

Emmanuel: But We're Not with God

09/05/2021

Scripture 1: (1 Kings 9:6-9 ESV)

[The LORD speaking to Solomon] But if you turn aside from following me, you or your children, and do not keep my commandments and my statutes that I have set before you, but go and serve other gods and worship them, then I will cut off Israel from the land that I have given them, and the house that I have consecrated for my name I will cast out of my sight, and Israel will become a proverb and a byword among all peoples. And this house will become a heap of ruins. Everyone passing by it will be astonished and will hiss, and they will say, 'Why has the LORD done thus to this land and to this house?' Then they will say, 'Because they abandoned the LORD their God who brought their fathers out of the land of Egypt and laid hold on other gods and worshiped them and served them. Therefore the LORD has brought all this disaster on them.'

Scripture 2: (Ezek. 10:1-22 ESV)

Then I looked, and behold, on the expanse that was over the heads of the cherubim there appeared above them something like a sapphire, in appearance like a throne. And he said to the man clothed in linen, "Go in among the whirling wheels underneath the cherubim. Fill your hands with burning coals from between the cherubim, and scatter them over the city." And he went in before my eyes. Now the cherubim were standing on the south side of the house, when the man went in, and a cloud filled the inner court. And the glory of the LORD went up from the cherub to the threshold of the house, and the house was filled with the cloud, and the court was filled with the brightness of the glory of the LORD. And the sound of the wings of the cherubim was heard as far as the outer court, like the voice of God Almighty when he speaks. And when he commanded the man clothed in linen, "Take fire from between the whirling wheels, from between the cherubim," he went in and stood beside a wheel. And a cherub stretched out his hand from between the cherubim to the fire that was between the cherubim, and took some of it and put it into the hands of the man clothed in linen, who took it and went out.

The cherubim appeared to have the form of a human hand under their wings. And I looked, and behold, there were four wheels beside the cherubim, one beside each cherub, and the appearance of the wheels was like sparkling beryl. And as for their appearance, the four had the same likeness, as if a wheel were within a wheel. When they went, they went in any of their four directions without turning as they went, but in whatever direction the front wheel faced, the others followed without turning as they went. And their whole body, their rims, and their spokes, their wings, and the wheels were full of eyes all around-- the wheels that the four of them had.

As for the wheels, they were called in my hearing "the whirling wheels." And every one had four faces: the first face was the face of the cherub, and the second face was a human face, and the third the face of a lion, and the fourth the face of an eagle. And the cherubim mounted up. These were the living creatures that I saw by the Chebar canal.

And when the cherubim went, the wheels went beside them. And when the cherubim lifted up their wings to mount up from the earth, the wheels did not turn from beside them. When they stood still, these stood still, and when they mounted up, these mounted up with them, for the spirit of the living creatures was in them. Then the glory of the LORD went out from the threshold of the house, and stood over the cherubim. And the cherubim lifted up their wings and mounted up from the earth before my eyes as they went out, with the wheels beside them. And they stood at the entrance of the east gate of the house of the LORD, and the glory of the God of Israel was over them.

And the cherubim lifted up their wings and mounted up from the earth before my eyes as they went out, with the wheels beside them. And they stood at the entrance of the east gate of the house of the LORD, and the glory of the God of Israel was over them. These were the living creatures that I saw underneath the God of Israel by the Chebar canal; and I knew that they were cherubim. Each had four faces, and each four wings, and underneath their wings the likeness of human hands. And as for the likeness of their faces, they were the same faces whose appearance I had seen by the Chebar canal. Each one of them went straight forward.

Scripture 3: (Malachi 3:1-6 ESV)

"Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

"Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts.

"For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed."

Sermon:

Emmanuel, the idea that God is with us, is something that we often take for granted. The people of ancient Israel certainly did, and it eventually cost them everything.

These past few weeks we have focused on various signs: signs of increasing greatness; signs of the LORD's Presence in the midst of His people, and the people's actions furthering the distance between themselves and God. The final one, with the grandest expression of temporal glory for the Sovereign LORD, the Jerusalem Temple, led to the people eventually becoming detached and spiritually removed from their relationship with Him, from their faith.

King Solomon built the Temple in Jerusalem according to his father's, King David's, desire and designs, as allowed by the LORD's Will. The construction of the Temple clearly met with God's approval, as the sign of His Presence, a theophonic¹ cloud filled the sanctuary, so that the priests could not see to minister or perform their duties. The LORD, God Almighty, took up residency in Jerusalem, and sat enthroned above the cherubim in the Temple. The infinite, in-expressible, un-containable divinity; the Creator of all that is or ever would be; Who is omniscient *{all knowing}*, omnipotent *{all powerful}*, and omnipresent *{in all places at all times}*, had chosen to show His favor and grace upon His elect people by declaring that there, in Jerusalem, in that Temple, His people could come to worship and meet with Him. The LORD God could be found in Jerusalem. God was with them.

However, the LORD choosing to favor His people by dwelling among them, also came with a warning, telling King Solomon {"If you or your children forsake Me, fail to keep My Law, and worship idols or other things of the creation; then I will remove Israel from this land and I will abandon this Temple."} (1 Kings 9)

God was with His people, but His Presence would only remain so long as they were faithful; otherwise His Presence would be felt by Its' absence.

We know the history of Israel and Judah. Solomon began faithfully, but then he fell away into idolatry with his many wives. The nation then divided under his son, Rehoboam, with ten tribes abandoning the true king and God for Jeroboam, with his two golden calf idols, and later the prophets of Ba'al and Ashtoreth. Yet in Judah, although they had many wicked kings, they also had some good and faithful kings who continued the worship of the LORD.

Unfortunately, those wicked kings in Judah **added** to the worship of God. Now they never saw themselves as abandoning or forgetting God; for the LORD was part of their national identity as Judah, like Baseball and Apple Pie is to the United States; instead they just **added** "other gods" into their worship routine and religious practice. First, they built altars to idols on the surrounding mountain tops, then they moved the idols into the LORD's Temple itself, although with subordinate positioning. They thought this would be O.K.. They were confident that God would continue to remain with them, and protect them so long as they still followed the forms of His worship, because their object of trust was actually the Temple, not in the One who dwelt there. They proclaimed the object of their faith in the superlative, "*This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD.*" (Jer. 7:4 ESV).

They forgot that the LORD is a "*jealous God*" (Exodus 34:14). They forgot the first commandment, "*Thou Shalt Have No Other Gods Before Me*" (Exodus 20:3)! So, they **added** and **added**, compounding idolatry into

¹Theophany, (from Greek *theophaneia*, "appearance of God"), [manifestation](#) of deity in sensible form.

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/theophany>

their religious life. They became a people, devoutly religious and spiritual, attending to all manners of false worship, idol worship; forsaking faith and obedience to the LORD alone, for the fantasies and crafts of men. All these religious **additions** only resulted in their **subtraction** from God's glory.

So, the LORD kept His promises, because He is faithful and true. Moses warned them (Deuteronomy 32). Solomon was warned (1 Kings 9). The many prophets, whom God sent to the people, prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah, whom the people ignored and persecuted for speaking God's truth, warned them about what was coming.

Then through His servant Nebuchadnezzar, God sent the Babylonian armies against Judah and deposed the rebellious *{against Babylon's over-lordship}* King Jehoiakim (2 Kings 24:1-6). Three months later, after the next king, Jehoiachin, did evil in God's sight, Nebuchadnezzar came against Jerusalem to besiege and conquer it. He carried off all the treasure from the LORD's Temple, the king's treasures, the king and his family, all of the government and religious officials, the soldiers, craftsmen and smiths; taking over ten thousand captives, before establishing Jehoiachin's uncle, Zedekiah, as the new king (2 Kings 24:10-20). Within this crop of captives were notable individuals like: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah (Dan. 1:6 ESV), and the priest, Ezekiel.

Now the book of Ezekiel is a very difficult and challenging prophecy to read, much less to begin to understand. It is a book filled with verbal and physical imagery; as Ezekiel himself would, on occasion, act out his prophecy *{also like Jeremiah and Hosea}*. It is filled with symbology and allegory fortunately the interaction of the symbols is sometimes rather plain and straight forward. Many of Ezekiel's prophecies and visions are accurate to recorded history, as he very specifically dates their occurrence. So while Jeremiah was prophesying the fall of Judah and Jerusalem to those who remained in the land, Ezekiel was prophesying the fall of Jerusalem and the Temple to the Exiles in Babylon.

Please understand that all Biblical prophecy and revelation is grounded in its' context and rarely exactly understood, it is subject to interpretation. We should have an understanding of the immediate textual context, along with the historical and cultural context, before we can begin to have **any** understanding of the prophetic voice.

The prophecy we read today, began back in the eighth chapter and runs through chapter eleven. Ezekiel received this vision *"In the sixth year, in the sixth month, on the fifth day of the month..."*(Ezek. 8:1 ESV) during the exile of King Jehoiachin *{the dating rubric is established in Ezekiel chapter 1, thus the time frames may be correlated to 2 Kings chapters 24 and 25}*; some six years after they were taken to Babylon in exile, and about five years before the final destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by Nebuchadnezzar.

This particular prophecy begins by displaying Judah's idolatry: all the detestable, unholy things being done by the leaders and people in Jerusalem and in the LORD's Temple itself. First, the LORD asks Ezekiel, *"...Son of man, do you see what they are doing, the great abominations that the house of Israel are committing here, to drive me far from my sanctuary?..."* (Ezek. 8:6 ESV) The sins of Judah: their idolatry and the abandonment of the one true faith in the LORD is explained to Ezekiel as being the specific cause for our passage and the judgment contained within. Next, chapter nine prophesies the death of these wicked, faithless, idolaters by violence, while only the faithful few, those who mourn the atrocities committed in the Temple, are preserved and spared.

It is very easy to get caught up in all the imagery, but we are not going to delve into symbology now. Today, our Scripture contains two very important and very clear acts of judgment being enacted by the LORD: a judgment

of fire in the burning destruction of the city of Jerusalem; and a judgment upon the people and the defiled Temple, by the LORD removing His Presence from them.

The LORD told the man clothed in linen *{the same man from chapter nine who had marked the Elect to be preserved}*, "Go in among the whirling wheels underneath the cherubim. Fill your hands with burning coals from between the cherubim, and scatter them over the city.", proclaiming the destruction of the Holy City by fire.

Five years later, the book of Second Kings records, "In the fifth month, on the seventh day of the month-- that was the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon-- Nebuzaradan, the captain of the bodyguard, a servant of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem. And he burned the house of the LORD and the king's house and all the houses of Jerusalem; every great house he burned down. And all the army of the Chaldeans, who were with the captain of the guard, broke down the walls around Jerusalem. And the rest of the people who were left in the city and the deserters who had deserted to the king of Babylon, together with the rest of the multitude, Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard carried into exile. But the captain of the guard left some of the poorest of the land to be vinedressers and plowmen." (2 Ki. 25:8-12 ESV), just as Ezekiel had prophesied in Babylon.

However, our focus now is not on this specific, historical fulfillment of prophecy, of the Temple's destruction, although recognizing the fulfillment of prophecy helps to increase our confidence and faith in what else Ezekiel describes.

The cherubim, of which Ezekiel speaks in his vision, were those in the Temple, inside the Holy of Holies. The mercy seat and atonement cover had two cherubim upon the Ark of the Covenant (Ex. 25:17–21); this was considered to be the earthly "Chariot-Throne of God", located in the Temple, where God's Presence would dwell and be moved (1 Samuel 4:4; Psalm 18:10; 99). Here with Ezekiel we see the "glory of the LORD"; then we see His Presence move from the throne to the threshold of the Temple, and pause there.

Why does the LORD pause? Everything spoken or written in prophecy is deliberate and intentional, so we cannot know for sure, (interpretations vary) but it could be for the observation of His will being done or as some commentators would suggest, a pause to wait and see if any people remain who would turn to Him; to plead for the LORD to remain among His people. John Calvin in particular suggested that God pauses at the threshold to display His Glory, for His voice to be resoundingly heard, to be obviously and evidently present; to see who would respond and answer His call to faith (Calvin's Commentaries #6) But seeing none, the LORD summons His chariot-throne from the Holy of Holies to leave the Temple, as "*the cherubim mounted up*".

"*Then the glory of the LORD went out from the threshold of the house, and stood over the cherubim. And the cherubim lifted up their wings and mounted up from the earth before my eyes as they went out, with the wheels beside them.*"

The LORD, the Holy One of Israel abandoned Judah to their sin and judgment. The Presence of the LORD forsook the Temple. His Presence was no longer felt or seen in the midst of His people. God's people were no longer with Him. Emmanuel's Presence was gone from Israel.

The people had utterly turned their back upon God, so He left them to it. As Paul puts it, "*Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.*" (Rom. 1:24-25 ESV)

According to Jeremiah, after the first two invasion, all of Judah, all of the people were still doing what was wicked in the LORD's eyes. They were in dire need of repentance, to return to the LORD, or else the absolute worst would happen. But, the people chose to indulge their sinful desires and passions, instead of pursuing godliness. They worshiped false gods: idols of wood and stone. They propagated fanciful ideas and trusted in pagan myths, instead of the LORD. They placed their faith, hope, and trust in the thickness of their city walls, their strength of arms, and the presence of God's Temple, instead of in God Himself. So, God allowed them to debase themselves, and then He called upon Nebuchadnezzar to enact His divine judgment upon Judah; proving that all their hope in themselves and the power of the creation was a lie. The Jews became a conquered people. They were removed from the Promised Land, removed far from the sight and presence of the LORD; because, in their sin and wickedness, they had become a proud people and had forgotten the LORD Who Saves, *Yehoshua* (Numbers 13:16).

Do these circumstances sound familiar? Have you watched the news recently? Ancient Israel turned their back on God and suffered for it; does America's situation sound any different or better?

Look around you. Who are the people missing? Who is not in church worshiping the LORD on Sunday mornings? What are they doing instead? What idols have become more important to the folks around us and in our community, than loving God?

Consider our current American culture, especially as *evangelized* through TV and other Media formats.

Our nation elevates, praises, and pays critical heed to sports figures, Hollywood elites, and politicians concerning what is right and wrong. We place our trust in and depend upon the government to protect us from each other with the police; to protect us from ourselves with “consumer safety regulations”; and they also protect us from other “peoples” by regulating who may come and go across our country's borders.

Science was once considered to be respectable, reliable, and trust worthy, but now we do not seem to know who to trust. Facts are presented as opinions, while opinions are broadcast as being fact. Who really knows anymore? Many professing Christians cannot even agree whether or not it is loving to wear a mask or to get a vaccination; whether we are at liberty to choose for ourselves; so instead some want the authorities to either **demand** or **prohibit** one or the other.

For all of us who might have ever placed our hopes and goals alongside the classical “American Dream” ideal, we now find ourselves awake inside of a nightmare. It is fair to say that our nation, our civic leadership as a whole, has abandoned the LORD. They have abandoned all pretense of righteousness, or faith, and have instead espoused everything which the “*god of this world*” (2 Cor 4:4) enjoys and affirms. Marriage without commitment, or “commitment” without marriage. Rampant divorce without cause. Abortion on demand. Violent or forced segregation from those who are considered to be “other”. People claim status as being “persecuted individuals”, in the land known as “Free” simply because their feelings get hurt, or because they are taught and constantly told that they are persecuted, for any excuse under the sun; but few Americans know what true persecution is like anymore, while folks flee from every other nation on earth to come here to America, to get away from persecution.

Now, people regularly demonize, de-legitimize, and de-humanize those who are different from themselves: whether it be in skin color, sex, faith, politics, values, or even opinions. None of us want to admit it, but we're all guilty of this to varying degrees. Everything around has become an idol, a potential distraction away from the true God. We forget that we are called to unity in Christ!

John Calvin wrote, “that the human mind is, so to speak, a perpetual forge of idols ” (Institutes 11.8), meaning we create things to try to supplant the LORD; to replace Him with a different voice that will tell us exactly what we want to hear; a voice not to speak into our hearts, minds, and lives to convict us of us of our sin; not to call us to live lives of holiness; not for us to give God the glory alone; but to instead consort with and choose the demonic and anti-Christian world, instead of holiness.

Society today, despite our many “modern conveniences” and sophistication and social advancements, looks very much like the societies of ancient Israel, and Judah, and Rome. We, as a collective, have turned our backs upon God, forgotten Him, buried His memory so far underneath all the noise of the world, that it is no wonder we do not find His Presence among us, as we once did.

We ask “Why does God feel so distant and remote?”, forgetting that we're the ones who walked away from Him first.

However, the Good News is, God is still with His people. The LORD is still Emmanuel. He is still right here with us, waiting for us to turn around, to change direction, to repent. No matter how far we think we have traveled from God, He is still near at hand. We may always return to Him and be welcomed with open arms (Luke 15:11-32).

The LORD removing His favor and Presence from Judah was still a sign of His presence with the people, a sign of absence; they would know He was missing. It was a call for His people to seek Him, to return to Him in faith; to leave all the world's garbage behind them, to put away the Lie and believe in the Truth. Withdrawing His Presence from the Temple was not a sign of God abandoning His people. He is not abdicating His sovereignty or authority. He was exercising it in judgment.

If God has done similar with our nation, removed His favor and blessing from us, then we are in as dire need of repentance as Israel was. If we continue to consort with the demonic, to flirt with wickedness, the LORD may very well give us exactly what we're asking for, and we will be {given up to our lusts}, and we will be destroyed by them, in His judgment. If America continues on this path, moving away from the LORD's Presence and His mercy and grace, He will grant us that desire; eternally separating the wicked from His love and grace, while also keeping them eternally under His judgment and wrath.

God is infinite. The whole of creation cannot contain Him. We could never truly escape His Presence for He is always with us, but the choice is: will we be in His Presence covered by the Grace of Jesus Christ, or covered by the condemnation due us by our sins?

Removing the visible sign of His Presence, does not mean that God has abandoned the world, but it symbolizes the change in our relationship. God's people had abandoned Him, they had done their best to sunder the relationship, but God always had the plan in place for their restoration (Ephesians 1:3-10). Sadly, we needed to first suffer His judgment, in part, to have an inkling of what life without the LORD is like; to comprehend just what negative choice we could make, by following our forbear Adam.

How often has a human parent allowed their child to sit in their own self-wrought pain and misery, to contemplate things? How often has that child then sought forgiveness, and reformed their ways? But reformation needs help. We cannot do it alone. That is why we need each other in the congregation: to pray, guide, and support each other; why we need other churches to partner with, to transform our community for Christ. This is why we all need Jesus Christ, who unites us in Himself and to each other; to justify us when we cannot. This is why we need the power and work of the Holy Spirit, to regenerate our hearts, to give us the strength to turn to the LORD, and apply His mercy and grace.

But God, although He removed His Presence from the midst of His people, the LORD never abandoned them, and He will not abandon us either.

God's servant Nebuchadnezzar removed the people from their land in judgment, while later His servant Cyrus (Isaiah 44:28-45:1) returned the Exiles to the land and allowed them to rebuild the Temple (Ezra 1:1-4). God did not forget or abandon His chosen people. When they returned to Him in faith, He was near at hand, and He restored them to His favor and blessed them. Yes, although many who were born ethnically of Israel were lost in the judgment, and just as God preserved His faithful remnant then, we may be confident that He will continue to preserve His faithful ones even now.

The prophet Malachi, the final prophet of the LORD before four hundred years of silence, prophesied, *"Behold, I send my messenger; and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts."*

That messenger, who prepared the way of the LORD, was John the Baptizer, of whom it was said to have the *"spirit...of Elijah"* (Malachi 4:5; Luke 1:17).

The Lord whom they sought, who is also the *"desire of nations"* (Haggai 2:7 KJV), and the *"messenger of the covenant in whom [we] delight"* is Jesus Christ (Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; Hebrews 7:22). He came to the Temple un-looked for and unexpected. He refined the LORD's called and chosen people; He purifies us, and causes us to bring offerings in His righteousness, and to be pleasing to the LORD *"as in the days of old"*.

Divine judgment and wrath came to Israel under the Kings of Israel, whenever His people abandoned the LORD.

Divine judgment and wrath came to Jerusalem and Judea during the days of Rome, when the people denied and crucified His Christ.

What we are experiencing now may very well be our deserved divine judgment and wrath, for our nation's abandonment and denial of God.

But God, in every case before has never abandoned His people. He is still Emmanuel. He always has and always will preserve for Himself a faithful remnant (Genesis 45:7; 2 Chronicles 34:9; Ezra 9:5; Isaiah 10:20; Micah 2:12; Zephaniah 2:7; Acts 15:17; Romans 11:5).

God is Good, All the Time and He does not change.

God, through the prophet Malachi, gives us such good news, *"For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed."*

So, even when we suffer His judgment, we are still under Grace, for the LORD is faithful to us and He keeps His promises; thus He will never destroy His people, but instead He has redeemed us as His children (John 1:11-13).

Regardless of how bad things may look, how sad and disappointing things around us become, we know that those who hold onto Christ and His cross in faith, will be preserved for His glory, for this life and into the next.

O Come Emmanuel, Come!

AMEN