

Dr. Leslie Allen, Ezekiel, Lecture 15, The Tide Turns, Ezekiel 33:1-33

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This is Dr. Leslie Allen in his teaching on the book of Ezekiel. This is session 15, part 5, The Tide Turns, Ezekiel 33:1-33.

We come now to chapter 33, and it is with some relief that the reader of the book reaches this point and succeeding chapters.

We have agonized with Ezekiel and his fellow prisoners of war over the coming fall of Jerusalem. Now, later in this chapter, the news is recorded that the worst has happened and is reported; it's repeated again at the end of chapter 24: Jerusalem has fallen. But in line with the Old Testament prophetic books in general, this book finds it the prelude to a new phase in God's dealings with his people, dealings of reversal, gracious renewal after punitive reprisal.

Judgment gives way to salvation from now on. But we've seen already in Ezekiel's writings that God's, that there's something more to this than the simple opposition of judgment and salvation. God's grace is never cheap grace.

It goes hand in hand with commitment and obligation on Israel's side, as well as on God's side. As Paul said in Romans 6:1-2, should we continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means. So, the first message in 33 verses 1-20, made up of two smaller messages in verses 2-11 and 12-20, can still speak of judgment, but what I call judgment with a small j. There are if the people of God do sin, then there are consequences, and there needs to be a warning about that.

And then after 33, there's a going on to grand statements about coming salvation in the following chapters. But in 33, we still find salvation, but it's mingled with this other note of what I call judgment with a small j. In the first half of the book, there was mainly that absolute judgment, that radical judgment, the end of everything before the start of anything. And it all hinged on that vital factor: would Jerusalem survive or not? And with the destruction of Jerusalem went the end of everything else.

Now, along with that major focus, we saw that there were other passages that really belonged to the post-587 messages of Jesus. I'm sorry, Ezekiel. And they have been interspersed.

So, as we read the book now, there's work there that we can do directly, that could be directly read by the 587 exiles, as well as being mainly addressed to the 597 exiles. But now, there's going to be a continuing stress on what had been a minor

theme in one through 24, the necessary moral and spiritual responsibility that rested on the people of God. This was part of the new positive bond between God and his people, a two-sided relationship.

And so that second, what I call the second edition of the book of Ezekiel, we find in tune with what Ezekiel has been talking about now. And that comes out very evidently when we come to the first part of chapter 33 because we've read it before or we've read extracts from it before. We've read some extracts in chapter 3 and other extracts in chapter 18.

But now, it belongs to its proper place chronologically. Yes, a message of salvation, but Israel still has to mind its Ps and Qs, and honor God in the way that they live. And so now, from the perspective of the book as a whole, this is a reminder of what readers have already read in chapter 3, and in chapter 18, the necessary reminder that grace comes with strings attached to it.

The exiles, as they wait out their period of exile, are not to wait idly twiddling their thumbs until God's gift of new life in terms of restoration from exile fell into their laps. They are to live now in the light of their hope. They are to choose the good and resist the bad in the way they live their lives as an appropriate way to prepare for the coming fullness of salvation.

And so, judgment with a capital J is over, but there's still the prospect, hopefully not encountered if the warnings of Ezekiel are heeded, the prospect of judgment with a small j. But here we come back to this other issue, which is that judgment is still a factor, but on a much lesser level. In medical terms, the difference between that radical judgment and this other type of judgment is like going to a doctor. And a doctor might tell a patient that they have an incurable disease they have just months to live.

Well, that's a parallel with the radical judgment. But another patient might come in, and the doctor would warn that patient about an unhealthy lifestyle and say, out with the smoking, get exercise, eat proper food, or else I will have to give you a bad prognosis before long. And there's a difference there.

So, what was incurable in the case of the first patient, what was inevitable, what was inescapable, is now indeed able to be escaped and avoided. And it's now very much on the individual and group level rather than on the national level. But in a sense, Judah died in 587, and its survivors went into a death-like phase in exile.

Ezekiel 37 is going to bring this out with the metaphor of resurrection. But looking ahead, there's going to be new life, which is aligned with restoration to the land and return from exile. But now, we can start thinking of life even now.

Even now, there can be a beginning of this enjoyment of life, which will guarantee the coming fullness of life in return. And so, over against the increasing emphasis on death in the immediately preceding chapters, now this word live is going to be an important one, held out in a series of promises of new life for the exiles from Judah. In comparing those two types of judgment that we find in the book of Ezekiel, we may compare the thinking of the New Testament to that of the other.

There is a whole collection of verses, some of which I brought to you in an earlier lecture. Christians are spared the last judgment, but according to 2 Corinthians 5:10, they await the judgment seat of Christ. 1 Corinthians 11:30 speaks of a providential judgment that Christians may experience in this life.

There were many Corinthian Christians, evidently, who were weak and ill, and some had died as part of this providential judgment of God. And so, this judgment with a small j is still alive and well, we might say, in the New Testament. Romans 11:22, it spoke plainly of God's kindness towards you, provided you continue in his kindness, otherwise you will be cut off, cut off from that olive tree that represents the people of God.

And perhaps, I think we said earlier, the letter to the Hebrews is the best example of what we're going to be reading now, the warnings that are necessary, the warnings from the author as a sort of a watchman, a sentry, for the New Testament people of God, as Ezekiel was for the Old Testament people of God. So, in chapter 33, verses 2 through 9, God tells the prophet of his new mission, and part of it we've already read from chapter 3, and this new mission is to warn the exiles, to help them to stay on the straight and narrow as they prepare and wait for the hope of restoration to the land. His old mission had been to announce that unavoidable judgment, summed up in the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonian army.

That judgment was inevitable, like death from an incurable disease. Now, the prophet's mission was different. He brought an opportunity of life, of death avoided.

Yet, like the doctor's warnings about an unhealthy lifestyle, the exile still had their own part to play. Verses 1 to 6 Then, the word of the Lord came to me, O mortal, speak to your people and say to them, If I bring the sword upon a land, and the people of the land take one of their number as their sentinel, and if the sentinel sees the sword coming upon the land and blows the trumpet and warns the people, then if any who hear the sound of the trumpet do not take warning, and the sword comes and takes them away, their blood shall be upon their own heads. They heard the sound of the trumpet and did not take warning, and their blood shall be upon themselves.

But if they had taken warning, they would have saved their lives. But if the sentinel sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet so that the people are not

warned, and the sword comes and takes any of them, they are taken away in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at the sentinel's hand." A longer version of what we read in chapter 3. It's about a country appointing a sentry to keep a lookout in case of an enemy attack and to sound the alarm if he sees the enemy coming, presumably so that the people could scurry into a walled city and find shelter there. The enemy attack is given a divine meaning in that parable.

It is God's providential punishment upon a sinful community or sinners in the community, such as one can read of these providential attacks in the book of Judges. But if any of the people heard the alarm but stayed out in their fields still tending their crops, it would be their own fault if they were captured and killed. But then the parable moves on to focus on the sentry.

If he neglects his duty and doesn't sound the alarm, people will die, but it will be the sentry's fault, and he's going to be held accountable. And true, from the theological perspective of the parable, it was their own fault for sinning and warranting the judgment, but they could have survived if the sentry had done the job he was supposed to do. So, the onus is on the sentry to sound the alarm, to blow his trumpet for all to hear and act upon.

Then in verses 7 to 9, there's an interpretation of this extended metaphor, what I've called a parable. So, you mortal, I've made a sentinel for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me.

If I say to the wicked, O wicked ones, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn them. If you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hands. But if you warn the wicked to turn from their ways, and they do not turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but you will have saved your life.

And so, a serious warning is given to Ezekiel himself because Ezekiel is that sentry in real life, in the application of this metaphor. And in the application, it's God who's appointed him. In the initial metaphor, it was the community appointing a sentry for their own good, but here, it's God who appointed the prophet, not the community.

And now there's that God has a double role, we might say, that God is acting to defend his people in providing somebody to warn them against trouble ahead. And now he's acting as judge of sin among his people, but also as defender of his people by giving a warning. Verses 10 to 11, quite logically, explain this defensive role of God.

Now you mortals say to the house of Israel, thus you have said, our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them, how then can we live? Say to them as I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the

wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live. Turn, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel? These verses present God's role as the defender of his people, is on God's side. These two verses challenge the exiles' perception of themselves as virtually dead in their exile, as despairing and wasting away because of God's punishment for their sins.

No, even in exile they have the opportunity to live, they have the beginnings of new life. But they need a good lifestyle, they need a spiritually healthy lifestyle, and then they will survive and thrive. A new life in the second half of the book looks forward to restoration to the land, to living back in the homeland again.

But even now they can contemplate that life by living moral and spiritual lives that honor God. Otherwise, they could sink further into that death-like experience of exile and never rise above it. But even now, God is the giver of life, and he doesn't want to have to exercise his punitive role as judge, being judge with a small j. Verses 10 to 11 has used material that we've read before in chapter 18.

So, chapters 3 and parts of chapter 3, and parts of chapter 18 are a splitting up of material that chronologically belongs here in chapter 33. The next message, which includes 12 to 16, also uses material from chapter 18 quite closely. This message focuses on the people's spiritual and moral responsibility before God.

12 through 16, a new mortal says to your people, the righteousness of the righteous shall not save them when they transgress. And as for the wickedness of the wicked, it shall not make them stumble when they turn from their wickedness. And the righteous shall not be able to live by their righteousness when they sin.

Though I say to the righteous that they shall surely live, yet if they trust in their righteousness and commit iniquity, none of their righteous deeds shall be remembered. But in the iniquity that they have committed, they shall die. Again, though I say to the wicked, you shall surely die, yet if they turn from their sin and do what is lawful and right.

Talk of restoring the pledge and giving back what they've taken by robbery, walking in the statutes of life, committing no iniquity, they shall surely live, they shall not die. None of the sins that they've committed shall be remembered against them. They have done what is lawful and right.

They shall surely live. And so here, repeating what we've already studied in chapter 18, this is a focus on the people's spiritual and moral responsibility before God. The exiles are now warned that there are right paths and wrong paths in the journey through life.

If they've been walking along the right paths and if they stay on those right paths, then there is indeed this promise of life and this opportunity to have life. And if they've strayed from them, they must return to them for their own good. There is no once and for all choice for good and evil.

Yesterday's moral victories are no substitute for the need to fight on the side of good today and tomorrow. Last week's moral defeats do not mean the war is lost. No, you can stand up and fight again in God's name this week and next week.

That's what God wants you to do, to keep on doing the right things. That's the necessary task of the people of God. And as we read in verse 15, there are a few examples of a good lifestyle.

And then also in 15 there was mention of walking in the statutes of life, in the NIV, the decrees that give you life. And this of course is referring to the text that had loomed so large in chapter 18 from Leviticus 18.5. You shall keep my statutes and my ordinances, by doing so you shall live. And here again we see Ezekiel is not merely a prophet, but he's the priest-prophet picking up from earlier priestly teaching.

Then, 17 to 20 closes the message by challenging the exile's own perceptions that it happened from 10 to 11 and that it happened again from 17 through 20. Yet your people say the way of the Lord is not just, but when it's their own way, that's not just. When the righteous turn from their righteousness and commit iniquity, they shall die for it.

And when the wicked turn from their wickedness and do what is lawful and right, they shall live by it. Yet you say the way of the Lord is not just. Oh, house of Israel, I will judge all of you according to your ways.

And so here there's the challenge of the exile's own perception again. Perhaps they didn't like the idea of God forgetting the believers' earlier commitment while welcoming back prodigal sons and daughters. They're rather like the older son in the parable of the prodigal son in the teaching of Jesus.

Anyway, the message is reaffirmed, and the exiles are solemnly warned against rejecting it as an excuse to stay just the bad way that they are now. We move on to verse 21, and we get a date in the 12th year of our exile in the 10th month on the fifth day of the month. And there is this survivor who's come, the survivor of the fall of Jerusalem.

And he's managed to make that long trek to the labor camp and bring the news that the exiles need to know the news that Jerusalem has fallen. It is so important. And on this date, we might have expected it back in verse one.

Why didn't we have it back in verse one? Well, it fits this particular incident that's spoken of here and it fits the arrival of this survival in point of fact. The date actually refers to 585 which is rather surprising. If Jerusalem did fall in 587 as many believe, if it fell in 586 as others believe, it took a long time to get to Babylon in this date of January 585.

But there it is. That's the date there. And then we might think of asking, well, why weren't verses 21 and 22 with their date put at the very beginning of the chapter? In the earlier pattern, there's been a mention of a date at the beginning of a new section.

So, what would be the answer to that? Well, presumably because of pride of place, it was felt needed to be given to the message in verses 1 to 20 on Ezekiel's new focus on good news but coming with a proviso for the exiles who heard it. The proviso that good news brought with it an obligation of good living. So, the date very much went with the incident of the survivor turning up, but there was this all-important message that needed to be stated at the outset.

This long message in 33:1 to 19. So that seems to be the explanation why we have this order in these sections. We're told in verse 21 about the survivor turning up to say the city has fallen.

What a momentous bit of news that was. The evening before, we're told that something had happened to Ezekiel in verse 22. Now, the hand of the Lord had been upon me the evening before the fugitive came, but he'd opened my mouth by the time the fugitive came to me in the morning, so my mouth was opened, and I was no longer able to speak.

That hand of the Lord preparing for an important message came the evening before, and even then, there was a lifting of that ban on Ezekiel, normally speaking, that we had right-back earlier in the book and struck dumb except for whenever God gave him messages of judgment, he can open his mouth again. But now he can speak freely. He can speak freely, and this is a symbol of the new turn of events.

This free speaking it goes along with the messages of life from now on. So that is very striking, and it goes along with the fact that he's no longer speaking these messages of absolute and inevitable judgment but instead, he could pass on messages of salvation as he was given them but along with this obligation that rested upon the people of God and woe betide them if they didn't take that obligation seriously. And then we have a message he was now given to pass on verses 23 to 29 is the next section, the next message, and in fact, it is a message of judgment but not for the exiles.

It's a message of judgment for the people who were not exiled, who were living back in the land. There was a polarization that developed between these two groups, the exiles in Babylonia and those who left in the land who had lives of their own, and they're the people that feature and are addressed in the book of Lamentations, in point of fact. But here, they need a message of doom and destruction, in fact.

These people left their homeland during the exile. But implicitly, of course, it was a message of comfort and assurance for the exiles who actually heard it. It dealt with the question, who represents the true people of God? We or them? And the exiles, of course, firmly believed they were the true people of God.

But the people back in the land said, no you're not, no you're not. And this is what they were saying in verse 24. The inhabitants of these waste places in the land of Israel keep saying that Abraham was only one man, yet he got possession of the land.

But we are many. The land is surely given to us to possess. And so, they take Abraham as their great prototype.

Here we are, this barren land, but now we can build it up. We're like Abraham, and it's our land, just as the land was given to Abraham. And so, there's this hope there.

We're the true people of God. Abraham came to the land, and we're still in the land. So, we are those who possess the land.

Those people over there in Babylon don't possess the land anymore at all. They're cast out of the land by God. That shows who they are.

That shows upon whom the judgment of God rests. They've been excommunicated from the people of God by implication. And so this was the story that got back to the exiles.

And Ezekiel had something to say in God's name. And so verse 24, it's actually an accusation. It has the force of an accusation in this oracle of judgment.

And so, we go on to this vital signal word, therefore say to them, and we come to the punishment that they must receive. But overall, the message is good news for the exiles. Yes, God's providential will has gone through exile.

And so, you exiles, you're in the providential path of God's will. You needed to receive that radical judgment, but from now on, there's a good future for you. And of course, this was an issue which earlier in the book had been raised in chapter 11.

It was part of the second period of Ezekiel's ministry back then, but it was pushed forward into chapter 11, verses 14 through 21. When the non-exiled members of

God's people had blatantly claimed that they were God's favorites and staying in the homeland after 587 was a privilege that proved it. Well, the book is returning now to this type of reaction here, now at an appropriate place chronologically.

And Ezekiel is told to challenge the spiritual lesson that those left behind were trying to draw out of their situation. At least we're left in the land, and those exiles aren't. They've been expelled from the land and so from God's grace.

And Ezekiel is to challenge that. And they're using, as we said, the old tradition of Abraham, living in the promised land, we too live in the land. But it was bad preaching.

Ezekiel has to point out it's bad preaching for them to apply it to themselves. And he challenges their exposition in verses 25 and 26. Therefore say to them, thus says the Lord God, you eat flesh with the blood, and you lift up your eyes to your idols, and there's paganism there, and you shed blood.

So, there was a lot of bloodshed in that period after 587 in the land of Judah. Shall you then possess the land? You depend on your swords. You commit abominations.

Each of you defiles his neighbor's wife. Shall you then possess the land? And he's saying there's a strong objection. Your lifestyle doesn't seem to fit what you're saying.

Your walk doesn't incline, doesn't accord with your talk. And in fact, you're a lot of wretched people morally and spiritually. And so, your lifestyle doesn't back up your theological claims.

And there's this rhetorical address of that non-exiled group, but of course, the exiles are the ones who are really listening. So, there's no evidence that they had a legitimate claim to possess the land. On the contrary, they were religiously and morally corrupt.

And might was right among them. They depended on their swords to get what they wanted from their fellows. The pragmatic test, that pragmatic test, by their fruit ye shall know them, proved they had no qualifications to back up their spiritual claim.

So, in verses 27 through 29, he can put them right. So, in verses 27 to 29, he can put them right. Say this to them.

Thus says the Lord God. Surely, those who are in the waste places shall fall by the sword. And those who are in the open field I will give to the wild animals to be devoured.

Those who are in strongholds and in caves shall die by pestilence. I will make the land a desolation and a waste, and its pride might come to an end. And the mountains of Israel shall be so desolate that no one will pass through.

Then they shall know that I am the Lord when I've made the land a desolation and a waste because of all their abominations that they've committed. There is something very striking about verses 27 to 29, and that is that it is quoting from Leviticus 26, the curses in the second half of Leviticus 26. And we've noticed Ezekiel doing this before in his oracles of the judgment delivered to the exiles, and here he's picking up the same thing because in verse 27, there's a talk of wild animals, and this comes from Leviticus 26 and verse 22,, I would let loose wild animals against you.

It also mentions pestilence in verse 27 again, and that comes from verse 25 of Leviticus 26: I will send pestilence among you. Then verse 28 says, its proud might shall come to an end, and Leviticus 26, 19, using very similar language, I will break your proud glory. And then lastly, in verse 28 here, there's a talk of desolation: I will make the land a desolation and a waste, and this comes from 26 and 33, your land shall be a desolation and your cities a waste.

So once more, there's a dependence on that priestly tradition, and those curses of Leviticus 26 are brought into play, those covenant curses. If the covenant is broken, then curses can be the only result. And this is being spelled out against the bad living, the utterly bad living of those who are still living there in the land.

And so, that's dealing with that particular problem, and implicitly, it must have been a message of encouragement to the exiles: God is on our side after all. In that terrible debate, which side is God on? He's on our side and not theirs. And this leads very naturally into the last section in 30 to 33, because Ezekiel had an enormous popularity.

Here he is, giving these messages of salvation, here he is speaking about new life, the opportunity of new life. Yes, there are warnings there, but he can talk about life now instead of death. He can talk about good prospects instead of the miserable lives that we're living now.

And so, verse 30. As for you, mortal, your people who talk together about you by the walls, at the doors of the houses, all through the labor camp, they say one to another, each to a neighbor, come and hear what the word is that comes from the Lord. Go along to Ezekiel's house and crowd in there, inside or in the doorway, and try to listen to everything that he says.

And they come to you, and they sit before you as my people. But we're coming back to that initial message at the beginning of the chapter. They hear your words, but they will not obey them, for flattery is on their lips.

Oh, he's a wonderful prophet. He's a wonderful preacher. Make sure you hear him every time you can.

He's so popular. But their heart is set on their gain. And there was that two-mindedness, that they were out for themselves, each one of them, really.

But they like to come and hear Ezekiel preaching. And why do they like it? Verse 32. To them, you are like a singer of love songs, one who has a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument.

You're the entertainer. You're the new entertainer in town. And they come up to all your meetings.

And they're coming to a concert. They're coming as a concert audience. They aren't coming as a congregation, really, to hear the word of the Lord.

But they so enjoy you. And you're this sensational entertainer that they like so much. You're a pop star.

And everything you say is like music to your ears. You're like someone who plays on an instrument. And what you say is so wonderful.

But, of course, they've missed the point, especially after the initial part of 33. And theirs was a selective hearing. They heard the nice things.

They heard the positive things. They didn't hear the provisos. They heard the promises but not the provisos.

And they hear what you say, but they will not do it. And, of course, this takes us back to that metaphor of the century that Ezekiel had been told to say earlier in the chapter because hearing and not hearing was a key term, wasn't it? Back in verse 4. If anyone hears the sound of the trumpet, they do not take warning, and they hear it, but they don't really listen. And they don't take it seriously.

And so, there's this question of hearing, of vital hearing. And a sensitive hearing, a real hearing that was listening and taking heed. Oh, we've got to mend our lives, or else trouble is on the way.

And so, in 31, they hear your words, but they will not obey them. And they hear what you say, but they will not do it. And so they're not really listening, and they're not acting on what Ezekiel says.

So, there's a coming back to the beginning in chapter 33. And at the end, we're having a practical outworking of the need for that parable of the century at the beginning. And it wasn't Ezekiel's fault.

Evidently, he was giving the warnings, but they didn't listen to that bit. They turned it off at that point, but they wanted to hear the nice bits. And so, when it comes, and come it will, then they shall know that a prophet has been among them.

That it, it's vague, it's rather sinister, but really it wants to recall what is being said in that initial parable about the sword coming, the sword coming, that sword of providential judgment. And those who heard but didn't act on it by going into the city as their defense would find themselves killed. And so here that it is turning back to what had been said in the parable.

And at the end, you're meant to remember where the beginning stood. And so, they enjoy your own ministry. They think of you as an entertainer, a pop star, but they're not really hearing.

They hear the trumpet sound, but they're not listening to that bit. And so, as I say, the text at this point wants readers to recall the sentry message in verses 1 to 9. That hearing to no effect in 31 and 32 operates as a deliberate echo of verses 4 and 5 about those who hear the alarm, the sound of the trumpet blown by the sentry prophet, and don't take warning. And what happened in the parable, they were unprepared.

The sword came, and they lost their lives—those who didn't act on the trumpet sound. So, when we read, as I say in verse 35, this is when this comes and come it will, then we're to think back to this terrible warning.

That sword of judgment is mentioned earlier in the parable. Judgment with a small J operating on those individuals to whom it applied, but still judgment. And we Christians cannot but be reminded of the warning that Jesus gave to his disciples at the end of the Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew 7.36 Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, the floods came, the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell. And great was its fall.

Next time, we should be moving on to chapter 34.

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