



# THE STORY OF *Everything* LUKE 24:27

Everyone longs for utopia – the perfect world. But have you ever considered what utopia might be? Almost 500 years ago, Thomas More wrote a little volume about an island where, through the eyes of a traveller, everything is perfect.

When Thomas More’s book was released, the title page had these words on it: “A fruitful, pleasant and witty work, of the best state of a public weal, and of the new isle, called Utopia.” More lived in King Henry VIII England, and criticizing the government could be very dangerous. But written as a piece of fiction, More had found a way to criticize his own government in an entertaining and unthreatening method to those who would read it.

Even the name of the perfect island was carefully chosen – Utopia. We use this word in English today to talk about a place of ideal perfection. But More coined this term, and he intentionally chose the word because it is a pun in Greek. The word “topia” in Greek means place. And the “U” in front of it can give it the idea of goodness, (as we do with the word “eulogy”), or it can give the meaning “No,” giving the Utopia the meaning “the good place” or “no place.” In other words, the name says it all: the “good place” is really “no place” – not in this world, at least.

Is that the case? Is no place really the good place we all dream about? Is the Paradise we long for just a projection of our imaginations? Does it really exist?

In the days of Ezekiel, the question of hope and the future was a real one. Ezekiel was a priest who lived at the same time as Jeremiah. During the early days of the Babylonian siege, before Jerusalem fell, a group of citizens from Jerusalem had been deported by the Babylonians into exile. He probably travelled to Babylon around 597 BC with the royal family and other leading citizens of Jerusalem. The city would not fall for another 10 years, but Ezekiel was away in exile, away from the temple, he may have looked like he had no future serving God’s people since a priest’s work was wrapped up in the life of the temple. For many Jews, it seemed like there was no hope since God was inaccessible – they were away from God’s presence, God’s place, and God’s people.

Ezekiel can strike us as one of the strangest figures of the Old Testament. He behaves in ways that are hard to explain. He lies motionless on his side for months. He is tied up in ropes in his own home so as to not to go out. He cannot speak for periods at a time. He doesn’t mourn when his wife dies. He makes a model city of Jerusalem, and then raises the sword against it. He packs his bags and digs through the city wall. For this reason, some have thought Ezekiel is pathological, psychotic, or paranoid. For this reason, the ancient rabbis forbade young men from reading this book until they were 30 out of concern that they would be discouraged and despair this book and the Scriptures as a whole.

But this book isn’t difficult to understand. It is divided into two sections. In chapters 1-24, the Lord speaks about his judgment on his people for their sins. And in 25-48, the Lord speaks a word of hope – there is judgment against the sinful nations and a restoration for the future of

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God's people. It is built around three visions: in chs. 1-3, Ezekiel has a vision in Babylon of the glory of the Lord. In chs. 8-11, Ezekiel is transported in a vision back to Jerusalem to see the horrors of the city, especially in the temple. And finally, in chs. 40-48 he sees a vision of God coming to his people again in a rebuilt temple. We won't spend time looking at the first vision in any detail, but what gave Ezekiel hope in the midst of hopelessness, when he and others felt far from God and his presence? Like Jeremiah, there is a word of warning and a word of hope.

**First, beware of the ugliness of sin.**

The book of Ezekiel begins with a vision of God's throne room and the glory of the Lord beside the river Chebar in Babylon. It is here that Ezekiel is given his prophetic call to a rebellious and estranged people (2:1-7). The cloud that would lead Israel out of Egypt, through the wilderness, and settle on the temple is the same cloud that has left the temple in Jerusalem and come to be with the people in exile. His first vision sees the cloud of the presence of God with the people in Babylon. But while he is sitting in Babylon, we are told that "the hand of the Lord fell on me" and "brought me the visions of God to Jerusalem" (8:1, 3). Ezekiel's vision in Jerusalem is going to show him how the cloud of God's presence leaves the temple and why it comes to Babylon and the exiles.

In Ezekiel's vision, he sees the temple, but it isn't covered with the pictures of Eden. Now it has carvings of every thing detestable, with all the idols of Israel (8:11). The elders are offering incense to the idols (8:12). At the entrance of the Temple, women are weeping for a Babylonian god who has died but will rise again each year (8:14-15). In the inner court are the men appointed by David who have turned their backs on the temple and are bowing toward the sunrise, facing west, away from the presence of God and toward exile (8:16-18).

All these things are taking place in the Temple. And the Lord will only take these insults so long. As the people continue, the Lord's presence begins to move. (READ 10:4, 18; 11:22-25). As the Lord leaves his house, he prepares to destroy the city. Why will the Lord destroy the city? Through chapters 12 and 13, he tells Ezekiel the reason: "So that you will know that I am the Lord (12:15, 20, 13:23). This phrase comes from the book of Exodus, where the Lord brings plagues upon Pharaoh and Egypt because Pharaoh says he doesn't know the God of the Hebrews (see Exod. 5:2). So the Lord's response to Pharaoh is that if you don't know who he is, he will show you. But in Ezekiel's day, it is God's people who do not know the Lord. So the Lord will send disaster upon his people.

But there is hope here too. Those who are marked on the forehead are those who will be saved (9:6), and those who leave the city will have their lives spared, just as Jeremiah had said. And to everyone's surprise, the glory of the Lord that departs moves eastward toward the exiles.

I can't help but think about how we live in difficult days. Many Christians are fighting a culture war, trying to hang on to the past, as though fighting a culture war and standing up for our

rights will preserve the Christian past that once existed. And yet, it may not be in asserting our rights that our Christian witness is preserved, but being prepared to find that God goes with us into exile. It may be that the tough days ahead – the destruction of the Christian west – is actually the beginning of a renewed Christian witness. I don't know these things. But the Lord shuts down the worship of his people when it becomes detestable. He leaves his glory. He hates our feasts and our celebrations when they are an abomination to him. Maybe one of the lessons of Covid that the Church needs to reflect upon is this: did our worship become detestable to God? Did we make worship all about us? Did we make church life all about what we want?

These are days that call for deep reflection and repentance. Maybe it's not you individually. But maybe it is a call to us collectively to take a good hard look at what evangelicalism has become. Why is evangelicalism associated more with a certain political stripe than the good news of the resurrected Christ? Have we allowed the sins of Israel and Judah – relying on political parties and successes – to become our identity? Have we made worship more about our rights and freedoms than the pleasure of adoring God almighty?

The good news is that when we reflect deeply on these things, I suspect that we find that the glory of the Lord is there – in those places of confession and repentance. It's in those places where we consider that God is worthy to be praised and adored not for what he gives us but for who he is in and of himself. And when we do turn to him and abandon the worship of idols, there is hope in exile – that the Lord goes with his people.

And this is the message of hope, and the second thing that we ought to see:

### **Second: Trust in the Lord with all your heart**

The last section of Ezekiel's prophecy has several famous visions. In chapter 36, the Lord promises to gather his people from the nations, cleanse them from their impurities, and give them a soft heart, a heart of flesh to replace their heart of stone so that they will keep his ways and commandments (READ 36:24-28). How will this be done? Ezekiel has a vision in ch. 37 of a valley of dry bones. As Ezekiel preaches God's word, there is a resurrection that takes place. In other words, the way that God will accomplish this new heart is by the Word and by resurrection power!

But in his final vision, God shows Ezekiel a new temple. The first temple had been destroyed by the Babylonians. But this new temple is something marvelous. It is the size of a city (40:2). And Ezekiel is told to tell God's people everything he sees (40:4). This temple is enormous. Its size is awe-inspiring. But what makes this temple great is what happens in 43:1-5 (READ). Just as God's people would return from exile, here the promise is that God's temple would be rebuilt and filled with the presence of God. And from this temple would flow streams of living water, as chapter 47 describes.

The key purpose of this temple, however, was to highlight the restored relationship between God and his people. So the final verse of Ezekiel is important: “And the name of the city from that time on will be: The Lord is There” (48:35). God is forever with his people. Never will he leave them. Never will he forsake them.

We will see in the book of Ezra that the exiles did return and built the temple. But we know from Haggai that the older generation wept because the temple foundation was smaller than the one that Solomon had built.

But that was because there was a better temple that was coming, a temple that would dwell with us forever. And this helps us to...

### **See the Glory of Christ**

At the coming of Jesus, he entered this rebuilt temple – the building that Herod had built. But again, the practices of the day were detestable to Jesus. He saw that the outer court for the Gentiles was filled with buying and selling, so much so that the nations could not come into the temple. So in rage, he flipped tables and angered the religious leaders. When the Jews asked him what he was doing, he said, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it up in three days” (Jn 2:19). But the temple that Jesus was speaking about was not the physical building, but John tells us he was referring to his own body.

And so, when Jesus would later come into the temple after his ride into the city on the final week leading up to Passover, Mark 11 tells us he rode into the temple. While all the people were crying out with praises for him, he came in to the temple, looked around, and found no one. And just as the glory of the Lord had departed from Ezekiel’s temple and gone to the mount of Olives, so Jesus does the exact same (Mk. 11: 11).

But there will come a day when the presence of God will be with his people. And just as the vision of Ezekiel saw a stream that would bring healing to the nations, John tells us in Revelation 22 that there was a river of life, flowing from the throne of God and bearing much fruit, so much so that the nations are healed. And just as Ezekiel saw the marking of those who were safe from exile, so John sees that there are those marked with the presence of God on their foreheads, and they rule forever and ever.

While we look for Paradise, it was in Eden. It was in the Promised Land. It was in the Jerusalem built by David. It was wherever God was.

And just as God was with his people in exile, dwelling with them, so we can have confidence and hope that though the world may fall apart around us, though the mountains give way and the seas roar, God’s people can live in Paradise now. Because the most blessed place you can

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be is with the Lord. And when you walk with him, you will know that he makes you his dwelling place, his holy temple. And his presence enables you to say, regardless of the circumstances, "The Lord is There."