

"In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the river Chebar, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God." This begins the book of Ezekiel, and with these words, we are thrust into its world. There are relentless denunciations, unconventional antics, a repetitive style, and quite a bewildering array of topics. "The concentration of so many bizarre features in one individual [in the Bible] is without precedent."¹ Because the person of Ezekiel seems so strange in the text, some scholars subject him to psychological evaluation. One suggests that his visions are influenced by an experience of abuse.² Let us set that analysis aside. The question for us is not psychology, but theology. What is Ezekiel's context? What does the prophet say and what does the book mean? And, what the text says about God?

Twenty-six to twenty-nine hundred years ago, the major world powers fought for control. This is a reoccurring theme throughout history. Fighting for control seems to be the of nature of humanity. In a microcosm of world affairs, we do it in our lives. We all want control. On a global stage, nothing seems to change. Current headlines are full of nations struggling for control over who gets to decide what about another country's national interest. Looking backward, this theme is remarkably consistent. Ken Burns' PBS special about Vietnam begins by looking at southeast Asia a century earlier. Different countries jockeyed for control.

During Ezekiel's time, Assyria, Babylonia, and Egypt maneuvered to control the region. In 605 BCE, Babylonia gained the upper hand. Our story focuses on Judah, which contains Jerusalem, and the Jewish people. Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Moses, and Judaism, the religion of Jesus and all the disciples, was centered in Jerusalem. When Babylonia beat Egypt in a decisive victory, Judah's fall was inevitable. For the Jews, this was inconceivable. How would God let them fall? But, when it fell, King Nebuchadnezzar II took Judah's best and brightest back to Babylonia. Ezekiel was part of this brain drain.

How does control work? When we have it, we like it and want to keep it. When we lose it, we want it back. Ezekiel resituated this thirst for control. Instead of control, he focused on God. His visions contrasted with the status quo of his day. He spoke against Judah and against Jerusalem, not because he had a problem with the physical location of Judaism, but because the place had taken precedence over God.

Speaking against Jerusalem would have been an incredibly unpopular prophecy. They wanted to go home. They wanted their army to rise up and defeat the Babylonians, but God wanted their commitment. God wanted them to surrender control to God. Instead, they wanted control. Does that sound familiar? We might say, 'Don't tell me about surrendering myself to God. Don't tell me to turn away from my selfish ways.' We do not say it with our words. We say it with our actions. Ezekiel's listeners were waiting to go home. Even if they could not defeat the Babylonians, they wanted the occupation to end. Yet, Ezekiel says that there is a sword against Jerusalem.

The people did not want to take responsibility for their own actions. They did not want to admit they wrestled control of their lives from God. Instead, they wanted to blame someone else. They blamed their parents or their parents’ parents. To put it in ancient terms, they said, ‘Who of our ancestors sinned that we now suffer?’ Today, we would say, ‘It’s not my fault! It’s society’s fault! It’s my upbringing or someone else’s fault.’ The problem with this transgenerational punishment is the reluctance to accept responsibility for their actions.

Ezekiel makes it clear that life’s unfairness is not related to God. We cannot blame God when things go wrong. We cannot blame our parents, nor can we blame anyone else when we make bad choices. Each one of us makes choices. Some are good. Some are bad. When we make a choice, we have to live with the outcome. For Ezekiel’s audience, the ones who suffered under King Nebuchadnezzar II, the geo-political landscape might not have included a viable option for them to avoid foreign occupation.

They truly suffered. This is no, ‘God helps those who help themselves,’ theology. This is a commentary on reality and a correction to the fallacious belief that God caused someone’s suffering. It was not God’s fault. King Nebuchadnezzar II and the Babylonians attacked and overtook them, not God. Judah was not a major power. If not Babylonia, it might have been Egypt.

For Ezekiel, the answer—to this question about occupiers in their land and some people being exiled—is God. The answer is not returning to Jerusalem or the religious status quo. For us, too, the answer is God, not getting back to the way things used to be. We might look back at some moment in a glorified past, or an imaginary, wonderful past. We might long for that time. God is at work in the present. God will continue to be at work in the future. And, God wants us to be involved in that work and transformed.

In Ezekiel 18, the sour grapes metaphor is an attempt to make sense of the world. Who can we blame? They blame God. *This must be how God administers justice.*³ Ezekiel disconnects their suffering from previous generations. For us, the message is what we do matters. We can connect this with New Testament readings, like Hebrews 13:16, “Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.” Or, we see in Jesus’ words in our Gospel Lesson, “John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and prostitutes believed him.” We are free to accept or reject God. God’s way is fair. God is not punishing us.

In Ezekiel 18, we see that “God’s justice is connected with the radical affirmation of the human freedom to change (repent) and also with divine pathos, God’s desire for Israel’s repentance.”⁴ God has compassion for humanity. In this case, God’s prophet Ezekiel is delivering the difficult message of repentance from our own attempt to connect God and fatalism. In other words, for Ezekiel’s audience, they might have said, ‘O! I cannot do anything because God wants me to suffer.’ God does not want us to suffer, but to be free.

For his listeners, the "sour grapes" saying let the people off the hook. Instead of being transformed, they could blame God for their problems. God offers all of us the possibility of life. "That possibility is available to all in spite of human misery and sin."⁵ We have a choice. But, we must make our choice. God cares about our choices. God also cares about all life. Let us turn from the self. Let us turn from trying to be in control. Let us turn to God and live, turn and live a life that is full and rich and abundant.

It is a life that we can taste, a life that we can experience, and a life where we can see a little bit like Ezekiel.

¹ Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 1-24* (Minneapolis: Eerdmans, 1997), 10.

² David J. Halperin, *Seeking Ezekiel: Text and Psychology* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1993).

³ Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, "Ezekiel," in *New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 1265.

⁴ Ellen F. Davis, "Matties, 'Ezekiel 18 and the Rhetoric of Moral Discourse,'" review of Ezekiel 18 and the Rhetoric of Moral Discourse, Gordon H. Matties, *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 84, no. 4 (1994): 502.

⁵ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel*, ed. James L. Mays, Patrick D. Miller, and Paul J. Achtemeier, *Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 84.