

Punishing the Unfaithful

(13) Ezekiel 14
By Scott Huckaby
6/27/2021

BIG BEND
BIBLE
FELLOWSHIP

Ezek 14:1-5 – The inquiry & the idols of the elders

Now some of the elders of Israel came to me and sat before me. And the word of the Lord came to me, saying, “Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their hearts, and put before them that which causes them to stumble into iniquity. Should I let Myself be inquired of at all by them? Therefore speak to them, and say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God: ‘Everyone of the house of Israel who sets up his idols in his heart, and puts before him what causes him to stumble into iniquity, and then comes to the prophet, I the Lord will answer him who comes, according to the multitude of his idols, that I may seize the house of Israel by their heart, because they are all estranged from Me by their idols.’”

Who were these elders who inquires of Ezekiel?

Some of the elders of Israel came to me: These **elders** had visited Ezekiel before (Ezekiel 8:1). These were the leaders of the Israelite community in exile.

What do you think these elders hoped to hear from Ezekiel?

They had come presumably in the hope of hearing some oracle about the length of their exile or giving news of affairs at home in Jerusalem. The oracle was given, but it was not what they expected.

- They pretend they want to listen to the prophet. It is like coming to church with a big Bible under your arm, pretending you want to serve the Lord.

What insight did God give Ezekiel about the elders?

These men had set up idols in their hearts: God gave Ezekiel supernatural insight into the **hearts** of these leaders. Like the leaders mentioned in Ezekiel 8:10-12 and 8:16, these were idol worshippers. Their idols were not evident outwardly, but in **their hearts**. This secret idolatry made **them to stumble into iniquity**.

How do you think these Jewish elders in exile became secret idolators?

- They may have been infected by their Babylonian environment and the attractions of its idolatrous religion either to appease their captors or thinking their gods were superior.

- They were like the people in Isaiah's day who drew near to God with words but not with their hearts (Isa. 29:13). Jesus said that the Pharisees in His day were guilty of the same sin (Matt. 15:8–9).

Can you think of any other examples of secret idolatry?

Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5) and the rich young ruler (Matthew 19:16-26) are New Testament examples of those who looked spiritual on the outside but had idols in their hearts. No wonder John closed his first letter, *little children, keep yourselves from idols* (1 John 5:21).

What did God think of the inquiry of the secret idolators?

Should I let Myself be inquired of at all by them? Knowing the hidden sin in their life, God asked Ezekiel and obvious and important question. This question, with the assumed answer of “no,” showed that God had no *obligation* to answer the inquiry of these men who harbored such secret sin.

- God is asking a rhetorical question here: Is it fitting I should give counsel to obstinate, resolved sinners, who come to inquire, but will not listen? Should I help them in their distress, who depend on idols which I hate?

How do we apply this to our own inquiries to the Lord?

This verse is important for those who come to Scripture seeking guidance. No true direction can be given to those who have erected idols in their hearts.

v4 – How would God answer the secret idolators?

I the Lord will answer him who comes, according to the multitude of his idols: God promised that the ones with such hidden idolatry and sin in their life would receive an answer from Him, but it would be an answer of *judgment*. It would be an answer **according to the multitude of his idols**.

How is it God would seize Israel by their heart?

This is a powerful and eloquent statement of one of the great reasons for God's judgment upon Israel in the Babylonian conquest and captivity. He did it to seize them **by their heart**. Their hearts were far from God, and He intended to grab hold of their hearts again.

Why did God need to seize the hearts of Israel?

Because they are all estranged from Me by their idols: This was why their hearts were distant from God. As an unfaithful spouse might give their heart to another, so Israel unfaithfully gave their hearts to the **idols** of the Canaanites and other surrounding nations.

Ezek 14:6-11 – God’s promised punishment

“Therefore say to the house of Israel, ‘Thus says the Lord God: “Repent, turn away from your idols, and turn your faces away from all your abominations. For anyone of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who dwell in Israel, who separates himself from Me and sets up his idols in his heart and puts before him what causes him to stumble into iniquity, then comes to a prophet to inquire of him concerning Me, I the Lord will answer him by Myself. I will set My face against that man and make him a sign and a proverb, and I will cut him off from the midst of My people. Then you shall know that I am the Lord. And if the prophet is induced to speak anything, I the Lord have induced that prophet, and I will stretch out My hand against him and destroy him from among My people Israel. And they shall bear their iniquity; the punishment of the prophet shall be the same as the punishment of the one who inquired, that the house of Israel may no longer stray from Me, nor be profaned anymore with all their transgressions, but that they may be My people and I may be their God,” says the Lord God.”

What was God’s solution for Israel?

Repent, turn away from your idols, and turn your faces away from all your abominations: This was God’s word to those among Israel who sought Him. If they inquired of Him, God had a simple response: **repent**. Then God defined repentance as *turning away from idols and abominations*.

What does it mean to repent?

When Jesus started His public ministry, He also called for repentance...

Matthew 4:17 – From that time on Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

Repentance is an important part of an initial response to the gospel, but it is also an important part of the life of the Christian...

2 Corinthians 7:9 – Now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended.

Essentially, repent means “to change one’s mind” about something. Of course, when a person has a change of mind about something, the result is a change of behavior as well.

What is the difference between being sorry and repenting?

Being sorry, or even feeling sorry are not the same as repenting. A person can feel emotionally sorry for something without addressing the underlying issue.

2 Corinthians 7:10 – Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.

Can you think of any biblical examples distinguishing the difference between remorse and repentance?

- Judas felt great remorse over what he had done to Jesus, but he did not repent. Instead, he committed suicide (Matthew 27:3–5).
- Peter also felt great remorse over his denial of Christ (Matthew 26:75), but in his case it did result in genuine repentance and a change of direction, as later he boldly proclaimed Christ in the face of persecution (see Acts 4).

How is faith essential for true repentance?

It is possible that someone can become convinced that what he has been doing is wrong and then attempt to “mend his ways”—and he may even succeed. But if such a person does not place his faith in Christ and the righteousness He provides, then he is simply trusting his own moral reformation.

- Biblical repentance is the recognition that we are helpless to save ourselves—it is turning from sin and to the One who paid for it and can forgive it.

So how does a person repent?

Like faith, repentance is a response to the work of God, who convicts and convinces a person that he is in error. In Acts 11:18, the Jewish believers “praised God, saying, ‘So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.’”

True repentance is from God when we respond to Him:

2 Timothy 2:25 – Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth.

There is a tension between God’s work and human responsibility. We gently instruct sinners in the hope that this intervention will be the means that God uses to bring them to repentance. It is the truth of God’s Word lovingly and accurately presented that God uses to bring about repentance.

- It is possible for a person to come to the point of admitting that a particular attitude or behavior is wrong

but then refuse to submit to God's truth regarding a change. That's not repentance.

- Repentance is agreeing with God's evaluation of the sin and then being willing to follow God's leading in a new direction.

What were the secret idolators doing?

Then comes to a prophet to inquire of him concerning Me: The people of Israel – such as the elders described in Ezekiel 14:1-3 – were secretly immersed in idolatry, yet they still went **to a prophet to inquire** about God's will.

What would God do about the secret idolators?

I will set My face against that man and make him a sign and a proverb: God promised to oppose such double-hearted men. God knew the truth about those who pretended to serve God on the outside but were filled with idolatry on the inside, and He would oppose them and judge them according to that truth.

How is it God would make the secret idolators a proverb?

Just as the name 'Nimrod' has become proverbial for hunting prowess (Gen. 10:9), and 'Babel' for incomprehensible speech (Gen. 11:9), so the name 'Israel' would become proverbial for divinely imposed disaster.

What kind of answer would the secret idolators inquiring of the false prophets receive?

If the prophet is induced to speak anything: When the idolhearted people went to a false prophet to inquire of the Lord, God could very well give them an answer (**I the Lord have induced that prophet**).

- God answers insincerity with insincerity. Unrepentant kings and unrepentant people, who seek confirmation of their perverse ways, and who clamor for reassurances of well-being, do not deserve a straight answer.

What would be the end of the false prophets?

I will stretch out My hand against him and destroy him from among My people Israel: God's ultimate response to that false prophet would be to destroy him. Even if God used the false prophet to give the idolater the deception they longed for, God would still send judgment upon the false and wicked prophet.

- Allowing false prophets to influence the secret idolators was part of the judgment of God.

How will God deal with anyone who misuses a gift He has given them?

This a warning to those who have a gift and are unfaithful with it. If we have some great gift and are being used in

the service of God, and then try to use it in our own interests, or divorce it from the requirements of Christian living, God may turn the gift against us.

- A theologian, who abandons revealed truth for clever ideas of his own, first deceives himself, and then, by divine rule, becomes blind to the truth.

What is the distinction between the false prophet and the secret idolators who inquire of them?

The punishment of the prophet shall be the same as the punishment of the one who inquired: There is no effective distinction... God would bring judgment upon the false prophet just as much as He brought it upon the secret idolater who sought the false prophet.

What end result for God's judgment on Israel is restated here?

That the house of Israel may no longer stray from Me, nor be profaned anymore: Once more, God explained the ultimate reason for His great judgment upon Israel. It was so that they would be corrected of their sins and **no longer stray** as before. Israel would have restored relationship with God (**that they may be My people and I may be their God**).

- This declared purpose of God was fulfilled in history. When Israel came back into the land in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, they did not have the same problem with idolatry as before.

Ezek 14:12-20 – No hope for Judah

The word of the Lord came again to me, saying: "Son of man, when a land sins against Me by persistent unfaithfulness, I will stretch out My hand against it; I will cut off its supply of bread, send famine on it, and cut off man and beast from it. Even if these three men, Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in it, they would deliver only themselves by their righteousness," says the Lord God. If I cause wild beasts to pass through the land, and they empty it, and make it so desolate that no man may pass through because of the beasts, even though these three men were in it, as I live," says the Lord God, "they would deliver neither sons nor daughters; only they would be delivered, and the land would be desolate. "Or if I bring a sword on that land, and say, 'Sword, go through the land,' and I cut off man and beast from it, even though these three men were in it, as I live," says the Lord God, "they would deliver neither sons nor daughters, but only they themselves would be delivered.

What did God have against real estate?

When a land sins against Me by persistent unfaithfulness, I will stretch out My hand against it: God said that there was

a sense in which **a land** could sin against Him. Of course, people sin and real estate does not. Yet since God gives responsibility over certain real estate to certain people, there is a sense in which **a land** can indeed sin – and become a target of God's judgment.

How would God deal with the unfaithful?

I will cut off its supply of bread and send famine on it: This was God's promised judgment upon a land – agricultural failure and the **famine** that results from it. The lack of food would **cut off man and beast from it**.

What is the point in bringing up Noah, Daniel, and Job here?

Even if these three men, Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in it, they would deliver only themselves: The sin of Israel was so deep and serious that even if three of the most righteous men of Israel's history were present in the land, it would not stop God's judgment against the land. They would **deliver only themselves by their righteousness**, and not the nation as a whole.

- Here he makes the point that a nation cannot shelter under the goodness of a few individuals.

Does this say that the intervention of the righteous can not sway God's judgment?

This is not addressing intercession in general, but only in this case where the intercession even of the holiest of men shall not avert God's judgments.

- *Noah*, though a righteous man, could not by his intercession preserve the old world from being drowned.
- *Job*, though a righteous man, could not preserve his children from being killed by the fall of their house.
- *Daniel*, though a righteous man, could not prevent the captivity of his country." (Clarke)

What did Noah, Job, and Daniel have in common that is relevant here?

All three were men who were tested and proven faithful, men of faith who were rescued by their trust in God.

- **Noah** was a righteous and obedient man (though later shown to be flawed), yet his righteousness did not save his world, only himself and his immediate family.
- **Job** was not, properly, even an Israelite (the same could be said of **Noah**). The reality of his relationship with God was demonstrated through the most difficult of testing and misery.
- **Daniel** was alive and in Babylon in Ezekiel's day. His leadership and godliness was so evident to everyone that God could cite *him* as an example of great **righteousness** even in his own lifetime.

What does this tell us about both Ezekiel and Daniel that Daniel was included in this list?

He was a well-known contemporary of Ezekiel at the court of Babylon.... Daniel's fame for wisdom and piety was already wide-spread in Ezekiel's day.

Daniel was now alive and in his prime; Ezekiel, his contemporary and fellow prophet, envied him not, but celebrated him; as also Peter did Paul...

2 Peter 3:15-16 – consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures.

v15 – What other judgment would God bring on Judah?

If I cause wild beasts to pass through the land, and they empty it: In the previous verses God described the judgment of famine. Here God spoke of the judgment of **wild beasts** that would drive out the people of the land.

- When the Babylonians depopulated the land of Israel, it gave much more territory to the wild animals of the forest and wilderness. This happens even in the present day when villages and town depopulate; animals such as wolves come in and make life dangerous for any who may remain.

Would this presence of Noah, Job, and Daniel make any difference in the judgment of wild animals?

Even though these three men were in it: God promised that even the presence of the **three men** (Noah, Daniel, and Job) would not spare the land of Israel from the judgment of the wild beasts soon to come.

v17 – What third judgment would God bring on Judah?

If I bring a sword on that land: God would also bring the **sword** of invading armies against them. And again, the presence of Noah, Daniel, and Job would not spare the land of Israel from the judgment of the sword soon to come.

v19 – What fourth judgment would God bring on Judah?

If I send a pestilence into that land: We can think of these four judgments as Ezekiel's version of the four horsemen: famine, wild beasts, war, and now **pestilence**.

And again, the presence of Noah, Daniel, and Job would not spare the land of Israel from the judgment of pestilence soon to come.

What is the biblical significance of the number 4?

In the Bible, number 4 represents creation. This number directly relates to the creative ability of God.

- The earliest mention of number 4 in the Bible is in the Book of Genesis. During the creation week, God finished the creation of what is termed the “material universe” on the 4th day.
- Our physical universe is 4-dimensional: length, breadth, depth, time
- There are four major cardinal points on earth which are North, South, East, and West.
- The 4th commandment says that we should keep the Sabbath Day holy. This Sabbath Day commandment is a direct reference to creation in the Book of Genesis.

So, since in the Bible, the number 4 relates to creation, what insight does that give here?

This punishing judgments on Judah were a direct creation of God... this wasn't some random consequence of living in a fallen world that God allowed to happen, God Himself orchestrated it.

Ezek 14:21-23 – The lesson from a remnant.

For thus says the Lord God: “How much more it shall be when I send My four severe judgments on Jerusalem—the sword and famine and wild beasts and pestilence—to cut off man and beast from it? Yet behold, there shall be left in it a remnant who will be brought out, both sons and daughters; surely they will come out to you, and you will see their ways and their doings. Then you will be comforted concerning the disaster that I have brought upon Jerusalem, all that I have brought upon it. And they will comfort you, when you see their ways and their doings; and you shall know that I have done nothing without cause that I have done in it,” says the Lord God.

What will be the result of God sending His four severe judgments on Jerusalem?

When they came, they would bring death to both **man and beast** leaving the land desolate.

What is the grace in these four severe judgments?

Yet behold, there shall be left in it a remnant: This is an unusual reference to a **remnant**, because it does not seem to refer to a righteous remnant, but a wicked one. We understand this from the phrase **their ways and doings**, which almost always had a negative meaning.

Their ways and their doings: “Most commentators recognize that the context demands that these words refer to ‘unrighteous doings’ for which due punishment has been meted out.

Why would God leave a wicked remnant in the land?

This ‘unspiritual remnant’ will provide evidence of God’s justice in annihilating the nation. Instead of responding to their narrow escape with a change in behavior, their pattern of impious conduct will be on display for the entire community of exiles to observe.

How would the exiles see the “ways and doings” of the remnant of Judah still in the land?

At the time Ezekiel spoke this, there were still many more exiles to come from Jerusalem and Judah to Babylon. When this **remnant** survived and arrived in Babylon, the Jews already in Babylon would see their wicked lives and *know* that the judgment Ezekiel spoke of was well deserved.

How would the Babylonian exiles be comforted?

Then you will be comforted: The comfort would come in the understanding of God’s ways and judgments. God would send these **sons and daughters** to be a living example of God’s righteousness in the **disaster** of the deserved judgment of God.

What would the Israelite exiles learn of God from His judgments?

You shall know that I have done nothing without cause: In the end Israel would know something of God’s comfort, but also His righteousness. They would understand that God was righteous in all He did, even in His **severe judgments**.

How may we find comfort in difficulty?

The Bible is the Word of God written to His people and, as such, it contains everything we need to be “complete” (2 Timothy 3:15-17). Part of the “everything” we need is comfort. The Bible has a lot to say about comfort and has many passages that comfort us in life’s tough times.

For example, how is this passage a comfort?

Job 5:7 – Yet man is born to trouble, as the sparks fly upward.

Difficulties are a part of life. We all experience setbacks in one way or another. Whatever the difficulties, they affect all of us at some point in our lives, and the Bible states that this is inevitable (see also Genesis 3:17; Proverbs 22:8).

How do the promises of God in the Bible comfort us?

The Lord makes promises to those who trust Him. These promises feed off the weakest spark of saving faith to provide the reward of comfort, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit; the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23).