

“Tell Me the Old, Old Story”
Sermon for 19 August 2018
Text: Ezekiel 17-19

Ezekiel 17 doesn't contain a new message: 1. God is sovereign; 2. he judges those who refuse to do his will; and 3. he has a steadfast plan to preserve a people for the glory of his name. Like Genesis 37-41 there are events related to us that disclose **a divine hand orchestrating the flow of things**—a flow that is hidden from human eyes, behind the apparent and surface meaning of things. That is to say, things do not always appear **the way they truly are** to us on first blush. There are significances and goals behind the events—reflecting a divine agenda. Take the actions of Nebuchadnezzar: they are not random, nor arbitrary; they are appointed. The time for judgment has come upon Zedekiah and that, grim and sore though it may be, is but a fraction of what God has in store for Israel! The prince has sinned and the nation is, as a whole insubordinate—imagine a whole nation plainly out of step with God's will, plan and purposes. Zedekiah has most to fear from the high King of heaven; but he is tone deaf, spiritually speaking, appallingly ignorant and arrogant.

Zedekiah breaks his oath to Nebuchadnezzar—who had left in place a plan for Jerusalem to endure as a city subject to Babylon *which was God's plan for the city but Zedekiah, thinking that he knew better than God how to rule the nation*, broke his word and sent ambassadors to Egypt, to Pharaoh, and sought to form an alliance which would enable the king to throw off the Babylonian oppressors. However, it becomes clear that Zedekiah is an opportunist; a useless shepherd who care for nothing but devouring the sheep. His attempted escape from the besieged city reveals his true colors! So he fomented revolt against Babylon and rebellion against God, both. These parables depict current events—there are five of them.

The first parable 17:1-6 (the series runs from 17:1-24 and 19:1-14) depicts a great eagle (Nebuchadnezzar) plucking the top of a tall cedar tree (Jehoiachin), planting it in fertile soil elsewhere, in **a land of trade, a city of merchants** (v.4)—where it flourishes (God's plan for it!). This signifies the many Jewish citizens, Israel's cultural elite, along with Jehoiachin, being carried off into captivity where God faithfully ministers to them for some seventy years. (vv.11-14) The second parable (17:7-10, 15-21) deals with another section of that parent cedar. This part (Zedekiah, the puppet king) of the tree gives its allegiance to a second eagle (Egypt)—therefore that part is slated for destruction by God due pointedly to this diplomatic/political maneuver. Zedekiah trusted in politics more than in the Lord apparently—and pays for geopolitical folly with first his eyes, and then his life. This is a personal judgment for the prince of Israel's **breach of covenant** (v.15). But vv. 9-10 inform us that **this vine** (a treacherous weed—this sprig becomes a low spreading vine) will not thrive (**he, God, will pull up its roots** (Zedekiah will be taken captive by the Lord's snare!) **and cut off its fruit** (the king's sons will be slain before him) **so that it withers** (Zedekiah dies blind in Babylon). Meanwhile, the destruction of Jerusalem will occur, is a different order of judgment because of its national focus—for its idolatry, faithlessness to God and immorality. A third parable follows (17:22-23), *and, note, these three parables are in historical order*. In it God takes a sprout from a tall cedar (another horticultural image) and plants it atop of Israel's highest mountain where it becomes the tree of the universe—so, out of the

house of David, there is a sprig (the Messianic seedling) planted and of his kingdom there shall be no end . . . a second cedar.

Again the fit between these current events and the riddle/parable is for the purpose of further revelation—things that God wants his people to know and understand. The purpose is education, not entertainment; education about the facts of Zedekiah's rebellion and subsequent judgement.

Before we move forward, we might observe a few things:

- Anyone who rejects God's plans will never flourish.
- Seeking refuge in anyone or anything but God can be a fatal mistake.
- Zedekiah did not "escape" divine judgment, and neither will we apart from Christ's aid. We will be held personally responsible for our sin.
- What is seen has more to do with what is unseen than we tend to be aware of. Zedekiah's capture and punishment had to do with the breaking of his oath—but the following cataclysm has the deeper purpose that everyone should know **that God is the Lord, and that he has spoken**. (v.21) Just because we do not know what is actually going on *does not mean nothing is going on!* ¹
- We note that the worst that Nebuchadnezzar could do was to kill Zedekiah's sons, then to blind and execute him—there is however, a second death, which God can bring upon the unrepentant and the wicked—full exposure to all the wrath of God—which is unspeakably terrible.

Chapter 17 ends with a promise... this "second cedar" represents a new beginning *all over again*. It could have ended with the lament of chapter 19; but it doesn't! God wants to signal that he is not done with them yet, as a people, and he is not done with the Davidic line either.

Chapter 18 is an excursus, a digression in the written text, the series of parables, which deals with a common cultural descent into a fatalistic worldview. It is a gem in the setting of "generic blame-shifting." Namely, they, Israelites, are *suffering because of the sins of their fathers and grandfathers*. If I said, they are "afflicted by their ancestry," or, their past, the element of **blame-shifting in their moral fatalism** would be blatantly **obvious**. Indeed, we Americans are, as a culture, also guilty of veering toward this extreme *when we seek to revise our history, taking down statues* of those in the past who are now deemed "morally unfit" for honors bestowed—either because they *owned* slaves, or espoused social and moral prejudices we *currently* deem reprehensible. Such pride and self-commendation ("How foolish our parents appear to be until we are exposed to their actual wisdom. Some of them are our moral betters, and we know it!) They pursued greater good against stiffer resistance! Without their earnest pursuit of equality and equity, we would still be waiting to get up to bat. What did they ever do without our "superior" guidance and most "current" insights!

¹ God's goodness has a dynamic property. Similarly, morality is not static but has an unfolding quality—it is a divine pursuit/pressure which brings about cleansing, purgation, purification and refinement in one's unfolding life. Thus we can say it both happens to us and through us as **moral agents of a moral God**.

But what is most odd-is that we seek ground in history to discredit our political rivals, hoping to disqualify our political enemies (opponents?). “History” is good enough for digging up dirt, but not for distributing honors and praise!? I suppose this explains why some seek to acid-wash their past, smash devices and pray that back-up copies won’t come to light before the next election cycle². Obliteration makes research more difficult, friends, but not impossible.

I am generally opposed to such cultural/generational one-up-man-ship chiefly because it is so narrow a point of view *and because we will soon be as obsolete as those we presume to sit in judgment over!* This is unavoidable in a world where many frames of knowledge are regularly jettisoned as we learn more, as we gain in our powers of observation, measurement and theoretical synthesis. Cultural humility, to coin a usage, requires a broader approach and cautions us against the prejudice of presumed superiority. That aside, it is the fatalistic edge of blame-shifting that Ezekiel is prompted by God to critique and expose.

Here’s the proverb Ezekiel’s contemporaries shared: **The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.** This is literal nonsense! What someone else puts in their mouth has no impact on my mouth! Many proverbs share this piece of non-transferability. God demands to know what do the people mean by this?! Why? Because he finds it to be offensive, and untrue . . . sin does have consequences, both immediate and deferred, but everyone suffers for his own sin. There’s enough to go around. In blaming their fathers, Ezekiel’s generation is in denial that there is only one person who chooses to sin: yourself. When God disciplines those he loves; they are individually judged.

When children are born addicted, or suffer from fetal alcoholic syndrome, it was the mother’s behavior that is sinful. She did not choose to desist from drugs, or from heavy drinking while pregnant. And, preferring drinking to health, she caused damage to others. This is not very different from a drunk driver—only somewhat less sudden, and radical—and irrevocable! When a parent walks out on the family, the consequences of that sin are visited upon the remaining spouse and the children *but those effects are not as sinful as leaving.* The abandoned child may cry itself to sleep but that, though sad, is not sin either. *We do suffer as a result of the sinful choices of others* but that should not shield us from admitting that most of the negative consequences we deal with in this life are traceable to personal choices/decisions. Sinful choices do have consequences. When we sober up and admit our personal responsibility, moral progress becomes possible—tearing down statues, and revising history may shield us from our past but they will not heal us, or

² Some pundits, social critics, are not satisfied with revising the narratives—the stories that we tell surrounding our monuments, statues and memorials. The more extreme would deny us any heroes at all! The management of history is prominent in our day because it is politically based . . . and very selective. You would think that great Christian minds, inside and outside of scientific and philosophical circles, never existed *but Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, William James, B. F. Skinner and Darwin* continue to be venerated in academia. They are not held to the same “racist” standard because they are viewed as supportive of the “Humanist Experiment,” or liberal philosophy. What is lost in this development is the use of “landmarks” as warnings—and so, too, we lose the encouragement that people, just like us, have turned about and done great things. We only install the “fence of contemporary ‘goodness’” around those who subscribe to our views and values—as if that were even possible historically speaking. Banning points of view is analogous to book-burnings.

atone for our forefathers' sins. Yes, we deal with social wreckage all the time—and we strive, sometimes, not to assign blame as to who caused the mess! However, it remains the fact that there were drivers involved in the accident. Milk does not spill itself!

Back to the exiles. People who live fatalistically commonly state that they do not *deserve* the situation they are in and they do not believe things will ever change. The discomforting truth is that they might deserve much worse! And sometimes the catastrophe is messy, but not ruinous—sometimes it is momentary and other times it is unalterable. Removing a statue, or changing the name of a school or a street, is an external change—but it changes little on the inside, *God expects a change of heart and transformation through repentance*. That claim of “undeserved” is tame, however, compared to the implicit accusation that **God is unfair**—worse, that he is **unjust**! That assertion is bad theology—an unwarranted conclusion. Unbiblical. Moreover, it insulates people from the necessity of ownership and repentance—spiritual necessities if we are to find life!

“The words “live/life” or “death/die” are used more than 28 times in this text (chapter). ***The repetition reveals the emphasis.***” (Landon Dowden, p.95) We want to blame others for our situation, our circumstances, *no one compels us to sin—we, as it were, pull the trigger on temptation and choose to sin*. We sped, we erred, we took our eyes off the driving, we ran off the road . . . we were there. The accident is ours to own.

Stop blaming your parents and grandparents—our past, our sociology, our ancestors! *Blaming our ancestors* is operationally a form of ancestor worship, a negative form, one stripped of any positivity. ***This is moral fatalism***. It is victimization and self-enslavement in the prison of our worldview. An excuse is not an explanation . . . take it away, and the motivation of sin is found still standing³. It is the power of sin that must be answered, steadily and persistently, if we are truly set free in Christ. The fact that we stumble does not erase the bigger truth that we are moving forward! When I suggest that blaming is fatalistic, I am aiming at the hidden assumptions behind the worldview: “This is how things work . . . a mind-set that affirms an inevitability, an uncontrollable determinism *and nothing can change it.*” THAT is simply not true. **God is not unable to change me**, or anything else. He is always fair: punishing those who sin against him, who commit treason against him. We are subjects of a heavenly king, and sin is the behavior of rebels and traitors. So sin is not just wrong, it's active wickedness.

It is impossible to accuse God of wrongdoing and to assume he either won't notice, or won't respond to the provocation.

Forget the ball! God never takes his eyes off you. He brings good out of evil—he even harnesses horrors to nudge us forward, heavenward. Picturing God as your loving Father in heaven makes that surveillance friendly and welcome—but if your picture of God is that he is mean-spirited, vengeful and wrathful, a pleasure-hating ogre, unfair and unjust, your right to privacy might just trump your desire to know and to be known by God. I commend the former. There is no place in this for bad

³ We must avoid condemnation without cause, complaints without grounds and actively choose to stop cursing—blessing with our mouths instead! Take responsibility.

karma, or for random “laws of the cosmos,” cruelly indifferent and impersonal! God is offendable because he is a personal, moral being *in a moral universe* created for moral relationships. He dialogues with us along these lines, in this vein.

Through the prophet, God presents three cases: a father, a son and his grandson. (18:5-17) the man who follows God’s statutes, is obedient, free and faithful. **He will live**—both presently and in the age to come. The son chooses to be a violent, blood-shedder—unlike his father!—**he will not live . . . his detestable acts will slay him—he will die**, again both presently and eternally(!). Both have eternal live, but in entirely different conditions, or setting (the father in heaven, his son in hell). Now comes the grandson, he sees the sinful ways of his father *and chooses not to walk in them*: **He will certainly live. Everyone chooses to sin, or not to sin!**

Every person is accountable to God for his, or her own sin.

Deut. 24:16 reads: **“Fathers shall not be put to death [with] for their sons, nor shall sons be put to death [with] for their fathers; everyone shall be put to death for his own sin.** Jeremiah will cope with this same worldview in the same generation (Jere. 31:29-30):

**“In those days they will not say again,
‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes,
And the children’s teeth are [lit., dull] set on edge.’**

30 But everyone will die for his own iniquity; each man who eats the sour grapes, his teeth will be [dull] set on edge.

No one in Ezekiel’s audience cites Deut. 24—it would have ended some of the nonsense expressed in the misleading proverb. **Knowing the word** clearly does have advantages; *it gives us the edge of truth*. And no one references Exodus 34:7: where God explains himself, **who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.** And if they had gotten that far in the bible studies (Scripture lessons in synagogues on the Sabbath?), they would have read past Exodus 20:5 containing directives on the ten commandments: **You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me.** (Exod. 34:7) It is **those who hate God** that suffer from the iniquity of their forefathers—detestable things *that they choose to persist in!* Their hatred is the problem!

Personal righteousness is evidenced more by practice
than by mere profession

The only innocent person God ever punished is His own sinless Son! In all other cases, those who turn from the sin patterns of their parents simply will not be punished for what they didn’t do . . . **only for what they did do.** The rebellious children of rebellious parents will receive identical treatment—for all have sinned.

Wicked children will not be given a pass because of their devout and obedient parents . . . and just because a father chose the path of sin, the children are **not** bound to follow in his footsteps. We are free moral agents if we are in Christ—and if we are not in Christ, *getting there should be our primary concern*. King Josiah broke with the patterns of evil kings, choosing to follow David's example(!)—there's a choice we can make, too! But, and this is a critical take-away: personal righteousness is evidenced more by practice than by mere profession—talk is cheap, the walk matters. And, lastly, when we are being disciplined, we should look no farther than to ourselves and repent of blame-shifting.

Taking accountability for our actions

We are like the people exiled in Babylon in this: we need to be rescued from our sinning, more than we need to be rescued from oppressive circumstances and unhappy situations. We need a deeper relief than relief from spiritual discomfort. Drugs and distraction simply won't do the trick. Pray for grace. Appreciation of grace is caught up in awareness of sin. If what the people heard in Ezekiel 18:5-20 was true, then the worldview they walked it, the one expressed in the proverb, was false. (Again there is enough sin to go around—we're all guilty.) Chapter 18 is about taking accountability for our actions. Remember, repentance and restoration are God's goals for discipline, not personal ruin!

We do not have to stay the way we are—or the way our parents were (in sin).

Making sin a thing of the past is a great move. And that is possible because God's grace can bring true and lasting change, genuine transformation.

Past righteousness never covers for present sin. Life differs from a debit sheet, you can't put righteousness by to draw on later! Consistent and present—faith is to be demonstrated in an ongoing godly lifestyle.

Remember that one of the sweetest outcomes of being saved is this: at last I can, for the first time, freely choose to do what he would have me do! DO that and you will live.

This whole business is neither arbitrary or unpredictable. God punishes those who turn to sin, and forgives those who turn from sin. Simple. God presents that as fair, we should agree with him. A proper vision of God, not one distorted by suspicions of weakness, unfairness and injustice—our suspicions are not his attributes! However, true repentance requires a new heart and a new spirit:

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh (a sentient (knowing) and sensitive (feeling) heart!). I will place My spirit within you and cause you to follow My statutes and carefully observe My ordinances. (Ezekiel 36:26-27)

Careful observance is obedience and obedience is perfect freedom. And freedom is the essence of **Repent and live!** Abandon death and choose life. Is this how we treat the others in our lives? Do we seek their best even though they have sought our harm? Do we initiate forgiveness and reconciliation . . . or do we wait for them to

come to their senses, or to come to us? The Christian life is nothing is not peaceful and proactive. Jesus went about doing good. We should be more like him.

From Chapter 19 we learn about **weeping for those who lead us**. Verses 2-4 suggest that we should weep when they intentionally reject God's ways. We should weep when they are full of pride (vv.5-9) and when they refuse to listen to God (vv. 10-14). All three of these grounds exist for us in our America—we should take note and pray together to remedy in each situation. We should lament that they reject God ways when they ought to follow in them. And we lament when they are so full of pride that they refuse to change their positions, or to take a courageous stand for what is right, and just and true. The equivocation is killing us! And with tears and loud cries we should protest our leadership's failure to heed the Lord's admonition and direction.

Amen