

~Other Speakers G-L: Raymond Golsworthy:

Ezekiel 36 has been called "Ezekiel's gospel to a needy people", and such it certainly is. It was written when Ezekiel was "among the captives by the River Chebar" (Ch. 1:1). We remember how the nation of Israel had long refused to listen to the warnings of God's prophets, and how, finally, God sent the armies of Babylon to invade their land and carry away large numbers of captives. In God's mercy, Ezekiel was among those captives and, even in that foreign land, continued to be a voice for God. His messages were many and varied, but, amongst them, was a message of hope. He assured them that God still planned to do great things for them once they had learned their lesson and were prepared to meet His condition. Much of this is set out in Ezekiel 36, a chapter from which God's people of all ages have derived much help and comfort.

We shall now look at four great undertakings of God mentioned in the chapter, noticing their direct relevance to our own times, when, in a spiritual sense, a similar captivity prevails. We have to admit, with shame, that we, too, have rejected God's prophets, and disobeyed God's Word, with the result that an awful inward bondage and spiritual deadness are everywhere. But, thank God, there is still a "gospel" which we may hear!

1. An answer to his enemies

The first thing that God undertook to do in Ezekiel 36 was to answer the taunts and scolding of the enemies of His people. We read that they had said, "Aha, even the ancient places are ours in possession" (verse 2), and also of Israel being "taken up in the lips of talkers" (verse 3), and of their becoming "a prey and derision to the heathen round about" (verse 4). But God had heard it all, and now He says, "Surely, the heathen that are about you, they shall bear their shame" (verse 7). Yes, indeed, God has His own way of answering the taunts of His enemies, both in Ezekiel's day and in our own. Atheists, agnostics, and superficial observers may laughingly refer to Christianity as a "spent force, holding no relevance for today's society". Of course, we can only admit that, like Israel of old, we have dismally failed the God who saved us; the glory is departed. However, as in Israel's day, God will yet have the final word, and "His enemies shall lick the dust" (psalm 72: 9). Those who have scoffed will one day bear their shame. God knows what He is doing and it is only right that He should discipline His people while they are in their disobedience. But the end is not yet. He still plans a recovery in a repentant and returning remnant, and those who have mocked so proudly will themselves be humiliated. As it was of old, God's Ezras and Nehemiahs shall yet emerge, building again the sanctuary of the Lord, and restoring the gates of His city. The silencing of mockers may not be the greatest thing that God will do, but it is at least a part of Ezekiel's gospel.

But what is the condition we earlier referred to? It is plainly stated in verse 37: "I will yet for this be enquired of by the house of Israel to do it for them". That simply means prayer, and we notice it is collective prayer. We dare to say that wherever and whenever, God had His few who will humble themselves and pray (2 Chron. 7:14) He will thereby be freed to move out and do all that He promises to do throughout this chapter. Of those things we shall say more later, but, for the present, we simply say: "Lord, teach us to pray; teach us to plead; and to do so together"! Surrounding mockers must be silenced, and God's testimony recovered.

We pointed out the applicability of Ezekiel 36 to the days in which we live, when, once more, God's people are in captivity, a captivity brought upon them by their own refusal to listen to God's messengers. However, God is a God of mercy, and still has His plans to change the situation, once His conditions are met. We have already noted His promise to answer the taunts of surrounding enemies and critics (Ezek. 36:1-7), something that we also need to claim in our day when God's church, too is being derided for its many evident failures, and its consequent captive condition.

2. A flourishing nation

It is from that point that the prophet goes on to assure the Babylonian captives that God also has plans to make them once more into a flourishing nation (Ezek. 36: 8-11). The picture given is actually that of a flourishing land, but that itself was to be a reflection of a flourishing nation, occupying the land. We shall here select just a few words and phrases from the text itself, all depicting the new flourishing nation. First, there is mention of multiplication (Ezek. 36:10,11). This has always been God's plan for His people, right from Genesis onwards (Gen. 1:28; 9:1,7 etc.). Israel himself was told to multiply (Gen. 35:11), and we certainly read of a blessed multiplication when we come to the book of Acts (Acts 6:1,7; 9:31, etc.). But God was also planning to do the same for Israel in Ezekiel's day, and it was part of Ezekiel's gospel. Thank God, He is planning to do the same for us today, when, in another sense, we are His captive people. It is good to know, too, that there is such a thing as spiritual multiplication; something which we might call a greatly enhanced knowing of the Lord "be it in an individual, or in a company. How great the need for this kind of multiplication amongst God's

people today!

Likewise, the same passage in Ezekiel speaks of God's people being settled (Ezek. 36:11); an equally heartening thought! For a new "settledness" of heart and spirit amongst God's people today, when a distressing unsettledness and deep confusion are everywhere, and when the tendency is for the Christians to be "carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men" (Eph. 4:14). All this is in God's merciful plan for us also. He will settle us today, and do so "after your old estates" (Ezek. 36:11; see also Col. 1:2; 1 Pet. 5:10).

Particularly, however, we would like to mention God's gracious promise: "I will do better unto you than at your beginnings" (Ezek. 36:11). What a heartening word that must have been for those captives in Ezekiel's day! God would make them flourish more than they had ever flourished before. Yes, indeed, our God is ever moving on from what is good to what is better. We often hear of Christians in our day longing for a return to the apostolic days, or for a repetition of what we read of in the Book of Acts. However, in the light of the promise in Ezekiel, we believe we should be looking for, and expecting, something that surpasses those early beginnings; certainly as far as intrinsic quality and genuine spirituality are concerned. We are told that Christ "must increase" and we are personally persuaded that that "increase" will yet be found in a foreknown remnant; individuals and companies where the Cross has done its work and Christ Himself has become everything! We may be sure that Christ is not coming back to rescue what has been a fading cause, but to gather to Himself a fully ripened harvest. Anything less than that would not be worthy of Him. He always longs to do better for us than at our beginnings!

All this brings us back again to the matter of God's prescribed condition; He will "yet for this be enquired of by the house of Israel, to do it for them" (Ezek. 36:37). In this present and particular matter of "a flourishing church", which we have been considering, "multiplied" and "settled", and something "better than at the beginnings", God requires this prayer instrument. We are reminded of Daniel, who, in the very days we are talking of, and at the risk of his own life, opened his windows toward Jerusalem and prayed (Dan. 6:10). God will surely hear such Daniels today, and will quickly stir His well prepared Ezras and Nehemiahs to be His instruments for His gracious purposes. Lord, teach us to pray; Lord, teach us to plead, together! Rescue and return Thy captives, and make them flourish again, spiritually!

3. Recovery of the honour of his own Name

The people of Israel had disobeyed God and were suffering for it, but God was "waiting to be gracious" (Isa. 30: 18), and Ezekiel tells of a number of wonderful things that God was still planning to do for them. We have already discussed two of these, and we now move on to the third, namely, that God would also recover the honour of His own Name. That Name had been profaned among the heathen (Ezek. 36:21-23) by the breakdown of God's nation, but now the promise comes: "I will sanctify my great Name" (verse 23). In the rescuing and restoring of these captives, God's own Name would again be honoured.

This matter of God's Name should always be a supreme concern amongst the people of God. It stands, of course, for the whole character of God, the essence of His nature, who and what He is, and what He is able to do. It touches, therefore, the matter of His reputation, and it is not surprising that God is "jealous for His Name" (Ezek. 39:25). It is a fact that that same jealousy gets into the hearts of those who live closest to Him, and often they find themselves crying out like Joshua, "What wilt thou do unto Thy Great Name?" (Josh. 7:9).

The marvel is that God has "put His Name" upon those He has redeemed (Num. 6:27); that is, He has somehow bound up His own reputation with them, so that, when they fail, He is dishonoured; when they sin, He is the One who suffers most. Here, indeed, is the timeless mystery of Calvary, but, for the present, we are simply noting that, in Ezekiel's day, and in the shameful captivity of God's people, God's own Name was being profaned.

This, however, prompts us to ask the question, how much more must that be true in our day when amongst professing Christians, a similar non-attention to God's Word, and long persistence in disobedience, have brought about a state of spiritual captivity which is all too evident on every hand. "Christianity" is being shamed, and "churches" are being despised, but far worse, God's great and holy Name is being profaned. We can only bow our heads in shame. We should have been reflectors of the very glory of God (1 Pet. 2:9; Eph. 1:12; etc.), beaming forth into end-time darkness the very "Light of the World" (John 8:12; Math. 5:14; etc.), and all provision has been made for this, but we would not hearken. Spiritual captivity has been the result, and God's great Name has suffered.

But even here, thank God, we have Ezekiel's sure promise: *He will sanctify my great Name which was profaned among the heathen, which ye have profaned* (Ezek. 36:23). God still has His plan for restoration and recovery. There are some who will humble themselves and pray, confessing their sins, and the sins of God's people, thereby making a way for God to move gloriously, and, in so doing, recover the honour of His own great Name. This, we believe is the greatest reason why we should cry to God to do a *new thing* spiritually in our day (Isa. 43:19). Needless to say, that *new thing* will be great gain for God's people themselves, as they are restored to *life together in the Spirit*, and to an experience of the operating Headship of Christ over them. But the greatest gain, and the one that really matters, will be a new sanctifying of God's Name. The condition for that also is the one described in Ezek. 36:37: *He will be enquired of*. Even in the matter of recovering His own honour, God evidently holds back until He finds those who will plead with Him about it. There are many mercies we must plead for, but, above them all, should be heard the cry, *Hallowed be Thy Name*!

May God help us to respond, even today, to Ezekiel's Gospel!

4. The return of the captives to their own land

We have thus far considered a series of specific promises, which God gave to His people when they were captives in Babylon. They had refused the warnings of the prophets, and were reaping the reward of their folly, but God had not forsaken them, and our chapter outlines the various mercies He would yet show to them. He would silence those who were mocking at them (Ezek. 36:1-7); make them flourish again as a nation (verses 8-11) and also recover the honour of His own great Name (verses 21-23). All this has its meaning for God's church today, when, in a spiritual sense, similar conditions prevail.

We shall now consider the final promise in the chapter, where God undertakes to return the captives to their own land. The passage reads, *He will take you from among the heathen and bring you into your own land* (verse 24) *and ye shall dwell in the land that I gave unto your fathers* (verse 28). This, too, has great significance for us today, as we shall now seek to show.

This mention of the land, and of returning to it, takes us immediately to such passages as Deut. 8: 7-9, where that same land is beautifully described as *a land of brooks of water; of fountains and depths that spring out of valleys and hills; a land of wheat and barley and vines and fig trees and pomegranates; a land of oil-olive and honey; a land wherein thou shalt eat bread without scarceness; a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills thou mayest dig brass*. That was the land to which God was promising to return His people in Ezekiel's day. Each of those details in Deuteronomy 8 has its own spiritual counterpart for the Christian, but, in a word, that land, for us, is Christ. The Great Living Lord, now ascended into heaven, is Himself our Land of Inheritance. The Bible says that it is in Him that we have our inheritance (Eph. 1:11). In Him is all we need, and we *receive of His fulness, grace upon grace* (John 1:16). Thus, the real Christian life is just a matter of living in Him and on Him. How sad it is, then, that, as far as experience is concerned, most of us have been *carried away from this land of Christ* and are only existing in the foreign land of self. We find ourselves resorting to mere fleshly energies, even in spiritual things, and what a miserable *Babylon* that is!

How welcome, then, is Ezekiel's gospel! God will take us from among the heathen, and bring us back to Our Own Land. How the hearts of those captives in Babylon would have been moved by Ezekiel's reassurances to them; what visions of plenty; what thoughts of utmost satisfaction; back again in their beloved homeland! But how much more should our hearts be moved! Who could describe the bliss of abiding in Christ once more, and of Christ abiding in us in all His fulness? Everything outside of Him is total barrenness; everything in Him is total blessedness. Thank God, we, too, can *return Home*, once God has taught us the folly of our disobedience. He again has this gospel for us: *He will take you from among the heathen, and will bring you into your own land*. That Land is already ours, and God is able, once again, to bring us back to it. He did this very thing for Israel of old, and we have the clear history of it in the first chapter of Ezra. Oh, for such a moving of God today, and for the same glad responses of God's people! Oh, for multitudes who will come back again to Life in Christ, finding in Him their *All in All* (Col. 3:11). Faith, again, can bring us Home.

But again we remind ourselves of God's single and simple condition; *He will yet for this be enquired of by the house of Israel to do it for them* (Ezek. 36:37). God must have those who will ask Him (John 14:13); He waits for those who will plead with Him concerning all these things. May God help us to claim these promises personally; to get right with Him individually, and then humbly join with others in calling on His Name. This is His ordained way of fulfilling all the precious promises of Ezekiel's Gospel. All praise to His wonderful Name!