

BIBLE EXPOSITOR AND ILLUMINATOR

The
FLOWERS
appear on the earth
the time of the *singing*
of **birds** is come
and the voice
of the **turtle**
is *heard*
in our **land**.

Song of Solomon 2:12

Spring Quarter

March | April | May

2026

Bible Expositor and Illuminator

SPRING QUARTER

March, April, May 2026

God's Wrath Satisfied in Christ

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SCRIPTURE LESSON TEXT

EZEK. 22:17 And the word of the LORD came unto me, saying,

18 Son of man, the house of Israel is to me become dross: all they are brass, and tin, and iron, and lead, in the midst of the furnace; they are even the dross of silver.

19 Therefore thus saith the Lord God; Because ye are all become dross, behold, therefore I will gather you into the midst of Jerusalem.

20 As they gather silver, and brass, and iron, and lead, and tin, into the midst of the furnace, to blow the fire upon it, to melt it; so will I gather you in mine anger and in my fury, and I will leave you there, and melt you.

21 Yea, I will gather you, and blow upon you in the fire of my wrath, and ye shall be melted in the midst thereof.

22 As silver is melted in the midst of the furnace, so shall ye be melted in the midst thereof; and ye shall know that I the LORD have poured out my fury upon you.

23 And the word of the LORD came unto me, saying,

24 Son of man, say unto her, Thou art the land that is not cleansed, nor rained upon in the day of indignation.

25 *There is* a conspiracy of her prophets in the midst thereof, like a roaring lion ravening the prey; they have devoured souls; they have taken the treasure and precious things;

they have made her many widows in the midst thereof.

26 Her priests have violated my law, and have profaned mine holy things: they have put no difference between the holy and profane, neither have they shewed difference between the unclean and the clean, and have hid their eyes from my sabbaths, and I am profaned among them.

27 Her princes in the midst thereof are like wolves ravening the prey, to shed blood, and to destroy souls, to get dishonest gain.

28 And her prophets have daubed them with untempered mortar, seeing vanity, and divining lies unto them, saying, Thus saith the Lord God, when the LORD hath not spoken.

29 The people of the land have used oppression, and exercised robbery, and have vexed the poor and needy: yea, they have oppressed the stranger wrongfully.

30 And I sought for a man among them, that should make up the hedge, and stand in the gap before me for the land, that I should not destroy it: but I found none.

31 Therefore have I poured out mine indignation upon them; I have consumed them with the fire of my wrath: their own way have I recompensed upon their heads, saith the Lord God.

NOTES

The Dross of Unrighteousness

Lesson Text: Ezekiel 22:17-31

Related Scriptures: Isaiah 1:21-26; 59:14-20; Malachi 3:1-5;
Matthew 25:31-46; Zephaniah 3:1-8

TIME: between 593 and 571 B.C.

PLACE: Babylon

GOLDEN TEXT—"As silver is melted in the midst of the furnace, so shall ye be melted in the midst thereof; and ye shall know that I the Lord have poured out my fury upon you" (Ezekiel 22:22).

Introduction

Many of God's people Israel were in exile in Babylon while their compatriots in Judah continued to practice idolatry and injustice. God saw everything they did, and His anger grew. Through Ezekiel, God announced that He would unleash His fiery wrath upon His people.

Why was God so angry with the Jews? God made a covenant with His people through Moses after He delivered them from Egypt. He promised great blessings for obedience and dire consequences if the covenant was not obeyed. And the Jews excelled at violating God's covenant.

In Ezekiel 22, the prophet delivered three judgment messages against Jerusalem's pervasive wickedness. Each

message was harsh and graphic, leaving no doubt that God's unleashed wrath was justified. In this lesson, we will investigate the last two of the three messages.

The judgment was fulfilled just a few years later. In 586 B.C., the Babylonians invaded Jerusalem, the city and the temple were destroyed, and Judah's population was deported. The covenantal curses befell God's people.

LESSON OUTLINE

1. **JERUSALEM: THE CRUCIBLE OF GOD'S JUDGMENT**—
Ezek. 22:17-22
2. **JERUSALEM: THE CITY OF THE GUILTY**—Ezek. 22:23-31

Exposition: Verse by Verse

JERUSALEM: THE CRUCIBLE OF GOD'S JUDGMENT

EZEK. 22:17 And the word of the LORD came unto me, saying,

18 Son of man, the house of Israel is to me become dross: all they are brass, and tin, and iron, and lead, in the midst of the furnace; they are even the dross of silver.

19 Therefore thus saith the Lord God; Because ye are all become dross, behold, therefore I will gather you into the midst of Jerusalem.

20 As they gather silver, and brass, and iron, and lead, and tin, into the midst of the furnace, to blow the fire upon it, to melt it; so will I gather you in mine anger and in my fury, and I will leave you there, and melt you.

21 Yea, I will gather you, and blow upon you in the fire of my wrath, and ye shall be melted in the midst thereof.

22 As silver is melted in the midst of the furnace, so shall ye be melted in the midst thereof; and ye shall know that I the LORD have poured out my fury upon you.

God's evaluation of His people (Ezek. 22:17-19). Over fifty times in Ezekiel's book, the prophet began his message with the same statement that appears in 22:17: "The word of the Lord came to me," duly emphasizing its divine origin. {Ezekiel had been rendered mute (cf. 3:26-27), which further emphasized that Ezekiel's message was what God wanted to proclaim to His people.}⁹¹ This was especially important since there were false prophets who said that Jerusalem would have peace (cf. 13:15-17). Ezekiel's words were not of peace but of the certainty of God's judgment.

God addressed Ezekiel as "son of man" ninety-three times. God is never recorded calling him Ezekiel. This designation conveyed that the prophet was a human being, in this context as a representative of God's rebellious people. In God's call to Ezekiel, He told him to listen to what He said and not to rebel like the rest of the house of Israel (2:8). Ezekiel was part of the people, but he had a message from God for them.

In 586 B.C., when King Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon attacked Israel, he destroyed not just Jerusalem but also other cities in Judah (cf. Jer. 34:6-7). {Jerusalem, however, was special. More than just a

capital, it was the city where God chose to dwell in the midst of His people. God's temple was there, where God was present in a special way. For God to judge that city sent a bold message—God would not tolerate His people's pervasive sin.}⁹²

God described His people in refinery terms (Ezek. 22:18-22). Frequently silver mined in the ground is not pure but is mixed with other metals. This requires a process to remove the impurities and leave just the purified silver. The process of purifying silver necessitates high heat, for pure silver melts at 1,763 degrees Fahrenheit. Getting a fire this hot required a furnace.

The impure byproduct is called dross (solid impurities that float on top of molten metal) or slag (molten liquid impurities). For Ezekiel's purposes, the terms can be used interchangeably, and either term may be used in different Bible translations.

The biggest surprise to Israel was likely that God did not consider them to be the silver. They might have welcomed the words of Psalm 66:10-12, where the psalmist recounted that God tested them to purify them as silver is purified, and they had come through the trials better than they were before. Or perhaps they would think the same way as the later prophecy of Zechariah 13:9, that God would refine them like silver or gold and that their place with God would be assured.

{But the time of God's patient refining of His people was over. There was no silver among them for Him to purify. The nation had become nothing but worthless dross to be cast by the wayside (Ezek. 22:18).}⁹³

God's gathering of His people for judgment (Ezek. 22:20-22). Israel was God's chosen people, the nation God had selected as His possession (Deut. 7:6-8). He loved His people, making His earthly dwelling in their midst. He often had demonstrated His goodness and

care for them by delivering them from powerful enemies. They were meant to show God's character to the nations, but their rebellion against God and His covenant made them unfit for the task.

Ezekiel recorded elsewhere that Jerusalem had acted more wickedly than the surrounding nations (Ezek. 5:6). Because Israel had become nothing but worthless dross, God decreed that He would gather them within the walls of Jerusalem as a metalsmith gathers metal into a furnace (22:19-20). {The fortified walls of Jerusalem would not protect it but would become the crucible of its destruction.}^{q4} In a few short years, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon swept into the land of Israel in 588 B.C., attacking Judah's cities on his way to Jerusalem. There he laid siege until 586 B.C., when the walls were breached and the city destroyed.

God would blow the fire of His wrath upon Jerusalem, just like a metalsmith blows air into a furnace to increase the heat and melt the metal (vs. 21). God was not merely displeased with His people but intensely angry with them.

The Israelites and the Egyptians first learned of God's great power when the Lord brought Israel out from their land of bondage. {By His actions, they learned His sovereign identity when He proclaimed, "I am the Lord" (Ex. 6:7; 7:5, 17). The plagues demonstrated that this was not mere talk but the truth. Through this same phrase, appearing seventy times in Ezekiel, God signaled that the coming horrific events were a clear statement that God oversees history and will not be disobeyed, even by His chosen people, without serious consequences (Ezek. 22:22).}^{q5}

JERUSALEM: THE CITY OF THE GUILTY

23 And the word of the Lord came unto me, saying,

24 Son of man, say unto her, Thou art the land that is not cleansed, nor

rained upon in the day of indignation.

25 There is a conspiracy of her prophets in the midst thereof, like a roaring lion ravening the prey; they have devoured souls; they have taken the treasure and precious things; they have made her many widows in the midst thereof.

26 Her priests have violated my law, and have profaned mine holy things: they have put no difference between the holy and profane, neither have they shewed difference between the unclean and the clean, and have hid their eyes from my sabbaths, and I am profaned among them.

27 Her princes in the midst thereof are like wolves ravening the prey, to shed blood, and to destroy souls, to get dishonest gain.

28 And her prophets have daubed them with untempered mortar, seeing vanity, and divining lies unto them, saying, Thus saith the Lord God, when the Lord hath not spoken.

29 The people of the land have used oppression, and exercised robbery, and have vexed the poor and needy: yea, they have oppressed the stranger wrongfully.

30 And I sought for a man among them, that should make up the hedge, and stand in the gap before me for the land, that I should not destroy it: but I found none.

31 Therefore have I poured out mine indignation upon them; I have consumed them with the fire of my wrath: their own way have I recompensed upon their heads, saith the Lord God.

God's message of judgment (Ezek. 22:23-24). In the previous message, Ezekiel proclaimed God's coming judgment upon Jerusalem. Now Ezekiel told God's rebellious people why the Lord's fiery wrath was coming upon them. He began his third message of judgment with the same introductory

statement that he used earlier (vss. 17, 23). God called Ezekiel “son of man” and then addressed Israel (vs. 24).

The people were like a polluted land that desperately needed a deluge to remove debris. Sadly for them, no thunderstorm had arrived to sweep away the refuse of the sin. Starting in Ezekiel 22:25, God singled out specific groups of corrupt people in Israel to describe their affronts to God. He confronted the sins of the prophets, priests, princes, prophets (again), and the powerful elite of the general populace. Zephaniah had previously preached against the sins of Jerusalem during the reign of King Josiah. His message still had value during Ezekiel’s day. In fact, Zephaniah 3:3-4 may form the basis for Ezekiel’s descriptions in Ezekiel 22:25-29.

Judgment upon the prophets (Ezek. 22:25). God began with the state of His prophets. They were described quite fittingly as lions (cf. 19:1-6), but it was not the majesty of lions to which God referred. {God’s accusation focused on lions as bloodthirsty killers of His people. Rather than promoting justice in His name, the nation’s prophets had been self-serving. By means of their power and influence, they had robbed the innocent and helpless. Lives were taken, women widowed, and children orphaned.}⁹⁶

Judgment upon the priests (Ezek. 22:26). The second group God condemned was the priests. The priests were entrusted with the sacred task of representing the people to God through the temple sacrifices. The requirements for the task of using the sacred vessels and approaching God were well documented in the book of Leviticus. The priests even had the warning of the former priests Nadab and Abihu, two sons of Aaron, who approached God with “strange fire” in a way that did not conform to His instructions. God judged them immediately (10:1-7). Then God gave instructions to Aaron on the im-

portance of distinguishing carefully between what is holy and what is common and between the clean and the unclean (vss. 8-10).

The priests violated the instructions that the Lord had given Aaron. Earlier the Lord showed Ezekiel what was happening in the temple in Jerusalem (Ezek. 8). {There were all sorts of idols and idolatry not only in Jerusalem but in the temple itself as well—the same temple where the Lord dwelled and met with His people! The priests did not stop it or instruct the people to respect God properly. The Lord was ignored in His own house!}

Further, the sacred priests did not enforce keeping the Sabbaths that God had prescribed for His people.⁹⁷ Jeremiah also warned the people of Judah that God’s judgment would fall if they did not keep the Sabbath (Jer. 17:21-27).

Judgment upon the princes (Ezek. 22:27). The third group, the princes, were likely members of the extended royal family whom the king appointed to serve in the local towns and villages. This was a different group than the princes mentioned in Ezekiel 19:1 and 22:25. This group likely referred to officials below the higher ranking royal rulers, such as the judges. {They were compared to a pack of wolves destroying God’s flock for their own personal gain (22:27).}⁹⁸

Judgment upon the prophets (Ezek. 22:28). The fourth address was against the prophets once again. Previously, Ezekiel spent most of chapter 13 chastising false prophets who were deceiving God’s people. Ezekiel drew imagery from that earlier proclamation as he summarized the charges against them.

In Ezekiel 13, God used a metaphor of whitewashing a wall to make it look sturdier than it really is. A corresponding example for us might be putting a coat of paint over a rotten board or using a layer of body fill and paint on a rusty car. The prophets’ messages

were like the whitewash—the message of peace for Jerusalem sounded great to the hearers, but there was no solid foundation for their assertions.

God did not give the prophets a message of peace. Their lies hid the truth—God was going to judge Jerusalem. {The false prophets would also experience God’s wrath because they presumed to speak for God, proclaiming a message that He had not given them as if it were His message.}⁹⁹

Judgment upon the people (Ezek. 22:29-31). The fifth group was the “people of the land.” The phrase likely refers to those who had enough influence to be able to abuse others. {He revealed that this group used oppression and robbery to vex the poor for personal gain. Their targets were the poor, needy, and foreigners—the helpless ones of society.}¹⁰⁰ God takes a very dim view of those who target the helpless, and He will not stand by and do nothing! God will arise to protect the poor and needy (Ps. 12:5), and He loves the sojourner (Deut. 10:18).

God concluded His condemnation of Jerusalem by stating how much sin had pervaded the people (Ezek. 22:30). He used a figure of speech about a good man building the protective walls in the city that would repel the Babylonian force that God was going to use to judge Jerusalem. In this context, such a person would be righteous, one who kept God’s law and worshipped God.

This was similar to God’s discussion with Abraham concerning Sodom (Gen. 18:20-33). God agreed that He would spare the city if ten righteous people were found (vs. 32). God did not find ten righteous people in the city! Only Lot, his wife, and his two daughters escaped from the city, though his wife perished (19:16-17, 26-28).

God placed a much lower bar for the city of Jerusalem than for Sodom and Gomorrah (Ezek. 22:30). He looked for

even one righteous person who opposed the injustices being committed. He wanted to preserve His people, but it seems that they were determined to reject His every attempt to deliver them.

Sin so thoroughly penetrated the lives of His people that they were in a worse state than Sodom when God rained fire upon it. Ezekiel earlier stated that Jerusalem was more wicked than Samaria and Sodom (16:46-52). The Lord could not find even one person to convince Him that Jerusalem should not be destroyed. Therefore, God determined that He would pour out His wrath upon them (22:31). Their punishment would correspond to their evil ways.

—Glenn Weaver

QUESTIONS

1. How did God emphasize to the Jews that Ezekiel’s message came from Him?
2. Why was God’s judgment against Jerusalem so important?
3. What was shocking about God subjecting Jerusalem to a refining process?
4. What would the walls of Jerusalem represent in God’s plan for judgment?
5. Why is the phrase “I the Lord” significant?
6. What was God’s complaint against the prophets?
7. Why was God angry with the priests?
8. How were the princes described as warranting God’s judgment?
9. Why was God incensed about the actions of His prophets?
10. Why was God judging the “people of the land” (Ezek. 22:29)?

—Glenn Weaver

Preparing to Teach the Lesson

Obviously, the wrath of God is not a pleasant topic. Our culture ridicules it as the subject of fire-and-brimstone sermons, which the secular media often caricatures. Even Christians tend to skim over God's wrath, highlighting instead His love or forgiveness. Yet we cannot understand God's love or forgiveness and rejoice in the good news of salvation without first understanding how bad His wrath is.

Our passage for this lesson may make our skin crawl a bit, since it depicts God's wrath in terms of a fiery furnace. In a culture that idolizes tolerance of all things, our first instinct may be to say, "Surely the Israelites did not deserve this wrath. Surely, they deserved another chance." However, this passage in Ezekiel reveals the character of God. No one can profane His holiness, and His offer of mercy is not indefinite. Eventually, His wrath will come to satisfy His perfect justice.

TODAY'S AIM

Facts: to learn what Ezekiel prophesied for the unrepentant people of Jerusalem.

Principle: to understand that God's holiness and justice are the basis for His wrath.

Application: to repent of any sins that would incur God's wrath and to look to the One who stood in the gap to save us from that punishment.

INTRODUCING THE LESSON

We are no stranger to political scandals. Consider, for example, the Watergate scandal—when President Nixon and many members of his administration engaged in corruption on such a large and public scale that we have assigned a name to their actions. When scandals like that occur, the people

the politicians are supposed to serve suffer instead.

When Ezekiel wrote to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, he addressed widespread political scandal, the type that would leave scars on a nation for centuries. Not only were the rulers corrupt, but so were the priests and the prophets—the people responsible for safeguarding the holiness of the temple. Under such guidance, the house of Israel had become detestable in the Lord's eyes. He had chosen them as His holy people, and they had received His law; yet they had turned their backs on Him. As a result, Ezekiel prophesied of God's coming wrath, the vindication of His holiness.

DEVELOPING THE LESSON

1. The judgment of the people (Ezek. 22:17-22). Many of us are acquainted with the biblical image of the crucible, God refining His people like precious metals so that they become pure and holy (cf. Mal. 3:3-4; 1 Pet. 1:7). In Ezekiel's prophecy, however, the focus was not on the purified silver left behind but on the dross discarded.

God would pour out His wrath upon His corrupt people. Those who continued to defy His holiness would find themselves discarded like the worthless metals that float to the surface when silver is refined in a furnace. They would go through the furnace, but they would not survive the refining process—there was no silver left (Isa. 1:22). He would put them in the city of Jerusalem, which was likely under siege, to be destroyed by their enemies and cast among the nations (Deut. 28:30-36).

2. The sin of the people (Ezek. 22:23-29). The violent depiction of God's wrath on His people may—and should—startle us. We might protest that God was unjust for casting aside His

people like dross; however, the house of Israel was guilty before the Lord. Ezekiel's prophecy listed the reasons *why* God was going to consume His people.

All of Israel's leaders—the princes, the priests, and the prophets—practiced injustice and profaned the law of the Lord. God had given them chance after chance to repent, yet they had refused to do so and neglected their charge to guide the people. They continued in their ways without a care for the way of the Lord. They even lied about what God wanted so that they could continue in their injustice, proclaiming a word from God when He had not spoken. These were supposed to be the ones safeguarding the holiness of God. Instead, they were worse than the nations, and God's own people had become His enemies (Isa. 1:24).

3. The need of the people (Ezek. 22:30-31). Ezekiel continued his prophecy by revealing that the Lord had looked for someone to stand in the gap. This imagery refers to a breach in a wall—a weakness in a city's fortification that would allow the enemy to come in and destroy that city.

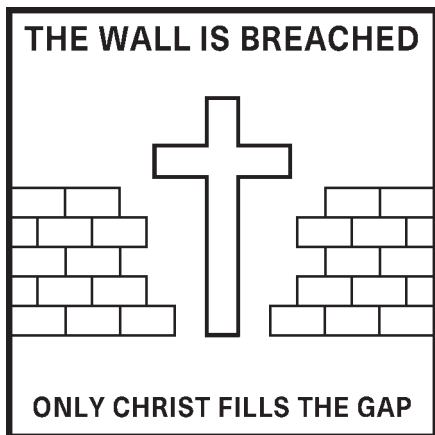
Israel needed someone to atone for their sins so that they could be holy before God. In the past, people such as Moses had stood in the gap to intercede for the people (cf. Ps. 106:23). It was also the role of the high priest, who was expected to guide the people in right sacrifices (see Heb. 5:1-3). When Ezekiel prophesied, however, there was no one to intercede. Corruption was unrestrained among leaders and the people, so God's judgment was certain.

Although Ezekiel's prophecy ended on a bleak note, we thankfully have the rest of Scripture to give us some hope. God did pour out His wrath on His people, but He left a remnant. Not only that, but He Himself stepped into the gap. On the cross, Christ bore the wrath of God for us so that we would not perish. God

redeemed us for Himself by stepping in when no one else could (Isa. 59:16-20).

ILLUSTRATING THE LESSON

Just as the Israelites faced the wrath of God because there was no one to stand in the gap, so we face the coming wrath of God. Only Christ can stand in the gap and save us.



CONCLUDING THE LESSON

Ezekiel prophesied of God's wrath on His corrupt people. They had forsaken His ways, and the leaders only practiced injustice. As a result, God would no longer delay His judgment. His wrath would consume them.

The wrath about which Ezekiel prophesied stands as a warning to us as well. There is a day of judgment coming, and if we do not repent and turn to Christ, we will experience the wrath of God. Let us not delay. Let us repent of sin and hide in Christ, who stands in the gap to save us!

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

In the next lesson, we will examine how God's wrath is just. He is faithful to those who turn from their sins but condemns those who turn to sin. Urge the students to read Ezekiel 33:12-20 before the next class time.

—Katherine Robinson

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. No matter what anyone else thinks of you, it is God's estimation that counts (Ezek. 22:17-18).
2. God is patient, but He will judge sin (vss. 19-21).
3. God is good, but He also makes Himself known through His discipline (vs. 22).
4. People may claim the name of the Lord but live in sin (vss. 23-24).
5. Sometimes the people who are in a position to promote God are the most sinful (vss. 25-29).
6. Even one person can make a difference (vss. 30-31).

—Glenn Weaver

RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

1. Why do you think God would use such harsh language to describe His people (Ezek. 22:17-22)?
2. What factors could lead a religious leader to take God and His Word lightly (vs. 26)?
3. What can a leader do to remain godly amid peers that seek dishonest gain (vs. 27)?
4. Why might someone deliver a prophecy that God has not given (vs. 28)? What are some parallels to this today?
5. What attitudes do we commonly find today concerning outsiders? How should Ezekiel's comments influence our attitude (vs. 29)?
6. No one is sinless. Since God was not looking for perfection, what would have persuaded Him not to destroy Jerusalem (vss. 30-31)?
7. How can we "stand in the gap" for our Lord today?

—Glenn Weaver

ILLUSTRATED HIGH POINTS

Ye shall be melted (Ezek. 22:21)

There is something about melting lead in a cast-iron pot. Old lead ingots with dirt, iron, and other particles go in. An intense fire heats the pot so that the temperature rises to over six hundred degrees. As the lead melts, the impurities rise. Then the impurities are skimmed off and discarded, revealing a molten pool of pure metal.

Which best characterizes you—the metal being refined to purity, or the dross to be discarded?

I am profaned among them (vs. 26)

My parents had a 1972 station wagon that they bought used at a car lot. After a year or so, we found that the car had an unexpected feature—a large rust hole in the fender that had been filled with steel wool and body filler and repainted. We drove the car for another year or so and then purchased another (from a different dealer).

As I prepared to get my first car, I was determined to buy a specific kind. Our experience left an impression on me that was hard to shake. It took years before I saw that many other cars have an excellent reputation.

Many people are dissuaded from Christianity because of the sinful behavior of some professing Christians. Let us be shining examples of the change that Christ makes in a person's life!

But I found none (vs. 30)

It took one man, Martin Luther, to start the reformation in Germany. It took one man, Winston Churchill, to rally England to stand against Nazi Germany. One person can make all the difference.

As our culture becomes increasingly hostile to God, will you stand for Him even if no one else will?

—Glenn Weaver

Golden Text Illuminated

"As silver is melted in the midst of the furnace, so shall ye be melted in the midst thereof; and ye shall know that I the Lord have poured out my fury upon you" (Ezekiel 22:22).

Our golden text envisions Jerusalem enveloped in God's refining fire, as metal melted away in a crucible to remove impurities. "As silver is melted in the midst of the furnace, so shall ye be melted in the midst thereof" (Ezek. 22:22). Though God's purifying fire may seem harsh, this vivid imagery conveys a profound spiritual truth—the Lord's ultimate purpose in leading us through adversities is to refine, purify, and restore us.

When we pass through trials and tribulations, it is not to harm but to reshape us for His glory. Even suffering serves a purpose in God's design—to forge character and unveil Christ's nature within us. Trials mold and shape us into useful vessels for the Master's use.

Consider Joseph, betrayed by his own brothers into forced enslavement in Egypt and then thrown into prison based on lies. Once refined through the injustice, isolation, and indignity of his imprisonment, Joseph emerged humble, wise, and ready to fulfill God's purpose—to lead and save God's people during a famine. "Ye thought evil against me," Joseph told his brothers, "but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive" (Gen. 50:20).

Or think of Saul of Tarsus, formerly consumed by religious self-righteous fury, bent on persecuting and destroying the early church. But when the resurrected Jesus apprehended him on the Damascus road, he emerged as the converted apostle Paul, becoming a champion of the very faith he had once sought to annihilate. Later he declared, "We glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and

patience, experience; and experience, hope" (Rom. 5:3-4).

Throughout history, many saints and martyrs have walked through adversity with their faith undimmed and undefeated, emerging on the other side like refined gold. Corrie ten Boom clung to God's love, grace, and forgiveness even in the hellish horror of Nazi concentration camps that claimed her sister's life. Dietrich Bonhoeffer gained profound spiritual insights into the cost of discipleship by courageously resisting Hitler, though it ultimately cost him his own life.

Charles Spurgeon saw even the darkness of chronic depression paradoxically refine, clarify, and strengthen his powerful preaching. He said, "I bear my willing witness that I owe more to the fire, and the hammer, and the file, than to anything else in the Lord's workshop. I sometimes question whether I have ever learned anything except through the rod" (*Spurgeon's Sermon Notes*, Kregel).

In the furnace of affliction, we must trust the divine Refiner to use our trials. We must yield to the Lord's purifying work in our lives, allowing Him to burn away all dross and impurities to bring forth His restored image in us, refining and polishing us into radiant vessels of His glory. He promises to sustain us through every trial and bring us forth from the furnace reflecting the very likeness of Christ, as refined gold purified seven times over. We can confidently rest in Him, who willingly bore the furious heat of God's judgment for our sins in our place, sparing us from its fullest fury.

—Gene Kissinger

Heart of the Lesson

Something is dreadfully wrong in the world. Most people recognize that reality. Nature is beautiful, but natural disasters cover the earth's landscape; and natural evil is only the beginning.

Moral evils stain human history with injustice, oppression, and war. In the suffering, the human heart cries out, "Why?" This lesson serves as a reminder that God will judge unrighteousness just as dross is melted in a crucible.

Ezekiel was exiled by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar in 597 B.C. The prophet experienced the pain of captivity and expected an invasion of Jerusalem. The refugee watchman's message was clear: the exiles must return to God.

All seemed hopeless. The siege of Jerusalem was the crucible where the unrighteous dross was judged and the silver was refined (Ezek. 22:19). Pain often prompts spiritual examination. Ezekiel had already urged such examination, teaching that those who turn from idolatry and rebellion to God will live (18:20-21), but no one had listened.

The Lord had "sought for a man among them" to "stand in the gap before [Him] and the land," but He had "found none" (22:30). The only thing left was for the Lord to fulfill His promise to pour out His wrath against Judah's sins. The crucible of the Lord serves at least three purposes.

1. The crucible reveals God's holy character (Ezek. 22:17-22). God's image-bearers are responsible for being holy because He is holy. The people of Judah were behaving completely against His holy purposes, however. In similar manner that the refiner's fire purifies metal, God's fiery judgment revealed His holy character and anger against sin.

Ezekiel described God's judgment as a smelting process that separates

impurities from silver (vs. 18). In His fierce anger and justice, God would eliminate the dross of unrighteousness, thus purifying the precious character that remained (cf. Isa. 1:21-26).

2. The crucible exposes unrighteous corruption (Ezek. 22:23-29). Judah's sin penetrated every sector of their lives. No one was left untouched by his or her corrupt pursuits. Sin is destructive, and God does not overlook it. God's righteous indignation would impose judgment on the people of Judah.

Why was God so angry? Spiritual bankruptcy precedes moral erosion and cultural, political, and social breakdown (cf. Mal. 3:1-5). Human misery only intensifies in a downward spiral. God's fury exposes the sharp contrast between His righteousness and human unrighteousness.

3. The crucible delivers a costly penalty (Ezek. 22:30-31). The Lord could not find anyone to rebuild the wall of righteousness. There was no one to stand in the gap. Judah had become thoroughly corrupt, and the penalty for their sins had fully matured.

Their judgment came in the form of an invasion by an enemy even more wicked than they were. Their idolatry was more costly than they could imagine, affecting future generations. Sin is never self-contained.

God judges in His love for righteousness. Nevertheless, His mercy offers hope in the crucible. The consequences of sin—the downward spiral of culture, suffering, and death—reveal that there is a problem. God's judgment, ironically, helps us know our need for Him. That knowledge, in turn, leads us straight to the foot of the Cross, where Jesus bore God's judgment on our behalf.

—Gregory H. Sergent

World Missions

In 1959, President Eisenhower, who was baptized after entering office, made a request of the king of Afghanistan. In view of a mosque having recently been opened in Washington D.C. for Muslims among the diplomatic staff of various nations, would the Afghan government allow a church to be built in the Afghan capital of Kabul for Christians working there in a similar capacity? The king agreed, and after years of fundraising and planning, the first church building in many centuries was erected on Afghan soil in 1970.

The church became a spiritual home to not only foreign diplomats but also a trickle of local Afghans, as a number had come to faith in Christ through the work of a school for the blind. The government became alarmed and announced that the school would have to close, that foreign teachers would have to leave the country, and that they would destroy the church building.

A German businessman in the country approached the mayor of Kabul to request that the order to destroy the church be revoked and boldly told him, perhaps prophetically, "If your government touches that House of God, God will overthrow your government!" (Wilson, *More to Be Desired than Gold*, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary).

Shortly after destroying this building dedicated to God, the government was overthrown, and after over two centuries, the Afghan monarchy came to an end. Interestingly, some Afghans saw the overthrow of a monarchy giving way first to a republic and then to Communist rule as a judgment from God. It is now under the harsh rule of the Taliban. An unnamed Afghan stated, "Ever since our Government destroyed that Christian Church, God has been judging our country" (Wilson).

We often conceptualize Jesus as the "friendly face of God" and feel uncomfortable when issues of God's judgment upon nations and individuals arises. Yet it is clear, in both the Old and New Testaments, that judgment is *also* an important aspect of God's message and character. Moreover, this is not merely cases of nations that have attacked God's people. God sometimes judges His own people as well. We read in Ezekiel 22:22, "As silver is melted in the midst of the furnace, so shall ye be melted in the midst thereof; and ye shall know that I the Lord have poured out my fury upon you."

Why was God responding with such harshness to His people? Verses 25 and 26 read in part, "There is a conspiracy of her prophets in the midst thereof, . . . they have devoured souls; they have taken the treasure and precious things; they have made her many widows in the midst thereof. Her priests have violated my law, and have profaned mine holy things: they have put no difference between the holy and profane, . . . and I am profaned among them." The leaders, including particularly the *spiritual* leaders, had become corrupt.

This stands as a warning both to us and to the nations today. Christians acknowledge that God still judges individuals, but they sometimes behave as if He no longer judges nations, as He clearly did in the Old Testament (Isa. 13—24). Is this reasonable? Might He not still judge nations today?

Closer to home, will He not discipline His people if they stray from Him? Our witness to the nations depends on us living lives that are empowered by God's gracious Holy Spirit and walking in holiness.

—Matthew Friedman

The Jewish Aspect

God's condemnation of Judah, often directed to Jerusalem specifically, is especially harsh in Ezekiel. The prophet did not word his proclamations to the nation for them to repent or else God's wrath would fall. Instead, Israel's judgment was a certainty, and they merely needed to wait for it to come to pass.

Why did God speak so harshly with His chosen people? On what basis did He weigh their actions and find them wanting?

The answer is found in the type of relationship God had with the nation of Israel. God made a covenant with Israel through Moses after God's people left Egypt. This covenant followed a similar format used by other ancient nations, so Israel would have understood what type of relationship they had with God. Undoubtedly, Moses, who was educated in Pharaoh's household, would have seen similar covenants.

There were a few types of ancient covenants. The type that God presented to Israel through Moses is much like a suzerain-vassal covenant. In this type of covenant, the superior party, such as a conquering king, told the conquered people what they were required to do in their relationship with the king. Included in the covenant were the benefits of obedience and penalties for disobedience to the terms of the covenant.

For Israel, their covenant document, which was in the format of ancient suzerain-vassal covenants of the same era, was the book of Deuteronomy. The curses and blessings appear in Deuteronomy 28 through 29.

The Lord promised His people great blessings. They would have many children, their fields would produce large crops, and their herds of live-

stock would abound. They would find prosperity in all their endeavors, and their enemies would flee from them.

To receive those blessings, there was a condition. Israel needed to follow God's commandments (28:13-14). If Israel failed to obey all that God commanded in His law, then they would endure the curses stipulated in Deuteronomy 28 through 29.

It was the curses of Deuteronomy 28 through 29 that Ezekiel proclaimed to Jerusalem. The people faced destruction because they disobeyed God and broke the covenant (cf. Ezek. 16:59).

King Jehoiakim was an evil king who disobeyed God and led the nation astray. Therefore, in fulfillment of Deuteronomy 28:47-52, the Babylonians attacked Jerusalem and took Jehoiakim captive to Babylon (2 Chr. 36:5-6). Jehoiachin, Jehoiakim's son, was no better than his father. The Babylonians took him away as a captive as well (vss. 8-10). During this invasion, Ezekiel was taken into captivity.

It was during the reign of Zedekiah, the next king, that God would send the Babylonians to finally destroy the walls of Jerusalem, burn the temple, and kill or capture the people (vss. 10-20). This devastation is the focus of Ezekiel's prophecies.

If Israel expected the Lord to be faithful to keep all His promises of blessing, then the people should also have expected Him to keep His promises of curses for covenant disobedience. God's perfect character of mercy and justice required that He fulfill all that He had promised. Israel should have anticipated God's discipline for many years. They had plenty of time and the warnings of many prophets, but they would not change their ways.

—Glenn Weaver

Guiding the Superintendent

Ezekiel's prophetic ministry spanned 593-571 B.C., all while living outside of his homeland—Judah—in Babylon. He was deported by the Babylonian army in 597 B.C., so he prophesied about the destruction of Jerusalem while living in Babylon (Ezek. 1:1). Jerusalem was not destroyed, however, until about 587 B.C. This gap of both time and space typifies the strangeness of Ezekiel's ministry.

Ezekiel comprises three large sections. Today's text occurs in the first section, Ezekiel 1 through 24, which addresses deported people from Judah, convinced their time in Babylon would be short-lived and that God would never destroy Jerusalem (cf. 13:16). The following section, chapters 25 through 32, contains Ezekiel's messages about the destruction of nations that opposed the Lord and His people. Chapters 33 through 48 addresses people who received word that the Lord had judged Jerusalem, just as Ezekiel had said (33:21). Today's text explains the purpose of the oncoming judgment (refinement) and the causes of judgment (covenant unfaithfulness).

DEVOTIONAL OUTLINE

1. Jerusalem would be refined by judgment (Ezek. 22:17-22). Ezekiel 22:17-22 is simultaneously foreboding and hopeful. The fire imagery implies three realities. First, the Lord's anger burned against Judah's covenant-breaking ways (cf. 2 Kgs. 23:26). Second, Jerusalem would literally burn (cf. 25:9). Third, fire would remove Judah's covenant-breaking dross.

2. Jerusalem's leaders would be judged (Ezek. 22:23-31). The Lord explained how Judah's prophets, priests, and princes had invited God's judgment. He focused on the leaders not because the general populace in Judah

was innocent (cf. 22:29; 18:1-4) but because their sin led others astray. Ezekiel's focus on leaders is like James's statement about "greater" judgment on teachers (Jas. 3:1-2).

The Lord judged Judah's leaders for (Ezek. 22:25-27). In verse 26, the priests were singled out because they had not shown the truth of God's words. This contrasts with Ezekiel, who consistently caused Judah to "know" that God is the Lord (cf. 5:13; 24:27). God caused Judah to know Him as Judge (22:22). This paved the way for Judah later to know Him as Redeemer (34:27).

The leaders were also called out for what they had left undone (22:30). Those leaders should have stood "in the gap" to avert God's judgment (vss. 30-31). Psalm 106 explains how Moses as prophet (vs. 23) and Phinehas as priest (vs. 30) stood in the gap to avert God's judgment on Israel.

"Princes" (Ezek. 22:27) sometimes refers to governing authorities (cf. 1 Kgs. 20:19) who could have used their office to promote covenant faithfulness among the people. Instead, they used the people, and so Jerusalem would fall. But one day a man would repair the gap (Amos 9:11). He would be the perfect Prophet (John 4:19), Priest (Heb. 7:23-26), and Prince (Isa. 9:7): the Lord Jesus Christ.

CHILDREN'S CORNER

Children often bear the brunt of adults' sinful actions. Emphasize that Jesus Christ is always there for them. His character is not like adults who may fail to love and care for them.

Jesus loves them always, no matter what they do. While Jesus wants children to obey His Word, His love is not withdrawn if they disobey.

—Matthew Swale