

# EZEKIEL

## Chapter 20

### *Israel's Continuing Rebellion*

In the seventh year, in the fifth month, on the tenth day of the month, certain of the elders of Israel came to inquire of the LORD, and sat before me. 2 And the word of the LORD came to me: 3 “Son of man, speak to the elders of Israel, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD, Is it to inquire of me that you come? As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I will not be inquired of by you. 4 Will you judge them, son of man, will you judge them? Let them know the abominations of their fathers, 5 and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: On the day when I chose Israel, I swore to the offspring of the house of Jacob, making myself known to them in the land of Egypt; I swore to them, saying, I am the LORD your God. 6 On that day I swore to them that I would bring them out of the land of Egypt into a land that I had searched out for them, a land flowing with milk and honey, the most glorious of all lands. 7 And I said to them, ‘Cast away the detestable things your eyes feast on, every one of you, and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt; I am the LORD your God.’ 8 But they rebelled against me and were not willing to listen to me. None of them cast away the detestable things their eyes feasted on, nor did they forsake the idols of Egypt. “Then I said I would pour out my wrath upon them and spend my anger against them in the midst of the land of Egypt. 9 But I acted for the sake of my name, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations among whom they lived, in whose sight I made myself known to them in bringing them out of the land of Egypt. 10 So I led them out of the land of Egypt and brought them into the wilderness. 11 I gave them my statutes and made known to them my rules, by which, if a person does them, he shall live. 12 Moreover, I gave them my Sabbaths, as a sign between me and them, that they might know that I am the LORD who sanctifies them. 13 But the house of Israel rebelled against me in the wilderness. They did not walk in my statutes but rejected my rules, by which, if a person does them, he shall live; and my Sabbaths they greatly profaned. “Then I said I would pour out my wrath upon them in the wilderness, to make a full end of them. 14 But I acted for the sake of my name, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations, in whose sight I had brought them out. 15 Moreover, I swore to them in the wilderness that I would not bring them into the land that I had given them, a land flowing with milk and honey, the most glorious of all lands, 16 because they rejected my rules and did not walk in my statutes, and profaned my Sabbaths; for their heart went after their idols. 17 Nevertheless, my eye spared them, and I did not destroy them or make a full end of them in the wilderness. 18 “And I said to their children in the wilderness, ‘Do not walk in the statutes of your fathers, nor keep their rules, nor defile yourselves with their idols. 19 I am the LORD your God; walk in my statutes, and be careful to obey my rules, 20 and keep my Sabbaths holy that they may be a sign between me and you, that you may know that I am the LORD your God.’ 21 But the children rebelled against me. They did not walk in my statutes and were not careful to obey my rules, by which, if a person does them, he shall live; they profaned my Sabbaths. “Then I said I would pour out my wrath upon them and spend my anger against them in the wilderness. 22 But I withheld my hand and acted for the sake of my name, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations, in whose sight I had brought them out. 23 Moreover, I swore to them in the wilderness that I would scatter them among the nations and disperse them through the countries, 24 because they had not obeyed my rules, but had rejected my statutes and profaned my Sabbaths, and their eyes were set on their fathers' idols. 25 Moreover, I gave them statutes that were not good and rules by which they could not have life, 26 and I defiled them through their very gifts in their offering up all their firstborn, that I might devastate them. I did it that they might know that I am the LORD. 27 “Therefore, son of man, speak to the house of Israel and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: In this also your fathers blasphemed me, by dealing treacherously with me. 28 For when I had brought them into the land that I swore to give them, then wherever they

saw any high hill or any leafy tree, there they offered their sacrifices and there they presented the provocation of their offering; there they sent up their pleasing aromas, and there they poured out their drink offerings. 29 (I said to them, ‘What is the high place to which you go?’ So its name is called Bamah to this day.) 30 “Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: Will you defile yourselves after the manner of your fathers and go whoring after their detestable things? 31 When you present your gifts and offer up your children in fire, you defile yourselves with all your idols to this day. And shall I be inquired of by you, O house of Israel? As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I will not be inquired of by you. 32 “What is in your mind shall never happen—the thought, ‘Let us be like the nations, like the tribes of the countries, and worship wood and stone.’

This is a long chapter. It is immediately divisible into two very uneven parts: an introduction (20:1–4), which gives us the context for the long divine speech (20:5–44). The latter is usually divided into two segments: a review of Israel’s history that serves as the indictment of Israel (20:5–31) and the future redemption that will bring forth a new Israel (the Christian church), couched in typological terms of a second exodus (20:32–44). (CC)

**20:1–4** A third visit by the elders of Israel showed that they continued to ignore Ezekiel’s unrelenting, impassioned preaching. The repetition in his preaching illustrates God’s infinite patience. Ezekiel had to tell the inquiring elders that they still have not removed their idols from their hearts (cf vv 31–32). Instead of granting the kind of favorable answer they sought, Ezekiel is instructed to judge them, pronouncing them guilty of the same abominations as their fathers. (TLSB)

**20:1** *seventh year ... fifth month ... tenth day.* Aug. 14, 591 B.C., the third date (see 1:2; 8:1). Since Ezekiel had received many revelations before this (see opening verses of chs. 12–18), the date must emphasize the importance of this chapter. Like chs. 16 and 23, it presents a negative view of Israel’s history; unlike them, it does not employ allegory. (CSB)

Aug 14, 591 BC, the seventh year of captivity. (TLSB)

**20:3** *As surely as I live.* Oath formula. (TLSB)

**20:5–32** From Israel’s beginning and throughout its history, God would have been justified if He had poured out His wrath on the people. They escaped destruction solely because God did not want His holy name to “be profaned in the sight of the nations” (vv 14, 22). (TLSB)

**20:5** *I chose.* The only occurrence of the word “choose” (election vocabulary) in Ezekiel. Verses 5–26 present Israel’s history in three acts (vv. 5–9, Egypt; vv. 10–17, Desert, Part 1; vv. 18–26, Desert, Part 2). The act has four scenes: (1) revelation, (2) rebellion, (3) wrath, (4) reconsideration. (CSB)

The bill of indictment begins with God’s unmerited election of “Israel.” The reference is not to the patriarch Jacob, but to the nation or people, as evidenced by the following parallel phrase “house of Jacob.” (CC)

*most glorious of all lands.* Cf. Dt 8:7–10; Jer 3:19 for the land’s natural beauty. Its real beauty lay in being selected as God’s dwelling place (Dt 12:5, 11). (CSB)

**20:7** *idols.* Except for Josh 24:14, we have no explicit record of Israelite idolatry in Egypt, nor of an explicit demand there that they cease and desist. But there is nothing intrinsically unlikely about either, and in fact, both can be inferred by the Israelites’ interactions with Moses: their initial rejection of the very idea of leaving Egypt with Moses (Ex 6:9, 12), their reaction when they feared that the Pharaoh had

them trapped at the Red Sea (Ex 14:11–12), their repeated expressions of a desire to return to Egypt (e.g., Num 11:4–5, 18, 20; 14:2–4), and the golden calf incident (Exodus 32). (CC)

**20:8** *None.* Hyperbole, since Moses and Joshua remained steadfast even during the idolatry with the golden calf (Ex 32). (TLSB)

*So I said I would pour out my wrath on them.* An internal refrain (see vv. 13, 21). (CSB)

**20:9** *for the sake of my name.*† See vv. 14, 22, 44. Name and person are closely connected in the Bible. God’s name is what he has revealed concerning himself, that by which he is known. The phrase used here is equivalent to “for my own sake” (cf. Isa 37:35; 43:25). God’s acts of deliverance—past and future—identify him, revealing his true nature (see 36:22; Ps 23:3; Isa 48:9). (CSB)

Mentioned frequently as the reason for Israel’s survival; the honor of God’s name is cited also by Isaiah and Jeremiah as motivating Him to restrain His anger (cf Jer 14:7; Ex 32:11–12; Nu 14:15–16; Dt 9:27–28). (TLSB)

*profaned.* By ridicule (see Nu 14:15–16). (CSB)

**20:10** *wilderness.* Act Two. (CSB)

With this verse begins the second phase of Israel’s past: the original generation of Israelites who participated in the exodus (ca. 1440 B.C.) and their relationship to Yahweh in the desert. While 20:11–12 certainly refers to the Torah God gave Moses at Sinai, one cannot help but note that Yahweh says nothing specifically about Mount Sinai or Horeb, neither here nor anywhere else in the book. The concern here is not the geographical location but the Israelites’ encounter with their God. (CC)

**20:11** *shall live.* The key terms “statutes,” “ordinances,” “live,” and “observes/keeps” are found throughout the Torah in abundance. The verse is very similar to Lev 18:5. The accent on faithfulness to Yahweh as the key to life repeats the emphasis of Ezekiel 18, where the man who keeps Yahweh’s “statutes” and “ordinances” (the same terms used in 20:11 are also in 18:9, 17; “statutes” is also in 18:21) will “live.” While the passage is about OT Israel, the promise of life also applies to all those incorporated into the new Israel through faith and Baptism into Christ (e.g., Gal 3:26–29; 6:16). We have earlier discussed the multivalence of “statutes” and “ordinances” (see the textual notes on Ezek 5:6 and 11:12), as well as the eschatological meaning of “live” in such contexts, which points to eternal life (see the commentary on 18:4 and also on 18:7–9). The proper understanding of all these terms in the light of all Scripture (including the NT) will keep them from being misunderstood as sheer legalism. Far from onerous demands, the Torah was God’s gracious gift, along with the land. (CC)

**20:12** *Sabbaths as a sign.* Israel’s observance of the Sabbath was to serve as a sign that she was the Lord’s holy people (see Ex 31:13–17). Ezekiel highlights the Sabbath (see 22:8, 26; 23:38; 44:24; 45:17; 46:3), as did Jeremiah (Jer 17:19–27; cf. Ne 13:17–18). Jewish legalism later corrupted the Sabbath law (see Mt 12:1–14). (CSB)

A sign of covenant faithfulness. (TLSB)

**20:13** *profamed.* By not observing the Sabbath-rest (see Jer 17:21–23) or by not observing it in the manner and spirit God intended (see Am 8:5). (CSB)

**20:18–19** “Doesn’t God forbid people everywhere in the Prophets from setting up peculiar rites of worship without His commandment?” (Ap XV 14). (TLSB)

**20:18** *I said to their children.* Act Three (see note on v. 5). God began anew with the second generation in the desert (see Nu 14:26–35). (CSB)

The generation born during the 40 years of wandering. (TLSB)

**20:21** *the children rebelled.* E.g., the murmurers and the sons of Korah (Nu 16). (TLSB)

**20:22** *withheld My hand.* Withheld full punishment. (TLSB)

**20:25–26†** Cf. God’s judgment on willful, hardened sinners in Ro 1:24–32. (CSB)

**20:25** *statutes ... not good.* The laws God gave that man shall live (v 11) can also become “a fragrance from death to death” (2Co 2:14, 16). When executing judgment on willful, hardened sinners, He sends them a strong delusion (2Th 2:11) so that they fall into perverting wholesome ordinances and make them an excuse for committing the most detestable crimes. Cf Rm 7:7–8. “Not even to His Law has God assigned the honor that it should merit eternal life, as He clearly says” (Ap XXVII 30). (TLSB)

**20:26** *that they might know that I am the LORD.* God will go to any lengths to get his people to acknowledge him.. (CSB)

**20:27** *blasphemed Me.* With the actions described in vv 28–29. (TLSB)

**20:28** *When I brought them into the land.* Apparently Act Four in Ezekiel’s history, but it is not carried through with the same schematic consistency. (CSB)

**20:30** *Will you ... ?* The point of the chapter: “How will you act?” (CSB)

**20:32** *like the nations.* The temptation to lose its uniqueness was always present for Israel (see 1Sa 8:5). (CSB)

Exiles of Ezekiel’s day hoped for favorable treatment from the Babylonians if they adopted their idols. (TLSB)

*shall never happen.* As happened to those who were exiled to Egypt (see Jer 44:15–19). (CSB)

**20:1–32** The stench of Israel’s sin is great. Verse by verse, God recounts how generations of Israelites compounded their sins. God desired to pour His wrath against them (vv 8, 13, 21) but, by His grace, stilled His own hand (vv 9, 14, 22). Today, make repentance a way of life. The heavenly Father will pardon your sins for the sake of Jesus, our Savior. He will raise His hand in blessing and incline His ear to hear your prayer. • Lord God, thankfully we do not receive what our sins deserve—eternal death. By Your grace, we receive eternal life. Amen. (TLSB)

*The LORD Will Restore Israel*

**33** “As I live, declares the Lord GOD, surely with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with wrath poured out I will be king over you. **34** I will bring you out from the peoples and gather you out of the countries where you are scattered, with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and with wrath poured out. **35** And I will bring you into the wilderness of the peoples, and there I will enter into judgment with you face to face. **36** As I entered into judgment with your fathers in the wilderness of the land of Egypt, so I will enter into judgment with you, declares the Lord GOD. **37** I will make you pass under the rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant. **38** I will purge

out the rebels from among you, and those who transgress against me. I will bring them out of the land where they sojourn, but they shall not enter the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the LORD. 39 “As for you, O house of Israel, thus says the Lord GOD: Go serve every one of you his idols, now and hereafter, if you will not listen to me; but my holy name you shall no more profane with your gifts and your idols. 40 “For on my holy mountain, the mountain height of Israel, declares the Lord GOD, there all the house of Israel, all of them, shall serve me in the land. There I will accept them, and there I will require your contributions and the choicest of your gifts, with all your sacred offerings. 41 As a pleasing aroma I will accept you, when I bring you out from the peoples and gather you out of the countries where you have been scattered. And I will manifest my holiness among you in the sight of the nations. 42 And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I bring you into the land of Israel, the country that I swore to give to your fathers. 43 And there you shall remember your ways and all your deeds with which you have defiled yourselves, and you shall loathe yourselves for all the evils that you have committed. 44 And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I deal with you for my name's sake, not according to your evil ways, nor according to your corrupt deeds, O house of Israel, declares the Lord GOD.” 45 And the word of the LORD came to me: 46 “Son of man, set your face toward the southland; preach against the south, and prophesy against the forest land in the Negeb. 47 Say to the forest of the Negeb, Hear the word of the LORD: Thus says the Lord GOD, Behold, I will kindle a fire in you, and it shall devour every green tree in you and every dry tree. The blazing flame shall not be quenched, and all faces from south to north shall be scorched by it. 48 All flesh shall see that I the LORD have kindled it; it shall not be quenched.” 49 Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! They are saying of me, ‘Is he not a maker of parables?’”

**20:33–44** As in the past, God would not make a full end of the unfaithful people, because the honor of His name was still at stake (vv 39, 44). He would manifest His holiness in the sight of the nations by doing again what He did at the time of the exodus from Egypt. (TLSB)

**20:33** *mighty hand ... outstretched arm.* Terminology of the exodus (cf. Dt 4:34; 5:15; 7:19; 11:2; 26:8). (CSB)

**20:35** *wilderness of the peoples.* Exile among the nations would be for Israel like a return to the desert through which she journeyed on the way to the promised land (see Hos 2:14). (CSB)

**20:37** *pass under the rod.* The way a shepherd counts or separates his flock (see Jer 33:13; Mt 25:32–33). (CSB)

As a shepherd wields his staff to judge which sheep belong in his flock, so the Lord will judge those who desire to acknowledge Him as their King (cf Jer 33:13). (TLSB)

*I will bring you into the bond of the covenant.* As he had in the Sinai Desert (see 16:60, 62). (CSB)

**20:38** *purge.* As in the first desert experience, many were not allowed to enter the land (see Nu 14:26–35). (CSB)

The rebellious generation after the exodus perished in the wilderness. The exile will provide a similar purging. (TLSB)

**20:39** *Go and serve everyone of your idols.* Irony; the opposite is meant (cf. 1Ki 22:15; Am 4:4). (CSB)

**20:40** *my holy mountain*. Mentioned only here in Ezekiel, it refers to Jerusalem or Zion (see Ps 2:6; 3:4; 15:1; see also Isa 11:9; 56:7; 57:13; 65:11; Ob 16; Zep 3:11). (CSB)

*all the house of Israel*. Includes the northern kingdom, which fell in 722–721 B.C. (see 11:15; 36:10). (CSB)

*I will require*. See Dt 23:21 (“demand”); Mic 6:8. (CSB)

*offerings*. Possibly refers to a prescribed contribution. The other 19 occurrences in Ezekiel of the Hebrew for this word are confined to chs. 44–48, where the reference is to the land set aside for the temple and priests (see 45:1; 48:8–10, “portion”) or to the special gifts for the priests (see 44:30). (CSB)

*choicest of your gifts*. Voluntary contributions. (CSB)

Technical terms for the wave offerings, firstfruits, and other offerings described by Moses. (TLSB)

**20:41** *as pleasing aroma*. Either in a metaphorical sense (as in Eph 5:2) or in a literal sense (as in 6:13). (CSB)

It is often forgotten or overlooked that the NT uses corresponding Greek similarly: Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as an offering and sacrifice to God for a pleasing aroma [ὄσμὴν εὐωδίας]. (Eph 5:2) (CC)

*bring you out*. Restored to their status as His covenant people, they will no longer be the object of ridicule. (TLSB)

**20:43** *you shall remember ... and ... loathe yourselves*. A thorough repentance (see 6:9; 16:63; 36:31; Lk 15:17–19). (CSB)

Ashamed of their misdeeds (cf 16:61; 36:31; Hos 5:15). (TLSB)

**20:44** *for my name’s sake*. Summarizes and concludes the oracle. (CSB)

**20:45–49** In the Hbr Bible, vv 45–49 are the opening section of the next ch, in which Ezekiel continues his efforts to convince his calloused hearers of inevitable judgment to come. (TLSB)

**20:46** *set your face*. A posture required eight times of Ezekiel (here; 13:17; 21:2; 25:2; 28:21; 29:2; 35:2; 38:2). (CSB)

*toward the southland*. Toward Judah and Jerusalem, the object of all of Ezekiel’s prophesying in these chapters. Any Babylonian invasion would traverse Palestine from north to south (see 26:7). (CSB)

**20:47** *kindle a fire*. Common figurative language for invading forces (see Isa 10:16–19; Jer 15:14; 17:4, 27; 21:14). (CSB)

Fire as divine wrath. Cf Is 10:17–18; Jer 44:6; Am 2:5. (TLSB)

*both green... and dry*. All trees (cf. 17:24; Lk 23:31). (CSB)

*from south to north*. Expresses totality, not direction; equivalent to saying, “from the border on the right to that on the left.” (CSB)

**20:49** *parables*. Hbr *mashal* used here as a verb and a noun together, a pun expressing their disdain for Ezekiel's repeated admonitions. (TLSB)

**20:33–49** God continues His prophetic dialogue with Ezekiel. While the elders come seeking counsel, God speaks only to Ezekiel and reveals how the withdrawal of His blessings will ultimately lead to Israel's repentance. God will use the Babylonian captivity to bring Israel back into a covenant agreement with Himself (v 37). When difficulties or even disasters enter your life, let them remind you of the need for daily repentance and the refreshing blessings of the Gospel extended to you through Christ. • Merciful Father, forgive my sins and restore me to a right relationship through Your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.