

REPENT AND LIVE!

Ezekiel 18:1-32

Key Verse: 31-32 “Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, people of Israel? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live!”

Today we're going to begin a three part study of some highlights from the book of Ezekiel. Why Ezekiel? Ezekiel is alluded to heavily throughout Revelation, because the purpose of the book of Ezekiel was to help God's people understand and respond to God's judgment. In Revelation 16 we learned that all judgment is from God alone, and there were two reactions: God's people say “just and true are your judgments” (Rev 16:5-7) and those belonging to the devil curse God and refuse to repent (16:9,11,21). It seems God has appointed us to study Revelation at this time. How are we responding to God's judgment on the world? The simple truth is that sickness only exists in the world as a result of sin—my sin. In Ezekiel 18, God convicts his people to stop blaming others, take responsibility for their sin and respond correctly. Ezekiel gives us a unique glimpse into God's heart and purpose in bringing judgment. It is such a relevant study for us today.

According to 1:1-2 Ezekiel was a priest, the son of Buzi, and was among the exiles in Babylon. Because they had broken their marriage covenant with God and forgotten his love and grace, God brought up Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon against them who carried into exile some 10,000 plus of the nobility and middle class first in 605BC—which we can read about in Daniel—and the full exile in 597 BC which included Ezekiel and his wife. In the fifth year of the exile, at the age of 30 he was called to be a prophet to the exiles till he was 50 (40:1)—the typical ages of service of a priest. God called him to be a watchman. In military terms, according to 33:1-6, a watchman's job was to watch carefully and sound the trumpet when danger was coming or the blood of those killed would be on his head. So Ezekiel was called to sound the desperate trumpet blast so the Israelites may flee from the impending judgment (see chapters 4-12). 2 Chronicles tells us in 586 BC, “[God] brought up against them the king of Babylonians, who killed their young men with the sword in the sanctuary, and did not spare young men or young women, the elderly or the infirm...He carried to Babylon all the articles from the temple of God...They set fire to God's temple and broke down the wall of Jerusalem; they burned all the palaces and destroyed everything of value there. He carried into exile to Babylon the remnant, who escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him” (2 Ch 36:17-20). The total number of exiles was about 20,000. Archeological

evidence puts the population of Judah before exile at around 75,000¹ meaning that possibly some 55,000 people were killed (12:15-16). God symbolized this tragedy through the sudden death of Ezekiel's wife "the delight of his eyes" (24:16-25). The glory of the Lord departed from Judah (11:23). It was cataclysmic, unthinkable, unimaginable judgment. The people had some idea that this time of captivity would end, things would go back to normal, they would endure and with this hope they were not facing the reality of what was happening. But God's message was "no its going to get much, much worse"—does this sound relevant? Yet, finally Ezekiel ends with the glimmer of hope after judgment. Though they were like dry bones they would live again (37), though their temple was destroyed the new temple would come down from heaven and God would dwell there with them forever (40-48). And so Ezekiel really is the image for our times and our study of the final chapters of Revelation.

First, God's standard of judgment (1-20)

As we begin chapter 18, the flow of the book has been Ezekiel's calling in 1-3, Ezekiel illustrating the destruction of Jerusalem in chapters 4-12, the assurance that it would certainly happen in chapters 13-14, and 3 parables about their unfaithfulness in chapters 15-17. In chapter 18 we hear the first response from the people to God's judgment. Did they repent and ask God's forgiveness? They quoted a popular proverb of their day, "The parents eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." Another way of saying it would be "The parents eat sour grapes and the children's lips pucker." In other words, "Our **parents** did evil but **we** are suffering the consequences." Not only were the exiles saying it, but so were the people back in Jerusalem, as we see in Jeremiah 31:29. Well what about that, was it true? Yes, in one sense it was true. The accumulated guilt of Judah's unfaithfulness finally came down on that generation (2 Ki 23:3-4) much like Jesus said that his generation would be held accountable for the "blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world" (Lk 11:50). It's foreign to our modern individualism but the context of the book of Ezekiel is that God deals with generations and nations as a whole. They got that, they agreed their ancestors were wicked, but made the excuse that God was punishing them for something they didn't do. Except there's 2 problems with what they were saying.

One is that they were making a nasty comment about the character of God: that he is an erratic, vengeful deity who in his wild rage just doles out judgment with no concern for who gets hurt. Like a random retaliatory missile strike killing innocent civilians—revenge with no concern for the collateral damage. God speaks very clearly to this, "As

¹ Finkelstein, Israel; Silberman, Neil Asher (2001). *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts*. Simon and Schuster.

surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel. For everyone belongs to me, the parent as well as the child—both alike belong to me” (3-4a). It is obvious from their history that God cares for people one by one. When God says, “each life belongs to me” (NIV 1984) he is saying that each person is his possession and he will not randomly destroy his possessions because we are his.

The second problem with what they were saying is that they weren’t owning up their own sin. And this we’re going to see is the central issue of this entire passage and maybe of the whole book. God makes it clear how he judges, “The one who sins is the one who will die” (4b). This is the foundation of the gospel. We must admit that we are sinners. I am a sinner and I deserve to die for my sin. They thought they were only suffering for what their fathers did but they were not willing to admit that **they** were doing the very same things. In every instance where God judged the nation communally, he only did so if that current generation was doing the same thing. If the next generation repented, he stalled his judgement. God illustrates his straightforward, objective principle of judgment in 3 examples. Each example represents a generation and how God judges them.

The first is a righteous man who does what is just and right (5). There is a close connection between what he does and the 10 commandments. He doesn’t worship idols (Ex 20:3-4), he doesn’t commit adultery (Ex 20:14) but even more he doesn’t approach his wife during her period (Lev 18:19) because that would be degrading and humiliating to her and he knows that as a man he is called to be a protector of women not use them for his own pleasure. He doesn’t oppress those poorer than him by stealing (Ex 20:15) their collateral when he loans them money but he returns it (Dt 24:12-13). He doesn’t commit violent robbery (Ex 20:13) but gives food to the hungry and provides clothing for the naked (Dt 15:7). He doesn’t lend to them—meaning the hungry and naked, the poor—at interest (Dt:23:19-20) or take a profit from them (Ex 20:17), unlike the many payday and car title loan centers that prey on the poor and desperate in *our* society. He judges fairly between two parties telling the truth in court cases (Ex 20:16)—can you even imagine that?! Is he some kind of super-saint with unattainable holiness? No, it seems pretty reasonable for a believer, he doesn’t sleep around, oppress the poor, murder or lie in court, simply put “He follows my decrees and faithfully keeps my laws”—he lives according to the Bible (9a). Did you notice that all his righteous deeds toward others all have to do with how he treats the weak and poor? Right actions can be faked, but how we treat those that we don’t have to treat well—those who will give us no benefit, the weak and poor—reveals our true character. The book of Deuteronomy goes into a lot of detail about how God wanted his people to treat the weak and poor but according to Isaiah they were notorious for injustice.

Here our actions are God's objective standard of judgment. Romans 2:6 says, "God will repay each person according to what they have done." We are not saved by our actions but we will be judged by them. Righteousness come through faith as it is written, "Abraham believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (Gen 15:6; also Eph 2:8-9; Ro 3:22; Heb 11:1,6). But Jesus said that a person's inner faith will be revealed by their outer fruit—a good tree produces good fruit (Mt 7:16-20). This righteous man has the image of Jesus the good shepherd. He loves God and loves his neighbor. His actions reveal that he is righteous; he will surely live (9b). Simply put, if their generation looked like this they would not be judged.

The second example is a son who is the total opposite of his father, a violent man who sheds blood (10). And so out of his character flow all the wicked deeds that his father abstained from: idolatry, adultery, oppression, robbery, murder, swindling (12-13). His actions reveal his character, he is wicked. "Will such a man live? He will not! Because he has done all these detestable things, he is to be put to death; his blood will be on his own head." The point here is that the righteousness of his father will not save him from judgment. Get this point really clearly: You will not be saved because of your parent's faith! Or we will not be spared because of what our forefathers did. 2 Corinthians 5:10 says, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that **each one** may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil" (ESV).

The third example is another reversal. The son of that wicked man, "sees all the sins his father commits and though he sees them, he does not do such things" (14). The son sees everything but he breaks the pattern of generational sin. And the point here is "he will not die for his father's sin; he will surely live" (17b). Of course the son did nothing wrong, God would never judge such a righteous man for the sins of his father (18). And so God shattered their argument that they were a righteous son suffering for the sins of a wicked father—it was untrue to his character and unbiblical.

They weren't so willing to let go of their excuse and asked, "Why does the son not share the guilt of his father?" (19) The basis of their excuse was a deeply ingrained and intentional misunderstanding of Exodus 20:5-6 which says, "I... [punish] the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me" (also Ex 34:6-7; Dt 5:9). They imagined God was like a mob boss; he doesn't just get revenge on you but he'll kill your children, and their children and their children's children—I mean it's ruthless. If this is how God had treated them they would all be dead. When we look closer, we notice that God punishes the third and fourth generation "of those who hate me"—not only does the father hate him but the children and their children hate him also. In a society where 3 or 4 generations lived in one house the sin of the father, **was** the

sin of the children. This is generational sin. According to verse 14, when children see what their father is doing they do the same thing and so they are judged for what **they** are doing.

So here's the point of the whole passage, God judges each of us based on what **we** have done, we can't play the victim. "The one who sins is the one who will die" (20a). It is self-evident, we all die, therefore we have all sinned. I said in the beginning that this concept is foundational to the gospel. The gospel means good news. But to understand the good news we first have to hear the bad news. The gospel says that I can never be good enough, that only when I admit my sin, repent and believe in Jesus for salvation can I be saved. And so helping people, however painfully it may need to be, to own their sin and admit that **they** are sinners, is the most loving thing that we can do for them. As we're going to see God doesn't want us to own our sin so that he can condemn us but because he wants to save us.

Second, God's pleasure (21-24)

So clearly, by God's objective standard of judgment, the people were guilty and they would die for their sins. "But" what a beautiful word. "But if a wicked person turns away from all the sins they have committed and keeps all my decrees and does what is just and right, that person will surely live; they will not die" (21). To turn away is the Hebrew word "shoob" (שוב). It is the same root word translated "repent" throughout this passage. Often people think that repentance is to confess and feel sad about my sin. But 2 Corinthians 7:10 says, "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation." Godly sorrow **leads to** repentance but it is **not** repentance. Repentance is **to turn**, to turn from my own way to God's way. You know recently I had to take over the livestreaming of the worship service while M. Joshua and his family recover. And I immediately realized how calm, patient and gracious M. Joshua is, serving with such a humble servant's attitude no matter how unreasonable the demands put on him or how people treat him. And I realized how much I am none of those things and how much I greatly admire him. So I sent him an email saying as much and he replied, "Well, I already died and now I am not who I was" (Gal 2:20). I've been meditating on that for several weeks. For some people that's just dogma but for him it really is the truth of what God has done.

When we die, we will live. The guilty person no longer lives, "none of the offenses they have committed will be remember against them." Even criminals can't ever clear their record but God forgets the sin we committed. That's crazy grace! David said it best, "He does not treat us as our sins deserve... as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:9-12; also Isa 1:18, 43:25).

Verse 23 says, “Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign LORD. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?” People have this idea that God takes pleasure in punishing the wicked. But God says, “Everyone belongs to me.” God is a father. A good father does not enjoy spanking their child—punishing them makes your heart sink. It is so painful for God to punish his children. A good father’s punishment is never to vent anger but it is always redemptive, educational and out of deep love for the best good of their child. A good father never lets sin go unpunished because it must be dealt with. He consistently judges the same behavior and increases the pressure more and more until they finally realize they are wrong and change. And father and child are happy together when this happens. What gives God great pleasure is to see sinners repent and turn to him and follow his word. Jesus said, “there is rejoicing in [heaven] over one sinner who repents” (Lk 15:10). Do you want to start a party in heaven? Do you want to give God great pleasure today? Repent!

But as much as verse 21 gives hope there is also a grave warning that we need to take very seriously. Another “But...” “But if a righteous person turns from their righteousness and commits sin and does the same detestable things the wicked person does, will they live? None of the righteous things that person has done will be remembered. Because of the unfaithfulness they are guilty of and because of the sins they have committed, they will die” (24). A lifetime of good can be wiped out if we decide to leave God to follow sin. God explains it more pointedly in 33:12b-13, “The righteous person who sins will not be allowed to live even though they were **formerly righteous**. If I tell a righteous person that they will surely live, but then they **trust in their righteousness** and do evil, none of the righteous things that person has done will be remembered; they will die for the evil they have done.” The person is “formerly righteous” they no longer have faith in God but practically they are following sin as their god. This happened because they trusted in their salvation and stopped struggling against their sin. This is not meant to make us doubt our salvation if we are struggling with our sin, but rather to warn us about the danger sin has to turn our heart and shipwreck out whole life. God’s judgment is a serious matter, sin is a serious matter—it must be dealt with like cancer. One of the major themes of Ezekiel is God’s constant rebuke that his name was blasphemed among the nations because of their example and how he would act to *defend* the glory of his name. Let’s take a hard look at our life, at the sin that we haven’t been dealing with and the secret idols we have turned to for fun and comfort apart from God. May God turn our hearts as we repent.

Third, God’s plea (25-32)

At this point I want to repent, I'm sure you're all already repenting, but these people they didn't want to repent. They responded, "The way of the Lord is not just." Literally, your scales are not balanced, you judge arbitrarily, your judgment is unequal to our sin. God replied, "Is my way unjust? Is it not your ways that are unjust?" The unavoidable issue with judgment is: Do we believe that God is God? In other words do I believe that God has the right to judge and that he is always right no matter what? Or do I have an entitled view that God should just accept me as I am? We know God is just because God's justice was perfectly carried out not against the wicked who deserved it, no against his one and only son—the righteous for the unrighteous. He had done no wrong but the guilt of the sin of all generations came down on him. The cross is the meeting place of God's perfect justice and perfect love. Before the cross no one can say, "I am righteous" or "God is unfair" or "I don't deserve this."

When we know we deserve God's judgment, we know every day that we deserve to die and every day we experience God's grace anew. Before marriage I knew that because of my sins I deserved to marry a pig but instead God gave me a princess. And I said, "God is so good! I don't deserve you" and Sharon says "I know..." And I'm so happy, almost 10 years later, because still I know I don't deserve her and she always reminds me of God's amazing grace. But when we simply refuse to admit "I'm wrong" then everything God does is unfair—"God is mean, God doesn't care about me... me, me, me, I deserve, I deserve... God can't judge me, he made me this way!"

What would God do to such rebellious people who refused to admit their sin? Verse 30 says, "Therefore, you Israelites, I will judge each of you according to your own ways." According to chapter 22, they had filled the land with idol worship, injustice, innocent blood and gross sexual immorality, in other words they were doomed! So God said, "Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, people of Israel? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live!" (30b-32).

I've heard so many people blaming the Chinese, blaming abortion clinics, blaming Trump, blaming Obama. But God holds our whole generation accountable. Now is the time to Repent! Don't let sin be your downfall. Confess your sin (1 Jn 1:9), grieve, mourn and wail (Ja 4:9), and rid yourselves of whatever offends God. Actually, in ourselves this is not possible, but now we come to the greatest promise of this passage, those who will turn from their way **he will** give us a new spirit and a new heart. God gives the Holy Spirit to every believer and through Him we **can** live a righteous life (36:25-27)

What should we do in these times? First, let's understand God's heart. God is taking no pleasure in the deaths caused by this pandemic but his heart is as broken as ours. However, because of the rebellion of our generation, this is the only way that God can get our attention. Let's stop blaming and admit that God's judgment is just and right. This is the time for us to repent! both personally but also nationally and world-wide. It is time for us to sound the trumpet blast, "Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, people of Chicago, of America of the world?" (33:11). "Repent and live!"