

How Then Can We Live?

Ezekiel, as God's mouthpiece to Israel, has high expectations placed upon his shoulders. He receives here a strong word of warning and instruction from the Lord. This warning also applies to *all* the watchmen - the pastors - who seek out the lost sheep of God's flock, and preach God's Word in order to bring the sheep back into the sheepfold. The gist of the warning is this: "Preach the Law and Gospel of God's Word to the sinner, and you've done your job. Rest secure in your work. Their salvation is not in your hands, but in mine. But fail to declare this Word to them, and you are accountable to me;" that is, accountable to the Lord. The watchman who fails to warn the people of their sin will find himself equally accountable for that sin. Such is the expectation of the pastors of God's Church.

Ezekiel has already heard this, privately, when the Lord ordained him into the prophetic office. Now it's repeated here in public. "Do not doubt that what this man is saying to you is from me. He proclaims to you in my stead. What he speaks to you is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if I deal with you myself." Certainly this has much to do with the preaching of God's expectation and judgement - the Law. But it also reassures, when the Gospel is proclaimed to God's hearers. It's the same today. The Law *and* the Gospel are both from God, and proclamation of both is necessary.

A significant portion of Ezekiel so far has been blistering Law. Up to this point, the message has been the scorching wrath of God against the sin of the Israelites, and also the whole world. God's actions of judgement are an example. An example for Israel, certainly, but also as an example for the whole world. This example is one big loud proclamation of "REPENT!" It's the same warning Paul makes: "**Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did**" and then Paul goes on to list several times in which fresh-out-of-Egypt Israel abandoned their God to their eternal peril. In the face of God's words of judgement, the cry is this: "**Surely our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we rot away because of them. How then can we live?**"

It's an appropriate, in fact, the *proper* response of anyone killed by God's Law; brought to the brink of completely giving up any hope they have of life as His people. This is Israel crying out, "Lord, have mercy!" These words aren't of a people who have no knowledge of God. These aren't the words of a people who

are suddenly and unexpectedly confronted with the righteous expectations of the Lord of the universe. Israel is *already* God's people. They've been under the care and direction of the Lord for years and years and years. God makes His people by His actions. This was true at the time of Moses. This was true at the time of Ezekiel. It was true of those Christians in Corinth to whom Paul was writing. And it's true of all gathered today. God has made all of us His people. He brought the whole world into His Kingdom through the suffering and death of His beloved Son, Jesus Christ, who paid for our sinful debt Himself with His own precious blood. He draws all people to Himself by His Word. Whether you know it or not - in fact, whether you like it or not - you are being made His people.

The Lord's standard for His people is simple. **“As for the wickedness of the wicked, he shall not fall by it when he turns from his wickedness, and the righteous shall not be able to live by his righteousness when he sins.”** If you are wicked, turn from your ways and do what is right. If you think you already do a good job of living right, don't screw up. It seems fair, doesn't it? But can we stand under this Word from the Lord? How do we hold up in the light of God's righteous Word and expectation?

We have an excellent staff here at Our Redeemer Lutheran School. They carefully teach the children in all sorts of subjects. They each do their best also to instruct the children in the ways and word of the Lord. We have excellent students, who diligently study their subjects and love and respect one another. The congregation (and by extension, the school) has a Pastor who carefully studies the Word of God so that he can proclaim it faithfully and in its truth and purity to the people placed under his care (both Law and Gospel). He faithfully stewards the mysteries of God: the Word and the Sacraments. All of this good and righteous work is done, week in and week out.

But, there's a problem. You students fail to complete an assignment, or you speak in an unkind way to one of your teachers, or perhaps to one of your classmates. Teachers go home and in frustration or anger speak ill of one of their students. Parents react in anger towards the school because a lunch isn't exactly the way they'd like it to be, or because a teacher offers constructive criticism concerning your child. Maybe you rejoice that your child is receiving “good moral instruction” but you get frustrated that at the same time they're hearing about Jesus Christ crucified for their sins. Maybe you don't want to hear this yourself? Paul's words in Romans apply to us all: **“None is righteous, no, not one.”** Truly the words of Israel are *our* words. They are true to each and every one of us gathered here today, in fact the whole world! **“Surely our transgressions and our sins are**

upon us, and we rot away because of them. How then can we live?” Speak them! Believe them!

“But it’s not fair! I’m a nice person. I try to live a good life. Surely God will not reject me because of this or that small mistake!” We all say it. We all want to believe that somehow, some way, we can just do the right thing and have God smile upon us. We cannot fathom that somehow that kindly atheist, or that Hindu who works every day at the homeless shelter, or that Muslim doctor who donates several days a month to the free clinic, are not going to be in heaven. Heaven is where all the nice people end up, right? **“Your people say, ‘The way of the Lord is not just,’ when it is their own way that is not just.”** This isn’t some sort of Divine “I know you are but what am I?” This is the righteous declaration of the Lord upon all mankind. We all walk in the way of injustice. We all seek first ourselves, rather than the Lord and His Kingdom. We look out for Number 1 instead of for our neighbor. No matter how many steps we take on the path of righteousness - and there are even a select few whose lives take place 99.9% of the time on that path - 100% of us steps off that path. And in that wicked step is death.

The irony of our situation is that there *is* recognition of sin. **“How then can we live?”** That’s a question of recognition. Sin abounds and presses down upon you and you can see and feel it. The effects of it might still be small for you, but it only takes time. All men eventually cry out in despair over their sin-ruined life. This is the first step of repentance: a recognition of the presence of sin throughout your life. But it doesn’t stop there! In fact, here in Ezekiel God’s Words are one of pleading for you to finally recognize that you cannot live through any effort of your own. These are words calling you to repent in the fullest sense: Repent and Believe. Trust in God for your salvation. He wants to give it to you!

“Turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die..?” Thus sayeth the Lord! Your end is not determined by how you begin the race, but by how you end it. Righteousness is not of ourselves, but it is a gift of God. Jesus Christ *is* that righteousness, and he freely gives you Himself through the Word and Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Through Baptism God makes you a part of Christ, part of His body. (He did this for Aaron and Bridget just this past Wednesday in school chapel.) And He keeps you through that same Word, spoken to you from the pulpit and from the sanctuary, and enfleshed upon the altar. Those gifts are here, in this house of the Lord, every Sunday. They don’t require any work or payment from you. They require from you nothing. Your way is not just, because you insist - even in the face of God’s amazing grace - to *do something*. Why? Why will you die? Why do you insist that you must save yourself, when the Lord has

already saved you, His people, through His Son Jesus Christ? **“When the righteous turns from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for it.”** This is us. But the Lord has another Word for you: **“I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked.”** God’s pleasure is that he has saved you and gives you salvation as a gift. Jesus Christ will give you a pleasure that will never end. It is the pleasure of having His righteousness, which you can claim as your very own. **“None of your sins that you have committed shall be remembered against you. In Christ, you have done what is just and right; you shall surely live.”**

- Vicar Michael Schuermann
SDG