

EZEKIEL

Chapter 5

Jerusalem Will Be Destroyed

“And you, O son of man, take a sharp sword. Use it as a barber's razor and pass it over your head and your beard. Then take balances for weighing and divide the hair. 2 A third part you shall burn in the fire in the midst of the city, when the days of the siege are completed. And a third part you shall take and strike with the sword all around the city. And a third part you shall scatter to the wind, and I will unsheathe the sword after them. 3 And you shall take from these a small number and bind them in the skirts of your robe. 4 And of these again you shall take some and cast them into the midst of the fire and burn them in the fire. From there a fire will come out into all the house of Israel. 5 “Thus says the Lord GOD: This is Jerusalem. I have set her in the center of the nations, with countries all around her. 6 And she has rebelled against my rules by doing wickedness more than the nations, and against my statutes more than the countries all around her; for they have rejected my rules and have not walked in my statutes. 7 Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: Because you are more turbulent than the nations that are all around you, and have not walked in my statutes or obeyed my rules, and have not even acted according to the rules of the nations that are all around you, 8 therefore thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, even I, am against you. And I will execute judgments in your midst in the sight of the nations. 9 And because of all your abominations I will do with you what I have never yet done, and the like of which I will never do again. 10 Therefore fathers shall eat their sons in your midst, and sons shall eat their fathers. And I will execute judgments on you, and any of you who survive I will scatter to all the winds. 11 Therefore, as I live, declares the Lord GOD, surely, because you have defiled my sanctuary with all your detestable things and with all your abominations, therefore I will withdraw. My eye will not spare, and I will have no pity. 12 A third part of you shall die of pestilence and be consumed with famine in your midst; a third part shall fall by the sword all around you; and a third part I will scatter to all the winds and will unsheathe the sword after them. 13 “Thus shall my anger spend itself, and I will vent my fury upon them and satisfy myself. And they shall know that I am the LORD—that I have spoken in my jealousy—when I spend my fury upon them. 14 Moreover, I will make you a desolation and an object of reproach among the nations all around you and in the sight of all who pass by. 15 You shall be a reproach and a taunt, a warning and a horror, to the nations all around you, when I execute judgments on you in anger and fury, and with furious rebukes—I am the LORD; I have spoken— 16 when I send against you the deadly arrows of famine, arrows for destruction, which I will send to destroy you, and when I bring more and more famine upon you and break your supply of bread. 17 I will send famine and wild beasts against you, and they will rob you of your children. Pestilence and blood shall pass through you, and I will bring the sword upon you. I am the LORD; I have spoken.”

5:1–12 Hair is the subject of this final action prophecy because it burns easily and because it is light enough that wind easily blows it about. (TLSB)

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

Or, “sharp blade,” used as a razor because a sword will be used in the judgments on the people. It is surprising that Ezekiel does not object as he did earlier to preparing his food on human dung. Scripture clearly prohibits priests from shaving their heads or beards. Near Eastern culture generally considered it dishonorable for a man to appear beardless (cf 2Sm 10:4; 1Ch 19:4). (TLSB)

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 *all around the city.* Jerusalem is the real object of the shaving. God is the real wielder of the sword. (God Himself speaks concerning the third portion of the hair.) Cf 4:1–3. (TLSB)

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 *small number.* Representing a few survivors of the catastrophic fall of the city. (TLSB)

skirts of your robe. Folds in the loose-fitting outer garment commonly worn at that time. (TLSB)

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 *a fire will come out.* Even the small number who escape (v 3) will nevertheless suffer the fire of the city's destruction. That fire will affect even those in exile with Ezekiel. (TLSB)

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 *Thus says the Lord GOD.* Topic transition. (TLSB)

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

Ezekiel is to point at the brick (4:1). (TLSB)

center of the nations. A privileged position, which made Israel's responsibility and judgment all the more severe. (CSB)

In medieval times, the phrase was often misunderstood as a geographical statement, but it is a theological one. The election of Zion as the city of David was part of the pivotal messianic promise. The people were misinterpreting God's promise to Zion as a magical guarantee of Jerusalem's impregnability (cf Jer 7:4), and God must demolish that fantasy. The grace God showed to Jerusalem and His chosen people in the past was well known; now its neighbors will note the imminent judgment upon Jerusalem (and Israel) for its infidelity. (TLSB)

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)

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)

5:6 *more.* Gentiles had only natural law written on their hearts, but Israel had God's special revelation, and so they were judged more guilty before God, even if externally they were no worse (cf Lk 12:48; Rm 2:12–14). (TLSB)

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)

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)

5:7 Introduces the punishment after the previous indictment (vv 5–6). (TLSB)

turbulent. Hbr unclear. Possibly “flagrant” or “brazen.” (TLSB)

not even acted according to the rules of the nations. Even pagan nations have rules and statutes as expression of the “natural law” in their hearts. Israel did not even meet the pagan standards. (TLSB)

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 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)

Hostile orientation formula used 14 times by Ezekiel, more often than by any other prophet. (TLSB)

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 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 *abominations*. Ezekiel’s all-purpose word for everything contrary to God’s will and provoking His wrath. Ezekiel uses it 43 times, more than the rest of the prophets combined. (TLSB)

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)

Cannibalism, even of family members, will occur in Jerusalem’s siege. (TLSB)

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)

scatter. When the city falls, God will scatter the few survivors. (TLSB)

to all the winds. Possibly even a stronger expression than “to the four winds” used elsewhere. (TLSB)

“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 God summarizes the reasons for His judgment. (TLSB)

as I live. 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)

defiled My sanctuary. Illustrated in ch 8. Since God’s promise to David and Zion centered on His presence in the Most Holy Place of the temple, all of Israel’s brazen misbehavior was a personal affront toward Him who is holiness. (TLSB)

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)

My eye will not spare. God is not mocked (Gal 6:7). He sees all. Such harshness does not contradict God’s love and desire that all should be saved (cf ch 18), but He is also a God of justice. (TLSB)

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 *pestilence.* Likely the bubonic plague, which would spread among the starving residents of a besieged city. (TLSB)

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

Virtually synonymous clauses piled up to emphasize that God’s justice must be satisfied. (TLSB)

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)

that I the 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)

jealousy. For a husband to share his bride with anyone else is contrary to the nature of things. (TLSB)

That Yahweh declares, “I ... have spoken *in my jealousy*” (Ezek 5:13), reveals much. This (קנא) 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” (אֱלֹהֵינוּ 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 The focus shifts from God’s anger to the emotional and psychological effects of the city’s fall upon surrounding nations. Zion, the city set on a hill (Mt 5:14) as a light to the nations (Is 42:6; 49:6), will become a symbol of shame and contempt. Various pictures are used to drive the point home. *I am the LORD; I have spoken.* Unique to Ezk, appearing 10 times. God’s Word will accomplish what it proclaims (Is 55:11). (TLSB)

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 a horror. A fourfold list. (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 brings his first major judgment sermon to a conclusion, adding new word pictures to describe the judgment. (TLSB)

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)

Ch 5 The Lord condemns Israel for its brazen, sometimes worse-than-heathen, misbehavior. Because God loves deeply, He responds vigorously to those who violate His covenant. The outpouring of His wrath on obstinate unbelievers reminds us that He operates by the same principle in salvation; His Son bore the wrath our sins deserved. His love is costly—a price we could never pay—complete holiness. • Lord, through Your Holy Spirit, instill in us true thankfulness and a holy life that honors Your gift of Your own Son, who paid the price through His blood. Amen. (TLSB)