

Why is God Good to Us?
Ezekiel 20

Turn to Ezekiel 20 please. This will really be the end of the Prophet Tour series the time being. When I was reading through Ezekiel earlier in spring, this chapter was as startling to me as any section of the prophets so far. I did not preach chapter 20 to you while we were going through Ezekiel, because I did not like it, pure and simple. It did not feel like good news, it distressed me.

I did not want to bring Ezk 20 to you until I could find good news in here. But Ezk 20 also grabbed me, and I could not leave it alone, read it many times. And I have come to love what's in here, and I hope I can give this to you that way.

Ezk 20 begins with a paragraph of introduction, vv1-4, and then we have the whole history of Israel in seven stages. The first stage is Israel in Egypt, where the book of Exodus begins, and the seventh stage is Israel restored to the land and serving God, still in the future. We'll go over the introduction and the first stage with some care, after that we'll go more quickly.

Why is God Good to his People when they Sin?

That's the question this chapter answers. What made this Scripture painful to Israel, and to us, is not the question. It's a common question. It's the answer. The normal answer, in the OT and the NT, for God's goodness when his people sin, is that he loves his covenant people. He forgives them and treats them well because of his mercy and compassion. That's NOT the answer here.

Introduction: the Elders of Israel Inquire (20:1-4)

In the seventh year, in the fifth month on the tenth day, some of the elders of Israel came to inquire of the Lord, and they sat down in front of me. Then the word of the Lord came to me: "Son of man, speak to the elders of Israel and say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Have you come to inquire of me? As surely as I live, I will not let you inquire of me, declares the Sovereign Lord.' "Will you judge them? Will you judge them, son of man? Then confront them with the detestable practices of their ancestors.

Ezekiel's opening vision in Ezk 1 was in the fifth year of his exile. His vision of God's glory leaving the temple, chs 8-11, was in the sixth year. This is in the seventh year.

The elders come to ask the Lord a question. We don't know what the question was, but it was probably, "when will God bring us exiles back to Judah and Jerusalem?" The third Babylonian invasion had not happened yet, that happened in the twelfth year, so the temple and the city were still in good shape. And they want to go back.

"Will you judge them? Will you judge them, son of man?" This is probably not a question. When you come into a room, and see your child hacking away at their hair with a pair of scissors, you

might say, “what are you doing?” But it is not a question. You can see what they are doing. What you really mean is, “What you are doing is terrible! Stop this minute!”

What God means is, “Judge them, son of man! Condemn them! They came to hear from me? You make sure they hear from me! Here’s what you tell them.”

Stage One: Israel in Egypt (20:5-9)

Say to them, “This is what the Sovereign Lord says: On the day I chose Israel, I swore with uplifted hand to the descendants of Jacob, and revealed myself to them in Egypt. With uplifted hand, I said to them, “I am Yahweh your God.” On that day, I swore to them that I would bring them out of Egypt, into a land I had searched out for them, a land flowing with milk and honey, the most beautiful of all lands. And I said to them, “Each of you, get rid of the vile images you have set your eyes on, and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt. I am Yahweh your God.” “But they rebelled against me, and would not listen to me; they did not get rid of the vile images they had set their eyes on, nor did they forsake the idols of Egypt. So I said I would pour out my wrath on them, and spend my anger against them, in Egypt. But for the sake of my name, Yahweh, I brought them out of Egypt. I did it to keep my name from being profaned in the eyes of the nations, among whom they lived, and in whose sight I had revealed myself to the Israelites.”

This is God on a day when he is totally fed up with his wayward people. Not feeling any love or compassion toward them. Is he still good to them, to us? Yes he is. Why? That the question: why is God still good to his people when he fed up with them, with us.

Here is what happened in the paragraph we just read. (1) God chose Israel and made a solemn promise, with uplifted hand – he would bring Israel out of Egypt, and into the most beautiful of all lands. (2) God gave commands to Israel in Egypt: get rid of the images you set your heart and eyes on, the idols of Egypt. (3) But Israel rebelled, carried on with the idols of Egypt.

(4) God was furious, he said he would destroy them right there in Egypt. He said it, but it was not a solemn promise. (5) God remembered his solemn promise, and brought them out of Egypt. Why? Because of his name, which here Ezekiel 20 means his honour, his reputation, his good name, before the nations, who watched his uplifted hand, and heard his solemn promise.

God absolutely will not give watching people a chance to mock or despise him. Why is God good to his people when he’s furious? To keep his good name before the watching nations.

Don’t miss God’s turmoil here. Our rebellion matters. Struggling with sin is one thing, that’s always common among his people, but this is about careless rebellion. Careless rebellion is another thing. It enrages God. On the other hand, he knows what he has promised, and he knows everyone is watching. This is very unpleasant for God. He’s holy, and he is torn.

But God had made a choice and a promise. He chose Israel, and made Israel a solemn promise. Another side to God’s holiness is his reputation and honour in the world.

He treats US well because THEY are watching HIM. In 2 Timothy, Paul says, *if we are faithless, he remains faithful, he cannot deny himself*. God's character requires him to keep his promises.

Stage Two: Israel in the Wilderness, First Generation (20:10-16)

Therefore I led them out of Egypt and brought them into the wilderness. 11 I gave them my decrees and made known to them my laws, by which the person who obeys them will live. 12 Also I gave them my Sabbaths as a sign between us, so they would know that I the Lord made them holy. 13 Yet the people of Israel rebelled against me in the wilderness. They did not follow my decrees but rejected my laws—by which the person who obeys them will live—and they utterly desecrated my Sabbaths. So I said I would pour out my wrath on them and destroy them in the wilderness. 14 But for the sake of my name I did what would keep it from being profaned in the eyes of the nations in whose sight I had brought them out. 15 Also with uplifted hand I swore to them in the wilderness that I would not bring them into the land I had given them—a land flowing with milk and honey, the most beautiful of all lands— 16 because they rejected my laws and did not follow my decrees and desecrated my Sabbaths. For their hearts were devoted to their idols.

Same five stages here: (1) God treated Israel well, he brought them out of Egypt. (2) He called them to obey, to live in his ways, which are the ways of life. (3) But Israel rebelled in the wilderness. (4) God said, I will pour out my wrath and destroy them. (5) For the sake of my name, in the eyes of the nations, who saw me bring Israel out of Egypt, I did not destroy Israel.

This paragraph adds another: (6) God solemnly promised that he would not bring that generation of Israel into the land. They were devoted to their idols, so they would not enter the land.

Stage Three: Israel in the Wilderness, Second Generation (20:17-26)

Yet I looked on the first generation with pity, and did not destroy them or put an end to them in the wilderness. 18 I said to their children in the wilderness, “Do not follow the statutes of your parents, or keep their laws, or defile yourselves with their idols. 19 I am the Lord your God; follow my decrees, and be careful to keep my laws. 20 Keep my Sabbaths holy, that they may be a sign between us. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God.” 21 But the children rebelled against me: They did not follow my decrees, they were not careful to keep my laws, of which I said, “The person who obeys them will live by them,” and they desecrated my Sabbaths. So I said I would pour out my wrath on them and spend my anger against them in the wilderness. 22 But I withheld my hand, and for the sake of my name I did what would keep it from being profaned in the eyes of the nations in whose sight I had brought them out. 23 Also with uplifted hand I swore to them in the wilderness that I would disperse them among the nations and scatter them through the countries, 24 because they had not obeyed my laws but had rejected my decrees and desecrated my Sabbaths, and their eyes lusted after their parents' idols. 25 So I gave them other statutes that were not good and laws through which they could not live; 26 I defiled them through their gifts—the sacrifice of every firstborn—that I might fill them with horror so they would know that I am the Lord.’

The same sequence here that we've already seen twice. And there's a sixth event here, too. Before God brought them into the promised land, while the second generation was still in the wilderness, God solemnly promised that he would scatter Israel among the nations. They had earned the exile before they even got into the promised land.

By the end of Deuteronomy, Moses was plain about this. Moses told Israel that they would keep sinning, and God would take them off the land he was about to give them.

By v26, three times God has been angry enough at his people to destroy them; and three times, for the sake of his name in the eyes of the watching world, he has been good to them. He chose Israel, and made promises, and he would keep them. Why is God good to his sinful people? To guard his name, his honour, his reputation. He's good to US because THEY watch HIM.

No other chapter of the Bible sounds like Ezk 20. We get hints of it, but nothing like this. Which is why we must consider this teaching. Don't let Ezk 20 erase what's clear in the rest of the Bible, that God loves his people and is a forgiving God. That's the main Bible teaching.

But remember this as well. God wants all his people to read and absorb this Scripture. It is not just about us. The good news, though, is that God has reason to bless to his people even after we have used up all his patience.

Example: God invites us each of us to say, "The LORD is my shepherd. Yahweh is my shepherd." Why is that so good for us? Because God invited us to announce: "The LORD is my shepherd." Now, *God* understands that everyone is watching *him* to see how *he* will do. *He leads in right paths for his name's sake*. His honour is at stake, which is very good for us.

Stage Four: Israel in the Land (20:27-29)

"Therefore, son of man, speak to the people of Israel and say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: In this also your ancestors blasphemed me by being unfaithful to me: 28 When I brought them into the land I had sworn to give them and they saw any high hill or any leafy tree, there they offered their sacrifices, made offerings that aroused my anger, presented their fragrant incense and poured out their drink offerings. 29 Then I said to them: What is this high place you go to?'" (It is called Bamah to this day.)

Israel's whole time in the land gets a short paragraph. God kept his promise, brought Israel into the best land, but their idolatry continued, just like before.

Stage Five: Israel in Exile (20:30-33)

Now God speaks directly to those elders who are in front of Ezekiel: *Will you (Israelites in Babylon) defile yourselves the way your ancestors did and lust after their vile images? 31 When you offer your gifts—the sacrifice of your children in the fire—you continue to defile yourselves*

with all your idols to this day. Am I to let you inquire of me, you Israelites? As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I will not let you inquire of me. 32 You say, “We want to be like the nations, like the peoples of the world, who serve wood and stone.” But what you have in mind will never happen. (!!!) 33 As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I will reign over you with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with outpoured wrath.

One more astonishing paragraph. The exiles in Babylon, the Jews around Ezekiel, continue to serve wood and stone. Israelites in Babylon were still worshipping idols, up to and including sacrificing their children. Perhaps it was happening among the elders in front of Ezekiel.

Three times so far, God has said that his laws and commands bring life (vv11,13,21). And two times God has reminded them that they sacrifice their children to their idols, which is for God the horrible low point of idolatry. Do those gods bring life? Do their laws and commands bring life? They sacrifice their children. That does not sound like “life,” does it.

Take this seriously. God’s laws and commands bring life. Perhaps we don’t want God, or his laws and commands. Here’s what will happen: we will end up sacrificing our own children. God lets this happen, he says in v26, to fill people with horror at their own idolatry. Sacrificing our children has been happening through all of human history, and carries on in different ways.

Verse 32, God speaking to exiles: *You say, “We want to be like the nations, like the peoples of the world, who serve wood and stone.” But what you have in mind will never happen.*

Israel was entirely willing to leave God completely, to serve wood and stone. But God says, “it will never happen. I chose you, Israel, and I said I would bring you into the most beautiful land, and I will do it. With a mighty hand, and an outstretched arm, and with outpoured wrath, you will serve me in the best possible land. You shall not leave me to serve gods of wood and stone.”

I hardly know how to process a line like that, but that’s what God said. Ezk 11 and 36 speak about God giving Israelites a new heart and a new spirit, and putting his Spirit on them. That is still coming for Israel, and that’s how he’ll bring them into the final promised land.

Stage Six: Israel in the Wilderness of Nations (20:34-38)

I will bring you from the nations and gather you from the countries where you have been scattered—with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with outpoured wrath. 35 I will bring you into the wilderness of the nations and there, face to face, I will execute judgment upon you. 36 As I judged your ancestors in the wilderness of the land of Egypt, so I will judge you, declares the Sovereign Lord. 37 I will take note of you as you pass under my staff, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant. 38 I will purge you of those who revolt and rebel against me. Although I will bring them out of the land where they are living, yet they will not enter the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the Lord.

This was in Ezekiel's future, and this is still in our future. Romans 11 speaks of a future revival of Israel, the nation turning to God, and that's probably what this is about.

This is sort of like another Exodus. In the past, God took Israel out of Egypt into the wilderness, and then into the land. Here God will take scattered Israel into the wilderness of the nations, and there he will renew them.

Take note of you as you pass under my staff. A shepherd used his staff when he brought the sheep back into the fold at night, so he could take a look at each sheep, and sort them out. Some Israelites will be like that first generation in the wilderness, they continued to rebel against God because they were devoted to other gods, and they did not enter the land.

But others will be brought back into the covenant. God will give them a new heart and a new spirit, and he will put his Holy Spirit on them, and they will live in his ways. What Ezekiel does not see is that people from the nations, that's you and me, will be brought into that covenant with God before this revival of Israel takes place.

Stage Seven: Israel on God's Holy Mountain (20:39-44)

As for you, people of Israel, this is what the Sovereign Lord says: Go and serve your idols, every one of you! But afterward you will surely listen to me and no longer profane my holy name with your gifts and idols. 40 For on my holy mountain, the high mountain of Israel, declares the Sovereign Lord, there in the land all the people of Israel will serve me, and there I will accept them. There I will require your offerings and your choice gifts, along with all your holy sacrifices. 41 I will accept you as fragrant incense when I bring you out from the nations and gather you from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will be proved holy through you in the sight of the nations. 42 Then you will know that I am the Lord, when I bring you into the land of Israel, the land I had sworn with uplifted hand to give to your ancestors (back in v6). 43 There you will remember your conduct and all the actions by which you have defiled yourselves, and you will loathe yourselves for all the evil you have done. 44 You will know that I am Yahweh, when I deal with you for my name's sake and not according to your evil ways and your corrupt practices, you people of Israel, declares the Sovereign Lord.'"

Let's wrap this up. Should we put ourselves in this last verse? *"You will know that I am Yahweh, when I deal with you for my name's sake, and not according to your evil ways, and your corrupt practices, you people of Israel," declares the Sovereign Lord.*

I do not see this church doing the kind of things Ezk 20 talks about. But it is still true. God is still dealing with us here, you who listen to this, for his name's sake, and not according to our evil ways and our corrupt practices. Let's thank him, and serve him, and wait for the Lord Jesus.

We are Gentiles, and because of Jesus we have been brought into this covenant. We are meeting God in the wilderness of the nations ahead of Israel. Yes, let's put ourselves in this chapter.

The first line of the Lord's Prayer says, Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, holy be your name. Sounds like Ezk 20. Ezk 20 is a solid background for both Ps 23 and the Lord's Prayer. Ps 23 celebrates what God does for us because of his name, and in the Lord's Prayer, we submit to this, and join up, we join God in making sure his holy name is honoured.

Why do NT songs and blessings often end with, "to the praise and glory of God," or something like that? Because that's where this all ends up, with God having shown that he's the best God that could be, and we have benefited, beyond what we can imagine, from him keeping his name honourable. And so we will praise God and thank him and give him glory for ever and ever.

PRAYER: Father in heaven, this staggers us. It frightens us. We are not used to hearing you speak like this to your people. But we submit, Father. You are Yahweh Almighty. You're our God, and we're your people. We are not leaving you. Thank you for Jesus, who brings us in. We bow before you, and we worship you. You have certainly treated us for your name's sake, and not according to our sinful ways. We know that, and it is the best thing that could have happened to us.

And now, Father, we don't want to test you, as your people did in this Scripture. Don't lead us into testing or temptation, because we don't do well. Rescue us from evil, and the evil one. We need your help on this. We want to bring honour to your name. Lead us with your Spirit, so we bring honour to your name. Amen.

BENEDICTION (this is actually a doxology, not a blessing. Let's give glory to God.) *To him who is able to keep us from stumbling and to present us before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.*