

Ezekiel 14A

- Bill Clinton once remarked that running a country was a lot like running a cemetery...you've got a lot of people under you and nobody's listening
 - Leaders will lament to one another that they can't motivate their people to follow orders or follow their example
 - Sometimes that's true
 - But usually, leaders are greatly influential in shaping the thoughts and behaviors of those under their charge
 - Sometimes they influence their people for the better, and sometimes for the worse
 - Knowing this, good leaders will take personal responsibility for any failures while giving credit to their people for any successes
 - For example, Harry Truman kept a sign on his presidential desk that said "The Buck Stops Here"
 - It was a reference to that old saying of "passing the buck" which means passing off blame to someone else
 - Truman said he wouldn't pass the blame to someone else for his mistakes
 - The buck (meaning the blame) stopped with him
- But not all leaders are so courageous and responsible
 - Some pass the buck quite regularly, quickly finding someone else to carry the blame for their failures
 - Leaders like this, who are corrupt or incompetent or unaccountable, usually foster the same attitudes in those under them
 - Their people will learn to blame others and pass the buck too
 - This holds true not only in business but also in spiritual communities
 - The kind of men who lead God's people can have a dramatic impact on the community's spiritual maturity and godliness

- Today in Chapter 14 of Ezekiel, we will see this principle at work clearly
- This tendency to pass the buck lies at the heart of Israel's fourth excuse
- We're in the middle of studying the eight excuses Israel offered to God for why they need not give attention to Ezekiel's warnings and exhortations
 - These eight excuses are found in Chapters 12-19
 - Today we reach the fourth excuse in Chapter 14
 - Israel's excuse uses Harry Truman's philosophy
 - The people of Israel said the buck should stop with their leaders
 - They said God should blame only Israel's leaders for their idolatry and disobedience to the covenant
 - They expected to be excused in their own disobedience because they were only following the elder's example
- Let's see how the Lord responds to this excuse (and I bet you can guess how)

Ezek. 14:1 Then some elders of Israel came to me and sat down before me.

Ezek. 14:2 And the word of the Lord came to me, saying,

Ezek. 14:3 "Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their hearts and have put right before their faces the stumbling block of their iniquity. Should I be consulted by them at all?"

Ezek. 14:4 "Therefore speak to them and tell them, 'Thus says the Lord God, "Any man of the house of Israel who sets up his idols in his heart, puts right before his face the stumbling block of his iniquity, and then comes to the prophet, I the Lord will be brought to give him an answer in the matter in view of the multitude of his idols,

Ezek. 14:5 in order to lay hold of the hearts of the house of Israel who are estranged from Me through all their idols.'"

Ezek. 14:6 "Therefore say to the house of Israel, 'Thus says the Lord God, "Repent and turn away from your idols and turn your faces away from all your abominations.

Ezek. 14:7 "For anyone of the house of Israel or of the immigrants who stay in Israel who separates himself from Me, sets up his idols in his heart, puts right before his face the stumbling block of his iniquity, and then comes to the prophet to inquire of Me for himself, I the Lord will be brought to answer him in My own person.

[Ezek. 14:8](#) "I will set My face against that man and make him a sign and a proverb, and I will cut him off from among My people. So you will know that I am the Lord.

- Chapter 14 is still set in the same time going back to Chapter 8
 - And for at least the second time in this period, the elders over the Jews in exile come to sit down before Ezekiel
 - By this point, these men must have thought Ezekiel was a first class agitator...a real "Debbie-downer"
 - He's got nothing but bad news to share with the exiles, or so it probably seemed (though it's not true)
 - And if so, it was because Israel had done nothing but bad things
 - We've learned a little about Israel's elders in prior chapters
 - They were steering the people of Israel into idolatry and away from the Law
 - They were corrupt and godless, setting up abominations in the temple, telling Israel to pray to false gods
 - They had deceived generations of Israel
 - Which explains their present circumstances: Judah under conquest and Israel in exile
- So now these corrupt leaders sit before Ezekiel, maybe to ask for his counsel or perhaps to ask him to tone it down a bit
 - Before the conversation gets going, the Lord begins to speak to Ezekiel
 - In v.3 the Lord says these men have set up idols in their hearts
 - And then put them right before their eyes to become stumbling blocks of iniquity
 - He asks Ezekiel, should the Lord receive counsel from such men?
 - It's rhetorical, because obviously these men have nothing to offer God or anyone who seeks godliness
 - Take a closer look at how the Lord describes how these men became corrupted

- First, they began to worship an idol in their heart
- Secondly, they produced an image of that idol and set it in front of themselves to reflect what was in their heart
- And that physical object became a way of focusing their idolatrous gaze
- God says it was “right before their faces” meaning it filled their field of view, it obscured everything else including the truth
- And as a result, with their vision obscured, these men stumbled over their idol, spiritually-speaking
- This is the formula for all idolatry, for everything that leads us away from true worship and obedience to the Lord
 - It always begins because we fix our heart on someone or something that captivates us
 - That idol could be a false deity or belief system
 - Or it can be a physical pleasure or a harmful relationship or a greedy pursuit
 - Whatever form it takes in our hearts, we’ll eventually set that desire before ourselves in physical form
 - We’ll create images of our deity or beliefs
 - We’ll satisfy that physical craving, we’ll pursue that unhealthy relationship, we’ll fill our shopping carts with stuff
 - And we set these things in front of our faces, so that we can’t see anything else at least for a time
 - That idol will obscure our vision to become a stumbling block
 - Our gaze is so fixed on our idol that no matter which way we step, we’re bound to trip, to fall
 - Like someone reading their iPhone while walking down the street...talk about an idol!
- Idols are cruel masters
 - They’ll demand more and more of our adoration
 - They are jealous and can’t tolerate it when we look away

- James describes this slippery slope this way:

[James 1:13](#) Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone.

[James 1:14](#) But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust.

[James 1:15](#) Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.

[James 1:16](#) Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren.

- James says God never sets these temptations before the child of God, because we're plenty capable of doing it ourselves
 - James says it begins in our heart, when our own lusts tempt us
 - He's speaking of the idols that we manufacture in our heart
 - Eventually those lusts are conceived, which means they emerge from us as something physical that we set before our own eyes
 - And then we begin to serve them, leading us into sin
- But we ought not be deceived in this way, James says
 - The solution to eliminating an idol begins with removing those stumbling blocks, those physical things we're focused on
 - Eliminate the physical representations of the idol, and we begin to break its spell
 - Like the old saying: out of sight, out of mind
 - That's why time after time the Lord called the good kings of Israel to destroy the high places of idol worship
 - Israel's idolatry began in their heart, but those carved wood and stone representations focus their evil desires and made them seem real
 - So God took away that distraction, proving these things were powerless and empty
 - Which gave opportunity for deceived hearts to return to the Lord
- So these elders, men with their idolatrous hearts, sit down to converse with Ezekiel, and the Lord gives Ezekiel a message for these men

- But it's not the message we might have expected
 - In v.4 the Lord says to Ezekiel say to any man in Israel who sets up an idol in his heart that he will hear from God
 - The prophet, Ezekiel, will give such a man a response from the living God, the very God that this man rejected
 - The man who has devoted himself to serving false gods will receive an answer from the true living God
- The Lord says He will give an answer to such a man concerning the matter the man inquires about *because* of his idolatry
 - Notice at the end of the verse the Lord says "in view of the multitude of his idols"
 - So He's talking about that Jew who has devoted his heart to idols and likely set up an altar in his home
 - He prays to these mute and deaf blocks of wood and rock expecting they will hear him and speak in response
 - His heart is captivated by lust and his gaze is fixed on dead things and he's turned his back on God
- Yet when this man finally comes seeking advice from the true prophet, the Lord says He will answer him
 - And the Lord does so in order that He might break the spell of these idols on this man's heart
 - Notice in v.5 the Lord seeks to lay hold of the hearts of those in Israel who are estranged from Him by their idols
- God is acting in mercy...this is grace
 - A God Who has been rejected by His covenant people, set aside for the sake of wood or stone, ignored and blasphemed...
 - That God still allows Himself to be sought and to be heard because He still desires to free their hearts from this slavery
 - Don't let anyone tell you that the God of the Old Testament is different than the God of the New Testament
 - This is Old Testament grace, the same grace the Church receives from the Lord today

- The Lord extends this same grace to you and me today
 - We've all harbored idols in our hearts from time to time
 - And perhaps we've even taken the next step of setting that idol right in front of our face, so to speak
 - We made it a stumbling block and it caused us to sin
- But then perhaps one day, as we experience the weight of that sin, as we feel the consequences and pain and loss it brought, maybe we begin to seek for the Lord again
 - When that day comes, you can be sure He will answer you too
 - Come back to Him, seek His mercy, ask for rescue
 - And the Lord will speak to you as he did these men and He'll do it for the same reason He did then
 - He wants to lay hold of your estranged heart, to bring it back to Himself
- As He does, just know He's going to say the same thing He said to Israel in v.6
 - Repent, turn away from your idols, and turn your face away from the abominations you've set up before yourself
 - Notice that order again...first, break free from the physical things obscuring your vision
 - If it's a bad relationship, break it off
 - If it's a greedy desire, cut up the credit card
 - If it's a fear or anxiety or addiction or obsession, change your environment, erect fences of protection, seek godly counsel
 - Do whatever is necessary to regain clear vision, to turn your attention away from what has captured you
 - Once the idol has been smashed and you see some daylight, take advantage of that opening to run back to the Lord in repentance
 - Seek the Lord again in the word, in the company of godly people, in the comfort of prayer
 - Invest the energy you squandered on that idol into pursuing the disciplines of the faith that promote meaningful spiritual growth

- Watch the Lord work to purge those unhealthy desires, evicting that idol from its home in your heart
- It's like a see-saw, that as you invest in strengthening your spirit, the attraction of those idols will begin to fade
 - And if you think that sounds too easy, then try it...sincerely... prayerfully
 - Test to see if the word of God can be trusted
 - Weaker people than you have broken free with the Lord's help
- Now let's look back at v.4 for a moment...notice the Lord didn't distinguish between the elders and the rest of Israel
 - In fact, the Lord says quite specifically that His offer applies to any man of Israel
 - The leaders were at the forefront of leading the people into idolatry
 - Nevertheless the Lord is treating everyone equally
 - Both the elder and ordinary Jew are equally guilty
 - Both may receive mercy if they repent
 - This is our introduction into the fourth excuse...the people saying their leaders were the only ones to blame
 - Why were the people so sure that God would only judge the leaders for idolatry?
 - It goes back to the history of Jerusalem's capture by the Babylonians
 - Babylon's first attack against the city in 605 BC led to the king of Judah being deposed by Nebuchadnezzar
 - Babylon also took the nobles and leaders of the people into exile
 - A few years later, the new king also rebelled against Babylon
 - So Nebuchadnezzar responded with a second attack of the city
 - And he again deposed that king and took yet more of the elite into exile

- So the people of Israel concluded that God directs His anger only against Israel's leaders
 - It became an excuse for them to dismiss the warnings of the prophet and to live without concern for God's judgment
 - But like the previous excuses, the people conveniently overlook the real facts
 - Yes the leadership were a focus of God's judgment, but they weren't the only ones to go into captivity
 - Many regular Jews had been caught up in slavery too or killed in the process
 - And soon enough, the rest were going into exile too
- So in vs.7-8 the Lord declares that anyone in the city who does not repent of idolatry will experience judgment
 - In v.7 He says this will apply to anyone of the house of Israel, both elders and common man
 - It even applies to the immigrants, the Gentiles who have set up a home in Israel
 - God will not be a respecter of persons but will deal justly in all cases
 - When such a person comes before the prophet again, having failed to repent, then that person will receive a word of judgment from the Lord
 - And specifically, they will receive God's answer from God personally – "in My own person"
 - Then in v.8 the Lord says He will make an example of such a person, or a proverb
 - The person will be cut off, killed, so that God's people will see that the Lord is truly the only God
 - Throughout these two verses, the Lord stresses over and over again the personal responsibility of each man for his own sin before the Lord
 - The people can't rest on the assumption that God will only judge the leaders

- Each person's sin is before the Lord and each person must repent to survive the coming judgment against the city
- More than that, the people couldn't claim ignorance, for the Lord has spoken to them through the prophet

Ezek. 14:9 "But if the prophet is prevailed upon to speak a word, it is I, the Lord, who have prevailed upon that prophet, and I will stretch out My hand against him and destroy him from among My people Israel.

Ezek. 14:10 "They will bear the punishment of their iniquity; as the iniquity of the inquirer is, so the iniquity of the prophet will be,

Ezek. 14:11 in order that the house of Israel may no longer stray from Me and no longer defile themselves with all their transgressions. Thus they will be My people, and I shall be their God," declares the Lord God."

- When these sinful elders have sat before the prophet seeking his counsel without repenting of their idolatry, the prophet will speak to them
 - But the Lord says these leaders and all the people need to recognize that what the prophet says is coming from God
 - Though the leaders asked the prophet to speak, nonetheless the Lord is responding
 - This reminds me of what God did through Balaam in Numbers 22
 - The prophet desired wealth, so he hired himself to the king of Moab who asked the prophet to curse Israel
 - The Lord permitted the prophet to go to the camp of Israel, but here's what the Lord told the prophet

Num. 22:20 God came to Balaam at night and said to him, "If the men have come to call you, rise up and go with them; but only the word which I speak to you shall you do."

- When Balaam went before the camp of Israel to pronounce a curse, the Lord only allowed blessings to emerge from the prophet's mouth
- It didn't matter what he had been asked to say, the Lord still ensured the prophet spoke God's word

- That's what He's saying to Israel again here...it didn't matter what they came to hear or what they asked the prophet to say
 - In the end, they should know they are hearing from the Lord
 - He's saying you can't blame your leaders and you can't blame the messenger
 - You heard the truth straight from the Lord, so you can't say you didn't know or that the prophet couldn't be trusted
- In fact, the Lord says in v.10 that should a prophet speak falsely, he too will be under judgment
 - And if a prophet were to sin in that way, they too would receive judgment
 - The Lord is holding everyone accountable and He's preventing excuses
- And He's doing all this, He says in v.11, to ensure that the people of Israel no longer stray and defile themselves
 - Remember, I said in an earlier lesson that the exile of Judah into Babylon put an end to idolatry in the land of Israel
 - Even after the people returned 70 years later, they never again returned to idolatry
 - The nation remained steadfast in following the Law and refusing to worship idols
 - The memory of the exile stuck just as God said it would
 - Christians often quote Romans 8:28 that says

Rom. 8:28 And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

- It's a beautiful verse, one that has given hope to countless believers living under difficult circumstances
- But sometimes we overlook what this verse is really saying
- The Lord causes all things to work together for good

- Things that are not good can be harnessed to produce a good outcome
- It means that God brings bad things sometimes, things we see as bad, but yet God sees them as necessary
- And they're necessary because they are the best way to produce something good in our lives
- The Lord's desire was to break the stronghold of idolatry in the hearts of His people, to bring them back to Himself
 - As He says, they will be My people and I shall be their God
 - If that required Israel should endure generations of captivity in Babylon, then so be it
 - The outcome was worth it
 - He worked these terrible circumstances to good for the sake of His people
- If we're spiritually mature, we'll come to understand the same thing about our circumstances
 - When things are going poorly, when our life seems to be moving from bad to worse, remember that God is at work
 - He's working to bring good
 - But He's determined that the good He wants to accomplish is only possible through these difficult circumstances
 - Trust Him, be patient, seek an understanding and know that He hasn't forgotten you
 - And when the dust settles, and the good things have come, you'll understand
 - Sometimes the best lessons can only be learned the hard way