

EZEKIEL: STREET PREACHER TO THE EXILES

Devotional Reading: [Psalm 147](#)

Background Scripture: [Ezekiel 18](#)

EZEKIEL 18:1-9, 30-32

¹ The word of the LORD came unto me again, saying,

² What mean ye, that ye use this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying, The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge?

³ As I live, saith the Lord GOD, ye shall not have occasion any more to use this proverb in Israel.

⁴ Behold, all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sinneth, it shall die.

⁵ But if a man be just, and do that which is lawful and right,

⁶ And hath not eaten upon the mountains, neither hath lifted up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, neither hath defiled his neighbour's wife, neither hath come near to a menstruous woman,

⁷ And hath not oppressed any, but hath restored to the debtor his pledge, hath spoiled none by violence, hath given his bread to the hungry, and hath covered the naked with a garment;

⁸ He that hath not given forth upon usury, neither hath taken any increase, that hath withdrawn his hand from iniquity, hath executed true judgment between man and man,

⁹ Hath walked in my statutes, and hath kept my judgments, to deal truly; he is just, he shall surely live, saith the Lord GOD.

³⁰ Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, saith the Lord GOD. Repent, and turn yourselves from all your transgressions; so iniquity shall not be your ruin.

³¹ Cast away from you all your transgressions, whereby ye have transgressed; and make you a new heart and a new spirit: for why will ye die, O house of Israel?

³² For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord GOD: wherefore turn yourselves, and live ye.

KEY VERSE

All souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sinneth, it shall die.—[Ezekiel 18:4](#)

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Quote the mistaken proverb the exiles believed.
2. Explain the reasons for the exiles' misconception regarding how God judges people.
3. Evaluate his or her preparedness to identify, avoid, and correct blame-shifting.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Imagined Righteousness
- B. Lesson Context

I. A Proverb ([Ezekiel 18:1-4](#))

- A. Repeated by the People ([vv. 1-2](#))

Selective Hearing

- B. Refuted by God ([vv. 3-4](#))

II. A Case Study ([Ezekiel 18:5-9](#))

- A. A Man's Actions ([vv. 5-9a](#))
- B. God's Verdict ([v. 9b](#))

III. A Call ([Ezekiel 18:30-32](#))

- A. To Repent ([vv. 30-31](#))
- B. To Live ([v. 32](#))

Autonomy

Conclusion

- A. Actual Righteousness
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Imagined Righteousness

The phrase *vicarious nostalgia* refers to a feeling of yearning for a past that one never actually lived. This term could describe a person born in the 1980s who loves a 1950s aesthetic and thinks of those years as simpler and better in many ways. It can describe a desire to return to “the good old days” that didn’t actually happen the way one imagines or even remembers.

For years, Garrison Keillor hosted a popular radio show in which he told touching and humorous stories about the citizens of a small fictional town in Minnesota. Each week he closed his program with the familiar sign-off, “Well, that’s the news from Lake Wobegon, where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average.” These descriptions are obviously caricatures, meant to capture a feeling of community pride more than an attainable reality. Yet, a place like Lake Wobegon can inspire vicarious nostalgia for all of us who live more complicated lives than the strong women, good-looking men, and brilliant children of that town.

An overstated self-assessment is dangerous enough in nostalgia. However, lacking a correct view of oneself is a devastating flaw. In this week’s lesson, the exiles didn’t understand their own role in the difficult situation the nation was facing. They assigned fault to their parents while claiming their own moral innocence.

B. Lesson Context

Ezekiel, a contemporary of Jeremiah, prophesied during and after the final chaotic years of the kingdom of Judah. He was called by God “in the fifth day of the [fourth] month ... which was the fifth year of king Jehoiachin’s captivity” ([Ezekiel 1:1-2](#)). Jehoiachin reigned only three months in 597 BC before the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem and took him, along with thousands of the most prominent and skilled people of Judah, to Babylon ([2 Kings 24:14](#)). This detail dates the beginning of Ezekiel’s book in 592 BC.

The group of deportees included the prophet Ezekiel ([Ezekiel 1:1-3](#)). The ruin of Jerusalem was devastating for the exiles. Jeremiah’s book of Lamentations captures the anguish that the destruction of the city and loss of human life caused (see [lesson 8](#)). Though some were left in Jerusalem and wider Judah, the survivors to whom Ezekiel spoke were those taken away to Babylon (see [lesson 8](#) Lesson Context). They lived together by the river Chebar.

The Babylonian exile created great uncertainty about the people’s relationship with God. Could God, who had allowed His holy city to be ravaged and His people carried into

exile, still care for the people? And if He still cared, could He actually *take* care of them in a foreign nation?

I. A Proverb

[\(Ezekiel 18:1-4\)](#)

A. Repeated by the People ([vv. 1-2](#))

¹ The word of the LORD came unto me again, saying.

The word of the Lord is a common phrase used in Ezekiel to emphasize that the Lord spoke to His prophet. This phrase occurs dozens of time in this book—far more often than in any other Bible book. Its frequent use in Ezekiel emphasizes that God communicated with His people even in exile. His continuing to speak to Ezekiel was meant in part to reassure the people that God was still with them in a foreign land.

SELECTIVE HEARING

My son was playing a video game. At the door of his room, I shouted, “Turn that noise down!”

No response. That’s when it dawned on me: he couldn’t hear. *That’s why he doesn’t always do what I ask him!* I thought.

I went into the kitchen to look up the number of an audiologist as I popped the tab of a cold soda. I didn’t get the cola to my lips before I heard my son shout, “Would you bring me one too?” He couldn’t hear me ask to turn down the noise, but he heard a soda-can tab from two rooms away! He didn’t have an auditory problem; he had selective hearing.

But don’t we all? We only hear fully what we want to hear. Like teenagers with parents, we can selectively ignore the word of the Lord. Are you *really* listening to God? —C. T.

² What mean ye, that ye use this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying, The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge?

As the exiles wallowed in the misery of their situation, now in its sixth or seventh year ([Ezekiel 8:1](#); [20:1](#)), they naturally tried to come to grips with the reason for it. In so doing, they landed on a *proverb* that became popular. A proverb is a short, pithy statement

used to express a general truth in a memorable way. The prophet Jeremiah was also confronted with this same proverb in his situation back in Judea ([Jeremiah 31:29-30](#)).

The Targum, a first-century AD Aramaic paraphrase of the Hebrew Bible, gives the meaning of the proverb: "The fathers sin, the children suffer." Therefore, *The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge* expresses the belief that those in exile (the children) are unjustly bearing the punishment for the sins of earlier generations (the parents). Claiming that their problem is inherited, the exiles deny responsibility or guilt on their part.

What Do You Think?

What old sayings do you need to let go of? Who will hold you accountable for progress?

Digging Deeper

How does [Lamentations 5:7](#) ([lesson 8](#)); [Matthew 5:27-28](#); etc., illustrate a need to do so?

The proverb has some truth to it in that the sins of one generation can have lasting effects on the next. We may think of how children suffer today when a breadwinning parent is sent to jail for a crime. Ezekiel himself pointed out that the exile was the result of covenant unfaithfulness by many generations of Israelites ([Ezekiel 16](#)). God had revealed himself as the one "visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation" ([Exodus 20:5](#)). The exiles' ancestors were indeed guilty (example: [2 Kings 21:1-16](#)). But this generation had been expelled from the promised land because of their own sin.

B. Refuted by God ([vv. 3-4](#))

³ As I live, saith the Lord GOD, ye shall not have occasion any more to use this proverb in Israel.

The fact that the sins of one generation have consequences for another is not the same as saying that God punishes an innocent group for the sins of a guilty group. Although there are times when the all-knowing and sovereign God deems this to be fitting, it is rare and certainly not the norm. The problem in today's text is that the exiles specifically apply their *proverb* to disavow any culpability for their situation. In so doing, they can claim that God is unjust in his dealings with them ([Ezekiel 18:25-29](#); [33:17-20](#)).

What Do You Think?

In what ways will the truism in [Proverbs 26:9](#) guide your use and non-use of maxims?

Digging Deeper

What foundational problem do you see when you compare these two old sayings: "Too many cooks spoil the broth" and "Many hands make light work"?

4. Behold, all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sinneth, it shall die.

Everyone belongs to God since He is the sovereign Creator. This included His chosen people as well as their Babylonian oppressors. His justice was not and is not limited by national borders (see [Ezekiel 25-32](#)). Therefore He has the right to declare that *the soul that sinneth, it shall die*. Each person is responsible to God for his or her own sin, and God will deal with each person individually. In giving the Israelites His law, God commanded that "fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers: every man shall be put to death for his own sin" ([Deuteronomy 24:16](#)).

This principle applied to how God dealt with His exiled people. His judgments are fair and true. It was pointless for the exiles to insist on their innocence ([Romans 3:23](#)). The apostle Paul echoed Ezekiel's words by stating that "the wages of sin is death" ([6:23](#)).

II. A Case Study

([Ezekiel 18:5-9](#))

A. A Man's Actions ([vv. 5-9a](#))

5. But if a man be just, and do that which is lawful and right.

This verse sets up the first of three case studies. The second and third, in [Ezekiel 18:10-17](#), are not part of today's lesson text. For the hypothetical *man* introduced here to be *just* is another, parallel way of saying that he does *that which is lawful and right*. It's interesting to note how rare it is for the Hebrew words translated "just," "lawful," and "right" to occur in the same verse; the only other place is [Jeremiah 23:5](#). Specifics follow.

6a. And hath not eaten upon the mountains, neither hath lifted up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel.

Eating *upon the mountains* refers to participation in idolatrous cult practices that were common in the mountain regions (compare [2 Kings 23:1-8](#); contrast [21:1-3](#)). These high

places featured altars, often dedicated to the worship of Canaanite deities such as Baal. To look *to the idols of Israel* was to worship and seek help from false gods or to make an image of the true God for worship.

Proper love for God begins with worshipping no other gods (compare [Exodus 20:3-6](#)). The righteous person didn't turn to false gods for assistance. He or she remained dependent on God alone for health and protection.

The exiles were hundreds of miles away from the high places of their fathers' idols. But the exiles were surrounded by the countless deities of the Babylonians. The temptation of straying to other gods remained real, especially when the exiles considered their uncertainty regarding God's continuing care.

6b. Neither hath defiled his neighbour's wife, neither hath come near to a menstruous woman.

The just man also was careful to stay morally pure. The Law of Moses prohibited not only adultery ([Exodus 20:14](#)) but also intercourse during a woman's menstrual period ([Leviticus 15:19-33](#); [18:19](#)). The penalty for violation of the latter was that "both of them shall be cut off from among their people" ([20:18](#)). Some suggest that the reason for this restriction was because of the special role of blood in atoning for sins, respecting certain rights of women, or to maintain ceremonial purity. Whatever the reason, the righteous man observed this statute as well.

7. And hath not oppressed any, but hath restored to the debtor his pledge, hath spoiled none by violence, hath given his bread to the hungry, and hath covered the naked with a garment.

The righteous man also exhibits godly love toward others. Righteousness consists of more than merely doing no harm. A just person uses his or her resources to provide for the material needs of others ([James 2:15-16](#)). These examples are all forms of economic righteousness shown to *the debtor* and *the hungry* and *the naked*. These are representative of other needy neighbors as well.

We note that all the positive and negative actions addressed here are covered in the Law of Moses (see [Exodus 20:15](#); [21:2](#); [22:21](#), [26-27](#); [Deuteronomy 15:7-11](#); [23:19-20](#)). The righteous man never lies about or wrongs a neighbor for any reason, in careful obedience to [Deuteronomy 5:20-21](#). Rather, he keeps his distance from evil and all forms of judicial corruption ([16:19](#)). In short, such a man puts God's law above any opportunity to gain at the expense of another.

⁸. He that hath not given forth upon usury, neither hath taken any increase, that hath withdrawn his hand from iniquity, hath executed true judgment between man and man.

The economically vulnerable often found themselves (and still do today) in positions where they had no choice but to accept the terms of predatory lenders. God viewed the practice as evidence that His people had forgotten Him ([Ezekiel 22:12](#)). He is the protector of the downtrodden, and He expected His people to be the same ([Psalm 82:3](#); [Proverbs 14:31](#)).

While the wicked people took advantage of the poor in various ways, the righteous person in Israel did not charge interest on loans (*usury*) to fellow Israelites. And while interest could be charged to a foreigner, it still had to be restrained ([Deuteronomy 23:19-20](#)).

What Do You Think?

If your locality had a ballot initiative to limit interest rates charged on so-called payday loans, should this text be used to influence how Christians vote on it? Why, or why not?

Digging Deeper

How do [Matthew 25:27](#) and [Luke 19:23](#) influence your response, if at all? Why?

^{9a}. Hath walked in my statutes, and hath kept my judgments, to deal truly.

Here we have a sparkling example of the parallelism that is a hallmark of Hebrew poetry: *hath walked* is another way of saying *hath kept*. Likewise, God's *statutes* are the same as His *judgments*. These same two sets of parallels of the underlying Hebrew terms are also found in [Ezekiel 11:20](#); [18:9](#); [20:19, 21](#); [37:24](#). Comprehensively, the righteous person does not follow the selfish, sinful ways of others in any respect.

B. God's Verdict ([v. 9b](#))

^{9b}. He is just, he shall surely live, saith the Lord GOD.

God will not judge or punish the *just* person for the sins of others—period. We may note in passing that the capitalization of the phrase *the Lord GOD* indicates different Hebrew words than does the capitalization of the phrase "the LORD ... God" as the latter occurs in, for example, [Ezekiel 20:5b](#). There are three single-word Hebrew names for God in the Old Testament: Yahweh, Adonai, and Elohim. The phrases "the Lord GOD" and "the LORD ... God" indicate different combinations of these names.

III. A Call

[\(Ezekiel 18:30-32\)](#)

A. To Repent ([vv. 30-31](#))

30-31a. Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, saith the Lord GOD. Repent, and turn yourselves from all your transgressions; so iniquity shall not be your ruin. Cast away from you all your transgressions, whereby ye have transgressed.

What follows recalls Solomon's prayer that God would forgive the people of their sins and heal their land when they repented ([2 Chronicles 6:36-39](#)). Israel's sense of national connectedness had diminished following the division into two kingdoms after Solomon's death in 930 BC. A sense of moral responsibility for the sins of the community followed. However, the Scriptures insist that both guilt and salvation have a corporate aspect (example: [1 Corinthians 5:6-11](#)). Sinful characteristics are transmitted from generation to generation. But God affirmed that He would also judge each person individually, according to his or her walk before God.

This is important enough to restate in a slightly different way. God said that He would judge the *house of Israel* [collective singular, corporate aspect], *every one of you according to his ways* [personal singular]. Although each person was responsible for his or her own guilt before the Lord, individual decisions affected the community as a whole. The collective singular *house of Israel* shows that the covenant God had with Israel was corporate; it included the whole of Israel. The singular *every one of you* shows that the overall moral tone of the community was formed on the collective choices of individuals. The Israelites were to look not at the conduct of their ancestors but to their own. The people were to rid themselves of any and all personal sin. To repent is to avoid the judgment of death that sin brings. God would be gracious and forgive all who turned to Him in repentance.

What Do You Think?

What are some practical ways for Christians to be accountable to one another in keeping sin in the rearview mirror?

Digging Deeper

Which kinds of biblical texts most help you in letting go of sin: texts that stress the positive results of doing so, or texts that stress the negative result for not doing so?

31b. And make you a new heart and a new spirit: for why will ye die, O house of Israel?

Those in the generation experiencing exile were worthy of the judgment that also could have fallen on the prior generation. However, God was equally clear that condemnation wasn't inevitable. He defined repentance as the rejection of one's past sinful ways, and He appealed to the *house of Israel* to accept *a new heart and a new spirit*. God had already promised to do this ([Ezekiel 11:19](#)).

God's rhetorical question *Why will ye die?* meant that the sentence of death was not inevitable since God extended an offer of forgiveness through repentance. Each individual had the freedom to choose life or death. If the people did not have free will, then they would not have been responsible. People are capable of knowing right from wrong, and God deals with us on that basis. The blame for one's sin and judgment cannot be shifted to God, Satan, nature, nurture, parents, or circumstances.

B. To Live ([v. 32](#))

³². For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord GOD: wherefore turn yourselves, and live ye.

God takes *no pleasure* in the destruction of His creation ([Ezekiel 33:11](#)). He wants to deliver people from their unfaithfulness and *the death* that it brings. He judges, but He also provides all people with the means of salvation, so they can avoid that judgment. God issues an invitation to repent and live, as He has done so many times before. He demonstrates love by his willingness to set people free from their sinful past and the punishment they deserve ([John 3:16](#); [2 Peter 3:9](#)). Yet He demonstrates His holiness by not allowing sin to continue indefinitely.

AUTONOMY

I find the reality of autonomous vehicles terrifying. Thinking about it causes me to remember a joke from the days when aviation was young.

A passenger airplane had reached its cruising altitude. A recorded message came over the speakers, reminding the passengers to keep their seat belts on. That was followed by an announcement: "The captain will soon come back to greet you. Don't worry, the plane is on automatic pilot, and nothing can go wrong, nothing can go wrong, nothing can go wrong ..."

Autonomous cars. Autonomous planes. Autonomous people. We are constantly in the presence of men and women who have wrested their lives from God and are moving forward on autopilot. How often are we numbered among them as we fight for control

that is rightly only God's? Only by repenting and turning back to God with our whole lives can we expect to be forgiven our sins and live fully. —C. T.

Conclusion

A. Actual Righteousness

The exiles imagined themselves to be the victims of a cosmic injustice. They viewed themselves as serving a sentence intended for the prior generation. The history of God's people reveals that they had always been incapable of keeping the covenant. Before Moses brought the Ten Commandments down from Mount Sinai, Aaron had already constructed the gold calf and led the people into idolatry. The book of Judges outlines the nation's checkered history of obeying God.

The exiles were not unique in their ability to view themselves as morally superior to the prior generation. Jesus called out similar duplicity in the Pharisees, who insisted that if they had been alive at the time of the prophets, they would not have murdered them ([Matthew 23:30](#)). Indeed, they had already plotted to kill Jesus ([12:14](#)). The apostle Paul's words "Let God be true, but every man a liar" ([Romans 3:4](#)) fit well in Ezekiel's defense of God's justice.

The hearts of the people were always incapable of obeying God fully. So God promised a new creative act: He would give the people new hearts, ones capable of being sensitive and obedient to God's Word.

HOW TO SAY IT

Adonai (Hebrew)Ad-owe-nye.

CanaaniteKay-nun-ite.

ChebarKee-bar.

Elohim (Hebrew)El-o-heem.

JehoiachinJeh-hoy-uh-kin.

Yahweh (Hebrew)Yaw-way.

This truth was intended to prevent Ezekiel's audience from slipping into the despair or apathy that came with believing they were the victims of their parents' decisions. Each person was charged with the responsibility of turning from his or her sinful ways and returning to God, in order that they would avoid being destroyed by the consequences of their own sins. This is ultimately fulfilled through following Jesus in the plan of salvation. Those who do so receive the Holy Spirit, who daily recreates our hearts and minds to be like Christ.

What Do You Think?

Which thought in today's text do you have the hardest time coming to grips with?
Why?

Digging Deeper

What extra effort will you expend to resolve this uncertainty?

B. Prayer

God, we see moral goodness in ourselves, but You see Your image marred with sin. We confess that Your assessment of our situation is correct. We thank You for providing mercy and renewal. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

If we cannot acknowledge God's judgment, we will see no need to receive His forgiveness.