

“When God Leaves the Building”

Introduction: You don’t have to be one of his fans to have heard the phrase, “Elvis has left the building!” It was first used by a promoter at a concert in Shreveport, Louisiana at which Elvis Presley had just performed. There were still several acts to go but Elvis had so revved up the crowd that the promoter had to try and convince them that Elvis had gone and was not coming back that night so that they would quiet down and listen to the next performer. The phrase then became used quite regularly by public address announcers at the conclusion of Elvis Presley concerts to disperse audiences who were waiting around in hopes of an encore. And since then it has become a catchphrase in popular culture to describe everything from a baseball that leaves the field of play through a home run, to the end of an episode of the television show, *Fraser*.

On a much more serious note, what happens when God leaves the building? That’s the essence of the next vision that Ezekiel receives from God while he’s sitting with the leaders of the exiled community in Babylon. Chapters 8-11 describe one vision through which God gave Ezekiel a guided tour of the temple in Jerusalem and of God’s glory ultimately leaving this sanctuary where God had been present. The vision takes place in 592 B.C., six years after this first group had been taken into exile and some 14 months after Ezekiel’s initial vision and God’s call upon him to be his prophet, to speak for him to the exiled community.

What was going on in Jerusalem, these elders in exile seemed to want to know? What there any word from God? What we’ll hear is that no matter how historical or tradition-filled our sanctuaries may be, God is not tied down, to them or by them. God is more concerned with spiritual vitality than physical places, with the direction of our hearts rather than the location of our seats.

I. God’s Glory Offended (ch. 8)

A. As Ezekiel describes his experience, God brought him, by means of a vision, to the gates of the Temple in Jerusalem. Kind of like a wildlife, video documentary, in which we, the viewer, are brought closer and closer to the animals being observed, in four successive scenes, Ezekiel is brought closer and closer to the inner sanctuary of the Temple. In each scene Ezekiel is called to observe the increasingly detestable practices that are taking place, practices that would move God to leave this sanctuary.

1. It begins at the north gate where “the idol that provokes to jealousy” stood. Jealousy describes the proper response of a spouse who has been betrayed. In this case, the Lord’s jealousy is aroused because his people, in effect, were having a love affair with another god. The idol was most likely a statue of the goddess Asherah, the Canaanite mother, fertility goddess. Carved poles representing this goddess were often seen out in the countryside, but now this “obelisk of obscenity,” as one writer dubs it, was also in the Temple, greeting worshipers at the gate, with an invitation to sexual immorality, as they entered.

2. The next scene takes Ezekiel through a hole in the wall and into an inner chamber. Its walls were covered with images of unclean animals and pagan deities. Before these stood seventy elders of Israel, seventy of its religious leaders, worshipping the various gods these images represented, most likely calling upon them for help against the siege by the Babylonian army they were experiencing. It was kind of like a dark, private men’s club where prominent men indulged their personal desires without risking

their public reputations. Even worse, they were convinced that God couldn't see them, or if he could, he didn't really care.

3. In the third scene Ezekiel sees a group of women, mourning a Babylonian god named Tammuz. According to legend, he had died tragically and was now providing a kind of cult of sentimentality for women who lived in an austere society and needed an emotional release, much, perhaps, like the escapist entertainment and emotional filling sought through a soap opera or romance novel.

4. The final scene took Ezekiel to the inner court of the house of the Lord where twenty-five men had their backs to the place of God's presence in the Holy of Holies and were facing east. As they did so, they were bowing down to the sun, worshipping not the creator, but something he's created, which is the heart of idolatry.

B. Before the tour is over, God informs Ezekiel that it is not only these various forms of idolatry that have offended him. It is also that the sin of Israel that had begun in the Temple had moved out into the social and economic realm, filling the land with violence and injustice (8:17; 9:9). What is remarkable is how long God had been patient with this people. But now, God was showing Ezekiel, he had become so offended that, despite the beauty and great tradition of the Temple, he could not hang around it any longer. What we see, however, is that God's glory doesn't move away from us unless and until we move away from him. In the next section we see the glory of God move to the threshold of the Temple, preparing, it seems, for take-off (9:3).

It should make us wonder, before going there, what might arouse God's jealousy today? While we tend to think we live in a highly pluralistic age, so did they! And yet the Lord called them to have no other gods before Him. So, having discussions with those from other faiths is certainly a needed task today. But abandoning the unique and exclusive claims of Christ or drawing bits and pieces from these other religious traditions to fashion a spirituality of our own choosing, all under the guise of Christian worship, just might be what it takes for God to leave our buildings as well. His word is not to be considered as just an opinion among others. At this point, it is not idolatry outside the church that God is worried about; that's called a mission field. It is idolatry inside the church that concerns God; that's called heresy!

II. God's Glory Defended (ch. 9)

A. Moving on, what Ezekiel then sees in his grand vision is how God moves to defend his glory for the days of patience have come to an end. The chapter begins with the entrance of six divine, armed executioners, ready to put to death all who had remained intentionally and unrepentantly wicked. They had acted like Canaanites and so God would treat them as such. Likely that the swords of the executioners represented the swords of the Babylonian army, through whom God would bring his judgment.

B. Significantly, God's judgment begins with the people in his sanctuary, the people who knew better in light of revelation and history, but who had remained persistently disobedient anyway. It brings to mind Peter's warning that judgment would begin with God's household (1 Pe. 4:17), with those whom God expected much. Significant also is that this was not an indiscriminate judgment. God knows hearts. God knew those who had been unrepentant, and those who were repentant. The latter group, who were grieving and lamenting all the detestable things that were being done in the Temple and the holy city were to be marked by a seventh figure, a man who had brought not a sword but a writing kit.

Those he was instructed to mark would be spared, much like those back in Egypt had been marked by the blood of the Passover lamb so that the angel of death would spare them and pass over their homes. Through these grisly scenes, we also need to keep in mind that such judgment gives God no pleasure, that he desires that all turn from their evil ways and turn to him so that they may live (33:10-11), that his commitment to utter righteousness and justice is part of his glory.

III. God's Glory Suspended (ch. 10-11)

A. Importantly, in the midst of seeing God defend his glory, Ezekiel is also given a preview of hope and restoration as he sees God's glory suspended as it moves outside the Temple, stopping at the mountain just to the east. It actually brings a bit of suspense to the narrative, kind of like the last episode in a season of NCIS. (Is Ziva dead or alive?) Where, if anywhere, will the glory go? Will it ever return? Stay tuned!

What we do get a glimpse of here in the previews is that, remarkably, God in all his glory is on his way further east, all the way to Babylon, to be a sanctuary for the exiles there, and in other places where they have been scattered. The great irony is that those remaining in Jerusalem had thought that they were the people God truly cared about because they had escaped the first round of exile. But what they would discover is that it would be those who had been scattered by God who God would bring home and in so doing, would be the ones to restore right practice in Jerusalem. Even though they had seemed like castaways and castoffs, even though their circumstances were horrible, God would choose to pursue them, meet them in their worst, unrighteous state, give them a new heart, and bring them home. (As one writer quips, those still in Jerusalem who thought they were in the better situation—in the frying pan rather than in the fire—would discover that they were actually the next meal on the menu. And those in exile who thought they were nothing but leftover scraps would be the ones, the remnant, with whom the future of God's people would rest.)

B. As Ezekiel shared all of this with the elders of the exiled community, I wonder what they were thinking. At the very least it would, I think, have shaken their complacency and revealed an incredibly gracious side of the God who they thought had forgotten them but who was now promising to be with them and work in them and through them far, far, from the structure of the Temple.

As glorious as this news must have been for the exiles in Babylon, we have even greater news to celebrate. The rebuilding of the city and the building of the second temple, upon their return from exile, left the people with a sense of incompleteness. Something more was still needed. The exile did not seem like it had ended yet, even though the people had returned. That something, that fulfillment, would come in the person of Jesus, the one in whom God's glory came to dwell. "We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (Jn. 1:14). This Jesus would reveal the living God to us, die for our sin, and give us the gift of his Spirit through whom God now dwells in the sanctuary that is our individual bodies, as well as the body that is the church, God's people gathered (1 Cor. 6:19; Eph. 2:18-22).

It should move us to pray that, as we have sung, God would help us to be, both individually and as a community, the kind of living sanctuary that honors his name, that is pure and holy, that is tried and true. May we abide with him so that his glory will not leave us but continue to abide with us, and in us, and work through us, as we live like exiles in our increasingly secularized, hurting, and wounded world, to bring about the healing and reconciliation that God so desires for his creation.