

Personal Centre

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[0 : 00] Now this is a chapter, Ezekiel chapter 6 is a chapter largely about judgment. It's one of the main themes in the chapter.

It's written to the same people, we've been studying Daniel in the mornings, it's written to the same people, the same situation at the same time, consequences of all that they've done.

Results in judgment. Now judgment, I don't know how you feel about reading Ezekiel chapter 6 and the whole thing about judgment, but often a lot of people won't go into the Old Testament, they won't go into a book like Ezekiel and they'll struggle to read if they do go there, a chapter like this, because it speaks about judgment.

We can become uneasy about such a subject and you might be feeling a bit uneasy about talking about it this morning. But I want you to think this is a very important chapter, it's a chapter about judgment because the Jews, God's people, essentially had removed the Lord, their God, from the place that he should have had in their personal and corporate or public life.

In other words, God had stopped being their personal center. I was reading a book recently and it was talking about everybody has a personal center. The thing in you that motivates you, the thing that gives you meaning, the thing that is to use biblical language again, what's in your heart, what's at the center of who you are that really drives you, motivates you and fulfills you.

[1 : 29] Now for the Jews that was to be God. They had many things to deal with in life as we do, many important things, things in life that they had to deal with as we do.

And yet the calling that they had was to see their Lord, their God as the one who established them, who was their foundation, who was the one who was to be their hope and who was their salvation and they'd forgotten.

They had not been in the business of remembering that he was their personal center. So rather than delighting in the Lord, rather than seeing him as their great hope, their great leader, their God, they looked everywhere else.

They were busy looking at all kinds of other things and getting their purpose, their identity in all other stuff.

And so God has judged them. The job of the prophets, the job of somebody like Ezekiel was to call them back to the Lord as their center, as the one who was to be at the core of who they were as people.

[2 : 35] So I want to bring out a few things from this chapter this morning. First asking the question, just to dwell on that just for a minute, why this judgment so much, what was it that they'd done? The first few verses describe to us, if you like a first heading, rotten worship.

They still worshiped. It wasn't like they jacked in religion and become atheists. They still worshiped, but the direction of their worship was rotten. How so?

Well, look at the first few verses just for a minute. Even when God established these people in the land, the promised land, he took them into the land of Canaan.

Now the land of Canaan had been a place that was inhabited already by a bunch of people, but they worshiped pagan gods. They worshiped on all different kinds of places throughout their country, gods of nature, gods that they'd made up, pagan gods.

And what the Israelites had done is they'd come in and they were to follow the Lord. But they had initially at least used the sites of the pagan worship to worship their God.

[3 : 46] Now they thought that was okay. One reference to that is in First Kings, it says the people were sacrificing to the Lord God at the high places because no house had yet been built for the name of the Lord.

So initially, see, they had no temple because they had no temple. They were permitted to use some of the sites of this pagan worship to worship to Jehovah, to their God.

But the problem was, you see, that they let this paganism creep back into their worship. They blended it. They'd allowed this singular devotion that they were to have had to God.

And he, of course, had the right to their worship because he's the one true God and he was the God who'd established them. They just dissolved that. They'd merged. They'd blended in.

So this reference in verse two, set your face against the mountains of Israel. And then it goes on to speak about later on the different high places.

[4 : 45] It's then speaks about places where they were worshiped and spreading oaks, spreading trees, spreading oaks. These are just references to the different locations of worship that had become, that had been pagan worship, that had been used for worship of God.

But where, if God was to look at them now, he would look at them and see them worshipping all kinds of idols, all kinds of pagan gods, not worshipping him.

They blended. They just, the whole focus of worshipping the Lord their God only had disintegrated. So we call this syncretism, mixing it all up and thinking it's okay to mix it all up. You can worship God for a little bit, worship Yahweh.

We remember him. Oh yeah, he was the one who maybe brought us here. But let's also worship all these other gods. They're just the same. They're equally attractive, even more so perhaps.

And this is the core of the change of heart, of the deterioration of their personal center being the Lord God. It's the core offense, if you like, to God.

[5 : 51] And it's what he wants to bring before them again and say, look, this is what you've done. This is what you're doing. This is why I've judged you. This is why you're now in the situation that you're in.

Your hearts, your hearts are all over the place. Now, I don't know if you noticed, but I found very much when Russell was reading the chapter, what is the sentence or the phrase that crops up time and time again?

Then you will know that I am the Lord. That's a key phrase that comes up four times in this chapter. Then you will know that I am the Lord. The profit is to call to these wayward people, these forgetful people, these sinful people, and say, you've gone miles away.

You're to be called back. And as you receive the judgment of God, and as you're refocused and challenged about your behavior, then you will know, as you will see this, then you will know again that I'm the Lord.

So that's the problem they have. And that's the message that is being called out to them, that they're being confronted with. And I think the immediate application for us is exactly the same.

[6 : 58] Human hearts don't change, do they? Do you find it easy to remain singularly devoted to your God today? Last week at work or whatever you were, did you find it easy to retain an undiluted love, focus on, hope in the Lord your God?

It's often so hard for us because we may not sacrifice to pagan deities, but our hearts often take refuge in other things.

Important things sometimes, regular things that we have to do, but we're being asked to take care because it can so often be the case that these things take precedence, or these things become of ultimate significance to us.

And going back to the Lord as our focus, as our salvation, as our hope, as the one who we are to be singularly devoted to, as the one who gives life and meaning, we forget that.

We find it easy to just, it's been a week since I've even thought about that. And we go cold. So our hearts have that tendency. And I think an immediate application is simply to say, to watch, to take care, to protect ourselves so that we don't drift.

[8 : 17] So rotten worship was at the core of the problem here, and they're being called up on that, they're being called to account by God. But I want to just, a couple of, the next couple of points, just address a couple of objections because, again, some people thinking about this whole idea of judgment, particularly reading the description of judgment in all its severity in a chapter like this, can be objectionable.

Or you may know people who object to a chapter like this. So second point would be to answer the question, is this on God's, from God's point of view, rotten judgment?

We've seen the rotten worship of the Israelites, but is this rotten judgment? Is God's judgment unfair? Is it wrong for God to judge so severely these people?

You might say, after all, they weren't necessarily harming anybody, they were just worshipping other gods. Is it arbitrary what God is doing?

Is God a mean God who just randomly looks at human beings and judges them, depending on what day of the week it is, depending on whether he feels good or bad? I was thinking about the most horrible example I remembered, arbitrary judgment.

[9 : 29] I don't know if you've seen Schindler's List, you know the film. There's a moment when, I can't remember his name, Ralph finds his character, you know, the commander, the Nazi governor, is standing on his balcony looking out over the land in the concentration camp.

And for whatever reason, he's in a vile mood and he picks up his rifle and he scans the people and he shoots one. For no reason. Probably arbitrary, evil, random judgment on somebody who, to all intents and purposes, from his point of view, was innocent, hadn't done anything.

That's a horrible, arbitrary, mean, evil example of judgment. What kind of judgment are we talking about here? Well, the first thing to say is that God isn't judging randomly.

God's not judging randomly. Verses four to seven, let me just read these. Now listen to these words. The prophecy is your altars will be demolished, your incense altars will be smashed and I will slay your people in front of your idols.

I will lay the dead bodies of the Israelites in front of their idols and I will scatter your bones around your altars. Now, in Leviticus chapter 26, let me read another verse to you.

[10 : 49] This is going back in time. This is going back to the Lord again, speaking to His people and warning them. So listen to this. Leviticus chapter 26, and I will destroy your high places and cut down your incense altars and cast your dead bodies upon the dead bodies of your idols.

My soul will abhor you. You see, the Lord had always spoken to the people and said, be careful. Where you go, there will be temptation.

I do not want you to cave in. I do not want you to assimilate and to become like everybody else because if you do that, you will not be given glory to me.

You'll forget about me as your Lord and your God and your salvation and you'll go off and you'll worship wood and stone and metal, which will do you no good.

So be careful. And He warned them of judgment. And you will have many instances in the Bible of this, many instances. So God has said to these people, because He knows how vulnerable they are and He knows their hearts because He made them.

[11 : 53] And so therefore He knows the propensity they have to go off and wander. As He knows us, take care, be faithful. So it wasn't a random judgment.

He didn't just wake up one morning and think, I'm going to judge these people because I feel like it. He was judging them based on the fact that He had warned them repeatedly, repeatedly, come back to me.

Remember me as your first love as it were. And they'd ignored Him and they didn't care.

And the second thing is that He's not judging them disproportionately. It's not like unfair. It's not like He's wildly overreacting. We do that sometimes, don't we? Somebody does something against us and we flare up and afterwards we think, man, I really completely overreacted there.

I was disproportionate the way I responded to that person. But God's not responding in that kind of way. In if you flick back a couple of chapters in Ezekiel chapter five and in verse seven, again, God is bringing if you like His complaint before them.

[12 : 59] Look at what He says. Therefore, this is what the sovereign Lord says. You've been more unruly than the nations around you and you've not followed my decrees or kept my laws.

You've not even conformed to the standards of the nations around you. In other words, they've been established by the Lord in this land. He'd given them the way that He wanted to live.

Not only had they forgotten that, not only had they started to get their eyes distracted back to the other pagan gods, they'd gone for it more than all the surrounding pagan nations.

They'd immersed themselves even more in all their, as it were, detestable practices in the Lord's sight. So they hadn't just slightly assimilated.

They weren't just blending a little bit. They caved in completely and the Lord wants to bring this before them, but also, and I won't go into this too much, but if you were to read in Ezekiel chapter eight, you get this really vivid, horrifying picture of, from the Lord's perspective, the horror, the offense of their idolatry, of their waywardness.

[14 : 05] And it describes, if you like He takes, He says in verse five, then He said to me, sort of man, look, and in verse six, then He said to me, son of man, do you see what they're doing, the utterly detestable things the house of Israel is doing here?

He gives Ezekiel this window into what his people, the Jews, had been doing, even in the temple. And they'd basically been using it as a place where they could worship other gods.

A complete offense, a complete horror story. And you think about that this was the Lord's house, the one God, as Russell was saying, the God of the nations, who all the nations should have worshiped him.

And the God's people should have been a testimony, a light to the nations about him, but the whole thing had been reversed and their heart had become so deceitful.

And there are other, you could read chapter eight, there are other descriptions of the offense that this was causing the Lord, rightly. So it's not disproportionate judgment.

[15 : 06] Their personal center had been wrecked. It was ruined. It was all over the place. And they had no love it seemed for their gods.

And they were shameless it seemed in their behavior. So that's the first is that this isn't rotten judgment on behalf of the Lord. It's appropriate.

It's appropriate. But the second objection you may have, or somebody you may know have, is that this is an outdated judgment. This is the Old Testament angry judgment.

Jesus would never have said anything like this. It doesn't apply in our gospel age. But just to say that that doesn't take account of what Jesus himself says.

And beware of thinking that judgment only applies in the olden days. God is the same yesterday, today and forever. What God is doing is he's calling his people to account for the way that he wants them to be.

[16 : 06] And that still is the case for us today. It's not like we can just say, well, this is irrelevant. This doesn't matter. So you may think that, well, judgment is uncomfortable because Jesus doesn't really go there.

You may also be thinking, or you may know people who think, well, I don't see judgment happening around me. God isn't judging me. Life's going on. I don't feel like God's about to judge me.

But can I just read you just, I suppose, dealing with this quite quickly? Let me just read you one thing that Jesus says in Matthew 24. Jesus tells a story to kind of illustrate this point.

Matthew chapter 24, I'm going to read from verse 45. And Jesus is speaking about the future and about the fact that he is coming, which incorporates this whole idea of the fact that he is coming to be the judge.

So he says, who then is the faithful and wise servant whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? It'll be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns.

[17 : 11] I tell you the truth. He will put him in charge of all his possessions. So he's speaking of somebody who's prepared. But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, my master's staying away a long time and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards.

The master of that servant will come on a day when he doesn't expect him and at an hour he's not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Now Jesus said that. And that means that we can't be complacent. There isn't room for complacency because you see now is the time where Jesus, if you like warns and he says, I am the one who holds out the words of life to you in me is salvation.

But you have to listen to my words. You have to come now because there is a day coming when I will come to judge all people. So now is a day of warning. It's certain that he will come so don't be complacent.

But he also speaks there of judgment, doesn't he? You see God is the same and God will exercise when they appropriate judgment on all people, on all people.

[18 : 21] So please don't think, this is just Old Testament. That's a dangerous way of thinking. So we've seen the problem with the people's hearts, the rotten worship.

We've seen that this is an appropriate and it's still a relevant judgment, the way that God is dealing with these people. But I want just to say one more thing about the way that God deals with the people.

Try to think about the justice of God and think about under this heading, restorative justice, restorative justice.

I was reading again about restorative justice this week. It reminded me when I was a teacher, we started to engage in something called restorative practice. You may be practice, restorative practice in your workplace.

And the point of restorative practice or restorative judgment is in a context where there's conflict or a situation where there's a problem. In the legal world, particularly if there's been a crime committed, the point of this is to take somebody who is a criminal, if you like, or a perpetrator of a crime, and somebody who's been a victim and to have a personal interface between them.

[19 : 38] And the purpose of that is to allow the person who's been the perpetrator to see their guilt. To understand the consequences of what they've done.

And so to be able to express remorse. And so to repent and to ask forgiveness. And to provide a place where the one who's been victimized can say, I forgive you.

And to be able to move on. It aims to heal something which otherwise can become a faceless and maybe unhelpful process. Now, an important verse in this passage that I just want to read just now is verse 9.

Because what this does is it shows you what God is like. And it's so important for us to consider our God and who He is and how He deals with what the Israelites have been doing to Him.

So read verse 9 with me. Check back in chapter 6 verse 9. He's talking about the remnant in verse 8. I will spare some, remember in Daniel's day after the terrible captivity the Babylonians had taken a remnant, they had taken a people who were spared and who still lived.

[20 : 48] Then it says in verse 9. Then in the nations where they have been carried captive, those who escape will remember me. How I have been grieved by their adulterous hearts which have turned away from me and by their eyes which have lusted after their idols.

They will load themselves for the evil they've done and for all their detestable practices. Now you see what's happening there. Remember I said that the Lord brings His word through the prophet to the people to call them to account.

There's a personal interface going on here if you like. The people had to see that the Lord their God was still the Lord their God and He was real and they had to know Him and they had to listen to His voice and to see what He was saying to them.

What He says to them is I've brought judgment on you because of the detestable way you've been living. But then doesn't this give us an insight into the way the Lord is affected.

It says I have been grieved by their adulterous hearts. If you like they were to look into the face of God, they were to have a face to face and realize the offensiveness of their hearts.

[22 : 00] They were being called to account. Now that means they had to take that message and take it personally, corporately, as the body of His people but personally, each one responsible for their own selves.

In the ESV I think it's translated I am broken over your iniquities. Describes the brokenness, the pain. Now remember I said that it was appropriate, the judgment of God.

It's appropriate because it's so horrible. Because God is so pure and so holy to see people abandoning Him, forgetting about Him and worshiping other gods is offensive to God.

Now that consideration is vital. You know God isn't just asking us to make a lifestyle choice. He wasn't just saying to them, no I want you to live differently.

He would say you have to know the horror of this before me because when you see that then He goes on to say they will loathe themselves for the evil they have done.

[23 : 02] In other words they'll realize how horrible it was to have done what they have done. In other words they'll see things in proportion. They'll see things as the Lord saw them. If left to ourselves isn't it so easy to get complacent about sin, about bitterness, about greed, about anger, about, it's just my personality, I'm an angry person or whatever.

Isn't it so easy to just kind of explain away and to grow up at blasé about the way that we are in our hearts. And what the Lord does is He calls us back to Himself face to face and says do you consider yourself, do you consider your heart, do you consider how horrible it is.

And what this does of course when He's talking there about they will load themselves for the evil they've done and for all their detestable practices verse 10 and they will know that I am the Lord.

It leads us to repentance, it leads us to a proper consideration of the Lord and who He is so that we see correctly God. We don't have a fiction example in our minds and our hearts of what God is like.

We see Him correctly and we're led back to a proper understanding of how we should be before Him. And I don't want to read another verse that Jesus speaks because we are still asked to think like this.

[24 : 25] In many ways before we see the Gospel, before we are called to the Gospel, we too have to have our hearts broken by our sinfulness. We have to realize the horror of our hearts apart from God, of hearts that resist God and say I will live my way, I will not live the Lord's way.

Listen to these words Jesus speaks as He looks over if you like His people, the city of His people as He's on the way to the cross. He's already decided to go to the cross to become the sacrifice, the way by which people would be saved and He says Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I've longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings and you weren't willing.

Jesus is, you'll feel like the brokenness of Jesus, the pain that it caused Jesus on the way to the Last Supper He will share with His disciples before He goes to the cross to be the atonement, to be the sacrifice and He looks over these people who have received repeated callings and warnings and judgments and He says you're still so hard but I long for you, I have love for you and I long for you and I wish that you would come to me.

And we need to know that of God so that our motivation is right. We need to see that He first loved us and it's not a cheap love, it's a very costly love because it led Christ to the cross.

It was hugely costly for Him. We need to see as just as we finish the key thing again where our hearts are, our personal center is do we have a clear view of the Lord this morning of what He's like which involves His judgment of sin, His holiness, His complete rightness in doing that, the appropriateness of Him judging but also His great, great mercy and love which draws us.

[26 : 45] So I call you this morning to His mercy in light of the fact that you need it and of the brokenness of our hearts if left to ourselves, we are called to see our sin for what it is in all its unpopularity in our society to talk about that, to see it for what it is but to be brought to repentance so that we can receive the mercy of the Lord and we can know His goodness.

Now is a time where we're called, there will be a time coming when the judgment will be final and we're called now to come and to receive His mercy.

So restoring the personal center if you like, making sure your heart, your heart's desire is the Lord.

If He is not your Lord this morning then like I said now is the time where the Gospel is offered to you and you have to have it if you like that face to face, easy still to come to church and to still look the other way, to not look at the Lord and to say to Him show me myself and show me what I'm really like and help me to be humble enough to receive your Gospel.

You're not a Christian that's the, if you like the personal conversation, the personal prayer you need to have with the Lord. If you're wavering this morning you might feel like you're a Christian but if you're on a wayward track, you've grown cold or you're a bit disinterested, you maybe identify with this people because you're currently really tempted to put your faith or your hope or your attraction in all kinds of different things.

[28 : 40] Well remembering that the Lord is God, remembering the focus that He wants us to have, I suppose says that we can't mess around with that. We can't treat God as if He's good for us one day and not good the next day.

This is a solemn call to remember that He is the Lord of the nations and that He doesn't want our hearts to be divided between Him and a million other things.

But also I suppose the question is why would we want to do that? Think again of Jesus' words, how He's longed to gather His people. And if that's the case and if that's the Jesus who we maybe prayed to and commit ourselves to but now we're so cold from them we need to see again Jesus.

If you find yourself in a position where you're careless about your faith and where you're wandering and you're distracted, go back to Jesus. And think again of His love and what He's done for you.

And if you're a believer who's going on in the Lord, maybe you're struggling to go on in the Lord, it's often difficult isn't it? You feel like there's a hundred obstacles against you, everybody thinks you're stupid at work, whatever it is.

[29 : 50] Now you're tired, you've been at it for a long time, then remembering again that He is the Lord and that He calls you back to recognise that as your personal centre is good news, isn't it?

Because God doesn't change. So if He is the Lord, then He's the Lord who makes promises to His people and keeps them. So if you're a Christian this morning who's going on but you're tired or you feel you're struggling or you feel you have questions, remember that He's the one who said that He who began a good work in you will carry it onto completion.

He began a work in you and He'll finish it. He's with you and He's for you and He is your Lord. And He calls you just to remember that and to remember His commitment to you and His faithfulness to you.

Good news for us. Amen. And pray. Lord God, we ask that you speak to us personally and help us not to look the other way.

Help us to admit you into our hearts and to see your deep, deep concern that we recognise your holiness and your goodness and our need of you if our hearts are wayward.

[31 : 14] Call us, we pray to you, help us to respond, forgive us for our hardness and encourage us also Lord, help us to see the great concern of Jesus for His people.

Thank you so much for the gospel and that right now we have that gospel as good news held out before us. Help us not to look the other way.

In Jesus' name, amen.