

Ezekiel 20 – God’s Patience, Israel’s Rebellion, and the Call to Turn and Live

1. Elders Come to Inquire... and God Refuses to Answer (Ezekiel 20:1-4)

“It came to pass in the seventh year, in the fifth month, on the tenth day of the month, that certain of the elders of Israel came to inquire of the Lord, and sat before me. Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying, ‘Son of man, speak to the elders of Israel, and say to them, “Thus says the Lord God: ‘Have you come to inquire of Me? As I live,’ says the Lord God, ‘I will not be inquired of by you.’”’”
(Ezekiel 20:1-3, NKJV)

The elders come to Ezekiel “to inquire of the Lord.” On the surface, it sounds spiritual. They sit respectfully, as if they are serious about God’s will.

But God sees past posture and words. He says, in effect, “Are you really here to seek Me? I will not be inquired of by you.”

Their lives and hearts are not in line with their outward interest in God. They want answers without repentance, guidance without surrender.

God then tells Ezekiel to judge them by telling them their own history:

“Will you judge them, son of man, will you judge them? Then make known to them the abominations of their fathers.” (Ezekiel 20:4, NKJV)

God is about to walk them through their story—generation by generation—to show that their current condition is not an accident. It is the fruit of repeated rebellion against His grace.

2. In Egypt: God Chose Them, They Clung to Idols (Ezekiel 20:5-9)

God takes them back to the beginning of their national life:

“In the day when I chose Israel and raised My hand in an oath to the descendants of the house of Jacob... saying, ‘I am the Lord your God’... to bring them out of the land of Egypt into a land that I had searched out for them, ‘flowing with milk and honey, the glory of all lands.’ Then I said to them, ‘Each of you, throw away the abominations which are before his eyes, and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt. I am the Lord your God.’ But they rebelled against Me and would not obey Me.” (Ezekiel 20:5-8, NKJV)

Even in Egypt, before the Exodus, they were attached to idols. God demanded exclusive devotion; they resisted.

God considered judging them right there in Egypt, but He acted for His name’s sake:

“But I acted for My name’s sake, that it should not be profaned before the Gentiles.” (Ezekiel 20:9, NKJV)

He delivered them—not because they were faithful, but because God is faithful.

3. In the Wilderness: First Generation Rebellion (Ezekiel 20:10-17)

“Therefore I made them go out of the land of Egypt and brought them into the wilderness. And I gave them My statutes and showed them My judgments, ‘which, if a man does, he shall live by them.’”
(Ezekiel 20:10-11, NKJV)

God gave them His ways—not to crush them, but to show them the path of life.

He also gave them His Sabbaths as a sign of relationship between Him and Israel (Ezekiel 20:12).

But:

“The house of Israel rebelled against Me in the wilderness; they did not walk in My statutes; they despised My judgments... and they greatly defiled My Sabbaths.” (Ezekiel 20:13, NKJV)

Again, God considered wiping them out, but He held back for the sake of His name (Ezekiel 20:14-17).

4. Their Children: Same Story, New Generation (Ezekiel 20:18-26)

God then turned to the next generation:

“But I said to their children in the wilderness, ‘Do not walk in the statutes of your fathers... I am the Lord your God: Walk in My statutes.’” (Ezekiel 20:18-19, NKJV)

They had a chance to break from their parents’ rebellion. But:

“Nevertheless the children rebelled against Me; they did not walk in My statutes, and were not careful to observe My judgments... and they defiled My Sabbaths.” (Ezekiel 20:21, NKJV)

God warned them of scattering among the nations (Ezekiel 20:23), the very exile they are now living through in Ezekiel’s day.

Verse 25 is sobering:

“Therefore I also gave them up to statutes that were not good, and judgments by which they could not live.” (Ezekiel 20:25, NKJV)

In other words, when they stubbornly refused God’s ways, He allowed them to follow their own. He gave them over, letting them experience the misery of their own choices—including horrific practices like sacrificing their children in fire to false gods (Ezekiel 20:26).

5. In the Land: High Places and Hardened Hearts (Ezekiel 20:27-32)

Even after God brought them into the promised land:

“When I brought them into the land... then they saw all the high hills and all the thick trees; there they offered their sacrifices... There they also made their sweet aroma and poured out their drink offerings.” (Ezekiel 20:28, NKJV)

Instead of worshiping the Lord in the way He commanded, they embraced the high places—the centers of pagan worship.

God asks:

“What is this high place to which you go?” (Ezekiel 20:29, NKJV)

They continued sacrificing, even sending their children through the fire. And then those same people sit before Ezekiel wanting a word from the Lord.

God says:

“So shall I be inquired of by you, O house of Israel? As I live... I will not be inquired of by you.” (Ezekiel 20:31, NKJV)

Their plans to be “like the Gentiles” and serve idols (Ezekiel 20:32) will not succeed. God will not let His people dissolve into spiritual compromise without His intervention.

6. God’s Future Purging and Restoration (Ezekiel 20:33-44)

Even in judgment, God remains their Lord:

“As I live... surely with a mighty hand, with an outstretched arm, and with fury poured out, I will rule over you.” (Ezekiel 20:33, NKJV)

He promises to gather them from the nations where they have been scattered (Ezekiel 20:34). He will bring them into a kind of “wilderness of the peoples” and deal with them personally, as He did in the days of Moses (Ezekiel 20:35-36).

“I will cause you to pass under the rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant; I will purge the rebels from among you.” (Ezekiel 20:37-38, NKJV)

This points to a future work of God where He regathers, refines, and restores a people who truly belong to Him.

Then He promises:

“On My holy mountain... there all the house of Israel, all of them in the land, shall serve Me; there I will accept them... I will accept you as a sweet aroma when I bring you out from the peoples and gather you out of the countries where you have been scattered.” (Ezekiel 20:40-41, NKJV)

They will remember their sins and loathe themselves for their past rebellion (Ezekiel 20:43), not in despair, but in humbled repentance.

And God says:

“You shall know that I am the Lord, when I have dealt with you for My name’s sake, not according to your wicked ways nor according to your corrupt doings.” (Ezekiel 20:44, NKJV)

Their future hope is not based on their goodness, but on God’s mercy and faithfulness.

In the full light of the New Testament, we see that this mercy and restoration are ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who shed His blood on the cross for our sins and rose from the dead, declaring that He is God, Savior, and Lord.

7. The Parable of the Burning Forest (Ezekiel 20:45-49)

The chapter closes with a parable of judgment:

“Thus says the Lord God: ‘Behold, I will kindle a fire in you, and it shall devour every green tree and every dry tree... and all faces from the south to the north shall be scorched by it.’” (Ezekiel 20:47, NKJV)

This points ahead to the burning and destruction of Jerusalem. The people complain that Ezekiel “speaks in parables” (Ezekiel 20:49), but the message is crystal clear: judgment is coming, and it will be devastating.

Practical Application

1. **History is a mirror, not just a record.**

God walks Israel through her past to show that the present crisis is the fruit of long-term rebellion. Our own lives often tell a similar story—patterns repeat when we refuse to listen to God.

2. **Religious interest without repentance is empty.**

The elders sat before Ezekiel as if they truly wanted to hear from God, but their hearts were full of idols. God wants more than questions—He wants hearts that are ready to obey.

3. **God is amazingly patient, but He will not ignore sin forever.**

Again and again He withholds judgment “for My name’s sake,” but eventually, if people refuse to turn, consequences fall.

4. **God still intends restoration for those who will turn.**

Even after all the rebellion, God speaks of gathering, purifying, renewing, and restoring. His heart is not to destroy but to redeem.

A Challenge for Believers

- Are you like those elders—sitting in “religious settings,” wanting God’s guidance, but unwilling to surrender certain idols of the heart?
- Are there places where you are repeating your parents’ or culture’s sins instead of learning from them?
- Have you mistaken God’s patience for God’s approval, assuming that because judgment has not yet fallen, your compromise must be “not that serious”?

God’s message through Ezekiel 20 presses on us: Turn, remember, and return.

He calls His people to see their history honestly, to recognize His patience, and to respond with genuine repentance.

You might need to pray something like:

“Lord, I do not want to come to You with a divided heart. Show me any idols I have tolerated. Forgive me for treating Your patience lightly. I turn from my sins and renew my surrender to You. Thank You for Your mercy, and help me to walk in obedience as a thankful response to Your grace.”

An Invitation to Non-Believers

Ezekiel 20 shows a God who:

- Sees rebellion clearly.
- Judges sin righteously.
- Yet still reaches out in mercy, calling people to turn and live.

That is why Jesus came.

He did not come so you could clean yourself up and try harder. He came because you and I cannot save ourselves. He shed His blood on the cross to pay for our sins—every idol, every act of rebellion, every secret shame. He rose from the dead, and His resurrection declares that He is God, Savior, and Lord.

God does not take pleasure in your destruction. He calls you to turn from sin and come to Him.

You might express your heart to Him like this:

“Lord Jesus, I see that I have sinned and gone my own way. I believe that You died on the cross for my sins and that You rose again. I confess that You are God, Savior, and Lord. I turn from my sin and put my trust in You. Please forgive me, cleanse me, and make me Yours. Teach me to follow You from this day forward.”

If you truly come to Him, He will not turn you away.

He will forgive you.

He will begin a work of restoration in your life that no exile, no past, and no failure can ultimately destroy.