

Homiletics Analysis: Ezekiel 20

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

Ezekiel 20 is a sustained historical retrospective delivered in response to a delegation of elders who come to “inquire of the LORD” (v. 1). God refuses their inquiry and instead commands Ezekiel to confront them with Israel’s history — not a history of faithfulness rewarded, but of repeated rebellion resisted only by God’s determination to act “for the sake of His name.” The passage moves through four historical epochs: the original rebellion in Egypt (vv. 5–9), the first generation in the wilderness (vv. 10–17), the second generation in the wilderness (vv. 18–26), and the ongoing rebellion in the land of Canaan (vv. 27–31). Each cycle follows a structural pattern: God reveals Himself and His law; Israel rebels and profanes His name; God withholds judgment “for the sake of His name, that it should not be profaned before the nations.” The chapter concludes with a forward movement — a promise of a second exodus, a wilderness judgment, and a purified remnant restored to covenant worship on God’s holy mountain (vv. 32–44). The final verses (vv. 45–49) append a separate oracle against the Negev/south, which functions as a bridge to Ezekiel 21.

This Text — Intent:

God’s intent through this passage is simultaneously accusatory, clarifying, and ultimately hope-generating — in that order. The accusation: Israel’s rebellion is not a recent problem and cannot be attributed to circumstance; it is the pattern of the entire history of the covenant relationship, running from Egypt to the present moment of exile. The clarification: the reason Israel still exists at all is not their faithfulness or even God’s affection for them in isolation — it is God’s jealousy for His own name and glory before the nations. The hope: that same jealousy for His name will drive a new exodus, a new wilderness discipline, a removal of the rebels, and a genuine covenant restoration for a purified remnant. God is seeking to demolish the elders’ assumption that they have standing to inquire of Him, expose the depth of the covenant failure, and then — precisely because the hope rests on His name and not theirs — open a door to genuine repentance and restoration grounded entirely in grace, not in Israel’s record.

Subject Sentence: Israel’s covenant history is an unbroken record of rebellion met only by God’s grace for His name’s sake.

Primary Claim: God confronts His people with the complete and unvarnished record of their rebellion, not to destroy hope, but to demolish every false ground for it — so that hope, when it is restored, rests entirely on His name, His initiative, and His grace.

Interpretive Evaluation

The “for the sake of My name” refrain: The most exegetically significant issue in Ezekiel 20 is the meaning and function of the recurring phrase “for the sake of My name, that it should not be profaned before the nations” (vv. 9, 14, 22, 44). The question is whether this operates primarily as a theological statement about divine motivation (God acts to protect His own glory) or primarily as a rhetorical device functioning as irony or accusation against Israel. Some interpreters emphasize the missional dimension — God’s restraint in judgment was a witness-strategy, keeping Israel intact as a testimony nation before the nations. This is not wrong, but it is incomplete if it stops there. The Reformed reading presses deeper: this phrase is simultaneously a declaration of God’s sovereign freedom (His mercy is not owed to Israel and is not conditioned on their behavior) and the only possible foundation for a restored hope in verses 32–44. God’s name — His revealed character, His covenant faithfulness, His glory — is what drove both His patience with rebels and will drive their ultimate restoration. This is not merely missional strategy; it is the theological heart of the passage and the only ground on which the gospel moves.

The problem of verse 25 — “statutes that were not good”: Verse 25 presents a genuine interpretive challenge: “Moreover, I gave them statutes that were not good and rules by which they could not have life.” Several interpretive options have been proposed: (1) This refers to God giving Israel over to the corrupt practices of surrounding nations as a judicial hardening — a giving over, not a giving of divine law. (2) This refers specifically to the law functioning as covenant curse for those who break it — not that the law itself is bad, but that its effect on rebellious Israel became death rather than life. (3) Some have read this as referring to child sacrifice regulations (v. 26, “the gift of the firstborn”), suggesting God permitted or even commanded this as judgment — a reading that has rightly been rejected by most Reformed interpreters as incompatible with the broader canon. The best reading follows Daniel Block and others: verse 25 describes God’s judicial act of abandonment — giving Israel over to statutes not good, meaning the corrupt religious practices of the nations that Israel had already chosen. This is the same theological logic as Romans 1:24–28 (“God gave them over”) — divine judgment taking the form of removing restraint and allowing chosen rebellion to run its course. This reading is textually grounded, canonically consistent, and avoids both the literalistic horror of reading God as commanding child sacrifice and the de-historicizing tendency to make verse 25 purely figurative.

The final oracle (vv. 45–49) — inclusion or appendix: The Negev oracle at the end of the chapter is structurally distinct from the main historical retrospective. Some scholars treat it as a separate unit erroneously joined to chapter 20; others treat it as an intentional thematic link. The Masoretic tradition and most canonical readings treat 20:45–21:32 as a

continuous unit about the coming sword. For homiletical purposes, the Negev oracle functions as a hinge: the fire judgment announced symbolically in 20:45–49 is explained and executed in 21:1–7. This does not substantially affect the exposition of chapter 20 as a unit but should be noted as context for any treatment of the chapter’s ending.

Arminian/Wesleyan concerns about divine sovereignty and human responsibility:

Wesleyan interpreters will note the genuine human agency at every rebellion point in the chapter — Israel *chose* to rebel repeatedly. This is correct and important — the passage does not mitigate human responsibility; it indicts it systematically. The Reformed reading does not deny this but insists that the passage’s theological weight falls entirely on the divine side: what sustained Israel was not their occasional faithfulness but God’s non-negotiable commitment to His own name. The elders’ implicit assumption in coming to “inquire of the LORD” — that they have standing, that their relationship with God can simply continue — is demolished by the historical retrospective. This is the kind of demolishing of human confidence that serves, not undermines, genuine grace.

Key Canonical Support

- **Romans 9:14–18** — Paul’s treatment of God’s sovereign mercy (“I will have mercy on whom I have mercy”) provides the New Testament’s clearest parallel to Ezekiel 20’s “for the sake of My name” logic: God’s mercy is grounded in His own sovereign choice, not in human record or worthiness.
- **Deuteronomy 9:4–6** — Moses explicitly warns Israel before entering the land: “Do not say in your heart, ‘It is because of my righteousness that the LORD has brought me in to possess this land’... it is not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart.” This is the Mosaic antecedent to Ezekiel 20’s entire argument — the history of the relationship is not one of earned standing.
- **Psalms 106** — The great confessional psalm of Israel’s history recapitulates essentially the same historical sequence as Ezekiel 20 — rebellion in Egypt, wilderness failure, land corruption — affirming that the perspective of Ezekiel 20 is not a late prophetic revision but the canonical reading of the Exodus-Wilderness-Conquest tradition.
- **Hosea 2:14–16** — God’s promise to “allure her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her” provides a close parallel to Ezekiel 20:35–38 — a second wilderness as the place of judgment-and-renewal, a new covenant engagement replacing the failed one.
- **Hebrews 3:7–4:11** — The author of Hebrews reads the wilderness generation as a paradigmatic warning for the new covenant community: hardness of heart leading to exclusion from rest, the same logic as Ezekiel 20:38 (“I will purge out the rebels

from among you”). The New Testament reading confirms that Ezekiel 20’s wilderness typology is genuinely load-bearing.

Aim: To bring the hearer to a complete reckoning with the bankruptcy of their own standing before God, and then — only then — to the wonder of a grace that rests entirely on His name.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–4	Date formula (seventh year, fifth month, tenth day); elders of Israel come to inquire of the LORD; God refuses the inquiry and commands Ezekiel to confront them with the “abominations of their fathers.”	The refusal to be inquired of is itself a judgment. God is not available for consultation by those who have not repented.
5–9	First epoch — Egypt: God chose Israel, swore to bring them out, revealed Himself, commanded them to abandon idols. Israel rebelled and did not abandon the idols of Egypt. God resolved to pour out His wrath; withheld it “for the sake of My name.”	The rebellion predates Sinai, predates the wilderness — it begins in Egypt itself. This is radical. The people were rebellious before they were delivered.
10–17	Second epoch — First wilderness generation: God brought Israel out, gave them the Sabbath as a sign, gave them His statutes. They rebelled, profaned the Sabbath, did not walk in His statutes. God resolved to destroy them in the wilderness; withheld it “for the sake of My name.” He swore they would not enter	The Sabbath is specifically named as the sign of the covenant relationship — its profanation is covenant rejection, not merely ritual failure.

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	the land.	
18–26	Third epoch — Second wilderness generation: God commanded them not to walk in the statutes of their fathers. They rebelled as their fathers had. God resolved to pour out His wrath; restrained it “for the sake of My name.” Then comes the difficult v. 25 — “I gave them statutes that were not good.”	The second generation repeats the pattern of the first. The judicial abandonment of v. 25 is God’s active judgment taking the form of giving them over.
27–31	Fourth epoch — In the land of Canaan: Israel committed blasphemy (ba’al worship at high places). They continue their fathers’ sins in the present day of the exile. God reiterates His refusal to be inquired of: “As I live, I will not be inquired of by you.”	The historical retrospective lands in the present moment. The elders who came to inquire in v. 1 are told in v. 31 that God will not be inquired of. The circle closes.
32–38	Future judgment and restoration — new exodus: Israel says “we will be like the nations”; God swears this will not happen. He will bring them out into “the wilderness of the peoples” for judgment, as in the Exodus wilderness. The rebels will be purged; only the faithful remnant will return.	The second exodus is both judgment and grace. Not all Israel will be restored — only a refined remnant.
39–44	Promise of covenant restoration: the remnant will worship on God’s holy mountain; God will accept their offerings; they will remember their ways and loathe themselves; they will know that He is the LORD	The restoration is emphatically grounded in God’s name, not Israel’s merit. The remnant’s response is self-loathing, not self-congratulation.

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
45–49	“not because of your good ways.” Separate oracle — fire against the Negev/south: Ezekiel is commanded to prophesy fire against the southern forest. The people say he speaks in parables (riddles).	Bridge to Ezekiel 21. Ezekiel’s own complaint in v. 49 is poignant — he is preaching and his audience says he speaks only in figures.

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–4	The Refused Inquiry
2	5–9	First Rebellion: Egypt — Chosen but Already Corrupt
3	10–17	Second Rebellion: First Wilderness Generation — Given the Law, Rejected the Law
4	18–26	Third Rebellion: Second Wilderness Generation — The Pattern Continues, Judgment Deepens
5	27–31	Fourth Rebellion: In the Land — Present-Day Indictment, Present-Day Refusal
6	32–44	The Second Exodus: Judgment as the Road to Restoration
7	45–49	Oracle Against the South — Hinge to the Coming Sword

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Israel’s covenant history is an unbroken record of rebellion met only by God’s grace for His name’s sake.

Primary Claim: God confronts His people with the complete and unvarnished record of their rebellion, not to destroy hope, but to demolish every false ground for it — so that hope, when it is restored, rests entirely on His name, His initiative, and His grace.

Applications (Five)

1. (Mind/Belief) — Reframe your standing before God entirely. The elders came to “inquire of the LORD” as though the relationship were intact and their access were simply available. God’s refusal is a theological statement before it is a relational one: you cannot approach God on the assumption that your history with Him is good enough. Ezekiel 20 lays out why that assumption is always false — not just for ancient Israel, but for anyone who has been given the law of God, profaned it, and now comes back to ask for guidance without reckoning with the pattern. The application for the believer is not despair but reckoning: come to God through the only ground He has provided — the name of Christ, not the record of your faithfulness.

2. (Affections/Worship) — Let the historical pattern grieve you, not merely instruct you. God does not give Ezekiel this history to make Israel smarter about their past; He gives it to produce grief. Verse 43 names the emotional response of the restored remnant: “you will loathe yourselves for all the evils that you have committed.” This self-loathing is not the opposite of joy — it is the precondition for it. The person who has genuinely seen themselves in the pattern of Ezekiel 20 — chosen, given, rebelling, given over — grieves not over consequences but over the nature of what they have done toward a holy God. Let this chapter produce that grief. Do not skip past the history to get to the restoration verses.

3. (Mind/Belief) — Anchor your hope in God’s name, not in your trajectory. Four times in this chapter, the only reason Israel still exists is that God acted “for the sake of My name.” This is not a comfortable truth — it means Israel’s survival is not evidence of their goodness, and the believer’s perseverance is not evidence of their faithfulness. It is evidence of His. The application is a complete reorientation of where hope is tethered. When you survey your own pattern of covenant failure — the way you have known the right thing and repeatedly not done it, the way the same idol keeps reasserting itself — the question is not “is there anything in me that justifies God’s continuing patience?” The answer to that question is always no. The question is “is God’s name still at stake in my sanctification?” And the answer to that question is always yes.

4. (Will/Behavior) — Stop treating access to God as unconditional while living in unaddressed rebellion. The elders came to inquire while the abominations of verse 31 were still present and unrepented. God’s refusal is not arbitrary — it is a structural reality: you cannot pursue divine guidance while simultaneously choosing the practices that mark rejection of His lordship. The behavioral application is pointed: identify the area where you are, like the elders, seeking God’s input on the next decision while a prior rebellion has not been renounced. The idols still present make the inquiry hollow. Repentance is not the condition for God’s love — it is the condition for genuine access to His counsel.

5. (Affections/Worship) — Worship the God who acts for His name’s sake, which is the only reason you are still here. The restored remnant in verses 40–44 does not worship God because they have finally gotten things right. They worship Him knowing He has brought them back “not because of your good ways or your corrupt deeds, O house of Israel” (v. 44). This is the purest form of grace-worship — praise from people who know they have no standing and whose only ground is the self-moved faithfulness of God. The application is a recalibration of worship: the person who thinks their standing with God is partly their own achievement worships out of a mixed motive; the person who has genuinely understood Ezekiel 20 worships out of sheer astonishment that God has acted for His own name’s sake, and has included them in that name’s vindication.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Ezekiel 20 is one of the most theologically concentrated passages in the Old Testament on the relationship between divine sovereignty, human rebellion, and gracious restoration. It teaches unambiguously that God’s covenant faithfulness is not contingent on Israel’s covenant performance — not at any point in the history, and not at the end. The “for the sake of My name” refrain is a full doctrinal statement: God’s mercy is grounded in His own character, not in human merit, human response, or human potential. The passage also teaches that divine judgment can take the form of giving people over to the consequences of their own choices (v. 25–26), which is a pattern confirmed across both Testaments. Finally, Ezekiel 20 teaches that genuine restoration requires a genuine reckoning — God does not restore the whole nation but purges the rebels and restores a remnant, which anticipates the New Testament’s consistent teaching that covenant membership is not ethnic or nominal but regenerate and genuine.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Ezekiel 20 functions as one of the Old Testament’s most direct scriptural warrants for the Reformed understanding of grace as unconditional and sovereign. The “for the sake of My name” refrain is the covenantal equivalent of *sola gratia* — Israel is not sustained because they deserve to be, but because God has bound His own glory to their existence and their restoration. This makes the gospel visible in unexpected form: the ground of the covenant relationship is God’s sovereign decision to act for His own name’s sake, which is precisely what makes that relationship secure. The passage also anticipates the Calvinist account of perseverance: the covenant community persists not because of the quality of its members but because God will not allow His name to be finally profaned before the nations. The remnant theology of verses 37–38 — a purging that preserves only those who enter under the bond of the covenant — maps

directly onto the Reformed distinction between the visible and invisible church, and anticipates Christ's own winnowing work described in Matthew 3:12 and John 15.

Main Takeaway

Your history with God does not commend you to Him — and that is the best possible news, because it means His commitment to you is not based on your record. He has acted through four millennia of Israel's failure not because of anything in them but because of everything in His own name. That same name is your only ground. Stop trying to rebuild a case for your standing. Come empty, come indicted by the same history Ezekiel recites, and find that the God who refused to be inquired of by the self-justified is the same God who promises to receive the remnant who loathe themselves and worship Him for no other reason than that He is faithful when they are not.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Using this passage as a history lecture rather than a mirror.** The structure of Ezekiel 20 invites the teacher to spend all the time on the historical content — what happened in Egypt, what happened in the wilderness — without pressing the question God is pressing: *this is your pattern too*. The elders in the room are the audience, not ancient Israel, and the preacher's audience is the elders in the room. The historical retrospective is a diagnostic tool. If the sermon ends with "Israel really did fail repeatedly," it has not yet done what God commissioned it to do.
- **Preaching the "for the sake of My name" refrain only as missional strategy.** It is common to read this phrase as primarily about God's concern for His witness among the nations — He kept Israel alive so the nations would see His faithfulness. This is present in the text but it is not the deepest level. The deeper level is that God's commitment to His own name is the only sustainable ground for grace — it removes it entirely from the domain of human merit. Preachers who stop at the missional level miss the doctrinal load the phrase is carrying.
- **Skipping verse 25 or handling it with a vague wave.** "Statutes that were not good" is difficult and cannot be passed over. If the preacher does not explain it, the congregation is left with the impression that God gave Israel bad laws, which is a serious misreading. The judicial abandonment reading must be explained clearly, with the Romans 1 parallel providing New Testament confirmation: God's giving-over is itself a judgment, not an error or a cruelty.
- **Preaching the restoration section (vv. 32–44) without the preceding indictment.** There is a strong pastoral temptation to move quickly to the hopeful material. Resist it. The restoration in Ezekiel 20 is structurally dependent on the indictment — the

second exodus is meaningful only for people who understand why the first exodus did not achieve what God intended. The remnant's self-loathing in verse 43 is not incidental to the restoration; it is the affective marker that the grace has actually landed. A congregation that has not sat under the full weight of the historical retrospective will receive the promise of restoration as cheap grace.

- **Treating the remnant promise as unconditional national restoration.** Verses 37–38 are clear: “I will make you pass under the rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant. I will purge out the rebels from among you.” This is not a promise that all Israel will be restored — it is a promise that God will create a purified remnant through judgment. Dispensational readings that treat Ezekiel 20 as a straightforward promise of national Israel's future restoration need to reckon seriously with the purging language. The promise is real and is ultimately fulfilled — but its fulfillment requires the removal of those who refuse the covenant, which is the logic of the New Covenant church, not a restored ethnic nation.
- **Missing Ezekiel's own moment in verse 49.** The chapter ends with Ezekiel's complaint: “Ah, Lord GOD! They are saying of me, ‘Is he not a speaker of parables?’” This is one of the most humanly poignant moments in the book. Ezekiel has preached with clarity, and his audience has dismissed the message as merely figurative. This is a preaching pitfall warning embedded *in the text itself*: the clear proclamation of God's word will sometimes be received as abstract or irrelevant. Do not omit it. It is the passage's own reflection on the difficulty of the preaching task — and it ends with Ezekiel simply obeying despite the reception.