

August 21  
Ezekiel 24

From chapter 12 right up to our reading today in chapter 24, the focus has been upon oracles (or messages) from God relating to the punishment of Israel that is coming. Some of Ezekiel's hearers had taken the view that the initial fall of Jerusalem, in which so many had been exiled to Babylon, was the worst thing that would ever happen to them, and now they just had to wait for the restoration to come! Others there by the waters of Babylon, felt that the fact that they were there at all was positive proof that the gods of Babylon were stronger than the God of Israel. To their minds, God had "lost face" in this whole exercise. Others believed that they were the unfortunate victims of their father's sins. All that we have been reading in the past few days has been intended to help them realize that:

1. God's anger was not yet spent -- there was more punishment coming!
2. The day was fast approaching when the gods of Babylon would be seen for what they really were -- "nothing" -- and soon enough everyone would know "that the Lord is really Lord of all" -- "then they will know that I am the Lord." Right up to the very end -- even after the first set of exiles had trudged off through the harsh desert sun to Babylon -- God would have relented and dealt with Israel in grace -- if only the people had repented; but they, just like their fathers, had refused. The judgment they had already experienced, and the ones they were about to experience, had been "earned" by them just as surely as their fathers!

The death of Ezekiel's wife draws our greatest attention today. Can you imagine how hard it must have been for Ezekiel first to hear what God was going to do -- and then to live through the horrible day -- then to go on with life, without even having the privilege and release that comes from grieving -- and finally, to continue afterward to faithfully serve God, without being bitter at the Almighty for the cruelty He had inflicted upon His suffering servant?

God has already required some very severe obedience from Ezekiel. The "son of man" Ezekiel has already publicly humiliated himself -- remember the 15 months spent lying on his side eating coarse food baked over dung -- and the head shaving? And now -- 'Ezekiel, I am going to take your wife, but you are not allowed to mourn or to grieve. No wailing. Don't put ashes on your head (leave your turban on), keep your sandals on and don't eat the food that is associated with funerals.' Once more Ezekiel, like Jeremiah, Hosea and Abraham before him, is acting out a parable. His wife is "the desire of his eyes!" -- that tells you how much he loved her - - just as the Temple, which is about to be destroyed, is the desire of Israel's eyes -- and Judah -- as she was meant to be, is the desire of the Lord's eye! But why no allowance for grief? Two suggestions have been offered at this point. The first is this: Ezekiel is not allowed to grieve because Israel has refused to grieve and mourn for her sins. Because the people refused to mourn when repentance was called for, God will not allow them to mourn when judgment falls. The second suggestion is

that God was not allowing Ezekiel or the Israelites to mourn, because the loss of Jerusalem and the Temple was such a profound loss that it went beyond the bounds of human grief. It was too big a loss to grieve like men and women normally do!

Now, I am not certain that all of you will remember that from the time of Ezekiel's call onward (all the way back at the beginning of this book) he has been bound to a ritual silence -- that is, the only time he speaks is when he is saying the things that come from God, prefaced by these words, "Thus says the Lord!!!" Apart from that, he has lived, with regard to his fellow Israelites, in silence -- probably because no one was ready to listen to anything he might have to say. 'But,' God says, 'when the messenger arrives to tell you that Jerusalem has finally fallen, then you can speak again -- then they will be ready to listen to you! Then you will no longer need to utter these prophecies of doom. Then you can start to be a shepherd and a watchman to the people of Israel!'