

Dr. Leslie Allen, Ezekiel, Lecture 9, Living Out the Hope. Ezekiel 18:1-32

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This is Dr. Leslie Allen and his teaching on the book of Ezekiel. This is session 9, Living Out the Hope. Ezekiel 18:1-32.

Last time we studied chapters 17 and 19, and we left out chapter 18, and now we have to come back to it. We're so used to chapter and verse in our Bibles that we don't appreciate that they are reference devices that we misuse if we concentrate on one verse or even one chapter. We're in danger of missing the overall context and losing the continuity.

This is especially true if we look only at chapter 18 by itself. If we isolate it from the context of chapter 17, we overlook an important lesson. At first sight, chapter 18 is an interruption.

In chapters 17 and 19, we saw at least a royal theme, but that's totally absent from chapter 18. I suggest that chapter 18 is a deliberate interruption that logically builds on 17:22 through 24, that positive message about Davidic kingship that promised a grand restoration of kingship as part of God's positive plan for his people. Verses 22 through 24 of chapter 17 belonged, I suggested, to the second period of Ezekiel's ministry, the positive period after 587, after Ezekiel had been prophesying a negative message of judgment for seven years from 593 to 587.

Such messages, at times, are put earlier. Messages from Ezekiel's second period are sometimes put earlier in the book, and we've already seen examples of that. And when you read chapter 18, it's obvious that it, too, fits into that pattern.

It offers a choice of death or life, and it calls for repentance as a way forward toward life. Ezekiel is playing a very different tune from that inevitable message of destruction that he had to prophesy up to 587. Ezekiel is practicing, in fact, in offering a choice of life and calling for repentance. He's practicing the watchman ministry of chapters 33 and back in chapter 3, warning the exiles and coaxing them forward instead of preaching messages of irreversible doom.

How can we appreciate the significance of placing chapter 18 after those final verses of chapter 17? I think we can do it best by comparing two New Testament texts. The first is 2 Peter 3, verses 11 and 12, which says, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for the coming of the day of God? The second New Testament reference I want to bring to you is from 1 John 3:3. All who have this hope in him, in Christ, purify themselves just as he is pure. And so I want to entitle chapter 18, Living Out the Hope, Living Out Now the Future Hope.

The royal hope expressed at the end of chapter 17 is meant to be a stimulus to adopt an appropriate lifestyle, even now, in preparation for experiencing that hope. And that, I believe, is the implicit link as we move from chapter 17 to chapter 18. There is a parallel of sorts in the book of Psalms.

If you look at Psalms 18, 20, and 21, you find a run of royal Psalms, all concerned in different ways with the King. Psalm 19 seems out of place. It speaks of creation and of God's gift of the Torah, which sets out God's standards for his covenant people.

In fact, Psalm 19 is meant, in its second half, is meant to develop a part of Psalm 18. Verses 20 through 27 of Psalm 18 speak of God giving victory over the King's enemies, and in this way honoring the moral stand the King had taken in his own life. And the second half of Psalm 19 echoes a lot of the language of that part of Psalm 18.

What it does is to apply the King's testimony of trying to live up to God's standards. It applies it to the individual believer who is called by God to take the same moral stand in his own life. So here, Ezekiel 18 takes time out from the royal theme to urge the exiles to live their lives in the light of that royal hope as they wait for their return from exile.

We just mentioned the emphasis on the Torah in the second half of Psalm 19, and the same applies to Ezekiel 18. That revealed standard of how believers were to live in Old Testament times were very much set out in the Torah. And we're reminded again that Ezekiel speaks not only as a prophet, but as a priest-prophet who teaches the lessons of the Torah to the exiles, and that's what we're going to find here.

God uses Ezekiel's training as a priest to present the need for good living as the exiles wait for the fulfillment of the prophetic message of new life. We will notice this priestly and prophetic interaction as we go through the text here in chapter 18. The chapter deals, it tells us in verse 2, with a specific contemporary problem that faced the exiles as they tried to come to terms with the fact of exile.

They were saying in verse 2, well, there's this. It's put in terms of what God is saying about what they were saying. What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel? The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge. Here again, we have to realize that you in the Hebrew is actually plural, and it's referring to that general group of exiles after 587.

It would be good if we could have some literary form of the southern yawl, but we don't have that, or at least if we had a footnote that this is a plural representing the exilic community. And here they're expressing what the loss of the land meant to them in terms of a slogan. And the slogan was a metaphor.

Eating something sour and the acid makes your teeth unpleasantly rough. But there's a variation on this cause and effect because it here applies to two different sets of people, two generations. It's like saying you have too much alcohol to drink, and somebody else wakes up with the hangover instead of you.

The cause rests with you, but the effect is on somebody else. And that's what the slogan is complaining about. The exiles are talking about their deportation and all the losses that went with deportation.

And they're saying it's not our fault. It's their fault. Previous generations.

That's the problem. And this links up with the text in Lamentations. In Lamentations chapter 5 and verse 7, it says our ancestors sinned, they are no more, and we bear their iniquities.

But there's a difference in Lamentations chapter 5 because it also goes on to say in verse 16, woe to us, for we have sinned. Our generation are the sinners too, as well as the past generations. And that second note was missing in the slogan in verse 2 here in chapter 18.

If you read the epic history of Joshua through Kings, you find a piling up of negative history of generation after generation saying no to the God they were supposed to be committed to. The backlog of sinning gradually built up until finally God's people underwent the climactic punishment of 587. Though, of course, there were earlier punishments of a different kind along the way.

And the prophets are rather like that in speaking of this pile-up of sin, and then at long last, canonically, it's pointing to 587 as the time when God finally and fully punishes all that backlog of sin. But 2 Kings and the earlier books are very careful to say that each generation, in turn, is sinning, and even the last generation is sinning. You can't blame it on past generations alone; that was part of the problem, but they, too, in the present generation, have contributed to the problem.

So, Lamentations 5, verses 7 and 16 give a balanced double view. It has a transgenerational viewpoint and also a generational viewpoint. We have sinned, too.

This all points to the significance of 587. However, the slogan here has a fatalistic ring of despair. It also has a ring of defiance and protest, with the implication that it's not fair.

We're the victims, and we shouldn't be. It was their fault. Why do we have to carry the can for their mistakes? Ezekiel, in the second half of his prophetic ministry, would go beyond that climactic judgment and speak of coming salvation.

But in God's name, in fact, he can offer a fresh start, a new orientation. And that old vertical solidarity had come to an end in 587 and now each generation stood on its own feet before God and were offered a fresh start. There's something dramatically new about the second period ministry of Ezekiel.

And so, there's no room now, after 587, for fatalism. There's no room for despair, but neither is there room for defiance or protest against God by implying it's not our fault. That slogan wasn't true because they had all been silly enough to eat those sour grapes themselves and not just previous generations.

There was something terribly wrong, pastorally, for the generation of exiles to think like that and just blame former generations. But that transgenerational principle of climactic judgment was over now. It came to an end in 587.

And in the post-587 era, there's a generational principle. Each generation has a spiritual responsibility to honor God in their lives. That's still valid.

That was an old principle, too, but that is still valid as 516 acknowledged the justice of 587 in their own sin, and we have sinned. But now, that generational principle remained in force. Notice chapter 18 and verse 3 here.

As I live, says the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. And then, it moves on to verse 4. And I like to translate the Hebrew of verse 4. As all persons relate directly to me, the parent as a personal entity and the child as a personal entity relate to me in the same direct way. And so, maintenance of the old generational principle for each generation has a part to play in their responsibility before God but it is saying goodbye to that old transgenerational principle.

There's a concentration on what this generation is doing in their attitude to God. The message is that we're not locked into those choices that previous generations made. This was a lesson that the generation of exiles needed to hear.

And so, the prophet can go on to declare the two sides of a single spiritual coin. It's only the person who sins that shall die. If a person is righteous and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live.

This is a summary of the text from the end of verse 4 until verse 9. It's only the person who sins that shall die. If a person is righteous and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live. We've got to look at this double statement from more than one perspective.

First, Ezekiel is reaffirming teaching consisting with the old Torah. As we move on, we find that the teaching in verse 4 is picked up and developed in verse 20. It's expanded in verse 20.

The person who sins shall die. A child shall not suffer for the iniquity of a parent, nor a parent suffer for the iniquity of a child. The righteousness of the righteous shall be his own, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be his own.

And actually, this is based on a text in the Torah. It's based on Deuteronomy chapter 24 and verse 16. And what does that say? Well, it's got a legal ruling.

I'm not talking about life generally; it's giving a legal ruling here. Parents shall not be put to death for their children, nor shall children be put to death for their parents. Only for their own crimes may persons be put to death.

And Ezekiel has that text in the back of his mind. But he's reapplying that legal formula spiritually. And he's saying in the first half of his double statement it's only a person who sins that shall die.

But Ezekiel has another Torah text up his sleeve, which is his scriptural justification for saying if one does what is right, he shall surely live. And the Torah text this time is in Leviticus. It's in Leviticus chapter 18 and verse 5. What does that say? You shall keep my statutes and my ordinances.

By doing so, one shall live. Life depends on living up to God's covenant standards. And so, these are the two Torah texts, old covenant texts that Ezekiel is implicitly appealing to, with his message of moral responsibility that the generation of exiles had to take into account.

A message that carries severe consequences of life or death. There's another perspective that we have to look at as we're considering this double statement. This message of life and death.

What does it mean? As soon as we realize that chapter 18 belongs to the second period of Ezekiel's ministry after 587, we can understand what life means. Because eventually we're going to come to chapter 37, which tells the vision of dry bones coming back to life. And as we read the interpretation of that vision, resurrection is a metaphor for new life in the land.

New life after exile, back in the homeland, after the death-like experience of exile. And so, living in Ezekiel's second period of ministry refers to that blessed life to come after returning to the land. And here in chapter 18, it's a promise made, not to all the exiles, but only to those who prepare for that coming hope by adopting a good lifestyle here and now.

They have a job of work to do in their ordinary lives, even in exile. And what does it mean to die? Well, soon, in chapter 20, we will find Ezekiel declaring that when it's time for the exiles to return to the land, God is going to set up a screening process. And he was going to stop rebels among the exiles from going home.

And that's in Ezekiel 20 and verses 35 through 38. I will bring you into the wilderness of the peoples, and there I will enter into judgment with you face to face on the way back from exile. As I entered into judgment with your ancestors in the wilderness of the land of Egypt, so I will enter into judgment with you, says the Lord.

I will make you pass under the staff. I will purge out the rebels among you and those who transgress against me. I will bring them out of the land where they reside as aliens, but they shall not enter the land of Israel.

And so, there was going to be this checkpoint, this screening process. And there's the metaphor used of a shepherd with that staff, who lets the sheep through, but, uh-uh, no, you hold back, you hold back. And it makes me think in contemporary terms, when you go to a parking lot, you have that wooden bar, and you've got to do a certain thing before it goes up and you can go through.

But you could stay there all day and never get through. And so, there's this standard that's set up. And so, it's not automatic, the return from exile.

And some are going to die in their land of exile or die in the wilderness. At least they won't go back and experience that new life. And we had a similar message of this, what I call judgment with a small J upon the exiles, back in chapter 13.

And in verse 9, that there were those false prophets, and they were going to be executed, they were going to be excommunicated, that's the word, excommunicated. And so, presumably, die a premature death and never make it home. And, uh, we have a similar message in 14:8, for those who paid lip service to the God of Israel, but were engaged in pagan idolatry behind his back.

God said to them, 14:8, I will cut them off from the midst of my people. So, they, in fact, wouldn't know the life of return to the promised land. And so, Ezekiel is saying, live now in keeping with God's positive future for you back in the land, or else, or else you'll stay in exile and die there, whether sooner or later.

And so, there's this sort of eschatological feel to these words of living and dying. And verses 6 through 8, in, uh, coming back to chapter 18, verses 6 through 8, give examples of what it means to be righteous and to go on to inherit God's promise of life. As we glance through, we can say that Ezekiel is probably making use of an old

priestly list that the priests before the exile in the Jerusalem temple used to use to instruct the people of God in right living.

And we have a number of different statements. In fact, five pairs of types of wrongdoing are listed here. In the first half of verse 6, we have a religious pair.

If he doesn't eat upon the mountains or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel. This is obviously a pre-exilic thinking of those high places that orthodox Judeans were not meant to visit and try and worship at. And there's also this reference to paganism, outright paganism, in worshipping images.

And then the second pair, in the second half of verse 16, is a sexual pair. Does not defile his neighbor's wife or approach a woman during her menstrual period. Adultery and intercourse during menstruation are referred to, and both practices were regarded as defiling.

And so, preventing those who did them from worshipping God debarred you from worship. And then the third pair, in the first half of verse 7, it gives a general statement. First of all, does not oppress anyone.

Then it gives two examples. But restores to the debtor his pledge and commits no robbery. And these are examples of oppression.

They are retaining a pledge after a debt had been paid off and actually stealing from somebody else's possessions. The fourth pair, in the second half of verse 7, is positive and concerns charity. He gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment.

And this is the charity of giving one's possessions to needy folk. The last pair, in the first half of verse 8, is another type of charity, though you might not have thought so. Does not take advance or accrued interest.

Executes, oh yes, does not take advance or accrued interest. This is a loan. In Old Testament times, loans were regarded as an act of charity.

That there were needy folk who needed some money at the moment, or they needed more than just a loaf of bread or a garment. And you were expected to meet their needs as a loan. But it would spoil the thought of charity if you demanded interest.

If you took advance interest and said, well, I'm going to give you \$100, but in fact, I'm going to give you \$95, and I'm going to count the \$5 as interest. Or you might think of accrued interest, saying, I'm going to give you \$100, but I want \$110 back at the end. That would be the accrued interest.

And so, interest, no, no, because loans to fellow Israelites are regarded as charity. And here again, there's a Torah text, which is the basis for what Deuteronomy is saying. What Ezekiel is saying, is in Deuteronomy and verse 19.

You shall not charge interest on loans to another Israelite. Interest on money, interest on provisions, and interest on anything that is lent. It's an act of charity.

And so, don't make anything out of the deal yourself. That's the principle of charity. You're demanding nothing back apart from the money you gave.

And you're giving up the use of that money for that time, and then you take it back, but no interest. And so, these are further acts of charity. And the aim is not to make money out of the transaction but to help out in a financial crisis.

Then, the second half of verse 8 speaks in more general terms. Withholds his hand from iniquity, executes true justice between contending parties. And verse 9 gives the theological foundation for all this from God's point of view.

Follows my statutes and is careful to observe my ordinances, acting faithfully. So those old covenant standards, they had to be maintained by the 587, as also by the 597 exiles. All right.

And so, verses 5 through 9 have reused the Torah standards of good living as the way to prepare for God's further blessing of renewed life in the land. And there's a sense of spiritual responsibility, and it's a challenge that Ezekiel brings to the exiles. The opposite of what the slogan said back in verse 2. And then, he turns to the other side of the issue in verses 10 through 13.

He's speaking in family terms and in transgenerational terms, but he says that doesn't matter. I'm speaking now of a bad son of a good father. And he doesn't inherit any of that goodness.

He's standing on his own feet before God. That's how God's looking at him. And spiritual responsibility, says verses 10 to 13, leads only to death, forfeiting God's future blessing.

The prophet goes through that priestly list again in 10 through 13, but now in reverse, from a negative point of view, not doing the right things, but doing the wrong things. And Leviticus 18.5 was still true. That the one who lives according to God's covenant standards, he's the one who shall live.

And the opposite is true, that if you don't, you shall die. So, each generation fares according to its own virtues and vices. This is a challenge and an incentive to honor God in one's life.

Verses 14 through 18 move on from a bad son to a good grandson. And that good grandson might deplore, would deplore the way that his father had lived, and might be afraid of it, that he would catch that disease of bad living. No, he has the opportunity.

He's free to start again. And his fate was not sealed by his own bad father. The fatalism of that slogan in verse 2 was unnecessary and it was wrong.

That grandson, that good grandson, and that good son of his bad father have the opportunity to make a fresh start, and he can take it. And so, by implication, should the exiles. This was the way forward, and they had to rid themselves of the psychological block of fatalism that held them back.

Then, in verses 19 and 20, the prophet reinforces this lesson by mentioning an objection. Yet you say, why should not the son suffer for the iniquity of the father when the son has done what is lawful in the right and has been careful? And then comes the answer. But that's the complaint, first of all.

The exiles had been living with their slogan in verse 2. They didn't like it, but they accepted it as a fact of life. But they had to break with its crippling force. And Deuteronomy 24, 16 is appealed to again with its new sense of each generation being regarded as separate in God's eyes.

God looks separately at each generation in turn, and each generation has its own opportunity to be a winner or a loser. And so there's a reinforcing of that message. Ezekiel just says, no, you're right.

And what I was saying was wrong, and this was what I was saying. Ezekiel hasn't finished with the slogan, and in verse 21 he begins to tackle it from another perspective. As he's gone through verses 4 to 19, he's argued against the slogan.

No, the exiles were no longer locked into the choices of previous generations. The judgment had come and gone. And though exile in a sense was the prolonging of that judgment, it was also a doorway into hope.

A hope that necessitated spiritual preparation even now during the exile. And now the prophet in God's name goes on to say the exiles are not locked into their own personal choices. Especially any bad choices that they have let govern their lives.

They're invited to make changes in their own lives, and then they, too, will be on the road to new life beyond exile. And this is the point of verse 21. If the wicked turn away from all their own sins that they've committed and keep all my statutes and do what is lawful and right, they shall surely live and shall not die.

None of the transgressions that they've committed shall be remembered against them. For the righteousness that they have done, they shall live. So there it is.

That's a different matter. But it's logically moving on from what he'd been saying about the slogan beforehand. He's reapplying it to stages within the life of individual exiles.

And if they've made bad choices, they're not doomed. They're not doomed as you might have argued from the first half of the chapter. But no, there is hope for them.

There's a fresh start offered to them. Just as each generation is offered a fresh start in comparison with the past generation, so within their own lives you can have a turning point and get right with God once more. And the past will be the past.

God will let bygones be bygones. And so, there's this sort of gospel message here. And the exiles who've taken wrong turns are now invited to come back to the right road.

They're invited to make changes in their own lives, and then they, too, will be on the road to new life beyond exile. God is ready to let bygones be bygones. And their own right to live will be accepted as their passport to the promised land.

Ezekiel presses the argument home with an emotional note in verse 23, looking into God's heart. Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live? This is what God wanted.

He has to punish so often, but that's not where his true heart is. He doesn't want to do it. Please don't make me do it.

I don't want to. I want you to do what is right and to honor me in your lives. But sadly, there's another side to this issue of change that he's been speaking of from verse 21 onwards.

And chapter 14 had mentioned those outwardly respectable elders who'd come to Ezekiel and said, Have you got a favorable message for us about return to the land? And Ezekiel can look into their hearts with God's help and see they're not quite what they seem to be. And there's a two-sidedness in their spiritual attachment. And there's paganism that on the side, I put it that they were hedging their bets.

And it wouldn't hurt to worship pagan gods as well as the true God of Israel, Yahweh. And Ezekiel could see that and say no message from you. You're debarred from receiving such a message.

And God could see into their hearts, and he knew that they were also committed to pagan worship. Similarly, here, Ezekiel gives a warning against straying from spiritual integrity and then trying to pass yourself off as part of the people of God. In Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 10-12, Let those who think they are standing beware of falling.

Such backsliding here could cancel out their former loyalty to God's claims here in Ezekiel. And like the elders in chapter 14, they would be cut off from the midst of God's people. They would be excommunicated and die as 14:8 says.

It's interesting that Paul uses that same sinister phrase cut off in speaking to Christians in Romans 11-22, Christians who don't continue in their good standing with God. Romans 11-22 Notice then the kindness and severity of God.

Severity towards those who have fallen, but God's kindness toward you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. And oh my, there's a warning there.

It seems to be in tune with this warning. But then, in verse 25, Ezekiel is heckled once more, and his hearers don't like what he's saying.

Yet you say the way of the Lord is unfair. And they wonder about the theology of this sort of switching sides midway. This new angle is that sinners can get forgiven, and then the righteous can die if they don't continue in their righteousness.

And they were saying perhaps, well, this doesn't conform with what you were saying before, before 587. Your old message of exile spoke of an unalterable fate. And now here you are, talking about changes in God's attitude, in God forgetting both past disloyalty and past loyalty.

As if present human behavior could easily trump bad behavior. And Ezekiel just dismisses their objections as a theological smokescreen. A front for a hidden agenda of refusing to honor God in the way that they lived.

There was a dangerous tendency among the exiles. Either a continuation of the bad old ways that led to the judgment of exile. Or in the case of some, a tendency to join the majority and have a pluralism.

A mystic faith. Oh yes, we still worship the God of Israel, but we're not in Israel anymore. We're in Babylon. And so, it might also be a good thing to worship the Babylonian gods.

In either case, Ezekiel has to say that way lies death. But all is not yet lost. What Ezekiel stated earlier in terms of statements he now restates as an invitation in verse 30.

Repent and turn from all your transgressions; otherwise, iniquity will be your ruin. And in verse 31, cast away from you all the transgressions that you've committed against me, he says in God's name. And then, at the end of 31, why will you die, oh house of Israel? And so, God doesn't want this.

Again, God's heart is drawing them on to a better lifestyle. And room is made for God's passionate, welcoming heart in 32, once more. I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God, turn then and live.

And so those statements of turning and living, back in verse 21, turning away and surely living, they're summed up in this direct invitation, a sort of alter call to the exiles. Turn then and live. Now, let me make something clear.

You might think that Ezekiel is having a focus on human effort. Human endeavor, human achievement. And it might sound like a call to the exiles to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps.

No, says Ezekiel, don't get me wrong. At the end of, in the middle of verse 31, he says, get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. And that is very much second-period ministry language.

If we had any doubts about where chapter 18 stood in the first period or the second period of Ezekiel ministry, we have a proof here. Because this coincides exactly with the promise of God in chapter 36 and verse 26. A new heart I will give you and a new spirit I will put within you.

In that way, I will make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. And so that was the promise. That was the part of the hope associated with return to the land, which is mentioned in the context of that verse in Ezekiel 36.

In fact, we've already met this promise back in chapter 11. It was put back also in chapter 11 and in verse 19 and 20. I will give them one heart, another text says a new heart, and put a new spirit within them so that they may follow my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them.

And so that is a future promise in 36 and in 11. And that gift of the new heart and the new spirit was to be God's enabling so that they could achieve and maintain the practical obedience to God's covenant standards that were required. But here, at the end of chapter 18, that land-related promise is said to be available even now to the exiles before they get home again.

It was theirs to appropriate even now. So, get yourself that gift of God, the new heart and the new spirit, even before you've gone back to the land. And this was the ultimate and most satisfying answer to that demoralized slogan back in verse 2. Chapter 18 is one of the most impressive chapters in the whole book of Ezekiel.

It shows Ezekiel as a prophet of good news as well as a warning against turning against God once more. It shows him as a priestly teacher who reaffirmed God's covenant standards. It shows him as a well-rounded preacher who could preach both challenge and assurance.

It shows him as a pastor who shares the passionate reaching out of his God and yearned to see the exiles living in line with God's will. He was a good man, and he was Ezekiel. Next time we will be moving on to chapter 20.

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