

# PAYBACK TIME

**SERIES: KNOWING THE GOD OF JUSTICE AND HOPE**



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Ezekiel 25:1-7,

28:24-26

7th Message

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*Ezekiel 25:1-7, 28:24-26*

I've shared before that I used to wrestle in high school. I started in middle school because my PE teacher, Mr. Weir, thought I had potential. Not because I was built like a wrestler or because I had any demonstrated athletic ability in any other sport or that I had any strength. But just because he'd heard that I was smart. And he was convinced that smart people made good wrestlers.

My first big wrestling debut was the 8th grade all school wrestling tournament. It was a huge deal - the whole school came to watch the all afternoon event. I had earned a spot to compete in my weight class. But there was one problem with my weight class: Todd Champagne.

Todd was one of the best looking guys in eighth grade. He was dating the best looking girl in eighth grade. He was definitely in the popular crowd. He excelled at every sport. He was the classic everything-seems-to-work-out-for-him-no-matter-what kid. And he was my first wrestling match.

Spoiler alert: I lost. Pretty quickly if I recall correctly. And then Todd Champagne went on to wrestle in the championship match. What do you think I wanted for Todd? Do you think I rooted for Todd in that match?

Isn't it human nature to want our enemies to lose? Don't we want whatever pain they have caused us to return on them at some point? We want to see the people who make our life difficult experience pain. Sometimes we dress it up and call it justice. But mostly it's just plain vengeance.

This morning we're continuing our series in the book of Ezekiel called "Knowing the God of Justice and Hope." The title comes from a phrase that repeats throughout the book: "that you may know that I am the LORD." God's goal is for his people to know him. Really know him.

But for most of the first half of this book, we've seen chapter after chapter of God's judgment. Ezekiel opens with three chapters of introduction but then chapters 4 through 24 are a sequence of prophetic judgments against God's people.

In chapter 25 things change. We still have judgment. Eight more solid chapters of judgment. But this time, it isn't Israel being judged. It's the enemies of Israel. Now the nations surrounding Israel are given their own prophecies of judgment. All of the people that had caused Israel pain for hundreds of years are called to account.

For Israel, listening to these chapters feels like vengeance. It feels like vindication. It feels like payback time.

A total of ten nations are given oracles of judgment. At the end of this section, Egypt gets four whole chapters of judgment just against her. This morning we'll look at the first nation that is mentioned in this section of judgment against the nations as a representative for the whole section. That nation is Ammon.

Ammon is a long-time enemy of the nation of Israel. This prophecy is addressed to the Ammonites. But we don't think that the words ever got to them. The message of judgment was against the Ammonites, but it seems to have been written for the sake of Israel.

The people of Israel are in exile in Babylon. They've listened to twenty chapters of judgment against them. But they need to know that God doesn't just judge her. He judges her enemies as well. God judges the enemies of Israel.

This will sound like great news to God's people. This is what they want. I wanted Todd Champagne to lose his wrestling match. Israel wanted the nations around them to suffer the same fate that they did.

But as we take a closer look, we'll think about how we are supposed to respond when other people are judged. What does the judgment of God's enemies have to do with God's people? We'll ask some questions about the fairness of God. Who gets judged? Who gets saved? Whose side is God really on?

This passage is going to help us to know how to relate to the world. If we are the people of God, how do we relate to others? We'll think about the dynamics of in here and out here. As we see this passage of God judging Israel's enemies, we're going to see a bit more about how God views his people, how he views outsiders and everyone in between.

## The Judgment of Ammon

The people-group of the Ammonites began with Ben-Ammi, who was the child of Lot. Lot was Abraham's nephew. His son came as a result of his daughters secretly sleeping with him. Not a great start for a nation.

From that beginning for 1300 years, the Ammonites had been enemies with Israel. They wouldn't let Israel pass through their land after the Exodus. They humiliated messengers sent by King David years later. During the period of the divided kingdom, they tempted Israel with their God, Molech, who demanded sacrifices of infants to be burned. There were countless other aggressions and conflicts as well.

Ammon and Israel had hated each other for over a millennium. You can imagine how the Ammonites must have felt when the Israelites were carried off into exile. But that is what gets them into trouble with the God of Israel.

### Ezekiel 25:1-7:

**The word of the Lord came to me: 2 "Son of man, set your face toward the Ammonites and prophesy against them. 3 Say to the Ammonites, Hear the word of the Lord God: Thus says the Lord God, Because you said, 'Aha!' over my sanctuary when it was profaned, and over the land of Israel when it was made desolate, and over the house of Judah when they went into exile, 4 therefore behold, I am handing you over to the people of the East for a possession, and they shall set their encampments among you and make their dwellings in your midst. They shall eat your fruit, and they shall drink your milk. 5**

**I will make Rabbah a pasture for camels and Ammon a fold for flocks. Then you will know that I am the Lord. 6 For thus says the Lord God: Because you have clapped your hands and stamped your feet and rejoiced with all the malice within your soul against the land of Israel, 7 therefore, behold, I have stretched out my hand against you, and will hand you over as plunder to the nations. And I will cut you off from the peoples and will make you perish out of the countries; I will destroy you. Then you will know that I am the Lord.**

Judgment oracles usually have an introduction, a list of the charges or cause of the judgment and a description of the sentence or consequence for the judgment. This prophesy has two cycles following that pattern. In both examples, the cause for judgment is that Ammon celebrated when Israel was defeated. They said "Aha" over the sanctuary, they clapped their hands and stamped their feet. They rejoiced with malice.

The consequence or punishment of their judgment is a progressive destruction of their identity as a people. First, they will lose their prosperity. Others will eat their fruit. Then they will lose their land - they will be handed over into exile. Finally, they will perish. God says with finality, "I will destroy you."

Their judgment is very similar to the judgment on Israel. Israel loses her prosperity. She is handed over into exile. Even the language of destruction is used against Israel in Ezekiel.

Here's the point: everyone is judged the same. God judges his people. God judges the nations.

We might think that Israel should feel better hearing that her longtime enemy Ammon is being judged. If you were an Israelite living in exile, wouldn't you enjoy reading this? Wouldn't it comfort you? Wouldn't you be tempted to celebrate? Maybe clap your hands? Or stamp your feet? Maybe even say "Aha"?

Here is the strange twist. God is assuring Israel that her enemies will be judged. You would think that is supposed to be a comfort for Israel. But the thing that Ammon is getting judged for is for celebrating with enemies are being judged. Do you follow this? How could Israel celebrate Ammon's judgment knowing that God doesn't seem to look favorably on that behavior?

As soon as your children start playing AYSO soccer, you have to teach them this: you can celebrate when your team scores but you can't boo when the other team does or celebrate when they make a mistake. We call it sportsmanship. In obedience, our kids stop booing. But inside, we're all still happy when the other team loses.

Partly, what God is doing with this first judgment oracle is to dismantle that kind of thinking. He is breaking apart the prevailing way that the world thinks about everything. All of us tend to see the world as a two-party system. There is my side and your side. Ammon and Israel.

Ammon celebrates when Israel loses. So she is judged. Then Israel celebrates when Ammon loses. There are only two sides. Debits and credits. Everything always adds up to zero. When one person wins, the other loses.

Two sides to every match. Two rivals. Two tribes. Two political parties. Two phone operating systems. Two of everything. We are bent on seeing the world this way. Either you are on my side, or you are on the side against me. There is no middle ground.

And when it comes to God, we expect God to be on our side. We think that we are God's favorites and if we find ourselves on the other side of the court as someone else, surely God will have our back, not theirs. What do you think? Do you expect God to be on your side?

What we notice in Ezekiel is that God doesn't seem to be on anyone's side. He judges everyone. Everyone gets equal treatment. Invasion. Occupation. Destruction. The same is true for Israel and the nations. Everyone gets judged.

It's a bit surprising that God picks this offense to judge Ammon for. They were bad people. They oppressed Israel. They sacrificed babies. They were characterized by injustice. But this judgment doesn't come for any of those reasons. It comes because they said "Aha"?

Why is this such an important thing? It seems like a trivial offense and a basic part of human nature. Why do they get in so much trouble for it?

When the Ammonites see Israel being judge, they conclude that God is on their side. And apparently, it is a serious mistake to think that God chooses sides in our earthly rivalries.

There have been times that the church has been guilty of this kind of an attitude. We need to be careful when we speak of how God might judge the world. We need to pause before we talk too confidently about how God's judgment will fall upon the sinners of the world. There are twenty chapters of judgment against Israel and eight chapters of judgment against the nations. Everyone gets judged.

But the judgment of God is always meant to lead to repentance. Whether we're the ones getting judged or our enemies. Judgment leads to repentance.

God will not allow himself to be pigeon-holed into a supporter of our agenda: whether it's political, national, theological, or personal.

One thousand years before this, God chose Joshua to lead his people into the Promised Land. Their task was to overcome the enemy nations living there. But just before the first battle at Jericho, this happened:

**Joshua 5:13:**

**When Joshua was by Jericho, he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a man was standing before him with his drawn sword in his hand. And Joshua went to him and said to him, "Are you for us, or for our adversaries?"**

Joshua is asking the question all of us ask. God, are you on my side or my enemies? There are only two sides. Which one do you pick? But the representative of God here had a surprising answer in the next verse,

**Joshua 5:14:**

**And he said, "No; but I am the commander of the army of the LORD. Now I have come." And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped and said to him, "What does my lord say to his servant?"**

Are you on my side or the other side? No. I am the commander of the army of the Lord.

Even as God was leading his people in a conquest of the nations in the Promised Land, he wanted them to understand that God doesn't choose sides. God doesn't align himself with our causes. God stands above. He is outside of the party politics and two-sided arguments that we always find ourselves enmeshed in.

God is not Republican or Democrat. He is not conservative or liberal. He is not on the right or the left. God does not choose sides. He is not partisan. God treats everyone fairly. Israel gets judged. Her enemies get judged. Everyone is judged.

## The Restoration of Israel

Some of you aren't sure about this. You think that God chose Israel. You want to tell me that God is on Israel's side. And there's something to that. In fact, our next passage seems to make your point.

Nation after nation gets judged in this section. But there's a little reprieve in the middle of it. Right in the middle of four chapters of judgment against Egypt, there is a reference to Israel.

### Ezekiel 28:24-26:

**“And for the house of Israel there shall be no more a brier to prick or a thorn to hurt them among all their neighbors who have treated them with contempt. Then they will know that I am the Lord God. 25 “Thus says the Lord God: When I gather the house of Israel from the peoples among whom they are scattered, and manifest my holiness in them in the sight of the nations, then they shall dwell in their own land that I gave to my servant Jacob. 26 And they shall dwell securely in it, and they shall build houses and plant vineyards. They shall dwell securely, when I execute judgments upon all their neighbors who have treated them with contempt. Then they will know that I am the Lord their God.”**

We find these kinds of passages about Israel sprinkled throughout these judgments. God promises that Israel will be gathered from the nations. She will return to her land. She will dwell securely.

Have you ever seen those backward movies of a glass breaking or something like that? You see shards of glass re-assembled themselves into the shape of a glass. Water get drawn back from a splash into a contained shape. The glass rises up off the ground and return to the hand that was holding it.

This is a bit like what God is prophesying for Israel. It's a bit like a reversal of everything that has been happening to Israel. First, God will gather them. The dispersion will be reversed. Then he will manifest his

holiness. The leaving of God's glory will be reversed. Then they will dwell in their land. The exile will be reversed. Finally, they will build houses and plant vineyards. The oppression of enemy armies will be reversed.

We've seen that God judges everyone equally. No one escapes his standards. But now we see God's mercy. His grace. His act of redemption. The nations will be judged. But Israel will be restored. Everything that was done against them will be restored. All will be put right.

This is what God does. He puts things back together. He is the God of redemption. This was meant to be a comfort to Israel. All the bad they had experienced would be redeemed.

For us, as the people of God in this time and place, we can take it as a comfort as well. We don't celebrate when others are judged. But we can take comfort in knowing that we will be restored. You will be restored. The only question is how.

Think about what Israel went through. Their pain. Think about how God promised to restore them. Now think about what you've gone through. How might God plan to restore you?

One of the most profound truths about the story that God reveals in his Scripture is that redemption is better than perfection. Did you get that? Redemption is better than perfection. The new city of Jerusalem is better than the garden of Eden. Seeing God work through our pain and our struggle and our difficulties is always more powerful than simply getting it right in the first place.

In an initial sense, God restores us when we put our faith in Jesus. When we accept the forgiveness and salvation that God offers through faith in Christ, we are immediately restored. We have a new life. We are a new creation. Everything is different. But there is a very real sense in which our restoration is an ongoing process as well.

I've had the privilege of walking alongside many people as they've faced personal tragedy. Unfaithfulness in marriage. Tragic illness. Death of a loved one. Devastating circumstances. And I always consider that part of my role is to have hope for people. Often in the midst of those kinds of situations, you can't feel hopeful yourself. But I've seen that what comes after these kinds of seasons is often something more beautiful, more rich, and more profound than what came before.



Israel receives twenty chapters of judgment, but then she receives a prophecy of restoration. She will be judged, but she will be restored. God judges us. He holds us accountable. But ultimately, we will be restored.

But what does this passage mean in the middle of a section on a judgment against the nations? How does it fit? It seems to counter my initial point. God judges the nations and restores Israel. Maybe he does pick sides. Hasn't he chosen Israel?

## Restoration of the Nations

My wife and I have enjoyed watching the recent show *This is Us*. It tells the story of a family of triplets and deals with marriage, children, adoption, loss, and a bunch of other stuff. By "enjoyed watching" I mean that we have cried for nearly 40 minutes straight through every episode.

Recently, there was a scene where Toby was talking to his future mother-in-law Rebecca about his fiancé Kate. The mother-in-law wants Toby to take her side in a conflict they are having. Toby gives this great speech where he says that as much as he wants her to like him, she has to know that he is always "Team Kate." He will always pick her side.

It's scenes like this that make me wish I had a writer to tell me what to say in life. I think my relationships would be so much better, particularly with my in-laws if I had a writer to write my dialogue.

I think this is what we want from God. We want him to be Team Me. We want him to be on our side all the time. We want him to tell us "I've got your back whether you win or lose. If you're a jerk or if you're nice, if you're right or if you're wrong. No matter what you do, I'll always choose your side. Even if you're ridiculous, I'll support you." We want to be God's favorite.

But so far in Ezekiel, we've seen God judging his people. We've seen him calling them to be accountable for their actions. And even here, we have to understand the restoration of Israel in its context. Has God picked Israel over Ammon?

The prophet Jeremiah contains a similar passage of judgment against the Ammonites. But Jeremiah points out something that Ezekiel doesn't.

### Jeremiah 49:6:

**"But afterward I will restore the fortunes of the Ammonites, declares the Lord."**

One little sentence. But that is so important. After he judges Israel he will restore her. And after he judges the Ammonites, he will restore them as well.

Later in Ezekiel, we see something about God restoring Egypt, the worst of Israel's enemies.

### Ezekiel 29:13-14:

**"For thus says the Lord God: At the end of forty years I will gather the Egyptians from the peoples among whom they were scattered, 14 and I will restore the fortunes of Egypt and bring them back to the land of Pathros, the land of their origin, and there they shall be a lowly kingdom."**

God makes it clear that Egypt will never be able to rule over other kingdoms again, but she will be restored. God will even restore Egypt.

This is the full picture of what we get in Ezekiel. God judges Israel. God judges the nations. He restores Israel. He restores the nations. No one gets a pass from judgment. No one gets overlooked for restoration. Everyone gets judged. Everyone gets the opportunity to be restored.

The restoration of Israel is a strong current throughout the Old Testament. We'll spend weeks looking at the beautiful promises of restoration in the later half of Ezekiel. The restoration of the nations doesn't receive as much attention. But it is there.

And what is an undercurrent in the Old Testament becomes a crashing wave in the New Testament. The Gospel is not just for Jews. The Gospel is for everyone.

The Jews had lost that vision. They thought that God picked their side. So God had to show Peter a vision to break him of that thinking before he really understood how the Gospel was meant for everyone.

Finally, Peter understood what was there all along. Read how he states this.

## Acts 10:34-35:

**So Peter opened his mouth and said: “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, 35 but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.**

Yes, God chose Israel. But God chose Israel so that men and women in every nation could encounter Him.

Yes, God loves you. God is crazy about you.

But when I say I love my wife, what I mean is that I love her more than any other woman. When I tell my kids that I love them, I mean that I love them more than any other children. But when God says that he loves you, he doesn't mean he loves you more than anyone else. He isn't on your side in that sense.

In fact, when God says that he loves you, he partly means that he loves you so that his love can be seen by those who don't experience it. God restores Israel so that the nations can be restored. God restores us so that everyone can be restored.

We are a launch pad of God's favor, not a landing pad. God gives us his favor so it can be launched everywhere to those who don't know him. God loves us, but the story doesn't stop there. We don't escape somewhere to enjoy God's love forever. We are loved to share his love.

There's a story about Abraham Lincoln, as he was signing the document that ended slavery in America. Someone asked him, "How can you be sure that God is on your side?"

He answered, "Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God's side, for God is always right."<sup>1</sup>

Our goal is to make sure that we are on God's side. Whose side are you on?

Do you expect God to take your side in whatever petty rivalry you're engaged in? I'm sure it doesn't feel petty - it must feel incredibly important or you wouldn't be so passionate about it. But don't expect God to pick your side. You just do your best to be on God's side.

Don't assume that God agrees with your opinions of the person in the White House. Don't assume that God agrees with you about your difficult boss. Don't assume that God agrees with you about your in-laws or roommate or noisy coworker. God doesn't take sides in our petty rivalries. He stands above.

It's up to us to be on his side.

And when we are on God's side, we are on the side of the everyone. God is on the side of the believer, the transgender, the Muslim, the prostitute, the professor, and the pastor. If God picks sides, he picks everyone. God chooses the outcast and the lowly. He chooses the wealthy and respected. God chooses the people you agree with and the people that you vehemently disagree with.

What does it look like for you to be on God's side? How can you rise above these rivalries that consume us?

We like to be right. We like to think about alternatives, pick a side, and defend it. But I've seen so many people, myself included, insist so vehemently on being right with regards to a certain issue that we completely forget about what characterizes those who follow Jesus.

The fruit of the Spirit is not being right. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. If you're right, but you aren't patient, you aren't right. If you're right, but you aren't gentle, you aren't right.

As the Apostle Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13:1, "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal."

Brothers and sisters, let's be on God's side. Let's understand that we are restored so that the world may know restoration from God. God is on the side of everyone. Don't expect God to be on your side. You be on his side.

## Conclusion

Todd Champagne won that championship wrestling match. As everyone expected. Looking back, it's easy to see that God probably didn't pick a side in that 8th-grade wrestling tournament. So why do we think he picks sides in other contests?

Six hundred years after Ezekiel's prophecy, Israel's king comes on the scene. He seems to choose all the wrong people. He seems to be on the wrong sides. He seems to be on everyone's side. He seems to be on no one's side.

All the judgment for Israel and her enemies falls on him. He takes it all. For God so loved the world, that he sent his only begotten Son. His death was not for God's chosen people. It was for the world.

The nation of Israel was hoping for payback time—vengeance for the wrongs done against them. But what God has called them to is a payback of a different sort. They aren't special. They are only chosen as forerunners of the blessing of God. They are called to pay back. But not vengeance. They pay back the blessing they have received for the sake of others in the world.

Think about your life. Think about the people that have hurt you. Friends. Family. Professional colleagues. How can you pay them back? Not with a vengeance but by sharing the blessing you've received.

And now think about the nations around us. Not the nationalities, but those people who are or who feel like they are excluded. The outsiders. Minority religions, especially Islam. Immigrants. Members of the LGBT community. The working poor in a land of working rich. The uneducated in an area of over-degreed.

How does the blessing of God's favor flow from us outward? How do we see ourselves as taking part in the restoration of the nations?

Everyone gets judged. Everyone has the opportunity to be restored.

It's payback time. It's time to pay back the restoration that you've received from God for the sake of someone else.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Lincoln, Abraham. "Abraham Lincoln Quotes." Famous Quotes and Quotations at BrainyQuote. Date unknown. BrainyMedia, Web. 22 Nov 2017. <[https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/abraham\\_lincoln\\_388944](https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/abraham_lincoln_388944)>