**A seal upon church prophecy (H.J. Schilder)**

**Ezekiel 11: 13a**

**~ *“Now it happened, while I prophesied, that Pelatiah the son of Benaiah died*.”**

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Whenever a sacrament is administered in the church, it is a sign and seal of the promises of the gospel. A glorious matter then: the joyful message is sealed.

But it can be different if God wills.

He can also give terrible signs and seals.

He can seal, not only as much as the promises, but also the threat, either His Word of grace or His prophecy of judgment.

This last part we meet in our text. A man falls down dead, a leader of the church of those days, one from the people in Jerusalem. It was not by chance, no, it is an affirmation of a sermon in the church, and of the Word of God which Ezekiel had to proclaim to the exiles in Babylon.

That sign and seal is so terrible, so shocking, that the prophet was himself confounded by it and could hardly digest it. He cries out: Lord, Thou art are so disquieting, will nothing be left of us, Do You make an end of the church? Have we believed in vain that at least a remnant and a church would be preserved for the future?

Yahweh gives him a detailed answer to that question. He does not want His faithful servants to be unable to keep up with the speed and violence of prophecy. And especially, He wants to engage them for the furtherance of His gospel and of His church, for the future coming of Christ. So He gives His answer opening the panorama of the future, beyond this present oppressiveness.

But the answer takes nothing away from the seriousness of the event. This is especially reinforced. Ezekiel must certainly know that the Word of God he speaks has such an awesome consequence, that the God who can be so patient can strike with haste when it comes to the point and that there is then only one way for escape and preservation: that is to hear and believe, confess and perform, speak and keep God’s Word.

See congregation, such things happen when there is prophecy in dispute, especially prophecy about the church, and its significance, the city of God and its future.

We will hear this prophetic Word of God, that it is still always relevant today and the more to understand that prophecy and believe its consequence, which is disturbing and bewildering at the same time.

And the new Testament congregation which may live by the signs and seals of God’s promises, may also understand this extraordinary, unique, bewildering sign and seal of the prophetic threat in Ezekiel’s prophecy. I preach; (It is preached to you):

Pelatiah’s death as a bewildering seal on true church prophecy. *We see*

*1) in whom it is sealed*

*2) what is sealed;*

*3) how it is sealed.*

**ONE**

There is a painful contrast between the name of the man we speak are speaking of and the fate that awaits him. That fate is death. But his name speaks of life and preservation. He is called Pelatiah son of Benaiah.

We know nothing of this man except from what appears here, that is that he was one of the influential leaders of Jerusalem in Ezekiel’s days.

It was in the days before Jerusalem’s destruction, before the ‘great exile’. A part, actually a very important part, of Jerusalem’s population was already sent to Babylon; among whom also Ezekiel was to be found. Now this prophet, (Ezekiel), while in Babylon, was transported in the Spirit and by the Spirit to Jerusalem.

What he gets to see there has been written about in the previous chapters. It is told in our chapter that he sees twenty five men at the east gate of the temple, political advisers and leaders of the nation. Of these the two most important are named: a certain Jaazaniah and this Pelatiah. We know nothing more of these names other than what is told here.

This also means that we know nothing more of this man other than what his name was. That name is so beautiful. Pelatiah: that is Yahweh preserves, the Lord gives deliverance, there is rescue and manifold liberation with Him. Furthermore there is his father’s name: Benaiah, meaning: Yahweh builds, the Lord establishes, brings something into being. Could it be better?

Such names are ~ originally at least ~ confessions of faith which speak of what Yahweh is for His people, they expound the welfare of the covenant, the promise of the gospel. ‘Pelatiah’, Yahweh preserves and delivers, that is similar to the name Joshua, Jesus, Isaiah: the Lord saves. And Benaiah, Yahweh builds, that makes us think of Hebrews 11; the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who is the chief craftsman and builder, Who establishes a city with foundations. this is how He is known in Israel, as a God who had led His people from the house of slavery. Who has delivered them out of all kinds of oppression for centuries, Who promised a Messiah and who let David’s Son build a house and establish a kingdom which would endure through all the ages.

These names speak of a rich past and reach for a still richer future.

Pelatiah, the son of Benaiah, the man with his names ~ which could have naturally became a sort of tradition in the family ~ is a confession, or profession, a preaching of the salvation that never passes away.

But his fate stands in sharp contrast with this; he perishes.

That is so bewildering that even Ezekiel is shocked. We will return to this in our third point but will note now already how terrible this is, also about how conflicting it is with the names the man carries.

Pelatiah, Yahweh gives escape ~ but Yahweh strikes him down in sudden death; there is no escape from it. Benaiah, Yahweh builds. In giving this name parents and grandparents must have meant that Yahweh builds us a house in the generations, keeps our name alive for the future in the children and grandchildren. But see now: Benaiah’s son is cut down, the future is darkened, the generations broken off, the building leveled.

Why so?

Was it because this man and his ruling colleagues were unmoved by the beautiful confession identified by their names? I include those colleagues, because what happens to Pelatiah obviously does not only affect him personally, but he is the representative of all twenty five of the leadership circle. And the colleague, also named here, carried the beautiful name Jaazaniah, which means: Yahweh listens, He listens to His people and hears them beseeching; and his father was called Azzur, the same as the more well known Azariah, Yahweh helps, comes to help, is a helper in need.

This message, this gospel, this confession was well known in that society, they were familiar with it. They were certainly not apathetic about it. On the contrary these men “lived” with that gospel in their own way; the significance of the names was more than a coincidental family tradition. It was rather the basis for their deliberations, their recommendations and decisions, their politics:

Yahweh preserves and so He will not let Jerusalem be lost;

He builds David’s city so He will not let the most important city leaders be given up to despair.

Certainly we know ominous things have happened, a large part of Jerusalem’s elite is already carried off and the situation is still critical. But they have a solution for it, as appears in verse 15 of this chapter. Concerning those carried off they say: they were our brothers but Yahweh has driven them away, he is finished with them, we can write them off. They are far away from His help and support, but we have been given to occupy the land, we live in the city of Jerusalem and we will be preserved.

In the manner of Easterners they sum up their conviction in a short and powerful proverb: *‘this city is the caldron, and we are the meat‘.*

See, that city is Jerusalem, that city with its military power and with its old dignity and promises for the future, the city where Yahweh had said He would live forever. That is the caldron, the pan, but they, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the elite leadership, are the precious meat which indeed is broiled on the fire, but not so as to burn, on the contrary to be handled with great care by the cook.

This is a crude and crafty proverb, full of fine irony from their point of view. Someone could say that it is not so amusing to be in a pan on a fire. But to that objection they would answer that it is all about how you look at it. That pan is directly exposed to the fire, the flames touch it. But the pan serves to protect the precious meat in it. It is broiled, yes, but this only makes the meat better, tastier, nutritious. It could happen of course the meat gets burnt but a good cook would watch out for that, he knows how to use the pan so the meat is prevented from burning and prepared as first class nutrition to later become the pride of the banquet. And you could argue: yes, but in the end the meat is eaten ~ but the parable does not go that far. It is primarily about one point: the precious meat is safe from fire in the pan, it only becomes the better for it.

This is a very slick way to take ownership of the gospel over against the clear language of Yahweh’s true prophets. For they talk of a sentence put over the people of Jerusalem and of purification through God’s judgments. That is how Jeremiah, for instance, had preached without ceasing during those years . But they had given an satirical application to these sermons: they give way to the prophets; they do not deny that things are difficult, that flames are ignited against the city, that Nebuchadnezzar’s armies form a continuing threat… but, they say, that will all come to our benefit.

Do the prophets speak of purification through judgment? Well we believe it. But in such a way that we are the precious meat, which can only improve in the flames of judgment, and that this strong city is the cauldron which prevents us from being burnt. Therefore a proverb; the city is the cauldron and we are the meat:

 When the flame licks around the pan,

 We are the better from it;

 When the cauldron stands in the fire,

 Our appearance improves by the hour.

That is the manner in which they take ownership of the promises. That is the manner by which they can believe their beautiful names; Pelatiah, Yahweh delivers; Benaiah, the Lord builds; Jaazaniah, the God of Israel hears us; Azzur, Yahweh rushes to our aid.

So they go their way reassured. They are the leaders of the city, political advisers, council of state, remaining together in conference here during the critical hours. The matters of homes for the people, housing crisis, rebuilding, and whatever else, are dealt with on the basis of this proverb.

It says in verse three that they say; it will never come to order to rebuild homes; this probably means that the matter of rebuilding about which the prophets speak is not real, because, good people, there is no even talk of tearing down. Whether the words actually mean this is not completely certain, the text, the phrase, is also told and explained differently. However it is in their thinking; in one way or another they pour their attention on the matter of plans to rebuild Jerusalem, building for the future and what the consequences are of the woes which have already overcome Jerusalem. They then reach their decisions based on the principle that ’the city is the cauldron and we are the meat’. Difficult things may have occurred, we have endured critical times, the flames may be licking the pan, we will only be the better off for it. For Yahweh preserves, the Lord builds, God listens, the Almighty rushes to help.

You can understand that in this way they fend off every fundamental criticism of their leadership.

But from the prophesies of Jeremiah, and from this one of Ezekiel, it becomes completely clear what was the matter.

Jerusalem was full of unrighteousness.

Laws for community relations were trampled upon. The innocent were ambushed and terribly oppressed, idolatry was practiced and vile paganism was introduced.

In the earlier chapters Ezekiel had, through the Spirit of God, observed horrific images of it. He even saw them in the temple at the place of God’s glory.

It was never denied, even for a moment in these visions, that the temple, that Jerusalem is the habitation of God in His glory. On the contrary, Ezekiel saw its presence their as clear and obvious as possible. It was as if God said; ‘it is no mistake when people call upon the fact that I have made my habitation here, for it is certainly true‘. But he also says that therefore it is so unbearable that all these things happen. The temple is My house, Jerusalem is My city, therefore I take it so serious that this unrighteousness takes place there, that sin has established its foothold there.

And then God lets Ezekiel also know that it cannot remain this way.

In chapter 10 he saw how the glory of God rose up from the temple to go elsewhere.

But something noteworthy happens. God makes a stop on His way out. In the next portion, chap.11: 22, it says that the glory of God finally leaves the city, goes from Zion to the Mount of Olives. But first God makes a stop by the East gate of the temple (10: 19). It is as if He ‘hesitates’ to leave the temple. In any case He doesn’t just do it nor does he make haste about it. He remains standing at the temple border.

Now note the correlation of this with the chapter of our text (11). This chapter comes along saying that exactly at that place, the East gate, I, Ezekiel saw the council meeting of Judah’s leaders; I saw Jaazaniah and Pelatiah and their council of twenty five. Everything comes together at the East gate. There is a high level conference of Jerusalem’s college of councilors in the hour of danger, but Yahweh is also there with all the tokens of His glory. It is now the one against the other.

They say: is this not the city of God and the place of His glory? Well, the city is the cauldron and we are the meat, our preservation is guaranteed. ~ Think of those beautiful names ‘Pelatiah’, the Lord rescues, ‘Benaiah’ the Lord builds, ‘Jaazaniah’ the Lord hears.

And now Yahweh makes it known; indeed, here I am, and My glory stands here, here I am, the God of promise and I watch over my city, and pay attention to My house, so therefore I am not just here without further ado, I am on the way, moving to make you understand what is required of that cauldron and of that meat, how I have established My promises for cauldron and meat.

**TWO**

In the second place we hear how God does so. The text puts a close connection between what happens to Pelatiah, when he dies, and what Ezekiel prophesies.

“While I prophesied, Pelatiah the son of Benaiah, died. This death occurred simultaneously with the prophesy and was recognizably linked to the prophesy.

So what did Ezekiel prophecy? To understand this everything in the text is relevant.

But let us be careful, congregation.

On the surface we also often have to do with such occurrences in life and in the history of the church. We have to do with it in a New Testament way. Yet the situations are similar. Whatever applied to Israel in the past now also applies to the church of God which He gathers everywhere. According to Paul’s instruction what applied to the temple then, now applies to the congregation of Christ. She is the Zion of the living God, the temple of the Holy Spirit. The rich promises which were committed formerly to those people and that city and that house now apply to her in a clearer and much more glorious sense. Our confession makes mention of it in clear language when it speaks of the gathering of the church, of true and false church, while admonishing for church faithfulness, and when, with a joyful cry and a sharp warning, it insists that outside of the church there is no salvation.

Does that not appear much like what is going on here?

But the question can arise: doesn’t that look deceptively much like what is said in that proverb, that precept of Jerusalem’s leaders: ‘the city the caldron and we the meat’? Outside the caldron there is no preservation, whatever finds itself outside is consumed in the flames, but inside its walls is safety, rescue, salvation: nothing will happen to us, the flames lick the pan, we are the better because of it.

Moreover, and someone will probably ask this, doesn’t it often go on today as it did in Jerusalem, namely that all kinds of sin occurs in the church, that unrighteousness abides in the temple, that norms are violated and rules trodden underfoot? Isn’t there often sin in the community, injustice and oppression, pagan contamination, manifold importation of many facets of evil?

And when this imagery is also applied to the New Testament isn’t much of such unrighteousness found with the church members and church leaders, at the bottom and at the top?

Shouldn’t we pipe down a bit when we sing about the church and her truth and clarity and hold back the confession that outside of the church there is no salvation?

Shouldn’t we make these strong words somewhat relative and postpone them for now and first work on old and young, on members and leaders, in churches and federation, for some personal repentance, and then to ask again if this confessional language is spoken correctly and is justly maintained?

Must we not first in humiliation, and only then for instance perhaps again organizationally, build on possibilities for the future?

This chapter and text almost appear to pose these kinds questions and give such advice. For doesn’t a man die on account of his calling upon the proverb: the city is the pan and we the meat? In his death Pelatiah’s leadership is belied and what Ezekiel said is proven true. Is not the phrase that in the church is salvation and none outside condemned by this?

But we say: be careful. For is it true that that phrase is judged, and that the call upon such a rule, even the parable, is rejected? The answer must sound to the contrary. It is the other way around. The rule is proven, yes, is taken on the lips of God Himself and set under the foundation of the nation‘s existence, under its future, under its history of decline and preservation, judgment and grace. He does not reject and judge the rule but the misuse of the rule, the false appeal on the confession, the unrighteous application of His promise, the haughty conclusions from His gospel.

Indeed, we read it in verse 7 that God had used the words Himself in an earlier prophesy, the city is the caldron and they are the meat. It was as He said: you are right when you call Jerusalem a means of preserving, an instrument of safety, crockery which prevents frying by the flames, a city which promotes the significance and value of what we put into it. It is true the contents of that city, the inhabitants of Jerusalem are the meat in the pan that is painstakingly preserved. To say it in our language: it is true that the church is a bastion and that there is preservation within her walls and no salvation outside of it. But the matter is, who may say it, and to whom is it applied? Or to say it otherwise: for whom is the city a city, and for whom is the cauldron protection? Is it for people who trample the commandments, give false leadership, who destroy order and still call upon God and His promises? For people like Pelatiah, Jaazaniah, and their council of twenty five?

No, says God, haven’t they violated the rule themselves? In this city they have multiplied their victims. It does not say whether that is through their lechery and oppression, or by their giving them as prize to the armies of Nebuchadnezzar, saying that by their politics they have turned the inhabitants into cannon fodder. Commentators think in different ways about that, it is not easy to determine exactly.

However it may be, in any case says the prophet, it is by the spirit of their politicking, leadership, advice that they have made and are making victims of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, whom they lead. As autocratic leaders they look down upon the nation with a certain disdain.

But Yahweh follows it up. ‘Do you speak of the city as the cauldron and you as the meat? Then you have heard the clock bell strike, but the bell ringer has eluded you. You have rightly heard the ring of the gospel that Jerusalem is the city of preservation, and have properly understood that Jerusalem’s population is precious to God as the costly meat that He purifies without letting it be burnt. But what has eluded you is the ringer and His electing good pleasure and the decrees of the covenant, for you yourself have trampled those decrees, and you have despised my good pleasure.’

You say: the city offers safety ~ but you yourself have proved the opposite by making the people prey to the flames in that city.

You say: the flames do lick at the pan, yet do not scorch inside ~ but you have ignited the fire inside the pan yourself, the fire of your apostasy and injustice and deception rages against the inhabitants of Jerusalem. How many have not fallen already as prizes of lawlessness. And how many will fall latter when Nebuchadnezzar kindles the flames in the city, when his soldiers break through the firebreak? That is what you have done as leaders who mislead and still call upon the promises of God.

Therefore they should not speak about the proverb. God turns it around.

He lets it be known: your proverb is true, but also completely true. The city is the cauldron which protects in time of danger. But that is also the city, Jerusalem as city of God, the city where Ezekiel witnessed His glory, so the city where God’s righteousness lives and where His judgment seats stand, the city where He is king and his kingship is honored. That is His city. Not what you make of it, you make it *your* city, and then the promises no longer apply.

For you do not preserve but Yahweh preserves; ‘Pelatiah’, He makes escape. And for whom does He make escape? The people He gathers, protects, maintains.

Therefore, God says, I will go after your dead. This does not mean to say that all those victims of their politics where faithful believers and would ’enter heaven’; that is not the point here. However it is the same language as we hear from Ezekiel when he talks about the evil shepherds. These oppress the sheep and do well for themselves at their cost. But, says God, I will seek for my sheep and establish One shepherd, David, over them. Yahweh will go after His people. He searches for His sheep, he gathers the miserable ones.

Therefore He did not allow those misleaders to carry on. He will leave the city, his glory departs; the temple is burned, Jerusalem destroyed.

Then the spectators will say: hoorah, Yahweh has lost, His city disappeared, the church could not keep it as the place of protection.

But those who fear God will say: now we see that it was true that He makes His Word stand, He will arise to protect us, He will show mercy over Zion…(Psalm 102).

**THREE**

Yes congregation, that will be said by those who fear the Lord.

But they learn the blessing in a difficult way. What happens in this text will prove that. Because at the same moment Ezekiel prophesies one of the leaders perishes, Pelatiah, member, probably chairman, of the moderama of the high conference at the East gate, falls dead to the earth.

That is the means by which God seals Ezekiel’s prophecy.

He does it.

Ezekiel does not do it, it doesn’t even say that it happened through Ezekiel’s prophecy ~ although it is true in a certain sense. Ezekiel does not do it; on the contrary he is surprised by it himself, he is so shocked by the suddenness of it and that it must be so amongst Jerusalem’s leader. If this happens with the top how will it go with the foot. If God strikes off the head of Jerusalem, how will it be with the people, of the body that remains?

You do not have to trouble yourself with the thought of how Ezekiel could have seen this while he was in Babylon and resided in Jerusalem through a vision. In these visions he did not observe things literally, that is to say in the sense of our daily observation of things exactly as they happen. He breaks through a wall, sees God’s glory, and thus still more. But that does not mean at the same time that what he sees is not true, real, also as we would see it. On the contrary, the factual death of this leader remains in context with Ezekiel’s prophesy and visions, its occurrence is a confirmation of it. A man falls there and that is a sign and seal of the prophesy’s warning; it appears immediately clear that the city is no protective pan for the leaders as sanctified meat; on the contrary, the flames of God’s judgment lick up inside the pan, burning the man who made a false claim on the confession of the church that inside its walls there is salvation. He is called Pelatiah, Yahweh gives deliverance; he is the one God strikes, there no escape.

Is God’s word not true? Have the people of God believed His promise and praised Zion as the place of preservation in vain? This question comes up so frightfully clear that it even scares Ezekiel himself, it disturbs him and he cries: Yahweh, will nothing remain? Will the remnant, the already pathetic remainder, also disappear? Have we misled ourselves with our joyful words, fiery psalms, our jubilant confessional language?

But then Yahweh gives him an answer. We summarize it (verse 14 ff.): no Ezekiel, says God, you have not misled yourself. Those men have misled themselves. Your prophetic leadership was good, there political leadership wrong. You can rightfully call upon those good words, and biblical psalms, but I will shut up their mouths. For they say we will write off those exiles who are already in Babylon, even though they were our brothers, Yahweh has dismissed them, the city and the land is given to us. But I say: those who were driven off I will recall, those exiles will reassemble and again receive from Me this land of Israel and they will receive from me everything they need to know Me; a new spirit and a heart of flesh, they will be a people to me and I will be a God to them. But the walk of those who have pledged their heart to their abominations ~ I will cause these to come down upon their own heads, says Yahweh.

After God had said this a new sign appeared: Ezekiel saw how God’s glory rose up. The hiatus at the East gate was over. He had judged the high conference of Pelatiah’s college of counselors and departed Jerusalem. The Spirit of God brings Ezekiel back among the exiles whom he tells what he experienced, what he saw and heard. He could assure the exiles that it was true what we had believed and confessed in the past, that Jerusalem is the city of protection, Israel is the land of promise, the church is a place of blessing and outside of it there is no salvation. It is true and will always be true, even when Yahweh leaves the city and gives the temple over to destruction and the people go off to Babylon. He does not leave His city, but leaves the city that people have made their own possession, by the misuse of His name. Expressed in our New Testament confessional language and in tune with our dispensation he does not leave the true church, but the one deteriorated to falsehood, where His right is despised and His people are oppressed. He leaves them to build His city, he strikes the shepherds to prove His shepherding; he condemns the misuse of the confessions in order to establish them to the end. This causes pain and difficulty. When seeing how it must go Ezekiel cries ~ and would God’s own heart not lament about what He must do to preserve His people to the end? But so it must be, now that the new David will come, the good shepherd. Thus the name Pelatiah must be preserved, Yahweh bids rescue, and Benaiah, Yahweh builds His city and sets up the Messianic kingdom.

So, congregation, Ezekiel’s pain was not in vain. Whoever takes serious the confession of the true Jerusalem knows the pain of what God does with His people as true Judge.

The apostasy grips him, and the judgment over it makes him cry bitterly.

But he did not lose his faith on account of it; God himself kept it fast. He condemns the misuse but He establishes the confession. He says: it is true and it remains true, even if everything appears to shine against it; Zion is the place of preservation and outside the church there is no salvation. He gathers the dispersed of Israel, He seeks His sheep, He makes His church to the assembling of true believers of Christ who find all their salvation in Him, their preserver. Therefore He judges those evil shepherds, and therefore he separates the goats from the sheep, in order to make His Word stand and make true the psalms of the church.

Whoever confesses this may stand firm in this world. He stands firm with the Word of his God between false churches, vain international religious conferences, between the apostasy and sin which penetrates the church itself all to often.

Ezekiel did not realize himself how strong the Word he preached actually was. He prophesied God’s judgment, he spoke it after Yahweh: Pelatiah, God will remove you and your colleagues from the pot and give you as prey to the sword, you will succumb. He will shame your false reliance on the proverb of the cauldron and the meat. That is what Ezekiel prophesied but it shocked him greatly when he saw before his eyes how true his word was. He must become aware that true prophecy has a much more powerful effect than what a prophet himself could expect.

Congregation, hold to this as church of the new covenant. You have received more and much clearer prophecy than Ezekiel and the church of that time. Moreover the whole congregation is acquainted and skilled to confess and work in that prophetic word through the Holy Spirit. And if it is difficult and you are unable to finish it all, do not then think little of God’s Word and do not make the confession of the church relative. On the contrary, think much of it and confess it emphatically. Preserve the fact that Yahweh preserves, Pelatiah, and builds, Benaiah, and listens, Jaazaniah, and rushes to help, Azariah. Hold to the fact that He gathers His church and that outside of it there is no salvation.

Prophecy and organize according to that Word and conformed to that confession, especially when the flames of God’s judgment begin to lick against the pan, that church, the city that is called Zion.

Resist the misuse, with yourself and those around you in this way . Expose and fight against sin in this way. In the firm belief that the effectiveness of God’s Word is much more, and much fiercer and more glorious than you yourself could apprehend.

Dare to speak great words, but speak them in faith. The city is the cauldron, those who believe are the meat, and the One who ignites the flames will preserve the meat by fire.

**Amen.**

Scripture reading: Ezekiel 11

Sing ~ Psalm 21: 1, 5, 6

 Psalm 119: 44, 45

 Psalm 21: 7

 Psalm 102: 1

 Psalm 102: 6, 11

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