

Ezekiel 18:1–4, 25–32, “It’s Not Fair”  
10/11/20 Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Pastor Alex Amiot

Ezekiel 18:1–4, 25-32 (NKJV)

<sup>1</sup> The word of the Lord came to me again, saying, <sup>2</sup> “What do you mean when you use this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying:

‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes,  
And the children’s teeth are set on edge’?

<sup>3</sup> “*As I live*,” says the Lord God, “you shall no longer use this proverb in Israel.

<sup>4</sup> “Behold, all souls are Mine;  
The soul of the father  
As well as the soul of the son is Mine;  
The soul who sins shall die.

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<sup>25</sup> “Yet you say, ‘The way of the Lord is not fair.’ Hear now, O house of Israel, is it not My way which is fair, and your ways which are not fair? <sup>26</sup> When a righteous *man* turns away from his righteousness, commits iniquity, and dies in it, it is because of the iniquity which he has done that he dies. <sup>27</sup> Again, when a wicked *man* turns away from the wickedness which he committed, and does what is lawful and right, he preserves himself alive. <sup>28</sup> Because he considers and turns away from all the transgressions which he committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die. <sup>29</sup> Yet the house of Israel says, ‘The way of the Lord is not fair.’ O house of Israel, is it not My ways which are fair, and your ways which are not fair?

<sup>30</sup> “Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways,” says the Lord God. “Repent, and turn from all your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin. <sup>31</sup> Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. For why should you die, O house of Israel? <sup>32</sup> For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies,” says the Lord God. “Therefore turn and live!”

Today is October 11—my dad’s birthday. Dad was born in 1955 and died in 2018. His departure from this earthly life, two years ago in July, showed me that life is not fair.

He was a good dad. He was a faithful husband. He was a loving and available grandpa. He was a good citizen, a good accountant, a good friend.

Life is not fair. Consider fairness as the middle of the “What You Deserve” scale. On this scale, if you get what you deserve, it is fair. On one end of the scale is “unfair,” which is when you get less than you deserve. On the other end of the scale is “generous,” which is when you get more than you deserve.

Dad worked hard and loved well, but the parting gift that this life gave him was cancer. The unfairness of this life is brought into greater relief when the sufferings of a good man are compared with the prosperity of a wicked man.

When Asaph wrote Psalm 73, he complained about how life was sometimes generous to the wicked. Asaph said in Psalm 73:3, “<sup>3</sup>For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. <sup>4</sup>For they have no pangs until death.”

And a few verses later he complained about how life was sometimes unfair to the righteous. “<sup>13</sup>All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. <sup>14</sup>For all the day long I have been stricken.”

Asaph was frustrated that the wicked and arrogant men were prosperous and then eventually died peacefully without even suffering. He, on the other hand, fled wickedness and lived innocently, but he was suffering in this life.

Life isn’t fair. The complaint of unfairness is on the minds and lips of the people in the book of Ezekiel. Today’s sermon text is from Ezekiel 18. Who was Ezekiel? He was a prophet of God to the people of the southern kingdom of Judah. Judah was in the middle of a couple-decades-long process of being conquered.

In the year 605 BC, 2,625 years ago, the Kingdom of Judah was overpowered by the Babylonians, but not completely destroyed. The Babylonians decided that the best way to weaken the military strength of the people of Judah was to deport the most influential and highly skilled Judeans away from their homeland in southern Israel over to Babylon.

Some years later, there was another massive deportation of other influential and skilled groups of Judeans. Eventually the Babylonians totally conquered Jerusalem in the year 586 BC, destroying Solomon’s Temple, and exiling many other Judeans to Babylon.

That destruction of Jerusalem hadn’t happened yet by chapter 18 in Ezekiel. At this point, Ezekiel was among many who had been taken from their homeland of Judah and forced to live with fellow exiles. You see this in the very first verse of Ezekiel. In Ezekiel 1:1 he says, “I was among the exiles by the Chebar canal”—that’s over in Babylon.

Talk about life not being fair. Not only were these exiled Judeans missing their home and family and temple back in Jerusalem and suffering over in Babylon, but they recognized why this happened to them—the Lord had used the Babylonians to bring judgment on Judah for their unbelief and rejection of God.

For generations the Lord had warned the people of Israel and Judah through His prophets that if they did not repent and call upon the name of the Lord, that they would be destroyed. Sometimes kings and people repented, but many hardened their hearts, for “wide *is* the gate and broad *is* the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it.”<sup>1</sup>

These exiles who were around Ezekiel complained that their forefathers had sinned a long time ago, but now they were the ones having to pay for it. Their forefathers and the wicked

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 7:13

kings of Judah had enjoyed prosperity and then died without suffering despite their wickedness. But these Judeans exiled in Babylon complained that they were innocent and their suffering was not fair.

They even came up with a proverb to describe their plight. It's in Ezekiel 18:2, "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." Can you tell what they meant by that? "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge."

If you bite into a sour lemon you pucker up. Or if you eat a grape that's not ripe yet so it's sour, you pucker up—that's your teeth being set on edge. What if someone else ate a sour grape but instead of their teeth being set on edge, you were overwhelmed with a sour taste in your mouth.

The exiled Judeans thought of their sinful forefathers as the ones who ate the sour grapes of sin by rejecting the true God and following false gods. As these exiles saw it, those forefathers didn't pay for their sin—they seemed to get away with it. The fathers ate the sour grapes, and the children's teeth were set on edge.

The complaint of unfairness was on their minds. Even Asaph complained in the psalms. But there is one major difference between their complaint in Ezekiel 18 and Asaph's complaint in Psalm 73. Both recognized the unfairness of life—they were right—but the exiles in the book of Ezekiel went too far when they concluded that since life isn't fair, then God isn't fair either.

In Ezekiel 18, the Lord is addressing the people of Judah through His prophet Ezekiel. In verse 25, the Lord rebuked them. "Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not fair.' Hear now, O house of Israel, is it not My way which is fair, and your ways which are not fair?"

In this chapter, the Lord repeatedly states that the soul who sins will die. In other words, each one will ultimately be dealt with according to their own deeds, not the deeds of others. He also repeatedly invites the people to repent and turn to Him, for even the one who has sinned may find grace and mercy when they humble themselves before God.

So what about the forefathers of these exiles who sinned and didn't seem to suffer, and these exiles who weren't as bad as their fathers but are suffering much worse? While there is unfair suffering in this life, when we face the Lord in death, then all is laid bare.

Those who walked in unbelief and hardness of heart, whether they walked through suffering or not, they will continue eternally in hardness of heart, separated from the Lord. Those who walked with faith in Jesus in this life, whether they suffered or not, will forever be with the Lord alive, at rest, without suffering or pain.

There is a big difference with eternal consequences to go from a place of our pain that says, "life isn't fair," to a place of unbelief that says, "God isn't fair."

Take my dad for example. How did this life perform on the scale of fairness? Though he lived in repentance and faith and love for his neighbors, he suffered much and he died. Unfair. It's his birthday today, and it's Jason's on Friday. These men lived well, not wickedly. We cry out in pain along with Asaph from Psalm 73 about the unfairness of this life. It's not fair.

Asaph recognized the unfairness of life like the exiles did, but while they blamed God in unbelief, He cried out to God in helpless distress. Take your tears to Jesus. In Psalm 73, Asaph contemplated the unfairness of life and said in verses 16-17, “When I thought *how* to understand this, it *was* too painful for me—<sup>17</sup>Until I went into the sanctuary of God.” He brought his pain to the Lord.

In Psalm 73:25-26 Asaph surrendered to the Lord in faith, saying “<sup>25</sup> Whom have I in heaven *but You*? And *there is* none upon earth *that* I desire besides You. <sup>26</sup> My flesh and my heart fail; *but God is* the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”

Life does not score well on the fairness scale. How about God—the Lord—this One to whom Asaph cried in his distress? Is God fair? He who came to Adam and Eve after they plunged all of creation into sin and brokenness and death and instead of throwing in the towel, He promised in Genesis 3:15 that a descendent of Eve would defeat Satan, though this promised messiah would Himself suffer.

If God was simply fair, He would have allowed Adam and Eve to get what they deserved for fracturing creation: they deserved death without hope. But God is far from unfair and He is more than fair: He is generous.

Consider the unfairness of life for the Israelites who were enslaved in Egypt. Consider the generosity of God toward them to save them from Pharaoh and bring them to the promised land!

Consider the unfairness of life for Jesus. Though He was God and loved God and loved people without sin, He was nailed to a cross like a sinner. Does God know how you feel when the pain of the unfairness of life hurts? Jesus has been there.

Today’s epistle lesson from Philippians 2 recounts how Jesus, the Son of God from eternity past, for whom it would have been fair to remain highly exalted without ever humbling Himself, willingly chose to humble Himself to endure unfairness at the hands of wicked men to accomplish your salvation.

Philippians 2:6-8 says, “Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, <sup>7</sup>but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, *and* coming in the likeness of men. <sup>8</sup>And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to *the point of* death, even the death of the cross.”

The Judean exiles in Babylon saw the unfairness of life and complained that God was unfair. They complained that their fathers had eaten sour grapes and now it was they, the next generation, that had their teeth set on edge by the sourness of someone else’s sin.

How does God perform on the scale of fairness? We are the ones who have sinned. We have eaten the sour grapes of sin. Whose teeth are set on edge from our sin? 1 Peter 3:18 says it like this, “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God.”

Life is unfair, and God knows how that feels. He became flesh and suffered all that we through our sins deserve. He got less from life than He deserved. Life is unfair. But God? God is

not unfair. God is fair. Fairness is getting what is deserved. Sin deserves death. All have sinned. Was the fair payment of death made? It was. God is fair.

But God is beyond fair. Who is the One who paid the price of death for the your sins and mine and Ezekiel's and even the sins of those exiles in Babylon? Jesus! God is not unfair. In His willing suffering and death, Jesus demonstrated the fairness of God, that sin results in death. But it wasn't His sins that He was dying for—it was yours! So in His death Jesus also demonstrated that God is quite the opposite of unfair. He is generous.

Life too often gives less than a person deserves. But God—God in Christ gives you who believe more than you deserve. In many ways life was not fair to the exiles in Babylon, or to my dad, or to Jason, or to anyone. Life may not be fair, but God is generous.

Jesus who willing suffered and died, allowing His teeth to be set on edge so to speak for the sour grapes of sin that we have indulged, He didn't stay dead. His resurrection on the third day means that death couldn't hold Him, and it won't hold you who suffer and die in this life. You who believe have life in Jesus that is eternal, unending, and not even death interrupts it.

Last week Wayne shared a verse with me from 1 Thessalonians 5:10 that says that Jesus “died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with Him.”

Today is my dad's birthday, and Friday is Jason's. In some ways, life was unfair to them as it is to you. But God is not unfair. Because of His fairness, sin was paid for with death—but whose death was it that paid for sin? Sin was paid for with Jesus' death. God is fair.

But God is beyond fair. Because of His kindness and generosity, you who suffer and yet believe get more than you deserve. You get eternal life with Jesus and all the saints. You get the righteousness of Christ credited to you now through faith. You get the Holy Spirit living in your hearts to comfort you in the midst of trouble and unfairness, pointing you always to Jesus who suffered in our shoes to prove God as One who is fair and generous.

So today, repent and believe the good news. As God said through Ezekiel in Ezekiel 18:30-32, “Repent, and turn from all your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin. <sup>31</sup> Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. For why should you die, O house of Israel? <sup>32</sup> For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies,” says the Lord God. “Therefore turn and live!”

As you turn and live, and as you call upon the Lord even in the midst of unfair suffering, may the peace of our generous God which surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.