

Explore the Bible: Saves

November 22, 2021

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for Dec. 12 focuses on Ezekiel 11:2-4, 14-21.*

Many a child has grown up hearing the words, “I’m doing this for your own good,” as a conclusion of a parent or authority figure meting out a punishment for something they had done. This observation generally is meant to express that the punisher intended the punishment to teach a lesson, thus making the punished one a better person.

The phrase also may be used, however, to accompany an isolation, separation or limitation that would keep the person safe and from harm. That is, it was an act that the person did not necessarily appreciate at the time, but it actually was a saving act after all. Regardless of which meaning one chooses in this case, the phrase is a good synopsis of what God was doing in relation to Judah in Ezekiel 11.

Ezekiel 11 comes squarely in the middle of the vision of the departure of God’s glory from the temple to Babylon. This departure was a necessary response of Yahweh to the sin taking place in Jerusalem and to the need of the exiles in Babylon to know that he was indeed with them. As we will see as we move through our focal passage, the meaning of this movement of God’s glory is, therefore, encapsulated well in the phrase, “I’m doing this for your own good.”

Called Out (Ezekiel 11:2-4)

Once again, the exchange with God begins with Ezekiel’s identification as “son of man.” In this particular case, the term is likely meant to be a contrasting expression of humility to the hubris of the people he is called to

engage with God's judgment.

The elders of the city seem to see themselves as the answer to all that has befallen Jerusalem. Their expression about building houses likely has to do with the role they have played in rebuilding Jerusalem after the destruction that had occurred just a few years before in 598 BC—the attack that led to Ezekiel's and other's exile to Babylon.

The Hebrew of Ezekiel 1:3 is difficult, but the leaders either are suggesting efforts need to be continued to restore Jerusalem, rather than building houses—"the time is not near to build houses." Or, it may mean they have come far enough in their reconstruction efforts that personal houses can now be built—"Is it not near time to build houses?" In either cases, they are feeling fairly secure and proud of themselves. Indeed, they refer to themselves using an idiom as the choice cuts of meat, or the best—"This city is a pot, and we are the meat in it" (Ezekiel 1:3b, NIV). God calls out Ezekiel to speak words of correction.

Part of the commission to engage our culture that was addressed in last week's lesson is the call to speak to arrogance and wickedness. Too often, however, Christians have been at the center of such expressions. God has called us out to be more like the humble "son of man" than the arrogant who ignore the plight of the people around them and praise God that he has not made them like the sinners all around them (See Luke 18:11-12).

Gathered (Ezekiel 11:14-17)

The verses between 11:4 and 11:14 outline how the wicked leaders of Jerusalem were more like food in a pot than they imagined, as God brought judgment on them. This judgment, for the good of those in Jerusalem, is accompanied now with insight into the exile itself and how God did that for the good of his people as well. God informs Ezekiel and those exiles with him that he has sent them away from Jerusalem in order to preserve them.

Though the people in Jerusalem saw themselves as the remnant, the fact that his glory had traveled to Babylon, said otherwise. God's presence with the people there communicated he had a plan to restore their fortunes one day and gather them back to himself. Indeed, God really had judged them for their own good—in ways beyond just teaching a lesson. His judgment was part of a bigger plan to bless (See Jeremiah 29:11).

Sanctified (Ezekiel 11:18-21)

The plan of God is clearly explained in verses 18-21. In their absence from the promised land and their eventual return, he intends to transform them. This passage is one of the clearest expressions of the new covenant in the book of Ezekiel. Like Jeremiah (Jeremiah 31:31-34), Ezekiel uses language that shows continuity with God's current covenant agreement with Israel, while also explaining that there would be a radical difference within the new system. A new spirit, a malleable (fleshly) heart and clarified status as his people all reveal the wonder of God's patience and goodness to his people.

Could God have done such a work without scattering his people? Certainly, but within his bold actions of exile and judgment he perfectly expressed consistency with what he had revealed in the law, his displeasure with the arrogance of false leaders and his capacity to preserve his people even in difficult situations. His work, as always, really was for their (and our) own good.

Timothy Pierce, Ph.D., is associate professor of Christian studies at East Texas Baptist University.