

Followers of the Way

Ezekiel and the wilderness of sin

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Ezekiel 16: 1-29

In the Bible, the wilderness of Sin wasn't a moral condition, but a place – a geographical area lying between Elim and Sinai. We find it mentioned in Exodus. On the fifteenth day of the second month after the Israelites' deliverance from Egypt, the people found themselves encamped in Sin, a desolate, harsh area without food, and they started to complain against Moses, looking back with longing towards Egypt: Exodus 16:3, 'If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.'

Pretty amazing, when you think about it. After all the Lord had done for them and the demonstrations of His awesome power, they start moaning because they're hungry! Didn't any of them think to ask this amazing God for food?

Well, clearly not, and that tells us something very profound about the human condition – that was fully revealed here, in the aptly named 'Wilderness of Sin'. No matter how much God has given us, and how much we've seen Him at work in our lives, we all tend, when things are difficult, to lack trust and want more. There is always the temptation to be disobedient and rebel. In that wilderness, where we're maybe fearful and feel 'alone', it can be all too easy to lose sight of God.

The wilderness of sin is something that confronts all believers, and through which we all at some time have to pass. But the response of God to the Israelites at this time is also very instructive, because it's clear that God Himself has led the people into this place and, though they can't see it for themselves, He is very much there, with them. To spell it out, where they find themselves is not a mistake – and, faced with their grumbling, God understands. He tells Moses that He'll provide for the people by raining down bread from heaven each day, that they can gather every morning – but only enough for each day, He says, because while providing for them, He's going to test them. So the wilderness of Sin is a place of learning – a necessary place – where God begins to reveal exactly who and what He is, and what He requires, and where the people are gradually transformed from an undisciplined rabble ... into the people of God. The chosen people.

In the wilderness of sin, we are all faced with a choice, and it's always up to us how we respond. Do we trust and go forward with God, stepping out into the darkness with only His light to guide – or do we turn back to the supposed safety of the 'known', relying on what's worked before, and on ourselves?

Ezekiel is a book about this wilderness, and the wrong choices made by God's chosen people, which, justly, have provoked His wrath and brought down judgment. God in His

love, the prophet says, brought the Israelites into the promised land, described in Ezekiel 20:6 as 'a land flowing with milk and honey, the most glorious of all lands'. He has given them so much abundance ... His favour has rested upon them ... but instead of acknowledging Him as their Sovereign Lord and obeying His commands, they have been unfaithful, hanging on – grimly – to all those things that are detestable in His sight, in particular the idols of Egypt. In a nutshell, they've taken and exploited God's gifts and treated Him with contempt.

So Ezekiel lays bare the nation's spiritual faithlessness ... which is branded prostitution by God ... and it's not a pretty picture. In this powerful image of the adulterous bride, loved beyond measure and lavished with every conceivable gift and sign of love, Israel, the prophet says, has been self-seeking, wantonly idolatrous, corrupt and exploitative. She has been not just sinful, but deliberately treacherous

This is the wilderness of sin laid bare, but in Ezekiel we've moved a long way from that place in the desert. Now the wilderness of sin is exposed for what it is – a state of mind, that rejects God and exalts Self, and is rotten to the core.

There is a message here for all of us as individuals. When we come into the wilderness and are faced with difficulty and temptation, we need to remember God's past dealings with us – His faithfulness – and know that, whatever we face, He is there and will help us. If we are faithful, in this time, He will protect, provide, and deliver us.

But there's also, I think, a wider message for our society, here in the UK. Over the centuries, God has loved and kept us, giving us our laws and constitution ... the framework for our society, and protecting us from attack. Time and again He's delivered us, whether from war (and the rescue from Dunkirk comes to mind); from civil unrest and strife, that's threatened to destroy society; from plague and disease. We haven't been perfect, of course, but over time, as we've followed, acknowledging Him as our Sovereign Lord, we've prospered and grown strong. So much so, that we've literally been the envy of the world. And I believe that that's because, down the centuries, as a nation we've tried to live by Christian values and truth.

But all that now seems to have changed. Now, as a nation, we seem increasingly to be rejecting the One true God, in favour of science and the great god Self, and as mark of our tolerance, these days we acknowledge all religions – all gods – as equal. For example, in the coronation only a few days ago, as reflection of our cultural diversity, other faiths were included in Charles' crowning and given space to pray. And this was in a supposedly Christian service. In the Bible, this kind of approach is branded apostasy, and dishonouring to God. And we can be very sure that God sees ... and is responding. In the growing violence and social breakdown bedeviling society, we are, I believe, seeing the first, bitter fruits of judgment.

The lesson from Ezekiel is clear: in the wilderness of sin, if we forget God and persist in insisting on our own way, rejecting Him and flouting His commands, we will face destruction and death. The choice is ours: either to continue to plunge deeper into the abyss, or to recognise our predicament and return to God's embrace.

