EZEKIEL

Chapter 9

*Idolaters Killed*

**Then I heard him call out in a loud voice, “Bring the guards of the city here, each with a weapon in his hand.”  2 And I saw six men coming from the direction of the upper gate, which faces north, each with a deadly weapon in his hand. With them was a man clothed in linen who had a writing kit at his side. They came in and stood beside the bronze altar. 3 Now the glory of the God of Israel went up from above the cherubim, where it had been, and moved to the threshold of the temple. Then the LORD called to the man clothed in linen who had the writing kit at his side  4 and said to him, “Go throughout the city of Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done in it.” 5 As I listened, he said to the others, “Follow him through the city and kill, without showing pity or compassion.  6 Slaughter old men, young men and maidens, women and children, but do not touch anyone who has the mark. Begin at my sanctuary.” So they began with the elders who were in front of the temple. 7 Then he said to them, “Defile the temple and fill the courts with the slain. Go!” So they went out and began killing throughout the city.  8 While they were killing and I was left alone, I fell facedown, crying out, “Ah, Sovereign LORD! Are you going to destroy the entire remnant of Israel in this outpouring of your wrath on Jerusalem?” 9 He answered me, “The sin of the house 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.’  10 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.” 11 Then the man in linen with the writing kit at his side brought back word, saying, “I have done as you commanded.”**

**9:1** *loud voice.* The thunderous voice of God (see Ex 19:19 and NIV text note; see also Ps 29). (CSB)

The vision hastens toward the final judgment of God’s apostate people. In this chapter, the judgment begins to fall upon the unfaithful people in the city and ultimately upon the city itself. This chapter is closely connected to chapter 8. (CC)

The speaker of 9:1 evidently is the “figure with an appearance like a man” (8:2), who is Ezekiel’s guide throughout the vision of chapters 8–11. He is the divine “Glory” (כָּבוֹד, 8:4), if not Yahweh himself, although the text is reluctant to be too specific. The Glory is Yahweh’s incarnational presence and may be identified as the preincarnate Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity. (CC)

In 9:1 he seems to order angelic attendants to “bring here the supervisors of the city.” The supervisors themselves may be angels who had been stationed over the city to protect it during physical and spiritual warfare (cf. 2 Ki 6:15–17; Is 62:6; Dan 10:13–21). The eschatological city of Jerusalem will have twelve angels, each stationed over one of the city gates (Rev 21:12). However, since the earthly Jerusalem is now apostate, the function of these supervisors is to execute judgment. That each of the supervisors is to have his “weapon of destruction” (Ezek 9:1) recalls the angelic “destroyer” Yahweh sent to slay the firstborn of Egypt (see the textual notes on 9:1). Compare also the two angels involved in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19) and Ps 78:49. (CC)

**9:2** *six men coming from the direction of the upper gate.* These six guardian angels of the city, plus the seventh clothed in linen (cf. the seven angels of the judgment in Rev 8:2, 6), came from the place where the idol that provoked to jealousy stood (see 8:3 and note). (CSB)

 *deadly weapon.* Probably a war club or a battle-ax. (CSB)

 MAN CLOTHED IN LINEN – A seventh “man” is “dressed in linen, with a scribe’s kit” (Ezek 9:2). His garb resembles that of the OT priests (see the textual note on “linen” in this verse), and his role in chapter 9 is like that of a priest or mediator who preserves the faithful from God’s wrath. However, in 10:2, 6–7, he will be the one charged with executing judgment by scattering coals on the city. Block notes that Jewish tradition understood the man as Gabriel, the angel who executed God’s will on earth. Some Christians have regarded him as a Christ figure. A messianic interpretation may antedate Christianity. Block quotes an excerpt from the pre-Qumran *Damascus Document*, which seems to understand him as the Messiah. (Compare the discussion below about the meaning of the mark on the forehead of the righteous.) However, in my judgment, that hermeneutic confuses possible analogy with identification. One may draw an analogy between this white-robed figure and NT portraits of Christ (e.g., Rev 19:11–16, where he executes judgment), but the passages are different enough that the figures are not to be equated. A comparison of the scribe’s role in Ezek 8:4–6 to that of the angel in Rev 7:2–3 (cf. Rev 9:4) suggests that more likely the scribe is an angel. (CC)

 BRONZE ALTAR – The “bronze altar” (Ezek 9:2) by which the men stand must be the Solomonic altar (1 Ki 8:64), which Ahaz had removed and placed north of the new altar he installed. His innovative, but apostate, altar was modeled after one he saw in Damascus (2 Ki 16:10–14). The fate of the true altar after the demise of Ahaz is uncertain. Perhaps the reformations of Hezekiah and Josiah did (at least temporarily) restore it to its rightful place in divine worship. However, one would not be surprised if the apostate kings that followed each of those reforming kings countermanded their efforts. The remark in this verse suggests that such was indeed the case. The “men” are taking their stand with orthodoxy, embodied by the true altar, which had been moved (once again) to the north of its ordained location in the temple court. (CC)

**9:3** *the glory … went up.* God began to vacate the temple, his glory moving to the door (see note on 8:1–11:25). (CSB)

It seems clear that the movement described here (and again in 10:4) represents the first stage of his ultimate abandonment of the temple. It will no longer be his house, which was protected from destruction by his presence. The vacated temple will be only another human structure, as vulnerable as any other building made of stone and wood. (CC)

**9:4** *mark.* A *taw,* the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which originally looked like an “x” (cf. Rev 7:2–4; 13:16; 14:9, 11; 20:4; 22:4).

Therefore in Ezek 9:4–6 the *taw* probably is best interpreted as Yahweh’s signature, or a mark that designates people who truly belong to him through faith and who are faithful to his kingdom. The passage may be compared to Is 44:5, where those who belong to Yahweh write ליהוה (“belonging to Yahweh”) on their hand. (Ownership was commonly expressed by the preposition לְ before the owner’s name, as we know from the OT and archaeologically from thousands of seals and jar handles.). (CC)

Clear Christian echoes of Ezek 9:4–6 appear in Rev 7:1–8; 9:4. Four angels are ready to unleash destructive winds, but another angel comes and tells them not to do so until he puts a seal on the foreheads (as in Ezek 9:4) of the servants of God. A total of 144,000 faithful from the twelve tribes of Israel are sealed—a symbolic number representing the entire church militant on earth, since God’s Israel consists of all Jewish and Gentile believers in Christ (Romans 9–11; Gal 6:16). The sealed believers in Christ are then spared when the demonic forces arise from hell to torment humanity (Rev 9:4). The mark put on their foreheads is “the seal of the living God” (Rev 7:2), which would be a stamp having God’s name or signature. In Rev 14:1 the 144,000 are about to join the church triumphant, and there they are described as having “his [the Lamb’s] name and the name of his Father written on their foreheads.” By analogy, that may suggest that the *taw* in Ezek 9:4–6 represents Yahweh’s name or signature, designating the marked people as his very own. (CC)

The church’s traditional practice is to make the sign of the cross upon the baptized, and Christians in the worshiping congregation likewise make the sign of the cross at the Invocation and other parts of the service in remembrance of their Baptism. For the last time, the sign of the cross is made upon the body of the baptized Christian in the funeral and interment in anticipation of the resurrection, which is the greatest act of divine preservation and deliverance from judgment and destruction. (CC)

 *those who grieve and lament.*† The penitent remnant (see Ex 12:23; 1Ki 19:18). (CSB)

**9:5-7** hese verses underscore the pitiless thoroughness of the annihilation of all but the righteous remnant. Strong, able-bodied men are conspicuous by their absence from the list of those destined for slaughter. The implication apparently is that they will already have fallen in battle. Instead, the six angels target the defenseless, who in ancient times would seek shelter behind a city’s walls. (CC)

This “take no prisoners” attitude reflects that of God himself (8:18 and 9:10), and the execution is here undertaken at God’s express command. Partly this may be understood as simply a reflection of the horror of war, ancient as well as modern, where innocent civilians commonly suffer as much as the actual combatants. But we may also discern the doctrine of original sin behind the thoroughness. “A little leaven leavens the whole lump” (1 Cor 5:6; Gal 5:9), regardless of which or how many actual sins have been committed. The solidarity of a “house” may also be in view; compare Josh 7:22–26, where not only Achan, but his entire estate is stoned and burned because of his transgression. What we know as the Close of the Commandments may also be relevant: God visits iniquity to the third and fourth generation of those who hate him (Ex 20:5). (CC)

Presuming that the six “men” (Ezek 9:2) were in fact angels, the following scene reminds us of an important aspect of angelology. With our de facto tendency one-sidedly to accent God’s love, we tend to picture angels as only agents of good. They certainly are that, but they can be dispatched to carry out “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). (CC)

**9:6** *Begin at my sanctuary.* Judgment begins with God’s people (see 1Pe 4:17). (CSB)

God’s command for them to “begin from my sanctuary” (Ezek 9:6) is programmatic. As virtually an antitype to the scene here, this clause is echoed in 1 Pet 4:17, speaking of the final judgment:

For it is the time for judgment to begin from the house of God. And if it is first from us, what will be the end of those who are disbelieving the Gospel of God? (CC)

In OT times, the temple could be used for asylum (e.g., by Adonijah in 1 Ki 1:50–51; cf. 2 Ki 11:14–15). Sometimes this is imitated in modern times (usually when those under judgment by the state seek refuge in a church or mosque out of secular motives). But the main point in Ezekiel 9 is that the structure that had been God’s earthly residence could no longer be that because of the persistent “abominations” (8:6, 9, 13, 15, 17; 9:4) perpetrated in and around the temple. Yahweh now pronounces the same sentence on his own former residence that he had earlier directed at pagan sanctuaries (6:4–14; see also Ex 23:24; 34:13; Deut 7:5; 12:3). Possibly this emphasis on the temple as Yahweh’s now uninhabitable house is conveyed by the switch from “sanctuary” in 9:6 to בַּיִת (literally, “house”) as the term for the temple in 9:6b–7, although that latter term is commonly used for the temple throughout the OT. (CC)

The idea of greater judgment upon those who have but abuse God’s greater gifts certainly applies to the church and the individual Christian. As Christ said, “Everyone to whom is given much, much shall be required from him” (Lk 12:48). We easily forget that the cross is not only the maximal expression of God’s love to those who believe, but also the maximal expression of his wrath to those who do not—or, as St. Paul puts it, “to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life” (2 Cor 2:16). (CC)

**9:8** *Ah, Sovereign Lord!* † One of the few times Ezekiel remonstrates with the Lord (see 4:14; 11:13). (CSB)

For the second time in the book, Ezekiel remonstrates with God. The first was in 4:14, where he used the same exclamation, “Ah!” There the prophet was reluctant to carry out a vile divine command. Here Ezekiel is an observer, not an actor, and his remonstration is an intercession on behalf of the people. Intercession was a common part of prophetic ministry, paradigmatically in the intercession of Moses for the Israelites after the golden calf incident (Exodus 32–34). Ezekiel intercedes again and similarly in 11:13, but that is the only other time in the book where he clearly adopts that role. Probably the rarity of his supplications is because of the book’s great accent on the imminence and inevitability of the judgment. (CC)

His petition takes the form of a question: “Are you destroying the entire remnant of Israel as you pour out your wrath upon Jerusalem?” Compare Abraham’s intercessory questions to God in Gen 18:23–32. By phrasing his petition as a question, the prophet does not challenge God’s authority or the justice of the well-deserved judgment, but he appeals nevertheless to the God whose heart he knows must still hold some mercy. His plea seems to be only for a faithful “remnant of Israel,” since it is less likely in this context that it is a general plea for absolution for all Israel. Apparently, in his excited state of mind, Ezekiel overlooks those marked with a *taw*, whom God had commanded the executioners to spare (9:6). Perhaps Ezekiel overlooks them because they were so small in number. In any case, Taylor is on target in describing Ezekiel: “Though his forehead was made as hard as adamant (3:9), his heart was always a heart of flesh (36:26). (CC)

“Israel” (9:8) may be a religious as well as a political or demographic term. “Jerusalem” at the end of Ezekiel’s question points toward the city and its inhabitants in politico-geographical terms. Yet Jerusalem plainly had representative significance for the whole people and land of Israel. With the city already decimated by the deportations of 605 b.c. (of which Daniel had been a part) and 597 b.c. (of which Ezekiel himself had been a part), Ezekiel fears that the comprehensive slaughter he is now witnessing will mean the extinction of the nation. (CC)

Nevertheless, both “Israel” and Ezekiel’s reference to a “remnant” point in a transnational direction. From the time when God called Abraham, the subsequent history of the patriarchs and the later people clearly showed that “not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel” (Rom 9:6), although it took a long time for God’s chosen people to grasp the implications of that fact. The OT history of Israel is full of examples where unfaithful Israelites were cut off from the people and promises of God despite their lineage, and of still other examples where non-Israelites were fully incorporated into the covenant people by grace. (CC)

The NT makes plain that even by that time many Christians (probably both Jewish and Gentile) had not fully comprehended the distinction between ethnic Israel and the Israel of faith, nor had all fully grasped God’s equal acceptance of Jew and Gentile alike in Christ by grace alone (see, e.g., Acts 1:6; Romans 9–11; Ephesians 3–4). In modern times too, confusion about “Israel” is evident in the millennial and dispensational schemes that involve a “two covenant” theology (one covenant for Jews, another for Gentiles). A similar confusion exists in liberal ecumenism, which holds out some hope of salvation for Jews apart from faith in Christ and abhors “supersessionism,” the tenet that the NT church fulfills and so supersedes OT Israel. Yet the OT theme of the preservation and salvation of the “remnant” remains one of the chief expressions by which especially the prophets articulated the same theology that now we call the distinction between the visible and the invisible church. In the OT era, the whole people of Israel were the visible church, while the faithful remnant was the true, invisible church seen and known by God (so in Ezek 9:4–6, 11, Yahweh’s scribe knows exactly whom to mark). (CC)

Ezekiel’s intercession is striking because it follows God’s declaration that he would not heed the prayers of Israel (8:18). Perhaps Ezekiel clings to the hope that even if God is deaf to the other Israelites, possibly he will listen to his prophet. In more general terms, St. Paul urges that intercessions be made for all people (e.g., 1 Tim 2:1). The pastor in particular carries out the intercessory role, both in publicly leading intercessory prayer in the Divine Service and in his private prayers for his church members. The NT picture is that the imminence of the final judgment is all the more reason to pray (cf. Mt 24:44; 25:13; Lk 21:28). (CC)

**9:9** Yahweh has ensured the salvation of the faithful remnant despite the forthcoming judgment that (in terms of its temporal consequences) will afflict the entire people and nation. However, in Yahweh’s answer to the prophet’s intercessory petition, his provision for the remnant is totally subordinated to the thoroughness of the punishment of the wicked. “The land is filled with bloodshed” (9:9) is a clear echo of the human condition that precipitated the flood: the earth was filled with/full of violence (Gen 6:11, 13), and so God sent the deluge to cover the face of the entire earth. As the depravity had been nearly total, so the judgment is comprehensive. In the universal flood only eight had been spared, and that salvation has typological application to the Sacrament of Christian Baptism (1 Pet 3:18–22). But Ezekiel gives no count of the marked members of the remnant here. (CC)

The objective guilt of the people is matched by their subjective stance that disclaims Yahweh’s covenant claims on them and forfeits his gracious promises. The people had expressed their unbelief using the same clauses earlier (“Yahweh does not see us; Yahweh has forsaken the land” [8:12]) in the context of depraved worship. Unbelief is ultimately inseparable from the perversion of justice (“the city is full of injustice,” 9:9). (CC)

**9:10** Yahweh continues with a reiteration of his mercilessness in the present context. The judgment will be commensurate with the crime. “Whatever a man sows, that will he also reap” (Gal 6:7). It is too late for any possible reprieve. Reference to God’s “eye” is an ironic reply to the people’s arrogant assertion that he does not “see” (9:9). (CC)

**9:11** This episode comes to a conclusion with the scribe’s report that he has obeyed God’s instructions. Since this scribe has been commissioned as an agent of protection for the penitent, this final note assures Ezekiel that a remnant will indeed be spared, even though Yahweh’s immediate answer (9:9–10) to his plea (9:8) might have left the impression that none would escape. (CC)