

“The Glory Departs”
Sermon for the 29 July 2018
Text: Ezekiel Chapters 8-11

If Ezekiel had any doubts about the true identity of the glory he saw in his vision by the canal Chebar, after he was teleported by an angelic being (the pre-incarnate Christ?) who put out **the form of a hand and took me by a lock of my hair and up he went between heaven and earth and brought him in vision of God** to the **entrance of the gateway to the inner court** (8:3-) in the Temple at Jerusalem, those doubts were erased in an instant. It is September 592. And what he first lays eyes upon is **the seat of the image of jealousy** (also v.3). This was quite possible where a heathen image, or a tableau (groups of figures?) of images were set up in the temple—both profaning that place and blaspheming God. This abomination replaced the brazen altar in the inner court! Also known as the “court of the priests,” intermittently from the time of Ahaz on (ruling from 741 to 725BC) idols of foreign gods had been introduced to the Temple. See 2 Kings 16:10-16 for this episode. The idols in Ezekiel’s day would have been in place during the reign of Zedekiah, some scholars conjecture that it is likely that this image, among others were representations of Baal (or of Ashtaroath), or even of Tammuz (referenced in ver. 14) and his accompanying consort goddesses, *Astarte*, the Syrian Venus perhaps.

Worshipping idols anywhere in Israel would be problematic, but to do so in a place consecrated to the worship of the one true God was blasphemous, particularly offensive to God. To put any object of licentious worship in the house of God, whose essence is holiness and purity is categorically *obscene—and shocking*. Regardless if this were a piece of “cultural accommodation,” or, perhaps even appeasement of the surrounding cultures (a display of “tolerance”?), this offense was a key motivation in God’s decision to move out of the “Holy of Holies”—to depart from the Temple and the city of Jerusalem. And with that departure, the protection of Jerusalem was removed!

This vision was awful enough, but Ezekiel, on this visionary tour, is about to be shown four specific instances of perverted, or heretical worship:

1. vv. 5-6 the revelation of the image (Canaanite strain?)
2. vv. 7-13 the clandestine worship of the seventy elders of Israel (and Egyptian strain).
3. vv. 14-15 the worship of the apostate women, Adonis, the god of vegetation (Mesopotamian strain)
4. vv. 16-18 the false worship of the twenty-five priests, sun worshippers

Chapter 9 depicts the judgment of God on all these idolaters through the executioners, six in number who proceed to slay everyone who does not have the mark of grief and sorrow over the transgressions of Israel (the abominations just detailed) and to slay all the rest:

9:9 Then He said to me, “The iniquity of the house of Israel and Judah is very, very great, and the land is filled with blood and the city is full of perversion; for they say, ‘The Lord has forsaken the land, and the Lord does not see!’ 10 But as for Me, My eye will have no pity nor will I spare, but I will bring their conduct upon their heads.” 11 Then behold, the man clothed in linen at whose loins was the [the inkhorn] writing case reported, saying, “I have done just as You have commanded me.” NASB

There are people are worshipping the image (general idolatry), who, in this vision, are standing in in the inner court, north of the altar gate in the Temple entrance (8:5-6) where King Ahaz had moved the brazen altar (for burnt offerings especially sin offerings!) to make room for the idol's altar(s) where misled people are offering sacrifices to foreign gods. The worse is yet to come—through **a hole in the wall**, which is enlarged by digging Ezekiel uncovers **an entrance (!)** and Ezekiel enters and, behold, **seventy elders** (some of whom Ezekiel knows by name!) **are engaging in worship of vile things, every from of creeping things and loathsome beasts and all the idols of Israel (!)**. Shocking *creature worship unfolds* in the supposed privacy, or secrecy **of this room**. *The wicked apostasy of Israel has thoroughly infested Judah!* The walls are filled with graffiti and pornographic imagery. This is the second instance of idolatry and Alexander Maclaren, the great Scottish expositor of Scripture (19th century) argues that this is a composite scene, a summary of various worship settings—a symbolic scene:

12 Then He said to me, “Son of man, do you see what the elders of the house of Israel are committing in the dark, each man in the room of his carved images? For they say, ‘The Lord does not see us; the Lord has forsaken the land.’” 13 And He said to me, “Yet you will see still greater abominations which they are committing.” NASB

To quote Alexander Maclaren, “Then he sees within the Temple three groups representing the idolatries of three different lands.. . those with whom my text is concerned, who, in some underground room, vaulted and windowless, were bowing down before painted animal forms upon the walls. Probably they were the representatives of Egyptian worship, for the description of their temple might have been taken out of any book of travels in Egypt in the present day. ***It is only an ideal picture that is represented to Ezekiel***, and not a real fact. It is not at all probable that all these various forms of idolatry were found *at any time* within the Temple itself. And the whole cast of the vision suggests that it is an ideal picture, and not reality, with which we have to do. Hence the number of these idolaters was seventy—the successors of the seventy whom Moses led up to Sinai to see the God of Israel! And now here they are groveling before brute forms painted on the walls in a hole in the dark.” Maclaren’s picture of this event is instructive. “Their leader bears a name which might have startled them in their apostasy, and choked their prayers in their throats, for Jaazan-iah means ‘the Lord hears.’ Each man has a censer in his hand—self-consecrated priests of self-chosen deities. Shrouded in obscurity, they pleased themselves with the ancient lie, ‘The Lord sees not; He hath forsaken the earth.’ And then, into that *Sanhedrim of apostates* there comes, all unknown to them, the light of God’s presence; and the eye of the prophet marks their evil.” —Maclaren

What is striking here is that where the men go astray into apostasy and strange religion (into the occult, or into paganism), their women, even those of high standing, follow! So what follows is not unexpected, but that should not deter us from being shocked as Ezekiel was. A similar dynamic occurred in late eighteenth and early nineteenth American religious circles, an apostate religion known as Deism¹. Nathaniel Hawthorne depicts this kind of

¹ Another historical religious movement that was the antithesis of (mid-eighteenth century) evangelicalism made its appearance in the (late) eighteenth century. Deism, a companion piece to the Enlightenment, which emphasized *morality* and rejected the orthodox Christian view of the divinity of Christ, found advocates among educated, upper-class Americans. Conspicuous among them were Thomas Jefferson and John Adams—plus Benjamin Franklin and other intellectual leaders. Deists, never more than “a minority within a minority,” a philosophical aberration,” were

reversal in his short story, “Young Goodman Brown.” ***False faiths get along easily together!*** They are as inherently as tolerant as they are baseless. Today they co-exist under the banner of pluralism—the name change does nothing to improve their error, to rehabilitate their apostasy.

Thirdly, vv. 14-15, Ezekiel is shown the debasing rites of the apostate Jewish women! “As the creature worship before mentioned was undoubtedly connected with political rationalizations, instituted while aid was being sought from Egypt (earlier in Jewish history), so the worship of Adonis, in this scenario, may have been affected by the league which Zedekiah attempted to form (Jeremiah 27:1-11) with the Edomites, Moabites, Ammonites, and Philistines against Nebuchadnezzar. The annual feast of Adonis consists of rite of mourning by the women for his death (and annual event—followed by his “resurrection in the spring!”—is coupled with by rejoicing over his return to life, and was accompanied by great abominations and licentiousness. The myth of Adonis was also closely associated with the worship of nature.” —Ellicott’s Commentary.

Fourthly, Ezekiel is taken into the inner court to view even greater abominations. **Twenty-five men** (most likely priests given the location!) **with their backs to the temple of the Lord, and their faces to the east, worshipping the sun**. That completes the tour!

“It is of no avail that we pray in the temple, if we have a dark underground shrine where our true adoration is rendered.”

Maclaren applies this passage “symbolically,” ***after clarifying that Ezekiel would have had no such intention, or meaning(!)***, by asserting, *in a pastoral mode*: “Look at that dark-painted chamber that *we have all of us got in our hearts*; at the idolatries that go on there, and at the flashing of the sudden light of God who marks, into the midst of the idolatry, ‘Hast thou seen what the ancients of the children of Israel do in the dark, each man in the chambers of his imagery? . . . Every man is a mystery to himself as to his fellows. . . . After all the manifestations of a life, we *remain enigmas to one another and mysteries to ourselves*. For every man is not fixed somewhat, but a growing personality, with dormant possibilities of good and evil lying in him, which up to the very last moment of his life may flame up into altogether unexpected and astonishing developments.

Therefore we have all to feel that after all self-examination there *lie awful depths within us* which we have not fathomed; and, after all our knowledge of one another, we yet do see but the surface, and each soul dwells alone. There is in every heart a dark chamber. Oh, brethren! there are very, very few of us that dare tell all our thoughts and show our inmost selves to our dearest ones. . . . Well, then, go to God and ask Him to keep you from unconscious sins. Go to Him and ask Him to root out of you the mischiefs that you do not know are there, and live humbly and self-distrustfully, and feel that your only strength is: ‘Hold Thou me up, and I shall be saved.’ ‘Hast thou seen what they do in the **dark?**’

Maclaren means for his people to stop and realize that this

submerged by evangelicalism in the nineteenth century. This deviance found fertile ground in the greater Boston area. The wives of Franklin Pierce and Nathaniel Hawthorne were involved in “summonings, the occult and seances as parlor religious activities as “New Lights”—in darkened rooms, we note, in privacy that they presumed shielded them from both neighbors and God. These rites took place in the second story parlor in Pierce’s home in Hillsborough, New Hampshire. And God did not miss out on their transgressive nature.

depiction of the going's on in the Temple represents their human heart.

“By our memory, and by that marvelous faculty that people call ‘the imagination,’ and by our desires, we are forever painting the walls of the inmost chambers of our hearts with such pictures. *That is an awful power which we possess*, and, alas! too often use for foul idolatries. . . . You, young men and women, especially you young men, mind what you paint upon those mystic walls! ***Foul things***, as my text says, ‘creeping things and abominable beasts,’ ***only too many of you are tracing there***. [Pornographic images, projected onto those walls, from video's, movies, magazines and unfortunate selfies, will suffice!—brackets, mine] Take care, for these figures are ineffaceable. No repentance will obliterate them. I do not know whether even Heaven can blot them out.”

This is a severe and dire warning. Brain neurology supports the idea of ineffaceable in its model of brain circuitry, in what they call “grooves” in the brain which function like ruts in a dirt road—forever dragging the wheels back into the ruts of prior traffic—which operate like the rails for a railroad line, restricting movement and making uniform the approach to one's destination. However, neural plasticity suggests that the patterns can be altered—they aren't absolutely ineffaceable! But like bad habits, they are difficult to break, change or alter. Stuff inputted to the brain can be overwritten, but, apparently not deleted. The power of images to stay in the brain, their addictive allure, is what the pornographic industry is counting on to make its money and stay in business. So avoid that stuff. I suggest that this falls under Romans 13:14: **But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires.**

“It is of no avail that we pray in the temple, if we have a dark underground shrine where our true adoration is rendered.”

Maclaren continues: “What you love, what you desire, what you think about [repeatedly], you are photographing on the walls of your immortal soul. . . . What are you painting on the chambers of imagery in your hearts? Obscenity, foul things, mean things, low things? Is that mystic shrine within you painted with such figures as were laid bare in some chambers in Pompeii, where the excavators had to cover up the pictures because they were so foul? Or, is it like the cells in the convent of San Marco at Florence, where Fra Angelico's holy and sweet genius has left on the bare walls, to be looked at, as he fancied, only by one devout brother in each cell, angel imaginings, and noble, pure celestial faces that calm and hallow those who gaze upon them? What are you doing, my brother, in the dark, in your chambers of imagery?”

“All these seventy grey-bearded elders that were bowing there before the bestial gods which they had portrayed, had, no doubt, often stood in the courts of the Temple and there made prayers to the God of Israel, with broad phylacteries, to be seen of men. Their true worship was their worship in the dark. The other was conscious or unconscious hypocrisy. And the very chamber in which they were gathered, according to the ideal representation of our text, was a chamber in, and therefore partaking of the consecration of, the Temple. So their worship was doubly criminal, in that it was sacrilege as well as idolatry. Both things are true about us.”

“A man's true worship is not the worship which he performs in the public temple, but that which he offers down in that little private chapel, where nobody goes but himself. Worship is the attribution of supreme excellence to, and the entire dependence of

the heart upon, a certain person. And the people or the things to which a man attributes the highest excellence, and on which he hangs his happiness and well-being, these be his gods, no matter what his outward profession is. You can find out what these are for you, if you will ask yourself, and honestly answer, one or two questions. What is that I want most? What is it which makes my ideal of happiness? What is that which I feel that I should be desperate without? What do I think about most naturally and spontaneously, when the spring is taken off, and my thoughts are allowed to go as they will? And if the answer to none of these questions is 'God!' then I do not know why you should call yourself a worshipper of God. It is of no avail that we pray in the temple, if we have a dark underground shrine where our true adoration is rendered."

"Honor, wealth, literary or other distinction, the sweet sanctities of human love dishonored and profaned by being exalted to the place which divine love should hold, ease, family, animal appetites, lust, drink—these are the gods of some of us."

"Bear with my poor words and ask yourselves, not whom do you worship before the eye of men, but who is the God to whom in your inmost heart you bow down? What do you do in the dark? That is the question. Whom do you worship there? Your other worship is not worship at all. . . Whom is your heart made to enshrine? Why! every stone, if I may so say, of the fabric of our being bears marked upon it that it was laid in order to make a dwelling-place for God. Whom are you meant to worship, by the witness of the very constitution of your nature and make of your spirits? Is there anybody but One who is worthy to receive the priceless gift of human love absolute and entire? Is there any but One to whom it is aught but degradation and blasphemy for a man to bow down? Is there any being but One that can still the tumult of my spirit, and satisfy the immortal yearnings of my soul? We were made for God, and whensoever we turn the hopes, the desires, the affections, the obedience, and that which is the root of them all, the confidence that ought to fix and fasten upon Him, to other creatures, we are guilty not only of idolatry but of sacrilege."

"And does that need much bending to make it an impressive form of putting a solemn truth? There are plenty of us—alas! alas! that it should be so—to whom it is the least welcome of all thoughts that there in the doorway stand God and His Word. Why should it be, my brother, that the properly blessed thought of a divine eye resting upon you should be to you like the thought of a policeman's bull's-eye to a thief? Why should it not be rather the sweetest and the most calming and strength-giving of all convictions—'Thou God seest me'? The little child runs about the lawn perfectly happy as long as she knows that her mother is watching her from the window. And it ought to be sweet and blessed to each of us to know that there is no darkness where a Father's eye comes not. But oh! to the men that stand before bestial idols and have turned their backs on the beauty of the one true God, the only possibility of composure is that they shall hug themselves in the vain delusion:—'The Lord seeth not.'

"I beseech you, dear friends, do not think of His eye as the prisoner in a cell thinks of the pin-hole somewhere in the wall, through which a jailer's jealous inspection may at any moment be glaring in upon him, but think of Him your Brother, who 'knew what was in man,' and who knows each man, and see in Christ the all-knowing Godhood that loves yet better [that is, more] than it knows, and beholds the hidden evils of men's hearts, in order that it may cleanse and forgive all which it beholds."

“One day a light will flash in upon all the dark cells. We must all be manifest before the judgment-seat of Christ. Do you like that thought? Can you stand it? Are you ready for it? My friend! let Jesus Christ come to you with His light. Let Him come into the dark corners of your hearts. Cast all your sinfulness, known and unknown, upon Him that died on the Cross for every soul of man, and He will come; and His light, streaming into your hearts, like the sunbeam upon foul garments, will cleanse and bleach them white by its shining upon them. *Let Him come into your hearts by your lowly penitence, by your humble faith,* and all these vile shapes that you have painted on its walls will, *like phosphorescent pictures in the daytime, pale and disappear* when the ‘Sun of Righteousness, with healing in His beams, floods your soul, leaving no part dark, and turning all into a temple of the living God.”

And so the glory of God who was induced by apostasy to depart the Temple in Jerusalem will turn and return and take up occupancy in the cleansed and purified heart. Then will all be as it should be . . . and you will be light, a city set on the hill, a light to all who long and dream to find their way home to God. So may it be.

Amen