EZEKIEL

Chapter 6

*A Prophecy Against the Mountains of Israel*

**The word of the LORD came to me:  2 “Son of man, set your face against the mountains of Israel; prophesy against them  3 and say: ‘O mountains of Israel, hear the word of the Sovereign LORD. This is what the Sovereign LORD says to the mountains and hills, to the ravines and valleys: I am about to bring a sword against you, and I will destroy your high places.  4 Your altars will be demolished and your incense altars will be smashed; and I will slay your people in front of your idols.  5 I will lay the dead bodies of the Israelites in front of their idols, and I will scatter your bones around your altars.  6 Wherever you live, the towns will be laid waste and the high places demolished, so that your altars will be laid waste and devastated, your idols smashed and ruined, your incense altars broken down, and what you have made wiped out.  7 Your people will fall slain among you, and you will know that I am the LORD. 8 “‘But I will spare some, for some of you will escape the sword when you are scattered among the lands and nations.  9 Then in the nations where they have been carried captive, those who escape will remember me—how I have been grieved by their adulterous hearts, which have turned away from me, and by their eyes, which have lusted after their idols. They will loathe themselves for the evil they have done and for all their detestable practices.  10 And they will know that I am the LORD; I did not threaten in vain to bring this calamity on them. 11 ”‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Strike your hands together and stamp your feet and cry out “Alas!” because of all the wicked and detestable practices of the house of Israel, for they will fall by the sword, famine and plague.  12 He that is far away will die of the plague, and he that is near will fall by the sword, and he that survives and is spared will die of famine. So will I spend my wrath upon them.  13 And they will know that I am the LORD, when their people lie slain among their idols around their altars, on every high hill and on all the mountaintops, under every spreading tree and every leafy oak—places where they offered fragrant incense to all their idols.  14 And I will stretch out my hand against them and make the land a desolate waste from the desert to Diblah—wherever they live. Then they will know that I am the LORD.’”**

**6:3** MOUNTAINS – The initial address to the “mountains” (6:2–3) extends the scope of Yahweh’s judgment (which had centered on Jerusalem in chapters 4–5) to the entire land of Israel, and that idea is seconded by “in all the places you live” in 6:6. (CC)

*high places.* Open-air sanctuaries of Canaanite origin, condemned throughout the OT. The high places, together with the “altars,” “incense altars” and “idols” (v. 4), make up a list of four objects (see note on 1:5) – (“Four,” which stands for completeness (cf. the four directions in Ge 13:14 and the four quarters of the earth in Isa 11:12), is used often in this chapter—and over 40 times in the book. The living creatures, called “cherubim” in ch. 10, are throne attendants, here (see v. 10) representing God’s creation: “man,” God’s ordained ruler of creation (see Ge 1:26–28; Ps 8); “lion,” the strongest of the wild beasts; “ox,” the most powerful of the domesticated animals; “eagle,” the mightiest of the birds. These four creatures appear again in Rev 4:7 and often are seen in the paintings and sculpture of the Middle Ages, where they represent the four Gospels.) (CSB)

**6:4-5** Various motifs converge in the warning that the Israelites’ corpses will lie in front of their idols, and their bones will be scattered around their altars (6:4–5). The threat evokes the horror of ignominy that the ancient world attached to the lack of a decent burial (much more so than is the case today). Ancient texts frequently speak of invaders deliberately exhuming the bodies of their enemies in the course of warfare, especially as punishment for a broken treaty oath or covenant. An element of sarcasm is probably involved here as well: instead of standing, kneeling, and prostrating themselves as live worshipers would, the apostate Israelites’ bodies will lie motionless, almost as though in mockery of their idols. The close contact with the dead would defile the pagan sanctuaries. 2 Ki 23:16–20 describes how Josiah deliberately defiled the altar and high place at Bethel by exhuming bones and burning them on the altar. Jer 8:1–3 prophesies that the dead apostate Jerusalemites will be exhumed and spread out before the heavenly bodies they had worshiped. This implies a deliberate challenge to the idols to defend their worshipers and themselves—if they really are deities. (Such was the response of Gideon’s father to devotees of Baal who protested the destruction of his altar in Judg 6:31.) (CC)

**6:4** *incense altars.* Made of burnt clay, about two feet high, usually inscribed with animal figures and idols of Canaanite gods. (CSB)

*idols.* The Hebrew for this word is a derisive term (lit. “dung pellets”), used especially by Ezekiel (38 times, as opposed to only 9 times elsewhere in the OT). (CSB)

**6:6** The last clause in Ezek 6:6 summarizes the entire chapter (and much of the rest of the first half of Ezekiel): “your works [מַעֲשֵׂיכֶֽם] (will be) wiped out.” “Works” is a very generic noun (as is the verb “work”), but the Hebrew word frequently has connotations of whatever people make or do in disregard for and defiance of the true God. For example, the account in 1 Ki 12:28–33 of the construction of the pagan temples in Dan and Bethel by Jeroboam I and his liturgical innovations contrary to the OT divine service repeatedly uses the verb עָשָׂה (“he made”). In Isaiah the verb and its derived nouns are used of men’s apostate cultic inventions (e.g., Is 2:8, 20). In many instances in the Bible, “(all) the works of their hands” or a similar phrase (e.g., 2 Ki 22:17; 2 Chr 34:25; Acts 7:41; Rev 9:20) refers to infractions against the First Commandment (see עָשָׂה in Ex 20:4, 23). Today the phrase applies just as easily to technology or other forms of “fine idolatry.” Against all such works, biblical theology proclaims salvation *sola gratia*, “by grace alone,” not by human “works” presumed to be meritorious, much less by “works” of idolatry or the occult. (CC)

**6:7** The result of divine judgment is that “you will know that I am Yahweh” (6:7). This so-called “recognition formula” characteristically comes at the end of Ezekiel’s oracles or sections. It is repeated (in various forms) in 6:7, 10, 13, 14 and occurs close to sixty times in the book. It refers to knowing and confessing that Yahweh both speaks and fulfills his Word—a faith-based recognition of his basic character and the consequences for all who believe or disbelieve. Repeatedly after commands in the Pentateuch (e.g., Leviticus 18), we meet simply, “I am Yahweh.” The very name implies, among other things, his sovereign power, holiness, and power to save. (CC)

The obedience of God’s people does not require them first to authenticate his claims by their own reason or experience. Rather, obedience simply follows faith: alignment with Yahweh’s own character takes place as he works through his Word and sacramental means of grace. In Ezekiel’s context, the accent is on Yahweh’s omnipotent power to punish and to rescue. Yahweh’s nature is more fully revealed in the NT by his incarnation in Jesus Christ, but the nature of the believers’ relationship to the triune God remains the same in both Testaments (*sola gratia* and *sola fide*). All circumcised Israelites were incorporated into the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants. “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ. … And if you are of Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed and heirs according to the promise” (Gal 3:27, 29). (CC)

**6:8** In a partial digression, Yahweh for the first time in Ezekiel broaches the idea of the “remnant,” although he had hinted at it in 5:3 by instructing the prophet to hide a few hairs in the folds of his garment. (CC)

The covenant curses in Leviticus 26, which reverberate so strongly in Ezekiel, themselves keep the door open for a converted remnant (Lev 26:40–45).The remnant theme (expressed with a variety of vocabulary) is also prominent in the prophets preceding Ezekiel. Once Ezekiel’s earlier prophecies of the fall of Jerusalem are fulfilled, God’s restoration of the remnant becomes the overriding theme (Ezekiel 33–48). Even before that, after this passage, each time when the remnant theme resurfaces, it is gradually expanded. The Gospel grows louder. (CC)

**6:9-10** These verses serve as a classic description of contrition after the Law has done its work of judgment. One might wish that such depictions of repentance were considered most characteristic of Ezekiel, rather than those passages that, if isolated from the total context, seem to know only of God’s relentless judgment. (CC)

Three main verbs describe the mental state of those who had escaped with their lives, but live as lonely refugees in foreign lands. First, Yahweh says they “will remember [זָכַר] me” (6:9). Like much Hebrew vocabulary, the word would be misunderstood if it were taken to refer exclusively to an intellectual exercise (as it tends to be in our usage). The cognitive element is certainly part of it: repentant believers confess the *fides quae creditur*, the objective “faith which is believed,” the body of Christian doctrine drawn from the Scriptures and expressed in the Creeds and confessions of the church. The greater accent in 6:9–10, however, is on the implementation of this knowledge of God—receiving it in faith (*fides qua creditur*, the individual’s subjective “faith by which it is believed”), internalizing it, and acting accordingly. In Christian worship, the idea climaxes in the remembrance of Christ in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper (Lk 22:19), with the faithful reception of his true body and blood for the forgiveness of sins according to his Words of Institution. (CC)

What the repentant Israelites will remember is surprising: “how I was heartbroken by their whoring heart” (Ezek 6:9). In NT language, this is not narcissistic bemoaning of the cross they must bear, but remembrance of the cross of Christ in which they share. God was (anthropopathically) “heartbroken” at their prostitution. The same covenant God who married Israel as his wife, then became jealous at her repeated infidelity (5:13; also chapters 16 and 23), can at the same time be “heartbroken” by the way the love he has shown his people is repaid with harlotry. God’s grieving is not unique to Ezekiel; compare also, for example, Ps 78:40; Is 63:10; Micah 6:3–4. (CC)

The repentant people realize that they have been unfaithful in both their “whoring heart” (that is, their will) and “their eyes which whored” (that is, their allegiance). The idioms here remind one of the similar phrases in 1 Jn 2:16: “the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes.” (CC)

The second main verb is that when the people are brought to repentance, “they will loathe themselves,” not merely for having been caught and punished, as it were, but at the realization of how depraved they had become. All the humanistic psychobabble that extols “feeling good about yourself,” about “rights” to sin and live as you please, and every notion that one’s heritage (such as being part of the covenant nation) somehow affords a privileged position before God—all this bursts like a soap bubble. What worth and dignity the people had resulted from their creation in the image of God, and as long as they refused to repent, they had forfeited even that. Now, like St. Paul, they consider their former lives to be dung (Phil 3:8). (CC)

Third, when they really “know” Yahweh (6:10; virtually synonymous with “remember me” in 6:9), they will confess the power of his Word, also in judgment. They realize more than that he has been justified in his actions in general. In particular, they will know that the warnings he gave long ago through Moses (especially Leviticus 26, which intellectually they “knew” perfectly well) were a matter of God’s faithfulness to his covenant, even in judgment. (CC)

**6:9** *those who escape will remember me.* The corrective outcome God intends from the severe judgment to come (see v. 10). (CSB)

**6:11-12** The last third of the chapter is essentially a reprise of the first third. Many of the same words or phrases are repeated or paralleled. Unlike in 6:8–10, but as in 6:1–7, there is no hint of a change of heart by the people, and certainly God appears to have nothing but judgment in mind at the moment. (CC)

**6:11** *Strike your hands together.* A command to Ezekiel, calling for his personal involvement in the tragedy—though Israel’s enemies were condemned for the same practice (see 25:6). (CSB)

**6:13** Yahweh emphasizes the comprehensiveness of his judgment, particularly against the high places. The phrases with “every” and “all” may have described the pervasiveness of Israel’s defiant apostasy, but now they describe the universality of God’s judgment. “Where ‘his’ [Yahweh’s] people had gathered to secure the blessing of the gods, there they will be gathered as corpses, heaped up and strewn about in the ultimate act of desecration. Rather than offering life to the devotees, the pagan sanctuaries have become symbols of death.” (CSB)

**6:14** *I will stretch out my hand against.* A common expression in Ezekiel (see 14:9, 13; 16:27; 25:7; 35:3). (CSB)

*Diblah.* Perhaps the Beth Diblathaim of Jer 48:22, a city in Moab; or Riblah, a city north of Damascus on the Orontes River (see NIV text note). (CSB)

The “hand” of Yahweh is stretched out for a great variety of purposes (see the textual notes on 1:3 and 6:14), but in the final verse of the chapter it becomes a summary formula for the comprehensive “scorched earth” judgment soon to come. “In all the places they live” implies that God’s long hand will reach them everywhere; there will be no hiding. For the fourth time in chapter 6 alone, they will know that he is Yahweh, learning it the hard way. Only after God’s judgment has brought them to a realization of their depravity will it be possible for his grace to work in them a new life (the dynamic of God’s Law as the necessary prerequisite for his Gospel). (CC)

“History does not repeat itself,” so the particular form of the judgment that befell Israel may not also be the form of ours. Yet the theological pattern remains the same. God works *sub contrario*: he kills in order to make alive; Good Friday was necessary before Easter Sunday; and we are baptized into Christ’s death in order that we may also be raised with Christ (Rom 6:1–4; Col 2:11–13). For Ezekiel’s prophecies of doom and destruction, we can access some of the pertinence for ourselves via the hermeneutic of typology. Especially in Advent the church thinks and sings of being “captive Israel” “that mourns in lonely exile here.” That implies that ancient Israel’s experience has been recapitulated in us who are “exiles” in the “diaspora” (1 Pet 1:1; 2:11; James 1:1) as daily we live out our Baptism, dying with Christ and rising with him to newness of life (Romans 6), awaiting our “return” to the promised land—our eternal home, the heavenly Jerusalem (Gal 4:26; Heb 12:22; Rev 3:12; Revelation 21). (CC)