



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“THE TWO HANDS OF GOD”

John Galbreath
Bible Study Series

Text: Ezekiel 20
Date: September 17, 1961

About Westminster's Galbreath Bible Study Series:

This lesson is one taken from a sermon preached by John Galbreath at Westminster Presbyterian Church on September 19, 1961

To complete the lesson, we suggest that you begin by reading the designated Bible passage (Ezekiel 20).

Next, review the outline of the sermon. Reflect on the chosen scripture and how you would “fill in” the remainder of the message from the chosen passage.

Then, review the study questions posed about the lesson — whether by yourself or in your small group.

Finally, share your thoughts on the Galbreath Bible Study blog on the Westminster Intranet.

The bulletin that week noted that a polio clinic was being held in the community later that month. There was also a collection of bicycles and tricycles in any condition being taken up for a "worthy group of children."

I. Introduction

A. Ezekiel lived during the period of the crumbling away of Judah.

1. Five years before his first prophecy, Jehoichim had been taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar, along with several thousand
2. Sometime during his ministry, Ezekiel himself was exiled to Babylonia.

B. A period of mixed reaction among the Jews.

1. "Certain of the elders of Israel came to inquire of the Lord."
 - a) *They were God's chosen people.*
 - b) *The Babylonians were rank pagans.*
 - c) *If God were really God, why were the Jews being defeated?*
 - d) *Many had already gone over to Marduk for if the Babylonian might was any indication, he must be the stronger god.*

II. Ezekiel's Message

A. Israel in Egypt

1. When famine came to their forefathers, they were given good land in Egypt, under the leadership of Joseph
 - a) *But they turned to the false gods of Egypt and forgot the Lord.*
 - b) *They became slaves.*
 - c) *God remembered his covenant with Abraham and delivered them.*

B. The wilderness

1. They who were no people -- but slaves and wanderers, God had delivered to freedom.
2. But they longed for the false Gods of Egypt and set up the golden calf.
3. God forbade them to enter the promised land.
4. But God relented and let their children conquer the land.

C. Israel in the promised land.

1. They who were but a nomad people were given the cities and rich lands of Palestine and the Jordan.
2. Time and again, they followed false gods and time and again God let their enemies chasten them.
3. God's patience had run out, and the hand of his chastisement would descend upon them through the Babylonians.
4. As a bride, Israel had made her vows to God, but had proved unfaithful.
 - a) *As an unfaithful wife, she was to be stripped, and shamed, and stoned, and enslaved.*

D. A new Egypt and a new wilderness.

1. As Israel had been enslaved in Egypt, so the cycle was to begin again in Babylonia.
2. A handful would yet remain to return once again to the promised land.
 - a) *"And ye shall be my people, and I will be your God."*

E. The two hands of God -- of blessing and of chastisement.

III. God's Hand of Blessing

A. Time and again, God's hand had stretched forth to bless his people

1. In the fine bottom lands of Goshen
2. In the manna of the wilderness
3. In the lands of milk and honey

B. We know well this hand of God.

1. We have a holiday -- Thanksgiving -- in recognition of God's goodness to us.
2. We can become ecstatic over the extent to which we have been blessed beyond all other generations.
3. The common man has blessings that kings would not have dreamed of -- foods from far corners of the earth -- vehicles of transportation that would stagger the imagination of those a century ago.

4. Our prayers give recognition to God's prodigality toward us.

C. But ours is a two-fisted God, a God who acts not only through our friends, but through our enemies.

IV. The Other Hand of God

A. Israel was well prepared to accept the prosperity of God, but could not see God at work through Babylon.

1. Because Babylonians were pagan, they were assumed to be out of God's control.
2. God's hand was at work, even through Nebuchadnezzar.
3. The Babylonians were being used of God in spite of themselves.

B. God still has two hands -- working through his enemies, as well as through those he chose to bless.

1. The world is exploding all about us -- a terrifying, exciting, exhausting generation.
2. Revolution, with its excesses, irresponsibility, instability, have shaken the foundations of civilization.
3. Why can't the world be quiet?
 - a) *We started this mess -- in our revolt against Britain.*
 - b) *The secessionists of Katanga had their counterpart here in Bethel and Upper St. Clair.*
 - c) *We had to throw out our Articles of Confederation and start all over again.*
 - d) *Our British cousins must have been distraught with us when we sided with the radicals of France and her revolution.*
 - e) *Yet through the cauldron of those early days, God's hand was forming our nation.*
4. What is happening to Red China?
 - a) *Had God's hand ceased to move in the life of that great land?*
 - b) *Has the gospel been sewn for naught?*

c) *Or through the purging fires of persecution will our Christian brethren emerge with a purer faith than ours?*

d) *What surprise has God awaiting us?*

5. What has God's hand done through Russia?

a) *Is God using the Russians in spite of themselves?*

b) *If we live through it, we may find that the Russian threat is the best thing that ever happened to America.*

c) *It has forced us to look at our failure in social justice and to act.*

d) *It has forced us to sense the needs of our neighbors -- and what we had not the heart to do out of love, we are forced to do in self-defense -- in Latin America and the under-developed.*

e) *What but fear of Russia would have forced the giant strides America is making in nuclear and space study?*

C. Israel's most profound contributions came through the period of defeat and exile.

1. Out of her period of testing, she was being used of God.

V. Conclusion

God has made us a chosen people -- far beyond any deserving. But when current events do not seem to be contributing to our comfort, we cannot conclude that God is dead or asleep -- but that even through our enemies -- even through our own chastisement, God's hand is at work.

Study Questions -- Part I*Bible Reading: Ezekiel 20*

Ezekiel 20:1-6 says: ¹Now in the seventh year, in the fifth month, on the tenth of the month, certain of the elders of Israel came to inquire of the LORD, and sat before me. ²And the word of the LORD came to me saying, ³"Son of man, speak to the elders of Israel and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, "Do you come to inquire of Me? As I live," declares the Lord GOD, "I will not be inquired of by you.'" ⁴"Will you judge them, will you judge them, son of man? Make them know the abominations of their fathers; ⁵and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, "On the day when I chose Israel and swore to the descendants of the house of Jacob and made Myself known to them in the land of Egypt, when I swore to them, saying, I am the LORD your God, ⁶on that day I swore to them, to bring them out from the land of Egypt into a land that I had selected for them, flowing with milk and honey, which is the glory of all lands.

- Have there been times when you may have been making inquiries of God? What were you asking about? What answer did you receive?

Ezekiel 20:7-11 says: ⁷"I said to them, 'Cast away, each of you, the detestable things of His eyes, 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; they did not cast away the detestable things of their eyes, nor did they forsake the idols of Egypt. Then I resolved to pour out My wrath on them, to accomplish 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 by bringing them out of the land of Egypt. ¹⁰"So I took them out of the land of Egypt and brought them into the wilderness. ¹¹"I gave them My statutes and informed them of My ordinances, by which, if a man observes them, he will live.

- What are the detestable things of your eyes? What do you do to cast them away?
- What do you do each day to live by God's ordinances?

Ezekiel 20:12-17 says: ¹²"Also I gave them My sabbaths to be 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 and they rejected My ordinances, by which, if a man observes them, he will live; and My sabbaths they greatly profaned. Then I resolved to pour out My wrath on them in the wilderness, to annihilate them. ¹⁴"But I acted for the sake of My name, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations, before whose sight I had brought them out. ¹⁵"Also I swore to them in the wilderness that I would not bring them into the land which I had given them, flowing with milk and honey, which is the glory of all lands, ¹⁶because they rejected My ordinances, and as for My statutes, they did not walk in them; they even profaned My sabbaths, for their heart continually went after their idols. ¹⁷"Yet My eye spared them rather than destroying them, and I did not cause their annihilation in the wilderness.

- What do you do to avoid profaning the sabbath?
- Which of God's ordinances and statues do find yourself rejecting?

Ezekiel 20: 18-22 says: ¹⁸"I said to their children in the wilderness, ' Do not walk in the statutes of your fathers or keep their ordinances or defile yourselves with their idols. ¹⁹I am the LORD your God; walk in My statutes and keep My ordinances and observe them. ²⁰Sanctify My sabbaths; and they shall 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, nor were they careful to observe My ordinances, by which, if a man observes them, he will live; they profaned My sabbaths. So I resolved to pour out My wrath on them, to accomplish My anger against them in the wilderness. ²²"But I withdrew 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.

- Are there times you feel you have faced God's wrath for not following his statutes or ordinances or profaning the sabbath?

Ezekiel 20:23-26 says: ²³"Also I swore to them in the wilderness that I would scatter them among the nations and disperse them among the lands, ²⁴because they had not observed My ordinances, but had rejected My statutes and had profaned My sabbaths, and their eyes were on the idols of their fathers. ²⁵"I also gave them statutes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not live; ²⁶and I pronounced them unclean because of their gifts, in that they caused all their firstborn to pass through the fire so that I might make them desolate, in order that they might know that I am the LORD."

- Why do you think there is so much repetition in this chapter?
- Do you ever feel as if you are facing statutes that are intentionally difficult to follow?

Ezekiel 20:27-32 says: ²⁷"Therefore, son of man, speak to the house of Israel and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, "Yet in this your fathers have blasphemed Me by acting treacherously against Me. ²⁸"When I had brought them into the land which I swore to give to them, then they saw every high hill and every leafy tree, and they offered there their sacrifices and there they presented the provocation of their offering. There also they made their soothing aroma and there they poured out their drink offerings. ²⁹"Then 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 play the harlot after their detestable things? ³¹"When you offer your gifts, when you cause your sons to pass through the fire, you are defiling 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 comes into your mind will not come about, when you say: 'We will be like the nations, like the tribes of the lands, serving wood and stone.'

- Again we see "I will not be inquired of by you." Why is this such an important statement in this chapter?

Ezekiel 20: 33-38 says: ³³"As I live," declares the Lord GOD, "surely with a mighty hand and with an outstretched arm and with wrath poured out, I shall be king over you. ³⁴"I will bring you out from the peoples and gather you from the lands where you are scattered, with a mighty hand and with an outstretched arm and with wrath poured out; ³⁵and 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; ³⁸and I will purge from you the rebels and those who transgress against Me; I will bring them out of the land where they sojourn, but they will not enter the land of Israel. Thus you will know that I am the LORD.

- This chapter is representative of what is often thought of as the "Old Testament God." Why do you think it spoke about punishment and judgment as the way of knowing "I am the Lord?"

Ezekiel 20: 39 through 42 says: ³⁹"As for you, O house of Israel," thus says the Lord GOD, "Go, serve everyone his idols; but later you will surely listen to Me, and My holy name you will profane no longer with your gifts and with your idols. ⁴⁰"For on My holy mountain, on the high mountain of Israel," declares the Lord GOD, "there the whole house of Israel, all of them, will serve Me in the land; there I will accept them and there I will seek your contributions and the choicest of your gifts, with all your holy things. ⁴¹"As a soothing aroma I will accept you when I bring you out from the peoples and gather you from the lands where you are scattered; and I will prove Myself holy among you in the sight of the nations. ⁴²"And you will know that I am the LORD, when I bring you into the land of Israel, into the land which I swore to give to your forefathers.

- In this passage, it says "I will prove Myself holy among you." Have there been times when you have expected God to prove His holiness?

Ezekiel 20: 43 through 49 says: ⁴³"There you will remember your ways and all your deeds with which you have defiled yourselves; and you will loathe yourselves in your own sight for all the evil things that you have done. ⁴⁴"Then you will know that I am the LORD when I have dealt with you for My name's sake, not according to your evil ways or according to your corrupt deeds, O house of Israel," declares the Lord GOD. ⁴⁵"Now the word of the LORD came to me, saying, ⁴⁶"Son of man, set your face toward Teman, and speak out against the south and prophesy against the forest land of the Negev, ⁴⁷and say to the forest of the Negev, 'Hear the word of the LORD: thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I am about to kindle a fire in you, and it will consume every green tree in you, as well as every dry tree; the blazing flame will not be quenched and the whole surface from south to north will be burned by it. ⁴⁸"All flesh will see that I, the LORD, have kindled it; it shall not be quenched.'" ⁴⁹Then I said, "Ah Lord GOD! They are saying of me, 'Is he not just speaking parables?'"

- Are there things you have done that make you loathe yourself? In light of the New Testament, how do you view those acts?

Study Questions -- Part II

Sermon :

There is a handwritten note on the document. "He plants his footsteps in the sea -- and rides upon the storm."

I.B.1.c. -- Why do you think there are so many times in the Bible when "the chosen people" faced defeat and disaster?

II.A.1.c. -- What impact do you think that covenant has today? Or does Jesus's life change the importance of such foundations of the Old Testament?

II.B.4. -- There is a pattern of God being the stern father then relenting and forgiving. Have there been moments in your life where you felt that in your relationship with God?

II.D.2.a. -- Why do you think this is future tense? Why doesn't it simply say "you *are* my people and I *am* your God?"

II.E. -- How do you see the two hands of God manifested today in your life? In the world?

III.B.3. -- This sermon was written in 1961. What additional blessings would you add to it in the 21st century?

IV.B.1. -- In what ways do you see the world exploding today? Is it better or worse than it was in 1961?

IV.B.4. -- How do you view the hand of God in today's China?

IV.B.4.d. -- Answer the question Dr. Galbreath posed for your life and your world.

IV.B.5. -- Reflect on how God's hand was at work in the fall of the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc.

IV.B.5.b. -- Do you think that the Soviet threat was the best thing that happened to America?

IV.B.5.c. -- Now that the Soviet Union is gone, what impact do you think it had on our failure in social justice? Without that threat are we more just now?

IV.B.5.d. -- Do you think we are doing more now out of love than we did in 1961?

IV.B.5.e. -- What do you think moves us forward today?

IV.C. -- What defeats do you think have faced our country and our people that have helped us to make progress in our faith journey?

V. -- How is God's hand at work today in Upper St. Clair? In Pittsburgh? The United States? The world?

V. Before the conclusion he used, there is a paragraph that he crossed out by hand. It read: "The John Birch Society is getting up a list of [communist sympathizers] and liberals. They must not forget to include God on their list. He was the original internationalist. In fact, he has at times seemed downright unAmerican!"