

Followers of the Way

Righteousness

Philip Quenby, 4th February 2024

Ezekiel 18:1-32

This is the second in our sermon series looking at the question: what does the LORD require of us? (Micah 6:8). Today's theme is righteousness.

When we fixed on this as our opening sermon series of the year, we had no intention of making Ezekiel a centrepiece of it. Yet a fortnight ago, Lynda used Ezekiel 10 and 11, before that I referenced Ezekiel 25:15-17 and 40:1-4, and today here we are again in this prophetic book. So, I want to start by saying something about this incredible Scripture, which is so much a text for these end times. Although the book of Daniel is often called the "little Revelation," in many ways Ezekiel is to the Old Testament what Revelation is to the New. Whilst Revelation draws on virtually every Old Testament prophetic book, it is Ezekiel to which it owes its skeleton and much of its core. Both were written by exiles (John on the island of Patmos, Ezekiel in Babylon), and there are many other parallels between them.

They start with **similar visions of the heavenly landscape:**

The same four living creatures are seen in Ezekiel 1:4-24 and Revelation 4:6-8.

God's throne is similarly described in Ezekiel 1:26-28 and Revelation 4:3.

A roar of rushing waters is heard in Ezekiel 1:24 and 43:2 and Revelation 1:15, 14:2 and 19:6.

A sea of glass features in Ezekiel 1:22 and Revelation 4:6.

They show **God dealing in similar fashion with His servants:**

The prophet is given a scroll to eat in Ezekiel 2:8-3:3 and Revelation 10:9-10.

A mark is put on the foreheads of God's people in Ezekiel 9:4 and Revelation 7:2-4.

They describe **similar patterns of judgment and war:**

Each tells of four dreadful judgments: Ezekiel 14:21 and Revelation 6:1-8.

Seven oracles in Ezekiel 25-32 mirror the seven seals of Revelation 6.

Seven angels of judgment feature in Ezekiel 9:2-3 and Revelation 8:2 and 6.

Both use the image of a cup: Ezekiel 23:32-34 and Revelation 17:4.

Ezekiel 27 laments over Tyre as Revelation 18:9-20 laments over Babylon.

Gog and Magog appear in each: Ezekiel 38-39 and Revelation 20:8.

Both tell of the clash of mighty armies: Ezekiel 39 and Revelation 9:3-11, 16:16 and 19:19.

They use **similar terminology**:

The term Son of Man is used in Ezekiel 1:26-28 and Revelation 1:9-18.

The Lion of Judah appears in Ezekiel 19:1-9 and 21:26-27 and Revelation 5:5.

They talk in similar ways about **end-time renewal and healing**:

Ezekiel 40-44 describes measuring the temple as Revelation 21 describes measuring the city.

The river of life flows from the throne of God in Ezekiel 47 as in Revelation 22:1-2.

The breath of life in Ezekiel 37:5 and 37:10 is the same as in Revelation 11:11.

Each speaks of trees whose leaves are for healing: Ezekiel 47:12 and Revelation 22:2.

Both conclude with God making his dwelling with men: Ezekiel 48:35 and Revelation 21:3.

The city of God appears in Ezekiel 48:35 and Revelation 21:10-27.

Ezekiel has details Revelation leaves out, and vice versa. Together they give a fuller end-time picture, with Ezekiel helping flesh out some of the things Revelation takes for granted when it describes God's unfolding end-time judgments. Ezekiel explains the underlying rationale for these judgments, and shows how they proceed from God's righteousness. The righteousness of God in turn feeds into His justice, which we will be looking at in the next session in this series.

Every word in the Bible is there for a purpose. There is not a word too many or too few. Each occupies exactly the place in the text it should, and every word of God deserves to be weighed and pondered. But sometimes a phrase is so important, God says it twice – for example, when talking of a wonderful future without war, when men “will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning-hooks.” (Isaiah 2:4, Micah 4:3). Now, if God says the same thing three times over, it requires our closest attention. The passage we just had read has at its heart a supremely important thing for us to grasp as the sheer awfulness of end-time events unfolds around us. It goes to the issue of God's purpose in bringing these judgments, and whether He is in any way unfair. These are issues we need to be able to explain to people we meet as our own nation starts to slide into greater and greater chaos, with many suffering as a result. The short version of the explanation we have to offer is this: hard times are coming because we have turned away from God and acted in ways that are displeasing to Him, but He is not bringing judgment to beat us up for the sake of it. His aim is to make us think about what we have done, to repent, and to turn back to Him. And if we do this, he will bless and restore us.

Well, back to our Bible text. Twice in the context of speaking about the personal responsibility we all bear before Him for what we have done and failed to do, God says, “Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign LORD. Rather am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?” (Ezekiel 18:23, see also 18:32). He follows this up later, when He tells Ezekiel as His appointed watchman to proclaim to the house of Israel, “As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn

from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?" (Ezekiel 33:11). God's call to Israel through His prophet is one He wants His Church to issue today to our nation: a call to turn again to the ways of righteousness, because righteousness brings blessing and life. In Proverbs, King Solomon twice says, "righteousness delivers from death" (Proverbs 10:2, 11:4), affirming that "in the way of righteousness there is life" (Proverbs 12:28), and "he who pursues righteousness and love finds life" (Proverbs 21:21). God longs for us to choose righteousness – to "choose life" (Deuteronomy 30:19) – for "righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people." (Proverbs 14:34). We are presently in deep disgrace as a nation, because so much of our personal and collective behaviour is unrighteous.

The dictionary definition of righteous is something or someone just, upright, morally good, equitable, deserved, justifiable, or fitting. Righteousness and justice are part and parcel of the same thing. In fact, in both Hebrew and Greek, a single word group lies behind these two English terms (Hebrew, *tsedek*; Greek, *dikaio*) so the linkage is clear in the New Testament as well as in the Old. Righteousness is one of God's qualities, for He is "righteous in all [His] ways, and holy in all his works." (Psalm 145:17, KJV). God's righteousness means He always acts in accordance with what is right and just, and is Himself the ultimate standard by which these things are measured. Moses talks of how "all his ways are just. [He is] a faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he." (Deuteronomy 32:4). David sings, "The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart." (Psalm 19:8). And God Himself says, "I the LORD speak the truth; I declare what is right." (Isaiah 45:19). Because God is righteous, it is necessary for Him to punish sin. Sin is wrong, and deserves punishment, not reward, or even indifference. When God sent Jesus as a sacrifice to bear the punishment for sin, it was "to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished" (Romans 3:25).

All this forms the backdrop to what our Scripture passage has to say. God starts by reminding Ezekiel about a maxim that was current in the prophet's time: "The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." (Ezekiel 18:2). The idea behind this is of later generations suffering for the bad choices of their forebears. We might think there is some logical force to this. A family will suffer if the father leaves the mother, or turns to drink. National and civic leaders can cause problems that linger long after their term of office has ended. And the Bible itself confirms that the consequences of some sins can be felt to the third and fourth generation, and even beyond (Exodus 20:5 and elsewhere). God is not going back on His Word, or denying the kind of practical examples I have just given. He is making a different point, which has to do with the fact that "every living soul belongs to [Him], the father as well as the son – both alike belong to [Him and] the soul who sins is the one who will die." (Ezekiel 18:4). Whatever the practical consequences of one person's sin may be for others (consequences that might very well continue bringing misery down several generations), when it comes to matters of eternal destiny, what determines how God treats us will be what we personally have done or failed to do. God says precisely this in words of one syllable: if a person behaves righteously, "He will not die for his father's sin; he will surely live. But his father will die for his own sin, because ... he did what was wrong" (Ezekiel 18:17-18).

This is a very important message to hear at any time, but had extra resonance at this point in Israel's history. In the immediately preceding chapter, Ezekiel prophesied an end to the independent existence of the Israelite kingdom of Judah, with its army put to flight and its last king condemned to die a captive in Babylon (Ezekiel 17:19-21). These things were the outworking of God's judgment against a corrupt leadership and unfaithful people. Things were so bad and God was so set upon judgment after Judah had spurned every chance to turn to Him, that He even told Ezekiel, "Son of man, set your face against Jerusalem and preach against the sanctuary. Prophecy against the land of Israel and say to her: "This is what the LORD says: I am against you." (Ezekiel 21:2-3). The resulting fall of Jerusalem, destruction of the temple, and seventy years of captivity in Babylon were terrible times for all Israelites, whether they stayed in the land or were deported to Babylon. The book of Daniel shows the reality of living under the oppressive regime of a pagan despot whose word was law, and who would have people killed or tortured on a whim. Even those Jews who gained high office and lived in comparative luxury were walking on eggshells every day of their lives. For these unfortunate exiles, it may well have seemed they were paying the price for the failings of others – and to some extent, of course, they were. So, for them to be told they were not cast to one side altogether and could still get right with God personally was a message of hope and liberation, even though they were in bondage.

Put that in our own context. When hard times come on a nation, everyone is affected. Some may suffer worse than others, and some may be able to shield themselves to a degree, but no-one can entirely insulate themselves from their surroundings. Poverty, crime, crumbling infrastructure, dysfunctional institutions, violence, extremism, and terrorism will make themselves felt in every region, every family, and in all walks of life. If this is what we are heading into, and if the only way out is for a nation to turn back to God, we need to be able to explain not just what is happening, and why. We also need to tell people what it is they are supposed to turn back to – what righteousness consists of, in other words. As far as that is concerned, a glance at the examples of righteousness and unrighteousness God gives Ezekiel provides a fair starting-point. The LORD says a righteous person "does what is just and right" (Ezekiel 18:5); does not sacrifice to idols or engage in false worship (Ezekiel 18:6); avoids sexual sin (Ezekiel 18:6); "does not oppress anyone" (Ezekiel 18:7); honours his commitments and deals fairly in business (Ezekiel 18:7); "does not commit robbery" (Ezekiel 18:7); is charitable and shows compassion to those less fortunate than themselves (Ezekiel 18:7); does not exploit people economically (Ezekiel 18:7); "withholds his hand from doing wrong and judges fairly between man and man" (Ezekiel 18:8); "follows [God's] decrees and faithfully keeps [His] laws" (Ezekiel 18:9). The last two general statements operate as a summary of what has gone before. They describe what righteousness looks like as between man and man on the one hand, and as between man and God on the other, prefiguring Jesus later condensing the entire Old Testament Law into the need to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength; and to love our neighbour as ourselves (Mark 12:29-31, Luke 10:27-28). (The ethical teaching in Ezekiel 18 is effectively the same as the teaching Jesus brought, albeit He emphasised that what God esteems most is our heart condition rather than outward observance of formulaic religion.)

By contrast, an unrighteous person will be characterised by violence (Ezekiel 18:10) and behaviour that is the very opposite of how the righteous act (Ezekiel 18:11-13, 18:18). The righteous will “live” (Ezekiel 18:9, 18:17, 18:19), that is, gain everlasting life, and so will an unrighteous person who changes their ways (Ezekiel 18:21, 18:27-28); whereas those who persist in unrighteousness or turn from a formerly righteous way of life will not (Ezekiel 18:13, 18:24, 18:26). This is the unfolding on a personal level of what God had shown Jeremiah playing out in the affairs of nations when he took him down to the potter’s house (Jeremiah 18:1-12). God is never unfair. We can hardly complain that “if a righteous man turns from his righteousness and commits sin and does the same detestable things the wicked man does ... None of the righteous things he has done will be remembered” (Ezekiel 18:24), since the flip side is that “if a wicked man turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he will save his life.” (Ezekiel 18:27, see also Ezekiel 18:21). In that event, “None of the offenses he has committed will be remembered against him.” (Ezekiel 18:22). God is on humanity’s side and is rooting for us. Within the context of His righteousness, holiness, and justice, He has done everything possible to load the dice in our favour. Note that in the examples God gives Ezekiel, those who live outnumber those who do not by a factor of two. God’s heart is for everyone to come to a saving knowledge of Him. Whether they make that choice or not is between Him and them. Our job is to present them with the facts they need to make an informed choice, and (as led by the Holy Spirit) to deal with any demonic oppression that prevents them being free to choose.

Righteousness should be pursued for its own sake as something required by God, which delights His heart, but it is also desirable because blessing flows from it. The Bible repeatedly contrasts the results of righteous conduct with the consequences of sinful behaviour, using “but” as a pivot: “The wicked man earns deceptive wages, but he who sows righteousness reaps a **sure reward**” (Proverbs 11:18); “The righteousness of the blameless **makes a straight way** for them, but the wicked are brought down by their own wickedness” (Proverbs 11:5); “The righteousness of the upright **delivers** them, but the unfaithful are trapped by evil desires” (Proverbs 11:6); “Righteousness **guards** the man of integrity, but wickedness overthrows the sinner” (Proverbs 13:6); “The LORD detests the way of the wicked but he **loves those** who pursue righteousness.” (Proverbs 15:9). Whatever fate may befall a nation or people-group, there will always be a distinction in terms of outcomes (not just in the next life, but also in this) between the righteous and the unrighteous. It was so when God brought plagues on Egypt, for He said, “I will deal differently with the land of Goshen, where my people live ... I will make a distinction between my people and [Pharaoh’s] people.” (Exodus 8:23, see also Exodus 9:4, 11:7). And it will be the same in our own day as the consequences of the choices we have made as a nation continue to be felt around us. If the people of God will walk in His righteousness, He will make a Goshen *for us* and He will make a Goshen *of us* in these days, so our fellow citizens will see a distinction between those who belong to Him and those who do not. This will help many come into the kingdom.

In this nation, we have turned from God’s ways and tried to build on wrong foundations. Sadly, this has been so even in the Church. We need to relearn the biblical wisdom our forefathers knew: that “a throne is established through righteousness” (Proverbs 16:12,

see also Proverbs 25:5), and “better a little with righteousness than much gain with injustice.” (Proverbs 16:8). A corrosive collectivism has taken hold in elite circles that tries to pigeonhole people according to innate characteristics they are said to possess, and the history of the group to which they belong, rather than dealing with them as unique individuals, each made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). Ezekiel confirms that, whatever the proponents of these theories may say, we are not prisoners of a mechanistic or deterministic universe, and do not need to labour under the weight of the sins of our ancestors. Whatever our forebears may have been or done, whatever faults and failings they may have had, we are not the slaves of inherited characteristics or outcomes. Every single person on this planet has been created by God with a mind, soul, and spirit, and the ability to choose a different path from the one taken by previous generations. We see this in the case of “a son who sees all the sins his father commits, and though he sees them he does not do such things” (Ezekiel 18:14, with examples of the sins given in 18:15-17), and consequently gains life. Repentance unlocks forgiveness, and opens the way to eternal life in Christ Jesus. To say otherwise is to deny people their freedom, and deny them their God-given potential. God hates seeing anyone in captivity, which is why, at the start of His earthly ministry, Jesus quoted the prophet Isaiah to proclaim “freedom for the prisoners.” (Luke 4:18, Isaiah 61:1-2).

God’s people should reflect His character, so we should likewise be righteous, and we should proclaim the same message Jesus did. For a nation in deep trouble, we are to be problem-diagnosers, solution-presenters, and freedom-proclaimers, speaking the Word of God to our people as Ezekiel did to his. The message today is no different from what it was then: “Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, O house of Israel?” (Ezekiel 18:30-31). May it be so!

Amen