

The Visions of Ezekiel

Lesson 15

Ezekiel's Twenty-fourth Assignment from the LORD

3. The Sword Sharpened and Polished

21:8 Again the word of the LORD came to me, saying, 21:9 "Son of man, prophesy and say, 'Thus says the LORD.' Say, 'A sword, a sword sharpened And also polished! 21:10 'Sharpened to make a slaughter, Polished to flash like lightning!' Or shall we rejoice, the rod of My son despising every tree?

In this poetic song of the LORD we see that He has prepared His sword for battle – sharpened to a razor's edge, polished to **“flash like lightning.”** Who was the sword intended for? It was for all who remained in the Southern Kingdom. Why? Because the people of the Southern Kingdom had despised every **“rod”** by **“despising every tree.”**

What is the **“rod?”** For the Bible student today, the word **“rod”** should best be translated *scepter*. It means *the authority of the king*. In this passage the LORD was speaking about the king of Babylon who held the scepter and was despised by **“every tree.”** In the previous passage, the LORD spoke of the cedar trees that would be ignited in the forests around Jerusalem when Nebuchadnezzar attacked the city. Therefore, in this third vision, the LORD had already spoken to the *elders of Israel* and placed in their thoughts the destruction of the trees. But before arriving in the Southern Kingdom, Nebuchadnezzar would destroy the trees in the land of Lebanon to the north of the kingdom. For the most part, the trees of Lebanon would all be laid on the ground.

a) The Sword Given to the Slayer

21:11 "It is given to be polished, that it may be handled; the sword is sharpened and polished, to give it into the hand of the slayer. 21:12 "Cry out and wail, son of man; for it is against My people, it is against all the officials of Israel. They are delivered over to the sword with My people, therefore strike your thigh. 21:13 "For there is a testing; and what if even the rod which despises will be no more?" declares the Lord GOD.

In this second stanza, the polished sword was ready to use and the LORD gave it **“into the hand of the slayer.”** We need not speculate about the target of this slayer for the LORD said it would be **“against My people ... the officials of Israel ... They are delivered over to the sword with my people.”** The LORD spoke this stanza as if it had already occurred. It had not for the Southern Kingdom, but it would soon. However, the same sword of Nebuchadnezzar had taken to their deaths the people of many other nations. Egypt, for one, had already come under his control by his deadly invasion. **“... strike your thigh. For there is a testing... .”** We might not know what this meant had the LORD not been speaking through Jeremiah in Jerusalem at the same time He was speaking to Ezekiel. Hear the words of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah 31:¹⁹ 'For after I turned back, I repented; And after I was instructed, I smote on *my* thigh; I was ashamed and also humiliated Because I bore the reproach of my youth.'

Striking or smoting the thigh as Jeremiah did was not strange then and it is not strange today. We all have seen those in great grief make their hands into fists and beat their thighs to expel great emotion from within. That was what the LORD told Ezekiel to do in the sight of the *elders*. Why? It was because the sending of Nebuchadnezzar to Jerusalem would comprise a great **“testing,”** which meant the trial of the

onslaught of Nebuchadnezzar was going to be horrendous. And then the LORD finished the stanza with **“... and what if even the rod which despises will be not more?”** In this stanza, the **“rod”** was not the scepter of Nebuchadnezzar. This was the **“rod”** and scepter of Zedekiah. *“What if Zedekiah was no more? What if the Southern Kingdom did not have a king on the throne? What if the Southern Kingdom was desolate?”* Poetic as it is, surely the *elders* sitting in front of Ezekiel knew by that time that Jerusalem and the Southern Kingdom were doomed for destruction and the King of Babylon was the one ordained to accomplish the task.

b) The Sword for the Great One Slain

21:14 "You therefore, son of man, prophesy and clap your hands together; and let the sword be doubled the third time, the sword for the slain. It is the sword for the great one slain, which surrounds them, 21:15 that their hearts may melt, and many fall at all their gates. I have given the glittering sword. Ah! It is made for striking like lightning, it is wrapped up in readiness for slaughter.

Here in the third stanza Ezekiel was told to **“prophesy and clap your hands together; and let the sword be doubled the third time ...”** Nebuchadnezzar attacked Jerusalem three times. First against Jehoiakim. Second against Jehoiachin. Third and soon to occur in the story, against Zedekiah. This third time the sword would **“double”** the damage experienced in either of the two previous visits. As seen in this passage, the sight of Nebuchadnezzar outside the city walls would emotionally destroy the souls of those within. The sword of the LORD was ready. Ready to kill! Just a little more time would pass before it would kill.

“Clap your hands together” had a specific meaning in that day. The practice was meant to get the attention of the listeners. But it meant more than that. It meant authority. It meant the deed would be done. Surely we all can remember as a child in school when a teacher would give an instruction and then double-clap her hands which meant *get it done now!* So, too, the LORD told Ezekiel to clap his hands as a prophecy that Nebuchadnezzar was about to *get it done now*.

c) The Sword to Appease the Wrath of the LORD

21:16 "Show yourself sharp, go to the right; set yourself; go to the left, wherever your edge is appointed. 21:17 "I will also clap My hands together, and I will appease My wrath; I, the LORD, have spoken."

Nebuchadnezzar was appointed to **“go to the right ... go to the left.”** In between he was to **“set”** himself. It meant he had full authority to go to the north or to the south or wherever he needed to go to be the sword of the LORD, to do His work in punishing the *rebellious house of Israel*.

Ezekiel's Twenty-fifth Assignment from the LORD

4. Two Paths for the King of Babylon

21:18 The word of the LORD came to me saying, 21:19 "As for you, son of man, make two ways for the sword of the king of Babylon to come; both of them will go out of one land. And make a signpost; make it at the head of the way to the city.

In this twenty-fifth assignment for the prophet, the LORD told Ezekiel to install a sign post at the edge of the city with directions toward two paths for the King of Babylon to choose from when he came through. We have all seen signs like this, if not in real life, surely in old movies or cartoons. The pole is placed in the ground and a board with an arrow at one end points down one road and another board points down another. When the king arrived with his men, he would have to decide which destination point he wanted to follow.

a) A Path to Ammon and Judah

21:20 "You shall mark a way for the sword to come to Rabbah of the sons of Ammon, and to Judah into fortified Jerusalem. 21:21 "For the king of Babylon stands at the parting of the way, at the head of the two ways, to use divination; he shakes the arrows, he consults the household idols, he looks at the liver.

One sign would point Nebuchadnezzar toward Rabbah, a town in the tribal area of Ammon. The word “mark” would be better translated *paint*. The LORD said, paint a “way for the sword to come to Rabbah.” Leaving the Chabar River and travelling down that trade route would take Nebuchadnezzar on the east side of the Jordan River into the land of Ammon, north of the land of Moab, east of the Dead Sea. Why Ammon? At that time, according to Jeremiah, the tribes of Ammon and Moab were united with Zedekiah in opposition to Nebuchadnezzar. For a reminder, Ammon and Moab, the patriarchs of these tribes, were the two sons of Lot, Abraham’s nephew, born to Lot one year after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and the formation of the Dead Sea. These same tribes opposed the *nation of Israel* when it attempted to move up the east side of the Dead Sea to cross the Jordan and enter the Promised Land from the east moving west. But with all the trouble with Babylon, these cousins of Israel had joined the efforts of Zedekiah.

Jeremiah 27:¹ In the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah the son of Josiah, king of Judah, this word came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying—² thus says the LORD to me—“Make for yourself bonds and yokes and put them on your neck, ³ and send word to the king of Edom, to the king of Moab, to the king of the sons of Ammon, to the king of Tyre and to the king of Sidon by the messengers who come to Jerusalem to Zedekiah king of Judah. ⁴ “Command them *to go* to their masters, saying, “Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, thus you shall say to your masters, ⁵ “I have made the earth, the men and the beasts which are on the face of the earth by My great power and by My outstretched arm, and I will give it to the one who is pleasing in My sight. ⁶ “Now I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, My servant, and I have given him also the wild animals of the field to serve him. ⁷ “All the nations shall serve him and his son and his grandson until the time of his own land comes; then many nations and great kings will make him their servant.

This sign, written by Ezekiel, was a warning to Ammon at least. Nebuchadnezzar was going to deal with Ammon when he arrived. “Rabbah” is mentioned here. It was the capital city of the tribe of Ammon. It was the home of the Ammonite king.

The other sign pointed to the tribe of Judah and its capital city of Jerusalem. We have already heard much about what Nebuchadnezzar would do to Jerusalem and more still remains to be said. Therefore, we will leave the description about Nebuchadnezzar’s intent to another section of this lesson.

By giving this instruction to Ezekiel, the LORD was giving Nebuchadnezzar a choice too. What would he do? How would he know which road to choose? Divination was the answer. Shake the arrows in the quiver and pour them on the ground. How many pointed to Ammon; how many pointed to Judah? Then he would pull out his idol that he carried with him and ask the idol. We have no information as to how the idol would respond! Why? Because it could not. In that case, he would look at a liver. Here and only here do we find this concept in the Bible. It was a strange concept to the Israelites and never used in their worship and inquiry of the LORD. But for the Babylonians and many other ancient societies, looking into the liver was extremely important. With these groups, the liver was the source of life. As in Proverbs 7:23 and Lamentations 2:11, there was a great fear of death caused by the liver’s being pierced with an arrow or being poured out on the ground. No doubt, either situation would be fatal to human or animal. The liver is important, but not the center of life; that position is held by the heart. Still, a liver would be cut out of the animal and cast to the ground. The direction closest to where the point of the liver was headed was the answer to the diviner’s question. What was a diviner or divination? Divination was the opposite

counterpart to prophecy in the Scripture. It was always evil and a diviner was evil too. The LORD gave Israel specific instructions to be extremely hostile to the diviner and his divination.

Deuteronomy 18:¹⁰ "There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, one who uses divination, one who practices witchcraft, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer,¹¹ or one who casts a spell, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. ¹² "For whoever does these things is detestable to the LORD; and because of these detestable things the LORD your God will drive them out before you.

b) A Path to Jerusalem

21:22 "Into his right hand came the divination, 'Jerusalem,' to set battering rams, to open the mouth for slaughter, to lift up the voice with a battle cry, to set battering rams against the gates, to cast up ramps, to build a siege wall.

The LORD revealed to Ezekiel the choice Nebuchadnezzar would make. It would be toward Jerusalem first. He would arrive there with a full army and all the mighty tools of war.

(1) A Reason to Remember

21:23 "And it will be to them like a false divination in their eyes; they have sworn solemn oaths. But he brings iniquity to remembrance, that they may be seized. **21:24** "Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD, 'Because you have made your iniquity to be remembered, in that your transgressions are uncovered, so that in all your deeds your sins appear—because you have come to remembrance, you will be seized with the hand.

The Israelites in Jerusalem would not believe their eyes when they saw Nebuchadnezzar outside the walls of the city. The Israelites would think the divination of the sorcerer had all gone wrong. The sins of their past were ever before them and they were unable to forget them.

But the men of Israel had made a **“solemn oath”** to Nebuchadnezzar and that oath they had avoided. When Nebuchadnezzar arrived, his mere presence would cause them to think about how they had treated him and rebelled against him.

(2) A Prince of Israel

21:25 'And you, O slain, wicked one, the prince of Israel, whose day has come, in the time of the punishment of the end,' **21:26** thus says the Lord GOD, 'Remove the turban and take off the crown; this will no longer be the same. Exalt that which is low and abase that which is high. **21:27** 'A ruin, a ruin, a ruin, I will make it. This also will be no more until He comes whose right it is, and I will give it to Him.'

Zedekiah was the **“slain, wicked one”** in this passage. He spearheaded the rebellion against the King of Babylon. He had broken the **“solemn oath.”** Zedekiah's kingship was also slain. In just four years it would be over. The position of the king of Israel would be vacated until the One would **“come whose right it is.”** That, of course, is a reference to the LORD Jesus, the King of all kings.

c) A Path to Ammon

21:28 "And you, son of man, prophesy and say, 'Thus says the Lord GOD concerning the sons of Ammon and concerning their reproach,' and say: 'A sword, a sword is drawn, polished for the slaughter, to cause it to consume, that it may be like lightning—**21:29** while they see for you false visions, while they divine lies for you—to place you on the necks of the wicked who are slain, whose day has come, in the time of the punishment of the end.

Although Nebuchadnezzar would go to Jerusalem first, Ammon would not be out of the way. The King of Babylon would still swing his sword against the cousin of Israel. But how soon would

Nebuchadnezzar attack Ammon. This prophecy would be fulfilled five years after the fall of Jerusalem. The story is told in Ezekiel 25, Jeremiah 27, 48 and 49. But when the Ammonites saw that Jerusalem had been attacked, Zedekiah removed, and Gedaliah was put in charge of the Southern Kingdom, not as king but as governor, the Ammonites devised a plot to kill Gedaliah with the sword.

(1) The LORD Sent Ammon

21:30 'Return it to its sheath. In the place where you were created, in the land of your origin, I will judge you.'

The Ammonites were unable to kill Gedaliah and had to return their sword to their sheath and return to their original homeland to be judged by the LORD.

(2) The LORD Gave Ammon

21:31 'I will pour out My indignation on you; I will blow on you with the fire of My wrath, and I will give you into the hand of brutal men, skilled in destruction.'

Thinking that Nebuchadnezzar had missed the Ammonites, they retreated to their homes but the LORD made sure Nebuchadnezzar made it to Ammon. The Babylonians were the **“brutal men, skilled in destruction”** that the Ammonites had to face. The LORD was going to help Nebuchadnezzar by blowing on the Ammonites **“with the fire of My wrath.”** In the furnace of the blacksmith’s shop the billows were used to blow on the flame to cause it to burn with great fierceness and cause even metal to melt. So, too, the fire would be billowed to rage against Ammon.

(3) The LORD Forgot Ammon

21:32 'You will be fuel for the fire; your blood will be in the midst of the land. You will not be remembered, for I, the LORD, have spoken.'

We can look to Zephaniah 2:9 to join with Ezekiel 25:5 to speak to this issue. Ammon was about to be literally burned into annihilation. After Nebuchadnezzar’s bout with them “Nothing but ruins are found here by an amazed explorer. Not an inhabited village remains, and not an Ammonite exists on the face of the earth.”⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Thomson, *Land and Book*, 3:622, *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*.