

Israel's Rebellion, God's Restoration

Ezekiel 20

Ezekiel 20:1-4: *"It came to pass in the seventh year, in the fifth month, on the tenth day of the month, that certain of the elders of Israel came to inquire of the Lord, and sat before me. ² Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying, ³"Son of man, speak to the elders of Israel, and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God: "Have you come to inquire of Me? As I live," says the Lord God, "I will not be inquired of by you." ⁴ Will you judge them, son of man, will you judge them? Then make known to them the abominations of their fathers."*

Background Notes

In chapter 20, the elders or leaders of the Jewish captives in Babylon came to the prophet Ezekiel to inquire of the Lord. The Lord's answer was not what they wanted to hear - He told them not to come with their curiosities and inquire of Him. They were asking the wrong questions. Ezekiel was to give them a message of judgment because they were not judging themselves or repenting for their past and present sins of idolatry.

Doctrinal Points

1. God's grace to Israel in the past is evident in their preservation.

Ezekiel 20:5-32 is a history lesson of how Israel was unfaithful throughout four successive periods of her history. But for the sake of His covenant with Abraham, and for the glory of His own Name, God graciously preserved His people - in spite of their unfaithfulness.

a. The first period of Israel's history was their time in the land of Egypt. Notice that Israel's practice of idolatry did not start with the worship of the golden calf in the wilderness. The people were already worshiping idols while they were still in Egypt – but in His grace, God brought Israel out of Egypt in the Exodus.

Ezekiel 20:5-9: *"Say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God: "On the day when I chose Israel and raised My hand in an oath to the descendants of the house of Jacob, and made Myself known to them in the land of Egypt, I raised My hand in an oath to them, saying, 'I am the Lord your God.' ⁶ On that day I raised My hand in an oath to them, to bring them out of the land of Egypt into a land that I had searched out for them, 'flowing with milk and honey,' the glory of all lands. ⁷ Then I said to them, 'Each of you, throw away the abominations which are before his eyes, and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt. I am the Lord your God.' ⁸ But they rebelled against Me and would not obey Me. They did not all cast away the abominations which were before their eyes, nor did they forsake the idols of Egypt. Then I said, 'I will pour out My fury on them and fulfill My anger against them in the midst of the land of Egypt.' ⁹ But I acted for My name's sake, that it should not be profaned before the Gentiles among whom they were, in whose sight I had made Myself known to them, to bring them out of the land of Egypt."*

b. The second period of Israel's history was their wilderness journey. Verses 10-17 give the account of the first generation in the wilderness. God gave His people the law to live by and the sign of the Sabbath, but Israel rebelled against the Lord in the wilderness and profaned God's Sabbaths – and yet in His grace, God did not completely annihilate them.

Ezekiel 20:10-17: "Therefore I made them go out of the land of Egypt and brought them into the wilderness. ¹¹ And I gave them My statutes and showed them My judgments, 'which, if a man does, he shall live by them.' ¹² Moreover I also gave them My Sabbaths, to be a sign between them and Me, that they might know that I am the Lord who sanctifies them. ¹³ Yet the house of Israel rebelled against Me in the wilderness; they did not walk in My statutes; they despised My judgments, 'which, if a man does, he shall live by them,' and they greatly defiled My Sabbaths. Then I said I would pour out My fury on them in the wilderness, to consume them. ¹⁴ But I acted for My name's sake, that it should not be profaned before the Gentiles, in whose sight I had brought them out. ¹⁵ So I also raised My hand in an oath to them in the wilderness, that I would not bring them into the land which I had given them, 'flowing with milk and honey,' the glory of all lands, ¹⁶ because they despised My judgments and did not walk in My statutes, but profaned My Sabbaths; for their heart went after their idols. ¹⁷ Nevertheless My eye spared them from destruction. I did not make an end of them in the wilderness."

Verses 18-26 recounted the second generation in the wilderness. They also rebelled against the Lord and profaned God's Sabbaths. They continued the idolatry of the former generation that died in the wilderness. The practices and "statutes that were not good" (v25) were the requirements of the pagan religions to which Israel turned.

Ezekiel 20:18-26: "But I said to their children in the wilderness, 'Do not walk in the statutes of your fathers, nor observe their judgments, nor defile yourselves with their idols. ¹⁹ I am the Lord your God: Walk in My statutes, keep My judgments, and do them; ²⁰ hallow My Sabbaths, and they will be a sign between Me and you, that you may know that I am the Lord your God."

²¹ Notwithstanding, the children rebelled against Me; they did not walk in My statutes, and were not careful to observe My judgments, 'which, if a man does, he shall live by them'; but they profaned My Sabbaths. Then I said I would pour out My fury on them and fulfill My anger against them in the wilderness. ²² Nevertheless I withdrew My hand and acted for My name's sake, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the Gentiles, in whose sight I had brought them out. ²³ Also I raised My hand in an oath to those in the wilderness, that I would scatter them among the Gentiles and disperse them throughout the countries, ²⁴ because they had not executed My judgments, but had despised My statutes, profaned My Sabbaths, and their eyes were fixed on their fathers' idols."

²⁵ "Therefore I also gave them up to statutes that were not good, and judgments by which they could not live; ²⁶ and I pronounced them unclean because of their ritual gifts, in that they caused all their firstborn to pass through the fire, that I might make them desolate and that they might know that I am the Lord."

c. The third period of Israel's history was their activity in the Promised Land. The people used the good land that God gave them for idolatry. They used the trees and hills as places of sacrifice to the foreign gods. In verses 27-29 the Lord denounced the activities of this period of Israel's history.

Ezekiel 20:27-29: *“Therefore, son of man, speak to the house of Israel, and say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God: “In this too your fathers have blasphemed Me, by being unfaithful to Me. ²⁸ When I brought them into the land concerning which I had raised My hand in an oath to give them, and they saw all the high hills and all the thick trees, there they offered their sacrifices and provoked Me with their offerings. There they also sent up their sweet aroma and poured out their drink offerings. ²⁹ Then I said to them, ‘What is this high place to which you go?’*

d. The fourth period of Israel’s history was Ezekiel’s own day.

Ezekiel 20:30-32: *“Therefore say to the house of Israel, ‘Thus says the Lord God: “Are you defiling yourselves in the manner of your fathers, and committing harlotry according to their abominations? ³¹ For when you offer your gifts and make your sons pass through the fire, you defile yourselves with all your idols, even to this day. So shall I be inquired of by you, O house of Israel? As I live,” says the Lord God, “I will not be inquired of by you. ³² What you have in your mind shall never be, when you say, ‘We will be like the Gentiles, like the families in other countries, serving wood and stone.’”*

Throughout these four periods of Israel’s history, God graciously preserved His people, in spite of their constant rebellion and unfaithfulness. God’s grace to Israel in the past is evident of their preservation.

2. God’s grace to Israel in the future will be evident in their restoration.

Ezekiel 20:33-44: *“As I live,” says the Lord God, “surely with a mighty hand, with an outstretched arm, and with fury poured out, I will rule over you. ³⁴ I will bring you out from the peoples and gather you out of the countries where you are scattered, with a mighty hand, with an outstretched arm, and with fury poured out. ³⁵ And I will bring you into the wilderness of the peoples, and there I will plead My case with you face to face. ³⁶ Just as I pleaded My case with your fathers in the wilderness of the land of Egypt, so I will plead My case with you,” says the Lord God. ³⁷ “I will make you pass under the rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant; ³⁸ I will purge the rebels from among you, and those who transgress against Me; I will bring them out of the country where they dwell, but they shall not enter the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the Lord.*

³⁹ *“As for you, O house of Israel,” thus says the Lord God: “Go, serve every one of you his idols—and hereafter—if you will not obey Me; but profane My holy name no more with your gifts and your idols. ⁴⁰ For on My holy mountain, on the mountain height of Israel,” says the Lord God, “there all the house of Israel, all of them in the land, shall serve Me; there I will accept them, and there I will require your offerings and the first fruits of your sacrifices, together with all your holy things. ⁴¹ I will accept you as a sweet aroma when I bring you out from the peoples and gather you out of the countries where you have been scattered; and I will be hallowed in you before the Gentiles. ⁴² Then you shall know that I am the Lord, when I bring you into the land of Israel, into the country for which I raised My hand in an oath to give to your fathers. ⁴³ And there you shall remember your ways and all your doings with which you were defiled; and you shall loathe yourselves in your own sight because of all the evils that you have committed. ⁴⁴ Then you shall know that I am the Lord, when I have dealt with you for My name’s sake, not according to your wicked ways nor according to your corrupt doings, O house of Israel,” says the Lord God.”*

These verses described another period of Israel's history - the present time. In fact, these verses take us into the future and show us God's dealings with Israel in the Tribulation period that is yet to take place in the future. Both the good news and the bad news for Israel are seen in these verses.

The bad news was that Israel as a nation would continue in rebellion and unfaithfulness throughout this present time. God would have to scatter them and bring them under His rod of discipline, to judge them and purge out the rebels (v34-38).

But the good news was that Israel will be restored as a believing nation in the future, after a time of great tribulation. God's discipline will cause them to turn away from their idolatry and serve the Lord (v39-40). Then they will no longer be scattered among the nations - they will be gathered together and brought back into the land of Israel. Then they will know that the Lord had been gracious to them (v40-44).

These promises were made to the Jewish people (*not* to the Church, as is sometimes taught!). Jeremiah 31:31 described the New Covenant that God will make with the nation of Israel. This same covenant is in Ezekiel 20:37 - "*I will bring you into the bond of the covenant.*"

God's grace to Israel in the future will be evident in their restoration.

Practical Application

Don't explain away the Bible as a "parable"!

Ezekiel 20:45-49: *"Furthermore the word of the Lord came to me, saying, ⁴⁶ 'Son of man, set your face toward the south; preach against the south and prophesy against the forest land, the South, ⁴⁷ and say to the forest of the South, 'Hear the word of the Lord! Thus says the Lord God: 'Behold, I will kindle a fire in you, and it shall devour every green tree and every dry tree in you; the blazing flame shall not be quenched, and all faces from the south to the north shall be scorched by it. ⁴⁸ All flesh shall see that I, the Lord, have kindled it; it shall not be quenched.'"*

⁴⁹ *Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! They say of me, 'Does he not speak parables?'"*

The parable of the forest fire was given in these verses. God's judgment of the kingdom of Judah would be like a forest fire sweeping through the land. Although it was a parable, it conveyed reality. However, the people listening to Ezekiel were not impressed or convicted. They wrote it off as merely a fictional tale - a parable.

That's what a lot of people do with the Bible today. They read it, and they listen to sermons about it, but they're not convicted by it. They're not stirred up at all, because to them the whole Bible is like a parable - a myth or a fictional story - not real truth.

Don't make that serious mistake. Don't explain away the Bible as a parable!