



Joined in Repentant Love

Ps 119:33-40; Ezek 33:7-11; Mat 18:15-20; Rom 13:11-14

In times of crisis, we are wont to complain. In times of crisis, we are wont to look for someone to blame. In times of crisis, we are wont to throw in the towel and lash out at the world around us or at God. Faith would call us to a different response than that which we are inclined to pursue. Rather than to look outward, we are called to look inward to the crisis of our responsibility before God. Will we face the crises of life on the basis of our natural inclinations, our instincts, or will we come to God in repentance, submission, and faith?

Ezekiel lived a difficult time and context. Jeremiah had come along, predicting the destruction of Jerusalem, and nobody wanted to listen. When the destruction Jeremiah had announced became reality, it was up to Ezekiel to take the reigns as prophet of *Yahweh*, leading the people to faith and repentance in light of Jerusalem's downfall and their deportation.

It was not a happy place to be. Anyone interested in representing God on the heels of national destruction and mass deportation? It was kind of like being in charge of federal emergency response programs in the aftermath of major hurricanes such as Katrina. You can be sure that even if everything went smoothly, people would be displeased. We are never happy when our plans are disturbed, our lives disrupted, and our sense of comfort, belonging, and well-being is destroyed.

That is precisely where Ezekiel found himself. As the people were deported from Jerusalem with its fall, Ezekiel was priest to *Yahweh*, God's mouthpiece before the deported population. The message he had to share was not a very comforting one, either. Who wants to hear that the problems they are facing are of their own making? It's like being told that global warming, drought, hurricane weather, gas prices, and a failing economy are our own fault for allowing greed to control our economic practices. It is like hearing that poor education and rising health care costs are due to irresponsible action on our own part. No one wants to hear that. No one wants to feel guilty when it is easier to blame someone else or some nebulous quantity like corrupt politicians, lobbyists, or a series of industries.

Ezekiel had to remind the people that the prophet's task was to speak truth, not just what we want to hear. The prophet was to speak the message of *Yahweh*, whether or not the people wanted to hear what God had to say. The messenger was responsible for the message and held accountable for fulfilling the charge of communicating God's message and warning. What the messenger was not responsible for was the people's response.

Jeremiah had given the warning loudly and clearly. No one had paid attention. They had heard the message, but rather than take it seriously, they had tried to squelch it by hushing Jeremiah in one way or another. He had been imprisoned, kept in a cistern, and forbidden to speak. Even his presence, however, communicated the very message they wanted to silence. The problem was not the messenger, but the response of the people.

Ezekiel found himself reminding the exiles that exile had never been God's will. It was not God's will to send them away from Jerusalem. They had made it necessary by failing to follow through on the mission set before them. He had the not so pleasant task of reminding them they had dropped the ball in being the people of *Yahweh* and failing to repent of their waywardness.

They blamed God. They should have looked at themselves. They should have come to God in contrition. They came with accusation and reproach, instead. Because they did not like the picture Jeremiah had painted, they had tried to brush him off. They chose not to heed the warning, and now they painted a picture of God as reveling in judgment, doom, and destruction. Ezekiel spoke to clear the air. Destruction was never God's will. God's will was always to forgive, heal, and bring reconciliation.

Like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, we are charged with being the mouthpieces of God's grace. This is a great responsibility and we are held accountable. God's desire is not that any should perish, but that all might come to grace, joined together in repentance before God's love. In this repentance we are joined together beneath the banner of the love of Christ Jesus.

The psalmist wrote of delighting in God's instruction. That is not our standard practice. We rather think of God's instruction as limiting, binding, and curtailing our freedom. Yet the psalmist sees in God's will the character of true, wholesome, and delightful living. It is living in God's presence. It is repentance that moves us into life under God's plan, will, and instruction. It is here that faith takes hold and builds a new quality of living and delighting in God.

Jesus spoke of this kind of unity. We so often misread His words in Matthew 18. We see the text and immediately turn to the topic of putting people out of the church. We miss the whole point. Jesus' point was that we are to be about the task of reconciling one another within the body of Christ. How do we build the body of Christ? We do it by purposefully coming together to seek repentance and reconciliation. We join together beneath God's love and grace, calling others to join us in this same life of repentant love.

Paul puts it a different way. He says we are to wear the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for fleshly desires. That is quite a statement, is it not? This is celebrating the body of Christ. We are to live by faith according to the pattern of Christ Jesus without any allowance for contrary desires. Greed is displaced. Selfishness is set aside. The desire to protect our personal interests is cut off. The use of power to promote our agendas has no place. Christ Jesus is given room to live and create new life and opportunity in the midst of our repentance before his love and grace.

We let go of the past and how things used to be. We drop our concerns with yesterday, tradition, history, and those patterns that make us feel comfortable and secure. In their place, we allow the grace and love of Christ to become our security. We repent of our individual and corporate responsibility for not fulfilling the call of the gospel. We allow the gospel to live, for Christ Jesus to be visible in us far beyond the cultural norms we substitute for faith.

In exile, Ezekiel's people learned that faith is not a temple in Jerusalem, a geographical issue of residence, a question of political independence or economic prosperity. Faith is rather about letting all these nice things go in order to allow God to change our character in accordance with God's own.

Are we willing to let go of those things that impede us from becoming the people of God? Are we ready to take the call of gospel faith seriously? Are we prepared to allow our responsibility for the gospel of salvation and reconciliation to hear? If repentance and faithfulness had reigned in Jeremiah's day, the exile might never have been necessary. What will it take for us to learn repentance for loving reconciliation?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*