

The God who Takes Pleasure in Giving Life

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[0 : 0 0] Let's pray. Father, would you open our hearts to hear your word this evening. In Christ's name. Amen. Amen. Well, let me add my welcome to Jordan's. My name is Aaron, and I'm one of the ministers on staff here at St. John's. If you're new, it's great to have you. Welcome.

I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, goodness. That's the passage you chose? For an infant baptism? Can I just say it was planned before the infant baptism? However, it is actually incredibly relevant to what happened this evening, and I'll get there, so just hold your horses. Just a little bit of context. From now until Christmas, we are looking at the book of Ezekiel. It's a long and strange and sometimes quite hard to listen to book, but it's wonderful. I'd like to remind you of context, but that's very helpful.

It's set about two and a half thousand years ago, towards the end of the Old Testament period. All that's left of the nation of Israel is Judah, which is the southern kingdom with its capital Jerusalem there. A hundred years before, northern kingdom's been just demolished by their Syrians.

So you have Judah, and except for King Josiah, they just had king after king after king who were just useless at sort of steering the ship. So in about 600 BC, King Nebuchadnezzar from Babylon, which is sort of on the other side of what was then sort of pretty much the known world for those guys, he brought this huge army across the Judah, sweeping east to west. He invaded Jerusalem, Jerusalem, and the local king in Jerusalem surrendered. Now the Babylonian imperial strategy was this. It was actually very, very clever. I mean, diabolical, but clever. To keep a newly occupied territory in subjugation, they would basically just deport all the leaders. So anyone that had any important voice, like all the literate people, all the politicians, the artisans, the priests, the community leaders, anyone that's important, they just got rid of them. They deported them, and then the Babylonians would install a puppet king, which is exactly what they did. So the Babylonians removed all the leaders from Judah, there was a couple of thousand of them, marched them back across the desert from west to east, and back to Babylon. And amongst that group, there was a young priest in training. His name was Ezekiel. He was about 25. This period in biblical history is called the exile. And it's a time when, you know, God's community lived as refugees. They were refugees, way away from the land that God had given them. Very dark days. A few years into exile, God spoke to Ezekiel and said, listen, you're going to be my voice, and I have a message for my people. And that's the book of Ezekiel. Now, as I said, we said last week, we're not going through the book sequentially. It's 48 chapters. That will take a couple of years by, you know, how we do it. So what we're going to do is we're going to look at various characteristics of God as they are presented in Ezekiel. And this week, it's the God who takes pleasure in giving. Now, the passage for this week, we're jumping into the middle of a chapter, and it's all a, it's a word from God to his people through Ezekiel. And it's a word that's quite damning, but clarifying and beautiful all at the same time. But to understand this second half of Ezekiel, you need to actually sort of get your head around the first half. It would be really, really helpful to have your Bibles open, because it is kind of confusing. Okay, chapter 18. I'm just going to run through chapter 18, the first half of it very quickly. What's the page number there for a minute?

Oh, you don't know. That's fine. You can find it. All right. So chapter 18 begins with this. God saying to the Israelites, there's a local proverb you guys cannot use anymore. When I was a kid, my mom used to say, do as I say, don't say as I say. Has anyone ever had that said to them? Do as I say, don't say as I say. It's kind of an older generation. I remember I always thought it was such, that was terrible what I just said. I said, that was terrible what I just said. Anyway, so I always thought, I always thought it was just such a silly saying. I just thought, oh, it's so hypocritical. How can you say that to me, mother? Anyway, I thought that up until a couple of days ago. The other day, I heard my daughter Sadie, and forgive me for what I'm about to say.

[4 : 52] I heard my daughter Sadie, who was four. She was at the back end of the house, and Amy and I were sort of around somewhere else in the house, and I heard Sadie say, where's my freaking crayons?

She's four years old. So Amy comes in, Amy comes in and says, sweetie, where did you learn that word? Daddy. Daddy. So I say, do as I say, don't say as I say. Anyway, you didn't hear me say that, and I'll deny it to my bosses if I'm not. Anyway, all right, so God is saying to the Ezekiel, look, there's a saying, there's a proverb, a cultural proverb you guys say all the time.

It's got to go. It's got to go. And here was the proverb. You can see at the beginning of chapter 18, verse 2, the fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are on edge. Now, what does that mean? It means God is making us suffer for the sins of previous generations. So that's what the exiled Israelites believed. They thought God's making, God's punishing us for what other people did, the previous generation. And God says, that is nonsense. And then he says, let me tell you a story.

And this is all the first half of chapter 18. Well, it's more of a case study than a story. In verses 5 to 18, just quickly just slide your eyes, just slide your eyes over there quickly. You see, there's three little sections, right? There's a story of a father, a son, and a grandson.

Father, son, grandson. And the father, we see in verse 5, he's a great guy. Great guy, does good stuff. He's pure and generous, and he's got integrity with regards to money, etc., right? And the verdict on his life from God is, he will live. And there's the son, the next one down, the next generation. He is terrible. Grows up to be a terrible man. His life is marked by bloodshed and violence. And the verdict on his life, God says, he will die. And then there's the son of the son, the grandson. He learns from his father's mistakes. He's righteous. And the verdict from God is, surely, he will live. Now remember the context.

[6 : 58] The Israelites think they're being punished for the sins of a previous generation, hence the local proverb about sour grapes and children's teeth. So they hear this story about three generations of a family, and they think, yep, we're the grandson. We're the last generation. We're the good guy, not like the previous generations. We're the good grandson. And yet we're getting punished. Now the second half of the chapter that we're going to be looking at, God just obliterates that idea. He wants them to know this. He goes, you are not the righteous grandson, Israel. You're actually the awful son. And that's why you're under judgment. And if you stay on this path, you will eternally die. So that's the biting, hard word from God. Now the Israelites were obviously, they're in a, I mean, they're in a terrible situation, okay? The future looks dark, and it seems to look like it's just absolutely set in stone.

They're eking out this existence. Prisoners in a foreign country, all the promises of God, it looked like, had been just robbed from them. They're despairing, they're bitter, they're angry. And, and they have developed some very wrong-headed ways of thinking about themselves, and thinking about God, and thinking about the future. And God wants to change that thinking. Because the way they're looking at life is like this huge wall. And it's a huge wall that is a barrier to salvation. And God wants to break that wall down brick by brick. And that's what he does in chapter 18. It's God smashing that wall. It's smashing those misbeliefs. And he does it in a very structured way, a way that a, you know, grade five person can understand. He's firm, he's tender, but he's, he's hard, he's a hard line.

But we see it's hard as well. So what are those misbeliefs? Two. I'll spend most of the time on the first one, a short time on the second one. Okay, the two lies or misbeliefs. The first one is this, the lie of moral extension. And the second one, the lie that God is capricious.

I'll explain those, you don't need to try and understand that right now. Okay, the lie of moral extension. All right, chapter 18, verse 19. We're on our way. Verse 19, you say, why should not the son suffer for the iniquity of the father? So Israelites say, they respond to the story from God and go, why doesn't the son, they're talking about the grandson, suffer for the iniquity of the father? So the Israelites have just heard the three generation story. And their response to it, remember, father, good, son, bad, grandson, good. And they say, why should not the father, the grandson, suffer for the iniquity of the father? In other words, how come the grandson is not suffering for the sins of his father? Because that's our experience. That's what's happening to us.

We're suffering even though we're the good guys. We're suffering because the previous generation was terrible. We haven't done anything wrong. And God says clearly in verse 20, check it out there, the son shall not suffer the iniquity of the father. He also says this, the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself. If you're righteous, you get life from God, eternal life. And if you're wicked, you inherit death. You get what you get because of you. God is insisting people take responsibility for themselves. He says, Israel, there's no moral extension. You do not inherit, you do not inherit your parents' judgment or their righteousness. You can't blame these guys for the judgment that you're under. The mess you're in, it's on you. What a challenge for us.

[10:36] What a great challenge for us. Take responsibility for your sin. See what the Israelites were doing? What were they doing? They're blaming God. They're blaming their parents. They're blaming their grandparents. We know this game, don't we? Don't we know this game? Don't we know the game of blame shifting? It's not my fault. I'm like this. You don't understand. It's my personality type.

I talk over people. I annoy them. I disregard them. I bully them. It's just me. I'm a crazy, wacky guy. I'm just my personality type. That's why I'm just like, oh, good. Or it's my social status.

If I had a more powerful job, I wouldn't be so angry all the time. It's technology. Really dodgy stuff is just so accessible now. It's on my computer. It's on my phone. It's going to be on my watch shortly. If I was born in a different era, I wouldn't have these problems. I'd be fine.

I'd be great. It's my upbringing. If you met my parents, you'd know why I, you know, fill in the blanks. It's not my fault. Blame shifting. It started right at the beginning of the Bible, shortly after the very first sin. You know the story. Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve eats the apple. Genesis 3. God comes, looks for them in the garden. You know, sees Adam. There's apple juice dripping down his chin, right? And God says, you know, is there something you need to tell me? What have you done? What have you done? And what does Adam say? She gave it to me. You know, the woman you made, you made, that was my helper. She gave it to me.

Another classic example. Exodus 32. So Moses goes up to the mountain to speak to God. To speak to God. Moses is up in the mountain speaking to God. And when he comes down, the Israelites, what are they doing? Worshipping a golden calf. Now, it's not a great look for Aaron, who was Moses' brother, who was the guy in charge in Moses' absence. And when confronted by Moses, Aaron says this. And you can read it in Exodus 32. You can read it. It's this. It's ridiculous.

[12 : 46] He goes, he says this. He goes, they just threw their gold into the fire and out came a golden calf. Just popped out of the fire. It's not my fault. It's him. It's a freaking fire.

You know? Don't blame me. There is an unlimited supply of excuses, isn't there? A myriad of ways we can avoid taking responsibility for sin in our life. Folks, put away the scapegoats.

You want one of those signs on you that says the buck stops here, right? Put it to your chest. The buck stops here. And this is what God is doing in Ezekiel 18. He separates out each generation. He says their stuff is their stuff. Your stuff is your stuff. And why is this important?

Because if you don't take responsibility for your actions, for the sins in your life, you won't repent of them. There's no repentance. There's no forgiveness. There's no forgiveness. There's no reconciliation with God. There's no reconciliation with God. There's no life.

There's no forgiveness. There's no forgiveness. There's no forgiveness. There's no forgiveness. There's no forgiveness. There's no forgiveness. There's no forgiveness. Why? Because the stakes are so high. Okay, before moving on, I need to make two side comments to clarify and nuance this. First, you may be thinking, I have this vague memory about some verses in the Bible which talk about God visiting the sins of parents on generations to come, three and four. Is that self-mortem? It's true. There are those passages. What are they talking about? Here's what they're talking about. Imagine you have a mum and dad that worship idols and they raise kids in that home. Those kids grow up and they become idol worshipers. So the apostasy of their parents is passed down. God will judge the parents and he will judge the kids. But he's not judging the kids because of what the parents did. He's judging them because they did it as well. Your sin does have consequences. It affects others. It can do for generations. But God does not arbitrarily punish children for the sins they haven't committed. So those passages are talking more about the terrible consequences of sinful parents on generations to come. And of course, the flip side of that works doesn't as well. It's so true as well. So what we did tonight, baptizing these wonderful kids here, right? You made promises. You made promises tonight. You folks made promises tonight. You made promises to give your kids the absolute best chance possible to be raised a Christian, to be discipled by Jesus. Those promises, if acted upon, will have consequences for those kids.

[15 : 38] Now, back to the negative example. This idea, I think, is really helpful because what I mean is this. There's a therapeutic model of counseling which says that essentially, primarily, your problems come as a result of you being acted upon by something from the outside. So you are the passive victim of circumstance. Now, do the poor decisions of others affect you in a way that can lead you to sin? Absolutely, of course they do. That's common sense.

Can the thing acting upon you be a biological disposition, a market force, a technology? Of course. The Bible has a lot to say about the catastrophic ripple effects of a broken world and poor decisions on others. But, but, but, but, but, but, the therapeutic model is not the complete picture. Yes, you are acted upon in multiplicity of negative ways. But you're not just acted upon, you are also an actor. Because we think, we desire, we choose, we react, we react, don't we? And those things, that stuff, we need to own it. When you read through the passage, you see God stresses, we have choices, and we'll be judged on those.

Just look at, I mean, there's so many examples, but, um, verse 30 here. Therefore, I will judge you, O house of Israel, according to his ways, declares the Lord God. Repent, and turn from your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin.

So there's not much, I know it's been tough for you guys, you've been dealt a difficult hand. No, it's, it's like, the focus is on facing up to your own decisions, and the acceptance that you'll be judged on them. Now, the second side issue has to do with righteousness. This is a huge topic, I'll give it three sentences. Seven sentences. Eight sentences. Alright, eight sentences on righteousness. So, uh, because you're reading that verse, and you can misunderstand it, right? Because it can look like, right, the good guy, the father and the grandson, you know, they just kind of probably did some bad stuff, and some good stuff, but more good stuff, and so, they come out on top, net positive, on the moral calculus equation, right? It's not so much that, right? When the Old Testament talks about righteousness, like the characters in our passage here, it's not talking about being morally perfect, right? It's not salvation by words. It's not like bringing all your good stuff to God and saying, oh, look how clever

I am, look what I've done. Righteousness describes a person, or a Christian who is righteous, as a person who takes seriously the commands of God, to love God with all your heart, soul, and strength, but who does that in grateful response to a God that has loved them first.

[18 : 26] So, righteousness is more about allegiance, not, um, not obligation, not, uh, it's not about achieving a moral standard. Okay, we're going to get back on track, folks.

As I said at the start, God wants to break down our misbeliefs. The first one is that the extra, is the exiled Israelites believed that they had done nothing wrong, and they've been punished for the sins of a previous generation. It's their parents' fault, they say. Not only that, actually, in the passage of look carefully, they think it's God's fault. Verse 25, you say, the way of the Lord is not just. Oh, here now, oh, house of Israel, is my way not just? Is it not perhaps, is it not perhaps your way? Is it not perhaps your way that's not just?

It's great coming at you. Which is related to my second and final point, and this one quickly. It seems that the Israelites believed that God was deprecious, you know, that God was fickle, it was unpredictable, but he's certainly not just. He's kind of just making stuff up as he goes. He loses his temper and just punishes people around him. So look at verses 30 to 32.

Therefore I will judge you, oh house of Israel. Everyone according to his ways decrees the Lord God. Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and new spirit. Why would you die in the house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who pleases the Lord. So turn and live. What do you see here? Are these the words of a fickle God? He sounds like he kind of enjoys judgment. No, it's the opposite, isn't it? There is consistency, there is justice, and there is certainly no desire for death, but rather a wonderful commitment to life. Let me just read the first two verses again. Therefore I will judge you, oh house of Israel. Everyone according to the ways declares the Lord God. Repent and turn from your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions you have committed. God says, you know, like, here's what I'm going to do, and here's why it's going to happen, and here's how you're going to stop it. So completely consistent. God doesn't lose his temper. He doesn't enjoy judging people. It's the opposite. He takes no pleasure in judgment. He says plainly, and you hear it in this little refrain here, why will you die, oh house of Israel? It doesn't have to be this way. So that's

God's heart. A desire that people would live. You want to bring a smile to God's face? Repent.

[21 : 12] Turn away from your sins. Take responsibility for them. After the tax collector repents in Luke 15. Which was a big deal, you know. And this guy was like the, basically like a Nazi conspirator at most times. It says in Luke 15, Jesus says this, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous people who need no repentance. Is this what you think about repentance? Is this what you think about your repentance? When you're sinner, you're really sort of a bit antsy about coming to God? Like he's this angry headmaster leaning over his desk? You know, looking over his glasses? Begrudgingly forgiving you?

Begrudgingly hearing your apology? That's what you think. You need to read Ezekiel 18. He desires repentance. Think about the parable of the prodigal son, right? Oh, it's a great parable. It's beautiful. You know, the son insults the father, takes his money, messes up his life, completely messes up his life. Comes back anticipating a cold welcome, hoping that he could perhaps work as a slave at his father's farm, you know, and what does he get? He gets a banquet. When we repent, the father runs towards us, with outstretched arms, and a beaming face.

God is committed to life, to your life. And the measure of that commitment is that he would give up his precious son for us. So I'll close with my two main points again. It's easier to berate heaven for things not being fair than it is to accept responsibility for your own guilt and your own actions. Folks, you've got to own your sin. And you've got to repent.

God is committed to life for you. And it's joy for God. Amen.