The going and coming of God’s gracious presence

Text: Ezekiel 8-11

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**Scriptures:** Exodus 20:1-3; 1 Cor 10:1-14; Ezekiel 8-11

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 96, 455, 204, 176, 106

Series: Ezekiel (sermon #4)

Theme: Fourteen months after the vision of the glory of the Lord in Babylon, Ezekiel has a vision of the idolatries and then of the fearsome judgement of God in the Jerusalem Temple, from where his presence had departed; also hearing God’s promise of a renewed covenant relationship with a remnant of Israel who have been scattered.

Proposition: Be both warned and encouraged; the judgement of the Lord begins with His church, but he remains ever faithful to His promise to rescue a people for Himself in Christ.

**Introduction**

I enjoy a range of different types of movies. My children think that I actually like romantic ‘chick flicks’, targeted especially to a female audience, which I watch with my wife on occasion. Of course, I don’t enjoy them for myself, I just view them for Jenny’s sake. 😊 However, there are some types of films I do not enjoy, and I will not watch. One of the categories I always avoid is horror movies. They tend to be graphic, shocking, scary, ugly and violent.

In the Bible, the Lord has not provided us with ‘moving pictures’. He has given us the Scripture which contains ‘word pictures’. We’ve already seen in the book of Ezekiel the opening vision of God’s glory coming in judgement upon Israel, but also that he was with His people in their exile in Babylon. We’ve seen that Ezekiel was called as God’s prophet to speak His Word to a rebellious people. We’ve seen Ezekiel instructed by God to act out the coming siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of people, property and nation as the Lord’s wrath comes. The people had broken the terms of the covenant agreement with God and would suffer the terrible consequences of turning away from Him.

Our focus this morning is on chapters 8-11 where we hear a warning of the terrible consequences of idolatry in the church, but also a message of encouragement in the mercy and grace of God in Christ.

1. **Abominable worship (8)**

The word ‘core’ means the central part of something. ‘Core’ in English comes from the French word ‘coeur’, meaning heart. The expression ‘rotten to the core’ means thoroughly bad, totally evil. When a government or other institution is described as ‘rotten to the core’ it is corrupt through and through. Like an apple which looks rotten on the outside and no matter how many layers or pieces you remove, there is nothing fresh and good to eat – right down to the innermost center.

In this second vision, which Ezekiel receives from the Lord, he sees that the Jerusalem temple is ‘rotten to the core’. The false worship which was being practiced there was an abomination. It wasdisgusting, detestable, loathsome. Like four scenes from a horror movie, Ezekiel moves from the outer part of the temple to the inner court.

**In ‘scene 1’** (8:5-6) he sees ‘north of the altar gate’ an ‘image of jealousy’. This is most likely an idol of the Canaanite goddess Asherah positioned at the outside of the entrance to the temple outer court. This image provokes the Lord to jealousy (8:3 cf. Deut 32:16). God will not share his glory with another (Ex 20:1-6; Isa 42:8).

**In ‘scene 2’** (8:10-12) Ezekiel goes through a hole in a wall to the entrance of the temple courtyard. There he sees engraved artwork on the walls depicting ceremonially unclean creatures - insects, reptiles, vermin – ‘the idols of Israel’. This form of false worship was similar to the religion of Egypt. Seventy of the elders of Israel are there offering worship and incense to inanimate murals carved into the walls of the temple. (Burning incense in this part of the temple was a rite only performed by priests – Ex 30:1-10; Num 16:40; 18:1-7; 2 Chron 26:16-21). Jaazaniah is identified as joining in this pagan worship. His father Shaphan had been a leader in Josiah’s great reform (2 Kings 22:3-20). In one generation, the nation had slid backwards again into idolatry.

Here were Israel’s leaders actively engaged in pursuing evil. They had lost faith in their God believing that ‘*The LORD does not see us, the LORD has forsaken the land*’ (8:12). The truth is that there are no secrets to be kept from the Lord, who sees and knows everything all the time (e.g. Ps 139:1-10). In the face of the threat of further invasion by the Babylonians, these leaders may well have feared slavery (remembering the captivity of Israel in Egypt), yet sadly and ironically, they became slaves of idols.

**In ‘scene 3’** (8:14-15) Ezekiel moves to the north gate of temple itself and sees there ‘*women weeping for Tammuz*’ (8:15). Tammuz was a fertility god of the underworld in the mythology of Babylon. The women were engaged in the summer ritual of mourning the annual death of Tammuz – as reflected, they thought, in the drying up of plants in the summer. They were seeking his ‘resurrection’ and return the following spring. The weeping women represented the religion of Babylon. Lamentation for a dead false god had replaced true worship of the Living God.

Finally, **in ‘scene 4’** (8:16-18) Ezekiel arrives at the inner court of the temple. There he sees 25 men, most likely priests, ‘*worshipping the sun*’. This is shocking. These men were facing the wrong way!, having ‘turned their backs’ on the Lord in order to follow the cult practice of worshipping the solar deity – a form of idolatry which was widely practiced in the Ancient Near East.

In summary, the Lord says to Ezekiel that those back in Jerusalem and wider Israel were **practicing abominable worship**. They were ‘*putting the branch to their nose*’ (8:17). We’re not exactly sure what this refers to, but it understood to be an insulting gesture – a defiant act of idolatry. Notice also the connection between false worship and immorality. The idolatrous Israelites had ‘*filled the land with violence*’ (8:17).

The vision of Ezekiel depicts the idols of the nations coming into the place where the LORD had chosen to make his name dwell (Deut 12:11). The holy place where God’s presence dwelt had been desecrated, disrespected.

Idols, false gods, come in many different forms and types. For example, when Jesus found money-changers in the Jerusalem Temple (which King Herod had rebuilt), he drove them out, quoting from the prophet Jeremiah (7:11), saying: '*My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you make it a den of robbers*" (Matt 21:13). As Jesus said, “*You cannot serve God and money*” (Matt 6:24b).

Christ himself is the new temple. After his completed work on the cross, God’s presence does not dwell in a physical building today; neither in Jerusalem nor in a church building at Cornwall Street, Christchurch. The body of Christ, the church gathered, is the new temple on earth (2 Cor 6:16) where idolatry, false worship, has no place.

In Ezekiel’s vision, God’s presence leaves the Jerusalem temple (10:4; 18; 11:23). God is ‘driven out of His house’ by idol worship there. The going away of God’s presence from the Temple would have been an utterly shocking event for Israel. His leaving of the place where He had chosen to make his name dwell was most certainly not because the Lord is ‘on the run’ as some kind of weakened or powerless deity. This divine departure necessary because true and false worship cannot co-exist.

In the aftermath of the 15th March shooting of Muslim worshippers in the Al Noor Mosque here in Christchurch there has been an outpouring of grief, sympathy and compassion to all those affected. This has been right and good. There have also been ‘interfaith’ services where the God of the Bible and Allah, the god of Islam, are both ‘worshipped’. This is neither right nor good. In the terminology of our text it is ‘an abomination’. As someone has wisely said ‘*The true temple has room only for one God*’.

Brothers and sisters in the Lord, each one of us is a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19). The Lord calls us all to ‘*flee idolatry*’ (1 Cor 10:14). There is only room for one God/god in your heart and in mine. If Christ is the greatest love of your life, if God’s presence in your life is that which you most fear losing, if serving the Lord is the highest motivation in your life, then there is no room for any idol to come in!

However, if idols have entered your heart then you, like the Jerusalem temple in Ezekiel’s day, are ‘rotten to the core’. You need Christ to drive your idols out so that He may ‘take up residence’ on the throne of your heart. Be warned today by the chilling words of the Lord to His rebellious people Israel: “*Therefore I will act in wrath. My eye will not spare, nor will I have pity. And though they cry in my ears with a loud voice, I will not hear them*." (Eze 8:18) These are words which speak of his fearsome judgement, the subject of our 2nd point:

1. **Fearsome judgment (9-11:18)**

There is another category of movie that I avoid: graphic violence. If the vision which Ezekiel saw in Sept 592BC, 14 months after the first vision, was made into a feature film which accurately depicted its extreme ugliness and violence then it would certainly need to have an R18 rating.

Six men come from the upper gate to the north – the direction associated with attack and judgement on Israel. They are executioners armed with ‘weapons for slaughter’ – most likely clubs. In the vision they may represent the Lord’s angels or his agent for judgement, the Babylonian army (Hab 1:5-11), or both. God commands a fearsome, widespread, slaughter in the Temple: **“***Kill old men outright, young men and maidens, little children and women, but touch no one on whom is the mark. And begin at my sanctuary*." (Eze 9:6) "*Defile the house, and fill the courts with the slain. Go out*." (Eze 9:7)

Why would the Lord allow the place where He had chosen to make his name dwell (Deut 12.11) to be strewn with dead (ceremonially unclean) bodies? Because it was no longer His house. It had become a temple of idols. God had left the house of his former dwelling, which was no longer a holy place. His glory had departed from there (10:4). This fearsome judgement from the Lord starts in the temple and then works outwards into the city.

In chapter 10, Ezekiel sees the throne-chariot of the Lord which had appeared to him in the first vision. The man who is clothed in linen, is instructed to: “*Go in among the whirling wheels underneath the cherubim. Fill your hands with burning coals from between the cherubim, and scatter them over the city*” (10:2). The same burning coals that are representative of God’s purity are also used in his punishment of rebellious Israel.

If we hear ‘9/11’ today it brings to mind immediately the attacks on the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre in New York City on September 11, 2001 which destroyed the buildings, killing almost 3000 people and injuring over 6,000. In a similar way, the words ‘Sodom and Gomorrah’ brought vividly to the minds of the Old Testament Israelites the fearful judgement of the Lord on these wicked cities (Gen 19:23-29). In Ezekiel’s vision, God’s fiery wrath would fall on the promised land of Israel because of her abominations,

In chapter 11, God’s judgement comes the leaders of the city, twenty five men who ‘*devise iniquity and who give wicked counsel*’ (11:2). These were the people who took control when the Babylonians had captured Jerusalem in 597BC, deporting the King (Jehoiachin), the royal family and the leading citizens and craftsmen (2 Kings 24:14). There was a ‘power vacuum’ left by the invaders and these men filled it. They say of themselves ‘*This city is the cauldron, and we are the meat*’ (11:3). This doesn’t sound very flattering, but it was to them! In contrast to the offal portion of the meat which was thrown on the fire, they saw themselves as the best part – to be put into the pot. (An alternative could be that they saw themselves as safer in the city of Jerusalem than the exiles who had been forcibly taken away). We might say ‘*better to be in the frying pan than in the fire*’. These wicked leaders were proud of the fact that they had not been sent away to exile – they were in the ‘frying pan’ of Jerusalem, not the ‘fire’ of Babylon.

The Lord turns their words around. They are the ‘meat’ and the city whilst being the ‘cauldron’, will not protect them. God says “*I will bring you out of the midst of it, and give you into the hands of foreigners, and execute judgments upon you. You shall fall by the sword. I will judge you at the border of Israel, and you shall know that I am the LORD*”. (11:9-10) In the vision, whilst Ezekiel is prophesying judgement against the wicked leaders, one of them, Pelatiah, drops dead. This sudden death powerfully demonstrates the awful reality of the wrath of God just as the death of Ananias and then Saphira did to the New Testament church (Acts 5:5; 10). Luke records that after this swift judgement that “*great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things*” (Acts 5:11).

We would be foolish of us not to hear the warning which comes to us from this vision first given to Ezekiel and then written down for our instruction. God does judge wickedness. This is revealed through the removal of physical blessings from Israel in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, Christ removes spiritual blessing from local churches who do not turn away from their wickedness and return to Him. Think for example of Christ’s words to the church in Ephesus: **“***Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent*” (Rev 2:5). Or to Pergamum **“***Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth*” (Rev 2:16).

There are many empty church buildings in the Western world, which have been converted into coffee shops, luxury apartments and restaurants. The Lord’s presence is clearly no longer there with his people. At some time in the past, there would have been people worshipping in these church buildings, but in many cases they were not worshipping the Living God, but idols of their own making. Many of these churches no longer exist.

Old Testament scholar Ian Duguid comments that: “*God does not always continue to bless forms and institutions that he has blessed in the past, nor is he always found in the large and apparently successful churches. In the Bible, he is most often found with the poor and weak, the despised and rejected, those whom the world regards as castoffs*” (Ezekiel, NAC, p155).

So what can you and I do? “*love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might*” (Deut 6:5). Thereby, keep idols far from your heart. If we are all faithful in this, idols will be far from the church gathered and we need not fear the departure of the Lord’s glory from us. Instead we can look forward to God’s gracious renewal, the subject of our 3rd point:

1. **Gracious renewal (9:4; 11:16-25)**

If you’ve read or watched any of Shakespeare’s ‘tragedies’, you’ll know that the ‘body count’ can be quite high. Here are the ‘top three’ of his tragic plays: Titus Andronicus 14, King Lear 10, Hamlet 9. I imagine that there are some violent horror movies which end with everyone dead at the end.

As Ezekiel watched this vision unfold, the question on his mind was “will there be any of God’s people left alive at the end of the ferocious judgement?” In his words “*Will you destroy all the remnant of Israel in the outpouring of your wrath on Jerusalem?*” (9:8).

It is very clear from the vision that **not all** will die by the judgement of God on Israel. With the six executioners in chapter 9 comes a seventh man who has, not a weapon in his hand, but a writing case at his waist. In those days writing cases were often wooden boxes, containing quill pens, ink, a small knife and some sheets of parchment. The seventh man’s task is not to execute idolaters, but to mark the foreheads of those “*who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in*" the temple (9:4). (Perhaps if this vision were made into a movie today, the 7th man would use a barcode sticker dispenser to mark those who would be spared from the fearsome judgement of the Lord).

This is very much like the judgement of God on the Egyptians in the tenth plague in the time of Moses. All those who had the ‘mark’ of the blood of the Passover lamb on the entranceway to their homes were spared (Ex 12:13). In Ezekiel’s vision, the protective mark was put on those who were deeply grieved by false worship, by the idolatry within the temple. They were the people of true faith and love for the Lord. They were people who were covered by the protective blood of Christ (in those days yet to be shed) for all who trust in the promise of God.

These true worshippers are part of the church universal described this way in Rev 14:1 “*Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads*.”

It is instructive to know that the name of the wicked leader Pelatiah, who died as Ezekiel prophesied, means ‘the Lord delivers’. Not that Pelatiah himself was saved, but that in the midst of his righteous judgement, the Lord displays his mercy. The Lord explains this in 11:16 “*Though I removed them far off among the nations, and though I scattered them among the countries, yet I have been a sanctuary to them for a whilein the countries where they have gone*”.

This is a message to the exiles in Babylon. As refugees forcibly deported to a foreign land they were wounded, weakened, vulnerable and grieving in a place which is far away from home. “*By the waters of Babylon they sat down and wept*” (Psalm 137:1). Their lives had been battered and their dreams shattered, and yet, even in this, the Lord was their sanctuary, their temple. His glorious presence had gone from Jerusalem, but it had come to them in Babylon.

Over 2,500 years later, the Apostle Peter would write to New Testament believers, scattered in exile amongst the nations. He explained that their suffering was part of the outworking of the judgement of God, which ‘*begins with the family of God*’ (1 Peter 4:17).

In the church we experience the judgement of God in various ways e.g. the deposition from office of ministers and elders under discipline, the excommunication of members, the removal of spiritual blessings and, at times, the closure of local churches. These are painful circumstances in the life of the church where her members suffer, and yet God uses these painful judgements for the purification (Mal 7:14; Heb 12:9-11) and/or strengthening of faith (1:6,7). So it was for the exiles in Babylon. God had preserved them. For those who would listen to His words through Ezekiel, He was purifying them and strengthening their faith in the painful circumstances of their suffering.

In Ezekiel’s first vision God had revealed that His glorious presence was with his people in the midst of their exile. Whilst the images in the vision Ezekiel received were not intended to be precise details of exactly what the idolatry and subsequent judgement would look like, the vision accurately depicts the spiritual bankruptcy and the ferocity of the subsequent conquest by the invading Babylonians.

At the beginning of chapter 8, the elders, leaders of the exiled community, come to see the prophet. The vision which he received is revealed in 8:2- 11:24 and is then reported to them (11:25). The vision is like a horror movie with extreme violence. It serves as a warning of the ferocity of God’s coming judgement on sin at the end of this age.

Anyone who is wise will seek shelter in Christ, who Himself suffered the terrible wrath of God, so that all who believe in Him would not. The promise to these exiles was that God would renew His covenant with Israel. You can see this clearly in the words which Ezekiel is given:

1. There would be a **new Exodus** from the places of exile: *“I will gather you from the peoples and assemble you out of the countries where you have been scattered*” (11:17a)
2. There would be a **restored, cleansed, land**: *“I will give you the land of Israel.' And when they come there, they will remove from it all its detestable things and all its abominations*” (11:17b-18).
3. There would be **renewed** spiritual life *“AND I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh*” (Eze 11:19)

The message to the exiles is one of hope from their gracious God. Brothers and sisters in our Lord, this message to us is also one of hope. In Christ, there is a **new Exodus** – a deliverance from slavery to sin. In Christ, there is a **new, cleansed, land**, not the cursed earth we currently live on, but a New Heavens and a New Earth. A New Jerusalem where ‘*the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them and they will be his people*’. In Christ, we are **‘new creations’** (2 Cor 5:17) who have been born again (John 3:3) having been made alive with Christ (Eph 4:4).

Brothers and sisters, by grace we have been saved! (Eph 4:5). Therefore let us ‘flee idolatry’ (1 Cor 10:14).

Amen.