

The Idol that Provokes to Jealousy

By David H. Roper

I suspect it has been a while since you have browsed in the book of Ezekiel. It is a remarkable book. I had an opportunity to teach through some of the major prophets for Discovery Seminars this summer, and I had to cover the book of Ezekiel in one class. As I read through chapter 8, it struck me anew how practical this book is in application to life. I hope you are aware that these Old Testament passages, though they may be highly symbolic, and though their primary reference may be to Israel, have great and lasting applicability to our lives.

Ezekiel was one of the sixth century prophets who, along with Jeremiah and Daniel, prophesied during the exilic period. Daniel was taken into captivity by Nebuchadnezzar in 606 B.C., and his ministry was carried out in the Babylonian and Persian royal courts. His was primarily a ministry to the Gentile nations. Jeremiah was left behind to prophesy to the people who were not deported from Jerusalem. Ezekiel was taken off into exile to be the prophet to the exiles, the Jews living in Babylon and, later, in the Persian Empire.

In chapter 1 you have an account of Ezekiel's call, which is dated in the fifth year of his captivity when he was thirty years old. A number of symbols there and in subsequent chapters describe the character of God and the nature of Ezekiel's ministry. Then in chapter 8 you have a second series of visions which were given some fourteen months after the first call and the first series of visions. Let's begin reading with verse 1:

And it came about in the sixth year, on the fifth day of the sixth month, as I was sitting in my house with the elders of Judah sitting before me, that the hand of the Lord God fell on me there. Then I looked, and behold a likeness as the appearance of a man; from His loins and downward there was the appearance of fire, and from His loins and upward the appearance of brightness, like the appearance of glowing metal. And He stretched out the form of a hand and caught me by a lock of my head; and the Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven and brought me in the visions of God to Jerusalem, to the entrance of the north gate of the inner court, where the seat of the idol of jealousy, which provokes to jealousy, was located. And behold, the glory of the God of Israel was there, like the appearance which I saw in the plain.

[I am glad that is not the normal means of locomotion for God's people! Some of us would be earthbound!]

Then He said to me, "Son of man, raise your eyes now, toward the north." So I raised my eyes toward the north, and behold, to the north of the altar gate was this idol of jealousy at the entrance [or, "the place of going in"]. And He said to me, "Son of man, do you see what they are doing, the great abominations which the house of Israel are committing here, that I should be far from My sanctuary? But yet you will see still greater abominations."

Ezekiel is taken back to Jerusalem. It is difficult to know whether he actually was transported there, or merely saw this in a vision. I am inclined to think the latter. In any case, what he saw was real, something actually going on in Jerusalem, because a bit later he will give the name of a man who lived there during this time. He was given this vision in response to an appeal on the part of the elders of Judah who had come to his house and asked for instructions concerning the nature of the exile. This vision was given as the answer to the elders.

Ezekiel is taken back to the temple, and he sees certain things occurring there. The temple faced east so that the main entrance was toward the rising sun. The normal way of entering the temple was through the east gate. On the north side was another gate called the Altar Gate because through this gate the animals were taken to the altar to be slaughtered. So a person coming through the north gate to sacrifice an animal would see first the altar.

But as Ezekiel is brought in through the north gate he sees not an altar but an idol, because someone has placed an idol (which he describes here as an idol that provokes to jealousy) between the gate and the altar, so that it is the focus of attention as anyone walks into the altar area. At the same time Ezekiel sees the glory of the Lord in the temple court. The glory was called the *Shekinah*-the cloud by day, the pillar of fire by night--which signified the presence of God there in the temple. Simultaneously Ezekiel sees the glory of God's presence and, along side it, an idol that makes God jealous.

We are not told precisely what this idol was-and for good reason, because it could have been anything. The important thing is that it *was* an *idol*. It was something that took the place of God in the life of Judah. It probably was an Asherah, a sexual symbol. There were a number of occurrences in the history of Israel and Judah of the building of Asherim within the temple grounds. Manasseh did this and later tore it down when he repented. But another was built. Josiah tore it down, ground it into powder, and threw it over the walls. But a later king built it again. Idol worshipers are always very persistent, and this idol kept appearing. It was standing there in the inner court of the temple, right before the altar, and it had once again become the center of the worship of Israel.

Then he brought me to the entrance of the court [the inner court which surrounds the temple], and when I looked, behold, a hole in the wall. And He said to me, "Son of man, now dig through the wall." So I dug through the wall, and behold, an entrance. And He said to me, "Go in and see the wicked abominations that they are committing here." So I entered and looked, and behold, every form of creeping things and beasts and detestable things, with all the idols of the house of Israel, were carved [incised, carved in relief] on the wall all around.

The walls, the ceilings, the floors-every part of the room was inscribed with these pictures of crawling things and idols.

And standing in front of them were seventy elders of the house of Israel, with Jaazaniah the son of Shaphan standing among them....

This was particularly horrifying to Ezekiel because Shaphan was the man who had found the long-lost scrolls of the Law during Josiah's reign. But now his son is among these idol worshipers hidden away in this chamber of horrors.

...each man with his censer in his hand, and the fragrance of the cloud of incense rising. Then He said to me, "Son of man, do you see what the elders of the house of Israel are committing in the dark, each man in the room of his carved images? For they say, 'The Lord does not see us; the Lord has forsaken the land.'" And He said to me, "Yet you will see still greater abominations which they are committing."

Ezekiel breaks into this secret chamber and there in the dark the seventy elders who represent the nation-the wiser, the older heads in the nation, the leaders-are occupied in idol worship, each with his little brazier of incense. And they are saying, "God doesn't see us. He doesn't know. He has forsaken the land."

Then He brought me to the entrance of the gate of the Lord's house which was toward the north; and behold, women were sitting there weeping for Tammuz. And He said to me, "Do you see this, son of man? Yet you will see still greater abominations than these."

He sees a group of women right in front of the Altar Gate of the temple, weeping for Tammuz. Tammuz was a widely worshiped false god. His history goes way back into Babylonian and Assyrian and Samarian and other early Near Eastern religions. He was the son in one of the well-known mother-son cults which spread throughout the ancient Near East. Different names were given to the individuals involved, but the elements are always the same. In Egypt it was Osiris and Isis. In Greek and Roman mythology they were called Adonis and Aphrodite, or Venus. And in Babylon they were called Ishtar and Tammuz. Ishtar was considered to be the queen mother of heaven, the "mother of all living", as she is called at times. Tammuz was her son. Often they are pictured with the son seated on the mother's lap.

Regardless of the names given to the individuals, these elements are the same in the mythology of religions throughout the Near East. The mother is believed to have conceived the son miraculously. The son is likewise able to do supernatural, superhuman things. He is half god and half man. He is the redeemer, the whole world longs for him, he is going to set everything right. But eventually he dies a very violent and tragic death and descends into the nether world. His mother weeps for him and eventually goes and seeks him and finds him and takes him out of the nether world and thus there is a resurrection to life. These elements occur in various forms in all of these ancient mystery religions.

So critics have long said, "Ah, ha! That is where the Christian story of the virgin birth and the resurrection of Christ has come from. It is merely another variation on the same theme." But what these critics don't realize is that the story of the miraculous conception of Jesus as the God-man, and his violent death and resurrection, is the fulfillment of something mankind has longed for from the very beginning. It is written deep into the spirit of man. All these other tales are merely corruptions of it. The story goes back to what transpired in the Garden of Eden when the man and woman fell into sin. God went after them, and he told the woman that she, Eve, the actual "mother of all living" (by the way her name in Hebrew is *ishah*--the feminine form of the word for man, *ish*, and that is where the name Ishtar and all the other very similar names come from) would have a Son. There is an inference in the Hebrew language of the account that the son would be miraculously conceived. He would be the "seed" of the woman. And he would be the God-man. Eve knew that. That is why in chapter 4 of Genesis she says, literally, when Cain is born, "I have acquired a man, who is Yahweh." She thought Cain was God, but he wasn't. He was a murderer. And throughout time women were disappointed. Their sons were not the promised Redeemer. But Mary was not disappointed. Jesus' birth was the fulfillment of this promise given back in the very beginning of human history.

But the promise was distorted and twisted and perverted and misused as it spread throughout the ancient world. So on the fourth month of every year women would gather and weep for Tammuz. They would weep because the "redeemer" had been slain and taken from them and they believed that somehow their weeping would bring him back. This is what Ezekiel saw occurring in the temple. And there was more yet:

Then He brought me into the inner court of the Lord's house. And behold, at the entrance to the temple of the Lord, between the porch and the altar, were about twenty-five men with their backs to the temple of the Lord and their faces toward the east; and they were prostrating themselves eastward toward the sun.

He sees the heads of the twenty-four priestly courses. And the high priest with them, standing where they were to stand in order to repent of the sins of the nation, the spot traditionally where they wept over the sins of the people. But here they were not weeping for Judah. They had turned their back upon the temple, upon God and his glory, and they were worshipping the sun- something somewhat similar to God, but not God. So you can see how this idol which had been there in the court had worked its way out into various aspects of the life of the nation. Ezekiel knows from this evidence that God would be perfectly just to bring wrath upon his people, because they have turned their backs upon him.

And he said to me, "Do you see this, son of man? Is it too light a thing for the house of Judah to commit the abominations which they have committed here, that they have filled the land with violence and provoked Me repeatedly? For behold, they are putting the twig to their nose. [An obscure reference some ancient rite which probably indicated derision, scorn.] Therefore, I indeed shall deal in wrath. My eye will have no pity nor shall I spare; and though they cry in My ears with a loud voice, yet I shall not listen to them."

This was fulfilled, four years after the vision was given, in the destruction of Jerusalem. Nebuchadnezzar besieged it for the third time, broke through the walls and destroyed the city, burned the temple to the ground, captured Zedekiah the king, killed his sons, put out Zedekiah's eyes, took him off to Babylon in chains, and the nation of Judah was no more.

In the visions that follow in chapters 9-11, Ezekiel sees a number of symbols which refer to the judgment of the nation. In chapter 9, he sees six executioners who go out with shattering weapons in their hands to slay old men, young men, maidens, little children, and women. Among them is a man clothed in linen who is sent out with an ink horn and a pen to make a mark upon those who weep over the abominations which have been committed, verse 4:

And the Lord said to him, "Go through the midst of the city, even through the midst of Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of men who sigh and groan over all the abominations which are being committed in its midst."

He was to mark out those who were truly sorry for the sins of Judah. There is something strangely prophetic in all of this. The Hebrew word translated "mark" is *tau*, which is the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet. In Ezekiel's time it was written like a cross. Therefore he was to mark all those who truly grieved with the sign of the cross!

Then in chapter 10 Ezekiel hears the man clothed in linen commanded to obtain coals of fire and scatter them over Jerusalem—a prediction of the destruction of that great city. But he sees something further which is even more horrifying. He sees the glory of God depart. This begins in verse 3 of chapter 9:

Then the glory of the God of Israel went up from the cherub on which it had been, to the threshold of the temple.

Then in chapter 10, verse 4:

Then the glory of the Lord went up from the cherub to the threshold of the temple, and the temple was filled with the cloud, and the court was filled with the brightness of the glory of the Lord.

And in verse 18:

Then the glory of the Lord departed from the threshold of the temple and stood over the cherubim.

And finally in chapter 11, verse 23:

And the glory of the Lord went up from the midst of the city, and stood over the mountain which is east of the city.

That is the Mount of Olives. Ezekiel sees the cloud move from its place between the cherubim out to the front of the temple, where it lingers over the walls of the temple. Then it moves out over the city and lingers over the walls of the city, as though reluctant to leave. Eventually it goes on to the east out to the Mount of Olives, and there it appears to disappear. It is not gone. It is just hovering there, but unseen. And Ezekiel cries out to the Lord in verse 13 of chapter 11, the last line of that verse:

"Alas, Lord God! Wilt Thou bring the remnant of Israel to a complete end?"

The crux of God's answer is in verses 17-19:

"Therefore say, 'Thus says the Lord God, "I shall gather you from the peoples and assemble you out of the countries among which you have been scattered, and I shall give you the land of Israel."' When they come there, they will remove all its detestable things and all its abominations from it. And I shall give them one heart, and shall put a new spirit within them. And I shall take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh...."

That is a promise. Israel has a future and a hope. God is going to bring them back, and the glory will return, and they will be given a new heart, and the abomination, the idol that provokes to jealousy, will be destroyed forever.

In the concluding chapters of Ezekiel's book, chapters 40-48, there is a vision of a temple which will be built in the end times, the temple to which Jesus will come back the second time. And in chapter 43, Ezekiel sees the glory coming back from the Mount of Olives. The cloud descends from the mountain, goes down through the valley, comes through the north gate, and again resides over the temple. Ezekiel thus sees that God is going to restore his people, return the land to them, and give them their temple back. The glory will return, and they will have a new heart, a renewed spirit.

It is fascinating to see that the Lord's ministry coincides almost exactly with this picture we have in Ezekiel. The temple which Nebuchadnezzar destroyed was rebuilt when the Jews returned from Babylon. They restored that temple on a smaller scale. Haggai predicted that though that temple was small and insignificant, God would bring to it the one desired of women—that is, the Messiah—who would come back to that temple and would fill it with his glory. That is a prediction of Jesus' coming to that temple when he *first* ministered there. Then he was rejected and crucified. But he rose again, and after the resurrection, accompanied by his disciples, he walked out of the city, up to the Mount of Olives, and that was the point from which he ascended.

If you read the Gospel accounts carefully, you come to the conclusion that the Lord did not ascend like a rocket from Cape Canaveral and rise out of sight into space. Rather, he disappeared. He was taken up and then he disappeared in a cloud. It is as though he is still there, as the glory is still there—unseen, but still there, just as real as in the days of his flesh, ministering to his people. He is still there, waiting. And he is coming back. Zechariah says that when he comes back his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives—the point of the ascension—and the mountain will be split by an earthquake. And he will come through that valley back into the city, and the glory will dwell again in the city and in the temple. So, what Ezekiel sees in a symbolic way is fulfilled in the ministry of Christ. Israel's Messiah is coming back. Israel will be regathered. They will be restored. They will again have the glory.

But what does this mean for us? Well, let's go through this account again and look at it in a different way. The Old Testament temple is a picture of our humanity indwelt by God. It is a picture of life as God intended it to be lived. When we give our life to Jesus Christ, when he becomes Savior and Lord, then we become the temple in which he dwells. That was his original intention. It was never his intent to indwell a building, on any permanent basis. His desire is to indwell humanity. And we fulfill that desire when our lives belong to him.

But we, like the Israelites, are inclined to erect idols. The central part of our life ought to be the altar. That is the place of sacrifice. The focal point of all Christian life ought to be the cross. That is what the altar signifies. When we come to Christ we realize, first, that he died for us. And then we come to see that we died with him, that we are identified with him in that death. All of Christian life is based on that fact—we are to reckon ourselves to be dead indeed unto sin but alive unto God. The old life is gone. We have a new life. We are complete in Christ. His life is our life. And that sacrifice, that altar, stands mid-way in all of Christian experience. That is why Paul says, "I implore you, brothers, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable act of worship" (Rom 12:1). That is the act of worship we are to carry out today. That is why Paul says, "I boast in nothing except the cross" (Gal 6:14). That is the central fact of our Christian life.

Yet we, like Israel, interpose some idol between the cross and the gate by which we enter. It is not named here. It can be any idol. It can be some young man, or young woman. It can be a piggy-back plant. It can be almost anything—something which occupies the central place in our life, and which we begin to worship. We are all prone to that. That is why John says, "Little children, keep yourself from idols" (1 John 5:21). That was his closing word in his first letter, because he knows we need to hear it again and again. "Little children, keep yourself from idols." But we don't heed that warning, and we build idols just as Israel did, and the same implications of idol worship begin to work out in our lives. First it occupies our mind. The dark chamber where the elders were worshiping is a picture of the mind, and of the images we flash on the wall. We begin to become preoccupied with the idol. We think about it. We meditate upon it. And what initially is an image merely flashed on the wall, becomes inscribed in the wall.

The clue which alerted me to this approach is the Hebrew of verse 12 in chapter 8: "Son of man, do you see what the elders of the house of Israel are committing in the dark, each man in the room of his carved *images*?" The

Hebrew word translated "images" is used elsewhere in Scripture to refer to *imaginations*. You see, the imagination is the image-making faculty in our mind. That is what we do. We take the image and we project it on the walls of our minds, and we brood over it, worship it. And there we are in the dark. We think no one sees us, that even God doesn't see us. We have deceived ourselves to believe that, and we allow these thoughts to become incised in that chamber of horrors. The word Ezekiel chooses for "idol" here is not the word normally used in the Old Testament. It is "*gillul*", and it means "a little rolled-up thing." It is intended to be disparaging, and authorities agree that it refers to a little ball of dung. That is what God thinks of these thoughts.

The next step is that this idol-worship moves into the realm of the emotions, represented here by the women weeping for Tammuz. We long for it. They wept for Tammuz because they considered him the hope, the one who would satisfy them, the savior who would make them whole. And we weep for the idol because we think it is what will satisfy us and make us whole.

This third step is that our emotions move the will. That is signified here by the twenty-five priests who have turned their backs upon God and are worshiping the sun. And that is what we do--we turn our back on God. We go our own way, and God gives us what we want. It is very significant that all of these idols are Babylonian--every one of them. It is as though God says, "If you want to worship the idols of Babylon, I will give you *all* of Babylon. You can even go *live* there." And he gave them over to their passions. This is described here in the rest of Ezekiel as the wrath of God being worked out in the life of Israel. He merely let them have what they wanted. He loves us enough that he will let us have what we want. And life begins to disintegrate, and the glory departs.

But if we truly know Jesus Christ, if we have been truly regenerated; the glory will never leave us altogether, just as the glory never actually left the nation of Judah. It lingered, hungered, yearned for them, and eventually it moved off to the east to the Mount of Olives. But it never left. And the glory will never depart from us, either, but there is the *sense* of the loss of the presence of God in our life, and a sense of lost power and authority. The glory is gone.

But, you see, that whole process is designed to bring us back to God. Judgment is always redemptive. God didn't let his own people go. He won't let us go too far. The process will bring us to the end of ourselves. And in the expression of chapter 11, verse 18, we find a parallel with our own life. The Lord says to Ezekiel that he is going to gather the people and bring them back. And, "When they come there, they will *put away* all its detestable things and all its abominations from it. And I shall give them one heart, and shall put a new spirit within them. And I shall *put away* the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh..."

"You put away the idol that provokes to jealousy and I will put away the heart of stone, and the glory will come back." So the route to recovery is to go back to that idol and tear it down, and to reestablish the cross, the place of sacrifice in our life, and say, "Lord, I will do it your way. I will reckon myself to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God." When we do that, the glory comes back. The temple is reestablished as a dwelling place in which God can display all of his glory.

I don't know where you are in that process. I have at various stages of my life been in various places along that continuum. Perhaps you are merely thinking about your idol. Or perhaps you are longing for it, but haven't yet decided. Or possibly you have already decided to turn your back upon the truth and to go your own way. But it doesn't matter where we are in the process. We can always come back. There is always a way back. The gate is always open. There is always that north gate, back to the place of the altar, where we can boast again in the cross, and only in the cross. Isaac Watts wrote:

*When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.*

*Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the death of Christ, my God;*

*All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood.*

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.*

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