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Preacher: Dennis Hill

[0 : 00] Well, it's good to be with you again. I bring you greetings from the folk back at Kingston Evangelical Church in Hull. And I had a lovely drive up here today, lovely weather I'm sure you're enjoying as well.

And I want to look with you at this, at just one particular verse in this book of Ezekiel. And it's true, it is not one of the most popular books that we look to in the Bible.

But, of course, the whole message, the whole Bible is God's message to us. And we know that it's a message of life and also, as we heard in that reading, a message of death.

It's a message of life to all those who will receive it. But it is a message of death to those who reject it. And that, of course, is true of the Bible as a whole. We are going to be looking in chapter 33, actually, not the passage that was read for us.

But it's a restatement of some of what we read there in chapter 18, Ezekiel 33, which in the Church Bible that I have is on page 611.

[1 : 10] I don't know if that's the same Bible that you have. But there are certain portions and certain passages, certain verses of Scripture that really stand out as shining lights.

And they deliver that message so clearly and so powerfully. And they're really special. You know, we believe that all of the Bible is equally true.

It is not all equally relevant for every need or every situation. But this is a particular verse that is very pertinent regarding the whole message of the Gospel.

It really directs our attention to what is supremely important. There is a world to come. There is a heaven and a hell.

And where am I going? One of these verses, as I say, is in the chapter 33 of Ezekiel that I'd like to read for you just now.

[2 : 09] Verse 11 is the verse we're focusing on. And it very much is similar to what we read in chapter 18, beginning verse 11, chapter 33.

It's a very moving verse.

And there are really just four simple truths here that I'd like for us to look at. And I believe that God wants us to know and act upon. First of all, there's something here that displeases God.

There's something that pleases God. There is something that God commands us to do. And then there's something that God would ask us. And I'd like to look at those four with you.

It seems to me that the text and the message are so clear that it really removes any question in our minds. And that if, after considering the text, we walk away and do not respond in the way that God is calling us to, then clearly we have made a choice.

[3 : 27] Not God's choice. We have made a choice different from that which God would have wanted us to make. First of all, there's something here very clearly that does not please God.

The verse starts out as, Surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked. You see, the Israelites were saying in one way or another back in chapter 18 that it's hopeless.

We can't be saved. We can never get right with God. It's just hopeless. A little bit of it is seen in the verse just prior to this one, verse 10, the second half of the verse.

Our offenses and our sins weigh us down and we're wasting away because of them. How then can we live? It's too much for us. Our sins are too much. We're involved in this life.

This is the way we live. We can't stop. We can't change. It's hopeless. Forget it. This is really what they were saying to God. In chapter 18, they were saying that their fathers had sinned and now God was punishing them for what their parents had done.

[4 : 36] So that it's a lost cause. And God says, no. He says, no, you're not suffering for their sins. The soul that sins, it shall die.

Each one shall be responsible for their own actions in their own life. You're not suffering because of what somebody else did. And the bottom line is, no one goes to hell because of what somebody else did.

Now, why would the Israelites say this? Why would they think this? Well, it may be because some were confused. There is a statement in the Ten Commandments that you may be familiar with.

In verses 4 to 6 of Exodus 20. Don't bother to turn there. I'll just read it. You can look at it later if you'd like. But it's the very important commandment about making idols.

You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

[5 : 47] Now, I don't believe what it's saying there is that the children were being judged for the parents.

If that were what it was saying, it would seem to me the logic of the verses would be saying then, therefore, that the parents who believe their children are saved because of their faith.

It's making a comparison there between how he deals with people. Children do suffer in some ways because of their parents. I think every parent knows that painfully, don't we?

We all think of our mistakes or the things that we've done or maybe our own shortcomings that we, in a sense, pass on to our children. And we recognize that. Of course, we inherit physical problems from our parents.

We can also, in a sense, inherit moral and spiritual problems from our parents. But whatever truth there is in that and whatever else the verse may mean, it is not saying that anyone is going to suffer wrath because of the sin that someone else committed.

[6 : 49] But some of the Israelites were apparently confused on this point. And so God spoke to them through Ezekiel on this very matter. The statement that I read in verse 10 here suggests that some were probably just using this as an excuse.

They had no real desire to repent and they wanted to continue. So this was the excuse. You know, well, you're punishing us and we're sort of trapped in this life and we can't do anything about it.

And the way God answers them here in verse 11 suggests that behind their statement was this idea that God didn't really want them anyway. He wanted to judge them for their sins.

So how could they escape? And as I say, some may have used this as an excuse, but I think some people were perhaps confused about this. And it's possible through sometimes a misunderstanding of some things that are in the Bible.

You know, there's a truth in the Bible, which I'm sure some of us here would believe, called election. You know, God chooses people. He chooses his children.

[7 : 52] And some people have imagined that God really enjoys judging and condemning people. And those people really need to hear and to take on board what God is saying here.

I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked. He says the exact opposite, doesn't he? I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked. He doesn't say that he has less pleasure. He says he has no pleasure.

None whatsoever. However, those who think that somehow because God chooses this teaching about election and predestination, that somehow God doesn't really want all of his creatures to be saved, it seems to me as going beyond what Scripture says.

It clearly doesn't fit very well with this verse, does it? You know, there's no other name more closely connected with that teaching of the Bible than John Calvin. And he says this about the passage we looked at in chapter 18.

God confirms the same sentiment, in other words, that God desires nothing more earnestly than those who are perishing and rushing to destruction should return to the way of safety.

[9 : 01] In his comments, Calvin acknowledges that it seems that there are two truths involved here which we can't quite bring together. Inscrutable is the word that he uses.

But he's very clear that one of them is that God wishes all to be saved. And this is the truth, it seems to me, that God is concerned with in this passage because he's speaking to men and women who are on the edge of eternity.

And you know what, friends? We're all on the edge of eternity. We live every day of our lives on the edge of eternity, every moment of our lives. I just had a funeral recently in the church, a man who was in the church for quite a long time.

He was a roofer and sadly, somehow, we're not sure yet quite how it happened, but he fell when he was working on a ladder and he died very shortly after that.

We all live on the edge of eternity. We are one step, as David says, between me and death. We don't know when it will come. And because of that, God wants to remove from the minds of these people and our minds any idea that God wants them to be lost or that God somehow delights in their destruction.

[10 : 15] Calvin says God wishes all to be saved. So it's not God's pleasure, but rather his displeasure when his creatures made in his image are lost. So something that displeases God is this, that people would be lost.

People would be apart from him and stay that way and die that way and live in eternity that way. That's not what pleases God. But there is something which does please God here in this verse.

And very simply, very quickly, he says, but that the wicked would turn from their ways and live. Now, God uses the word wicked here.

He's referring, really, to anyone who is in what we would call an unconverted state. Anyone who has not really trusted in the God of the Bible through his Son and receive the forgiveness of their sins.

That would include everybody, not just people that we might think of as particularly wicked, like probably most, the name that would come to our minds most this week would be Muammar Gaddafi. He's not thinking just simply of people like that.

[11 : 21] What he's talking about here are those who have not responded to the mercy of God and who have not repented of their sin and they're not forgiven. Those people might be some of the best citizens in the country.

They might be some of the most polite people. They pay their taxes. They mow their lawns. They say please and they say thank you. And they're nice people to be around. But they've said no to God. They've said no to him.

And they would be included in this list. That's who he's referring to here. That's the condition of every human being in the world until we come to faith in Jesus Christ, until we receive a new life and a new heart.

And even at that point, of course, we're sinners saved by grace. There are two kinds of people in the world. There are unforgiven sinners and forgiven sinners. And so that's what he's talking about here when he says the wicked.

And God is pleased, we see here, when we recognize our sin and come to Christ in repentance. There's no better picture in the Bible to portray this than the picture, many of you will know, the prodigal son.

[12 : 26] And remember, he was off in the far country, wasted everything, decided he would come back finally and ask his father to let him be one of his servants. And we read that the father is there. He must have been down looking for him, looking for him to come back, because he sees him afar off, way off.

And he runs to meet his son. He throws his armor on him. He's so happy to see him. And this is the picture that Jesus is giving us in this parable of what God is like when he sees someone responding to that offer of grace, no matter what they're coming from.

And his son had really blown it big time, didn't he? He was really awful to his father and blew everything and was living in rebellion. But he came back and his father was delighted to see him.

And this is the picture of how God looks upon people who want to turn to him from sin. We're told that the angels of heaven rejoice more over one sinner that repents than over 99 who didn't need to.

And we're told that there's rejoicing in heaven, obviously because God is rejoicing. Christ is rejoicing. So this is God's great pleasure when another person turns to him and recognizes that that's what they need to do.

[13 : 51] That words of Isaiah the prophet says, all we like sheep have gone astray. Each of us has turned to his own way. And that's just basically what sin is. Me doing what I want.

And repentance is me saying, okay, Lord, you're in charge. I'm supposed to be living for you. This is your world. I belong to you. Lord, have mercy on me. Forgive my sins. I want to follow you.

And that's what he's talking about here. And that's what pleases God. So there's something here that God commands us to do. You know, the Bible's filled with God's commands.

We just looked at one of the Ten Commandments. And there are all kinds of commandments all throughout the Bible. And the New Testament is filled with commandments as well. You know, sometimes we have this idea about the Old Testament laws and the New Testament gospel.

But it doesn't quite really neatly divide that way. The Old Testament has wonderful promises. This promise right here is a gospel promise.

[14 : 51] You know, those who will turn. You know, he will receive. And there are many, many commands in the New Testament that we are to do. But the chief command to sinners is the one that Jesus began his ministry with.

You remember how he started? What did he say? The first thing he said was, repent. The first thing Jesus said. Repent and believe the gospel. You know, in the Old Testament, the whole duty of man was summed up by Solomon.

At the end of Ecclesiastes, he says, this is it. Fear God and keep his commandments. Jesus said, repent and believe the gospel. That's fear God. And he said, love one another.

That's keep the commandments. So you see, the difference between the Old and the New Testament in some ways is not there. They're identical in some ways. There are, of course, differences. But there's a continuity too.

God is saying the same thing to us that he was at the beginning. He was saying, repent and believe the gospel. Just as Jesus did in the New Testament. Continuity there.

[15 : 54] So, we start with repent. And this is just exactly what God commands us to do here, doesn't he? He says, turn. That's what repentance means. It means turning.

The word actually literally means to turn. We're going one way. We're facing one way. God says, turn to me. Turn away from that and turn to me. That's repentance.

We're to turn away from evil and toward God and his word. It means leaving something and embracing something else. It means a new direction.

Not perfection, but a new direction. We stop heading in one direction and begin heading in another. So, the question for each one of us to ask this morning is, has that happened to me?

Has that happened to me? Was there a time when I turned directions? I was going that way before, but now I'm going this way. God wasn't in the picture before, but now he's center stage.

[16 : 51] Has that happened? What do we have to turn from? Well, what the Bible calls sin. And the Bible, of course, is our authority. And that's really a crucial part of repentance.

Accepting that authority. That it's God's word. What it says is what should direct my life. Repentance is the first and in some ways the crucial commandment.

You know, Paul said God commands New Testament. God commands all people everywhere to repent. Every person you have ever met, every person you will ever meet in your life, is under a command from God to repent.

How far and how wide should we spread the gospel? Everyone is commanded to repent. Everyone is going to give account before that judge on that day. So, we should determine right now that this is what I will do.

And begin immediately. You know, repentance postponed is continued sin. Isn't it? You know, we can never repent tomorrow.

[18 : 00] We can never repent tomorrow. We can never be saved tomorrow. Today is the day, the Bible says. The Bible knows nothing about yesterday and nothing about tomorrow. The Bible only knows about today.

Today is the only day you can ever repent. It's the only day you can ever believe. Tomorrow may never come. Of course, not everything can be done immediately, but we can begin right now.

We can begin. And that's what God calls us to do. And that's his command. That's the command right here. Turn. Turn from your evil ways. And then he's got something here to ask us.

And this is God's question to us. You know, there are some very good questions in the Bible. Some very searching questions. I know sometimes we have some good questions about the Bible. But there are also some good questions in the Bible.

It would make a very good study. There's that wonderful question. Remember God speaking to Adam. Where are you? Where are you, Adam? Adam had moved from where he was. It's a wonderful question for us Christians sometimes to think about.

[19 : 05] Where am I? Where am I in terms of the Lord? Where am I in terms of his word? Where am I in terms of his will for my life? Where are you?

Where are you? Now we address briefly the idea that some people have, in the light of the teaching of election, that God may not want all to be saved.

I think we can see this verse is really correcting that idea. Whatever unanswered questions there may be, which remain about all that, and there are. I don't have all the answers.

Nobody does. If anyone tells you they have all the answers about the Bible and the Christian faith, you shouldn't listen to them. Because they don't. There are some things that God, he calls the secret things, which he has not revealed.

But one question that's answered in this text is that God wants us to be saved. He doesn't take any pleasure in those who turn away. But he's pleased when we turn to him. But the real question that's posed by this text is, not does God want all people to be saved, but do all people want to be saved?

[20 : 11] That's the very heart of the question here that God asks. For why, why will you die, O house of Israel? Why? Why?

For what reason? For what purpose? God has just commanded and pleaded with Israel to repent. And this is what God commands and what God wants.

Because, of course, if there's no repentance, there's no salvation. And God wants them to be saved. No repentance, they will die. And, of course, die here means more than physical death, because, of course, we realize all are going to die physically.

He's not just talking about physical death here. He's talking about spiritual death. He's talking about that separation from God, which, if it is our experience in death, it will be our experience for all eternity.

Remember, Jesus used that phrase, they will die in their sins. If you do not believe that I am he, you will die in your sins. And he means that they will continue in that state of enmity with God, which will last forever.

[21 : 18] It won't change after death. There's no change after death. If we die enemies of God, we will remain enemies of God forever. God, through Ezekiel here, has assured those who are confused that God does want them to be saved.

And he will be displeased if they do not turn. He will be pleased if they turn. So he asked them this obvious and searching question, why? Why?

I'm not against you. Why will you die? In other words, there's no reason you should die. There's no reason you should remain outside of my favor and fellowship, God says.

I don't want you to be judged eternally. I am God Almighty. I want you to be saved. I'm able to save you. Why? Why will you die?

Why? It's the kind of question that Jesus asked, really. I think it was referred to earlier in the prayer. You know, when Jesus entered Jerusalem for that last time, knowing he was on the way to death at the hands of the people that he wanted to save, he said some things here.

[22 : 32] In Matthew we read this, O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those who sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.

And very similar over in Luke, as Jesus approached Jerusalem, we read, he saw the city and he wept over it and said, if you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace, but now it is hidden from your eyes.

Does God take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? Surely Jesus' tears must give us all the answer that we need. It's one of the great ironies that it was their rejection of Jesus that put him on the cross where he died for our sins and thereby provided the salvation that he offered to them and that he offers to the whole world.

What a gospel. What a gospel. What a gospel we have. Every human being on the face of the earth is invited, is urged to come. His death atoned for sin for all who will receive him, but they would not receive him, we're told.

So I wonder if there's anyone here today for whom this would be true. You haven't really yet come to that point where you've turned to him, not yet received him as Savior and Lord.

[24 : 08] Well, my text tells you God wants you to today. And he assures us all that any who do, he will receive.

And any who don't turn will only have themselves to blame. He takes no pleasure. One of the old Puritan commentators said this, God in effect here is saying this to us.

He put this in his own words as though he's speaking and God is speaking these words. And God is saying, it will please me to pardon your sins and to throw away the rod and save you.

Why will you die? Death is your choice, not mine. It is your will, not mine.

God says death is your choice, not mine. It's not God's desire that any would perish and it would please him to pardon sin. So four very simple but very powerful truths here in this little verse tucked away in a book that we don't look at too often, but a very important verse.

[25 : 24] First of all, something that God is not pleased with when we turn away from him and thereby receive the judgment that must come if we do.

That does not please him. Something that does please God is if we do turn in repentance. That's what will please him and all the angels of heaven.

And his command is very simply that we do that now. And the question is, why should you die when you may live?

Why should you suffer when you can be comforted? Why should you be lonely when you can have fellowship? Why should you be sad when you can have joy?

Why should you go to hell when you can go to heaven? That's the question God asks every one of us. It's clear that in sending his son and offering him to the whole world, God does not desire death for us.

[26 : 29] He desires life. And if we only repent and receive that life, his son, the Lord Jesus Christ, we will have life.

Because he who has the son has life. So this morning I would urge you if you're in that position that you turn now.

Begin turning now. Lord, help me to turn. The Lord's grace is the only thing that can turn anyone to himself. Lord, have mercy on me. If you do, you will have life.

And your life will never be the same. And you won't regret it. Let's pray. Let's pray. Father, we thank you that though there are things in your word that we cannot fully understand and we accept that this is the way that you intended it, you have not revealed everything to us.

Our little minds couldn't take in your great infinite truth and wisdom and knowledge. And so, Father, we thank you, though, that you have revealed things to us and the most important things you've made so clear and so plain as this passage teaches us so clearly that it is your desire that you weep over those who turn away to their own folly and destruction.

[27 : 53] Lord, we pray this morning that you would give much grace and help to each one of us, those, any here, who may not have really turned in repentance, that this might be the day.

Lord, help them to see that by your grace they can turn to you. And for those of us who have, Lord, we pray that you'll fill us with joy and peace in believing and help us to be your good ambassadors to a whole world that have been invited to come and to live.

For Jesus' sake we ask it. Amen.