

Justice

We hear a lot about justice in the public discussions. Many people feel that they or someone whom they know has been treated or is still treated in an unjust manner. It is not a difficult matter for anyone to see why there is a perception of injustice.

We could spend the rest of our time here this morning talking about the fact that many of our elected officials seem to flaunt the very laws that we are expected to observe. We see people from minority groups rudely treated and that behavior is an accepted norm. The list could go on and we would never cover all of the examples of real or perceived injustice.

The scope of our focus this morning is on God and justice. We may hear people condemn God for the injustice we see in the world today. They look to the past and hold others accountable for the current situation. Well, this is not a new idea.

For many of us, we have attended Sunday school classes and been told about the constant failure of the children of Israel to follow the commandments of God. We know they were always whining and complaining. Their sins were apparent even in the highest levels of the leaders. We understand that eventually their sins resulted in several calamities. First, the once united prosperous kingdom split. Second, the northern kingdom was over-run by the Assyrians. Third, the Babylonians conquered the southern kingdom. In each of the conquered portions, many of the children of Israel were taken into captivity by the conquering armies.

As we reflect on these “Sunday school” lessons, we see the hand of God exacting justice. That is our perception. It may not be an erroneous perception but it was not the way the contemporaries viewed the events as they unfolded.

This morning, we will spend some time looking at just one of those people caught up in the captivity by an oppressive conquering army. We will look at a young man who was a priest of God and chosen by God to be His voice to the people of Israel. We will be looking at the prophet Ezekiel. My guess is that most of us have not spent much time in this book of the Bible. Ezekiel is not as popular as Isaiah or Jeremiah. Ezekiel can never compete with the beauty of the Psalms. Therefore, we tend to omit Ezekiel from our reading time spent in the Bible.

Let’s set the stage for today’s reading by going over a brief and extremely high-altitude history of Israel leading up to the exile and the writing of Ezekiel. After Solomon reigned for forty years, his son Rehoboam became king. There was a rebellion and the northern region rallied behind Jeroboam. Jeroboam became the king over the kingdom of Israel and Rehoboam maintained the southern region or the kingdom of Judah. This split occurred around 930 BC. The Assyrians invaded the northern region and took many into exile around 722 BC. Later, the Babylonians took many from southern region into exile around 587 BC.

The Babylonian invasion of the southern region happened in three waves. The first was occurred around 605 BC and in that wave, they took young talented people into exile. This is when Daniel was taken. The second wave occurred around 597 BC. In that wave, King Jehoiachin and approximately 10,000 more of the elite were taken into captivity. Ezekiel was in this wave. The third and final wave was around 587 BC. In this wave, Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed.

We have covered approximately 343 years in just a few minutes. This brings us to the book of Ezekiel. It was written by the young priest who was taken into Babylon about ten years before the fall of Jerusalem. Ezekiel was a prophet in exile. There is no record that he returned home from exile. In fact, Jewish tradition places his tomb in what is known as southern Iraq.

The point of this history lesson is to bring us to the 18th chapter of Ezekiel. The captured people were lamenting that they were paying for the sins of their fathers. In their view, they were unjustly being punished for wrongs they had not done.

Let's open our Bibles to the 18th chapter of Ezekiel as we examine whether God is a just god or a vengeful god.

Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying, "What do you mean by using this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying,

'The fathers eat the sour grapes,

But the children's teeth are set on edge'?

As I live," declares the Lord GOD (OR YAHWEH), "you are surely not going to use this proverb in Israel anymore. Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine. The soul who sins will die. (Ezekiel 18:1-4 NASB)

The exiled children of Israel were blaming their ancestors for their sins. Some of them may be remembering the injunction given with the Ten Commandments where the warning against idolatry would bring repercussions to multiple subsequent generations (Exodus 20:5 and Deuteronomy 5:9).

Whatever they were doing, it was a tactic we employ today. It's called blame shifting. We suffer therefore it must be your fault. Here, they were in exile in a foreign land and it must be their father's fault.

It is true that my poor decisions and choices might cause my children and grandchildren to suffer from my errors. However, each person and each generation have the chance and the choice to remain in poor circumstances or work to overcome those hardships.

The last sentence in verse 4 sums up the way God views each of us as individuals- **The soul who sins will die.** My sins may affect my children but my sins do not doom my children.

This morning we will not read verses 5 through 23 of Ezekiel 18. I would recommend that you do so at your leisure. However, we will note that in those verses, God sites various examples that show the principles of His judgement.

In verses 5 through 9. God tells that a person who live by the commandments will live. In verses 10 through 13. God tells that even a righteous men's sinful son will die. Here, we may recall the arguments that were used by the religious leaders with Jesus. "We're Abraham's seed." They were trying to claim their righteous father would save them. It didn't work (Luke 3:8 and John 8:39).

In verses 14 through 17, we learn that an unrighteous father may have a righteous son and that son will live. However, the son's righteousness does not save the unrighteous father (versed 18).

In verses 21 through 23, we see that wicked people may repent and turn away from their wickedness and live. In each of the cases sited by God, the individual has full choice over their actions and the consequence to their choice is fully theirs. People choose to do wickedly die and people choose to do righteously live. People have the opportunity to turn away from sin and live or to stay in sin and die.

Beginning in verse 25, God turns the tables on the complaining children.

Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not right.' Hear now, O house of Israel! Is My way not right? Is it not your ways that are not right? When a righteous man turns away from his righteousness, commits iniquity and dies because of it, for his iniquity which he has committed he will die. Again, when a wicked man turns away from his wickedness which he has committed and practices justice and righteousness, he will save his life. Because he considered and turned away from all his transgressions which he had committed, he shall

surely live; he shall not die. But the house of Israel says, ‘The way of the Lord is not right.’ Are My ways not right, O house of Israel? Is it not your ways that are not right? (Ezekiel 18:25-29 NASB)

God holds up their belief that God is not just. I can almost hear the sarcasm in these words: **‘The way of the Lord is not right.’**

God answers and clearly lays the charge of inequity and injustice on the shoulders of the children of Israel.

They tried to shift the blame for their situation on God holding them accountable for the sins of their fathers. God sums up His arguments that the righteous are righteous only because they have practiced righteousness and justice according to the Mosaic covenant, and the wicked are unrighteous because they have turned from the righteous demands of the law. God's grace, in harmony with his law, always allows the wicked to become righteous by turning from their wickedness and practicing the righteous ordinances of the Mosaic covenant. Likewise, the righteous will die if they fail to walk in God's holy ways. Righteousness or unrighteousness is not due to our ancestors nor was it due to the ancestors of the children of Israel. Righteousness is reckoned to the individual when he or she does righteous acts of God revealed in the Scriptures. Likewise, unrighteousness is credited to the individual who fails to practice God's righteous ways. The decision is up to the individual.

God issues a final statement that is as true now as it was then. Let's read this as we end our look at the 18th chapter of Ezekiel. We pick back up with verse 30.

“Therefore, I will judge you, O house of Israel, each according to his conduct,” declares the Lord GOD. “Repent and turn away from all your transgressions, so that iniquity may not become a stumbling block to you. Cast away from you all your transgressions which you have committed and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! For why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies,” declares the Lord GOD. “Therefore, repent and live.” (Ezekiel 18:30-32 NASB)

We began with the statement found in verse 4 of this chapter: **The soul who sins will die.** We end with God's passionate plea: **“Therefore, repent and live.”**

Each of us bear the burden for our own actions. We cannot truthfully blame anyone else. We have made the choices we have made and we make the choices that we continue to make.

For some of us, we think that it has been so long and we may never have to face God. Peter addresses that as he adds his voice to the words we have just read.

But do not let this one *fact* escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:8-9 NASB)

God is just. His justice is above impunity. He has allowed us time to repent and live.