

The God Who Judges Justly

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[0:00] All right, get ready. Luke chapter, I mean not Luke, Ezekiel. Maybe I should be ready first. Ezekiel chapter 11 was what was just read for us, but Ezekiel chapters 8 to 11 is actually what was assigned for this Sunday.

That is four chapters of a massive prophet. I'm only going to cover two of those chapters and very lightly. So hang in with me.

We have a lot of work to do tonight. But I want to boil it down to two major things. I want to talk about two temptations. Two temptations that the ancient Israelites felt quite acutely in their own lives.

Two temptations that I think every human being is faced with every day. Two temptations that express themselves in innumerable shapes and sizes, emotions and attitudes, thoughts and actions.

Two temptations that have defined whole periods and centuries of history and two temptations that could threaten to define our own lives today and our lives tomorrow.

[1:07] It's this. The temptation to arrogance and pride. And it's the temptation to despair. Pride and despair.

And the temptation of arrogance leads to false hopes. And the temptation to despair leads to no hope. False hopes and no hopes.

And the thing is, is that these are not just some kind of random abstract categories. These are things that cut to the very core of our concrete daily lives and reality.

They cut to the core of our devotion, of our allegiance, of our reason for living. And what God wants to do tonight, I think through Ezekiel chapters 8 to 11, is speak into both these situations.

The situation of arrogance and pride and the situation of despair. And I think to the arrogant and prideful, he wants to speak a word of judgment. He wants to confront us in our pride and demolish all of our false hopes.

[2:14] And then to those of us that are in despair, I think he wants to speak a word of grace. He wants to lift us up out of the pit of despair and give us new hope.

So I think that's what God's on about tonight in this passage, to put it simply. Let's begin with the temptation to arrogance and God's judgment. Open up your Bibles.

We're going to need those. Ezekiel chapter 8. The temptation to despair is kind of encapsulated in these chapters through two pithy proverbs, or through two mottos, that the Israelite leaders are kind of muttering to themselves, that's circulating around their groups.

One has to do with pride towards God, and the other has to do with pride towards people. So look at chapter 8, verse 12. This is the first proverb, the first motto.

It goes something like this. The Lord does not see us. The Lord has forsaken the land. The Lord does not see us. The Lord has forsaken the land.

[3:19] If I were to summarize this motto in two words, it would go something like this. Practical atheism. Practical atheism. It's the belief that God is uninvolved and unconcerned.

It's the belief that God can't really see the realities of our lives and our hearts and our minds. It's the belief that what we do with our lives is ultimately our own business, because God doesn't really notice, and he doesn't really care anyways.

So the best we can do is for all practical purposes to live as if God does not exist. The Lord does not see, and the Lord has forsaken the land.

And what happens is that this mindset and attitude towards God leads Israel into deep, deep idolatry. It leads them into idolatry.

It leads them to worshiping counterfeit gods and false hope. Look at verses 10 to 11. By the way, this is always true of human life.

[4 : 24] Anytime we are prideful towards God himself, it's not that we reject all hope. It's that we seek to have our hope satisfied in other gods and other things.

And we see this in these verses. God gives Ezekiel an x-ray vision of the temple, and this is what he discovers in verse 10. So I went in and saw, and there engraved on the wall all around was every form of creeping things and loathsome beasts and all the idols of the house of Israel. And before them stood 70 men of the elders of the house of Israel, with Jazaniah and the son of Shephan standing among them.

Each had a censer in his hand, and the smoke of the cloud of incense went up. So imagine the scene, a room full of engraved pictures of animals, and God's people, the leaders of God's people, bowing down before them.

Now in the ancient world, it's important to know that bowing down to these pictures of animals was not just because people liked animals. These animals were actually representative of gods of all the surrounding nations in the ancient Middle East that surrounded Israel.

[5 : 40] So when Israel's leaders are bowing down to these images, it's actually as if they are bowing down and worshipping the gods of all the other nations around them, right in the midst of the temple.

And notice the way Ezekiel describes it. Look at the end of verse 10. The word that Ezekiel uses for idols could literally be translated the excrement of animals.

The excrement of animals. So it's as if God is saying, your idolatry before me looks like you're bowing down to a load of crap. Seriously.

Seriously. Who said God didn't have a good sense of humor in that? But seriously, it's a startling image. It's like we're bowing down to a load of crap.

But the elders' idolatry isn't just about bowing down in some ritual. It's about hope. Where do they place their hopes? Look at verse 11. They are offering incense to the gods.

[6 : 41] In the ancient world, you would offer incense up to the heavens as a way of evoking the help of the gods. So what essentially is happening here is they are praying.

They're asking for help. They're asking the gods to intervene in their lives and provide for them. They're asking the gods to care and give them the life they so desperately desire.

And so we see here that idolatry is not just about idols. It's about where do we place our hope? It's not so much about bowing down to some external painting.

It's more about where do we put our hope? Who do we trust? And this sort of idolatry is not merely an ancient problem.

It has its grip on us too. It could be innumerable things. Maybe for you, you worship the idol of financial success. Not because you just want a bunch of dollar bills here or you want big numbers in your bank account, but because you believe that financial success will make you, will give you the sort of life that you've always wanted.

[7 : 49] And so this idolatry of financial success causes you to study really hard in school so that you have no time for people, worship, rest, or play. Or maybe this idolatry causes you to overwork and neglect your family or your friends or your church.

Or maybe it's an idolatry of social status and affirmation. You want social status and affirmation not just because you want some nice plaque on the wall of all your accomplishments, but because you believe that it will make you into the certain sort of person that you really want to be, but you don't feel you actually are.

So this idolatry causes you to have an insatiable drive to achieve and prove yourself to others. Or it causes you to compromise your moral integrity so that you will fit in with the ones who you want to esteem you so highly.

Or it causes you to dwell on past achievements or even on future goals and aspirations to the neglect of present gifts and responsibilities. Maybe you worship the idol of romantic and sexual relationships.

Not because you think sex is going to be so great, but because you believe it will provide the intimacy that you so deeply desire and long for.

[9 : 13] And this idolatry causes you to justify maybe staying in a relationship that, dating somebody that you really shouldn't be dating, or getting into marrying somebody you really

shouldn't marry.

Or maybe this causes you to justify engaging in sexual relationships before or outside of marriage, or seeking to satisfy your craving alone in the privacy of your own bedroom before a computer screen.

Or maybe you worship the idol of comfort and security. Not just because you don't want to do anything, but because you believe it will defend you from all tragedy and pain and provide the rest you so deeply long for.

And this idolatry causes you to neglect giving to the church or to the poor who really need your help.

Or it causes you to neglect being generous with your time and flexible with your schedule.

Or it causes you to worry unduly about your retirement or be obsessed about your financial investments. And the list could go on and on and on as God unveils the idols of our hearts.

[10:26] And what God wants to do here is He wants to wake us up to the fact that all these false idols are false hopes. We're putting hope in things that are false.

But not just that. He doesn't want to just expose our false hopes. He also wants to show us that in putting our hope in these things, we have actually turned our back on the only hope that we actually have, the true and living God.

Look at verse 16. Once again, Ezekiel is brought to the inner court of the house of the Lord. And behold, at the entrance of the temple of the Lord, between the porch and the altar, there are about 75 men with their backs to the temple of the Lord and their faces toward the east, worshiping the sun toward the east.

This image is meant to be startling. It's meant to be one of those images that when you read it, it causes you to hold your breath because you realize that idolatry is actually a massive offensive rejection of God.

When you worship other idols, you reject God. I love the way one Old Testament scholar, Christopher Wright, put it. He put it in a very British way, which is kind of nice.

[11:46] A little bit of humor at the end. He says this about this scene. The description is surely meant to be both physical and metaphorical. The temple is behind them, literally.

They have turned their backs on the covenant God right in front of his face. The word backs can literally be used of the hindquarters of a cattle.

So in bowing down to the sun, these men were literally lifting their backsides to God. And here's his kind of funny British humor. Metaphorically, sunnies to the east and moonies to the Lord.

The insult is blatant and breathtaking. Moonies to the Lord. We laugh, but it's supposed to be that ridiculous.

It's meant to be that ridiculous. Every time we put our hope in something other than living God, we turn our back on our only true hope.

[12:50] And what Ezekiel wants to see now as we turn to chapter 11, is that whenever we turn our back on the living God, it doesn't just affect our relationship with God.

It doesn't just affect our own private spirituality. It actually affects every relationship we have with people in the public realm. When this relationship breaks down, all these other relationships start to crack and fracture and fray and dissolve.

And that's what we see in chapter 11. Look at verse 3. Once again, we're given another proverb or another motto that is circulating among the leaders of Israel.

It goes something like this in verse 3. The time is not near to build houses. This city is the cauldron, and we are the meat.

Now, if any of you understands what that means off the bat, kudos to you. The time is not near to build houses. It's as if they're saying, we don't need to make changes.

[13:52] We're fine just as we are. And then here's the real thing. This city is the cauldron, and we are the meat. Are any of you enjoying making stew now that the fall is setting in?

That's the image here. In the ancient world, these cauldrons were something that you would cook stew in over an open fire or something that you would put stew in after you've made it to store it overnight with a lid.

And the idea is that a cauldron was a source of protection and security for the important food inside. And the idea was that the meat inside of the stew was the most precious and important part of the stew itself.

So it's as if the Jerusalem leaders are saying, Jerusalem, this city, is the cauldron. It's secure. It's invincible. And we are the meat inside of it, lo and behold.

We're the best part of this stew. We're the best part of this invincible city. It's a tremendously arrogant claim. It's a claim of self-importance and false security.

[15:03] And look at verses 2 and 6. 2 and 6. It leads to political and social injustice. Verse 2. Son of man, these are the men who devise iniquity and who gave wicked counsel in this city.

Wicked counsel is that idea of political involvement for the sake of evil, not good. And then look at verse 6. You have multiplied your slain in this city and have filled its streets with the slain.

So the leaders of Jerusalem are using their power to abuse and exploit the weak and vulnerable for their own selfish gain. Then look at verse 12.

For you have not walked in my statutes, says God, nor obeyed my rules, but have acted according to the rules of the nations that are around you. So not only have the leaders of Israel trampled over the weak and the vulnerable and the needy of their society, but now they've decided that they want to fit in with all the other nations in the surrounding culture instead of actually be faithful to God and be different.

So it's injustice with people and it's fitting into the culture around them. This is where the temptation to arrogance ultimately leads. To turning backs towards God, to fitting into the culture around you, and to oppressing the very people who need you most.

[16:36] That's where it leads. And what we see in this passage is that God responds to this arrogance with judgment. He confronts the pride and demolishes false hope.

Look at verses 7 to 11. Therefore, thus says the Lord God, you're slain whom you have laid in the midst of it. They are the meat and the city is the cauldron, but you shall be brought out of the midst of it.

You have feared the sword and I will bring the sword upon you, declares the Lord. And I will bring you out of the midst of it and give you into the hands of foreigners and execute judgments on you.

You shall fall by the sword. I will judge you at the border of Israel and you shall know that I am the Lord. This city shall not be your cauldron, nor shall you be the meat in the midst of it.

I will judge you at the border of Israel and you shall know that I am the Lord. I will judge you, says God. Now, it's at this point, whether you're a Christian or not, that many modern people start to feel the tension, right?

[17:46] Maybe some of you felt that tension. You wanted to stand up, raise your hand, and say, I object right away. How could God do this? People have a couple different objections they often raise.

They say, isn't this unjust and undeserved? Surely these people, or we, or the people I know in my life, don't deserve this sort of judgment. But our passage is designed in such a way to show us exactly the opposite.

In verses 6 and 12, our tells us the reasons why God judges, and it forms a sandwich for his judgment. So it literally goes, verse 6, reason why God judges, then verses 7 to 11, God's judgment, and then verse 12, reason why God judges.

As if to show us that God's judgment is not just arbitrary, it's just, and it's deserved. It has reasons. But there's also those that say, okay, well, is God not malevolent and unfeeling then?

Is God not bad, and somehow does this not show us that God delights in judging, actually? And once again, Ezekiel is at great lengths throughout chapters 8 to 11 to show us that that is not the case.

[19:05] I wish I could go into it with you, but chapters 8 to 11 are these chapters where God's glory is leaving the temple and leaving the city of Jerusalem in judgment. But it happens slowly in four different stages throughout four chapters.

As if to say, God is leaving slowly and reluctantly from his people because he does not want to leave his people. God does not delight in judging his people.

You've heard it plenty of times already. It's shown up in chapter 18 and throughout the book of Ezekiel. God says, I have no pleasure in the death of a wicked, but rather that they would turn from their ways and live.

Why, O Israel, will you die? Turn and live. Brothers and sisters, God is a God of life, and he wants life for sinners.

So when he judges, he judges because people have not chosen life and he does it with a broken heart. As we see Jesus in Luke chapter 19 approaching the city of Jerusalem, when he sees that city, he weeps over it.

[20 : 16] As if to say, God weeps when he judges. But that should not lead us to believe that God's judgment is not serious and severe.

God is not to be messed with in this passage. He's not some heavenly Santa Claus. He will judge those who refuse to turn to him for life.

And this judgment is so serious that Ezekiel himself is tempted to despair and give up all hope.

Look at verse 13. And it came to pass, while I was prophesying, that Pelletiah, the son of Benaiah, died.

If you look back up at verse 1, this is one of the princes and leaders of the people. So Ezekiel sees this guy die, and he's like, oh no, all the leaders are about to be obliterated.

And then in verse 13, he says, Then I fell down on my face and cried out with a loud voice and said, Oh Lord God, will you make a full end to the remnant of Israel?

[21 : 18] I hope you sense the note of despair and desperation in Ezekiel's words here. Ezekiel thinks it's all over. He thinks this is the beginning of the end.

And not just because Israel's sin is so bad, but because of the ferocity with which God opposes Israel's sin. He thinks God is going to obliterate his people once for all and do away with them, and this is going to be the end of the project called Israel and Redemption.

But notice how God responds. He responds to despair, not with judgment, but with grace. God responds to despair with grace.

What he wants to do to Ezekiel and you and me is lift us out of the pit of despair and give us new hope. Notice, God doesn't lift us out of despair by minimizing our sin, saying, you're not really that bad.

Or minimizing his judgment, I'm not really that serious. He does it by showing us that he's a lot more gracious than we could have ever imagined. And we see this, first of all, in verse 16.

[22 : 25] It's the grace of God's presence. Look at verse 16. Though I removed them far off among the nations, and though I scattered them among the countries, yet I have been a sanctuary for them for a while in the countries where they have gone.

Do you see that, friends? God is scattering his people. He's sending them out of Jerusalem and he is judging them. And his glory is leaving Jerusalem. But where is God going to go? He's going to go into exile with his people.

God's going to go straight into the countries where he's sending his people so that he can be a sanctuary for them. To show that even in the midst of judgment, God wants to be present to his people and he wants to comfort them.

He wants to be a fortress and a rock for those that turn to him. He wants to be a refuge and a rest for those who come. God goes into exile to be a presence to his people.

But then God gives them the grace of promises. Even in judgment, God makes promises as if to say, I'm judging you and it's going to be bad but it's not going to be the last word.

[23 : 41] Grace will be. God gives new hope. Look at verse 17. He gives the hope of a new community.

We're not meant to be alone. I will gather you from the peoples and assemble you out of the countries where you have been scattered. friends, we were never created to be alone.

Adam said in Genesis chapter 2 or in Genesis chapter 2 it said, it is not good for man to be alone. And that wasn't just some statement about it's good to marry.

That was a statement that I think is true about all of us. It is not good to be alone. And when God does a saving work in his life, he doesn't save us to be Christians alone.

There is no such thing as a lone ranger Christian. There is no such thing as an individual isolated spirituality in Christianity. Because sin scatters and isolates and grace gathers together and forms community.

[24 : 49] I will gather you says God and I will assemble you. God is about creating a community of people who in their relationships reflect the grace that God has shown them in their relationship with him.

So God says, I will gather you and I will assemble you. One of the great theologians and pastors of the 20th century, a guy named Dietrich Bonhoeffer, meditated on this fact a whole lot.

In the 1930s, he was a part of an underground seminary teaching theology and being a pastor in Germany as the rise of the Nazis happened basically.

And Hitler was on the rise. And during that time, Dietrich Bonhoeffer reflected a lot on the fact of Christian community because he felt as Hitler was coming into power that Christian communities could really be threatened.

Christian fellowship. And so he started reflecting on this a bit and he wrote this book called Life Together. Life Together as he was living among his seminary students and he wrote this in that book.

[26 : 08] He said, It is true, of course, that what is an unspeakable gift of God for the lonely individual is easily disregarded and trodden underfoot by those who have the gift every day.

It is easily forgotten that the fellowship of Christian brothers and sisters is a gift of grace, a gift of the kingdom of God. Therefore, let him who until now has had the privilege of living in common Christian life with other Christians praise God from the bottom of his heart.

Let him thank God on his knees and declare, It is grace and nothing but grace that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brothers and sisters.

Friends, I want you to see how great of a gift it is that God gathers us together. Every single time we gather here on a Sunday night, every time you gather in a Bible study or home group during the week, every time you gather with a fellow Christian one-on-one over a cup of tea or coffee and you talk life and you pray and you chat and you dig into the scriptures and you do what you do, you are experiencing an amazing, amazing gift of God's grace.

He is gathering you and He is assembling you. Don't take that lightly. Second promise He gives, verses 19 to 20, the hope of new life.

[27 : 35] We're not meant to be sinners. We're not meant to be alone. We're not meant to be sinners. Yes, we are sinners. Yes, we should say that we shouldn't say that we're anything but sinners but we're not meant to be and we're not destined to be.

We see this in verses 19 to 20. I will give them one heart and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them.

God wants new life for us. I know I've told you this story before but when I was about 16 years old it was Boxing Day and my father brought me in to my bedroom.

He sat me down to have a conversation with me and he said, Jordan, I know how you've been living. I know what you're doing and it wasn't good at that time. He said, Jordan, God wants better for your life.

That's all he said to me. God wants better for your life and that was a major turning point in my life. If you've ever talked to me about my testimony you know that and I think that's what God is saying in this verse basically is I want better for your lives.

[28 : 49] You were never designed for all this sin and guilt and shame. You were never designed for all this autonomy and isolation and loneliness. You were never designed for all this idolatry and rebellion and selfishness.

You were never designed for all this brokenness and heartache and anguish. God wants new life for you. So he says, I'm going to give you a new heart I'm going to restore your will your decisions your thoughts I'm going to give you a new spirit to empower you to live in faithful obedience to me because I want new life for you.

Friends, God wants new life for you. He promises that. And then the best comes at the end of verse 20. He wants new intimacy for us. He doesn't want to be without us and us to be without him.

They shall be my people he says and I will be their God. Intimacy, communion, unhindered relationship is what God wants for us.

This has been God's intention from the very beginning with Abraham and Moses and this is God's intention for all eternity. If you flip to Revelation 21 and 22 this is almost verbatim quoted as the culmination of all creation.

[30 : 07] God is dwelling with his people. We are his people and he is our God and we see him face to face and his name is written on our forehead. It's this unspeakable image of intimacy that in the end of it all after all of God's judgment and after all of God's grace what are we going to get out of all of this?

We're going to get God himself. That's going to be the great gift. That in the end God is our God and we are his people.

That's the gift of all of this. And that's exactly what we're going to do for the rest of this service. What we're going to celebrate is the Lord's Supper. We're going to celebrate the cross of Jesus Christ.

That cross where God spoke the final word of judgment a no to all of our idols and sins. But it was a word of judgment that God took on himself in his son.

And in that way on the cross God speaks a word of new life and hope and grace and says I want to be your God.

[31 : 17] I want to forgive you and I want to give you new hope. So as we come to the table brothers and sisters you are receiving the gift of new life and new intimacy and new community.

in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen.