

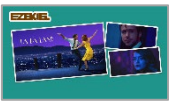


The Glory Departs

(Ezekiel 8-11)

Ezekiel #3 | Apr 28, 2024 | 8:00, 9:30, 11:00 | Preached by Steve H

Opening



A couple of months ago, I was walking through our living room, sat down at our table, and glanced up to see what my daughter, Chaynee, was watching. It was the ending 20 minutes of the 2016 film *La La Land*.

Now, many of you know that my movie choices tend to be a little more nerdy – I’m always up for a trip to a galaxy far, far away...or into Rivendell...or flying along in an Avengers adventure. There is more sci fi and fantasy and action in my preferred films.

La La Land is off-script for me. It’s a musical romance. “*The movie is about a struggling jazz pianist and an aspiring actress who meet and fall in love while pursuing their dreams in Los Angeles.*”¹ The movie won lots of awards and accolades...and **I hate it!** But not for the reasons you might guess.

The reason I hate *La La Land* is that turns me into a weepy mess within 4 four bars of the ending montage song. It is absolutely gut-wrenching! The movie is eight years old, and if you haven’t seen it...sorry. You might get a few spoilers here.

In a nutshell, here’s what happens in the film’s ending:

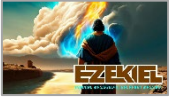
The actress and her ex (the jazz pianist) exchange a meaningful glance and a subsequent flashback/alternate-timeline montage while he plays “their song” during a performance. But the moment soon passes...and each carries on with their own life. Separately.

I can describe it to you in that short paragraph, and it doesn’t sound that bad. But the impact is wrapped up in the emotions built by the backstory – the haunting melody, the love story, the hope, the mistakes, the dreams, the what-ifs. There is a visceral reaction the second you realize that you’ve been plucked from the hopeful “what if” scenario and thrust back into the real moment of “what is” instead of “what should be.”

My description won’t make you cry. But if you’ve invested in the backstory with the characters, you can’t help but feel devastated.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_La_Land

Ezekiel Recap



Welcome to Ezekiel, chapters 8-11.

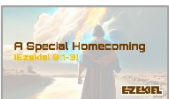
In our sermon series on this Old Testament book of the Bible, we've been listening to a prophet (Ezekiel) whose task is to receive and declare the message of God. We've seen Ezekiel:

- Experience a dramatic vision and encounter with the glory of God (Ezekiel 1-3)
- Receive a command to share God's message of judgment using "sign-acts" (Ezekiel 4-7)

As the book develops, we now come to chapters 8-11...in which Ezekiel will have another dramatic vision, this one related to the city of Jerusalem and God's presence. Like the opening visions in the first few chapters, this one has some intense imagery. We could read the passage and understand it pretty easily (with a bit of explanation). You could understand what it *meant*. But you wouldn't feel the *weight*. You wouldn't understand the heartache. You might skip over the most crushing lines and never notice.

Today I don't want you to simply understand what Ezekiel says; I want you to grasp the **emotional impact** of the vision. I want you to recognize the gut-wrenching truth in this scene that makes it more intense than a break-up in a musical romance.

What could cause it to be so emotional? Exhale, grab the tissues, and let's find out!



A Special Homecoming (Ezekiel 8:1-3)

Chapter 8 begins with a new vision and a chance for a special homecoming.

"Then on September 17, during the sixth year of King Jehoiachin's captivity, while the leaders of Judah were in my home, the Sovereign LORD took hold of me. I saw a figure that appeared to be a man. From what appeared to be his waist down, he looked like a burning flame. From the waist up he looked like gleaming amber. He reached out what seemed to be a hand and took me by the hair. Then the Spirit lifted me up into the sky and transported me to Jerusalem in a vision from God..." (Ezekiel 8:1-3, NLT)

Ezekiel gets a special, divine visitor in his home, and he is plucked up and "taken" to the city of Jerusalem – maybe not physically, but in the Spirit. As we try to grasp the **emotional impact** of what Ezekiel experiences, we first need to know his connection to his destination.



A Special Place: Jerusalem

Ezekiel is returned to the city of Jerusalem.

Special to a People

What does Jerusalem mean to Ezekiel as a *Jew*? Listen to the following description in the 48th Psalm.

*“How great is the LORD, how deserving of praise, in the **city of our God**, which sits on his holy mountain! It is high and magnificent; the whole earth rejoices to see it! Mount Zion, the holy mountain, is the city of the great King! God himself is in Jerusalem’s towers, revealing himself as its defender. The kings of the earth joined forces and advanced against the city. But when they saw it, they were stunned; they were terrified and ran away. They were gripped with terror and writhed in pain like a woman in labor. You destroyed them like the mighty ships of Tarshish shattered by a powerful east wind. We had heard of the city’s glory, but now we have seen it ourselves— the city of the LORD of Heaven’s Armies. It is the city of our God; he will make it safe forever.”* (Psalm 48:1–8, NLT)

As the crown jewel of the people of God, the Jewish capital city of Jerusalem holds a special place in God’s heart. It represents God’s presence and promises. It owes its success to its most prominent heavenly Resident. In one of his “thus says the Lord” messages, God Himself calls Jerusalem “*the city where I have chosen to put my name*” (1 Kings 11:36, ESV). It is certainly special to the people of Israel!

Special to a Person

But it is also special to Ezekiel. What does Jerusalem mean to Ezekiel as an *individual*?

Remember where Ezekiel is! Remember his backstory.

Currently, Ezekiel is living among the Jewish exiles in the nation of Babylon. He is a 900-mile journey away from home. The physical distance is imposing (imagine walking from here to Niagara Falls), but it is the nature of his absence that matters more. Ezekiel was taken here by force; he was captured by the Babylonians and removed from his home.

Think about your own home – the place where you grew up or the place where you settled. Imagine if a nuclear bomb hit it, and you could never go back...and you had to live half a continent away. How would you feel? How would you cope with the loss?

His possessions? Gone. His childhood bedroom? Burned. His apartment with all his décor and favorite recliner? A distant memory. The people he knew and loved? Absent.

Ezekiel is most likely never returning to Jerusalem under normal circumstances.

And yet, now, in this vision, Ezekiel gets carried to the city he loves! Imagine being plucked from a place of misery and *going home*.

There is joy! Excitement! Ezekiel gets a glimpse of the familiar streets, maybe his favorite restaurant. And then he is placed at his destination: the Temple!



A Special Place: the Temple

Ezekiel arrives at the Temple of God!

Special to a People

What does the Temple mean to Ezekiel as a *Jew*?

In a nutshell, the Temple is the house of the Lord!

We use that phrase sometimes to describe our church building (it's even the title of a Phil Wickham song we sing). You and I know that God is not constrained to any single location church or place of worship. He is "omnipresent." Yet at certain times God makes Himself specially available to people in a certain location.

God told the Israelites to construct a special tent (a "tabernacle") where they could worship Him. God said that He would *dwell* in this location. Later, King David approached God with a plan to move from the *portable* tent to a *permanent* building. God allowed David's son, Solomon, to construct it. The Temple became the new site that signified God's special presence; it became the site where a nation worshiped.

It was special to the Jews as a people.

Special to a Person

But it is also special to Ezekiel. What does the Temple mean to Ezekiel as an *individual*?

Remember Ezekiel's background. He was a *priest*. The Temple was the place where he had worshipped, where the most significant spiritual events of his life had happened. It was the place where he was due to begin serving when he turned 30. It was the place where he never got to serve, being taken as an exile while he was still in his 20s. The Temple was sacred, holy, and perfect.

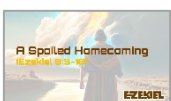
*Maybe you have a place that is your spiritual spot – a place out by the lake, a seat in the sanctuary, a window in your home. This is the place where you are most focused on God, most aware of His presence. The **mundane** transforms into the **sublime** here as you regularly and sincerely approach the throne of God.*

The temple is Ezekiel's place. And in this vision, Ezekiel has a chance to return HOME – to his town, to his place of worship. It should be a moment of bliss! It should be a moment of profound elation!

Instead, it is a moment of devastation.

A Spoiled Homecoming (Ezekiel 8:3-18)

Ezekiel arrives and sees heartbreaking scenes.



“He reached out what seemed to be a hand and took me by the hair. Then the Spirit lifted me up into the sky and transported me to Jerusalem in a vision from God. I was taken to the north gate of the inner courtyard of the Temple, where there is a large idol that has made the LORD very jealous.

Suddenly, the glory of the God of Israel was there, just as I had seen it before in the valley. Then the LORD said to me, “Son of man, look toward the north.” So I looked, and there to the north, beside the entrance to the gate near the altar, stood the idol that had made the LORD so jealous.

“Son of man,” he said, “do you see what they are doing? Do you see the detestable sins the people of Israel are committing to drive me from my Temple? But come, and you will see even more detestable sins than these!”

Then he brought me to the door of the Temple courtyard, where I could see a hole in the wall. He said to me, “Now, son of man, dig into the wall.” So I dug into the wall and found a hidden doorway. “Go in,” he said, “and see the wicked and detestable sins they are committing in there!” So I went in and saw the walls covered with engravings of all kinds of crawling animals and detestable creatures. I also saw the various idols worshiped by the people of Israel. Seventy leaders of Israel were standing there with Jaazaniah son of Shaphan in the center. Each of them held an incense burner, from which a cloud of incense rose above their heads. Then the LORD said to me, “Son of man, have you seen what the leaders of Israel are doing with their idols in dark rooms? They are saying, ‘The LORD doesn’t see us; he has deserted our land!’ ” Then the LORD added, “Come, and I will show you even more detestable sins than these!”

He brought me to the north gate of the LORD’s Temple, and some women were sitting there, weeping for the god Tammuz. “Have you seen this?” he asked. “But I will show you even more detestable sins than these!” Then he brought me into the inner courtyard of the LORD’s Temple. At the entrance to the sanctuary, between the entry room and the bronze altar, there were about twenty-five men with their backs to the sanctuary of the LORD. They were facing east, bowing low to the ground, worshiping the sun!

“Have you seen this, son of man?” he asked. “Is it nothing to the people of Judah that they commit these detestable sins, leading the whole nation into violence, thumbing their noses at me, and provoking my anger? Therefore, I will respond in fury. I will neither pity nor spare them. And though they cry for mercy, I will not listen.””

(Ezekiel 8:3–18, NLT)



In every corner of Ezekiel’s special spot, he finds corruption and wickedness. The spiritual sanctuary has been defiled.

- Outside is an **idol** whose presence mocks God himself (8:3-6)
- Inside, the **elders(!)** are worshipping **idols** in the dark (with **offensive images** engraved on the walls of the sacred space. (8:7-13)
- Outside there are **women** worshipping a **foreign god** (Tammuz) and **men** worshipping the **sun** (8:14-18)

Can you even picture the devastation he felt?

The church where Deb and I got married was right across the street from her childhood home. Years after we made our vows there, the church sold the property, and the church became an alternative high school for troubled kids. The worship space was no longer there. The place where we stood was now transformed into an everyday facility.

I’m a little sad that our sentimental space is gone, but I’m not devastated because that **church** still worships in a new place. But what if it wasn’t a different group making the changes? What if the **church itself** had made a mockery of what used to be sacred?

Think about our worship space here. This is our place where we worship God together. It is the site of special moments – weddings, funerals, baptisms, tearful confessions, joyful praise, deep prayers, messages from God...CHURCH!

Now, imagine that our elders placed a shrine to Vishnu out front. Imagine it with vile graffiti on the walls, painted by the deacons. Imagine it with a pentagram hanging in front of the cross, courtesy of our youth group. Imagine our men’s ministry hosting a conference of Satanists on these chairs. Imagine our women blaring profanities across our speakers and showing pornographic videos on our screens.

How would you feel if your sacred space was corrupted and defiled? How would you respond if your spiritual leaders were spiritual frauds?



A Strong Response (Ezekiel 9-11)

A Purifying Force

Well, God responds with a purifying force! He proclaims his intention to cleanse and purify the people from their wickedness.



“Therefore, I will respond in fury. I will neither pity nor spare them. And though they cry for mercy, I will not listen.”” (Ezekiel 8:18, NLT)

In **chapter 9**, Ezekiel sees God calling in a “hit squad” – a group of angels who will destroy those who have set themselves against God (e.g. most of Jerusalem). Yet God will not be indiscriminate. He assigns one angel to mark all those who “*sigh and groan*

over all the abominations that are committed in the city” (9:4), and they were to be unharmed. Yet the others were marked for death.

The plan carries echoes of the final plague in Egypt, the death of the firstborn immediately before the Exodus. Ezekiel is dismayed by the destruction and death that he sees in his vision, but God remains adamant – their sins brought this upon Israel and Judah.

In **chapter 10**, Ezekiel encounters the same representation of God that he saw in chapters 1-3: the throne, the glorious expanse, the four winged cherubim with four faces, the four wheels within wheels, etc (we’ll come back to these in a minute). This time, Ezekiel is called to take burning coals from between the cherubim and scatter them on the city...a sign of judgment.

Later, in **chapter 11**, Ezekiel is commanded to speak words of prophetic judgment on men who give wicked counsel, steering people away from God.

These are strong responses from God to purify the evil from His people.



A Departing Glory

However, the most shocking thing isn’t the *message* of God; it is the *movement* of God.

Literally. God moves locations.

From the beginning of God’s residential dwellings, His glory has been constrained to one location: the Holy of Holies. It was the back room of the tabernacle/temple, closed off from everyday folks, only entered once a year (the Day of Atonement), and only entered by one person (the High Priest). God’s presence there was tied to a box called the Ark of the Covenant. He gave instructions about it back in Exodus 25:

*“Place inside the Ark the stone tablets inscribed with the terms of the covenant, which I will give to you. Then put the atonement cover on top of the Ark. **I will meet with you there** and talk to you from above the atonement cover between the gold cherubim that hover over the Ark of the Covenant. From there I will give you my commands for the people of Israel.”* (Exodus 25:21–22, NLT)

God’s presence and glory were squarely in the Holy of Holies, remaining there by the will and choice of God. Yet as Ezekiel watches, the glory (identical in form to what Ezekiel saw by the Khebar River in Babylon) departs further and further away from where it should have been.

[Physically move away as each verse is read]

*“Then the glory of the God of Israel rose up from between the cherubim, where it had rested, and moved to the **entrance** of the Temple...”* (Ezekiel 9:3, NLT)

*“Then the glory of the LORD rose up from above the cherubim and went over to the entrance of the Temple. The Temple was filled with this cloud of glory, and the **courtyard** glowed brightly with the glory of the LORD.” (Ezekiel 10:4, NLT)*

*“Then the glory of the LORD **moved out from the entrance** of the Temple and hovered above the cherubim. And as I watched, the cherubim flew with their wheels to the **east gate** of the LORD’s Temple. And the glory of the God of Israel hovered above them.” (Ezekiel 10:18–19, NLT)*

*“Then the cherubim lifted their wings and rose into the air with their wheels beside them, and the glory of the God of Israel hovered above them. Then the glory of the LORD **went up from the city** and stopped above the **mountain to the east**.” (Ezekiel 11:22–23, NLT)*

[Exit the stage...after a few seconds, return to the podium]

The glory of God...left.

God...moved out.

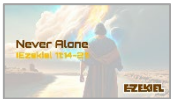
Are you sufficiently devastated?

The Chiefs and Royals have been in the news lately as they consider locations for new stadiums. Jackson County (MO) voted down a sales tax that would help fund their presence, and now there are questions about whether they’ll stay.

Could you imagine the San Antonio Chiefs? the OKC Chiefs? the London Chiefs? Many of you would be in shock, even tears.

It’s one thing when a business or a team moves. It’s more personal when a child moves out of the house. It is crushing when a spouse moves out. But this? *God* abandoning you?

It makes *La La Land* seem like a comedy.



Never Alone (Ezekiel 11:14-21)

The fear many of us have is the fear of being alone. We identify all too well with the Jews and we wonder if *our* sins are too much for God. Would He stay close by, or would He check out? After all, if “*our body is a temple of the Holy Spirit*” (1 Corinthians 6:19), maybe He would flee us, too.

But remember that the prophetic books like Ezekiel are here to help us see God’s heart. They help us understand how He functions and know what matters most to Him.

God left...but He didn’t leave them alone. He withdrew Himself from a building and made it clear that He would not tolerate the idolatry and wickedness of His people. Yet His goal wasn’t rejection; it was restoration.

Despite how abandoned Ezekiel feels now, God continues to plan a good future for his people...a future where He is *present*.



“Therefore, tell the exiles, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Although I have scattered you in the countries of the world, I will be a sanctuary to you during your time in exile. I, the Sovereign Lord, will gather you back from the nations where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel once again.’
“When the people return to their homeland, they will remove every trace of their vile images and detestable idols. And I will give them singleness of heart and put a new spirit within them. I will take away their stony, stubborn heart and give them a tender, responsive heart, so they will obey my decrees and regulations. Then they will truly be my people, and I will be their God.”
(Ezekiel 11:16–20, NLT)

In the midst of their ruin, God shares hope!

- God will no longer be present in the Temple, yet He will be **present** with the people, in all His holiness.
- God may have scattered them to foreign lands, but He promises to later **gather** them home to the Promised Land.
- God will not allow the stony, stubborn heart to remain...instead he will make a **new heart**, a living heart.

He will be their God! And He'll be a “be there” God – present with them!

God's Spirit

The hope of Ezekiel is the reality of the Christian. God IS present with us. He has taken up residence in a new temple.



*“You are coming to Christ, who is the living cornerstone of God’s temple. He was rejected by people, but he was chosen by God for great honor. And **you are living stones that God is building into his spiritual temple**. What’s more, you are his holy priests. Through the mediation of Jesus Christ, you offer spiritual sacrifices that please God.”* (1 Peter 2:4–5, NLT)

We aren’t just a temple. We aren’t just priests. We are also sons and daughters!



*“And because we are his children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, prompting us to call out, “Abba, Father.” Now you are no longer a slave but **God’s own child**. And since you are his child, God has made you his heir.”*
(Galatians 4:6–7, NLT)

There is closeness in this reality. It is the undeniable truth! You might not feel it personally, but that may be more on your part than His. In his book *Forgotten God*,



Francis Chan suggests that a couple of obstacles might be in your way of really experiencing closeness:²

1. **Comfort (Maybe your life is too safe!).** We don't need the Comforter if we are already comfortable. Maybe we need to go out on a limb, do something bold, strike up a conversation that we've been avoiding. As we go beyond our limits, we can recognize how much we need the Spirit that is already there.
2. **Volume (Maybe your life is too loud!).** We drown out other voices with all the things on our calendars and on our devices. We fail to "be still," and we refuse to unplug and shut off communication from others so we can be with Him.

Those obstacles may impact our *experience* of closeness. But they haven't undone the *reality*. The reality is that God's Spirit indwells every Christian. He is here, with us, every moment of every day. Right now, God is close! And He wants you to truly *know* Him, just like He wanted the Jewish exiles to know Him.

Closing



After this intense vision, Ezekiel is taken up by the Spirit and returned to Babylon...where he tells the exiles everything that the Lord had shown him.

They would feel the emotional impact of God's statement...and I hope *you* feel some of that weight now, too.

But do you feel the gloom of abandonment, or the joy of God's presence?

Are you convicted of your own sin, aware of your own guilt, discouraged by your faithlessness, feeling like God can't possibly draw near?

Or are you lifted by grace, forgiven by the blood of Jesus, transformed as a new creation in Christ, and adopted as a child and heir of God?

You and I *need* to feel the weight of sin. But we *need even more* to feel the closeness of God! God doesn't want us to stay in the mire and the muck. He wants us to hold on to Him as He lifts us up, as he cleanses us, as he changes our hearts. He wants to be close. He never wants us to be alone!

Jesus isn't calling us into a story like *La La Land* where the hope of being together is an illusion and you're left heartbroken. He's not calling us into a vision where the stain of sin infects all that we love and ruins it forever.

No, he has called us into a story where we can see how bad our choices have been – where we can be revolted by our rebellion - and yet trust that He has worked out the happy ending for us where we are together! We can be his people; He can be our God!

² Chan, Francis. *Forgotten God* (2009, David C. Cook). p. 106-108

Invitation



And that can be your reality.

I want you to know that presence of God. I want you to know the closeness that is possible. I want you to draw near to him and repent of the things that have kept Him at arm's length.

If you have never made the decision to know God and accept the forgiveness of Jesus, then let today be the day you begin to experience a new kind of closeness.

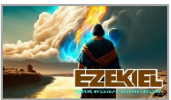
Who cares if you don't have a bathing suit? Who cares if you don't have an extra towel? Who cares if you don't have all the people here viewing it that you hoped?

If you can acknowledge and repent of your sins, if you can believe that Jesus is God's plan to remedy them, if you can confess that you want Jesus to be your Lord and Savior, then why not make the decision now and get baptized this morning?!

If you've already made that decision and you need to know that closeness again, then allow us to pray for you today.

If you need help remembering your status as a child of God, if you need encouragement to set aside distractions, if you need a refresher in what feels like to be in His presence, then why not come forward and ask for prayer. You don't have to explain it...just come forward and allow us to pray for you.

During our song, if you need to be closer to God...or to better remember the closeness that already exists...then come forward and share. Of if you are uncomfortable coming forward, just raise your hand up high and I'll pray from a distance. Let's pray, and then we'll stand and sing.



Prayer

Invitation Song

PRAYER REQUESTS/DECISIONS:

Notes

A Special Homecoming (Ezekiel 8:1-3)

A Special Place: Jerusalem (Psalm 48:1-8)

A Special Place: the Temple

A Spoiled Homecoming (Ezekiel 8:3-18)

A Strong Response (Ezekiel 9-11)

A Purifying Force

A Departing Glory (Exodus 25:21-22; Ezekiel 9:3; 10:4, 18-19; 11:22-23)

Never Alone (Ezekiel 11:14-21)

God's Spirit (1 Peter 2:4-5; Galatians 4:6-7)

Discussion Questions

Use the following questions based on today's sermon as a starting point for spiritual discussions with your family or a small group of Christian friends this week.

Fellowship—Relationship with a Purpose

- What story (movie or book) is the most emotionally devastating for you? What aspect of the story causes it to be so deep?

Growth—Thinking About Spiritual Matters

- Where is Ezekiel taken (see Ezekiel 8:1-3)?
- Why would the city of Jerusalem be significant to Ezekiel? Read Psalm 48:1-8 and explain what the city meant to God's people.
- Can you still visit the place where you grew up? In what ways has it changed? Are these changes for the better or worse?
- How has Jerusalem changed for Ezekiel (read 8:3-18)?
- Consider our worship space at TCC. If it was as desecrated as the temple was for Ezekiel, how would you feel? Why?
- God judges the idolaters who had defiled His presence. How does he treat those who have been faithful (see Ezekiel 9:4-6)? What percentage do you think he would mark if God was doing the same for Tonganoxie today? How does this motivate you to share the gospel?
- Find a map of Old Testament Jerusalem. Use Ezekiel 9:3; 10:4; 10:18-19; and 11:22-23 to track the movement of God's glory.
- When you feel absent from God, has He left you? What factors might prevent you from feeling His presence?
- Describe the impact of knowing that God indwells you as a Christian believer. What does the presence of the Holy Spirit change in your life? What would be different if He were gone?

Prayer – Taking Your Thoughts to God

- Thank God for His presence – for never leaving you alone!