

Divine Punishment Follows Unrepentant Sin, part 1

In 2020, Dane Ortlund wrote a book titled “Gentle and Lowly.” WORLD magazine labeled it the “Accessible Theology” book of the year. The Gospel Coalition called it the “Popular Theology” book of the year. It was also listed as the ACBC Biblical Counseling book of the year. It was very popular among Christians for over one year. It is still listed as a best-seller. Some churches used the book in Bible studies and sold them. But it was not theologically accurate. Grace To You and others issued scathing reviews of the poor theology.

The controversy was the theme of the book taken from Matthew 11:29.

For I am gentle
and lowly in
heart. Matthew
11:29 (ESV)

The author, Dane Ortlund, claimed that this verse helps us understand the deepest part of Jesus’ heart. He wrote the verse,

“... pulls back the veil and lets us peer way down into the core of who he is.”¹

But the author missed the fact that all of Scripture reveals Jesus’ heart. We are not to be limited to one verse. We see deeply into God’s character from Genesis to Revelation. Dane Ortlund over-emphasized the love of Christ and minimized God’s hatred for sin. He minimized God’s judgment of sin. Dane Ortlund made many assumptions that cannot be sup-

ported in Scripture. He encouraged believers to feel loved and accepted by Christ in spite of their sin. While it is true that God loves both sinners and believers, it is not true that sinning believers can assume they will escape His discipline.

His book is only one example of a very popular preaching style. No matter what the Scripture says, some pastors and teachers work to make their messages positive, encouraging and loving. Why do they do that? One well-known author said the people in the congregation do not want to feel poorly or bad about themselves. A pastor’s positive message helps them to feel better about themselves.

People love to hear positive messages. Isaiah 30:10 reveals that this has always been true of us. It states that the people in the northern kingdom of Israel, before they were defeated by the Assyrian army, begged for pleasant words



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to be spoken. They wanted to hear positive messages. Jeremiah 26:7-11 tells us the priest and the prophets of the kingdom of Judah wanted to kill the prophet Jeremiah because they did not like his negative message. Jeremiah was prophesying that the Babylonian army was going to defeat Jerusalem and make it desolate. They did not like his negative message. Later in Jeremiah 28, the false prophet, Hananiah, was giving the people encouraging news. He prophesied that Jerusalem would not be destroyed. That was encouraging to the people, but it was

1. Dane Ortlund. Gentle and Lowly. Crossway =, 2020., p. 18.

contrary to Jeremiah's prophecy. It was a false prophecy. Then in Jeremiah 32:1-5, we are told King Zedekiah imprisoned Jeremiah because he had given another negative prophecy that Jerusalem would be conquered. The point is the people wanted to hear pleasant messages just like people today. We would rather not hear that we are sinners, that God is angry with our sin, and we are going to be punished. Since Jeremiah and Ezekiel were contemporaries, this helps us understand that Ezekiel is speaking to the same people. They wanted to hear positive messages, just as people do today.

The bad news is that the book "Gentle and Lowly" and other positive only messages desensitize unbelievers and believers to their sin. If we read the writings of the apostles, we discover that many of their writings were negative. They were constantly warning or rebuking believers about sin. This fact alone reveals that the message of Scripture must not be sugar-coated. It is clear from the writings of Jeremiah that the positive messages of false prophets resulted in the people not repenting of their sins. Because they never repented, Judah was invaded and Jerusalem was destroyed.

That is the background to our study. In our last two studies in chapters 2 and 3 of the book of Ezekiel, we learned that Yahweh had called a man named Ezekiel to serve Him. He became a prophet. He was told to preach to the rebellious people of Judah and Jerusalem. They would attack him with words. Their words were illustrated as being like thistles, thorns, and like sitting on a scorpion (Ezekiel 2:6). He was told to speak only the words that Yahweh gave. Yet, the people would not listen and their behavior did not change (Ezekiel 3:4-7). Ezekiel was warned to not change what Yahweh said. He was to warn the wicked and those whose outward behavior only was righteous.

SIGN OF THE CLAY BRICK. Our study is the first part of a two-part study which begins in Ezekiel 4:1 and continues through Ezekiel 5:17. In these two chapters, we will learn about four signs and their interpretations. The signs are all about the destruction of Jerusalem and the suffering the people of Judah experienced. The description is difficult to read and accept. But we will learn and be reminded of some important truths.

The first sign is given in Ezekiel 4:1-3. It is the sign of the clay brick. Here is verse 1.

Now you son of man, get yourself a brick, place it before you and inscribe a city on it, Jerusalem. Ezekiel 4:1 (NASB)

Once again Ezekiel is called "the son of man," which means "human." So, Yahweh said, "Human, get yourself a brick." The Hebrew word for "brick" refers to a clay tile. That makes sense since Ezekiel was told to inscribe a layout of the city of Jerusalem on it. That would require a large soft clay tile. He would have scratched an outline of the city onto the brick. It would have been a large Babylonian, sun-baked, clay brick. He most likely would have inscribed an outline of the major features of the city.

Verse 2 continues recording Yahweh's command. He said,

Then lay siege against it, build a siege wall, raise up a ramp, pitch camps and place battering rams against it all around. Ezekiel 4:2 (NASB)

Now Ezekiel was to do four things. He was to lay siege against the city. That required a siege wall, a ramp, pitch camps, and battering rams placed around the city. Charles E. Dyer in his commentary on Ezekiel explains these individual parts. He wrote this helpful description,

God then told Ezekiel to lay siege to the brick. Because Jerusalem was a well-fortified city, it would take Babylon months to capture it. The purpose of a siege was to starve out the enemies and wear them down by halting their flow of food, supplies, and weapons.

In depicting the attack on Jerusalem, Ezekiel may have used small wooden models or clods of dirt to represent the army of Babylon circling the city and laying siege to it. He first erected siege works (*dayeq*) against his "city." These were earthen towers or walls of dirt erected all around Jerusalem (cf. 2 Kings 25:1; Jer. 52:4). They protected the offensive army from arrows fired from the wall and gave the attackers additional height from which to shoot arrows over the city wall.

Ezekiel was also to build a ramp up to the brick city. The ramp provided a relatively smooth incline up which siege towers and battering rams could be pushed. Also the ramp allowed the

attackers to get above the bedrock and large foundation stones of the city so the smaller and more vulnerable upper stones could be reached by the battering rams.

To prevent reinforcements and supplies from coming in and to keep survivors from slipping out, an attacking army would set up camps around the besieged city. Ezekiel did the same on his small scale model. Later Nebuchadnezzar's army surrounded Jerusalem during the siege and allowed the city no means of relief or escape. Once everything was positioned the battering rams were brought forward to begin their assault. Their constant hammering gradually weakened the city's walls.²

Once the walls collapsed, the massive Babylonian army could have rushed the city and slaughtered the people. We learn more about this in our next study.

In verse 3,

Then get yourself an iron plate and set it up as an iron wall between you and the city, and set your face toward it so that it is under siege, and besiege it. This is a sign to the house of Israel.
Ezekiel 4:3 (NASB)

The iron plate, *mahabat barzel*, was a kitchen utensil. It was an iron griddle that was used for roasting, frying, and baking flat breads over an open fire. So, Yahweh commanded Ezekiel to take this kitchen utensil and place it between himself and Jerusalem. Then Ezekiel was told to besiege the iron wall. That is, Yahweh was not passive during the Babylonian siege against Jerusalem. He was the active force behind the siege against Jerusalem. When Ezekiel set his face against this iron wall, it was a sign to the house of Israel that Yahweh was besieging the city. He was the active force behind the Babylonian army's destruction of the city and the horrors that occurred to the people.

Yahweh was not going to rescue His beloved city, Jerusalem. Nor would He respond to the prayers for deliverance from the people inside. Judgment was unavoidable and He was using King Nebuchadnezzar, His servant, to punish the house of

Judah and the city of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 25:8-12). Yahweh was besieging Jerusalem! The message of the first sign is that Yahweh, Himself, will punish unrepentant sin.

SIGN OF THE PROPHET'S POSITION. The second sign was the prophet's position. In verses 4-8, Ezekiel was told to lie down on his left side and then on his right side. Both actions had symbolic meaning. Verses 4-5 describes Ezekiel's first action.

As for you, lie down on your left side and lay the iniquity of the house of Israel on it; you shall bear their iniquity for the number of days that you lie on it. For I have assigned you a number of days corresponding to the years of their iniquity, three hundred and ninety days; thus you shall bear the iniquity of the house of Israel.
Ezekiel 4:4-5 (NASB)

When he lay on his left side for a number of days, that symbolized the length of time the house of Israel would suffer because of their unrepentant sins. The number of days Ezekiel was to lie on his left side was 390 days. Since directions were typically calculated by facing east, this means that his left side would be facing north to the house of Israel. That is, the kingdom of Israel would be under siege for 390 days.

Then verses 6-7 state that Ezekiel was to lie on his right side.

When you have completed these, you shall lie down a second time, but on your right side and bear the iniquity of the house of Judah; I have assigned it to you for forty days, a day for each year. Then you shall set your face toward the siege of Jerusalem with your arm bared and prophesy against it.
Ezekiel 4:6 (NASB)

When he had lain on his right side for 40 days, it would symbolize the length of time the house of Judah would be under siege because of their unrepentant sin.

Both verses 5 and 6 say that each day symbolized a year of rebellion. Remember in Ezekiel 2:3-5 Yahweh described them as rebellious. That is a reminder that our sins are like rebellion to our God. So the prophet lay on his left side for 390 days and on his right side for 40 days. Verse 9 seems to suggest that these days are overlapping.

The meaning of the 390 days and 40 days is not clear. Every

2. Charles Dyer. Ezekiel. The Bible Knowledge Commentary. ChariotVictor Publishing. 1985. pp. 1234-1235.

commentator agrees that no one can dogmatically claim where the 390 days and 40 days starts. None of the dates usually suggested works out correctly. But it is clear from Ezekiel 23:11 that Judah was not less guilty than the northern kingdom. In that passage, God said that the southern kingdom was more corrupt.

Verse 8 concludes this sign. It says,

Now behold, I will put ropes on you so that you cannot turn from one side to the other until you have completed the days of your siege. Ezekiel 4:8 (NASB)

The binding of the prophet reveals that the siege would not end until the defeat was successful. It would not end until Jerusalem was destroyed. God's plan would not and could not be frustrated (Isaiah 14:27). It will become clear in the next sign that Ezekiel did not lie on his side all these days because he had to prepare his meals.

SIGN OF THE POLLUTED BREAD. The third sign is given in verses 9-17. It is the sign of the polluted bread. Verses 9-11 state,

But as for you, take wheat, barley, beans, lentils, millet and spelt, put them in one vessel and make them into bread for yourself; you shall eat it according to the number of the days that you lie on your side, three hundred and ninety days. Your food which you eat shall be twenty shekels a day by weight; you shall eat it from time to time. The water you drink shall be the sixth part of a hin by measure; you shall drink it from time to time. Ezekiel 4:9-11 (NASB)

Here Yahweh told the prophet what he would eat and drink for the 390 days. He was to make bread of various grains. The various grains may represent unholiness since Leviticus 19:19 and Deuteronomy 22:9 prohibited planting different grains together, but we cannot be positive. What is clear is that the twenty shekels was slightly more than 9 ounces of bread. The sixth of a hin of water is about a quart. So, Ezekiel was to eat and drink that each of the 390 days. It was a starvation diet. This also reveals that he would not be lying on his side all day, every day. He would also have to buy the grain, and make his

bread.

Then Yahweh told him how he was to bake the bread. Verses 12-15 describe their discussion.

“You shall eat it as a barley cake, having baked it in their sight over human dung.” Then the LORD said, “Thus will the sons of Israel eat their bread unclean among the nations where I will banish them.” But I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I have never been defiled; for from my youth until now I have never eaten what died of itself or was torn by beasts, nor has any unclean meat ever entered my mouth.” Then He said to me, “See, I will give you cow’s dung in place of human dung over which you will prepare your bread.” Ezekiel 4:12-15 (NASB)

Yahweh told Ezekiel to bake the bread over human dung. Normally, the bread was baked on a metal pan over hot stones (1 Kings 19:6). But Yahweh commanded him to not use stones but human dung. It is important to note that Deuteronomy 23:12-14 commanded the Israelites to deposit their excrement outside the camp when they were walking through the wilderness. They were to then cover their excrement. So, to bake their bread over human dung would cause defilement. Consequently, Ezekiel protested. He did not want to be defiled. Then Yahweh allowed him to use cow dung.

What was the meaning of this sign? Verses 16-17 tell us,

Moreover, He said to me, “Son of man, behold, I am going to break the staff of bread in Jerusalem, and they will eat bread by weight and with anxiety, and drink water by measure and in horror, because bread and water will be scarce; and they will be appalled with one another and waste away in their iniquity. Ezekiel 4:16-17 (NASB)

The sign meant that Yahweh caused a famine during the siege on Jerusalem. In our next study we will discover why Yahweh said they will eat in horror. “They will be appalled with one another and waste away in their iniquity.”

CONCLUSION. That is the first three of the four signs Yahweh gave to Ezekiel. So, what principles can we learn from these signs?

PRINCIPLE #1 — GOD, HIMSELF, DISCIPLINES US FOR UNREPENTANT SIN. The sign of the clay brick gives us the principle that God, Himself, disciplines us because of unrepentant sin. When God commanded Ezekiel to use the iron plate as an iron wall and besiege it, it revealed that God was the hidden force helping the Babylonian army defeat Jerusalem. This gives us the principle that God, Himself, will cause us to be disciplined when we sin against Him. Hebrews 12:4-9 states,

You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin; and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons,

*“MY SON, DO NOT REGARD LIGHTLY THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LORD,
NOR FAINT WHEN YOU ARE REPROVED BY HIM;
FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES,
AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES.”*

It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? Hebrews 12:4-9 (NASB)

That is, if we do not stop committing a certain sin, God the Father will eventually discipline us to motivate us to stop sinning. He does this for those who are His children. So, if you are repeatedly committing some sin and are not disciplined for it, then you may not be a believer.

PRINCIPLE #2 — GOD IS SLOW TO PUNISH SIN. The second sign of the prophet's position gives us the principle that Yahweh is slow to punish sin. In the second sign, Yahweh said that the house of Israel had been sinning for 390 days and the house of Judah for 40 days. That is, Yahweh was very patient. That is part of the fruit of the Spirit. Romans 2:4-6 summarizes this truth. It says,

Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance? Romans 2:4 (NASB)

The books of 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles reveal that none of the kings of the northern kingdom were good. Only three kings of the southern kingdom were good. Yahweh kept sending prophets to warn the kings and the people to repent. We can be glad that God is not eager and fast to punish for our every sin. He is slow.

PRINCIPLE #3 — UNREPENTANT SIN STORES UP PUNISHMENT. Another principle that we learn from the second sign is that when we are unrepentant, we store up wrath for ourselves. Romans 2:5-6 states,

But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who WILL RENDER TO EACH PERSON ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS. Romans 2:5-6 (NASB)

This helps us understand why the punishment upon the houses of Israel and Judah was terrible. God does the same to us.

PRINCIPLE #4 — GOD REVEALS HIS HOLINESS WHEN HE PUNISHES SIN. A fourth principle that we can learn from these three signs is that Yahweh is holy when He responds in anger and punishes people who continue in habitual sins. God proves Himself holy in how He responds to sin. He proves Himself holy when He finally punishes people for their sin. Amen.