

Dear Friends in Christ,

Well, that certainly wasn't one of those upbeat songs of praise, was it?!

Before you, God, the Judge of all, with grief and shame I humbly fall.

I see my sins against you, Lord, my sins of thought and deed and word.

They press me sore; to you I flee: O God, be merciful to me!

It is my hope and prayer that each of us meant what we just sang. That is a hymn of repentance, of humbly falling before the Lord, acknowledging our sins, seeking God's mercy with the intention of not sinning in those ways any more, but instead pleasing him with our lives. That's what repentance is. Today we get a more in-depth look at repentance and the love of God. It is one of the most important subjects for anyone. It always has been, as we'll see this morning. It is absolutely vital that we understand repentance because it is connected to Christ and to our salvation. The way we'll look at repentance today is to hear a bit of a story, a true story. We'll hear exactly what the eternal, unchanging God said to his people then and how we're in the same position before the Holy God who told them: **REPENT AND LIVE!**

I don't believe there is a person here this morning who can truly relate to what had recently happened to Ezekiel. Here he was, a faithful child of God from a priestly family, living in Jerusalem—the very heart of God's land of Judah. All you have to do is read the book of Ezekiel and you'll come away admitting that God truly blessed him with intelligence and education in diverse fields. That all sounds very nice, but in 597 BC something happened that changed his life forever.

The Babylonians had risen to super-power status in 612 BC and in 605 cherry-picked some of the brightest and best from Judah to serve in Babylon. (You might remember Daniel as one of those.) They did this again in 597, taking Judah's king and other important people—Ezekiel was one of those. It's not that life was horrible there in Babylon for Ezekiel, however. He was married, he had a house, and he enjoyed a relatively free existence. Many of you know how life changes when you move to a new place or when you get married or buy a house. But God had a bigger change in mind for Ezekiel. In 593, while he was in exile in Babylon, the LORD called Ezekiel to serve as a prophet. So not only was he a priest, trying to serve God's people far away from the temple, he was now to be the LORD's mouthpiece, announcing to the people the very words of God himself. While we might see how this could be difficult under those circumstances, that's not the half of it!

This was the most horrible period in Judah's history. They knew how the Assyrians had carried off their brothers and sisters under God in the north, in Israel, just about 120 years before. Those people were never heard from again. Now the Babylonians seemed intent on doing the same thing to them in the southern kingdom of Judah. And Ezekiel, God's spokesman, was called to forecast doom and gloom for their nation. The message in the first 24 chapters of Ezekiel is that of God's judgment and their nation's impending troubles. More of them would be taken captive. Jerusalem would be destroyed. The temple would lie in ruins.

Things were terrible and the forecast looked even worse. It was kind of like watching the recent hurricane trackers as Harvey, Irma, Maria, and Nate all bore down on the U.S. My parents' house in Florida was looking like it could have been totally destroyed by a direct hit from Irma. It seemed like certain damage and possible destruction. Thankfully, it didn't happen; we can't perfectly predict these things. But the impending destruction upon God's people was a sure thing because God said it would happen. As you might imagine, there was a fair amount of grumbling and accusations made against God by his people.

As we sit here this morning, our obvious question is "Why?" Why did God allow this to happen to his people? The answer is simple: God's people had repeatedly turned away from him. One of their previous kings, King Manasseh, was terribly rebellious against the Lord. God calls his sins "detestable." Among other things, he promoted the worship of false gods and built temples to them right inside the temple of God! And God's people followed their king's lead instead of following the Lord's. The people who did that were the parents and grandparents of the people who were now doing the complaining to God. But the truth is they were doing those things too. You heard their complaint and the Lord's response to their griping.

You know proverbs like "*A bird in the hand beats two in the bush*" and "*A friend in need is a friend in deed.*" Well, the people of Ezekiel's time had some proverbs too. And this is one of them: **'The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.'** That doesn't sound like a particularly pleasant proverb, does it? No, when the people would say this, they were blaming God and they were blaming their parents and others who went before them. **"The fathers"** did sinful things before God **"and the children"** have to suffer is the sense of that proverb. *"It's someone else's fault, not mine!"* they said. *"It's unfair that we have to suffer because of what they did!"* they claimed. *"How can you blame the children for what their parents and grandparents did?"* That's what they accused God of doing.

They may have even been twisting the words God had spoken to Moses which said, **I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me (Exodus 20:6).** That may even sound unfair to us at first until we realize that the third and fourth generations are not punished because of their parents' sins but because they continued in the same sins! And it helps to keep listening to God because he follows up those words with these: **but (I show) love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments (Exodus 20:6).** But just like it is with us sometimes, it was more convenient for them to accuse God rather than listen to him!

God's people needed to learn about sin and repentance. And I don't mean that they needed to be taught a lesson. They truly needed to know or they would not just suffer in life...they would suffer eternally. They were under the impression that they were somehow better than others who went before them, that their sin wasn't as bad and therefore they did not deserve to lose their land, their freedom, their beautiful city and the gorgeous temple. They believed that all of this gloom and doom preaching of Ezekiel wasn't fair and GOD wasn't being fair with them!

Well, God heard them...and despite their sin and their skewed sense of justice and their selective hearing, he *loved* them. So he sent Ezekiel with the message that every soul belongs to him and that he treats everyone as an individual. The sins of their fathers and mothers had nothing to do with how God would deal with each one of them individually. His clear statement fully catches the sinner's attention and causes terror: **The soul who sins is the one who will die.** If you are an imperfect person, sinful person, just let that soak in for a minute. The result of sin is eternal death.

As you heard, God then tackles the issue of just who is being unfair here. The things he says make sense, don't they? If a righteous person stops being righteous and lives sinfully, then that person will die eternally. That seems fair. If a wicked person stops his wicked life and lives a righteous life, then that person will live eternally. That seems fair too. It was not God who was being unfair, it was the people! They should never have been talking as if God was unjust. God states these facts and then turns his attention to the individual sinner, explaining just what he wants: **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? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!**

Do you hear the love of God for you in those words too? God gets a lot of bad press in times of trouble. The Israelites of old do not hold the patent on the charge that God is unfair. We say it too, don't we? We hear it IN us and all AROUND us!

- If things are financially tight, God didn't provide enough. It could never be our mismanagement, could it?!
- When we have relationship troubles we say, *"Why does God let this happen?"* It could never be that we haven't worked hard at the relationship or that we have been unwilling to fix what is wrong with us, could it?!
- Sickness and death visit us or our family and it's *"Why, God? Why me? I'm one of your people!"* It doesn't occur to us that we are sinful humans just like anyone else and that we live in a sinful world where sickness and death come to everyone.
- We get bad grades in school and suddenly that's God's fault too because he just didn't make me smart enough. Could it be that we don't study hard enough and would rather take shortcuts or goof around instead of applying ourselves?
- We pray for something and it doesn't happen the way we wanted it to and we blame God for not hearing our prayers. We forget that God can say "No" also and that he has a view and purpose for things we cannot know or comprehend.

Yes, all of those things and more happen. But we better be very careful about accusing God of being unfair. Our personal sense of fairness is twisted by the very sins that make us completely guilty before the Holy God! Instead of charging God with injustice, we ought to instead look inside our hearts and encourage others to do the same. We need to honestly consider our personal sins against God and repent of them.

Remember that when God says “repent”, he means that we

recognize our sins,

confess them before the Lord,

trust that he forgives us because of Jesus’ life and death for us, and that we fully

intend to change our sinful ways.

If any part of that is missing, then there is no true repentance. And in that condition, our faith is in jeopardy and so is our eternal life. This is not what God wants!

If you really want to know what God is like, listen to how his love cries out in frustration over sinners who don’t repent and change their sinful life? Listen once more: **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? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!**

God loves us! God wants us to live! He wants us to live with him for all eternity! That’s why he sent Jesus—to work forgiveness for the sins of all people because we could never perfectly obey God. With divine love Jesus came to save us and with divine justice the Father accepted his payment for sin. Justice and love have opened the gates of heaven! So you see that it’s not the change in our behavior that makes us acceptable to God—it’s his love for us and a change in our heart toward God. You heard him say that he wants us to **get a new heart and a new spirit**. It is our heart that God wants. He wants us to love him, to trust him, to rely on him so much that we are truly sorry for all that we do wrong and that we really do want to get rid of our sinful behavior.

It’s really that simple. That’s what God wanted from the people Ezekiel preached to and that’s what he wants from us today. “REPENT AND LIVE!” he says. You and I do well to remember the words Martin Luther wrote in the very first of the Ninety-Five Theses that he posted on the Castle Church door in Wittenberg, Germany on October 31, 1517: *“Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, in saying, ‘Repent,’ wanted the entire life of the believer to be one of repentance.”*

May the Holy Spirit move each of us to go daily before our Savior, confessing what we have done wrong, trusting in him to forgive those sins, and truly intending to change all that is wrong in our lives because our Savior promises that changed hearts which love and trust and repent, will live with Christ for eternity! Amen.

Now the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.