

2014

## Proper 21 • Ezekiel 18:1–4, 25–32 • September 28, 2014

Kent Bureson

*Concordia Seminary, St. Louis*, [Buresonk@csl.edu](mailto:Buresonk@csl.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholar.csl.edu/cj>

 Part of the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Bureson, Kent (2014) "Proper 21 • Ezekiel 18:1–4, 25–32 • September 28, 2014," *Concordia Journal*: Vol. 40: No. 3, Article 14.  
Available at: <http://scholar.csl.edu/cj/vol40/iss3/14>

This Homiletical Help is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Journal by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact [seitzw@csl.edu](mailto:seitzw@csl.edu).

## The Just Way of God

“The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” This phrase leads Yahweh through Ezekiel to address Israel’s whining as they blame Yahweh for their woe and suffering in the destruction of the land and in the exile under Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar. The preacher is encouraged to give attention to the rhetorical structure of the pericope that reconstructs a conversation between Yahweh and Israel through Ezekiel, although decidedly from God’s perspective. The rhetorical structure provides a potential pattern for preaching the text.

In 597, King Jehoiachin, the nobility of Judea, and much of the populace are taken into exile and resettled in southeastern Mesopotamia. Significant destruction of Jerusalem and the land of Judea occurs at the hands of the Babylonians. And the people in exile with Ezekiel are repeating the popular proverb: “The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge.”<sup>1</sup> They complain that they are suffering judgment (their teeth set on edge) because of the sour grapes (the sin) that

their fathers chose to eat. Their complaint to Yahweh implies that God's judgment is patently unfair and Yahweh is to blame for his enactment of such inequitable justice.

Yahweh's response through Ezekiel is to prohibit the use of the proverb (v. 3). Yahweh affirms his just ways proclaimed in Deuteronomy 24:16: "Each one shall be put to death for his own sin." All creatures belong to God and God holds all accountable. Yahweh judges the sinner. "And the soul who sins shall die (v. 4)."

Ezekiel unpacks Yahweh's assertion in verses 5–24 (not in the pericope) by way of specific examples of God judging sinners for their personal sins alone. Yet, Israel continues to complain that the Lord's ways are not just (v. 25). Israel perceives that sinners are not judged by Yahweh for their own sins and that the punishment that befits justice actually does not fit the crime. So the Lord tells Israel that their ways are unjust and that he will judge them according to his way. He invites them: "Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin" (v. 30). In the end, he pleads for Israel to have a new heart and spirit, to turn and live since Yahweh has no pleasure in anyone's death (vv. 31–32).

Preaching this pericope according to its rhetorical structure would entail focusing upon the way of the Lord: Turning from sin and death to life. This Old Testament reading highlights the fundamental issue of human responsibility for living that is contrary to God's will and design (sin).<sup>2</sup> The cry of injustice is on the tip of the tongue of every sinner. The preacher should consider leading the hearer to perceive how they impugn God by representing his way as unjust. When justifiable lament turns to blame, then the sinner's true love is manifest: love for the self. And love for God above all things is ruled out. For the sinner has now blamed God as the source of his trouble and woe. For us, the children, our teeth are set on edge, because our fathers (and fellow human beings) have eaten sour grapes. The judgment of God for the sin of others appears to have fallen on us, since we appear to be suffering the consequences for their sins. The particular consequences will depend upon the nature of the sin and the experience of sin and its consequences in each community in which God's people live. Yet, the preacher proclaims, "Hear now, O church—is it not your ways that are unjust?"

Rhetorically the preacher would then turn, as Ezekiel did, to make the call: "Repent and turn from all your transgressions. Make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit." The crucifixion of Christ manifests the impossibility: we cannot repent and make ourselves new. Who can follow the just way? Who can create a new heart and a new spirit for herself?

Yet, Ezekiel does not end in despair. Yahweh does not delight in death (2 Pt 3:9). God desires that we live. So how do we repent/turn/die and then live? We repent and live through the promise of the word of God in the name of Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38–39). "So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls" (Acts 2:41). The preacher should proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins through baptism and daily confession and personal absolution—a new heart and a new spirit to the people of God.<sup>3</sup>

Kent Burreson

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Consult Horace D. Hummel, *Ezekiel 1–20* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005).

Burreson: Proper 21 • Ezekiel 18:1–4, 25–32

<sup>2</sup> The gospel reading for this Sunday from Matthew 21:23–27 (28–32) focuses on the issue of responsibility through the chief priests' and the elders' questioning of Jesus's authority and the parable of the two sons which highlights that the true Son is the one who does the will of his father, even if he didn't at first.

<sup>3</sup> Given this rhetorical emphasis, it might make sense to place the general rite of confession and absolution after the sermon, following Saxon Lutheran practice. The rite could include portions of Ezekiel 18 in the versicles in dialogue fashion leading to confession or in the confession itself.