible.

You've made Sodom look like a paragon of virtue. And they deserve judgment, God says. And I did judge them. Verse 50.

[48 : 51] You removed them, but you, you're worse with all your privilege, with all your blessing, with all your knowledge. And you will bear your disgrace.

Verse 52. Be ashamed and bear your disgrace because it's coming to you in history. And ultimately, of course, a far worse judgment than anything earthly is coming to all.

And it will be more tolerable, listen, it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for Sodom than for those who have had freely the privilege of knowing and hearing God's words in their own hearing, in their society, all of their lives.

That's what Jesus Himself said to His own contemporaries who heard His words and saw His works and yet closed their hearts utterly to Him. You can read it in Matthew chapter 11.

They insulted God Himself come in the flesh to woo them, holding out the love of His heart. But you see, not only did they sin against His law, they spat in the face of the lover of their souls.

[50 : 11] And you see, until we begin to plumb the depths of what that really means, to see our sins as not just an unfulfillment of God's perfect law, but a dreadful unfaithfulness to God's personal love.

And we've not yet considered the greatness of the weight of sin. Be ashamed. Bear your disgrace as the prophet. For you've made your sisters seem righteous.

And if they both suffered the weight of God's judgment, what hope can there possibly be for you? It's the only possible conclusion, isn't it? Justice is demanded for everything that she's done. And indeed, God says, verse 59, I will deal with you as you have done, you who have despised the oath in breaking the covenant. And that must mean God's promised curses in all that He's promised to them in the covenant.

And so it was going to be. And yet, says verse 60, yet, there's something more in God's promise to remember His covenant and to keep His covenant commitment in punishing disobedience and rebellion.

[51 : 39] There's something more than just that. And it is mysterious. It doesn't seem to add up. It seems to stretch the entire logic of everything that God has said repeatedly here about His justice, about the need to be judged completely.

Yet, yet, into even this horrific picture of disaster, that word does inject a ray of hope, doesn't it? And verses 53 to 63 seem to allude to an utterly undeserved and yet extraordinary restoration.

the covenant is not dead. And the consequence of rebellion is curse. Yet, whenever God says, I remember, whenever God says, I will remember my covenant, there is hope.

It goes right back to Noah in Genesis 8 and 9. God remembers His covenant which will overcome even His judgment on sin. It's there in Leviticus chapter 26 which underlies so much of what Ezekiel has been saying in this prophecy.

After all the calamities listed there which Ezekiel says now are going to be vested on Judah in his day, there is some hope beyond judgment.

[53 : 06] And it's here, however strange, however extraordinary. Look at verse 53. There will be restoration, he says, for Sodom and Samaria. And it almost is an afterthought for you also in the midst of that.

There's hope for Israel but only on the same basis as there is for all these chiefs of sinners. You're all in the same boat. You all have the same need.

There will be restoration but no possibility of any pride. No absolute thought of any merit attached to that. Verse 54, only in such a way as you will be bearing your disgrace, knowing the shame of your abject failure, like every pagan, sharing in the same grace needed by every pagan man.

A restoration in which your pride is utterly destroyed. And only penitence remains. Verse 61, you will remember your ways and be ashamed.

When they see that these other sinful peoples whom they despised are one with them under God's grace and restoration. Indeed, Israel becomes like a mother giving birth to their restoration also, which he says comes not apart from, I think the footnote reading is better there, not apart from, but now as part of the everlasting covenant that God will establish with you, his people, together, all will remember, verse 63, and be confounded by the greatness of the shame that they all share and know that they all share for the greatness of their sins, but also confounded surely by the greatness of the Savior.

[54 : 59] Do you see verse 63? The knowledge that it is this Lord who knows them truly, that he himself atones for their sins.

How can that be? How can God do that and why? A judge doesn't atone for sins. A judge is an impartial figure. A judge dispenses justice. A judge doesn't get personally involved.

with the guilty prisoner. It's a matter of the law. But our judge, you see, the Lord God is not just our divine lawgiver, but he is the divine lover of our souls.

And our sins incur not just guilt to be punished judicially, but it destroys a covenant of love that can only possibly be restored personally.

You see. And the extraordinary mysterious reality here is that that is what God himself promises. When I make atonement for you and all that you have done.

[56 : 14] Restoration for that generation of Israelites. Just as ultimate restoration for every sinner, for every Sodom, for every Samaria, for everyone in Scotland, whether it's 2000 BC or 2000 AD, all of that, all of that flows from this same day when I, I will atone for your sins.

When's that going to be and how is that going to be? Well, we get a glimpse of that if you turn to the last paragraph of chapter 17 where you see God says that despite the abject failure and the cutting off of the last of the line of Israel's kings, these cedar trees in the parable by these eagles of the world empires, despite all of that, look at verse 22, I will take a sprig, a tiny tender little twig, and I will plant it on a high and lofty mountain, Mount Zion, Jerusalem, a whole new king, and this one will

sprout, verse 23, do you see, and produce real fruit, become truly noble, and under this tree, under his rule, will be room for every kind of bird to find a home and make its nest, and he, this ruler, will, verse 24, reveal the

Lord to all the world, all the trees of the field will know that I am the Lord, and he will humble every ruler of this world, I bring low the high tree, and exalt the humble of this world, I will make high the low tree, and bring life even to the dead, make the dry tree flourish, that is an extraordinary picture, is it not?

Of a great reversal, the world sees all these great figures, these powers, these rulers, these empires, these great eagles that struts the stage of history, but behind all of that, God is at work, taking something at first tiny, tender, barely visible, but which in the end will bring about a glorious restoration, not just for one people, one tree, but for every bird of every kind.

Ezekiel knew what he was speaking about here because he knew that Isaiah and other prophets had spoken before of God's promise to bring something new out of even the dead stump of the tree of Israel, a new David, who would gather the remnant of his people, but also who would gather the nations under his rule.

[59 : 06] Read it in Isaiah chapter 11. We'll be reading it in our Christmas services. And he also knew that he spoke of this one as God's servant in Isaiah 53, who would grow up like a young plant, like a root out of the dry ground, and he would atone for his people's sins, bear the sin of many, be wounded for their transgressions, crushed for their iniquities, but when he was high and lifted up, he would sprinkle many nations for the cleansing of their sins.

I will atone for your sins, says the Lord, when my true king comes at last, and the world will know that I am the Lord, and my kingdom at last will fill the whole earth.

For those beleaguered exiles, these glimpses of hope must have seemed tiny, small as a tiny mustard seed.

And yes, says Jesus, it might often seem as small as that to us as well, barely visible, but there is sufficient hope in that tiny seed, in the promise of that tiny twig.

for a kingdom whose branches will have room for all the birds in the whole world, for all in this world who want to find a home, among those whose shame the Lord himself has utterly confided by himself making atonement for all that they have done, for all the terrible pains that our adulterous hearts have inflicted upon the Lord, the lover of our souls.

[60 : 53] I have spoken, and I will do it, says the Lord in the last words of chapter 17, and he's done it. Now, in the coming of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ, to save his people from their sins, to bring a restoration which is undeserved, which is extraordinary, a restoration to make his people what they truly are and what they are called for, to be for the praise of his glorious grace, to show his beauty, to show his splendor, bestowed upon us, to show it to all the nations of the world.

That's Ezekiel's gospel. It's the gospel fulfilled at last in our Lord Jesus Christ. And it's the most beautiful story, the most beautiful story that this world will ever hear.

But it's a story our world needs to hear again and again and again. And that's our task as God's people today.

Let's pray. We were by nature children of wrath, just like the rest of mankind. God, but God being rich in mercy because of the great love with which he loved us.

Even when we were dead in trespasses, he made us alive together with Christ. And he raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

[62 : 34] So that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace and kindness towards us in Christ Jesus.

Lord, we are confounded by your exposure of our sin and our shame. And yet you've remembered us.

You've confounded us all the more by your grace and your mercy. So help us, we pray. help us to truly love you so that we might truly live for you today and all the days of our lives until the day we long for when we will at last see you and then at last be truly like you.

Help us, Lord, and keep us until that day. For we ask it for the glory of our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.