A True Love Story

Text: Ezekiel 16

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**Scriptures:** Ephesians 5; Ezekiel 16:15-25; 59-63

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 145, 32, 422, 181, 523

Series: Ezekiel (sermon #5)

Theme: Ezekiel tells the story of God’s true love for His people using a parable of an abandoned child being rescued, loved and growing into a beautiful woman who is then married to a husband whom she repeatedly rejects in favour of lovers who treat her harshly and then abandon her. Despite her unfaithfulness, her husband, The Lord, renews his covenant with her and promises to atone for her sins.

Proposition: Brother and sister, the love of the Lord for you, is a true love, which deals justly with your ugly sin through the atonement of Christ and extends mercy to you by forgiving your sins in Jesus. How will you respond to His true love?

**Introduction**

I began the morning sermon last week by trying to pretend to you that I don’t actually enjoy romantic ‘chick flicks’, which I watch with my wife on occasion. The truth is that I do like a love story. I think if we are honest with ourselves, we all do. An essential part of being human is both to love and to be loved. Deep within us all this divine design characteristic of loving and desiring to be loved powerfully influences our thoughts, actions and emotions. A true love story resonates, reverberates, echoes, with us all.

God’s Word is the greatest love story ever written. The Bible unfolds the great love of God for people like you and me. Our text today, Ezekiel chapter 16, is a mini-love story within the broader love story of the whole Scripture. Here we see the astonishingly beautiful abiding love of God, but also the utterly ugly depravity of the object of his love: His people.

Chapter 16 of Ezekiel is so explicit in its extended description, both of the origins of Israel and of her repeated unfaithfulness that the 19th century English Particular Baptist preacher C.H. Spurgeon once said that ‘A *minister can scarcely read it in public*’. Well, we haven’t read the whole chapter today, because it is very long (almost 1800 words in English). We also haven’t read chapters 12-15 in this preaching series. The reason for this is that there is much repetition in the 20 chapters of Ezekiel from 4 through to 24, as the Lord brings his Word of condemnation upon Israel through His prophet Ezekiel. This same core message of God’s judgement is conveyed in different ways. For example:

* In **chapter 12**, Ezekiel symbolises the captivity of the exiles by carrying baggage on his shoulder.
* In **chapter 13**, Ezekiel prophesies against the false prophets of Israel, who misled the people by saying ‘peace when there was no peace’ (13:10) and who practiced magic and sorcery (13:17-23.
* In **chapter 14**, the idolatrous elders of Israel are called to repentance and the coming covenant curses of warfare, pestilence and destruction are again proclaimed against Jerusalem.
* In **chapter 15**, Israel is compared to a non-productive vine, only fit for burning in the fire.

Now let’s focus on chapter 16 under three headings:

* An unwanted child
* An unfaithful bride
* A faithful husband
1. **An unwanted child**

‘Keep your theology off my biology’ is a slogan which is popular with the pro-abortion movement today. This slogan basically says, “the belief that every human life is sacred and is therefore to be protected, does not trump the ‘rights’ of anyone to have a child ‘terminated’ through abortion if they so wish”. In 2017, there were 13,285 induced abortions in New Zealand. By way of comparison, our local church membership is currently about 155, so that’s the equivalent of about 85 congregations of people like this one murdered each year by abortion in our country.

Quite similarly, and equally sadly, unwanted babies were disposed of in the ancient world, often by leaving them alone in the countryside, exposed to the weather, without protection, covering, food or drink. Girls were abandoned more frequently than boys; who were generally valued more highly by society.

In our text, Jerusalem is portrayed as an unwanted female child. She is unloved, uncared for, and left to die. God describes her sorry condition (4-5): “*And as for your birth, on the day you were born your cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to cleanse you, nor rubbed with salt, nor wrapped in swaddling cloths. No eye pitied you, to do any of these things to you out of compassion for you, but you were cast out on the open field, for you were abhorred, on the day that you were born*”. Before her capture by Israel, Jerusalem was a pagan city, being inhabited by various peoples including the Amorites, Canaanites, Jebusites, and Hittites (16:45; Gen 10:15; 16; Josh 10:5; Jud 1:21; 19:10; 2 Sam 5:6). She was like a child born to parents of mixed race (16:3).

God is portrayed in this story as a passer-by, somewhat like the ‘good Samaritan’ on the road to Jericho (Luke 10:33). With compassion the Lord rescues the helpless child, still ‘*wallowing in her blood*’ (16:6). Apart from His kind intervention, she would have surely died. Just like Old Testament Israel was delivered from slavery in Egypt only because the Lord had set his love on her (Deut 7:7) so this helpless child was recovered.

Sadly, some girls were ‘rescued’ in this way in the ancient world, only to be raised as ‘sex slaves’ to be prostituted for the profit of others. {Tragically, this has not changed in the 21st century. It is estimated that more than 12 million women and girls are bought and sold globally for sexual exploitation}.

In contrast, God’s intention for the unloved child is only good, when she grows up into a woman, he marries her, the ‘ceremony’ similar to the way Boaz becomes the husband of Ruth by covering her with his garment (Ruth 3:9). God enters into a covenant with His bride and she becomes his (16:8). He washes her, anoints her with oil, clothes her with fine garments, adorns her with jewels and feeds her with choice food. Her clothing was not merely elegant and regal. The materials described are elsewhere associated with the tabernacle, underlining her symbolic identity as Jerusalem, the home of the Temple of the LORD. Notice that God’s love is lavish, even extravagant, and because of this his bride becomes radiantly beautiful. The Lord bestowed splendour upon her and she ‘advanced to royalty’ (14:13). She was transformed into a beautiful queen, famous throughout the world.

Remember how the queen of Sheba had heard of the fame of Solomon concerning the name of the Lord (1 Kings 10:1) and when she came to Jerusalem, she spoke to him of the great love of God for His people Israel: **“***Blessed be the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and set you on the throne of Israel! Because the LORD loved Israel forever, he has made you king, that you may execute justice and righteousness*." (1 Kings 10:9)

What does this story of God’s love for Jerusalem show us?

1. The Lord’s love does not depend on anything we have, or how lovely we may appear. The unwanted girl child had nothing and would not have been attractive to look at. The love of the Lord is not blinded by external ugliness.
2. The Lord’s love is seen in action. He intervenes to help the helpless from every people group. "*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life*”. (John 3:16)
3. The Lord’s love has the very best interests for those upon whom He sets his love. His desire is that they become radiantly beautiful in Him, like a bride who knows deep within her heart that her husband really, really, loves her.
4. The Lord’s love is an abundant, lavish, even extravagant. It is a love which pours out blessings upon those upon whom He sets that love.
5. The Lord’s love is a liberating love which sets the one who is loved free to return the love first given. American writer Richard Bach has said “*If you love someone set them free. If they come back, they are yours. If they don’t, they never were*”.

The story of God’s love for his unlovely bride is a true ‘rags to riches’ journey of rescue, growth and resulting radiant glory. Here it is again, in summary, from Eph 2:1; 4-6: “*And you were dead in the trespasses and sins…. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ- by grace you have been saved- and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus*”.

Oh that the story of God’s love for Jerusalem would end there at verse 14 so that the Lord and His people would ‘live happily ever after’ – a loving King and His beautiful wife. But, as we know from the history of the Old Testament, she was an extremely unfaithful bride... which brings us to our 2nd point:

1. **An unfaithful bride**

We have all heard of public figures who have dramatically ‘fallen from grace’ and suffered public scorn and shame as a result. They might be presidents, politicians, celebrities, businessmen, pastors or elders. We know of some who have taken a dreadfully downward slide from ‘riches to rags’, from fame to infamy, from honour to disgrace.

Jerusalem, the great city of wealth, power and fame fell by degrees because of her self-seeking lusts in which she repeatedly rejected the love of her husband, the Lord Himself. Jerusalem ‘the Golden’ became Jerusalem ‘the Great Prostitute’, thoroughly depraved and degraded in all her ways. The ‘holy city’ sank lower and lower as she ‘looked for love in all the wrong places’:

* From Assyria in the days of Ahaz (2 Ki 16:7)
* From Babylon in the days of Hezekiah (20:12-19
* From Egypt in the days of Zedekiah (Jer 2:36; Eze 17:15)

True religion which trusted in the Lord had gradually been exchanged for false faiths and unholy alliances with foreign nations. She ‘*did not remember the days of her youth*’ (v22) – when she was ‘*naked and bare, wallowing in her blood*’. She forgot the Lord’s great love for her when she had been helpless and unlovely. Her forgetfulness led to pride. The Lord exposes her true heart: ‘*You trusted in your own beauty*’ (v15). Her pride then led to a life of increasing wickedness which is expressed in the shocking behaviour of a brazen prostitute:

* Who “*lavished {her} whorings on any passer-by; {her} beauty became his*” (v15)
* Who sacrificed her sons and daughters to be devoured (v20)
* Who, unlike a ‘normal’ prostitute, did not receive payment from her lovers, but whose depravity was so great that she actually paid them for the privilege of having her! (v34)

This ungrateful, unfaithful wife was more corrupt than ‘her daughters’ Sodom and Samaria (16:47). The name of ‘Sodom’ epitomised not only sexual sin (Gen 19:4-9), but the fearsome judgement of the Lord in righteous anger against her. Similarly Samaria had been judged by the Lord for her sin (1 Kings 12:28-33) and was overrun by the Assyrians (2 Kings 17:3-23). Jerusalem, now representing God’s people Israel under His judgement, would become an ‘object of reproach’ (16:57).

There is a warning here for each one of us. Here are some stages on the ‘slippery slope’ which leads to great distress:

* Forgetfulness of what the Lord has done to rescue you in the past.
* Pride in your own abilities and possessions (all of which are gifts from the Lord) which replaces trust in the Lord.
* A life of looking for love and satisfaction in ‘all the wrong places’. This is a life of idolatry – placing your highest affection on people and/or things rather than on Christ. Let’s be honest with ourselves –we are all prone to do this.
* A progressive decline into ever increasing wickedness, to which a person is often blind until they are almost at the bottom of the ‘slippery slope’, if not beyond it. This is the wide ‘easy way’ which Jesus warns ‘leads to destruction’ (Matt 7:13).
* Finally, at the bottom of the ‘slope’ - great shame and dishonour.

In Old Testament Israel, convicted adulteresses were often exposed naked in public (16:37; Nah 3:5) and then stoned to death (Deut 22:22; Eze 16:40). Similarly, Jerusalem, the Great Whore, was going to suffer at the hands of her lovers into whose deadly embrace the Lord would deliver her. She would be stripped bare, stoned, and cut to pieces with swords. Her houses would be burned. In a sense she would be reduced to a similar state in which she had been at ‘birth’; helpless, abandoned, abhorred, and bare.

All of this by the decree of her righteously jealous husband, the Lord, who says: “*So will I satisfy my wrath on you, and my jealousy shall depart from you. I will be calm and will no more be angry*” (16.42). The Lord would act so that ‘*you may bear your disgrace and be ashamed of all that you have done*’ (16:54).

For you and me, at times, the Lord may discipline us, resulting in personal disgrace, so that we come to be ashamed of what we have done. There is a difference between a godly grief which ‘produces that leads to salvation without regret’ as opposed to a ‘worldly grief’(a sorrow of painful consequences resulting from sin) that produces death (2 Cor 7:10).

Brother or sister in Christ, have you become forgetful/unthankful for what the Lord has done for you? Has your trust in the Lord been gradually replaced with a self-reliance which is rooted in pride? Are you ‘looking for love in all the wrong places?’ Is your life showing signs of moral decline? Are there patterns of sinfulness which are beginning to entangle you?

The Lord could be using His Word to you today to cause you to be ashamed of what you have done and thereby to bring you to the godly grief of repentance. He does this because He is a faithful husband to His people. Which brings us to our third point:

1. **A faithful husband**

How many of you would like to be able to go back 2600years and exchange places with Ezekiel and to have his ministry? Not a particularly attractive proposition? You might well think that Ezekiel had a hard task as the Lord’s prophet. For example, being commanded to lie on his side for 430 days depicting the siege of Jerusalem, publicly shaving off his hair, speaking to a people who would not be willing to listen to him (3:7).

Yes, his was a difficult calling, but he was by no means the only prophet who suffered greatly in serving our God. Think of Hosea who was told by the Lord to “*Go again and love a woman who is loved by another man and is an adulteress, even as the Lord loves the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods*” (Hosea 3:1). Hosea was called to be faithful to His wife, even though she had been unfaithful to him.

This reflects the great love of God who is a faithful husband to His people. He is faithful to the covenant agreement He has made both in justice and in mercy.

**In justice**, He dealt with unfaithful Israel in judgement, as He had said that he would (Deut 28:15-68; Lev 26:14-39). This is what He says through Ezekiel in v59 "*I will deal with you as you have done, you who have despised the oath in breaking the covenant*”.

But also, **in mercy**, He would establish an everlasting covenant with Israel so that (v63): “*you may remember and be confounded, and never open your mouth again because of your shame, when I atone for you for all that you have done, declares the Lord GOD*". God Himself would cover over the naked, ugly, depraved, abominable sins of His unfaithful wife, Israel. How? Ezekiel was not told in 592BC, but we know!

John writes in his first epistle: “*In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins*” (1 John 4:10). Brothers and sisters in the Lord, Jesus Christ covers the ugly naked shame of our sin. He has atoned for all that we have done in our unfaithfulness so that God’s jealousy has departed from us and the Lord is no longer angry at us.

The image of Israel prostituting herself is ugly in the extreme but think of the ugliness that Jesus Christ became as He was punished for the crimes of others; people like you and me. In the words of Isaiah 53:2b “*He had no form or majesty that we should look at him and no beauty that we should desire him*”. Convicted in a rigged trial, abused by his guards until he could scarcely walk, yet forced to carry his own cross on a back which had been flayed raw. Nails were forced into his living flesh. Then he would have been jerked upright until, too tired to lift himself up to breath one more breath, he suffocated. A naked, bloodied man, abandoned by God and man, left to hang in agony until he no longer lived.

What awful thing could be so bad that only such an atonement was necessary to pay for it? Sin. We think it less ugly than it really is and when we are confronted with passages like Ezekiel 16, we are shocked. We think too little of the Lord’s love and rely too much on the strength and beauty which He has kindly bestowed upon us. How much more are we like the Jerusalem of Ezekiel’s day than we would likely care to admit. The remembrance of our sin should stir our hearts to shame (16:63) and then to repentance and devotion to the Lord.

Christ is the faithful husband to His church who has loved His bride and who “*gave himself up for her that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish*” (Eph 5:25-27).

Where do you fit today in the true story of God’s great love for His people? Remember that the Lord’s love does not depend on anything we have, or how lovely we appear. The love of the Lord is not blinded by external ugliness. Remember that The Lord’s love is seen in action. He intervenes to help the helpless. "*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life*”. (John 3:16) Remember that the Lord’s love has the very best interests for those upon whom He sets his love. His desire is that they become radiantly beautiful in Him, like a bride who knows deep within her heart that her husband really really loves her. Remember that the Lord’s love is an abundant, lavish, even extravagant, love which pours out blessings upon those upon whom he sets that love. Remember that the Lord’s love is a liberating love which sets the one who is loved free to return the love first given.

The Lord’s great love bestows great honour on those He loves, they become children of God, the Great King. Dressed in the radiantly beautiful garment of Christ’s righteousness.

Brothers and Sisters, spiritual descendants of Abraham (Gal 3.29), you who belong to the New Israel, the love of the Lord for you in Christ is a true love. It is a love which had dealt justly with your sin and has extended you great mercy through the atonement of your sin by Christ. How will you respond to the true love of God for you?

AMEN.