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TEACHING THE WHOLE COUNSEL OF GOD

Ezekiel - Lesson 21

20:45-49, 21:1-32

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- Ralph Waldo Emerson once said:

We are a puny and fickle folk. Avarice, hesitation, and following are our diseases.

- The Israel of Ezekiel’s day certainly fit that description
 - They were miserable in their captivity, puny in their power, voracious in their appetites for sin and hesitant to hear the word of the Lord
 - And most of all they were following...following corrupt leaders as they had for centuries
 - These leaders were godless men intent only on saving themselves and their place of prominence among the people
 - And their corruption brought the people of Israel down with them
- So as the Lord concludes His declarations of judgment upon Jerusalem, He takes aim at the root cause of it all: Israel’s corrupt leaders
 - Last week we studied through most of Chapter 20 where the Lord explained the pattern of judgment that accompanies idolatry
 - The generation of Israel that lived in Egypt and the generation that wandered in the desert both ran afoul of the first commandment
 - As a result they each suffered exile of a sort, and the Lord uses their examples to convince this generation they face a similar fate
- And that fate came largely as a result of evil men who led the people astray
 - That too had parallels to earlier generations
 - As we remember that Aaron enabled the generation in the Exodus to sin at the mountain
 - So the Lord now turns His words of wrath against the leaders

Ezek. 20:45 Now the word of the LORD came to me, saying,

Ezek. 20:46 “Son of man, set your face toward Teman, and speak out against the south and prophesy against the forest land of the Negev,

Ezek. 20:47 and say to the forest of the Negev, ‘Hear the word of the LORD: thus says the Lord GOD, “Behold, I am about to kindle a fire in you, and it will consume every green tree in you, as well as every dry tree; the blazing flame will not be quenched and the whole surface from south to north will be burned by it.

Ezek. 20:48 “All flesh will see that I, the LORD, have kindled it; it shall not be quenched.”””

Ezek. 20:49 Then I said, “Ah Lord GOD! They are saying of me, ‘Is he not just speaking parables?’”

- In the Hebrew Bible this final section of Chapter 20 is considered part of Chapter 21, because it leads directly into where we’re going

- The Lord tells Ezekiel to set his face toward three places
 - First, toward Teman then the south and finally the Negev
 - All three of these Hebrew words were general references to the southern kingdom of Judah
 - The word *temanah* (Teman) means “right”, as in the direction of south when facing the rising sun in the east
 - And the Negev was the desert south of Jerusalem
- So this is a prophecy concerning the south, and as we move into Chapter 21 we soon see that the “south” refers to Judah in general
 - To the southern kingdom the Lord says He will soon kindle a fire in that kingdom
 - That fire will consume every green tree and dry tree, the whole area from south to north
 - Green trees represent the good within Israel, while the dry tree represents the spiritual dead Jews in the land
- This was to be a judgment that wouldn’t distinguish between the good and bad, at least not in the sense that anyone could expect to escape
 - The only difference would be that the good within Israel would be preserved in captivity while the bad would not
 - But this flame could not be quenched, and all flesh would know the Lord Himself was responsible for bringing the calamity
- From all our study up to this point, we can see that this parable describes the coming third invasion of Nebuchadnezzar’s army
 - As the army moved in from the north and went through Judah, they followed a scorched earth policy
 - They left few survivors, they left no cities standing, and they showed no mercy to anyone
 - They literally wiped Israel off the map...it was an unprecedented degree of destruction, even for the Babylonians
 - But as Ezekiel relates this latest warning to the people, he hears the exiles complaining that the prophet is speaking in parables
 - That’s not a compliment...they are suggesting he’s not making sense
 - And so they aren’t responsible for listening much less heeding his words
 - And so Ezekiel complains back to the Lord asking for defense
- Which leads us into Chapter 21...

Ezek. 21:1 And the word of the LORD came to me saying,

Ezek. 21:2 “Son of man, set your face toward Jerusalem, and speak against the sanctuaries and prophesy against the land of Israel;

Ezek. 21:3 and say to the land of Israel, ‘Thus says the LORD, “Behold, I am against you; and I will draw My sword out of its sheath and cut off from you the righteous and the wicked.

Ezek. 21:4 “Because I will cut off from you the righteous and the wicked, therefore My sword will go forth from its sheath against all flesh from south to north.

Ezek. 21:5 “Thus all flesh will know that I, the LORD, have drawn My sword out of its sheath. It will not return to its sheath again.”

Ezek. 21:6 “As for you, son of man, groan with breaking heart and bitter grief, groan in their sight.

Ezek. 21:7 “And when they say to you, ‘Why do you groan?’ you shall say, ‘Because of the news that is coming; and every heart will melt, all hands will be feeble, every spirit will faint and all knees will be weak as water. Behold, it comes and it will happen,’ declares the Lord GOD.”

- This chapter opens with the Lord making plain what the exiles complained was too hard to understand
 - In short, a judgment is coming against Jerusalem and all the southern kingdom
 - In v.2 the Lord explains that the judgment would impact the city, the temple and the land overall...nothing would be overlooked
 - More importantly, the Lord takes full credit for that destruction
 - The Lord wants the people to know that He was the one swinging this judgment sword
 - Moreover He has designed this judgment to remove all Jews from the land, both the righteous and the wicked and from south to north
 - There will be no exceptions
 - And the sword won't be placed in the sheath, He says
 - Which means the Lord won't stop short of completing the total judgment He's promised
- Now we've heard similar things in this book before, yet some may still wrestle with what's happening here
 - Some question whether the Lord could truly be the Author of destruction, death and mayhem in this way
 - They prefer to think that the Lord isn't involved in such things...that such events are the result of Satan's mischief
 - And the Lord desires for better things to come to pass
 - For that group, let me remind you of the Lord's own words

Is. 45:5 “I am the LORD, and there is no other;
Besides Me there is no God.

I will gird you, though you have not known Me;

Is. 45:6 **That men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun**

That there is no one besides Me.

I am the LORD, and there is no other,

Is. 45:7 **The One forming light and creating darkness,**

Causing well-being and creating calamity; I am the LORD who does all these.

- The Lord says plainly to Israel that there is no source of power and authority for what happens on earth besides Him
 - All that happens is according to the Lord's power and intentions
 - He is the one who created both light and darkness in the beginning, symbolizing good and bad
 - And He says He is the One who causes well-being and also creates calamity
- Yes, the devil is real and he has power of his own as a created being
 - But the Lord harnesses Satan's power as part of His plan for Creation
 - Remember, it was Jesus Who released Judas from the meal and instructed him to accomplish his plan of betrayal quickly
 - That's one of the clearest examples of God's permissive will incorporating Satan's evil desires into God's plan
 - While we credit Satan with leading Judas to betray Jesus, we also acknowledge that Satan acted by and according to God's will
 - Likewise we're told that the Lord used a demon to torment King Saul

1Sam. 18:10 Now it came about on the next day that an evil spirit from God came mightily upon Saul, and he raved in the midst of the house, while David was playing the harp with his hand, as usual; and a spear was in Saul's hand.

- So the Lord has always used evil to further His plan
- And creating calamity in this way isn't sin when it's a righteous judgment in response to sin
- That's the situation we have at present in Israel
 - These people have sinned for generations
 - So the Lord is perfectly right to bring judgment
- Nevertheless, that raises a second concern for some: the indiscriminate nature of this judgment
 - Peter tells us the Lord distinguishes between the righteous and the unrighteous in His judgments
 - Yet in this case, the Lord says His judgment will impact both the righteous and the wicked (i.e., the green tree vs. dry tree)
 - Still, no one escapes untouched, and so we should ask why is the Lord willing to allow the righteous to suffer at all?
- The answer is the Old Covenant
 - That covenant, as we've discussed, bound the entire population of the nation to God under certain terms
 - And as part of the terms of that covenant, the nation was required to refrain from

idolatry

- If they violated those terms, then the Lord committed to placing the entire nation into exile
- So in this unique case, the Lord must bring the entire nation into exile
 - Because the terms of the covenant require the nation be treated uniformly
 - Nevertheless, there is a measure of distinction between the righteous and the unrighteous in the events of the judgment
 - The righteous will escape death if they obey the voice of the Lord and surrender to the Babylonians
 - While the unrighteous who resist the invasion because they don't heed the word of God will die in the fight
 - So even as the Lord is bringing the entire nation into the judgment as the covenant requires, He is still just to all
 - The Lord's purpose in bringing such a sweeping judgment was that there would be no question in anyone's mind Who the true Lord is
 - Notice in v.5 He says all flesh would know that it was the Lord Who acted
 - And in knowing the Lord acted, all people would also know that He was real, He alone is God and He is faithful to His covenant
 - Nevertheless, the judgment would be terrible to behold, even for the righteous, the Lord says
 - So he asks Ezekiel to begin his mourning process now
 - Ezekiel is told to groan publicly as one would do when in mourning
 - Obviously, this would gain Ezekiel a lot of attention from the exiles who would come to him asking what's wrong
 - And to that question, the Lord says in v.7 that Ezekiel is to tell them that this is what everyone in Israel will be doing soon
- Which leads to the next part of this prophecy

Ezek. 21:8 Again the word of the LORD came to me, saying,

Ezek. 21:9 “Son of man, prophesy and say, ‘Thus says the LORD.’ Say,

‘A sword, a sword sharpened

And also polished!

Ezek. 21:10 ‘Sharpened to make a slaughter,

Polished to flash like lightning!’

Or shall we rejoice, the rod of My son despising every tree?

Ezek. 21:11 “It is given to be polished, that it may be handled; the sword is sharpened and polished, to give it into the hand of the slayer.

Ezek. 21:12 “Cry out and wail, son of man; for it is against My people, it is against all the officials of Israel. They are delivered over to the sword with My people, therefore strike your thigh.

Ezek. 21:13 “For there is a testing; and what if even the rod which despises will be no more?” declares the Lord GOD.

Ezek. 21:14 “You therefore, son of man, prophesy and clap your hands together; and let the sword be doubled the third time, the sword for the slain. It is the sword for the great one slain, which surrounds them,
Ezek. 21:15 that their hearts may melt, and many fall at all their gates. I have given the glittering sword. Ah! It is made for striking like lightning, it is wrapped up in readiness for slaughter.
Ezek. 21:16 “Show yourself sharp, go to the right; set yourself; go to the left, wherever your edge is appointed.
Ezek. 21:17 “I will also clap My hands together, and I will appease My wrath; I, the LORD, have spoken.”

- This prophecy is written in a poetic form at least in parts, so it’s become known as the song of the sword
 - The poem describes a spectacularly dangerous sword, an “Excalibur” of a weapon that strikes terror
 - It’s been specially prepared for God’s people
 - And the Lord will bring it upon everyone
 - The poem is arranged as a chiasm
 - Notice it starts in vs.9-10 with descriptions of the sword’s sharpness and reflections
 - And then in vs.15-16 those same features are repeated in a reverse, chiasmic order
 - Next we have descriptions of the slaughter and the slayer in vs.11-12
 - And that thought is repeated on the opposite end again vs.14-15
 - Which places the center of the chiasm on v.13, which is the “point” of the chiasm
 - The point of the chiasm is the point of the story
 - And in this case that point is this judgment is a test for the people of Israel
 - The test is how will they live in exile without any leaders to guide them
 - Because the Lord is going to remove all officials from among them
- Backing up for a moment, we need to understand why the Lord keeps emphasizing the point of a coming judgment over and over again
 - The Jews held stubbornly to their assumptions of rescue
 - As long as the city of Jerusalem still stood, the people continued to believe that they had a home to return to one day
 - As long as the temple still stood and the walls of the city were still standing (mostly), and priest and kings ruled, they clung to hope
 - They simply wouldn’t believe that they weren’t going to return home soon
 - But the Lord says over and over again through Ezekiel and Jeremiah that they won’t be returning anytime soon
 - And many of them would never return
 - The cities would be empty and wiped away

- The temple would be razed to the foundations and the walls would be gone too
 - There simply would be no Israel on earth for a time
 - And when that reality hit home at a certain point, the people came face to face with the reality of this judgment
 - They aren't there yet, but the Lord is giving them these prophecies now in preparation for that moment
 - So that when the events come to pass, Israel will have reason to pause and consider what they heard and recognize the Lord acted
- So in v.11 the Lord says He hands His sword of judgment to an unnamed executioner, who would be Nebuchadnezzar
 - And in v.12 the Lord says that man's attack would be directed specifically at the officials of Israel
 - Here we reach the point where the Lord calls out the leaders of Israel for their part in the tragedy
 - The leaders of Israel would be sure to die in this attack, which means they would not have the option to live as others might
 - But though we understand the leaders to be bad and to be worthy of this end, it was still a particularly sad outcome for the people
 - The people of Israel would be rocked by the complete loss of their leaders
 - Traditionally, the people have known three types of leaders: judges, priests and kings
 - We could also include prophets in that list, though prophets typically didn't hold authority over people in the same way
 - But after this judgment, the nation would lose access to priests, judges, kings and the like
 - There would be no officials in Israel at the start of the exile
 - The people would be leaderless for a time, and that would prove to be a great humiliation to them
 - And it would provoke great fear among the people
 - Because even though their past officials were evil, nevertheless they offered Israel an identity and a degree of security
 - Because it's bad enough to be held in captivity away from your country
 - But it's a far worse thing to be held in captivity away from your country *and* your country doesn't exist any longer *and* your leaders are wiped out
- In vs.12-13 the Lord says this will be an occasion for great mourning such that Ezekiel and the people will strike their thighs in despair
 - And the Lord says this will be a severe testing for the people
 - The Lord calls His choice to remove all leaders a "rod" as in a stick used to discipline disobedience
 - Specifically, Nebuchadnezzar is that rod of discipline
 - Having no officials while in exile leads the people to search for authority and

guidance

- And in their searching they will rediscover the Lord and His law
- So the Lord then asks what will they do if even that rod is no more?
 - He’s alluding to the day when Babylon gave way to Persia and this stage of discipline ended for the people
 - In other words, He’s saying that even though the rod doesn’t last forever, still it will have its desired effect
- So then the Lord tells Ezekiel clap your hands as you announce this double of the sword on the third time
 - The third time is the attack on the city which was coming
 - And in that third attack, the battle would be twice as bad as anything that had come to the city so far
 - And Ezekiel was to clap as if applauding the Lord’s judgment and apprising of His judgment
 - Finally in v.17, the Lord says He will “clap His hands too” in approval of this judgment on His people
 - It will appease His wrath and He has spoken so it will come to pass
 - Remember, the Lord instinctively experiences wrath in the face of sin
 - And His wrath cannot dissipate absent something to remove it, something to appease it
 - If the Lord’s wrath for sin were to dissipate without cause, it would be an injustice
 - So this severe judgment is the means by which the Lord appeases His wrath under the terms of the Old Covenant
 - The people have violated the agreements prohibiting idolatry
 - And He is now acting to bring wrath and once it is spent, He approves since it has appeased Him
- Now it’s time for Ezekiel to return for a moment to his prior role as a street artist, giving Israel prophecies by mime

Ezek. 21:18 The word of the LORD came to me saying,

Ezek. 21:19 “As for you, son of man, make two ways for the sword of the king of Babylon to come; both of them will go out of one land. And make a signpost; make it at the head of the way to the city.

Ezek. 21:20 “You shall mark a way for the sword to come to Rabbah of the sons of Ammon, and to Judah into fortified Jerusalem.

Ezek. 21:21 “For the king of Babylon stands at the parting of the way, at the head of the two ways, to use divination; he shakes the arrows, he consults the household idols, he looks at the liver.

Ezek. 21:22 “Into his right hand came the divination, ‘Jerusalem,’ to set battering rams, to open the mouth for slaughter, to lift up the voice with a battle cry, to set battering rams against the gates, to cast up ramps, to build a

siege wall.

Ezek. 21:23 “And it will be to them like a false divination in their eyes; they have sworn solemn oaths. But he brings iniquity to remembrance, that they may be seized.

Ezek. 21:24 “Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD, ‘Because you have made your iniquity to be remembered, in that your transgressions are uncovered, so that in all your deeds your sins appear — because you have come to remembrance, you will be seized with the hand.

Ezek. 21:25 ‘And you, O slain, wicked one, the prince of Israel, whose day has come, in the time of the punishment of the end,’

Ezek. 21:26 thus says the Lord GOD, ‘Remove the turban and take off the crown; this will no longer be the same. Exalt that which is low and abase that which is high.

Ezek. 21:27 ‘A ruin, a ruin, a ruin, I will make it. This also will be no more until He comes whose right it is, and I will give it to Him.’

- The Lord tells Ezekiel to make a map, probably by drawing in the dirt or on a tablet
 - The map traces the major road that connects Babylon to Jerusalem
 - That road diverged at a point in Damascus
 - The east fork of the road went to Rabbah, the capital city of the Ammonites that settled east of Judah
 - The other side of the fork went to Jerusalem
 - Now in that day, these roads were little more than worn paths used by traders
 - Generally, maps didn’t exist and roads didn’t have signposts
 - So as Nebuchadnezzar’s army marched, they relied on local knowledge and divination to find their way to their desired destination
 - In this prophecy, the Lord tells Ezekiel to explain to the exiles how Babylon would find its way to Jerusalem for this devastating attack
 - Using the map, the Lord says He brings the sword upon Jerusalem by guiding it to them
 - In v.20 the Lord tells Ezekiel to mark the left route toward Ammon and the right path to Jerusalem
 - And then the king will stop at the fork not knowing which way to go, so he will resort to divination
- Divination is ritual that taps into demonic power for insight and guidance
 - In this case, demons certainly know the right way to go, so they can provide that knowledge to those they wish
 - There were standard methods diviners used to learn the knowledge of the demons
 - And the Lord mentions three of them here:
 - Belomancy involved writing possible answers on arrows, mixing them up, replacing them in a quiver and drawing one

- Necromancy was a process of consulting idols that could communicate with dead ancestors
 - And hepatoscopy involved inspecting the liver of dead animals to discern an answer from the markings or shape of the organ
 - In all cases, we're talking about methods that opened the person up to hearing from demons
- And the Lord says in v.21 that the king of Babylon will use these methods to learn how to find Jerusalem for his attack
 - And in v.22 the Lord says the king's divination efforts will lead him to the road headed to Jerusalem
 - In other words, the Lord will ensure that Nebuchadnezzar gets the right answer
 - And as a result, their battle cry, battering rams and siege ramps will appear at the city walls
- But the people of the city will see Babylon's arrival as some kind of colossal mistake on God's part
 - They expected God to thwart the king's efforts and to lead the army toward Ammon
 - After all, Ammon was the enemy of God
 - Ammon deserved God's wrath, Israel thought
 - And in v.23 they say to themselves we have sworn oaths to the Lord and He to us, so that should ensure Israel's safety
 - But the problem is those oaths committed Israel to remaining faithful to Yahweh, which they didn't do
 - They want it both ways...they want God to be faithful to them even as they weren't faithful to Him
 - We've already learned that Israel was committing worse sin than her neighbors
 - So in reality Ammon was less deserving than Israel
 - In v.23 the Lord says He is using this judgment to bring Israel's sin back to mind
 - That's the fundamental disconnect driving Israel's misconceptions
 - They fail to remember or appreciate their own sin
 - And if you don't recognize your sin before God, you'll never understand His discipline or judgment
 - And even when judgment comes, you won't get the point
 - But in this case, the Lord is working to ensure they get the point
 - In v.24 He says their sinful deeds have been exposed to all and so will their judgment be
 - Furthermore, the current king, Zedekiah, would also see his time come
 - He would have his crown removed, and he would receive his own punishment
 - Everything that was exalted by this people would be made low and that which was low will be exalted by the Lord

- Notice v.27...the disposing of Zedekiah marks a fundamental shift in ruling in Israel
 - Where before in Israel there was a steady succession of kings who ruled uninterrupted, that was changing now
 - The Lord would bring the Davidic dynasty to ruin
 - And it would be no more until “He” comes whose right it is to rule Israel
 - Obviously, that’s a reference to Jesus ruling Israel
 - So another consequence of this judgment is the elimination of legitimate kings ruling Israel
 - Even those who tried to assume the throne after the Maccabean rulers, or Herod’s family, were not from David’s line
 - In fact, Herod’s family were not even Jewish
 - So the nation will have to wait for the Kingdom before they see a king again
 - Which is in keeping with the pattern of restoration we saw last week
- Now we have one last section of the chapter to complete, and it’s a bit of foreshadowing
 - The second half of this book starts in Chapter 25
 - In the first part of that second half, Ezekiel will issue a series of prophecies concerning Israel’s enemies
 - One at a time, the Lord explains how in the future He will judge the nations that have historically opposed Israel
 - These prophecies come true when the Kingdom comes to earth, so they are part of the section looking forward to that time
 - One of those enemies are the Ammonites, which the Lord just mentioned in this prophecy to Israel
 - But rather than wait for that coming section to pronounce judgment on Ammon, the Lord chooses to mention it here
 - So this is a bit of a preview of what we will be studying soon as we enter the second half of the book

Ezek. 21:28 “And you, son of man, prophesy and say, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD concerning the sons of Ammon and concerning their reproach,’ and say: ‘A sword, a sword is drawn, polished for the slaughter, to cause it to consume, that it may be like lightning —

Ezek. 21:29 while they see for you false visions, while they divine lies for you — to place you on the necks of the wicked who are slain, whose day has come, in the time of the punishment of the end.

Ezek. 21:30 ‘Return it to its sheath. In the place where you were created, in the land of your origin, I will judge you.

Ezek. 21:31 ‘I will pour out My indignation on you; I will blow on you with the fire of My wrath, and I will give you into the hand of brutal men, skilled in destruction.

Ezek. 21:32 ‘You will be fuel for the fire; your blood will be in the midst of the

land. You will not be remembered, for I, the LORD, have spoken.’”

- The Ammonites were the descendants of the incestuous relationships between Lot and his daughters
 - They were always enemies of the Jewish people
 - And in this situation particularly, they did Israel a disservice
 - The Lord had just mentioned that He would send the Babylonians to Jerusalem rather than to Ammon
 - And of course, this would confuse the people of Israel at first, because they understood that the Ammonites were people deserving God’s judgment
 - Furthermore, after the Babylonians removed Israel from the land and destroyed Jerusalem, the Ammonites entered the land
 - They ransacked what little was left of Jerusalem
 - They attacked the few remaining Jews that had managed to escape the army of the Babylonians
 - So naturally, the people of Israel were expecting the Lord to bring vengeance on that people
- So the Lord connects Israel’s judgment to Ammon’s fate
 - He says the same sword that conquers Israel will be drawn against the Ammonites too
 - They will suffer reproach for their acts against the Lord and His people
 - And even though the Lord chose to bring judgment to Israel over Ammon in the case of Babylon’s third attack
 - That doesn’t mean that Ammon didn’t have their own judgment coming
 - So the Lord reminds them not to be self-satisfied
 - The sons of Ammon will see false visions and lies in their divination that cause them to be on the necks of Israel (v.29)
 - This is a reference to the way Ammon piled on to Israel’s troubles during Babylon’s attacks
 - But in v.30 the Lord says when Ammon returns to its land, they will face judgment
 - Sure enough, the land of Ammon was attacked not long afterward by Persia
 - The Persian army was even more brutal than the Babylonian army, men skilled in destruction the Lord says
 - The Ammonites would be fuel for the fire and their blood would be in the midst of the land
- After the Persians attacked the region and subdued the Ammonites, history mostly forgot about that people
 - There are isolated mentions of Ammonites up to about the second century
 - But they were never again a powerful people much less a threat to Israel
 - And in Jeremiah, the Lord also tells Israel that in the Kingdom the land of Ammon would become Israel’s possession

- So the example of Ammon reminds us that the Lord can harness evil to do His bidding and then turn around and judge that vessel for that evil
 - God can allow Satan to use Judas to betray Christ
 - And then He can turn around and judge both Satan and Judas for that sin
 - That's the sovereignty of God to use evil without forfeiting His right to judge evil for what it does
- That's why the Bible asks us to leave room for the vengeance of God
 - When evil comes against you, the Lord allowed it for some good purpose
 - But that doesn't mean the Lord doesn't have a plan to ultimately judge that evil for what it did
 - So He can use evil to accomplish good and then do good Himself by judging that same evil
 - That's how He has dealt with Israel through all her enemies, and in weeks to come we will examine how God does this in each case