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The watchman sounds the alarm. Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch.

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Transcript

Ezekiel chapter 7. The word of the Lord came to me, and you, O son of man, thus says the Lord God to the land of Israel, an end, the end has come upon the four corners of the land. Now the end is upon you, and I will send my anger upon you. I will judge you according to your ways, and I will punish you for all your abominations.

And my eye will not spare you, nor will I have pity, but I will punish you for your ways, while your abominations are in your midst. Then you will know that I am the Lord. Thus says the Lord God, disaster after disaster, behold it comes, an end has come, the end has come.

It has awakened against you, behold it comes. Your doom has come to you, O inhabitant of the land. The time has come, the day is near, a day of tumult, a knot of joyful shouting on the mountains.

Now I will soon pour out my wrath upon you, and spend my anger against you, and judge you according to your ways, and I will punish you for all your abominations. And my eye will not spare, nor will I have pity, I will punish you according to your ways, while your abominations are in your midst. Then you will know that I am the Lord who strikes.

Behold the day, behold it comes, your doom has come, the rod has blossomed, pride has budded, violence has grown up into a rod of wickedness. None of them shall remain, nor their abundance, nor their wealth, neither shall there be preeminence among them. The time has come, the day has arrived, let not the buyer rejoice, nor the seller mourn, for wrath is upon all their multitude.

For the seller shall not return to what he has sold, while they live, for the vision concerns all their multitude, it shall not turn back, and because of his iniquity, none can maintain his life. They have blown the trumpet and made everything ready, but none goes to battle, for my wrath is upon all their multitude. The sword is without, pestilence and famine are within.

He who is in the field dies by the sword, and him who is in the city, famine and pestilence devour. And if any survivors escape, they will be on the mountains, like doves of the valleys, all of them moaning, each one over his iniquity. All hands are feeble, and all knees turn to water.

They put on sackcloth, and horror covers them. Shame is on all faces, and baldness on all their heads. They cast their silver into the streets, and their gold is like an unclean thing.

Their silver and gold are not able to deliver them in the day of the wrath of the Lord. They cannot satisfy their hunger, or fill their stomachs with it, for it was the stumbling block of their iniquity. His beautiful ornament they used for pride, and they made their abominable images and their detestable things of it.

Therefore I make it an unclean thing to them, and I will give it into the hands of foreigners for prey, and to the wicked of the earth for spoil, and they shall profane it. I will turn my face from them, and they shall profane my treasured place. Robbers shall enter and profane it.

Forge a chain, for the land is full of bloody crimes, and the city is full of violence. I will bring the worst of the nations to take possession of their houses. I will put an end to the pride of the strong, and their holy places shall be profaned.

When anguish comes, they will seek peace, but there shall be none. Disaster comes upon disaster. Rumor follows rumor.

They seek a vision from the prophet, while the law perishes from the priest, and counsel from the elders. The king mourns. The prince is wrapped in despair, and the hands of the

people of the land are paralyzed by terror.

According to their way I will do to them, and according to their judgments I will judge them, and they shall know that I am the Lord. Ezekiel chapter 7 is a new oracle, beginning with the familiar formula, The word of the Lord came to me. The previous chapter had addressed the mountains and the land of Israel, and this chapter continues to address them.

Ezekiel had been established as a watchman for the house of Israel back in chapter 3. In this chapter he is called to sound the alarm. Daniel Bloch subdivides the oracle into three sections, verses 2-4, 5-9 and 10-27. The first two sections, which have significant similarities to each other, are marked off in the beginning by Thus says the Lord God, and all three of the sections conclude with what commentators term a recognition formula.

Then you will know that I am the Lord. The Lord is demonstrating his character through his judgment upon his people. As commentators note, this is a difficult oracle, presenting many conundrums for the translator and interpreter.

Marsha Greenberg recognises in the second half of the passage, in verses 12-18 and 19-27, two rounds of scenes of the end awaiting the land and its people, arguing that, much as there are large-scale parallels between verses 2-4 and 5-9 in the first half, strong connections exist between these two parts of the second half of the chapter. He writes, It is evident that the second round of the scenes of the end not only corresponds to the first, but heightens and specifies it. This is especially clear in the particularisation of sin, cultic and civil, of the cruel punishments and of the detail of institutional collapse.

The second half of the chapter also elaborates the first, Bloch describing it as an intentional exposition of the two-fold alarm sounds in verses 2-9. The chapter speaks of a coming day of the Lord. The day of the Lord is a common theme in the prophets.

The day of the Lord is the event in which the Lord will act decisively in history to establish his justice. It is the day of salvation and deliverance, but also the day of reckoning and vengeance. The people seem to have popularly associated the day with positive themes, but Amos and other prophets paint a far more forbidding portrait of the awaited day.

Amos 5, verses 18-20 Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord! Why would you have the day of the Lord? It is darkness and not light, as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him, or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall, and a serpent bit him. Is not the day of the Lord darkness and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it? Zephaniah also speaks in a similar manner of the day of the Lord in chapter 1, verses 14-16 of his prophecy. The great day of the Lord is near, near and hastening fast.

The sound of the day of the Lord is bitter. The mighty man cries aloud there. A day of wrath is that day, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements.

On the expected day of the Lord the lights would go out all over Judah, the land and its people engulfed in the darkness of utter destruction and desolation. The exiles in Babylon would live through all of this horrific history from a distance. Ezekiel, the watchman, high on the sentry tower, receives the word of the Lord.

The day of reckoning is at hand, the day of the full measure of the Lord's judgment. It will be comprehensive and conclusive, an end coming upon the four corners of the land. Whether people are ready or not, it has arrived, the day when the punishment for all of their sins would come upon them.

They had been warned on numerous occasions by earlier prophets, even yet Jeremiah was among them, offering them the smallest glimmer of hope of escaping with their lives if they would submit to the Lord's word. The disaster about to come should not have been a surprise, nor could it be claimed that it was excessive. The judgment was only according to the measure of their sins.

Verses 5-9 repeat and develop this warning. The watchman's warning trumpet is sounded once more, but louder. One of several difficult words and verses in the chapter, the term that the ESV, with many commentators, translates as doom in verse 7, a term found elsewhere in Isaiah chapter 28 verse 5 in reference to a diadem, might, according to Block, here refer to a chain or a leash by which the Israelites would be led off captive to Babylon.

The judgment about to come would not be tempered by pity, but would be utterly devastating. The third cycle of warning opens with a staccato series of alarms in verses 10-12. Verse 10 is especially difficult to interpret, possibly depending upon a figure of speech that is lost to history.

Greenberg observes the fact that its elements are reminiscent of the story of Aaron's rod in Numbers chapter 17. He suggests that it might function as a grim parody of election. The rod might refer to the rod of the Lord's judgment through a foreign nation, the references to blossoming and budding making clear that the time was ripe for their destruction.

Alternatively, pointed differently, the vowels of biblical Hebrew were later added as markings around a text that was originally just consonants. The word here might refer not to a rod but to perverted justice. Their sins had reached the full measure and now they faced the consequent devastation.

Verse 11 is also textually obscure, but its point might be that they would be stripped of everything, wealth, plenty and status. The trees turned to water in verse 17 might be a reference to them wetting themselves. The watchman's trumpets blow in vain.

The stoutest hearts are seized by terror. People crumple in the face of the onslaught. The few abject survivors are scattered abroad upon the mountains.

Greenberg argues for a parallel between verses 12-18 and 19-27, with the latter heightening and specifying the former. What he describes as the futility of commerce in the first round of the scenes of the end, in verses 12-13, corresponds with the futility of wealth, in verse 19. The impending war, disasters and refugees, in verses 14-16, with the invasion, desecration and spoilation in verses 21-24.

Interspersed references to divine anger and the people's sin, in verses 12, 13, 14 and 16, correspond with those in verses 19, 20, 22 and 23, and what he terms the general appallment of verses 17-18, with all classes being paralysed, in verses 25-27. Bloch suggests that more than the collapse of the economy is in view in verse 19. Rather, it's a condemnation of the materialism of the people.

Their souls are being required of them by the Lord's judgement. Their enlarged barns are now utterly worthless to them. Their silver and gold won't buy them freedom from the besieging army.

They can't eat it in the famine. That which they once rested all of their confidence upon is now powerless to help them. The beautiful ornament of verse 20 is probably a reference to the temple and its treasures, the crowning jewel of the city of Jerusalem, the sanctuary of the Lord, which they had repeatedly defiled with their idolatry.

In Jeremiah chapter 7 we also see that the people treated the temple itself in an idolatrous fashion, fetishising and putting their hope in the temple, rather than trusting in the Lord. This great house of the Lord would be utterly profaned and despoiled by the Babylonians. They would strip it of its treasures and destroy it.

The place the Lord had treasured is given into the hands of a wrecking crew. The people themselves, the treacherous bride, would be taken away by a chain, and their possessions given into the hands of strangers. In the coming disaster they would flail around for something to grasp hold of, yet no peace or escape would be afforded them.

It would be one merciless blow after another. The Lord would be silent in their distress. The prophet would have no vision, the priest would no longer be able to bring the clarity of the law to bear, and the elders would be dumbstruck.

The king, the nobles and officials, and the citizens would all despair as their sins came upon their heads. A question to consider, how might the Lord's terrible judgement against the people's materialism in verse 19 speak into our own day? Acts chapter 8

verses 26-40 Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. This is a desert place.

And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship, and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah.

And the spirit said to Philip, Go over and join this chariot. So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, Do you understand what you are reading? And he said, How can I, unless someone guides me? And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this, Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth.

In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth. And the eunuch said to Philip, About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this? About himself or about someone else? Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this scripture he told him the good news about Jesus.

And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, See, here is water. What prevents me from being baptized? And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they came up out of the water, the spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.

But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea. To this point in the book of Acts, the second half of chapter 8, we have seen the conversion of various groups of persons. The next few stories however focus upon three key individuals, the Ethiopian eunuch, Saul of Tarsus, and Cornelius in Caesarea.

The story of the Ethiopian eunuch, the second story that focuses upon the character of Philip, is a journey narrative, like that of Saul after it, and like the story of the two travellers on the road to Emmaus at the end of Luke's gospel. Later in Acts chapter 21 verses 8 to 10, we will discover that Luke stayed for some time with Philip. Presumably during this period Philip informed him of the events recorded in this chapter.

An angel of the Lord directs Philip to go to the south, to a road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. Being directed here by the angel of the Lord, and in a few verses timed by the spirit of the Lord, we see that God is the one in charge of this mission. This is not a mission that is primarily directed by the apostles, it is directed by God himself who is sending the messengers where they really ought to go.

On the road he meets an Ethiopian, a eunuch, who is a court official of the Queen. While some have suggested that he might just have been a high ranking official, it is almost certain that he was an actual literal eunuch. Because they had no natural heirs, eunuchs could be of value to courts.

As their personal legacy was entirely invested in the health and continuance of the dynasty, the loyalties of such men could be more certain than those who had children of their own. Eunuchs were sometimes used to guard the harem, whereas other eunuchs like this were high ranking officials who performed important state tasks. This eunuch is in charge of the Queen's treasure.

He has come to Jerusalem to worship, which suggests that he is at the very least a God-fearer. Perhaps he is some sort of proselyte. Others have raised the possibility that he might have been a diaspora Jew.

One way or another he has a prior attachment to the worship of God. It is important to remember that when we read of conversions in the Book of Acts, many of them are conversions not from unbelief to belief, but from old covenant and the status that belonged to someone within that order to new covenant and a new status. The eunuch is a very effective illustration of this particular movement.

Someone who would have enjoyed little to no status within the old covenant order, now being marked out as a full member of the people of God, the eunuch would have been restricted in a number of ways. First of all, as a Gentile or God-fearer, when he went to the temple he would at most have been able to come into the court of the Gentiles. Then we read in Deuteronomy chapter 23 verse 1, The spirit directs Philip to go over to the Ethiopian eunuch's chariot.

There, Philip hears him reading Isaiah the prophet. While modern readers are accustomed to read texts silently, ancient readers almost invariably read aloud or while muttering the words under their breath. We should bear this in mind as we so often read the scripture without any regard for the ear and its place in receiving the word.

There are certain things that the ear will hear in texts, the eyes cannot see. The story here is similar to ones that we have read before, particularly to the story of Emmaus. There is a stranger meeting someone returning from Jerusalem on their way.

They enter into conversation. They speak to a lack of understanding. They teach them the scriptures, beginning with some part in particular.

As we go further we will see that there are greater similarities binding together these two stories, similarities that might help us better understand the message that they have for us. The fact that the Ethiopian eunuch has a copy of Isaiah probably indicates both his personal wealth and his interest in the Old Testament scriptures as a Gentile God-

fearer or proselyte. As the travellers of Emmaus invited Jesus in to share a meal with them, the Ethiopian eunuch invites Philip into his chariot.

The passage he is reading is Isaiah 53, a text that was of importance for the early church as a testimony to Christ as the suffering servant. However, this particular scripture might have had a resonance for the Ethiopian eunuch beyond its regular readers. Peter Lighthouse observes, Anyone reading the book of Isaiah beyond this point would also discover a reference to the eunuch that would have been an immediate source of promise to someone like this Ethiopian.

It speaks directly to two aspects of his experience and his existence, to the fact that he is a foreigner and to the fact that he is a eunuch. Isaiah 56, verses 3-8 Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say, The Lord will surely separate me from his people. And let not the eunuch say, Behold, I am a dry tree.

For thus says the Lord, To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters. I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant, these I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer.

Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar. For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. The Lord God who gathers the outcasts of Israel declares, I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered.

The eunuch then receives a promise that he will have an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. The eunuch by virtue of the fact that he could not have children would presume himself to be cut off, his name would die with him. Yet in this word of prophecy there is a promise of a way in which his name need not be cut off.

Through the work of the suffering servant, one who himself was cut off, cut off from the land of the living itself, yet one who nonetheless saw his offspring and gave fruitfulness to others, he might receive a sort of fruitfulness and re-inclusion himself. The spirit is clearly working on both sides of this interaction. He's brought Philip to the Ethiopian eunuch, but he's also brought the Ethiopian eunuch to these particular texts to reflect upon those and then to invite Philip into his chariot.

The spirit is a sort of matchmaker, one who's doing the work of forming the kingdom of Christ beyond the walls of the church, beyond the purview of the church. He's bringing life in the wilderness to people that the church has not yet encountered, so that when the church in people like Philip encounters people like this Ethiopian eunuch, they will discover that the spirit has already been working there. Having been provided his text by

the work of the spirit, Philip is well able to speak of the gospel and to explain the meaning of Christ from this text.

And like Jesus teaching the disciples on the road to Emmaus, taking this as his starting point, he goes all the way through to explain what Christ means. As they're passing through this wilderness, they encounter some water and the eunuch's response is to ask for baptism. In certain translations, there is a verse following this in verse 37, a verse that almost certainly does not belong in the text but is a later inclusion.

Nevertheless, it likely witnesses to widespread early Christian understandings of baptism. The chariot is stopped, they both go down into the water and Philip baptises him. While they're both going down into the water suggests that this was something more than a sprinkling, it should not be taken as certain evidence of immersion.

It could, for instance, have involved pouring the water upon the Ethiopian eunuch while he was standing in the water to his waist. Such a form of baptism would capture different aspects of the symbolism of baptism. Baptism symbolically draws upon waters from above and waters from below.

The waters from below are the waters associated with death, the waters from which we are delivered, that we pass through, and the waters from above are the waters of God's heavenly blessing, most particularly the water of the spirit poured out. Were there these two different dimensions of baptism, it might also help us better to explain how the church's later practice of baptism could involve either full submersion or the pouring out of water or the sprinkling of it from above. Both of these forms then would be running with one particular aspect of the symbolism of the water, either the water from above or the water from below, whereas both forms could be included in a single rite.

The story of the Ethiopian eunuch might also remind us of other stories. A high court official who comes in a chariot who is then washed in water. It's the story of Elisha and Naaman the Syrian.

There might also be some sort of reversal of the story of the Exodus. Here a Jewish man on foot is pursuing a descendant of Ham in a chariot. This is the reversal of the story of the Exodus where the Egyptians, descendants of Ham, pursued the Israelites who were traveling on foot in their chariots.

And whereas Pharaoh and his men were submerged in the water of the Red Sea, here the Ethiopian eunuch goes down into the water, is washed, comes up, and is cleansed. In a reversal of the story of the Egyptians, this man is delivered through the waters. As they come up from the water, the spirit of the Lord carries Philip away.

It seems to be an instantaneous thing. He is instantaneously moved away from that place and snatched up and placed somewhere else. We read of similar events in the

context of Elijah and also in the book of Ezekiel.

Philip's disappearing from the sight of the eunuch immediately after the baptism is completed might remind us of something. It should remind us of the story of Emmaus once again. Luke chapter 24 verses 30 to 31.

When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed it and broke it and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, and he vanished from their sight. In the story of Emmaus, in the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, and later in the story of Paul, we have three examples of an encounter with Christ in speech or in the words of scripture.

In all of these occasions, it is followed by an administration of the sacrament. Christ breaks the bread and is revealed in that act of breaking bread. Here it is in the act of baptism, and then later on in the story of Saul, it is baptism once more.

The story ends with Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch both going their own ways. The eunuch continues on his way back home rejoicing. According to Christian tradition, he became the father of the Ethiopian church, a very powerful fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah.

His name is not cut off. He has many sons and daughters, even though a eunuch. Philip, for his part, finds himself at Zodus, the former site of Ashdod, and then he preaches all the way up to Caesarea.

A question to consider, what lessons might we learn from Luke's three journey narratives about the proper form and purpose of Christian worship?