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May 31st: Ezekiel 5 & Acts 7:35—8:3

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Ezekiel's three parts of hair. Stephen's martyrdom.

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Transcript

Ezekiel chapter 5. And you, O son of man, take a sharp sword, use it as a barber's razor, and pass it over your head and your beard. Then take balances for weighing and divide the hair. A third part you shall burn in the fire in the midst of the city, when the days of the siege are completed.

And a third part you shall take and strike with the sword all around the city. And a third part you shall scatter to the wind, and I will unsheathe the sword after them. And you shall take from these a small number, and bind them in the skirts of your robe.

And of these again you shall take some, and cast them into the midst of the fire, and burn them in the fire. From there a fire will come out into all the house of Israel. Thus says the Lord God, This is Jerusalem.

I have set her in the centre of the nations, with countries all around her. And she has rebelled against my rules by doing wickedness, more than the nations, and against my statutes more than the countries all around her. For they have rejected my rules, and have not walked in my statutes.

Therefore thus says the Lord God, Because you are more turbulent than the nations that are all around you, and have not walked in my statutes or obeyed my rules, and have not even acted according to the rules of the nations that are all around you. Therefore thus says the Lord God, Behold I, even I, am against you, and I will execute judgments in your midst in the sight of the nations. And because of all your abominations, I will do with you what I have never yet done, and the like of which I will never do again.

Therefore fathers shall eat their sons in your midst, and sons shall eat their fathers. And I will execute judgments on you, and any of you who survive I will scatter to all the winds. Therefore as I live, declares the Lord God, Surely because you have defiled my sanctuary with all your detestable things, and with all your abominations, therefore I will withdraw, my eye will not spare, and I will have no pity.

A third part of you shall die of pestilence, and be consumed with famine in your midst. A third part shall fall by the sword all around you, and a third part I will scatter to all the winds, and will unsheathe the sword after them. Thus shall my anger spend itself, and I will vent my fury upon them, and satisfy myself.

And they shall know that I am the Lord, that I have spoken in my jealousy, when I spend my fury upon them. Moreover I will make you a desolation, and an object of reproach among the nations all around you, and in the sight of all who pass by. You shall be a reproach and a taunt, a warning and a horror to all the nations all around you, when I execute judgments on you in anger and fury, and with furious rebukes.

I am the Lord, I have spoken when I send against you the deadly arrows of famine, arrows for destruction, which I will send to destroy you, and when I bring more and more famine upon you, and break your supply of bread, I will send famine and wild beasts against you, and they will rob you of your children. Pestilence and blood shall pass through you, and I will bring the sword upon you. I am the Lord, I have spoken.

Ezekiel chapter 5 continues the multi-stage sign act that the Lord instructed the prophet to perform in chapter 4. In chapter 4 he enacted the siege of Jerusalem, and in chapter 5 Ezekiel enacts the judgment and scattering of the people that will follow it. He is instructed to take a sharp sword, and to use it to shave the hair off his head and his beard. Isaiah had spoken of such an act as a symbol of judgment by a foreign army back in Isaiah chapter 7 verse 20.

In that day the Lord will shave with a razor that is hired beyond the river, with the king of Assyria, the head and the hair of the feet, and it will sweep away the beard also. Perhaps

those watching Ezekiel may have recognized an allusion to Isaiah's words in his action. Ezekiel's shaving of his head and beard would have been a humiliating symbol of mourning and disgrace.

It was something that priests serving the Lord were not supposed to do, as we see in Leviticus chapter 21 verse 5. They shall not make bald patches on their heads, nor shave off the edges of their beards, nor make any cuts on their body. Later in describing the priests in the renewed temple, Ezekiel himself will write in chapter 44 verse 20 of his prophecy, they shall not shave their heads, or let their locks grow long, they shall surely trim the hair of their heads. Here the shaving of the head seems to represent a forceful humiliation of the people of the land by an invading enemy, a stripping of the glory of the nation.

Hair is also a symbol of a multitude and of growth, as Marsha Greenberg observes. Having been shaved he was instructed to weigh the hair, something which Absalom was said to have done back in 2 Samuel chapter 14 verse 26, for rather different reasons. Ezekiel would then divide the hair into three separate parts, one part he would burn up in the midst of the city, presumably the engraved image of Jerusalem that he had made on the brick.

This seemingly was performed at the end of the 390 days. The second third of the hair was scattered around the city, where it was struck with the sword. The final third of the hair was scattered to the wind, so that it would be blown away and presumably lost.

However of this final third of the hair Ezekiel was instructed to retain a small amount, which he was to bind to the folds of his garment for preservation. The word for binding here is related to the word used for besieging at the beginning of the sign act in chapter 4 verse 3, as Bloch observes. While the third in the city and the third around the city would be utterly destroyed, of the third that made it into exile a small remnant would be graciously preserved by the Lord.

Ezekiel within his sign act is playing both the part of the people at some points and the part of the Lord at others. However the preservation of the small remnant of the third to be scattered to the wind was also attended by a warning against complacency. Even some of the hair that had been preserved was to be burned.

The people would not be safe from the Lord's judgment in the land of exile, but it would follow some of them and destroy them there. We have a similar image in Zechariah chapter 13 verses 8 to 9. In the whole land declares the Lord, two thirds shall be cut off and perish and one third shall be left alive. I will put this third into the fire and refine them as one refined silver and test them as gold is tested.

In verses 5 to 17 of this chapter the Lord speaks in association with the sign act. If any of the spectators were uncertain about the meaning of the engraved brick for instance, the

Lord's announcement through Ezekiel made clear its meaning. It was a representation of Jerusalem.

Jerusalem had enjoyed a blessed and privileged status, Israel having been set apart from all of the other nations, with the Lord dwelling in their midst. However in their privilege they had sinned more grievously and egregiously than any of the other nations who did not know the Lord. The people of Israel had not only failed to observe the commandments of the Lord, they had not even lived up to the standards of the pagan nations around them.

Consequently the Lord's face was set against them. They were barred from His presence, much as the iron griddle of Ezekiel had divided Him from the model city. As a result of their sin they would suffer the grimmest of fates.

In Deuteronomy chapter 28 verses 52 to 55 the gruesome results of the siege that the Lord would bring upon Israel on account of its apostasy are described. They shall besiege you in all your towns until your high and fortified walls in which you trusted come down throughout all your land. And they shall besiege you in all your towns throughout all your land which the Lord your God has given you.

And you shall eat the fruit of your womb, the flesh of your sons and daughters whom the Lord your God has given you in the siege and in the distress with which your enemies shall distress you. The man who is the most tender and refined among you will begrudge food to his brother, to the wife he embraces, and to the last of the children whom he has left, so that he will not give to any of them any of the flesh of his children whom he is eating, because he has nothing else left in the siege and in the distress with which your enemies shall distress you in all your towns. On account of their idolatries and abominations the Lord would bring Israel to the point where they would cannibalise their own children in the most horrific manner.

Parents eating their own children is described as a result of the siege of Samaria in 2 Kings chapter 6 and of the final siege of Jerusalem in Lamentations chapter 2 verse 20, survivors would be uprooted and scattered. The judgement of the Lord that would fall upon the people of Israel would utterly devastate them on account of their persistent idolatry and their defiling of the Lord's sanctuary with their sin and their service of false gods. The threefold punishment of sword, famine and pestilence or the fourfold punishment of sword, famine, pestilence and exile are mentioned on several occasions in the book of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah chapter 15 verses 2 to 4. And when they ask you, where shall we go? You shall say to them, Thus says the Lord, Those who are for pestilence to pestilence, and those who are for the sword to the sword, those who are for famine to famine, and those who are for captivity to captivity, I will appoint over them four kinds of destroyers, declares the Lord, the sword to kill, the dogs to tear, and the birds of the air and the beasts of the

earth to devour and destroy. And I will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth because of what Manasseh the son of Hezekiah king of Judah did in Jerusalem. The description of the fate awaiting the people of Israel here is also familiar from the curses of the covenant.

They will become a byword among the nations, the awful nature of their judgement getting the attention of the surrounding peoples. A question to consider, throughout his prophecies to this point, Ezekiel has been restricted, humiliated, and charged to defile himself. He has been struck down.

The Lord has rendered him immobile. He has eaten starvation rations and food cooked over defiling dung. He has also had all of his hair shaven off in a way that serving priests were not supposed to.

How would this have shaped Ezekiel and the people's senses of the meaning of his sign Acts? Acts 7.35-8.3 This Moses whom they rejected, saying, Who made you a ruler and a judge? This man God sent as both ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush. This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years. This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.

This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai and with our fathers. He received living oracles to give to us. Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, saying to Aaron, Make for us gods who will go before us.

As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him. And they made a calf in those days and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. But God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets, Did you bring to me slain beasts and sacrifices during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? You took up the tender Moloch and the star of your god Rephan, the images that you made to worship, and I will send you into exile beyond Babylon.

Our fathers had the tender witness in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to the pattern that he had seen. Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers. So it was until the days of David, who found favour in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the god of Jacob.

But it was Solomon who built a house for him, yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says, Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord? Or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things? You stiff-necked people, and circumcised in

heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit, as your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels, and did not keep it.

And when they heard these things, they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.

But they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city, and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.

And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And falling to his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, Lord, do not hold this sin against them. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem. And they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

Devout men buried Stephen, and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women, and committed them to prison. The end of Acts chapter 7 tells the story of Stephen's martyrdom, the first martyr in the history of the church.

Stephen has been accused and he is brought before the council. He stands accused of speaking blasphemous words against God and Moses, seeking to change the customs and also the holy place of the temple. In response to these charges, Stephen retells the story of Israel.

He particularly focuses upon the characters of Joseph and Moses. He tells the story of Moses as a periodized narrative. He is delivered as an infant.

Then he visits Israel for the first time as a 40 year old. And then at the age of 80, he leads the people out of Egypt. There is a sort of parallel within the biblical narrative between these different deliverances or events.

In his childhood, he is drawn out of the water, taken from the Nile by Pharaoh's daughter. At the age of 40, he has a deliverance at the wells. He fights off the false shepherds and he delivers the bride.

And then on a second occasion, leading a flock to Mount Sinai, there is another deliverance at the water. The nation now is drawn out of the water at the Red Sea. The

Sea of Reeds would remind us of the fact that Moses himself was drawn out of the reeds.

Stephen wants us to recognize the symmetries, the symmetries within the story of Moses, but also greater symmetries. Stephen is especially concerned that we appreciate the themes of rejection that run throughout the story of Scripture. Those appointed by the Lord for the deliverance of the people are rejected by those people.

Joseph is the first one that's told, and then Moses. Moses was called at the burning bush and he had been rejected at his first visitation and now he is sent to them again. Christ is returning to Israel in the message of his apostles.

They have a chance to listen this time and to repent. There's a contrast between Israel's rejection of Moses and God's sending of him. God had chosen this one and yet Israel turned their back on him.

There's also an emphasis upon the role of the angel. The angel appears to Moses at Sinai in the burning bush. The angel also accompanies Moses in the wilderness and angels are the means by which the law is given.

Much as with Joseph, Stephen is likely telling the story in a way designed to help and encourage people to notice the resemblances between Jesus and Moses. Daryl Bok notes a number of these. Moses is rejected but he becomes ruler and judge.

Moses is a deliverer. He performs signs and wonders. Moses is a prophet and a prototype of the coming prophet like Moses.

He is a mediator. He receives and gives the words of God. This is not a flattering telling of Israel's story.

There's a parallel drawn between their past behaviour and their current condition and this is going to be only heightened at the end of Stephen's speech as he gives his indictment upon the nation. We're used to telling the stories of our peoples in flattering ways, in ways that present us as the heroic protagonists of the narrative. This is not, however, how Stephen tells his story.

In his telling of the story, Israel constantly rejects the ones that are sent to them. This way of telling the story is not novel to Stephen. We find the same thing as Christ tells the story of Israel in the parable of the wicked vinedressers.

Whereas he speaks over Jerusalem in chapter 23 of Matthew, he talks to his disciples in Matthew chapter 5 and the Beatitudes of how they persecuted the prophets that went before them. Christ's people stand facing a tradition of rejection of the word of God. They are not the first to be rejected in this manner.

This brutally honest and non-hagiographic telling of the story is possible because

forgiveness is extended to Israel. When forgiveness is extended, it is possible to tell the truth about what has happened. Indeed, forgiveness requires confession, the honest admission of our sins.

For forgiveness to be received, there must be an act of telling the truth. In telling the brutal truth of Israel's actions in this way, Stephen is inviting the people to repent. On the Day of Pentecost, a message concerning Israel's sinful rejection of their Messiah had been accepted and it led to forgiveness and repentance.

But it does not have the same effect here. Stephen summarises the whole story of the Exodus in verse 36. His concern seems to be to get to the point of the parallels between Christ and Moses.

Moses had foretold the coming of a prophet like him in the future. In Deuteronomy chapter 18 verses 15-19, The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers. It is to him you shall listen, just as you desired of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God, or see this great fire any more lest I die.

And the Lord said to me, They are right in what they have spoken. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.

And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him. This is not a promise that terminates upon Joshua. It looks forward to something greater still.

And this was an important promise for the early church. In Acts chapter 3 verses 22-24, Moses said, The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers. You shall listen to him in whatever he tells you.

And it shall be that every soul who does not listen to that prophet shall be destroyed from the people. And all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and those who came after him, also proclaim these days. We should remember that part of the accusation against Stephen was that he spoke blasphemous words against Moses.

Now we know Moses is absolutely integral to Stephen's defence. He is turning the accusation back on them. In rejecting Jesus, they are rejecting Moses, just as they rejected Moses in the past.

Israel rejected Moses when he was sent to them the first time. They rejected him the second time too. Moses mediated the law and brought about their deliverance.

But Israel wanted a golden calf as a replacement for him. Moses is also rejected or resisted on several occasions in the book of Numbers. The golden calf though was the

great act of rebellion in Exodus chapter 32.

In consequence of their rejection of Moses and turning to worship idols, the works of their hands, God gave them over to the worship of the host of heaven. There's a reference to Amos chapter 5 verses 25-27 here. It's similar to Romans 1 where people are given up to idolatry and perversion as they reject God.

Again, one of the accusations against Stephen was that he taught that Jesus would destroy the temple. And indeed Jesus had taught that he would destroy the temple. However Stephen wants to challenge the way that they regard the house.

They have turned the house of God into a sort of idol. It's treated as something that gives them a way of containing and controlling God. But God cannot be contained by such a building.

Stephen tells the story in a way that makes the wilderness experience paradigmatic. When they feel rooted in the land, it can be easy for them to forget that they are always strangers and sojourners before the Lord. The temple itself as a symbol of God's dwelling with them can always turn into a sort of false idol, something that they presume upon.

We might remember the words of Jeremiah chapter 7 verses 3 following. I will let you dwell in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words.

This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord. For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever. Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail.

Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house which is called by my name, and say, We are delivered, only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house which is called by my name become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, declares the Lord. Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it because of the evil of my people Israel. And now, because you have done all these things, declares the Lord, and when I spoke to you persistently you did not listen, and when I called you you did not answer, therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, and in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your fathers, as I did to Shiloh, and I will cast you out of my sight as I cast out all your kinsmen, all the offspring of Ephraim.

Stephen, like Christ, is presenting a similar condemnation to that of Jeremiah. They have

put their trust in this building. It has become an idol to them, but no building can contain the Lord of hosts.

He ends with a powerful denunciation, their stiff-necked rebellion, their rejection of the messengers of the Lord. These have been consistent features of their behaviour throughout their history. Israel's history is not a glorious history of accepting the messengers of the Lord.

Rather, which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed the ones who foretold Christ. It is not surprising that they have killed Christ himself. They accuse Stephen of rejecting the customs.

They received the law from angels, and did not keep it. They accuse him of blasphemy against Moses, but they have rejected the prophet like Moses, just as their forefathers rejected Moses when he was sent to them. Stephen's speech is a stunning defence.

It is also a window into how deeply the early church reflected upon Scripture and the way in which it was fulfilled in Christ. Jesus had foretold such persecution to his disciples in Luke 21, verses 12-19. He had also foretold that they would be given the words to speak when the time came.

But before all this, they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness. Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, for I will give you a mouth and wisdom which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.

You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. You will be hated by all for my name's sake, but not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives.

This is all being fulfilled for the first time in the story of Stephen. He is the first of the martyrs. And in this he is following his master.

Christ himself had a very similar trial. The accusations faced by Christ are very similar to those faced by Stephen. And the events of Stephen's trial also fulfill something that Jesus spoke of in his, in Matthew chapter 26, verses 63 to 64.

But Jesus remained silent, and the high priest said to him, I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God. Jesus said to him, you have said so, but I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven. In his trial Stephen declares, behold I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.

Most of the people in Stephen's trial would have been present at the trial of Christ. They

would have recognized the significance of these words. But their response is to shut their ears.

They stop their ears and they run at him. In this response we see them willfully closing themselves off to the message of Stephen and of the apostles, and not just closing themselves off but taking the position of utmost hostility to it. Stephen, on his part, commits his spirit to the Lord Jesus.

There is a parallel between Jesus cast outside and Stephen cast outside. Both cry with a loud voice, both call for forgiveness for their enemies. And Stephen, when he is killed, falls asleep.

When he had foretold that some of them would be martyrs, Jesus had told his disciples, but not a hair of your head will perish. The description of Stephen falling asleep in such a violent form of death is a manifestation of the fact that they cannot really harm Stephen. They may be able to destroy Stephen's body but they cannot kill his soul.

Ever since Luke chapter 19, Jerusalem was the stage on which all of these events were taking place. And now there is going to be a shift. As Jesus entered Jerusalem in the triumphal entry, people remove their garments and place them before him.

Here they remove garments again to drive Stephen out. And the apostles are scattered to the four winds of heaven. They are scattered like a dandelion cloth being blown.

And as they are scattered they bring the message with them wherever they go. We also have another character introduced here. Those putting Stephen to death put their garments at the feet of a man named Saul.

This man named Saul becomes the instigator of great persecution for the church. A question to consider. Stephen's speech comes at a decisive moment in the narrative.

From this point onwards the narrative will move away from Jerusalem and out into the wider world, to Samaria and then to the ends of the earth. How could we read Stephen's speech as a speech summing up the early stage of the mission and a verdict being declared upon people's response to it?