

## Ezekiel 8-10 – What if God Left? - A God-Sized Vision of God's Presence

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The most painful thing I can imagine is my wife walking out on me. She's my best friend, the most godly person I know, and an amazing mother. I cannot imagine my life without her. Her death would be unbearable, but to think she would knowingly leave me is utterly unthinkable.

But this is not a sermon on marriage.

Instead, I have a little over 30 minutes to convince you that there is something desperately worse than a broken marriage or the estrangement of a friend or close family member.

What you should fear most is the absence of God...There is nothing, absolutely nothing worse than losing God.

The key verse that stands out for me in these chapters is Ezekiel 8:6. Let me read to you vv. 1-6 of chapter 8:

<sup>NIV</sup> **Ezekiel 8:1** In the sixth year, in the sixth month on the fifth day, while I was sitting in my house and the elders of Judah were sitting before me, the hand of the Sovereign LORD came on me there. <sup>2</sup> I looked, and I saw a figure like that of a man. From what appeared to be his waist down he was like fire, and from there up his appearance was as bright as glowing metal. <sup>3</sup> He stretched out what looked like a hand and took me by the hair of my head. The Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven and in visions of God he took me to Jerusalem, to the entrance of the north gate of the inner court, where the idol that provokes to jealousy stood. <sup>4</sup> And there before me was the glory of the God of Israel, as in the vision I had seen in the plain. <sup>5</sup> Then he said to me, "Son of man, look toward the north." So I looked, and in the entrance north of the gate of the altar I saw this idol of jealousy. <sup>6</sup> And he said to me, "Son of man, do you see what they are doing-- the utterly detestable things the Israelites are doing here, things that will drive me far from my sanctuary? But you will see things that are even more detestable."

This may be one of the most shocking things you'll ever read in the Bible. It's the 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> of September, 592BC. A Jewish exile living in Babylon is transported to Jerusalem--500 miles in a blink of an eye.

Ezekiel has been in Babylon for 6 years. At the 5 year mark, Ezekiel was called by God to be a prophet. His first vision involved him lying on his side for about 14 months. At the end of the 14 months, he spoke what God wanted him to say to the other exiles in Babylon. His message was simple: Jerusalem is going to be destroyed. A nation is going to besiege the city and kill nearly every person.

Now, if I were Ezekiel, 500 miles from Jerusalem, the question in the back of my mind would be something like...what God? Why God? Why are you going to destroy your people? Doesn't Jerusalem

have your holy temple? Isn't the temple where Heaven and earth meet? It would be the same questions all the exiles would have...and so God shows why...

In Ezekiel chapter 8, God reveals to Ezekiel that things are bad in the temple, very bad. And so it's time for God to walk out the door.

Verse 6 again: .<sup>6</sup> And he said to me, "Son of man, do you see what they are doing-- the utterly detestable things the Israelites are doing here, things that will drive me far from my sanctuary? But you will see things that are even more detestable."

The repeated phrase "detestable" comes from a Hebrew word that refers to all manner of offensive things. Sometimes the word is translated "abomination." This term shows up all throughout the Old Testament. For instance, in the book of Proverbs we read:

<sup>NIV</sup> **Proverbs 6:16** There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him: <sup>17</sup> haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, <sup>18</sup> a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, <sup>19</sup> a false witness who pours out lies and a person who stirs up conflict in the community.

The book of Deuteronomy speaks of detestable practices both in the marketplace and in religious places.

<sup>NIV</sup> **Deuteronomy 25:15** You must have accurate and honest weights and measures, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you. <sup>16</sup> For the LORD your God detests anyone who does these things, anyone who deals dishonestly.

<sup>NIV</sup> **Deuteronomy 27:15** "Cursed is anyone who makes an idol-- a thing detestable to the LORD, the work of skilled hands-- and sets it up in secret." Then all the people shall say, "Amen!"

<sup>NIV</sup> **Deuteronomy 18:9** When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. <sup>10</sup> Let no one be found among you who sacrifices their son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, <sup>11</sup> or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. <sup>12</sup> Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD; because of these same detestable practices the LORD your God will drive out those nations before you.

One thing I want us to note is that what the Bible says is detestable rarely lines up perfectly with any individual person's, culture's, or group's list. So, I'm guessing someone who is more left politically loves God's demand for economic justice in the Bible. And someone leaning more to the right more likely champions God's sexual ethics and opposes what the Bible deems detestable in the bedroom.

Remember, my goal today is to help you. At least for the rest of the sermon, let's assume for argument's sake, that God is right about what is good and what is evil. Let's assume his definitions of beauty and excellence are correct, and that God's ideas of what is detestable or not are correct.

If you think about it, it's highly unlikely that God's standards of righteousness would ever line up with ours. That's what makes him God and not us.

Let's get back to Ezekiel...in chapter 8, God reveals to Ezekiel why judgment must come, and then in chapters 9-11, God explains how the judgment will come.

Chapter 8 tells us that the rationale for God's "great walk out" is this: the people have abandoned God in wholesale.

The wholesale rejection begins by the city leaders:

<sup>NIV</sup> **Ezekiel 8:7** Then he brought me to the entrance to the court. I looked, and I saw a hole in the wall. <sup>8</sup> He said to me, "Son of man, now dig into the wall." So I dug into the wall and saw a doorway there. <sup>9</sup> And he said to me, "Go in and see the wicked and detestable things they are doing here." <sup>10</sup> So I went in and looked, and I saw portrayed all over the walls all kinds of crawling things and unclean animals and all the idols of Israel. <sup>11</sup> In front of them stood seventy elders of Israel, and Jaazaniah son of Shaphan was standing among them. Each had a censer in his hand, and a fragrant cloud of incense was rising. <sup>12</sup> He said to me, "Son of man, have you seen what the elders of Israel are doing in the darkness, each at the shrine of his own idol? They say, 'The LORD does not see us; the LORD has forsaken the land.'" <sup>13</sup> Again, he said, "You will see them doing things that are even more detestable."

The scene is stunning. The 70 elders of Israel, this is like the 100 senators of the United States, are all worshipping false gods. The room is covered with images of crawling creatures, unclean, and unacceptable by God. In front of all these images are elders burning incense to 70 different false gods, probably gods connected to Egypt. The room is dark...and the elders are making excuses for their behavior: 'The LORD does not see us; the LORD has forsaken the land.'

They are saying the true God YHWH is no longer watching over them, no longer protecting them, and thus, they have every reason to turn to help from other deities.

But the wholesale rejection isn't just the appointed leaders, next up are the women of the city: vv. 14-15 – <sup>14</sup> Then he brought me to the entrance of the north gate of the house of the LORD, and I saw women sitting there, mourning the god Tammuz. <sup>15</sup> He said to me, "Do you see this, son of man? You will see things that are even more detestable than this."

The god of Tammuz is a God of death. They are worshipping a god of death, a god actually connected with enemy nation Babylon. Not only have the women abandoned the LORD, they are now turning to the gods of their conquerors.

From random women, God next shows some random men worshipping a sun God:

<sup>16</sup> He then brought me into the inner court of the house of the LORD, and there at the entrance to the temple, between the portico and the altar, were about twenty-five men. With their backs toward the temple of the LORD and their faces toward the east, they were bowing down to the sun in the east.

And then, God explains that there is a connection between false worship and violence. <sup>17</sup> He said to me, "Have you seen this, son of man? Is it a trivial matter for the people of Judah to do the detestable things they are doing here? Must they also fill the land with violence and continually arouse my anger? Look at them putting the branch to their nose! <sup>18</sup> Therefore I will deal with them in anger; I will not look on them with pity or spare them. Although they shout in my ears, I will not listen to them."

For God, belief and behavior are interconnected.

Turning to false gods will ultimately end in offensive behavior.

This is why if we worship before the Almighty Dollar we'll use money for power and position, turning a blind eye to the exploited. If we worship at the gods of pleasure and entertainment, we'll find ourselves over-sexed, over-indulged and under-satisfied. Not to mention, more and more people today are caught up in fad spiritualities, mother-earth homage, and all manner of religious practice, except Biblical Christianity.

What Ezekiel sees is an entire people worshipping false gods, engaging in all manner of deplorable behavior, and God is watching.

Next, Ezekiel watches God act against this wholesale rebellion.

In chapter 9, Ezekiel sees a vision of a man sent out to put marks on the few people in Jerusalem who haven't turned to these detestable practices. These few, these very few, survive a mass slaughter. In the scene 6 heavenly men bring the destruction. Most likely, this is Ezekiel seeing in advance the future defeat of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 6 years time. But make no mistake, the coming punishment is heavenly judgment.

At this point a shocked Ezekiel cries out:

<sup>NIV</sup> **Ezekiel 9:8** While they were killing and I was left alone, I fell facedown, crying out, "Alas, Sovereign LORD! Are you going to destroy the entire remnant of Israel in this outpouring of your wrath on Jerusalem?"

Ezekiel had falsely believed that the people not sent into Babylon were a holy remnant. He's shocked to see these people face such judgment.

But the LORD confirms in words, what Ezekiel has seen in images: verse 9: <sup>9</sup> He answered me, "The sin of the people of Israel and Judah is exceedingly great; the land is full of bloodshed and the city is full of injustice. They say, 'The LORD has forsaken the land; the LORD does not see.' <sup>10</sup> So I will not look on them with pity or spare them, but I will bring down on their own heads what they have done."

God's mercy has run out. No more pity for these people.

Now, if all we had in Scripture was Ezekiel chapters 8-9, God would seem harsh. But God had given instructions previously on numerous occasions on what the people should do in the event of a

national catastrophe. First, in Leviticus, Moses had taught them, that if the land seemed under judgment, all they needed to do was repent from sin and cry out to God:

<sup>NIV</sup> **Leviticus 26:40** "But if they will confess their sins and the sins of their ancestors-- their unfaithfulness and their hostility toward me, <sup>41</sup> which made me hostile toward them so that I sent them into the land of their enemies-- then when their uncircumcised hearts are humbled and they pay for their sin, <sup>42</sup> I will remember my covenant with Jacob and my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land.

This was in one of the first 5 books of the Bible, a section of Scripture that almost every Jewish boy would have memorized.

But if that wasn't enough, just 20-30 years before this event, God sent the prophet Jeremiah to the people, and called for them to repent.

This is recorded in Jeremiah 7: <sup>3</sup> This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. <sup>4</sup> Do not trust in deceptive words and say, "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!" <sup>5</sup> If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, <sup>6</sup> if you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, <sup>7</sup> then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your ancestors for ever and ever. <sup>8</sup> But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless. <sup>9</sup> "Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, <sup>10</sup> and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, "We are safe"-- safe to do all these detestable things? <sup>11</sup> Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the LORD.

For generations, God has sent prophets to the people. He's withheld judgment and held out mercy. But generation after generation has turned from God. Israel left God long ago within their hearts, and now the LORD is going to remove his presence from their lives.

Just picture a couple married in their mid-20s. The relationship started with passion and promise. But a few years into the marriage, the wife keeps finding her husband clicking away at his computer in the dark of night. Eventually she catches him with pornography. He says he loves her and it will never happen again. But it only gets worse. He flirts openly with other women. Whether in public or private, his growing disdain for his wife is obvious. And then one day, she walks in the bedroom to see him with another room, in her bed.

**Oh, he might say he's still married, but he has left this woman long ago in his heart, and she has every right to walk out with her feet.**

This is exactly what Ezekiel sees...remember chapter 8, vv. 5-6: <sup>NIV</sup> **Ezekiel 8:5** Then he said to me, "Son of man, look toward the north." So I looked, and in the entrance north of the gate of the altar I saw this idol of jealousy. <sup>6</sup> And he said to me, "Son of man, do you see what they are doing-- the utterly

detestable things the Israelites are doing here, things that will drive me far from my sanctuary? But you will see things that are even more detestable."

In God's house, in *His* place of love and worship, stands another god, another woman. Israel can say they are faithful until they are blue in the face, but their hearts are far from God. And God says, I'm leaving.

All this culminates in chapters 10 and 11 of Ezekiel.

First in 10, vv. 18-19 we read: <sup>NIV</sup> **Ezekiel 10:18** Then the glory of the LORD departed from over the threshold of the temple and stopped above the cherubim. <sup>19</sup> While I watched, the cherubim spread their wings and rose from the ground, and as they went, the wheels went with them. They stopped at the entrance of the east gate of the LORD's house, and the glory of the God of Israel was above them.

God has gone to the edge of the Temple...he's sitting on the wall. Waiting for the time of judgment. And then in chapter 11:22-25... <sup>NIV</sup> **Ezekiel 11:22** Then the cherubim, with the wheels beside them, spread their wings, and the glory of the God of Israel was above them. <sup>23</sup> The glory of the LORD went up from within the city and stopped above the mountain east of it. <sup>24</sup> The Spirit lifted me up and brought me to the exiles in Babylonia in the vision given by the Spirit of God. Then the vision I had seen went up from me, <sup>25</sup> and I told the exiles everything the LORD had shown me.

The last thing Ezekiel sees is God's glory not only leaving the Temple, but leaving the whole city. Jerusalem is abandoned. God watches and waits; he's poised to bring about the judgments Ezekiel has seen.

What would the exiles come to understand from these scenes? Simply this: **The welcome of abominations produces an exit of God's holy presence.**

If we love our stuff and our pleasures more than God, he will give us our desires. He'll leave. He'll leave us to our destruction. He leaves us to taste the full consequences of rejecting the God of love and blessing.

So let me go back to where I started...there is absolutely nothing more horrible than losing out on a relationship with God. If we hold onto our false gods, sinful practices, and the like, one day, our chances for repentance might run out. What's left when God's gone isn't much. Oh, our little puny gods will string us along like any good drug dealer. We'll have moments of happiness, all the while our soul will be shriveling up and future judgment looming.

There's nothing worse than losing God, than losing His presence. This is why hell is hell; it's the place where God's manifest presence is totally gone. It's the place where no happiness dwells. It's where those who are utterly forsaken are left...to be judged...to be held to account.

Oh to lose God...the greatest loss...the greatest sacrifice.

This is what we all deserve, but something happened 2,000 years ago to provide us a hope that ran out for the Jews of the past. 2,000 years ago, Jesus chose to be forsaken so we could be accepted. On the Cross, Jesus cries out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" On the cross, Jesus lost God's presence. God walked out on His perfect Son, so He can now welcome estranged sons and daughters.

This is why those who believe in Jesus can be forgiven. This is how God saves people. We're saved by the death of Jesus. We're saved because Jesus wasn't saved. We're welcome in because God walked out...on Jesus. On the Cross, Jesus takes hell so we can have heaven. When Jesus rises from the dead 3 days later, this is God's verdict that Jesus accomplished all that needed to be accomplished. Sin can be forgiven, sinners welcomed home.

If we welcome abominations, God walks out.

But if welcome God, he comes in and helps us clean house.

And don't miss the fact, that not everyone dies in Jerusalem. God always preserves those who trust in Him. They are marked. Not only that, God promises to create a people who do love Him. Look at chapter 11 - <sup>NIV</sup> **Ezekiel 11:17** "Therefore say: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will gather you from the nations and bring you back from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you back the land of Israel again.' <sup>18</sup> "They will return to it and remove all its vile images and detestable idols. <sup>19</sup> **I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh.** <sup>20</sup> **Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God.**

When I was 18, I went on my first missions trip to inner city Chicago. We helped renovate an inner city recovery center. There I met one special man. He was in his early 50s, but he looked like he'd lived a long and hard life. His teeth had fallen out long ago because of drug abuse. But what I'll never forget about him was the joy in his soul. He knew what it meant to run from God's presence. He knew what it meant to turn from God and find pleasure in the things of this earth...pleasures that almost stole his life. But he also knew what it meant to be welcomed by God because of the forgiveness of Jesus. He looked at the cross and knew the great sacrifice Jesus endured so that he could come home, that he could come home to His heavenly Father.

It's a journey any person can take...it's a welcome available today to any who have run away...but it's a welcome that does not last forever. If we welcome abominations, God walks out. But if we welcome God, he comes in and cleans house.