

God's Dilemma of Love

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- [0 : 0 0] down. Well friends, as we've read that reading, you might understand now why Paul has gone to Myanmar and not here tonight.
- It's a tricky passage, isn't it? Anyway, let's pray and ask God to help us. Father, we do thank you so much for your kindness to us in Christ.
- We pray tonight that as we deal with these two difficult passages that you would help us to listen to your word, to stand under it, when confronted by it, to be willing to learn and Father, we pray these things in Jesus' name.
- Amen. Well, I want to start tonight's sermon by telling you a story. It is a well-known story. In fact, it is so well-known that this story has contributed various common sayings into everyday English and you'll recognise it as we go along.
- The story goes something like this. Once upon a time, there was a shepherd boy who found himself bored on a hillside while watching the village sheep. In order to amuse himself, he took a great breath and sang out at the top of his voice, Wolf!
- [1 : 1 2] Wolf! A wolf is chasing the sheep. And the villagers came running up the hill to help the boy drive the wolf away. And when they arrived on top of the hill, they of course found that there was no wolf and so the boy laughed at them and laughed at the sight of their angry faces.
- And they said to him, Shepherd boy, do not cry wolf when there is no wolf. And so they went grumbling back down the hill to their little village.
- And the boy laughed to himself, enjoying his entertainment. And so before long, he tried it again at the top of his voice. He cried out, Wolf! Wolf!
- The wolf is chasing the sheep. And it worked yet again. To his naughty delight, he watched the villagers run to the hill to help him drive that wolf away.
- And when the villagers saw that there was no wolf, they rebuked the lad. Save your frightened song for when there really is something wrong.
- [2 : 1 3] Do not cry wolf when there is no wolf. And the boy just grinned. And again, he watched them go grumbling back down the hill to the village.
- Now later, he of course saw the real wolf prowling around the flock. And alarmed, he leapt to his feet and he sang out as loud as he could, this time with a hint of fear, Wolf!
- Wolf! But the villagers thought he was trying to fool them again. And they did not come. And so at sunset, everyone wondered why the shepherd boy hadn't returned to the village with their sheep.
- And so they did at this point go up the hill to find the boy. And they found him weeping. There really was a wolf here. The flock has scattered.
- I cried, Wolf! Why didn't you come? And an old man tried to comfort the boy as they walked back to the village. We'll help you look for the lost sheep in the morning, he said, putting his arm around the youth.

[3 : 18] And then he continued, Lad, nobody believes a liar, even when he's telling the truth. Now, the story, of course, is commonly known as the boy who cried wolf.

And we have all sorts of phrases that come out of it that have come into English, just as I said. It is attributed, some of you might realise, to a 6th century BC slave called Aesop.

And although it's often called a fable, it is an example of allegory. And an allegory is an extended metaphor that is designed to appeal to your imagination. It describes objects or persons or actions in a story as a way of presenting something outside the story itself that you consider to be real.

The meaning which is outside of the story could be something moral or social or religious or political. So an allegory is, in this sense, something that has two meanings.

There is the literal meaning of the story itself, the figures it presents and so on. And then there is the meaning that lies behind that meaning, the one, really, that you're wanting to convey.

[4 : 27] So allegories are very common in human society. They operate in nearly all human societies. They are very common in literature. And I wonder if you can think of some.

Some of the most famous, Plato has a story about a cave. Another is one by Nathaniel Hawthorne, which is called The Great Carbuncle. Now, some famous Christian allegories are, of course, Pilgrim's Progress by John Bunyan.

And, of course, the Narnia stories by C.S. Lewis. That also is an allegory. And there are lots of allegories actually within scripture itself. And the prophet Ezekiel, well, he seems to have a real interest and a like for allegory.

And so there are a number of them for him. And so let me give you some examples. In chapter 15 of Ezekiel, he gives an allegory of a worthless vine. In chapter 17, he gives an allegory about a cedar and an eagle.

In chapter 19, there's one about a lioness and a vine. A cauldron in chapter 24. But the most startling of all of Ezekiel's allegories are those found in chapter 16 and chapter 23.

[5 : 40] And both are about women. The first one we might call the allegory of the foundling child. But that's a very neat little way of talking about something that is far starker.

The second we might call the allegory of the unfaithful sisters. But again, that's a bit tame for what it actually is. These allegories are separate, separated by a number of chapters and quite different, but they are related.

You see, they address the same theme and they both do so with significant strength. So tonight, I'm going to do the brave feat of going through these allegories with you.

Now, before we start, I need to warn you that these allegories in Ezekiel are quite explicit. You'll have already picked that up. Now, sometimes they are very disturbing.

And because of this, our translations at times have just sort of smoothed them over a little, tamed them down a little. In doing so, I think they've sometimes taken away their shock value.

[6 : 42] So at times I'm going to tell you what they actually said. But I need to tell you beforehand that I'm going to do this. I want to do this because I want us to grapple with what they are actually doing. And I think unless you hear what they say, you won't grapple with what they're doing.

So these are God's word to God's people in Ezekiel's day. And he didn't water it down. We must not do it either.

And God caused them to be written for our instruction as well. And they are therefore God's word to us as well. So let's get started and open your Bibles at Ezekiel 16.

Now, I'm going to deal with Ezekiel 16 in greater depth than 23. So if you think, wow, he's taken a long time to get through Ezekiel 16, just be sure that you hear that I'm not going to take as long with 23.

Okay, so it's not a sort of halfway point for you. So some of what chapter 16 says is repeated in chapter 23. So I don't need to do it in as great depth.

[7 : 41] I would encourage you to have your Bibles open just to check these things out with me. Now, Ezekiel chapter 16 begins with the word of the Lord coming to Ezekiel. And in verse 1, God calls on him to make known to Jerusalem her abomination.

So he's pointing at the city of Jerusalem and say, tell her these are her abominations. God in this verse is making a legal case public. He has an accused party, the city of Jerusalem, which stands for the whole nation of Israel.

And the charge can be summarized in one word, abomination. And if you read on in chapter 16, verse 22 and 36, that word is linked with another word, whoring.

You will have heard it all the way through that reading. God is accusing his people of a sort of spiritual harlotry. And such spiritual harlotry, he says, amounts to gross abomination.

So with that charge stated, the allegory begins. And in verses 3 to 5, he outlines Jerusalem's origin and desperate situation. Now, have you thought about this for a moment?

[8 : 50] Did you hear it in the reading? Did you notice how shocking this must have been to the original hearers? When they thought of their ancestor, who did they think of? Abraham. Right, so what does Ezekiel do?

The first shock is he says, oh, not Abraham was your parent. The city's origin has its roots in Canaan. Your parents are Amorites and Hittites. In other words, Jerusalem has had its beginning in peoples and places associated with gross depravity and sin.

It's not a promising beginning, is it? If you're telling this nation off. And then God recalls the birth of this girl, Jerusalem. And verse 4 tells us that the child had none of the usual treatment that in the ancient world would have been given to children who were loved.

Her umbilical cord was not even cut. She was not washed. She didn't have the traditional rubbing down with salt. She was not wrapped in swaddling clothes. There was no pity, no compassion for her.

Rather, in an extreme act of inhumanity, her parents simply threw her out in a field to die. And verse 6 indicates that this child was left flailing around, you know, in amniotic fluid and blood.

[10 : 05] And it's a situation which would have meant death in the hot Palestinian sun within hours. Now look again at verse 6. And the focus shifts away from the child and it falls to the Lord himself who is pictured as being just a passerby.

And he looks and he sees this child flailing around in blood. And in an awesome act of kindness and grace, he pronounces life to this child.

In effect, he adopts this baby. And in verse 7, we move quickly to her adolescence. She grows up tall and sexually mature.

And by the end of the verse, we're told that she still, though, remains naked. Being naked at birth is one thing, isn't it? If you're naked at birth, it's a symbol, isn't it, of vulnerability and of the need for compassion.

But being naked and mature is a symbol of something entirely different, isn't it? It's a symbol of exposure to threat, different threats and very different human responses.

[11 : 12] And again, the Lord comes by. And this time he acts in again in amazing and awesome grace. Because he wraps his cloak around her, a symbol of marrying her.

And he marries her. He enters into covenant with her. And in verse 9, he washes and anoints her again with loving care. And in verses 10 to 13, he clothes her with abundant clothes and expensive ornaments.

He feeds her with rich food and she grows in response to his generosity and becomes exceedingly beautiful. Then verse 14 says that the fame of her beauty spread.

And it was perfect beauty. Because it came from the rich benevolence of a loving husband. Her beauty, you see, was a gift.

A gift from a God who loved her. It came from the Lord God himself. A symbol of his awesome grace and mercy. A witness to his love.

[12 : 14] And then verses 15 to 34. They tell us how Jerusalem responded to God's grace and God's love. And the gift of God's focus and beauty.

That focus that God gave to this woman who's abused. For what she does is she takes the beauty that this husband had given her and turns it to serve her sexual desires.

She prostitutes God's gift to her. In verse 15. As verse 15 puts it. She lavishes her whorings on passers-by.

Rather than placing her confidence in the one who made her beautiful. She places it in the beauty itself. She corrupts the gift of beauty by turning it against the giver.

She abuses his awesome grace by turning the gift that he'd given into an instrument of awesome unfaithfulness. Rather than receiving the gift that God had given her.

[13 : 15] She passes it on indiscriminately to anyone who is passing by. And the gift of beautiful clothing is turned into colorful shrines. In verse 16. The gift of beautiful jewelry is turned into images.

In verse 17. The gift of embroidered garments. And rich food is turned into instruments of worship. In verses 18 and 19. And the gift of children by her husband.

Is similarly turned into instruments of worship. As she offers up her children in child sacrifice. She herself had been a child. She had been rescued in great mercy.

But as verse 22 says. She acts like her own parents rather than the rescuer of her husband. She forgets his awesome grace toward her and outsider.

And reciprocates with awesome cruelty toward her own children. In verse 23. The picture is developed even further. For verse 15 to 22 focuses on how she prostitutes the good gift of God.

[14 : 18] But verses 23 to 29. Well they focus on something slightly different. How she prostitutes herself. She sets up very public brothels. In verses 23 to 25.

That can be seen by everyone. And verse 25 is very strong in the original. It says that she spread her legs at every passerby. And multiplied her whoring.

Insatiable in her lust. She heightens her harlotry. In verses 26 to 29. And it's clear that the harlotry that she engages in. Is a synonym for political allegiances and alliances.

Instead of remaining true to her husband. She turns in unfaithfulness and adulterous whoring. To the nations around about her. And if any of you have read. The history of Israel. You know she did that time and time again.

And they include the Egyptians in verse 26. Chaldeans in verse 29. Verse 27 says that the extent of her whoredom was so extreme. That even the Philistines.

[15 : 19] Those characters that were sort of known for their. You know not being straight. They were embarrassed. At what they saw her do. And no wonder.

For as verses 30 to 34 make clear. Most prostitutes engage in such activities for money. But not God's nation.

No. They did it for free. In fact. They paid for it. In other words. They did it just for the sheer sexual gratification. In verse 35.

We move on to God's sentencing of Jerusalem. For what they have done. First. The charges are again summarized in verse 36. Have a look at it there. Second. God outlines what he's going to do in response.

To Jerusalem's actions. And in verses 37 to 39. He indicates. He will gather all those lovers. And those haters of Jerusalem. He'll bring them all together.

[16:15] Remember what I said at the beginning. In the ancient Near East. When a man publicly spread his garment. As he did over this woman. He showed that he was committing himself to her in marriage. Now look at what happens.

Publicly stripping her. Symbolizes a divorce. These lovers and haters had seen this woman naked before. Then she was offering herself sexually.

But not now. Now she is suffering the humiliation and shame of rejection. By the very one. Who had put his cloak over her. As he takes it off. And verses 38 to 39.

Indicates that God will do even more. Having divorced her. He will give her to those. With whom she had prostituted herself. And they will carry the sentence of adultery.

Out on her. They will bring blood upon her. In other words. They will execute her. And in verses 39 to 41. Describe that in detail. And I want you to notice something though.

[17:14] The goal of this punishment. This sentence. Is not simple destruction. No. In verses 41 and 42. They indicate that God's intention in judgment. Is that he wishes.

That Jerusalem will end her harlotry. That is his goal. This very judgment though. Will have an additional effect. Look at verse 42. His jealous anger.

Will be turned away. And he will become calm. And he will be angry no more. But it will only happen after his judgment. Has been fully executed.

And then verses 45 to 52. God makes the point that Jerusalem. Is like the other women in her family. There is a family likeness.

He says you're like your mother. You're like your elder city. The northern tribes of Israel. As represented by the city of Samaria. And you're like your younger sister. The city of Sodom. World renowned for its depravity.

[18:12] However. What he goes on to say is. But you've excelled them all. And in verse 52. He says the actions of Jerusalem. Have made Sodom and Gomorrah. Samaria. And her mother.

The Canaanites. Appear to be righteous. That's an overwhelming judgment. Isn't it? And you imagine if you were an Israelite. Hearing this story. Told to you.

The shocks would have come. Shock after shuddering shock. Wouldn't they? As you heard this story. But this would have been the crunch. Because what you are saying to Israelites is.

You are worse than Sodom and Gomorrah. You are worse than Samaria. You have been worse. Than the Canaanites before you. This one would have been overwhelming.

Their depravity. He says. Those three. Pass into insignificance. Beside that of Jerusalem. No. Jerusalem is not a child of Abraham. No. She's a whore child of Canaan.

[19:11] And this whore child. Has set a new benchmark. For wickedness. And depravity. And her gross sinfulness. Deserves punishment. And in verses 53 to 59.

God then promises. The extraordinary. He promises. He'll restore Jerusalem. But there'll be no reason for pride. Because there'll be nothing in her. That deserves pride. And that'll be shown by the fact.

That Sodom. Samaria. And her daughters. Will be rescued as well. And finally. Look at 59 to 63. It's been unrelenting. So far.

Hasn't it? But look at 59 to 63. The allegory. Has had its shocking effect. Now things can be stated. In plain truth. Israel.

Has despised the oath. God says. I think what this means is. She has treated with contempt. God's promise. Of covenant curses. For breach of sin.

[20 : 08] God promised covenant curses. Right from the beginning. From when the covenant was enacted. And what she has done. Is ignored them. She's acted as though God would never act on his oath. She has broken covenant.

And the rules of any covenant. In the ancient Near East. Are clear. If one side breaks covenant. The other is free. To walk away from that covenant. The other has no further obligation.

But look at verse 60. Listen to it. Soak it in. For in yet another act of amazing grace. God says these words. Yet.

I will remember my covenant. With you. In the days of your youth. And I will establish with you. An everlasting covenant.

Incredibly. God looks beyond the judgment day. Of Jerusalem. And the effect of his grace. Will be that Jerusalem. Will remember her. Youthful sin. She will be ashamed.

[21 : 08] She will know the Lord. And never again. Will she open her mouth. In complaint. Against God's activity. Her mouth will be silenced. By his overwhelming. And awesome grace.

Now friends. There's our first allegory. Now. It's been tough going. Isn't it? Take another. We're going to now take a quick look at. Chapter 23. And I'm going to deal with it more quickly.

And then we look at the problems raised by it. The ones that are probably running around in your mind already. And also at the incredible truths within them. So let's go on. Turn with me to Ezekiel 23.

You're doing well tonight. Because it's a warm day isn't it? And. You're staying with me so far. Most of you. So. Well done. In chapter 23. The word of the Lord to Ezekiel. Concerns two sisters.

In verses one to four. They're introduced. Now. Then. And. First thing is. They're named. Now the names are just. The nonsensical names. Really. They just come out of anywhere. And. The name of the older one.

[22 : 07] Is. Ahola. She represents the northern tribes. The ten northern tribes. With their capital at Samaria. And the other is named. Aholibah.

And. Aholibah. Is the southern tribes. You know. Those two remaining tribes. With their capital at Jerusalem. Now look at verse three. For the second thing. It tells us that. They were in their adolescence.

These. Two young women. That is. Before they were married to the Lord. They lived as whores. The literal language is. That they let their. Their breasts be squeezed. And in Egypt.

Their virgin nipples. Were fondled. It's very explicit language. In the original. Ah. This is probably an allusion. To the fact. That in the days of Moses. The Israelites were reluctant. To leave Egypt.

Do you remember that? Every time they got close to the. To leaving. They say. Oh no. No. It's too much for us. And they back out. So they loved Egypt. There's probably a way of saying. You were lovers of Egypt. Or if you want the language of the book of Hebrews.

[23 : 03] They found fleeting pleasures. The fleeting pleasures of sin. In Egypt. An attractive option. The third thing we're told about these sisters. Is that they are the lords.

I think this means. After their time in Egypt. They were married to him. In other words. It's a way of saying. When they came out of Egypt. They went to Mount Sinai. They entered into covenant with God. Into a covenant relationship with him.

And then verse 4 says. They bore him sons and daughters. Now the sins of Ahola. Outline in verses 5 to 10. We're told she lusted after Assyria.

Because of his military strength. And grandeur. And again the language I might say. Is very explicit here. And has been somewhat glossed over. By our virgins in a couple of places. Basically it says. She continued the sexual addiction.

That she had experienced in Egypt. This time she seeks gratification. With the Assyrians. And verse 7 says. That her lust spread itself. Not only to political alliances.

[23 : 59] But also to the world of their idols. She gave. And however God. Used the very same lovers. As agents of his judgment. And he gave her into their hands.

And verse 10 says. They seized her sons and daughters. And killed her with the sword. And that of course is the destruction. Of the northern tribes in Samaria. Verses 11 to 35.

Outline the exploits of Ahola's little sister. Aholi Bar. Had a look over at Ahola. And she saw what she did. And she saw what she received.

For doing it. And she excelled. Even more than over her sister. Verse 11 says. She was more corrupt in her lusting and whoring. However the objects of her lust.

Were not primarily the Assyrians. So they did include the Assyrians. But the Babylonians. And after having engaged sexually with them. That is formed allegiances and alliances with them.

[24 : 54] She turned from them in disgust. And flaunted herself. Before others such as the Egyptians. And in verse 20 the NRSV does capture some of what this says. It preserves the explicitness of the original language.

She lusted after her paramours there. Whose members were like those of donkeys. And whose omission was like those of stallions. And in verse 23 to 35 indicates that God's response is strong.

He will bring her former lovers and others. And they will attack her on every side. They'll mutilate her. Seize her sons and daughters. Burn any survivors.

Denude her of wealth and finery. And verses 32 to 35. Put it in poetic form. And I'm going to read it to you. Thus says the Lord God. You shall drink your sister's cup.

Deep and wide. You shall be scorned and derided. It holds much. You shall be filled with drunkenness and sorrow. A cup of horror.

[25 : 56] And desolation is the cup of your sister Samaria. And you shall drink it. And drain it out. And gnaw its sherds. And tear out your breasts.

For I have spoken says the Lord God. And all of this because the Lord's people forgot him. And they cast him behind their back. God is clear in sentencing in 36 to 49.

He says judgment is happening. It is coming. And it will happen because you two sisters committed adultery with their idols. You offered your children to your lovers as food. You defiled God's sanctuary.

You profaned his Sabbath. And the chapter concludes with an announcement of terrifying judgment. And unlike chapter 16. There is no hope offered.

Israel shall bear the penalty of her sinful idolatry. And they shall know that he is the Lord God. Friends, there are the two allegories of Ezekiel.

[26 : 54] Now when you go through them like this. And you put together the imagery. And I've tried to just sort of tell you them as they come. I don't know about you. But they are overwhelming. They are overwhelming.

And as I've indicated to you, the language in the original is graphic and coarse, if not sort of bawdy or even close on, you know, very explicit, if not semi-pornographic.

The violence exercised by all parties, including God, is of a kind which both ancient and modern sensibilities react to rightly. However, let's be careful, friends, that we don't misread these passages.

Please be careful. For a start, there is no degradation of human sexuality here. There is just abuse of it. That is, people have abused their own sexuality. Nor is there any endorsement of abusive relationships.

That is not here. The relationships that are held out as right and good are ones of compassion and grace and kindness. The revulsion that we feel is clearly what the writer wanted us to feel.

[27 : 59] Please hear me on that. These stories were intended to revolt us. They were intended to give in us that intense sense of, how could this be?

They were designed to shock, both in words and in the depiction of violence. So if that's the case, friends, why is this? Why did God call Ezekiel his prophet to go using such language and imagery?

Why did he call upon him to speak so harshly to his beloved people? Well, let me suggest one answer. One answer is that it's necessary because of the attitude of his people.

You see, as you read through the Old Testament, you often get the impression, don't you, that there was a prominent view among people that things would always end up okay.

You see, there are groups of people who were convinced that God's blessings were sure. You see, they knew that way back with Moses, he had revealed himself as a God who relents from sending disaster.

[29 : 06] Those words were uttered after the golden calf incident back in Exodus 32 to 34. When God reveals himself, he says, I am the Lord, the Lord, the gracious and compassionate God, abounding in love and steadfastness and faithfulness.

And he'd continually shown himself to be like that. In fact, the minor prophets, the 12 prophets, they even added a clause to what was there in Exodus 32. They said, and he relents from sending disaster.

And so, you see, many of the people heard these things and they had a tendency to think that God would do so again. And even though some of them were already off in Babylon, there were people and movements within Israel that sensed that what was going on at the moment, the first exile, was just a bit overdone.

And God knew that and he'd back off. However, Ezekiel and the other prophets had come to a growing realisation that there would be no relenting this time. And what's more, they knew that God had indeed been long-suffering.

He had forgiven his people time after time after time after time. And that what was going to happen to Jerusalem was more than deserved. Now, because of the people's reluctance to hear that message, a special tactic was needed.

[30 : 25] A special tactic. And one part of that, I think, was to go through Israel's history graphically, as Ezekiel does, to this point. To show just how awful, how culpable Israel's sin was.

And how punishment was inevitable. Let me give you an example of what I think is going on in Ezekiel. I'm going to give you two illustrations. The first one is, I want you to imagine that you are like me, an Australian who loves their country.

Now, and you think Australia is the best country on earth. And you think it's just. You think it's fair. You think that its people are friendly. And you think that it's, you like this reputation that Australia has for itself.

And you think it's beyond dispute. And you think it's been there all along. What's more, you are so convinced about this that it shapes your own self-identity. You are intensely proud of your country and patriotic about it.

Now, imagine someone turned up one day and said, look, you're totally wrong. Your view about Australia is incorrect. Now, how would you react?

[31 : 35] Oh, if you're like me, you'd want to sort of discount it as quickly as you could. What's more, you'd argue against them strongly and passionately. Now, I wonder if that was the case.

How might someone choose to get through to you? If it's so ingrained in you. Well, someone might want to prove that your view is a little over strong by shocking you out of your complacency.

And how might you go about that? Well, one way might be to tell you graphic stories and to show you vivid pictures of the cruelty enacted by white Australians upon Aboriginal people in Australia in the first hundred years or so.

Some of the short stories are shocking. We cleared Tasmania virtually. Can you see what I'm saying? To overcome complacency, vivid portrayal is often necessary.

Now, our governments and advertising agencies know this. They know this. You can see it on the history of cigarette boxes in Australia. Do you remember?

[32 : 41] First, they had no warnings. And then they had warnings that, you know, smoking can be a serious danger to health. Then you became a bit more explicit. You said it'll cause cancer for you. Now, there's a packet I found just outside my house.

Been lying in the lane there for a few days and I picked up the other day. And it is a graphic picture of a person's mouth riddled with cancer on the very cigarette box. So that when you pick it up, you see it there.

Now, we've also seen it in Australia, haven't we, and other countries around the world in relation to drink driving. At first, people are given facts and figures and verbal warnings. But those don't work.

Or they gradually have the cutting edge taken off them. And so when facts and figures no longer work on people, what do you do? You resort to shock tactics, don't you? Vivid imagery is paraded before us on our television screens.

And we are taken into the lounge rooms of those who are killed in car accidents. And we watch them grieving. And we're shown photos that leave very little to the imagination.

[33 : 45] And things that happen just off screen as cars hit people. Friends, I think that this is what Ezekiel is faced with. He's faced with a complacent and disbelieving audience who think that it's not going to happen to them.

And so God gives him some graphic street theatre and vivid, shocking stories of whores in order to paint a picture that people might take notice of.

So with that in mind, that God wants us to take notice of something. Let's see what we can learn. From those allegories. You see, they are full of amazing theological insight.

They tell us incredible things about God. They tell us incredible things about ourselves. So let's not stand in judgment of the mechanism God uses. But let's see what God has to say through that mechanism.

Let's allow God to be God and have our ears open and our hearts soft to his direction. Let's turn to ourselves first.

[34 : 47] Friends, the picture presented in this chapter, of these chapters, has a spiritual ancestry. Let me explain what I mean by that. You see, the chapters we have looked at, Ezekiel 16 and 23, are at the back pages of Israel's history.

They're toward the end of the Bible. But they cannot be understood without the front pages of Israel's history. You see, and at the front pages, you will not find Israel.

Israel doesn't occur until chapter 12 of Genesis. You will not find Israel at the front pages of Israel's history. No, the front pages of the history of God's people begins at a garden in Genesis 1 to 3.

And chapters 2 and 3 of Genesis tell us the facts that lie behind the history of Israel. They tell us that all humans are sinful. And God gives them everything they need.

He gives them this wonderful garden full of wonderful things. He lavishes upon them awesome grace and beauty. He gives them to each other. And he gives them a garden filled with good things.

[35 : 55] And most wonderfully, he gives them unfettered access to him. And he walks among them. He's accessible. He's available. He's loving.

And he's generous. And they turn and they do what all human beings do. They squander his generosity and his grace for self-rule.

Though they belong to him, they seek to belong to no one else but themselves. Friends, can you hear the news from Genesis 2 and 3?

It is this. Israel's no different to their ancestors. And their ancestors are us. Their ancestors are humans like us.

All humans are spiritual adulterers. All humans engage in whoredom in the sense that they want to replace God by themselves. And the story of Israel is not the story of some distant group of people in history that are somehow, somehow different to everyone else.

[37 : 03] No, their story is our story. We are with them. And left on our own, we are without God and without hope in the world. Now let's turn to see what we learn about God in these chapters.

If that's us, what do we learn about God? Now the truths that arise out of this chapter about God are rich and full. For example, these chapters interact with the awful truth about us.

By telling us an awesome truth about God. And the truth is that the God presented here in these chapters is a God who is not just, just in judgment.

If you want some more on that, listen to the tape from the other night, from Sunday night. He's not just, just in judgment. But he's overwhelming in grace. Friends, answer me this.

What sort of person would take back the wives of chapter 16 and 23? What sort of person would welcome those whores back?

[38 : 12] What sort of person would cohabit with them again? Well, the Lord God would. And chapters 40 to 48, picture him doing it.

40 to 48 paints this magnificent picture of a reconstituted temple city. And the tribes of Israel are all there. Their gates have their names on them.

And the closing verse of Ezekiel 40 says this. The very closing verse of the whole book of 48 tells us this. It says, that city, it has a name.

And the name is, the Lord is there. Friends, the God of these chapters and the God of Ezekiel is a God of awesome grace who chooses to live among his people, though they don't deserve it.

There is nothing in these people that deserves such grace. There is nothing in us that deserves such grace. And yet our story will finish in the same place.

- [39 : 25] In a garden city. In the book of Revelation. With God there and the Lamb standing in the midst. You see, such grace has no limits.
- If it can reach out to wanton whores like Israel. And it has no limits. If it can reach out to rebels like us.
- And we know this. For we who have read the New Testament know the lengths that God has gone to. In order to have company with us. He has sent his only son into the world that we might be no longer without God and without hope in the world.
- As Paul says in Ephesians 2. We were dead through our trespasses and sins. We were children of God's wrath. But God acted in mercy.
- He reached out in rich mercy. Out of the great love. Out of his great love. He made us alive together with Christ. Can you hear that? He made us alive together with Christ.
- [40 : 31] By grace he saved us. And what did he do with us? He raised us up with Christ. And seated us where? In his presence. In the heavenly places. He cohabited with us.
- For by his grace we have been saved through faith. And it's not our own doing. But it is the gift of God. For there was nothing in us that earned it.
- Friends. Our God is one who can take wretched sinners. And make them saints. Who can make enemies friends. Who can take outcasts.
- And put them into his very presence. Without such a God we are nothing. But with such a God. We are everything. So if that is the case.
- Let me urge you to cast yourself upon him. And to beg him for help. To plead with him for mercy. And to thank him for the mercy you found in Jesus Christ.
- [41 : 29] And determine that you will live. As the faithful bride. Of his son. Friends. There is. Only a few truths that I have given you tonight.
- That saturate these chapters. I want to make one more observation. Of a far more practical sort. And that is this. Do you know. When I read through these chapters. I find one aspect of it.
- That revolts me enormously. And I bet it revolts you too. And I know it revolts God. What is it?
- What is it in these chapters. That makes us react to them. So so strongly. Friends. I can tell you what it is. At least what it is for me. It is the ugliness.
- Of the unfaithfulness. Of these women. It is the sheer ugliness of it. It is revolting. This ugliness of unfaithfulness.
- [42 : 30] Is ugly to God as well. For you see friends. Our God is a God of faithfulness. And when he gives himself to someone. He does not opt out.
- His nature is to be faithful. He has made us relational beings. He has made us to live under his rule. And to imitate his character. And God's character.
- Has a deep seated revulsion. And disgust at unfaithfulness. And friends. We must have this as well. Faithfulness is far more important.
- Than stirring in our loins. It is far more important. Than the fleeting attractiveness. Of someone not your spouse. Faithfulness. Faithfulness is God likeness. So I urge you tonight.
- To imitate the God. Who is faithful to you. And his ancient people Israel. Be faithful. Even though God is faithful. And I don't just mean in marriage. I mean in everything you are in.
- [43 : 33] Let faithfulness. Filter down to every corner. Of your existence. For God is a faithful God. It sits at the core. Of his character.

So in every area of life. Be faithful. For he finds unfaithfulness. Revolting. Because it is not like him.

Let's pray. Father God. These stories are so stirring. In so many ways.

And in some ways. We want to hold ourselves back from them. But we thank you. That through them. You have told us. Incredible things about ourself. And about you. And yes.

You have shocked us somewhat. But Father. Sometimes we know. That our complacency. Needs some jolting. Father. We thank you for these words.

[44 : 30] From you. Through Ezekiel. And we pray that. In these coming days. You would help us. Remember them. Imbibe them. Think on them more. And respond rightly to you.

In response. We pray this. In Jesus name. Amen.