

The God Who Judges Justly

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Date: 26 October 2014

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[0 : 00] Well, welcome back to the Ezekiel series that we've been a part of through this whole fall. And this reading that we heard is a culmination of a vision that actually started in chapter 8.

And there's a lot of bad news. It's one of those passages where at the end you say, this is the word of the Lord. And it's kind of hard to say, thanks be to God.

You sort of might say it half-heartedly. But in fact, we give thanks for all of the passages in the Bible. And I think this one, particularly because it exposes false hopes.

And it challenges us with the question, where is our hope? Where is your hope placed? And I think that this passage leads us to true hope.

It reveals to us false hopes that we may cling to. And it really makes us think about what it is that God has given to us in Jesus Christ.

[1 : 05] We've just gone through a week where we have probably thought a lot about hope because of what is happening in the news. It's a week that was marked by at least two tragedies.

Two of them very close to home that make us think about hope. The first was the killing of an unarmed guard at the National War Memorial and the attack on Parliament.

And then we heard right after the killing and wounding of students just down the road in Marysville. And what happens when we see these kinds of events happen is that a lot of our sense and security is something that comes into question.

It's called into question because stable and just government as well as good and safe schools really are part of what ensures our future.

They're things that we depend upon. Things that we assume are good and right and in good order. They're foundations of our well-being. And so this makes us think about our future.

[2 : 13] What secures our future? What is it that we place our trust in? And in each case there was also flashes of hope as well.

People who risked their lives to prevent further bloodshed. The marvelous caring for those who are dying or wounded at risk to people.

Also, I don't know if you know it, but there was a church that opened their doors to the high school in Marysville as a safe sanctuary for the students to come to.

And so in the darkness of these moments there are signs of hope that make us as a country think, well, perhaps evil will not win out. And these are wonderful conversations to have as a society.

To think through where our hope lies. Because those are questions that are about ultimate things. They inevitably lead to a conversation about God.

[3 : 13] Because God is the God of hope. And the Bible speaks powerfully about hope right through, right through from beginning to end. Because God shows us, he unfolds in the Bible, a plan of action to ensure that good wins.

Good government and good education, which are gifts from God, they cannot ensure this. He alone secures the future of all of creation by Jesus dying on a cross for the sins of the world.

And rising to show that he is Lord, that he is powerful, that he conquers sin and evil and death. So to believe in Jesus is to believe that in him our relationship with the God of life is healed.

And that the root cause of the sin and the evil and the anguish of this world is actually transformed. That there is change of heart.

He releases people from sin that rules us. To believe in Jesus is to know with certainty that one day he will come again to sweep away all evil and death.

[4 : 30] And bring heaven to earth. So that God will dwell with his resurrected people. And he will be their God. They will be his people. They will know his goodness continually with no corruption.

All crying and pain and evil and death will be wiped away as God heals the nations. This is the stuff of true hope. This is what God is doing with our world.

And this is a strong hope that Christians are meant to rejoice in. That are meant to hold on to. Both in times of dark evil and in times of great goodness.

In fact, it is critical for us as we serve God in this world. It's the only way that we can bless it. C.S. Lewis spoke a lot about hope.

There is a book called Mere Christianity which has a marvelous chapter on hope. And in it, he says this. It is worth quoting. He says, The continual looking forward to the eternal world is not, as some modern people think, a form of escapism or wishful thinking.

[5 : 38] But it is one of the things that Christians are meant to do. It does not mean that we are to leave the present world as it is. In fact, if you read history, you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most about the next world.

It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have actually become so ineffective in this world. You see, hope is critical for us if we are to bless the world.

Christians leave their mark on the world because their minds are occupied by heaven, by the hope that we have in Jesus Christ. And I thought a marvelous example of this was Brian McConaughy speaking last week at the missions lunch.

Because in that lunch, it was incredibly powerful to hear how he has been working for over 20 years in a very, very dark place with the worst kind of human evil, exploitation of children, and how many children have been rescued, how the love of God has actually transformed people's lives.

Not only children, but people who are high up in government. And he has gone through incredible disappointments, experienced incredible obstacles and evil, enough to really get you down and depress you.

[7 : 01] But the reason that he has persevered is very simply because of the hope that he has in Jesus Christ. It is why all those who are working in that ministry in Cambodia persevere and go through the darkness and are able to deal with it.

It is because they have this hope that is before them. It is why they act in the way they do. Why they sacrifice themselves in the way that you do. Because you work hard for the things that last.

You work hard for the things of heaven. For the reconciliation between people in our lives. For healing in a variety of different ways in people around us.

It is why we serve one another. It is why you would bring the goodness of God into people's lives. It is why you would live for the truth, even though it is costly to do it.

And it is why we speak to people in our lives about the immense hope that we find in Jesus Christ. It is because of what God has placed into our lives.

[8 : 05] This true hope. Now the thing that is difficult as Christians is that even though that glorious hope is something that is powerful and strong and actually changes our lives, we have constant temptations, each of us, to exchange that true hope and instead place our trust in false hopes to cling to hopes that the world offers.

And I think our reading, this very difficult vision from chapters 8 through 11 today, really helps us because it shows us people who have thrown away their hope.

It shows it exposes false hope and it leads us back into the true hope that God gives. Those chapters, the context of them, are a people who are in Jerusalem who are very much fearful of superpowers that are around them.

They are threatened by powers that they see that could destroy them. And in chapter 8, the Spirit takes Ezekiel from Babylon in a vision all the way to those hundreds of miles back to Jerusalem and he sees things that are happening in the temple that show how these people in Jerusalem have dealt with the threats around them.

And in each scene that he sees in the temple, you see a terrible kind of idolatry of giving over their lives to false hopes.

[9 : 44] In each scene, Ezekiel is taken from room to room in the temple, gradually getting to the hope holy of holies, to holier and holier places in the temple. And in each scene, the kind of love and honor and commitment that's meant to go to God is given to even the most detestable kinds of idols, the most detestable kind of temple rituals.

And the worst part of it of all is that it takes place in the temple where God's presence is meant to dwell. The priests of Israel were saying all of this kind of idol worship, this giving over their

commitment to false hopes, to false gods, were compatible with the worship of the true God. And the leaders of Israel are very clear of what has led them to do this. You don't have to look back at it, but chapter 8, verse 12 tells us that they say very clearly, the Lord doesn't see us. The Lord has forsaken us. In other words, God has let us down and he's not really Lord of everything. He can't see us. And because he has not helped us with superpowers around us that threaten us, we are going to take matters into our own hands. We will ask for help from other nations, from their gods. It was a great temptation. And the reason it was a temptation they fell into is because they could see those idols and they could not see the living God.

[11 : 21] They can see the threats around them that could destroy them, the power of the nations. And they could see the gods and idols that they had that were so powerful.

So they placed their hopes in those tangible things to give them the security that they desired. Because God, who they could not see, was not doing what they desperately wanted. And this is a terrible decision to make. We can see that. But really, this is a temptation for all of us here as we are gathered here as Christians who know the true hope of God.

It's very easy for us to stop hoping in God. We can very easily become entangled by the false hopes that the world offers. Perhaps the biggest thing is that we can work really hard to find our earthly security elsewhere than the trust in God.

And that shows itself sometimes in a very unhealthy commitment to our work by which God provides us our finances. It can lead to unethical decisions in business.

[12 : 28] In our lives, in our sexual lives, we can look for sexual fulfillment at all costs, rejecting God's purity and his goodness and his good purposes for marriage so that somehow needs that I have might be fulfilled.

We can feel let down by God perhaps in our relationships, in our marriages, or as single people as well. That the person I was hoping would come into my life has not come.

And we take matters into our own hands in ways that actually reject God, that walk away from him and his ways. And always this leads to the breakdown of relationships, not just with God but with one another.

And that's what happens in Israel as well. God said in chapter 8 to Ezekiel that Israel's idolatry led to something much worse than wrong idol worship in the temple.

It led to violence in relationships. Physical violence but also all kinds of emotional, economic violence as well. There was a deep social injustice that had developed in Israel so that people who were vulnerable in Israel were dispossessed of their land and of their houses by more powerful people simply because of greed.

[13 : 50] Because of the wealth that one could see that they saw was a source of security and at all costs they would go after that false God. They also entered into disastrous alliances with Egypt and other countries because they could see again that those were powerful possibilities, powerful kinds of hopes to secure what God himself had told them he would give to them if they trusted in him.

So tragically Ezekiel is shown that this is going to bring God's right and good judgment upon them. So chapters 9 and 10 shows that this takes the form of God's presence leaving the temple.

And this is what was the great gift to Jerusalem to the people of God that there was a place that God revealed his presence that showed that he was a living God.

God's presence according to chapters 9 and 10 leave the temple and Jerusalem slowly and in stages. It's really a strange way that it is described.

Step by step by slow step God's glory leaves. And it's as though God is reluctant to give up on his people. And this teaches something very important about God's judgment.

[15 : 13] And that is it is never cold hearted. It is never ruthless. And it is never because of a desire to punish. We must see that God's judgment is something that people choose.

And that it actually breaks God's heart to make that choice. That's why over and over again in Ezekiel God says choose life. Why would you choose death?

Choose life. Yet they do choose death and their sin makes it impossible for God's presence to stay. God himself says that. And so the result of God's glory leaving the temple is that there is destruction in Jerusalem.

God commands all the idolaters to be killed and the city burned. And that vision which was awful to see actually took place several years later when the Babylonian army completely razes the city. And that brings us to chapter 11. And chapter 11 has an amazing thing in it which is important for us to see in verse 2. The top leaders of the city who are leading Israel into their terrible sin and giving evil advice it says there are really confident in their false hopes.

[16 : 30] They really think that there is nothing wrong that they are complacent. And they say in verse 3 it's not time to build houses. In other words they're saying things are just fine the way they are.

Let's just leave things the way they are because we are secure. Things are going to be fine in Jerusalem. And they use a strange saying to say that in verse 3. They say the city is the cauldron and we are the meat.

Now that is what that means is the cauldron which is strong and made of steel or metal is actually something that is holding the stew which is the people of Israel.

And you don't need to worry about. The stew is fine in there. And not only that but we are the meat. Now that is a strange thing to say. They are the meat.

Now my boys who would understand would understand what this means because they grew up not liking stew very much. But the thing that would happen is you would put the stew in their bowls or in their plates and an amazing thing would happen.

[17 : 38] Suddenly all of the meat would be gobbled up. It would be gone immediately. But it was quite another story for the carrots and for the potatoes and for the onions and the yams that were there.

They were generally not touched. And so at the end of the meal you had meatless stews sitting on their plates. They knew the meat was the best part. The leaders of Israel who were gathered there were saying we are the best part.

We are the choice part of the stew of the people of Israel. And we are the ones who are favored by God. It shows how self-deceived they are when it comes to recognizing their own sin which is incredibly far-reaching and violent.

And it's a word for us too that we can suffer in our human nature from self-deception to hide our sin in our religious practice in the ways that we are living.

But God speaks to them in this dream through Ezekiel and he tears that all away. He says in verse 7 that the slain ones the ones that you have done violence to the one that you have dispossessed those are the ones that are my choice people.

[18 : 54] They are the ones that I favor and I'm going to take you out of the cauldron out of the place of safety and I will give you into the hands of foreigners.

You will come under the sword. You have worked so hard to avoid through the alliances and twice God repeats verses 10 and 11 you will be judged at the border of Israel.

And so you see God completely shatters their false hopes. All their attempts to find security in this world are taken away and they find that they find out that when God is against them there is no hope at all.

And in fact at the end of verse 12 God says that they had acted according to the rules of the nations that are around them which means that their hopes were the same as the nations the world's hopes around them who didn't know God who didn't know about this covenant this relationship loving relationship with God and now those hopes are gone taken away by those very countries.

And I want you to notice the purpose for God's judgment. It says twice there in verses 10 and 12 it is not just that God is perfectly just it is not just for those reasons that he is placing their evil deeds back on their head but more importantly he says the reason that I am judging you is so that you will know that I am God very simply.

[20 : 23] He is judging so that they will know that he is God. And that is the fundamental problem for those people who had become so complacent and had gone after false hope.

They didn't really trust that God was God. That he was mighty to save. That he is the author of real hope. That he is the living God who loves them and cares for them.

And I think that God is speaking to us this morning when he says this twice to us. Do we believe that God is God? That he is Lord over all of the things that you face?

Over all the threats that may be in your life? Over the direction that your life is taking? Do you entrust him with your hopes and fears? Is he truly the living God to you?

Well, Ezekiel feels this shattering of false hope deeply. He sees this man Peletiah, somebody who knew, die right in front of him in the vision and it's a sign to him.

[21 : 29] You know, is this the end of Israel? If you are against the people of Israel, there's no hope. What will happen to the promises that God has given? How will God bless the world if his people no longer are his people?

Well, now all of a sudden, unexpectedly, good news comes. And we've been spending a lot of time speaking about false hopes to reveal what those are, to expose them because that helps us to see really clearly where our true hope is meant to lie.

And amazingly, God answers him and says that you, you who are forsaken way over in Babylon, that small percentage who got taken away first, you are the ones who are the remnant.

You are the ones that I'm going to make big changes in. And this is totally contrary to the accepted thinking in Israel. In Israel, we find out in verse 13 there that they thought those people were forsaken by God.

They had lost out and the people in Jerusalem were the true believers. But God says to them something we don't find anywhere else in the Old Testament. He says, I myself am your sanctuary.

[22 : 45] In other words, I am your temple. I am the place of the presence of my presence here in Babylon. And so to these people who are completely without hope in the world with a terrible record of betraying God, God says, I'm going to be with you.

And he makes promises after promise in verses 17 and following. And let's look at the promises that he says. We heard them last week as well. There are promises that says, I will.

Promises of hope. Verse 17, I will gather you from the peoples and assemble you. I will give you the land of Israel. And in 19, I will give them one heart and a new spirit I will put within them.

By one heart, he means a heart that will be devoted and loyal to God. Not divided with other gods, but one that is wholeheartedly loving the one who has given them true hope.

and a new spirit I will put within them. That means a mind that wants what God wants, that follows after what God gives to them. And I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh.

[23 : 59] And I don't know if you remember the children's talk last week, but when they described the stone, when I was comparing a stone and a real heart, they said the heart was hard, it was cold, and it was rough.

And they were exactly right. The stone represents hardness towards God, roughness towards God, and really a coldness towards him.

God says, I'm going to replace that with a warm, beating heart that wants what God loves, that loves the things that God loves and is alive to him.

And then finally, he says, not only that, but I am going to, at the end of verse 20, they shall be my people and I will be their God.

And that sums up all of the hope that God gives to you. I will be your God. I will be your God. This is the hope that you and I have in Jesus Christ.

[25 : 01] And you know, we are held in suspense at the end of our chapter because the glory of God doesn't completely leave. It hovers over the mountains to the east of Jerusalem, over the Mount of Olives, which makes us think of another person who prepared to die for the sins of the world in the Mount of Olives.

We know that the amazing heart transplant doesn't actually happen to the people of God immediately when they are allowed back in Babylon 70, or back in Jerusalem 70 years later.

It doesn't happen. The fulfillment happens almost 600 years later. When Simeon, a man who is waiting his whole life for the consolation of Israel, for the hope of Israel, he sees the newborn Jesus and he says, now I can go in peace for my eyes have seen God's salvation that you, God, have prepared in the presence of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.

You see, Jesus is the light, the hope, so that it means that Christ, God, is with us. All who truly trust in him know that they are his people, that he is their God.

And he gathers people to himself. He gives them a new heart, forgiven, a heart that has the Holy Spirit in us to transform us. He gives us the kingdom of God, the land where Jesus rules.

[26 : 26] He gives us a heart that beats towards him and takes away by his forgiveness of sins the stony heart. And he says to us most wonderfully of all that you belong to me.

Nobody can snatch you out of my hand. And that's why Ephesians 2 says, remember that you were at one time separated from Christ. You were all alienated from the commonwealth of Israel. You were strangers to the covenant of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus, you who were once far off, you've been brought near by the blood of Christ. And so I end by saying, you know, that the big question for us, as we have this hope, all of us, so clearly shining out at us in the Bible, the question is, how do we live with hope? How do we live out that hope in this world as people who belong to him? Well, the answer is very simple. Because God gives new hearts, the result is that people obey him. [27 : 33] So to live in hope means very simply a life of doing what God says. It means a life of loving what he loves, of desiring the things that he commands.

And this is how Christians leave their mark on the world, because their minds are occupied with the things of heaven. And that's why Christians throughout the years have been instrumental in developing schools and hospitals and good government and the ways that people care for others of bringing the good things of heaven into our life now.

So may we be shaped by this hope that God has given to us, leaving aside the false hopes that so easily entangle us and strongly living for the hope that Jesus gives.

Let us pray. Father, we thank you for the light of Jesus coming into the world. We thank you that in him all of the promises that are filled with hope, the hope for all of the universe is given to us in him. And we pray that that hope would fill our minds and hearts so that we are able to let go of false hopes that we so easily grab hold of and that we embrace fully the hope we have in Jesus Christ.

[28 : 55] Strengthen us to bless the world, to bless your creation because we are shaped by that hope. In Jesus' name we ask. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.