

Temple Abominations

(7) Ezekiel 8

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Ezekiel 8:1-4 – Ezekiel transported to Jerusalem

And it came to pass in the sixth year, in the sixth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I sat in my house with the elders of Judah sitting before me, that the hand of the Lord God fell upon me there. ² Then I looked, and there was a likeness, like the appearance of fire—from the appearance of His waist and downward, fire; and from His waist and upward, like the appearance of brightness, like the color of amber. ³ He stretched out the form of a hand, and took me by a lock of my hair; and the Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven, and brought me in visions of God to Jerusalem, to the door of the north gate of the inner court, where the seat of the image of jealousy was, which provokes to jealousy. ⁴ And behold, the glory of the God of Israel was there, like the vision that I saw in the plain.

v1 – When did Ezekiel have this vision?

In the sixth year, in the sixth month: Ezekiel began a series of visions beginning in *the fifth year of King Jehoiachin's captivity*. This is a new time marker describing visions that happened about a year and a half later. This series of visions is in Ezekiel 8-11.

- Ezekiel 8-11 is the record of one long vision. In the beginning of the vision Ezekiel sees the glory of the Lord at the temple in Jerusalem. By the end of the vision (chapters 10 and 11), this glory will depart.

Where was Ezekiel when he received his vision?

I sat in my house with the elders of Judah sitting before me: This reminds us that Ezekiel had his own **house**, and that he was respected enough as God's prophet to receive the **elders of Judah** for an audience in his home.

How did Ezekiel know that he was about to receive a vision?

The hand of the Lord God fell upon me there: As before at Ezekiel 1:3, 3:14, and 3:22, Ezekiel felt the presence and strength of Yahweh upon him.

v2 – What did Ezekiel see in his vision?

There was a likeness, like the appearance of fire: Ezekiel saw something similar to the **likeness** He saw in the vision

of God and His glory in the first chapter (Ezekiel 1:27). That was a representation of God in some human **likeness**, and we would see the same here.

v3 – What did God do in this vision?

He stretched out the form of a hand: In his vision, something like a hand grabbed Ezekiel by the hair, and the **Spirit** carried him **between heaven and earth**, bringing him to Jerusalem in a vision.

- That he did not actually leave Babylon is clear from Eze 11:24. He was carried back in spirit to Babylon after the visions were completed (Eze 11:22-25).

In this vision Ezekiel saw four abominations at the temple. They were probably not literal in the sense that they were happening all at the same time at the temple and Ezekiel saw this in real time.

- The outrageous idol, associated with the king (Ezekiel 8:5-6)
- The images and censers, associated with the city leaders (Ezekiel 8:7-13)
- The weeping over Tammuz, associated with the women (Ezekiel 8:14-15)
- The worship of the sun, associated with the priests (Ezekiel 8:16-18)

What did Ezekiel see at the temple?

Where the seat of the image of jealousy was: In his vision, Ezekiel apparently saw an idolatrous image – **the image of jealousy** – standing in the **inner court**. This was likely right outside the temple building itself.

- It was called *the image of jealousy* because it *provokes to jealousy*, i.e. it was an insult both to God and to his temple and to his people.
- Hezekiah removed idolatry from Judah (2 Kings 18:1-5), but his son Manasseh restored it and made it worse than ever, even putting an idol into the temple (2 Kings 21:1-7).
- Manasseh's son Amon continued the state-sponsored idolatry of his father. King Josiah cleansed Judah of idolatry and burned the idol Manasseh had put in the

temple (2 Kings 23:4-20). Now we see that the idol in the temple was back.

- The word 'image' is *semel*, which occurs elsewhere only in Deut. 4:16 (where it is translated 'figure') and in 2 Chron. 33:7,15, of a special 'idol' set up by King Manasseh in the Temple. Although this idol was later removed, Ezekiel's use of the word may mean that a replica, if not the original, was put back. The word also occurs in Phoenician writings.

How is the jealousy of God different from the sin of jealousy?

Galatians 5:19-21 – *Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.*

When we use the word "jealous," we use it in the sense of being envious of someone who has something we do not have.

- A person might be jealous or envious of another person because they have a nice car or home (possessions).
- Or a person might be jealous or envious of another person because of some ability or skill that other person has (such as athletic ability).
- Another example would be that one person might be jealous or envious of another because of his or her beauty.

Was God jealous of the idols the Israelites worshiped?

It is not that God is jealous or envious because someone has something He wants or needs. God is jealous when someone gives to another something that rightly belongs to Him.

- God is possessive of the worship and service that belong to Him. It is a sin to worship or serve anything other than God.
- It is a sin when we desire, or we are envious, or we are jealous of someone because he has something that we do not have.

It is a different use of the word "jealous" when God says He is jealous. What He is jealous of belongs to Him; worship and service belong to Him alone, and are to be given to Him alone.

Can you think of any examples where a person can have a godly righteous form of jealousy that is not sin?
If a husband sees another man flirting with his wife, he is

right to be jealous, for only he has the right to flirt with his wife.

- Being jealous for something that God declares to belong to you is good and appropriate.
- Jealousy is a sin when it is a desire for something that does not belong to you.

Worship, praise, honor, and adoration belong to God alone, for only He is truly worthy of it.

- Therefore, God is rightly jealous when worship, praise, honor, or adoration is given to idols.
- This is precisely the jealousy the apostle Paul described in 2 Corinthians 11:2, "*I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy...*"

What did God think of the temple?

It was the symbol of God's presence among His people... *Behold, the glory of the God of Israel was there: In his vision, Ezekiel saw the same glory of God that he saw in the plain.* The glory of God was present at the temple of God in Jerusalem. There is a strong contrast between this **glory** and the debased idols and idolatry Ezekiel will see in the rest of this vision.

Ezek 8:5-8 – Great and greater abominations

⁵ *Then He said to me, "Son of man, lift your eyes now toward the north." So I lifted my eyes toward the north, and there, north of the altar gate, was this image of jealousy in the entrance.*

⁶ *Furthermore He said to me, "Son of man, do you see what they are doing, the great abominations that the house of Israel commits here, to make Me go far away from My sanctuary? Now turn again, you will see greater abominations." ⁷ So He brought me to the door of the court; and when I looked, there was a hole in the wall. ⁸ Then He said to me, "Son of man, dig into the wall"; and when I dug into the wall, there was a door.*

v5 – What did Ezekiel see to the north?

North of the altar gate, was this image of jealousy in the entrance: There again, Ezekiel saw this idol in the temple court. It was called **the image of jealousy** because it provoked God to holy jealousy.

v6 – What did God want Ezekiel to see?

The great abominations that the house of Israel commits here: Ezekiel saw the *image of jealousy*, and God told him that it represented **the great abominations** of Israel.

What is an abomination?

An abomination is something that God loathes or hates because it is offensive to Him and His character.

Why was idolatry such an abomination to God?

God hates the falsehood, impurity, and wickedness of pagan gods.

What other abominations are called out in Scripture?

Occult practices are also called an abomination in Scripture, as is child sacrifice (Deuteronomy 18:9–12; 20:18; 2 Chronicles 28:3). Other abominations in God’s sight are ungodly sexual relationships like homosexuality and adultery (Leviticus 18:22–29; 20:13; Deuteronomy 24:4), cross-dressing (Deuteronomy 22:5), imperfect sacrifices (Deuteronomy 17:1), dishonest business dealings (Deuteronomy 25:13–16; Proverbs 11:1; 20:10, 23), wickedness (Proverbs 15:9, 26), injustice (Proverbs 17:15), turning a deaf ear to God’s instruction (Proverbs 28:9), and hypocritical offerings from the unrepentant (Proverbs 15:8; Isaiah 1:13). Most of the references to that which is abominable or detestable come in God’s Law in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, in prophecies declaring God’s judgment against Israel, and in Proverbs...

Proverbs 6:16–19 – *There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers* (ESV)

What kind of abominations are common today?

Luke 16:15 – *What is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God* (ESV).

The context of Jesus’ statement is a rebuke of the Pharisees’ love of money. The Pharisees responded with ridicule, showing the blindness of a heart that revels in what God calls an abomination.

Titus 1:16 says that false teachers may “*claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him. They are detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good.*”

What kind of abomination will there be in the future?

- Jesus and Daniel both predicted the *abomination of desolation* that would corrupt the holy place of the temple (Matthew 24:15; Daniel 9:27).
- Also related to the end times, the whore of Babylon is pictured as holding “*a golden cup in her hand, filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries*” (Revelation 17:4). She is said to be the mother of all the abominations on earth (Revelation 17:5) and identified as “*the great city that rules over the kings of the earth*” (verse 18). This city with all of its loathsome acts will be destroyed (verses 16–17).

What is the good news in the fact that our abominations are offensive to God?

From idolatry to unfair scales to ungodly sexual relationships to wickedness of various kinds, abominations separate people from God. Really, all sin (missing the mark of God’s perfection) can be considered an abomination.

- All sin separates us from God and is detestable to Him (Romans 3:23; 6:23; Proverbs 15:9).
- God’s hatred of sin makes Christ’s sacrifice on the cross all the more remarkable. It was at the cross that “*God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Jesus took our abominations upon Himself and gave us the gift of His righteousness in return. All who put their trust in Him will be saved.

How did God feel about the abominations?

To make Me go far away from My sanctuary: The idolatry was so persistent and offensive to God that it made Him determined to **go far away**. It was His **sanctuary**, belonging to God Himself, but He would leave it because of their **great abominations**.

v7-8 – What did God show Ezekiel next?

Now turn again, you will see greater abominations: What Ezekiel saw was bad enough; God now promised to show him worse things, **greater abominations**.

Son of man, dig into the wall: To see those **greater abominations**, Ezekiel had to dig through a wall to see in his vision what was inside the temple itself.

- If only an easy or surface observation is allowed, the true state of things may not be seen.

I dug into the wall, there was a door: Ezekiel needed to go through the door to see the abominations beyond.

Eze 8:9-12 – Wicked things and blind men.

9 And He said to me, “Go in, and see the wicked abominations which they are doing there.”¹⁰ So I went in and saw, and there—every sort of creeping thing, abominable beasts, and all the idols of the house of Israel, portrayed all around on the walls.¹¹ And there stood before them seventy men of the elders of the house of Israel, and in their midst stood Jaazaniah the son of Shaphan. Each man had a censer in his hand, and a thick cloud of incense went up.¹² Then He said to me, “Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel do in the dark, every man in the room of his idols? For they say, ‘The Lord does not see us, the Lord has forsaken the land.’ ”

V9-10 – What was behind the door?

Every sort of creeping thing, the abominable beasts, and all the idols: In his vision, Ezekiel saw the inside of the temple with all sorts of unclean and idolatrous things portrayed all around on the walls. The interior of the temple was supposed have cherubim surrounding God's throne portrayed on the walls, and instead had filthy idols.

v11 – What was before the idols?

There stood before them seventy elders of the house of Israel: In front of these foul and idolatrous images were the leaders of Israel, each with a **censer** putting forth a **thick cloud of incense**. They offered priestly service and incense associated with prayers, in the midst of the idolatry and impurity.

What was the significance of there being 70 elders?

This was the number of the Sanhedrin, the rulers of Israel.

Who was Jaazaniah the son of Shaphan?

Shaphan is probably to be identified with Josiah's secretary of state (2 Kgs 22:3), and Ahikam, another of Shaphan's sons, was an influential supporter of Jeremiah (Jer. 26:24). Clearly Jaazaniah was the black sheep of a worthy family.

v12 – What were the elders of Israel doing in the dark?

Have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel do in the dark, every man in the room of his idols? God showed Ezekiel that the vision was about what the leaders of Israel did **in the dark**, and **in the room of his idols**. It wasn't about what the leaders did in the temple, but the hidden place of their heart was filled with dark deeds and idolatry—yet they carried on their service as if all was right.

What were the secret idolaters thinking?

The Lord does not see us, the Lord has forsaken the land: They excused their sin because they did not think Yahweh saw them, either in their minds or their actions. They also excused their sin because they believed God had **forsaken** Israel, when in fact they had forsaken God.

What sort of secret idolaters do we have today?

Those who go through the motions of worshiping God by going to church on Sunday but during the week you can't see any difference between them and a garden variety secular humanist.

Eze 8:13-16 – Worshiping the Sun

¹³ *And He said to me, "Turn again, and you will see greater abominations that they are doing."* ¹⁴ *So He brought me to the door of the north gate of the Lord's house; and to my dismay, women were sitting there weeping for Tammuz.*

¹⁵ *Then He said to me, "Have you seen this, O son of man? Turn again, you will see greater abominations than these."* ¹⁶ *So He brought me into the inner court of the Lord's house; and there, at the door of the temple of the Lord, between the porch and the altar, were about twenty-five men with their backs toward the temple of the Lord and their faces toward the east, and they were worshipping the sun toward the east.*

v13-14 – What greater abomination did Ezekiel see?

To my dismay, women were sitting there weeping for Tammuz: This is the only mention of **Tammuz** in Ezekiel and the Old Testament. This was another example of pagan worship, and **Tammuz** was a deity worshipped by many in neighboring nations, often with immoral or impure rites. Ezekiel was dismayed because women were **there**, in the holy place reserved only for priests, and because of their immoral idolatry.

- The worship of Tammuz, beloved of Ishtar, came from Babylon through the Phoenicians (Canaanites) and then the Greeks.
- The worship of this god in ancient times were connected the basest immoralities. With the greatest of abandon women gave themselves up to most shameful practices.

v15-16 – What even greater abominations did Ezekiel see?

About twenty-five men with their backs toward the temple...and they were worshipping the sun toward the east: These men stood where the priests would normally stand to bless the people. Yet, with the temple behind them and the altar before them (**their faces toward the east**), **they were worshipping the sun toward the east**. They didn't worship Yahweh, *even at His own temple* – they worshipped the sun, as the other pagan nations did.

What is the significance of there being 25 men?

The *number* and the *location* of these men make it likely they were priests... because there was a representative of each of the twenty-four courses of the priests plus the high priest (cf. 1 Chron 23).

Eze 8:17-18 – A promise of judgment

¹⁷ And He said to me, “Have you seen this, O son of man? Is it a trivial thing to the house of Judah to commit the abominations which they commit here? For they have filled the land with violence; then they have returned to provoke Me to anger. Indeed they put the branch to their nose. ¹⁸ Therefore I also will act in fury. My eye will not spare nor will I have pity; and though they cry in My ears with a loud voice, I will not hear them.”

Were these abominations trivial?

In his vision of the temple, Ezekiel saw a terrible variety of idolatries and **abominations**. While the leaders and people of Jerusalem regarded it all as a **trivial thing**, God did not.

What sins do people trivialize today?

Gossip, gluttony, self-righteousness, arrogance, taking the Lord’s name in vain, anger...

Is all sin equal?

Yes...

James 2:10 – *For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all.*

There are varying degrees of sin...

John 19:11 – *Jesus answered, “You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above. Therefore the one who delivered Me to you has the greater sin.”*

As there are degrees of punishment...

Luke 12:47 – *And that servant who knew his master’s will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes.*

Heb. 10:29 – *How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?*

How had the Israelites filled the land with violence?

For they have filled the land with violence: These were not only religious or spiritual sins. Their rejection of Yahweh and His true worship led to a breakdown in the social order... social chaos and injustice.

What does it mean that “they put the branch to their nose?”

This unusual statement, used only here, was an obscure expression of contempt for God.

- The branch held to the nose may have been in imitation of the Egyptian *ankh*, a symbol of life, which is shown in carvings as held to the nose, or it may have been connected with plants sacred to Tammuz or some other god.

- All that the Lord is saying is that in place of the pleasing odor of honest sacrificial worship (Lev. 1:9, etc.), what God is receiving from the Israelites comes as a stench in God’s nostrils.

How does God respond to these abominations?

My eye will not spare nor will I have pity: Because of the great idolatries and sins of Jerusalem, and that the people regarded it all as a **trivial thing**, God’s judgment was assured, and could not be turned back.

Why would God not hear their prayers?

John 9:31 – *We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will.*

It has been said that, “the only prayer that God hears from a sinner is the prayer for salvation.” As a result, some believe that God does not hear and/or will never answer the prayers of an unbeliever. In context, though, John 9:31 is saying that God does not perform miracles through an unbeliever.

1 John 5:14 – *Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.*

If an unbeliever asks a prayer of God that is according to His will, nothing prevents God from answering such a prayer—according to His will and especially if answering such a prayer would lead to their salvation.

Can you think of any examples from the Bible where God heard and answered the prayers of unbelievers?

- The people of Nineveh prayed that Nineveh might be spared (Jonah 3:5-10). God answered this prayer and did not destroy the city of Nineveh as He had threatened.
- Hagar asked God to protect her son Ishmael (Genesis 21:14-19). God not only protected Ishmael, God blessed him exceedingly.
- In 1 Kings 21:17-29, especially verses 27-29, Ahab fasts and mourns over Elijah’s prophecy concerning his posterity. God responds by not bringing about the calamity in Ahab’s time.
- The Gentile woman from the Tyre and Sidon area prayed that Jesus would deliver her daughter from a demon (Mark 7:24-30). Jesus cast the demon out of the woman’s daughter.
- Cornelius, the Roman centurion in Acts 10, had the apostle Peter sent to him in response to Cornelius being a righteous man. Acts 10:2 tells us that Cornelius “prayed to God regularly.”