

The Promise of God

Ezekiel 16:49-63

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On the playground, or perhaps in the streets in your neighborhood, that old promise that we would make with friends when things got really serious. Do you remember? “I absolutely promise.” Where we would say, “How much do you promise?” “Cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in my eye.” That was the kind of oath that we would take with our friends. Maybe you didn’t. I know I did plenty of times. But things became a little more sophisticated around the age of four. You realized that there was always an off-ramp to such a promise, and that was if you made that promise with your fingers crossed behind your back. Did you ever ask your friends, “Now, did you cross your fingers?”

The absurdity of the level to which we would go to pledge allegiance, to make a promise. And when push came to shove, you really got to see—sometimes literally, when pushes came to shoves—you would try to realize just who had your back, who was with you, who was loyal, who was faithful to their promise. It made all the difference. But generally it was not seen, of course, until the promise was tried and tested. All the oath-taking, all the vows, they all look really good when they’re dressed up in suits and ties with smiley faces and no dirt, but none of those are of value until they’re actually tested—when pain and brokenness enters in. How does the promise of God stand up to this kind of difficulty?

The last number of weeks, we’ve been going through one set of verses, Ezekiel 16:49-50. Now this morning we’re going to break it out a little bit into the larger context, because my desire is for us to see as a congregation the promise of God, and to break out what the prophet was saying to the nation of Judah. It was at one time Israel, which had a northern part and a southern part. But after Solomon, that broke into two—the northern kingdom, Israel, and Judah in the south. At the time of this prophesy, Israel in the north was gone. Only Judah remained, and its capitol was Jerusalem. Ezekiel was a prophet to Judah in exile. However, Ezekiel was with the exiles who had been taken off into Babylon. The prophet Jeremiah remained in Jerusalem, and we will look at him next. But we’re going to finish with this part of Ezekiel’s prophesy, as he does so by looking at the nation of Judah and the promise of God in light of the sins of Sodom.

We’ve been looking at the sins of Sodom in particular, one after the other, for the last several weeks. We come now to the conclusion of that matter as Ezekiel applies it specifically to the nation of Judah. But his whole desire is that we might see the durability, the beauty of the promise of God. Hear now the Word of God. Ezekiel 16:49-63.

Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: 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. Samaria has not committed half 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 more 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 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, 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 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. 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. [Ezekiel 16:49-63, ESV]

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me?

Lord, there is no getting around it, that this is a hard word. What, then? What then should we see in this, your Word, in this season of advent? By your Holy Spirit, open our hearts, that we may see and receive Christ our Lord, the promise of God, despite our sin. Help us, we pray, to receive the promise of God. Help the teacher. In Jesus' mighty name we pray. Amen.

My role as a pastor is to deliver the whole counsel of God. And it may seem an odd thing that in the season of advent, that I'm not in the gospels. Why in the world would I be in the prophets? And that is a good question. This prophecy comes nearly six hundred years prior to the coming of Christ. What could we learn in the season of advent from the prophet Ezekiel, and, beginning next week, from the prophet of Jeremiah, known as the weeping prophet? I believe the thing for us to consider is how in the world can we receive the gift of Christ unless we see into what context and to what situation does the giving of Christ look so incredibly beautiful. The way to see that—to see how the promise of God comes to us not in a season of great obedience and of moral victory and religious orthodoxy. Rather, the promise of God is precisely the sterling, clear work of grace, the promise of God in the midst of our lewdness and disobedience.

If you go back and you read Genesis 19 and you hear first of the city of Sodom and you read that there, you will hear of an attempt of a great abomination. And for many Christians, that's where their understanding of Sodom stops. And Sodom becomes, aided with the teaching of Paul in Romans 1, Sodom becomes this one lens through which we see lewdness and despicable abominations—that is through their sexual immorality. And they become the target of all of God's wrath, because they were dealt with in a very incredible and solemn and direct way as they were judged, and Sodom was removed. Lot, though he was faithful, his wife turned and disobeyed God and turned back to look at Sodom, and she was turned into a pillar of salt and died there.

And it's very easy to see Sodom as a representation of all that stands against God, and we move on from there. And our memories then begin to collapse—if you're familiar at all with the biblical history—and, Lord, give us again and again this history that we need to repeat and reread and reread—but our minds, which is very human, collapses that history into one act: Sodom was sexually immoral, God judged them. Done. Case closed. Let's move on. But Ezekiel doesn't let us do that. And he breaks open for us, if you will, a much more rich understanding of what was going on in Sodom for this purpose: to understand in a much richer way what was going on with the exiles of Judah, so that we can understand in a much

more rich way the beauty of the promise of God. So let's look together. The comparison, the charge, the covenant. The comparison, the charge, and the covenant. And perhaps already in my introduction I've already unpacked half of my first point, so there you go.

First point, part two. It's this. The comparison is crucial for Ezekiel, because he knew it. He tells us something very interesting in the passage. He says to them regarding their understanding of Sodom was this, verse fifty-six, "Was not your sister Sodom a byword in your mouth in the day of your pride, before your wickedness was uncovered?" So he draws out this issue of Sodom through the whole idea of comparison. He does so because he recognized who Sodom was to Judah. And it's this. For Judah is now in exile. A portion of them—that is the elite, the teachers, the artisans, and the political leaders, including Ezekiel—a portion of them were taken off about ten years before 587 BC, and they were taken out into Babylon, which was north of Judah. The other remaining exiles remained in Jerusalem until 587, when Jerusalem was then finally removed and sacked and destroyed and made a part of the Babylonian Empire. And as such, Ezekiel recognized that if there was ever a point for Judah and its exiles to be humbled, now would be a really good time.

The problem was, Judah in its pride, because they were the people of God, they were chosen by God, they had Jerusalem and the temple and all the blessings and all the history and all the working of God—they were filled up still in their pride, and they looked at Sodom, and Sodom was a byword. That's a Scripture way of saying they were basically the favorite whipping boy of Israel. They would look at it and say, "Yeah, Sodom. Look at them." They were the example of all that God hates and is against. "But we. We are the people of God. Thank you very much. We have the building. We have the real estate. We have the promise. We have the history. But not Sodom. Oh, no."

But Ezekiel does a couple of things in this one verse. He exposes the fact that, number one, that used to be your favorite go-to accusation for wickedness. But he does so by saying "your sister Sodom." Now, any knowledge of biblical history would understand, there is absolutely no blood relation between Jerusalem and Sodom. What do you mean, our sister? She's become your sister spiritually by way of comparison.

And this is where we've been over the last number of weeks. He says, "What was the sin of Sodom?" And what he does is he removes all of our biblical reductionism that leads us to believe that the chief sin was sexual immorality, and he goes way below there, and he looks at the sin beneath the sin. And this is where we've been. He says pride, excess of food, prosperous ease, a rejection of the poor and needy, which led them to believe that they were superior. And all those things wrapped up in the human heart leads to all kinds of abominations. And it happened to be that those set of sins in the heart showed itself through sexual sin of all sorts. But their first and foremost problem wasn't the sin of sexual immorality. The first and foremost problem was the roots of all of it, and the root of all sin, and that was pride. And so he comes to them and he says, this was their sin, so I remove them when I saw it. And God did.

But then in verse fifty-one he says, "Samaria has not committed half your sins. You have committed more abominations than they." And then this devastating sentence: "You have made your sisters appear righteous." In fact, you have become in the eyes of Sodom and Samaria—you have become a consolation. In other words, they can now point to you and say, "At least, we, Sodom, we're not as guilty as they." This is Ezekiel uttering the words of God to God's people. And he says "your sister Sodom," meaning, by your abomination and disobedience to the Lord, Israel, you are a spiritual sister with Sodom. You used to pick and point fingers at the sin of Sodom, but now you no longer do so, he says, because your lewdness and your abominations have been brought out into the open. That is a devastating comparison.

And isn't it so understandable—Hebrews continually, over and over again, says to the people of God, "Remember what happened in the Old Testament? Remember Israel? Remember their disobedience?" To remember them as a lesson. And is it not a lesson for the church of the twenty-first

century to be oh so very careful in pointing at the world and trying to find our favorite targets of disobedience and abomination and saying, “See the wickedness of the world?” when underneath is the subtle, ever so subtle, presumption: “We have Christ. We have the promise. We have the buildings. We have the establishment of being the evangelical church of Jesus Christ who sends missionaries across the world to preach Jesus.” As if that gains us one iota of grace or credit before a holy God. It is not to say that the world isn’t full of sin. But the beauty of the gospel is not that sin begins out there. Sin begins right here in these seats and in these buildings. And our first position to consider is one of humility in saying, “Lord, have mercy upon me, a sinner.”

Not only do we have comparison. The question is, what exactly is the charge? What is the charge that God feels so compelled to bring up this devastating comparison? And it is chiefly this one charge: idolatry. The idolatry of his people, Israel. What is idolatry? Idolatry is anything that becomes so central to your life that it begins to give you and your life meaning. And if you were to lose it, you are completely undone. An idol can be absolutely anything. I encourage you, dear Christian, if you proclaim the name of Christ, and even if you don’t, I beg you to consider for just a moment. Do not be so naïve as to believe that an idol is something for the people way back yonder who weren’t smart enough, who got on their knees before wood and stone and worshipped it.

An idol can be anything. Because at the center of idolatry is saying, “This thing gives me what I want, what I think I need, and how dare you take it away from me—because when you do, I will be devastated.” And by that definition, for some people in the Old Testament, yes, it was idols made of wood and stone. But guess what? There are other metaphors that God uses with his people to talk about idolatry—specifically in this one chapter. And I encourage you to go and read this chapter to yourselves, because I cannot read it in polite company. It is that devastating in talking about the idolatry of the people of Israel. But broadly speaking, there are three metaphors that Ezekiel draws one. One is marital, political, and religious.

The marital is one of spiritual adultery. And what he was accusing the charge of the nation of Judah was this: that they, out of fear and hope that they could remain important in the world, decided to take up the false gods and the false practices of enemy nations. And so they simply gave themselves over to the worship of whatever god seemed convenient at the moment so that they could retain their position of power. It was God as husband, the nation of Israel as his wife, and Israel over and over and over again was committing spiritual adultery with other, false gods. And Ezekiel goes through great detail early on in chapter sixteen exactly what that looks like.

The second was political idolatry. You see, this is what was happening. Israel had Egypt’s power to the south and, for a long time, Assyria’s power to the north. And the problem was the Assyrians and the Egyptians were always warring against one another, trying to maintain power, and stuck in the middle was Israel. And so depending on who was the prevailing power of the day, Israel did whatever it could to retain its position. Instead of trusting in the Lord, it turned either to the Egyptian powers for salvation against the Assyrians, or they would turn to the Assyrians to save them from the Egyptian powers, or whatever worked. But now you’ve got Babylon that’s overtaken the old place of Assyria and is getting ready to defeat Egypt. And so now Israel simply wants to turn to Egypt, if that’s what’s necessary, for political salvation, instead of turning to God their King. And so they had successive kings, one who would obey, one who didn’t. One who would bring restoration of the worship of God, another one who would bring in all the false gods and all the false practices—all the while trying to look for a political solution to their spiritual problem.

The third form of idolatry was religious. And that is, they would simply give their place of worship over to the false practices of these other religions. And yet at the same time they would project this sense of faithfulness, that they were the ones who had the promises, as I was speaking of earlier. They were the ones who had Jerusalem and the temple. And so that became a form of pride. All the while, they were still

committing spiritual adultery. They still tried to hold onto, “Well, but we’re still the righteous people of God.”

And Ezekiel, in this one chapter, seeks to unpack that each of those forms of idolatry—spiritual or marital, if you will, political, and religious—was all part of this grand system of Israel trying to look for salvation outside of their faithful God, the Lord. And here’s what would happen—and you’ll see it if you read it to yourself—that when things would go badly, they would go whimpering back to the Lord. “Lord, save us, save us!” Yet when things would get good, they would go right back to disobedience. This was the kind of idolatry that was consuming Israel.

But here’s the question. What application does that have for us? Is idolatry still possible for the people of God that proclaim Christ as Savior? You bet it is. It’s very much possible. Indeed, we can make idols of all kinds of things. We can make idol of truth. How can we make an idol of truth? One of the ways that Proverbs talks about this is he always counsels against the fool who sets himself up as a mocker and a scoffer of others. How can the Christian church make an idol of truth? When we take that truth as being so self-evident and we have it together, that we look at those who don’t believe the truths that we believe, and we scoff and we mock those, and with a superior air act as though that was self-evident and aren’t we smart because we believe in Jesus, and why don’t you get it? You see? You see, truth at that point doesn’t become our trust. Truth just becomes a leverage for our idolatry. We have it together. And we look down our noses at those who don’t believe like we do, forgetting that we are all recipients of the truth of grace, and the grace of truth. And we did not find it on our own, but it found us.

Another is politics. Can politics be an idol? I’ll let you answer that question. What about morality? Can morality become an idol? Yes. I’m doing all that I can do to be obedient. I’m a faithful giver. I read my Bible. My children do, too. I faithfully give to the church, and I seek to help others. That can become our trust, as if God is impressed with our obedience.

Can children become an idol? As one writer said, “In the evangelical world, we don’t think of children as idols. Let me tell you, there are all kinds of parents out there who are looking at their children and essentially, in their heart of hearts, are saying, ‘If my children are happy, if my children are believers, if my children grow up to love me, if my children are successful, then I know that I am worth something.’” And if that’s how you look at your children, not just as good things but as ultimate things, you start to live out your life through your children. The child is either going to stay near you and possibly live a crushed life under your expectations, or they will seek to flee from you at the earliest possible moment. And because it is so easy to turn our children into idols, it will wound us in a way that we could possibly never get over and easily become very angry at God, for we might say, “How dare you, God, do such a thing as this? I can’t believe in God, because my children did not end up the way that I hoped.” But as this writer says, “But the depth of that wound is not God’s making. It is our own.”

We can make an idol of anything, because our hearts, as Calvin said, are idol factories. Because we are first and foremost not thinking things; we are first and foremost loving things, and what we love can easily become an idol. And we can take that which God calls good and make it something that we invest with our hope of meaning and identity. And so the question becomes: can the church of Jesus Christ find a contemporary application of Ezekiel’s charge of spiritual adultery? Yes. But what is the way out? How do we address it? How do we uncover it? It’s through the covenant.

Let me say by word of warning—as I’ve said before, when dealing with some of the sins which we’ve been unpacking, it’s very easy to sabotage recovering as an idol-maker. One way to sabotage the covenant is to presume that, indeed, “Well, the Lord is the Lord of forgiveness. He will forgive me. It doesn’t matter.” And that just becomes a form of cheap grace, as if the Lord has saved you and brought you to himself through the work of Christ but doesn’t intend to make you holy. Our holiness never merits God’s grace, but God’s grace always yields holiness. But we cannot presume that, therefore, our idolatry and our spiritual adultery somehow doesn’t matter—that the Lord, well, you know, he forgives. Yes, he

does. But forgiveness is not cheap grace. Forgiveness means the recognition of our idolatry, and confessing it to him.

The other way to sabotage this is not just cheap grace—it becomes legalism. And we try really hard to make sure that we're doing everything right. We give up things. "Well, you know, I'm making an idol of my work, and so I need to find a new career." No. "I'm making an idol of my children, and so I just need to disregard them in some way." No. The way to solve the issue of idolatry is to come to the center of the gospel, and it's this. The covenant is stated for us here in this wonderful passage when he says in verse sixty:

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.

The word here is confounded, meaning absolutely amazed into silent humility because of what I've done.

And what is it that the Lord has done at the center of this covenant? And it is this. The sentence, for God's people and their adultery and idolatry, according to the covenant of God, is death. Because a part of that covenant is the law of God. The consequence of Israel's disobedience of idolatry is absolute death without question, without any remnant, without anything else. God is perfectly righteous and just to do that. But God says, "I am the one who made the covenant, and I am the one who will fulfill the covenant—an everlasting covenant." That means one of two things. Either God does away with the law, or God somehow satisfies his justice. God is the husband. Israel is the wife. And in the midst of her adultery, the husband says to his wife, "I still love you. And though your adultery has been brought out into the wide light of exposure and your lewdness and your shame is for everyone to see, you need to know, I chose you, and I make an everlasting covenant."

May I say this. The covenant even six hundred years prior to the coming of Christ through the prophet Isaiah, through the prophet Ezekiel, through the prophet of Jeremiah, it is this—cross my heart and I hope to die. Indeed, it is this. Cross my heart? No. My heart will go to the cross. And not that I will hope to die. I will die to satisfy my righteous justice. And yet I will make you the beneficiary of my justice, because I love you. God is, according to Paul, both just and the justifier. And that everlasting covenant is this: I will come to you not in your righteousness, but in the lewdness of your disobedience. For the promise of God is not seen in our obedience and righteousness; it is seen in the face of our shame. And God comes with the Technicolor beauty of his grace, and he covers our sin. And the gift of advent is longing, "Lord Jesus, come again."

For even though we are recipients of the covenant of grace which only Judah could hope for, which only Ezekiel prophesied about, we as the church of Jesus Christ have received the covenant of grace—the new covenant. Yet we, too, can easily be given over to pride, superiority, prosperous ease, dismissing the poor and the needy, and being filled up with our own superiority and haughtiness. And we make an idol of so many things. I don't know what that looks like for you. The Lord does. But he calls us in this advent season by his grace as our Heavenly Father, as our husband, to come again, not to the path of legalism, not to the path of cheap grace, but to the foot of the cross. Lord, have mercy on me. That we might be able to say in this advent season the words of John: "Behold, the Lamb of God has come, who will take away the sins of the world." Amen? Let's pray.

Father, I thank you for the patience and the forbearance of my hearers this morning as we have unpacked this passage over the last number of weeks in painful detail. And Lord, what better season than this that we are reminded why we need a Savior. Why was there an original advent? Because we are desperately broken, in need of a Messiah. Lord, we ask you for your grace again, to rescue us from our idolatry. We thank you for your grace. We thank you that your cross is where the heart of God, the Lord

Jesus Christ, went to die for us without fingers crossed and with the everlasting covenant to fulfill, that we are made clean. We are made your children, because of your grace. We give you thanks and praise. Now help us to respond to this Word as we come to you in song. In Jesus' name. Amen.