

Explore the Bible: Judges

November 29, 2021

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for Dec. 19 focuses on Ezekiel 20:1-14.*

As a professor, I regularly run into students who fail to complete their work. Although I attempt to communicate to the student throughout the semester there is a cost to not turning in assignments, they often seem unconcerned and unmoved by my pleas. Inevitably, as the semester is drawing to a close and they see that their grade is nowhere near passing, they will approach me and ask if there is anything that can be done to get their grade up to a passing level. Unfortunately, most of the time it is simply too late to make-up the amount of work that they have missed and the penalties for lateness are too great to overcome.

In such situations, I rarely pull out the “I told you so” concerning the relationship of my previous warnings and their current predicament, but the thought always enters my mind. Why didn’t they listen to me? Did they really think they could ignore their responsibilities and my warnings without consequence? The integrity of the class and the role that I serve as a teacher, not just of facts but of realities of life, require there ultimately is a reckoning for faulty behavior.

In our section of Ezekiel in this lesson, the prophet once again confronts Judah for her sins, but the message has been amped up as the day of judgment draws near. We are told in the opening verse of this prophecy that the year is 591 B.C. (Ezekiel 20:1), a mere four years before Jerusalem and the temple will be destroyed. The nearness of the judgment is the start of this literary section that is full of intense images of fire and destruction, vivid images of the adulterous/idolatrous sisters Oholah and Oholibah in Ezekiel 25 and the impactful death of his wife that God restricts Ezekiel from mourning (Ezekiel 24:15-26). Indeed, in life, judgment does eventually

come.

Confronted (Ezekiel 20:1-4)

One of the key themes of Ezekiel is found in the phrase “That they may know that I am the LORD (Yahweh).” The phrase appears more than 70 times in the book and is at its heart a relational expression. Whether it is God’s judgment (Ezekiel 1-24) or God’s grace (Ezekiel 24-48), a relationship with him always is the driving motivation for all that he does. It might seem surprising, then, that God tells the elders who have come to Ezekiel that he will not allow them to inquire of him.

Yet, the refusal seems best understood as somewhat of an invitation. At the heart of every relationship is the need for authenticity. Without it, there is no way for either person to proceed. So, God’s refusal to allow inquiry is more about the lack of authenticity on the part of the elders than some sort of closing off all discussions. This is made clear by verse 4, where God says he will explain (make clear) their practices. Until such matters are cleared up and a level of realism in the discussion itself achieved, there is no need to progress.

Early Signs (Ezekiel 20:5-9)

God makes it clear the sinfulness of Israel is not a new reality. Their disobedience of him goes back to their very beginnings in the wilderness. His selection of them as a people bound him to them. Because of this, his response over the years has been uncommon. Though they continually and constantly chased other gods, he likewise unswervingly pursued them in his love.

Ezekiel 20:9 states God would not allow his name to be profaned by judging Israel too quickly. The word behind the NIV’s “profaned” is often rendered

as “polluted” (KJV) or “shamed” (NLT). While such translations are proper in many senses, at its root the word means to “make common,” as its opposite is “sanctified” or “holy.” God, therefore, kept his word because he didn’t want to be seen as one who was like all the other gods—petty and selfish, like the people who created them. He would stand apart and would be seen for the glorious, true and distinct God that he is. But if this was indeed part of his motivation for mercy, then it would also serve as a motivation for judgment.

Repeated Rebellion (20:10-14)

God’s holiness led to him consecrating (setting apart) Israel for his purposes. Ezekiel 20:12 says he carried out this consecration, so they would know he is LORD (Yahweh). This relational desire is the same that drives his judgment in Ezekiel’s own day. Despite all his efforts, the people continued to rebel, so that now the only thing that remains is judgment. The subsequent chapters of Ezekiel go on to make this point more strongly. Indeed, there comes a point when all that is left is judgment.

Fortunately, even still, God’s mercy is uncommon. He took giant steps in the days following the judgment to restore Israel and to write his law on their heart. These steps culminated in the sending of his Son, some 600 years after Ezekiel’s time, to save not only Israel, but all of mankind.

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