

The Fall of Jerusalem

How bad must a situation become before a person will face the truth and change their attitudes and actions?



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An out-of-state couple attended worship and requested a meeting on Sunday afternoon. They were grieving for their son who was serving a lengthy term in the federal prison outside my community. Would I visit him? Of course. For several months I visited the young man, listened to him blame the government and everyone else for his problems, and tell me that there is a nationwide plot by prison inmates to rise up and take control of the country. Any attempt to talk about his attitude and choices was brushed aside. The last time I saw him it was clear he refused to face the truth about himself.

Ezekiel 24:1 carefully dates the fall of God's judgment on the rebellious people of the southern kingdom: the ninth year of King Zedekiah's reign, probably January 15, 588 BC. For years the pattern of Judah's idolatry and immorality had grown in spite of the first deportation of 3,000 to Babylon and now the enemy is at the gates again. No one should be surprised the day of reckoning has come. In eighteen months' time Nebuchadnezzar's army will reduce the beautiful city and Temple to a pile of rubble. The "chosen people" have not faced their repeated failures!

With the menacing enemy outside the city walls, God tells Ezekiel to compose a parable for "the rebels' household," a new title for these "chosen people" (24:3). The Hebrew word for parable may also be translated proverb, wise saying, poem or song. Ezekiel's parable is negative, but his interpretation is even more bitter in its condemnation and despair. Behind the prophet's words is the grief he feels for a people who have so easily and repeatedly walked away from the loving God. The parable pictures making a stew in a boiling pot, filling it with the best cuts of meat until they are so tender they fall off the bones. But the mouth-watering stew becomes an unpalatable vat of corruption.

The first interpretation of this parable begins: "The Lord God proclaims: Horror! You bloody city, you corroded pot" (26:6). In earlier years the prophet Nahum had called the detested Assyrian city of Nineveh "the bloody city, completely full of lies and pillage" (Nahum 3:1). Every Hebrew would have considered any connection between Jerusalem and Nineveh an obscenity. The image of a wonderful feast is transformed into rotten meat in a contaminated pot. Jerusalem's population has become like rotted food in the sight of God, described as: "Horror! You bloody city, you corroded pot ... whose corrosion cannot be removed" (24:6)! There is also a reference here to the required proper disposal of blood from any meat, a process of draining the blood and covering (burying) it with soil (Leviticus 17:13). Jews were forbidden to eat blood because it represented life. In this parable Jerusalem is so far from God they ignore the instruction of God's law as though it is meaningless.

The second interpretation begins as the first with a reference to the "bloody city" (24:9). In this section the Lord becomes the cook, building up the fire to cleanse the copper pot (Jerusalem) of its impurities. Because the impurities cannot be cleansed it is pronounced "a worthless task" (24:12). The way the text is written may point to the burning of Jerusalem in 587 BC.

The final words of this message are overwhelmingly dark: "How your betrayals defile you! I cleansed you but you didn't come clean ... you won't be clean again until I have exhausted my anger against you" (24:13).

How did the people of Jerusalem respond to Ezekiel's message? Were they angry that he declared God's judgment instead of proclaiming them to be God's special people, protected against those barbarians, immune to disaster because of God's promises? Did they regard the prophet as a remnant of the past, no longer relevant? Did they wonder what happened to all God's promises? Where is the hope?

We will hear much more from Ezekiel. Next week we will experience

Formations

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the prophet's vision of dry bones, the promise that God will breathe new life into what seems like a valley filled with death (Ezekiel 37). Then we will examine the final chapter's river of water where "every living thing that moves will thrive" (Ezekiel 47:9). The vision of a boiling, corrupted pot will be replaced with the hope of God's grace.

The books of the Old Testament are complex. They are honest about human failures and attempts to recreate God to suit our ideas about life and faith. We see the consequences of sin and the unbelievable ways God offers a new beginning. We read the Psalms as they express grief, anger, despair, hope and the help only God can give. We, hopefully, learn from the mistakes of the patriarchs and the blessings of God. We discover from Job that life cannot be reduced to an easy balance of rewards for good behavior and the idea that everything that happens is God's will. And we finally begin to learn that when we examine the calamities that have afflicted this world the main contributing element is human choice.

We observe Ezekiel and the people of Jerusalem and wonder why they kept on making the same mistakes generation after generation. We might look just as carefully at our world. As the Old Testament progresses to the New Testament we slowly learn about God and we abandon the thinking that proved to be flawed and immature. We begin to understand grace as it is perfectly revealed by God. Judgment is real and deserved. But the unfolding narrative about God at last comes to fullness, not in the restoration of Israel, nor the rebuilding of the Temple, nor the keeping of a religious legal system, but in the good news of Jesus Christ, God's Son, our Savior. Ezekiel reminds us that in spite of the horror of the moment there is the possibility of hope. There is God!

Retired after more than 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.