

CHAPTER 20

In this chapter,

- I.** The prophet is consulted by some of the elders of Israel (v. 1).
- II.** He is instructed by his God what answer to give them. He must,
 - 1.** Signify God's displeasure against them (v. 2, 3). And,
 - 2.** He must show them what just cause he had for that displeasure, by giving them a history of God's grateful dealings with their fathers and their treacherous dealings with God.
 - (1.)** In Egypt (v. 5-9).
 - (2.)** In the wilderness (v. 10-26).
 - (3.)** In Canaan (v. 27-32).
 - 3.** He must denounce the judgments of God against them (v. 33-36).
 - 4.** He must tell them likewise what mercy God had in store for them, when he would bring a remnant of them to repentance, re-establish them in their own land, and set up his sanctuary among them again (v. 37-44).
 - 5.** Here is another word dropped towards Jerusalem, which is explained and enlarged upon in the next chapter (v. 45-49).

~~350~~ EZEKIEL 20:1-4

THE PROPHETS CONSULTED BY THE ELDERS

Here is,

- 1.** The occasion of the message which we have in this chapter. That sermon which we had Ezekiel 18 was occasioned by their presumptuous reflections upon God; this was occasioned by their hypocritical enquiries after him. Each shall have his own. This prophecy is exactly dated, in the *seventh year of the captivity*, about two years after Ezekiel began to prophesy. God would have them to keep account how long their captivity lasted, that they might see how the years went on towards their deliverance, though very slowly. *Certain of the elders of Israel came to*

enquire of the Lord, not stately (as those ²³⁸¹Ezekiel 8:1), but, as it should seem, occasionally, and upon a particular emergency. Whether they were of those that were now in captivity, or elders lately come from Jerusalem upon business to Babylon, is not certain; but, by what the prophet says to them (v. 32), it should seem, their enquiry was whether now that they were captives in Babylon, at a distance from their own country, where they had not only no temple, but no synagogue, for the worship of God, it was not lawful for them, that they might ingratiate themselves with their lords and masters, to join with them in their worship and do *as the families of these countries* do, that *serve wood and stone*. This matter was palliated as well as it would bear, like Naaman's pleading with Elisha for leave to bow in the house of Rimmon, in compliment to the king; but we have reason to suspect that their enquiry drove at this. Note, Those hearts are wretchedly hardened which ask God leave to go on in sin, and that when they are suffering for it. They came and *sat* very demurely and with a show of devotion *before the prophet*, ²³⁸¹Ezekiel 33:31.

2. The purport of this message.

(1.) They must be made to know that *God is angry with them*; he takes it as an affront that they come to enquire of him when they are resolved to go on still in their trespasses: *As I live, saith the Lord God, I will not be enquired of by you*, v. 3. Their shows of devotion shall be neither acceptable to God nor advantageous to themselves. God will not take notice of their enquiries, nor give them any satisfactory answers. Note, A hypocritical attendance on God and his ordinances is so far from being pleasing to him that it is provoking.

(2.) They must be made to know that God is justly angry with them (v. 4): "*Wilt thou judge them, son of man, wilt thou judge them?* Thou art a prophet, surely thou wilt not *plead for them*, as an intercessor with God; but surely thou wilt *pass sentence* on them as a judge for God. *See, I have set thee over the nation*; wilt thou not declare to them the judgments of the Lord? Cause them therefore *to know the abominations of their fathers*." So the orders run now, as before (²³⁸²Ezekiel 16:2) he must cause them to *know their own abominations*. Though their own abominations were sufficient to justify God in the severest of his proceedings against them, yet it would be of use for them to know the *abominations of their fathers*, that they might see what a righteous thing it was with God now at last to

cut them off from being a people, who from the first were such a provoking people.

~~3305~~ EZEKIEL 20:5-9

GOD'S GRACIOUS DEALINGS WITH ISRAEL

The history of the ingratitude and rebellion of the people of Israel here begins as early as their beginning; so does the history of man's apostasy from his Maker. No sooner have we read the story of our first parents' creation than we immediately meet with that of their rebellion; so we see here it was with Israel, a people designed to represent the body of mankind both in their dealings with God and in his with them. Here is,

I. The gracious purposes of God's law concerning Israel in Egypt, where they were bond-slaves to Pharaoh. Be it spoken, be it written, to the immortal honour of free grace, that then and there,

1. He chose Israel to be a peculiar people to himself, though their condition was bad and their character worse, that he might have the honour of mending both. He *therefore* chose them, because they were *the seed of the house of Jacob*, the posterity of that prince with God, *that he might keep the oath which he had sworn unto their fathers*,

~~3306~~ Deuteronomy 7:7, 8.

2. He *made himself known to them* by his name *Jehovah* (a new name, ~~3307~~ Exodus 6:3), when by reason of their servitude they had almost lost the knowledge of that name by which he was known to their fathers, *God Almighty*. Note, As the foundation of our blessedness is laid in God's choosing us, so the first step towards it is God's making himself known to us. And whatever distance we are at, whatever distress we are in, he that made himself known to Israel even in the land of Egypt can find us out, and follow us with the gracious discoveries and manifestations of his favour.

3. He made over himself to them as their God in covenant: *I lifted up my hand unto them*, saying it, and confirming it with an oath. *"I am the Lord your God, to whom you are to pay your homage, and from whom and in whom you are to expect your bliss."*

4. He promised to bring them out of Egypt; and made good what he promised. He *lifted up his hand*, that is, he swore unto them, that he would deliver them; and, they being very unworthy, and their deliverance very unlikely, it was requisite that the promise of it should be *confirmed by an oath*. Or, He *lifted up his hand*, that is, he put forth his almighty power to do it; he did it with an *outstretched arm*, ^{<Df2>}Psalm 136:12.

5. He assured them that he would put them in possession of the land of Canaan. He *therefore* brought them out of Egypt, *that he might bring them into a land that he had spied out for them*, a second garden of Eden, which was *the glory of all lands*. So he found it, the climate being temperate, the soil fruitful, the situation pleasant, and every thing agreeable (^{<Rf2>}Deuteronomy 8:7; 11:12); or, however this might be, so he made it, by setting up his sanctuary in it.

II. The reasonable commands he gave them, and the easy conditions of his covenant with them at that time. Having told them what they might expect from him, he next tells them what was all he expected from them; it was no more than this (v. 7): “*Cast you away every man his images that he uses for worship, that are the adorations, but should be the abominations, of his eyes*. Let him abominate them, and put them out of his sight, and *defile not yourselves with the idols of Egypt*.” Of these, it seems, many of them were fond; the golden calf was one of them. It was just, and what might reasonably be expected, that, being delivered from the Egyptian slavery, they should quit the Egyptian idolatry, especially when God, at bringing them out, *executed judgment upon the gods of Egypt* (^{<Rf2>}Numbers 33:4) and thereby showed himself above them. And, whatever other idols they might have an inclination to, one would think they should have had a rooted aversion to the gods of Egypt for Egypt's sake, which had been to them a house of bondage. Yet, it seems, they needed this caution, and it is backed with a good reason: *I am the Lord your God*, who neither need an assistant nor will admit a rival.

III. Their unreasonable disobedience to these commands, for which God might justly have cut them off as soon as ever they were formed into a people (v. 8): *They rebelled against God*, not only refused to comply with his particular precepts, but shook off their allegiance, and in effect told him that they should be at liberty to worship what God they pleased. And even then when God came down to deliver them, and sent Moses for that purpose, yet they would not *forsake the idols of Egypt*, which perhaps

made them speak so affectionately of the *onions of Egypt* (~~CH15~~ Numbers 11:5), for among other things the Egyptians worshipped an onion. It was strange that all the plagues of Egypt would not prevail to cure them of their affection to the *idols of Egypt*. For this God said he would *pour out his fury upon them*, even while they were yet *in the midst of the land of Egypt*. Justly might he have said, "Let them die with the Egyptians." This magnifies the riches of God's goodness, that he was pleased to work so great a salvation for them even when he saw them ripe for ruin. Well might Moses tell them, It is *not for your righteousness*, ~~CH04~~ Deuteronomy 9:4, 5.

IV. The wonderful deliverance which God wrought for them, notwithstanding. Though they forfeited the favour while it was in the bestowing, and when God *would have healed them* then their *iniquity was discovered* (~~CH08~~ Hosea 7:1), yet *mercy rejoiced against judgment*, and God did what he designed purely *for his own name's sake*, v. 9. When nothing in us will furnish him with a reason for his favours he furnishes himself with one. God *made himself known* to them *in the sight of the heathen* when he ordered Moses publicly to say to Pharaoh, *Israel is my son, my first-born, let them go, that they may serve me*. Now, if he had left them to perish for their wickedness as they deserved, the Egyptians would have reflected upon him for it, and his name would have been polluted, which ought to be sanctified and shall be so. Note, The church is secured, even when it is corrupt, because God will secure his own honour.

~~CH10~~ EZEKIEL 20:10-26

THE PRIVILEGES AND SINS OF ISRAEL

The history of the struggle between the sins of Israel, by which they endeavoured to ruin themselves, and the mercies of God, by which he endeavoured to save them and make them happy, is here continued: and the instances of that struggle in these verses have reference to what passed between God and them in the wilderness, in which God honoured himself and they shamed themselves. The story of Israel in the wilderness is referred to in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 10 and Hebrews 3), as well as often in the Old, for warning to us Christians; and therefore we are particularly concerned in these verses. Observe,

I. The great things God did for them, which he puts them in mind of, not as grudging them his favours, but to show how ungrateful they had been. And we say, If you call a man ungrateful, you can call him no worse. It was a great favour,

1. That God *brought them forth out of Egypt* (v. 10), though, as it follows, he *brought them into the wilderness* and not into Canaan immediately. It is better to be at liberty in a wilderness than bond-slaves in a land of plenty, to enjoy God and ourselves in solitude than to lose both in a crowd; yet there were many of them who had such base servile spirits as not to understand this, but, when they met with the difficulties of a desert, wished themselves in Egypt again.

2. That he gave them the law upon Mount Sinai (v. 11), not only instructed them concerning good and evil, but by his authority bound them from the evil and to the good. He *gave them his statutes*, and a valuable gift it was. *Moses commanded them a law that was the inheritance of the congregation of Israel*, ^(~~Exo~~) Deuteronomy 33:4. God *made them to know his judgments*, not only enacted laws for them, but showed them the reasonableness and equity of those laws, with what judgment they were formed. The laws he gave them they were encouraged to observe and obey; for, *if a man do them, he shall even live in them*; in keeping God's commandments there is abundance of comfort and a great reward. Christ says, *If thou wilt into enter life, and enjoy it, keep the commandments*. Though those who are the most strict in their obedience are thus far unprofitable servants that they do no more than is their duty to do, yet it is thus richly recompensed: *This do, and thou shalt live*. The Chaldee says, *He shall live an eternal life in them*. St. Paul quotes this (^(~~Exo~~) Galatians 3:12) to show that *the law is not of faith*, but proposes life upon condition of perfect obedience, which we are not capable of rendering, and therefore must have recourse to the grace of the gospel, without which we are all undone.

3. That he revived the ancient institution of the sabbath day, which was lost and forgotten while they were bond-slaves in Egypt; for their task-masters there would by no means allow them to rest one day in seven. In the wilderness indeed every day was a day of rest; for what need had those to labour who lived upon manna, and whose raiment waxed not old? But one day in seven must be a holy rest (v. 12): *I gave them my sabbaths to be a sign between me and them* (the institution of the sabbath was a sign of

God's good-will to them, and their observance of it a sign of their regard to him), *that they might know that I am the Lord that sanctify them*. By this God made it to appear that he had distinguished them from the rest of the world, and designed to model them for a peculiar people to himself; and by their attendance on God in solemn assemblies on sabbath days they were made to increase in the knowledge of God, in an experimental knowledge of the powers and pleasures of his sanctifying grace. Note,

- (1.) Sabbaths are privileges, and are so to be accounted; the church acknowledges as a great favour, in that chapter which is parallel to this and seems to have a reference to this (^{<4044>}Nehemiah 9:14), *Thou madest known unto them thy holy sabbaths*.
- (2.) Sabbaths are signs; it is a sign that men have a sense of religion, and that there is some good correspondence between them and God, when they make conscience of keeping holy and sabbath day.
- (3.) Sabbaths, if duly sanctified, are the means of our sanctification; if we do the duty of the day, we shall find, to our comfort, *it is the Lord that sanctifies us*, makes us holy (that is, truly happy) here, and prepares us to be happy (that is, perfectly holy) hereafter.

II. Their disobedient undutiful conduct towards God, for which he might justly have thrown them out of covenant as soon as he had taken them into covenant (v. 13): *They rebelled in the wilderness*. There where they received so much mercy from God, and had such a dependence upon him, and were in their way to Canaan, yet there they broke out in many open rebellions against the God that led them and fed them. They did not only not *walk in God's statutes*, but they *despised his judgments* as not worth observing; instead of sanctifying the sabbaths, they polluted them, greatly polluted them; one gathered sticks, many went out to gather manna on this day. Hereupon God was ready sometimes to cut them off; he said, more than once, that he would *consume them in the wilderness*. But Moses interceded, so did God's own mercy more powerfully, and most of all a concern for his own glory, that *his name might not be polluted and profaned among the heathen* (v. 14), that the Egyptians might not say that for mischief he brought them thus far, or that he was not able to bring them any further, or that he had no such good land as was talked of to bring them to, ^{<0322>}Exodus 32:12; ^{<0443>}Numbers 14:13, etc. Note, God's

strongest reasons for his sparing mercy are those which are fetched from his own glory.

III. God's determination to cut off that generation of them in the wilderness. He who *lifted up his hand* for them (v. 6) now *lifted up his hand against them*; he who by an oath confirmed his promise to bring them out of Egypt now by an oath confirmed his threatenings that he would not bring them into Canaan (v. 15, 16): *I lifted up my hand unto them*, saying, *As truly as I live, these men who have tempted me these ten times shall never see the land which I swore unto their fathers*, ~~(412)~~ Numbers 14:22, 23; ~~(411)~~ Psalm 95:11. By their contempt of God's laws, and particularly of his sabbaths, they put a bar in their own door; and that which was at the bottom of their disobedience to God, and their neglect of his institutions, was a secret affection to the gods of Egypt: *Their heart went after their idols*. Note, The bias of the mind towards the world and the flesh, the money and the belly (those two great objects of spiritual idolatry), is the root of bitterness from which springs all disobedience to the divine law. The heart that goes after those idols despises God's judgments.

IV. The reservation of a seed that should be admitted upon a new trial, and the instructions given to that seed, v. 17. Though they thus deserved ruin, and were doomed to it, yet *my eye spared them*. When he looked upon them he had compassion on them, and did not *make an end of them*, but reprieved them till a new generation was reared. Note, It is owing purely to the mercy of God that he has not long ago *made an end of us*. This new generation is well educated. Moses in Deuteronomy reported and enforce the laws which had been given to those that came out of Egypt, that their children might have them as it were sounding in their ears afresh when they entered Canaan (v. 18): *"I said unto their children in the wilderness, in the plains of Moab, Walk in the statutes of your God and walk not in the statutes of your fathers; do not imitate their superstitious usages nor retain their foolish wicked customs; away with their vain conversation, which has nothing else to say for itself but that it was received by the tradition of your fathers,* ~~(411)~~ 1 Peter 1:18. *Defile not yourselves with their idols*, for you see how odious they rendered themselves to God by them. But *keep my judgments and hallow my sabbaths,*" v. 19, 20. Note, If parents be careless, and do not give their children good instructions as they ought, the children ought to make up the

want by studying the word of God so much the more carefully and diligently themselves when they grow up; and the bad examples of parents must be made use of by their children for admonition, and not for imitation.

V. The revolt of the next generation from God, by which they also made themselves obnoxious to the wrath of God (v. 21): *The children rebelled against me* too. And the same that was said of the fathers' rebellion is here said of *the children's*, for they were a seed of evil-doers. Moses told them that he *knew their rebellion and their stiff neck*, ^{<6527>}Deuteronomy 31:27. And ^{<8924>}Deuteronomy 9:24, *You have been rebellious against the Lord from the day that I knew you. They walked not in my statutes* (v. 21); nay, *they despised my statutes*, v. 24. Those who disobey God's statutes despise them, they show that they have a mean opinion of them and of him whose statutes they are. They *polluted God's sabbaths*, as their fathers. Note, The profanation of the sabbath day is an inlet to all impiety; those who pollute holy time will keep nothing pure. It was said of the fathers (v. 16) that *their heart went after their idols*; they worshipped idols because they had an affection for them. It is said of the children (v. 24) that *their eyes went after their fathers' idols*; they had grown atheistical, and had no affection for any gods at all, but they worshipped *their fathers' idols* because they were their fathers' and they had them before their eyes. They were used to them; and, if they must have gods, they would have such as they could see, such as they could manage. And that which aggravated their disobedience to God's statutes was that, *if they had done them, they might have lived in them* (v. 21), might have been a happy thriving people. Note, Those that go contrary to their duty go contrary to their interest; they will not obey, will not come to Christ, that they may have life, ^{<4150>}John 5:40. And it is therefore just that those who will not live and flourish as they might in their obedience should die and perish in their disobedience. Now the great instance of that generation's rebellion and inclination to idolatry was the *iniquity of Peor*, as that of their fathers was the *golden calf*. Then *the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel*, ^{<0423>}Numbers 25:3. Then there was a plague in the congregation of the Lord, which, if it had not been seasonably stayed by Phinehas's zeal, had cut them all off; and yet they owned, in Joshua's time, We were not *cleansed from that iniquity unto this day*, ^{<1627>}Joshua 22:17; ^{<1949>}Psalm 106:29. Then it was that God said he would *pour out his fury upon them* (v. 21), that he *lifted up his hand unto them in the wilderness*, when they were a second time just ready

to enter Canaan, *that he would scatter them among the heathen*. This very thing he said to them by Moses in his parting song, ⁽⁴⁵²⁰⁾Deuteronomy 32:20. Because they *provoked him to jealousy with strange gods*, he said, *I will hide my face from them*; and (v. 26, 27) he said, *I would scatter them into corners, were it not that I feared the wrath of the enemy*, which explains this (v. 21, 22), *I said I would pour out my fury upon them, but I withdrew my hand for my name's sake*. Note, When the corruptions of the visible church are such, and so provoking, that we have reason to fear its total extirpation, yet then we may be confident of this, to our comfort, that God will secure his own honour, by making good his purpose, that while the world stands he will have a church in it.

VI. The judgments of God upon them for their rebellion. They would not regard the statutes and judgments by which God prescribed them their duty, but despised them, and therefore God *gave them statutes and judgments which were not good, and by which they should not live*, v. 25. By this we may understand the several ways by which God punished them while they were in the wilderness — the plague that broke in upon them, the fiery serpent, and the like — which, in allusion to the law they had broken, are called *judgments*, because inflicted by the justice of God, and *statutes*, because he gave orders concerning them and commanded desolations as sometimes he had commanded deliverances, and appointed Israel's plagues as he had done the plagues of Egypt. When God said, *I will consume them in a moment* (⁽⁴⁶⁵²⁾Numbers 16:21), when he said, *Take the heads of the people and hang them up* (⁽⁴⁶²⁴⁾Numbers 25:4), when he threatened them with the curse and obliged them to say *Amen* to every curse (⁽⁴⁵⁷²⁾Deuteronomy 27:28), then he gave them judgments by *which they should not live*. More is implied than is expressed; they are judgments by which they should die. Those that will not be bound by the precepts of the law shall be bound by the sentence of it; for one way or other the word of God will *take hold* of men, ⁽³⁰¹⁶⁾Zechariah 1:6. Spiritual judgments are the most dreadful; and these God punished them with. The statutes and judgments which the heathen observed in the worship of their idols were not good, and in practising them they could not live; and God gave them up to those. He made their sin to be their punishment, gave them up to a *reprobate mind*, as he did the Gentile idolaters (⁽⁴¹²⁴⁾Romans 1:24, 26), gave them up to their own heart's lusts (⁽³⁸¹²⁾Psalms 81:12), punished them for those superstitious customs which were against the written law by giving them up to those which were against the very light and law of nature; he

left them to themselves to be guilty of the most impure idolatries, as in the worship of Baal-peor (he *polluted them*, that is, he permitted them to pollute themselves, *in their own gifts*, v. 26), and of the most barbarous idolatries, as in the worship of Moloch, when they *caused their children*, especially their first-born, which God challenged a particular property in (*the first-born of thy sons shalt thou give unto me*), to pass *through the fire*, to be sacrificed to their idols; that thus he might *make them desolate*, not only that he might justly do it, but that he might do it by their own hands; for this must needs be a great weakening to their families and a diminution of the honour and strength of their country. Note, God sometimes makes sin to be its own punishment, and yet is not the author of sin; and there needs no more to make men miserable than to give them up to their own vile appetites and passions. Let them be put into the hand of their own counsels, and they will ruin themselves and make themselves desolate. And thus God makes them know that he is the Lord, and that he is a righteous God, which they themselves will be compelled to own when they see how much their wilful transgressions contribute to their own desolations. Note, Those who will not acknowledge God as the Lord their ruler shall be made to acknowledge him as the Lord their judge when it is too late.

EZEKIEL 20:27-32

THE SINS OF ISRAEL

Here the prophet goes on with the story of their rebellions, for their further humiliation, and shows,

I. That they had persisted in them after they were settled in the land of Canaan. Though God had so many times testified his displeasure against their wicked courses, “yet *in this* (that is, in the very same thing) *your fathers have blasphemed me*, continued to affront me, that they *also have trespassed a trespass against me*,” v. 27. Note, It is a great aggravation of sin when men will not take warning by the mischievous consequences of sin in those that have gone before them: this is *blaspheming God*; it is speaking reproachfully of his judgments, as if they were of no significancy and were not worth regarding.

1. God had made good his promise: *I brought them into the land* that I had sworn to give them. Though their unbelief and disobedience had made the performance slow, and much retarded it, yet it did not *make the promise of no effect*. They were often very near being cut off in the wilderness, but a step between them and ruin, and yet they came to Canaan at last. Note, Even God's Israel get to heaven by hell-gates; so many are their transgressions, and so strong their corruptions, that it is a miracle of mercy they are happy at last; as hypocrites go to hell by heaven-gates. *The righteous scarcely are saved. Per tot discrimina rerum tendimus ad coelum — Ten thousand dangers fill the road to haven.*

2. They had broken his precept by their abominable idolatries. God had appointed them to destroy all the monuments of idolatry, that they might not be tempted to desert his sanctuary; but, instead of defacing them, they fell in love with them, and when they *saw every high hill* whence they had the most delightful prospects, and all the *thick trees* where they had the most delightful shades (the former to show forth their pompous idolatries, the latter to conceal their shameful ones), *there they offered their sacrifices* and *made their sweet savour*, which should have been presented upon God's altar only. *There they presented the provocation of their offering* (v. 28), that is, their offerings, which, instead of pacifying God, or pleasing him, were highly provoking — sacrifices which, though costly, yet being misplaced, were an abomination to the Lord.

3. They obstinately persisted herein notwithstanding all the admonitions that were given them (v. 29): “*Then I told them, by my servants the prophets, told them where the high place was, to which they went; nay, I put them upon considering it, and asking their own consciences concerning it, by putting this question to them, Which is the high place whereunto you go? What do you find there so inviting that you will leave God's altars, where he requires your attendance, to frequent such places as he has forbidden you to worship in? Do you not know that those high places are of a heathenish extraction, and that the things which the Gentiles sacrificed they sacrificed to devils and not to God? Did not Moses tell you so? ⁽¹⁵⁰⁷⁾Deuteronomy 32:17. And will you have fellowship with devils? What is that high place to which you go when you turn your back on God's altars? O foolish Israelites, who or what has bewitched you, that you will forsake the fountain of life for broken cisterns, that worship which God appoints, and will accept, for that which he forbids, which he abhors, and which he will punish?*” And yet *the name is called Bamah*

unto this day; they will have their way, let God and his prophets say what they please to the contrary. They are wedded to their *high places*; even in the best reigns those were not taken away; you could not prevail to take away the name of *Bamah* — *the high place*, out of their mouths, but still they would have that in the place of their worship. The sin and the sinner are with difficulty parted.

II. That this generation, after they were unsettled, continued under the dominion of the same corrupt inclinations to idolatry, v. 30. He must *say* to the present *house of Israel*, some of whose elders were now sitting before him, “*Are you polluted after the manner of your fathers? After all that God has said against you by a succession of prophets, and done against you by a series of judgments, yet will you take no warning? Will you still be as bad as your fathers were, and commit the same abominations that they committed? I see you will; you are bent upon returning to the old abominations; you offer your gifts in the high places, and you make your sons to pass through the fire; either you actually do it or you do it in purpose and imagination, and so you continue idolaters to this day.*” These elders seem now to have been projecting a coalition with the heathen; their hearts they will reserve for the God of Israel, but their knees they will be at liberty to bow to the gods of the nations among whom they live, that they may have the more respect and the fairer quarter among them. Now the prophet is here ordered to tell those who were forming this scheme, and were for compounding the matter between God and Baal, that they should have no comfort or benefit from either.

1. They should have no benefit by their consulting in private with the prophets of the Lord; for, because they were hearkening after idols, God would have nothing to do with them (v. 31): *As I live, saith the Lord God, I will not be enquired of by you.* What he had said before (v. 3), having largely shown how just it was, he here repeats, as that which he would abide by. Let them not think that they honoured him by their enquiries, nor expect an answer of peace from him, as long as they continued in love and league with their idols. Note, Those reap no benefit by their religion that are not entire and sincere in it; nor can we have any comfortable communion with God in ordinances of worship unless we be inward and upright with him therein. We make nothing of our profession if it be but a profession. Nay,

2. They should have no benefit from their conforming in public to the practice of their neighbours (v. 32): “*That which comes into your mind as a piece of refined politics in the present difficult juncture, and which you would be advised to for your own preservation, and that you may not by being singular expose yourselves to abuses, it shall not be at all, it shall turn to no account to you. You say, ‘We will be as the heathen, we will join with them in worshipping their gods, though at the same time we do not believe them to be gods, but wood and stone, and then we should be taken as the families of the countries; they will not know, or in a little while will have forgotten, that we are Jews, and will allow us the same privileges with their own countrymen.’ Tell them,*” says God, “that this project shall *never prosper*. Either their neighbours will not admit them to join with them in their worship, or, if they do, will think never the better, but the worse, of them for it, and will look upon them as dissemblers, and not fit to be trusted, who are thus false to their God, and put a cheat upon their neighbours.” Note, There is nothing got by sinful compliances; and the carnal projects of hypocrites will stand them in no stead. It is only integrity and uprightness that will preserve men, and recommend them to God and man.

EZEKIEL 20:33-44

JUDGMENT AND MERCY

The design which was now on foot among the elders of Israel was that the people of Israel, being scattered among the nations, should lay aside all their peculiarities and conform to those among whom they lived; but God had told them that the design should not take effect, v. 32. Now, in these verses, he shows particularly how it should be frustrated. They aimed at the *mingling* of the families of *Israel with the families of the countries*; but it will prove in the issue that the wicked Israelites, notwithstanding their compliances, shall not mingle with them in their prosperity, but shall be distinguished from them for destruction; for idolatrous Israelites, that are apostates from God, shall be sooner and more sorely punished than idolatrous Babylonians that never knew the way of righteousness. Read and tremble at the doom here passed upon them; it is backed with an oath not to be reversed: *As I live, saith the Lord God*, thus and thus will I deal with you. They think to make both Jerusalem and Babylon their friends by

halting between two; but God threatens that neither of them shall serve for a rest or refuge for them.

I. Babylon shall not protect them, nor any of the countries of the heathen; for God will cast them out of his protection and then what prince, what people, what place, can serve to be a sanctuary to them? God was Israel's King of old, and had they continued his loyal subjects he would have *ruled over them* with care and tenderness for their good, but now *with a stretched-out arm, and with fury poured out, will I rule over them*, v. 33. That power which should have been exerted fore their protection shall be exerted for their destruction. Note, There is no shaking off God's dominion; rule he will, either with the golden sceptre or with the iron rod; and those that will not yield to the power of his grace shall be made to sink under the power of his wrath. Now when God is angry with them, though they may think that they shall be lost in the crowd of the heathen among whom they are scattered, they will be disappointed; for (v. 34) *I will gather you out of the countries wherein you are scattered*, as, when the rebels are dispersed in battle, those that have escaped the sword of war are pursued and brought together out of all the places whither they were scattered, to be punished by the sword of justice. They shall be brought *into the wilderness of the people* (v. 35), either into Babylon, which is called a *wilderness* (²⁸⁸³Ezekiel 19:13), and the *desert of the sea* (²⁹⁰¹Isaiah 21:1), or into some place which, though full of people, shall be to them as the wilderness was to Israel after they came out of Egypt, a place where God will *plead with them face to face*, as he *pleaded with their fathers in the wilderness of Egypt* (v. 36), — where their carcasses shall fall and where he will swear concerning them that they shall never return to Canaan, as he did swear concerning their fathers that they should never come into Canaan, — where he will avenge the breach of his law with as much terror as that with which he gave it in the wilderness of Sinai. Note, God has a good action against apostates, and will find not only time, but a proper place, to plead with them in upon that action, a wilderness even in the midst of the people for that purpose.

II. Israel shall be no more able to protect them than Babylon could; nor shall their relation to God's people stand them in any more stead for the other world than their compliance with idolaters shall for this world; nor shall they stand *in the congregation of the righteous* any more than in the congregation of evil-doers; for there will come a distinguishing day, when

God will separate between the precious and the vile; he will *cause them*, as the shepherd causes his sheep, to *pass under the rod*, when he tithes them (¹⁰⁷²Leviticus 27:32), that he may mark which is for God. God will take particular notice of each of them, one by one, as sheep are counted, and *he will bring them into the bond of the covenant* (v. 37); he will try them and judge of them according to the tenour of the covenant, and the difference made between some and others by the blessings and curses of the covenant. Or it may refer to those among them that repented and reformed; he will cause them to pass under the rod of affliction, and, having done them good by it, he will bring them again *into the bond of the covenant*, will be to them a God in covenant, and use them again as *heirs of promise*.

1. He will separate the wicked from among them (v. 38): “*I will purge out from among you the rebels*, who have been a grief and scandal to you, and who have by their rebellions brought all these calamities upon you.” The judgments of God shall find them out, and their naming the name of Israel shall be no shelter to them. They shall be *brought out of the countries where they sojourn*, and shall not have that rest in them which they promised themselves. But they *shall not enter into the land of Israel*, nor enjoy the benefit of that rest which God has promised to his people. Note, Though godly people may share with the wicked in the calamities of the world, yet wicked people shall have no share with the godly in the heavenly Canaan; but it shall be part of the blessedness of that world that they shall be *purged out from among them*, the tares from the wheat, the chaff from the corn, ¹⁰⁷³Ezekiel 13:9. But wherever these idolaters of *the house of Israel* were contriving to worship both God and their idols, thinking to please both, God here protests against it (v. 39), as Elijah had done in his name: “*If the Lord be God, then follow him, but, if Baal, then follow him; if you will serve your idols, do, and take what comes of it; but then do not pretend relation to God and a religious regard to him, nor pollute his holy name with your gifts at his altar.*” Spiritual judgments are the sorest judgments. Two of that kind of judgments are threatened in this verse against those that were for dividing between the God of Israel and the gods of the nations: —

(1.) That they should be given up to the service of their idols. To them he said ironically, “*Since you will not hearken unto me, go you, serve every one his idols*, now that you think it will be for your interest, *and hereafter also*. You shall go on in it. *Ephraim is joined to idols, let him alone*; let him take his course, and see what he will get by it at last.” Note, Those

who think to serve themselves by sin will find in the end that they have but enslaved themselves to sin.

(2.) That they should be cut off from the service of God and communion with God: “You *shall not pollute my holy name* with your *vain oblations*, ~~<III>~~ Isaiah 1:11. You bring your gifts in your hands, wherewith you pretend to honour me, but at the same time you bring your idols in your hearts, and therefore you do but pollute me, which I will not suffer any more,” ~~<III>~~ Amos 5:21, 22. Note, Those are justly forbidden God's house that profane his house.

2. He will separate them to himself again.

(1.) He will *gather them* in mercy *out of the countries whither they were scattered*, to be monuments of mercy, as the incorrigible were gathered to be vessels of wrath, v. 41. Not one of God's jewels shall be lost in the lumber of this world.

(2.) He will *bring them to the land of Israel*, which he had promised to *give to their fathers*; and the discontinuance of their possession shall be no defeasance of their right; it is the *land of Israel* still, and thither God will bring them safely again, v. 42.

(3.) He will re-establish his ordinances among them, will set up his sanctuary in his holy mountain, which is here called *the mountain of the height of Israel*; for, though the Mount Zion was none of the highest mountains, yet the temple there was one of the highest honours of Israel. It is promised that those who preserved their integrity, and would not serve idols, in other lands, shall return to their prosperity and shall serve the true God in their own land: *All of them in the land shall serve me*. Note, It is the true happiness of a people, and a sure token for good to them, when there is a prevailing disposition in them to serve God. Whereas God had forbidden the idolaters to bring their gifts to his altar, of these he will *require offerings and first-fruits*, and will accept them, v. 40. What he does not require he will not accept, but what is done with a regard to his precepts he will be well pleased with. He will *accept them with their sweet savour*, or *savour of rest* (v. 41), as being very grateful to him and what he takes a complacency in; whereas, to hypocritical worshippers, he says, *I will not smell in your solemn assemblies*.

(4.) He will give them true repentance for their sins, v. 43. When they find how gracious God is to them they will be overcome with his kindness, and blush to think of their bad behaviour towards so *good a God*: “There, in *my holy mountain*, when you come to enjoy the privileges of that again, *there shall you remember your doings*, wherein you have been defiled.” Note, The more conversant we are with God's holiness the more we shall see of the odious nature of sin. There *you shall loathe yourselves in your own sight*. Note, Ingenuous evangelical repentance makes people loathe themselves for their sins, as ~~1825~~ Job 42:5, 6.

(5.) He will give them the knowledge of himself: *They shall know* by experience that *he is the Lord*, that he is a God of almighty power and inexhaustible goodness, kind to his people and faithful to his covenant with them. Note, All the favours we receive from God should lead us into a more intimate acquaintance with him.

(6.) He will do all this for his own name's sake, notwithstanding their undeservings and ill-deservings (v. 44); he has *wrought with them*, that is, wrought for them, wrought in favour of them, wrought in concurrence with them, they doing their endeavour; he has wrought with them purely *for his name's sake*. His reasons were all fetched from himself. Had he dealt with them *according to their wicked ways and their corrupt doings*, though they were the better and sounder part of the house of Israel, he would have left them to be scattered and lost with the rest; but he recovered and restored them for the sake of his own name, not only that it might not be *polluted* (v. 14), but that he might be *sanctified in them before the heathen* (v. 41), that he might *sanctify himself* (so the word is); for it is God's work to glorify his own name. He will do well for his people that he may have the glory of it, that he may manifest himself to be a God pardoning sin and so keeping promise, that his people may praise him, and that their neighbours may likewise take notice of him, as they did when God *burned again their captivity*, ~~1825~~ Psalm 126:3. *Then said they among the heathen, The Lord has done great things for them.*

~~3216~~ EZEKIEL 20:45-49

THREATENINGS AGAINST ISRAEL

We have here a prophecy of wrath against Judah and Jerusalem, which would more fitly have begun the next chapter than conclude this; for it has no dependence on what goes before, but that which follows in the beginning of the next chapter is the explication of it, when the people complained that this was a parable which they understood not. In this parable,

1. It is a forest that is prophesied against, *the forest of the south field*, Judah and Jerusalem. These lay south from Babylon, where Ezekiel now was, and therefore he is directed to *set his face towards the south* (v. 46), to intimate to them that God had set his face against them, was displeased with them, and determined to destroy them. But, though it be a message of wrath which he has to deliver, he must deliver it with mildness and tenderness; he must *drop his word towards the south*; his doctrine must *distil as the rain* (~~451D~~ Deuteronomy 32:2), that people's hearts might be softened by it, as the earth by the *river of God*, which *drops upon the pastures of the wilderness* (~~456D~~ Psalm 65:12) and which a south land more especially calls for, (~~459~~ Joshua 15:19. Judah and Jerusalem are called *forests*, not only because they had been full of people, as a wood of trees, but because they had been empty of fruit, for fruit-trees grow not in a forest; and a forest is put in opposition to a fruitful field, ~~2325~~ Isaiah 32:15. Those that should have been as the garden of the Lord, and his vineyard, had become like a forest, all overgrown with *briers and thorns*; and those that are so, that bring not forth the fruits of righteousness, God's word prophesies against.

2. It is a fire kindled in his forest that is prophesied of, v. 47. All those judgments which wasted and consumed both the city and the country — sword, famine, pestilence, and captivity, are signified by this fire.

(1.) It is a fire of God's own kindling: *I will kindle a fire in thee*; the *breath of the Lord* is not as a drop, but *as a stream, of brimstone* to set it on fire, (~~2303~~ Isaiah 30:33. He that had been himself a protecting fire about Jerusalem is now a consuming fire in it. *All flesh shall see* by the fury of this fire, and the desolations it shall make, especially when they compare it

with the sins which had made them fuel for this fire, that it is *the Lord* that *has kindled it* (v. 48), as a just avenger of his own injured honour.

(2.) This conflagration shall be general: all orders and degrees of men shall be devoured by it — young and old, rich and poor, high and low. Even *green trees*, which the fire does not easily fasten upon, shall be devoured by this fire; even good people shall some of them be involved in these calamities; and *if this be done in the green trees, what shall be done in the dry?* The dry trees shall be as tinder and touch-wood to this fire. *All faces* (that is, all that covers the face of the earth) *from the south* of Canaan to the north, from Beer-sheba to Dan, shall be *burnt therein*.

(3.) The fire *shall not be quenched*; no attempts to give check to the dissolution shall prevail. When God will ruin a nation, who or what can save it?

Now observe,

1. The people's reflection upon the prophet on occasion of this discourse. They said, *Does he not speak parables?* This was the language either of their ignorance or infidelity (the plainest truths were as parables to them), or of their malice and ill-will to the prophet. Note. It is common for those who will not be wrought upon by the word to pick quarrels with it; it is either too plain or too obscure, too fine or too homely, too common or too singular; something or other is amiss in it.

2. The prophet's complaint to God: *Ah, Lord God! they say so and so of me.* Note, It is a comfort to us, when people speak ill of us unjustly, that we have a God to complain to.