

God Asks: Do You Want to Live?  
12 August 2018  
Text: Ezekiel 16 & 23

Looking ahead, chapter seventeen begins with a riddle (“difficult language requiring an explanation”) and before I answer *tentatively* why God might direct his prophet to use difficult language with a hardheaded and hardhearted crowd, I want to pose a riddle of my own: What is it that is honorable, beautiful, precious, free and cheerful? What both demonstrates love, and is devout, fiery, comprehensive and glorifying to God? What is to be both constant and reasonable? (PAUSE) If you answered “obedience,” you have answered the riddle correctly. Perhaps the multitude of adjectives gave it away—but obedience is rarely painted in such vivid colors with such pictorial depth. And perhaps it has been hidden from you *that the person who is most obedient to God is the freest person of all!* We are established in this conclusion by the example of Christ Himself whose perfect obedience to God issued in his entire liberty among humankind. Ah, the obedient are the free!

Secondly, you will note that I am combining two chapters, 16 and 23, this morning because of the graphic language and the depiction of lewdness entailed in both chapters which share the purpose of exposing us to the vileness of sin. God wanted Ezekiel to disclose to us the hideousness of sin—of all sin, great sin or little sin—so that we might weigh sin in accordance to the offense it gives to God, to our God who is holy and pure and righteous. Sin grieves God deeply, personally and terribly. As reasonable creatures, confronted with the offense of sin to God, we might well be moved either 1. to repent fully and thoroughly of any and all sin we are in; or, 2. that we might choose to avoid sinning early on (while it is still little, less powerful and resistible, or defeat-able). The sooner and better you weed the garden the easier it is to keep the garden weed-free! And as those who were dismayed to find tares among the wheat exclaimed, **some enemy has done this**, it is reasonable to suppose that temptations to sin originate from all sides—internally and externally. Regardless, the intent of weeds is first infestation and then occupation. Sin intends to reign—so do weeds! It is up to us to exercise dominion over the plant life in our garden **and getting rid of the weeds** (the **thorns and thistles**-Genesis 3:18) when they arrive! There is *no procrastination that is profitable* and mere rebuke is insufficient—sin must be uprooted and thrown out. To the good and diligent gardener dominion is active, *it is keeping down the weeds* which by vigor and proliferation represent the presence of sin in a fallen world.

The lewdness of chapters 16 and 23 is very bad. The word is vile. Vile is extremely unpleasant, morally depraved, or wicked . . . and it used to also mean worthless, or without value. I personally appreciate the archaic meanings—vile (14th century, Middle English) started off as “cheap and base” (Latin, *vilse*). I mention that because we formerly paired wicked and evil *and we are too timorous (cowardly), too culturally sensitive to allow that anymore*. However if we consider the list of synonyms for vile, it would appear that all is not lost! Here they are:

foul, nasty, unpleasant, bad, disagreeable, horrid, horrible, dreadful, abominable, atrocious, offensive, obnoxious, odious, unsavory, repulsive, disgusting, distasteful, loathsome, hateful, nauseating, sickening; disgraceful, appalling, shocking, sorry, shabby, shameful, dishonorable, execrable, heinous, abhorrent, deplorable, monstrous, wicked, evil, iniquitous, nefarious, depraved, debased; contemptible,

despicable, reprehensible; *informal* gross, godawful, lowdown, lousy; *archaic* scurvy.

While I lament the vocabulary loss of “vile” meaning “worthless and valueless” as lost, I regret the loss of the word “scurvy” even more. Chapter 16 could be entitled “The Redemption of the Scurvy Princess.” Yes, despite her adulterous and scurvy faithlessness to God—which sounds as bad as it means—the great good news in Ezekiel is that after she is judged and punished as scurvy, **God still restores her!** The love of God triumphs over sin—no matter that her life was a landfill of vile and immoral behaviors, ***a path of atonement is laid out for her, EVEN HER!***

So here, in one summary sentence is the message of Ezekiel 16 and 23: “Though you have been an adulterous nymphomaniac, I love you and will atone for all your whoredom(s). as cited Douglas Stuart, “Ezekiel,” The Preacher’s Commentary, p.211; Nelson. 1989

What this means, beloved, is that there is more mercy in Christ, than there is sin in us! Or that **Where sin abounds, grace aboundeth more!** (Romans 5:20) It is striking that Stuart describes the royal princess as a nymphomaniac in a clinical way. Note the twin curse of compulsive sexuality: insatiability is the Siamese twin of endless escalation! Here’s a definition:

Nymphomania is a mental disorder marked by compulsive sexual behavior. Compulsions are unwanted actions, or rituals, that a person engages in repeatedly without getting pleasure from them or being able to control them. In the case of nymphomania, people act out their compulsions by engaging in risky behaviors such as promiscuity. Whether or not nymphomania qualifies as a true mental illness is often debated in the medical community, but evidence suggests that compulsive sexual behavior is a real and serious illness. Source: <https://www.healthgrades.com/conditions/nymphomania>

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We read that definition and we can appreciate why Karl Menninger wrote Whatever Became of Sin? (Hawthorn Books (September 1, 1973)) Clinical description appears to be an attempt at “moral neutrality”—but we are not permitted to walk with that approach as we hear about the lewdness of the royal princess. In context, the sins of ingratitude (**she forgot from whence she had come and who had provided for her**) and pride in self (**she trusted in her beauty**) brought her to practice whoredom, that is, spiritual harlotry in the form of adultery (faithless sexual acts) and infidelity—sinning against herself, God, her marriage and her husband multiple times(!). We know that women can be afflicted in this manner (the scripture offers three explicit cases, currently at hand) but it is true that a nymphomaniac could go to many doctors and counselors before she would hear her condition described spiritually as sinful. And sinful is plainly God’s view of this lewdness. And that is problematic because ***the sin of nymphomania is treatable by repentance and fully forgivable by faith in Jesus Christ***. Spiritual treatment for spiritual conditions is both compassionate and apt. As to the status of nymphomania as a mental condition, or a

compulsive behavior disorder rooted in brain chemistry, childhood trauma and environment, a debatable proposition, other interventions may be in order. Such is the web of sin, however, these categories of disorder are intertwined—and can only be extricated very carefully.

To wit, we have the pitiable conditions of an unwanted female baby, heartlessly abandoned in a field and left to die. Infanticide. This is a terrible crime of inhumanity and who is to say where the damage caused by such treatment begins, or ends. Of course this is the condition of being an orphan from the victim's perspective—an infant can only internalize the trauma. And who knows how much love and affirmation it would take to bring healing. *It takes a towering, unrelenting divine love to do so and a love that remains despite rejection, diversion and deviations. It takes the transforming power of divine love to bring health out of sickness such as this.* To treat a baby so inhumanely is sick, vile even, and it changes people, we become inhumane oneself. God help the parents of an unwanted child who callously act so as to dispose of their baby—yes, despite the costs, expense and demands involved in keeping that child. Yet, this picture is not simply one of infanticide. No. It is a picture of the human condition, without God—it involves our helplessness and our hopelessness because we are relational beings, living persons from birth.

Helplessness and hopelessness are giant fears, even terrors. They so frighten us that we are sorely tempted to seek any refuge, any sanctuary from the vulnerability and, yes, death, with which we are threatened. The mercy of God, his unmerited favor, are the only grounds of security that we have—or were ever meant to have. And God knows that we are what we are—having been made for relationship with himself first, and then for relationship with one another through him.

So, why when God has so rescued her, so tenderly fathered her from birth, and showed such utter compassion to her and for her? Why when he spoke “Live!” to her and she lived(!), did she forget? Does pride carry amnesia? The newborn infant's situation was so dire, her circumstances so drastic, that it took the creative Word of the living God to keep her alive! Yes, and, then, to enable her to thrive into womanhood! That divine love transformed her into a gloriously beautiful woman. She was redeemed from death to be his chosen one, his bride—from completely unwanted to totally wanted. What an amazing span of grace!!

Imagine this castaway baby, raised not just well but royally (**you advanced to royalty** (v.13)). She was so fashionably outfitted that **her renown went out to the nations . . . for it was perfect through the splendor I had lavished on you.** (v. 14)

**But you trusted in your beauty because of your renown, and lavished your whorings on any passerby; AND YOUR BEAUTY BECAME HIS . . . AND YOU TOOK YOUR BEAUTIFUL JEWELS OF MY GOLD AND MY SILVER, WHICH I HAD GIVEN YOU and you made for yourself images of men, and played the whore with them.** (vv. 15-17)

The majority opinion is that these images were images of supposed male deities which were employed as objects of idolatrous worship. There is the tone of an injured husband here because in the parable that is the part played by God himself—all of this was unfaithfulness to him! More heinous is his wife's *indulgence of child sacrifice to Molech*—**you took your sons and your daughters, whom you had borne to me and these you sacrificed to them** (those pagan *deities*?) **to be devoured,** **Were your whorings so little a matter that you that you slaughtered my children and offered them up as an offering of fire to them.** (vv. 20-21) Sadly we note that she treated her own offspring just

as she had been treated . . . **you did not remember the days of your youth, when you were naked and bare and wallowing in your blood?!** (v.22) The anguish of these words should make them burn upon the page!

As we pivot to chapter 23, it is important to note that there is only one wife in chapter 16, representing the whole of Israel. Now there are two unfaithful wives, sisters, Oholah (representing Samaria) and Oholibah (standing for Jerusalem), **daughters of one mother** (meaning perhaps Leah or Rachel, the wives of Jacob who had twelve sons between them?), were sexually precocious girls and they were sexually exploited/abused, in their youth **in Egypt**. They were, according to the script, married to God, their husband, in a parallel parable. They too were lewd, insatiably unfaithful. Oholah was judged—**delivered into the hands of her lovers (the choicest men of Assyria—warriors, governors and commanders)—These uncovered her nakedness; they seized her sons and daughters; and as for her, they killed her with the sword** (alluding to the conquest and captivity of Samaria by the Assyrians).

In what appears to be a form of sibling rivalry, Oholibah, **her sister . . . became even more corrupt than her sister in her lust and in her whoring.**(v. 11). She went after the **Assyrians** also, **all of them desirable young men.** (v.12) Then, after observing the wall paintings of the Chaldeans, **in vermillion . . . with flowing turbans, all of them officers . . . she sent messengers to them in Chaldea. And the Babylonians came to her into the bed of love, and they defiled her with their whoring lust.** And after she was defiled by them, **she turned from them in disgust** (*all you want is sex*) . . . **then I turned from her in disgust, as I had turned in disgust from her sister. Yet she increased her whoring.** . . . Therefore, O Oholibah, thus says the Lord God; ‘Behold, I will stir up against you your lovers . . . I will bring them against you from every side (v.22) . . . and I will commit the judgment to them, **and they will judge you according to their judgments** . . . they will deal with you in fury through disfigurement, slaughter, devouring fire and strip you and take away your adornments. **THUS WILL I PUT AN END TO YOUR LEWDNESS AND YOUR WHORING BEGUN IN THE LAND OF EGYPT . . . your lewdness and your whoring have brought this upon you.** (vv. 29-30)

All this is bad enough, but they have done even worse:

**38 Again, they have done this to Me: they have defiled My sanctuary on the same day and have profaned My sabbaths. 39 For when they had slaughtered their children for their idols, they entered My sanctuary on the same day to profane it; and lo, thus they did within My house. 40 “Furthermore, [their women] they have even sent for men who come from afar, to whom a messenger was sent; and lo, they came—for whom you bathed, painted your eyes and decorated yourselves with ornaments;**

**45 But they, righteous men, will judge them with the judgment of adulteresses and with the judgment of women who shed blood, because they are adulteresses and blood is on their hands. 46 “For thus says the Lord God, ‘Bring up a company against them and give them over to terror and plunder. 47 The company will stone them with stones and cut them down with their swords; they will slay their sons and their daughters and burn their houses with fire. 48 Thus *I will make lewdness cease from the land*, that all women may be admonished and not commit lewdness as you have done.**

**49 Your lewdness will be requited upon you, and you will bear the penalty of worshipping your idols; thus you will know that I am the Lord God.’”**

We must remember that this spiritual harlotry is not merely something that women do—these lewd women represent the whole nation Israel—and they represent Israel in its fractured state—that is, the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom as it existed in the days of Ezekiel. It is the faithlessness of God’s people that is in the crosshairs. But God doesn’t totally give up on them—he does not abandon them. Ezekiel 16 ends with verses 59-63:

**59 For thus says the Lord God, “I will also do with you as you have done, you who have despised the oath by breaking the covenant. 60 “Nevertheless, I will remember My covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish an everlasting covenant with you. 61 Then you will remember your ways and be ashamed when you receive your sisters, both your older and your younger; and I will give them to you as daughters, but not because of your covenant. 62 Thus I will establish My covenant with you, and you shall know that I am the Lord, 63 so that you may remember and be ashamed and never open your mouth anymore *because of your humiliation*, when I have forgiven you for all that you have done,” the Lord God declares.**

***God remembers his covenant, despite our amnesia!*** Although this is not reiterated in chapter 23; this ending applies to both chapters, both scenarios.

Rather than abandoning us, God makes atonement for our sins through Jesus Christ—by forsaking him in our stead, by treating Jesus *as if* he had been unfaithful, engaged in prostitution, worshipped other gods, abandoned their children to death, or offered them *to be devoured in pagan child sacrifice, as if he looked for security anywhere but in the father, as if* he engaged in porn, or gossiped, performed an abortion, murdered and lied—indeed he would treat Jesus *as if* he had personally performed every act of rebellion from Adam and Eve on down! That would include all our sinning against God—all of it, entirely paid for in blood, by the blood of the Eternal Lamb of God. No one can truly claim that God cannot forgive the filthy things they done ***because the forgiving has already been done.*** Jesus bore it all, Christian, you go free. God is continually passing by the open field of our bloody tawdriness, rescues, redeems and refines us and says “Live.” Then he says, “Love . . . love the One who loves you with a holy and everlasting love—a divine love, his love. God speaks life to life. Are you listening? **Amen**