

The Book of Ezekiel

Lesson 8: A Lament for Israel's Princes; Rebellion Rehearsed -- Ezekiel

19:1-20:49

God commands Ezekiel to take up a lamentation, a qinah, the slow and broken funeral dirge sung over the dead, for the princes of Israel. The very form is grief. He paints Israel as a lioness who lay down among the lions and raised her cubs. One cub she nurtured until he became a young lion, and he learned to tear the prey and devoured men, but the nations heard of him, took him in their pit, and led him away with hooks to the land of Egypt. She raised up another of her cubs, and he too became a young lion who ravaged the land, but he also was trapped, put in a cage, and brought to the king of Babylon. The cubs are the last kings of Judah, dragged off into exile one after another, and the lament mourns the ruin of the royal house that should have shepherded God's people.

Then the song shifts its picture. Israel is a vine planted by the waters, fruitful and full of branches, with strong stems fit for the scepters of rulers, towering above the thick boughs. But she was plucked up in fury, cast to the ground, withered by the east wind, and her strong stem was consumed by fire so that no strong rod was left in her to be a ruler's scepter. The vine that should have flourished is now planted in a dry and thirsty wilderness, and the dirge ends with the mournful refrain, This is a lamentation, and has become a lamentation. The glory of the house of David has gone down into the dust, and Ezekiel sings its funeral.

Chapter 20 then answers a delegation. Certain elders of Israel came to sit before Ezekiel to inquire of the LORD, and God refused to be inquired of by them. Instead He turned to rehearse the whole sorry history of His people's rebellion. He recalled how He chose Israel in Egypt, swore to bring them to a land flowing with milk and honey, and told them to cast away their idols, but they rebelled even there. He brought them into the wilderness and gave them His statutes and His sabbaths as a sign between Him and them, yet they rebelled in the wilderness too. Generation after generation profaned His sabbaths and went after idols, and again and again God says He acted for the sake of His name, that it should not be profaned among the nations.

The rehearsal of rebellion is not told to crush hope but to magnify grace and to call for repentance. God recounts how, despite their persistent rebellion, He did not make a full end of them, restraining His anger for His name's sake. And He looks ahead with a promise: I will bring you out from the peoples, I will be inquired of by you, I will gather you, I will purge out the rebels, and I will accept you as a pleasing aroma when I bring you into the bond of the covenant. As we study, we should hear in this the gospel pattern, that God gathers a purified people to Himself, and we should see its fulfillment not in a future political Israel but in Christ, who gathers and cleanses His church and brings the obedient into the covenant of grace.

Group Discussion: In Ezekiel 20 God recounts how, again and again, He acted for the sake of His name rather than dealing with His people as their rebellion deserved. How should the truth that God's saving work is ultimately for the glory of His own name shape the way the church understands salvation and worships Him, and how does it guard us against making ourselves the center of redemption?

Personal Reflection: Ezekiel 19 is a funeral dirge over a royal house that ruined itself through violence and pride. As you consider the wasted promise of Israel's princes, where in your own life has God-given potential been squandered through sin or self-will, and how is God calling you to return to Him?

Read Ezekiel 19:1–20:49

Study Questions

1. In Ezekiel 19:1–9 God laments Israel as a lioness whose cubs became young lions that devoured and were dragged off to Egypt and Babylon. Whom do these cubs represent, and what does it say about the last kings of Judah that their story is told as a funeral dirge rather than a tale of triumph?
2. The cubs were full of strength and yet ended caged and exiled (Ezekiel 19:7–9). Where have you seen strength or giftedness lead to ruin when it was not surrendered to God, and how does that warn you in your own life?
3. In Ezekiel 19:10–14 Israel is a fruitful vine plucked up, withered, and replanted in a dry wilderness, with no strong stem left for a ruler's scepter. What does this picture teach about the fall of the house of David, and how does even this lament leave room for the hope that God would raise up a different kind of King?
4. The lament ends, This is a lamentation, and has become a lamentation (Ezekiel 19:14). Why is it fitting to grieve over sin and its consequences, and what place should honest mourning over sin have in your own walk with God?

5. In Ezekiel 20:1–9 elders come to inquire of the LORD, but God refuses and instead recalls how Israel rebelled even in Egypt by refusing to cast away their idols. What does God's refusal to be inquired of teach about the seriousness of approaching Him while clinging to sin?
6. Israel clung to the idols of Egypt even as God prepared to redeem them (Ezekiel 20:7–8). What idols from your past or your surroundings are you tempted to hold onto even as you profess to follow God, and what would it mean to cast them away?
7. In Ezekiel 20:10–26 God recounts giving Israel His statutes and His sabbaths in the wilderness as a sign between Him and them, yet they rebelled and profaned His sabbaths. What did the sabbath signify about Israel's relationship to God, and how does the principle of setting apart holy time find its place for God's people now?
8. Throughout chapter 20 God says He acted for the sake of His name, that it should not be profaned among the nations (Ezekiel 20:9, 14, 22). When you consider that your salvation is ultimately for the glory of God's name and not merely for your own benefit, how does that reorder your priorities and your worship?
9. In Ezekiel 20:33–44 God promises to bring His people out from the peoples, purge out the rebels, gather the rest, and bring them into the bond of the covenant as a pleasing aroma. Drawing the chapter together, how is this promise of a gathered and purified people fulfilled in Christ and His church rather than in a future political Israel, and what does it teach about how God forms and cleanses His people?

10. Looking back across this lament and this rehearsal of rebellion, name one specific way the God who grieves over ruined potential and gathers a purified people for His name's sake is calling you to turn from rebellion and be wholly His this week.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Genesis 49:9–10, Judah as a lion's whelp and the scepter that shall not depart until Shiloh comes, the royal hope behind the lioness and her cubs in Ezekiel 19.; Jeremiah 22:24–30, the prophecies against Judah's last kings, Jehoahaz, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah, whose fall Ezekiel 19 sings as a dirge.; Ezekiel 36:22–28, God acting for the sake of His holy name to cleanse His people and give them a new heart, the same name-centered grace as chapter 20.; 1 Peter 2:9–10, the church as a chosen race and holy nation gathered out of the peoples, fulfilling the promise to gather and purify a people for God's name.; Hebrews 4:9–11, the sabbath rest that remains for the people of God, fulfilled in the rest we enter through Christ, illuminating the sign of the sabbaths.

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