

INCREASE & DECREASE

Ezekiel is clear, the reason for the removal of God's people from the gifts given to them (his dwelling presence and the abundant life that is the by-product) is that they have joined—if not lead—in the rebellion (Ezek. 5:5-12). They found themselves fully engaged in striving for a good life by whatever means were at their disposal. They cultivated a culture of duplicity, where God was used as a tool, forgotten, manipulated, and profaned—out of ignorance and arrogance in their attempts to build the kingdom of Israel. They bought the lie, that something/someone other than the God who birthed them could accurately know them, and truthfully provide for them identity and purpose. For their consistently chosen, generation after generation, cooperative rebellion; they experience the just and long-suffered consequence: destruction (which happens to sound like the word *judgment* in the Hebrew language). Everything they looked to, to determine the validity, vitality, and virtue of life; destroyed along with its crowing symbol: the temple city.

Ezekiel's sign-acts foretold the destruction soon approaching for God's people. The presence of God leaving them and their subjugation to the wickedness they chose (Ezek. 10-11). A time of judgment: the destruction of their alliances with the ways of the world—divine and human—of warfare, economics, dependency on resources, political prestige and partnerships, and religious relationships. The destruction of their attempted pursuits of a good life testified to in the signs of scarcity, anxiety, fear, and death. Once this judgment occurred, then the tone of Ezekiel's prophetic words changed. Hope is the word that describes best what follows death. An expectant hope of God's powerful and gracious reawakening and re-creating.

And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the LORD...when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes...I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God...And they will say, 'This land that was desolate has become like the garden of Eden.' (Ezek. 36:23-35)

Accompanying Ezekiel's proclamation was a vision of dry bones spread out over a vast valley, the bones of the slain being breathed on by the Spirit of God and brought together and alive once more. An "exceedingly great army" raised from their graves and brought back to life (Ezek. 37:1-14). Based upon the conviction and hope of these prophetic words, many of the remnants of Israel returned to Jerusalem to rebuild their city and their temple in anticipation of the return of the glory of the LORD. Hundreds of years passed with Israel being but a bystander in the shaping of the world, a marginal people and their city and temple one among many. But it was not without effort, during that time the people had tried over and over to help make the promises of God happen on their own through the same means as before: warfare (violence), political alignments, religious purity, economic viability and exploitation of natural resource; to no avail. By the time Jesus turned water into wine, indicating that the [time cleansing was fulfilled](#), there were a variety of groups doing everything possible to prepare for the return of the King and his resurrected "army of God." Each group hoping that their teaching, their actions, would make straight the path of the promised prince (Ezek. 44-48) to reclaim his Kingdom.

Four groups, with numerous and nuanced off-shoots, help us understand the atmosphere in which Jesus prophesied. *The Sadducees*, including the chief priest and his family, aligned themselves with governing powers under the excuse that such partnership allowed them religious freedom and influence. From their perspective, if you wanted the kingdom of God to come, then you'd better work as someone on the inside of history, writing God into it.

Then there was *the Zealots*, a passionate group that went about devising plots to take out the traders, overthrow the oppressors, and reclaim the promise land. They were holy assians, a righteous army, lurking in the shadows and stirring up strife in the streets to unsettle the powers that be. From their perspective, if you wanted the kingdom of God to come, you better go take it.

The *Essene* communities had enough with the collaboration and gorilla tactics of the other groups, so they withdrew for purity sake from the city and its rhythms. Dedicated to the scriptures, and devote students of the prophets, they saw everything around them as infected by the rebellious and thus to be abandoned. Instead, they shared life amongst themselves, and yet lived estranged, segregated and segregating—men from women, insiders from outsiders, the truly committed from the only partially so, and away from “the world.” For an Essene, if you wanted to enter the kingdom of God, then you better leave the world.

And lastly, the largest and most influential group upon the everyday lives of Jewish people the *Pharisees*. They did not collaborate with the occupying powers; they did not attempt to overthrow them by fighting, nor did the Pharisees abandon the people of the city and nation they loved. No, they simply became the judges of what is righteous and what is not. What (and who) is clean and unclean. They took God’s word seriously and themselves even more seriously. If you wanted to enter the kingdom of God, they’d give you a detailed map and method to find your way.

It is into this atmosphere that Jesus begins his sign-acts announce the arrival of the expected hope, and the kingdom perceptions of these groups that cause Jesus to clear out the symbol of God’s glory among them, declaring its destruction and resurrection (2:1-22). After all, God promised to replace the heart of his children, not merely fix their old one. It would be a new life or no life at all. At least that is what Jesus tells Nicodemus, and John the Baptizer affirms in John chapter 3. Take a few minutes to [read John 3](#).

Nicodemus is a Pharisee, dedicated to clarity and cleanliness. He is a member of the leadership of the Jews, the Sanhedrin, and thus respected. And, he is “*the* teacher of Israel,” educated and an educator in the ways of God. However, he comes to Jesus “by night.” John’s phrase has a double meaning. This, by all accounts, godly man engages Jesus in the evening, yes, but also in the dark spiritually. He cannot “see the kingdom of God.” His sight requires not a corrective lens, but new eyes altogether. Nicodemus, like all of all those desiring to “enter the kingdom of God,” need to be “born again,” (which should also be read as “born from above”). “born of water and the Spirit” just as God through Ezekiel said he would do. Heaven revealing what is essential and true, what is the means and methods of God’s loving actions.

Jesus’ entry into the world was to enlighten us to ways of God. History has already revealed to us that the ideas of the world do not lead to the eternal flourishing of life and creation. And yet, though the means and method of God are made clear for us, we often “love darkness rather than the light.” We love the means and methods of the Pharisees and other groups that we have transliterated into our time and place in history. We prefer to enter and experience the kingdom of God on our terms.

Will we be like those in the wilderness journey that grow impatient with God’s way, complaining about his methods for fulfilling his promise, longing to return to our visions and plans for prosperity? Or, will we look to the “Son of Man lifted up” for salvation? God’s people, like you and I today, were always trying to do for themselves only what God could and would do for them if they would just submit. The irony is that such pursuits require a constant fight. They cause us to feel shame for not living up to perceptions or shaming others for the same. What else should we expect? After all, they can never get us where we long to be: resurrected into eternal life. And yet, when we follow the light, we find ourselves not fighting the flow of redemption but carried along in the movement of the Spirit.

This God-given clarity is why John the Baptizer declares that what “is given him from heaven,” has allowed his joy to be complete. All his efforts at the kingdom life have led him to Jesus, and his statement, “He [Jesus] must increase, but I must decrease,” compels you and me to consider if we are satisfied with new life in and through Jesus; or will we continue to go about building God’s kingdom based on our preferences. The way of Jesus—his teachings, his interactions, his actions, etc.—must increase as the means and methods by which we relate to God, one another, and the world decrease.

“Father, thank you for the new life you have given me through Jesus. Let the way I see and experience your kingdom more and more align with the person and work of Jesus as your Spirit blows me where you design and desire. Amen.”

