

SEE FOR YOURSELF

SERIES: KNOWING THE GOD OF
JUSTICE AND HOPE



Catalog No. 20171008
Ezekiel 12:1–28
5th Message
Paul Taylor
October 8, 2017

Ezekiel 12:1–28

My father-in-law is an excellent carpenter. He can build structures that are large and sturdy. He can do fine detail woodwork to make something look beautiful. I've worked with him on several projects. He's always three steps ahead of me. He anticipates things. He understands how to solve problems that I don't grasp.

And he loves to tell stories. So he tells stories about projects that he's done. Tools that he has used. Different kinds of cuts and joins and other words I don't really even know: chamfer, mortise, and noggins. My problem is that I just don't know enough about carpentry to follow all the time.

He'll be describing a tool or a project. I can tell that he's describing it well enough. But I don't know the vocabulary. I've never seen anything like that. So I end up hearing him, but I just can't imagine what he is describing. I just can't see.

I can feel this way with God sometimes as well. I look at the things going on in my life. I recognize that important things are happening. It seems like God is trying to help me to understand something: to guide me somewhere. But I don't seem to get it. I can't quite grasp what it is. I can't put the pieces together. I hear the words, but I don't see the big picture.

We're continuing our series today in the book of Ezekiel. We've called it *Knowing the God of Justice and Hope* based on a phrase that's repeated throughout the book. Over seventy times in this book, God attributes the judgment and promise and prophecy and explanation to one simple goal "that you may know that I am the LORD."

But God's people aren't getting it. They have the same problem that I have when I listen to my father-in-law describe carpentry projects. They just can't see the goal clearly. God wants them to understand what he was doing and why. He wants them to know him and his purposes. But they can't see.

God has patience with his people. He goes to great lengths to help them grasp what he is doing and why. In our passage this morning, God gives Ezekiel a series of symbolic actions that he is supposed to do. Interpreters call these kinds of things "sign-acts." Their purpose is to show through real actions some truth that God is trying to communicate. It's like a one-act play that lives out the prophetic word. God calls Ezekiel to do this so that his people can see for yourself.

This is a demonstration of God's generosity. He wants us to understand him. He wants us to know him. He is constantly trying to reveal himself to us in big and small ways. Throughout Ezekiel, we'll see several of these "sign-acts" that God gives his prophet for the sake of his people. God is always working in our lives to help us to see him clearly.

But we have so many obstacles—our own assumptions, our background, our unwillingness to face into hard things, patterns of sin, the desire to hide and escape—that make it hard for us to really grasp what God is doing.

As we look at this passage in Ezekiel this morning, we'll see how each of these acts that God gives to Ezekiel helps to break down something that makes it difficult for the people to understand God's purposes. We will observe God systematically dismantling those things that make it hard for them to understand.

From our perspective, we might be incredulous that they don't understand. It is obvious to us what God is doing. But these people who had been recently led into exile were in the midst of it. They were in shock. They were in denial. They needed help to grasp God's purposes.

As we see God breaking down the barriers that the people had, we'll find that we have many of the same barriers. We clearly can see what God was doing in their time but can we see what God is doing in ours? Maybe these sign-acts of Ezekiel's can help us get past some of the challenges that we have in understanding God's purposes. Maybe they can help us to get it. Maybe we can see for ourselves what God is doing.

Hard Truth For the Optimist

We'll begin by reading the instructions from God for the first sign act.

Ezekiel 12:1-6:

The word of the Lord came to me: 2 “Son of man, you dwell in the midst of a rebellious house, who have eyes to see, but see not, who have ears to hear, but hear not, for they are a rebellious house. 3 As for you, son of man, prepare for yourself an exile’s baggage, and go into exile by day in their sight. You shall go like an exile from your place to another place in their sight. Perhaps they will understand, though they are a rebellious house. 4 You shall bring out your baggage by day in their sight, as baggage for exile, and you shall go out yourself at evening in their sight, as those do who must go into exile. 5 In their sight dig through the wall, and bring your baggage out through it. 6 In their sight you shall lift the baggage upon your shoulder and carry it out at dusk. You shall cover your face that you may not see the land, for I have made you a sign for the house of Israel.”

We've seen this phrase “Son of Man” used before for Ezekiel. As a title, it's almost exclusively applied to the prophet Ezekiel. Ninety-three times in this book God addresses his prophet as “Son of Man.” The term only appears 14 other times in the rest of the Old Testament. Ezekiel is presented as a kind of representative of the human race.

An exile leaving their homeland would typically carry three things: an animal skin, a mat, and a bowl. The skin would be used to carry flour and serve as a pillow at night. The mat would be used to sleep on or sit on. The bowl would be for eating and drinking. This is a sparse list of items.

My family has been going to Camp PBC every summer for the past ten years. This list is pretty similar to our packing list for a week of camping except for the tents, sleeping bags, grills, pop-up canopy, solar lanterns, four crates of dry food, two coolers of refrigerated food, two cartons of kitchen utensils, a few folding tables, chairs for all seven of us, and more. We have to rent a U-Haul trailer to get all the gear that we need for a week in the woods for our family.

Imagine Ezekiel breaking through the wall of his house with an animal skin, a mat, and a bowl? Remember that they had just recently done this very thing. They had packed up an exile's baggage. They had travelled one thousand miles from Jerusalem to Babylon. Imagine the emotions and memories that would come from watching Ezekiel.

Why does God want to dredge up this painful memory? The sadness, the despair, the mourning, the pain of leaving their homeland. The exiles had already lived through this. Why would God want Ezekiel to re-enact it for them?

God's people asked the same thing in Ezekiel 12:9. They saw him and said,

Ezekiel 12:9:

“Son of man, has not the house of Israel, the rebellious house, said to you, ‘What are you doing?’

On one level, the people were confused by Ezekiel's behavior. But this question reveals a deeper ignorance. They don't understand why they went into exile. They think that things aren't that serious. Even after the war. Even after the travels. Even after the deaths that must have occurred on the journey. They thought that life was going to go back to normal any day.

For a long time, I thought I was a great singer. I wanted more than anything to be able to sing. I had mostly convinced myself that I could. For a year in between high school and college, I travelled with a ministry band. I usually only sang backups. Way in the back. But one day our lead guitarist and singer was sick. And I offered to step in. This was my chance.

It was terrible. I realized that I was only a very mediocre guitarist. And mediocre would be a compliment for my singing. That day, I finally had to face a hard truth that I should have known for a long time: I am not a great singer.

God was trying to get his people to understand something that seems clear to us, but they couldn't grasp. This exile is not a mistake, it isn't bad luck, and it's not going to be over soon. This is serious. This is judgment for literally centuries of oppression, violence, idolatry, and injustice.

What made God's people blind to this fact is that they were overly optimistic. They thought that everything would always work out in the end. They thought that God couldn't possibly be upset with them. In the midst of the tragedy they were facing, they thought it would all be over soon. This wasn't real life. God wouldn't actually allow this to happen.

God wants Ezekiel to crush their optimism. To get them to see that things are really bad. God is serious. They need to take stock of their lives. Their singing isn't as great as they think it is.

Sometimes this over-optimism can affect us as well. We tend to be an optimistic culture. We think that God is our friend. We know that he is love, but we have a Hallmark cards kind of view of love. We know that God forgives us, so we can take his forgiveness for granted.

Are you over-optimistic? Are you overly optimistic?

Maybe God is trying to open your eyes. Maybe some things are happening, and it seems like your world is falling apart, but perhaps God is trying to get you understand something serious in your life. Has God been trying to tell you something and you're asking, "what are you doing" with a confused look? Should it be more obvious what is really going on?

When I was in seminary, I was invited to participate in a special group for young leaders. It was a unique opportunity, and I was privileged to be a part of it.

But the most significant thing that came of that experience was the realization that my marriage was in serious danger. The problems and issues that I had simply attributed to being tired or stressed out ran much deeper. My wife and I needed marriage counseling.

Facing that truth was incredibly hard for me. I thought I had it all figured, only to realize that if I didn't act soon, my marriage and family might disintegrate. I felt like such a failure. Gradually I realized that this was partly what made me blind to how severe our challenges were. I didn't want to face the fact that I wasn't as good as I thought I was. I was an optimist.

Have you convinced yourself that something in your life isn't really a big deal? It's just a little bit of pornography. It's not like I'm addicted. I only drink a little alcohol—not like that other person I know. I'm only mean when I'm stressed out. Once things calm down, I'll

get my anger under control. God will always be there. It's okay to let my spiritual life slip while this is going on in my life. I'll initiate with my kids or my spouse when I have more time; it's not like I'm ignoring them.

Maybe God needs to crush your optimism—help you to see what is really going on. It may seem harsh, but it is a merciful thing to help an optimist face the truth.

One of the ways that we can become oblivious to God's work is through over-optimism. But there are others.

The Victim Mentality

God gives Ezekiel this dramatic sign-act to convince his people that things are serious. He means business. But then God gives Ezekiel a second sign-act with a different kind of purpose.

Ezekiel 12:17-20:

And the word of the Lord came to me: 18 "Son of man, eat your bread with quaking, and drink water with trembling and with anxiety. 19 And say to the people of the land, Thus says the Lord God concerning the inhabitants of Jerusalem in the land of Israel: They shall eat their bread with anxiety, and drink water in dismay. In this way her land will be stripped of all it contains, on account of the violence of all those who dwell in it. 20 And the inhabited cities shall be laid waste, and the land shall become a desolation; and you shall know that I am the Lord."

This time, God is telling Ezekiel to eat nervously. Quaking, trembling, and anxiety. God is showing his people how their friends and family were eating back in Jerusalem.

The armies of Babylon were camped outside of Jerusalem. There was a food shortage. Everyone in the city was constantly worried that the enemy would finally break through. So what little food they had, they ate nervously, with constant fear and anxiety.

Remember that they were one thousand miles apart. There was no way for the exiles in Babylon to receive news from Jerusalem. Any news they might have had would have been at least months old.

So what do you do when you're struggling, and you don't know how others are doing? What is our tendency? We assume that others have it better than us. Our life is hard. We are feeling pain. But everyone else must be happy.

I'd call this the Facebook effect, but it has been the case for thousands of years before Facebook was even invented. We feel our pain deeply. When we look at other people's lives, all we see is the surface, and we assume that that's all there is. So we can sometimes tend towards thinking that we are victims of life and everyone else is doing great. We're losing in a world of winners.

In fact, a friend of mine asked me about this very question lately. They were talking about some struggles they were having in their marriage, and I assured her that all marriages faced difficulty. She asked whether that was really true. Everyone else looks so happy. She said that she felt like her marriage must be harder than everyone else.

Do you ever sound like this? Do you ever see yourself as a victim and assume that everyone else is great? Do you see yourself as a victim?

One of the antidotes to seeing yourself as a victim is to understand the pain of others.

A few weeks ago I was having a particularly hard day. I had been close to tears for most of the day. But then I had lunch with a group of pastors who were friends of mine. And as I heard their stories of pain and transition and confusion and anxiety, I felt a lot better. Not because I was happy for their struggle, but because I knew that we're all in this broken life together.

This is one of the great benefits of real deep community. And it's never been more important than today. Facebook may not invent the victim mentality, but it is part of a set of tools that offer particularly potent ways of assuming that other people have it better than us.

Maybe you're struggling with loneliness. Maybe you're dealing with something that you think no else will understand. Questions about your sexual identity. Recovering from abuse. Addiction. Anger. Financial problems. Legal trouble. Whatever you are facing, I can guarantee you that someone else is facing it too. You are not a victim. You are not alone.

Talk to someone. Talk to a pastor. Find a community that you can go deep with. Finding support from others and listening to their struggles helps to break us out of this victim mentality.

This is what eating bread nervously demonstrated to God's people. The people back in Jerusalem didn't have it better than them. Ezekiel showed God's people the pain of the people they were envious of.

You are not a victim. Your pain is unique and different from what others are going through, but no one gets a free pass in life. No one is immune to pain and struggle. Don't get swallowed up by your pain. Deal with it. Face it. Work through it, with the help of the community that God has given you.

We're always tempted to look at others and envy their lives. We're always tempted to think that our life would be better if only this part were different. But God has us where we are. The best place to be is where God has placed us.

God's people in exile are blind to what God wants to show them. First, we saw how their optimism made it hard for them to grasp it. Then we saw how their victim mentality made it challenging. There's one more, and this one is especially important for us today.

Reminders for the Cynic

On top of everything else that had made God's people blind to his actions and deaf to his words, they had simply grown tired of listening to God. They had become desensitized to God's word in their lives.

Ezekiel 12:21-28:

And the word of the Lord came to me: 22 "Son of man, what is this proverb that you have about the land of Israel, saying, 'The days grow long, and every vision comes to nothing'? 23 Tell them therefore, 'Thus says the Lord God: I will put an end to this proverb, and they shall no more use it as a proverb in Israel.' But say to them, 'The days are near, and the fulfillment of every vision. 24 For there shall be no more any false vision or flattering divination within the house of Israel. 25 For I am the Lord; I will speak the word that I will speak, and it will be performed. It will no longer be delayed, but in your days, O rebellious house, I will speak the word and perform it, declares the Lord

God.” 26 And the word of the Lord came to me: 27 “Son of man, behold, they of the house of Israel say, “The vision that he sees is for many days from now, and he prophesies of times far off.’ 28 Therefore say to them, Thus says the Lord God: None of my words will be delayed any longer, but the word that I speak will be performed, declares the Lord God.”

God calls out two proverbs that people were apparently fond of quoting: “The days grow long, and every vision comes to nothing” and “The vision that he sees is for many days from now, and he prophesies of times far off.”

These are the equivalent of saying, “all talk and no action” or “live in the moment.” The first proverb suggests that nothing Ezekiel says will actually happen. The second one says that even if it might happen, it’s so far away in the future that it doesn’t have any relevance to our lives right now.

Practically, both of these proverbs amount to the same thing: what God says doesn’t apply to me. It doesn’t matter. It’s not relevant. I need to focus on what is happening in my life right now.

Does that sound like us at all? You’re here, in a church on a Sunday morning. But don’t you sometimes think that all this stuff we talk about in here isn’t as real as your project deadline this week or the test on Tuesday or the way the friend betrayed you a few days ago?

How many sermons have you heard in your life? Let’s say you’ve been going to church for an average of 25 years. Let’s say you have heard 40 sermons every year. And let’s say there are 350 people in this room. That’s 350,000 sermons.

Let’s say that the average sermon (this one included) has three main points. That’s over one million application points from the word of God that we in this room have heard. We must be incredibly mature! We must have pretty much all of it figured out. One million points of application, all drawn from the power of the Word of God. What happens when you hear that kind of wisdom? What kind of transformation does it cause in your life?

For a lot of us, it makes us cynical. It’s not optimism, thinking that things are great. It’s not a victim mentality, thinking that everyone else has it better than us. It’s just weariness. Maybe it’s true. Maybe it’s not. How can I even know anymore? I’m just tired of it all. Week after week. What does it all matter? It’s the spiritual equivalent of “meh.”

If there is a characteristic trait of our modern society, this is it: nothing really matters anymore. I’ve heard it all before. It’s all just empty words. Let me just live my life.

What about you? Does this describe you at all? Are you caught in cynicism? Are you caught in cynicism?

You know you are if you’re thinking, now we’ve heard one million and one application points. Here we go again.

To these ideas, God leads Ezekiel to respond with an overwhelming correction. “The days are near!” “None of my words will be delayed, but the word that I speak will be performed.” This is the real stuff. You have to pay attention to this. This has to do with you. It’s real, and it’s important to face now.

We mostly assume that life is going to continue the way it always has. I’ll wake up tomorrow and go to work or school. Again the next day. And so forth.

This was true even in the early church. That’s why Peter said the following.

2 Peter 3:4:

They will say, “Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.”

But life doesn’t always keep going the way it has. All things don’t necessarily continue as they were. Illness and tragedy and disaster are always unexpected. And who knows? Jesus might actually return tomorrow.

Brothers and sisters, we need to hear these words that God gives Ezekiel. “The days are near!” “The word that I speak will be performed.” These prophecies are real. God’s work in the world is far more important and significant than any of the daily things that monopolize our time and energy and attention. Jesus could return at any time.

In college, I was involved in a serious car accident. A friend was driving my car when she fell asleep at the wheel. The car flipped several times, and we ended up upside down. While no one was seriously hurt, this was a huge wake-up call. Even now, when I’m driving, I have a keen sense of how close we are every moment of our lives to things taking a surprising turn. Things can always change in an instant.

We need the antidote to cynicism. We need to be confronted with the imminence of God's work in the world. This is real.

When we live this way, it changes how we think about everything in our lives. It changes how we think about the lives of the people around us. If the days are near, then the people we know who don't know Jesus are at risk of losing the opportunity to encounter the lifesaving words of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

This is not a test. This is not a game. This is for real.

This is the wake-up call we need in our spiritual lives. The days are near. God's words will be performed. Snap out of it. Figure out what God is trying to tell you. Nothing you accomplish today or tomorrow or this whole year could be anywhere close to as important.

Conclusion

When my father-in-law tells me about carpentry projects or tools or some cool technique, no matter how hard I try, I usually can't seem to understand it. I just don't have the mental map to see what he's talking about.

But when we've been working on a project together and he shows me - on a piece of wood, with a saw, and I can see it, feel it, even try it for myself. Then I get it. And that's a powerful moment.

This is what God was doing when he told Ezekiel to act out these strange rituals. He was showing his people what was really going on. He was showing people who he is. But eventually, God did even more than that.

Ezekiel, the Son of Man, was given the calling of helping God's people to understand his purposes. But there would come another who would also be called the Son of Man. And this prophet would show God's people the nature of God himself in an even more powerful manner.

When Jesus came to earth, God's people were in a similar place. They weren't in exile. Instead, their own land was overrun by enemy occupiers. They had a king, but he was in bed with the Romans. They had a temple, but the priests were corrupt.

Jesus came to open their eyes to many of the same things that Ezekiel did.

He would crush their naïve optimism and show them that things were actually worse than they thought. They thought their politics and circumstances were broken. He died to show that the very nature of humanity was broken.

They thought they were victims of the Romans. They thought that the people elsewhere had it better than them. So Jesus would become the ultimate victim. He would sacrifice himself. His goal was not to be a martyr, celebrated for suffering as a victim. His goal was to proclaim victory, defeating sin and death once and for all.

And finally, Jesus would show them and show us, that God does indeed act in history. It had been a thousand years—a thousand years— since the nation had thrived under King David. How long they had longed for a king in his line to restore the glory days of Israel. And how cynical they had become that such a thing was ever possible.

Then Jesus came and showed them, "None of my words will be delayed any longer, but the word that I speak will be performed." God has not forgotten. He acts in history. His promises may seem far off, but they are sure.

What do you need to see? What blinders need to be removed? Are you overly-optimistic? Are you stuck as a victim? Or are you cynical and can't imagine anything actually happening?

Or maybe there is some combination of all three. Look at Ezekiel. See the pain and the hurt, but take note of the promise. Touch the sides of Jesus and put your fingers in his wounds. This is real. See for yourself.