

The Book of Ezekiel

Lesson 4: Abominations in the Temple; the Glory Departs -- Ezekiel 8:1-11:25

Sit with Ezekiel in his house in Babylon. It is the sixth year of the exile, and the elders of Judah are gathered before him, perhaps hoping for a comforting word from God. Instead, the hand of the Lord God falls upon the prophet, and suddenly he is no longer in that little house by the river Chebar. In a vision, the Spirit lifts him up between earth and heaven and carries him hundreds of miles back to Jerusalem, to the very temple of the LORD. God has something He wants His prophet to see, and through him, something He wants His exiled people to understand. Why is judgment coming on the holy city? Why would the LORD allow His own dwelling place to be destroyed? The answer is not pretty, and God is about to walk Ezekiel through it room by room, like a guide leading a witness through a crime scene. Son of man, He keeps saying, do you see what they are doing? You will see greater abominations than these.

And what abominations they are. At the gate stands an image that provokes God to jealousy, an idol set up in the very courts of the One who said, you shall have no other gods before Me. Then God brings Ezekiel through a hole in the wall into a hidden chamber, and there, in the dark, seventy of the elders of Israel, the respected leaders of the people, stand each with his censor, worshiping carved images of crawling things and beasts on the walls. They say to themselves, the LORD does not see us; the LORD has forsaken the land. They think God is blind. At another gate sit women weeping for Tammuz, a pagan fertility god, mourning a dead idol in the house of the living God. And then, the worst of all, at the very door of the temple, between the porch and the altar, about twenty-five men stand with their backs to the temple of the LORD and their faces toward the east, bowing down to worship the sun. They have turned their backs on God in His own house. Layer by layer, God peels back the respectable surface of Jerusalem's religion to show the rot underneath.

Then the vision turns from the sin to its consequence, and it is here that your heart should both tremble and break. God calls for those who carry out the judgment of the city, and before the slaughter begins, He sends a man clothed in linen with a writer's inkhorn to go through the city and set a mark upon the foreheads of all who sigh and cry over the abominations done in it. Do you see the mercy threaded through the judgment? God knows the few who still grieve over sin, and He marks them for protection. Then comes the most sorrowful movement in the whole vision. The glory of the LORD, the visible presence of God that had filled that temple since the days of Solomon, begins to move. It rises from above the cherubim to the threshold of the house. Then it goes to the east gate. Then it lifts up from the midst of the city and stands upon the mountain on the east side. Step by reluctant step, like a grieving father leaving a home he can no longer stay in, the glory of God departs.

But do not close this vision in despair, because tucked inside this dark chapter is one of the most luminous promises in all the prophets. To the exiles, the very ones who felt cast off and far from the temple, God says something astonishing: although I have scattered them among the countries, yet I will be to them as a little sanctuary in the countries where they shall come. God Himself, not a building, would be their holy place. And then this: I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within you; and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them a heart of flesh. Hold onto that promise, friend, because it is reaching past the exile, past the return, all the way to a new covenant that God would one day make and that Christ would one day seal. The glory was leaving the old temple. But God was already speaking of a day when He would write His law not on stone but on hearts of flesh, and dwell among His people in a way no temple of stone could ever contain. Let us walk through this vision together, soberly and hopefully, and learn both why God's presence departs and how, in Christ, it returns to stay.

Group Discussion: As you trace the four abominations Ezekiel is shown in the temple, and then watch the glory of the LORD depart step by step, what do these two movements together teach us about why God's presence cannot remain where He is dishonored, and what He requires of a people who would have Him dwell among them?

Personal Reflection: The man clothed in linen marked those who sigh and cry over the abominations done in the city. Is your heart still tender enough to grieve over sin, your own and that around you, or have you grown comfortable and numb, and what would it take for you to be among those who mourn what God mourns?

Read Ezekiel 8:1–11:25

Study Questions

1. In Ezekiel 8 the Spirit carries Ezekiel in a vision to Jerusalem, and God shows him abomination after abomination in the temple, each time saying, you shall see greater abominations (8:6, 8:13, 8:15). What does it teach us about God that He sees and exposes the hidden sins committed in His own house, and why does He insist that Ezekiel look at each one in turn?
2. The seventy elders worshiped idols in the dark, saying, the LORD does not see us; the LORD has forsaken the land (8:12). Where in your own life have you been tempted to sin in secret, quietly assuming that God does not see or no longer cares what you do behind closed doors?

3. The abominations escalate from an image of jealousy, to elders with censers before creatures on the wall, to women weeping for Tammuz, to men bowing eastward to the sun with their backs to the temple (8:3–16). What does this progression, ending with men turning their backs on God to worship the sun in His own house, reveal about the nature and downward pull of idolatry, and how is all worship that turns from the true God toward His creation a turning of the back on Him (compare Romans 1:25)?
4. These men worshiped the sun, a created thing, with their backs turned to the Creator's house (8:16). In what subtle ways might you be giving your highest devotion to created things, comfort, success, family, or pleasure, while turning your back on the God who made them?
5. Before the judgment fell, God sent a man clothed in linen to set a mark on the foreheads of all who sigh and cry over the abominations of the city, and these were spared (9:3–6). What does this teach us about God's care to distinguish the faithful from the wicked in judgment, and how does it foreshadow the way God seals and preserves His own people (compare Revelation 7:3; 9:4; Ephesians 1:13–14)?
6. The mark was given to those who grieved over sin while everyone else carried on untroubled. Honestly, has your heart grown numb to sins that should grieve you, and what would it look like for you to recover a tender conscience that mourns what God mourns?
7. To the exiles, who felt cut off from the temple, God promised, I will be to them as a little sanctuary in the countries where they shall come (11:16). What does this teach us about where God's true dwelling is found, and how does it correct the idea that God's presence is bound to a particular building or place (compare John 4:21–24; Acts 7:48–50; 1 Corinthians 3:16)?

8. God promised His scattered people that He Himself would be their sanctuary, even far from Jerusalem. When you have felt distant from the church, from worship, or from familiar spiritual supports, have you learned to find your refuge in God Himself rather than only in a place or a routine?

9. God promised, I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within you; and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in My statutes (11:19–20). The New Testament reveals that this promise of a new heart and a new spirit is fulfilled in the new covenant sealed by Christ, in those who are born of water and the Spirit and walk in newness of life (Jeremiah 31:31–34; Hebrews 8:8–12; Ezekiel 36:25–27; John 3:5; Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4; 2 Corinthians 5:17). What do these passages teach about how God actually gives a person a new heart, and how is this transformation received not by mere human resolve but by the gracious work of God in those who come to Him in trusting, obedient faith?

10. The glory of the LORD departed from the temple because of Israel's persistent sin, yet God promised to be a sanctuary to His people and to give them a new heart. Looking back over this whole vision, name one specific abomination or hardness God has exposed in your own heart, and one concrete way you will yield to Him this week so that His presence, given to us in Christ, may truly dwell in you.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Ezekiel 36:25–27, the fuller promise of cleansing with clean water and the gift of a new heart and a new spirit, with God's Spirit placed within; Jeremiah 31:31–34, the new covenant in which God writes His law on the heart, fulfilled in Christ; Hebrews 8:8–12, the inspired declaration that this new covenant has now come in Christ and made the first one old; John 4:21–24, Jesus' teaching that true worshipers worship the Father in spirit and in truth, not bound to a particular mountain or temple; 1 Corinthians 3:16–17, the church now the temple of God in which His Spirit dwells, the fulfillment of God being a sanctuary to His people

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