

Ezk 33:21-33 It's a Heart Problem

Throughout the previous chapters of the book, Ezekiel repeatedly pronounced the coming judgment on Judah. He said that when it came to pass, the people would know God was the one who brought it. Of course, many of the people didn't believe what God's prophet had to say, and came up with all sorts of alternate explanations.

In v. 21, Ezekiel is visited by a fugitive who escaped from Jerusalem, bringing news of the city's destruction. After that, God gave him another message: "Son of man, the inhabitants of these waste places in the land of Israel keep saying, 'Abraham was only one man, yet he got possession of the land; but we are many; the land is surely given us to possess.'" The people were convinced that they deserved so much more than Abraham. After all, he was just one man, but they were a whole nation. How much more should God protect their interest in the land? God knew what the people were thinking, and was responding to it. They had an inaccurate understanding of how God works, and why He promised the land to Abraham in the first place. In Deut 7:7-9, Moses said "It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers...know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations." God chose Abraham in order to call out a people for His name, and Abraham believed and obeyed God, resulting in the covenant of promise. With that promise was also a warning, that if the people stopped obeying God's commands, He would judge them and take them out of that land. This is the second part of God's message through Ezekiel.

"Therefore say to them, Thus says the Lord God, You eat flesh with the blood and lift up your eyes to your idols and shed blood; shall you then possess the land? You rely on the sword, you commit abominations, and each of you defiles his neighbor's wife; shall you then possess the land? Say this to them, Thus says the Lord God: as I live, surely those who are in the waste places shall fall by the sword, and whoever is in the open field I will give to the beasts to be devoured, and those who are in strongholds and in caves shall die by pestilence. And I will make the land a desolation and a waste, and her proud might shall come to an end, and the mountains of Israel shall be so desolate that none will pass through. Then they will know that I am the Lord, when I have made the land a desolation and a waste because of all their abominations that they have committed." It was the sin of the people that caused their destruction. They had turned against God and His laws, so God took away His blessing from them. Now, what does this have to do with us today? As a nation, we're not God's chosen people. This isn't "the promised land" that is part of a covenant from God. Yet we've seen repeatedly as God pronounced His judgment on the nations surrounding Israel that He held all of them to the same basic standards of morality and justice, and would judge them for their sins. As we look at this list of sins, we certainly see our nation, our society, guilty of these same things. Do we deserve to stay in our land? As we saw last week, the only hope is that "we the people" confess our sins and turn from our wicked ways.

God wasn't done with His message to Ezekiel and the people, though. He addressed yet another problem starting in v. 30. This is the problem of hypocrisy, of false righteousness, of duplicity. "As for you, son of man, your people who talk together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, say to one another, each to his brother, 'Come, and hear what the word is that comes from the Lord.'

And they come to you as people come, and they sit before you as my people, and they hear what you say but they will not do it; for with lustful talk in their mouths they act; their heart is set on their gain. And behold, you are to them like one who sings lustful songs with a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument, for they hear what you say, but they will not do it.”

I see several things in this: first, the whispered, behind-the-back conversations about the prophet. This is the idle talk that you only say in certain company. In the presence of Ezekiel, they may have been respectful and supportive, but behind his back, they were disrespectful and sarcastic. “Let’s hear what God says...” Are you and I guilty of this kind of duplicity? The second thing is the self-righteous hypocrisy. They come, sit as though sincerely listening, but all the while ignoring or discounting what they hear. They have no intention of believing or obeying. I find this rampant in our society. People like to present themselves as Christians, and may even faithfully attend church, but their lives tell a different story. As the text says, “for with lustful talk in their mouths they act; their heart is set on their gain.” They are only interested in satisfying their own desires, whatever those may be, but want to be seen as upright. The third thing in this section is a shallow religion. Ezekiel was nothing more to them than a great performance artist. The content of his message was irrelevant to them, as long as he put on a good show. This sounds like much of the modern church. Make sure the lights and staging are right, get the sound quality and performance up to par, and let everyone enjoy a good show. They feel good about worship and go away with their consciences massaged for another week, so they can keep on doing whatever they want to do.

These are the kind of people who ended up suffering, running for their lives, and dying in the destruction of Jerusalem. They didn’t believe God’s warnings, they were self-assured and entitled, and they were caught in their sins. God said, “When this comes—and come it will!—then they will know that a prophet has been among them.” Worship isn’t about feeling good – it’s about honoring God from the heart. We can’t call ourselves God’s people if we don’t listen to, believe, and obey what He says. We need to acknowledge our sins, confess and forsake them if we want God’s blessings. God’s Word will always be proven true. It is up to us whether we discover that the easy way or the hard way. The natural heart is deceitful and desperately wicked – and it needs to be replaced by a new heart that yearns for and loves God. Confession of and repentance from sin is the way God accomplishes that in us.