

# OpenTheo

## June 9th: Ezekiel 14 & Acts 12:1-24

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Cutting off the false prophets. The resurrection of Peter.

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## Transcript

Ezekiel chapter 14. I will answer him as he comes with the multitude of his idols, that I may lay hold of the hearts of the house of Israel, who are all estranged from me through their idols. Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God, Repent and turn away from your idols, and turn away your faces from all your abominations.

For any one of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who sojourn in Israel, who separates himself from me, taking his idols into his heart, and putting the stumbling block of his iniquity before his face, and yet comes to a prophet to consult me through him, I the Lord will answer him myself. And I will set my face against that man, I will make him a sign and a byword, and cut him off from the midst of my people, and you shall know that I am the Lord. And if the prophet is deceived and speaks a word, I the Lord have deceived that prophet, and I will stretch out my hand against him, and will

destroy him from the midst of my people Israel, and they shall bear their punishment.

The punishment of the prophet and the punishment of the inquirer shall be alike, that the house of Israel may no more go astray from me, nor defile themselves any more with all their transgressions, but that they may be my people, and I may be their God, declares the Lord God. And the word of the Lord came to me, Son of man, when a land sins against me by acting faithlessly, and I stretch out my hand against it and break its supply of bread, and send famine upon it, and cut off from it man and beast, even if these three men, Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in it, they would deliver but their own lives by their righteousness, declares the Lord God. If I cause wild beasts to pass through the land, and they ravage it, and it be made desolate, so that no one may pass through because of the beasts, even if these three men were in it, as I live, declares the Lord God, they would deliver neither sons nor daughters, they alone would be delivered, but the land would be desolate.

Or if I bring a sword upon that land, and say, Let a sword pass through the land, and I cut off from it man and beast, though these three men were in it, as I live, declares the Lord God, they would deliver neither sons nor daughters, but they alone would be delivered. Or if I send a pestilence into that land, and pour out my wrath upon it with blood, to cut off from it man and beast, even if Noah, Daniel, and Job were in it, as I live, declares the Lord God, they would deliver neither son nor daughter, they would deliver but their own lives by their righteousness. For thus says the Lord God, How much more when I send upon Jerusalem my four disastrous acts of judgment, sword-famine, wild beasts, and pestilence, to cut off from it man and beast! But behold, some survivors will be left in it, sons and daughters, who will be brought out.

Behold when they come out to you, and you see their ways and their deeds, you will be consoled for the disaster that I have brought upon Jerusalem, for all that I have brought upon it. They will console you when you see their ways and their deeds, and you shall know that I have not done without cause all that I have done in it, declares the Lord God. Ezekiel chapter 14 contains further oracles addressed to the house of Israel and its leaders.

The first oracle is occasioned by a delegation of elders of the exilic community coming to inquire of Ezekiel, much as they did in chapter 8 verse 1. They are presumably seeking some word from the Lord to address the situation of the community, and as in chapter 8, the Lord gives a word to Ezekiel in response to their visit. However, the response of the Lord is one of deep displeasure. In verse 3, the Lord's initial response is to Ezekiel himself.

Before he delivers the word of the Lord to the elders and the community, Ezekiel is brought into a deeper awareness of the Lord's heart towards his people, in this case by reflecting upon how presumptuous the inquiry of the elders is, considering the treachery

that they are engaged in, giving their hearts to idols. They are utterly unmindful of the fact that the Lord is a jealous God. The elders have taken idols into their hearts.

Some commentators have understood the descriptions of the elders here as referring to the wearing of amulets or idolatrous tattoos upon their chests, but as Daniel Block rightly argues, this is an overly literalistic reading of the terminology. Rather, the problem is that their hearts are still set upon idolatry, the very sin for which they were sent away into exile in the first place. Notwithstanding the presumptuous character of the elders' inquiry, the Lord still gives them an answer, but not to their inquiry.

He does not answer in a way that would justify their presumption, but rather speaks directly to their idolatry and presumption by condemning them. They have come before the Lord with the multitude of their idols still in their hearts. The Lord has determined to lay hold of the hearts of the house of Israel, whose hearts are estranged from Him through idolatry, even when they go through the motions of seeking His face.

Israel is like a wife who feigns to love and be faithful to her husband, even while she is constantly lusting after her lovers and pursuing affairs with them on the side. The Lord presents an urgent warning to the house of Israel. There remains still a slim possibility that, if they would put away their idolatries, they might know the sort of covenant relationship with the Lord that He had always intended for them.

However, all of those who provoked the Lord to jealousy by persisting in idolatry, even while inciting the Lord by inquiring of Him by the prophet, would be utterly cut off. They would face the judgment that was to fall upon the person who would lead others astray into idolatry, in the book of Deuteronomy, for instance. Such people would be cautionary examples to everyone else.

In 1 Kings chapter 22 we see the Lord placing a lying spirit in the mouths of all of Ahab's prophets. And even though the faithful prophet Micaiah alerts him to this fact, King Ahab's heart is still set on the falsehood. Those whose hearts are devoted to idols, yet inquire of the Lord, would also be sent such deception and delusion, as would the prophets who served them.

In such a manner the Lord would deal with the adulterous idolatry of the house of Israel, which had estranged their hearts from Him. We see a similar warning in the context of the prophesied coming of the lawless one, in 2 Thessalonians chapter 2 verses 9-12. The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan, with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refuse to love the truth and so be saved.

Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness. One of the surprising points of that passage in 2 Thessalonians is that

genuine love for the truth must in many ways precede belief in the truth. And conversely those who do not love the truth, and those whose hearts are given to lies, will easily accept delusions, even when they retain some knowledge that they are not true.

There is a sort of collaboration in falsehood between the person who consults the false prophet, their hearts being set upon lies, and the false prophet whose heart is given to the lies, and is easily taken in delusions, and give flattering falsehoods to the persons who seek them. As the Lord dealt decisively with both the false prophets and those who sought them, the people would know that He was the Lord. Verses 12-20 present the hypothetical case of a land that has proved deeply unfaithful.

Such a land faces a fourfold judgment, famine, wild beasts, sword, and pestilence. There are several allusions back to Leviticus chapter 26 here, and to the curses of the covenant. We might also think of Ezekiel chapter 5 verse 17.

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.

We encounter similar statements in places like Jeremiah chapter 15 verses 2-3. 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. The certainty of the destruction of such a land is such that even the most famous intercessors and righteous men would only be delivered themselves in the case of its destruction.

Faithful Noah was saved with seven other people, his sons and their wives and his wife. But in the disaster facing such a nation, a man such as Noah could not be certain of saving his family. Job was famous as a righteous man who feared God and eschewed evil, one who persevered under trial and was vindicated as a result.

Job's family were directly implicated in his testing and in his blessing. Job interceded for his children and we have every reason to believe that he was heard. However, in the case of such an unfaithful nation, even the prayers of a faithful man like Job would prove ineffectual.

The surprising figure on this list is Daniel or Danel. Scholars often dismiss the idea that this could be the Daniel of the biblical book, and not without some reason. If we think about it, Daniel is a young contemporary of Ezekiel and the great deeds and prophecies associated with him are still at this point in history, in the future.

Why would such a figure be listed along with Job and Noah? For this reason, scholars

have put forward other candidates as possible figures that might be referred to here. It might be the Danel mentioned in Jubilees chapter 4 verse 20, the maternal grandfather of Methuselah. Others have seen it as the righteous Ugaritic king Danel.

However, neither of these two cases seem to be in any way remarkable enough to justify inclusion in such a list of three persons. We don't even know if the righteous king Danel was viewed to be a servant of Yahweh. Also, when we return to consider the identification of this figure with the canonical figure of Daniel, the case really isn't as weak as it might originally seem.

The younger Daniel, tested in the court of Nebuchadnezzar and interpreting the king's dreams, sets himself apart from others and is raised up to high status. As a result of his faithfulness and wisdom, the king of Babylon himself declares the sovereignty of the Lord. One can imagine that the faithfulness of this man Daniel resulted in a considerable amelioration of the lot of the Judahite exiles and also of their king Jehoiakim.

Here is a man who through his individual righteousness has blessed a whole nation. But what the Lord is saying here, that in the case of this unfaithful nation that he's speaking about, even a man as faithful as this man Daniel would only save himself. No one else would be saved or blessed on his account.

Verses 13 to 20 are a four panel list of the potential judgments that might face such a nation. In verses 13 to 14, famine. 15 to 16, wild beasts.

17 to 18, the sword. And then 19 to 20, pestilence. In all of these cases the judgment is certain and irrevocable.

Even the most famously faithful people of the current time or of the distant past could only save their own skins through their faithfulness. And if the hypothetical land of verses 12 to 20 faces such certain judgment, how much more so After all of the blessings and the warnings and the privileges that Jerusalem had enjoyed, how would they be spared of the fourfold judgment of sword, famine, wild beasts and pestilence? No, they would not be spared. They would be utterly cut off.

Both man and beast would be scoured off the land. However, there is a surprising twist. Some survivors would be left in it.

Sons and daughters not saved by the faithfulness of any righteous men within the land. No such salvation was possible as we saw earlier, but purely by God's grace. They would join the exiles in Babylon.

However, such people, those spared, would not share in the blessings that would be enjoyed by a reformed and renewed nation made out of the Jewish exiles in Babylon after their hearts were circumcised. Rather, they would be evidence of the justice of the Lord's judgment. Their wickedness seen by the exiles in Babylon would be evidence that

God had acted justly in His destruction of Jerusalem.

A question to consider. Verses 12 to 20 present us with the fact that in ordinary times, faithful people can save others around them. Can you think of examples in scripture where the faithfulness of particular individuals led to the salvation of many others, even though those others were not righteous themselves? Acts chapter 12 verses 1 to 24.

About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. He killed James the brother of John with the sword, and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of unleavened bread.

And when he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people. So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church. Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison.

And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, Get up quickly. And the chains fell off his hands.

And the angel said to him, Dress yourself and put on your sandals. And he did so. And he said to him, Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.

And he went out and followed him. He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city.

It opened for them of its own accord, and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him. When Peter came to himself, he said, Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel, and rescued me from the hand of Herod, and from all that the Jewish people were expecting. When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John, whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying.

And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Broda came to answer. Recognizing Peter's voice in her joy, she did not open the gate, but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. They said to her, You are out of your mind.

But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, It is his angel. But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened they saw him, and were amazed. But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison.

And he said, Tell these things to James and to the brothers. Then he departed and went to another place. Now when day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter.

And after Herod searched for him and did not find him, he examined the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and spent time there. Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon, and they came to him with one accord, and having persuaded Blastus, the king's chamberlain, they asked for peace, because their country depended on the king's country for food.

On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them. And the people were shouting, The voice of a god and not of a man. Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last.

But the word of God increased and multiplied. Acts chapter 12 tells of further persecution of the church at the hands of Herod. The Herod here is Herod Agrippa, who follows after Herod Antipas, who is the one who is involved in Jesus' crucifixion.

Herod the Great was involved in the slaughter of the innocents at the beginning of the book of Matthew. There is a further Herod later on in the book of Acts, Herod Agrippa II, who is the son of this Agrippa. Paul will speak before him later on in the book.

Herod kills James the brother of John and seeing that this action pleases the Jews, he proceeds to arrest Peter. Both the Jewish and the Roman leaders seem to rule in large part by crowd pleasing, rather than actually out of a concern for justice. The timing of the arrest of Peter is significant.

He is arrested during the feast of unleavened bread. Herod intends to bring him out after the time of the Passover, presumably when the large crowd of the worshippers from other parts of Judea and the Diaspora have departed, as the greatest opposition to Peter and the early church is probably found among the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. On the very night before he is about to be brought out, Peter is sleeping between two soldiers, he is bound with two chains, and he has sentries guarding the door.

Reading this account of Peter, we might recall the story of Christ. Like the story of Christ's crucifixion, this occurs around the time of the Passover. Like Christ, Peter is between two men, Christ was between two criminals on his cross, and Peter is between two soldiers.

Like Jesus in his tomb, Peter is in a sealed prison, a prison guarded by people outside. As an angel of the Lord descends and rolls back the stone of Christ's tomb, so an angel of the Lord comes to Peter, removes the chains from his hand, opens up the gate of the prison, and leads him out into freedom. The story then is a sort of resurrection for Peter,

and this theme continues as we go further on in the narrative.

Having been delivered by the angel, Peter goes to the house of Mary, the mother of Mark, where he knows that people will be praying for him. This would be the house of some well-to-do people. They have a servant girl, they have a gate.

Mary was most likely a widow and a host of the early church. While many of the people in Jerusalem had sold their property and their possessions, there were certain people who still had considerable riches, and would use those to support the wider community. She is the mother of John Mark, a character in the narrative in his own right later on in the story of Acts.

Mark was a cousin of Barnabas, as we see in Colossians 4.10. Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, greets you, and Mark, the cousin of Barnabas, concerning whom you have received instructions. If he comes to you, welcome him. It is possible that Mary and John Mark were also Levites, as Barnabas was a Levite.

Mark was a Latin personal name, most commonly encountered in people with Roman citizenship. Like John, a Jewish name, it was an extremely common name. It is likely that this is the same Mark as wrote the Gospel, and Peter going to his house suggests some association between the two, something that the tradition has generally recognised, Peter being regarded as a particularly important source for Mark's account in his Gospel.

Many early church meetings would occur in private houses for prayer, worship and study of Scripture. The earlier stage of the church's life involved this meeting from house to house, private associations, meeting in domestic contexts, and without the same formal institutional and leadership structures which would often develop later. Such house churches would have been very small for the most part.

Craig Keener suggests that the sort of number we should expect to have been there would have been over a dozen, but not more than fifty. When Peter arrives at the gate, Rhoda the servant girl hears and recognises his voice, and she runs to tell the people who are praying, but they don't believe her. While they are praying for the protection and deliverance of Peter, they cannot imagine that their prayers will be answered in such dramatic fashion.

This is the second of three deliverances from jails or prisons, the Lord demonstrating his power to open up prison doors, just as he has opened up the prison doors of the grave itself. Reading the story of the resurrection in the light of this parallel, we can also see the way in which the resurrection is a breaking open of a prison. The sealed entrance, the armed guards, all of these are features of a prison.

Christ opened up the prison of the tomb, and now his disciples are opening up the prisons of the tyrants of this age. Peter appears to a woman, who brings the news to the



disciples, and yet they fail to believe. The exact same pattern can be seen in Luke 24 10-11.

Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles, but their words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. One of the initial responses of the disciples to the appearance of Christ was to think that he must be a ghost, Luke 24 37, but they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit. Here they presume that the person who has appeared must be Peter's ghost.

When they finally let him in, and there's a certain comedy to the way that this plays out, underlining something of the playfulness and unpredictability of the spirit, Peter then reports the miracle that had occurred. He instructs them to pass on the news to James and the brothers. James here is almost certainly the brother of Jesus, who plays a prominent role in the leadership of the early church in Jerusalem.

Peter's commissioning them as witnesses to his deliverance, tell these things to James and to the brothers, also reminds us of the story of Christ's resurrection, where those who witnessed the empty tomb are instructed to go and tell his disciples and Peter in Mark chapter 16 verse 7. Peter goes on at this point to another place, presumably this is because a large house associated with the disciples in the eyes of the authorities would be the first place where he will be sought. Peter's experience is similar to that of Christ. He's released from prison during the feast of unleavened bread.

Christ was delivered from the grave. He appears to a woman much as Christ appeared to women, but her report is not believed, as the report of the women was not believed in the story of the gospels. He appears to the disciples and then he disappears from the scene.

From this point in the story of Acts, Peter is no longer the centre of attention. The narrative gaze switches from Jerusalem and from Peter to Paul and his missionary companions. Much as Christ's resurrection was followed by his departure, so Peter's resurrection-like deliverance is followed by his departure from the scene.

Besides a parallel with Christ, there's a juxtaposition with Herod. Peter has gone up from Caesarea to Judea and Herod goes down from Judea to Caesarea. Peter goes to the Gentiles and eats with them.

Herod has hostility with the Gentiles and refuses to share food with them. Peter refuses worship in Caesarea in Acts 10 25-26. When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshipped him.

But Peter lifted him up, saying, Stand up, I too am a man. While Peter had refused worship there, Herod accepts worship in the city of Caesarea. And both of them are

struck.

Peter is struck by the angel to wake him up and lift him up and Herod is struck by an angel to bring him down. All of these things happening around the time of the Passover might also help us to think in terms of themes of Exodus. Peter is like the Jews instructed to dress for departure at midnight and then being brought out through this passage, while Herod is like the pursuing pharaoh and he is struck down by the angel of death.

One firstborn son is delivered at midnight and another firstborn son is destroyed. Josephus in his Antiquities of the Jews book 19 also recalls the death of Agrippa. He writes, Now when Agrippa had reigned three years over all Judea, he came to the city Caesarea, which was formerly called Stratos Tower, and there he exhibited shows in honour of Caesar upon his being informed that there was a certain festival celebrated to make vows for his safety.

At which festival a great multitude was gotten together, of the principal persons, and such as were of dignity through his province, on the second day of which shows he put on a garment made wholly of silver, and of a contexture truly wonderful, and came into the theatre early in the morning, at which time the silver of his garment being illuminated by the fresh reflection of the sun's rays upon it, shone out after a surprising manner, and was so resplendent as to spread in horror over those that looked intently upon him. And presently his flatterers cried out, one from one place, and another from another, though not for his good, that he was a god. And they added, Be thou merciful to us, for although we have hitherto revered thee only as a man, yet shall we henceforth own thee as superior to mortal nature.

Upon this the king did neither rebuke them, nor reject their impious flattery, but as he presently afterward looked up, he saw an owl sitting on a certain rope over his head, and immediately understood that this bird was the messenger of ill tidings, as it had once been the messenger of good tidings to him, and fell into the deepest sorrow. A severe pain also arose in his belly, and began in a most violent manner. And when he had been quite worn out by the pain in his belly for five days, he departed this life.

The passage ends by describing the word of God increasing and multiplying. This language recalls the language of Genesis. It is being fruitful and multiplying.

This was part of the fundamental human blessing and calling, and now it is being fulfilled as the word of God is spreading out. It is also the language of growth, similar to that which we have at the beginning of the book of 1 Samuel, and of the young Jesus and John the Baptist in the book of Luke. A question to consider.

The experience of Peter in this chapter is closely modelled upon the experience of Christ in his resurrection. What are some other examples in the story of the book of Acts where the experience of the disciples is modelled upon the experience of Christ?

