EZEKIEL

Chapter 5

**“Now, son of man, take a sharp sword and use it as a barber’s razor to shave your head and your beard. Then take a set of scales and divide up the hair.  2 When the days of your siege come to an end, burn a third of the hair with fire inside the city. Take a third and strike it with the sword all around the city. And scatter a third to the wind. For I will pursue them with drawn sword.  3 But take a few strands of hair and tuck them away in the folds of your garment.  4 Again, take a few of these and throw them into the fire and burn them up. A fire will spread from there to the whole house of Israel. 5 “This is what the Sovereign LORD says: This is Jerusalem, which I have set in the center of the nations, with countries all around her.  6 Yet in her wickedness she has rebelled against my laws and decrees more than the nations and countries around her. She has rejected my laws and has not followed my decrees. 7 “Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: You have been more unruly than the nations around you and have not followed my decrees or kept my laws. You have not even conformed to the standards of the nations around you. 8 “Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself am against you, Jerusalem, and I will inflict punishment on you in the sight of the nations.  9 Because of all your detestable idols, I will do to you what I have never done before and will never do again.  10 Therefore in your midst fathers will eat their children, and children will eat their fathers. I will inflict punishment on you and will scatter all your survivors to the winds.  11 Therefore as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, because you have defiled my sanctuary with all your vile images and detestable practices, I myself will withdraw my favor; I will not look on you with pity or spare you.  12 A third of your people will die of the plague or perish by famine inside you; a third will fall by the sword outside your walls; and a third I will scatter to the winds and pursue with drawn sword. 13 “Then my anger will cease and my wrath against them will subside, and I will be avenged. And when I have spent my wrath upon them, they will know that I the LORD have spoken in my zeal. 14 “I will make you a ruin and a reproach among the nations around you, in the sight of all who pass by.  15 You will be a reproach and a taunt, a warning and an object of horror to the nations around you when I inflict punishment on you in anger and in wrath and with stinging rebuke. I the LORD have spoken.  16 When I shoot at you with my deadly and destructive arrows of famine, I will shoot to destroy you. I will bring more and more famine upon you and cut off your supply of food.  17 I will send famine and wild beasts against you, and they will leave you childless. Plague and bloodshed will sweep through you, and I will bring the sword against you. I the LORD have spoken.”**

**5:1** *take a sharp sword.* What Isaiah had expressed in a metaphor (Isa 7:20) Ezekiel acted out in prophetic symbolism. (CSB)

One is surprised that Ezekiel does not react as negatively to the command to shave his head and face as he had to the earlier command to eat bread baked over human excrement (4:12–14). There are clear prohibitions against priests shaving their heads or beards (Lev 21:5; Ezek 44:20), but despite them, Ezekiel maintains his usual posture of unquestioning obedience. In addition to the religious stigma, under ordinary circumstances it was also dishonorable culturally for a man to appear beardless (2 Sam 10:4 || 1 Chr 19:4). Shaving of the head is frequently associated with mourning rites (cf. Deut 14:10), and Ezekiel’s audience may have inferred that Ezekiel was mourning proleptically at the fall of Jerusalem (if they got the message at all). By being the one shaved, Ezekiel assumes the role of the people in the city. That the city is the ultimate object of the shaving becomes clear shortly, and in that application it also emerges that Yahweh is the real wielder of the judgment sword (5:2, 12, 17). (CC)

**5:2** Most theological comment on this verse can wait until the texts’ own explication of it in 5:12. The mention of “the city” in connection with the first third of the hair connects this action of the prophet with the sketch of Jerusalem on a brick in 4:1–3. The audience should not be tempted to think for a moment that Ezekiel is prophesying about anything but Jerusalem—and so, ultimately, themselves. “Fire” is a common symbol of destruction and sometimes of God himself as punisher, partly because of the common practice, ancient and modern, of torching conquered cities (e.g., Josh 6:24 and 11:11, which use the same vocabulary as Ezek 5:4). The initial completion of the “days of the siege” would have been the 390 days Ezekiel lay on his left side (4:4–5). (CC)

The “sword” is the agent of destruction for the second third of hair, and Yahweh will pursue the last third, scattered to the wind, with his own “sword.” The term appears ninety-one times in Ezekiel and is especially prominent in chapter 21, with its Song of the Sword (21:8–17). (CC)

**5:3** Since Yahweh does not provide his own exegesis of this verse later (as he does of 5:2 in 5:12), we must attempt one here. If the previous verse represents God’s various judgments on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, this action prophecy predicts that a tiny remnant, “few in number,” will somehow survive the catastrophe (see also, e.g., 6:8, 12; 9:1–6; 12:16; 14:22). That will not be a matter of “luck,” however, but of God’s own gracious intervention. (Contrast the biblical view with the tremendous popularity of Tyche, the Greek goddess of luck—and the careless way in which Christians often speak today, even of “Lady Luck.”) Elsewhere, the OT prophets develop the theme of the “remnant” considerably, and it ultimately undergirds what we know as “church versus state” in Israel’s theocratic community. Only some of those in the nation of Israel truly belonged to theological Israel, the OT church, as St. Paul explains in Romans 9–11. The same distinction applies to the NT church, “the Israel of God” (Gal 6:16), in terms of the “visible” church (all who belong to a church) versus the “invisible” church comprised of all baptized believers in Christ. “The church in the proper sense is the assembly of saints who truly believe the Gospel of Christ and who have the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, we grant that the many hypocrites and evil men who are mingled with them in this life share an association in the outward marks” (Ap VII/VIII 28). (CC)

**5:4** Even that small act of divine mercy (5:3) is immediately qualified. Not all who escape the immediate conflagration will ultimately survive. The long arm of Yahweh’s wrath will reach even those in exile. Echoes of the curses in Lev 26:36–39 for covenant violation are again apparent here. The ancient message of Moses (some eight centuries before Ezekiel) was not new to those acquainted with the Scriptures, but Ezekiel’s audience needed to be reminded of its applicability to them. (CC)

**5:5** *This is Jerusalem.* After wordlessly acting out the symbols (beginning in 4:1), Ezekiel received and probably related the divine explanations. (CSB)

One might picture Ezekiel pointing at the sketched brick (4:1) as he reminds the audience of what his action prophecies have all been about. Block also thinks of a courtroom scene, where “this is Jerusalem” introduces the accused to the court. (CC)

 *center of the nations.* A privileged position, which made Israel’s responsibility and judgment all the more severe (see note on 38:12). (CSB)

The statement that Jerusalem was “in the middle of the nations” includes the idea that God had placed her in the thick and thin of human politics and commerce. It was taken in later Jewish and Christian thought in a literalistic, geographical sense. We have medieval maps so depicting Jerusalem at the center of the known world. The precise age and origin of this idea is unknown. It can be documented in the pseudepigraphical *Jubilees* (8:12, 19) from the intertestamental period. A plaque in the floor under the high dome of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in present-day Jerusalem still identifies it as the center of the world. Closely related is the metaphor of Jerusalem as the “navel of the earth” (Ezek 38:12), that is, the place from which the earth was formed. (CC)

However, these passages are not so much about the geographic centrality of Jerusalem (and it is doubtful if the ancients would have understood them that way). Rather, their point is that Jerusalem is the *theological* center of God’s activity, the locus of his salvation, both in the OT era and in its fulfillment in Christ, who died and rose there. If one reads them theologically, they are powerful metaphors. That Jerusalem had been chosen as the center of God’s salvific activity is often accented with its epithet “Zion.” (CC)

In that sense, Jerusalem/Zion is all but inseparable from the election of David and his house—and thus of the promised Son of David, Jesus Christ, who shall reign on David’s throne forever. Zion and the promised Davidic King are linked explicitly in, for example, Pss 2:6; 132:10–14. In that vein one can, indeed, speak of Calvary as the center of God’s whole soteriological activity, as the “navel” from which the new creation has been born and is being formed. The new birth into God’s kingdom comes through Holy Baptism (“water and the Spirit,” Jn 3:5) into Christ’s death and resurrection (Rom 6:1–4), and this “living water” offered by Jesus is not confined to any particular geographical locale (John 4). To be sure, the church’s mission begins in Jerusalem, but then it fans out to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). (CC)

The theological centrality of Jerusalem is obviously in the background of Ezekiel’s thought here and elsewhere. However, right now the perversion of the “theology of Zion,” that is, making the theological centrality of Jerusalem into a magical guarantee of the city’s and the people’s impregnability, was precisely the notion that Ezekiel had to demolish. In the present context, the point is that all the grace and kindness that God has showered on Jerusalem has not taken place in a private corner, nor has her behavior gone unnoticed. Neither will the forthcoming judgment upon Israel for its ingratitude and infidelity be private and concealed from public view. (CC)

**5:6** *This verse is Ezekiel’s whole indictment of Jerusalem in a nutshell*. It is the same basic indictment voiced by many other prophets as well. “To whom is given much, much shall be required from him” (Lk 12:48). Jerusalem is targeted for theological reasons. As the focal custodian of God’s promises (land, temple, king, Messiah), Jerusalem also had special responsibilities. But now she had become a model for paganism. As Isaiah (1:21) had trenchantly summarized, “How the faithful city has become a whore!” (CC)

Deut 4:7–8 describes Israel’s covenant relationship as the envy of the nations: none of them had the one true God living in their midst, and none had received such beneficial and “righteous” (צַרִּיק) laws as Israel. As Deuteronomy makes clear (perhaps more than any other part of the OT), Israel’s covenant relationship with God was established and continued solely by his grace and love, through and through. When we (like Ezekiel) refer to the OT laws, statutes, and so on, we must be careful to expound them within their setting: they were given after Yahweh had already redeemed his undeserving people from Egypt and claimed them as his own. The laws can function according to the first, second, and third uses of the (doctrinal) Law (to use classic Lutheran terminology); they never were (and are not now) a means to obtain God’s favor. Otherwise, the OT would have expounded an entirely different type of religion than the NT, and the one in the NT would have been the abrogation, not the fulfillment of the OT faith. (In principle, Marcion would have been right!) (CC)

Instead of treasuring God’s gifts of grace and showing its gratitude by obedience, Israel had followed the behavior patterns of its Gentile neighbors. In fact, says Yahweh, Israel had become even more wicked and rebellious than the surrounding heathen (Ezek 5:6)! It was not merely a case of Israel’s assimilation or acculturation, but of its calculated rebellion and rejection of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants. (CC)

The accusation against Jerusalem is not intended to praise the pagan nations round about her, of course. They cannot have rebelled against God’s Torah (special revelation), because God had not given it to any of them (cf. Ps 147:20). But a doctrine of “natural law” (as in Rom 1:18–32) underlies the thought here, as in many other places in Scripture, such as the covenant with Noah in Genesis 9; Amos 1:3–2:3; and, ultimately, most of the Gentile oracles in the prophetic corpus, including Ezekiel 25–32. Yahweh prophesies against the Gentile nations too, because of their hubris and inhumanity toward others. Despite how evil they are, the law written on their hearts had kept them on a higher level than the depravity to which Israel had sunk in her rebellion, says Yahweh here (Ezek 5:6). This thought had been adumbrated already in 3:6b. St. Paul makes a similar point in Rom 2:12–14. The Gentiles, unlike Israel, had sinned ἀνόμως (“without the Law”), and so they shall perish ἀνόμως. Israel had sinned while having the Law and so shall be judged according to the Law, as Ezekiel is doing here. (CC)

**5:7** It is still true that unbelievers may externally lead a more lawful life than some members of the visible church (especially weak or nominal Christians, but sometimes even clergy!), who may display behavior of which even secular society disapproves, both in sins of omission and of commission. (CC)

**5:8** *I myself am against you.* A short and effective phrase of judgment used often by Ezekiel (see 13:8; 21:3; 26:3; 28:22; 29:3, 10; 30:22; 34:10; 35:3; 38:3; 39:1; see also Jer 23:30–32; 50:31; 51:25; Na 2:13; 3:5). (CSB)

By repetition of the formulaic signal of punishment that also began 5:7 (“Therefore, thus says the Lord Yahweh”; see the textual notes) and by an accumulation of other devices, this verse underscores the gravity of the divine verdict against Israel. The following formula, “Behold, I am against you,” occurs here for the first time in the book of Ezekiel. This Hebrew formula (sometimes called the hostile orientation formula) is thought to have originally been a challenge to a duel in face-to-face combat (e.g., Samson and the Philistines in Judg 16:9), but more characteristically it announces imminent retribution upon the enemies of God’s people (e.g., Nah 2:13). But now Israel has proved to be God’s enemy, and so the phrase is applied to Israel itself. In Ezekiel God uses the formula “Behold, I am [הִנְנִי] against [עַל or אֶל] …” fourteen times, more than any other prophet. (CC)

Lest there be any misunderstanding about who the agent of judgment is, Yahweh adds, “even I.” This is no mechanical working out of some impersonal principle of retribution or cycle of karma, but is God’s personal execution of the curses for disobedience inherent in the covenant. This climaxes on the cross, where Christ is cursed on our behalf (Gal 3:13). Since we have been baptized into his death, we would die in our sins if we did not also daily rise with him to newness of life (Romans 6; 8:13). (CC)

The punishment will fit the crime precisely. The Hebrew conveys the correspondence clearly, but it is impossible to reproduce in English. In Ezek 5:7 Yahweh used the negated verb עָשָׂה twice to refer to Israel’s evil behavior and sins of omission (“you have *not performed* my ordinances, and you have *not* even *acted* …”). Now in 5:8–9 he uses the same verb twice to express what he himself will do: “I will *perform* judgments in your midst. … I will *do* …” The term for the punishments is מִשְׁפָּטִים, which is the same noun translated “ordinances” in 5:6 and 5:7, but here it must mean “judgments.” God will perform what his unfaithful people failed to perform, but to their condemnation. Often the related noun שְׁפָטִים is used for “judgments,” and God uses that noun with עָשָׂה (“perform”) to describe his punishment of Israel in 5:10, 15; 11:9. God had performed (עָשָׂה) judgments (שְׁפָטִים) against Egypt in the exodus narrative (Ex 12:12; Num 33:4; cf. “judgments” in Ex 6:6 and 7:4). Ezekiel may intend that the Israelites now see themselves before God in the same role as the Egyptians appeared then. Later, Ezekiel will speak of God performing (עָשָׂה) judgments (שְׁפָטִים or מִשְׁפָּטִים) against Israel’s enemies. (CC)

The appropriate divine judgment will take place where the rebellion occurred, “in your midst” (5:8) and “among you” (5:9), that is, in Jerusalem. God’s acts of judgment there will also be “in the sight of the nations” (5:8). Since Jerusalem is located among the nations and she had acted even more flagrantly than the surrounding nations (5:7), her insolence had been evident to all. So it will also be with her comeuppance. (CC)

**5:9** Her unprecedented sin will bring unprecedented punishment. A concrete example will be given in the next verse. The reason is all her “abominations,” that all-purpose word for everything that is incompatible with God’s Word and provokes his wrath. The word’s forty-three occurrences in Ezekiel far outnumber its appearances in all the other prophets combined. (CC)

**5:10** *fathers will eat their children.* Cannibalism, the most gruesome extremity of life under siege, was threatened as a consequence of breaking the covenant (Dt 28:53; see Jer 19:9; La 2:20; Zec 11:9). (CSB)

The horrors of cannibalism, even within one’s own family, are not unparalleled in desperate siege conditions elsewhere in world history, but that God himself would instigate it now among his chosen people was unprecedented. While the language is masculine (“fathers” and “sons”), the practice undoubtedly would not discriminate between genders. The threat of cannibalism often occurs in ancient secular Near Eastern treaty curses. The possibility is referred to in other biblical passages, most fully in Deut 28:53–57, as part of the curses should Israel break the Mosaic covenant. (CC)

 TO THE WINDS – “To every wind” here (Ezek 5:10) is stronger than would be “the four winds” (e.g., 37:9). God will disperse the remnant in every direction imaginable. Here we may pick up an echo of the action prophecy in 5:2, but the explicit connection to 5:2 will come in 5:12. (CC)

**5:11** *as surely as I live.* See note on 18:3. (CSB)

By an accumulation of oaths, emphatics, and stress on God himself as the speaker and the one who threatens, this verse leads into the climax in the next verse (5:12), where the specifics of the action prophecy at the head of the chapter (5:1–4) are interpreted. The transition is prepared by Yahweh’s use of the metaphor “I will do the shaving” (5:11, recalling 5:1) to describe his coming judgment. (CC)

Yahweh adduces Israel’s climactic offense as reason for the fury of his judgment: “because you have defiled my sanctuary.” The clause adumbrates what will be described in considerable detail in chapters 8 and 11. God’s laws in Leviticus had the purpose of keeping his holiness, which was incarnate at the tabernacle and temple, separate from and undefiled by the unclean things of the people. Israel violated the entire divine purpose as well as the letter of those laws. (CC)

The verse ends with two parallel assertions of Yahweh’s pitilessness and mercilessness in carrying out the judgment: “My eye will not pity, and I myself will have no compassion.” There may be a slight element of hyperbole (since “a few” still remain in 5:3), but it brings out forcefully Yahweh’s “grim resolve” to carry out his threats. No sentimentality will be allowed to interfere. “My eye” is used anthropomorphically parallel to Yahweh (“I myself”) because grief or horror are readily perceived by and expressed in the eyes, perhaps to the point of shedding tears. (CC)

Still, the fact that God here declares that he will have no mercy shows, in a backhanded way, “that the normal, basic attitude of God toward Israel is not determined merely by law, but by love. It is his proper manner to spare and pity, but there is a level of human guilt at which this mode is set aside, and the standard of his judicial righteousness comes into force.” (CC)

**5:12** Here we are given God’s own exegesis of the action prophecy of 5:1–4. It is striking, however, that there is not even a hint of the few hairs tucked in the folds of the prophet’s robe (5:3)—that is, of a tiny surviving remnant of Israelites. The account of the fulfillment—the fall and exile of Jerusalem—appears three times in the Bible: 2 Ki 25:1–21; 2 Chr 36:17–21; Jer 39:1–18. (CC)

**5:13** *spent my wrath upon.* An expression frequently used by the Lord in this book (see 6:12; 7:8; 13:15; 20:8, 21). (CSB)

The OT depiction of God meting out his seemingly unquenchable wrath on his unfaithful people points to the inability of sinful humans to do anything themselves to atone for their sins. Yet this recognition is not intended by God to dead-end in total despair; his goal is repentance and renewal in faith. In the text, the purposefulness of Yahweh’s action is emphasized by an expansion of the recognition formula: “Then they will know that I, Yahweh, have spoken in my jealousy when I exhaust my wrath at them” (5:13). The shorter formula “I, Yahweh, have spoken” (5:13) will be repeated two more times before the chapter ends (it concludes 5:15 and 5:17). (CC)

Whatever false notions the Israelites may have developed about God, his drastic acts of judgment, no less than his signal acts of deliverance, were in fulfillment of predictions uttered long ago and were intended to remind the people of the covenant he had made with them. The curses for covenant disobedience in Leviticus 26 echo throughout the chapter. Yahweh’s efficacious Word, spoken by Moses over eight hundred years earlier, soon will be fulfilled in concrete action. Since the curses of God’s Law upon their sin are fulfilled so dramatically, how much more confident can God’s people be that his Gospel promises of salvation in Christ shall be brought to completion in their entirety (cf. Rom 5:6–10)! (CC)

 *they will know that I the Lord have spoken.* The first of 65 occurrences in Ezekiel of this or similar declarations. God’s acts of judgment and salvation reveal who he is. Since the people would not listen to God’s words, they would be taught by his actions. (CSB)

That Yahweh declares, “I … have spoken *in my jealousy*” (Ezek 5:13), reveals much. This (קִנְאָה) and related Hebrew terms apply to God frequently in Ezekiel, and, indeed, throughout the OT. In the Torah God had commanded his people to avoid provoking him because he is “a jealous God” (אֵל קַנָּא). Since Yahweh’s relationship with his people is so frequently described as a marriage, this language indicates that God is a husband who will not share his “wife” with any other god and who will take appropriate action when the marriage covenant is broken. The same dynamic pertains to human marriage.

God is “monogamous” also in religion. “Because he loves so deeply, he must respond vigorously.” He tolerates no spiritual adultery or harlotry with other gods, no syncretism or unionism of any sort. Ezekiel in chapters 16 and 23 will expound at length Israel’s spiritual harlotry in terms of sexual infidelity, and the two usually go together, both in the OT and in the NT. Perverted practices in the ancient world such as homosexuality and cultic prostitution were commonly part of the worship of other gods. Today too, the church must affirm that extramarital intercourse and homosexuality incur God’s wrath. (CC)

All this relates to the First Commandment: “You shall have no other gods!” (Ex 20:3; Deut 5:7). Other “gods” really are not divinities at all, but demons (1 Cor 10:20–21). They have diabolical power and attraction, but cannot be tolerated among God’s people, lest God pour out his wrath in his jealousy. In NT application, Jesus insists that “no man comes to the Father except by me” (Jn 14:6). Any compromise of the Gospel of salvation through Christ alone constitutes accommodation or acceptance of false gods. An orthodox church is always on its guard against any kind of universalism or false ecumenism. (CC)

**5:14-15** In 5:14–15 the focus shifts from Yahweh’s anger to the emotional and psychological effects of Jerusalem’s devastation, especially among the surrounding nations. One might entitle these two verses “a great reversal”—not the common biblical one of justification by grace alone, but its very opposite. Jerusalem, who was called to be a “light to the nations” (Is 42:6; 49:6), is reduced to rubble. Whatever pride and glory she had achieved, as judged by human standards, will now be changed into reproach and shame. Under God’s blessing, Jerusalem was the holy city, the city set on a hill (Mount Zion; cf. Mt 5:14), but since she has defiled her sacred status with abominations, she will be brought to ruin—as every person without God is but dust and ashes. (CC)

**5:15** *a reproach and a taunt, a warning and an object of horror.* A fourfold list (see note on 1:5). (CSB)

We have four overlapping Hebrew nouns of invective reflecting “the richness of the Hebrew vocabulary of contempt.” Jerusalem will be “a reproach and a taunt, a warning and an object of horror.” With its heaping up of words describing onlookers’ reactions, the final clause (“I, Yahweh, have spoken”) emphasizes (as had 5:13 and as 5:17 will again) that it is all the result of God’s exercise of his almighty Word. (CC)

**5:16-17** Ezekiel’s first major judgment sermon comes to a climax in these verses, both summarizing and heightening themes that appeared earlier. The background of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 and 32 reminds the audience that God is as good as his ancient Word—in judgment as well as grace. Yahweh’s zeal (“jealousy,” 5:13) in fulfilling his covenant promises and curses is manifested by his summoning all kinds of agents to carry out his will. (CC)