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# The Round Church at St Andrew the Great Cambridge

A Sermon Preached  
on Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> January 2004  
by Mark Ashton

Ezekiel 28:1–26

## The Idolatry of Pride

### 1) The Passing of Human Glory (verses 1-23)

Have you ever stood in the ruins of some once-great building and wondered what became of those who built it and lived in it? Perhaps one of the great medieval English Castles, like Framlingham or Warwick; or perhaps you may have stood in the Coliseum in Rome, or the Parthenon in Athens, or by the Egyptian Pyramids. There is a certain sadness, a pathos at how great civilisations can just vanish, leaving nothing behind but a few ruins. In one of his poems, Shelley tells of two huge stone legs standing in the desert with beside them, half buried in the sand, the remains of a sculptured head with a cold sneer on its face. And there was an inscription which read:

*'My name is Ozymandias, King of kings: look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!'*

And the poem ends:

*'Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,  
the lone and level sands stretch far away.'*

Human civilisations think they are here for ever; but time betrays them all. What looks huge and permanent to contemporary, human eyes fades eventually into history. And we need to learn a lesson from ruins, from the great artefacts of past civilisations, because it is a lesson that the Bible endorses: never to let human achievement get out of proportion. But more of that in a moment.

We are in the middle of this book of Ezekiel. It began with the prophet's call, and then with 21 chapters of condemnation of God's people for their unfaithfulness, climaxing in Chapter 24 with the declaration that things are actually going to get even worse: Jerusalem itself is going to be destroyed. The news that Jerusalem had in fact fallen will come to Ezekiel (where he was living in exile in Babylon) in Chapter 33. But in between that prediction (in Ch. 24) and the news of its fulfilment (in Ch. 33), as though to keep us in suspense, there come eight chapters of condemnation of the nations around Israel (in Chapters 25–32), beginning with Ammon, to the east of Jerusalem, and going in a sort of clockwise direction (following that arrow) around neighbouring nations and city states: Moab, Edom, Philistia, Tyre, Sidon. And then finally (at much greater length than the others) comes Egypt, down to the South-West.



Now, the judgement announced on these neighbouring nations is very similar to that which has already been announced on Jerusalem and on the Jews; but it would, of course, have been far more welcome to Jewish ears. In fact this was probably what an Israelite prophet was expected to do: to declaim against hostile

neighbouring states; rather as if it was my job to preach against the French and the Germans (not that they're actually hostile) or perhaps the Welsh and the Irish and the Scots (I joke, I joke!). But God's judgment on Israel's enemies had, to some extent, to be good news to Israel itself.

So, right in the middle of this section of Ezekiel, come the three verses with which Chapter 28 ends, and which make exactly this point: ***“No longer will the people of Israel have malicious neighbours who are painful briars and sharp thorns. Then they will know that I am the Sovereign LORD”*** (v. 24). So there is the beginning of something a little more positive at this point in Ezekiel; as we move from the hopelessness of those early chapters (1-24), and before we get to the hope of chapters 33–48 (the end of the book).

But today we're just going to look at one of those oracles against the nations, that against the king of Tyre. Tyre was a maritime city-state on the Mediterranean coast. We're going to look at it as it comes at the beginning of Chapter 28, ***‘The word of the LORD came to me: <sup>2</sup>“Son of man, say to the ruler of Tyre, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: “In the pride of your heart you say, ‘I am a god; I sit on the throne of a god in the heart of the seas.’ But you are a man and not a god, though you think you are as wise as a god”’*** (28:1, 2).

The strange imagery that Ezekiel uses in this chapter has led some commentators to wonder if this could really be a man he is addressing in such elevated terms. ***“You were the model of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. <sup>13</sup>You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone adorned you . . . <sup>14</sup>You were anointed as a guardian cherub, for so I ordained you. You were on the holy mount of God; you walked among the fiery stones. <sup>15</sup>You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created till wickedness was found in you”*** (vv. 12b, 13a, 14-15). Some have speculated that this might be Satan's fall that Ezekiel is describing here. But in the context of these oracles (where it comes in the book of Ezekiel) this has to be the king of Tyre, Ethbaal II. In Isaiah chapter 14 we find Isaiah speaking very similarly of the ruler of Babylon. And so here we have some rather elevated strange imagery, drawing on earlier bits of the Bible – not, I think, a clue to Satan's origin. (The Bible doesn't actually help us to answer the question: ‘Where did evil come from?’ It encourages you and me to accept responsibility for our own evil by confessing it and repenting of it, rather than looking for someone or something else to blame for it. The Old Testament shows no interest in the devil's origin; but it does reveal to us a recurrent pattern of human pride.)

#### (a) Beauty, Wisdom & Pride

Notice that the emphasis there is on God's provision for this man, in verses 12-15: ***‘You were the model of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. <sup>13</sup>You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone adorned you: ruby, topaz, emerald, chrysolite, onyx and jasper, sapphire, turquoise and beryl. Your settings and mountings were made of gold; on the day you were created they were prepared. <sup>14</sup>You were anointed as a guardian cherub, for so I ordained you. You were on the holy mount of God; you walked among the fiery stones. <sup>15</sup>You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created till wickedness was found in you.’*** Created by God to be the model of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty; perfectly adorned and provided for. But what does a man do with such divine generosity? Last week we saw how Israel trusted in her beauty as if it were her own achievement. Here it is even worse: ***“In the pride of your heart you say, ‘I am a god; I sit on the throne of a god in the heart of the seas.’ But you are a man and not a god, though you think you are as wise as a god”*** (v. 2b, c). The human tendency is not just to treat God's gifts as if they were our own achievements. It is actually to seek to take God's place: not to rule the universe (I don't think most of us want to do that), but to rule our own lives.

Haven't we done that? We may reckon that we're a long way from this successful ruler of an ancient maritime city-state, but the person who claims that there is no God is quite prepared to play at being God as far as their own life is concerned. After all, we've eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, so we can decide for ourselves what is right and what is wrong: what moral guidelines should shape my behaviour. And that is what it is to take the place of God, from Whom alone all good derives. And the wiser and more beautiful we are the more we will be tempted to do so: ***‘Your heart became proud on account of your beauty, and you corrupted your wisdom because of your splendour’*** (v. 17). And our material success will take us down that same path.

(b) Trade/Wealth

Notice how the king of Tyre's commercial success had compounded his spiritual vanity: *'By your wisdom and understanding you have gained wealth for yourself and amassed gold and silver in your treasuries. <sup>5</sup>By your great skill in trading you have increased your wealth, and because of your wealth your heart has grown proud'* (vv. 4, 5). It's picked up again in verses 16 and 18: *'Through your widespread trade you were filled with violence, and you sinned.'* *'By your many sins and dishonest trade you have desecrated your sanctuaries.'* Again and again in history those who amass great wealth are prone to great sins. There is the injustice of economic inequality among the nations in our world today, just as violent in its effect on the poor as warfare: *'Through your widespread trade you were filled with violence . . .'* The G8 summit of the world's richest nations, which met for a few days in Okinawa, Japan, in July 2000, cost over £500 million (more than the annual gross national product of Sierra Leone). But how little was done at it to reduce the debts of the world's poorest countries!

Then there is the way we human beings are always determined to clamber above one another and to create a vast gap, if we can, between ourselves and other people. I understand that the six richest men in our world today are apparently each individually wealthier than the ten poorest countries of our world put together. And how quickly the amassing of wealth goes to our heads! So you may remember the city bond traders of the 1980's calling themselves 'the masters of the universe'. But the pursuit of wealth for its own sake is never morally neutral. Business practice so quickly becomes dishonest, and all of life becomes spiritually tainted. That, I think, is what the beginning of verse 18 means: *'By your many sins and dishonest trade you have desecrated your sanctuaries.'* Everything has been affected. You may be saying to yourself: *This is a very long way from me, on a student loan. Mark, you have no idea.* Well, I still would like you to consider: do the things that you and I own influence our behaviour? I think they do. They certainly influence mine – and not for the better.

But God is never defeated by human sin, and no man has ever grown too big to be accountable to the God who made him. So we are going to end on a second point.

2) The Establishing of God's Identity (vv. 24-26)

This isn't just confined to the end of the chapter; first it's there in the harsh, unyielding fact of death. It was his mortality that was going to give the lie to Ethbaal of Tyre's pretensions to divinity: *'Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: "Because you think you are wise, as wise as a god, <sup>7</sup>I am going to bring foreigners against you, the most ruthless of nations [probably the Babylonians]; they will draw their swords against your beauty and wisdom and pierce your shining splendour. <sup>8</sup>They will bring you down to the pit, and you will die a violent death in the heart of the seas. <sup>9</sup>Will you then say, 'I am a god,' in the presence of those who kill you? You will be but a man, not a god, in the hands of those who slay you. <sup>10</sup>You will die the death of the uncircumcised at the hands of foreigners. I have spoken, declares the Sovereign LORD"'* (vv. 6-10). Ethbaal would die a violent death. But the key point is that all will die. Our poets have expressed this so well, over the centuries:

*The glories of our blood and state  
Are shadows, not substantial things;  
There is no armour against Fate;  
Death lays his icy hand on kings;  
Sceptre and Crown  
Must tumble down,  
And in the dust be equal made  
With the poor crooked scythe and spade.* (James Shirley)

The final verdict on every human life is not that passed by the rest of humanity on that individual at the moment of his or her death: it is the verdict passed by God on that individual after their death. We are not at one another's mercy in this matter, and we should not let human achievement overawe us. We may feel at

times that we are dwarfed by the achievements of the human race. I don't know if you feel like that. I do – I look at the Judge Institute's makeover of the Old Addenbrookes building in Trumpington Street (you have to know Cambridge a little bit to follow this particular illustration: it used to be the hospital just opposite the Fitzwilliam Museum there, now the Chartered Institute of Management), or maybe Bill Gates' building on the Madingley Road, and I am cowed by such things – by a man who has made his millions, and a system that thinks it doesn't need God. But God will reassert His identity. And for God to be identified as God, man must be put in perspective. Humanity's achievements must be seen for what they really are.

Glance again at the end of the chapter, as we finish: ***'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: When I gather the people of Israel from the nations where they have been scattered, I will show myself holy among them in the sight of the nations. Then they will live in their own land, which I gave to my servant Jacob. <sup>26</sup>They will live there in safety and will build houses and plant vineyards; they will live in safety when I inflict punishment on all their neighbours who maligned them. Then they will know that I am the LORD their God'*** ' (vv. 25, 26). God's actions in history to restore the Jewish nation in the centuries before Christ were to be events of divine disclosure: ***"Then they will know that I am the LORD their God"*** (vv. 24 & 26). The kings of Tyre all fall. Today we can see the ruins. But we must look at our own contemporary equivalents to the king of Tyre in the same perspective. They too will pass, as will all merely human achievement; and God alone remains for ever – and you and I must build our lives on a vision of Him, in His Son, Jesus.

*(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)*