

“The Justice of God”

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If you knew what God knows, you would trust what God does.

Ezekiel 14:12-23

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God in the dock

I want to begin with a quote from C. S. Lewis –

The ancient man approached God (or even the gods) as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man the roles are reversed. He is the judge: God is in the dock. He is quite the kindly judge: if God should have a reasonable defense for being the god who permits war, poverty, and disease, he is ready to listen to it. The trial may even end in God’s acquittal. But the important thing is that Man is on the Bench and God is in the Dock.

Lewis wrote these words more than seven decades ago, in 1948, just after World War II. Today we focus more on personal autonomy than on larger human and social issues when we blame God. We blame political parties for perpetuating poverty, other nations for starting wars, and humans in general for climate change. In the aftermath of a hurricane or a mass shooting, we are less likely to blame God and more likely to blame people. Not so in our personal lives. In the aftermath of a job loss or sudden death of a loved one or cancer diagnosis that makes life shorter or more miserable, we cry out, “Where was God? Can he defend what happened to me? There is no justice.”

And so with that I begin a sermon titled “The Justice of God” feeling as I need to defend God against accusations that he is unfair or disinterested. That he needs to answer for not making our lives longer or easier. That he is, indeed, in the dock and it’s my job to ask you as listeners to go a little easier on God. Give him a break. Maybe let him off with probation. If God will behave a little better, can you trust him again?

Idolatry in the heart

To wrestle with the theme of God's justice, we return to the writings and antics of the prophet Ezekiel. As chapter 14 opens we find him hosting a group of elders.

We are about five years prior to the Fall of Jerusalem, when the temple was destroyed and the city was burned and razed. There were three waves of exiles to Babylon, 700 miles away from home, one in 605 BC, one in 597 BC, and one in 586 BC. Ezekiel was in the second group. About five years after he was taken to Babylon, the young priest began seeing prophetic visions of Jerusalem's destruction. The exiles wanted to believe their refugee resettlement was temporary, that God would return them to their homeland. The elders come to Ezekiel, hoping for some good news.

Instead, they get a sermon on idolatry. Nobody likes a sermon on idolatry – not unless it's someone else's idolatry. I suspect this sermon on idolatry surprised the elders precisely because they believed they had left the problem of idolatry back in Jerusalem. No Jew in the refugee resettlement camp beside the Kebar River in Babylon had erected a statue of Tammuz or painted murals of Ba'al on their walls.

Ezekiel surprises them with a harsh sermon on idolatry *of the heart*. What did that look like? Maybe their idolatry was the city of Jerusalem itself, that walls and a temple would save their homeland. Maybe it was political, that a new leader would rise in Babylon or Nebuchadnezzar would change his mind. Maybe it was materialism, a longing for the homes and jobs they left behind. Or maybe the idols of their hearts were the family members they had left behind in Jerusalem, even their own children.

Perhaps they said something like this: "Ezekiel, you've been telling us God is going to allow the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem because its idolatry has polluted the temple. But not everyone in Jerusalem is wicked. Many of us left children and grandchildren there. They have good hearts. Some of them are young and innocent. If there are some righteous people left in Jerusalem, won't God spare them? If he doesn't, is he truly just?" Ezekiel calls that idolatry of the heart, and he challenges them.

Truth justifies judgment

The passage we read is "the word of the LORD" to Ezekiel in response to that plea from the elders. Once again, God addresses Ezekiel as "Son of man." To be "son of" means to be "the same as." You're just as human as they are, Ezekiel.

The message is about four judgments about to fall on Jerusalem. They are the four possibilities ancients feared the most. What would we fear the most? Nuclear terrorists? An earthquake? Disruption in the power grid? A Category 7 hurricane?

The big four for ancients were (1) a famine, because the food supply was dependent on regular rain and good crops, (2) wild beasts, because their homes were

not protected by heavy doors much less security systems, (3) the sword, because smaller villages and even walled cities were always vulnerable to attack from larger armies, and (4) a plague, because they didn't have hospitals and medicines and labs. They didn't understand viruses and bacteria, didn't have penicillin or antibiotics, didn't understand how to stop the spread of micro biotic deadly agents. It's terrifying for an ancient reader to hear these prophesied one right after the other in Ezekiel 14 in successive paragraphs. But there's more.

Ezekiel is answering the question, "Wouldn't God spare a country from these judgments if there are at least some good people in it?" It's quite likely the exiles were familiar with the story of Genesis 18, when God was getting ready to torch Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham had pled with God on behalf of his nephew Lot. "What if there are fifty righteous people in Sodom?" Abraham asked God. "OK," God answered, "I'll spare the city if I find 50 righteous people." Abraham proceeded to bargain with God. "Well, then, what if there are only 45? You wouldn't destroy the city for coming five short of fifty, would you?" Abraham gets down to ten people and God promises to spare the city if there are only ten righteous people in it. There weren't.

This time God is cutting short that argument through Ezekiel. Suppose there are only three righteous people in the city, and they are the most legendary of all righteous people because of the contrast of their goodness vis-à-vis the people around them. God himself calls Job a righteous man. Noah and his family are spared alone in the flood. Daniel, even though he had come to Babylon only a decade before Ezekiel, had already established his legendary virtue.¹ It doesn't matter if the most famous of good people are in the city. The city's going down with famine AND wild beasts AND sword AND plague. Your sons and daughters are going down with the city.

So we put God in the dock: "That isn't fair! There's collateral damage. Innocent people shouldn't die with the wicked." In chapter 18, Ezekiel will spend a whole chapter saying that's true. Sons don't die for their fathers' sins, but neither does the righteousness of a father save a son. Everyone is personally responsible.

Ezekiel continues: When God judges Jerusalem, it will be a worse judgment than for some random country of unbelievers. Death will reign in the city by all means (21).

But there will be mercy. There will be some survivors – a remnant that will include some of your sons and daughters. And when they come, you will be consoled about all the disasters I have brought on Jerusalem (22). I'm not sure whether the consolation will be because some of their children are rescued or because their children will report how much evil was in Jerusalem.

¹ Some question whether Daniel had been there long enough to attain legendary status. Another option is that Ezekiel's not talking about Daniel but Dan'el, a legendary pagan figure. The problem is that Ezekiel, the anti-idolatry prophet, is not likely to hold up a pagan figure as a model for righteousness.

Ezekiel then repeats in verse 23 that the elders will be consoled when they know the whole truth through these exiles. Why? “You will know,” (God says to the exiles) that I have done nothing in it without cause” (23).

Truth is essential to justice. It’s why our American system doesn’t tolerate lynching. A rush to judgment without all the facts in play will often result in injustice. Our legal system, regardless of whether you like it, works slowly for a reason. The reason is that sometimes only time uncovers the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

The principle in this passage is a great spiritual principle: *If you knew what God knows you would trust what God does.* When the last wave of exiles arrives in Babylon from Jerusalem, God will be vindicated. They are understandably anxious and even accusatory before they know the whole story. When they know all the facts, they will see that God had cause – cause to bring judgment and cause to spare the remnant.

This God is our God

I believe all the Bible is the Word of God and that these writings were preserved and passed on by the Jewish and Christian community because all of them are profitable for our own faith and practice (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

It is precisely my high view of Scripture that causes me to say that it is a misuse of Scripture to suggest that God’s word through Ezekiel to the Jewish exiles in Babylon in the seventh century B.C. is exactly the same as God’s word to us. America is not Israel, and the events described in Ezekiel are unique in God’s redemptive story.

However, *this* God is *our* God. Let me offer three specifics.

First, idolatry still matters. That statement is probably too weak. I could say, “God still loathes idolatry.” It is an offense to his sovereignty, but there’s more. He hates idolatry because of what it does to us.

The New Testament doesn’t say as much about idolatry as the Old Testament, but it says enough. Surprisingly Jesus never mentioned idolatry – at least not by using the word, even though he surely encountered them in places like Caesarea Philippi and the cities of the Decapolis. One of the reasons Jesus didn’t directly address idolatry may be that Israel was largely cured of its idolatry in the most literal form by the exile. From that time until now, you would be hard pressed to find a community of Jewish people anywhere in the world setting up a statue or bowing down before the sun-god or sacrificing their children to pagan deities. There are a number of places in the New Testament where this kind of idolatry is in view, such as when the Apostle Paul visits Athens and is “greatly distressed” by all the idols (Acts 17:16).

Idolatry is deceptive and multi-layered. If idolatry is not a statue, it’s a substitute for God. The Apostle Paul includes idolatry several times in his sin lists – including

Ephesians 5:5 where he says that a greedy person is an idolater and has no “inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.” Strong words. This kind of idolatry may not be a statue, but it is often tangible. It’s anything I serve or in which I trust that displaces and then replaces God: wealth, sex, country, beauty, fitness, political party, travel, sports and my favorite team, health, family, pleasure, alcohol, drugs, shopping, food.

Give me a look at your checkbook and your store of financial assets and I can tell you rather quickly what your idols are – as you can me. If I’m good when I have those tangible things but without them I’m anxious, insecure, and afraid, those are idols. If I can never get enough and the addiction only grows with time, that’s an idol. And before long, you don’t own it; it owns you, and you will give up family and friends and life itself for the addiction.

Sometimes, though, idolatry is not a statue or any tangible substitute. It’s what Ezekiel called “idolatry of the heart.” It’s inside – a desire for revenge or recognition or control. It’s a defense mechanism for how you treat people. It’s pride, that your sins aren’t as bad as someone else’s, or that your spiritual practices are better. It’s whatever you obsess over. And just so you think I’m not just talking about you, my idolatry of the heart is control over my schedule and task list. I want to be in charge, and I don’t like it when people interrupt my plans or my way or my personal bubble.

Why does all that matter? Because ultimately all idolatry substitutes something or someone for God, and at the root that substitute is the self. We have an entire culture that lives by the mantra, “You have a right to be happy, to make your own decisions, to get all you can out of life for you.” That idolatry as well as any other will destroy you and your relationships and maybe even your eternity, if left unchecked. No wonder John, the apostle of love, ends his letter saying, “Little children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21). That’s a New Testament thing. Idolatry is the opposite of love and the murderer of love. Yes, idolatry still matters – all forms of it.

Second, God is still just. The justice of God means that God always does the right thing, that God is completely fair. If justice demands the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, then God alone can be just. We humans can be more just if we know more of the truth, but absolute truth only comes from God.

The word “justice” is, of course, tied to the word “judge.” The reason we are not to judge others is because we don’t know all that God knows. But that also means we don’t have the right to judge God. To put God in the dock is idolatry. We think, “If I were God, I would...” and no matter how you finish that sentence, it’s idolatry.

So you say, “Well, isn’t that whole business about God being a judge also Old Testament-ish?” Oh, no! J. I. Packer in *Knowing God* says this: “If we examine the New Testament, even in the most cursory way, we find at once that the Old Testament emphasis on God’s action as Judge, far from being reduced, is actually intensified.”

Why does Jesus say not to judge others? Because if you judge them you will be judged (Matthew 7:1). Jesus says the Father has entrusted all judgment to him (John 5:22). Paul tells those same Athenians with all the idols that Jesus “will judge the world with justice” (Acts 17:31). He writes to the Romans that God will judge “people’s secret thoughts through Jesus Christ” (Romans 2:16). 2 Timothy 4:1 is the basis for the phrase in the Apostles’ Creed, that Jesus will come again to “judge the living and the dead.” James reminds grumbling Christians, “The Judge is standing at the door” (James 5:9). Revelation says the books will be opened and the dead will be judged according to what they have done (Revelation 20:12-13).

Judgment isn’t always negative, of course. Judgment can result in acquittal. Then whom will God ultimately condemn or acquit? People ask me whether I think hell is just or what about people who have never heard the gospel or what about sincere people of other faiths. My answer boils down to God’s justice. I don’t know what God’s going to do about all these complex problems with which we struggle. But I can tell you that if I don’t believe in God’s justice, I don’t believe in God. Whatever God has done, is doing, or will do is right. It’s pure arrogance for us to set up a standard of what we think would be fair, and demand God measure up. If I knew all God knows, I would trust whatever God does.

Finally, *mercy still has the last word*. Aren’t you glad? Relieved? Ready to shout hallelujah? If idolatry still matters, in all its forms, and if God still judges sin, I need some good news.

There is a sense in which all of the Old Testament is a set up for grace. There are hints – well, not just hints but major splashes of grace-colored paint on the canvas of the Old Testament. They’re a little harder to find in Ezekiel, but they’re there. Here in Ezekiel 14, there’s a remnant of survivors. But it’s more than that. Ezekiel, like Jeremiah and Isaiah, anticipates a day when mercy will have the last word, when God will restore and forgive and make whole. One key theme of the book is, “They will be my people and I will be their God. They will know that I am the LORD.” There is good news for those who know God’s heart. That will be our theme next week.

The ultimate mercy is found at the cross of Jesus Christ. If you have confessed your sin and placed your trust in Jesus Christ, you don’t have to fear the Judge. Justice has already been done and the debt has been fully paid. You deserve all of God’s wrath, but Jesus accepted it on your behalf. Now the reason you hate idolatry is not because you fear the Judge and because the Judge knows every hidden pocket of idolatry in that heart of yours, even the ones that you don’t know or won’t admit, but because, in Christ, God treats you as if you had never had a sinful action, word, or even thought.

Because we are loved that completely we keep ourselves from idols. Amen.