

A story is told about Muhammad Ali of a particular time he was flying on an airplane.

Muhammad Ali, by the way, lives in Berrien Springs, Michigan—home of Andrews University.

He has a home there that used to be a getaway for Al Capone. Capone would drive his boat from Chicago, across Lake Michigan, go up the St. Joe River and hide out there quite often. So Ali bought his house.

What was frustrating for me was that during my six years at Andrews, I never once saw Muhammad Ali. I would always have friends tell me, “**Yeah, we saw Ali at the gas station the other day. We took a picture with him.**” Another friend, before I got to Andrews, was standing on the curb at the airport in South Bend, waiting for a ride back to Berrien Springs, when a car rolled up next to him, the window went down, and Muhammad Ali sticks his head out and asks, “**Do you need a ride?**” He drove the 30 minutes back to Berrien Springs with the guy!

Maybe this story took place right before that, who knows? It was a time he was flying on an airplane. And, though the story may be apocryphal, it seems to fit the attitude that he possesses, nonetheless.

Apparently he was flying the friendly skies one day on a commercial airplane when the plane started experiencing some turbulence. I don't know about you, but this can be quite alarming for me sometimes when I'm flying. I hate to feel that sudden drop that sometimes occurs when the skies are rough. Of course, as soon as the turbulence hit the plane, the captain flashed the seat belt sign on, signaling that everyone should sit down and buckle up.

Well, Ali cooperated with the first part of the equation, but he didn't feel it necessary to follow through with the second—buckling his seat belt. Unfortunately, one of the flight attendants, as she was walking by, noticed that the famous boxer had not fastened his seat belt, and she quickly informed him that he would have to do so. But Ali wouldn't hear of it. He was not going to fasten his seat belt. The woman, not intimidated by the large man and knowing full well who he was, kept insisting that he do so. Belligerent, Ali finally blurted out, “**Superman don't need no seatbelt.**” Without missing a beat, the flight attendant returned, “**And Superman don't need no airplane, either.**”

Muhammad Ali certainly had a high opinion of himself, didn't he? It was he who infamously declared himself to be “**the Greatest.**” He wasn't going to wear no seatbelt. He was above that. Yet a little flight attendant, probably a quarter of his size, sure helped him out with a little perspective, didn't she? She caused Superman's airplane to come crashing down.

I would like to invite you to open your Bibles to the book of Ezekiel this morning. It's been a few weeks since I've been with you, and I'm sure you've missed this crazy prophet, so let's jump right back into the book. The last time I met with you on Sabbath morning we actually jumped ahead to make our sermon a little more “**Easter Friendly,**” so we're going to take a few steps back and return to another chapter.

We are going to turn to **Ezekiel 28** and as we turn there, I am going to ask you a very important question. It's a very tricky question. You'll have to buckle up for it. In fact, you'll have to buckle up for this whole sermon. We're going to cover a lot of ground that is pretty heavy stuff. I don't want you to get bored on me, okay? You're going to have to use your brain this morning—which

is something I try to encourage every week. I kind of take after my dad, who tells his congregations to not “**leave their brains**” in the parking lot when they come into church. So I hope you didn’t leave your brain in the parking lot!

But I am going to ask you a question, to see if you can identify what this idea is, all right? Are you ready for it? It’s a word that is used in literature—mostly in Hebrew literature, so I’m not sure how many of you have heard of it. It’s a very important word, though. All right. Are you ready for it? How many of you know what a **chiasm** is? A what? Raise your hand if you know what this word means.

I’m sure you’re sitting there, thinking, “**A Chi-what? What does that have to do with anything? How does that word help me at all?**” Well, it is an important word because it helps us understand the Bible better—which helps us out a lot. Quite simply, a **chiasm is a literary device that is often used in the Hebrew writing**. The easiest way to explain a chiasm is to draw a diagram. And, if you will turn your attention to this board, I’ll show you what I mean by this.

You see, in today’s times, if we were going to write a paper, we would make each point step-by-step, wouldn’t we? In a chiasm, though, you make all of your points in one section, and then you make the same points as a mirror image in the next section. Thus, it kind of looks like a mountain. Most important, though, is the very top of the chiasm. Instead of leaving your most important point for the end, which we often do in modern times, in a chiasm you would put your most important point in the very middle—or at the “top” of the mountain.

Have I lost you yet? I have to admit that when I was an undergraduate Theology student, I thought this chiasm thing was a bunch of baloney. I hated chiasms. I thought it was just a figment of people's imaginations and they were trying to make up stuff to find the "most important point" of a particular piece of literature. I can remember my sophomore year at Andrews, I took a class on the Old Testament prophets, and this was one of my frustrations. There was supposedly so many chiasms in the prophets—many of which I didn't buy into—and I hated that. It all culminated in my final exam for the course, where I was so overwhelmed with all the information, that I hardly studied, and I ended up writing on my exam to my teacher, "Please have mercy on me." I don't remember if he did or not.

But when I got to the seminary, I found a joy in chiasms when I realized that this was simply the way the Old Testament writers often wrote. It wasn't anything profound. Just as we emphasize structure in the ways we write today—you know, you have your main headings, with your subheadings, etc.—they also used chiasms as one of their main ways to write. It was just the way they wrote.

So why am I making such a big deal about chiasms? Simple: scholars recognize that the book of Ezekiel is one of the most structurally sound books in all of the Old Testament.¹ It is abundantly clear that the author and editors of the book did a very good job of making the book structurally coherent. And the structure that was employed was a chiasm. And where does the author place his most important point in a chiasm? In the middle—or at the top of the mountain. And where do you suppose that the center of Ezekiel's chiasm is? **In Ezekiel 28, of course!**

¹ Cf. Richard M. Davidson, "The Chiastic Literary Structure of the Book of Ezekiel," in *To Understand the Scriptures: Essays in Honor of William H. Shea* (ed. David Merling; Berrien Springs, Mich.: Institute of Archaeology, Siegfried H. Horn Archaeological Museum, Andrews University, 1997), 71.

So, the very center of Ezekiel’s message lies here in this chapter. This is the very heart of Ezekiel’s message. It would be well for us to pay close attention to this chapter, then. It has great relevance to us.

So let’s take a look at this passage. I hope you will see the relevance of pointing out that this passage is the center of the chiasm by the time I’m done here. Like I said, knowing what a chiasm is will not make you feel better when your dog dies, or when you’ve had a tough week at work. Knowing a little bit about chiasms, though, helps a person understand the most important message that God has for us through the pen of His prophets. It helps us see the heart of God’s burden for us.

We’re going to start in **verse 11**. By the way, it only seems appropriate that the very center of Ezekiel’s message—the “mountaintop” of his book—is also very complicated. Scholars are a little perplexed by this chapter, saying that it is the most confusing chapter in the whole book. I think it will be easy to understand why they are confused when we get into it, so without further ado, let’s read it.

God comes to Ezekiel and tells him to bring a “**lamentation against the King of Tyre.**” Already we’re a bit confused because, previously, the addressee of the chapter was the “**Prince of Tyre**” and now God calls him the “**king of Tyre.**” This city of Tyre, by the way, was introduced in **chapter 26**, where God brings a lamentation against the whole city. It was a city on the seacoast that was known for its merchants. They had a very productive mercantile industry, but God

spends **three chapters** denouncing the city in **Ezekiel**—the culmination of which we find in our scripture today. The city’s wretchedness was spear-headed by its king, and so God says to Ezekiel, “**Son of man, take up a lamentation for the king of Tyre.**”

And then God utilizes some rather puzzling words to describe this king of Tyre. He, first of all, says that he had the “**seal of perfection**” and he was “**full of wisdom and perfect in beauty.**”

And then He claims that this king was in Eden, the Garden of God, and that He was covered with 9 precious jewels—all of which are only found in one other place in the Bible.

And then he claims that this king was an anointed “**covering Cherub**” on the “**Holy Mountain of God, who walked back and forth in the midst of the fiery stones.**” It may not sound all that confusing to you—or maybe it does—but God is using some rather Hebraic imagery to describe a very un-Hebraic king.

And thus, the confusion sets in for many scholars. What God is doing here would be the **equivalent of describing George W. Bush as the one who sits on the thrown in Buckingham Palace.** Any sane person knows that George W. Bush doesn’t really sit on Buckingham Palace’s thrown. He’s out of place there! (Many think that he’s out of place being in the White House, too, I suppose, but that is another story!)

As I alluded to a second ago, the only place in the whole Old Testament where these “**precious stones**” are mentioned is—where? Does anyone know where? All nine of these stones are on the breastplate of the High Priest as He ministered in the sanctuary. Of course, as it describes these

stones in the book of **Exodus**, we notice that one whole row is missing from the description in Ezekiel. The Septuagint—or Greek version of this passage in Ezekiel—adds those stones, though, assuming that the row was simply neglected as an oversight.

Similarly, there is only four other places in the whole Old Testament that talk about a “Cherub” that covers anything, and you know what that is in reference to, don’t you? These four passages—and I will give them to you if you want to check it out for yourself—speak of the Cherubim that cover the mercy seat on the Ark of the Covenant in the Most Holy Place of the sanctuary. Those passages, by the way, are **Exodus 25:20; 37:9; 1 Kings 8:7; and 1 Chronicles 28:18.**

Furthermore, this “**holy mountain of God**” can only refer to one thing as well. That refers to the God’s house in His city, which was often described as being the mountain of God.²

So it seems pretty apparent that this pagan, godless king of Tyre that God is directing this message to has a lot of godly, Hebraic attributes. What’s up with that? The description is quite flattering, of course. He is described as being “**blameless and beautiful.**” What a flattering description.

But those attributes were also his downfall. Reading on in **verse 16** we see that this beauty and wisdom also got to the king’s head. He started to feel pretty good about himself. **Verse 17** literally says that his “**heart was lifted up.**” Muhammad Ali’s Superman Syndrome also got to the king of Tyre’s head. He struggled with that thing disease called pride, as so many of us do.

² Cf. Isaiah 2:3; Revelation 21:10.

Nevermind being “**Bold and Beautiful**,” what is even worse is when someone is “**Blameless and Beautiful**”—which is precisely what caused the crashing of the king’s airplane.

And what about you?

Do you know what it is like to be blameless and beautiful? Perhaps you have been blessed with only one of those attributes—or maybe you’ve been blessed with neither!

I’m sure how I have told this story to you many times before, but I am reminded of a story that H. M. S. Richards, Sr., used to tell about a man who talked with him one Sabbath at potluck. The man came up to Richards and said, “**Elder Richards, I want you to know that I have not sinned in fourteen years!**” Impressed with the man’s great accomplishment, Richards replied, “**Congratulations! You must be very proud!**” Without missing a beat, the man responded, “**Yes, I am.**”

And thus was his downfall, wasn’t it? We have the tendency to get very proud of our blamelessness and beauty, forgetting that **the presence of pride necessarily means the absence of blamelessness.**

But that’s not all of the King’s challenges. There is something in **verse 16** that we do not get in our English translations, mainly because the Hebrew word that is being translated is such an elusive term. Most, if not all, versions of this passage say that “**By the abundance of your**

trading. . .” Quite simply, why would a king who has been described as a “**Covering Cherub**” be someone who is “**trading**”? The Hebrew word that is translated here as “**trading**” actually has a primary meaning that is quite different. This is a very fascinating and you’ll want to pay close attention to this. The verbal form of this word, actually, literally means, to “**go about, from one to another (for trade or gossip).**”³ Did you catch that? One of the main problems with the king of Tyre was that he was going around, from person to person, spreading gossip. In a word, he was a slanderer.

I wish I was making this up. I am very hesitant to address this topic in detail right now, and I am not going to say a lot. But this past week, someone called me and was concerned about some of the “**gossip**” that was going around this church. You, no doubt, know a lot of the talk that has been going on. I don’t have to share any details. The person who called me, though, wondered if we should meet as a church, to remind everyone that we shouldn’t be going around from person to person, spreading gossip. After some prayer and council, I decided it probably wouldn’t be the best idea to take such a course of action. We all know that gossiping is wrong already, anyway, don’t we?

But wouldn’t you know it, I start preparing for this very sermon a few days ago from a portion of scripture that I decided to preach on two months ago, and this issue of gossiping and slandering is at the very heart of Ezekiel’s message this morning. In fact, it’s at the very heart of Ezekiel’s message, period. This king of Tyre, whoever he was, was a slanderer. That was his MO. Can you picture him there? He goes around from person to person, “**Hey, did you hear about so-and-so?**

³ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, eds., *The New Brown, Driver, and Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1981), 940.

I hear he did this.” And then he goes to the next person, **“Did you know that so-and-so has this problem?”** And on and on it goes. And what was the result of the king’s gossiping? Look at the very next line in **verse 16: “By the abundance of your gossiping and slandering, you became filled with violence within.”** Do you know what the word for **“violence”** is? It’s the word *hamas*. Have you ever heard that word before?

If you pay attention at all to current events, you know that the organization *Hamas* is a Palestinian resistance movement that has single-handedly wreaked more havoc in Palestine than any other Arabic organization. The word *hamas* is the same word in Arabic and Hebrew both. It means **“violence.”** The king’s slandering and gossiping filled him with violence.

That’s what tearing down other people leads to, friends. When we go behind their backs and spread rumors, we are committing violence against them. It was the king’s downfall, and it can be ours as well.

I had no intention of talking about this at all. Believe me. This is something that I really don’t enjoy preaching about. But, as I was sharing with someone the other day, the job of the preacher is to allow the text to take him where it leads. We don’t take a text wherever we want to go. We allow it to take us where it—through the Holy Spirit—wants to go.

And just who was this king? Who was this King of Tyre that seemed to be a **“Covering Cherub”** who dwelt on the **“holy mountain of God,”** who eventually became too proud and started going from person to person, spreading gossip and slander? I’m sure you are already

ahead of me. The reason that scholars have had such a hard time identifying this king is because they are trying to limit him to an earthly sphere. But this king is none other than Lucifer himself. He was that created being who was made perfect in the very beginning. His dwelling place was the Temple of God where he had daily communion with the Almighty. He **“walked to and fro”** among the **“fiery stones,”** which, I believe, were the Ten Commandments.⁴ (There is only two places in the whole Old Testament that use the words **“mountain,” “fire,” “stones,”** and **“midst”** in the same verse, and they describe God’s giving of the Ten Commandments.)

Yes, Lucifer was blameless and beautiful but that was also his downfall. And in his pride, he began going around from angel to angel, spreading rumors about God. Ellen White describes this very scene in *Patriarchs and Prophets*. For years, people have just assumed that this was something she saw in vision—or a figment of her imagination—but this very passage attests to the fact that that is what Lucifer did. He went from person to person, saying, **“Hey, did you hear about God? Did you know that He thinks this?”** Pretty soon, his heart—as well as a third of the angels’ hearts—was filled with violence; a violence that not only forfeited his right to heaven when he was cast out, but a violence that ultimately sent Jesus to the cross.

Thus, the pride and slandering that finds its way into our hearts began in the heart of Lucifer. Do you realize that, friends? When we take part in this act of going from person to person, spreading gossip and slander, we are resorting to the tactics of Satan. The only reason we do this is because of our own pride—a pride that mirrors that of Lucifer’s. We want to make ourselves look good, so we bring another person down. But when we do so, we become filled with violence—**hamas**—within. The more we talk about that other person, the more upset we become. We call

⁴ Cf. Deuteronomy 5:22; 9:10.

up one person after the other, trying to find someone who is sympathetic to our gossip. And the more we spread that gossip, the more violence we are carrying out against that person, and the more our hearts become filled with hatred and violence as well.

Listen, I have to be honest with you: I am not faultless when it comes to these issues. I have violence within my heart as well—through the pride of my accomplishments; my heart has been lifted up because of my wisdom; and I have slandered someone else as well. I am not innocent of these crimes.

And it is that pride, slandering, and violence that brought Christ to His cross. It was this Lucifer, the one who shows his ugly head at the very mountaintop of Ezekiel's book, that drove Jesus to Calvary. And by so mirroring His actions, we are guilty of doing the same.

“But pastor,” you say, **“Where is the good news in this sermon?”** You ask a good question! Every sermon should have a bit of Good News in it. Every sermon should feature the Gospel and provide people with a bit of hope. As I prepared for this sermon and looked for the Gospel in Ezekiel 28, I have been scratching my head. A good homiletics teacher will tell you to look for the Gospel in every text. After all, when Jesus said that **“these are they which testify of me,”** He was referring to the whole Old Testament, wasn't He—including Ezekiel 28? Where is Jesus in this passage? Where is Jesus in a sermon that talks about Lucifer's proud and slanderous actions?

But maybe that's just it. Maybe the Gospel in the text is the fact that God has mercifully shown us where pride and slandering take us. We can look at Lucifer's existence and understand the natural pathway of the heart. It leads to violence; violence ultimately committed against the Son of God.

And isn't that Good News in itself? Jesus went to the cross because of our pride and slandering. He experienced the full weight of Calvary so as to pay the price for us. Not only to pay the price for us, of course, but also to rid us of that pride and slandering. That's what Jesus is trying to work out of our characters right now, and He shows us the story of Lucifer so we can realize how painful these vices are to Him.

The year is 1964 and the setting is the 1964 winter Olympics in Innsbruck, Austria. The leader board and time-keeping devices look a little different way back then, but the excitement is the same. The two-man Italian bobsled team, led by **Eugenio Monti** has just completed its final run and that Italian team is solidly in the lead. There is only one team—the **British one led by Tony Nash**—that seems to have any chance of beating the Italians. And just now, that team is getting into place, preparing to sprint and hop and swoosh their way down their final run.

As they position the bobsled they make the discovery—a critical bolt on their bobsled has snapped. Without it, they dare not make the run. Down at the bottom of the hill, Italian bobsled captain Eugenio Monti gets the news. And he might have celebrated: “**Their bobsled is broken! They can't make the run! We're the winners!**”

But not Eugenio Monti.

You see, Eugenio Monti is a sportsman—the real thing. He knows that the two bobsleds are built the same. He bends down, removes the bolt from his own bobsled and sends it up to the top of the hill.

Nash fixes the British sled and comes hurtling down the course to set a record and win the gold medal. Eugenio Monti's accomplishment, though, must surely be judged to win the day. A touch of real class. Nobility of spirit. Respect for the opposition.

Monti becomes the very first recipient of what has become in Europe a highly celebrated honor: **The Pierre de Coubertin International Fair Play Trophy**. Named for the founder of the modern Olympic Games, it has been awarded annually for more than 40 years to people in sports who have demonstrated nobility of spirit. Eugenio Monti is the first.⁵

And what about us, friends? In the stillness of our experience, when someone else is on the ropes, in our proud and self-seeking, do we put their interests above our own? Or do we kick the other person while they're down, slandering them and celebrating our victories as an outgrowth of our pride?

And what was Jesus' response when this world was down-and-out; when we were on the ropes?

In His love and humility He did not kick us while we were down. He didn't go to the rest of the

⁵ Due to time constraints in writing this sermon, this story was taken directly, word-for-word, from a sermon delivered by John McVay at the *Questions on Doctrine* 50th Anniversary Conference, held at Andrews University, October 24-27, 2007.

angelic beings and say, “**Hey, did you hear what so-and-so did again!**” He didn’t look at us, full of pride, and say, “**That person needs to come to their senses.**” No! Jesus gave us the bolt off His bobsled and went to Calvary, paying the ultimate price for our well-being. He could have very easily said that He was going to protect His own interests—He need to look out for Himself. But instead, He put our interests above His own, refused to give way to pride and self-preservation and slander, and experienced the cross in our place.

So what do you say to that kind of love, friends? We can look to the devil and choose to follow His violent ways, or we can look to the cross, realizing that the devil’s violence drove Jesus to that cross—a cross that has picked us up and given all of us the Gold Medal in the Olympics of life.

What is your response to that kind of humility?