

Judah, the Harlot

(15) Ezekiel 16:15–43

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**BIG BEND
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Ezek 16:15-19 – Jerusalem acts like a harlot.

“But you trusted in your own beauty, played the harlot because of your fame, and poured out your harlotry on everyone passing by who would have it. You took some of your garments and adorned multicolored high places for yourself, and played the harlot on them. Such things should not happen, nor be. You have also taken your beautiful jewelry from My gold and My silver, which I had given you, and made for yourself male images and played the harlot with them. You took your embroidered garments and covered them, and you set My oil and My incense before them. Also My food which I gave you—the pastry of fine flour, oil, and honey which I fed you—you set it before them as sweet incense; and so it was,” says the Lord God.

What was the root cause of Judah’s fall?

You trusted in your own beauty: This pride was the root of Israel’s decline. They forgot that they were nothing when God found them, and that He had bestowed their beauty upon them. Brought to beauty by God’s blessing, they **trusted** in the blessing God gave instead of in God Himself.

How may this root problem be applied to the church today?

As Israel forgot an important principle: everything good they were and all the good they had were the gift of God’s grace to them. Many centuries later the Apostle Paul wrote of this same principle for Christians:

For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it? (1 Corinthians 4:7)

Why is pride a sin?

Proverbs 16:18 – *Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.*

It is very important to understand what precisely is the pride that God hates (Proverbs 8:13). Sinful pride is refusing to recognize God's sovereign role in everything. "Good pride" is recognizing that apart from God, you can do nothing...

John 15:5 – *I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing*

Therefore, we should give God the glory for the things we accomplish.

How did Satan epitomize sinful pride?

Isaiah 14:12-15 and Ezekiel 28:12-15 makes it clear that Satan's sin was pride. Despite the fact that God had created Satan, and despite the fact that it was God who gave Satan the power and beauty he possessed, Satan wanted the glory and credit for himself. Satan did not want to worship God in response to the gifts God had given him. Instead, Satan wanted to be worshipped.

- Satan viewed himself as glorious instead of what he actually was: a reflection of God's glory.

How then should we handle recognition for our accomplishments?

How can we receive complements without sounding prideful or conceited? We entirely recognize that nothing we have accomplished would have been possible without God. We entirely recognize that God is the one who has given us the wisdom, discernment, and strength to accomplish what we have. At the same time, we have a role to play. God choose to accomplish His will through us due to our willingness to submit to Him.

- While God is absolutely sovereign, and nothing happens outside of His providence. Of course, no one can come to God or submit to God without His enablement...

John 6:44 – *No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him*

God will accomplish His plan no matter what. How much God incorporates you into how He accomplishes His plan depends at least somewhat on you.

How did Judah abuse their status among the nations?

Played the harlot because of your fame: God gave Israel a place of status and royalty among the nations, but they used that **fame** to seek after the idols of the pagan nations. They ran after pagan idols like a harlot runs after customers (**poured out your harlotry on everyone passing by**).

- It is a bad thing in any of us when God's blessings are made into idols. If we begin to worship our wealth, health, children, learning, or anything God has given us, this will provoke the Blessing-Giver.

How did Israel pervert God's blessings?

You took some of your garments and adorned multicolored high places: Israel took the very blessings God adorned her with and she used those blessings to adorn the places of pagan idolatry.

- The **gold** and **silver** God gave them was used in sexually charged idol worship (**male images and played the harlot with them**).
- The colorful hangings of the tents that were set up at the high places (see note on 6:3), which were seen by Ezekiel to be places for feasting, fornication, idolatry and child-sacrifice.

What were the "male images" they made?

These were idols associated with the ceremonies of Osiris, Bacchus, and Adonis. This was *phallic* worship in which the women were principally involved.

Ezek 16:20-26 – Jerusalem sacrifices their children

"Moreover you took your sons and your daughters, whom you bore to Me, and these you sacrificed to them to be devoured. Were your acts of harlotry a small matter, that you have slain My children and offered them up to them by causing them to pass through the fire? And in all your abominations and acts of harlotry you did not remember the days of your youth, when you were naked and bare, struggling in your blood.

"Then it was so, after all your wickedness—'Woe, woe to you!' says the Lord God — that you also built for yourself a shrine, and made a high place for yourself in every street. You built your high places at the head of every road, and made your beauty to be abhorred. You offered yourself to everyone who passed by, and multiplied your acts of harlotry. You also committed harlotry with the Egyptians, your very fleshly neighbors, and increased your acts of harlotry to provoke Me to anger.

How bad was the idolatry of Israel?

These you sacrificed to them to be devoured: Israel became so degenerate in her devotion to idols that she offered her

own sons and daughters to be sacrificed to pagan idols such as the detestable Molech.

How was it that the children were devoured by the idols?

Israel gave their children *as food* to the pagan images that she had made! The children became the diet of the idols.

What does it mean that the children were caused to pass through the fire?

The pagan god (or, *demon*, more accurately) Molech was worshipped by heating a metal statue representing the god until it was red hot, then placing a living infant on the outstretched hands of the statue, while beating drums drowned out the screams of the child until it burned to death.

- Their idolatry went so far that they actually participated in the Canaanite cult of child sacrifice.
- Sadly, even a man as great as Solomon at least sanctioned the worship of Molech and built a temple to this idol (1 Kings 11:7).
- One of the great crimes of the northern tribes of Israel was their worship of Molech, leading to the Assyrian captivity (2 Kings 17:17).
- King Manasseh of Judah gave his son to Molech (2 Kings 21:6). Up to the days of King Josiah of Judah, Molech worship continued, because he destroyed a place of worship to that idol (2 Kings 23:10).

What does it tell us that there is no archaeological evidence for child sacrifice by the Israelites of this period?

This means that either the practice was very rare or diligently covered up. This may be God's way of saying that even if the practice was rare, it was an abomination to Him.

What contributed to the pride of Israel?

You did not remember the days of your youth: Israel's haughty pride was rooted in their failure to **remember**. They no longer remembered their poor and humble beginning, and how all the protection, provision, and adornment they enjoyed was the blessing and gift of God.

What does it mean when God said, "woe, woe to you?"

This was God's sorrowful lament over wicked Israel. God's protest came from great depth of feeling.

- The repeated woe is not just a lament but also a threat

Do these woes remind us of anything?

The Tribulation judgment God pronounces on the evil inhabitants of the earth in order to spur them to repentance (Revelation 9:20). The three woes are, indeed, a time of

great anguish and affliction for those who have pledged their allegiance to the Antichrist during the end times.

The **first woe** is revealed after the fifth trumpet judgment. This woe involves something like locusts that have the ability to sting like a scorpion (Revelation 9:3).

- Generally, these are not accepted as literal locusts because of their description and because they come from the Abyss and have a demonic overlord (Revelation 9:3, 7-8, 11).
- These creatures are permitted to harm only those people who do not have the “seal of God on their forehead” (Revelation 9:4). Those bearing God’s seal are the 144,000 (Revelation 7:3-4) or, possibly, all believers during that time (Ephesians 4:30).
- These demonic locusts are allowed to torment unbelievers for five months (Revelation 9:5). Although victims will long for death (Revelation 9: 6), they will not be granted that release.

The **second woe** is revealed after the sixth trumpet judgment. This woe begins when a voice commands, “*Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates*” (Revelation 9:14). These four angels are demons who were cast from heaven with Satan.

- God is right now keeping them imprisoned until the appointed time (Revelation 9:15; cf. Jude 1:6; 2 Peter 2:4). These angels and their armies, numbering two hundred million, are released to kill a third of mankind (Revelation 9:15-16).
- After the second woe passes (Revelation 11:14), there comes a clear division in the book with the announcement from heaven, “*The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ*” (Revelation 11:15). In other words, this final stage of judgment will be the end, and righteousness will be restored to the earth.

The **third woe** is revealed after the seventh trumpet judgment. This woe signals the consummation of God’s plan for the entire world. This third woe marks the finishing of God’s judgment on sin; it occupies the book of Revelation through the 19th chapter, when Christ’s Kingdom is established on earth.

- Incorporated within this third and final woe are the seven “bowls” of God’s wrath, described in Revelation 16:1-21. This series of judgments is the greatest horror the citizens of earth have ever seen. Jesus said, “If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive” (Matthew 24:22).

What woes apply today?

In Matthew 23, Jesus pronounces seven “woes” on the religious leaders of His day. In pronouncing woes, Jesus was prophesying judgment on the religious elite who were guilty of hypocrisy and sundry other sins.

1. Jesus condemned the scribes and Pharisees for keeping people out of the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 23:13).
2. Jesus condemned the leaders for teaching their converts the same hypocrisy that they themselves practiced. They led their converts into a religion of works, but not into true righteousness, making them “*twice as much a child of hell*” (Matthew 13:15).
3. Jesus referred to the religious elite as “*blind guides*” and “*blind fools*” (Matthew 23:16–17). The hypocrites fancied themselves guides of the blind (see Romans 2:19), but they themselves were blind and therefore unfit to guide others.
4. Jesus called out the scribes and Pharisees for their hypocrisy in the practice of tithing. They made a big deal of small things like tithing spices, while they ignored crucial matters. (Matthew 23:23).
5. Jesus likened them to dishes that were scrupulously cleaned on the outside but left dirty inside. (Matthew 23:25).
6. Jesus compared them to “*whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean*” (Matthew 23:27). They appeared righteous on the outside, but they were just beautified tombs; inwardly, they were spiritually dead.
7. Jesus addressed hypocrisy of those who erected monuments and decorated the tombs of the prophets of old. Jesus points out that those prophets had been slain by the Pharisees’ own ancestors (Matthew 23:30).

How are the 7 woes of Matthew 23 a warning to us today?

We are called to true godliness, sincere love, and enduring faith. Pretension, affectation, and hypocrisy will only lead to woe.

How common did idol worship become in Israel?

You also built for yourself a shrine, and made a high place for yourself in every street: As they grew worse in wickedness, Israel began to multiply their idolatry. It became widespread and common over the entire land.

How is it that Israel offered themselves to everyone who passed by?

Literally, this is *you opened your feet*. It was an indelicate way of saying “you spread your legs for everyone.” Ezekiel used this shocking language to jolt his jaded listeners.

- Israel’s unfaithfulness to God was not only in every place, but seemingly also to every pagan god, even the gods of **the Egyptians**.

Why were the Egyptians described as “very fleshly neighbors”?

This is more shocking language. “The prophet describes this lover in obscenely physical terms: *your neighbors with the huge organs.*”

- There are several places in the Old Testament where the penis is euphemistically referred to as flesh: Ezekiel 23:20, 44:7, 9; Genesis 17:11, 14, 23-25; Exodus 28:42; and Leviticus 15:2-19.

Ezek 16:27-34 – Foreigners turn on Jerusalem

“Behold, therefore, I stretched out My hand against you, diminished your allotment, and gave you up to the will of those who hate you, the daughters of the Philistines, who were ashamed of your lewd behavior. You also played the harlot with the Assyrians, because you were insatiable; indeed you played the harlot with them and still were not satisfied. Moreover you multiplied your acts of harlotry as far as the land of the trader, Chaldea; and even then you were not satisfied.

“How degenerate is your heart!” says the Lord God, “seeing you do all these things, the deeds of a brazen harlot.

“You erected your shrine at the head of every road, and built your high place in every street. Yet you were not like a harlot, because you scorned payment. You are an adulterous wife, who takes strangers instead of her husband. Men make payment to all harlots, but you made your payments to all your lovers, and hired them to come to you from all around for your harlotry. You are the opposite of other women in your harlotry, because no one solicited you to be a harlot. In that you gave payment but no payment was given you, therefore you are the opposite.”

What did God do when He had enough of Israel’s unfaithfulness?

Therefore, I stretched out My hand against you: After a long time and great provocation, God began to act against Israel. He **diminished** their provision and gave them to their enemies the Philistines (**gave you up to the will of those who hate you**). Israel’s idolatry was so great it made the **Philistines** blush.

How did God diminish Israel’s allotment?

God’s reaction to Israel’s unfaithfulness was that He was provoked to anger (Eze 16:26), for which His appointed punishment was to diminish her *allotted portion* (Eze

16:27), which refers to loss of territory by enemy annexation.

What did God think of Israel’s foreign relations?

You also played the harlot with the Assyrians: Along with embracing foreign gods, they made alliances with those who would be their enemies. The temptation was not only to idolatry, but also to reliance upon and alliances with foreign nations.

- The historical books recount the pro-Assyrian policy of both Ahaz and Manasseh (see II Kings 16:7 ff.; Hosea 5:13; 8:9; Amos 5:26).

What was worse than Israel’s acts of unfaithfulness?

v30 – *How degenerate is your heart!* God saw that the problem with Israel went far deeper than their actions. Their **heart** had become proud and dissatisfied with their covenant God. This decline was truly **degenerate**.

The deeds of a brazen harlot: Israel’s decline began in the **heart**, but it did not end there. In their wickedness and idolatry they **did the deeds** of unashamed prostitutes.

How was Israel worse than a harlot?

Yet you were not like a harlot, because you scorned payment: Israel practiced their idolatry every place (**at the head of every road and a high place in every street**), yet in one way they were significantly worse than a literal **harlot** – they received *no benefit of any kind* from their idolatry, still they persisted in it.

- Ezek. 16:30–34 is sarcastic portraying Israel as a nymphomaniac whose promiscuous lust caused her to reverse the usual order of prostitution, paying rather than being paid.

You are an adulterous wife, who takes strangers: The sense is that the harlot does it for pay, but the **adulterous wife** for free, merely for the thrill of transgression and a combination of weakness and hardness of heart.

Men make payments to all harlots, but you made payments to all your lovers: Israel was like the adulterous wife who not only gives herself away for free, but buys lavish gifts for her illicit **lovers**.

How was it that no one caused Israel to be a harlot?

No one solicited you to be a harlot: In her metaphorical harlotry, Israel had no pimp. She was not forced or persuaded to do what she did; it came from her degenerate heart (Ezekiel 16:30). Even though it cost her (**you gave payment**), she still continued unfaithful to her God.

How is the unfaithfulness of Israel seen in the church today?

- Members of local churches commit the same sins we read about in the newspapers, but the news doesn't always get to the headlines.
- Professed Christians who are involved in lawsuits, divorces, immorality, family feuds, crooked business deals, financial scandals, and a host of other activities that belong to the world.
- Congregations are being torn apart because of bad doctrine and the toleration of wolves who scatter the sheep.
- Compromise with the world to attract a crowd, fit in better with unbelievers, make the gospel seem less exclusive, or to satisfy the itching ears of the congregation.

Ezek 16:35-43 – Judgment against the harlot

'Now then, O harlot, hear the word of the Lord! Thus says the Lord God: "Because your filthiness was poured out and your nakedness uncovered in your harlotry with your lovers, and with all your abominable idols, and because of the blood of your children which you gave to them, surely, therefore, I will gather all your lovers with whom you took pleasure, all those you loved, and all those you hated; I will gather them from all around against you and will uncover your nakedness to them, that they may see all your nakedness. And I will judge you as women who break wedlock or shed blood are judged; I will bring blood upon you in fury and jealousy. I will also give you into their hand, and they shall throw down your shrines and break down your high places. They shall also strip you of your clothes, take your beautiful jewelry, and leave you naked and bare.

"They shall also bring up an assembly against you, and they shall stone you with stones and thrust you through with their swords. They shall burn your houses with fire, and execute judgments on you in the sight of many women; and I will make you cease playing the harlot, and you shall no longer hire lovers. So I will lay to rest My fury toward you, and My jealousy shall depart from you. I will be quiet, and be angry no more. Because you did not remember the days of your youth, but agitated Me with all these things, surely I will also recompense your deeds on your own head," says the Lord God. "And you shall not commit lewdness in addition to all your abominations.

O harlot, hear the word of the Lord: God didn't address Israel by a noble name. Their degenerate heart deserved a shocking address.

To what do you think the filthiness Israel poured out refers?

Because your filthiness was poured out: This could be a reference to the issue of a venereal disease.

How is it that Israel's lovers will be both loved and hated?

I will gather all your lovers with whom you took pleasure, all those you loved, and all those you hated: The Lord spoke as the one who knows human nature. He knew that when people run after illicit lovers – either literally or spiritually – some they may love, but others they will hate.

- Appropriately, it is Israel's 'lovers' who will execute God's vengeance upon her. By that they add to the depth of her shame. They show how cheaply they had valued what she had to offer them and the real contempt in which they held her.

How would God humiliate Israel?

I will gather them from all around against you and will uncover your nakedness to them: God promised to humiliate Israel before her pagan neighbors. The beauty and adornment she had traded upon before the nations would be stripped away, and they would see what Israel was without God.

- Jerusalem had effectively bared her body to all passersby. If she wants to be a public spectacle, God assists. Naked he had found her; naked he would leave her. The hell that awaited her was of her own making.

Why would God bring shame to His people?

This wasn't shame for the sake of shame; this was for the sake of repentance and restoration.

What justified God's judgment of Israel?

I will judge you as women who break wedlock or shed blood are judged: God would bring the punishment of death upon Israel. He would not kill the nation completely, but reign death upon them in judgment. God promised to bring this judgment with passion: **I will bring blood upon you in fury and jealousy.**

- The first step in her retributive judgment at the hands of the Lord would be public exposure before both her lovers and her enemies. Public exposure of adulterous women and stoning of them were well-known customs in ancient Israel.

Who would be the agents of God's judgment?

I will also give you into their hand: The judgment to Israel would come through the very lovers she gave herself to. The neighboring nations, and their gods by proxy, would conquer and humiliate stubborn Israel... *they shall also*

strip you. Causing the nakedness of the Jewish adulteress to appear.

What would be the assembly God would raise up against Israel?

v40 – They shall also bring up an assembly against you: The armies of the nations surrounding Israel would come against her in a divinely appointed judgment. The judgment would be complete, with the **stones** of attack, the **swords** of war, and the **fire** of destruction.

How would God cure Israel's idolatry?

I will make you cease playing the harlot, and you shall no longer hire lovers: The judgment God would bring upon them would be something of a cure of Israel's gross idolatry. After this judgment and exile, they would never have the same problem with the idols of the nations.

What is the grace in God's judgment of Israel?

So I will lay to rest My fury against you: God's judgment against and anger towards Israel was not to last forever. When their hearts were turned away from their gross idolatry, God would change His disposition toward them.

What needed to change with Israel?

Because you did not remember the days of your youth: God repeats the idea from Ezekiel 16:22. Their self-destructive pride was based in their failure to remember that all the good they had was a blessing and gift from God.

How should we apply this need to remember God working in our lives?

God brought His discipline on Israel so that she might remember him once again. We too need to remember the blessing God has brought to us and not get puffed-up in our pride as if we were responsible for our own blessings.

What applications do we see in this passage for today?

- Beware of pride and guard against it.
- Beware of unfaithful compromise with the world and guard against it.