

HOMILETICA ET HOMILIAE
—THE HERITAGE OF REFORMED PREACHING—

ACTIONS LOUDER THAN WORDS
INTRODUCTION TO A SERMON SERIES ON EZEKIEL 4:1–5:4

by J. Mark Beach

THE FOLLOWING set of sermons (four in total) cover the three symbolic actions of the prophet Ezekiel depicted in Ezekiel 4:1–5:4. They are published with the goal of demonstrating how homiletics follows exegesis. More particularly, these sermons line up next to the exegetical article of Professor Andrew Compton on Ezekiel 3:22–5:17. The aim of these sermons is not to parrot the exegetical work of Prof. Compton or any other exegete. Instead, this sermon series offers itself as an example of how exegetical work transitions to the pew in the form of the sermon.

The four sermons presented here do not pretend to be the finest specimens of homiletical theory put into practice. They are merely samples of sermon-writing that seek to be exegetically responsible, textual-thematically ordered, redemptive-historically informed, christologically centered, and robust in application. They are samples of a set of convictions about homiletics on a peculiar and difficult genre of Scripture, namely Old Testament prophecy.

The challenges of preaching this genre of Scripture are numerous. First, unlike the original audience of the prophet's message (in this case, Ezekiel's fellow Jewish exiles living along the Kebar River in Babylon and, derivatively, the large remainder population still living in Jerusalem), the church today is not a theocracy; nor does the church live under the Mosaic economy. It lives as recipients of the new covenant in Christ's blood.

Second, and very much related to this first issue, we face the hard question where and how (or in what way) does the church of the new covenant identify with Israel of the old economy. Make no mistake, such an identity exists, for they participate in the *one* covenant of grace. But we must recognize that there are diverse economies in that one covenant. Therefore, it is necessary to travel along and through covenant history in order to make proper exegetical and homiletical moves from an Old Testament situation to a new covenant reality. Otherwise, if we fail to do this, we likely launch vertically (straight up) from the text to find moral or theological principles that exist

independently from Jesus Christ and subsequent redemptive history. That move is an unhelpful and common mistake.

Third, the manner of divine judgment upon an apostate people in Ezekiel's day, and what may count as God's fatherly scolding of the church in our time, do not match up exactly. Thus, the way God may correct his church today is not necessarily (or likely) through the formula of the invasion of a pagan nation, displacing his people and sending them into exile. For an apostate church, however, God's corrective hand can come in other forms—some equally devastating.

Of course, and fourth, what also comes into play here is the call of the gospel to the nations (the lost), and the warning of the gospel to a church that turns, like Israel of old, apostate. Sorting out and applying these materials from Ezekiel to the modern church, and modern believers, is challenging—to say the least. What must not be done, on the one hand, is to harvest from these verses, what amounts to, “theological truisms,” such as “God is a God of justice”; and so we must be warned that he is *still* just. Such is true, a truism, but that approach loses the texture and focus of the text of Ezekiel—both then and now. In addition, it loses how we fit into this text as Christ's church today. On the other hand, what must not be done is to glean the text for “moralistic truisms,” which reduce Ezekiel's behaviors as models for modern mimicking. It is quite odd to bid Christians to mimic some set of behaviors as though Christ were an after-thought (or not thought of at all). Such moralism reduces Christ to an *addendum* to Christianity. He is shoved to the periphery of faith. While there are potent moral features present in these verses from Ezekiel, how we get to them, and apply them, is the important question. But it is not answered without the promise fulfilled in Jesus Christ composing the answer.

Fifth, in preaching these verses, we face the question of how the church (and individual Christians) should relate to these materials. This is to make explicit that which is implicit in the previous points. Given the sharp word of judgment that marks these scenes, what is the path to right application (or applications) for the contemporary church, and also for the world? How might we offer application that does not discount or ignore where we are as church (and individual members of the church) in the history of redemption? This, of course, requires that we analyze a given church or congregation in light of God's Word. A sermon always requires an exegesis of people (audience), not just the words of the biblical text. The sermons as composed and presented here could be (and should be) adjusted and refocused, especially in their applicatory specifics, from congregation to congregation. Each local church is composed of people from different backgrounds, at different stages in their sojourn of Christian faith and their grasp of the gospel. Some churches have many persons attending worship who are seeking to explore the Christian faith—like those testing the water. There are also churches that have many members for whom faith is traced back many generations—some of whom are jaded toward the faith, others of whom prize highly what they have received. Sermons inevitably should be targeted to specific people and their circumstances. More broadly speaking, we must recognize that as Christ's church we live not on the side of the promise *awaiting fulfillment* but on the side of *the promise fulfilled (and still being fulfilled)*.

Sixth, and last, given that we have four sermons on these materials, how do we avoid repetition of emphasis while not losing the common thread that runs through this text-series on Ezekiel 4:1–5:4? These sermons, for good or ill, attempt to keep hold of the thread without preaching the same sermon four times.

It should be noted that this series does not cover verses 5–17 of chapter 5, where God explains *in words* the meaning and reason for Ezekiel's symbolic actions. While the commentary presented in those verses is in "in play" throughout these sermons, the sermons themselves focus on the specific texts and the symbolic actions they describe—actions that communicate without words.

As a final note, it is probably apt to alert readers that I do not preach sermons *as written*. In the act of preaching (the preaching event) I allow myself the freedom to speak as it comes naturally to me in the moment. Thus, while the manuscript of a sermon is generally followed, the exact words are not. I may well simplify paragraphs of a sermon, add material as it comes to me, and rework applications or illustrations on the fly (so to speak). However, the theme and structure of the sermon is respected. These sermons as written are probably too long to preach word-for-word, but I don't do that in any case. Rather, I preach the content of the sermon in words that I judge to be appropriate at the moment. This is only to say that a sermon *as preached* need not (necessarily) be identical with the sermon *as written*—though the latter serves and guides the former.

ACTIONS LOUDER THAN WORDS (1): SILLY CHILD’S PLAY OR GOD’S DEADLY GAME?

A Sermon on Ezekiel 4:1–3
(*Scripture Reading: Ezekiel 3:16–4:8*)

by J. Mark Beach

SOMETIMES ACTIONS speak louder than words. I don’t remember how young I was when I first came across Ezekiel 4, but it made quite an impression on me. I do remember that. And that is exactly what Ezekiel’s actions were designed to do.

God’s prophet performs a kind of “street theater” in order to gain the attention of an inattentive people. An exiled people! A humiliated people, who, in spite of being exiled and humiliated, were still proud. They were a people confident that their exile was a momentary lapse, a mere hiccup before things were back to normal. “God will come through for us. He won’t renege on his promises.”

Is that a correct way to think? It is a vital question, isn’t it? On the one hand, we should never doubt God’s promises. We are dependent on God. We know that. Our good works can’t be good enough to get us blessed ... and certainly not saved. It is all of God, all of grace. On the other hand, God’s promise still calls us to faith—we must trust in and depend on God’s grace, ever looking for God’s mercy, walking in the repentance of faith and in the fear of the Lord. We need mercy every day.

But what happens if we are jaded, uncaring, and presumptuous? What if we think God owes us favors? What if we think *that* ... even while we walk headlong into sin? What then? What if we shove God into corner and chase idols? Will God be mocked?

These exiles, Ezekiel living among them, were covenantally presumptuous. They were idol-chasers. They shoved God into a corner and figured God wouldn’t fail them. Yet, here they are ... in exile.

So where do we find ourselves as we face the silent message of Ezekiel 4? Do we identify with Ezekiel’s viewers, with the people in exile with him—presumptuous, unrepentant, smug? Do we identify with the people left back in Jerusalem? Or do we identify with Ezekiel himself?

Perhaps you say: “Well, of course, we should identify with Ezekiel.” But are you ready to identify with him, to suffer as he must suffer? Have you counted the cost? He has a difficult task, the task of a watchman. “*Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them*

warning from me” (Ezek. 3:17 ESV). Thus, if God says to the wicked, “You shall die,” then Ezekiel must warn him. If he does not, he is guilty along with the wicked man. If he does warn him, but he ignores the warning, then Ezekiel will be without guilt. Ezekiel has this calling to be a watchman. And that is what he is doing here. But, for now, he does it by actions, not words.

Odd, isn’t it? A silent prophet. A wordless preacher. But God has his reasons for this. So, here God brings his Word to a “hard-to-get-their-attention” people. He addresses them (and us) with:

ACTIONS LOUDER THAN WORDS—SILLY CHILD’S PLAY OR GOD’S DEADLY GAME?

- (1) *Ezekiel’s child’s play—which is no game*
- (2) *God’s game—which is no child’s play*

I. Child’s Play—which is no game (vv. 1–2)

We must remember that God had banned Ezekiel from preaching. For now, no sermons for Israel. “*I will make your tongue stick to the roof of your mouth so that you will be silent and unable to rebuke them, for they are a rebellious people*” (Ezek. 3:26 NIV). True, Ezekiel may not speak to the *ear*, but he is deliberately commanded to speak to the *eye*. He will preach *by deeds! By actions!*

A set of three actions are presented here in chapters 4 and 5 of Ezekiel. Each are presented without a word—total silence. Not a peep, not a word. But how loud!

The first of these symbols is a double-feature, and our focus begins here with act one of it. Ezekiel, the son of man and the man of God, begins with what looks like silly child’s play—yet this was no game. Look at what God says:

And you, son of man, take a brick and lay it before you, and engrave on it a city, even Jerusalem. And put siege-works against it, and build a siege wall against it, and cast up a mound against it. Set camps also against it, and plant battering rams against it all around (Ezek. 4:1–2 ESV).

So Ezekiel is to take a clay slab—probably of soft (not fired) clay—the size of a typical building brick, and use it as a slate, a tablet. He is to play etch-a-sketch on this clay tablet, drawing into it with a sharp stick or some pointed object. He must make a sketch of a “city” on that clay. Which city? Ah, Jerusalem. His homeland. The city he remembers and longs for—as do the other exiles. The city he knows by heart. Zion. The place where we find God’s Temple, his dwelling place of promise. Draw Jerusalem, Ezekiel.

Ezekiel proves himself skilled enough for this task. He knows this city, street by street, ally-ways and short-cuts—like we know roads and bike-paths and sidewalks of our own neighborhoods. So far, so good!

Perhaps Ezekiel, playing the role of the silent drawing-prophet, found a kind of pleasure reminiscing about the holy city: religious memories, better days. Perhaps he

felt a profound homesickness. But he must do more than draw the city. No, he must also depict Jerusalem as a *besieged* city!

Around Jerusalem he has to create siege works, with all the machinery for laying siege to a walled city: siege ramps going up, siege towers, camps of soldiers (entire army divisions) set all around the city, and also battering rams, and the like. Maybe he scratched these images into the dirt surrounding his tablet sketch, but I like to think that he used some of the soft clay to create miniature figures of soldiers and the other battle implements. God has Ezekiel preach through a kind of visual instruction. An Etch-a-sketch sermon. A game of Pictionary. Call it flannel-graph, Old Testament style. Visual aids for a disobedient people, except it is much more than that.

So Ezekiel sets to work with his drawing. Look at this son of Jerusalem, silently going about his task, etching in the clay this message from God—perhaps with an ache in his heart, with eyes welling with tears. He must obey God. He must be God’s voice. But this is a voice gone silent. His tongue is stuck to the roof of his mouth—a silent Word of God that, nonetheless, speaks volumes. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, God’s very own, look what fate is portrayed for you here.

What God has Ezekiel do is designed to gather a crowd.

“What is this? What is he drawing? What are those figures about it?” The crowd looks on with interest. Their curiosity is roused, for they too can see the lines in the clay; they too can remember; they can recognize what city that is—their city! Their home! Look at those lines. Isn’t that the silhouette of Jerusalem? But then—as the sketch continues—as the prophet continues to draw and to fashion the figures of a siege and its machinery, then what? “What is he portraying there? What is this? A siege ramp, battering rams, armies encamped? Oh!”

This is a picture of Jerusalem—most of her inhabitants still there—a picture of Jerusalem besieged; a foreign army encamped around her walls, starving her. No one and no-thing can get in or out. Building towers and ramps up her walls. Battering-rams to breach her fortifications. This is serious business. No, this is a horror! Desperate people. Hungry babies. A ticking doom – tick, tick. A siege could take years—but the outcome was certain.

From bemusement to annoyance! Or is it from annoyance to bemusement? The crowd beholds what? Silly child’s play? The one nudges the other and points out the frown on the prophet’s forehead. Another chuckles! Ah! He laughs at this childish show, a grown man making little stick figures on a slate. What a joke! A grown man at child’s play. Etch-a-sketch in the clay; let’s mold some army men and mounds! Childish!

But this is no game. In all the silence, does Israel have ears to hear? Do we?

Covenant presumption can get in the way. Covenant presumption—spiritual conceit—becoming puffed up from divine favor can make you presume upon it. Indeed, the exiles laugh at this threat, this warning—this depicted future of Jerusalem.

“We are God’s people. We matter! We are chosen. We worship God. He calls *us*—not them—*his people*.” (The church today can say all the same sorts of things.) “So, why this pessimism Ezekiel? Relax. Jerusalem is safe! God won’t fail us! God will come through for us! Want proof? Don’t you remember when Sennacherib thought he could bully us? But God had other plans (cf. 2 Kings 18:13–19:36; Isa. 36

and 37). Remember? Isaiah declares as God's mouthpiece: *'I will defend this city and save it, for my sake and for the sake of David my servant'* (2 Kings 19:34 NIV). So, you see Ezekiel, all your silent etching in the clay slab and all the molded figures erected around it do not undo God's promises. Have you lost your marbles, Ezekiel? Enough of this child's play."

John the Baptist and Jesus also faced people who suffered covenant presumption, people who refused to be warned, to be corrected or set straight. The presumptuous ones replied to John the Baptist with words to the effect: "We have Abraham as our father, so how dare you suggest that we're in the wrong." Jesus described such people as those who have heard without hearing and have seen without seeing, as dull-hearted people. They don't want to hear; they don't want to see or "*understand with their heart and turn*"—but if they would hear and see and turn, then he would heal them (see Matt. 13:15 NRSV).

We know that God likes to speak with actions, not just words. Baptism is a message of God by actions. Baptism declares to all who will pay attention—to believer and unbeliever alike—that you are dirty and you need God's cleansing in Jesus Christ. You are dead and you need rebirth and renewal of your whole life. You are disunited from God and you need to be reunited to him by his Son, by his cross, by his death and resurrection for you. That's baptism. In many ways, actions louder than words!

And the Lord's Supper is the same way. It declares to you visually and visibly that you can only be right with God through the body and blood of Jesus Christ—broken for you and shed for you. You cannot stand on your own. He died for sinners! You're dead if you think you can stand without him. You can't! There is hell to pay for sin, and he paid it. But if you will not partake of him, of his body and his blood, of his hell-payment in your stead, then you have hell to pay yourself. Eat, drink, commune of him—flesh of his flesh, bone of his bone—united to him; his body and blood administered to you by the Holy Spirit. Actions louder than words!

Both baptism and the Lord's Supper show us a "besieged" Son of God, Jesus Christ suffering and dying, undergoing divine curse, for such is sin's due and our due as sinners! Jesus Christ was besieged, punished—*crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell.*

And here, too, a besieged city, a picture of judgment. But they won't listen. Child's play, they say.

That's convenient, isn't it? To ignore God's Word—to ignore God altogether—as if it is all silly. Pie-in-the-sky when you die. Unbelief writes God off as fantasy; it is all just too much. Prayer is just talking-to-yourself. It doesn't do any good. This is all childish stuff. Yes, sinners love to whittle God down to size and, then, dismiss him. First they make God manageable, reduce him to a play-thing; and then they ridicule their notion of him.

We live in an age in which there is an emerging consensus (at least within university circles) in which ordinary back-biting, sexually harassing, fornicating, stealing and cheating (Ten Commandment breaking) human beings judge themselves as morally superior to God himself—at least superior to the God of the Old Testament (the God Ezekiel knew and served). They say: "The world being the way it is, 'if God is all-powerful, then he is not good.' And 'if he is good, then he is not all-powerful.'

Either way, he is not worth my time.” They forget that we human beings have made the world the way it is.

No, for them, God is a game. Modern people (the university culture) even talk about how “God-language” or “God-talk”—any speech about God—is just a language-game. Playing with words and creating a fantasy world around those words. In other words, modern, secular people think nothing of trifling with God. There is no fear of the Lord. No worries! They conclude: “We can do without you, God, thank you very much.”

Yet, the church, too, trifles with God. It too plays games with him. How? Well, as believers we can play games with God by never asking whether a divine displeasure, even a fatherly correction, may be our due. This is not to call in question God’s mercy in Jesus Christ; but it is to call in question whether *we actually seek that mercy in Jesus Christ*. Or has covenant presumption replaced seeking his mercy?

Covenant presumption means to presume on God’s promises rather than trust in and depend upon them. It breeds *pride*, not humility, *conceit*, not concern, and *self-satisfaction*, not self-denial. It breeds the notion: “We’ve arrived!” That stands in stark contrast to humility and concern and self-denial.

Israel, even the people already in exile, could not accept the notion that they deserved such punishment. No way!

She was to be a light to the nations; but she had become dull gray. The church also is called to be a light to the nations. But if she becomes dull gray, then what? If she refuses to humble herself to be a servant to lost souls (for she is full of pride), if she has no concern for the weak and burdened and broken (because she is plump with conceit), and if she will not examine how she might grow up in Christ, yes, become more obedient to him (versus just standing pat, we’re fine), if she refuses to do that because she is self-satisfied; then, indeed, self-denial won’t register either. Isn’t besiegement due?

Think about it. Is the church besieged today? If she is, is it for correction or for punishment? Where there are churches which disapprove of gospel preaching (or have pastors that refuse to preach the gospel), isn’t that a form of spiritual starvation? Then, too, there is besiegement in the form of doctrinal error. Nowadays, there are those who say we cannot look to Christ’s death for help because it is just too violent. Cosmic child abuse is not a path to the forgiveness of our sins. More recently, there are those who question (or simply disregard) the Bible’s authority regarding sexual orientation and its expression or what constitutes fornication. There are theological writers who insist that it is immoral to try to evangelize people, for they have their own beliefs already. We must respect that.

The church is besieged by such doctrinal error. Is this correction and testing for the church? Or is it judgment? Will we stand faithful and humble through trial? Or will we suffer a besiegement through moral compromise? The church needs to repent publicly before the nations—what, with the scandals that embarrass the whole church publicly: Roman Catholic priests abusing children or Protestant mega-church leaders having affairs with church members. (Our churches have not escaped such scandal either.) The church besieged!

If we will not repent and be corrected, then such besieging can only lead to its deadly outcome—a removal of the lampstand.

Child's play? But this is no game.

II. God's game—which is no child's play (v. 3)

We need to see that, too, for what God has Ezekiel do (what they scoff at as silly child's play) is God's game; and that game is no child's play. God is deadly serious. Israel must wake up. Notice what comes next. Verse 3: "*And you, take an iron griddle, and place it as an iron wall between you and the city; and set your face toward it, and let it be in a state of siege, and press the siege against it. This is a sign for the house of Israel*" (Ezek. 4:3 ESV).

This is a curious addition to the scene depicted here. Ezekiel takes an iron pan or baking sheet (a griddle), and places it as an iron wall between Jerusalem and the prophet, the Lord's servant. It is striking symbolism, but what does it mean?

Many see it as symbolizing an iron wall of God's anger against Jerusalem—an impenetrable iron curtain. All the prayers and supplications of the lamenting people will come to a halt. Sin creates walls; and the sin of the people, it is said, erects this wall so that the intimacy and nearness of God and his people is cut off. Fellowship is broken! God is no longer friend but foe. The iron wall, then, functions to break off any hope or help from God.

That is the most common view. But does it capture the whole meaning here?

We must remember that Ezekiel is a priest. As such, he is the Lord's servant who can act with priestly mediation. And here, at verse 3, he is told to set up this iron griddle. This term for "cooking pan" used here is rare in the Old Testament. When it is used, it is always associated with priestly activities. Does it have any priestly connotations here? Perhaps, for this griddle always refers to the vessel the priest handled for preparing the grain offering. It was a priestly cooking vessel, connected to the work of sacrifice to God. In fact, a grain offering signified the sacrifice of devotion and honor in worshipping God. Ezekiel, the priest, then, is told to take this priestly cooking vessel, and to erect it as an iron wall. It is without question a wall of separation—but as a priestly vessel can it not offer a hint of hope?

This iron wall is certainly not a wall forestalling the judgment to come, the siege of Jerusalem. But it isn't saying too much to note that this griddle can also suggest a blunting of judgment, for in the symbolic acts that follow—Ezekiel laying on his side, the dreadful bread he must eat, his humiliation in shaving his head and beard, all this points to his coming alongside of a judged, suffering people. So, as priest, he comes alongside them here. Here is an iron wall, a priestly griddle that places the sacrificial work of the Temple in the foreground amidst all this doom. Is this a mild hint that a remnant will be rescued from the flames of judgment?

Walls, of course, are usually intended to keep unwanted people out. The temple, for example, is a walled place, walled off to outsiders. But it also has gates of entrance—there is a way to enter under the prescribed conditions. The temple is walled off from those who do not believe in God or seek his mercy. Likewise, the holy of holies (that cubed sanctuary) within the temple is boxed away and walled off from all

others. Only the high-priest, and only once a year (with all sorts of preparation), could enter there to intercede for forgiveness; yet within that holiest of sanctuaries the work of atonement takes place to provide access to God's mercy. And then, too, think of the holy city of God, the new Jerusalem itself, the city of God restored, purified, a perfect cube like the holy of holies of old, it is also a place with walls, for not all belong there. But it is a city with gates as well—for there is access into it. And most important of all, Jesus himself is the way, the truth, and the life; he is the narrow gate by which we must enter. He is our access to God's presence. There is no path to the Father except by him. God is walled off from all of us except through the priestly gate of his blood. Jesus is the ultimate wall of separation for those who will not seek God's mercy in him; but he is also the gate of highest blessing for those who seek him in faith.

Clearly, what Ezekiel depicts for his gathered audience here, for us too, is certain doom. God behind an iron wall. But look at that wall! Look at God's priest! Shouldn't we repent and seek mercy? Or will we, like Israel, balk at this negative message; this doomsday warning; this sour memo from God's silent prophet?

For them, it seems unjust. God using a foreign power to besiege them—this is too much to stomach.

I suppose this has always baffled the church. Why does God use an evil instrument—in this case Babylon—to afflict his people, his own city, containing his temple? Don't the nations *deserve* his wrath and judgment *more than* they do? Why doesn't God get busy punishing them? These nations mock him, chase other gods, practice violence, spread injustice and moral perversion. Why not them? Why us? Why should Jerusalem be flattened when these pagan nations are *far worse*? "God, flatten the pornographers and drug-dealers! They surely deserve your judgment *more than* we do."

Are you baffled? You must be careful when you say things like: They are "far worse" or "deserve it more." What constitutes "far worse"?

God, of course, hates all sin. We needn't worry about that. Sketched for us in his Word, we see the siege of all the sinful cities of the world. This has been drawn up by God a long time ago. I don't care whether it is Paris or Portland, New York or New Delhi, every sinful city is doomed. None will escape God's judgment—not Moscow, not Miami. It is already drawn up. Nobody is getting away with anything.

So, why are we always pointing our sinful fingers at others? That is an old tactic, as old as Eden.

"Lord, the woman you gave me ... it's her fault."

"Lord, the serpent told me ... it's his fault."

No, look at yourself! Jerusalem, look at yourself! Church, look at yourself!

Judgment begins with the house of the Lord. The Bible tells us that (Jer. 25:29; Amos 3:2; 1 Pet. 4:17). God's anger rages fiercest toward the ones who have scorned his passionate love and mercy.

So, it isn't the most violent city or the smuttiest or grossly immoral that is first in God's sights of judgment. No, with his own house God begins. Judgment begins with the house of the Lord, with those hiding behind a mask of piety, called hypocrisy. That

is, God begins with *covenant presumption*—pride, conceit, self-satisfaction. He begins with temple-goers and church-goers who proudly pray with the Pharisee, in thanksgiving, that they are not like other people (see Luke 18:11). This is churchly child’s play—which is no game. Didn’t the prophets, and Jesus too, make clear that God rejects empty forms and the pious façade? He is all-knowing and all-seeing; therefore he sees what is happening in our hearts and at his temple in Jerusalem (see Ezek. 8). He sniffs out the idolatry practiced in his name.

The more boldly we declare that Jerusalem can never be lost, or go about boasting how we possess the purest preaching and the purest church, such pride goes hand-in-hand with sowing seeds of a church to come under siege. Indeed, the church, as real church, true church, shall never die. The gates of hell shall not prevail against it—even if God must correct it as a father corrects a son. But sham churches die. False churches vanish. Fake churches melt away under God’s siege.

So we must be careful about branding worldly people, our lost neighbors, as “far worse” than we are or “deserve it more” than we do. The exiles thought like that. The inhabitants of Jerusalem thought like that. But God didn’t think like that. This is God’s own explanation about the judgment on his people (this comes from Ezekiel 5, starting at verse 5, which is a verbal commentary on Ezekiel’s symbolic actions):

Thus says the Lord GOD: This is Jerusalem. I have set her in the center of the nations, with countries all around her. And she has rebelled against my rules by doing wickedness more than the nations, and against my statutes more than the countries all around her; for they have rejected my rules and have not walked in my statutes. Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: Because you are more turbulent [unruly] than the nations that are all around you, and have not walked in my statutes or obeyed my rules, and have not even acted according to the rules of the nations that are all around you, therefore thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, even I, am against you. And I will execute judgments in your midst in the sight of the nations (Ezek. 5:5–8 ESV).

Israel had become a “more sinful than them” people—that is, *more sinful than her neighbors*. Might the church at least be humble enough to recognize that sinning takes on many forms? Yes, we see a sin-befouled world around us. But let us look at our own reflection in the mirror. Are we pock-marked with pride and conceit and self-satisfaction—*covenant presumption*? Is there room in our hearts to repent of those foul habits of heart? If we don’t, then we may as well choke on the bread of the Supper and drown in the water of baptism. Does Ezekiel need to rework his sketch into a silhouette of our church building?

Consider this: We don’t need Jesus Christ *less* because we believe in him and claim him as Lord. We need him *more*. Here’s why: because as believers *new sins* of pride and covenant smugness now lurk at our door. Precisely in being “church people” we face “church people” ways of sinning. We need Jesus to rescue us from complacency and self-assuredness. We need to point our fingers *less* at the world (how it deserves God’s judgment) and *more* at ourselves, lest we lose our way. Israel became a “more sinful than them” people—that is, they became more sinful than their pagan

neighbors. The church too must take warning here: Will we insist that we aren't a "more sinful than them" people?

Will we insist that we are a "better than them" people? Will we pray to him, "Lord, we thank you, that we are a *better than them* people"? Yet, Israel had become a *more sinful than them* people. She was *more unruly and disobedient*.

If we think we are a "better than them" people, we probably think as well that we have "less need than them": "We have *less need* of Jesus *than them*." Could it be we are in *more need of Jesus* because we confess him?

What can we say except, "Help us Lord, lest we are besieged"?

The Lord does help us. We can be delivered from the impending besiegement of a rebellious world that scoffs at the Christ and his cross as child's play. God will one day impose his game of judgment on the whole world. But before the world faces that day we are called upon to find relief and hope past the iron wall that separates sinners from a holy God, to look to Jesus Christ, who suffered *for us* the decisive siege of divine judgment *against us*. He was encircled, captured, accused, stripped, mocked, beat-up, and crossed-up. But he tears in two the veil of the temple, even as he penetrates the iron wall of separation, and opens gates of paradise for all repenting sinners—that is, for all who know they are not a "better than them" people, for the one who cries out: "Lord, have mercy on me, the sinner."

Yes, Lord, cleanse us of covenant presumption—our pride, our conceit, our self-satisfaction. Make us a different sort of a "more than" people—make us *more trusting* and *more repenting* and *more humble* and *more concerned for others*, yes, *more loving* and *more self-denying*, *more* of all these things; and so, Lord, make us *more than conquerors* through him who loved us (Rom. 8:37).

May we be done with play-acting religion, silly child's play, as we embrace God's mercy afresh in Christ our Lord!

Indeed, that is no game.

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ACTIONS LOUDER THAN WORDS (2): SYMPATHETIC SUFFERING

A Sermon on Ezekiel 4:4–8
(*Scripture Reading: Ezekiel 4:1–8*)

by J. Mark Beach

SUFFERING IS NOT a popular topic in the church today. Who wants to suffer? In fact, nowadays suffering is hardly acknowledged as part of the Christian life.

Why is that? Noah suffered. Abraham suffered. Moses suffered. They suffered doing God's work, obeying God's commands, walking in God's ways. Joshua suffered, too, as did David. It is a common theme in the Bible. The prophets suffered a great deal at the hands of a disobedient "church" that could not bear to hear a negative message of warning, calling God's people to correction. Jeremiah was thrown into a deep cistern, sinking into the mud. They left him there to starve, before he was finally rescued (see Jer. 38:6ff.). Daniel and his companions, in exile, suffered a great deal at the hands of foreign oppressors—fiery furnaces and lion's dens are not games of tinker toys.

Mary suffered, too. Imagine the gossip and scandal surrounding her. John the Baptist was rejected by the religious "somebodies" of his day; he came neither eating nor drinking and they said, "*He has a demon*" (Luke 7:33). Jesus, too, suffered. He is the suffering servant of prophecy. He came eating and drinking (the opposite of John)—yes, he attended parties and banquets and festivals, and mingled with all sorts of people (even undesirable people)—and they said, "*Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!*" (Luke 7:34 ESV).

Suffering is a common thread that runs through the Bible. Paul suffers imprisonments and floggings and beatings, and many other perils (see 2 Cor. 11:23ff.). John, Jesus' disciple, suffers banishment to the Island of Patmos for the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus (see Rev. 1:9). Ezekiel suffers as well.

Here in Ezekiel 4 we see this servant of God suffering, in misery, as verses 4–8 show us. These verses show us the second half of this first symbolic action that God instructed him to perform. He must do this publicly, in silence, in front of the exiles in Babylon. This is a continuation of the siege depiction, with the drawing on the clay brick, and the miniature soldiers and siege machinery. Up to

this point, Ezekiel could act a bit more like a spectator, but now God requires him to be part of the action. He is called upon to suffer in his body as he enacts this “street-theater” sermon—a sermon that isn’t finished in, say, 30 minutes. No, this is a sermon that will go on for 390 days and then 40 more.

But now we see Ezekiel in the role of suffering servant.

ACTIONS LOUDER THAN WORDS (2)—EZEKIEL’S SYMPATHETIC SUFFERING

- (1) *His sympathetic suffering—depicting sin’s due*
- (2) *His sympathetic suffering—bearing sin’s penalty*

I. Sympathetic suffering—depicting sin’s due (vv. 4–6)

We must not forget that Ezekiel is not allowed to preach during this time. Afterwards, yes. But not now. Symbolic actions, not words, are the vehicle for instruction. This is how God’s message comes to the exiles (and eventually it will be told to the inhabitants of Jerusalem). So as a continuation of the siege drawing and the iron griddle, this “iron curtain,” in verses 4–6 Ezekiel receives these instructions:

Then lie on your left side and put the sin of the people of Israel upon yourself. You are to bear their sin for the number of days you lie on your side. I have assigned you the same number of days as the years of their sin. So for 390 days you will bear the sin of the people of Israel. After you have finished this, lie down again, this time on your right side, and bear the sin of the people of Judah. I have assigned you 40 days, a day for each year (Ezek. 4:4–6 NIV).

Some translations, like the ESV, translate the phrase “bear their sin” as “bear their punishment” and also the phrase “years of their sin” as “years of their punishment.” The Hebrew word simply means “sin” but can also, in context, mean the *punishment* due sin or the *guilt* of sin. But the picture here is that Ezekiel must bear the sin of the people with its punishment, portrayed in this way.

Meanwhile, just so we get the full picture, it says in verse 8 that God will tie him up with ropes so that he cannot turn from one side to the other until he had finished the days of the siege. The idea is that Ezekiel would be bound by ropes in such a way that he could not roll-over or turn from one side to the other. This was a miserable situation. His suffering needed to be observed and grasped.

Why? The answer is probably because among the exiles, in whose midst Ezekiel labored (and certainly among the inhabitants of Jerusalem), there was an optimistic mood. The number of those who had been exiled was not very large; in fact, a large portion of the people still remained in their own land. Jerusalem, the holy city, stood intact. The question of the return of those who had been exiled, Ezekiel among them, was just a matter of time, for God was a promise-making God and he had to keep his promises. He was morally obliged not to allow their being in exile to go on for long. The people dreamed a sweet dream of restoration. This exile will end shortly. It is just

a matter of some political negotiations. Things will be back to normal before long. Don't worry.

This thinking, though, was so off the mark—a chasing after wind! You might as well have the kids try to catch bubbles in the backyard. Somehow it just didn't register with Israel that her exile was not a fluke; it was not a result of political miscalculation that could be fixed with some political recalculation. No. Her exile is divine judgment. The besiegement of Jerusalem that Ezekiel depicts on the clay brick is the guarantee of more exile, more misery, and more judgment. Exile is not going to end soon. It will get worse. For the seed of disobedience always reaps a harvest of sorrow.

The Bible never teaches us: "Sin ... and be blessed!" It never promises: "Disobey ... and flourish!" Redemption never implies: "sin some more so that grace may abound." No. Redemption, both in the New Testament and in the Old Testament, is always a redemption *unto service to God*; it is a salvation *unto loving your neighbor*. It is restoration to walk with God in joyful and liberating obedience. This is basic: redemption is for obedience, not disobedience. The path of blessing isn't along the broad road that leads to destruction. Blessing is by grace, and along the narrow road—yes, a road of suffering, of bearing a cross—but it leads to life. After the cross comes the crown. But disobedience spells doom.

Ezekiel makes this quite plain to them. Look at the sketch of Jerusalem on the clay slab! Jerusalem under siege, for Jerusalem is not obedient to God; she is not faithful to him; she does not depend on him. Nor do the exiles in Babylon. They shall not return home soon. No, rather, those who are still living in Jerusalem will find that they shall join the company of exiles in Babylon. Besiegement! Then exile! That's the message.

And God's prophet, remember, has been silenced. He now communicates without words in the symbolism of these actions. And his silent actions make a scene. It creates curiosity. Tongues cluck. Word spreads. People come to look at this spectacle of suffering. "What is this?" they ask. "What does this mean?" "Look!"

Yes, look! Look at how he suffers! Bound up and unable to move. Contemplate what this means and why this goes on day after day after day. It is the same thing, always. Can they get the message, this symbolic act of suffering? Each action shows Israel that her bubble of optimism has floated away and popped. Ezekiel seeks to startle them, awaken them from their fantasy. Stop dreaming!

They need to prepare for a greater captivity. The "tight ropes" of exile will be tightened even more. There is no resurrection or homecoming on the horizon. Just the opposite. They shall languish there, powerless and bound up, many, many years. The walls of Jerusalem shall be toppled; the temple in its splendor shall lie in ruins.

This is why he is commanded to lay on his left side for 390 days (4:5), to lay there motionless and powerless—bound, tied up. He presents Jerusalem with a portrait of herself, a future portrait: Shackled. Imprisoned. Led off to a strange land. In despair. She will be led away—from house, from business, from neighborhood, from temple, from homeland. She will suffer!

We are told explicitly that in laying on his side "*the sin of the house of Israel*" is being laid on him. This is Ezekiel taking on the role of the people. He bears their sin and punishment. Obviously, this doesn't mean he somehow can "take away" or

remove their sins. Indeed, he cannot atone for their sins or vicariously substitute himself as their sin-bearer. But it does mean he can *symbolically bear what is due their sins*—at least a hint of the suffering their sins have earned as punishment.

But why this number of days? Why 390 days on his left side for the sins of Israel and 40 more days on his right side for the sins of Judah? Verse 5 tells us that God has assigned to Ezekiel the same number of days as the years of their sin. This link shows up, for example, back in Numbers 14:34, where God tells the Israelites that they will wander for 40 years in the wilderness: “*According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, a year for each day, you shall bear your iniquity forty years, and you shall know my displeasure*” (ESV). While scholars play with these numbers in creative ways, probably the best solution comes when we add the numbers together: 390 + 40 gives us 430 years. That number would immediately call to mind the number of years Israel suffered under Egyptian bondage. With exile, Israel was going again into bondage—carted off to a foreign land, under the thumb of a foreign power, displaced from home and land and temple. This would be her Babylonian captivity.

Ezekiel, in *actions louder than words*, enacts Israel’s future suffering, as he lays on his side day after day, for over a year. When that is over, 40 more days on his other side. Tied up! While some commentators want to minimize how long Ezekiel lay this way each day—even as they want to minimize the meager and unclean diet he suffers during this time (that comes next in Ezekiel 4), this is a mistake. To minimize his suffering is to destroy the effect (the point) of Ezekiel’s actions. A potent warning is hardly sounded by a *mere ritual performed* each day. However, watching God’s prophet actually suffer, witnessing this first hand for over a year, as his health fails, as his body is consumed with misery for the greater part of each day—that sends a compelling message. “Look! Is he for real?” “He seems serious about this stuff. Has he lost his mind?” “Isn’t he taking things too far?” Tongues wag! Heads shake!

But are minds and hearts changed? Will they confess that they are guilty with sins that deserve punishment?

Ezekiel is the living embodiment of that deserved punishment. His sympathetic suffering exhibits sin’s due.

As we saw from the message of verses 1–3, these verses also call us as the church today to walk humbly before God—confessing our sins. We know by grace we have been saved through faith—and this is not from ourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast (Eph. 2:8, 9). We know that it is pure gift. But we doubt that, too.

I suppose the reason we might acknowledge that with our heads but doubt it in our hearts is because unbelievers, non-Christians, and people of other religions seem to get what we get (maybe more) without praying or repenting or believing in God or serving him. They have homes and jobs and businesses and freedom and security just like we do. So, our hearts can betray faith; and we start thinking that these blessings are to be expected; they have been “earned” because we live right and do well and discipline ourselves.

Well, hard work and self-discipline are commendable and, usually, fruitful traits. But “earned”? That is a mistake—a deadly one. Besides, we forget that God can spare

a wicked city because of his mercy toward those who do repent and walk with him in faith. That isn't earning anything. That is God being merciful to those who seek mercy. Meanwhile, a kind of "overflow" of mercy benefits many others who do not seek mercy, who do not love or serve God. Crumbs of grace fall from the table of God's kindness for those who do not seek his favor. We need to remember that.

What happens, though, when the church, when Christians, don't think they need (much) mercy? What happened to Israel? Ezekiel shows them (and us) that *his sympathetic suffering depicts sin's due*. Look at sin's due! It is an ugly picture. Frightful!

II. Sympathetic suffering—bearing sin's penalty (vv. 7–8)

So Ezekiel 4 shows us *Ezekiel's sympathetic suffering—it portrays sin's due, as he also bears sin's penalty*.

It is clear that this part of Ezekiel's symbolic act (part two of the first symbolic act) is not a repeat of part one. But it is an extension of it. Only now, as noted earlier, we see the prophet himself outside of the city, suffering.

Look on! Take note! For Ezekiel is no longer the unaffected and safe outsider. Now he is the suffering servant. Now he is the assaulted insider. He is no longer the besieger but the besieged. It is no longer the man who turns his face toward the siege of Jerusalem (vv. 3, 7), and with that announces (at least in part) God's judgment and disfavor on her. He is no longer acting on God's behalf, as if he were God himself. No! Now he is a fellow sufferer. Now he acts in a *priestly manner* toward the people. Now he takes on the role of one who also bears the sins of the people. Here we see Ezekiel stands with (or occupies a place with) the sinners. He bears their pain in his own body. Laying on his side, tied up, he languishes there, day after day, powerless, motionless, a silent prophet, a suffering priest.

This is the sort of prophet we all (preachers and hearers) need—one who lies there, suffering.

Actually we need one who does not lie there but the One who will hang there, suffering for us!

As God's priest, Ezekiel's life was not his own. Our lives also, as Christians, are not our own. In fact, we confess that—that *we are not our own, but belong body and soul, in life and in death, to our faithful savior Jesus Christ*. We're under new ownership. Our lives belong to him.

Ezekiel's obedience (and ours) is to be one in absolute obedience to God. Ezekiel performs his duty body and soul, in life and in death—his life ebbing toward death. This sermon is in actions louder than words. He suffers as the bearer of sin's penalty, Israel's sin.

It is not out-of-bounds, then, to think about the immense physical toll this action brought on God's servant. This wouldn't just involve bed-sores and aching joints; this could also weaken his muscles throughout his body. It could affect digestion and internal organs, and lead to a weakening of health over-all. To be God's prophet is sometimes frightening and horrible. God's demand on his servant is total, body and soul, in life unto death, for our salvation is also body and soul, in life unto conquering

death. We must be fully at his service! Like Daniel's companions, there needs to be a commitment in which our bodies are surrendered to the furnace. Are we prophets and priests minus the sacrifice of ourselves, absent our being living sacrifices?

Here is a suffering servant. He labors in loneliness. He acts as a symbolic mediator, moaning while the people laugh. He will survive (as the next section shows us) on wartime rations. He will grow emaciated—his body will ache and his physical health will be jeopardized. But he will offer himself as a living sacrifice unto God. And he will do so as one whose task is now to come alongside fellow sufferers. But to suffer alongside suggests that others are suffering too. But Ezekiel's contemporaries are *not yet* really suffering.

No, they were busy sinning. There was a split in God's house. Some of the people were in exile; the majority however remained in Jerusalem and the countryside. The people back in Jerusalem mostly figured that the elitist exiles were getting what they deserved. That is, the political leaders and the rich citizens were getting their due. They also figured that God didn't count them guilty. "We're not exiled. God doesn't count us guilty." So, they lived life as always. They went about as usual—sinning as usual, not repenting as usual, and chasing idols as usual. All to their demise. Ezekiel 16 and 18 and 23 well depicts their sins. But they had the gall to accuse God of being unjust. Chapter 18, verse 11 describes such a sinner:

He eats at the mountain shrines. [Idolatry] He defiles his neighbor's wife. [Adultery] He oppresses the poor and needy. [Greed and meanness] He commits robbery. [Theft] He does not return what he took in pledge. [More theft] He looks to the idols. [More idolatry]. He does detestable things. [Lewdness and spiritual abomination] He lends at interest and takes a profit. [More greed] Will such a man live? He will not! Because he has done all these detestable things, he is to be put to death; his blood will be on his own head (Ezek. 18:11–13 NIV).

How unpleasant. Indeed! And I get it. But turning our backs to it doesn't bring remedy. Ezekiel's suffering, as an endurance, portends and warns. Before his fellow countrymen had suffered a scratch, the sins of the people bear down on him. This silent symbolism speaks volumes. Ezekiel experiences, ever so sparingly compared to the coming reality, something of the heat of God's wrath against the sins of his people.

We know that Jesus Christ is the definitive fulfillment of the suffering servant of God. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). He taught us that it is better to give than to receive (Acts 20:35); he gave himself. He did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). He became a humble servant, wrapped in a towel, washing his disciples' feet, anticipating his hanging on the cross as the humiliated Savior, washing away our sins. And we know that being washed, being loved and reclaimed, he calls us to offer our bodies as living sacrifices to him, for this is our spiritual service (Rom. 12:1).

This spiritual service takes on a twofold role, two targets if you will. *First*, we are called to suffer alongside and serve one another in Jesus Christ. We weep with those who weep. We visit and take another's hand. We cry. We pray one another *onward*

and *forward*. We tell each other that. We encourage each other. We write notes and send emails and make phone calls, and sit down for coffee or lunch. We bear each other's burdens. We help with financial need. We share the grief of death, of broken marriages, of lost children. We come alongside, in Jesus Christ, and offer our lives in sympathetic suffering.

Second, it calls us to intercede for the world, for the lost—a lost world, lost neighbors, with their broken lives and broken hearts. It calls us to intercede to God on their behalf, to come alongside of them—when, where, and how we can—to point them to our loving and gracious God, to the suffering Savior; and also to bid them to turn away from that final siege, the final judgment day. We enter into service both for the church and for the world as sympathetic sufferers, for all around us we see sin's due and sin's penalty.

This is part of what we see here in Ezekiel 4—God's sympathetic suffering servant, who makes himself a living sacrifice ... who comes alongside ... even to his life's destruction. Because Jesus Christ took on what is due our sin (your sin, my sin), and because he bore the penalty for sin (your sin, my sin), there is a turning aside of the wrath of God from us. There is a lifting of the siege. There is hope and life.

We are not our own. We belong to him. So, contrary to the prevalent habit of our hearts—to recoil from suffering, to carry on with our lives oblivious to the needs inside the church and outside of it—the gospel calls us to follow Jesus. He said it plain enough: Count the cost! Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me (see Luke 9:23). The church is filled with hurting souls. It is filled with people whose sins have caught up with them, and now they are suffering sin's consequences. The church is also emptied of people who once worshipped but have strayed away in their sins. They are oblivious of their need for Jesus. The church is emptied of people who feel beyond forgiveness, who certainly do not know the only comfort in life and in death, but live with guilt that has them by the throat. Some feel smothered by disapproval and judge themselves as dismal failures. They walk in sin as the only path to walk. Their flicker of faith is about to go out.

Such people need someone to come alongside them. They need someone to speak a sturdy word of hope and comfort to them, not because God winks at sin but because Jesus suffers our sin's due and bears our sin's penalty. They need to be reintroduced to this suffering servant, bound up, crossed up, unable to move, who with tender strength dies to save sinners—such, as they are. They need to hear that he loves sinners in their unlovableness. Yes, these people need a loving church to come alongside them in their suffering because Jesus comes alongside us. They need to see that they can escape all that has besieged their lives as an entangled judgment by turning to the Savior, who was besieged by the wrath of God due us but bore by him. They need us to be sympathetic suffering servants of Jesus Christ, who as those who are united to Jesus Christ, are with him prophets, priests, and kings.

In short, they need from us—in actions louder than words—to be brought to Jesus. His cross shows us sin's due; and he bears sin's penalty. They need what we need: *him*, for he is our sympathetic suffering savior. He is rest for our souls.

ACTIONS LOUDER THAN WORDS (3): BARE EXISTENCE

A Sermon on Ezekiel 4:9–17
(*Scripture Reading: Ezekiel 4:1–17*)

by J. Mark Beach

IT IS NOT an easy task to be a prophet of God. Walking in accord with God's call, *living alongside* a disobedient people brings with it for Ezekiel *a suffering alongside* a disobedient people. He must offer up his body to his prophetic calling, and suffer pain of body and pain of stomach. But should that surprise us? Is it really any different for the believer? Aren't we under Christ's ownership—body and soul, in life and in death? Ezekiel's life must serve as a poignant illustration of a hard word of God.

Let us, then, reorient ourselves to all that has happened. In his first symbolic act, Ezekiel makes his drawing of Jerusalem on the clay brick, complete with siege works and soldiers and encampments and battering rams. Then, as a piece of this two-part play of symbols, he sets up the iron griddle and is commanded to lie on his left side for 390 days and for 40 days on his right side, symbolic of the number of years Israel has been disobedient and unfaithful to God; and symbolic too of the longevity of punishment she deserves. There is a siege coming—a foreign army of divine judgment. And exile follows.

These aren't trifles! This is life unravelling! This is a portrait where there seems to be no hope, no future for your children. Happiness and joy vanish! Your life, your family, your future—all of it yanked from you, all of it conquered, taken away! Your todays and tomorrows are written in the words "Helplessness!" and "Hopelessness!" Just as Ezekiel is helpless, tied up and lying in one place; he can't even turn over. Israel shall lose all freedom. The inhabitants of Zion are doomed.

And now, this second symbolic act piles on the misery. There is no denying it. This is not a reprieve. No pretty picture is presented here. No, it is a sign and symbol of the depth of the misery, the desperation of the suffering: hunger and starvation, a slow ebbing away of life which awaits a God-forsaking people. This all points very concretely to a city whose inhabitants are starving to death, to hungry children wailing, to weeping mothers, howling infants, distress unimaginable.

It is our somber task to focus on this Word of the Lord, though we hardly dare. We need to look straight into the eyes of the suffering portrayed here. For the Word of God here comes to us with:

ACTIONS LOUDER THAN WORDS (3): BARE EXISTENCE

1. Bare existence and sin's penalty
 2. Bare existence and the bread of life
 3. Bare existence and divine cleansing
- I. Bare existence and sin's penalty (vv. 9, 14-15)

The bread that Ezekiel is instructed to prepare for himself shows us *bare existence*. It is a concoction of various types of grain, mostly of poor quality, barley and spelt, stuff used as a fodder. This is not wholesome food. Verse 9 describes it this way: “*And you, take wheat and barley, beans and lentils, millet and emmer [or spelt], and put them into a single vessel [a storage jar] and make your bread from them. During the number of days that you lie on your side, 390 days, you shall eat it*” (Ezek. 4:9 ESV).

This pictures for us food of desperation. This is scouring to find what you can, to scrape together what is left. This is wartime bread, when all the resources are nearly expended. With this scarcity there are also hunger pangs! He was living on about 8 oz. of this grit per day—it's a starvation diet. That's what we learn in verse 10: “*And your food that you eat shall be by weight, twenty shekels a day; from day to day you shall eat it*” (Ezek. 4:10 ESV). And Ezekiel was not allowed to bake this bread over the hot coals of charcoal or wood. Think about it: the siege would make firewood and the like scarce. You can't meander outside the city walls to fetch more. Instead you had to economize. You had to make do. What is left to burn? Well, what is in rich supply? Human waste. That's everywhere. This most unclean and foulest of resources.

Can we think of anything worse? Human excrement.

Ezekiel objects: “No, Lord, not that!” From his youth, he has not defiled himself in any such way. And, so he pleads to God: “No, Lord, not that.” This is so repulsive and foul. He asks if he might use cow dung for fuel instead—instead of human excrement (vv. 14, 15). Does this paint a clear enough picture for them? For us? Here we see *bare existence as sin's penalty*.

What does it take to get through to hard-hearted sinners? What suffering awaits? And is that suffering even enough to bring sinners to their senses? Sadly, suffering isn't always sanctifying.

Let us pause for a moment. I wouldn't be surprised if it hasn't crossed your mind that maybe preachers would be better off passing over these sorts of passages in the Bible. Perhaps you question how this has any relevance for the church today. After all, we don't live under a theocracy. We are not a political nation of Christians, with God's anointed king as the leader of our nation. The theocracy has transitioned into a spiritual kingdom called the Christian church. As believers we are spread across borders and political alliances. We are God's people spread and scattered across

nations and peoples and tribes and countries. In such diverse and varied places we cannot exist, and are not supposed to exist, as Israel once did under David or Solomon or some other earthly king or ruler. Our king is King Jesus. He is in heaven and we are on earth. So, perhaps you conclude that the sad story depicted here in Ezekiel 4 is for a former time, not ours. Perhaps you say to yourself that you cannot identify with these apostate Israelites, these covenant breaking unbelievers, these idolaters. And perhaps you say to yourself that your life and your church do not come under the censure and the divine displeasure that is silently portrayed by Ezekiel. Maybe you say to yourself, “Yes, to be sure, this is God’s Word, but it is God’s Word for another time and another place. Not our time. Not our place.”

Such thoughts, I must tell you, are quite mistaken. Here’s why. The great catastrophes of divine judgment foretold by the prophets (and it is all over the place in the big book prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel; and the smaller book prophets like Hosea and Amos and Micah, and Zephaniah, to mention some of them). It is all over the place, and such portraits of the coming judgment are portraits of the Day of the Lord.

Here’s the thing, though. The Day of the Lord isn’t only the judgment depicted against Jerusalem in Ezekiel 4, for example (and many other places). It is the Day of days, the last day, the Great Judgment Day, the final Day. Now let me ask you something: How can you stand before God on that day?

If you are a believer, you know the right answer to that question. Before God, on the great and last day, Judgment Day, I can stand before God only in Jesus Christ, clothed in his righteousness, reckoned right in God’s eyes because he paid the penalty of all my sins; and in him I am found to be righteous with his righteousness, obedient with his obedience, a covenant keeper with his covenant keeping, and forgiven, for he satisfied God’s wrath against (paid for) all my sins. Yes, praise God! Amen!

But do you hear what you have just said? You have just said that Jesus already underwent the Great Judgment Day of the Lord *for you!* Don’t look away from the hellish horrors that God’s Word so starkly paints for us, with such dark shadows and tones. Don’t look away! Don’t say: That’s not really for me. You might as well say Christ’s cross isn’t for you. You might as well say that your sins deserve something *less than* what Ezekiel silently portrays. You might as well say that you don’t need Jesus or his undergoing the Great Judgment Day for you. Will you say that?

Look again at this silent proclamation of God’s prophet Ezekiel: bound, lying on his side, suffering, and grubbing out an existence (bare existence) of an unnourishing mixture of ground up beans, lentils, and poor quality grains, fodder—silage. It is better suited for animals. Look close at God’s undernourished prophet! Are you annoyed? Do you say: “This doesn’t apply to me. I don’t deserve that! I am a believer. I am a Christ confessor. I repent of my sins. Yes, I sin; I know it. But I also repent of my sins.”

But, you know (don’t you?) that you’re not saved by your repentance. Repentance is a kind of sanctification—a small step of getting well. You don’t claim your small steps of sanctification as your standing with God, do you? Your sorrow and your efforts to turn from your sins aren’t the answer. You’re surely not claiming that. I pray you’re not doing that. If you are, the devil has you duped!

Look again at sin's penalty, sin's wages. Look again at what Israel refused to see, what she refused to believe about herself. What do you believe about yourself? Is it: "I'm not that bad." Well, how "not that bad" do you have to be to escape the great day of the Lord? Or: How "not that bad" do you have to be to not need Christ's suffering the great judgment day *for you*?

Bare existence as sin's penalty will not allow us to look away. We must not skip this Word of God, which is for the church of our day, too. We must not overlook this misery. Look it squarely in the eyes. Ezekiel cooking a meager helping of bread-over-dung. Contemplate this a moment. What did you eat yesterday, Ezekiel? Bread-over-dung. And what will you eat today? Bread-over-dung. And tomorrow? Same thing. Here we witness sin's penalty.

II. Bare existence and the bread of life (vv. 10-13, 16-17)

But this drives us also to see *bare existence and the bread of life*.

We all know, I trust, that it is easy enough to serve God *outwardly*, following some rules, performing some ceremonies. It might be a hassle, to be sure, but manageable. This is how Israel thought. Conform to the outward rules, and you're good. But God is repulsed by this—this sham religion. They have disinherited God. Now they can live as disinherited. They can eat concocted bread-over-dung.

It is known that desert nomads, because of the scarcity of trees and the like, use camel or cow dung for fuel. In the Old West they called them buffalo pies (and still do). Ranchers still talk about cow pies. This was used as fuel in the vast prairies of North America. As such, you gathered this dried out dung and placed it in a pile, then you would place an iron grate on some rocks, so that it would be up off the flame, and you would cook your food in some pots.

But Ezekiel must bake his bread in contact with the embers. And the apportionment, as noted, is meager. 20 shekels a day (or 8 oz.) and a sixth of a hin of water (little more than a pint). This is typical of the sort of rationing that goes on in wartime.

For example, we read about the horrible suffering during WWII, especially in places like Leningrad and Stalingrad, where the Germans surrounded these Russian cities all through the winter. And the populations starved to death. Mothers eating their children. Children eating their parents. Horror of horrors! These horrors on the earth are an extension of the horrors presented on the pages of the Bible. For what do we read in Lamentations, which is a book that describes the lament because of the Babylonian siege and the exile that follows? "*Look, O LORD, and see! With whom have you dealt thus? Should women eat the fruit of their womb, the children of their tender care?*" (Lam. 2:20 ESV). Ezekiel himself, in chapter 5, likewise brings us to the depths of such horrors awaiting Jerusalem. "*And because of all your abominations I will do with you what I have never yet done, and the like of which I will never do again. Therefore fathers shall eat their sons in your midst, and sons shall eat their fathers. And I will execute judgments on you, and any of you who survive I will scatter to all the winds*" (Ezek. 5:9–10 ESV).

So look upon this scene of the meager assignment of garbage bread, the daily allotment of water (and that too would run dry). The besieged citizens of Jerusalem cannot expect more. And it will only, over time, get worse—enough to produce a slow death or a barely alive life. Parents devouring their children. Children devouring their parents (see Ezek. 5:10). *Bare existence*.

This is life when daily bread is barely bread and barely daily! This is a bread and water existence like a prisoner in solitary confinement, only worse. This is divine punishment for idolatry and violence, for injustice and adultery, for spiritual whoredom and spiritual apathy—steady, constant, with no repentance. This is the suffering of hunger and thirst for a people that refused to hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Ezekiel describes this poverty of bread in the next chapter, using an interesting expression. God says that he will send the deadly arrows of famine and destruction, and he will break your “staff of bread” (v. 16 KJV, ASV, NASB, RSV, NRSV). The ESV and NIV say: “*break (cut off) your supply of bread (food)*.” The key word there refers to a stick for support, a staff or a cane. It reminds you of an old man leaning on his cane. If you kick his cane out from under him, he tumbles. Likewise, the staff of bread. It is the cane supporting life. Remove the cane of bread, and life collapses. Now Israel gets less than the staple for life—bare existence. “The staff of bread” has been broken (see Lev. 26:26; Ps. 105:16; Ezek. 5:16).

Bread, however, even in abundance, isn’t everything, is it? Life is blessed only under God’s blessing. Ezekiel’s depiction of a starving city, whose bread is unclean fragments, should remind us that we do not live by bread alone anyway. Right? “*Man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD*.” Moses tells us this; and so does Jesus (Deut. 8:3; Matt. 4:4). But this doesn’t mean that life consists of bread plus *spiritual food*, physical bread plus spiritual bread. Rather, the Word of God is the blessing *also* upon our physical bread. It is the blessing that makes bread a staff or cane to uphold and enable life. Indeed, God’s Word is the real staff or cane. It is what we lean on.

Yes, people can die for *want of bread*. But they can also die with full barns and freezers packed with food. Every blessing, even bread, depends on God’s Word. We don’t live in days or in a land of meagerness, a want of bread. We live in abundance. Most of us have likely never suffered serious hunger or thirst. We live in a culture of mostly well-fed people—and *yet* how hungry they are! If people refuse to set their souls under the discipline of God’s Word, then God in turn takes away the blessing from the bread. If people think that their cane or crutch of bread (and money and wisdom) is strong enough to lean on, then God shows what a great mistake that is: he breaks the staff of bread.

A staff or cane enables us to make our way, to help us get along where we are going. But the cane isn’t the main thing; it is just an instrument—it helps us along. It is not an end in itself; it is just a means to an end. The Bible tells us that God is our goal. God is our chief end. God serves us with bread so that we can serve him. He brings us wealth so that we can share it and use it to be a blessing for those in need. If we lose our fix on him, we inevitably live for idols. We bow before the *means* instead of the *end*.

People today are like panicked passengers on a sinking yacht, getting onto a dingy, taking all their valuables and money and best clothes, but in their haste have forgotten to take food and water. What good is money when you're dead? What does it profit a man to gain the whole world but forfeit his soul? (Mark 8:36). People die with houses stuffed with goods! People are on their way to the grave while worrying about their social status, dashing after success, and acting like they are going to live forever ... but they won't. As Jesus reminds us in his parable of the barn builder who had accumulated so much, so that he says to himself: "*Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.*" But then God said to him, "*Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?*" It is bad news if we aren't "*rich toward God*" (Luke 12:19–21 ESV).

If the meat in your freezer spoils because of a power failure, you throw it out. You grumble, what waste! The meat was there to be eaten. But now it is spoiled. Similarly, what if your life spoils? Your life is a gift of God. You have been placed here for a purpose. But if, by sin and compromise, you turn from him, your life also spoils. What waste! Must it be thrown out? We have been given life so that we may know God, glorify God, and enjoy him forever in Jesus Christ. That's our purpose. Doing that encompasses work and leisure, Sunday and all the other days, worship services and making a living. But we are not here to live well-bridled lives so that we can be successful, build bigger barns, and then take it easy.

Taking it easy on those terms is a bare existence, even amidst abundance. You see, you don't yet have real bread to eat—neither Ezekiel's garbage bread nor fresh heavy loaves from the oven—if we do not have *the bread of life*, Jesus himself. Ezekiel's meager bread (sin's wages and penalty) doesn't mean that abundant bread in itself suggests blessing. People perish with freezers packed with meat and cupboards stacked with food. People perish while dining on delicacies. People perish even though they enjoy daily bread, whether in poverty or while planning trips to Europe. They perish because they do not have the bread of life. All around us we see people—some of them professed Christians—whose lives are being wasted in the pursuit of spiritual compromises that eventually produce spiritual starvation, a bare existence. Some are addicted to opioids; some are addicted to pornography; others are shopaholics or alcoholics or workaholics. People distract themselves with T.V., with social media, with health and fitness, with sports or sports-betting or gambling or gossip. People can occupy themselves with vacations and their lawn. No matter, all activities that become an idol are a "bare" existence, for Jesus isn't your clothing and Jesus isn't your nourishment, and Jesus isn't your joy.

Ezekiel's depiction of a starvation diet, of a people under siege and going into exile, calls us not simply to hope for *a time of more bread*. It calls us to seek *the source of bread*, the Lord of bread, the Lord of life—that is, to seek the one who declares himself the bread of life. How did Jesus say it? "*[I]t is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world*" (John 6:32–33 NIV). And then Jesus declares: "*I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty*" (John 6:35 NIV).

This is what Israel needed. This is what you need, for he is the only answer to satisfy your hungry heart. The Preacher of Ecclesiastes shows us this. He has “been there” and “done that.” He has chased the idols of life. Is it wisdom and knowledge? He chased studies and worked his brain hard. He became an intellectual athlete. Verdict: chasing after wind. Trying to catch bubbles. It is foolhardy. So he next tried pleasure, sex. What’s better than that? Sex is great but it won’t satiate your soul. Laughter? Have a good time. Is that the answer? Nope. Wealth, success, achievement, a financial or business legacy? “I’ve made it. I can relax.” Does that satiate and satisfy? No, meaningless, meaningless. But most people chase the wind anyway. Folly. A wasted life. Israel, God’s chosen child, chasing idols, chasing the wind. Isn’t this another version of a “bare existence”? Do we need to nibble on bread-over-dung to wake up? To repent?

Only Jesus Christ is the bread of life—the bread that is the only answer and the only hope for the bare existence of bread-over-dung existence of starvation or the bare existence of a spoiled life lived in vain. Only Jesus is the true bread from heaven. He is the only answer for sinners. Jesus tells us that he is the Good Shepherd. He came to give life, and that we might have that life *abundantly* (John 10:10).

So Ezekiel, God’s prophet, in *actions louder than words*, portrays to the exiles and to us (God’s people today) a bare existence, calling us to seek more than daily bread, to seek the Lord of bread, who is the Bread from Heaven, the Bread of Life. We need the bread of life, and with this bread we also discover here in Ezekiel 4 that this bare existence needs *divine cleansing*.

III. Bare existence and divine cleansing (v. 13)

Yes, Ezekiel’s *bare existence* (which was an unclean existence) shows us that we also need *divine cleansing*. Two things stand out in this judgment depicted by Ezekiel.

Beside this food being of such low quality, barely fit for human consumption, the accent is placed on its uncleanness. As verse 13 says: “And the LORD said, “*Thus shall the people of Israel eat their bread unclean, among the nations where I will drive them*” (ESV). We need to remember that the Jews lived by food laws. For a Jew who sought to live by the dietary laws prescribed in the Torah, to eat unclean bread was a terrible thing to endure. Ezekiel is disgusted by the thought of eating food cooked over dried up human excrement. He abhors this idea. He is not prepared for that, eating measly morsels of bread, yes; but rendered so unclean, no. Yet, hunger will drive them on. Their hands will reach out desperately for this repulsive food. They can’t help themselves. Death gnaws at them. They eat this or die. But this is eating that merely delays death.

That *uncleanness* can’t be ignored. They will have to scrape together what they can find—a mixture of low quality grains and legumes. Some commentators suggest that such a comingling rendered the bread unclean as such; for in the Old Testament, it was forbidden to sow two kinds of seed in the same field (Deut. 22:9). The law also forbade wearing clothes of wool and linen woven together (Deut. 22:11). Likewise, the law disallowed yoking ox and donkey together for plowing (Deut. 22:10). So, perhaps this concoction of bread composed of six sorts of grain and beans was unclean

as such. But whatever the case may be, this mix of grains is certainly unclean because of *how it is cooked*—baked over cow feces. What desperate, hard hearted people. For the devout among them this was abominable. For those who disregarded God’s law, it was a humiliation. For Ezekiel, who must perform the street theater to exhibit it, it is both.

Food laws are mostly foreign to us. Unclean versus clean is foreign to us. We aren’t concerned about what is kosher and what isn’t. Perhaps the *meager* amount is what most concerns us.

But the Jews, remember, identified themselves by their cultic cleanness, that is, their outward ceremonies. Many years later, during the days of Jesus, the elders of Israel would be careful not to set foot in Pilate’s palace, for that would render them unclean. Mustn’t tread there! In Ezekiel’s days, too, cultic purity mattered. It did for Ezekiel. It was unthinkable for him to live in violation of food laws—just as Christians do not want to live in open violation of their marriage vows. Keeping God’s law—even food laws—in the details mattered.

Yet, the inhabitants of Jerusalem were only too eager to rush headlong into sin, with no brakes, to catch up with and overtake the Gentiles in ungodliness and evil, in wickedness and shame. Ezekiel describes this for us in chapter 5. He says about Jerusalem, verse 16: “*You have been more unruly than the nations around you and have not followed my decrees or kept my laws. You have not even conformed to the standards of the nations around you.*” The indictment is that she is *worse* than the nations around her. Worse than pagans! God rehearses for her a litany of her sins: worshiping detestable idols (or mixing worship of the Lord with detestable idols) (v. 9); God’s sanctuary is defiled with vile images and abominable practices (v. 11).

So God is explicit in the penalty to follow, verses 16–17 of chapter 4:

[H]e said to me, ‘Son of man, behold, I will break the supply of bread (staff of bread) in Jerusalem. They shall eat bread by weight and with anxiety, and they shall drink water by measure and in dismay. I will do this that they may lack bread and water, and look at one another in dismay, and rot away because of their punishment’ (Ezek. 4:16–17 ESV).

And in chapter 5, these words:

I will make you a ruin and a reproach among the nations around you, ... a taunt, a warning and an object of horror to the nations around you I will bring more and more famine upon you I will send famine and wild beasts against you, and they will leave you childless. Plague and bloodshed will sweep through you, and I will bring the sword against you. I the LORD have spoken (Ezek. 5:14–17 NIV).

This is why he leaves them with unclean bread to eat over unclean fire: they are an unclean people. The city is unclean. Enough with the half measures! Why should they be clean *outwardly* when they are unclean *inwardly*? They are no longer a “holy people.” So, unclean food is apportioned for an unclean, unholy people.

It is important, as the church today, that we get this point. An *unclean church* is a contradiction in terms. The church, by definition, is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. If it is not that, it is not the church at all. Such a beast, an unholy church, cannot be a light upon a hill. An unclean church cannot be salt of the earth. An unclean church—worldly, wallowing in worldliness—has no message (or at best a much muffled message) of salvation, of the cleansing away of sins for a dirty world. Similarly, Christians are bonded and united to Christ by faith. They share in his anointing, and in his holiness. That is why we pursue godliness; because in him we are counted as godly. But if your life is caught in the uncleanness of bitterness (“I won’t forgive my mother!” or “I won’t forgive that elder!”) or the uncleanness of lust (“Oh, wow, look at him; or, “My, O My: Look at her!”—and you keep looking); or your life is messy and dirty in the uncleanness of pride (“I can snub them because they’re not up to my speed!”), then your life is a living contradiction to your identity in Christ. So what is the answer to that?

Well, the answer is not to follow Israel’s path and harden your heart to your sins. No, turn from your sins—you *know* them; they’re yours! Turn from them again (even if it is an again-and-again-sin) and seek God’s mercy. Seek cleansing in Jesus Christ. When he washes you, you are washed indeed. Your baptism tells you that, for baptism is for people who need to be washed and trust in Jesus to do it. We need washing even from birth. Our baptism tells us that.

Now, I could bid you to live a washed life. That would be fitting enough. But you need more than a pep-talk. You need to live a washed life because *you live under the reign of a new king. You live under the new epoch of the coming of Christ’s kingdom.* The future, as the New Testament so beautifully shows us, has already barged backwards into the present. The victory is here. It is irrefutable and undefeatable. Therefore, live like it. Yes, be holy. Be holy—which doesn’t mean outdo each other in prudishness or world-flight, or touch not, taste not, or a revived asceticism. But be holy by following a Jesus-like life of *in* the world but not *of* the world. Be holy, be clean by being a light-bearer of him, pointing weary souls to him—worn souls that you work alongside; worn souls who are your neighbors and family members. They need cleansing. They need rescue from the filth of the devil’s dirt. They need to be washed clean. They need Jesus, for they are living a bare existence under sin’s penalty. They need the bread of life. They need the cleansing he gives. As it says in Hebrews: “*let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water*” (Heb. 10:22 ESV).

Yes, draw near to the abundant life, through the bread of life, and be clean.

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ACTIONS LOUDER THAN WORDS (4): SINNERS ON THE SCALES OF A RIGHTEOUS GOD

*A Sermon on Ezekiel 5:1–4
(Scripture Reading: Ezekiel 5:1–17)*

by J. Mark Beach

MANY OF YOU probably remember the television show “The Biggest Loser.” The formula became predicable. A group of contestants, all of whom were morbidly overweight, checked themselves into a rehab center for weight loss. The contestants were divided into teams and assigned fitness coaches. They lived on the campus, separated from family and friends—and hopefully from old habits—where they could learn new habits and exercise for extended periods multiple times each day in order to drop the pounds. The show featured weekly weigh-ins of individuals—the person who had lost the most pounds that week was the “biggest loser” (ha, ha) for that week. The teams competed for total weight loss, too, from week to week, and over-all. The person with the greatest weight loss for the duration of the show was awarded “The Biggest Loser” cash prize, etc.

This show made very public people’s weight problems, and also (as it would happen) it made very public people’s emotional struggles, heart wounds, and esteem issues. It exposed brokenness in people’s lives as a part of their weight problems.

Here’s the thing about that show. The scales didn’t lie. The scales revealed what was happening to each contestant—to their glory or their shame. Scales do this. Scales set a standard. Many people don’t want to step on the scales—the doctor is going to scold me. Or, will you scold yourself?

The Biggest Loser Show cleverly played on that phrase, for the *biggest loser* (of pounds) was actually the *winner*—that person was not a loser but a winner. The scales revealed the truth.

I suppose we are all biggest losers when we are weighed on God’s scales of justice. Israel was! We scold ourselves (if our sins bother us at all) when they are placed on the balances of God’s scrutiny.

Here in Ezekiel 5, in this last symbolic act of the prophet, this last symbolic portrait of Israel’s doom, we are given an image of Israel on the scales. She is divided into thirds, each part weighed out precisely as a biggest loser (but not a

winner). No, each third is weighed out with their sins and assigned punishment as part of the coming siege and exile. Here again we meet with:

ACTIONS LOUDER THAN WORDS (4): SINNERS ON THE SCALES OF A RIGHTEOUS GOD

1. *Inescapable Scales of Divine Justice—the division of God’s wrath*
2. *Surprising Scales of Divine Grace—the remnant of God’s mercy*

- I. Inescapable scales of divine justice—the division of God’s covenant wrath (vv. 1–2)

The third symbolic act that Ezekiel must perform, which is described for us here in the first four verses of chapter 5, is an illustration of the New Testament words: “*For many are called, but few are chosen*” (Matt. 22:14). What should the Prophet do now? He must take a razor-sharp sword. Not an ordinary razor, but a sword, which in this case, however, must be used as a razor, to shave beard and head hair. After the sword comes the scales. This hair must be carefully weighed on precise scales and divided into three equal parts.

The first part must be burned with fire. The second part must be struck with the sword. The third part should be tossed to the wind. A few hairs, from that last third, Ezekiel is to tuck away in the folds of his garment; but before doing that, even some of these are to be thrown into the fire. Ezekiel is to do all of this in front of the bewildered spectators.

It is astonishing. What is all of this supposed to mean? It becomes immediately clear if we can agree about *who* is in mind, *who* is depicted or symbolized by this shaved-off hair.

Virtually all interpreters are agreed that the inhabitants of Jerusalem are here in view. These people are the target of God’s wrath. But there isn’t uniform interpretation about the meaning of this symbolism. (Some interpreters (among them Calvin) place the accent upon the punishment, on the division of the hair—a symbol of the people—this hair divided into thirds, and each meeting a different fate—all of them bad.)

Others accent the significance of the shaving of the head and the beard.

Some have suggested that the hair of a man’s head, and his beard, may be likened to an ornament—it is what glorifies a man. To be shorn of both is a humiliation. So, Jerusalem was the ornament of the people of God, its glory. With the destruction of Jerusalem, the divine ornament of God’s favor is removed.

The Bible itself helps us understand this symbolism. What, after all, does the cutting or shaving off of hair often signify? Well, look at Job. Upon hearing all the sad reports that came to him in succession, one after the other—loss of all his property, and the loss of all his children—what does he do? “*Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped*” (Job 1:20 ESV). He was in grief and great sorrow: a shaved head, shaved to the scalp, a baldhead, signified that. We find other examples as well. When Moab is judged by God, devastated by an enemy, Jeremiah reports this: “*For every head is shaved and every beard cut off. On all the hands are gashes, and around the waist is sackcloth*” (Jer. 48:37 ESV). And

baldness of head and chin can also signify humiliation and shame. Through Isaiah God tells king Ahaz of “the day of the Lord”: “*In that day the Lord will use a razor hired from beyond the Euphrates River—the king of Assyria—to shave your head and private parts, and to cut off your beard also*” (Isa. 7:20 NIV).

This shaving, making oneself bald, depicts a time of mourning or a time of shame (humiliation). Each had a deep meaning. It offered a visible portrait of an inner suffering—whether of grief or shame. Ezekiel no doubt suffers both—great sorrow, great shame (for Jerusalem, for God’s covenant people, for hard-of-heart Jerusalem). His shorn scalp, his bald head and bare face depicted that life has been cut off, laid bare. Life was empty; the future naked. And so, the clean-shaven face and bald head pointed to this mourning and loss, this lament, this humiliation: that life is lost. Tomorrow has no sunshine. God’s silent prophet is now a shaved-bald prophet. Look, Israel! Behold! This is what awaits you.

Indeed, how apt, too. For this shaving off the hair also portrays for us a people who will be shorn away from their land and place. The land itself will be left bald—empty, lifeless, forsaken, in lamentation. This is the coming destruction and dissolution of the people of Jerusalem.

Actions louder than words! This silent speech, this last symbolic act of the shaved face and bald head had to make the people shudder. Yet they just don’t get it. Therefore, Ezekiel, in this last symbolic act, reveals to them more misery. Whether we accent the division of Ezekiel’s shaved hair or the significance of it being shaved off—either way, the one act goes together with the other act. Each fills out the meaning of the other. Everything here gives meaning to the whole event.

Calvin is certainly right to accent the judgment and doom displayed here. The population, divided into three equal groups, meets either a *slow* death or a *quick* death or an *eventual* death. For by his silent actions, Ezekiel shows that a third *perish by fire* (a picture of the death that descended upon the inhabitant by the siege itself: famine, pestilence, and other evils; and, then, with the breach of the city walls, there is fire and destruction). This is a grisly image. Yet, two thirds of the population have escaped that fate, right? Perhaps they thought themselves better off. There is hope of escape.

No. We are told that another third *perish by the sword*. That is, once the city is penetrated, it is open season to commit atrocities. Many of the inhabitants are slaughtered. Maybe some tried to die as soldiers, while others cowered in fear, hiding in their houses under the bed. But slaughter overtakes them. And then another third are *cast to the winds*. They are scattered about, most are taken into exile in Babylon, though some escaped to Moab or Ammon; others to Egypt; and others sought out various hiding places. The point is that the remaining third of the population is dispersed, scattered like hair on the wind. But these hiding places will not really benefit them. This is no remedy. They are cast from the land. And the sword will chase them down. They too will perish. It matters not which third you fall into—those who perish by starvation or disease; those who fight and die or cower and die; or those who are captured or flee. All are found. None escape. The wrath of God finds them. The whole with its parts is destroyed.

But we need to understand that this judgment upon “pious sinners” does not come suddenly or unexpectedly. This kind of fate never just drops out of the sky. God does

not mug them, so to speak; he is not a killer, hiding in the shadows, waiting to stab them. No, Israel had been warned, pleaded with, called to faith. She blithely goes her own way. And, now, she finds herself on the scales of God's justice—sinners in the hands of an angry God; sinners on the scales of a righteous God. For the weapon Ezekiel uses here is a “set of scales.” With those scales God can weigh out the punishment with great accuracy—for this one or that one (one third shall know famine and fire; one third shall know battle and sword; another third shall know exile and slow death). All are weighed out on the scales of justice, with precision. And God's scales of judgment are never off the mark. They're never unfair. They're never out of balance, tipped wrong.

But who wants to come under this scrutiny? Who can bear such inspection? Can you? Can I? If placed on God's scales, don't our sins outweigh our good deeds? Are we ready to be weighed for judgment, to be divided into our assigned third?

Christian sins (the sins of believers) are not lesser sins than the sins of unbelievers. We need the same blood of Jesus for forgiveness as they do. In fact, our sins can be the same sins as theirs, but we can also sin our uniquely church-goer sins. For example, we can sin with the rest of the world in breaking the Ten Commandments: having idols that we serve more than God—success or status or material things, or personal pleasure (these are first); worshipping God as we want, not as he wants (I will serve you, Lord, just to the point of suffering, then I compromise); treating God and his name profanely, commonly—as nothing much (God is a commodity to use, and his name may be tossed about recklessly); or let's not set time aside to worship God (Sunday is Sunday); dishonoring parents, killing, being unfaithful in marriage, stealing, slandering your neighbor, and being eaten up with “wanting” and discontentment. Common sins of the masses—all of us.

But Jesus shows us, in his Sermon on the Mount, that mere external conformity to God's law does not “git-r-done.” God peels back the veneer. He sees what's underneath. He is not fooled! He sees our hearts: “Yes, Lord, we are sinners. Have mercy on us! I am greedy. I am stingy. I am discontented. I am a luster! Lord, I struggle with forgiving others! I want to live by eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth. I hold grudges. Help me, Lord! I judge others and look down on them. I pick at people and find all their faults. I see splinters in their eyes, with tweezers handy to help them out; while I'm oblivious about the log in my own eye. Yes, Lord, I am a sinner. Have mercy on me!”

What is more, our uniquely Christian sins can be judgmentalism or a superiority-complex that goes with counting ourselves “on God's side” over against those who are “on the devil's side.” But where bitterness or anger or hatred thrive in us, their fruits eventually come out from under the bed in our lives. This monster, hiding under the bed, is your ungodly “Christian” monster. These “Christian” sins (sins you sin because you identify yourself as a Christian) do not bear kingdom fruits—kingdom fruits like being “poor in spirit” or “meek” or “hungering and thirsting for righteousness” (versus apathy) or being “merciful” or “pure in heart” or “peacemakers.” And without these fruits of righteousness, how can we ever be “persecuted for righteousness sake”? When God puts us on his scales, what does he see?

The Lord's Table is a constant reminder that we are people who, sadly, are not done with sinning (not yet, not in this life), and who still need the broken body and shed blood of Jesus. For sinning deserves death; it deserves the breaking of the body and shedding of the blood. There is hell to pay. Can you pay it? Can I?

When God analyzed his prideful, unrepentant people, Israel, he found it necessary to place them on the scales of his justice. As a people who did not seek his mercy or his glory, the scales of God's justice tilted only one direction. They registered death!

So Ezekiel shows us the scales of God's judgment here. There is a trial—a sorting out—followed by judgment. Crimes meet punishment. Being weighed by God, Israel is divided into thirds for sentencing. Sinners on the scales of a righteous God.

It is important that we get this point as the church today. For a church that differs from the world only in outward religious habits, but not in its values and desires and actions, that differs not from rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, that fails in the love-of-neighbor department, is a church that is dead already, or at the crossroads of life and death. Sham churches usually die a slow death. Sure, gross scandal can scatter the people quickly. But usually a sham church slowly bleeds members. The next generation doesn't show up anymore. The old people slowly get older. The talent and money dry up. The building may well be paid for, but there is not enough money to pay a pastor. They labor on. Eventually, they can't hire out the persons needed to do worship services; or a key member dies. It is finished. Sell the building. It all evaporates. It might take 50 years. But the death occurred long before. Churches on the scales.

The church today is still being warned. We still need to look at ourselves. No, not to wallow in misery, but honestly to assess ourselves. Where are we proud? What makes us think that God is pleased with us? Is he? If he isn't, are we repenting of that, turning to him, earnestly and humbling seeking mercy? Remember Jesus' words to the seven churches in Revelation? Don't try to escape Jesus' evaluation. Take heed.

Are we champions of orthodoxy like Ephesus, but losing our first love? Conservatism (or worse *stale* conservatism)—or any *-ism*—is not the same thing as loving Christ and the gospel. Are we willing to suffer affliction like Smyrna, or do we try to escape it as much as possible? Or are we compromised by worldliness or sexual immorality like Pergamum or Thyatira? (Is porn our problem? Secret affairs on the side?) Are we fighting this fight? Sardis was a church whose candle had gone out! But she thought of herself as alive. Christ declares her a corpse. We must be humble enough to want to wake up and grow up in the faith. Not, "we're just fine; leave us alone." No, we must pray for open doors of opportunity for ministry, to be used of God, like the church at Philadelphia. And we must not go the way of Laodicea, which was a church on the brink, neither hot nor cold. A lukewarm, tepid, unappetizing cocktail of a church, a room temperature church that was ready to be tossed out. No! We must be a repenting church, a going-back-to-Jesus church. A hot-and-on-fire for the Lord church. We pray for that, then. We ask God to give us these blessings. And we seek him for rescue.

This is what we need in our daily lives. Not judgmentalism. Not a superiority complex. Not, "I've arrived. We're it." But humility. "Help us Lord." "Help me Lord." For it is the Lord who gives us the right to eat from the tree of life in the paradise of

God (Rev. 2:7). He gives us the victor's crown (Rev. 2:10). He promises us "the hidden manna" and the new name (Rev. 2:17). He gives us the morning star and the authority to rule over the nations with him (Rev. 2:27–28). And he also dresses us in white, and protects our names in the book of life; even as he will confess our names before the Father in heaven (Rev. 3:4–5). Do you see where our victory lies? Not in ourselves, but in him. He makes us pillars in his city, the new Jerusalem, with new names written on us (Rev. 3:12). And he is the one who even gives us the right to sit with him on his throne—on his throne! (Rev. 3:21). He is our victory!

But there is another verdict, another outcome, another city, an eternally besieged city under God's frown, and its inhabitants have tongues swollen, yearning for a drop of water. There is a *bare existence*, a miserable existence, a hellish existence. How does it go for us when we are weighed on the scales of righteousness?

May we be warned, for more often than not our own sins are the twine that entangle and bind us. Often God punishes us with the consequences of our own sinning. As we saw last time, Israel, outwardly religious and marked off by specific purity laws, was reckless in her walk with God. She chased Gentile idols and ways of life. Pagan habits of heart pulsed through her. She wanted to walk in uncleanness of heart and raced after wealth and fortune. Now she will eat unclean food and suffer poverty. And, whirling about in the inferno of her lust, driven by her raging passions, she never finds peace. And so it is ever true, also today. People, driven by their narcissism and money-lust, are left in the cold with their sterile idols, and warned: an eternal barrenness awaits. That is, a sterile, dead existence awaits, a forever "bare existence" of weeping and gnashing of teeth—barely alive but never dying. And then the scales.

That's a gloomy message, I know. But such are the inescapable scales of divine justice. Recompense is just another word for God's wrath hitting its proper target.

II. Surprising scales of divine grace—the remnant of God's covenant mercy (vv. 3–4)

Yet there is a more complex melody here than that single note. In these silent actions, louder than words, we also discover a harmony hinting of help, a hint of hope; a harmony about a remnant selected, protected, according to God's covenant mercy. For the Lord will fulfill his promise of the "remnant." He remembers his covenant. We also see surprising scales of divine grace. God saves a remnant according to his covenant mercy.

We read in verses 3–4 that Ezekiel is ordered to take a few hairs from this last third (literally a "number"—so he had to count them), and he is to stow them in the fold of his garment. Probably what is in mind here is an area of his garment along the beltline, where he could fold his robe and tuck it with his belt, so that it served as a pocket of sort. In this way he could carry something in it. But even some of this small portion, set aside, even some of these numbered hairs must be cast into the fire. Thus, the remnant, that which remains is appallingly small. This remnant is the church.

The overall scene that Ezekiel presents to the Jewish exiles in Babylon, living along the Kebar River, is so grave and sobering. What the people witness is

astonishing: the scales, the division of the hair, the apportioning out of some hairs from the last bundle of hair, the tossing to the flames even of some of these hairs, so that only these few remain. These exiled people were the upscale people, the political movers; the business population with money; the intellectuals and most skilled sorts of persons. They witness what will be Israel's future. Not liberation from Babylon, but a greater exile. The whole population is next. This divided nation will be reunited in death—mostly death. The axe is laid to the root of the tree; fruitless trees are cut down. To the flames. God's winnowing fork is in hand; he is clearing his threshing floor, gathering the wheat into the barn but burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire (see Matt. 3:10, 12). This is what they witness—and now we witness. Except the wheat is depicted here as hairs; and there is not enough to gather into a barn. No, there are only a few left. But with God—and this is what we must not miss—a few is enough to begin again.

A remnant is left. But a remnant is enough. If need be, God can raise up children of Abraham from stones. God keeps and protects his own—not so that they can be smug, but so that they can be humble; and God begins again. Indeed, the Lord never uproots his church. He is never like a careless gardener who gets too aggressive with the hoe. As he rids the garden of weeds, he never recklessly digs up the healthy vegetables. God places his people on the scales. He separates the wheat from the chaff. He picks out a remnant (a few hairs). The unbelief amid these hairs are cast into the flames. What is left is wheat. It is gathered. It is protected. The hoe digging in God's garden rids it of weeds, protects the good plants. They are not cast aside.

But this isn't because they aren't sinners, too. They are. This "saving out" is a salvation by grace. They would likewise be people cast into the fire, except Christ Jesus himself suffered, being cast out for them. He suffered this being tossed into the fire himself, in their stead. We know this. He underwent the hellish penalty for them. Indeed, for us! That is, such proves to be *for us* if we would heed the words that stand atop the New Testament, spoken from the mouth of the last and greatest Old Testament prophet, John the Baptist: "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near*" (Matt. 3:2). "*Produce fruit in keeping with repentance*" (Matt. 3:8)

The *living* members of Christ's body are the believing and repenting members. Being that, we have the promise that he will never leave us or forsake us. He abides with us forever. To be sure, the church is pruned from time to time. Branches are trimmed. Dead branches. Unhealthy twigs and whole arms of branches are sometimes lopped off, so that the vine of the church can look rather bare or austere—as if hardly anything is left of it. (Such Elijah once thought, saying, "I alone am left" [1 Kings 19:10]; but he was wrong. And such it again seems here.) But the living stem remains intact.

In the history of the church it has often seemed that God has tucked away in the fold of his garment these carefully numbered hairs, his own children. They seem to be counted out carefully from among all the other hair—all the others who confess his name but then chase after other gods, sniffing the wind to pursue new idols of their hearts' longing. Such was the case in the days of Noah and the great flood—not days of a flourishing kingdom of God. No, those were days of lopping off. Those were days of hoeing the garden, but protecting a remnant, saving them out, placing them in the

fold of his coat—Noah and his eight family members (Gen. 7:7, 23). A remnant church. But that is all God needs. Don't forget, after Babel (the Tower of Babel), he started from scratch. He chose Abram, from Ur of the Chaldeans (Gen. 11:28). Meager, but a beginning. God can count. It was enough for him to build his church. Again, in the days of Lot, the great cities Sodom and Gomorrah are put to the flames, but Lot with his own escape—in the fold of God's garment, as it were (Gen. 19:29).

And likewise God will keep safe in the fold of his coat all his children, all his own in Jesus Christ, his entire church—*one, holy, catholic* church—as his fires of judgment visit the earth one last time, in the last great fire he will visit upon the whole world.

Yet we know that the visible church is not altogether safe, for hypocrites undetected can also occupy a place. In Noah's Ark, among the faithful, there resides the unholy Ham. Among the population boiled and baked at Sodom, there is unbelief among Lot's family. Remember Lot's wife? And Paul tells us that our spiritual forefathers enjoyed the baptism of Moses in the cloud and the passing through the sea, even as they enjoyed a kind of Lord's Supper in eating the spiritual food of the manna and drinking the miraculous water from the rock (which was Christ), yet he tells us, God was not pleased with most of them and they perished in the desert (see 1 Cor. 1: 1–5). Disturbing?

Yet these facts should not disturb *living* faith—faith casting its eyes on Jesus. By faith in him we know that we are safely in the fold of God's garment. Will we not weep, then, for those who make themselves like separated hairs to be cast into the flame? For those who do not want to repent—inside or outside the church? Won't we cry out to the Lord for those who wander as lost sheep, or worse, as prodigal sons? Won't we seek out the lost and look for our prodigal siblings? We must ask God to bring them to their senses. If you believe in Jesus Christ, if you love God, if you repent of your sins, you do that only because God has brought *you* to your senses. You see that, right? Maybe he starting doing that for you from your infant seat or by the time you could buckle-up by yourself or when you finally got behind the steering wheel or maybe later in life. No matter, God, by his grace, plucks you from the scales of judgment and places you on surprising scales of his grace; and then puts you into the fold of his robe.

But rather than presume on grace—like Israel did so long ago—how about we plead for it?

For some of us (or many of us), being people raised in the church, we regularly crowd about Jesus. We bump into him in catechism class and Bible study and Sunday worship (with Sunday sermon). Yet, we can throng about him and bump into him and never *touch* him. Remember, it was the woman with the flow of blood, amid the bustling crowd, who *touched* him. She touched him for help, in faith. And *she* was the one who was healed and blessed (cf. Mark 5:31). We all need to touch him, not merely bump into him. We need to look to Jesus in faith for forgiveness. Look to him! You need him! So reach out your hand to him and touch him with all your need *in faith*. And hold him, for he holds you.

And then you will find yourself on God's scales—not the scales of a righteous God as sinner, but the scales of his grace as forgiven. Amazing! Jesus places you in

the fold of his garment; and he is weighed in the balance for you; and dies for you. Now those are *actions louder than words*.

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