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The Covenant Presence of God Retracted, Part 1

One of the key themes of Ezekiel is this: The loss and restoration of the covenant presence of God. Over the years, I have referenced this concept multiple times. Yet, when this topic was referenced a few months ago, it hit a raw nerve.

Ezekiel 5-11 is about the loss of the covenant presence of God from among His people. It

consists of four progressive, yet parallel revelations pertaining to the judgment that was coming to the people of Judah in 586 BC. The section was intended to frame our thinking as we consider the substance of God's departure from His people in Ezekiel 8-11. Hopefully by series end, we all will have a good understanding of this very important facet of God's redeeming work: His Covenant Presence Amongst His People.

In order to understand God's covenant presence being retracted it is important to understand the backstory (Ezekiel 5-7) behind the fourth and primary vision of this section: The retreating glory of the Lord, Ezekiel 8-11.

There is a progression to these first visions which for the sake of clarity and organization, I am NOT going to look at in order. RATHER using a chiasmic approach, we will take up the first vision (chapter 5), then the third vision (chapter 7), and end with the second vision (chapter 6).

Notice with me, the first vision is God's judgment is morally demanded.

Ezekiel 5:1-4, "As for you, son of man, take a sharp sword [what we are reading about here once again would have been in public, for all to see. // This sign-act would have begun with Ezekiel sharpening a warrior's sword. After that, Ezekiel was to proceed accordingly...]; take and use it *as* a barber's razor on your head and beard [the shaving of the beard and head was a sign of mourning¹]. Then take scales for weighing and divide the hair. One third you shall burn in the fire at the center of the city, when the days of the siege are completed [this references the 430 days on which Ezekiel lay on his side]. Then you shall take one third and strike *it* with the sword all around the city [God is still talking here about the brick on which Ezekiel drew the skyline of Jerusalem, cf. Ezekiel 4:1-3], and one third you shall scatter to the wind; and I will unsheathe a sword behind them [this statement makes it clear that God clearly was the One behind the coming judgment... it was He who would 'unsheathe the sword'!]. Take also a few in number from them and bind them in the edges of your *robes* [this would represent the remnant that would survive the initial downfall of Jerusalem; and yet from this remnant marching into exile, some would still perish...]. And take again some of them and throw them into the fire, and burn them in the fire; from it a fire will spread to all the house of Israel."

Upon the calling and commissioning of Ezekiel to the Prophetic ministry, the first message God gave His people through Ezekiel was a "Siege Play" (Ezekiel 4) in which Ezekiel enacted an attack on Jerusalem, all of which was to last for 430 days! Now Ezekiel 5 would have advanced the sign with the shaving of Ezekiel's head/beard and then the burning, scattering, or collecting of his hair with a sword.

The picture here is that of the scattering that was coming to the people of God after the siege! Relatively speaking, only a few would be preserved, as pictured by the hair sewn on the edge of Ezekiel's robe. Everyone else would either die, be lost in exile, or stay in Jerusalem!² With that, notice verses 5-6.

Ezekiel 5:5-6a, “Thus says the Lord God, ‘This is Jerusalem [if there was any doubt as to the significance of Ezekiel’s sign act, God made it abundantly clear here]; I have set her at the center of the nations, with lands around her [this speaks of the privileged position God’s people hold in this world³]. BUT she has rebelled against My ordinances more wickedly than the nations and against My statutes more than the lands which surround her...”

How could a people loved and cared for by God turn their backs so radically on the One who gave them so much? Yet they did! By the time of the exile of 586 BC, God’s people had out-sinned the Canaanites that dwelt in the land! That is saying something when you consider that the Canaanites were one of the basest cultures that has ever existed on the earth! With this, consider the sin of God’s people.

Ezekiel 5:9, “And because of all your abominations, I will do among you what I have not done, and the like of which I will never do again.”

There is NOT a stronger word in the Hebrew to denote physical, religious, or ethical atrocities better than the word before us here. It denotes anything that is morally repulsive, the word is translated as “a thing of horror” in Psalm 88:8! Brothers and sisters, this is the description of God’s privileged people at the time of the exile!

Ezekiel 5:11, “‘So as I live,’ declares the Lord God, ‘surely, because you have defiled My sanctuary with all your detestable idols and with all your abominations, therefore I will also withdraw [this is the loss of God’s Covenant Presence pictured in Ezekiel 8-11], and My eye shall have no pity and I will not spare.’”

The abominable acts of God’s people did NOT infect their worship. RATHER, it was their abominable worship which infected their living! We are talking here about a worship service whose central feature included the use of drugs, vestal virgins, orgies, mutilation, and child sacrifice! This is how God’s people sought to honor their covenant Lord!

With all of this we see the moral necessity of God’s coming judgment! Accordingly the remainder of the chapter contains an overview of the judgment that soon would come upon the people of God (vv. 11b-16)! It is brutal; but honestly, not brutal enough in light of the rebellion of Israel!

In light of this, we know that no one amongst the nations or amongst God’s people could charge God with being unfair. God had given His people and the multiple covenant blessings they had enjoyed from His hand, the idea that these people could reject God is unthinkable! Indeed! God’s judgment was morally demanded! With that, notice the third vision, the certainty of God’s judgment.

Ezekiel 7:1-2, “Moreover, the word of the Lord came to me saying, ‘And you, son of

man, thus says the Lord God to the land of Israel, “An end! The end is coming on the four corners of the land.””

Recall the fourfold gaze of the Cherubim which spoke of God’s sovereign dominion over a world which at all times remains in His immediate presence! On account of His all-encompassing sovereignty, hear the message: NO ONE would escape! Accordingly, the flow of this chapter is a detailing of this judgment with emphatic statements proclaiming the unavoidable nature of this coming judgment! Consider three verses:

Ezekiel 7:13, “Indeed, the seller will not regain what he sold as long as they *both* live; for the vision regarding all their multitude will not be averted, nor will any of them maintain his life by his iniquity.”

It is amazing how much stock we place in our darling lusts. We think they can give us so much when it comes to happiness, contentment, and power. Yet, as God here states, “[no one will] maintain his life by his iniquity.” Paul essentially repeated this in Romans 6.

Romans 6:21, “Therefore what benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the outcome of those things is death.”

Recall the words of R. C. Sproul explaining our desire to sin: “Every choice we have ever made, even though it might have seemed repugnant, was chosen because not choosing it was even more repugnant.” (Sproul, 2009, p. 236) This is the *modus operandi* of the sinning Christian; they are deluded. They look to the future with confidence. They think that no matter how bad their life may become, nevertheless they will have their darling lusts by which they will endeavor to cope with the ugliness of this world!

Heed the word of God this day, “...the outcome of those things is death!” The passing pleasures of sin will NOT make “every little thing... alright!” And such would NOT be the case when it came to material possession as well. Ezekiel describes this by using the analogy of the attacking army breaching the walls of the city.

Ezekiel 7:19, “They [God’s people] shall fling their silver into the streets [as they run for their lives], and their gold shall become an abhorrent thing; their silver and their gold shall not be able to deliver them in the day of the wrath of the Lord. They cannot satisfy their appetite, nor can they fill their stomachs, for their iniquity has become an occasion of stumbling.”

The focus is on commerce and the material possessions we think will provide so much satisfaction if only we could acquire it! D. I. Block wrote:

...the reader quickly discovers that these precious metals represent much more than coinage paid out in business transactions. They have been perceived as the keys to life itself. The bankruptcy of this materialism is demonstrated in two ways. First, the

silver and gold will buy no food... Second, their money will not purchase the appeasement of divine wrath. (Block, 1997, p. 264)

It is amazing the “shelters” we erect and to which we flee when the wages of sin are reaped in our lives- like spiritual hunger and thirsting, the rotting of our souls, conflict, and difficulty! So many flee to material wealth! Yet it does not satisfy, it can only placate and anesthetize us to reality for a time! In the end, sin’s destruction will always prevail! In light of this, the material wealth of God’s people will NOT insulate them from the coming Judgment of God! Nor would their works.

Ezekiel 7:27, “The king will mourn, the prince will be clothed with horror, and the hands of the people of the land will tremble. According to their conduct I shall deal with them, and by their judgments I shall judge them. And they will know that I am the Lord.”

We are so familiar with the truth of this passage that we miss the implication. Is it NOT on the basis of our conduct that all of us- in the flesh- want to stand before God? This is the default program of the non-Christian. And this is the remaining passion of our fallenness as Christians. Accordingly, quite often we can be found “seeking to rebuild what has once been destroyed” (Galatians 2:18) by endeavoring to relate to God on the basis of our conduct. For example:

- Our Bible reading!
- Our church attendance!
- Our acts of devotion and sacrifice!

We appeal to all of these in the day of difficulty as reasons for why God’s providence is unjust! And God’s people most certainly did in Ezekiel’s day! And so, God told His people, *“You want to stand before me on the basis of your deeds; it will be ‘by your deeds’ that my covenant justice will be exonerated!”*

Any and every idol to which God’s people might flee will let them down. They and the world eventually will know and so confess that the God of Judah is the only reigning omnipotent!

Ezekiel 7:4b, 9b, 27, “And they will know that I am the Lord... it is I, the Lord who does the smiting.”

This is the Old Testament equivalent of Philippians:

Philippians 2:9-11, “Therefore also God highly exalted Him (Christ), and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Ezekiel's third vision progressed the message that God gave to His people in Ezekiel 5. Not only is God's judgment morally demanded (we are shocked it didn't come sooner), but it also is most certain! Notice a third characteristic about God's coming judgment, it is sobering.

Ezekiel 6:1-2, "And the word of the Lord came to me saying, 'Son of man, set your face toward the mountains of Israel, and prophesy against them.'"

God's people's hearts were so hard and their ears so dull, God would have better success giving a prophecy to the mountains which surrounded Jerusalem. In other words, there was a better chance that God would be heard if He addressed them! Accordingly, vv. 1-8 God directs Ezekiel to address the mountains.⁴

The remainder of this chapter details the redemptive consequences that would come as a result of God's judgment (vv. 9-10) and then the devastation that would immediately result (vv. 11-14)! We are going to close our look at the back story of the prophetic word given to God's people in Ezekiel 8-11 by considering the redemptive consequences that accompanied God's judgment.

Ezekiel 6:9-10, "Then those of you who escape will remember Me among the nations to which they will be carried captive, how I have been hurt by their adulterous hearts which turned away from Me, and by their eyes, which played the harlot after their idols; and they will loathe themselves in their own sight for the evils which they have committed, for all their abominations. Then they will know that I am the Lord; I have not said in vain that I would inflict this disaster on them."

As we look in earnest at the covenant presence of God amongst His people, we must bear this passage in mind. For these are the redemptive consequences that would accompany the covenant judgment of 586 BC.

We call it covenant judgment because the Babylonian exile was NOT the manifestation of condemnation on the part of God, BUT the disciplining hand of the Lord. In other words, what we are considering here is NOT God's disposition toward the reprobate (as in the Lake of Fire Judgment, Revelation 20), BUT the overflow of the love and care that He has for the rebellious child!

God's covenant judgment (Ezekiel 8-11) is issued from a heart of love, not wrath, v. 9a.

Ezekiel 6:9a, "Then those of you who escape will remember Me among the nations to which they will be carried captive, how I have been hurt by their adulterous hearts which turned away from Me, and by their eyes, which played the harlot after their idols..."

Talk about challenging a misconception I think we all have when it comes to God. Christian let me ask you, "What is God's disposition toward you when you sin?" Most of us naturally think,

"He must be angry!" Yet get this, God's first response is pain... sadness... hurt! It is NOT anger, BUT grief that is the predominant response! When the child of God persists in rebellion, that which is roused in God is the pain of a loving heart let down!

Hebrews 12:7b-8, "...God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom *his* father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons."

God's dealing with us is NOT that of a selfish deity offended by our sin, BUT that of a loving father dealing with son.

Psalms 119:75-76, "I know, O Lord, that Thy judgments [which involved suffering and difficulty] are righteous, and that in faithfulness Thou hast afflicted me. O may Thy lovingkindness comfort me, according to Thy word to Thy servant."

How revolutionary! The Babylonian Exile was NOT the result of an offended deity who counted to ten and then let loose. RATHER, it was the response of a loving God who would rather have His children sad for a while that they might be happy for eternity rather than happy in time and lost forever!

When we talk about the Covenant Presence of God in our lives, we are talking about a God who loves like that! God's Covenant Judgment (Ezekiel 8-11) has as its aim the well-being of the child of God, v. 9b.

Ezekiel 6:9b, "...and they will loathe themselves in their own sight for the evils which they have committed, for all their abominations."

What we have in this verse is NOT self-hatred BUT Biblical repentance!

2 Corinthians 7:9-10, "I now rejoice, not that you were made sorrowful, but that you were made sorrowful to *the point of* repentance [this is what God is after when it comes to His disciplining grace]; for you were made sorrowful according to *the will of* God, in order that you might not suffer loss in anything through us. For the sorrow that is according to *the will of* God produces a repentance without regret, *leading* to salvation; but the sorrow of the world produces death."

Because of God's disciplining hand, the people of God, who spent so long in a moral stupor of rebellion, will wake up to reality and see themselves aright. *It wasn't God who did them wrong; God hadn't forsaken them! RATHER, they had forsaken God in their sin!* Accordingly, the net effect of God's Judgment of His people in 586 BC was the softening of His people's hearts and so the nourishing of their love toward the Lord!

Hebrews 12:10, "For they (earthly fathers) disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, BUT HE *disciplines us for our good*, that we may share His holiness."

Hebrews 12:11, "All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness."

That is the end of God's disciplining hand. That is the telos of God's covenant judgment. It is never to tear down; it is always to build up!⁵

Proverbs 3:11-12, "My son, do not reject the discipline of the Lord, or loathe His reproof, for whom the Lord loves He reproves, even as a father, the son in whom he delights."

It is on account of this truth that we speak about "Improving upon our Suffering." For most in this world who suffer difficulty (both outside and inside the church), the focus is on enduring the pain/hardship/trial! *Just get through it!*

The informed Christian understands that trial and difficulty are vehicles by which God raises up spiritual giants!

Psalms 119:71, "It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I may learn Thy statutes."

Accordingly, the call in Scripture is NOT simply to endure them, BUT to improve upon them!

James 1:2-4, "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. [This is how growth occurs in a muscle. The muscle fiber must be torn in order for healing to occur. When we jump, jog, or walk, we damage our bones which brings about a healing that makes them stronger than they were before. Accordingly, notice the call when it comes to trial...] And let endurance have *its* perfect result [this is a call for active participation when it comes to our suffering... we improve upon it] that you may be perfect and complete [mature], lacking in nothing."

The call in Scripture is NOT to be a passive recipient of trial, BUT an active participant in its purpose in our lives: maturation and growth in grace! Thomas Sherman wrote:

As it is the duty of God's children to prepare for affliction before it comes; so it is also their duty to improve affliction when it does come... If we do not prepare for affliction, we shall be surprised by it; and, if we do not improve it we are likely to increase it. He who takes more care to avoid afflictions than to be fitted for them, or is more solicitous to be delivered from them than to be bettered by them, is likely to come soonest into them and to live longest under them! (Sherman, 1680 (2015 Reprint), p. 67)

When we talk about the covenant presence of God in our lives, we are talking about a God who ordains trial and difficulty that we might grow in our walks with Him!

God's covenant judgment is always effectual.

Ezekiel 6:10, "Then they will know that I am the Lord; I have not said in vain that I would inflict this disaster on them."

This is such a wonderful truth when it comes to covenant judgment... it never is meaningless. There always is a result!

1 Corinthians 15:58, "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not *in vain* in the Lord."

The word for "toil" here speaks of enduring hardship over time; that is what toil is! When we do this, we must know that it is NEVER in vain. It always bears a fruit!

Romans 5:3-5a, "And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint."

Truly, when it comes to God's disciplining hand, there always is a redemptive consequence in our life! God's sanctifying work is never in vain! That was another glorious result of the Babylonian Exile, God's people were preserved, brought into the wilderness and so separated from sin and temptation in order to be alone with their Lord and there weaned from their idols and adultery! Recall the promise God made to His people when once He brought them in exile to the wilderness:

Hosea 3:3-5, "Then I said to her, 'You shall stay with me for many days. You shall not play the harlot, nor shall you have a man; so I will also be toward you.' For the sons of Israel will remain for many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or *sacred* pillar, and without ephod or household idols. Afterward the sons of Israel will return and seek the Lord their God and David their king; and they will come trembling to the Lord and to His goodness in the last days."

And so it is in our lives as well! There is not a tear cried in faith that falls to the ground vainly!⁶ When we talk about the Covenant Presence of God in our lives, we are talking about a God whose work in "the valley of weeping" always brings about a Redemptive purpose!

The whole of this passage is introduced in v. 9 by the exhortation to, "...remember [God] among the nations to which they will be carried captive." That means that while the covenant presence of God plays a crucial role in our discipline as children of God, that upon which we must set our mind- that which we must work to remember-

- God's covenant judgment is Issued from a heart of love, not wrath, v. 9a. This is God's disposition toward us when we sin!

- God’s Covenant Judgment has as its Aim the Well-being of the Child of God, v. 9b. God’s grace never tears down the child of God; it always builds up!
- God’s Covenant Judgment is Always Effectual- and so will Mature Us in Time, v. 10. That means, no amount of objection, disbelief, or sin on our part will be able to thwart it!

With these truths in mind, we are ready to address The Retracting of the Covenant Presence of God!

Works Cited

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End Note(s)

¹ cf. Ezekiel 7:18; 27:31; Is. 15:2; 22:12; Jer. 16:6; 41:5; 47:5; 48:37; Amos 8:9–10; Mic. 1:16.

² Because Ezekiel used “a large sword” to carry out this particular sign (rather than a razor), Ezekiel’s head and face would have been covered by blood; he’d have multiple cuts!!! Yet such was the judgment, pain, and scattering that was coming to God’s people!

³ cf. Deuteronomy 4:7-8!!

⁴ This is a common practice in Covenantal Lawsuits (cf. Mic. 6). God calls as His witness the earth (the mountains, sun, moon, stars) when He sues His people for their worship, love, and devotion.

⁵ In fact, that is the difference between tempering and temptation in the Bible. When Satan tempts us, it is so that we might be ruined. When God tempers us, it is so that we might be established!

⁶ In the words of William Cowper, “Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust him for his grace; behind a frowning providence he hides a smiling face. His purposes will ripen fast, unfolding every hour; the bud may have a bitter taste, but sweet will be the flower.” (*Red Trinity Hymnal* #128)