

Sin Hurts
Ezekiel 6:1-14

Here we go again. “Stop worshipping other gods and stop mistreating each other or I will destroy you.” We heard such a message from Isaiah, then from Jeremiah and now from Ezekiel. So why is so much of the Old Testament so repetitive? And why do we need to keep on reading the same warnings over and over again? Why not just skip ahead to Matthew’s gospel, where we’ll see that Jesus is the answer to all these problems?

Well, Maybe God had to keep repeating His message of repentance to His Old Testament people because they were a lot like us: Maybe it was because they kept ignoring what He said, no matter how many prophets he sent to warn them. In fact, by the time Ezekiel’s ministry began, so many of Isaiah and Jeremiah’s predictions had already come true, hadn’t they? For Ezekiel was among the first group of God’s people that had been carried off into exile in Babylon, just like those earlier prophets had predicted. And in the earliest of his own prophecies, Ezekiel joined Isaiah and Jeremiah in predicting the siege and the destruction of Jerusalem, all of which ended up taking place about a decade later. So it’s no wonder that Ezekiel picked up where Isaiah and Jeremiah had left off, echoing their pleas for God’s people to repent before it was too late.

But while God kept sending the same basic message to His people, his prophets became more and more strident in their tone. Isaiah’s beautiful, elegant descriptions of the suffering servant who would take away the sins of God’s people gave way to Jeremiah’s incessant, bitter rebukes of the political and religious leaders of his time – in fact, we still call such extended condemnations and lamentations of societal woes “jeremiads.”

But by the time Ezekiel began his ministry, it seems that God was tired of talking. For He instructed Ezekiel not to preach God’s impending judgment on Jerusalem in words, but instead to act his message out in pantomime. In chapter 4, for example, we see God telling Ezekiel to lie on his side for over a year next to a model of the besieged city, with an iron plate between it and him, eating only siege rations cooked over a fire made of dung. Next, in chapter 5, God told Ezekiel to shave off all the hair on his head and beard, then to scatter some of it in the wind, to strike some of it with a sword, and to burn some of it up in the fire – in all these ways, symbolizing what would happen to the people of the city. And even in chapter 6, notice that Ezekiel isn’t talking to the people at all: since they won’t listen, God tells him to prophesy to the mountains.

Yes, from Isaiah’s well-turned phrases to Ezekiel’s desperate actions, we can clearly hear the increasing urgency of God’s pleas: “Listen to me. Listen to me! Do I have to draw you a picture? Turn back to me so you won’t be destroyed!” Yes, just as our cries for a driver to slam on the brakes would become louder and louder the closer his car comes to the edge of a cliff, God kept turning up the rhetorical heat on His people: “Stop, stop, stop!”

And God calls out to us for the same urgent reason that we would warn that driver of his peril: because sin hurts us and others, because sin makes a wreck of our lives. In fact, no matter what pleasure or prosperity it might promise us, sin is actually just as deadly as a car careening over a cliff.

And when you think about what sin really is, that just makes sense, doesn’t it? For sin is after all nothing more and nothing less than turning away from God, breaking fellowship with God, cutting ourselves off from God. So, since we know that God is the only source of light, it only makes sense that

sin inevitably leads only to wandering in darkness and confusion. And since we know that God is the only source of life, any departure from His good and perfect will can lead only to death.

And make no mistake: that's exactly what Ezekiel describes so vividly in chapter 6. He sees death. He sees the bodies of the Lord's slain people lying among their smashed idols, God's people killed in the very act of making offerings to their false gods. Oh yes, Paul's words in Romans chapter 6 are undeniably true: the wages of sin, the only thing sin actually delivers is death (Romans 6:23).

Now, we can't always see the connection between sin and death in our own lives. Oh, sure, it's easy to see it in other people. It's easy to condemn the selfish choices of the alcoholics who succumb to liver disease. It's easy to look down on the drug addicts who are reduced to begging on the streets to try to get their next fix. It's easy to recognize how rejecting God's Word and God's will has ruined other people's lives.

But at the same time, we often imagine that a little bit of sin, a little bit of separation from God won't do us any harm. No, as long as we continue to be socially respectable, as long as we aren't actively causing harm to other people, as long as we give God a little bit of our time and talent and treasure, while keeping the rest for ourselves, we reassure ourselves that we are good to go.

And that's exactly why we need to have prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel keep telling us the same thing: no matter what sin promises you in the short run, in the long run any separation from God is deadly. For let's face it: it doesn't matter whether the plug on your phone charger is one inch away from the nearest electrical outlet or one mile away: if there's no connection to its source of energy, its battery will eventually run down. It will eventually die.

Or to put it another way, it may seem like fun to feel the wind in your hair as your car speeds toward the edge of the cliff, but the end result is deadly. In short, any sin, no matter how great or how small, hurts. Any separation from God, any deviation from God's perfect will, from His perfect Law of love hurts us and hurts other people.

But today's passage reminds us of an even more astonishing truth: our sin also hurts God. For that's exactly what verse 9 says, isn't it? "I have been broken by their adulterous hearts." And why does our sin break God's heart? Because no matter what excuses we might try to make, no matter what sort of spin we put on it, whenever we give our attention and devotion to other gods, whenever we transfer our trust to anyone or anything besides the Lord, we are being unfaithful to Him, cheating on Him, two-timing Him.

And no, that's not just some preacher's exaggeration. For the fact is that God deserves the same kind of complete and exclusive love and loyalty from all human beings that husbands and wives deserve from each other. And why? Oh, I don't know – maybe because He's the One Who made the whole of creation, the rocks and trees, the skies and seas to declare their maker's praise, to display His glory. So, how dare we give our love and loyalty to any part of His creation instead of its much greater Creator?

Oh, and unlike any other thing God created, the Lord has made us in His own image, breathing His own breath of life into us so that we might be living souls, appreciating His bounty and beauty, living in perfect relationship with Him forever. So, how dare we turn away from Him, fixing our hearts and minds on anyone or anything else? How dare we seek our comfort and peace, our reassurance and hope from any other source?

Oh, and let's not forget: just as God redeemed His Old Testament people from hundreds of years of slavery in Egypt, He has redeemed all of us New Testament Christians from an even greater peril: He has delivered us from bondage to sin and death. So, how dare we imagine that we can live independently of Him, concerned only with our own pleasure or profit, ignoring the One Who gave up everything for us?

Sure, those of you who are married know exactly how you would feel if your husband or wife treated you the way we treat God whenever we pull our hands out of His hand, whenever we are unfaithful to the covenant He has made with us. You'd be outraged. You'd be scandalized. In fact, you would be broken. And that's exactly the way God says He feels in today's passage.

But of course we know that our God didn't just tell all of His prophets to tell all of us about His brokenness. No, He showed that broken heart to us. He showed us just how much our sin hurts Him when the Son of God allowed those Roman soldiers to mock Him and beat Him and crucify Him. And the Father showed us just what our sin costs Him when He gave up His only Son in order to save us. So yes, sin hurts. But it doesn't just hurt us and the people around us. It hurts God. It breaks God's heart. And as long as there's any sin, any infidelity against God in our lives, we can't hear that sad truth too many times.

But once we finally get it, once we finally realize how badly our sin has hurt our loving Lord, what should we do? What effect should such a message have on us?

Well, what did the Lord say His Old Testament people would do? What did He say would happen to them after they were scattered among the unbelieving nations, physically separated from the Temple of God in the same way that their unfaithfulness had spiritually separated them from Him? In verse 9, He simply says, "You shall remember Me. You shall remember how your sinful unfaithfulness has broken my heart. And you shall loathe yourselves because you will finally realize how evilly, how abominably you have treated Me."

And that's the first step toward healing any broken relationship, isn't it? Don't we have to start by recognizing what we have done? Don't we need to confess how hurtful our actions and words have been? Don't we have to turn back to the one from whom we have turned away? Don't we have to remember the promises we have made to each other before we can pledge anew to keep them?

So, why would anything else be true of the covenant our Lord has made with us, the covenant He has sealed with the blood of His Own Son? So let us remember and confess how we have broken His heart. Let us remember and confess how loathesome we have become in His sight, how we deserve everything that happened to Jesus on the cross. But let us also remember that Christ took all the pain and shame and humiliation that we deserve, not so that we can go on living apart from Him, but so that we might truly be His own, so that we might live in more and more consistent communion with Him not only in the world to come, but here and now, each and every day.

Yes, we can go on allowing our sin to hurt ourselves and others. We can keep ignoring the Lord's pleas to slam on the brakes before our sin carries us over the cliff of death and Hell. We can keep our backs turned to the only source of light and life and truth. We can go on breaking God's heart.

Or will we confess our loathsome sin and our unworthiness? Will we turn back to the wondrous cross of Christ, receiving His amazing love and mercy, bowing before His sovereign grace? Will we remember our broken-hearted but still loving Lord? And will we give ourselves again to the One Who gave Himself for us?