

Preaching Judgment from Ezekiel¹

Iain Duguid

*Iain Duguid is professor of Old Testament and dean of online learning
at Westminster Theological College*

The old slogan, “Repent, the end is nigh!” has become distinctly unfashionable in our day and age. It has been so overused as the butt of jokes that it is hard, even for us as Christians, to take its message seriously. It seems old-fashioned and out of date. Nowadays, we are much more likely to say to people that we wish to reach for Christ: “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life” or “Do you know for sure that you are going to heaven when you die?” We like to focus on the “good news” aspect of the gospel: all the ways in which the gospel contributes to human flourishing. One pastor described the goal of his church’s services like this: “In a non-threatening atmosphere the “seekers” share a delightful, thought-provoking hour in which they are introduced to the person of Jesus Christ”² I’m guessing that he is probably not preaching a series of sermons from the early chapters of the Book of Ezekiel.

Misusing the Prophets

Like many of the prophets, Ezekiel’s calling during the first part of his ministry was to be the bringer of bad news, the news of impending judgment. The covenant people needed to know that God’s patience with them was running out and the axe was about to fall. In the same way, Jeremiah’s calling was “to uproot and tear down, to destroy and demolish”, as well as “to build and plant” (Jer. 1:10)³ – four negative verbs to go with

¹ Dr Duguid’s article has been through the peer review process, however due to serious health issues at the time he was unable to make the revisions suggested by the reviewer. Nevertheless, we have decided to continue with publication of his article because we believe it will be of great use to the preacher or teacher wishing to gain a greater understanding of this important theme in Ezekiel.

² See Cecil Martens, “The Seeker Service at Fair Haven,” *Reformed Worship* 23 (1992) 10.

³ Bible quotations are taken from the CSB (*The Christian Standard Bible* © 2017 Holman Bible Publishers).

the two positive ones. It is therefore a travesty that the only passage from the book of Jeremiah that most Christians have ever heard preached is Jeremiah 29:11, “For I know the plans I have for you – this is the LORD’s declaration – plans for your well-being, not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.”

What makes it worse is that this verse from Jeremiah is often preached as if it were a universal truth, equally applicable in all times and places, whereas in context it is plainly a word addressed to a specific group of people: the exiles who had already been taken from Judah by Nebuchadnezzar, even before the city was besieged and destroyed by him in 586 B.C. The point of the oracle in its original context is precisely that God does not have an equally good plan for everyone in Jeremiah’s days. For the exiles in Babylon, the future good plan of God contrasts with his rather miserable plan for their present: most of them would remain far away from their home and temple for their entire lifetimes. Equally, however, the ‘good’ plan for those in exile contrasts with the Lord’s ‘bad’ plan for those who remained behind in Judah. Contrary to the words of some of the false prophets who were operating in Jeremiah’s day, the future of God’s people lay precisely with those who were already in Babylon, who might have seemed to be far away from God, and not with those who are in Jerusalem, even though they still have the temple and the trappings of independent nationhood (cf. Ezek. 11:15-16).

Meanwhile, the Lord also identifies a third group of people in Jeremiah 29, distinct from the exiles and the residents of Judah: this group encompasses people like Shemaiah, the exile who wrote home to complain to the authorities about Jeremiah’s discouraging letter. He was therefore condemned to share in the ‘bad news’ message sent to those back home, not the good plan that God had for those around him in exile. In other words, being an exile is not enough: you have to be an exile with faith in God. On the other hand, the good news of Shemaiah’s separation from the rest of the exiles for his lack of faith was that it suggested that God could similarly single out for salvation those still living in Jerusalem who did have faith.⁴

⁴ In Ezekiel 9:4, the angel in priestly garb is told to mark out for salvation those who “sigh and

So if I were preaching on Jeremiah 29:11 – or more broadly Jeremiah 28-29 – my sermon would have three points:

- 1) God loves some of you and has a wonderful plan for your lives (at least in heaven: you could be in for a rough next seventy years or so).
- 2) God hates some of you and has a terrible plan for your lives. The scenery along the way may not be too bad but you'd better enjoy it while it lasts; it's all you've got.
- 3) the crucial factor is not your location or the destiny of your family and friends: it is determined by your response to the word of the prophet. In other words, come to Christ now or face eternal punishment.

That's still a little rough as a sermon outline, perhaps. We would probably want to expand the bit about Jesus, showing how he took the terrible fate that we all deserve by going into the ultimate exile from the Father's presence on the cross. Because of his suffering in our place, we, who all deserve the bad fate of the unbelieving Jews, may inherit in Christ a gloriously undeserved plan for our welfare and hope. But this brief example does illustrate the reality that when we preach from the prophets, all too often we zero in quickly on their messages of hope, to the exclusion of their messages of judgment.

If we do turn to judgment passages of the prophets at all, I think that many preachers like to cherry-pick famous passages and extract their words out of context. This is especially true of fairly generic appeals in the prophets to do what is right, like Micah 6:8 (“Mankind, he has told each of you what is good and what it is the LORD requires of you: to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”). From passages like that we can derive a moral lesson, something we can tell people to do – law – which is fairly easy to preach. But we don't as often set the passage in its broader context as part of the Lord's covenant lawsuit against the people of Judah's day, who have bought into “the statutes of Omri and all the practices of Ahab's house”, as Micah 6:16 puts it.

groan” over all the abominations committed in the city. We are not told how many he marked (or even that he marked any), but the assumption seems to be that there are such people.

The result of this tendency is that in our preaching we tend to avoid the more searching passages of judgment. If we were to preach consecutively through the prophetic books – or even preach a substantial series from a prophetic book like Ezekiel – they would challenge us (and our people) to rethink our view of sin, righteousness and judgment, not coincidentally the three things Jesus tells us the Holy Spirit will convict the world of when he comes (John 16:8). As Hebrews 10:31 tells us, it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God, not a delightful thought provoking encounter. At least some of the time, our preaching should plainly reflect that reality.

Of course, our seminaries and theological colleges don't generally help us much in our preparation. Our preaching courses typically start out with passages in the Pauline Epistles and the Gospels. Maybe you get some instruction on preaching Old Testament narratives. That makes sense pedagogically since those portions of Scripture are generally easier for beginning preachers to start with. But courses on preaching from the prophets are rare. So how do we preach on passages whose entire focus seems to be judgment in a gospel-centered way? And how does Ezekiel help us?

The Holiness of God

First, the prophets show us who God is. The prophets' call narratives are programmatic for the ministry the Lord has for them. Isaiah sees the Lord, high and exalted in the temple on Mount Zion (Isa. 6). The seraphim cry "Holy, holy, holy" – and it is not coincidental that Isaiah's favorite (and almost unique)⁵ title for God becomes the Holy One of Israel. Isaiah is convicted of the fact that he is a man of unclean lips, and that he is surrounded by a people similarly defiled, which does not make his situation better but worse. How can such an unholy people survive in the presence of an all-holy God? No wonder the prophet pronounces judgment upon himself: "Woe is me! I am sure to be destroyed" (Isa. 6:5). But contrary to all expectation, Isaiah is not destroyed. A seraph is sent with a hot coal from the altar – so hot that this angelic creature has to use

⁵ Twenty six out of the thirty one uses of the phrase in the Bible are on the lips of Isaiah.

tongs to take it from the altar – and he touches it to Isaiah’s lips (6:6-7). You expect Isaiah to flinch with pain as the delicate flesh of his mouth comes in contact with such intense white-heat, silencing his unclean lips forever. But instead his guilt is removed by the encounter, his sin atoned for. Isaiah then responds to God’s rhetorical question “Whom shall we send and who will go for us?” and is called to go his defiled people as God’s ambassador (6:8-9).

Of course, that’s where we typically end our sermon on Isaiah 6, since the occasion is often sending out a missionary and the message of rest of the chapter is too much of a downer. After Isaiah’s response, the Lord says, “Go! Say to these people: Keep listening, but do not understand; keep looking, but do not perceive. Make the minds of these people dull; deafen their ears and blind their eyes; otherwise they might see with their eyes and hear with their ears, understand with their minds, turn back, and be healed. Then I said, “Until when, Lord?” And he replied: Until cities lie in ruins without inhabitants, houses are without people, the land is ruined and desolate, and the Lord drives the people far away, leaving great emptiness in the land. Though a tenth will remain in the land, it will be burned again. Like the terebinth or the oak that leaves a stump when felled, the holy seed is the stump” (Isa. 6:10-13).

In other words, the Lord tells Isaiah that there is massive and repeated judgment to come on Israel, with only a teeny tiny flicker of long term hope. No one will listen to you, Isaiah; no one will heed your words. You will be a lone voice crying in the wilderness. But God’s miniscule remnant will endure. Who wants to say that to a missionary? So we miss that part of the passage out. In the process, however, we misrepresent who the God is who has sent Isaiah, the God who likewise sends us, like Zion, to go up on a high mountain and proclaim to the cities of Judah “Behold your God!” We are happy to say to people, “See, the Lord God comes with strength, and his power establishes his rule. His wages are with him, and his reward accompanies him. He protects his flock like a shepherd; he gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them in the fold of his garment. He gently leads those that are nursing” (Isa. 40:10-11). We are not so happy to join the prophet in telling the people, “Your land is desolate, your cities burned down; foreigners devour your fields right in front of you-- a desolation,

like a place demolished by foreigners. Daughter Zion is abandoned like a shelter in a vineyard, like a shack in a cucumber field, like a besieged city. If the Lord of Armies had not left us a few survivors, we would be like Sodom, we would resemble Gomorrah. (Isa. 1:7-9). Same God; different message – but we need both parts to do justice to the whole revelation of God.

The Calling to Be Watchmen

Ezekiel's opening vision of God is equally as glorious as Isaiah's but it is different, just as his message was different from Isaiah's. Isaiah saw a static picture of God seated on a throne in his temple, but Ezekiel saw God on the move, away from the temple, seated on his divine chariot, riding on the storm, which is approaching from the north, the traditional direction from which Israel's enemies arrive (Ezek. 1:4). It's easy to get confused by the details in his opening vision, but it is best viewed as an impressionist painting – from a distance. Everywhere you look there is movement: wheels, wings, legs, lightning zapping back and forth. And all of that movement is threatening: the Lord is coming on his war chariot ready to bring immediate judgment on his people. His chariot has intersecting wheels covered with eyes, and its bearers, the cherubim, have four faces so they can look and move in all directions at once without turning: where can you run and where can you hide from this God? The answer, of course, is “Nowhere”. There is nowhere to run and nowhere to hide before this all-powerful, all-threatening God. The only thing to do is to fall flat on your face when you behold this God, and that is precisely what Ezekiel does: he falls on his face as though he were dead (1:28).

But of course, the dead don't always stay dead in Ezekiel. The Spirit of the Lord enters the prophet, sets him on his feet and commissions him for service (2:1-2), just as the Spirit will later enter the dry bones that represent Israel in Ezekiel 37: it is important to notice that what happens later to the bones, happens first for the prophet. He is himself a kind of first fruits of the new Israel, the prototype of the Spirit-empowered resurrection that he will later proclaim to those who feel cut off from God, dead in their transgressions and sins. Yet, as with Isaiah, the Lord warns Ezekiel that his ministry will not see much success: if the Lord

had sent him to people “deep of lip and heavy of tongue” (3:5) – to the Gentiles – they would have listened, but he is sending him to Israel, the rebellious house, with foreheads of flint and stubborn hearts (3:7). The divinely appointed goal of his ministry is not that his hearers should all be converted – or even that many among them should be converted – but that at the end of his time of ministry “they will know there has been a prophet among them” (2:5).

This reality is stressed when Ezekiel is called to be a watchman for the people (Ezek. 3). The job of a watchman was to shout out a warning of the enemy’s approach so that the people could run to find shelter within the city walls. In this case, the threatening enemy from whom they need shelter is the Lord, who is coming in judgment against his own people. If, knowing what has been revealed to him, the prophet fails to shout out the news of danger, then the peoples’ blood will be on his head. But if he shouts out his warning and they refuse to hear, then the responsibility for their fate will be on them, not on him. It is probably not coincidental that in Acts 20, Paul testifies to the Ephesian elders that he is innocent of the blood of all in that place because he did not shrink from declaring to them the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:26-27). Paul was a watchman who need not be ashamed because he had testified both to the Jews and the Greeks repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ – not just repentance without faith (“Repent the end is nigh”), nor faith without repentance (“God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life”), but repentance and faith together.

Of course, both Isaiah and Ezekiel’s call narratives challenge us in the contemporary church with the reality that we are far too enamored with numbers as a measure of success. This is one reason why we don’t preach these kind of challenging sermons on judgment from the prophets, instead preferring to give people a “delightful thought-provoking hour” (or, better still, forty five minutes) that introduces them to a caricature of Jesus. As I have been preaching through the latter chapters of the Book of Acts, where Paul seems to be endlessly in prison or on trial, I’ve been struck afresh by the reality that God’s agenda is very different from ours. It is a surreal storyline: judge after judge declares Paul not guilty, yet still he languishes in jail. This makes you wonder about the Lord’s

competence: a half-decent lawyer without divine assistance ought surely to have been able to free Paul, yet the apostle to the gentiles and the Lord's most effective church planter lingers in prison, rather than being out and about in the cities of the empire planting new churches. What was God up to?

To be sure, as Luke notes in the very ending of the Book of Acts, “the gospel is not bound” (Acts 28:31). Paul was in chains; he was not able to bring large numbers of people to Christ or plant new churches, but he could nonetheless witness to a few people who would never have attended those churches voluntarily, including, ultimately, Caesar himself. He could write a series of letters that he might otherwise never have had the time or need to write, which now form part of our Scriptures. And he could form a personal model for other persecuted believers of how to rejoice while in chains for the sake of the gospel. God was up to good things in and through Paul's life, even though they weren't the kind of things he would have preferred to be accomplishing, or the kind of things that the world deems “success”. In the same way, it is really important that we grasp the significance of the fact that God's utterly sovereign power in the universe is not always demonstrated in providing his servants with abundant hearers and disciples. Paul knew that, and I suspect he learned it from the prophets.

“Prophetic” Ministry

So Ezekiel started off with a clear and overwhelming vision of God a clear and realistic expectation of the response he would receive, and a clear sense of his own responsibility in that situation: to be a watchman, whose ministry measure would be faithfulness in declaring God's Word, not the size or responsiveness of his audience. His listeners readily dismissed him as a mere “maker of metaphors” (Ezek. 20:49) or “singer of love songs” (33:32) but the message he had for them was, quite literally, one of life or death. It was a message that totally engulfed him: Ezekiel not only had a message from God for the people: he was a message from God to the people. He swallowed a scroll containing words of lamentation and woe during his call vision, internalizing the message he had to communicate from God (3:1). Ezekiel was also struck with dumbness from God for the

first part of his ministry, only able to speak the words of judgment that the Lord gave him to say and nothing else (3:26). He was called to perform a number of bizarre sign acts – lying on his side for days on end, eating siege rations, making threatening gestures at a clay model of Jerusalem (4:1-17), digging a hole through the wall of his own house and packing a bag like someone going into exile (12:1-7), and, perhaps most striking to us, not performing the usual mourning rituals after the sudden death of his wife (24:16-18). We should perhaps clarify that God’s command to the prophet not to mourn over his wife’s death is not a demand by God that he feel nothing in response to that tragedy; it is a command that he avoid the normal outward displays of his grief – similar to the restrictions on priests in general and the High Priest in particular over when and how they might display their grief (Lev. 21:1-11). But all of this still shows us a man who was totally gripped by the word of God: a man who was swept up in his message.

All of these aspects of the prophetic call ratchet up what it means for us as pastors to exercise a “prophetic ministry”. Paul calls Timothy a “man of God” (1 Tim. 6:11), picking up on a clear prophetic title from the Old Testament. In the same way, the Puritan William Perkins entitled his treatise on preaching, *The Art of Prophecy*.⁶ Like the prophets, we are not professionals merely doing a job, trying to entertain and inspire people to live better lives. We are not simply makers of metaphors and singers of sweet love songs. We are called to be men who have swallowed a book whole, and as a result whatever comes out of us is rooted and grounded in that Word. We cry out as watchmen warning of the wrath to come, as well as ambassadors of the invading sovereign king, authorized to offer his exclusive terms of surrender, which are repentance and faith in Christ. We have a message of life and death to deliver to our congregations and to our wider communities. Woe to us if we fail in that task!

There is another striking difference between Ezekiel and many of us: he will not be polite about sin. In Ezekiel 16 and 23, we have some of the most graphic descriptions of the spiritual adultery of God’s people. Even in our tamed down English translations, his words are graphic and shocking. It

⁶ William Perkins, *The Art of Prophecy* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1996).

is perhaps not surprising that these chapters are rarely preached in our churches. In spite of the conclusion of Douglas Stuart that “those who wish to teach or preach on this chapter...can do so quite successfully and with decorum”,⁷ many would still concur with the assessment of Spurgeon: “A minister can scarcely read it in public”!⁸ While certainly discernment must be exercised – it is understandable, for instance, why this passage is not found in children’s Bible storybooks (which, in any event, largely ignore the prophets) – one wonders if contemporary Christians need to be as shielded from unpleasant realities as we tend to think. These same Christians are regularly bombarded with similarly shocking stories on the nightly news and the internet, let alone in what they watch for entertainment. It’s not as if they are completely unfamiliar with the concepts of rampant adultery and prostitution. Moreover, is it possible to teach these passages “with decorum” and not lose an essential element of the message? There are no new facts in these chapters about Israel’s history, and if we read them simply as a dispassionate historical catalog of crime like 2 Kings 17, we lose everything that these passages distinctively contribute to the message of Scripture. The whole point is precisely the lack of decorum in Ezekiel’s manner. He will not “be polite” about Israel’s history of sin: instead, he is instructed to expose it in its full ugliness in the most graphic manner possible. Only thus can he get the point across to his reluctant audience.

Preaching Judgment Without Being Judgmental

So perhaps I have convinced you of the need to preach these judgment passages. But the significant challenge remains of how to do so in a way that does justice to them and still focuses our attention on the central message of the Old Testament, which is the sufferings of Christ and the glories that will follow – the gospel? How can we preach passages of judgment without being judgmental?

⁷ *Ezekiel* (Mastering the Old Testament 18; Dallas: Word, 1988), 141. The desire to downplay the shocking aspects of the chapter is not merely a modern phenomenon. The Aramaic Targum already exhibits the same tendency (see J. Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel* [Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1990], 77).

⁸ Cited in Derek Thomas, *God Strengthens: Ezekiel Simply Explained* (Welwyn Commentary; Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 1993), 108.

To begin with, I think we may make the point that most correct application – from whatever passage of Scripture – functions by way of building an analogy. The Bible was not in general written as a personal letter from God to me, though some are certainly tempted to read it that way. It is a collection of stories, songs, oracles, letters and apocalypses that were written for particular people in particular places and at particular times. Nevertheless, those ancient messages, being inspired by God, do have continuing relevance to direct the life of the believer. Paul does not hesitate to tell the Gentile Corinthians “These things [the stories of Israel’s wilderness wanderings] happened to them as examples, and they were written for our instruction ” (1 Cor. 10:11) – even though, strictly speaking, the stories were written down as a warning for a Jewish audience long before the Corinthians were even born. The reason they could continue to speak to Paul’s day is that there is a fundamental analogy between the experiences of the wilderness generation of Israel, delivered out of the bondage of Egypt but not yet having entered into the Promised Land, and the Christian life that the Corinthians were called to live. Both audiences are part of the larger people of God, the Israel of God. The epistle to the Hebrews is constructed around that same analogy: its theme is, as one commentator put it, “the wandering people of God”.⁹ And of course Paul’s words to the Corinthians also speak to us because there is an analogy between their situation as early believers in Christ and ours as contemporary believers in Christ.

Every analogy implies similarities and differences between two objects. Proper understanding of analogies always implies making the right comparisons and ignoring the wrong ones. “Your sneeze is like the sound of a trumpet” creates an analogy. Presumably, it means that you sneeze loudly, like trumpets do, not that your sneeze can play a fanfare, like trumpets do. Interpreting and applying Biblical texts involves recognizing where the right analogies are, and rejecting the wrong ones. For example, in the earlier illustration from Jeremiah 29:11, the problem was that people are drawing the wrong analogy: they assume Jeremiah’s words are addressed to everyone, and therefore may be directly addressed to

⁹ Ernst Käsemann, *The Wandering People of God: An Investigation of the Letter to the Hebrews*, trans. Roy Harrisville & Irving Sandberg (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984).

us as a kind of “timeless truth,” without consideration of the fact that they originally addressed only the exiles among God’s people. So an important question in making proper application of that verse to the contemporary context becomes “Who are the equivalent in our setting to the exiles in the original context?” The answer is that this promise may be appropriately applied to those who are in Christ – for as 1 Peter 2:11 reminds us, Christians are in a profound sense strangers and exiles in this world. Jeremiah 29:11 is in some respects the functional equivalent of Romans 8:35-39, which asks “Who can separate us from the love of Christ?” – once again, a text that is addressed to believers, not universally.

On the other hand, the wider context of Jeremiah 29:11 reminds us that not everybody who is part of the people of God outwardly is necessarily truly part of the people of God. Those living in Judah thought they were the people of God, and therefore the recipients of God’s blessing. But they were deceived: actually, they were the subject of God’s curse. So too there may be people listening to us preach, Sunday after Sunday, who do not have true faith. Like Shemaiah, they may expose their true nature by resisting the full-orbed proclamation of Biblical truth. Again, notice how we are building analogies between the original audience(s) and our own situation.

So there is a multistage process in the interpretation of Old Testament texts. We first need to understand the text within its original historical and literary context: to whom was it originally addressed and what did it say to them? That is the grounding that gives us confidence that we are not simply free-associating the passage with some broad Biblical truth but are drawing a legitimate message from this particular text, a message that God intended that text to communicate. People should not walk away saying, “I would never in a million years have imagined that that text was about that subject.” They should go away wondering how they previously missed what the passage is so obviously about.

Taking Account of Redemptive History

But we not only need to explore the meaning of the text for its original hearers; we also need to ask how that message and audience translates

over into our contemporary context. This is where preaching the Old Testament is significantly harder than preaching the New Testament. The analogy between us and the Corinthians is relatively straightforward – we all live as believers in God in a post-Pentecost, pre-return of Christ era of redemptive history. There may be important historical and cultural factors of difference between their situation and ours to consider, but these are relatively straightforward compared with passages from a different time in redemptive history.

This will come to bear immediately in terms of two obvious differences between the prophetic era and ours: the law of God and the people of God. Let's start with the law of God. The prophets repeatedly indict the people for covenant unfaithfulness, and wherever they descend into details it is clear that it is the Sinai covenant that is the standard of righteousness in view. For example, in Ezekiel 18, the prophet describes a righteous man in these terms: "He does not eat at the mountain shrines or look to the idols of the house of Israel. He does not defile his neighbor's wife or approach a woman during her menstrual impurity. He doesn't oppress anyone but returns his collateral to the debtor. He does not commit robbery, but gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with clothing. He doesn't lend at interest or for profit but keeps his hand from injustice and carries out true justice between men. He follows my statutes and keeps my ordinances, acting faithfully. Such a person is righteous; he will certainly live" (Ezek. 18:6-9). These are not random timeless virtues that are revealed in creation. Rather, they are all based on the requirements of the Book of Leviticus (see chapters 18-20). So to apply them to a contemporary audience we have to understand how Old Testament law from the Mosaic economy applies to us.

In order to be able to deal rightly with Old Testament law, we first of all need to distinguish between the three different aspects of Old Testament law – the moral, civil and ceremonial law.¹⁰ What I mean by moral, civil

¹⁰ I recognize that there are a number of fine New Testament scholars who resist these categories since they are not directly found anywhere in Scripture. Nevertheless, if we reject these terms, we are forced to recreate their functions, since most Christians acknowledge that some Old Testament laws apply unchanged in all times and situations, others point forward to Christ and have now fulfilled their purpose, while other laws applied to Israel during their tenure of

and ceremonial law is the fact that there are three ways in which Old Testament laws guide contemporary believers. Some Old Testament laws (moral laws) are of enduring significance for all times and all places. An example of “moral law” that is binding in all times and places would be “You shall not kill.” These laws apply equally to all people everywhere, regardless of their culture or place in history.

Other laws –ceremonial laws – were specifically designed to point forward to Christ and were completely fulfilled in him. Because Jesus Christ is our Passover Lamb (1 Cor. 5:7), we Christians no longer celebrate the Passover (even though the Old Testament commands God’s people to do so, and threatens excommunication if they fail to keep the feast). It would be wrong for us to slaughter a lamb and offer it to God, because the whole purpose of this law was to point us forward to God’s ultimate sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

The third category, the civil laws, were designed as specific applications of God’s wisdom for the Old Testament state of Israel during their occupation of the Promised Land and have therefore now expired, though the general principles that they embody continue to be relevant – what the Westminster Confession calls the general equity.¹¹ An example of civil law would be the requirement that when the Israelites were harvesting, they were not to cut the grain all the way to the edges of the field but were to leave some for the poor (Deut. 24:19-21). That law doesn’t apply to us today (even if we are farmers) because it was intended for national Israel during the period when they occupied the Promised Land. Nonetheless, the “general equity” of the law still has applications for us. A lawyer or a nurse who sets aside a portion of his or her time for volunteer work for the poor is fulfilling the motivation behind the law of Deuteronomy 24, even though the details have changed.

the land and still have lessons for us, even though they don’t apply directly. If you eliminate these categories, as some popular evangelical authors have sought to do, it is difficult to explain why the Old Testament laws on homosexual behavior are still relevant, while those that forbid wearing a garment with mixed fibres does not prevent you from wearing a polyester/cotton blend shirt (Deut. 22:11). Sometimes, those who dislike the terminology end up recreating the same categories under a different name.

¹¹ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 19.4.

Now that is not to say that it is always easy to distinguish how a particular law addresses us as New Testament believers, nor to deny that more than one of these aspects may be relevant for any specific law. The practice of interpreting Old Testament law may not be easy, but the fundamental questions that we need to ask the text flow exactly from these three categories:

- 1) In what ways do these practices have enduring and universal implications for God's people in all times and all places (moral law)?
- 2) In what ways do these practices point us forward to Christ, and find their complete fulfillment in him (ceremonial law)?
- 3) In what ways do these practices reflect purely cultural and local practices, given to ethnic Israel, which do not govern us directly but more broadly in "their general equity" (civil law)?

Translating Contexts

Returning to Ezekiel 18, it is clear that not all of the laws listed there are of the same sort. Some are moral laws: not robbing people, not defiling your neighbor's wife or looking to idols are injunctions that apply relatively straightforwardly for modern people too. Some of the behaviors that are forbidden are ceremonial: the laws about emissions of life fluids such as menstruation do not bind us directly. They are not meaningless, however: they remind us (as they did the original audience) of our continual contact with the realm of death, even in the most life-giving activities, from which the blood of Christ alone can deliver us. Other prescriptions are civil laws, such as the laws about lending at interest or for profit. They bind us to the principle of not taking advantage of our neighbor through extortionate loans (and in Israel, your neighbor was virtually the only person from whom you could borrow or to whom you could lend), but the law does not forbid taking out a mortgage on a house or borrowing to expand a business. These are fundamentally different kinds of transactions.

Even moral laws may need some translation in our preaching to make them sharp arrows to convict people's hearts. For example, in Ezekiel 18, the prophet rules out eating at the mountaintop pagan shrines and

bowing down to idols. In Ezekiel 8, he likewise describes a number of idolatrous activities that are forbidden, including bowing down to the sun, offering incense to a wall of carved deities, and erecting a statue that provokes jealousy, probably representing the goddess Asherah. Unless your congregational context is a lot wilder than mine, it's unlikely that any of those precise practices were a temptation to your listeners last week.

However, once we probe deeper and ask what idol worship promised ancient people, we can hit closer to the mark. The analogy still connects. In antiquity, the heavenly bodies such as the stars and the sun were thought to exercise control over people's fates, while fertility deities like Asherah promised security and significance through the acquisition of many children (especially sons), who could continue your line and provide for you in old age. Ezekiel himself gives us a potent bridge in Ezekiel 14, where he talks about the idols of the heart that the elders of Israel have set up: even in their context, idolatry was not merely bowing down to objects of wood and stone, though it includes that.¹² It also covers everything that we value that prevents us serving the Lord wholeheartedly. What are the things that we moderns look to, that promise to give us security and significance if we will just bow down and worship them? Our careers, our relationships, our perfect families, our retirement portfolios, our houses, our sexual identity, even the cars that we drive become means of measuring our personal significance and value, and the secure refuge that will protect us against life's storms. We don't even have to ascend a mountain to join in the sacred ceremonies of these idols: they are right there in our hearts all along. As John Calvin put it, our hearts are factories that turn out a whole succession of idols, one after the other.¹³ These become our stumbling blocks that get in the way of serving and pursuing God. Even when outwardly we are seeking God, we are often deeply compromised in our loyalties.

Of course, in order for the analogy to work well and convict us of our sins, the people we are speaking to have to provide an apt analogy to those the

¹² See David Powlison, "Idols of the Heart and 'Vanity Fair'", *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 13 (1995) 35-50.

¹³ *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.11.8.

prophet was addressing. Ezekiel spoke to a number of different audiences, but he was never simply speaking out into a vacuum. He addressed the exiles as a group, the elders of the exiles, the inhabitants of Judah, Jerusalem itself, even inanimate objects like the mountains of Israel, and so on. He also penned a sequence of oracles against seven surrounding nations, though as far as we know, he never visited these locations or mailed the oracles to them. In fact, the real audience for these oracles against the nations was actually his own exilic context.

How do we build that analogy properly? Clearly, as with the example from Jeremiah, there are sub-groupings within God's people in Ezekiel's day. There are the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, who are outwardly part of God's people – indeed, they are the leaders of God's people – yet they are condemned for their rebellion against the Lord and are destined for destruction by the Babylonians. Then there are the exiles, who are regarded by the Jerusalemites as being far away from God as well as the land. Even though they too are a rebellious house, reluctant to listen to the prophet, God still has a positive plan for them: he will be a sanctuary for them in exile for a little while. That may not sound like a big deal for us, with our cavalier view whereby we can worship God anywhere we choose, but would have been a bombshell concept in the ancient world with its tight connection between deity, people and land.¹⁴

What is more, it is clear that neither of these groups is monolithic: the elders among the exiles are castigated almost as much as those left behind at home, though the crimes of which they are accused are more subtle. Meanwhile, there are those in Jerusalem who sigh and mourn over the abominations going on all around them, who are specially marked out for salvation by an angelic messenger before the destruction of the city begins (9:4).

How do these categories map onto our context? The broad analogy I work with – one that constantly informs the New Testament use of the Old Testament, is that Israel = the church. That is, there is only one people of God in all times and places; in the past, it was largely, though not exclusively,

¹⁴ Daniel I. Block, *Ezekiel 1-24* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 7.

limited to descendants of Abraham and their offspring, the inhabitants of the land. Now it incorporates Gentiles along with descendants of Abraham and their offspring, as Peter notes on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:39). God's people is fundamentally a unitary category, which is what makes it legitimate to apply words originally written to God's Old Testament people to his New Testament people (as Peter does with Exodus 19:6 in 1 Peter 2:9). The sub-categories now are not defined by location (exiles vs Jerusalemites); from a Biblical-Theological perspective, we can regard all Christians as exiles, which enables us potentially to appropriate the words of comfort spoken to the exiles as addressing us too. Yet it is possible for people who find themselves among the exiles geographically to act like – or actually to be – Jerusalemites: people having the form of godliness but denying its power (2 Tim. 3:5). Even real Christians often act like idolaters, and some in our midst may actually be true idolaters, whose hearts are given over fully to the worship of other gods.

What is more, there doesn't need to be an identical situation between initial hearers and modern audience for conviction to happen. Sometime the sins are sufficiently similar as to be recognizable, even when the contexts are completely different. Ezekiel addresses the last king of Judah, Zedekiah, and condemns him for breaking his covenant commitment of political submission to Babylon, while at the same time pursuing relationships with Egypt (Ezek. 17). It is unlikely that anyone in our audience will directly relate to Zedekiah, even if they work in the diplomatic corps. But the underlying story of Zedekiah's persistent refusal to trust God in the face of a crisis, in spite of the Lord's long history of faithfulness to his people is one that we can all relate to. If we think in terms of the tendency to trust in human strategies and the world's methods – to look to Egypt, in other words, rather than to believe God and take him at his Word – well, now you are talking my language. I know what it looks like in my own life to trust in human strategies rather than in faithfully obeying God, and so, since my behaviour and motivations map onto Zedekiah's, I can recognize that the outcome I deserve matches his. The wages of his sin is death, as the siege, fall and destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. makes abundantly clear. The wages that my sin deserves is death also, whether or not the Lord works that deserved judgment out in my present

experience. Covenant breakers deserve covenant curse: in that regard, I am thoroughly condemned by Ezekiel's prophecy every bit as much as his original audience(s).

This is particularly the case since the fall of Jerusalem and Israel's exile from the land where God promised to dwell with them serve as profound foreshadowings in redemptive history of the judgment that is yet to come. The language that the prophets use to describe both events overlap and merge, just as is the case with the Flood (Gen. 6-8), or the fall of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19). These historical events provide built-in patterns and analogies that are designed to enable us to think clearly about the world-shattering crisis that is coming at the end of cosmic history. We each face our own personal judgment after death, of course (Heb. 9:27), and the entire world faces a season of judgment at the end of all things (2 Pet. 3:10-12). The One who was a sanctuary for the exiles during the terrible events of Judean history can be a refuge for us in that dreadful day; but there is no other refuge that will endure the day of his coming in judgment, as should be vividly clear from the opening vision of Ezekiel.

Preaching Good News

But how do we get to good news from these messages of doom and destruction? Are we condemned to spend weeks on a row convicting people of their sin, without offering them the hope of the gospel? Not at all! The key lies in recognizing how the identification Israel = the church comes about. It is not that the church has displaced or replaced Israel, as some imagine the Reformed view to teach. Rather, it is that Israel finds its ultimate embodiment in the person of Jesus Christ. He is the true Israel of God, the chosen firstborn son, as Matthew makes abundantly clear in the opening chapters of his gospel. He gives us Jesus' genealogy: fourteen generations from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile and fourteen from the exile to the Christ (Matt. 1:1-17). As a child, Jesus goes down into Egypt, while a king tries to eliminate him by killing all of the baby boys (2:14-18). When the Father brings him up from there, Matthew cites Hosea 11: "Out of Egypt, I called my son", making an explicit analogy between Jesus and Israel (Matt. 2:15). After his baptism (Matt. 3), which corresponds to the parting of the Red Sea, Jesus goes into the wilderness

for forty days and forty nights (Matt. 4), just as Israel went there for forty years. While there he experiences exactly the same temptations that Israel faced in the wilderness: hunger, putting God to the test and false worship, but he succeeds each time where the original Israel failed. Then he goes up on a mountain and delivers his law to his new community (Matt. 5-7). The same analogy is operating in John's gospel when Jesus describes himself as a vine (John 15), a key image for Israel in the Old Testament (see Ps. 80:8-14).

How do we Christians become part of the vine? We are branches that are ingrafted in by the vinedresser. The same is true for Israelites after the flesh now that Christ has come: they too must be added to the true Israel through faith in Christ. Those who by their fruitlessness demonstrate that they are not truly connected to the vine are cut off by the vinedresser.

This reality reshapes and refines our fundamental analogy. The goal of Old Testament Israel is Christ: he is the fulfilment of its calling to be the firstborn Son of God (Exod. 4:22; cf. Rom. 8:29). He perfectly kept the Sinai covenant in all of its detailed ramifications, from the heart, not merely externally (Gal. 4:4-5). That means that he merits the long list of blessings laid out in Leviticus 28 for obedient Israel. He is the obedient servant of God in Ezekiel 18, who should live and not die. He is the godly man of Psalm 1, who should flourish like a tree planted beside irrigation canals of water, experiencing the Lord's blessing (Ps. 1:3).

But here the mismatch in the analogy becomes apparent. This righteous servant of the Lord, who should experience the Lord's richest blessing because of his faithfulness, turns out to be a root out of dry ground (Isa. 53:2). He is like the chaff that the wind blows away (Ps. 1:4), experiencing the punishment reserved for covenant breakers who are under God's curse: being hung on a tree, his body exposed to ridicule and condemnation (Deut. 21:23). How can this be? The answer is that Christ as the new Israel has taken into himself the covenant curses that Israel earned through their rebellious disobedience. The holocaust of Jerusalem's destruction in 586 B.C. is one potential outcome of their sins. But the holocaust of the cross is another, alternative reality. The sheep have sinned but the good shepherd pays the price: he was pierced for our transgressions; he was

crushed for our iniquities; the punishment for our peace was on him – but as a result, by his wounds we are healed (Isa. 53:5-6). A remnant of Israel could look forward by faith to the Christ who would come and bring about their deliverance, by grace through faith.

But since our salvation in Christ is by grace through faith, it is no longer limited to the physical descendants of Abraham. Now it goes out to gentiles as well, as we become the spiritual descendants of Abraham by faith in him (see Rom. 4). It is as we are united to Christ by faith that we become the new Israel: the church is only the new Israel because Christ is the new Israel, and it is his body.

What this means is that every passage of condemnation in the prophets points us to the cross. The destruction of Jerusalem points us to the cross. Israel's sin had to be paid for – and at the cross the sin of the remnant of God's people was paid in full. The same analogy connects us with them. The prophet's condemnation falls on us as well. We are all guilty, with real guilt that deserves real condemnation. But if anyone is in Christ they are new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), their sin and guilt is nailed to the cross, paid for by him (Col. 2:14), while the promise of every spiritual blessing that he earned through his righteousness is now ours in him. The gospel of cross is the powerful linkage that connects the condemnation of the Old Testament prophets with the “no condemnation” of the New Testament believer (Rom. 8:1).

Of course, having heard that word of no condemnation, the law continues to guide and shape the life of gratitude of the believer in Christ. But the centerpiece of our preaching ought to be, as it was for Paul and the other apostles, the sufferings of Christ and the glories that will follow (Acts 17:3; 1 Pet. 4:13). The more precisely and powerfully you can convict your hearers of their sin, the more beautifully Christ's perfect righteousness in this specific area will shine, a comfort to the broken and a light to those wandering in deep darkness. Throughout the prophets, the judgment of God leads us by the hand and points us to the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ, time and time again.