D. Israel's defective leadership chs. 20–23 [Aug. 14, 591]

1. The history of Israel's rebellion and Yahweh's grace 20:1–44

Chapters 20-23 were given to Ezekiel on August 14, 591BC.

20:1-4. He will not be inquired of them. Some of the elders of the exiles along the Kebar River actually came and set before Ezekiel in order to "inquire of the LORD (Yahweh) (v. 1). God responded to this inquiry by giving Ezekiel a message. God asked of them, "Do you come to inquire of me? As I live, "declares the Lord, "I will not be inquired of by you." God's message was for them, but He actually spoke to Ezekiel ("son of man") who then relayed it to them. First, He reminds them of the message He gave to their forefathers whom he brought out of Egypt (Exodus, Moses).

20:5-17. **The abominations of their fathers**. Verse 5 starts with God sovereignly choosing Israel. The **uplifted hand** (Ezek. 20:5 [twice], 15, 23, 42) was apparently a gesture used when one made an oath (cf. Ex. 6:8; Neh. 9:15; Ps. 106:26; Ezek. 36:7; 44:12; 47:14).[1] We know from Exodus that he revealed himself to them through Moses and Aaron in Egypt. He clearly demonstrated who He was not only through the words of Moses and Aaron but also by His miraculous abilities to decimate the most powerful nation on the planet at the time of the Exodus. Verses 5-8 tell of God's choice, His deliverance of them from Egyptian bondage, and His command to separate themselves from the idols of Egypt. It is significant that he keeps repeating to them now, "I am the LORD (Yahweh, his covenant name) your God!" (vv. 5, 7). During his deliverance of them, He clearly set Himself apart from any and all gods (idols) since nothing could stop Him. He was totally sovereign and dominated the "Egyptian gods."

The first part of verse 8 tells that "they rebelled against" Yahweh, their God. So, He resolved to "pour out" His wrath on them in Egypt. But He didn't carry through with that "for the sake of" His name. If He had destroyed His own people who He had chosen then the nations would "profane his name. "Israel's being spared from God's wrath was not because of any goodness on her part. It was only because of God's grace and mercy: **for the sake of** His **name** (cf. Ezek. 20:14, 22). The 'name' of God expressed His revealed character. God's reputation among the nations was at stake in His covenant faithfulness to His people. Instead of giving them judgment, which they deserved, God gave deliverance."[2]

So, for the sake of Yahweh's reputation before the nations verses 10-13 says he did deliver them and, gave them His sabbaths (days of rest and reflect on Him) so that they might know Him. To accomplish "knowing Him" they were given His statutes and His ordinances so that they would experience abundant life (Ex. 19-24:8, esp. 24:3-7). But once again, they rebelled against God by not walking in His statues and obeying his ordinances. So, they did not pursue the sanctification that God sought for them but lived like all the pagan nations around them. So, once again, Yahweh determined to "pour out His wrath" on them in the desert and annihilate them.

But once again did not, even though it was deserved. What he did is allow all of that generation (everyone over 20 years old) to die in the wilderness because of their disobedience and for profaning his sabbaths. They had to live the rest of their lives with the fact that they would not see

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[1] Dyer, Ibid., 1264.
[2] Dyer, Ibid., 1264.

the goodness of God in the promised land "flowing with milk and honey" called here "the glory of all lands." Once again they rejected God's ordinances and did not walk in His statues and profaned his sabbaths. This showed where their heart really was. But once again, God extended mercy (v. 17).

20:18-26. **How God dealt with Israel's Disobedience in the Wilderness.** Before the new generation (those 20 and under when they rejected entering the land in Kadesh Barnea) crossed the Jordan and entered the land with Joshua in at the helm, Moses once again presented God's law to them Deuteronomy chapters 1-30. And, they once again did not sanctify His sabbaths, walk in His statues, nor observe His ordinances, so they didn't experience a blessed, fruitful, abundant life in the land. Once again, God resolved to pour His wrath out on them and once again he "withdrew His hand for the sake of His name so that that His name might not be profane by the nations. So, his punishment was to scatter them among the nations. Being forced to live in these pagan nations, they were forced to follow ordinances of those nations that did not produce and blessing from the Lord (they did not "live"). They even sacrificed their children like those they lived among.

20:27-32. **Israel Present's Spiritual Idolatry and Adultery**. God then brings this full circle. They are doing exactly as their fathers did. Just as their father before them blasphemed God by living out a lifestyle that did not reflect His nature and character, they are doing the exact same thing. They are not a "holy nation" as they were meant to be. They offered their sacrifices to idols at their pagan "high places" and they even burned their infant children. Think about this, instead of pointing them to the one true God as God had instructed them through Moses in Deuteronomy 6:1-9, they had worship idols, reject God's life giving law and even offered to Molech and other God's their most precious gifts from God, children.

20:33-38. **God's Future Purging and Purification of Israel**. God then reveals how He will one day break this cycle of idolatry and rejecting God's law. In verse 33 "the Lord GOD (*Adonai Yahweh*) state, "surely with a might hand and with an outstretched arm and with wrath poured out, "I shall be king over you." How? God speaks of a purge of Israel where he will "enter into judgment" with a future generation. The result will be that God will "make them pass under the rod, and …bring them into the bond of the covenant." This is a sovereign act that God will bring about. Constable writes:

> But He would re-gather them to their land from the distant countries where He had scattered them (cf. 36:14–38; 37:21–23; Deut. 30:1–10; Isa. 11:11–16; 49:17–23; 60; 61:4–9; Jer. 23:1–8; Amos 9:11–15; Zech. 10:8–12; et al.). The descriptions of God doing this with "a mighty hand" and "an outstretched arm" recall the terms used of His liberation of the Israelites from Egypt (Exod. 6:6; 32:11; cf. Deut. 4:34; 5:15; 7:19; 11:2; Ps. 136:12).[3]
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> A second Exodus is in view. He would bring them into another type of wilderness, a wilderness full of people, and there He would personally judge them. This probably refers to the present worldwide dispersion of the Jews that began in A.D. 70 when the Jews had to leave the Promised Land again.[4]

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[3] Constable, ibid., Eze 20:32.

[4] See Louis A. Barbieri Jr., "The Future for Israel in God's Plan," in *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost*, pp. 163-79, for a concise survey of this large subject.

The Lord would also bring His people under obligation to keep the terms of a covenant. This is evidently a reference to the New Covenant (cf. 36:25–38; Jer. 31:31–34). He would weed out the rebels and transgressors from among them, and bring them out of the countries where they lived, but would not bring them into the Promised Land (cf. Num. 16; Deut. 11:6). This probably refers to the Jews who will die during the Tribulation period (cf. Zech. 13:8; Rev. 12:15–17) and/or when the Lord returns to the earth (cf. Matt. 25:31–46). Of course, many other Jews will enter the Millennium, as the verses cited make clear.

The passage is a prophecy of future judgment upon Israel, regathered from all nations … The issue of this judgment determines who of Israel in that day will enter kingdom blessing (Ps. 50:1–7; Ezek. 20:33–44; Mal. 3:2–5; 4:1–2).

At that time His people would know that the One who did this was Yahweh.[5]

20:39-44.**God' Future Restoration of Israel**.

20:39–41. When Israel enters into the New Covenant she will really know the Lord (vv. 39–44). Though Israel was serving **idols** in Ezekiel's day (to her own defilement, vv. 25–26), in the future God will not permit such sin among His people (**you will … no longer profane My holy name**; cf. 39:7; 43:7).

God's ideal for Israel will finally be realized in the millennial kingdom. She will **serve** the Lord, He **will accept** her, and the people will offer Him their choicest **offerings … gifts**, and **sacrifices** in sincere worship. (For an explanation of sacrifices during the Millennium see the comments on 40:38–43.) As a result, God **will show** Himself **holy**. "Holy" (*qōḏēš*) means "set apart," the opposite of "profaned" or "made common." Israel had profaned her God by debasing her worship with sin and idolatry (20:39). In the future, however, she will set God apart so all **the nations** will sense God's holiness.

20:42–44. God's restoration of Israel will produce several changes: (1) The first change will be a new *realization* of her God. God said that Israel **will know that I am the Lord**. "Lord" (*Yahweh*) is God's personal name, revealed to **Israel** (cf. Ex. 3:13–15). It stresses God's self-existence and His covenant-keeping faithfulness. Israel will come to understand the true meaning of God's name (and character) when He brings her into Palestine. This promise does not depend on her faithfulness, for she had been extremely unfaithful. The promise, made by God, depends on *His* faithfulness. He will demonstrate His covenant loyalty by fulfilling it (cf. Ezek. 20:44).

(2) The second result of Israel's restoration will be her *repentance*. She **will remember** her **conduct** and **will loathe** herself **for all the evil** she has **done**. The shame **Israel** should have felt (but didn't) in Ezekiel's day will finally be manifested when God restores her.[6]

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[5] Constable, ibid., Eze 20:36.

[6] Dyer, Ibid., 1266.

2. Judgment on Judah's contemporary leaders 20:45–21:32

20:45-49. The Parable of the Forest Fire. Ezekiel's long message (vv. 1–44) was followed by a short parable. In the Hebrew Bible 20:45 is actually the first verse of chapter 21, thus showing that this parable introduces the four messages in chapter 21. Ezekiel was to **face toward the south** (*têmānâh*) and **preach against the south** (*dārôm*) and **the southland** (*negēḇ*).[7]

God said to Ezekiel "Son of man, set your face toward…" this area. The Hebrew word here translated "set his face" is *panim*. It signals unwavering attention. Setting your face toward something means you're fixed on it, like a compass needle that won't budge. Set your face on it is a declaration of war—your now God's instrument of judgment against that target."

This prophecy is against a "forest" in the Negev Desert. God will bring a fire (probably figurative meaning "a fire of judgment") to this forest (the people of Judah) and it would consume the entire "forest." God's goal is that as a result, "all flesh will see that I, the LORD, have kindled it; and it shall not be quenched" (v. 18).

…it seems clear that the Lord was referring to Judah. Later He clarified that "the south" included Jerusalem, its sanctuaries, and all the land of Israel, which was then Judah (cf. 21:2). Judah was, of course, the "Southern Kingdom."[8] It seems that this judgment would be comprehensive, the outwardly righteous, and the outwardly unrighteousness would be judged. So, Ezekiel proclaimed this message to the exiles in Judah. Their response was that they believed it was just a parable. In other words, a fictional story.

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[7] Dyer, ibid., 1266.
[8] Constable, ibid., Eze 20:45.