Ezekiel 20

For My Name's Sake: Rebellion, Mercy and the Rod

OBSERVATION · INTERPRETATION · APPLICATION

"These were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so."

Acts 17:11

CHAPTER THEME

Men came to ask God for a word while their hearts were still full of idols, and God answered with their own history: rebellion in Egypt, rebellion in the wilderness, rebellion in the land. Over and over He held back judgment for the sake of His name. He will not be used, and He will not let His people go — He will drag them through the wilderness, under the rod, and into the covenant, until they loathe their sin and know that He is the LORD.

Ed Smith · Started 20 October 2026

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00 The Text

EZEKIEL 20 (KJV), MARKED

▲ Gold God — His character & actions
Green Command / instruction
⇄ Sky Key repeated word
⚠ Rose Sin / warning
★ Violet Promise / blessing
◷ Amber Time / place / contrast

1 And it came to pass ◷ in the seventh year, in the fifth month, the tenth day of the month, that certain of the elders of Israel came to enquire of the LORD, and sat before me.

2 Then came the word of the LORD unto me, saying,

3 Son of man, speak unto the elders of Israel, and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Are ye come to enquire of me? As I live, saith the Lord GOD, ⚠ I will not be enquired of by you.

4 Wilt thou judge them, son of man, wilt thou judge them? cause them to know the abominations of their fathers:

5 And say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD; ▲ In the day when I chose Israel, and lifted up mine hand unto the seed of the house of Jacob, and made myself known unto them in the land of Egypt, when I lifted up mine hand unto them, saying, I am the LORD your God;

6 In the day that I lifted up mine hand unto them, to bring them forth of the land of Egypt into a land that I had espied for them, ★ flowing with milk and honey, which is the glory of all lands:

7 Then said I unto them, Cast ye away every man the abominations of his eyes, and defile not yourselves with the idols of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.

8 But they ⚠ rebelled against me, and would not hearken unto me: they did not every man cast away the abominations of their eyes, neither did they forsake the idols of Egypt: then I said, I will pour out my fury upon them, to accomplish my anger against them in the midst of the land of Egypt.

9 But I ▲ wrought for my name's sake, that it should not be polluted before the heathen, among whom they were, in whose sight I made myself known unto them, in bringing them forth out of the land of Egypt.

10 Wherefore I caused them to go forth out of the land of Egypt, and brought them into the wilderness.

11 And I gave them my statutes, and shewed them my judgments, which if a man do, he shall even live in them.

12 Moreover also I gave them ⇄ my sabbaths, ★ to be a sign between me and them, that they might ⇄ know that I am the LORD that sanctify them.

13 But the house of Israel ⚠ rebelled against me in the wilderness: they walked not in my statutes, and they despised my judgments, which if a man do, he shall even live in them; and ⇄ my sabbaths they greatly polluted: then I said, I would pour out my fury upon them in the wilderness, to consume them.

14 But I ▲ wrought for my name's sake, that it should not be polluted before the heathen, in whose sight I brought them out.

15 Yet also I lifted up my hand unto them in the wilderness, that I would not bring them into the land which I had given them, flowing with milk and honey, which is the glory of all lands;

16 Because they despised my judgments, and walked not in my statutes, but polluted ⇄ my sabbaths: for ⚠ their heart went after their idols.

17 Nevertheless ▲ mine eye spared them from destroying them, neither did I make an end of them in the wilderness.

18 But I said unto their children in the wilderness, Walk ye not in the statutes of your fathers, neither observe their judgments, nor defile yourselves with their idols:

19 I am the LORD your God; walk in my statutes, and keep my judgments, and do them;

20 And hallow ⇄ my sabbaths; and they shall be a sign between me and you, that ye may ⇄ know that I am the LORD your God.

21 Notwithstanding the children ⚠ rebelled against me: they walked not in my statutes, neither kept my judgments to do them, which if a man do, he shall even live in them; they polluted ⇄ my sabbaths: then I said, I would pour out my fury upon them, to accomplish my anger against them in the wilderness.

22 Nevertheless I withdrew mine hand, and ▲ wrought for my name's sake, that it should not be polluted in the sight of the heathen, in whose sight I brought them forth.

23 I lifted up mine hand unto them also in the wilderness, that I would scatter them among the heathen, and disperse them through the countries;

24 Because they had not executed my judgments, but had despised my statutes, and had polluted ⇄ my sabbaths, and their eyes were after their fathers' idols.

25 Wherefore I gave them also ⚠ statutes that were not good, and judgments whereby they should not live;

26 And I polluted them in their own gifts, in that they caused ⚠ to pass through the fire all that openeth the womb, that I might make them desolate, to the end that they might ⇄ know that I am the LORD.

27 Therefore, son of man, speak unto the house of Israel, and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Yet in this your fathers have blasphemed me, in that they have committed a trespass against me.

28 For when I had brought them into the land, for the which I lifted up mine hand to give it to them, then they saw every high hill, and all the thick trees, and they offered there their sacrifices, and there they presented the provocation of their offering: there also they made their sweet savour, and poured out there their drink offerings.

29 Then I said unto them, What is the high place whereunto ye go? And the name thereof is called Bamah unto this day.

30 Wherefore say unto the house of Israel, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Are ye polluted after the manner of your fathers? and commit ye whoredom after their abominations?

31 For when ye offer your gifts, when ye make your sons ⚠ to pass through the fire, ye pollute yourselves with all your idols, even unto this day: and shall I be enquired of by you, O house of Israel? As I live, saith the Lord GOD, ⚠ I will not be enquired of by you.

32 And that which cometh into your mind shall not be at all, that ye say, ⚠ We will be as the heathen, as the families of the countries, to serve wood and stone.

33 As I live, saith the Lord GOD, surely ▲ with a mighty hand, and with a stretched out arm, and with fury poured out, will I rule over you:

34 And I will bring you out from the people, and will gather you out of the countries wherein ye are scattered, with a mighty hand, and with a stretched out arm, and with fury poured out.

35 And I will bring you into the wilderness of the people, and there will I plead with you face to face.

36 Like as I pleaded with your fathers in the wilderness of the land of Egypt, so will I plead with you, saith the Lord GOD.

37 And I will cause you to ▲ pass under the rod, and I will bring you into ★ the bond of the covenant:

38 And I will ⚠ purge out from among you the rebels, and them that transgress against me: I will bring them forth out of the country where they sojourn, and they shall not enter into the land of Israel: and ye shall ⇄ know that I am the LORD.

39 As for you, O house of Israel, thus saith the Lord GOD; Go ye, serve ye every one his idols, and hereafter also, if ye will not hearken unto me: but pollute ye my holy name no more with your gifts, and with your idols.

40 For in mine holy mountain, in the mountain of the height of Israel, saith the Lord GOD, there shall all the house of Israel, all of them in the land, serve me: there will I accept them, and there will I require your offerings, and the firstfruits of your oblations, with all your holy things.

41 ★ I will accept you with your sweet savour, when I bring you out from the people, and gather you out of the countries wherein ye have been scattered; and I will be sanctified in you before the heathen.

42 And ye shall ⇄ know that I am the LORD, when I shall bring you into the land of Israel, into the country for the which I lifted up mine hand to give it to your fathers.

43 And there shall ye remember your ways, and all your doings, wherein ye have been defiled; and ye shall lothe yourselves in your own sight for all your evils that ye have committed.

44 And ye shall ⇄ know that I am the LORD, when I have wrought with you for my name's sake, ★ not according to your wicked ways, nor according to your corrupt doings, O ye house of Israel, saith the Lord GOD.

45 Moreover the word of the LORD came unto me, saying,

46 Son of man, set thy face toward the south, and drop thy word toward the south, and prophesy against the forest of the south field;

47 And say to the forest of the south, Hear the word of the LORD; Thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold, I will kindle a fire in thee, and it shall devour ◷ every green tree in thee, and every dry tree: the flaming flame shall not be quenched, and all faces from the south to the north shall be burned therein.

48 And all flesh shall see that I the LORD have kindled it: it shall not be quenched.

49 Then said I, Ah Lord GOD! they say of me, ⚠ Doth he not speak parables?

Marked in the text

- **v1** ◷ in the seventh year, in the fifth month, the tenth day
- **v3** ⚠ I will not be enquired of by you *(every occurrence)*
- **v5** ▲ In the day when I chose Israel
- **v6** ★ flowing with milk and honey
- **v7** Cast ye away every man the abominations of his eyes
- **v8** ⚠ rebelled against me *(every occurrence)*
- **v9** ▲ wrought for my name's sake *(every occurrence)*
- **v12** ⇄ my sabbaths *(every occurrence)*
- **v12** ★ to be a sign between me and them
- **v12** ⇄ know that I am the LORD *(every occurrence)*
- **v16** ⚠ their heart went after their idols
- **v17** ▲ mine eye spared them
- **v25** ⚠ statutes that were not good
- **v26** ⚠ to pass through the fire *(every occurrence)*
- **v32** ⚠ We will be as the heathen
- **v33** ▲ with a mighty hand, and with a stretched out arm

- **v37** ▲ pass under the rod
- **v37** ★ the bond of the covenant
- **v38** ⚠ purge out from among you the rebels
- **v41** ★ I will accept you with your sweet savour
- **v44** ★ not according to your wicked ways
- **v47** ◷ every green tree in thee, and every dry tree
- **v49** ⚠ Doth he not speak parables

Marks are drawn on the KJV text. Quotations in the notes are from the NASB95, so their wording may differ from the KJV above.

01 Observation

WHAT DOES THE TEXT SAY?

KEY VERSE · EZEKIEL 20:12 (KJV)

12 Moreover also I gave them ⇄ my sabbaths, ★ to be a sign between me and them, that they might ⇄ know that I am the LORD that sanctify them.

Setting

The text dates it: "in the seventh year, in the fifth month, on the tenth of the month" of Jehoiachin's exile (v1) — about August 591 B.C., some two years after Ezekiel's call (1:2) and five years before Jerusalem falls. "Certain of the elders of Israel came to inquire of the LORD, and sat before me" (v1). God answers them with a history lesson instead of an oracle. (In Hebrew Bibles, vv45–49 begin chapter 21.)

Structure

- vv1–4 — **God refuses the elders:** "I will not be inquired of by you" (v3). "Make them know the abominations of their fathers" (v4).
- vv5–9 — **rebellion in Egypt:** "On the day when I chose Israel" (v5), God swore to bring them to a land "flowing with milk and honey, which is the glory of all lands" (v6). "Cast away, each of you, the detestable things of his eyes" (v7). "But they rebelled against Me and were not willing to listen to Me" (v8). "But I acted for the sake of My name, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations" (v9).
- vv10–17 — **rebellion in the wilderness, first generation:** "I gave them My statutes and informed them of My ordinances, by which, if a man observes them, he will live" (v11). "I gave them My sabbaths to be a sign between Me and them, that they might know that I am the LORD who sanctifies them" (v12). "But the house of Israel rebelled against Me in the wilderness" (v13), "for their heart continually went after their idols" (v16). "Yet My eye spared them rather than destroying them" (v17).
- vv18–26 — **rebellion in the wilderness, second generation:** "Do not walk in the statutes of your fathers" (v18). The children rebel too (v21). God swears to scatter them (v23) and gives them "statutes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not live" (v25); they "caused all their firstborn to pass through the fire" (v26).

- vv27–32 — **rebellion in the land, and now in exile:** high places on every hill (vv28–29): "What is the high place to which you go?" (v29). The exiles defile themselves the same way (vv30–31) and secretly plan, "We will be like the nations … serving wood and stone" (v32).
- vv33–38 — **a second exodus with judgment:** "with a mighty hand and with an outstretched arm and with wrath poured out, I shall be king over you" (v33). "There I will enter into judgment with you face to face" (v35). "I will make you pass under the rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant" (v37); "I will purge from you the rebels and those who transgress against Me" (v38).
- vv39–44 — **restored worship:** "Go, serve everyone his idols" (v39) — but "My holy name you will profane no longer with your gifts and with your idols" (v39). "For on My holy mountain, on the high mountain of Israel" they will serve Him (v40). "As a soothing aroma I will accept you" (v41). "You will loathe yourselves in your own sight for all the evil things that you have done" (v43) — and know Him "when I have dealt with you for My name's sake, not according to your evil ways or according to your corrupt deeds" (v44).
- vv45–49 — **the forest fire:** against the forest of the south, God will kindle a fire: "it will consume every green tree in you, as well as every dry tree; the blazing flame will not be quenched" (v47). "All flesh will see that I, the LORD, have kindled it" (v48). Ezekiel: "Is he not just speaking parables?" (v49).

Repeated words

rebelled (vv8, 13, 21); for the sake of My name / for My name's sake (vv9, 14, 22, 44); statutes (vv11, 13, 16, 18, 19, 21, 24, 25); sabbaths (vv12, 13, 16, 20, 21, 24); wilderness (vv10, 13, 15, 17, 18, 21, 23, 35, 36); idols (vv7, 8, 16, 18, 24, 31, 39); know that I am the LORD (vv12, 20, 26, 38, 42, 44); as I live (vv3, 31, 33); inquire / inquired (vv1, 3, 31).

Contrasts

"I chose Israel" (v5) ⟷ "they rebelled against Me" (vv8, 13, 21). Statutes by which a man will live (v11) ⟷ statutes by which they could not live (v25). "I will pour out My wrath" (vv8, 13, 21) ⟷ "I acted for the sake of My name" (vv9, 14, 22). "We will be like the nations" (v32) ⟷ "I shall be king over you" (v33). Gifts that defiled them (v26) ⟷ a people accepted "as a soothing aroma" (v41). Dealt with "not according to your evil ways" (v44) ⟷ a fire that takes the green tree and the dry (v47).

Chapter theme (my words)

Men came to ask God for a word while their hearts were still full of idols, and God answered with their own history: rebellion in Egypt, rebellion in the wilderness, rebellion in the land. Over and over He held back judgment for the sake of His name. He will not be used, and He will not let His people go — He will drag them through the wilderness, under the rod, and into the covenant, until they loathe their sin and know that He is the LORD.

02 Interpretation

WHAT DOES THE TEXT MEAN?

KEY VERSE · EZEKIEL 20:37 (KJV)

37 And I will cause you to ▲ pass under the rod, and I will bring you into ★ the bond of the covenant:

God refuses the elders (vv1–4)

This is the third time elders sit before Ezekiel (8:1; 14:1). God's answer is blunt: "As I live ... I will not be inquired of by you" (v3). They wanted guidance without repentance — a word from God while keeping their idols (14:3). Guzik dates the visit: "This took place some two years after the prophecies of Ezekiel 1-3 (Ezekiel 1:2)." Instead of a prediction, God makes Ezekiel a prosecutor: "Will you judge them...?" (v4).

Egypt (vv5–9)

God chose Israel and lifted His hand in an oath — the language of swearing (Exod 6:8). Guzik ties the oath to the covenant with Abraham. Exodus never records Israel worshiping Egypt's idols in so many words, but Ezekiel reveals what was underneath (compare Josh 24:14). God could have destroyed them in Egypt; He acted for His name instead. Block, quoted in Guzik: "The divine reputation depends on the fate and welfare of his people."

The wilderness (vv10–26)

God gave life-giving law — "if a man observes them, he will live" (v11; Lev 18:5). Alexander, in Guzik: "It is not a reference to eternal salvation by works." The point is that God's law is the path of blessed life for a redeemed people (compare Rom 10:5; Gal 3:12). The Sabbath was the covenant sign (Exod 31:13), and they trampled it. The pattern repeats: rebellion, wrath deserved, mercy for His name, and a generation dying in the desert (Num 14:26–35). Then the children did the same.

"Statutes that were not good" (vv25–26)

This verse troubles readers. God did not give Israel evil laws at Sinai. Guzik explains that God handed Israel over to the consequences of the idolatry they chose — including living under the laws and customs of other nations — and he cites Feinberg, who describes it as a judicial sentence. It is the same pattern as Romans 1, where "God gave them over" (Rom 1:24, 26, 28). The darkest example is child sacrifice — "all their firstborn" passed through the fire (v26; Jer 7:31; Ps 106:37–38). When people refuse God's good statutes, He lets them have the deadly ones they want.

The land and the exile (vv27–32)

In Canaan they saw every high hill and leafy tree and made them altars (v28). God's wordplay in v29 mocks the "high place" (*bamah*). Then He turns to the men in front of Ezekiel: you are doing the same thing (vv30–31). Guzik notes that the elders' attitude mirrored their fathers' — they wanted to be like the Gentiles. "We will be like the nations" (v32) was the secret plan: settle down in Babylon and blend in. God says it will not happen.

A second exodus (vv33–38)

"I shall be king over you" (v33) — whether they like it or not. The phrase "mighty hand … outstretched arm" is exodus language (Deut 4:34), but now with "wrath poured out." God will bring them into "the wilderness of the peoples" (v35) to judge them face to face, as He did their fathers. "Pass under the rod" (v37) is a shepherd's picture — the sheep pass one by one under the staff to be counted and sorted (Lev 27:32). The rebels are purged and will not enter the land (v38). Guzik sees "a partial fulfillment" in the return from Babylon and "a greater and more perfect fulfillment in the millennial age."

Restoration on the holy mountain (vv39–44)

Verse 39 is a jolt of irony: go ahead, serve your idols — but stop dragging My name into it. Then the promise: on God's holy mountain the whole house of Israel will serve Him, and He will accept them "as a soothing aroma" (v41). Christians read vv33–44 three main ways: (1) fulfilled in the return from Babylon and the rebuilt temple; (2) a future national restoration and conversion of Israel, often tied to the millennial kingdom; (3) fulfilled spiritually as God gathers His people, Jew and Gentile, into Christ. Guzik says the worship promise "was fulfilled when the temple was rebuilt under Ezra and Zerubbabel," applies the return to the land also to 1948, and looks to a greater fulfillment in the millennium; he does not identify these verses with the church. All agree on the heart of it: true restoration ends in self-loathing over sin (v43) and wonder at grace — "not according to your evil ways" (v44).

The forest fire (vv45–49)

Ezekiel faces south — toward Judah, which lay to the south as invaders came from the north. The fire will take "every green tree … as well as every dry tree" (v47). Guzik: "The judgment would be so complete that it would burn both the green tree and the dry tree." Jesus used the same picture on the road to the cross (Luke 23:31). Ezekiel's complaint (v49) shows the people dismissing him as a storyteller. Guzik: "Their failure to understand was willful and would be judged." Chapter 21 explains the parable plainly.

Word study (Hebrew)

- **inquire — *darash* (H1875):** to seek, consult, inquire of.
- **abominations — *to'ebah* (H8441):** a detestable thing, especially idolatry.
- **detestable things — *shiqquts* (H8251):** a filthy, disgusting thing; an idol.
- **idols — *gillulim* (H1544):** idols; possibly "dung-gods," a contemptuous word Ezekiel uses often.
- **rebelled — *marah* (H4784):** to be contentious, rebellious.
- **statutes — *chuqqah* (H2708):** a fixed decree, ordinance.
- **ordinances — *mishpat* (H4941):** a judgment, legal decision, justice.
- **sabbaths — *shabbath* (H7676):** a day of rest.
- **sign — *'oth* (H226):** a sign, mark, pledge.
- **sanctifies — *qadash* (H6942):** to set apart, make holy.
- **profaned — *chalal* (H2490):** to pollute, defile, treat as common.
- **high place — *bamah* (H1116):** a raised place of worship.

- **rod — *shebet* (H7626):** a rod, staff, scepter.
- **bond — *masoreth* (H4562):** a bond, fetter.
- **purge — *barar* (H1305):** to purify, sift out.
- **soothing — *nichoach* (H5207):** pleasing, restful (of an aroma).
- **loathe — *quṭ* (H6962):** to feel disgust, loathe.
- **parables — *mashal* (H4912):** a proverb, parable, byword.

Cross-references

Exod 6:6–8; Exod 20:8–11; Exod 31:13–17; Lev 18:5; Lev 27:32; Num 14:26–35; Deut 4:34; Josh 24:14; Neh 9:16–31; Ps 106:6–48; Isa 48:9–11; Jer 7:31; Ezek 8:1; Ezek 14:1–5; Ezek 36:22–32; Hos 2:14–20; Luke 23:31; Rom 1:24–28; Rom 10:5; Rom 11:25–27; Gal 3:12; 1 Cor 10:1–12; 1 Pet 4:17.

03 Application

HOW DOES IT CHANGE ME?

KEY VERSE · EZEKIEL 20:6 (KJV)

6 In the day that I lifted up mine hand unto them, to bring them forth of the land of Egypt into a land that I had espied for them, ★ flowing with milk and honey, which is the glory of all lands:

Command to obey — "Cast away, each of you, the detestable things of his eyes" (v7)

The idols started with the eyes. I'll name what I keep looking at that pulls my heart away — screens, money, approval — and get rid of it, not manage it. The men I disciple know this battle well; a recovery that keeps the old phone numbers and the old routes home is not a recovery.

Sin to confess — asking God for a word while keeping my idols

The elders sat politely before the prophet with idols in their hearts (v3; 14:3). I can open my Bible for guidance while refusing to deal with the sin God already put His finger on. I'll confess that before I ask Him for anything else.

Warning to heed — "We will be like the nations" (v32)

The exiles' secret plan was to blend in and stop being different. That's the quiet drift that ruins men — not one big rebellion but a slow decision to be like everybody else. And God says, "I shall be king over you" (v33). He loves me too much to let me go.

Promise to trust — "for My name's sake."

Four times God says He acted for His name, not because Israel deserved it (vv9, 14, 22, 44). My hope rests there too. He deals with me "not according to your evil ways or according to your corrupt deeds" (v44). For a man walking out of prison who thinks his record decides his future, God's name is a stronger reason than his record.

Example to follow — pass under the rod

The Shepherd counts His sheep one by one (v37). I want to let Him examine me — not avoid the rod but walk under it — and to shepherd the men God gives me with the same patient, personal care, one man at a time.

Worship

God chose a rebellious people and kept His oath to them for generation after generation. He is holy, and He will prove Himself holy in the sight of the nations (v41). He accepts sinners like a soothing aroma — because of His Son, the true offering.

Prayer

Lord GOD, I don't want to come to You with idols in my heart. Show me what my eyes are chasing, and help me cast it away. Thank You that You have dealt with me for Your name's sake and not according to my ways. Make me Yours, under Your rod and in Your covenant, and let the men I walk with find the same mercy. Amen.