

The Torment Of The Godly

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I do not know if you have ever thought about it, but God's people are tormented people.

Let us consider this for a few minutes by way of introduction.

Speaking of God's judgment of sin, the apostle Peter describes Lot as one who was oppressed with the filthy conduct of the wicked.

II Peter 2:8 (for that righteous man, dwelling among them, tormented his righteous soul from day to day by seeing and hearing their lawless deeds)...

The way that Peter describes it is really quite interesting. Lot was not tormented, you see, as if by demons. But, it was what he saw and heard around him that tormented him. He knew the inevitable consequences of lawlessness, and it distressed him greatly.

A prophet of God has no pretty job. Of all God's people, a prophet may be the most tormented. Of so many examples available, we will only look at Ezekiel today. We will look at a few of the visions God showed Ezekiel. What did he see? And, how did he respond?

Reading the text, can we catch that same vision? Can we respond the same way?

I submit to you that we had better. We had better, like Ezekiel, and like Lot, come to the point where we, too, become tormented people as we respond to the evil we see around us.

VISIONS OF GREATER ABOMINATIONS

Ezekiel was among the first group of captives to be taken to Babylon. More captives would arrive later. In this passage in chapter 8, he is in his home with the elders of Judah sitting before him (verse 1). Now in verse 3 he is, "lifted up between earth and heaven, and brought in visions of God to Jerusalem."

Remember, this was early on, and Jerusalem had not been destroyed yet.

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There he sees a series of visions. He sees, in verse 6, the image of jealousy, which had been set up in the temple, an image which had made God go far away from the sanctuary. This was probably some type of an abomination that makes desolate, some pagan idol in the temple in Jerusalem.

In verse 7, he sees a greater abomination. He spies a hole in a wall in the court of the Temple. Obeying God's command to dig around the hole, he finds behind it a door. The door admits him into a hidden, inner chamber, the walls of which are engraved with pagan idols. It says there, "all the idols of the house of Israel." In this room are the 70 elders of Israel, "each one with a censer in his hand."

Ezekiel is witnessing a pagan worship-service taking place behind closed doors right there in the temple. It is very secret. The worshippers are not extremists on the outer edges of Israelite society, but rather, they are the elders and leaders of the land.

Did Ezekiel witness the movers and shakers of American society in a satanic skull-and-cross-bones service, attended by the President of the United States? Well, that would be a contemporary version of this particular vision, and he could have seen something like that. For the leaders of Ephraim and Manasseh today are deeply involved into witchcraft, the occult, and other various pagan worship practices. Abominations! All are quite clandestine and surreptitious.

And then in verse 14, Ezekiel expresses his dismay at seeing yet a greater abomination, the women weeping for Tammuz, another pagan practice. Paganism had affected the women of Israelite society as well.

In verse 16, he sees, in the inner court of the Temple, a fourth vision of about 25 men with their backs toward the temple of the Lord and their faces toward the east, and they were worshipping the sun toward the east—a pagan sunrise service. Each abomination is greater than the one before it. God asks in verse 17,

Ezekiel 8:17 Is it a trivial thing to the house of Judah to commit the abominations which they commit here [right in the Temple]? For they have filled the land with violence; then they have returned to provoke Me to anger."

These leaders displayed no social responsibility whatsoever; the society they led had degenerated to one of rape and rapine, murder and violence at every quarter. Yet, these hypocritical leaders dared return to God's temple, furtively retiring to its inner rooms to

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practice their pagan rites in the dark (Ezekiel 8:12).

I submit to you that Ezekiel's blood must have run cold when he heard God's judgment, which appears in the last verse. God says,

Ezekiel 8:18 Therefore I also will act in fury. My eye will not spare nor will I have pity; and though they cry in My ears with a loud voice, I will not hear them."

Let us continue in Chapter 9, which relates a partial execution of that judgment. Remember, this is still in vision. It is important to note here that God leaves the cherubs and the portable throne; He dismounts from it (described in chapter 1 and again in chapter 10) and moves to the threshold of the temple (verse 3). This was a momentous judgment.

In verse 5, God commands,

Ezekiel 9:5-6 ... Go after him through the city and kill; do not let your eye spare, nor have any pity. Utterly slay old and young men, maidens and little children and women;...

How did Ezekiel respond? It was not in a self-righteous "I-told-you-so fashion," but rather,

Ezekiel 9:8 So it was, that while they were killing them, I was left alone; and I fell on my face and cried out, and said, "Ah, Lord GOOD! Will You destroy all the remnant of Israel in pouring out Your fury on Jerusalem?"

That was an important question to Ezekiel. The prophet was concerned about the people—about the scope of God's judgment. Ezekiel, just like Lot, lived in his own genus of Sodom, in his own type of Gomorrah. Like Lot, he too was in anguish over the sin he saw and heard, and over its consequences—as it were, tormented by what was happening around him.

And, no, he was not tormented by what the pagans were doing over there, but by what God's people were doing in his own around-and-about—in God's very temple—by what they were doing, and were soon going to suffer.

Ezekiel must have witnessed a terrible slaughter in vision, and the shock and trauma of those visions affected him acutely. A prophet of God has no pretty job.

This did not end the visions God gave Ezekiel. In Chapter 10, God is still in the temple's court, as verse 4 indicates.

Ezekiel 10:6-7 Then it happened, when He commanded the man clothed in linen, saying, "Take fire from among the wheels, from among the cherubim," that he went in and stood beside the wheels. And the cherub stretched out his hand from among the cherubim to the fire that was among the cherubim, and took some of it and put it into the hands of the man clothed with linen, who took it and went out.

There is here no mention of the Babylonians, those who physically, later on, carried out God's judgment, who slew and who burned the city of Jerusalem.

This is an interesting passage. Spiritually speaking, those who died in the catastrophe died at the hands of angels sent by God to slay, and Jerusalem was burned with the fire of God. Mr. Armstrong taught us that the Book of Ezekiel is written for modern Israel—for us.

I understand that this is a vision, but it points to what was to become a historical reality. John Ritenbaugh mentioned that America's fall would be the greatest fall of any nation in history. Yes—and the vision seems to indicate that, when she burns, she will burn with the fire from God, the fire that burns before Him. Remarkable passage.

Ezekiel, as verse 19 narrates, watched as the cherubim "mounted up from the earth." God left, but the impact of the visions remained on the prophet's psyche. Many in the city had perished; the city was in flames. Ezekiel may have been terrified to see God leave, to see such utter devastation in advance, probably in living Technicolor, to witness the destruction of God's temple, the slaughter of thousands of people, the end of his homeland, at least as he and his forefathers had known it for centuries.

Could Israel have become so decadent? Could this happen to the city of God? Ezekiel must have wondered. But he knew the answer; he had seen it.

Similarly, we today ask: Can America become so far subverted from the godly principles of the founding? Can the destruction of America, as we have known it, really be happening right before our eyes and her final dissolution so relatively close?

We know the answer. For we too have seen it—in God's Word.

THE INKHORN VISION

Are we tormented by what we see around us? I want to turn back to chapter 9 to some sections that I skipped over earlier, but sections we know very well. One of the spirit beings who had charge over the city (Ezekiel 9:1) carried not a battle-ax like his fellows, but a writer's inkhorn. He was dressed differently too, in white linen. God charges him to go ahead of his fellows:

Ezekiel 9:4-6 ...Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and cry over all the abominations that are done within it." To the others He said in my hearing, "Go after him through the city and kill; do not let your eye spare, nor have any pity. Utterly slay old and young men, maidens and little children and women; but do not come near anyone on whom is the mark;..."

Those who sighed and cried somehow found a place of safety from the conflagration and the terror. They had God's mark on them. So, sighing and crying over the abominations—over the sins—of the larger society might be enormously important to us.

Let us spend the remainder of the time looking into this matter.

Sigh, by way of definition, is Strong's number 584. It means, "to groan; mourn." Its first use is in Exodus 2:23.

Exodus 2:23-25 Now it happened in the process of time that the king of Egypt died. Then the children of Israel groaned because of the bondage, and they cried out; and their cry came up to God because of the bondage. So God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God looked upon the children of Israel, and God acknowledged them.

Note from the first use of the word: God is a covenant keeper who hears and acknowledges the sighs of His people.

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Cry is Strong's number 602, and it means, "to groan; to shriek"—as with feeling. Sighing and crying are emotional. They involve feelings.

REQUISITES OF REAL SIGHING AND CRYING

Pentecostals might say, "That is all there is to it." But no, that is not all there is to it. Sighing and crying involve thinking as well. Reason underlies the emotion. I need to elaborate a bit before I go on.

Neuroscientists once spoke of compartments of the brain. They thought sight was facilitated in one area, hearing in another; artistic skills in one section, math skills in another. Reason would be in one section (the pre-frontal cortex); emotion in another. This is called, "the localization thesis," a simplistic view that is now falling by the wayside as neuroscientists learn more and more about our brain.

One critic of this thesis has this to say,

"[F]unctions [of the brain] ... are distributed, that is, they require a whole system or mechanism to be realized A danger inherent in the localization thesis may be illuminated by analogy to an internal combustion engine. In describing an engine, one might be tempted to say, "The opening of the intake valve is caused by the movement of the rocker arm." Except that the rocker arm is, in turn, set in motion by the camshaft, the camshaft by the crankshaft, the crank by a connecting rod, the rod by the piston. But of course, the piston will not move unless the intake valve opens to let the air-fuel mixture in. This logic is finally circular because, really, it is the entire mechanism that causes the opening of the intake valve Given that the human brain is more complexly interconnected than a reciprocating engine by untold orders of magnitude, it is a dubious undertaking to say that any localized organic structure is the ... exclusive locus of something like "reason" or "emotion. For example, when I get angry, ... I generally do so for a reason To cleanly separate emotion from reason ... makes a hash of human experience"

Reason and emotion are not separate entities occurring in discrete areas of the brain. It is far better to think of them as two sides of the same coin. You cannot have one side without the other.

So, sighing and crying are not just emotions, and not just feelings, or not just matters of

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the heart, but also of the head. Attached to them is reason—thought. With that said, let us look at four vital requisites to effective sighing and crying, matters of reason.

First, it is obvious that to cry and sigh over the abominations of Israel we must know what sin is. "Sin is the transgression of the law" (I John 3:4). The apostle Paul tells us that, "By the law is the knowledge of sin" (Romans 3:20). A few pages over, in Romans 7:7, Paul reiterates the point when he says, "[he] would not have known sin except through the law." So, we must know God's law in order to identify sin. This is knowledge pure and simple, not just emotion.

Without this knowledge of the law, the deceitful rudiments of this world could subvert us—by demonic philosophies (Colossians 2:8). Such philosophies conclude that abortion, bestiality, and gluttony are okay, because they are merely expressions of personal liberties—or, as the liberals tell us today, acceptable choices.

But by knowing God's law, we understand that they are not expressions, and they are not acceptable. They are sins, and indeed they are abominations.

Psalm 119:136 Rivers of water run down from my eyes, because men do not keep Your law.

The Psalmist cries because he recognizes that people were not keeping God's law. It is not just emotion, but it is connected with an understanding of God's law. We will come back to this point in a minute because, admittedly, we need more than just plain knowledge—but that is a vital starting point all the same.

Secondly, to sigh and cry over the sins of Israel, we must know what those sins are. This means that we need to be watching and listening, just as Peter says that Lot was tormented by what he saw and what he heard. Lot surely spent some of his time watching SNN—the Sodom News Network. We cannot sigh and cry if we, like an ostrich, bury our heads in the sand. This is a type of denial. We need to be awake and aware, not slumbering and not sleeping.

We need to ensure that we interpret the events we see and hear in the news in terms of God's law. That holy law is the touchstone, the benchmark, the standard, by which we must measure the mark of our leadership and of our peoples—and of ourselves.

Now, of course, awareness of sin does not imply participation in it. In one sense, we need to be like the guy in the pathetic 1969 Bee Gees song. In the song there is a line,

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with far more poetry than grammar, "I started to cry, which started the whole world laughing."

The song is about an individual out-of-step (out of touch) with the world around him, alienated from it. We, too, are fish-out-of-water, odd-men-out; we cannot sigh and cry over Israel's sins if we are singing from this world's song sheet. To change my metaphor: We cannot march in step with this world and simultaneously sigh and cry at its sins. That will not work.

While in the world, we are not of it. We are spectators, not participants. And, though we are on the sidelines watching, we dare not even for a moment cheer the ways of a world that is oblivious of God's law, a world that almost ubiquitously considers that law to be both onerous and odious, a world that is giving and taking in marriage—laughing—all the time while we are crying.

We cannot be successfully crying and sighing before God if we are of the world, part and parcel with its sins. We must remain outside.

Ever consider where our commitment to God's law puts us? The liberals around us maintain that God does not see their actions, or that He is gone, or dead, or never was. God condemns the leaders of ancient Judah because they thought that same way, as Ezekiel 8:12 indicates:

Ezekiel 8:12 Then He said to me, "Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel do in the dark, every man in the room of his idols? For they say, 'The LORD does not see us, the LORD has forsaken the land.'"

Obedience to God plays no part in the thinking of liberals.

But are the conservatives any better? Consider, for example, the fundamental, evangelical Christians. While giving lip-service to the Ten Commandments, and becoming upset when liberals remove them from our courthouses, they themselves refuse to keep that same law. Their battle with the liberals is, at best, logically inconsistent, and at worst, it is morally hypocritical, for they do not practice what they preach. The most striking example is their refusal to observe the Sabbath. Not recognizing the need to obey God's law, they preach salvation through grace. They claim that is all you need.

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This all puts us right in the middle, between left and right, surrounded by lawlessness on every side. There is no light in this world's ways at all. True, some in the world are a law to themselves, as Paul says, "by nature" practicing "the things contained in the law" (Romans 2:14). It is interesting to note that it does not say that they obey the law, but that they practice it. I believe that there is a difference.

But we are the only people in the world who, by covenant, have committed ourselves to keep all His law. We are indeed odd-men-out who sigh and cry while the world laughs. God remembers His covenant, and God acknowledges our sighs and cries.

A third point, and a vital one, is that to sigh and cry we must believe God. I mean, in this context, we must believe how He defines sin. We must never come to think that, "weeping for Tammuz," (Ezekiel 8:14) is all that bad. God calls it an abomination. And if He calls it that, we must accept His definition.

To use a more contemporary example, there are many people out there who will be observing Christmas in a couple of months, sincerely believing they are worshipping God. They will tell you, "This is the way I worship God." We know that how they worship God does not amount to a hill of beans. God defines for us how we are to worship Him. It is for us to believe Him, and act accordingly.

We need to have more just than a knowledge of the law, but to believe that the law defines sin. Some people can see sin right before their eyes. They can hear sin, but never sigh, never cry, because they refuse to allow God's law to be the standard of their behavior.

History is replete with examples. I will only mention the example alluded to in John 16. Except for Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus and perhaps a few others, who of the Jewish leadership sighed and cried at the perpetration of an illegal trial resulting in Christ's death?

Christ, speaking to His disciples of His upcoming death, says,

John 16:20 "Most assuredly, I say to you that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; and you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy.

The world, rejecting God's standard, rejoices at injustice and sin. Human nature is able to rationalize large scale sin and social injustice—such as the Holocaust—a sin that fills

the land with vast violence—on racial, economic and religious grounds.

We in God's church must come to avoid partiality (Leviticus 19:15) in our interpretation the news about America's social injustices. After all, God did not ask Ezekiel to seek out and identify Israel's sin. He showed Ezekiel the sin, even when practiced in secret. God calls out the sins in His Word; He defines the abominations; He makes the laws. We must know those laws, and believe they are sin—and to sigh and cry accordingly.

Finally—my fourth point—sighing and crying does not imply an, "I told you so," attitude. Lot was oppressed by what he witnessed around him; he wrestled with it. There is no indication that he self-righteously gloated at the destruction of the cities.

And Ezekiel? Well, probably stunned at the destruction he saw in the visions, he cried out, asking God how far the judgment would go. Far from self-righteous gloating, this forward-looking prophet expressed his concern over the welfare of his countryman. His was not a self-righteous response to the destruction that he saw coming.

Because Ezekiel asked, we know. God tells us that He spares and protects His people. We know that God will not destroy all of Israel, but will rescue a remnant, out of which He will build a far better world for our children's children. It will be a world where "justice [will] run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream" (Amos 5:24).

There will, then, be no need to sigh and cry over abominations.

But, that will be then. However, now is now.

In this present evil world, let us sigh and cry over Israel's sins, praying that we use God's Word to understand what those sins are. Let us remain awake and alert to what is happening around us, but ensure that we do not participate in those sins. Brethren, let us not gloat in self-righteous glee at the wholesale death and destruction that we know will come, but rather pray for God's mercy and for His grace on everyone.

The days are evil, and the guy with the inkhorn might just be roaming around now. If we do these things, he might not pass us by.