

The God Who is Over the Nations

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[0 : 01] Our Heavenly Father, we ask now as we turn to your word that you would show us more clearly the unsearchable riches of Jesus Christ and wean us away from all other things to love him. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Well if you would turn to Ezekiel 28, we're going to spend most of our time in the last half of this chapter, beginning on page 715.

And as you find that place, I just want to say, make a couple of personal comments if I could. I want to say thank you very much to you for your prayers and support in the recent death of my father a couple of weeks ago.

Like many of you, I was not able to be with my father when he died, but I travelled back to Australia to be with my mum and my sisters and to plan the funeral, which in a very weak moment I had agreed to preach at in January.

And my dad had asked me for years to preach at his funeral and I'd always said no. And in January I agreed and in October he died. So my father was a bishop in the Diocese of Sydney and so the funeral was in the cathedral and it was packed.

[1 : 27] Organ, choirs, brass, rows of bishops, I don't know what the plural noun is for bishops, archbishops. In their colours, military chaplains.

My father was also a major general in the army, bishop to the defence force and an active serving soldier in the Second World War. So he was buried with the full military honours.

And what that means is that the military blocked off two of the main streets in downtown Sydney during peak hour and his casket was placed on a gun carriage and marched toward the cathedral with an honour guard of a hundred soldiers with pipes and drums and brass.

And his casket with flag and medals was brought into the church. And the funeral was one of those wonderful, terrible experiences.

There was one eulogy, which my father and I agree on that. Funerals are not about the person who died, they're about Jesus Christ who rose from the dead.

[2 : 36] And I found it almost impossible to preach. And the week before the funeral, I confess, is one of the hardest in my life.

And many of you have been through this kind of experience, I'm sure, where the waves of emotion sweep over you. And if it weren't for the prayers of many people and the constant reminders of the promises of God, I'm not sure I would have been able to do it.

So I just want to say thank you. Thank you for your prayers and thank you for your messages. Those ones that kept pushing me toward God and the promises of God. The one promise that kept coming back again and again is the one in Isaiah 41, where God says, do not fear, I am with you, nor be dismayed, for I am your God.

I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. So I just, I want to testify to God's goodness and thank you for your prayers and encouragement.

And now, at the end of Ezekiel 28, we are invited to participate in another funeral. The invitation comes from God in chapter 28, verse 12, to join a lamentation, a dirge for the ancient city of Tyre.

[4 : 01] It's a unique invitation and it's in a unique section of Ezekiel's prophecy. From chapter 25 to chapter 32, Ezekiel takes a break from prophesying to Israel and begins to speak to the pagan nations surrounding Israel.

At the end of chapter 24, if you just want to flick back there and have a look, the siege of Jerusalem, a thousand miles away, they're in exile. The siege of Jerusalem begins.

But instead, in chapter 25 of moving to the news that Jerusalem has fallen, during the months of agony waiting in Babylon, God directs Ezekiel to prophesy to the pagan nations round about.

These are nations that have no interest in God, the God of Israel. There's no faith, there's no belief or no commitment. Because, you see, God is not just a local God. He's not just the God of Israel.

He's not a local deity who's just powerful over those who believe. He is the creator and sovereign Lord of every nation, of every tribe, of every person who lives.

[5 : 16] And since there is only one God, and since God is the true God, his concern is not confined to his people. He is concerned for the whole world.

And through these seven chapters, the one phrase that is repeated again and again and again 15 times is so that they will know that I am the Lord. So they will know that I am the Lord. So they will know that I am the Lord.

Because in all God's doing, not only through his people and through churches, but through nations and cultures that even don't recognize him, is that people will come to know that he is the Lord.

Not in an abstract and intellectual sense, but in repentance and faith. And we only have time today to look at one of those, and we're going to look at the ancient nation, city and culture of Tyre.

T-Y-R-E. Not Canadian Tyre. This was the dominant economic and trading culture of the day. In fact, three chapters are given to it.

[6 : 19] If you look back, chapter 26, 27 and 28. But our focus is on the funeral. Because you see, it's in funerals where everything's crystallized.

Everything is summarized. Everything is told that is true. And instead of a eulogy, it's a lamentation.

And it's given by God himself, verses 11 to 19. And it's very important for us to see the way in which God tells this lament. Because God tells the story of the prosperity and market success of Tyre in terms of the Garden of Eden.

Look at verse 12 in 28 with me. Son of man, God says. Raise a lamentation over the king of Tyre and say to him, Thus says the Lord God.

You, Tyre, were the signet of perfection, full of wisdom and beauty, perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God, every precious stone which you're covering, etc, etc.

[7 : 23] In Genesis 1, 2 and 3, we have the narrative of creation and the fall of humanity in the Garden of Eden.

And we believe that the Garden of Eden was a single event on a single day with Adam and Eve. But part of what God is doing here is here showing that the Eden narrative, both the creation and the fall, is the pattern and paradigm of all human experience.

Every living human being, whether they believe in God or not, lives a life gospel shaped. And you can summarise the storyline of the Bible in those four things, creation and fall and redemption and new creation.

And what this passage and other passages do is they say that this is the storyline of every person and every culture. And if you have friends who are not Christians and you talk to them long enough, you find that every human being has this storyline in their lives of creation and of falling away and of redemption and of new creation.

And they form their lives around what they believe about those things. So what we believe about creation is who we are, what our identity is, who we truly are.

[8 : 45] And about the fall is people believe something is wrong with their lives, something's gone bad. And redemption is what's the solution to my problems?

And the new creation is where my hope is. What would it look like if things were going my way? And so in this funeral lamentation, God reveals this storyline.

In the life of the wealthiest and most secure person in the world, the king of types, the personification of the culture. And we get to see how God views cultures that are affluent, wealthy, and have economic prosperity.

And God makes two points. And the first is the Eden gifts of God. The Eden gifts of God. Of course, it's highly poetic and symbolic.

Tyre wasn't literally in the Garden of Eden, but in exactly the same way that God gave to Adam and Eve all the gifts that they had, life and food and whatever, the remarkable prosperity and wealth and success that Tyre had was all given to them freely by God's goodness.

[9 : 58] The signet of perfection, the beauty of their wisdom, the precious stones. If you read down the verses, their feet on the holy mountain. All the abundance and even excess of Tyre, God had given happily and gladly.

You see, Tyre had more advantages than Vancouver or Hong Kong. It was an island off the coast of Lebanon, about 100 miles north of Jerusalem, and it had two brilliantly deep ocean harbours off the island, which were impregnable from land.

And it became the centre of the economic trading culture of the Phoenician Empire for 1,000 years, from 1500 BC to just after this prophecy. It's one of the first truly world economies.

They were Canaanites, pagan people who took to the seas and invented the latest maritime technology, the bi-ream. In my research this week, I discovered that's a ship with two rows of oars, quicker than any other ship on the sea.

So that all the trade that went east-west through the Mediterranean and much of it that went north-south went through Tyre, so they set the prices and they sat back and watched the money roll in.

[11 : 20] They're famous in Greek and Roman culture and it's interesting how deeply God understands the marketplace. God sees right through, transparently through the marketplace. Just turn back to chapter 27 for a moment.

Let me read a few verses. Verse 4, I'll begin. He says to Tyre, Your borders are in the heart of the seas. Absolutely. Your builders made perfect your beauty.

They made all your planks of fir trees from Sinia. They took cedar from Lebanon to make a mast for you. Of oaks of Bashan they made your oars. They made your decks of pine from the coasts of Cyprus inlaid with ivory.

Ivory decks. Of fine embroidered linen from Egypt, 400 count cotton was your sail, serving as your banner. Blue and purple, the coasts of Elisha were your awnings. But it's very interesting.

If you continue reading through chapter 27, it's the language of exchange and trade which becomes heavy. Both words used seven times. Look down at verse 12.

[12 : 25] Tarshish, which is in Spain, did business with you because of the great wealth of every kind. Silver, iron, tin, and lead they exchanged for your wares.

Jarvan, Tubal, Meshek traded with you. They exchanged human beings and vessels of bronze for your merchandise. Beth Togamar, they exchanged horses, war horses and mules.

We know all this. There's a ship that's been discovered at the bottom of the ocean there in 1977 and the lists here accord with some of the manifests on the ship.

Down at verse 33. When your wares came from the seas, you satisfied many peoples. There's a trickle-down effect. With the abundant wealth and merchandise, you enriched the kings of the earth.

Tyre traded from Syria to Spain, from North Africa to Britain. They're the first known culture to circumnavigate Africa and they established factories.

[13 : 23] It was the centre of fabulous and unimaginable wealth and the point is it was given to them by God. Physical position, their wisdom and their trading, they were like God's gifts to Adam and Eve.

They had been freely, happily given by God. And what that means is that wealth and material blessings are not wrong in themselves. God finds no fault with their wisdom or God's not anti-wisdom or anti-wealth.

But all the precious stones and all the successful trading, all their accumulation and admiration of others are due to one thing and that is God's creation blessings.

So while their wealth had grown, it had been God's doing. And we are not Buddhists. We don't think these things are evil in themselves. And God's understanding of the marketplace is fascinating, isn't it?

Because he understands exchange and markets and trading. And he's very interested in economic forces. Not just with the treatment of the poor, although that is addressed here.

[14 : 35] God stands with the poor. But with the wealth. And with those who have a lot of wealth. And everyone in between. What's made clear here is that God's not just interested in the amount of wealth that we have, or just how we came by it, or how we spend it, but primarily in the character of our wealth as gift and how it affects our hearts.

That's the first point of this lamentation. That just as God placed man and woman in the Garden of Eden, so God has given Ty everything. And if you flick over 28, flick your eyes down verses 13, 14, and 15, this drumbeat of God says, I created you.

I anointed you. I placed you. I created you. Because we owe our very existence to God. And everything we have, either by trading or by wealth production, belongs to God.

And he's given it to us as a gift. And just as God rules the world and he rules nations, he rules markets as well. He raises up and he brings down. God blows the wind that fills the sails of the successful market.

And God blows the storm that sinks the ships to the bottom of the sea of the market. And I think Tyre was not too different from Vancouver in this regard. It was a crassly and successfully materialistic culture with a finely tuned economic system.

[16 : 08] The leaders of Tyre we know had brilliant business acumen, smart long-term investments, and they worshipped financial wisdom, just like we do.

If you are successful financially, I'm sorry about this, but you are burdened with the problem in our culture that people think you're better than they are. They think you're smarter than they are.

In our culture, we think there's nothing more beautiful than win the lottery. We all want to hear what Warren Buffett has to say, and some of you even understand it. The Tyrians, the people from Tyre, ought to have been the most thankful and worshipping people on the planet, yes?

They ought to have been giving glory to God and giving away their prosperity and generosity to others. I think this is important for us as Christians today because many Christians think that God is vaguely relevant to the marketplace.

I think they think his involvement stops with me being a good person, you know, doing honest and ethical things and getting an opportunity to speak for him when I can. But somehow we think that the business of trading is a bit murky for him.

[17 : 22] He can't see it. But if what Ezekiel is saying is true, God is not only interested in Christians in the marketplace, he is also actively involved in the marketplace.

And I don't think there's a simple equation that we can get out of this. We can't say, you know, if my investments go up, then I'm obviously doing the will of God. If they go down, I'm not doing the will of God. There's a complexity and there's an indirectness at God's work here.

But God is sovereign over every Eden blessing. It's God who raises up. It's God who brings down. And he understands and he directs all things. And the question, I think, for Christians in the marketplace is where is God?

What is God doing here? And I don't have to have my identity, my creation identity. I don't get that from the numbers, you know.

And prosperity or lack of it are not ultimately going to change me. So that is the, that's the first point, the Eden gifts of God.

[18 : 25] And as I said at the earlier service, it'd probably be good to take a few hours right now and discuss this, don't you think? To have a bit of conversation about it. But I won't do that.

I'm moving to the second point. It's very important. We move from the gifts of Eden to Eden lost. How we fall out of Eden. Go back to the beginning of chapter 28, please.

Now the word of the Lord came to me, verse one, son of man, say to the prince of Tyre, thus says the Lord of God, because your heart is proud and you've said, I am a God, I sit in the seat of God's in the heart of the seas.

Yet you are but a man and no God, though you make your heart like the heart of God. The heart of the problem is the human heart. And although wealth and prosperity may be good gifts in themselves, whenever wealth comes into contact with the human heart, it produces pride.

Sorry to tell you that. So six times in the next verses, God speaks about the human heart. Verse five, great wisdom in your trade.

[19 : 40] You've increased your wealth. Your heart has become proud in your wealth. Therefore, thus says the Lord God, because you make your heart like the heart of a God, et cetera, et cetera.

I point out, by the way, at this point, that God listens to the internal heart conversations of every person, whether they belong to him or not. And I've never heard anyone say, I am a God.

I don't think people actually say that out loud. But what happens when you begin to gather wealth is you develop a God complex. you begin to think that you're not really needy, you're not really helpless, that you're not completely dependent on God.

You don't need really to pray so much. You certainly don't need to pray for your daily bread because you've got enough money to live until the rest of your life. So we begin, we stop looking to God for our security.

And gradually, the focus of my life is on things in this life, things that are visible and temporary, things I can control. And as the wealth grows, I say to myself, I must be doing something right.

[20 : 47] And rather than thankfulness and faith, gradually what happens is my worthiness moves across to my stuff. So that we now have people who we describe as high net worth individuals.

When I was, in my first year as rector of St. John's, I had a phone call from a guy from Toronto, never heard of him, and I went and had lunch and he met me in a five star hotel and he said to me, do you have any high net worth individuals in your congregation?

The first time I'd heard the phrase and I said, I don't know. And he said, I'm talking north of five million. And I said, I've got absolutely no idea.

He said, would you give me your parish mailing list? I said, I said, no. And he showed me to the door. It was not a successful interview. I'm sorry to tell you this, I wish it was different, but there's no way around it.

Whenever wealth touches the human heart, the human heart responds with pride. The God complex that took Adam and Eve out of the garden is this same God complex.

[22 : 02] It comes from money as well. we begin to think we decide what's good and evil. This is how it works in an affluent culture and we live in an affluent culture. I'm not trying to be legalistic.

God cares. He cares about the marketplace. He cares, yes, of course, not just about how we spend our money or how we save our money or how we make our money, but underneath, the thing that he's really interested in is what it does to my heart and to my view of myself.

And pride begins with thanklessness and the refusal to recognize that all I have comes from God. And it's a very short step from there to saying, well, can God really be trusted?

And it grows as I move my trust away from God onto other things and I begin to believe lies, lies about myself, lies about you. I begin to think money is the measure of who I am, my problem, my fall is I don't have enough, my salvation is to make more, my holy text is the daily rise of those numbers and the bottom line, my hope for salvation is to be financially secure, so that's what I'm going to give myself to.

And Ezekiel says, it's the way of death. And he skewers the so-called security of wealth in verse 9 in simple and devastating terms.

[23 : 24] Just look at verse 9. Will you say, I am a God in the presence of those who kill you? It's pretty clear, isn't it?

So that all the cleverness and accumulation of wealth, all the so-called security in the world, it cannot give you life, it cannot give us salvation, and it cannot protect us from the sovereign judgment and power of God.

empires and economies, markets, personal fortunes, they come and go, and what this is saying is that they are not the product of impersonal forces.

They are decided and disposed of by God himself. Ever thought about how crazy that is? Here is a rejected prophet in a nation that has lost its land and been taken into exile, speaking to the greatest economic power of the day, telling them their destruction is soon, which came to pass, not as a result of economic mistakes or as bigger economic forces, but as the direct judgment of God.

I mean, it would be as crazy as saying in the 1850s that the English Empire would collapse, yes? Or in the 1950s, the Soviet Union would be dismantled.

[24 : 47] Or in the 20-teens that North America would become a third world economy. And as the chapter finishes, twice God tells us why he's doing it.

Twice we hear this report, then they will know that I am the Lord. Then they will know that I am the Lord. And if you're a note-taker, what that means is we need to keep three things together.

Three things. The first is this, that what God is doing through his people and with his people, Israel, and with his church, is for the sake of the nations, roundabout.

Second, what God is doing through the nations, roundabout, in the markets and in political affairs, is for the sake of his people, the church. And thirdly, what God is doing through both his people and through nations, is for the sake of the revelation of his great name.

So the work of God is not confined to his people. Through them, God's desire is that others would come to know. This is the reason God had taken Israel into exile, so that the nations would come to know him as God.

[26 : 05] Nebuchadnezzar didn't think that. I mean, Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, thought that the siege of Jerusalem was his idea. But the plans and the power and the possessions and the posturing of the pagan nations are all part of God's plan for the salvation of his people.

That mangy little group are off in Babylon. And God's purposes this morning as we meet here and all the churches in Vancouver meet and as we move into this frantic Christmas season, God's purpose in the global markets and in the headlines is that men and women and boys and girls will come to know that he is the Lord.

Because you see, what we need, what we really need is someone who can bring us true riches, the riches of heaven, yes? We need someone who can bring us riches that won't rot our souls, that won't ruin us, that won't meet with pride in our hearts, that will take us through death and into the security of eternity.

We need God to give us true wealth, not just material resources. we need to give us his son. And the verse we started the service with is that beautiful Christmas text.

You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor so that by his poverty you might become rich.

[27 : 30] These are the unsearchable riches of Christ that never spoil and never devalue, that purify and save. They can't contaminate, they can't corrupt because they change us.

They are our true salvation and they make us more like Christ and they grow in us and they affect others. And the way in which God makes himself known today is as his people live out of the wealth of Christ.

Christ. And one of the ways, one of the key ways we do that is holding all our possessions with an open hand. I heard a remarkable illustration of this just last week and I finish here.

My brother-in-law is the chairman of Overseas Council in Australia and he talked to me about what's going on in Lebanon right now. This doesn't come out in the headlines. Lebanon, ironically, where Ty is.

Lebanon has a population of 4.5 million and since the beginning of the Syrian war and the monstrosity of ISIS, they have had an influx of 1.3 million immigrants.

[28 : 42] 1.3 million. And the evangelical churches in Lebanon have seen this as an opportunity and Christians have opened their homes almost wholesale to families, extended families of Muslims to feed them and to give them places of rest.

My brother-in-law says that when you go to these churches around Lebanon, these evangelical churches, they are full to overflowing with Muslims. Sitting quietly and respectfully, Shia sitting next to Sunni, listening to the gospel side by side and he said, when you ask them, this is what they say, they say, our brothers wouldn't take us in but you Christians take us in.

Why do you do this? You won't find that in the headlines but this is the power of God. This is what it means to live out of the riches of God.

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy and thieves break in and steal but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven where neither moth nor rust destroy and where thieves do not break in and steal for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Amen.