

The Abandoned Baby

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Date: 12 May 2019

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[0 : 00] I wonder how you would describe this epic image in Ezekiel chapter 16.

I can think of many different adjectives that you might use to describe it. The one that I would use to describe it is shocking, because that's what it's intended to do.

It's a passage that's intended to be shocking, and it's meant to blow you away. It's meant to blow us away as we read it. It's very easy just to make the gospel in our Christian lives very easy, isn't it?

And a passage like this, if it doesn't, I think it should feel like a punch in the guts for us metaphorically.

It should feel like being driven up to the highlands in a cold winter's day, being stripped down to your pants and then being thrown into a freezing highland loch. That's what it should feel like.

[1 : 05] Or being woken up in the morning by a klaxon horn, just shaking you, shaking us out of sometimes a spiritual turpor that we find ourselves in, and the lack of understanding of who God is and what God thinks and how He wants us to consider Him in our lives.

I think sometimes for us it's easy to forget that the only peace we have as believers is peace on the front line. That's what our peace is for Him.

Our life is full in Christ, that we believe that we are living life to the full as believers. But that life to the full does involve dying to our sinful selves.

And the beauty of forgiveness, which we love thinking about and enjoying and embracing, and so we should, the beauty of forgiveness embraces tears of repentance, doesn't it?

It has to. If we understand grace fully, then we understand a little bit more about our need for grace. And so shocking may be one word, scary might be another word.

[2 : 22] It's not easy to understand all of God's pictures and all of God's images, especially in Ezekiel. Go back to thinking of something C.S. Lewis said in one of his Narnia books about God being good but not being safe.

And we have that kind of picture of a God who is good but not safe. We are so used to being sovereign. We are so used to being in control.

We want to have all the answers, we want to know things as they are. And so to be confronted with a different kind of picture is difficult for us. And the other word that I would use in looking at a passage like this is the need for, or the word that is honest, honesty.

When we come to God's word, the thing He requires of us most is honesty, I think, in our Christian thinking. Because on the one hand, I think it's easy for us all to think grace isn't quite so special.

Grace isn't that important. God's love isn't that significant in my life. Or on the other hand, to think sin isn't quite so bad.

[3 : 28] Sin is okay. Well, everyone's sinning and who really cares too much about it? Well, I think this chapter really causes, ought to cause us to take up and sit note.

Take, it should get us to sit up and take note. What did I say, sit note and take up? Okay, well, you can sit note and take up as well if you want.

It's what happens when you're not used to preaching twice in a Sunday anymore. You can become lazy and slovenly, but take note of His reality, okay? It's what's so important for us all.

And I hope you'll stick with me. I know it's an evening and it's tiring. The context of this chapter, as the context of all of Ezekiel is God's message to His own people, the people of Judah particularly, and Jerusalem, and of the two tribes that were remaining in Jerusalem, who were the people of God who were taken into exile because of their rebellion because they had turned away from the living God, and they were taken into exile to Babylon.

And the people of God, the people particularly of Jerusalem were complaining and saying, look, we don't deserve this. We're God's people. God's been unfaithful to His promises.

[4 : 54] He said He would take us into this land that was flowing with milk and honey out of the slavery from Egypt and would have our own homeland and it would be ours forever. And it's unfair, our sin isn't so bad.

We are His special people. Why is He dealing with us like this? He should be protecting us. He's insignificant and small and unable to do what we wanted Him to do.

So last week we saw that amazing picture of the wheels and all the images that came from Ezekiel chapter 1, which Thomas preached on brilliantly last week.

And so we see throughout Ezekiel a series of prophecies and pictures where God is teaching them about His nature, His character, why He's done what He's done, and what His purposes are within it.

And I think what we need to remember, and this was a fairly brutal passage, a beautiful passage but also brutal, beautiful and brutal, particularly in the ESVF.

[6 : 01] It's quite a brutal translation. But remember, we need to remember that the Hebrew writing of the Old Testament, particularly at this time in the prophecies, was very visual, very pictorial, very graphic.

It certainly is, isn't it? And also that God is writing into the prophecy that Ezekiel is giving into an ancient Near East culture.

Okay? So remember, it wasn't written into a 21st century Western culture, or Edinburgh culture, or sophisticated secular culture. It was written into this ancient Near East culture where baby human life was often cheap.

Maybe that's not so different. Where kings were all powerful and all had all authority, and where women generally were not afforded equality.

So you're working, and the image that God gives us into a different context, a different situation than we're in, and there's always a danger for us of reading back our 21st century Western cultural thinking into a picture like this.

[7 : 10] There's a huge difference in the mindset, in the culture, in the language, but God was speaking into that, and He was speaking into that for a reason. And He was speaking to His own redeemed people in that context.

And the interesting thing, although the context and the culture and the situation changes, God doesn't change, and actually people don't change. And people in a relationship with God don't really change that much.

The outworking of that relationship might look different sometimes. But this is very much part of God's revealed truth, and we find His principles and His teaching come across very clearly in this passage.

And the first thing I want to say is to speak about this picture of amazing grace, right, in the middle of the Old Testament, and in this book of prophetic judgment really, which it is.

Jerusalem is very much the focus up till now of God's blessing of His people, of His presence.

[8 : 16] He's present among the people in Jerusalem, and His promises. It's the capital city of the promised land. The seat of, being the seat of King David, and it had known amazing power and reputation and blessing.

It'd been known as the city of the living God. This is where God's people were. You remember the story of Solomon, don't you, after David, Solomon, David's son.

It was the richest, most opulent kingdom, and He had all these riches, and the renown was known far and wide so that the Queen of Sheba came to visit Him from a long distance, from a long, far away to see and to learn more about this amazing reputation and His wisdom.

And it was a place really of an astonishing blessing. And what God wants to say here to the people who had become really proud and arrogant because of that, He was saying, look, you rose to where you rose.

You were blessed to the blessing you received because of my grace, my grace to you. He wants them to remember that, and He gives them this picture of their inauspicious origins, that they were this baby girl whose mother and father couldn't care less for her, didn't even bother cutting her umbilical cord, throw it out into the desert to die.

[9 : 53] And she's left there unwashed, unclean, covered in blood, and the King passes by, and He says, live. No one to show mercy, no one to care, but then this picture of God who comes as the King of Kings, and He grants this newborn baby life, and she grows, and she grows under His care and protection, and she grows up and becomes beautiful.

And then she is clothed by Him and given ornaments and jewelry, and she becomes His queen.

And she's taken into this amazing covenant relationship. She becomes perfectly beautiful and famous. And really, God is saying through this picture of His great grace to her, that the best of everything she had was because of His grace, and because He had chosen the people of God in the Old Testament, and He had led them out of slavery in Egypt, and He had taken them to the promised land, and He had given them this great land, and He had blessed them because He loved them, and because He redeemed them, and because He chose them.

And He was saying, lest you remember your beginnings, He said. Remember that you rose to this great position, but it wasn't because of your own abilities and gifts, and it was because of what I had done in bringing my salvation and my rescue and my favor to you from that place of slavery and anonymity.

And it's a very old, it's an Old Testament picture, but lest we forget, that's our picture as well as believers. If we understand anything of grace and of the gospel and of what Jesus Christ has done for us, it is our picture also.

[11 : 54] We have been lifted from obscurity and from certain death spiritually and physically dead in our sins, and it's God who has said sovereignly to us, live, and He's picked us up, and He's washed us and made us clean, and He's given us all good things that we need for our salvation and for our life, and He has blessed us in ways that we can never fully understand.

He has clothed us in the righteousness of Jesus to mix the metaphors and to bring the pictures into the New Testament. He has made vows on our behalf, and as we belong to the church, we are part of what the New Testament calls the bride of Christ.

And He has done that extravagantly and at great cost to Himself, who even in the Old Testament here could have imagined a cost that had to be paid in order for us to be set free and to live and to belong to God, the death of the Son Jesus Christ.

And I think this picture of grace is a reminder to us that we haven't earned our right with God, and we aren't in and of ourselves worthy of His grace and His goodness and His love.

That He has chosen, He has sovereignly said, live, and He has given us this great future and great reality now in Him.

[13 : 25] In many ways I'd like just to finish there, but the picture doesn't finish there, unfortunately, because I read verse 15, which said, you trusted in your beauty and you became a prostitute, I think, which is a bit more a politer way of saying what is said there, still not that polite, and you lavished your prostitution on anyone who would have it.

So and from verses 15 to 34, you've got that picture unfolding of her shameless cheating on the King who loved her and who saved her and who brought her life.

It's truly a, it's a brutal picture in these verses. It's deliberately and provocatively offensive, the words that we have there.

I wrestled with her to read it because I wondered whether it was too graphic to read in a public service. But there's this whole picture of her giving herself essentially to anyone who would have her in prostitution and beyond.

She takes the jewelry that she'd been gifted and she melts it down and makes idols to worship. She takes the food and the oil and the perfume and she sells that or she makes it as gifts to those with whom she is engaged in prostitution.

[14 : 58] She sacrifices her children to the idols that she worships. She forgets her past. She has insatiable appetites to make alliances.

And here it mixes this picture with the reality that Jerusalem made alliances with other nations with Babylon and with Egypt in order to gain power and prestige and authority and renewed safety as it were.

And they forgot who they were. They forgot they were a theocracy under God and that God was their king and their leader. And so they made all these kind of alliances with all these foreign nations and engaged in idolatry and trusted in their power.

And they preferred these strangers to the relationship she had with the living God. She chased after them and she paid them. It's a truly repulsive picture.

She becomes proud and lazy and unconcerned for the poor around her and rejecting of her children. This is God's, it's a brutal picture of the nature of sins.

[16 : 07] An un... If we can call it an un-reconstructed picture of sin. It's taking sin and giving the image of sin as the most fearsome breaking of trust.

It's the abandoning of God's love and provision and protection. At the height of their blessing, remember, this was Jerusalem and the...

At the height of its blessing, turned its back on God, became proud in its own strength and misplaced its trust. The people of God became thankless and selfish and blind and pursued the gratification away from the living God that could never satisfy.

And whatever else we would take from a picture like this, this epic image, we need to take the teaching of God both to the original hearers but also to us that sin isn't okay, grace isn't insignificant and cheap.

And it's so easy for us to become blunted to that fact. It's so easy to be thankless, to take God's gifts without recognizing Him as the giver, to trust in other things other than the living God, to seek gratification and significance in our lives away from our relationship with Christ and His gifts.

[17 : 34] Just pouring all our energies into entertainment and into our hearts' desires which ignore God and keep God out of the picture.

And we can argue, sin isn't so bad. Isn't God just being a bit harsh in what He says about sin? And I think it's tremendously important for us to wrestle with the Holy Spirit and with God to show us that the choices we make and the desires we have in our heart of hearts if they are sinful are rebelling against just and a pure and a holy God who extended His love all the way to the cross in order to free us from its enslavement.

So there's this picture of shameless cheating. And really that's what sin is. It's just shameless cheating as Christians against God.

Then there's also a picture of inevitable judgment really from verses 35. And if you have time at home to read it again, do so 35 to 52. He talks about the judgment that He's going to bring in to this people because it's a message of judgment and also we'll see a message of hope.

And as a just God, there's an inevitability about judgment for breaking the covenant, for breaking the relationship of love. And I just want to highlight and recognize the principles of God's judgment are discipline, shall we say, for the people of God because His judgment has already been poured out on Jesus on our behalf.

[19 : 17] But He still disciplines His children because He loves them. And I think there's two aspects to mucking about with sin and treating it lightly as God's covenant people as believers, that He will not simply ignore in our lives.

We may think He will, but He doesn't do that. The first is the divine jealousy. And verse 38, He says, He speaks of that.

And He says, And I will judge you as women who commit adultery and shed blood and are judged and bring upon you the blood of wrath and jealousy. Now, we generally think of jealousy as a negative thing.

We see it as possessive and we see it as an unhealthy emotion, an insecure emotion, and that often can be that.

But we also know there's a right jealousy, don't we, where either just anger is aroused or where protection for someone you love is invoked.

[20 : 20] So if you love someone greatly, you have a jealous protection for us. It's hard for us to accept that with all the mixed motives and sinful hearts that we have. But it's also a response of true love.

True love demands, doesn't it, exclusivity. It demands that we don't share our love with others in that marital, covenantal context.

It demands a loyalty and it demands an openness and an honesty. And there's always going to be a response to brutal unfaithfulness and cheating in such a context.

And in God's perfect love, it brooks, His love brooks no rivals. Not because He's possessive or insecure, but because He recognizes and sees that a divided heart is a broken heart and is destructively pouring out our commitment and our love and our loyalty in areas it shouldn't be directed in.

And there's a price to pay for that destruction because He wants to bring us back into that faithful loving relationship with Him. So He is jealous in direct proportion to His love.

[21 : 47] And when He loves us, the way He loves us, then His jealousy is real in our lives and He will invoke discipline to bring us back because He loves us.

And that can be revealed, I'm sure, in different ways, but it's revealed in this chapter, I think in one way, in verse 39, where He says, And I will give you into their hands and they will throw down your vaulted chamber and break down your lofty places.

They will strip you of your clothes and take your beautiful jewels and leave you naked and bare. And what He's saying there is He's just, He's saying, I'm removing that protection and you will be in a place where you will find that there is no love and the love that you thought you were finding there is abuse and is taking advantage of you.

In a sense, He says, this is what you want. This is what you've chosen. Please see the reality of turning your back on me and where it leaves you.

There's a dreadful picture here of enslavement and of brutality and recognizing, but the point is to recognize that outside of His grace, outside of His protective love, there is only darkness.

[23 : 04] There's never genuine hope and life. There's using others and being used by others. There's taking advantage of others and being taken advantage of.

And there's a brutalization outside of the covenant of grace. And this picture exposes that at either end, right at the very beginning, where the child was left to die in a desert context.

And then in judgment, as God's protective love was taken away, there was only being taken advantage of and a stripping back of all that had been gifted.

It's a kind of Old Testament parallel to the prodigal Son, isn't it? You know, the prodigal Son had everything, but took it away from the context of love and from the Father.

And it was used up and He was left with nothing. And the reality is outside of Christ, nobody really cares for you, ultimately, to a greater or lesser degree.

[24 : 19] The devil certainly isn't concerned for your welfare. He will chew you up and spit you out. Your sin can offer life to you and to me.

If we choose to love sin and choose to be deceived, we're being blinded. We're blind to its destructiveness because it's death, not life. You know what it's like.

We all know what it's like. We know what it's like when someone that you love heads down the path of, say, drug addiction. You know what that's like. You know that that is a dangerous path for them to go through.

And in loving jealousy, you want to bring them away from that. Or someone who you know chooses to walk away from a loving marriage, wife or husband and children, just for some fun.

You know that's destructive, don't you? Or someone who gives up all of their wealth gambling just to pursue wealth that they can never hold on to.

[25 : 17] You know that there's a destructiveness there. But there's also things that are much more subtle, where there's a gradual searing of our conscience because we don't regard sin with any degree of seriousness.

And we take grace for granted. And we gently go into a comatose position away from God.

And we were talking about a film that was on the television last week, a kind of docu film called The Last Breath. I don't know if anybody saw it. It's a true story.

It's a true story of a diver in the North Sea whose umbilical cord breaks away from the mother ship in a storm. And you only naturally have five minutes of emergency oxygen left.

It was in complete darkness and they ended up lying on top of the unit that he had been working on at the seabed. And he survived for 37 minutes.

[26 : 19] It's a miraculous, it's a great watch if you have time to watch it, watch it. Brilliant watch. He should have only had five minutes but he survived for 37. But the interesting thing was, they don't know exactly how he survived.

Could have been because it was so cold down there. And also because he had a higher level of oxygen in his blood because it was coming through a pipe originally.

But it's interesting, he speaks of not really feeling that he was dying, that he was just gently going, becoming unconscious and it wasn't terribly unpleasant.

And there's that in our spiritual lives when we surround ourselves with coldness, we can become so cold and our spiritual bodies can be so desensitized that we hardly even notice that we're dying.

That sin just isn't on our radar as it were and we just gradually are engulfed in the coldness and darkness of a sinful lifestyle that we hardly recognize, that we've moved out of protection.

[27 : 30] And that's I think what is extremely dangerous. We're encouraged to hate sin and to run from it. We don't want our grace to be cheap and we don't want our salvation to be a sideline.

We want to know our hearts. And so we come to the last little bit here in verse 60 of this passage.

We didn't read from, we just read really the first section. From verse 59 to the end he said, for the last few years that I will do, we have done who have despised the oath and break in the covenant, yet I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth and I will establish for you an everlasting covenant.

Then you will remember your ways and so on. And then it goes on to say, I will establish my covenant with you and you shall know that I am the Lord. So it ends in a much more positive note that God's purpose is in exposing their sin and their rebellion and drifting away from them.

And the discipline and the judgment that comes from that has an end to bring them back to Himself. It's all about God's commitment and vows both to redeem and to restore a people.

[28 : 42] And a people did return. There was renewal. It was a small renewal. But they did rebuild and restore Jerusalem. And it was all of it was only a shadow of what was to come in Jesus Christ.

And He speaks in verse 63 about the importance of atonement. That you may remember and be confounded and never open your mouth again because of your shame.

When I atone for you for all you have done declares the Lord. When I atone for you. So there's a gentle picture looking forward to the work of Jesus Christ.

So you've got this picture of perfect jealousy and of discipline and judgment, the grotesque nature of sin, God's fixed hatred and opposition to all its evil and destructive and proud and violent and brutal and selfish.

And then you have Christ. I will atone. Christ becomes, the judge becomes the judged on the cross. And He willingly takes all of that, all of that picture.

[29 : 45] He takes all of that picture. And you see Christ is prostituted on the cross.

He takes that. He becomes, He had no sin, becomes sin for us. And we treat that so lightly.

Comes off our lips, yeah. And we ask for forgiveness because it's there and because it's free. And yet we often forget the great cost and the cost that He has paid to set us free from that so our hearts are renewed and refreshed and revived.

And I think the great picture for us in binding this all together and recognizing the purpose of God is in Revelation chapter 21 when we have a future picture of what God is doing.

And He says, then I saw a new heaven and a new earth for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

[31 : 10] So you can write back to that picture. Write back to that picture that God has this great future for us as His people.

We are part of a promised unimaginable life and He asks us to stay under His protection, to be part of that new Jerusalem, to recognize there's nothing worthwhile outside of His grace that all the good things He gives us, many good things, are to be enjoyed.

And through Him, recognizing Him as the giver and that we have a great future in Him and with Him, God will be there in all His fullness. It will be that new Jerusalem that is pictured here to a degree where all the tears will be wiped away, where there isn't any more death, no more crying, no more pain, the sweetest and most beautiful existence.

And in the light of this incredible promise, we need to wrestle with the temptation to say grace is nothing special or that sin isn't quite so bad.

And just ask, I know I can do it, but ask the Holy Spirit to make the reality of rebellion and sin much more heinous to each of us and the beauty of God's grace much more powerful in our lives.

[32 : 33] Let's pray. Father God, help us to understand and know a little bit more clearly by the power of Your Holy Spirit, Your perspective.

We've said that a lot recently that the Bible is that living word which is trying to make clear Your perspective, sovereign as King as God.

We often wrestle because our perspective is so different because we are enthroned often in the as the center of our own lives and Christ and God is somewhere far off.

So help us and we know it's a battle, we know it's a struggle, we know we have remaining sin in us which wants to abandon you, wants to commit spiritual adultery as it were.

And abuse you and take your gifts but ignore you as the giver. Help us to see that in our own lives and hearts and we pray that you would make us amazed by grace more and more and find safety and security and protection and happiness in your company and acknowledging you for who you are.

[33 : 55] We do pray that and we do pray for forgiveness when we get that wrong when we are doing it. Our drawn and our hearts are attracted by other loves that take preeminence in first place in our lives.

Help us to give you that place of lordship and preeminence at all times and grant us the ability to do so by your Spirit.

Forgive us when we fail and we thank you that you are so willing to forgive but also so loving that you will discipline. We thank you for the picture of God as Mother that cares for His children but also this great protective fatherly figure who is jealous for our unadulterated love and we pray that you would help us to grasp both of these pictures and live in the shadow of Calvary.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.