

## The Empty Temple

Ezekiel 8–11

As many of you know, Carissa and I have moved twice in the last two years. And seven other times before that in our nearly 15 years of marriage. And if there's one lesson we've learned in moving so often, it's that it's not really the stuff that makes a place a home. It's the presence of the people who live there. That becomes clear when a family member leaves home. Your child, or your older brother or sister, goes off to college, or takes a job and moves out on their own. All their stuff is still in their room (sometimes to your chagrin). The posters are still on the wall, the trophies are in the same place on the shelf, the dirty socks may still be in the corner of the room—but it feels empty, sad, strangely quiet. Not because there's nothing in there. But because *no one lives there*. It's the presence of your family member that makes that room feel like home.

Now, in thinking about Ezekiel, imagine that scenario when it's not simply that someone has grown up and left the house, but that a family member has been *driven* from the home because of something you said or did. Adultery, abuse, betrayal. You walk into their room now, and it doesn't just feel empty. It's a monument to your failure. The Legos collecting dust on the shelf; the family pictures on the wall—they're a testimony of your unfaithfulness. Which you would think would result in a deep sense of guilt or shame or regret. But imagine yet again that you are unfazed. That you don't even notice the absence of your loved one, despite all the signs. That you just keep on doing what you were doing that caused trouble in the first place, oblivious to the pain you've wrought, unaware of the consequences of your behavior and the devastation you have brought upon your house. You're all alone—not because there's nothing in the house, but because no one else lives there—and you don't even realize it.

That scenario is the story of God's rebellious people and the effect they have on God's temple in the book of Ezekiel. Because of Israel's unrepentant sin, God abandons his house, and they don't realize he's left.

### The Temple and Advent

For advent this year we've been taking a broader look at what it really means for God to be *with us*. We're told in Matthew 1 that when Jesus Christ was born, when the eternal Son of God took on human flesh and was *incarnated*—became human—that he would be called “Immanuel,” which in Hebrew means, “God with us” (Matt. 1:23). Christmas is all about God coming down to dwell with his people.

But what we've seen so far is that the idea that God wants to be with his people in a special way is not new or unique to Christmas. It's one of the central promises of the whole biblical story, beginning with the Garden of Eden in Genesis, which was the first temple, and then taking shape in the tabernacle and temple in the rest of the Old Testament. Last week Pastor Bruce gave us a tour of sorts of what we called the old temple—the building that Solomon constructed in

Jerusalem that became a kind of home for God, where the God of heaven comes down to be with his people in a special way on earth. For Israel, going up to the temple was like coming home—their true home. God’s presence was where they belonged.

But all of that unravels in the book of Ezekiel. And we’re invited to look in on that unraveling and tragic turn of events through a vision God gives to the prophet Ezekiel in chapters 8–11.

### **Ezekiel the Prophet**

Now Ezekiel is not exactly a typical source for a Christmas sermon. In fact, it’s not a typical source for a sermon at all, unfortunately. Not one of those books that gets a lot of time in the pulpit, largely because it’s so weird and difficult to understand. But this is God’s Word. And it’s a Word we need to hear this morning, as we seek to understand what it means for God to be with us.

Ezekiel was both a priest and a prophet. He was taken as a captive to Babylon, along with much of Jerusalem’s ruling class, around 597 B.C. This is during one of the lowest points in ancient Israel’s history. What had been a glorious kingdom under David and Solomon, in the land God promised to Abraham, with Jerusalem and the temple at the center, had fractured into two kingdoms under Solomon’s son, and then gotten so bad that God handed his people over to their enemies as judgment for their sin (cf. Deut. 30:45-68). For the southern kingdom that meant Babylon.<sup>1</sup> As Isaiah prophesied in Isaiah 39:6, “Behold, the days are coming, when all that is in your house, and that which your fathers have stored up till this day, shall be carried to Babylon. Nothing shall be left, says the LORD.”

In Ezekiel’s day that process has already begun. Though Jerusalem and the temple were still standing at this point in the book, Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, had already carried two waves of captives into his territory (including Jehoiachin, King of Judah, and Ezekiel, both in the second group).<sup>2</sup> This is what God warned Israel he would do if they broke his covenant, clear back in Deuteronomy 30 and Leviticus 26.

But despite all of the signs that God is disciplining his people, the Israelites aren’t buying it. Those with Ezekiel in Babylon aren’t convinced that things are going to get worse, and those still in Jerusalem aren’t interested in repentance. They’re continuing to do the very things that got them into trouble in the first place.

And so God gives Ezekiel a vision, to show him (and Israel, and us) what’s really going on among God’s people, and how that impacts his presence among him.

### **Ezekiel’s Vision of the Temple (Ezekiel 8–11)**

Now we read earlier just from ch. 10, but chs. 8–11 all form one vision, in which Ezekiel is carried in that vision from Babylon to the temple in Jerusalem. Go ahead and flip a few pages back to ch. 8:1:

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<sup>1</sup> The northern kingdom was destroyed by Assyria in 722 B.C. (see 2 Kgs. 17).

<sup>2</sup> The first deportation occurred in 605 B.C., during the third year of Jehoiakim’s reign (2 Kgs. 24:1; Dan. 1:1). The second in 597 B.C., when Nebuchadnezzar replaced Jehoiachin with Zedekiah (2 Kgs. 24:8-17; Ezek. 1:2). The final deportation, including the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, occurred in 586 B.C. (2 Kgs. 25).

In the sixth year, in the sixth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I sat in my house, with the elders of Judah sitting before me, the hand of the Lord GOD fell upon me there. <sup>2</sup> Then I looked, and behold, a form that had the appearance of a man. Below what appeared to be his waist was fire, and above his waist was something like the appearance of brightness, like gleaming metal. <sup>3</sup> He put out the form of a hand and took me by a lock of my head, and the Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven and brought me in visions of God to Jerusalem, to the entrance of the gateway of the inner court that faces north, where was the seat of the image of jealousy, which provokes to jealousy. (Ezek. 8:1-3)

So Ezekiel is quite literally dragged by the hair (in a vision) to Jerusalem. And he's brought to the temple, where he sees an idol sitting in the north gate. An image that rouses God's holy jealousy. That's not supposed to be there.

Now whether what he sees is actually happening in Jerusalem, or is a visionary metaphor for how Israel is living—we're not sure. We know that Israel's main problem was idolatry—the worship of false gods; and we know that that idolatry sometimes infiltrated the temple (e.g. 2 Kgs. 17:7-23; 21:1-9). We also know that the temple is supposed to be filled with the glory of God's presence, not false idols. And Ezekiel sees the glory of the LORD in the temple when he arrives—ch. 8:4: “And behold, the glory of the God of Israel was there, like the vision that I saw in the valley” (an earlier vision of God's glory from ch. 1). But then God says to him, “‘Son of man, lift up your eyes now toward the north.’ So I lifted up my eyes toward the north, and behold, north of the altar gate, in the entrance, was this image of jealousy. And he said to me, ‘Son of man, do you see what they are doing, the great abominations that the house of Israel are committing here, *to drive me far from my sanctuary?* . . .’” (8:5-6).

Did you catch that last phrase? What Israel is doing—God's covenant people, whom he saved from slavery in Egypt and chose to be his treasured possession among all nations, that he might dwell with them and be their God and they his people—what they are doing is actually *driving* God from his temple. He can no longer stand to be around them.

So what are they doing? Through the rest of ch. 8, Ezekiel is taken on a tour of the temple, where he witnesses idolatry everywhere he looks. He sees the image of jealousy in the north gate (8:5-6). He sees seventy elders of Israel worshiping graven images in the court (8:7-13). He sees women worshiping a false god at the gate (8:14-15), and in the inner court, 25 men “with their backs to the temple of the LORD, and their faces toward the east, worshiping the sun toward the east” (8:16). God's covenant people have forsaken him and given their faith, their allegiance, their desire, their obedience—in a word, their *worship*—to things that are not god. Images, idols, “abominations” as Ezekiel puts it. They practice false worship.

But more than that, they freely pursue sin. God continues in 8:17, “Is it too light a thing for the house of Judah to commit the abominations that they commit here, that they should fill the land with violence and provoke me still further to anger?” False worship isn't their only problem; they practice false living as well. And the reality is, the two always travel together—idolatry and sin. Either one might enter the door first—false worship or false living—but the other is never far behind. If I'm willing to disregard God's Word in how I live my life, my worship will become shallow and self-focused. If my worship becomes shallow and misdirected, my life will eventually bend to other, more compelling allegiances.

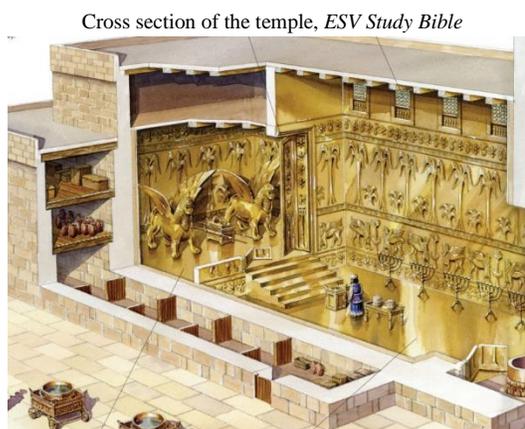
And so God people have forsaken their God. They have profaned the presence of God. How will he respond? He tells Ezekiel in 8:18: “Therefore I will act in wrath. My eye will not spare, nor will I have pity. And though they cry in my ears with a loud voice, I will not hear them.” And what follows is God’s judgment on his people, prophetically described in two ways. In ch. 9, God will destroy the idolaters. In chs. 10-11, he will depart from his temple.

Chapter 9 is where we meet the “man clothed in linen”—the one mentioned in ch. 10 that we read earlier (10:2ff). His first job in ch. 9 is to go throughout the city and “put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it”—those whose hearts are broken over Israel’s idolatry (9:4). And those who receive this mark will be spared from the executioners whom God is sending throughout the city, beginning in his sanctuary (9:5-6). God will destroy the idolaters.

But he will also depart from his temple. And that’s what we see in ch. 10. The chapter divides into two sections. In the first part, vv. 1-8, we see this same man—the one clothed in linen—who now, instead of marking the survivors, is told to approach the throne of God and fill his hands with burning coals from within it, and then scatter them over the city (10:2). The picture here emphasizes the fact that God’s judgment comes from his throne—he’s the one who decrees it. It may be eventually Babylonian soldiers who wield the sword, but they are executing God’s righteous decree to act in wrath toward Israel’s idolatry.

But there’s something else that dominates the scene in ch. 10. It’s this strange vision of four cherubim (heavenly creatures), with four wheels under them, which Ezekiel tells us looked like a throne (10:1). Most of the chapter is taken up in describing this throne scene, first with respect to the man who takes the coals from it in vv. 1-8, and then with respect to the glory of God who rides on it in vv. 9-22.

It’s not the first time Ezekiel has seen this. He tells us that it’s the same creatures he saw back in ch. 1, by the Chebar canal (8:15, 21; cf. 1:4-26). Although there he had even less a clue of what he was seeing. He couldn’t place the creatures as cherubim the first time he saw them, but now he’s putting things together. He realizes that what he is seeing are *the heavenly realities of God’s glorious presence in the temple*. The tabernacle and temple were “copies of the true things,” as Hebrews puts it (Heb. 9:24). They were modeled after the pattern of God’s heavenly temple (Exod. 25:8-9, 40; cf. Heb. 8:5; 9:11, 23-24). And so in the earthly temple there were four statues of cherubim—two on top of the ark of the covenant, and two standing over the ark, each with their wings spread as a kind of throne for God. God is often described in the Psalms as the one enthroned on or riding on the cherubim (e.g. Ps. 18:10; 80:1; 99:1; 104:3). What Ezekiel sees here are “the living heavenly realities that the static sculptures in the inner sanctum symbolize.”<sup>3</sup> The statues on earth correspond to creatures in heaven, on which God’s glory is enthroned.



<sup>3</sup> Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 1-24* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 320.

And perhaps the most shocking part of this vision is that the glory of God is on the move. The glory of God that filled the Holy of Holies in the temple *isn't staying there*. In v. 4 it moves to the threshold of the temple: “And the glory of the LORD went up from the cherub to the threshold of the house, and the house was filled with the cloud, and the court was filled with the brightness of the glory of the LORD” (10:4; cf. 9:3). Then in vv. 18-19 it moves to the gate of the temple:

Then the glory of the LORD went out from the threshold of the house, and stood over the cherubim.<sup>19</sup> And the cherubim lifted up their wings and mounted up from the earth before my eyes as they went out, with the wheels beside them. And they stood at the entrance of the east gate of the house of the LORD, and the glory of the God of Israel was over them.

Finally, in 11:22-23, it moves to the edge of the city: “Then the cherubim lifted up their wings, with the wheels beside them, and the glory of the God of Israel was over them. And the glory of the LORD went up from the midst of the city and stood on the mountain that is on the east side of the city.”

Because of Israel’s idolatry, God no longer dwells with his people. He has moved out. Abandoned his temple. Which means that even though all of furnishings are still in place, all of the furniture and implements, that the temple is now an empty house. Not because there’s nothing in there, but because no one lives there anymore. Just like what makes a house a home is the presence of the people who live there, so what made the temple the temple was the presence of God within it. Now it’s just an empty building. When we practice false worship and freely pursue sin, we forfeit the presence of God.

This a major turning point in the biblical story. As one author describes it, “The departure of the glory signals the end of a relationship that had existed for almost four centuries. The divine king has abandoned his residence.”<sup>4</sup>

And you would think that this would bother Israel. That they would notice his absence and feel shame or regret for what they’ve done to drive him away. But instead they keep on doing the things that caused all of their problems in the first place—offering false worship at the temple while freely pursuing sin in their lives. Ezekiel’s fellow captives even mock him for warning them that the temple was going to be destroyed for their sin (e.g. 33:30-33). But it was. And when Nebuchadnezzar came against Jerusalem a third time in 586 B.C., he finished it off. He dethroned the king, destroyed the temple, and deported the people (2 Kgs. 25). Not because Babylon was stronger than God, but because God abandoned his temple, and kicked his people out of his land. It was like the Garden of Eden all over again—being driven out from the presence of the LORD, cut off from his glory, which is pretty much the worst possible form of judgment there is. That’s how Paul described hell in 2 Thessalonians 1 (vv. 6-10).

God wants to dwell with his people. We were made to enjoy his unmediated presence. But when we practice false worship and freely pursue sin, we forfeit the presence of God. Because God is holy. He is above us and unlike us, over us and bigger than us, morally perfect in every way. And therefore nothing unclean is allowed into his holy presence. As Bruce talked about last week, the only way sinful people could draw near a holy God in his holy temple was on the basis of a sacrifice made for their atonement, offered by a priest. And only the high priest was allowed

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<sup>4</sup> Block, 326-327.

into the inmost section of the temple, the Holy of Holies, and then only once a year, and not without a blood sacrifice for himself and the people (Heb. 9:7).

But Israel took God's presence for granted. And through their false worship, forfeited his presence. The sobering reality is that it's pretty easy for us to do the same thing today. We may not be tempted to bow down to statues here in the Metrowest, but we are drawn to false worship all the same. Sometimes it's a *misguided heart*. We give our worship to something other than God. In the ancient world, or other majority world contexts today, that may very well be a stature or an image. In the western world today, it more likely takes the form of money, career, power, sex, fame, family, a cause—as Tim Keller puts it, “anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give.”<sup>5</sup> We may go to church, we may do all sorts of religious things, but our real hope is not in Christ our Savior; it's in these counterfeit gods that not only steal from God the glory he deserves, but will only let us down. A misguided heart.

Sometimes false worship takes the shape of a *hollow heart*. We have the right God (so to speak), we agree with the right doctrine, but we're just going through the motions. It doesn't mean anything to us. We're only here because we have to be. Or because we think that by performing certain religious activities, we're doing our duty for God. But our heart isn't in it. It's like buying your significant other flowers because that's what you're supposed to do, but not because you actually want to. It's hollow love, empty religiosity. A hollow heart.

Sometimes false worship is more *half-hearted*. Lazy, apathetic. We give God our leftovers. We spent our time and our money and our energy on ourselves, and if we have anything left, then God can have that. It's like when ancient Israel would look at their flocks and say, “well we can't sell that sick and injured one at the market, so I guess we'll give it to the LORD instead” (cf. Mal. 1:6-14). We're not neglecting God per se, but we're not prioritizing him. We're half-hearted.

Similarly, sometimes we have a *distracted heart*. We want to worship God, we want to give him glory and live our lives for him. But our minds and hearts wander. We're distracted by the things of the world, by our worries and anxieties in life. We're distracted by what others think of us. How often, when we're praying or singing to God, does your mind wander? We're supposed to be making much of God, and we're thinking about the football game, or Monday morning, or what others might be thinking of us right now, or whether that person over there is actually worshipping God or not. We're distracted.

But more often than not, false worship sneaks its way in through a *divided heart*. We compartmentalize our lives, build a wall between the part of my life that's for God, and the part of my life that's for me, or for something else. And so there becomes a huge disconnect between how I worship on Sunday, and how I live Monday through Saturday. I tolerate sin, selfishness, and greed in my life, and then I think that God will be pleased with my singing, or I'm surprised when I have a hard time connecting with God in gathered worship. We forget that all of life is to be an act of worship to God, whether gathered or scattered. Everything we do, we are called to do in service to the King.

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<sup>5</sup> Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods* (New York: Dutton, 2009), xvii.

And so all of us, in big ways and small ways, are guilty of false worship. I'm guilty of every single one of these—my heart is so often a mess of selfishness and distraction and self-righteousness. And I know I'm not alone. There's not a single one of us, who left to themselves, is fit to enter the presence of God. As the apostle Paul puts it in Romans, "for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23)—the glory that fills the temple, we fail to reflect it, and are unworthy to approach it. Our sin hides God's face from us. It drives his presence away. False worship and false living forfeit the presence of God.

But if this is the case, then who can stand? How could God let anyone into his presence? This is actually the question Ezekiel cries out twice in this vision, as he watches God's judgment unfold. "Will you make a full end of the remnant of Israel?" (11:13; cf. 9:8).

But God answers Ezekiel's cry with a promise. Right here in the same vision, 11:14-21. Verse 16: "Thus says the Lord GOD: Though I removed them far off among the nations, and though I scattered them among the countries, yet I have been a sanctuary to them for a while in the countries where they have gone." The temple in Jerusalem may be empty, but God will still be with his people, even in captivity. Verse 17: "Thus says the Lord GOD: I will gather you from the peoples and assemble you out of the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel." God promises a new exodus; he will bring them once again into the land. He promises a new worship, v. 18: "And when they come there, they will remove from it all its detestable things and all its abominations. And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God" (11:18-20).

Though they are utterly unworthy, God will be faithful to his covenant. Which means he will act mercifully toward his people. His vision for creation will be realized—his people in his place under his rule enjoying his blessing for the sake of his glory. He will fulfill his promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to Moses, Samuel, and David. He will get the glory due his name.

And as Ezekiel unfolds we learn a little more about how that's going to happen. The repeated promise of a new heart, a new spirit, a new covenant (e.g. 36:22-38; 37:15-26). A vision of a new temple in chs. 40-48, which will once again be filled with the glory of God (43:1-5).

And when Israel was eventually allowed to return to their land, after their captivity, they did in fact rebuild the temple, although those who remembered the first one wept at the mediocrity of the new one (Ezra 3:12). And even though God promised to fill this house with his glory (Hag. 2:7-8), unlike the tabernacle and the temple before it, we never see it happen in the stories. When the Old Testament ends, there's a sense in which Ezekiel's vision of the glory of the LORD returning to his temple has yet to occur.

Until one day the Son of God, the one in whom "the fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Col. 2:9), is born in a manger. Immanuel, God with us. And at the climax of his ministry, he even stands on the Mount of Olives, the mountain east of the city—the same mountain by which the glory departed and from which it will return (Ezek. 11:22-23; Zech. 14:4)—Jesus stands on that mountain and enters the city on Palm Sunday and goes to the temple (Mk. 11:1-25). God *returns*

to his temple. Not to restore the building, however, but to condemn it, and replace it with himself. We'll look at that more next week.

There is only one worthy to enter the presence of God. Only one Son whose worship is acceptable to God. One person who is at the very same time the temple, and the priest, and the sacrifice, who is able to cleanse us from our sin and take our unworthy worship and sanctify it, making us acceptable to God, if we will turn away from sin and trust him in faith.

Because worship matters. We were made for worship—to enjoy God's presence and serve him as priests. It matters *who* we worship—there is only one God worthy of it, and he has made himself known to us by his Spirit in the face of Jesus Christ. It matters *how* we worship—with whole hearts, not going through the motions or giving God the leftovers or compartmentalizing our lives between what we do for God and what we do for ourselves. And it matters *why* we worship—not in order to be accepted by God, but because we have been accepted by God through faith in Christ.

More than anything, it matters that we worship God on his own terms, and not ours. False worship forfeits his presence. True worship is centered on Christ, dependent on the Spirit, anchored in his Word, expressed in every part of life, and aimed at the Father's glory above all else. It's about him, not us.

And it's all made possible by Christ. And only by Christ. Hebrews describes it this way:

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent [the heavenly temple] (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) <sup>12</sup> he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. <sup>13</sup> For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, <sup>14</sup> how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God. (Heb. 9:11-14)

Jesus makes true worship possible. He makes God's presence accessible, even for sinners like us. May we come to God on God's terms—by his Spirit, through faith in Christ, to the glory of God the Father, and find our joy in him.