

Ezekiel: Street Preacher to the Exiles

Ezekiel 18:1-9, 30-32

¹ The word of the LORD came to me: ² What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge”? ³ As I live, says the Lord GOD, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. ⁴ Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only the person who sins that shall die.

⁵ If a man is righteous and does what is lawful and right— ⁶ if he does not eat upon the mountains or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, does not defile his neighbor’s wife or approach a woman during her menstrual period, ⁷ does not oppress anyone, but restores to the debtor his pledge, commits no robbery, gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, ⁸ does not take advance or accrued interest, withholds his hand from iniquity, executes true justice between contending parties, ⁹ follows my statutes, and is careful to observe my ordinances, acting faithfully—such a one is righteous; he shall surely live, says the Lord GOD. . . .

¹⁰ Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, all of you according to your ways, says the Lord GOD. Repent and turn from all your transgressions; otherwise iniquity will be your ruin. ³¹ Cast away from you all the transgressions that

you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? ³² For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord GOD. Turn, then, and live.

Theme Statement

Yahweh warns the house of Israel against the inappropriate application of an aphorism to their own situation. Neither righteousness nor unrighteousness is hereditary; only the person who sins must die. How we conduct ourselves, therefore, is important.

Exploring the Word

Among the captives taken to Babylon in 597 BCE was Ezekiel ben Buzi. Ezekiel's familiarity with the temple precincts suggests that he was a priest or a priest in training. In 593 BCE, while in exile by the river Chebar, Ezekiel received his inaugural vision (1:1, 3). His prophetic ministry included oracles of doom until the time of Jerusalem's fall and visions of hope thereafter. His oracles ceased in 571 BCE (29:17 is the latest dated oracle), although the span of his ministry may have continued until 563 BCE, the enigmatic "thirtieth year" of 1:1.

Ezekiel 18:1-3 Sour grapes!

The word of the Lord came to Ezekiel (18:1), but the Hebrew second-person plural form in verse 2 signals that it was directed at "y'all." The Lord wants to know what the people intend to say by repeating a proverb and applying it to the "land of Israel."

Like most aphorisms, the expression about sour grapes is more than a claim about unripe fruit. It cannot, of course, be understood literally. Parents eating hard, unripe fruit will not dull their children's teeth. On the other hand, the

proverb points to a truth that can hardly be denied: parents' bad behavior often has negative consequences for their children. Traditionally, this is how the proverb has been interpreted. The exiles complain that their hard condition was in consequence to their parents' misdeeds, and their suffering was, therefore, largely undeserved. However, there is an alternative interpretation having to do with land heritance rights, which your study leader will explain.

Ezekiel 18:4-9 Life comes with righteous living

To the exiles' hope of restitution, Yahweh swears a solemn oath and outlaws the saying (18:3). In place of the proverb, Yahweh offers two affirmations about divine governance:

- All lives are mine, both parents and children alike (18:4a).
- Only the person who sins will die (18:4b).

To illustrate the principle that only the one who sins will die, the Lord provides three examples, in verses 5-18. Only the first is printed above.

The Lord describes a father whose life exemplifies righteousness. He refrains from certain activities such as honoring pagan deities on mountaintops, looking up to idols of the house of Israel (18:6), defiling his neighbor's wife (Leviticus 18:20; 20:10), or approaching a woman during her menstrual period (Leviticus 18:19). Interestingly, the list of moral behavior exhibited by the father in 18:7-8 centers on economic integrity, justice, and mercy. Given the patriarchal character of ancient Israelite society and its commodification of women, it may be that the examples in Ezekiel 18:6b also are matters of economic integrity. Because the righteous man lives and acts faithfully, heeding the Lord's statutes, he will live (18:9).

His son, on the other hand, will die because he lived without righteousness (18:13). Will the latter man's son die on

account of his father's sins? No, for he chose the path of righteousness (18:14-17).

Ezekiel 18:30-32 A threat and an appeal

The chapter concludes with a warning and an appeal. Following the principles of what has come before in this chapter, Israel can anticipate judgment: "all of you according to your ways" (18:30). And yet, the Lord has already declared a perfect willingness to forgo punishment, providing that the people turn from their wickedness (18:27-28). "Cast away [your] transgressions," says the Lord, "and get yourselves a new heart and . . . spirit" (18:31). This is a word directed to the entire faith community, the "house of Israel." Again, as in 18:2, the English "you" hides a second-person plural address ("y'all"). However one might get a new heart or spirit, the summons is for national action, national repentance.

The Word Today

Many years ago, I knew a man who committed a war crime in the jungles of Vietnam. When I met him, he was a faithful husband and the father of grown, successful children. And yet, decades after his crime, he regularly woke up screaming in the night, reliving what he had done.

Many years ago, I knew a woman who, when she was young and in desperate need of money, posed nude for a men's magazine. Sometime later, she married but could not bring herself to tell her husband. She lived in fear that either he or their future children would find out. Moreover, she came to believe she had dishonored her body as the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19-20) and so worried about whether those photos marked her forever.

Many years ago, I knew a couple who, though married, did not believe their marriage was blessed by God. His first wife had left him. Her first husband physically abused her. Years after their first marriages dissolved, they found each other. And yet, they believed their new relationship might well be irreparably tainted by their past, in large measure because of how they understood Jesus' pronouncement about divorce (Matthew 5:31-32).

All these people dragged weighty loads of guilt as they made their way through life. Obviously, some of that guilt was real and some, imagined. Whether real or imagined, however, it was guilt they experienced about things in their past that defined them and left them in fear of divine judgment.

It is hard to imagine that any of them would have found grace in the thematic verse for Ezekiel 18: "It is only the person who sins that shall die" (v. 4).

That statement hardly sounds like good news if you are convinced you have, in fact, sinned. That, however, is not the whole story. Our faith has to do with a God who takes no pleasure in meting out punishment and who wills life for all (18:32).

More to the point, the Lord makes it clear that our past does not determine our future. Verses 21-22 are the hidden gospel gem in this chapter, but especially 18:22, "None of the transgressions that they have committed shall be remembered against them; for the righteousness that they have done they shall live."

"None of [their] transgressions . . . shall be remembered against them." That can feel like too much grace to sinners. Our impulse is to glom on to "keeping statutes" and righteous living in order to earn that grace. Before we jump down

that rabbit hole, however, we also need to remember that Jesus Christ has already done everything needful for our life and salvation. We simply need to believe that the cross and the resurrection are enough.

Questions for Discussion

Beginnings

1. An aphorism is a short statement that reveals a larger, general truth. Using a 3x5 index card, write down a familiar aphorism.

Exploring the Word

1. Complete this sentence regarding Ezekiel 18:2: "I believe the Lord is upset at the use of the proverb because . . ."
2. What is your reaction to the declaration "It is only the person who sins that shall die" (18:4b)?

Worried	Terrified	Unconcerned
Nervous	Confused	Confident
3. Describe someone you have known who most fits the description of the righteous person in 18:5-9.
4. Identify the characteristics of both the threat and the promise of 18:30-32.

The Word Today

1. Together, devise a list of contemporary examples corresponding to each behavior of the righteous person (18:6-9).
2. What evidence is there that your nation needs to repent and get a new heart and a new spirit?

Closing Prayer

Lord, help us to remember that whatever past guilt and sin we may carry, it is your desire to remember none of that against us. Lead us to live in ways that reflect your justice and love. Give us minds and spirits to champion your righteousness in the world. Amen.

Further Study

Deuteronomy 6:1-25; Matthew 5:1-48; Philippians 3:1-16

Daily Readings

- | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| M. Deuteronomy 24:14-18 | F. Ezekiel 18:19-24 |
| T. Jeremiah 31:27-30 | S. Ezekiel 18:25-29 |
| W. Ezekiel 18:10-13 | S. Ezekiel 18:1-9, 30-32 |
| T. Ezekiel 18:14-18 | |

Memorization

Ezekiel 18:4

Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only the person who sins that shall die.