

**“WHO DWELLS IN THE SHELTER OF THE MOST HIGH?”**

**I. Introduction**

- A. The word “sanctuary” has been in the news quite a bit in recent weeks and months, though it is not being used in a religious sense.
- B. We are hearing about cities and states that are declaring themselves to be “sanctuaries” for illegal immigrants, places where such people will be protected from the threat of deportation.
- C. While there is a great deal of controversy about this issue, it does serve as a helpful illustration of the main point that is being addressed in these two chapters.
- D. As the people of Israel in Ezekiel’s day thought about their future, the question that was on all of their minds was, ‘Where can we be safe?’
- E. And the portion of Ezekiel’s vision that is described in these two chapters answers that question in a surprising way.

**II. A Temple Deprived of God’s Glory**

- A. As we noted in last week’s sermon, these chapters are part of one vision that runs from chapter 8 through chapter 11.
  - 1. The first part of this vision described the abominations that God’s people had brought into the temple and the dreadful judgment that God was about to send on Jerusalem in response.
  - 2. Here in the second part of the vision, we are given another depiction of the city’s impending destruction at the hands of the Babylonians.
  - 3. This portion of the vision begins with Ezekiel once again seeing the Lord’s wheeled throne and its cherubim attendants.

4. Then the prophet hears the Lord speaking to the man dressed in linen, the figure who had marked out those who were to be spared from the judgment depicted in the preceding chapter.
  5. This time, instead of being an agent of God's preserving mercy, this man in linen is an agent of judgment.
  6. The Lord instructs him to take burning coals from beneath the throne and scatter them over the city of Jerusalem.
  7. Thus the wheeled throne of the Lord, which is the spiritual reality to which the ark of the covenant pointed, has now become the bearer of judgment.
  8. Because of the great abominations that the Israelites were committing, the holy city will be burned up with fire from on high, just like the wicked city of Sodom in the days of Abraham.
- B. After this, beginning in verse 9, there is a description of the withdrawal of the glory of the Lord from the temple.
1. God's heavenly throne is depicted as a chariot with strange wheels that enable it to move in any direction without having to be turned.
  2. This detail confronts the mistaken notion that the Israelites had about God's presence in their midst.
  3. They assumed that the fact that the glory of the Lord had filled the temple meant that they were safe and secure.
  4. They thought that God's presence was inseparably bound to the temple.
  5. Yet in Ezekiel's visions we see that God's throne is mobile, not stationary.
  6. While the Lord had caused his presence to dwell in the temple for a time, Israel's persistent unfaithfulness caused him to remove his glorious presence from the temple, leaving the city that housed it

ripe for destruction.

- C. One thing that we should note about this description of the withdrawal of God's glory from the temple is that God causes his glory to depart in stages.
1. In 10:4, the glory of the Lord goes to the temple threshold.
  2. Then in 10:18, the glory of the Lord goes out from the threshold and stands over the cherubim, who mount up from the earth and stand at the entrance of the temple's east gate.
  3. Finally, in 11:23, the glory of the Lord goes up from the city and rests upon the mountain that is to the east of the city.
  4. The fact that this departure takes place in stages probably symbolizes how the Lord gave his people plenty of opportunity to repent.
  5. The longer they persisted in their evil ways, the further and further away from them he went.
  6. We can see the same thing happen in churches when they drift away from the Lord.
  7. Typically, the Lord's gracious presence does not immediately withdraw from the ministry of straying churches.
  8. Instead, it does so in phases that run parallel to the deformation that is taking place in those churches.
  9. Unless the process of deformation is halted and reversed, the point is eventually reached when God entirely vacates the premises.
  10. This reminds us that the mere fact that a church calls itself Christian is no guarantee that the Lord dwells in its midst.

11. When falsehood and immorality are tolerated or promoted, God is eventually driven out.

### III. A City That Offers No Security

- A. This brings us to chapter 11, which begins by telling us that the prophet saw twenty-five men at the entrance to the temple's east gate.
  1. Two of these men are mentioned by name, and they are described as "princes of the people."
  2. This tells us that these men represented the civic leaders who filled the political vacuum that was created when the king and the nobility were deported by the Babylonians in 597 BC.
  3. While the precise issues at stake are not made clear, the basic idea is that these men were using their positions and influence to exploit the people.
  4. As the Lord says in verse 2, these men "devise iniquity" and "give wicked counsel."
- B. The statements found in verse 3 are not easy to interpret.
  1. In that verse, the Lord rebukes these twenty-five men because they say, "The time is not near to build houses. This city is the cauldron, and we are the meat."
  2. What is meant by this reference to building houses?
  3. And what is the meaning of this image of a cauldron filled with meat?
  4. This verse can be translated in different ways, and there are several viable interpretations of what it means.
  5. In my opinion, the statement about the cauldron and the meat is an image of security, not one of impending doom.

6. It seems to be a jab at the exiles, who are regarded as the entrails that would be cast away, while those who remained in Jerusalem are the choice meat.
  7. If this is correct, then the first sentence in the verse should be translated as a question, as it is in the ESV footnote that reads, "Is not the time near to build houses?"
  8. In other words, these men feel secure.
  9. They are not worried about the threats of judgment that were being leveled against them.
  10. As far as they were concerned, the Babylonian threat was past.
  11. Now was the time to rebuild, not the time to worry.
- C. This is a picture of the false security that we see in so many of the people in our culture.
1. There are many who do not give a second thought to the Bible's warnings of coming judgment.
  2. If they ever do think about them, it is only to make light of them.
  3. They consider it to be utterly preposterous to say that their sin places them under God's just wrath.
  4. This is what happens when people have a false sense of spiritual security.
  5. They have no worries, not even when their souls may very well be tottering on the brink of hell.
- D. In verses 5-15, the Lord makes it clear that these twenty-five men had absolutely no basis for their sense of security.

1. He tells them that the only people in Jerusalem who are truly secure are the people whom they have slain in the city.
  2. Whether or not this is a reference to literal acts of murder, it is clear that Israel's leaders were using their position to take advantage of people.
  3. They were disregarding human lives and using them for their own gain.
  4. Because they were doing such wicked things, the Lord will let the people whom they have oppressed remain in the city while he brings them out of it to be slain by foreigners.
- E. As Ezekiel is prophesying these things, he is made aware that the leader named Peletiah has died.
1. This tells Ezekiel that the Lord's hand of judgment is already being stretched out towards the covenant people.
  2. He responds to this news in the same way he responded to the visionary judgment in chapter 9.
  3. He falls down on his face and cries out, "Ah, Lord GOD! Will you make a full end of the remnant of Israel?"

#### **IV. A Sanctuary for a Scattered People**

- A. This leads us into the final section of our text, which begins in verse 14.
1. Here the Lord helps Ezekiel to see that he has an incorrect notion of who it is that constitutes the remnant of Israel.
  2. Ezekiel thinks that those who are left in Jerusalem are the remnant.
  3. They thought so too, as we see by the words they say to the exiles in verse 15: "Go far from the LORD; to us this land is given for a possession."

4. But God tells Ezekiel that it is actually the other way around.
  5. It is the exiles who make up the whole house of Israel, the entirety of the covenant people.
  6. And God himself will be their sanctuary while they are in foreign lands, preserving them for himself.
  7. Here we see that, even in the Old Testament, the true temple is not the physical structure in Jerusalem, but the Lord himself.
  8. And the text says that after the Lord preserves his people throughout the period of their exile, he will gather and assemble them and bring them back to the land of promise.
  9. So we see that Israel's future lies not with the current inhabitants of Jerusalem, but with those who have been scattered among the nations.
- B. While this promise of being restored to the land certainly was encouraging, it did not really offer much hope for the long run, at least not in and of itself.
1. All that it would do is bring Israel back to square one.
  2. Who is to say that they will not fall into the same sins once again?
  3. But the Lord promises more than just a physical return to the land.
  4. He also says this: "I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God." (Ezek 11:19-20 ESV)
  5. God is going to give his restored people new hearts.
  6. He is going to give them an undivided loyalty to him.

7. Instead of hearts of stone, they will have hearts of flesh, hearts that respond to God's commands in grateful obedience.
- C. Notice also the appearance of the covenant formula at the end of this promise, as God says, "they shall be my people, and I will be their God."
1. This tells us that this is the promise of the new covenant, a promise that will be reiterated in the chapters to come.
  2. This promise of a new covenant was not fulfilled by the return of the remnant of ethnic Jews who rebuilt the temple.
  3. Instead, this promise only reached its fruition in the coming of Jesus Christ and his outpouring of the Spirit upon the church on the day of Pentecost.
  4. The Lord continues to carry out this promise to this day.
  5. Through the gospel ministry, he is giving his people new hearts and leading us in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

## V. Conclusion

- A. This passage assures God's people that there is a sanctuary for us, even though we live as strangers and exiles in this world.
1. Our sanctuary is not a physical structure.
  2. Our sanctuary is not anything that we can create or attain.
  3. Our sanctuary is the Lord himself.
- B. It is when we are gathered in public worship on the Lord's Day that we are especially reminded of this.
1. In this life we are faced with all sorts of dangers and conflicts and anxieties.

2. But as we take shelter in the presence of the Most High each Lord's Day, we are assured that we always abide in the shadow of the Almighty.
  
3. In the words of J. Gresham Machen, "Is there no refuge from the strife? Is there no place of refreshing where a man can prepare for the battle of life? Is there no place where two or three can gather in Jesus' name, to forget for the moment all those things that divide nation from nation and race from race, to forget human pride, to forget the passions of war, to forget the puzzling problems of industrial strife, and to unite in overflowing gratitude at the foot of the Cross? If there be such a place, then that is the house of God and that the gate of heaven. And from under the threshold of that house will go forth a river that will revive the weary world." [*Christianity and Liberalism*, 180]