

“A Little Sanctuary”

The Lord’s Help and Protection for Families

Rev. Peter Buss, Jr.

Thus says the Lord GOD: “Although I have cast them far off among the Gentiles, and although I have scattered them among the countries, yet I shall be a little sanctuary for them in the countries where they have gone.” (Ezekiel 11:16)

It’s fairly obvious to most people that the Lord loves families. It’s even safe to say that He loves them A LOT. Why? Because they are the means by which the heavens are populated, they are the setting in which new people are born whom He can care for and lead, they are the arena for so much spiritual growth for all involved.

Given that reality, we would expect the Lord, as a loving and powerful God, to bless families with happiness—to reward those involved in them with a sense of joy and peace because they’re participating in such an important use. And it’s true that He does bless families with happiness whenever possible. I invite you all to consider the happiness you have experienced as you’ve raised your family. Truly, there are so many uplifting, humorous, tender, peaceful, and deeply satisfying memories for all of us.

At the same time, we all recognize that life isn’t always this way. There are times when raising a family is plain hard work. Conflicts arise. Stress invades. The feelings of being overloaded, frustrated, and just tired are all too common.

Have you ever wondered why it’s so hard at times? Have you ever thought to yourself, “This isn’t what I thought it was going to be like!”? Have you ever doubted your ability to be a good parent, or even a passable one? More than likely, the answer to all these questions is “Of course!”

Why does the Lord allow parents to feel so helpless at times, when they’re trying to participate in something that is so important to Him? Why doesn’t it seem like He’s doing much for us in the hard times?

The History of the Israelites

For more clarity on what the Lord will and will not do for us in these difficult times, we can look at the history of the Israelites, specifically at one statement in the book of Ezekiel which offers a powerful picture to help us.

Thus says the Lord God, “Although I have cast them far off among the Gentiles, and although I have scattered them among the countries, yet I shall be a little sanctuary for them in the countries where they have gone” (Ezekiel 11:16).

This prophecy was spoken during a particularly dark time in the history of Israel—a time that symbolizes a stage of unhappiness or emptiness for us. The days of King David and King

Solomon—the golden age of Israel—were long gone. Their wealth had been lost; their cities were in ruin. Not only did the Israelites not have their independence, but they had been uprooted from their homes and carried away to other parts of the expanding empire of Babylon. Some of them had fled to Egypt, others to neighboring countries. Truly the people of Israel had been “scattered,” as the Lord said. A stronger nation had overcome them. Their covenant with Jehovah their God appeared to be over. He had promised to preserve them in the Land of Canaan in exchange for their obedience and worship, but that land was now occupied by their enemies. Certainly the Lord did not *want* the Israelites to suffer as they were, because He doesn’t delight in warfare and punishments. And yet that’s where the Israelites found themselves: feeling punished because of their choices, and attributing those punishments to their God.

Still, if we look closely, the Lord had not given up on the Israelites. He allowed them to feel the consequences of their choices, but He said “I shall be a little sanctuary for them in the countries where they have gone” (Ezekiel 11:16). In effect, He said, “I will still be with them, protecting them and leading them.” He went on to say, just one verse later, “I will gather you from the peoples, assemble you from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel” (Ezekiel 11:17).

Scattered states and the Lord’s Protection During Them

Think for a moment about the image reflected in this passage from Ezekiel. The Israelites are scattered among the nations, no longer living in Canaan itself. This is a picture of the way we feel sometimes—an image of our mental state. Sometimes our lives feel scattered, without any central focus, without a clear sense of identity, without a concrete idea of who we are and where God is leading us. But all of this does not mean that the Lord doesn’t care about our happiness. It doesn’t mean that He is abandoning us to experience all the struggles of life on our own. The truth presented in the image from Ezekiel is that the Lord is preserving and protecting us, even while we’re going through difficult times. He is with us every moment, working with all His Divine means, to provide for us.

Again, turning to the family dynamic, we can see a picture of how the Lord works with us during challenging times. The family I present to you has reached an unpleasant low. We can think of parents who have that nagging realization that their family is in trouble. The husband and wife are both busy with their different agendas. They tag-team as best they can and meet the basic needs of their children (meals, bed-time, homework, rides to events, *etc.*). But they are very aware of bad habits their kids have picked up—whining to get their way and talking back with alarming intensity. The oldest boy plays the part of a commanding general with his younger siblings, and the younger ones engage in a litany of attention-getting behaviors, pushing their parents’ buttons with decided skill. Many of these things may be familiar to you in your family, but hopefully not all of them.

The point is, families can get tangled up in messy stages. There can be a sense that things are more out of control than the parents would like. The high aspirations of having a peaceful, friendly, loving home where communication and charity abound are gone. Instead, the goal is just to keep things together. The family members have slowly slid away from each other—like the gradual decline of the Israelites from the time of Solomon onward, until they reached the

stage of their history when they were scattered among the nations. In many ways, that family is like those Israelites; they're scattered. They each feel hurt, lonely, deeply saddened in their own way. Their beliefs about what a family is or can be, and about the Lord as a God who really cares, have been cast to the outskirts of their minds as hopeless ideals which have been proven false.

It's to these people that the Lord says, "I will be a little sanctuary for them, in the countries where they have gone." He will be working in so many ways to protect them from greater harm, to guard their good qualities, and bring goodness out of this unfortunate state of affairs. He will be with each family member, in their scattered states, leading them back to each other. He will remind them of the love they shared. He will keep alive the hope of better days in the near future. And, if they listen, He will show them some of the things they need to do to get back on track—ways in which each of them can bend, so that their thoughts and choices include the others, instead of focusing only on their own needs. Each of these things is a little sanctuary in their lives—a small place where the Lord is at work, leading them, in His providence, back to a state of happiness.

The Lord provides for us continually. Throughout our lives, in all the challenges we face, He's there, protecting us from greater harm and misery, and leading us onward toward better times. There is a phrase in the Psalms which summarizes these concepts very clearly: "Behold, the eye of the LORD *is* on those who fear Him, on those who hope in His mercy, to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine" (Psalm 33:18-19). The eye of the Lord is a symbol for His providence—for His continual watchfulness over all the events of our lives (see *Apocalypse Explained* 68, 386:18).

This is what the Lord reminds us of by means of the prophet Ezekiel: His providence; His guidance throughout our lives; His efforts to remove us from sadness and the consequences of evil, and lead us toward eternal happiness in heaven. He is always there as a little sanctuary, working to instruct us and help us in whatever challenges we face. All that He asks is that we turn to Him and cooperate with Him as He tries to help us. If we can hold onto that goal during those challenges, the promise is that we will soon find ourselves experiencing once again the blessings of raising a family—blessings that come from the Lord Himself, reminding us so powerfully that He does indeed care deeply about families. As that Psalm concludes,

Our soul waits for the LORD; He is our help and our shield. For our heart shall rejoice in Him, because we have trusted in His holy name. Let Your mercy, O LORD, be upon us, Just as we hope in You (Psalm 33:20-22).

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