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The Covenant Presence of God Retracted, Part 4

The story has been told of a boy who mistreated his bike, frequently leaving it where it could be stolen, damaged, or destroyed. Eventually his carelessness caught up to him. He dropped his bike one afternoon behind a large truck in a parking lot and went off to play. The truck driver came out, started the engine, and backed up, only to be stopped by the sound of crunching plastic and twisting metal. The boy came running, and when he saw his ruined bike he said to the truck driver, *“Don’t worry! My mom and dad will buy me a new one!”*

If you were his parents and heard that story, as the parents eventually did, what would you do? I'll tell you what the parents did, they did NOT replace the bicycle. To humiliate him? No! To teach him the responsibility of privilege; that with benefit comes obligation.

In our examination of Ezekiel 5-11 the privilege of salvation brings with it the responsibility of seeking the Lord. When the child of God does not do this, he could suffer The Loss of God's Covenant Presence.

By "Covenant Presence" we here are NOT talking about God's Omnipresence by which everything in creation is in His immediate presence. NOR are we talking about God's Redemptive Presence by which the Lord joins Himself to the believer such that He will never leave him.

Hebrews 13:5b, "...[God] Himself has said, 'I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you.'"

RATHER, we are talking about the personal, experiential sense of God's presence in the life of the believer, "The Covenant Presence of God."

2 Chronicles 24:20, "Thus God has said, 'Why do you transgress the commandments of the Lord and do not prosper? Because you have forsaken the Lord, He has also forsaken you.'"

This no doubt is why Asaph said this:

Psalms 73:28a, "But as for me, the nearness of God is my good..."

Likewise, Moses prayed this way:

Exodus 33:15b, "If Thy presence does not go *with us*, do not lead us up from here."

A Consequence of the Loss of God's Presence: Exile

Ezekiel 9:1-2, "Then He cried out in my hearing with a loud voice saying, 'Draw near, O executioners of the city [most if not every city in the ancient world employed the use of 'guards/disciplinarians' who were charged with keeping the order of the city; that is what is pictured here], each with his destroying weapon in his hand.'¹ And behold, six men [angels] came from the direction of the upper gate which faces north [this either would have been where 'the idol of jealousy' was or where the women were weeping for Tammuz], each with his shattering weapon in his hand [this was not a sword, but a club (cf. Jeremiah 51:20); again, these were angelic constables charged with the welfare of the city]; and among them was a certain man clothed in linen [his dress spoke of dignity- as in the dress of a priest (Exodus 28:42; 1 Samuel 2:18; 22:18) or a messenger of God (Daniel 10:5; 12:6-7). That means this seventh angel was the one in charge!]

with a writing case at his loins [this would have been the typical writing equipment of the scribe which would have included a pen, ink-horns (usually filled with red and black ink), and a wax writing-tablet²]. And they went in and stood beside the bronze altar.”

Like the Angel of Death who executed God’s judgment during the Exodus (Exodus 11), here the ending of the Theocracy was depicted as being carried out by seven angels!

Now again, this is a vision used to describe/explain why the nation went into exile. Accordingly, we are brought back to the sober reality that it was NOT because God somehow was distracted that the Babylonians devastated God’s people in 586 BC. Rather, the Babylonian Exile was the direct work of almighty God!

The Discriminating Command, vv. 4-6.

As the “angelic executioners” assembled themselves by the “bronze altar,” God’s glory moved from the Holy of Holies to the threshold of the sanctuary (v. 3).

Ezekiel 9:4, “And the Lord said to him [the seventh angel], ‘Go through the midst of the city, *even* through the midst of Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations which are being committed in its midst But to the others [the executing angels] He said in my hearing, ‘Go through the city after him and strike; do not let your eye have pity, and do not spare. Utterly slay old men, young men, maidens, little children, and women, but do not touch any man on whom is the mark; and you shall start from My sanctuary.’ So they started with the elders who *were* before the temple.”³

The ‘mark’ here was the last letter in the Hebrew alphabet- a ך (tāw)! As the last letter of the alphabet it would have indicated that these were the remnant, the remaining servants of God most high that could be found in the city. NOW, at this time the letter would have been written in a script that looked like a cross⁴! Clearly, Ezekiel here spoke much more than he knew!

Now on whom was the mark of a cross to be placed? On those genuine servants of God- the epitome of a true church. They have and will always be those who ‘grieve about the appointed feast’... of whom ‘the reproach of exile is a burden on them’ (Zephaniah 3:18; cf. Amos 6:6)]. It is noteworthy that God here has the angels start with “the elders”... as the spiritual guides/shepherds of the people of God, they ultimately bore the responsibility for the rebellion of the nation, from king to the lowliest Jew.⁵

You say, what about men like Habakkuk or Jeremiah or their supporters? Wouldn’t they have received the mark. They most certainly would have for they genuinely grieved about God’s people. Yet the focus here is NOT on the remnant, BUT on those who would be judged. Among them, all were guilty!

The Judgment, v. 7; Ezekiel 11:8-9.

Ezekiel 9:7, “And He said to them, ‘Defile the temple [that is, ‘*with bodies*’; IOW, don’t wait for the minister to leave the holy place; kill him where he stands] and fill the courts with the slain. Go out!’ Thus they went out and struck down *the people* in the city.”

This is quite reminiscent of the last plague of the Exodus. Like in the day of Moses, here the destroying angels went through the entire city filling it with the blood of those who had bowed their knee to Baal!⁶ We see The Judgment further in chapter 11.

Ezekiel 11:8-9, “‘You have feared a sword; so I will bring a sword upon you,’ the Lord God declares. ‘And I shall bring you out of the midst of the city, and I shall deliver you into the hands of strangers and execute judgments against you.’”

This ultimately is what is being pictured in this vision. Did angelic executioners literally accompany the Babylonian horde as they attacked Jerusalem in 586 BC? No! This is a vision. What is being pictured by this vision is the complete and total destruction of Jerusalem, the Temple, and so the Theocracy!

It is important to note that the judgment described did NOT result in the condemnation of these people, BUT the loss of their nation! Yes, MANY would die at this time and so enter the presence of God if they were in Christ. But ALL would be negatively impacted... for again, the Theocracy was coming to an end!

Once again, we ask: Is this an example of God forsaking His people? Is this God giving up on His children? The answer is a resounding, “NO!” RATHER, this is an example NOT of the absence of God amongst His people, BUT the presence of His disciplining grace!

The word for “executioner” in v. 1 actually is פְּקֻדָּה (pequddah) which comes from a verb meaning “to visit” or “to draw near in blessing or punishment.” From this we conclude that this judgment was NOT the absence of God, BUT the presence of God when it came to His disobedient children! Accordingly, this was NOT a forsaking of the love that God has for His children, BUT the manifesting of it when they became enamored with sin!

Hebrews 12:7-8, “It is for discipline that you endure; 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.”

It is this truth that prompted Old Testament saints to pray as they did. The Psalmist wrote:

Psalm 99:8, “O Lord our God, Thou didst answer them; Thou wast a forgiving God to

them, and yet an avenger of their *evil* deeds.”

Habakkuk 3;2b, “O Lord, revive Thy work in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy.”

That is exactly what God did and continues to do in our lives today; He gives compassion to His sinning people, which is the next point!

As we’ve already seen, chapter 10 describes the glorious vision of God which Ezekiel saw when he was called as a prophet (Ezekiel 1); again it never left him! Ezekiel 11:1-12 details the response of the leadership of Jerusalem to the warning of judgment issued by such men as Zephaniah and Jeremiah (we’ll talk about this next time). Accordingly, we are now at Ezekiel 11:13 where we get a glimpse at the disposition of God during this time of judgment! What was it? One of compassion! We begin with an important preface.

The Compassion, Ezekiel 11:13-10

Ezekiel 11:13, “Now it came about as I prophesied, that Pelatiah son of Benaiah died. [While Ezekiel conveyed the substance of the vision of chapters 8-11, one of the leaders of the elders in Jerusalem- a man whose name means, ‘Yahweh has delivered’- fell over dead!!! How uncanny! Just as Ezekiel was describing the execution of God’s judgment, this man died in real life! Was this a portent... a sign? Ezekiel wasn’t going to wait for the answer...] Then I fell on my face and cried out with a loud voice and said, “Alas, Lord God! Wilt Thou bring the remnant of Israel to a complete end?””

Listen if judgment truly begins with the household of God (1 Peter 4:17), and if the most godly of the leaders in Jerusalem was found wanting and so was struck dead, what hope is there for the rest of the nation? More pointedly (this is where Ezekiel is going here), what about the Jew who already was “cursed” (in their mind) on account of the exile?... who struggled and suffered much, for life in a sinful world is filled with pain? For example, consider the lamentations in the Psalter.

Psalm 10:1-2a, “Why dost Thou stand afar off, O Lord? Why dost Thou hide *Thyself* in times of trouble? In pride the wicked hotly pursue the afflicted...”

David prayed this way:

Psalm 22:1-2, “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me? Far from my deliverance are the words of my groaning. O my God, I cry by day, but Thou dost not answer; and by night, but I have no rest.”

The sons of Korah complained bitterly against the Lord.

Psalm 44:12, “Thou dost sell Thy people cheaply, and hast not profited by their sale.”

Listen to the words of Asaph:

Psalm 73:2-5, "But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling; my steps had almost slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant, *as* I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For there are no pains in their death; and their body is fat. They are not in trouble *as other* men [that is, the genuine servant of God]; nor are they plagued like mankind [that is, the follower of God]."

So dark did his road become that Asaph approached a very dangerous ledge in his thinking. This is the place many of us go when it comes to the difficult path that must be traversed if you and I would arrive at the gates to the Jerusalem above! According to Peter (1 Peter 1:1-2), in Christ we too are exiles in the diaspora, for this world is not our home! And so with our brethren who suffered as exiles in Babylon, the question naturally arises, "Are we cursed?" Notice Ezekiel took that question head on here:

Ezekiel 11:14-15, "Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying, 'Son of man, your brothers, your relatives [lit., 'men of your redemption'- that is, those who should have spoken up for them in their defense], your fellow exiles], and the whole house of Israel, all of them, *are those* to whom the inhabitants of Jerusalem have said, "Go far from the Lord; this land has been given us as a possession.'"

When the 10,000 Jewish exiles were placed in chains in 597 BC and marched out of Jerusalem (Ezekiel and the elders before him would have remembered this vividly), the inhabitants of the city — including their family and friends — as well as those in chains considered these prisoners to be cursed! The fact that they were being removed from the Promised Land meant that they had to be sinners who secretly courted the wrath of God! Accordingly, all would have thought, "*They got what they deserved!*" J. B. Taylor wrote:

The voice of orthodoxy spoke clearly and logically. The exiles had departed from the holy city; they were on foreign soil; they were unclean and God-forsaken. Those who remained in Jerusalem were the righteous ones and were the recipients of all God's favours. (Taylor, 1981, p. 111)

That is why when "Pelatiah" fell over dead while Ezekiel prophesied of the coming judgment of God, Ezekiel understandably mistook this man's demise as an indicator that God's judgment could reach the exiles as well! So, would it? Is the Christian life one big trial only to end with God condemning us in the end for the slightest error? God masterfully orchestrated the death of this man (who if a genuine believer would have passed into glory- THE Promised Land!) to bring out into the open that which every Jew believed in his heart... that "*...every exiled Jew was cursed; there was no hope for them!*"

Consider with me God's response to this question; a question that has plagued God's people throughout Redemptive history, even unto our own day, "*Is God against me for my sin?!*" The

answer? Absolutely Not! In fact, quite to the contrary. The exiled servant of the Lord receives grace to help in time of need.

Grace #1: A Rich and Abiding Relationship with the Lord, v. 16.

Ezekiel 11:15-16, “Son of man, your brothers, your relatives, your fellow exiles, and the whole house of Israel, all of them, *are those* to whom the inhabitants of Jerusalem have said, ‘Go far from the Lord; this land has been given us as a possession.’ [again, that is what God’s people thought when it came to those in the exile. Yet what was God’s opinion?] Therefore say, ‘Thus says the Lord God, “Though I had removed them far away among the nations, and though I had scattered them among the countries, yet I WAS A SANCTUARY FOR THEM a little while in the countries where they had gone.””

This is a most amazing declaration... a glorious, life-changing truth for any and all exiled on account of Christ! Speaking of His people, God said:

Hosea 2:14, “Therefore, behold, I will allure her, bring her into the wilderness, and speak kindly to her.”

When we examined this passage, I asked the question: Have you ever wondered why God chose not to bring His people directly to the Promised Land after the Exodus? Instead He brought them into “the wilderness,” to the base of Mount Sinai, to a place of want, trial, and suffering! If Israel’s best was in His mind, why didn’t God bring them immediately to the Promised Land? In answer to that question, listen to Exodus 13.

Exodus 13:17-18a, “Now it came about when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God did not lead them by the way of the land of the Philistines, even though it was near; for God said, ‘Lest the people change their minds when they see war, and they return to Egypt.’ Hence God led the people around by the way of the wilderness...”

Do you understand the significance of “the wilderness” in the life of God’s people (and so the death bed, the place of suffering, the turmoil and difficulties of this life)? We think of the wilderness as a God-forsaken land of misery and suffering.⁷ Yet don’t miss it: it is here that God incubates the faith of His people. For in this place of suffering the silly temptations of life do not dwell. All that there is... is you and God! This was God’s response to His wayward people in the day of Hosea! He deigned to bring them back to that time in their lives when their walk with God was most dear!

Hosea 2:15a, “Then I will give her her vineyards from there [the metaphor of “vineyards” denotes the idea of spiritual growth/prosperity], and the valley of Achor [this is a reference to the burial place of Achan who, after sinning against God, was crushed beneath a pile of rocks. Accordingly, from Achan on down to the contemporaries of Hosea, Achor was a name of disgrace! Yet grace radically transforms shame, doesn’t it? Notice, the “valley of Achor”- this judgment- would become...] as a

door of hope [lit., “a portal of hope” and a portal of blessing]”:

How is it that Israel’s judgment could be a “portal of hope”? How is it that pain, suffering, and want could be a portal to the richest blessings imaginable? Simply stated, through the trials, pain, and sufferings of life God removes the distractions of this world, leaving only Himself and the Christian!

That is the assurance that God gave here through Ezekiel to the exiles! This is the END of ALL Retractions of the Covenant Presence of God! When Ezekiel and the exiles left Jerusalem in chains, traversed the hard and difficult path to Babylon, God was NOT marching them to their death, BUT into His arms! Listen to the language:

I was a sanctuary to them: the word for “sanctuary” is *מִקְדָּשׁ* (*miqdash*) which comes from the Hebrew word for “holy” (*קֹדֶשׁ* [*qodesh*]). Accordingly, the language here is packed with meaning.

At this time in redemptive history, God’s people believed that Covenant Blessing could only be found on a strip of land 50 x 150 miles long called Palestine. This was believed to be the LAND OF BLESSING! Accordingly, when the exiles were removed from this land, it was believed that they were separated from God’s redemptive blessings (which is why everyone including themselves considered them “accursed”)!

The passage before us therefore is radical! Get This: With the fall of Jerusalem, God’s Covenant Blessing no longer would be attached to a physical temple or a land, BUT the temple of man’s heart! Accordingly, enjoying the Redemptive Blessings of the Lord from this point forward would NOT be tied to where you were, BUT whose you are! Accordingly, if you are in Christ, then no matter where you are, you are in the Land of Blessing! That is why it is so significant that the Hebrew writer, thinking of Christ’s crucifixion, wrote this:

Hebrews 13:12-13, “Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people through His own blood, suffered outside the gate [that is, in the wilderness]. Hence, let us go out to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach.”

The sons of Korah made this observation:

Psalm 84:5-6a, “How blessed is the man whose strength is in Thee; in whose heart are the highways *to Zion*! [This is the realization of the promise made here to the exiles. In this regard, notice...] Passing through the valley of Baca, they make it a spring...”

The first grace God gives to His people in the wilderness is Himself! Accordingly, they/you/me need only to open their eyes! In Christ our diaspora is “a portal of blessing” (Hosea 2:15)!

And so if you sense that God’s Covenant Presence has lifted in your life, realize that this act itself testifies to the ongoing presence of the Spirit of God in your life by which He is

endeavoring to arouse a greater passion in you for the Lord! Accordingly at these times, do NOT shrink back in your walk. RATHER, seek the Lord with greater energy, for at these times God is in fact quite near to you! When life is difficult and the going is tough, James exhorted:

James 4:8a, “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you...”

Again, though your perception may feel as if God is far from you, that is only perception. God is ever and always active in our lives as Christians.

Hebrews 4:16, “Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need.”

The sons of Korah put it this way:

Psalms 46:1, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”

Do you understand what this means? In times of trouble, God is ever present... we need only call on Him! Christian, the universal teaching of Scripture is that God is near to His people especially when they enter into the wilderness! Accordingly, may we redouble our efforts in the day of trial and so seek the Lord and His strength!

References

Taylor, J. B. (1981). *Ezekiel (The Tyndale Old Testament Commentary Series)*. Chicago: IVP Academic.

End Note(s)

¹ It is just as God said in Ezekiel 8:18, judgment was moral necessity... as such, nothing could avert it now. This is repeated in Ezekiel 9:9-10.

² L. E. Cooper wrote, “This writing kit usually was made from an animal horn. It had a palette with a slot for pens and a hollow place for two kinds of ink, usually black and red. Professional scribes usually carried this kind of equipment.” (*Ezekiel*, NAC, pp. 126–127)

³ You say, what about men like Jeremiah and those who supported him? Wouldn't they have borne the mark. They most certainly would have for they genuinely grieved about God's people. Yet the focus here was NOT on the remnant, BUT those who would be judged. Among them, all were guilty!

⁴ A mark like this also will be employed at the Last Day (cf. Revelation 7:3–4; 14:1).

⁵ L. E. Cooper wrote, “Those who are leaders are not exempt from the holy standard of God's Word. They are even more responsible and will incur more severe punishment for leading others astray (cf. Matt 18:6; Mark 9:42; Luke 17:2; Hebrews 13:17).” (*Ezekiel*, NAC, pp. 128)

⁶ When comparing the two judgments, it is noteworthy that the “blood of the Lamb,” which caused the angel of death to pass over the individual in Egypt, would have produced a heart that beat passionately for the Lord which in Ezekiel's day was the basis for God's judgment passing over the child of God in Jerusalem!

⁷ And so it is without Christ!