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June 6th: Ezekiel 11 & Acts 10:24-48

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The proud delusions of those remaining in Jerusalem. The Apostle Peter declares the gospel to Cornelius' household.

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Transcript

Ezekiel chapter 11. The Spirit lifted me up and brought me to the east gate of the house of the Lord, which faces east. And behold, at the entrance of the gateway there were twenty-five men.

And I saw among them Jeazaniah the son of Azur, and Pelatiah the son of Benaiah, princes of the people. And he said to me, Son of man, these are the men who devise iniquity, and who give wicked counsel in this city, who say, The time is not near to build houses. This city is the cauldron, and we are the meat.

Therefore prophesy against them. Prophecy, O son of man. And the Spirit of the Lord fell upon me, and he said to me, Say, Thus says the Lord, So you think, O house of Israel.

For I know the things that come into your mind. You have multiplied your slain in this city, and have filled its streets with the slain. Therefore thus says the Lord God, Your slain whom you have laid in the midst of it, they are the meat.

And this city is the cauldron, but you shall be brought out of the midst of it. You have feared the sword, and I will bring the sword upon you, declares the Lord God. And I will bring you out of the midst of it, and give you into the hands of foreigners, and execute judgments upon you.

You shall fall by the sword. I will judge you at the border of Israel, and you shall know that I am the Lord. This city shall not be your cauldron, nor shall you be the meat in the midst of it.

I will judge you at the border of Israel, and you shall know that I am the Lord. For you have not walked in my statutes, nor obeyed my rules, but have acted according to the rules of the nations that are around you. And it came to pass, while I was prophesying, that Pelletier the son of Benaiah died.

Then I fell down on my face, and cried out with a loud voice, and said, Our Lord God, will you make a full end of the remnant of Israel? And the word of the Lord came to me, Son of man, your brothers, even your brothers, your kinsmen, the whole house of Israel, all of them, are those of whom the inhabitants of Jerusalem have said, Go far from the Lord. To us this land is given for a possession. Therefore say, Thus says the Lord God.

Though I removed them far off among the nations, and though I scattered them among the countries, yet I have been a sanctuary to them for a while in the countries where they have gone. Therefore say, Thus says the Lord God. I will gather you from the peoples, and assemble you out of the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel.

And when they come there, they will remove from it all its detestable things, and all its abominations. And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in My statutes, and keep My rules, and obey them.

And they shall be My people, and I will be their God. But as for those whose heart goes after their detestable things and their abominations, I will bring their deeds upon their own heads, declares the Lord God. Then the cherubim lifted up their wings, with the wheels beside them, and the glory of the God of Israel was over them, and the glory of the Lord went up from the midst of the city, and stood on the mountain that is on the east side of the city.

And the Spirit lifted me up, and brought me in the vision by the Spirit of God into Chaldea, to the exiles. Then the vision that I had seen went up from me, and I told the

exiles all the things that the Lord had shown me. In chapter 8, while the elders of Judah were with him in his house in the land of exile, Ezekiel began to receive a vision, in which he was taken to the temple in Jerusalem, saw the abominations performed there, the declaration of a sentence of destruction upon the city, and the Lord's departure from his sanctuary.

This vision concludes in chapter 11. While this chapter represents a new phase of the vision, it connects with that which preceded it in several ways. In verse 19 of the preceding chapter, the throne chariot stood at the east gate of the temple.

In the first verse of this chapter, Ezekiel is lifted up to the throne chariot there. The twenty-five men at the gate recall chapter 8, verse 16, And he brought me into the inner court of the house of the Lord. And behold, at the entrance of the temple of the Lord, between the porch and the altar, were about twenty-five men, with their backs to the temple of the Lord, and their faces toward the east, worshipping the sun toward the east.

As Daniel Bloch notes, there are other recollections of the earlier chapters of the vision. For instance, to chapter 9, verse 8, in verse 13. The spirit lifts up Ezekiel again, moving him to his next location, on his tour of inspection of the temple, and the abominations performed there, and his witnessing of the subsequent departure of the Lord from his house.

Two of the twenty-five men are mentioned, Jeazaniah the son of Azzur, a man who should not be mistaken with Jeazaniah the son of Shaphan, who was earlier mentioned among the seventy men performing idolatry in the closed chamber, and Pelitiah the son of Benaiah. The twenty-five appear to be elders. Peter Lighthouse has suggested that they are the heads of the priestly houses, and therefore councillors of the rulers of the city.

The Lord accuses them as wicked councillors, committed to iniquity. The meaning of their words in verse 3 is challenging to determine, as their statement is open to several different interpretations. Are they referring to refraining from building houses nearby, or to building them soon, or are they referring to starting households? The men here are presumably those who came to power as the old elite was deported to Babylon with Jehoiachin.

Their statement probably indicates their complacency and indifference to the plight of the poor of the city. They see no need to provide them with housing, having either taken over much of the existing housing when they came to power, or determined to use all of the resources for the defence of the city. The meaning of the second part of their statement could also be interpreted in different ways.

The image of meat in a cauldron is one that Ezekiel will use again in chapter 24. Jeremiah chapter 1 also represents the city of Jerusalem as a cauldron, about to be

overturned by a force coming from the north. Are we to understand the statement of the twenty-five men as comparing themselves to the choice pieces of meat in a stew? Bloch suggests that the cauldron should rather be understood as a crock or a storage vessel.

The men presume themselves to be safe within the protective confines of the fortified city. While the old ruling class was removed and scattered from the container's waste, they are secure within it. However, as the Lord will make clear, this is far from the case.

Ezekiel is given an urgent command to prophesy against the rulers of Jerusalem. The Spirit of the Lord rushes upon him and he is instructed as to what he must say. The leaders of Jerusalem are oppressive and exploitative.

They have filled the city with victims of their injustice. Their presumption will be proven ill-founded. They think that they are the prime pieces of meat, safely preserved within the crock, yet they are the butchers, and the people that they have slain are the meat.

They themselves will be removed from the city and will suffer the sword, being killed by foreigners acting as the Lord's executioners, the very fate that they had fancied themselves immune to. When the Lord delivers his sentence upon them, his identity and sovereignty will be decisively demonstrated. They have rejected the law of the Lord and have walked according to the customs of the nations.

So the Lord has given them into their hands. As Ezekiel prophesies, Pelletier, the son of Benaiah, one of the twenty-five men, died. His death is a sign of the fate apportioned for all of the men.

It is also a sign of the Lord's causing the word of Ezekiel to be effective. The fact that Ezekiel is still physically situated in his house in Chaldea naturally raises questions about how we are to understand this event. Ezekiel recognises Pelletier, so he seems to be a specific historical figure.

It seems most likely to me that Pelletier was literally at the gate of the temple in Jerusalem with the other men at the time, and died as Ezekiel prophesied in his vision. Later, we can presume, when news from Jerusalem next reached the exiles, they would hear about the sudden and strange death of Pelletier at the gate and when it occurred. This would serve as a confirmation of the words of Ezekiel, both to the exiles and to any messenger.

In verses 14 and 15, the Lord reveals the way that the inhabitants of Jerusalem regard the exiles. The Lord describes the exiles in a somewhat surprising way, using language that intensifies the hearer's sense of their kinship with Ezekiel. Even though Ezekiel was warned in the opening vision of the book that he should expect their strong resistance, they remain his people.

The Lord also speaks of them as the whole house of Israel, as those who carry the baton

of Israel's continuing peoplehood, as it were. However, the Judahites in Jerusalem have dismissed the exiles, regarding themselves as the true possessors of the land. The exiles have been cut off, but they suppose that they retain their stake in the land.

We can readily imagine that many of the exiles themselves would have considered their situation similarly. However, in a startling statement in verse 16, the Lord declares that he has been the sanctuary of the exiles, even in a foreign and far-off land. The leaders of Jerusalem have presumed that, since they have the temple and the glory of the Lord within it, they enjoy a privileged and maybe even an immune status.

Yet, as we saw in the preceding chapters, the glory of the Lord had left the building of the temple. Furthermore, as was seen in the opening vision of Ezekiel, the glory chariot of the Lord, connected with the temple, was found far outside of the land of Israel, in Chaldea, among the exiles. While the exiles had been uprooted from the land, the Lord was also present with them.

The false confidence of the men in Jerusalem is challenged here by Ezekiel. Having spoken of the leaders of Jerusalem, Ezekiel turns to address the exiles in verse 17 and following. Deuteronomy chapter 30 verses 1 to 6 famously foretold that, after the curse of exile had come upon the people, they would be restored from the land of their exile.

In particular, it promised that the Lord would address the most fundamental problem of the covenant, the problem with the people's hearts. And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you, and return to the Lord your God, you and your children, and obey His voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you, and He will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you. If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there He will take you, and the Lord your God will bring you into the land that your fathers possessed, that you may possess it, and He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers, and the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.

Having circumcised the hearts of the people, the covenant could finally begin to be kept. The process of restoration would reunite people and land, taking the scattered exiles and bringing them back to their ancestral land, replanting them, though they had formerly been uprooted. On their return they would cleanse the land of its idolatries and pollutions.

Perhaps one of the most striking features of the returned people is the contrast between the pervasive idolatry prior to the exile and the relative rarity of the practice of idolatry

in Israel after the return. If they are to be restored and established in covenant relationship with the Lord again, their rebellious hearts have to be addressed. We find similar promises of changed hearts and new covenant to the ones that we find here in the book of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah chapter 24 verses 6 to 7. I will set my eyes on them for good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up and not tear them down. I will plant them and not pluck them up.

I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord, and they shall be my people, and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart. And perhaps most famously, Jeremiah chapter 31 verses 31 to 34. Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt.

My covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord, for this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, Know the Lord, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

Here the Lord speaks of the removal of their heart of stone and replacing it with a heart of flesh. James Jordan has speculated that, in addition to the stubbornness, rebellion, and hard-heartedness of the people referred to by it, the heart of stone might also refer to the tablets of the law, which were in the symbolic heart of the people in the Holy of Holies. However, the law was there engraved upon stone, and it would later be enfleshed in transformed hearts, committed to the worship and service of the Lord in faithfulness.

This is in keeping with the broader new covenant and biblical theme of the movement of the word of the Lord from an external to an internalized word. With such a renewed heart, they would be equipped to obey the law. The result would be a renewed covenant situation, with God being the people's God and they being his people, a key formula which expresses the ideal covenant bond, which we see in a number of the quotes from Jeremiah, for instance.

However, this restoration and renewal would not be universally enjoyed. Those who gave themselves to idols and other abominations would suffer the devastating consequences. In verse 22, we return to the scene that we left in chapter 10, verse 19, where we read, And the cherubim lifted up their wings and mounted up from the earth before my eyes as they went out, with the wheels beside them.

And they stood at the entrance of the east gate of the house of the Lord, and the glory of the God of Israel was over them. The glory chariot of the Lord is now finally leaving the city. It rises up from the middle of the city in the temple complex and goes to the Mount of Olives.

Perhaps we should recall here the departure of David from Jerusalem by way of the Mount of Olives during the coup of Absalom in 2 Samuel chapter 15. However, Christians should see a far more powerful and illuminating connection between this and the interplay between the temple mount and the Mount of Olives in the final week of Jesus' ministry prior to his crucifixion. In the final week of his ministry, Christ was constantly alternating between the temple mount where he would minister and the Mount of Olives where he would rest.

The temple is finally forsaken, its destruction is foretold, and then Christ leaves the city, crosses the brook Kidron, and ascends the Mount of Olives where he weeps in the garden. After his trials in Jerusalem, he returns to the Mount of Olives where he is crucified, and finally as he ascends into heaven, it is from the Mount of Olives that he does so. In his vision, Ezekiel returns to Chaldea and the exiles, and he recounts all that he saw to them.

One can easily recognize that this would have been a message of considerable consequence for them. A question to consider. What else can we glean from various biblical passages about the relationship between the exiles in Chaldea and the men who remained in Jerusalem during this particular period of history? So Peter opened his mouth and said, You yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed, how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power.

He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. And we are witnesses of all that he did, both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him up on the third day and made him appear, not to all the people, but to us who have been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.

And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be the judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name. While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word.

And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles, for they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we

have? And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days.

In the first half of Acts chapter 10 two men had received visions. Cornelius had received a vision while he was praying, a vision that told him to summon Peter who was staying with Simon the Tanner. The apostle Peter had received a vision of his own.

Three times a sheet containing various unclean animals had descended from heaven and he was told to rise, kill and eat. Each time he had resisted and been told that what God had cleansed he should not call common. The explanation of the vision began to become apparent to him as he was instructed by the Spirit to go with the three men who were to bring him to Cornelius.

Now in the second half of Acts chapter 10 these two men with their two separate visions are brought together, the Lord demonstrating in bringing them both together that the visions were ultimately from him and that his purpose was to bring them together in an act of mutual recognition. Neither of them fully knows the information of the other yet. Peter does not fully understand why he has been summoned and Cornelius does not yet know the message that Peter has to give to him.

Much of Acts chapter 10 and 11 is concerned with the relaying of information from one party to another, communicating to other parties what we the reader already know. Cornelius's story is told first of all by Luke, then it's conveyed by the messengers to Peter, then it's related by Cornelius to Peter and then later by Peter to the people in Jerusalem. The point of all of this is not merely that Cornelius and the people in his household receive the Holy Spirit but that they and the Jewish Christians be joined together as one body by the Spirit.

The act of mutual recognition for which the conveying of the story again and again to different parties is so important is at the very heart of what the chapters are about. When he arrives at the house of Cornelius, Cornelius responds by falling at his feet and This is clearly an inappropriate response to Peter and Peter makes very clear that he is just immortal. He is not divine, he is not worthy of worship, he is a human being like Cornelius himself.

In a couple of chapters time we'll see a contrast between Peter and another man who accepts such worship. Herod at the end of chapter 12 receives the worship of the people and as a result he is struck down by the Lord. Cornelius in anticipation of Peter's arrival has clearly summoned a great number of people.

His relatives, his close friends and all of his household are gathered together. There is clearly going to be a sense of great anticipation. What is Peter, this man who has been sent by God, going to say to him? Peter begins by explaining how remarkable it is that he's coming into a house to socialise with a Gentile.

This is not something that a typical observant Jew would do. Rather they would scrupulously maintain a distance that would enable them to remain clean. Yet Peter sees in his vision a message concerning this, that the Lord has taught him not to call anyone common or unclean.

God is going to form his holy people from people of all nations, not just people of the Jews. The very fact that Peter has come into a Gentile's house to socialise with him is already a sign that God has spoken to him, that his former opinions have been changed. Having related something of the vision that he has received, he asks why Cornelius was sent for him.

Cornelius proceeds to relate his own vision. Cornelius' story begins four days previously. Presumably he had received the vision that day, the next day he had sent out the messengers, the day afterward, the third day they had arrived in Joppa, and then on the fourth day they arrived back in Caesarea with Peter.

Cornelius describes being visited by an angel in bright clothing, described here as a man. The angel tells him that his arms have been remembered by the Lord. The Lord has seen Cornelius' acts of love and faith and in response to those acts he is going to bless Cornelius.

He instructs Cornelius to send to Joppa to ask for Simon Peter, who is lodging at the house of Simon Attana by the sea. The location of Simon Attana's house might be interesting to us. Both of these places, Joppa and Caesarea, are towns by the sea.

Within Luke's gospel he does not really talk about the sea in the same way as the other gospels do. Each of the other gospels talk about the Sea of Galilee or the Sea of Tiberias, whereas Luke talks about the Lake of Gennesaret. In the book of Acts, however, he talks about the sea as the gospel goes out to the Gentiles and to the people who are farther off.

Symbolically the sea represents the realm of the Gentiles and as the gospel moves out to these seaside towns and cities there is a sort of symbolic setting of the scene for the gospel going out from the land to other lands farther off. Cornelius tells Peter that all the people have gathered together to hear the message that he has from the Lord and Peter goes on to relate the gospel account. He begins by talking about the lesson that he has just been learning.

God shows no partiality but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. The message of the kingdom is not just for Jews, it's for Gentiles also. While God might formally have focused his work and his message upon the people of Israel, this was always towards the end that one day it would spread out the entire world.

Peter, as he goes on to relate the gospel message, does not at all disguise the fact that it is centered upon the Jewish people and their land. He talks about what has happened in Judea, in Galilee, talks about Jesus of Nazareth and of the country of the Jews in Jerusalem. While the word of Christ can be delivered to people of other nations, Jesus never ceases to be the king of the Jews.

Peter's message begins with God. Jesus is the word that he sent to Israel. God declares his good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is the Lord of all.

The testimony of the apostles began with the ministry of John the Baptist and moved on to the resurrection of Christ and Peter here tells the story in such a way. He begins with the ministry of John the Baptist, the baptism that John proclaimed and then how Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit and with power at the baptism of John. Then he goes about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil.

Jesus is a man of the spirit who acts in the power of the spirit to deliver and to save people. In so doing he manifests the power of the kingdom that has been promised by the Lord. He also achieves the victory of God against the devil, the one who oppresses, binds and accuses, keeping people of all nations under his sway.

Jesus was put to death by his people who hung him on a tree but God raised him on the third day and made him appear to people who had been chosen by God as witnesses of him. These people ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. We often downplay the significance of the post-resurrection meals with Christ.

These served as a demonstration of Christ's embodied existence following the resurrection. They also served as a joyful manifestation of the meaning of Christ's victory, performing the actions associated with the Last Supper in the context of the meal at Emmaus. Jesus gives that action a new meaning.

It is not just seen in the anticipation of his forthcoming death, it also serves as a joyful celebration of the victory looking back. When we celebrate the Lord's Supper it has both of these aspects to it. In one respect it might take us back to that evening that Christ was betrayed, to the evening of the Last Supper, the sorrow of Gethsemane and the great shadow of the forthcoming death hanging over it all.

However it should also take us back to the joy of the post-resurrection feasts, to Christ eating with the two travellers at Emmaus or to Christ eating with his disciples on the shores of the Sea of Tiberias. Christ commanded the apostles to preach to the people, to testify that he was appointed as the one to be the judge of all. Christ is the King of the Jews, he's the Messiah, but he is also the Lord of all, the judge of all, the message of Christ's universal Lordship and the fact that he will judge all persons is very much central to the message of the apostles to the Gentiles in the Book of Acts.

Although we can often speak about the Gospel as if it were a sort of salvation system, the Gospel at its very heart is the proclamation that Jesus is Lord, it's the proclamation that God's Kingdom has been established in him, that God has brought about salvation, deliverance and forgiveness for his people and that everyone should go down on their knees to pay homage to him and every mouth should confess his authority and rule. As such it is not just a message of personal salvation, it's a message of cosmic rule, it is a message about a public fact, a great fact in light of which everyone must live their lives differently. The truth of Christ as the judge of the living and the dead is something that all the prophets have borne witness to.

Everyone who believes in this one also receives forgiveness of sins through his name. Jesus' name comes with authority and power. As people receive the summons that comes in Jesus' name and with his authority, their sins can be forgiven, their lives can be changed, they can be delivered from death to life and released from the clutches of the evil one.

Even as Peter is still saying these things, the spirit comes down upon those who hear the word, presumably they have received it and as a result they receive the blessing of the Holy Spirit. The spirit's descent is a sort of second Pentecost. It's like the event of Pentecost received in Acts chapter 2 when the spirit descended upon the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem but here it's happening to Gentiles.

This serves as the spirit's imprimatur of the Gentiles, a sealing of them as true members of the people of God. They've not been circumcised, they've not even been baptised and yet they receive the spirit. Both Peter and Cornelius had received visions from God, visions from God that when brought together brought a degree of illumination.

They began to understand why the Lord had brought them together. But now in the descent of the spirit upon the Gentiles, there is a powerful confirmation that the spirit's hand has been directing all of these events. By the spirit Christ is forming his church and by giving the spirit to Jews and Gentiles alike, he desires that they recognise each other as brothers and sisters, as those who truly belong to Christ on the same level ground.

In Christ there will be no Jew nor Gentile. At this point baptism is pretty much a formality. It's a recognition of what God has already done within these people.

They have received the Holy Spirit, they've been received by God and so to withhold baptism would be going against God. It would be refusing to recognise and receive and welcome those who had been welcomed by Christ. The act of mutual recognition, reception and welcome is confirmed by the fact that Peter remains with them for a number of days.

In accepting the hospitality of Gentiles and living with them and eating with them, Peter is treating them as full brothers and sisters. A question to consider, what lessons might

we learn for our presentation of the gospel to people from Peter's condensed gospel message within this passage?