

CHAPTER 14

Hearing the word, and prayer, are two great ordinances of God, in which we are to give honour to him and may hope to find favour and acceptance with him; and yet in this chapter, to our great surprise, we find some waiting upon God in the one and some in the other and yet not meeting with success as they expected.

I. The elders of Israel come to hear the word, and enquire of the prophet, but, because they are not duly qualified, they meet with a rebuke instead of acceptance (v. 1-5) and are called upon to repent of their sins and reform their lives, else it is at their peril to enquire of God (v. 6-11).

II. Noah, Daniel, and Job, are supposed to pray for this people, and yet, because the decree has gone forth, and the destruction of them is determined by a variety of judgments, their prayers shall not be answered (v. 12-21). And yet it is promised, in the close, that a remnant shall escape (v. 22, 23).

~~340~~ EZEKIEL 14:1-11

THE ELDERS OF ISRAEL REBUKED

Here is,

I. The address which some of the elders of Israel made to the prophet, as an oracle, to enquire of the Lord by him. They *came, and sat before him*, v. 1. It is probable that they were not of those who were now his fellow-captives, and constantly attended his ministry (such as those we read of ~~380~~ Ezekiel 8:1), but some occasional hearers, some of the grandees of Jerusalem who had come upon business to Babylon, perhaps public business, on an embassy from the king, and in their way called on the prophet, having heard much of him and being desirous to know if he had any message from God, which might be some guide to them in their negotiation. By the severe answer given them one would suspect they had a design to ensnare the prophet, or to try if they could catch hold of any thing that might look like a contradiction to Jeremiah's prophecies, and so

they might have occasion to reproach them both. However, they feigned themselves just men, complimented the prophet, and sat before him gravely enough, as God's people used to sit. Note, It is no new thing for bad men to be found employed in the external performances of religion.

II. The account which God gave the prophet privately concerning them. They were strangers to him; he only knew that they were *elders of Israel*; that was the character they wore, and as such he received them with respect, and, it is likely, was glad to see them so well disposed. But God gives him their real character (v. 3); they were idolaters, and did only consult Ezekiel as they would any oracle of a pretended deity, to gratify their curiosity, and therefore he appeals to the prophet himself whether they deserved to have any countenance or encouragement given them: “*Should I be enquired of at all by them? Should I accept their enquiries as an honour to myself, or answer them for satisfaction to them? No; they have no reason to expect it;*” for,

1. *They have set up their idols in their heart*; they not only have idols, but they are in love with them, they dote upon them, are wedded to them, and have laid them so near their hearts, and have given them so great a room in their affections, that there is no parting with them. The idols they have set up in their houses, though they are now at a distance from *the chambers of their imagery*, yet they have them in their hearts, and they are ever and anon worshipping them in their fancies and imaginations. *They have made their idols to ascend upon their hearts* (so the word is); they have subjected their hearts to their idols, they are upon the throne there. Or when they came to enquire of the prophet they pretended to put away their idols, but it was in pretence only; they still had a secret reserve for them. They kept them *up in their hearts*; and, if they left them for a while, it was *cum animo revertendi* — *with an intention to return to them*, not a final farewell. Or it may be understood of spiritual idolatry; those whose affections are placed upon the wealth of the world and the pleasures of sense, whose god is their money, *whose god is their belly*, they *set up their idols in their heart*. Many who have no idols in their sanctuary have idols in their hearts, which is no less a usurpation of God's throne and a profanation of his name. *Little children, keep yourselves from those idols.*

2. *They put the stumbling-block of their iniquity before their face.* Their silver and gold were called *the stumbling-block of their iniquity* (⁽²⁰⁷⁹⁾Ezekiel 7:19), their *idols of silver and gold*, by the beauty of which

they were allured to idolatry, and so it was the block at which they stumbled, and fell into that sin; or *their iniquity* is their *stumbling-block*, which throws them down, so that they fall into ruin. Note, Sinners are their own tempters (*every man is tempted when he is drawn aside of his own lust*), and so they are their own destroyers. *If thou scornest, thou alone shalt bear it*; and thus *they put the stumbling-block of their iniquity before their own faces*, and stumble upon it though they see it before their eyes. It intimates that they are resolved to go on in sin, whatever comes of it. *I have loved strangers, and after them I will go*; that is the language of their hearts. And *should God be enquired of* by such wretches? Do they not hereby rather put an affront upon him than do him any honour, as those did who *bowed the knee* to Christ in mockery? Can those expect an answer of peace from God who thus continue their acts of hostility against him? “Ezekiel, what thinkest thou of it?”

III. The answer which God, in just displeasure, orders Ezekiel to give them, v. 4. Let them know that it is not out of any disrespect to their persons that God refuses to give them an answer, but it is laid down as a rule for *every man of the house of Israel*, whoever he be, that if he continue in love and league with his idols, and come to enquire of God, God will resent it as an indignity done to him, and will answer him according to his real iniquity, not according to his pretended piety. He *comes to the prophet*, who, he expects, will be civil to him, but God will give him his answer, by punishing him for his impudence: *I the Lord, who speak and it is done, I will answer him that cometh, according to the multitude of his idols*. Observe, Those who *set up idols in their hearts*, and set their hearts upon their idols, commonly have a multitude of them. Humble worshippers God answers *according to the multitude of his mercies*, but bold intruders he answers *according to the multitude of their idols*, that is,

1. According to the desire of their idols; he will give them up *to their own hearts' lust*, and leave them to themselves to be as bad as they have a mind to be, till they *have filled up the measure of their iniquity*. Men's corruptions are *idols in their hearts*, and they are of their own setting up; their temptations are *the stumbling-block of their iniquity*, and they are of their own putting, and God will answer them accordingly; let them take their course.

2. According to the desert of their idols; they shall have such an answer as it is just that such idolaters should have. God will punish them as he usually punishes idolaters, that is, when they stand in need of his help he will *send them to the gods whom they have chosen*, ^{OT13}Judges 10:13, 14. Note, The judgment of God will dwell with men according to what they are really (that is, according to what their hearts are), not according to what they are in show and profession. And what will be the end of this? What will this threatened answer amount to? He tells them (v. 5): *That I may take the house of Israel in their own heart*, may lay them open to the world, that they may be ashamed; nay, lay them open to the curse, that they may be ruined. Note, The sin and shame, and pain and ruin, of sinners, are all from themselves, and their own hearts are the snares in which they are taken; they seduce them, they betray them; their own consciences witness against them, condemn them, and are a terror to them. If God take them, if he discover them, if he convict them, if he bind them over to his judgment, it is all by *their own hearts*. *O Israel! thou hast destroyed thyself. The house of Israel is ruined by its own hands, because they are all estranged from me through their idols*. Note,

(1.) The ruin of sinners is owing to their estrangement from God.

(2.) It is through some idol or other that the hearts of men are estranged from God; some creature has gained that place and dominion in the heart that God should have.

IV. The extent of this answer which God had given them — to all *the house of Israel*, v. 7, 8. The same thing is repeated, which intimates God's just displeasure against hypocrites, who mock him with the shows and forms of devotion, while their hearts are estranged from him and at war with him. Observe,

1. To whom this declaration belongs. It concerns not only every one of the house of Israel (as before, v. 4), but *the stranger that sojourns in Israel*; let him not think it will be an excuse for him in his idolatries that he is but a stranger and a sojourner in Israel, and does but worship the gods that his father served and that he himself was bred up in the service of; no, let him not expect any benefit from Israel's oracles or prophets unless he thoroughly renounce his idolatry. Note, Even proselytes shall not be countenanced if they be not sincere: a dissembled conversion is no conversion.

2. The description here given of hypocrites: They *separate themselves from* God by their fellowship with idols; they cut themselves off from their relation to God and their interest in him; they break off their acquaintance and intercourse with him, and set themselves at a distance from him. Note, Those that join themselves to idols separate themselves from God; nor shall any be for ever separated from the vision and fruition of God, but such as now separate themselves from his service and wilfully withdraw their allegiance from him. But there are those who thus separate themselves from God, and yet come to the prophets with a seeming respect and deference to their office, *to enquire of them concerning* God, in order to satisfy a vain curiosity, to stop the mouth of a clamorous conscience, or to get or save a reputation among men, but without any desire to be acquainted with God or any design to be ruled by him.

3. The doom of those who thus trifle with God and think to impose upon him: *“I the Lord will answer him by myself; let me alone to deal with him; I will give him an answer that shall fill him with confusion, that shall make him repent of his daring impiety.”* He shall have his answer, not by the words of the prophet, but by the judgments of God. *And I will set my face against that man*, which denotes great displeasure against him and a fixed resolution to ruin him. God can outface the most impenitent sinner. The hypocrite thought to save his credit, nay, and to gain applause, but, on the contrary, *God will make him a sign and a proverb*, will inflict such judgments upon him as shall make him remarkable and contemptible in the eyes of all about him; his misery shall be made use of to express the greatest misery, as when the worst of sinners are said to have *their portion appointed them with hypocrites*, ¹²⁵¹Matthew 24:51. God will make him an example; his judgments upon him shall be for warning to others to take heed of mocking God: for *thus shall it be done to the man that separates himself from God*, and yet pretends to *enquire concerning him*. The hypocrite thought to pass for one of God's people, and to crowd into heaven among them; but *God will cut him off from the midst of his people*, will discover him, and pluck him out from the thickest of them; and by this, says God, *you shall know that I am the Lord*. By the discovery of hypocrites it appears that God is omniscient: ministers know not how people stand affected when they come to hear the word, by God does. And by the punishment of hypocrites it appears that he is a jealous God, and one that cannot and will not be imposed upon.

V. The doom of those pretenders to prophecy who give countenance to these pretenders to piety, v. 9, 10. These hypocritical enquirers, though Ezekiel will not give them a comfortable answer, yet hope to meet with some other prophets that will; and if they do, as perhaps they may, let them know that God permits those lying prophets to deceive them in part of punishment: “*If the prophet that flatters them be deceived, and gives them hopes which there is no ground for, I the Lord have deceived that prophet, have suffered the temptation to be laid before him, and suffered him to yield to it, and overruled it for the hardening of those in their wicked courses who were resolved to go on in them.*” We are sure that God is not the author of sin, but we are sure that he is the Lord of all and the Judge of sinners, and that he often makes use of one wicked man to destroy another, and so of one wicked man to deceive another. Both are sins in him who does them, and so they are *not* from God; both are punishments to him to whom they are done, and so they *are* from God. We have a full instance of this in the story of Ahab's prophets, who were deceived by a lying spirit, which God put into their mouths (¹²²³1 Kings 22:23), and another in those whom God *gives up to strong delusions, to believe a lie, because they received not the love of the truth,* ⁵¹⁰2 Thessalonians 2:10, 11. But read the fearful doom of the lying prophet: *I will stretch out my hand upon him and will destroy him.* When God has served his own righteous purposes by him he shall be reckoned with for his unrighteous purposes. As, when God had made use of the Chaldeans for the wasting of a sinful people, he justly punished them for their rage, so when he had made use of *false prophets*, and afterwards of *false Christs*, for the deceiving of a sinful people, he justly punished them for their falsehood. But herein we must acknowledge (as Calvin upon this place reminds us) that *God's judgments are a great deep*, that we are incompetent judges of them, and that, though we cannot account for the equity of God's proceedings to the satisfying and silencing of every caviller, yet there is a day coming when he will be justified before all the world, and particularly in this instance, when *the punishment of the prophet* that flattereth the hypocrite in his evil way shall be as the punishment of the hypocrite that seeketh to him and bespeaks *smooth things* only, ²³⁰⁰Isaiah 30:10. The ditch shall be the same to the blind leader and the blind followers.

VI. The good counsel that is given them for the preventing of this fearful doom (v. 6): “*Therefore repent, and turn yourselves from your idols. Let*

this separate between you and them, that they separate between you and God; because they set God's face against you, do you turn away your faces from them," which denotes, not only forsaking them, but forsaking them with loathing and detestation: "Turn from them as from abominations that you are sick of; and then you will be welcome to enquire of the Lord. *Come now, and let us reason together.*"

VII. The good issue of all this as to the house of Israel; *therefore* the pretending prophets, and the pretending saints, shall perish together by the judgments of God, that, some being made examples, the body of the people may be reformed, *that the house of Israel may go no more astray from me*, v. 11. Note, The punishments of some are designed for the prevention of sin, that others may hear, and fear, and take warning. When we see what becomes of those that go astray from God we should thereby be engaged to keep close to him. And, *if the house of Israel go not astray, they will not be polluted any more.* Note, Sin is a polluting thing; it renders the sinner odious in the eyes of the pure and holy God, and in his own eyes too whenever conscience is awakened; and therefore they shall *no more be polluted, that they may be my people and I may be their God.* Note, Those whom God takes into covenant with himself must first be cleansed from the pollutions of sin; and those who are so cleansed shall not only be saved from ruin, but be entitled to all the privileges of God's people.

EZEKIEL 14:12-23

DESTRUCTION OF THE PEOPLE DETERMINED

The scope of these verses is to show,

I. That national sins bring national judgments. When virtue is ruined and laid waste every thing else will soon be ruined and laid waste too (v. 13): *When the land sins against me*, when vice and wickedness become epidemical, *when the land sins by trespassing grievously*, when the sinners have become very numerous and their sins very heinous, when gross impieties and immoralities universally prevail, *then will I stretch forth my hand upon it*, for the punishment of it. The divine power shall be vigorously and openly exerted; the judgments shall be extended and

stretched forth to all the corners of the land, to all the concerns and interests of the nation. Grievous sins bring grievous plagues.

II. That God has a variety of sore judgments wherewith to punish sinful nations, and he has them all at command and inflicts which he pleases. He did indeed give David his choice what judgment he would be punished with for his sin in numbering the people; for any of them would serve to answer the end, which was to lessen the numbers he was proud of; but David, in effect, referred it to God again: “*Let us fall into the hands of the Lord; let him choose with what rod we shall be beaten.*” But he uses a variety of judgments that it may appear he has a universal dominion, and that in all our concerns we may see our dependence on him. *Four sore judgments* are here specified: —

1. *Famine*, v. 13. The denying and withholding of common mercies is itself judgment enough, there needs no more to make a people miserable. God needs not bring the staff of oppression, it is but *breaking the staff of bread* and the work is soon done; he *cuts off man and beast* by cutting off the provisions which nature makes for both in the annual products of the earth. God *breaks the staff of bread* when, though we have bread, yet we are not nourished and strengthened by it. ^{<3016>}Haggai 1:6, *You eat, but you have not enough.*

2. *Hurtful beasts, noisome and noxious*, either as poisonous or as ravenous. God can make these *to pass through the land* (v. 15), to increase in all parts of it, and to bereave it, not only of the tame cattle, preying upon their flocks and herds, but of their people, devouring men, women, and children, so *that no man may pass through because of the beasts*; none dare travel even in the high roads for fear of being pulled in pieces by lions, or other beasts of prey, as the children of Beth-el by two bears. Note, When men revolt from their allegiance to God, and rebel against him, it is just with God that the inferior creatures should rise up in arms against men, ^{<3032>}Leviticus 26:22.

3. *War*. God often chastises sinful nations by bringing a sword upon them, the sword of a foreign enemy, and he gives it its commission and orders what execution it shall do (v. 17): he says, *Sword, go through the land*. It is bad enough if the sword do but enter into the borders of a land, but much worse when it goes through the bowels of a land. By it God *cuts off*

man and beast, horse and foot. What execution the sword does God does by it; for it is his sword, and it acts as he directs.

4. *Pestilence* (v. 19), a dreadful disease, which has sometimes depopulated cities; by it God *pours out his fury in blood* (that is, in death); the pestilence kills as effectually as if the blood were shed by the sword, for it is poisoned by the disease, *the sickness* we call it. See how miserable the case of mankind is that lies thus exposed to deaths in various shapes. See how dangerous the case of sinners is against whom God has so many ways of fighting, so that, though they escape one judgment, God has another waiting for them.

III. That when God's professing people revolt from him, and rebel against him, they may justly expect a complication of judgments to fall upon them. God has various ways of contending with a sinful nation; but if Jerusalem, the holy city, *become a harlot*, God will send upon her all his *four sore judgments* (v. 21); for the nearer any are to God in name and profession the more severely will he reckon with them if they reproach that worthy name by which they are called and give the lie to that profession. They shall be punished *seven times more*.

IV. That there may be, and commonly are, some few very good men, even in those places that by sin are ripened for ruin. It is no foreign supposition that, even in a land that has *trespassed grievously*, there may be *three* such men as *Noah, Daniel, and Job*. Daniel was now living, and at this time had scarcely arrived at the prime of his eminency, but he was already famous (at least this word of God concerning him would without fail make him so); yet he was carried away into captivity with the first of all, ²⁰⁰⁶ Daniel 1:6. Some of the better sort of people in Jerusalem might perhaps think that, if Daniel (of whose fame in the king of Babylon's court they had heard much) had but continued in Jerusalem, it would have been spared for his sake, as the magicians in Babylon were. "No," says God, "though you had him, who was as eminently good in bad times and places as Noah in the old world and Job in the land of Uz, yet a reprieve should not be obtained." In the places that are most corrupt, and in the ages that are most degenerate, *there is a remnant* which God reserves to himself, and which *still hold fast their integrity* and stand fair for the honour of *delivering the land*, as *the innocent* are said to do, ¹⁸²³ Job 22:30.

V. That God often spares very wicked places for the sake of a few godly people in them. This is implied here as the expectation of Jerusalem's friends in the day of its distress: "Surely God will stay his controversy with us; for are there not some among us that are emptying the measure of national guilt by their prayers, as others are filling it by their sins? And, rather than God will *destroy the righteous with the wicked*, he will preserve *the wicked with the righteous*. If Sodom might have been spared for the sake of ten good men, surely Jerusalem may."

VI. That such men as Noah, Daniel, and Job, will prevail, if any can, to turn away the wrath of God from a sinful people. Noah was a perfect man, and kept his integrity when all flesh had corrupted their way; and, for his sake, his family, though one of them was wicked (Ham), was saved in the ark. Job was a great example of piety, and mighty in prayer for his children, for his friends; and God turned his captivity when he prayed. Those were very ancient examples, before Moses, that great intercessor; and therefore God mentions them, to intimate that he had some very peculiar favourites long before the Jewish nation was formed or founded, and would have such when it was ruined, for which reason, it should seem, those names were made use of, rather than Moses, Aaron, or Samuel; and yet, lest any should think that God was partial in his respects to the ancient days, here is a modern instance, a living one, placed between those two that were the glories of antiquity, and he now a captive, and that is Daniel, to teach us not to lessen the useful good men of our own day by over-magnifying the ancients. Let the children of the captivity know that Daniel, their neighbour, and *companion in tribulation*, being a man of great humility, piety, and zeal for God, and instant and constant in prayer, had as good an interest in heaven as Noah or Job had. Why may not God raise up as great and good men now as he did formerly, and do as much for them?

VII. That when the sin of a people has come to its height, and the decree has gone forth for their ruin, the piety and prayers of the best men shall not prevail to finish the controversy. This is here asserted again and again, that, *though these three men were in Jerusalem at this time*, yet they should *deliver neither son nor daughter*; not so much as the little ones should be spared for their sakes, as the little ones of Israel were upon the prayer of Moses, ^{Gen} Numbers 14:31. No; *the land shall be desolate*, and God would not hear their prayers for it, though *Moses and Samuel stood*

before him, ²⁸¹Jeremiah 15:1. Note, Abused patience will turn at last into inexorable wrath; and it should seem as if God would be more inexorable in Jerusalem's case than in another (v. 6), because, besides the divine patience, they had enjoyed greater privileges than any other people, which were the aggravations of their sin.

VIII. That, though pious praying men may not prevail to deliver others, yet *they shall deliver their own souls by their righteousness*, so that, though they may suffer in the common calamity, yet to them the property of it is altered; it is not to them what it is to the wicked; it is unstrung, and does them no hurt; it is sanctified, and does them good. Sometimes *their souls* (their lives) are remarkably *delivered*, and *given them for a prey*; at least *their souls* (their spiritual interests) are secured. If their bodies be not *delivered*, yet *their souls* are. *Riches indeed profit not in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death*, from so great a death, so many deaths as are here threatened. This should encourage us to keep our integrity in times of common apostasy, that, if we do so, we shall be *hidden in the day of the Lord's anger*.

IX. That, even when God makes the greatest desolations by his judgments, he reserves some to be the monuments of his mercy, v. 22, 23. In Jerusalem itself, though marked for utter ruin, yet *there shall be left a remnant*, who shall not be cut off by any of those *sore judgments* before mentioned, but shall be carried into captivity, both *sons and daughters*, who shall be the seed of a new generation. The young ones, who had not grown up to such an obstinacy in sin as their fathers had who were therefore cut off as incurable, these *shall be brought forth* out of the ruins of Jerusalem by the victorious enemy, and *behold they shall come forth to you* that are in captivity, they shall make a virtue of a necessity, and shall come the more willingly to Babylon because so many of their friends have gone thither before them and are there ready to receive them; and, when they come, *you shall see their ways and their doing*; you shall hear them make a free and ingenuous confession of the sins they had formerly been guilty of, and a humble profession of repentance for them, with promises of reformation; and you shall see instances of their reformation, shall see what good their affliction has done them, and how prudently and patiently they conduct themselves under it. Their narrow escape shall have a good effect upon them; it shall change their temper and conversation, and make them new men. And this will rebound,

1. To the satisfaction of their brethren: *They shall comfort you when you see their ways.* Note, It is a very comfortable sight to see people, when they are under the rod, repenting and humbling themselves, justifying God and accepting the punishment of their iniquity. When we sorrow (as we ought to do) for the afflictions of others, it is a great comfort to us in our sorrow to see them improving their afflictions and making a good use of them. When those captives told their friends how bad they had been, and how righteous God was in bringing these judgments upon them, it made them very easy, and helped to reconcile them to the calamities of Jerusalem, to the justice of God in punishing his own people so, and to the goodness of God, which now appeared to have had kind intentions in all; and thus *“You shall be comforted concerning all the evil that I have brought upon Jerusalem, and, when you better understand the thing, shall not have such direful apprehensions concerning it as you have had.”* Note, It is a debt we owe to our brethren, if we have got good by our afflictions, to comfort them by letting them know it.

2. It will redound to the honour of God: *“You shall know that I have not done without cause, not without a just provocation, and yet not without a gracious design, all that I have done in it.”* Note, When afflictions have done their work, and have accomplished that for which they were sent, then will appear the wisdom and goodness of God in sending them, and God will be not only justified, but glorified in them.