

## When the walls fall down

In March I was reading through Ezekiel I think in part because I've been eating Ezekiel bread a lot lately which is better for you than typical sandwich bread. However, I would definitely NOT recommend following the full recipe from Ezekiel 4 - it's pretty gross. In this passage I think God has a message for us regarding discipleship, the sufficiency of God, and the security we have in Jesus in this passage. It reminds me of the trip to an interview I had 20 years ago. Some of you may remember life before apps that are able to give you audible turn-by-turn directions to your destination. One of the first options was a print-out of turn-by-turn directions which was really handy if you had someone in the car with you. Otherwise you were dangerously distracted or pulling off the road frequently to check. Bari had already finished grad school and had started a job that kind of defined the geography where I could find something. I applied at lots of places and had a couple of interviews without any success. I found a lower paying, temporary position that was nearby. It would be a great experience, but I wasn't interested in more great experiences - I wanted a job. On the evening before the interview, I printed out the directions and looked briefly at another map of the route. It was one of those routes where there weren't really many options of how to get there, so I felt pretty confident. It was about an hour drive and I started out the next morning with a little buffer of time. I didn't need to be there until 11, so I figured traffic would not be much of a problem. A little bit into the trip I saw a sign for Dunkin Donuts at an upcoming exit. I was expecting it to be just off the highway. I got to the top of the ramp and a sign indicated another 2.5 miles. Well, in the time since I had seen the ad and this point my desire for the donut was off the charts. I really wanted a donut and rationalized it would help relax my nervousness a little. Unfortunately, the DD was not on the main road and of course I didn't have an app to help me get back, but I needed that donut. As I was eating my Boston Creme some of the filling spilled out onto my tie. I tried to wipe it off with my napkin which already had chocolate on it making it worse and since I was eating and driving I couldn't go for another napkin or to the bathroom. So now all of my buffer time is gone and I made a mess of my tie. So much for less nervous. I find my way back to the highway. I glanced down at the directions to note the exit I was to take - let's say it's exit 28. About 15 minutes later I pass 27A and 27B and then the next thing I see is exit 29. I take exit 29 and pull off on the shoulder. Sure enough, the directions said exit 28. So I go across the bridge and then start heading south looking for exit 28. Next thing I see is Exit 27B so I take it. There is only one direction to go, but I feel better because I recognize the name of the road from the directions. So now I'm clearly running a couple of minutes late, but I could be OK if no long lights or mistakes in the last few turns. After driving a few minutes and asking myself what is a speed limit anyway, I see a sign for a city in New Jersey that I know is the opposite direction of the town I was going to! Argh. I find a gas station and a pay phone, because I didn't have a cell phone and call and tell the person I'm interviewing with that I am going to be late because I got lost (I didn't mention DD!) So I turn around and head back in the opposite direction, stressed beyond belief for an interview for a job I wasn't sure I wanted, with DD drippings on my tie, and late trying not to speed or at least get caught speeding. Talk about first impressions, but they were gracious and adjusted the schedule for me. By God's grace I ended up getting the position. Now, what in the world does this story have to do with Ezekiel 13 and walls?? Just hold on and hopefully it will become clearer.

Three key points for this morning:

Filter the inputs to your discipleship through the Scripture and do a heart check

God is sufficient - as we walk through this life, we don't need anything in addition to God

Jesus is our ultimate defense

Context is so important, so let's take a few minutes and set the stage for our passage. Ezekiel is the prophet writing and he is a priest in his 20s who was exiled from Jerusalem along with many others in 597 B.C. to a place between modern day Baghdad and Basra. Jerusalem was the location of the temple and also the capital city so in Babylon's conquest, it was an important site. Babylon would have multiple interactions with Jerusalem in this context and would weaken the country by military attacks and forcibly removing or exiling many of its people from Jerusalem to Babylon and leave a small, weak remnant behind. The attacks were severe. One of the major defenses of that time were these really big walls around cities. And so either to breach the wall or to lay siege to the city and starve the people out were common approaches. Both happened in Jerusalem. Why were God's people being attacked? The Israelites were facing judgement for their lack of faithfulness to God and turning their backs on the covenants or contracts they had agreed to with God.

When Ezekiel is prophesying in the first half of the book, the walls of Jerusalem had likely been breached, but not totally broken down and Ezekiel uses that visual as a metaphor in our text today. In this metaphor, Ezekiel compares the wall around Jerusalem to faithfulness and a right standing with God which would be a defense in the day of the Lord. The day of the Lord is a term you see throughout the Bible and has typically one of two meanings. The first one is a period of time when God is particularly active to bring deliverance or judgement and the

second is an ultimate day of Judgement at the end of times when we have to stand before God and give an account and when he makes everything right. Since we're all still here, we can safely say that this day of the Lord was not the final one.

The focus of chapter 13 is largely on false prophets and God accuses them of several things. Right at the beginning, God points out that these prophets are prophesying out of their own imaginations.

**2** "Son of man, prophesy against the prophets of Israel who are now prophesying. Say to those who prophesy out of their own imagination: 'Hear the word of the Lord! **3** This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Woe to the foolish[a] prophets who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing!

Now God gave us creative and vivid imaginations, but these beautiful imaginations do not carry the word of God. They can help sometimes to convey the word of God in a relatable way like Jesus did in the parables. And this is a first point this morning, we cannot confuse nice sounding ideas with God's word. When people hear the term prophet, they typically think of a weird old dude with a white beard saying mystical things about the future. There was some future telling among the prophets in the old testament, but a tremendous amount of what they said was actually warning people of what God had already told them. Reminding them of the covenants they had made. Reminding them of the character of God and the things that are important to Him. Reminding them of the consequences for breaking those covenants and the blessing of keeping them. And typically the future telling that the old testament prophets did do was in light of these consequences. **Whether we realize it or not we are continuously being disciplined - our thoughts and opinions and positions are always being influenced and shaped by what we hear and read. So when we hear sermons, or podcasts, or political commentaries, or teachings, we need to**

**discern if they are sharing their own ideas or God's word.** And we can do it together! The Bereans we learned about in Acts 17 were well noted for doing just this - comparing what they heard from Paul with the scripture and discerning its consistency with the truth. It can be a little tricky, because false teaching is craftily disguised with parts of scripture. These are often scripture passages taken out of context or not in light of the whole of scripture. Prosperity gospel, cults, Christians who isolate themselves from the world and strive to create a Christian utopia are some examples that we see around us today.

**4** Your prophets, Israel, are like jackals among ruins. **5** You have not gone up to the breaches in the wall to repair it for the people of Israel so that it will stand firm in the battle on the day of the Lord.

God accuses these false prophets of being jackals - scavenging among the breaches and the ruins of the wall instead of fortifying and rebuilding it. The prophets were more concerned about profiting from the situation rather than doing the hard work of rebuilding and fortifying the faithfulness which had deteriorated so far over the years.

Ezekiel continues with the metaphor when he talks about smearing the wall with whitewash. Covering the wall with whitewash symbolizes a covering over of the difficult condition of the wall to make things appear to be all OK.

**10** "Because they lead my people astray, saying, "Peace," when there is no peace, and because, when a flimsy wall is built, they cover it with whitewash, **11** therefore tell those who cover it with whitewash that it is going to fall. Rain will come in torrents, and I will send hailstones hurtling down, and violent winds will burst forth. **12** When the wall collapses, will people not ask you, "Where is the whitewash you covered it with?"

A veneer concealing the problems underneath. And when God's judgement does come, they are surprised that the wall falls down and they are decimated. And while a popular message of everything is OK would be popular, the cancer of idolatry and an unrepentant heart grew. We can have the same problem today. There are churches who will not speak truth because it makes the people in the pews uncomfortable, because the people in the pews pay the bills, because people are going to church only for community and for affirmation. Brothers and sisters, that is not a gospel preaching church. If everything is OK, you don't need the gospel. Some of you may know of the situation of Ravi Zacharias. World famous Christian apologist whose teaching lead many people to Jesus. Shortly after he died last year it was disclosed that he had a history of sexual abuse and inappropriate relationships. There were people who knew, but did not act because the ministry was too big to fail. So the ministry put whitewash over it, they said everything is ok, no one was willing to speak truth and the ministry continued to bring in money and disciples. Do you think those disciples are now questioning? If it can happen to a Ravi Zacharias, can it happen to me? If Ravi needed to hear truth, don't I?

It seems many times Christians can be all about truth, when it's about others. It seems like a lot of our time and energy in truth telling can often be directed at what is wrong in this broken world around us. We need to be aware and make sure we aren't heading off in those directions and also lovingly warning others; however we find Jesus's criticism was mainly internal - his teachings were not focused on the morality of the Roman Empire or the dreaded Samaritans. He was willing to face the Ravi's of His day. If our teachings and preachings are only focused on those outside of the church and what they're doing wrong, we have serious problems. We create an us vs them mentality. We begin to create a holier than you culture and we easily forget that it is by God's grace that we aren't in a different position.

So if you sit in sermon after sermon after sermon and are not challenged, then you need to question the content or question your own heart to make sure your heart is open to God's word and make sure you are not like the priest who was comparing himself to the sinner in Luke 18: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." **If you are not being challenged in your discipleship - check the source and check your heart.** That doesn't mean you should feel guilty and convicted after every message - there are times for encouragement and celebrating who God is and what God has done in our lives. Don't be convicted about not being convicted all the time! One word here - when you do get a feeling of conviction, try to define it so you can act on it. If we leave it as just a sense of discontent, but can't say why we feel like this then it's difficult to act on it.

My second point this morning is that **God is sufficient** and that is covered by the last two passages in slightly different ways.

The next passage addresses women prophets who were weaving together powers of the occult and witchcraft with the word of God.

**17** "Now, son of man, set your face against the daughters of your people who prophesy out of their own imagination. Prophesy against them **18** and say, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Woe to the women who sew magic charms on all their wrists and make veils of various lengths

for their heads in order to ensnare people. Will you ensnare the lives of my people but preserve your own?

It's not the fact that they were women, but that they were using magical charms (Lucky Charms are OK) and magical bracelets and using divination. They brought elements of the culture and religion around them into the worship of God. Their worship and religion would look more like those around them. But in fact, God calls us to be holy - to be set apart - to be unique. And Christianity is just that. These false prophets fooled people with practices that were familiar from their neighbors and they took it as being from God. They were in fact bringing down those who were trying to live in a holy way. It's pretty clear from the Bible that God has no place for these magical practices. No fortune tellers, no ouija boards, no palm readings, no communicating with the dead - because in each of these cases you are seeking something instead of God Himself - the statement we make by doing such things is that God isn't sufficient. God isn't answering me how or when I want, so I will look to something else. God has clearly put these things off limits because they are evil. Not because they don't have power, but because they are not from God. **What God has provided for our discipleship is sufficient - a relationship, the church, the Word, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.** If you are tempted to look elsewhere, ask yourself what am I looking for that God cannot provide?

Then in the first part of Ezekiel 14 we see the elders of the community coming to the prophet Ezekiel to get a message from God.

Some of the elders of Israel came to me and sat down in front of me. **2** Then the word of the Lord came to me: **3** "Son of man, these men have set up idols in their hearts and put wicked stumbling blocks before their faces. Should I let them inquire of me at all?

We should credit them for wanting to hear from God! However, God knows their hearts as they approach Him. We learn their hearts have a divided loyalty. They want their idols and God. As long as God's people have these idols in their lives, they will be a continual stumbling block. And God tells them pretty clearly, forget it. Phew - glad we don't have any idols today! Maybe we don't have figurines that we worship or we're not worshipping Jesus one day and Mohamed the next, but idols are a problem today. In some way, I wish they were as obvious as figurines and false gods. But they tend to be not overtly evil, but things that are in and of themselves morally neutral. It's when we elevate them to points in our lives that we put our faith in them or they distract us from worshipping the one true God or our identity is so tightly tied to something or that we think we can only be content if we have that... your 401k, your career, your family, your nation, your level of income, your political party, your way of doing things, your good cause, your business, ...Brothers and sisters, we have idols in the church today. I know Jonathan has preached on this before and I hope it isn't getting tiring, because I believe it is something that we need to constantly be vigilant against. I have battles with things that threaten to take the throne of Jesus all the time. We need to do a self-inspection - are there things occupying our hearts as we come to hear from God? God doesn't want it to be 401k + Jesus. Or security + Jesus. Or being right + Jesus. Or career + Jesus. Or the perfect home + Jesus. Or health + Jesus. Or ... you get it. **God is sufficient. As we seek to be discipled, let's examine our hearts and put those things that can divide our hearts in their proper place and then approach to hear from God.** Are there things in our lives like the rich young ruler that when asked to give it up for Jesus, he was sad and walked away?

My last point this morning is that Jesus is our ultimate defense.

I mentioned the wall around Jerusalem. It eventually gets overrun and the city and temple destroyed. The wall was an imperfect defense, just



like the people's ability to be good enough or make it on their own in their standing with God. When we face that ultimate Day of The Lord we won't have a wall to stand behind. So what is the answer?

Ezekiel 18:31-32

Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, people of Israel? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live!

Repent - turn from what you are chasing after to God. The NT tells us how to get that new spirit: Acts 2:**38** Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

If you put your faith in Jesus alone, if you follow Him alone - He defends you because He has already absorbed the judgement for our failures. That is a wall that will never fall.

Discipleship can be a little bit like that interview drive which was about 70% true. If I had compared the directions from the computer with the map more closely, I would have seen the differences and known the right exit to take. If I compare what I hear to what the scripture says, I can know better what is true.

There is a destination, and being sure of what you want changes the way you approach and prepare for it. Do you want to be a disciple of Jesus? To know Him and to love Him? If I had realized the sufficiency of this job and not anticipating something better, I would have taken it much more seriously and given it my full attention. God is sufficient for all we need.

Finally, when you put your faith wholly in Jesus, He not only defends us but God sees His righteousness and doesn't see that I'm late or have donut on my tie or that I've been distracted, but He welcomes me to join Him in eternity.