

EZEKIEL 18:1-4, 25-32

YOU TALKING TO ME?

Who in the world is God talking to in this reading. For those who don't know their Bibles well this may not be so confusing, however, if you do know your Bible it does become confusing, and you have to ask yourself, "Who is God talking to?". So, let's break this down and see who God is speaking to. Is He even speaking to you and me?

"The word of the LORD came to me." God is speaking to Ezekiel. That's the easiest part. But then God says, "What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'?" Did you catch that God says Israel?

For starters, right from the start of this book Ezekiel is in exile in Babylon. Now who is exile along with Ezekiel in Babylon? I make this really easy when teaching confirmation. Just think of this alphabetically. There once was the nation of Israel, but then there was a civil war and it divided into Israel and Judah. I and J. Israel on top and Judah on the bottom. Then they both get taken away into captivity, first Israel, and then Judah. I and then J. First Israel to Assyria, and then Judah to Babylon. A and then B. So then if Ezkiel is in captivity in Babylon, then he is with . . . Judah! So why is God referring to Israel throughout our entire reading? It's not because Ezekiel is going to travel to up Assyria to visit the Israelites there, but rather it's because God still sees them as one nation. What God has joined together let man not separate, and even if man separates, God still sees them as one.

In our sinful nature we tear things apart, especially relationships. Yet, it's in God's nature to want to heal and bring back together what we've broken. This reading beautifully shows us God's compassion, mercy and forgiveness, and it starts right from the beginning by addressing the people of Judah as the people of Israel.

Now we turn to the problem that the people of Israel and Judah are facing, which is one of captivity in a foreign land. They've both been exiled because of their sins, their turning away from the Lord God of Israel to the gods of other nations, and so God sent them off to the other nations. Now back to just the people of Judah, whom God refers to as the people of Israel, and so I'll refer to the captives in Babylon as Israel as God does from now on.

Israel was in captivity for seventy years. Some will have had children and grandchildren in that time. This reading is addressing those who were born in captivity. This reading is addressing those who felt that they were being punished for the sins of their parents or grandparents. The proverb that God didn't like suggested that the fathers had eaten sour grapes and the children could taste that sourness in their mouths.

How would you like to suffer for something that someone else did? Maybe you've experienced that. Maybe you are experiencing that. When I was in grade six I happened to walk by some classmates who were doing something wrong, and at that point the teacher came along and gave us all detention. Oh, was I furious that I would be punished for something I didn't do. I can still remember my anger to this day. That was a small thing. Now imagine being born into punishment and suffering it for years. Your parents or grandparents go on and on about how good it was back home, and lament that they were taken away to this foreign land because they sinned against their God. And you think, 'But I didn't do that! Why do I have to suffer for what you did?'

God speaks into this situation and says, "No! I'm not going to punish you for what your parents or grandparents did." God says that He'll forgive those who turn away from the sinful ways of their parents or grandparents. He won't let our past define who we are. If you turn away from the sinful ways of those in your past you'll live, but if you don't turn you'll die in your sins just like your parents and grandparents. God says that the soul who sins will die. God doesn't do communal punishment and just grab everyone and punish them all together like that teacher did to me.

If the people in captivity knew their Scriptures, they would've known that this wasn't God's proverb, they would've know that Moses taught that, "Fathers shall not be put to death because of their children, nor shall children be put to death because of their fathers. Each one shall be put to death for his own sin" (Deuteronomy 24:16). And if we do sin like our parents did but turn from those sins God will forgive us.

Now, of course that's hard to believe if you grew up with an image of a God who is very judging. You might have an image of God in that you think He's waiting to catch you doing something wrong so that He can punish you. He got your parents, and He'll get you too. Or it might be a generational sin. Your parents did it, and now you do it too. Sometimes it's even generational trauma. Your parents suffered and they passed that negative, 'woe is me' thinking down onto you. You're always waiting for something bad to happen to you, and you have no hope for the future.

Here God is trying to break these generational cycles of harm being passed down from grandparent, to parent, to child. God wants to break you free from whatever the cycle is – abuse, despair, poverty – the things that people become captive to, those bad patterns of life that harm us. God doesn't want you to get stuck in the past reliving generational problems. God wants to return us to the present, to the here and now, to His forgiveness grace and mercy. God listens to us in our pits of despair, our fatalism, our sayings of "it is what it is", "our parents went through this and this is just the way it will be." God says, 'No!', and He invites you to turn away from that way of negative thinking, that way of life.

Now in reading just our text this might sound like works righteousness, like God is telling us to save ourselves, but rather if you read the whole book of Ezekiel, you'll see that this is an invitation to accept that He's enabling them and us to turn away from sinful lives

At the end of our reading God says, "Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live" (v.s 30b-32). Sure it's great that God doesn't want us to die, but rather He wants us to live, but then He tells us to create new hearts and spirits within ourselves. How could we ever do that? Go back seven chapters and you'll see that God has already created the new hearts and here He's just inviting us to accept His gift.

"Thus says the Lord GOD: **I will gather you** from the peoples and assemble you out of the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel.' And when they come there, they will remove from it all its detestable things and all its abominations. And **I will give them** one heart, and a new spirit **I will put within them. I will remove** the heart of stone from their flesh and **give them a heart of flesh**" (11:17b-19).

David prayed for this in Psalm 51 (10-12), "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from Your presence, and take not Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit." God offered this to the people of Israel in their time of exile. God gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit and the forgiveness of our sins in our baptism (Acts 2:38).

Part of being a Christian is just realizing what God does for us and slowly our lives and actions catch up with the new heart and Holy Spirit that God gives us, and out of our hearts flow the new life that God desires for us.

After Jesus' death and resurrection to pay the punishment for our sins the apostle John saw Jesus in heaven where there were no tears and no death, no crying and no pain. And Jesus said to John, "Behold, I am making all things new" (Revelation 21:5). You don't need to make a new heart for yourself or a new spirit. Jesus makes one for you.

So yes, God is speaking to Ezekiel, to Judah, to the whole nation of Israel, and to us, to you. God doesn't want you to suffer because of things that happened to you in your past, or happened to your ancestors, or were done by your parents. God wants to free you from all your sins and give you a new heart that His Son Jesus makes for you. Amen.