

The God who Warns and Woos

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[0 : 0 0] Ezekiel. Ezekiel, eh? Ezekiel. I love this book. I love it. It could be my new favorite book of the Bible. Who's with me? Who's with me? One. I've got one person with me. Thank you. It is a difficult book. It's a difficult book to hear because I think our hearts want to resist some of the very core messages of judgment and repentance. Well, we're in Ezekiel 33 today, and it's the great transition chapter where the book transitions from mostly oracles of judgment to oracles of hope and salvation and restoration. Now, the title of the sermon you can see in the service sheet is The God Who Warns and Woos. It's a great title. It's a clever title. Thank you, David. But let's change it. Let's change it to the beginner's guide to avoiding salvation. And how is it that you avoid salvation? Well, you avoid repentance. And I think that's what 33 is all about. I think it's all about the different ways that the Israelites are avoiding repentance. And they do it a number of ways. One, through despair. Two, through a distaste for grace. And three, through just being tasters of God's word.

We'll go through them slowly. Here we go. Number one, avoidance through despair. Have a look at verse 10 there. And you, son of man, say to the house of Israel, thus have you said, surely our transgressions and our sins are upon us and we rot away because of them. How then can we live? Okay, first the good news. Do you remember chapter 18? There was a sermon about sort of, how would you say it? Blame shifting. Blame shifting is probably the best way to describe it. The Israelites were blame shifting. They were saying to God, we're being punished for things we haven't done. We're, you know, we're all right. We're pretty good. Our forefathers, they were awful. So God, why are you punishing us? So they're blame shifting. Now, so the good news here in verse 10 is we see that, you know, a few more years have passed and it seems like they're beginning to move on from that idea and definitely own their sin. They're saying that they're responsible. They call it, they say it's our transgressions. They talk about our sins. They're upon us. We rot away. But is that repentance?

Repentance. Is that verse there, is that describing repentance? No. No, it's not. It's describing despair. It's describing a sense of hopelessness. It's describing an agony of the heart when you feel like there's no way out of this situation. It's describing remorse. Think about Judas and Peter.

[2 : 5 9] Peter. Both betrayed Christ in profound and acute ways. Judas got caught in this tailspin of remorse and despair. It was never repentance, a tailspin. And where did it end? It actually ended in his physical death. Peter. Did he feel terrible? Of course he felt terrible. But what did he do? He trusted in the hope of God. He trusted in the grace of God. So what's happening here? What's happening here?

What are they describing? I've said they're describing despair and remorse and hopelessness. You do something wrong. You feel bad. You make a mistake. At the very most, if I was being generous to the Israelites, we could say that despair can be an element of repentance.

But using this Judas and Peter example, it comes catastrophically short of actually being repentant. There is no turning to God. There is no change of heart. There is no receiving of forgiveness. So at its best, you know, feeling terrible is sort of part of repentance, maybe.

At its worst, it can actually lead you away from God. Despair can lead you away from God. And how does it do that? Well, for a start, it can lead to more sin. I mean, you might think, oh, my life's in the toilet. You know, I've just done these terrible things. It's just, you know, my life's in the toilet. So I might as well just keep going and grasp at a few thin little joys, a few little thin, the thin joys of living fairly sort of recklessly.

Another way is you could think, well, no, here's a better way of describing it. Despair can work against one of the key things the gospel is trying to do in your heart. One of the big things the gospel tries to do is it tries to turn you from a person that is curved in on themselves to a person that's curved outward. Luther used some cool Latin words. He talked about incurvatus and

excavatus. And what despair does is you can just start, you're in this tailspin of despair and you're like, I'm such a terrible person. I'm such a terrible person. I'm such a terrible person. There's no way out of this. Your horizon becomes your misery, your own misery, your own sense of hopelessness. And you become increasingly introspective when the gospel is trying to get you to look outwards, to see the hope that there is in God. Despair can also tell you lies, sinister lives, awful lies, lives that lead to death.

[5 : 54] Despair says, my sin is more powerful than the death and resurrection of Jesus. So if you want to avoid repenting, remain in your despair and ignore the character of God on display in verse 11. Let me read verse 11 to you. And this comes immediately afterwards.

As I live, declares the Lord, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that they turn away and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways. Why will you die, O house of Israel? See, God is trying to smash through that despair. Isn't that wonderful? As I live, God says. That's an oath. So he begins this with an oath. Like, as I live, like, there's hope. No matter how bad it is, there's hope. I want to give you life. God loves you. He wants you to turn to him. In sort of God's plea here, you really get a sense of his heart. Turn back, turn back. Why will you die? Oh, it's like you're sort of going, what are you doing?

What are you doing? Don't you understand? What are you doing? I don't know if you can relate to this, you know. Perhaps there are some of you, though, who think that you have awful sin in your life, and it's completely overwhelming. Think about the context here. Think about how badly these people have messed up. So badly, God has actually taken their land from them. He's removed his presence from a temple. Then he destroys the temple. He gets an army of pagans to come in and wipe out the city.

[7 : 49] You think you've got problems, you know. And yet in verse 11, Israel, why would you die? There's hope. There's wonderful hope. I want to give you life.

What Ezekiel's trying to do here is just, he's trying to get across the scale of God's mercy, which is immense. So don't despair. Turn to God. The trajectory of your despair is death, certainly spiritual death. The trajectory of repentance is life.

Some of you probably need to get out of the tailspin of despair and see that. Moving on. A beginner's guide to avoiding repentance.

If you want to avoid repentance, stay in despair. Secondly, develop a distaste for grace. Maybe you don't need to develop it. Maybe it's already there. I know it's in my life.

I can preach grace, you know, 9, 11, 6.30 p.m. And by 10 o'clock Monday morning, be trying to earn my salvation again. You know, there's something in our hearts that does find it distasteful because it takes ownership of our salvation away from us.

[9 : 15] And it's something we want to hold. We want to control it. Let me read a few verses here. This is mostly verses 12 to 20, by the way. I'll just read a couple of verses here. And you, son of man, say to your people, this is verse 12, the righteousness of the righteous shall not deliver him when he transgresses.

As for the wickedness of the wicked, he shall not fall by it when he turns from his wickedness. And the righteous shall not be able to live by his righteousness when he sins. Though I say to the righteous that he shall surely live. Yet if he trusts in his righteousness and does injustice, none of his righteous deeds shall be remembered. But in his injustice that he has done, he shall die. Again, though I say to the wicked, you shall surely die. Yet if he turns from his sin and does what is just and right. See, the Israelites hear that and go in verse 17, well, that just makes no sense. God, you're unjust.

It's like in their mind, they have this like really good, you know, these two bank accounts. One that's got all their good works in it, and this other bank account that's got all their bad works in it. And the big thing is just keeping a really healthy, really healthy kind of good works bank account going. Because if I've got that, like I'm sweet. Like I'm all right. I'm good. I'm in God's good books.

It's very easy to think that way, isn't it? I mean, I think if I'm preaching on a Sunday, if I think I've had a particularly holy week, I will come to the pulpit very confident. Like, oh yeah, God, you saw me this week. I gave some money to that guy, and I was really nice to my kids.

And all the movies I watched were like PG or less, you know. I am just going to dominate this Sunday.

[11 : 12] I mean, doesn't our heart want to sort of feel that way? I mean, if I am, I'm just going to assume you are. It's a distaste for grace. I said it. We want to control our salvation, don't we? We

want to manage it.

And it leads to just terrible ways of thinking. It leads to just thinking like what I just said. I'm a pretty good guy. And, you know, pretty good guys don't need to repent, do they? That's a problem, isn't it? See, the problem is we're believing in our own goodness, not God's.

We're believing in our big good works bank accounts. We're trusting in our own righteousness.

Well, God just wants to smash that idea to pieces because it leads to death.

The key word there is trust, I think, in verse 13. If he trusts in his righteousness and does injustice, none of his righteous deeds shall be remembered. What a remarkable verse. Do you hear what that says? If you trust in your righteousness, that's a terrible idea because it says God will intentionally forget them when you come to him. I think it's a warning.

Now, here's the application. Let's say this. Let's say you have really messed up in your life. You've done some bad stuff. Maybe you have some kind of addiction or whatever. I don't know. And then you're trying to reconcile your heart. You feel terrible, and you don't want to feel terrible.

[12:33] You're kind of despairing, but you want to make yourself feel better, right? So what do you do? What do we naturally do? We naturally start recalling the good things we've done. We naturally start to think about, you know, like, oh, well, I've had a dodgy internet week, but, man, I'm a really great father. You know, I give 10% of my income.

I work for the church, for goodness sake. Gee, that's unhelpful, isn't it? I mean, that hinders repentance. That'll stop repentance dead in its tracks. Because repentance is coming to God completely empty-handed, throwing yourself on his mercy.

Good works are not a replacement for repentance. Although, repentance should lead to good works. Final point. How can we avoid repentance?

Become sermon tasters, not sermon doers. So back in chapter 24, Ezekiel got this word from God. And it was, God spoke to Ezekiel and he said, A fugitive is going to come from east. A fugitive is going to come from the east, and he's going to tell you that Jerusalem's fallen.

[13:59] So what happens in chapter 33, verse 21? A fugitive comes from the east and says that Jerusalem has fallen. All of a sudden, crazy Ezekiel is the talk of the town.

Verse 30 there. As for you, son of man, your people who talk together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, say to one another, each to his brother, come and hear what the word is that comes from the Lord.

All of a sudden, Ezekiel's been sort of vindicated, and he's like this new Christian sort of pop star kind of guy, and everyone wants to be around him, and everyone wants to hear his great talks, because they're so stimulating, so interesting.

Verse 32. Here's how it's described, how they think of Ezekiel's talks. Like one who sings lustful songs with a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument.

What a damning indictment, eh? That's what the people think of Ezekiel's talks. You know, they're coming to get their Ezekiel fix, their Ezekiel experience.

[15:04] Here's the problem. Verse 31. And repeat it again in verse 32. And they hear what you say, but they do not do it. Verse 32. And they hear what you say, but they do not do it.

I used to work in New Zealand as a sexual and mental health educator. Yes. I know, the mind boggles, doesn't it? And so my job is basically, I would travel around the country, and I would do these talks in high schools about sexual and mental health.

And so I'd be like the visiting speaker that came to assembly. And you became quite well-known. Like you sort of, you do these, you know, I'd walk down, I was like a D-grade celebrity. I'd walk down the street, because I was speaking to probably 30,000 kids a year.

So I'd walk down the street, and people would yell out of their cars at me, oh, there's the sex guy. Like I always became called the sex guy, which is great, I guess.

Awkward if you're out with your mum or something, like obviously on a date or something. Anyway. So it was a great job. It went really well. I did it for seven years. And I did it because New Zealand has one of the highest rates of youth suicide and teen pregnancy and drug use in the world.

[16:12] Remarkable, really. So I'd go to these schools, and I'd speak for about 50 minutes, which is quite a long time to speak to teenagers, particularly about quite heavy things. So what I'd do is I'd tell lots of jokes, and I'd tell lots of stories.

And at the end of the talk, kids would come up to me, and it would be really great when kids would say, you know, young people would say, listen, I've got, you know, I've been kind of, I've been

sleeping around or whatever, and say I really need to turn this around in my life.

That would happen sometimes. The most discouraging thing that would happen though, the most discouraging thing, was when a group of teenagers would come up to me and say, Aaron, Aaron, can you tell us another story?

Tell us a story. Tell us a funny story. And I'd think, is that all I did for 50 minutes is entertain you? That would just be heartbreaking for me.

I think, is there anything, is there anything in your life that's going to change after this talk? Folks, I sometimes feel like this happens here.

[17:16] Let me come back to that in a moment. See, Ezekiel's message for many people was entertainment. That would be like, goodness, that was an interesting, that was an interesting, stimulating message, Ezekiel.

Thank you for that. But no heart change. You know, at a church like St. John's, we are in danger. Here's the danger.

We, the preachers here do our best, the best job we can do preaching. We try and do the best job we can. The danger is this, is that we have quite an academic approach to the text.

And the danger is that, for you folks, is this, is that it just becomes a thought-provoking 25 minutes. That it's just a stimulating 25 minutes.

When it's supposed to be a heart-changing one. When it's supposed to be a life-reorienting one. Now my job is not to, is not to, is not to save you, right?

[18:18] My job is just proclamation. That's what preachers do. Your job though, is to put aside your desire to be intellectually stimulated. Your job is to put aside your desire to be entertained, and let the word of God go deep in your heart, so that you will experience real change in your life.

So if you hear a sermon, and you're only engaged on a head level, now I want you to be engaged on a head level, but if you're only engaged up here, and you're kind of thinking through about, oh that's interesting, that was interesting, what he said about the history and the culture, and I didn't know that Greek word or whatever.

If that's all the engagement that's happening, folks, that is a cracker of a way to avoid repenting. Because you never let it reach your heart, and there is never the dead conviction, that the word of God is supposed to do.

Well, those are my three tips on avoiding repentance. If we put this more positively, don't remain in the tailspin of despair.

If there is acute presenting sin in your life, turn to God. There is forgiveness. Forgiveness that you can't even wrap your head around.

[19:40] Forgiveness. Wonderful forgiveness. And there is life, too. Don't reject grace by trusting in your own goodness. You know, grace has got to be, grace has got to be our operating system.

Don't come to God on your own merits. Come to God on the merits of Jesus. Because God will actually intentionally forget your good works if you keep trusting in them.

And three, lastly, when you come to church, the goal is not an interesting experience, just for your head. It's a heart change. It's a life change.

That's the goal. Amen.