

STUDY 10

The Glory Departed: Ezekiel the Tragedy of Violated Identity

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As indicated in the title Ezekiel's prophecy with its apocalyptic language will be a primary source for this session. Ezekiel is bound to speak of Yahweh's destruction of the Temple. The Temple is the place pledged by God as the sign of his presence among them and the sanctuary where he meets with his people. Destruction of the Temple was unthinkable. To prophecy the departure of Yahweh's glory from the Temple, Ezekiel uses extreme language to cause God's dull people to awaken to the seriousness of their situation. D. Brent Sandy pushes us to get the point of God's prophetic Word when he says that ignorance of the implications of the illocation (illocal: not local, having no location in space) of the prophets can lead to exegetical fallacies. Metaphor, poetry, symbol carry an intensity in language that cannot be imparted by legal line upon line of prose.¹

How would we express to baptised priestly congregations the reality of our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, acting in judgement to close them down? Is such an idea Christian? Then can the faithful covenant God of Israel remove his glory from his chosen people and burn their city and his sanctuary with fire? I will ask what the removal of God's glory from Israel meant for his ancient priestly people and seek to connect this overwhelming reality with the priestly worship and mission of the church today in Australia.

EZEKIEL PRIEST AND PROPHET

As a young man Ezekiel grew up as a member of the Zion priesthood. The proud traditions of the Temple service were indelibly formed in him together with the proud and unique awareness of Israel's history as the people of Yahweh. He preserved the law and priestly discipline required for closeness to the presence of the Holy One in the Temple (Exod. 25:22). The Temple was the place appointed by Yahweh to reveal his name and his glory, a glory that could not be contained in heaven or the highest heaven (2 Chron. 6:18–21; 7:1–3). The glory of the Lord revealed in the Temple was as real as the lightning, thunderstorm and deep darkness that appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai:

¹ D. Brent Sandy, *Plowshares & Pruning Hooks*, IVP, Leicester, 2002.

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Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud . . . (Exod. 24:15–18).

The visible weight and wealth and majesty of God's glory was unapproachable to human sight. The arrangement of the Temple courts and furnishings emphasised this, especially the approach to Yahweh only through sacrificial blood and the entrance of the high priest into the most holy place where the throne of Yahweh or the mercy seat was above the huge seraphim.

As a performer and teacher of Israel's sacred traditions and liturgy, Ezekiel musters the well-known signs of the Temple worship for his prophecy. These would be the medium for a theophany in which the heavenly presence of God would be joined to the Temple worship:

. . . the *kābōd* becomes *the reflected splendour of the transcendent God*, a token of the divine glory, by means of which Yahweh declares his gracious presence. It is at the 'Tent of Meeting' that Yahweh confronts his people, because it is here that his *kābōd* descends, girded with the cloud, and reveals his will.²

Ezekiel the priest had his prophetic vision in 594 BC among Jews carried off to Babylon on the River Chebar (Ezek. 1:2–3). Ezekiel is now far from Yahweh's presence in the sanctuary where the destiny of the remaining Jews was being worked out and possibly the whole existence of Israel was headed for catastrophe. It was in Babylon, the land of unclean hands, that Ezekiel saw the heavens opened and was given an insight of the divine world (Ezek. 1:4–28).

HOLOCAUST AND ABSENCE OF THE PRESENCE

The text is Ezekiel 10:1–22:

In verses 1–8 Ezekiel sees the throne of God on the dome above the seraphim. The action in heaven appears to be joined with what God does in the Temple. But the throne of Yahweh, blazing with fire and supernatural power, casts a shadow over Jerusalem. The transcendent Ruler of the world sits enthroned in dazzling power with his throne supported by the four seraphim, or the four corners of the entire universe. Veiled in a cloud, what Ezekiel sees is a reflection of Yahweh's glory, rather than Yahweh's glory itself. The glory that appears is that of Hebrews 1:3. The revelation is very unnerving, full of terror, moving, dynamic, consuming and all-encompassing, yet upholding the historical realism of revelation.³

Ezekiel sees the figure of a man—a dignified personage, suitably attired—respond to a command, enter the immediate presence of the cloud, and the wheelwork of the seraphim (see also 9:2). It appears that Yahweh has issued his command to the vizier from his throne, and yet 10:4 says that the glory rises up again from the throne and

² W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, SCM, London, 1967, p. 32.

³ See Eichrodt, pp. 32–3.

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moves to the threshold of the Temple. Thus when the vizier (who may be identified with the seraphim in vv. 20–22), takes fire from God’s own burning holiness and throws it over Jerusalem it is intended for God’s people to see this is directly God’s act of judgement. Yahweh himself transforms a fire he kindles in his house into the fire of his wrath.

The impact of Ezekiel’s prophecy upon him and Israel was devastating. Jerusalem occupies a peculiar position as God’s priest nation among all the peoples of the world. To comprehend that Yahweh after watching his chosen people patiently for a long time, now turns on them and eliminates them from the earth, is impossible to imagine.

In verses 9–22 the removal of God’s glory from the Temple is confirmed. The Temple is the holy place, and the sign of God’s presence amongst his people which acts as the guarantee of his presence:

Then the glory of the LORD went out from the threshold of the house and stopped above the cherubim. The cherubim lifted up their wings and rose up from the earth in my sight as they went out with the wheels beside them. They stopped at the entrance of the east gate of the house of the LORD; and the glory of the God of Israel was above them (Ezek. 10:18–19).

Israel could not continue apart from God’s presence being amongst them (Exod. 33:14f.). It would appear that Yahweh’s inexorable judgement was lacking altogether in compassion. Where were his covenant promises?

Throughout South Australia numbers of buildings consecrated for Christian worship are being closed. For some communities this seems to be the end. The people who once participated in Christ’s worship simply cease to meet. Their presence in the community as a church has concluded.

We have participated in gatherings when the place was filled with the awareness of the presence of the Holy Spirit, when the Word of God came powerfully, the action of the real presence of Christ seemed almost tangible and wonders occurred as resounding praise, singing and thanksgiving came in response from Christ’s people. We have also returned to these same places to find people who would not hear. Hardness and cynicism has come like a black frost so that it seemed there was no awareness of Christ’s real presence. For the observer rich in memory the experience can be so devastating and depressing that the spirit of the place sucks all of the life out of them. Where do clichés or comfort verses from the Bible, or a new glitter of religious management principles bring a cure in such arid captivity?

THE TRAGEDY OF VIOLATED IDENTITY

Our identity as Christ’s priestly community is violated when we reverse our calling from service to God and the nations into self-service. When the community of God reduced him to a manageable concoction of everyone’s soft images and dreams, Israel took God’s covenant promises for granted. Yet Yahweh’s judgement arises from these covenant promises. The basis upon which their relationship with Yahweh was founded, through his grace, demanded their exclusive worship. In a barefaced manner Israel had abrogated the command of the covenant both in public and in private. Ezekiel 8:5–6 says God’s people set up an ‘image of jealousy’ in the Temple,

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(cf. 2 Kings 21:7). This would be an image of Asherah who could be identified with the queen of heaven (Jer. 7:18; 44:17). Asherah was the goddess of 'passionate love'. Sexual desire and impure pleasure are introduced into the presence of God and Yahweh is degraded to the level of a nature god, a god that is inclusive of evil as well as good. The bisexual Asherah becomes a priestly mediator through whom an audience must be obtained with Yahweh.

Ezekiel 8:7–18 depicts God's people in the secret worship of pornographic Egyptian images which are painted on the wall of the Temple like graffiti. From the worship of the gods of the Nile, people gain from the power of magic. Yahweh is treated obscenely (vv. 16–18):

Her [Israel's] worship of God had become a hypocritical mummery, and the solemn recital by the mouth of the priest at the great covenant festivals proclaiming her election as people of God with all the privileges and honours that that involved, had become a blasphemy of the covenant God. In face of facts such as these, the passionate protest against the message of judgement, as if it were a godless blasphemy against the solemnly guaranteed saving acts of Yahweh, had to be unmasked as the grandiose piece of self-deception that it was. The patient love, which had hitherto repeatedly pardoned Israel's apostasy and striven to correct by chastisement or by forgiveness and re-acceptance, was faced by the complete failure to respond to salvation in a people which sought in their unbridled lust for life to find satisfaction by some easier means than genuine surrender to God's will. By turning to the mysteries of the heathen nature-gods, they surrendered to the temptation to deify their own basic vital forces, and had necessarily to be dismissed as incapable of personal communion with the divine will which controls history. The dissolution of the covenant relationship and the surrender of the covenant people, who had become a house of rebellion instead of being the house of Israel, to the heathen power of the world, is the inevitable result of a history of sin.⁴

The parallel with the church in Australia is not all that hard to draw. Are we not prone to serious syncretism? Does the power of images grow in our midst until, as always, they grasp more and more of Christian worship, often at the expense of hearing the Word of God? Has not a theology of glory replaced the theology and teaching of the cross, seducing Christ's priestly community into thinking we must be effective because we can't tell the difference between Holy Communion and an every person amateur hour? What of morality and sex ethic? Yet like Israel of old we kid ourselves that with more innovation, management principles and polished entertainment we can beat the inevitable judgement of having our candlestick removed (Rev. 2–3).

Ezekiel had to face his fellow exiles who could not hear him because they were blaming the previous generation for their woes (Ezek. 18). They had turned God's election into fatalism which brought the banished ones into lethargy and moral paralysis. Therefore the prophet is used by God to confront the people with the true state of affairs. Does all this overturn God's election purposes? No, not at all (Rom. 11:1ff.). We cannot, any more than Israel, seize God's election as our own prey and profane his name in the world, for the Lord of the church will protect his transcendent majesty and immanent saving grace from being transmogrified into a human consortium.

⁴ W. Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, SCM, London, 1980, p. 28.

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SEVERE JUDGEMENT, FREE SALVATION

There can be no final and lasting universal salvation except through judgement. Ezekiel 10:18–19 says the glory of the Lord departed from the threshold of the Temple and remained at the entrance of the east gate, above the cherubim. The entrance of this gate is not the main gate of the Temple, but the eastern gate of the outer court. Perhaps this is an indication that while the glory of God's presence is withdrawn, his covenant promise remains.⁵

Whatever else it means, Ezekiel the priest had, and gave, his vision of Yahweh's sovereign majesty, not in the Temple but on the banks of a river in an unclean land. He prophesied of Yahweh's glory being over all the creation:

... God's personal manifestations of Himself to men and women must be seen as acts of sheer grace. We do not mean that God absented Himself from man, but that there was an absence of the Presence which was—and is—man's most painful experience of this world. We mean that the separation of God's personal Presence from man brings intolerable anguish, even though that Presence would be unbearable to man who wishes to assert his own 'I am' independently of his Creator ... The 'absence of the Presence' is really the 'presence of the Absence'. It means God is absent from man as regards man's desire not to know Him and to live apart from Him, but is present in that He will not let man go, and such Presence is painful and confronting.⁶

Through judgement Israel has become a slain army of dry bones strewn on the dry floor of a desert valley. By the Word of God speaking to them, and through the action of the Holy Spirit, this host is raised from death to live. The Spirit is imparted to all the members of the new people of God who will show their renewal by their joyful assent and obedience to the law of the covenant (Ezek. 37:1–14). The divided kingdoms of Israel will have vanished and Yahweh will dwell with them in a renewal of the covenant of peace (Ezek. 37:15–28). Yahweh will display his glory to the nations (Ezek. 39:21–24), and a new Temple is promised to which all the nations will flow (Isa. 2). The Holy Spirit will flow with fructifying affect and for the Edenisation of the nations (Ezek. 47:1–23). All this comes by God's faithfulness to his own holy will.

Later studies will show that the Word made flesh in Jesus, the Son of God, is the very Temple of God's presence and glory which will displace all human concoction (John 2:19–22). He it is who makes atonement for the sins of the world through the judgement of the cross where he, as God's elect one, becomes the accused, rejected one, in order to gather believers into the Temple of his body.

For the church today we too must heed the warning not to keep saying to ourselves, we are the temple of the Lord, and seize our election in order to advance our own ambitions and power, and to clutch the privileges of church membership for ourselves. We must recognise the seriousness of judgement beginning with the household of God. Rather than rationalise judgement and evade it we are called by Christ to acknowledge it. We do this in a decisive act of faith, repudiating all human effort, and clinging only to the cross of our dear Lord where there is death, but resurrection to new life.

⁵ See C. F. Keil, 'The Prophecies of Ezekiel', vol. 1, in *Ezekiel, Daniel*, Commentary on the Old Testament, vol. 9, by C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1976, pp. 141–2.

⁶ Geoffrey Bingham, *The Everlasting Presence*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1990, p. 9.