Ezekiel 18:30-32 30“Therefore, I will judge each one of you according to his ways, O house of Israel, says the Lord God. Repent and turn away from all your rebellious acts, so that you will not set out a stumbling block that makes you guilty. 31Throw off from yourselves all your rebellious actions by which you have rebelled, and get for yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. Why should you die, O house of Israel? 32For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies, declares the Lord God. So repent and live!”

Did you catch that first line of our highlighted text? I want to tell you that that first line absolutely bothers me. In truth, I am hoping that it bothers you too. It is the line that said, **“Therefore, I will judge each one of you according to his ways.”**

Now, if any man of this world said that to me, I wouldn’t be bothered in the least. That’s because the best anyone could do in this world is watch my actions and then try to judge me. Honestly, you wouldn’t get much on me because that’s just the way my life is. I live a pretty clean and decent life by the standards of the world. The problem though is that these words are not spoken by my neighbor or fellow human. Rather they are spoken by the Lord God…the Almighty and all-knowing Lord God.

That bothers me. God is not just going to judge me by what can be seen in this world, but rather by what He knows about me. He knows everything there is. He knows what’s in my heart. He knows what is going on in my head. He knows my attitudes and intents, yes, we confess it and it is true: God judges us by thought, word and deed. I might be able to fool my neighbor concerning my sins, but God, I cannot fool God. God will judge me for exactly what I am: a sinner. A sinner with horrid, rotten sins, multiple sins of every shape and size. When these sins are stacked up against the so-called “good things” of my life it will be clear in the scale of justice that I am not going to heaven by my works or my human awesomeness.

Of course, that might lead some of you to wonder just what kind of man you have as a Pastor. I am a sinner, just like all of you. Perhaps the only difference between you and me is my theological training, that fact that I have learned to know God’s Word very well. That means that I know what God’s law demands. I know about God’s do’s and don’ts. I know them very well and thus I judge myself by a very high and strict standard (a standard still not as high as the Lord’s)! I know I can’t keep his Law! I know that God demands only the purest of perfection. That’s the problem I have. I know how I stand on my own under the weight of God’s Law and I am afraid.

You heard me right, I am afraid. God’s Law makes me shake in my boots because I know that the words of the Lord found in this section speak to me of my condemnation before his throne of judgment. I know I don’t stand a chance on my own because God says very clearly: **“I will judge each one of you according to his ways.”**

Of course, the knowledge that I have is also the reason for the hope and confidence in God that I have. Yes, it is true that under the Law of God I (and any human) would stand before God as nothing but mere chaff to be burned up, a weed to be pulled and thrown into the fire. Yet the Law is not the only side to God. God has another side. God offers and gives us the side of his mercy and grace. This side does not nullify and void the law. This side of God, this Gospel side of God is the cure for the sins I have under the law. Because of the Gospel side of God my fear is squashed, repressed, and shoved into the furthest reaches of my mind. The Gospel side offers me hope and comfort. The Gospel side takes the sting and horror out of the words that God here speaks.

How? That’s what our sermon is going to address. Our theme will be: **REPENT AND LIVE!**

You would be surprised at the number of people who do not grasp the very clear and concise point of the words that are before us. That’s because most people would not take into consideration the context of what the Lord says here. What the Lord is doing is addressing the self-righteous, false piety, we have no problem attitude of the children of Israel. Yet, they were a nation faced with difficulties and adversity. In fact, they were suffering calamity after calamity. They were in exile in Babylon, stripped of their homeland and literally the captives of a foreign state. They were a nation whose true prophets had pointed out that this would happen, that it was happening because the people had rejected the truth and wonder of God. And even at this, the people refused to hear the truth. Their attitude was not one of repentance and humility but rather one of offense and accusations against the Lord God! They accused God of being unjust. They accuse God of this because they believed that they were not sinful but rather were holy and perfect before the Lord. They believed that God was unjustly punishing them for their father’s sins, for in their mind that was the only way that God could treat them in such a way.

Did you hear that little proverb that was quoted in the beginning of this section? That proverb said, **“The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.”** That proverb was something that the Judaites were quoting in their lives. It is a proverb that says they believe they are being punished, they are suffering exile and the horrors of war all because their fathers did not do what was right before the Lord. In other words, they are accusing God of being unjust. God is not fair. God is punishing us for the sins of our fathers. Doesn’t God see how good and upright we are? Doesn’t God see how religious we are? What in the world is wrong with God! But they were wrong!

What this section does is show them they were wrong. The Lord in chapter 18 goes to great length to show the truth of sin, their sin. How God does that is very clear. For instance, he says in verse 24, **“But if a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and does what is unrighteous—namely, all the abominations that the wicked man practices—will he live?”** The answer is obvious, but God gives that answer in verse 26, **“If a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and practices unrighteousness, he will die because of it. Because of the unrighteousness that he has practiced, he will die.”** What those words do is show the truth of sin. If you have even one sin, you are going to die. In other words, these verses teach what is found elsewhere in God’s Word. James 2:10 says, **“In fact, whoever keeps the whole law but stumbles in one point has become guilty of breaking all of it.”** Romans 3:23 says, **“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”** Finally we hear from 1 John 1:8, **“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”** The inescapable conclusion to what God says here is that everyone needs to repent. God has driven that message home with the clear words of our text: **“The soul that sins is the one who will die.”**

Doesn’t sound good does it? Yet here is an interesting thing to know. God calls for us to repent and live. Repentance is an act of faith. Repentance is caused by Godly sorrow. 2 Corinthians 7:9-10 says, **“Now I rejoice, not because you were made to feel sorrow, but because this sorrow resulted in repentance. Yes, you were made sorry in a godly way. So you were not harmed in any way by us. In fact, godly sorrow produces repentance, which leads to salvation, leaving no regret. On the other hand, worldly sorrow produces death.”** Godly sorrow is born of faith. As we see our sins, God moves us to be sorry. God moves us to desire to stop that sin. God moves us to change our mind about what sin is. That’s what repentance means. It means to change your mind. It is only because of the faith that God gives that we repent.

We especially see this fact of faith as we contemplate verse 31. It says, **“Throw off from yourselves all your rebellious actions by which you have rebelled, and get for yourselves a new heart and a new spirit.”** The key to understanding this verse is to understand how we get a new heart and spirit. Again the Lord provides the answer through Ezekiel. Twice (11:19, 36:25-27) he reveals, **“I will sprinkle purifying water on you, and you will be clean. I will cleanse you from all your impurity and from all your filthy idols. Then I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit inside you. I will remove the heart of stone from your body and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my Spirit within you and will cause you to walk in my statutes, and you will carefully observe my ordinances.”**

The new heart and spirit comes from the Lord. God in grace and mercy forgives our sins and renews our spirits. God in love promises to change us from lost and condemned sinners, who are enemies of God, to beloved children of God whose hearts and minds desire only to do what is pleasing in God’s eyes. God will do all the work. God will take care of all of our needs. God will rid us of our sins and offenses. This has always been God’s promise of what He will do.

God will do this, or perhaps I should say, God has done all of this in Jesus. Jesus has won for us eternal life and salvation because Jesus has paid for our sins. In and through Jesus we are accounted as righteous before God. This is not a righteousness of our works but a righteousness of Jesus’ works. This righteousness does not come to us because we did something but rather because Jesus did something. Jesus lived the perfect life we could not. Jesus then went to the cross to take upon himself the punishment for all of our sins. In this act Jesus has brought to us the forgiveness of sins. By faith in Jesus we are forgiven. By faith in Jesus we are renewed and restored in our status as children of God. By faith in Jesus we have that new heart and mind created to do good works to the glory of Jesus. Such is what God promised and did in our Savior.

And now, because of Jesus, we can talk about eternal living. Living a life based on the fact that we have been given the gift of eternal life. In other words, the gift of faith in Jesus brings life and salvation. This life and salvation then leads us to strive in our earthly lives to give glory and honor to Jesus by how we live. And because of Jesus we are God as righteous. It is faith that brings righteousness. Even in Ezekiel, when righteousness and unrighteousness are spoken of it is understood as “faith” or “unbelief.”

When our hearts are motivated by faith in Jesus, when we do what God commands or don’t do what God forbids because of Jesus, we are giving glory and honor to God. The key is faith. Faith that understands our sinfulness, and we are excellent sinners, and faith that grasps that in Jesus our sins are forgiven. This is the way it works, the only way it works. Even in the Old Testament of Ezekiel’s day it was how it worked. They were to believe in the savior to come, we believe in the Savior who has come. And in that faith, that trust in God as the Savior from sin we have life and salvation, yes, the new heart and spirit.

Yet here is where we have a problem. It is so easy for us to be living to the Lord and then to begin to think that because we are so good, because we do right things this is the reason God loves us. It isn’t long after beginning to think this way that we lose sight of our sinful nature and start to abandon the marvel of Jesus. Jesus is no longer the reason and power for what we do and are. Jesus becomes simply nothing more than an example of how we must live to gain eternal life. We think we are pretty good and holy and before you know it we are in the same boat the people of Ezekiel’s day were in. Then God, through his Word will once again call us to repentance and to faith in Jesus rather than faith in ourselves.

Dear people, I understand what happened to the people of Ezekiel’s day. I understand how they lost sight of the truth of sin and the need for God’s forgiveness. It’s true, they were a very religious people. They went through the motions of religion: the sacrifices, the offerings, the rituals, yes, all the outward trappings of religion and faith but it was empty, empty of the promises of God in the Savior. It is no wonder that God called them to repent and live.

Let us not forget to repent and live. Let’s not get so proud that we become self-righteous and think WE are the reason God loves us. We have God’s love because he is gracious and good. We have the gift of faith in Jesus because we believe the truth of God’s Word, that very word through which the Holy Spirit works to give us new hearts and minds. We are God’s children because in Jesus we continue to remember to repent and live.

I pray that if in your life, especially in this time of pandemic and strife, that if you are finding that you are starting to put Jesus and His church on the back burner that these words will remind you of God’s love and grace in Jesus. Remember God is going to judge us according to our ways. We are either judged according to the way of faith in Jesus or judged according to the way of the law. One brings eternal life and salvation and one brings eternal death. Repent and live in Jesus. Amen.