

Last week we talked about the prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel was a prophet who spoke to the people of Israel and Judah in the midst of turmoil and exile between the years of 593 B.C. and 563 B.C. He was a quirky kind of guy who delivered God's message in some unique and interesting ways. We talked about how he made a model of the city of Jerusalem, only to destroy it to symbolize their impending defeat at the hands of the Babylonians. Then he lay on his left side for 390 days to symbolize the 390 years of Israel's punishment. Then, as if that wasn't enough, he lay on his right side for 40 days to symbolize Judah's punishment of 40 years. And my personal favorite was when he carried his luggage out of the city in plain view of everyone to symbolize the upcoming exile. It would be like driving a U-Haul out of town to say to the community, "We are out of here!" Just think of what the people were saying about this guy. I imagine he was not the most popular individual in town.

But extreme times call for extreme measures. God did everything he could to reach the people, but they would not listen, and finally, God said, "Enough is enough." The main issue God had with the Israelites was their worshiping of other gods. They were not being faithful to the God who had delivered and sustained them. If you read through the book of Ezekiel it will not take you long to figure out why God was so upset. Listen to some of the things that were happening.

Some of the Israelite women were weeping for Tammuz. Tammuz was a god that was worshiped in Mesopotamia and was thought to have died and held captive in the underworld. Plant growth and fertility were associated with the life power of Tammuz, harvest and drought were associated with his death. Veneration of Tammuz was incorporated in the worship of Canaanite gods. So when they should have been worshiping God, they were mourning for a false god of another nation. I love what God said to Ezekiel in regards to this: "Have you seen this, O Mortal?" That was God's way of saying, "You're not going to believe this, but look..."

If weeping over Tammuz was not enough, get a load of this. In the temple of the Lord there were about 25 Judahites with their backsides facing the altar and their faces set toward the east worshiping the sun. It was bad enough to be worshiping the sun, but did they have to do it with their butts facing the altar? To say they had a lot of nerve is an understatement! God said it again, "Have you seen this, O mortal?" There were many other things

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that led to the punishment of Israel and Judah, but I think you get the point and can understand why God allowed the exile. No doubt about it – they were punished and paid the price for their falling away from God.

I was visiting with someone the other day about the Old Testament and how some people think it is a waste of time to study it. Some say, “There is no grace in the Old Testament. Besides that, when Jesus came he wiped the slate clean, so we don’t have to read Genesis and Exodus and the Prophets, etc.” If that is your belief then I don’t know what Bible you have been reading, but it’s not the same one I’ve been reading. There is grace all over the pages of the Old Testament. Yes, there is God’s judgment, but there is also God’s grace.

The prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel are usually associated with gloom and doom, and it’s true, there is that message, but there is also grace. In Jeremiah God said, “The days are surely coming when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt – a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.” Now if that is not grace somebody tell me what it is? If that is not worth hearing and reading then what is?

Now we have our passage from Ezekiel. Ezekiel has warned the people of the impending exile and the people have paid the price. So what happens next? You guessed it – grace. God restores the people. But the interesting thing about this passage and form of God’s grace is the motivation behind it. God restores the people not for their sake’s but for his. God said, “It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. I will sanctify my great name.” I have never thought of God’s grace in those terms. It has never crossed my mind that God would forgive and redeem for the sole purpose of restoring his holy name. In effect, God has said, “Even though you have messed up, I’m not going to allow you to drag me and my name through the mud.”

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Our son Benjamin is playing T-ball again this year. He is a sports fanatic. It doesn't matter if it's baseball, football, soccer, or basketball, he loves to play. This year I have volunteered my services as an assistant coach on the team. I say "assistant" because that way if there is ever a sticky situation or issue that arises, I can say, "I'm just an assistant. You need to talk to the Head Coach – Coach Kendall!" All kidding aside, I have really enjoyed working with the kids. One of the things I told Kent before I agreed to help coach is that I have enough stress with my work and don't need to get more of it at T-ball. In other words, I am out there to have fun and am not going to tolerate those maniac parents who think their son is the next Babe Ruth. He agreed and we both talked about what we should say at the first practice to the kids and parents. Here is what we told them, "We are going to have fun, but we are also going to be disciplined. If you don't pay attention you will not play. The point is to have fun, learn to be a teammate, and maybe, just maybe get a little discipline and character along the way." Well, we have only played one game and I can tell you we are having fun. I'm not sure about the discipline part yet. There is something about corralling four, five, and six year-olds that does not lend itself to the word "discipline".

One thing we are working on is getting the boys to understand that when the ball comes into the field of play, they do not need to fight over it. Once at practice there were three boys on top of each other fighting over a grounder. I said to them, "I thought we were on the same team? On this team we don't fight over the ball. We play together as a team." Later in that same practice one of the boys was upset over another boy missing a ball. I said to him, "We don't do that on this team. If another teammate makes a mistake we say, 'That's okay we will do better next time.'"

I didn't think about it at the time but what I was doing (unintentionally of course because I'm not that smart) was laying the groundwork for our identity as a team. We were setting standards. Other teams might fight over the ball in the infield and criticize one another, but not on our team. We might lose every game we play but these kids are going to learn how to be on a team and how to support one another.

I think that is what God was saying to Israel. He was saying to the people, "You are on my team and when you are on my team this is what is expected of you. You put me first and know that I am your only God." Well, even though they knew they were on God's team, they didn't do what

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required of them, yet God took it a step further and saved them anyway. In verse 26 God said, “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.” The point here is that it wasn’t so much what the people did but what God did for them. God had to do what the people could not do for themselves – save them from themselves. In some ways that is what salvation is – God saving us from ourselves and our brokenness. If left to our own devices we would be in big trouble, but thankfully our God doesn’t leave us floundering in a pool of sin. Even when we least deserve it, his grace comes to us. In this case, it came to the Israelites not because of anything they did, but because of God’s holy name.

Speaking of holiness that is something we neglect to talk about all too often. We serve a holy, righteous God who will not compromise when it comes to right and wrong and justice. Just thinking about the concept of an eternal God can make your head spin. In Revelation there is that passage where God says, “I am the Alpha and Omega. I am the beginning and the end.” Just to think that there was no beginning to God’s existence and will be no end to it is enough to make you wonder why this God of the universe would care about a relationship with people like you and me. But from stories like this in Ezekiel we find that God not only cares about a relationship with us, but also cares about his reputation among us.

Another way of putting it would be like this – **life matters to God**. God is paying attention to what we are doing and miraculously even when we flat out disregard him and ignore him, he has a way of reaching down to us and pulling us back up to where we belong. If you want a definition of the cross there it is. Through the cross of Jesus God extended his hand of grace and mercy, and in the process transformed us and gave us a fresh start. To think that God would go to that much trouble for people like you and me is mind boggling. But just as God reached down to us, you and I are called to reach out to others, even when that might be uncomfortable. We are not called to evaluate who is worthy of God’s grace and who isn’t. We are called to serve in the name of Jesus.

Will Campbell preached a sermon and in that sermon he criticized the “invitation” as it is given in many of our churches. The invitation is that time when the preacher invites those in the congregation who want to commit their lives to Jesus to come down the aisle and indicate that desire. He said, “I hope that someday there will be a service in which, when the

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preacher gives the invitation and people start coming down the aisle, he yells back at them, 'Don't come down the aisle! Go to Jesus! Don't come to me! Go to Jesus'."

"Upon that declaration, the people who were coming down the aisle turn around and exit the sanctuary and get in their cars and drive away. He then yells at the rest of the congregation, 'Why are you hanging around here? Why don't you go to Jesus to? Why don't you all go to Jesus?' The people arise en masse and quickly leave the church."

"What I imagine is that about a half hour later the telephone at the police station starts ringing off the hook, and the voice at the other end says, 'We're down at the nursing home and there's some crazy people at the door yelling that they want to come in and visit Jesus, and I keep telling them Jesus isn't in here! All we have in here is a bunch of old ladies who are half dead. But they keep saying, 'But we want to visit Jesus! We want to visit Jesus!'"

"The next call comes from the warden down at the prison. He's saying, 'Send some cops down here! There's a bunch of nuts at the gate and they're yelling and screaming, 'Let us in there! We want to visit Jesus!' I keep telling them that all we have in this place are murderers, rapists, and thieves. But they keep yelling, 'Let us in! We want to visit Jesus!'"

"No sooner does the cop at the desk hang up the phone than it rings again. This time it's the superintendent of the state hospital calling for help. He's complaining there are a bunch of weird people outside begging to get in. They, too, want to see Jesus! The superintendent says, "I keep telling them Jesus isn't here. All we have here are a bunch of nuts, but they keep yelling at us, 'We want to see Jesus.'"

If you want to go to Jesus you got to