

Ezekiel 31-32
Psalm 1, 63
Revelation 12

“The Fall of the Great Dragon”

December 26, 2010

We’ve heard quite a bit about “Eden” in the oracles against the nations.

Why does Eden show up here?

What do Egypt, Tyre, and Assyria have to do with the Garden of Eden?

Adam and Eve were created by God and placed in the Garden in Eden.

The Garden was the “Holy of Holies” where God met with his people.

Adam was the “chief priest” who was tasked with ruling and guarding the Garden.

And God commanded Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply –
to fill the earth and subdue it,
conforming all the earth to the pattern of the garden,
and building it into the City of God.

Ever since the fall, humanity has been busy about that task!

Our problem has been that we are busy about that task in all the wrong ways,
and towards all the wrong ends!

Israel was *supposed* to be the holy nation that would become what Adam failed to be.

Jerusalem was to be the holy city that would become the center of the new humanity.

But as we have seen with great clarity from Ezekiel,

Israel failed just like Adam.

Jerusalem has fallen from her glory into debauchery and wickedness.

And now, in the oracles against the nations,

Ezekiel shows that the nations have tried to usurp Jerusalem’s place.

In Ezekiel 31-32 Assyria and Egypt are portrayed

as trying to become what Israel was supposed to be.

The glory of Eden should have lived and flowed through Jerusalem to the nations.

But instead, Egypt’s pride and Assyria’s power have dominated the nations.

God had promised Abraham that all nations would be blessed through his seed.

But as of Ezekiel’s day, that hasn’t happened yet!

That’s why I wanted us to sing Psalm 1 today.

Because the river of living water will only flow – the tree of life will only grow –
when there is a blessed man whose delight is in the law of the Lord!

And that blessed man is our Lord Jesus Christ.

So let us sing with joy to the Lord, Psalm 1!
Revelation 12

I have been struck by how rare it is for pastors to preach through *all* of Ezekiel.

They usually hit the highlights:

Sermon Audio suggests that the “favorite” chapters
are Ezekiel 36 and 37 (over 200 sermons each),
and Ezekiel 16 (120 sermons).

The call of Ezekiel (chapters 1-3) receives some attention,
and the vision of the departure of the glory of the LORD from the temple
(chapters 8-11) also attracts some comment;
but most preachers skip to the highlights:

Ezekiel 18 on personal responsibility,
Ezekiel 22 against apostasy and the decline of the church,
or Ezekiel 28 exploring the connection with Satan and Eden.

But the rest of Ezekiel gets very little attention.

So the the *real* question is whether you have ever heard a sermon from Ezekiel 31!
(there are only 2 sermons on Sermon Audio from that chapter!)

I bring this up to highlight a contrast:

there are at least 200 sermons for *each verse* of Paul’s letter to the Philippians.

I don’t object that pastors preach *more* on Paul than on Ezekiel.

But God gave us the *whole* of Scripture,
and we need the whole of Scripture,
in particular, we *need* Ezekiel
to remind us that we cannot bargain or negotiate our way out of Exile;
our only hope is that God himself will act.

Ezekiel 31-32 is a fitting passage to end the year on.

My last sermon for 2010 has as its basic message this warning:

You are going to die.
Death is coming.
It is inevitable.
It is relentless.
It *will* find you.

In the oracles against the nations,
there are seven nations.

Egypt is the seventh – and last.

The oracles against the first six nations take up 97 verses.

The oracles against Egypt take up 97 verses.

And at the very center (at the end of chapter 28)

God promises that he will restore Israel and cause them to dwell safely in the land.
The oracles against the nations are designed to give comfort to God's people
because of God's promise that he is working all things together
for his glory and their good.

Egypt is the seventh nation in Ezekiel's list of nations,
but there are also seven oracles against Egypt.

Last week we looked at the first four oracles.

we saw Pharaoh the great dragon – who was nothing more than a broken reed,
who failed to save Israel from their enemies.

God judges Egypt because Egypt tried to take God's place in defending his people.
No one and nothing can replace God!

Pharaoh's pride and arrogance will fall under God's judgment.

Today we conclude with the last three oracles in chapters 31-32.

1. Pharaoh, the Glorious Tree: Pride Ends in the Grave (31:1-18)

a. The Pharaonic Tree – the Envy of Eden (v1-9)

31:1 In the eleventh year, in the third month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came to me: 2 “Son of man, say to Pharaoh king of Egypt and to his multitude:

This is June 21, 587 BC – two months after the previous oracle –
still during the siege of Jerusalem.

“Whom are you like in your greatness?

*3 Behold, Assyria was a cedar in Lebanon, with beautiful branches and forest shade,
and of towering height, its top among the clouds.*

*4 The waters nourished it; the deep made it grow tall,
making its rivers flow around the place of its planting,
sending forth its streams to all the trees of the field.*

*5 So it towered high above all the trees of the field;
its boughs grew large and its branches long from abundant water in its shoots.*

*6 All the birds of the heavens made their nests in its boughs;
under its branches all the beasts of the field gave birth to their young,
and under its shadow lived all great nations.*

*7 It was beautiful in its greatness, in the length of its branches;
for its roots went down to abundant waters.*

*8 The cedars in the garden of God could not rival it, nor the fir trees equal its boughs;
neither were the plane trees like its branches;
no tree in the garden of God was its equal in beauty.*

*9 I made it beautiful in the mass of its branches,
and all the trees of Eden envied it, that were in the garden of God.*

This language draws on several themes:

a tree with its roots in the deep – the waters under the earth –

a tree with its branches among the clouds –
 where all the birds of the heavens make their nests –
a tree where all the nations live under its shadow.

Certainly there is Edenic language there –
God even says that the trees of Eden envied Assyria (and then Egypt)!
“No tree in the garden of God was its equal in beauty.”

I'll admit, there may be hyperbole there!
But why does God say that Egypt outshines Eden?

Because it *was* Adam's task to “improve” the Garden.
He was not merely a caretaker.
His calling was to fill the earth and subdue it.
His task was to plant and build things that would be *more glorious* than Eden.

And among the glorious cultures of the ancient world,
 Assyria and Egypt certainly deserve this description.
When you look at the mighty power of Egypt –
 and the impressive monuments (the pyramids, the Sphinx)
 that they left behind –
 when you look at the glory and splendor of these ancient civilizations,
 you can properly say that – in one sense –
 they were more glorious than the Garden of Eden.

Humanity is noble and beautiful.
Human culture, politics, education, economics – these are good things
 that are part of what God created us to do!

But there is something more going on here.
I hope you saw the connection with Psalm 1 –
 the blessed man who is planted by streams of water,
 whose leaf does not wither,
 and who bears fruit in season.

And the connections are strengthened when you consider earlier parts of Ezekiel.

Ezekiel 19:11 spoke of Jerusalem as a vine whose strong stems (the kings)
 towered aloft among the clouds –
 which was planted by the waters.
Ezekiel 17:1-6 spoke of the kings of Jerusalem in similar terms –
 and Ezekiel 17:22-24 promised that God would plant a noble cedar
 on the mountain height of Israel,
 “and under it will dwell every kind of bird;
 in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest.
And all the trees of the field shall know that I am the LORD.”

In other words, the description of Assyria and Egypt in Ezekiel 31
is very much a description of what Jerusalem was *supposed* to be!
The description of Pharaoh shows us
that Pharaoh was trying to be what the Son of David was supposed to be.

Pharaoh is trying to be Lord.

I want you to think about that.

Because that is precisely the same problem that we see today.
You sometimes hear someone say that a person has a “Messiah-complex.”
We are constantly trying to be what only Jesus can be.
We are constantly looking for someone or something else that will “fix” everything.

As Iain Duguid puts it, “for some contemporary people the allure of Egypt
is replaced by the allure of wealth.
For those people, money seems to offer the same things that Egypt offered Judah:
independence, freedom from outside controls and limits,
the power to choose, and comfortable affluence.
The core is the same; only the packaging has changed.” (p377)

The early Christian confession was “Jesus is Lord.”
and because Jesus is Lord, he is the one who will judge all nations.
All people will have to give answer before Jesus for the deeds done in the body.
Judgment day is coming!

b. The Judgment of the Tree – the Pride of Pharaoh (v10-14)

In verses 10-14 Ezekiel reminds us of how Assyria (and Egypt) have deserved judgment.

10 “Therefore thus says the Lord God: Because it towered high and set its top among the clouds, and its heart was proud of its height, 11 I will give it into the hand of a mighty one of the nations. He shall surely deal with it as its wickedness deserves. I have cast it out. 12 Foreigners, the most ruthless of nations, have cut it down and left it. On the mountains and in all the valleys its branches have fallen, and its boughs have been broken in all the ravines of the land, and all the peoples of the earth have gone away from its shadow and left it. 13 On its fallen trunk dwell all the birds of the heavens, and on its branches are all the beasts of the field. 14 All this is in order that no trees by the waters may grow to towering height or set their tops among the clouds, and that no trees that drink water may reach up to them in height. For they are all given over to death, to the world below, among the children of man [Adam], with those who go down to the pit.

Assyria was great and glorious –
but Assyria was proud, and so was condemned.

But is Ezekiel still speaking of Assyria?
Or is he speaking of Egypt?

Yes!

If Egypt thinks of itself as the new Assyria –
then let Egypt understand that it will face Assyria's fate as well!

Verse 14 makes clear that God will not allow any nation to pretend to rival him.
God will send the lumberjacks of the nations to chop down the tree,
so that “no trees by the waters may grow to towering height
or set their tops among the clouds.”
Death will have the final word with all nations – with all men.

The children of man – literally, the sons of Adam – will all go down to the pit.

You are all going to die!

And as Daniel Block puts it, (p192)
“the depths to which the arrogant are cast
will be commensurate with the heights to which they have aspired.”

If you have tried to replace the Son of David –
if you have tried to be all that Israel failed to be –
you will fall under the judgment and curse of Israel.

We all want to be Lord.
“It's good to be the king” – because the king can do whatever he wants!
Who is going to say no to the king!

That is – until you go down to Sheol!
The trees of Eden were jealous of Assyria and Egypt –
until they saw what happened to these mighty nations in the grave!

c. The Destruction of the Tree – from Eden to Sheol (v15-18)

15 “Thus says the Lord God: On the day the cedar [it] went down to Sheol I caused mourning; I closed the deep over it, and restrained its rivers, and many waters were stopped. I clothed Lebanon in gloom for it, and all the trees of the field fainted because of it. 16 I made the nations quake at the sound of its fall, when I cast it down to Sheol with those who go down to the pit. And all the trees of Eden, the choice and best of Lebanon, all that drink water, were comforted in the world below. 17 They also went down to Sheol with it, to those who are slain by the sword; yes, those who were its arm, who lived under its shadow among the nations.

Notice in verse 15 that when the cedar went down to Sheol,
“I closed the deep over it.”
Assyria – and thus Egypt – will find themselves in the uttermost depths of Sheol.
The trees of Eden and the great cedars of Lebanon find comfort in this!
Assyria and Egypt may have been great in life –
but death is the great equalizer!

18 *“Whom are you thus like in glory and in greatness among the trees of Eden? You shall be brought down with the trees of Eden to the world below. You shall lie among the uncircumcised, with those who are slain by the sword.*

What are the trees of Eden?

There are two that were named in Genesis:
the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil,
and the Tree of Life.

I think Ezekiel is referring to them.

The trees of Eden are in Sheol –
they are in the depths of the grave.
The OT conception of Sheol is not the same as “hell.”

Sheol is the place of the dead.

All people go down to Sheol –
the righteous as well as the wicked.
Of course, the righteous have a hope beyond the grave –
a hope beyond Sheol.

But because of Adam’s sin,
all of creation is doomed to death.

The whole of creation – including the trees of Eden –
are under God’s wrath and curse.

But of course, even as the great Cedar of Ezekiel 31 points beyond itself to Assyria and Egypt,

“This is Pharaoh and all his multitude, declares the Lord God.”

so also the trees of Eden point beyond itself to Adam – and all the sons of Adam (v14).

All nations – all powers – all people
will end in the grave.
All will go down into death.

This way of thinking about the powers of this age is also found in Colossians 2.

Paul insists that we need to have a different way of thinking than the mindset of this age.
“See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.” (2:8-10)

And how did Christ become head of all rule and authority?
“He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in the cross.” (2:15)

The death and resurrection of Christ is where Christ has disarmed the powers.

Egypt – Tyre – Assyria – Babylon – Rome – Hong Kong – New York – Walmart –

the powers of this age have been disarmed and put to shame through the cross.

That is why Paul says – don't let any other way of thinking take you captive!

All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are found in Christ.

All rule and authority has been given to him.

2. Pharaoh, the Impotent Dragon: Power Ends in the Grave (32:1-16)

a. The Dragon of the Seas (v1-2)

32:1 In the twelfth year, in the twelfth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came to me: 2 “Son of man, raise a lamentation over Pharaoh king of Egypt and say to him:

“You consider yourself a lion of the nations,

but you are like a dragon in the seas;

you burst forth in your rivers,

trouble the waters with your feet,

and foul their rivers.

This oracle was given on March 3, 585 – two years after chapter 31.

It returns to the theme of the “dragon” that we looked at last week.

Pharaoh considers himself a “lion of the nations” –

but God says he is a “tannim” – a dragon of the seas –

but an impotent dragon.

We saw last Sunday night from Psalm 87 that one of the tannim was named Rahab.

And Rahab is often used in the OT to refer to Pharaoh, the dragon of Egypt.

In Isaiah 30 Pharaoh is called “Rahab who sits still.”

Pharaoh claims to be big stuff –

but in fact all his pretended power will come to naught.

b. The Slaughter of the Dragon (v3-10)

3 Thus says the Lord God:

I will throw my net over you with a host of many peoples,

and they will haul you up in my dragnet.

God says in verse 3 that he will trap Pharaoh in his net,

and feed him to the birds of the heavens and the beasts of the earth.

4 And I will cast you on the ground; on the open field I will fling you,

and will cause all the birds of the heavens to settle on you,

and I will gorge the beasts of the whole earth with you.

5 I will strew your flesh upon the mountains and fill the valleys with your carcass.

6 I will drench the land even to the mountains with your flowing blood,

and the ravines will be full of you.

7 When I blot you out, I will cover the heavens and make their stars dark;

I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give its light.

8 All the bright lights of heaven will I make dark over you,

and put darkness on your land, declares the Lord God.

There are echoes of the plagues in verses 6-8,
particularly the plague of blood (v6) and darkness (v7-8).

When the dragon is slain,
its blood will flow throughout the land,
filling the ravines and drenching the land.

The destruction of the dragon will also be attended with heavenly portents:
the sun will be darkened and the moon will not shine.

Darkness will fall when God casts down the dragon!
(Does that sound familiar?)

That is what God did when his Son did battle against the dragon on the cross!
In the cross, the dragon is cast down – in the cross, the powers are put to open shame!

9 “I will trouble the hearts of many peoples, when I bring your destruction among the nations, into the countries that you have not known. 10 I will make many peoples appalled at you, and the hair of their kings shall bristle with horror because of you, when I brandish my sword before them. They shall tremble every moment, every one for his own life, on the day of your downfall.

c. The Destruction of Egypt (v11-16)

11 “For thus says the Lord God: The sword of the king of Babylon shall come upon you. 12 I will cause your multitude to fall by the swords of mighty ones, all of them most ruthless of nations.

“They shall bring to ruin the pride of Egypt, and all its multitude shall perish.

*13 I will destroy all its beasts from beside many waters;
and no foot of man shall trouble them anymore, nor shall the hoofs of beasts trouble them.*

*14 Then I will make their waters clear, and cause their rivers to run like oil,
declares the Lord God.*

*15 When I make the land of Egypt desolate, and when the land is desolate of all that fills it,
when I strike down all who dwell in it, then they will know that I am the Lord.*

Verses 11-15 then explain how God’s sword will fall upon them –
through the king of Babylon.

In the 10th plague, it was only the firstborn of Egypt who died.
Now, God will strike down *all* who dwell in it.

And then the daughters of the nations will chant a dirge over Egypt:

16 This is a lamentation that shall be chanted; the daughters of the nations shall chant it; over Egypt, and over all her multitude, shall they chant it, declares the Lord God.”

3. The Lament over Egypt’s Descent into Sheol (32:17-32)

a. Egypt’s Descent into the Pit (v17-21)

17 In the twelfth year, in the twelfth month, on the fifteenth day of the month, the word of the Lord came to me: 18 “Son of man, wail over the multitude of Egypt, and send them down, her and the daughters of majestic nations, to the world below, to those who have gone down to the pit:

Two weeks later on March 18, 585 BC, Ezekiel received his final oracle against Egypt.

The final oracle against Egypt at the end of chapter 32 has aptly been called
“morbidly repetitious.” (Block, 213)

In these 16 verses the word “multitude or pomp” is used 7 times,
“go down” is used 11 times,
“those who go down to the pit” 5 times,
“land of the living” 7 times,
“to lie” 8 times,
“uncircumcised” 9 times,
“the sword” 14 times,
“to fall” 5 times,
“to give/hand over” 11 times,
“all or every” 17 times,
“grave” 6 times,
“terror” 7 times.

The effect of this is pretty clear:

all nations who set themselves against God will be brought down to the pit.

19 ‘Whom do you surpass in beauty?

Go down and be laid to rest with the uncircumcised.’

20 They shall fall amid those who are slain by the sword. Egypt is delivered to the sword; drag her away, and all her multitudes. 21 The mighty chiefs shall speak of them, with their helpers, out of the midst of Sheol: ‘They have come down, they lie still, the uncircumcised, slain by the sword.’

Egypt is now mocked as a common nation.

“The nation that perceived itself as the epitome of culture, greatness and glory
is hereby sentenced to the most ignominious fate in the netherworld.” (Block, 218)

Any nation that would hold itself up as a leader among nations must take heed to this warning.

As a new Congress takes its seats next month – let them take heed!

As state legislatures and governors begin their duties – be warned!

As John the Baptist told the tax collectors in his day –

“Collect no more than you are authorized to do”

and as he told the soldiers

“Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation,
and be content with your wages.” (Luke 3:13-14)

Those in authority must understand their limits.
Those with power must wield it with humility.

Of course, that goes for each of us!

Parents – how do you wield your power over your children?

In the work place, how do you use your authority?

You are to think with the mind of Christ –

you are to live with the humility that he demonstrated
in his incarnation and atoning death!

The cross is where Jesus saved us –

but the cross is also then the pattern for our lives.

On the other hand – as verses 22-30 shows us clearly –
he who would save his life will lose it.

b. Egypt in the Hall of Shame (v22-30)

Verses 22-30 describe how Egypt will join the international Hall of Shame:

22 “Assyria is there, and all her company, its graves all around it, all of them slain, fallen by the sword, 23 whose graves are set in the uttermost parts of the pit; and her company is all around her grave, all of them slain, fallen by the sword, who spread terror in the land of the living.

24 “Elam is there, and all her multitude around her grave; all of them slain, fallen by the sword, who went down uncircumcised into the world below, who spread their terror in the land of the living; and they bear their shame with those who go down to the pit. 25 They have made her a bed among the slain with all her multitude, her graves all around it, all of them uncircumcised, slain by the sword; for terror of them was spread in the land of the living, and they bear their shame with those who go down to the pit; they are placed among the slain.

26 “Meshech-Tubal is there, and all her multitude, her graves all around it, all of them uncircumcised, slain by the sword; for they spread their terror in the land of the living. 27 And they do not lie with the mighty, the fallen from among the uncircumcised, who went down to Sheol with their weapons of war, whose swords were laid under their heads, and whose iniquities are upon their bones; for the terror of the mighty men was in the land of the living.

28 But as for you, you shall be broken and lie among the uncircumcised, with those who are slain by the sword.

29 “Edom is there, her kings and all her princes, who for all their might are laid with those who are killed by the sword; they lie with the uncircumcised, with those who go down to the pit.

30 “The princes of the north are there, all of them, and all the Sidonians, who have gone down in shame with the slain, for all the terror that they caused by their might; they lie uncircumcised with those who are slain by the sword, and bear their shame with those who go down to the pit.

Those who live by the sword will die by the sword.

The nations who used terror to intimidate and oppress other nations
will themselves perish and go down to the pit.

Notice that for Ezekiel there are three realms:

the heavens above – where God dwells,
the “land of the living,” where the living dwell!
and the “pit” – the underworld, the place of the dead.

All these great and mighty nations have gone down to the pit.
Their great power and mighty warriors could not save them.

c. The Consolation of the Grave: at Least Everyone Else Is Here! (v31-32)

And so we come to Ezekiel’s final point regarding the nations:

31 “When Pharaoh sees them, he will be comforted for all his multitude, Pharaoh and all his army, slain by the sword, declares the Lord God. 32 For I spread terror in the land of the living; and he shall be laid to rest among the uncircumcised, with those who are slain by the sword, Pharaoh and all his multitude, declares the Lord God.”

There is a certain consolation for Pharaoh in the grave!
At least everyone else is here!

As Block puts it,

“One might have expected him to react to his fate with hostility and anger.
The greatest, most glorious and beautiful king(dom) in all the world
is sentenced to spend his (its) afterlife with this despicable crowd
of uncircumcised and ignominious victims of the sword!”
Why does he take comfort here?
At least everyone else is here!

In Ezekiel 32 Sheol is arranged like a great communal cemetery,
with each nation having its own plot –
the heroes of old having an honorable spot,
while the dishonorable are relegated to “the remotest parts of the Pit.

Ezekiel never speaks of what happens to the righteous dead.
But it is clear that the wicked have some sort of conscious experience in Sheol,
and the ordering of the Sheol
clearly reflects the deeds done in the land of the living.

For Ezekiel, Yahweh alone holds the key to Sheol.

He rules the grave – and the people who dwell there.
It is certainly *not* a complete doctrine of heaven and hell –
but it *is* a very clear statement of a conscious existence beyond the grave.

Ezekiel wants the exiles to see that those who put their hope in Egypt
are putting their hope in one who will go down to the pit in shame and despair.

We need to encourage each other as well to put our hope and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ –
and not to put our trust in that which is temporary and fleeting.

We've been talking quite a bit lately about the importance of making disciples.
Making disciples is not an individual project.
It requires the whole body of Christ working together.
Each part doing its part, functioning properly in the growth of the whole.

In the church where I grew up,
there was a man who thought that there were only three ways to be a good Christian:
either be a missionary, an evangelist, or a pastor.
He knew he wasn't cut out to be a missionary,
and he was a pretty lousy evangelist,
so he figured he needed to be a pastor.
But after going to seminary and serving an internship in our church,
the pastors told him that he had no business being a pastor.

He was devastated.

For a couple years he had no idea what he should do.
But then he discovered the concept of the body of Christ!
It turned out he had a real gift for encouragement.

In fact, he played a very significant part in encouraging me to become a pastor!

Some of you have more opportunities for evangelism at work than others.
But making disciples includes far more than "evangelizing."
What happens to those who come to faith in Christ?
They need to grow and mature in the faith.

We have had people come to faith through this congregation.
How are we doing at encouraging them in their discipleship?

Christ has overcome death, hell, and the grave through his resurrection from the dead.
We are called to live as those who have been rescued from the pit –
as those who have been delivered from death and hell.

End with Psalm 63