

The God who Takes Pleasure in Giving Life

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[0 : 00] Father in heaven, we pray that you, by your Holy Spirit, will open our eyes to your word this morning. We ask that you will change us in our hearts and our minds by this glorious gospel that you have given to us.

Give us life as we follow your commandments. And so we commit our time to you in Jesus' name. Amen. Please be seated. Well, we're starting, we're actually in the second part of our series on Ezekiel.

And you're going to ask, why did you jump to chapter 18 from chapter 1 last week? We are jumping around a little bit in this series.

And the reason I think for this one, jumping 18 chapters, is because the first 24 chapters of Ezekiel really reveals God's judgment against sin.

Particularly the accumulated sin and rebellion of Israel against their God. But in chapter 18, we discover that the reason God speaks so powerfully, so forcefully in those first 24 chapters about judgment and sin, is because God is the God who takes pleasure in giving life.

[1 : 21] It is the reason for him speaking to his people about judgment and sin. The seriousness of rebelling against God. God takes pleasure in giving life.

This is who he is now for you and me, just as he was in the time of Ezekiel. And up until this part of the book, we have not seen the pleasure of God.

We have seen his wrath against sin and injustice. The context of Ezekiel, I talked to James and he said, you still need a little bit of context.

And it is that Israel has ceased to trust in God, basically. That they have gone after idols. Their relationships are unjust.

In fact, Ezekiel says that your wickedness is actually worse than the pagan nations that are around you. They've entered into disastrous military alliances because they actually don't trust in God for their security.

[2 : 25] And the result is that God has allowed the superpower Babylon to take over Israel. They have deported the king, Jehoiakim, and put up a puppet king who was Jehoiakim's uncle.

And they have deported 10,000 of the movers and shakers in Israeli society. The priests. The military leaders.

The business leaders. 10,000 of them have been deported. And Ezekiel was one of those deported to Babylon because he was a priest. It's 1,000 miles away from their home by the trade routes.

And Ezekiel, as you learned last week, is preaching to those deported people far away in Babylon. And the people who are there have a shallow hope that they are entitled to God's favor and that they will return to Jerusalem soon, that things will be okay there, and that somehow this disastrous situation would be made right.

But their feeling, according to Ezekiel, is that they deserve better from God than they are currently experiencing. But God speaks through Ezekiel in those 24 chapters.

[3 : 45] And he says, no. Your only hope is in God. And you have cut yourself off from God. God alone gives you life.

And you, his people, have chosen death. Their situation is spiritually and physically far worse than they imagine. Their sin is worse than they can possibly think.

In fact, they have made God their enemy. It's very different from the situation where they experience suffering. The people of God experience suffering in Exodus. Because they were the people of God.

They were made slaves. And we see that today in present-day Iraq and Syria. People are suffering as Christians because they stand for the faith of God. Because they are clinging to God.

The living God. In Jesus Christ. But this situation is a different kind of suffering. It is a suffering because they have cut themselves off, God's people, from the very source of life.

[4 : 47] From the source of truth. From all true happiness. They have cut themselves off from. And it's so bad that five years after this chapter, we're going to see that Jerusalem will be completely destroyed.

The temple will be destroyed. Everything that speaks of the Israelites being God's people are taken away. And almost everyone is deported to Babylon.

But that's not the last word. There is this extraordinary gift that God speaks to the Israelites in this passage today. In that desperate situation, so far away from Israel, subject to a military power, pagan power, God places life in front of them.

In that place far away from Israel. And as I read this passage, I realized that this message of life is guaranteed because it is the living God who is choosing to speak to these Israelites far, far away in this pagan land.

He is choosing to speak to them very, very clearly. And he is the God that has been made their enemy, who they have made their enemy, chooses to give them life.

[6 : 07] Let's look at verse 21 and 22 together. In fact, I think it would be good if we read these two verses out loud together. So it's on page 705, verse 21.

This is God speaking. Isn't that a powerful passage?

It's all about life. Three times it's repeated. Surely you shall live. Surely you shall not die. He shall live, it says at the end of verse 22.

Why is that repeated? Well, it is because these people have chosen the path of death. And that path of life, that light of the message of life needs to get through to them.

And here, God is giving a powerful gift. He is showing them the way to change paths in the midst of their darkness and their sin.

[7 : 34] And it is the gift of repentance, very simply. This is what God is giving to them in this chapter. And there's two parts to that repentance.

It's very, very practical. The first part is to turn away from all your sins. And the second part you saw there is to keep all my statutes and do what is just and right, God says.

There's two parts. There's a turning away and there is a clinging to God in practical ways. The message of Ezekiel in those 24 chapters at the beginning says, Take responsibility for your sin.

See your sin as God sees it. Don't hide from it and don't blame others for it. See it for what it is and turn away from it.

That's the message. But the people didn't want to do this. If you just glance up at the top of the chapter, chapter 18, they say this proverb in the verse 2 that says, The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge.

[8 : 41] In other words, they're saying the previous generation has sinned and we're getting the consequences. We're getting a raw deal from God because of what others have done, our ancestors and our parents.

This was a real barrier to their repentance. And I think it's a barrier for us as well. It's very easy to blame something or someone else for my own sin.

It's very easy to say, My parents didn't raise me right. Or my spouse is very difficult to live with. Or it's just not a good atmosphere at work to actually be a Christian.

Or I'm really suffering unfair things in my life. It's making me bitter. It's no wonder that I'm sinning. This was the complaint of Israel. God, you are so unfair.

Why would you allow this awful situation when it is not my fault? But Ezekiel 18 demolishes this idea that other generations or anything outside themselves are causing the Israelite sin.

[9 : 52] He is saying you are responsible for that sin. Look at verse 20. It says, The father may be the most sinful person in all the world.

But if the son chooses God's ways, he will live. If he repents in practical ways, he will live. Now I want to give a little bit of an aside here, a short one.

And the question may come up in your mind, How does this square with what God says when he says, I will visit the sins of the fathers on the third and fourth generation of the children of those who hate me.

But I'll show steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. How does this square with this promise that sins are visited on subsequent generations?

Well, the very simple answer is that the generations to come who experience the penalty of their fathers' sins are those who hate God, it says in that promise.

[10 : 58] We are not told how the fathers' sins become the children's sins, but we are told that the fathers' sins are visited on the children. In that, I should say, the fathers' sins are visited on the children.

It is because the children are themselves sinful. In other words, they are sinning in the same ways that their parents did. It is their own sin.

Judgment is deserved by them. So, what Ezekiel is saying is don't blame your sin and its consequences on your parents or your rulers.

He is saying today is the day. See your own sin and take responsibility for it. Don't wait for conditions to get right. Do it now.

It's a very urgent call because repentance is not easy. C.S. Lewis, in an essay in Mere Christianity, said something really helpful. He says, Repentance means unlearning all the self-conceit and self-will that we have been trained ourselves into.

[12 : 07] It means killing part of yourself, undergoing a kind of death. And I think that's why it's easy to shift blame and not to face our sin and to turn away from it.

There is a kind of death, as C.S. Lewis says. It's unlearning these patterns of sin. So, we need grace. We need grace to cling to God.

To put off the sin that so easily entangles us. And that's why the second part of repentance is just as urgent. It is to choose life.

Cling to God our life as you obey his commandments. And do what is right and just. You see, Ezekiel is saying that God imparts real life to the Israelites.

God imparts real life to you and I as we practically obey God. As we live for him. As we cling to him. Look down at verse 31.

[13 : 11] It says, Well, how can we possibly be doing that?

Well, we can't do that. That's a promise that God says is a gift from him. When he commands us to do this. To make a new heart. In other words, to have new affections in our life.

And a new spirit. Which means a new mind. We immediately know that this is a gift that God promises. Jesus does this in us. He makes us a new creation. As we practically obey him.

As we practically live for him. As we practically seek for his life in our lives. He alone strengthens our hearts and minds. In this work.

And for this work. You can hear the urgency at the end of. In verse 31. Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone.

[14 : 07] Declares the Lord. But here is his pleasure. To turn and live. Turn and live. This is God's great pleasure for us. His deep desire is to give life to you and to the world.

Every day. You and I are facing choices. That have to do with life or death. We choose life in what we say and do.

In our family relationships. In our work. In our church relationships. In our friendships. And the question God puts before us is. Will you choose life?

Or will you choose death? In those relationships. It is God's good pleasure. To give us the gift of repentance. And life. This is the gospel.

This is what Jesus has come to do. He has freed us. For this work of repentance. And Jesus says there is a great joy in heaven. For every sinner. That repents.

[15 : 06] So may the joy of the Lord. Be your strength. As you do the practical work of repentance. May you know the pleasure of God.

In casting away sin. And choosing life. This is the urgent call. From Ezekiel today for us. And I'd like to close with a prayer. It's a very old prayer.

400 years. That has a lot to do with this passage. Let's bow our heads and pray. Grant almighty God. Since nothing is more frail than we are.

And even when you have once stretched forth your hand to us. We labor under such infirmity. That numberless falls await us. Unless you help us.

Grant we pray. That being propped up by your unconquered strength. We may proceed in the course of thy holy calling. And may so bravely and perseveringly.

[16 : 04] Make war against all temptation. That we may at length enjoy in heaven. The fruit of our victory. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.