

The God who Takes Pleasure in Giving Life

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[0 : 0 0] it'd be great if you took your Bibles and open to Ezekiel chapter 18 on page 705 and as you do so you can hum the last verse of that hymn quietly to yourself that's done okay Ezekiel chapter 18 we're in a series looking on well we're trying to get a vaster vision of God and we began last week in Ezekiel and if you're struggling to get your feet in Ezekiel you're not alone and you're warmly invited tomorrow night at seven o'clock we'll have a bit of an orientation to Ezekiel here if you'd like to come chapter 18 is simply one of the most amazing chapters in all the Bible God engages the false ideas and the arguments that people have against him not to win his case but to joyfully draw his people back to himself and there's a heart-rending appeal at the end of the chapter but before that God stops and opens his heart to us and gives us an insight to who he is which is just it's quite remarkable he says I take no pleasure in the work of judgment in the death of the wicked my pleasure is in saving and sharing my life with others we're near the end of the old testament generations ago was Abraham Moses David the kings and God's people throughout the old testament have enthusiastically and consistently rejected God and gone after idols as we do they've wronged God and they filled their lives with all kinds of sexual and personal sin and God has evicted them from the land from Israel by using the Babylonians and there they are thousand kilometers away from Jerusalem in the land of Babylon in exile and around 600 BC God calls one of the young men in exile to speak his words despite the fact that God knows and says to us that his people will not listen

God reaches across his people's defiance across his own pain across his own judgment to speak to his people to draw them back to himself we only read the last bit of chapter 18 but it begins it opens with bitterness our own bitterness so if you have it open let me read the first two verses the word of the Lord came to me what do you mean you Israelites by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel the fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge that's what we would call today a defeater belief that some people would call it that a defeater belief is something that most people believe is so obviously true it doesn't take any argument but it makes other beliefs absolutely impossible and in our culture there are all sorts of defeater beliefs which are hostile to the Christian faith for example there can be no one true religion for all people that's a very popular belief in Vancouver and it makes belief in Christianity impossible or nobody has the right to tell me what is right and wrong I have to be authentic and therefore the institutional church oh it just crushes me or Christians have done such terrible things in the past it cannot possibly be true or the Bible is repressive and regressive socially and morally

I can't believe it do you want me to go on it's pretty disheartening isn't it but here at the beginning of chapter 16 God goes after the most popular defeat defeat of belief amongst his people Israel in those days and it's simply this God is not fair the fathers ate sour grapes the children's teeth are set on edge somehow we are suffering for what people did in the previous generation this is the assumption about life that's circulating and is the most natural and obvious way to the Israelites to explain the great difficulty of their situation they had been defeated by Babylon taken captive removed to a foreign land and it's perfectly obvious to them that they are suffering for the wrongs of the previous generation it's not their fault and it's completely unfair for God to inflict judgment on them they were victims of what their ancestors did and therefore it is a simple and certain justification for bitterness because think about it because you see if they're right it means that God cannot possibly call on them to do anything different since God is treating us unfairly he has no right to expect anything from me see how it works

I am bitter because of what is happening to me and what is happening to me is because of what others have done God has done nothing about it or this is the way God works he won't fix it he is to blame therefore God can't tell me to do anything the father's teeth have eaten sour grapes sorry the father have eaten sour grapes the children's teeth are set on edge it's very subtle and it's very seductive and it's prevalent in a number of Asian cultures where I inherit the good or the bad results of the behavior of my ancestors I need to make amends for the sins of my ancestors or the whole number of Western varieties of this as well I do what I do because I'm a victim of the inadequacy of my parents or my schooling or my opportunities or my genetics or my personality type or my social status I deserve better I'm entitled to more nothing academic about this there are two infallible signs this is going on in our lives now the first is a kind of paralysis which I'll call fatalism you see since if I'm not really responsible for my situation I can blame others for it and I can't really do anything about it then why would I bother trying to do something about it you know

I think this is what lies behind a grumpy spiritual lethargy a great deal of bitterness I think is behind spiritual apathy I can't change anything why try and you see at a deeper level it's very sneaky because it prevents me from responding to God in repentance because if I can prove to myself that I'm a victim repentance is the last thing that I'm going to be interested in that's the fatalism but it also at a surface level it also there's another sign of it at work and that is blame shifting because if I'm convinced that what's happening to me is not my fault the fault of others I'm not really responsible for my actions I don't need to repent I don't need salvation this is the usual reaction when we get caught doing something naughty it's the old garden of Eden two-step remember when God came to Adam and he's got fruit dripping down his chin and God says what have you done remember what Adam said the woman you gave me she did it she started this you can't blame me you can't hold me responsible

[7 : 40] Israel's deeply committed to this view of life that God is unfair and unjust look down at verse 19 they say why should not the son suffer for the iniquity of the father this is the way things are or down verse 25 you say the way of the Lord is not just or in 29 again the way of the Lord is not just this mentality is the perfect way to avoid taking responsibility and to avoid repentance and it means that we can close our ears to anything God has to say so how does God deal with bitterness and this fatalism and this blame shifting and the answer is all of chapter 18 but let me just touch on let me begin with verse 4 and then we'll dive into it a little more deeply in verse 4 in verse 4 God simply says behold all souls are mine soul is living person all living persons are mine the living person of the father as well as the living person of the son is mine the living person whose sins shall die you belong to God

I belong to God it's universally true it's individually true we don't live in a world of karma or impersonal forces because every one of us lives in relation to God everything we do is in relation to God which I know is clean contrary to the current view that I am the captain of my own soul and I create my own identity by my choices my shopping choices and my face page time thing on the internet thing it's not I'm not going to say any more about that the point that God is trying to make is that God will not hold us guilty for the sins of others very simple and let me just I just need to pause here and say it is true that parents actions do have consequences for children if a parent abuses a child it leaves a trail of devastation that cannot be fixed well only it can only ultimately be healed by God and sometimes not in this life and many of us here are victims of different forms of abuse my experience is paradoxically victims of true true victims of abuse tend to blame themselves for everything and that has to be dealt with that is not what Ezekiel 18 is talking about the simple principle here is that because we live in relation with God

God will not hold you responsible for the actions of others but he will hold you responsible for your own actions so he's saying to Israel yes yes you are in exile partly because of the actions of former generations but no you are not innocent victims you are just as guilty of those sins you need to bear responsibility for your own sin but God is not content to be right about this and the whole drift of the chapter is his desire to give us life and I want you to see the urgency and passion of this chapter as God pursues us if you have time this afternoon I encourage you to read chapter 18 because what God does is he moves very gently and carefully and definitively through two kinds of cases until he reveals his heart to us the first the first cases I've called cases about judgment and that's kind of the first half of the chapter verses 5 to 20 and and God spells out in painful detail clear enough for a fourth grader he takes three generations and if you just look at the page there's a paragraph for each generation in the nine o'clock congregation

I call them Alan, Brian and Christopher and I use male names we could use female names and so I'm thinking of biblical people Abishag Bathsheba and I can't think of a C so I'll go with Delilah let's say grandmother mother daughter the point that God makes here is that each generation is judged exactly on their lives so Abishag grandmother worshiped the true God with generous with her money and time sexually faithful to her husband God says she shall live Bathsheba turns away from God the daughter the mother exploits others financially and sexually God says she shall die her blood will be upon herself the grandchild Delilah turns away from her mother's ways turns back to the grandmother's ways follows the ways of God she's not punished for her mother's sin God judges her as she really is that's simple isn't it God knows and cares about what we do and how we live he will not judge you for the sins of others he will judge you perfectly and purely for how you've lived since our whole lives belong to him and we live in relation to him we know that we've wronged him and it's very interesting in this chapter to see what pleases God and what God is going to judge and if you look through those verses 5 to 20 you'll find it ranges from how we express our faith publicly how we worship God the worship of the true God to the consistency of our sexual ethics to the cleanness of our financial dealings to the generosity of our actions in God's view there's only two ways to live we either follow God's way or we're fighting against God's way although we keep trying to make a middle ground and what this means is that there's a great seriousness about our choices in life the choices you're making and I'm making all our decisions are made in relation to God which gives great dignity to our decisions but God is not indifferent to how we spend our money or what the plans are for this week since you and your soul belong to him everything you and I do is in relation to him his judgment will be just and right and I think at the end of the first half of the chapter we feel just a little downcast so he then goes to a second kind of case study and this is about salvation from verses 21 onwards and this is where it gets interesting these are case studies about two people who change tracks in life one person turns to good from evil and the other turns from evil to good so just imagine one person who's lived for 50 years for no one but himself he's exploited others he's cheated them happily he's used and abused women and those around him proud to say he's never spent a dime on charity and one day something happens to him to bring about a complete change he recognizes he's been living in defiance of God and he sees the effect of his actions on other people and he owns up to God he takes responsibility and he turns to God and he turns his back on the evil and he seeks to follow God's ways verse 22

God says none of the transgressions that guy has committed shall be remembered against him for the righteousness that he's done he shall live in just the same way here is someone who's led a blameless life they've been involved in church leadership they've been a genuine help to others and one day there is a change one day they up and abdicate responsibility and turn and live selfishly and disobediently verse 24 none of the righteous deeds that he has done shall be remembered for the treachery of which he is guilty and the sin he has committed for them he shall die though God will judge us according to our deeds the wicked person is not held captive by any sins that he's committed nor is the righteous person supported by any good deed that he has done in his life why is this important?

[15 : 41] because God is speaking to those who desperately want to avoid taking personal responsibility you see he's speaking to people who enjoy their bitterness and want to blame God for their difficulties and what he's doing is he's just simply laying on us the reality of our choice to draw us out of our out of our illusion of entitlement and paralysis and blame shifting to come back to him the chapter is a call for radical repentance in three steps I want to look at this as we come to the end there are three steps the first step is in verse 21 if a wicked person turns away from all his sins that he has committed and keeps all my statutes and does what is right and just he shall surely live he shall not die so repentance is very practical yeah it simply means this it simply means turning away from every everything that's wrong all sin and turning to God and trying to keep all his statutes it's a complete repudiation of one way of life and it's a dedication to another

God is not demanding sinless perfection he's saying this is the direction of your life do you turn from worshipping false gods to worshipping the true God do you turn from defiling your neighbour's wife to honouring the covenant of marriage do you turn from being acquisitive and materialistic and oppressing others in your financial decisions to generosity and sacrifice turn away from ignoring God's word to living by God's word turn away from living just for yourself try to put things in place that'll help you to live for God that's the first step it's just we all know this very simple it's radical repentance step number two is the most amazing promise from God verse 22 and we skimmed over this a moment ago none of the transgressions that he has committed or she has committed shall be remembered against him for the righteousness he has done he shall live this is full and final forgiveness none of your sins not one single sin shall be remembered in other words there is a deliberate and intentional forgetting on God's part

I forget things all the time but this is God's choice he says when someone turns to me I will forget their sins this is his promise he puts them at the bottom of the ocean it says in Micah or in the Psalms it says as far as the east is from the west so far does he remove our sins from us and how far how far is the east is from the west you just have you have to keep traveling you never get there my experience is we don't forget the sins we've committed and we still we know that we know the shame of failing God but God has promised that he will not remember our sins that were committed against him because sin ultimately is wronging God whenever we sin we wrong God that's why we cannot relate to God on the basis of our performance God's not impressed with the accumulation of good deeds the only basis of relating to him in the end is his willingness to forgive that's right to forget to cancel our debt to give us a fresh start but in this context

I think this is the power of true repentance isn't it because God is willing to forget our sins and remember them no more when we turn to God we move from being under the judgment of God to being in the place of no condemnation it's immediate it's stark it's real it's fabulous in exactly the same way you might have lived a respectable life for I don't know 50, 60 years and now you're tempted to go off into moral sin and slide away and the warning of Ezekiel is that none of your previous good deeds God will take into account and if you feel uncomfortable about that it means you're dangerously close to self-righteousness because the way of God with this is not you know a good angel on this shoulder and a bad angel on this shoulder watching what I do and you know by the end of my life I hope that I'm on the plus side no no he is willing to forgive because his great desire is that we come to him and to give us eternal life and that takes us to the third step repentance

God's willingness to forget and verse 23 this is the most astounding statement of all have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked declares the Lord God and not rather that he should turn from his way and live a couple of months ago I was reading through Ezekiel it's hard going because it's a very dark landscape from chapters 1 to 24 it's mostly God's judgment the amazing thing that God should send a prophet to his disobedient people but here this is like a flash of lightning of God's grace and goodness where he says I have no pleasure in that work I mean typically in chapter 5 God says you Israel you're more turbulent you're more disobedient than the nations round about therefore I am against you and I will execute judgments in your midst but you see here in chapter 18 when God opens his heart to us we find out he will deal with evil

[21 : 32] God will judge what's evil for the sake of the moral integrity of the universe he has to deal with what's evil and I don't know how to say it any other way but he does he does it sadly reluctantly without enthusiasm he takes no pleasure in judgment he takes no pleasure in the death of any wicked person God's delight is in giving us salvation God's delight is when we turn from the wickedness and live if you know your Old Testament you know that in the book of Isaiah when God speaks about his work of judgment he calls it my alien work it's my strange work it's the response of the Holy God confronted with the obscenity of evil and how carefully and wonderfully and wisely God works his judgment but that is not where his pleasure lies our God is a God who's slow to anger abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness and his proper work if you will his characteristic work the work that he loves is the work of saving us that's why

God sent Ezekiel that's what this book is doing in the Bible it's God pursuing us because his delight is to be united with us as we finish listen to the appeal this heart-rending appeal at the end of the chapter verses 30 32 therefore God says I will judge you O house of Israel everyone according to his ways declares the Lord God so repent and turn from your transgressions lest iniquity be your ruin cast away from you all the transgressions you've committed make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit and Ezekiel goes on to explain actually God does that for us as well why will you die O house of Israel I have no pleasure in the death of anyone declares the Lord God so turn and live so the idea that the Old Testament God is a monster is a travesty of the truth and I think we as Christians sometimes get this a bit confused as well we have this view that somehow God is 50% just and 50% gracious it's kind of evenly balanced you know but if you have a

God who's 50% just and 50% gracious you've got to watch your step that you don't cross the line don't you that is not the God of the Bible that's a God made in our own image see everything God does is perfect in justice and perfect in grace but but and this this is the amazing thing about this chapter from the beginning to the Bible to the end of the Bible God reveals himself as the God who delights in showing us love and goodness that's what gives him pleasure he wants to give life he won't treat us as we deserve to be treated but purely according to his grace and mercy and forgiveness and I don't know how to say this in a way that's going to satisfy those of you basement systematic theologians but Ezekiel 18 shows that God is perfect in justice but extreme in grace he breaks out of systematic theology the God of creation who's already demonstrated his grace over generation after generation to

Israel pleading with men and women to turn from their wickedness to come back to him and live even at this very late stage even when they're under his judgment God appeals to them to come back just as he appeals to us because he will not impose his grace on us he will not force his grace on us we have to take responsibility for our lives we have to take responsibility for our destiny this is a true and genuine choice which we have to make on a day by day basis to repent and it's offered to us by the God who delights in nothing more than giving us life so very obviously I conclude and I say this if you're tempted to rest on your past achievements you need to repent you need to turn back to God perhaps you're facing a particular temptation you're considering turning your back on God listen cast away from you all your sins get yourself a new heart and a new spirit why will you die and I think this is the key to new and fresh spiritual energy and life the only way to break out of bitterness or spiritual lethargy or blame shifting is to turn to him and the only way we can turn to him is know that he promises to forget our sins and the reason we know that he will forget our sins and remember them no more is because God is a

God of extreme grace who delights in us and of course the measure of his grace and his delight in us is that he gives up his son for us and though my sins and your sins cry out for justice not mercy God has found a way where he can choose not to remember our sins against us by remembering our sins against him so that's very good news let's kneel and pray boxed in out and open to new h