

The Purpose of Man and the Pleasure of God

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Date: 28 January 2024

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[0 : 00] But we're going to turn now to our Bible reading for this morning, and we are in Ezekiel chapter 18. We have plenty of Bibles, visitor Bibles at the side, at the back, so do please grab a Bible if you need.

And turn with me to Ezekiel. And we're in chapter 18 and 19 this morning. If you find the book of Psalms in the middle of your Bible, keep going right and you'll get to Ezekiel.

So Ezekiel 18, I'm reading from verse 1. The word of the Lord came to me. What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel?

The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge. As I live, declares the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel.

Behold, all souls are mine. The soul of the Father as well as the soul of the Son is mine. The soul who sins shall die.

[1 : 14] If a man is righteous and does what is just and right, if he does not eat upon the mountains or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, does not defile his neighbor's wife or approach a woman in her time of menstrual impurity, does not oppress anyone but restores to the debtor his pledge, commits no robbery, gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, does not lend it interest or take any profit, withholds his hand from injustice, executes true justice between man and man, walks in my statutes and keeps my rules by acting faithfully, he is righteous.

He shall surely live, declares the Lord God. If he fathers a son who is violent, a shedder of blood, who does any of these things, though he himself did none of these things, who even eats upon the mountains, defiles his neighbor's wife, oppresses the poor and needy, commits robbery, does not restore the pledge, lifts up his eyes to idols, commits abomination, lends an interest and takes profit, shall he then live?

He shall not live. He has done all these abominations. He shall surely die. His blood shall be upon himself. Now suppose this man fathers a son who sees all the sins that his father has done.

He sees and does not do likewise. He does not eat upon the mountains or lift up his eyes to the idols of his house of Israel, does not defile his neighbor's wife, does not oppress anyone, exacts no pledge, commits no robbery, but gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, withholds his hand from iniquity, takes no interest or profit, obeys my rules and walks in my statutes.

He shall not die for his father's iniquity. He shall surely live. As for his father, because he practiced exhaustion, robbed his brother, and did what is not good among his people, behold, he shall die for his iniquity.

[3 : 31] Yet you say, why should not the son suffer for the iniquity of the father? When the son has done what is just and right and has been careful to observe all my statutes, he shall surely live.

The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer the iniquity of the son.

The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself. But if a wicked person turns away from all his sins that he has committed and keeps all my statutes and does what is just and right, he shall surely live.

He shall not die. None of the transgressions that he has committed shall be remembered against him. For the righteousness that he has done, he shall live.

Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn away from this and live? But when a righteous person turns away from his righteousness and does injustice and does the same abominations that the wicked person does,

shall he live?

[4 : 43] None of the righteous deeds that he has done shall be remembered. For the treachery of which he is guilty and the sin he has committed, for them he shall die.

Yet you say, the way of the Lord is not just. Hear now, O house of Israel, is my way not just? Is it not your ways that are not just? When a righteous person turns away from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for it. For the injustice that he has done, he shall die.

Again, when a wicked person turns away from the wickedness he has committed, and does what is just and right, he shall save his life. Because he considered and turned away from all the transgressions that he had committed, he shall surely live.

He shall not die. Yet, the house of Israel says, the way of the Lord is not just. O house of Israel, are my ways not just?

[5 : 50] Is it not your ways that are not just? Therefore, I will judge you, O house of Israel. Every one according to his ways, declares the Lord God. Repent, and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin.

Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, O house of Israel?

For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord God. So turn and live. In chapter 19, just to give a brief summary, there is another of Ezekiel's allegories, with Israel's rebellious kings, represented as lions.

And again, as in chapters 15 and 17, they're represented as a vine. But the vine, which once gave rise to the scepters of kings, the lions of Judah, is now plucked up in fury and destroyed.

So all that remains now is lament. Look at verse 1. Take up a lamentation for the princes of Israel.

[7 : 15] And of this now sad vine, he says, look at verse 14. Fire has gone out from the stem of its shoots, has consumed its fruits, so that there remains in it no strong stem, no scepter for ruling.

This is a lamentation and has become a lamentation. Amen. May God bless God's word to us this morning.

Well, please do turn in your Bibles to Ezekiel in chapter 19. First of all, we're coming back to Ezekiel after a break of quite a while over Christmas and New Year.

back to this flamboyant prophet. His message came often in dramatic acting, sometimes in curious allegories, and sometimes in quite shocking language of great vulgarity, really.

Quite embarrassing sexual crudity. But if you remember back in chapter 3, we saw that God himself shut the mouth of Ezekiel, made him mute, so that the only words that he could actually speak were the exact words that God himself put in his mouth.

[8 : 33] So, the shocking language actually comes directly from God. And he uses that language because he wants, and indeed he needs, to shock his people into facing reality.

Ezekiel had to preach in one of the most calamitous times of Israel's history. He and his hearers are in exile in Babylon. They're part of a deportation of the leading citizens from Israel after Nebuchadnezzar annexed Judah in 597 BC.

This is real history we're talking about, of course. Now, the people that had been exiled, they hoped for a very swift return to Israel because surely God couldn't allow his city and his land to be ruined. He was the God of Israel after all. But Ezekiel's message was one that relentlessly punctured all of those hopes. Far from a reprieve, much worse was to come.

Jerusalem itself would fall to utter destruction and total exile was looming. And such judgment must come in order to vindicate the holy glory of God because it was being blasphemed among the nations of the world by his people and their sin and evil.

[9 : 58] Jerusalem and the city of Jerusalem was a jewel. Chapter 5, verse 5 says, God set it in the center of the nations to be God's light to the world.

But instead, he says, she has become worse than the worst of all of them. an ugly sister even to proverbial Sodom.

That was the charge in chapter 16, verse 48. Far from showcasing the glory of God, Israel had brought only shame on the name of the Lord.

And so God, who is just and who is impartial, must judge. And he will judge their sin in the sight of the nations so that all, Israel and the nations, will know that he is the Lord.

He is the God of justice and of righteousness. That's the great refrain all the way through Ezekiel. And so here in chapter 19, if you look, he tells another of his allegories about the decline of Israel

and God's choice vine that he brought out of Egypt.

[11:08] He planted in the fertile land of the promised land. That's what Psalm 80 that we sang about, we're speaking about. But now it's burned with fire. It's utterly broken.

And it's the third of these allegories talking about Israel as a vine. In chapter 15, remember, the message is that a vine has only got one purpose, to bear fruit. It's absolutely no use for wood. It's no use for building. It's not even any use for firewood. And so if it is fruitless, well, it'll be just burned up completely. The main stem is destroyed.

Well, what hope is there for the branches that are already in exile? It's a very grim picture for Ezekiel's people. Then chapter 17 spoke about the vine again, seeking help this time from the empires of the world, the great eagles of Egypt and Babylon and others.

But he says there's no hope there. When God's people seek their fortune along with this world, my goodness, that is just playing with fire.

[12:10] The world will just turn on all of those who pin their hopes there and he'll just exploit them and destroy them. And that's what happened then and that is still what happens today, isn't it?

When the church courts the world for its help. It's a real warning to the church today. And so chapter 19 here, you see, he says there can be no hope at all in human leaders for God's people. The kings, the lions of Judah, well, they're captured, they're conquered and their roar is silence. And the vine, verse 10, that was Israel, once well watered, once fruitful, whose stem once gave rise to the scepters of the rulers, verse 11, David and Solomon and so on.

Well, now he says in verse 12, it's just been plucked up in fury, cast to the ground and all that remains is just a wailing lament. And that's what begins and ends the chapter.

You see it, verse 1 and verse 14. Take up a lamentation for the princes of Israel. This is a lamentation. It's become a lamentation. There is no hope in man, not even in Israel's chosen kings.

[13:34] Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man in whom there is no salvation, says the psalmist. And all these kind of shallow hopes are going to be dashed by Ezekiel's painful realism.

And friends, that kind of realism is just as needed today, isn't it? In the Christian church, certainly in our part of the world where we were once known, weren't we, as the Christian West.

Well, the mainstream church has likewise been brought absolutely low. It's been captured by the powers of the world. It's become largely shriveled, largely fruitless.

There's no roar anymore, is there, of clear proclamation of the gospel. There's just whispers of lament, decline, and largely disappearance of the church from the public consciousness.

Implosion in terms of membership and finance and all of these things. And indeed, so it is in Western culture, which was once shaped and nurtured by Christianity.

[14:44] That is manifestly disintegrating. On the one hand, it's being assaulted from without. The sheer numerical power of Islam, for example, through mass migration, massive procreation.

But on the other hand, perhaps worse, Western culture is being dismembered from within under the assault of the cultural Marxism all around us today, the woke ideology that wants to deconstruct and demonize everything that brought the moral foundations of our society into being.

wants to cast shame on all of that in the past, destroy, in the end, everything that was built upon those bedrocks of our civilization. Wants to destroy the family.

Wants to see the church destroyed, even the nation state itself. And as all of these things disintegrate around us and implode, well, just the same, circling around are the great eagles of rising empires that have ambitions to exploit our weakness and to make great gains in their power and in their influence.

We are living through days of the death throes of the dominant powers of the Western world. We're living through days of a struggle for a new hegemony in the world.

[16:10] And when you're living in those days, it means we're living in very dangerous times. And if you read history, usually it means living through growing tension, growing conflicts in the world, and even world war.

And as God's people living in this world today, we also need great realism, don't we? Not fantasy. Not fantasy. There's no place for fantasy and wishful thinking.

And we too, we are caught up, aren't we, in the ebb and the flow of the great tides of history, which of course ultimately are in the hands and under the control of God, who is working at His purposes of justice and righteousness.

What we see in the world as we look out is wars and rumors of wars and nations rising against nation and kingdom against kingdom and famines and earthquakes and lawlessness and tribulation as Jesus warned us.

But as He Himself tells us, all of these are but the birth pains by which the righteousness of God will ultimately be known among all nations.

[17 : 30] and that's what our lives and that's what world history is all about. We're caught up in something far, far greater.

We're caught up, aren't we, in the sovereign plan and purpose of God to reveal His glory in judgment and also in mercy. humanity. And when we think that and understand that, we might well ask ourselves, well, are we but pawns then in this great divine comedy and tragedy of human history?

There's nothing that we do personally change anything or ever really matter. I mean, if God is sovereign, if God's purpose destined all things even before the world began, does anything that we think or do really matter for ourselves?

That may be the question that some of the Release the Worders are asking as they study and wrestle with these difficult chapters in Romans chapter 9 and 10 and 11 and so on. Well, the consistent answer that the Bible gives to that question is yes, we are caught up in the great plan and the unswerving purpose of God, a God who is utterly sovereign over all things.

Yes, nevertheless, the Bible says, each and every person who ever lives is responsible to God for their own response to Him and God will hold each of us personally responsible for every choice that we make.

[19 : 10] And what matters above everything for every person alive, whatever the age we live in, whatever the circumstances around us, however dark and dangerous the times may be, whatever we may face in the world, in the nation, in the church, what matters above all for every single person is to turn away from sin and wickedness personally and to turn to God.

as Ezekiel declares God's command in the very last verse there of chapter 18. Do you see it? Turn and live. No one, whenever they live, wherever they live, whoever they are, can either justify themselves vicariously by the faithfulness of others or excuse themselves due to their being the victims of other people's failings.

every single person will be judged by God individually for their response to God's call on their life. Whether they respond righteously or rebelliously. Whether they turn to Him in obedient faith or whether they turn away from Him in disobedient unbelief.

and that is the absolutely central issue for every person in every age. Whatever God might be doing in the world around us. Whether we can see that with clarity or whether as is true most of the time we may be completely confused as to what it all means.

[20 : 48] Don't be confused about this is the Bible's message. And that's why we've got this chapter Ezekiel chapter 18 right here in the midst of all of these great chapters about the grand movements of God and the great convulsions of history.

It's here to show us the absolute priority for every human being in every place at every time. And it signs to us an absolutely clarion call right across the ages to every human being and it says embrace your responsibility to God.

You must embrace His way of righteousness. And you can only do that when you personally embody real repentance.

It's an extraordinarily clear message. And it's a wonderful one. Because it tells us so clearly that not only does God command righteousness from every single person, He commends to us His way of righteousness with such clarity so that no one need fail to find that way.

He shows us that the way of real righteousness is simply the way of real repentance. And that that and that alone is the way to life.

[22 : 08] And He urges us all to seek it and to find it. Why would you die, says God here? I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord, verse 32.

So turn and live. Repent and be saved. Find life. Find the true life that is knowing the living God and walking in His way forever.

It is a confusing world that we live in today. In fact, it's a very unsettling world. I think a frightening world. But here is a message of utter clarity that brings wonderful peace about the real purpose of God for every one of our lives.

Whoever we are, it tells us who we are and why we're here and what we're for. For seeking and finding and knowing God, our sovereign Lord and Savior.

That is the purpose of man, every single one of us. And wonderfully, we will find that that life, not judgment and death, but that life is the pleasure of Almighty God Himself.

[23 : 24] He wants you, personally, to turn and live. And that's why this chapter is here in the Bible. Let's look at it. It begins with a call to embrace real responsibility.

The message of verses 1 to 20 is that we must accept the responsibility for our destiny lies squarely with ourselves, and our personal response to God's command to bow to Him as sovereign Lord of our lives.

It is our rebellion, and only our rebellion, that brings judgment and death. Verse 2 encapsulates the attitude of the exiled Israelites that Ezekiel is talking to.

They say, the fathers have eaten sour grapes, but it's the children's teeth that are set on edge. In other words, we're suffering for previous generations' failings.

And they were wallowing in a kind of fatalistic despair about their situation, as if they were totally helpless, as though they were just shifting the blame for everything that was happening to them onto others.

[24 : 36] It's not our fault, is what they were saying. Well, that's hardly a unique response, is it, to these people? We're well able, aren't we, to constantly protest that whatever's going wrong in our lives is not our fault.

It's not our fault. It's natural to us. That's our default position, but you see, God will not have that. Look at verse 3. No more of that, he says. By the way, this wasn't the first time that proverb had been quoted to him.

Jeremiah 31, verse 29, they say the same thing, and God gives them the same response there. No, no, no, he says, it's each one who eats the sour grapes, he sets his own teeth on edge.

You're each responsible for your own sin and your own mess. That's what he's saying here. There's no refuge in fatalism. You can't say, oh, it's not my choice, it's our forefathers.

Or we might say, oh, it's not my fault, it's in my genes, it's in my misfortune, it's in my bad luck.

Whatever it is, it's not my fault. That victim mentality is so common, isn't it, especially today.

[25 : 45] But that demeans our humanity. As if we were just helpless. By contrast, God dignifies our humanity. He treats us as responsible beings.

And that kind of self-pity also denies us the way of true humanity, which is the way of life through repentance, through submission to God's command for us to embrace it.

And until we admit our responsibility for our own life, as long as we think no blame attaches to us, well, we're closing the door, aren't we, to true repentance, and therefore to true life.

But God demands that of us. God makes us responsible to respond to Him because, He says, verse 4, everyone belongs not to ourselves but to Him.

All living souls, all human lives are mine, says the Lord. Our lives are not some cosmic accident, through some collision of gods in the skies, that's what the ancient pagans believed, or by the mindless collision of atoms in outer space, as modern atheists think.

[27 : 03] we are made, every one of us, by God and for God. Not by impersonal forces, but by a personal God.

And we're defined not by our past, not by our proclivities, not by our personality, not by our performance, not by anything, but we're defined by and for the personal ownership of our maker.

And he's not an unknown, distant, undefinable power, but he is a personal God who has made himself known by name, the Lord, the covenant God of his people.

And he knows, he says here, every individual, not just collectively, but personally, the soul of the Father, as well as the soul of the Son, is mine.

And each is individually responsible directly to God. We can't shift the blame for our misfortune and dump all the responsibility on others, violence on God.

[28 : 16] And of course, it is true in one sense that the sins of the fathers are visited on their children and their grandchildren, and that's because, of course, the effect of sin does cascade, doesn't it, through the generations, through families, through society.

God himself warns his people about that in giving the Ten Commandments in Exodus chapter 20. That's very, very different from saying that God arbitrarily will punish children for the crimes committed by their parents or vice versa.

God's law says precisely the opposite. It's quite clear. Fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor children put to death because of their fathers. Each shall be put to death for his own sin.

Deuteronomy chapter 24 verse 16. Verse 4 here is just repeating that same principle, isn't it, of God's justice. And so in the case of Ezekiel's heroes, if they are being punished by God, it's because they have repeated the same crimes, the same sins that they blame on their previous generations.

They've done it themselves. In fact, God quoted another proverb directly to them. You might remember in chapter 16 verse 44, it's like mother, like daughter, he said.

[29 : 33] That's the real pertinent proverb you need to chew on. And that's one that we all need to reckon with, isn't it? By the way, this pertains also to the issue of what we sometimes call original sin.

Sometimes people find it unfair, and we think it's unfair for God to blame us for Adam's sin. When Paul says that sin and death came into the world through one man's sin to affect us all, we might say that's not fair.

But the truth is, not only have we all sinned in Adam, but we're chips off the old block, aren't we? All of us have sinned just like Adam too.

like mother, like daughter. That's the truth. And neither we now nor Ezekiel's people then can blame others for our sin.

We are responsible. And unless and until we embrace that responsibility, we're just closing the door to salvation, you see.

[30 : 40] We're deceiving ourselves to a false sense of security in terms of the reality of God's judgment. And we're denying ourselves the only way to real security and real safety, which is through repentance.

But that victim mentality is so very common, especially in our culture today. People don't want to entertain the idea, do they? That they're at fault, that we're sinners.

In fact, even to say that to somebody about their way of life is seen as oppressive victimization. And so if God does say that, well, God is an oppressor and he's at fault.

So he must repent for his unaccepting attitude towards me. He must turn around and bow to me, to my identity, to my autonomy, to my proud self-assertion.

Christopher Wright is right when he says this is the gospel stood on its head. Well, it is to say that God must repent and then I'll maybe forgive him. In fact, so upside down, so confused as people's thinking today, Christopher Wright says that we often encounter what he calls the popular perversity of people blaming the God they don't believe exists for allowing or causing things that he should have stopped if he did.

[32 : 08] And that's what people do. But no, the true God does not treat us like hapless and helpless victims, incapable of moral response.

The true God dignifies our humanity. He makes us fully responsible as individuals and he makes us worthy of his call to righteousness.

And in verses 5 to 20, you see, he works out that principle in a case study. You can see through three generations to show that each generation is responsible and must be responsive, therefore, to God.

Verses 5 to 9, it's wonderfully clear, isn't it? It's wonderfully positive. If a man is righteous, if he does what is just and right, verse 5, then he shall surely live, says verse 9.

Notice the emphasis on does. That is, he's real. This is not just an outward show. It's not a sham. He doesn't just talk the talk, he actually walks the walk. He's real.

[33 : 13] As Jesus says, he's not someone who just says, Lord, Lord. He actually does the will of the Father in heaven. The tree bears real fruit, and it's the fruit of real faith.

He acts, says verse 9, faithfully. And his life, described in these verses, show that his life is faithful. It is full of faith, real faith. But the point is, you see, that the reward of that faith can't be bequeathed to his children in his will.

His son must also embrace the same real faith. But if he rebels, verses 10 to 13, well, his blood will be upon himself.

There's no vicarious salvation. And that's an important word, isn't it? That's an especially important word for those who have the wonderful privilege of being raised by Christian parents.

You can rejoice in your parents' faithfulness, but you can't rely on it. If you turn away from everything that you've been taught by them, well, you're responsible.

[34 : 26] You also must follow the Lord wholeheartedly. That's a great sadness, isn't it, when a child does turn away like that. But even then, you see, it's not an end to all hope.

Look at verses 14 to 18. What's clear is that the next generation may turn back. They're not cast off forever for their father's sins. If they obey God's call, well, they too will live.

You see, there's no vicarious judgment either. And you see, Ezekiel's point is forcing his people to embrace the responsibility in their own generation to turn to God and to find life.

Maybe they saw themselves here like the grandson, having inherited a wicked father and therefore feeling, well, their fate is sealed, it's beyond us. Maybe they're saying there in verse 90 is expressing that sense of hopelessness, that they're all doomed to judgment.

Surely it's inevitable, isn't it, that we'll just suffer for our father's iniquity. No, says the Lord, it is not. You're responsible. You can be like the son who's wayward and wicked and be judged by God, or you can be like the grandson.

[35 : 39] You can repent, you can turn back to the Lord and find life. Stop blaming other people. Look to yourselves and your own life.

It's the rebellious and it is only the rebellious who need die. Not sons for their fathers or fathers for their sons. Verse 20, it's quite clear. You have a choice.

You are each responsible to choose the way of rebellion or the way of righteousness. It's on you, says God.

So choose life. Choose life. That's the refrain from the beginning of the Bible to the end. Choose life, said Moses to his people.

See, I've set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life. Choose life because not only is it possible, but it is God's clear desire for you.

[36 : 40] And that's a clear message, isn't it, in verses 21 to 29. God says through his prophet, embrace real righteousness. We must affirm that real righteousness is not only possible, but it's God's desire for us.

It's God's pleasure. He commands. And God's command is to life. Verse 21 begins by declaring that those who turn from sin shall not die, but shall surely live.

And verse 32 ends with the urgent call, so turn and live. God's heart desire is not hidden, is it? God is not indifferent.

Oh, I don't care, live or die, it's all the same to me. Live is his command. Why will you die? So great is that desire in God that ultimately God the Son himself came into this world in the flesh to declare it to the world.

The Father who sent me, said Jesus, gave me a commandment. God and his commandment is eternal life.

[37 : 55] Live. But that commandment tells us that it is submission to God's righteousness and that alone that is the way to life.

It's all about turning, you see, verse 21. Focus moves now from that three generations in one family to the different phrases of any individual's life.

And the point, again, is very clear. You are not trapped by previous generations' behavior. You're not trapped even by your own past. What matters is that you're responding to God today, now.

And again, that is the Bible's consistent message. We sang it in Psalm 95. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart. Real faith shows itself today in real repentance today, in real obedience to God now.

It knows that past obedience isn't enough. Look at verses 24 and 25. That will all be forgotten if you depart from God now, today. It's he who endures to the end who will be saved.

[39 : 15] That's what Jesus says. And that's just as real a warning in the New Testament as it is in the Old Testament. Read Hebrews chapter 3. That's why we're exhorted to exhort one another every day as long as it's called today.

Why? so that none of you will be deceived by the deceitfulness of sin and hardened by it. So that none of you will fall away by the same kind of disobedience.

It can happen. And it's a real warning to all of us, to all of us here this morning who profess Christ. But there's also wonderfully real hope here, isn't there?

Because he's saying it's never too late to hear God's voice. It's never too late to embody that real repentance as long as it's still called today. Verse 21.

If a wicked person turns away from all his sin and does what God commands, he shall surely live. I'll say it again, verse 27, again. When a wicked person turns, he shall save his life.

[40 : 18] He shall surely live, not die. Do you see? But notice the solid reality of that turning, though. Not just a psychological change of mind, is it?

It's a total change of direction in life. But that real change is possible. And so finding that real life is possible.

And that real life is God's pleasure. It is his purpose for humanity. real life for the Bible is far, far more than just mere existence.

There's existence beyond mere physical life. In fact, you read on to Ezekiel chapter 32, you'll see it refers to conscious existence, conversations even, in Sheol, in the place of the dead.

But that is not life, because it is devoid of the presence of the Lord, who is the giver of true life. Real life is to live personally in relationship with God, to know him.

[41 : 29] That's the purpose of man. Jesus himself tells us that. True life, he says, is knowing God as Father and knowing the Son, Jesus Christ. But that was so right back from the beginning, again back to Moses.

His parting words to his people at the end of his life was to say this, love the Lord, obey him, hold fast to him. He is your life. To walk with God is life.

And it is life that will not be interrupted even by physical death. The psalmist knew that. Psalm 16, you may know to me, he says, the path of life in your presence there is fullness of joy forever more.

Forever more. That's why the prayer all through Psalm 119 is give me life. The life that transcends our mere mortality. In the path of the righteous is life, says Proverbs 12, verse 28, and in its pathway is no death.

Doesn't mean he thinks we won't have physical death. Chapter 14, verse 32, he says the wicked is overthrown by his evil doing, but the righteous finds refuge in his death.

[42 : 48] Because it's the gateway to ongoing, everlasting life in the presence of God. But you see, just as life in the Bible is far more than mere existence, so death, and this is the death that's being spoken of here, it's far more also than physical demise.

It's the very antithesis of that fulsome life of blessing. It consists in knowing the awesome and awful judgment of God.

And that's why you see verses 24 and 25 are such a solemn warning against all presumption in those who profess faith. Watch yourselves lest you turn away. That's the message, and that is still a real warning to us, all of us.

You can't think, oh, I've been a Christian for decades, it'll be fine. You can't say, oh, I've been an elder in this church for 50 years, you know.

I can't say, oh, I've been the pastor of this church for 20 years. Do you see what God says there? None of that will be remembered if today you turn away from me to treachery.

[44 : 06] None of that will count for anything. That's why Paul says that these Old Testament scriptures are in our Bibles. They're a warning for us. In case you think you stand firm, he says, beware lest you fall.

Watch and pray lest you fall into temptations, what Jesus said to his followers. And the New Testament's full of those warnings. They're real. And notice verse 25.

We can't blame God. God is not unfair and unjust. It's we who are unfair and unjust in our thinking. We so often blame God for his judgments, don't we?

Especially when those judgments seem to challenge us. How could God think that my chosen way is wrong? It's not fair. It's who I am. It's what I want.

We blame God for his judgments, but we blame God also for his mercy, don't we? Especially when that mercy is shown to other people. He doesn't deserve that. She's far worse than me.

[45 : 09] Why on earth should she and I be treated in just the same way by God? Remember the outrage that was expressed in that parable that Jesus told about the vineyard workers? Remember at the end of the day they all got the same pay, whether it was for an hour's work or for a day's work.

God's unjust. We hate the grace of God, don't we? The mercy of God that levels us all in the same place on the ground. Treats us all the same way.

But no, says verse 30, God is utterly just. He will judge everyone according to his ways. According to whether we've turned and embodied true repentance or have embodied in our lives rebellion against our true purpose.

The soul who sins shall die. And notice verse 26, judged for what he has done.

You cannot blame anyone else but yourself. We're all responsible for ourselves, for our lives, before God. But God is nevertheless gracious.

[46 : 22] He is merciful. He's given a way to life for those who will embrace his way. There's only two ways. Only two ways. The way of death and judgment for sins is real.

But there is also a way to life. And that is what God wants. Verse 23, look, have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked? No. No. God wants us to turn and to live.

And so the whole purpose of this whole passage finds its climax in the great call there at the end of verses 31 and 32. Choose life. And when we do, he says, and this is our third thing, we do it when we embody real repentance.

We have to acknowledge that there's two and only two categories of humanity in this world. And God sees them as righteous and wicked. And what he is telling us is that it is repentance and it is only real and radical repentance that is the way to righteousness and therefore the path to that true life.

And it's clear, as I said, this repentance isn't just a psychological thing. It's not just changing our mind. It's a bodily change of life because it is living out a complete change of heart.

[47 : 48] Verse 31, look, it's radical. Cast away all the transgressions, all the treason, all the treachery, all the rebellion against God's soul lordship over your whole life.

And that can only come, can't it, from a totally new heart and spirit. And of course, that's something that is miraculous. Only God himself can give that. Ezekiel is very clear about that later on in chapter 36.

God says, I will give you a new heart and a new spirit. But look here, God commands them to make themselves a new heart. There's no contradiction there.

That's just that God commands that we will respond to his sovereign work of grace and mercy. that we will receive it with obedient faith, that we will embody real repentance.

Moses did just the same thing. He called his people to circumcise their hearts. It was only God who could do that in them. But he calls them to turn to God.

[48 : 57] He tells them to turn to God in heart and soul. That's the condition of their restoration. But it's God's command of grace that actually makes them do that. And that's the wonder of God's grace.

It's in responding to God's command to repent that that power comes to us so that we do. There's a wonderful illustration of that in the Gospels.

Mark chapter 3 and other places where, do you remember, Jesus commands that man in the synagogue who's got a withered hand. He commands him to do the one thing that is utterly impossible for him.

Stretch out your hand, says Jesus. The man's hand can't do anything. But Jesus says, stretch out your hand, and in responding in obedient faith, stretches out his hand, and he is healed.

That's what Wesley means in the hymn when he says, he speaks, and listening to his voice, new life the dead receive. And when our hearts and our spirits, you see, are truly changed.

[50 : 02] When they're made new by God, well, the whole of our life will be changed visibly and bodily. Real faith isn't just what we believe inside. It changes everything we do outside.

Verse 21, look, real turning changes our doing. Verse 27, turning away from wickedness and doing right.

That's what John the Baptist meant. when he said to people, bear fruit in keeping with real repentance. Real repentance is embodied, is what he's saying. Real repentance works real righteousness.

It's visible, it's bodily. Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, says Paul in Romans. That's real worship. No longer being conformed to this world, but being transformed through the renewing of your mind and heart by the spirit.

It's not just saying, Lord, Lord, it's doing the will of the Father. It's showing the lordship of Christ that is the fruit of real repentance.

[51 : 14] And that's what's pictured, isn't it, in these lovely verses, verses 5 to 9. Look at them again. It's actually doing righteousness and justice, loving the Lord wholeheartedly, verse 6, not serving other gods and idols and ideologies, but loyal to him in all his ways.

Nothing to do with achieving merit. Don't be confused. Not about achieving merit, it's all about allegiance to your true master. And these verses just show us what real living faith looks like in a life that is transformed.

You're no longer a slave to yourself, but you're a true servant of God. Loving God wholeheartedly, and therefore, look at verses 7 to 9, they just illustrate, don't they, what it means to love your neighbor wholeheartedly in tangible ways.

Not grasping from them, but giving to them. Not stealing, but sharing. Very telling, isn't it? Repentance, if it's real, will affect our finances.

Chris Wright says this, given the hold that money has over us, it's likely that until repentance and conversion does affect that part of our lives, it's premature to talk about a new heart and a new spirit.

[52 : 33] The heart is not changed, he says, if our pockets have not felt the difference. Well, on that measure, it's good to ask ourselves, isn't it?

What do our pockets say about the measure of our penitence? What do our pockets, what we spend our money on, say about the real heart change of the spirit of God in our lives?

It's a very clear question, isn't it? When you look at these verses, you may ask yourself, is that kind of radical change really possible?

You may think it's just far too much for me, or you may think it's far too late for me. No, look at verse 22, real repentance brings total cleansing from all the past.

None of it will be remembered, says the Lord, when you turn to me. And it does bring total change. Look again at verses five to nine. Not just total cleansing from the past, but total change for the future, a future that can be wonderfully fruitful.

[53 : 41] These verses are a wonderful picture, aren't they? Of real, fruitful human life. Isn't that what you want for your life? Isn't that what we want to see pervading our city?

Isn't that what we want to see pervading the whole world of humanity? That is real life because it reflects the life of God himself. Generous, gracious, full of abundance.

And that is God's plan and purpose for this whole world and its future. That is what God is bringing about. That is what God will bring to completion until the nations, the whole world, will see and know his glory.

He will not fail. This transformation is not only possible, but it is God's purpose. It's God's pleasure. desire. It is his heart's desire.

Look at verse 32 again. He has no pleasure in judgment and death. He is the God of life. He cries out, why will you die? So many people have such a truncated, such a twisted view of God.

[55 : 01] Does that sound like the voice of a vengeful deity, of a God full of darkness and foreboding? nothing? Now, this is the God who so loved this rebellious world that he gave his only begotten son so that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have life, true life, life everlasting in him and with him forever.

this is the God who gave his own life. So great was his desire for your life so that you may turn and live.

Nothing gives more pleasure to God than when any sinner repents and comes to find their true purpose as a human being, belonging to God and being with him forever.

I tell you, says Jesus, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance. So Ezekiel says to his people, he says to us, turn and live.

God doesn't want to rob you of everything that's precious in life. He wants you to find fullness of life. It is his greatest pleasure that you should find your true purpose.

[56 : 31] It's the lives of this world that are the thief, as Jesus said, come to steal and to kill and destroy your life. I came, says Jesus, that they might have life and have it in abundance.

So, friends, God is saying here, as he is saying all through the scriptures, he's calling us to recognize the true dignity of our purpose as human beings.

We are made to image the glory and the goodness of God himself, his righteousness forever. And so he's calling us to embrace our responsibility, to embrace his righteousness, to embody real repentance today.

Turn and live and keep on turning to him and living with him all the days of our lives. And we can, he says, we have his promise.

It's the pleasure of God our Savior to bring us to our true purpose both in this world and in the world to come forever, to know life in all its fullness, and to know it through Jesus Christ our Lord.

[57 : 52] Turn and live. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are a God who takes no pleasure in the death of anyone, but would rather that he should turn and live.

How we thank you that you sent your Son into our world with that commandment, the commandment to eternal life. To help us, Lord, this morning, every one of us, to embrace our responsibility, to embrace your righteousness as we embody real repentance through the grace and the mercy that is ours in your Son.

Help us, Lord, we pray, for Jesus' sake. Amen.