

# OpenTheo

## June 14th: Ezekiel 33 & Acts 15:1-21

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### Alastair Roberts

News of Jerusalem's fall. The Jerusalem Council.

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## Transcript

Ezekiel chapter 33. I will not take warning, his blood shall be upon himself. But if he had taken warning, he would have saved his life.

But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, so that the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes any one of them, that person is taken away in his iniquity. But his blood I will require at the watchman's hand. So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel.

Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, a wicked one, you shall surely die. And you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity.

But his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way,

and he does not turn from his way, that person shall die in his iniquity. But you will have delivered your soul.

And you, son of man, say to the house of Israel, thus have you said, surely our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we rot away because of them. How then can we live? Say to them, as I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel? And you, son of man, say to your people, the righteousness of the righteous shall not deliver him when he transgresses.

And as for the wickedness of the wicked, he shall not fall by it when he turns from his wickedness. And the righteous shall not be able to live by his righteousness when he sins. Though I say to the righteous that he shall surely live, yet if he trusts in his righteousness and does injustice, none of his righteous deeds shall be remembered.

But in his injustice that he has done, he shall die. Again, though I say to the wicked, he shall surely die, yet if he turns from his sin and does what is just and right, if the wicked restores the pledge, gives back what he has taken by robbery, and walks in the statutes of life, not doing injustice, he shall surely live, he shall not die. None of the sins that he has committed shall be remembered against him.

He has done what is just and right, he shall surely live. Yet your people say, the way of the Lord is not just, when it is their own way that is not just. When the righteous turns from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for it.

And when the wicked turns from his wickedness and does what is just and right, he shall live by this. Yet you say, the way of the Lord is not just. O house of Israel, I will judge each of you according to his ways.

In the twelfth year of our exile, in the tenth month, on the fifth day of the month, a fugitive from Jerusalem came to me and said, The city has been struck down. Now the hand of the Lord had been upon me the evening before the fugitive came, and he had opened my mouth by the time the man came to me in the morning. So my mouth was opened, and I was no longer mute.

The word of the Lord came to me, Son of man, the inhabitants of these waste places in the land of Israel keep saying, Abraham was only one man, yet he got possession of the land. But we are many, the land is surely given us to possess. Therefore say to them, Thus says the Lord God, You eat flesh with the blood, and lift up your eyes to your idols and shed blood.

Shall you then possess the land? You rely on the sword, you commit abominations, and each of you defiles his neighbor's wife. Shall you then possess the land? Say this to

them, Thus says the Lord God, As I live, surely those who are in the waste places shall fall by the sword, and whoever is in the open field I will give to the beast to be devoured, and those who are in strongholds and in caves shall die by pestilence. And I will make the land a desolation and a waste, and her proud might shall come to an end, and the mountains of Israel shall be so desolate that none will pass through.

Then they will know that I am the Lord, when I have made the land a desolation and a waste because of all their abominations that they have committed. As for you, son of man, your people who talk together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, say to one another, each to his brother, Come and hear what the word is that comes from the Lord. And they come to you as people come, and they sit before you as my people, and they hear what you say, but they will not do it, for with lustful talk in their mouths they act, their heart is set on their gain.

And behold, you are to them like one who sings lustful songs with a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument, for they hear what you say, but they will not do it. When this comes, and come it will, then they will know that a prophet has been among them. Ezekiel chapter 33 appears to function as a seam in the book.

It opens the final section of the book, after the oracles against various nations in chapters 25 to 32. However, it also recalls much of the first part of the book in chapters 1 to 24 in a pronounced fashion. Daniel Block writes, Chapter 33 verses 1 to 9 echoes chapter 3 verses 19 to 21, but with a new urgency.

Chapter 33 verses 10 to 20 summarizes chapter 18 verses 1 to 32. Chapter 33 verses 21 to 22 fulfills chapter 24 verses 25 to 27 and ends the prophet's silence reported in chapter 3 verses 22 to 27. Chapter 33 verses 23 to 29 summarizes the same charges of idolatry and abominations and announces the same judgment proclaimed in chapters 5 to 6, while also alluding to chapter 11 verses 14 to 21.

Chapter 33 verses 30 to 33 reflects chapter 20 verses 1 to 3 and 31 and announces the fulfillment of the prediction of his audience's hardened hearts. Chapters 2 verses 3 to 7 and 3 verses 4 to 11. The chapter is divided from the part of the book with which it has the strongest affinities by intervening material, but it is adopted into the body of material that follows it.

It might be seen to function as a bridge between chapters 1 to 24 and 34 to 48. There is a clear connection between verses 1 to 9 and chapter 3 verses 17 to 21. But if you warn the wicked and he does not turn from his wickedness or from his wicked way, he shall die for his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul.

Again, if a righteous person turns from his righteousness and commits injustice, and I lay a stumbling block before him, he shall die. Because you have not warned him, he shall die for his sin, and his righteous deeds that he has done shall not be remembered, but

his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the righteous person not to sin, and he does not sin, he shall surely live.

Because you took warning, and you will have delivered your soul. Here Ezekiel's original call is renewed and recalled. However, in contrast to the first call, here there is a message concerning a hypothetical watchman primarily directed to the people.

Later in verses 7 to 9, this is applied to Ezekiel in particular. Here the analogy of the watchman is developed more in verses 2 to 6, in which the responsibilities of a typical watchman is laid out. He must blow the trumpet to warn people at the first sign of trouble.

If he fails to do so, the responsibility for the death of people will be upon his shoulders. If he does so, and they do not respond, then they are the ones responsible. In verses 7 to 9, we can observe close parallels with the earlier statements of chapter 3. Ezekiel's particular charge is as the watchman of the house of Israel, delivering the word of the Lord to them.

The message here is presumably one that would have been publicly shared with the people. In the context of the earlier message concerning the generic watchman in verses 2 to 6, the nature of Ezekiel's mission, the mission he had been performing for the past seven years, is being made public and explicit. As in chapter 18, the message of verses 10 to 20 here offer hope to a people in despair, who may feel a fruitless remorse for their past deeds, but feel that change or any reversal of their fate is now impossible.

These verses contain two arguments presented by the people, and the prophetic challenge and response to them. The first is that of verse 10, The claim is not the same as that of chapter 18, in which the people blame the sins of their fathers for their current predicament. The father's eight sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge.

Rather, here they despairingly blame themselves, regarding their situation as hopeless and beyond recovery. A similar response to that of chapter 18 is given, The House of Israel must beware that they do not permit despair to deny them the future that God's gracious forgiveness could open up for them, if they would only turn from their evil ways. The task of the watchman is to alert the people to the urgency of their present moment.

The righteous must not become complacent or presumptuous. Past righteousness is of little value to the man who apostatizes. God's statement that a righteous man is in good standing with him, that he will surely live, will be revoked if that righteous man turns away from his righteousness.

Such a man will die. One's own standing is not something to trust in. It will merely make you presumptuous.

The wicked man, on the other hand, must not become despairing or fatalistic. There is

always a way back to God for the penitent. His condemnation need not be regarded as the final word.

Indeed, his condemnation should be that which spurs him to repentance. Were he to repent and do what is just and right, all of his past sins would be forgotten. The second argument or objection of the people is found in verse 17, the way of the Lord is not just.

As in the preceding section, this section closely follows parts of chapter 18. The people want to claim that the Lord's ways are arbitrary or unjust. The Lord counters this accusation by claiming that it is rather they whose ways are unjust.

He reiterates the principle described in the preceding section. They are in a situation where their ways, and by implication, their destinies could turn. They could either change for their blessing or for their judgment.

They should neither be despairing nor complacent and presumptuous. It is not the Lord holding them back from returning to him. The Lord does not desire their death.

Rather, it is their own stubborn hearts. Ezekiel had been rendered mute, save for those occasions when the Lord opened his mouth to deliver a message, back at the time of his first call in chapter 3, seven years ago. In chapter 24, verses 25 to 27, he had been promised the opening of his mouth as a sign to the community of the exiles.

As for you, son of man, surely on the day when I take from them their stronghold, their joy and glory, the delight of their eyes and their soul's desire, and also their sons and daughters, on that day a fugitive will come to you to report to you the news. On that day your mouth will be open to the fugitive, and you shall speak and be no longer mute. So you will be a sign to them, and they will know that I am the Lord.

By opening the mouth of Ezekiel in the evening, at the very start of the day on which the fugitive came, there was an advance warning, and the fulfillment of the earlier prophecy was more compelling. In verses 21 to 22, we see the prophecy that was made coming to pass. A messenger comes with the news of the city of Jerusalem's downfall.

The chronology is perplexing here, as the twelfth year might seem to date this about a year and a half after the fall of Jerusalem, an unrealistically long period of time. Leslie Allen discusses a number of possibilities. A minority textual tradition has this as the eleventh year, which would make more sense chronologically, but is very weak textually.

Another possibility is that the dates of the book, save for chapter 24 verse 1 which draws on 2 Kings chapter 25 verse 1, are dated by the exile, whereas that date in chapter 24 verse 1 is dated according to the regnal year reckoning of Judahite kings, the dates being measured from the first full year of the king's office. This would account for the extra year, and give us a far more realistic dating of the coming of the messenger, one that tallies quite well with the time that it took Ezra to make that journey. Both the

advent of this messenger, bearing such important news, and the releasing of Ezekiel's speech herald a new phase of Ezekiel's public ministry.

This is a further proof, should one be needed, of the power and truth of the word of God delivered through Ezekiel, and would have strengthened his public standing as a prophet. However, although Ezekiel's mouth is opened, the situation on the front of the remaining people of Judah does not look good. First, in verses 23 to 29, we see the situation of those remaining in the land of Judah.

A second great deportation of people occurred with the fall of Jerusalem, leaving but a small rump left in the land. These were almost entirely the poor people under the governorship of Gedaliah. Looking at the waste of the land, and the numbers that they have, they fancy that they can possess the land.

If their father Abraham got possession of the land as only one person, things look far more propitious for them as tens of thousands of people. Yet they are people who continue in the defiling ways of those who preceded them, the ways that got them expelled from the land. The description of this situation in the book of Jeremiah is of one where there was great potential.

The land was being given its sabbaths, and the poor were enjoying its produce. There was potentially an element of jubilee taking place. However, a people committed to such idolatry and uncleanness was not going to possess the land for long.

The Lord was still looking over the land and judging those within it, although they were not mixed with other people transplanted from elsewhere, as the Assyrians had mixed the northern kingdom of Israel. Those remaining in the former kingdom of Judah had no good reason to be confident in their future as a people, as long that is as they continued in their idolatries and uncleanness. The land had been devastated and left to waste, although they might have thought that surviving the two previous attacks of the Babylonians, they were in a good position.

They too would be removed from or destroyed within the land. In verses 30-33, we see that things were not much better among the exiles in Babylon. While on the surface they seemed to be interested in hearing the word of the Lord, they were not truly heeding it.

Rather, they seemed to regard Ezekiel more as a source of entertainment and diversion. However, the Lord, according to his promise, would once more vindicate Ezekiel, bring the word that he had spoken through him to pass. When that took place, the people would know for a fact that a prophet had been among them.

A question to consider, why do you think that Ezekiel's mouth was opened at this particular point? Acts chapter 15 verses 1-21 But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of

Moses, you cannot be saved. And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. So being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers.

When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses. The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter.

And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God who knows the heart bore witness to them by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us. And he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith.

Now therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will. And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. After they finished speaking, James replied, Brothers, listen to me.

Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles to take from them a people for his name. And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen. I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old.

Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he has read every Sabbath in the synagogues. Acts chapter 15 is at the heart of the book of Acts.

The Gentile mission is underway. Peter has brought the gospel to Cornelius. Paul and Barnabas have recently returned from the first missionary journey in Asia Minor.

Now the question of the character of the new body of the church is an issue to be decided. What status should the Gentiles have within the church? Do they need to be circumcised and come under the Jewish purity requirements, and take on the covenant sign of circumcision? Most of the Gentile converts to this point had been God-fearers,

associated with synagogue communities. It probably wouldn't have been seen as a big thing for them to be circumcised, and become full members of Christian synagogues.

The Christian movement at this point was largely a Jewish one, and it might have seemed natural to most at this point that becoming part of such a movement would require becoming a Jew. The question of circumcision would become a much keener question, as the gospel went out to Gentiles with a pagan background, without any prior association with the Jews. The controversy that leads to the Jerusalem Council is first provoked by men coming from Judea to Antioch, teaching that Gentile converts need to be circumcised in order to be saved.

This was the cause of great dispute with Paul and Barnabas. Paul had already had the Gentile mission especially committed to him, and had just returned from his first missionary journey with Barnabas. Paul is naturally especially concerned that this question be settled adequately.

The issues at stake in the Jerusalem Council and other related matters are at the very heart of Paul's message in a number of his epistles, especially Romans and Galatians. The visit of Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem at the end of Acts chapter 11 is the visit that seems to be mentioned in the first part of Galatians chapter 2. It's a private visit, it's by revelation, by the prophecy of the coming famine, and it's bringing aid to the needy saints in Jerusalem. This might help to explain why the leaders in Jerusalem are concerned that Paul take continued interest in the needs of the poor, the poor being the Judean Christians that needed support from those outside of the region.

The conflict in Antioch that provokes this visit to Jerusalem is the conflict with Peter described in Galatians chapter 2 verses 11 to 21. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, if you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews? We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners, yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ. So we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

But if in our endeavour to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not, for if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor, for through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ, it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose. This, I believe, fits the description of the events in this chapter. The conflict occurs in Antioch, the teachers come from Jerusalem, from the churches



associated with James.

The false teachers here believe that Gentiles must be circumcised in order to be saved. As there had long been uncircumcised God-fearers, we might wonder what this belief exactly was. My suggestion is that they believed that something had changed with the coming of Christ.

God had formally overlooked the situation of the Gentiles, they had formally been able to be God-fearers, not part of the covenant but relating to God from outside of it. But now, in their understanding, God wanted all people everywhere to repent, to turn to become part of his people and to be circumcised. At stake in such a form of apocalyptic Judaism then would be the question of what happens in the shift of the old age to the new age in the coming of the new covenant.

It's a question of eschatology. Are Gentiles to be saved as Gentiles, or do they need to become Jews to become part of this new age of the Messiah? In response to the coming of people of the circumcision party to Antioch, Peter acted hypocritically. He acted out of fear of the circumcision party, rather than out of his true convictions.

To have a clearer idea of what is at stake here, it's instructive to consider Paul's arguments in the book of Galatians. There Paul argues that one of the reasons why the Judaizers want circumcision is to make a good showing in the flesh. The Judaizers can present Christianity as a sort of respectable Jewish sect, observant and conformist.

They are making good proselytes of all of these Gentile converts, emphasising the fact that they are converting them to Judaism, not necessarily the fact that they are converting them to Christ. In such a manner they can avoid persecution. The problem however, as Paul makes clear, is that such an approach carefully masks the distinctiveness of the Christian faith.

It downplays the cross for something that is distinctively secondary. Indeed it latches onto that secondary an unnecessary thing, precisely in order to soft-pedal the cross, the way in which Christ is out of step with and at odds with the rulers of this present age, and the ways in which he fulfils the law. At such points, becoming all things to all men can be a dangerous thing.

And the circumcision party seem to be concerned for more than just getting the Gentiles circumcised. The Gentiles also need to observe the other requirements of the Mosaic covenant in their minds. There are Jews who are members of the Pharisees who are Christians.

These groups are not mutually exclusive as we might commonly think. Some of the early Christians were both Pharisees and Christians. And while there were clear tensions between these things, one did not necessarily rule out the other.

Elsewhere Paul will speak of himself as a Pharisee, although it is clear that he thinks of that identity very differently after his conversion. The apostles and the elders assemble to consider the matter, and they have an extensive debate. Peter stands up to speak about the gospel going to Cornelius through him.

The council needs to reckon with the way that God has welcomed the Gentiles, without making a distinction between them and the Jews. One of the more surprising things here is the way that Peter describes the law as a yoke to be put on the neck of disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear. It's not just a statement about the law at this present juncture in history, it's a more general statement about the law that applies to their fathers also.

Why would Peter seemingly present the law so negatively? It seems that he regarded the law as an incredibly onerous thing. And when we think about it, that's not surprising. It involves all these sacrifices, pilgrimages, these different forms of cleanness that need to be maintained.

To be truly and fully observant was incredibly difficult and costly. In many respects it would be a very frustrating way to live, one that would constantly remind you of your sinfulness and your fleshly nature. And this frustrating character seems to be more intrinsic to the character of law-keeping.

If God had truly cleansed the hearts of the Gentiles by faith, why would they need to go through all of this rigmarole just to keep some Jews happy? God had clearly accepted them as Gentiles, so why would they need to become Jews in order to be accepted? The law is not necessary for such converts. The law is being insisted upon purely out of fear of the Jews, rather than out of any true conviction. It is the grace of the Lord Jesus that gives salvation, the cross of Christ, rather than the law.

The contrast between the law and Christ is also present in Paul's message in Pisidian Antioch at the end of chapter 13, verses 38-39. This is Peter's last appearance in the book of Acts. James, from whose orbit the teachers who insisted on the circumcision of the Gentiles had come, makes the decisive statement and is against those teachers.

Peter, here called Simeon by James, has given personal testimony of the gospel going to the Gentiles. Paul and Barnabas have given further confirming witness. Now James references scripture, establishing the point more decisively.

He quotes Amos 9, verses 11-12. In that day I will raise up the booth of David that has fallen, and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old, that they may possess the remnant of Edom, and all the nations who are called by my name, declares the Lord who does this. The booth of David likely has in mind the dynasty and the house of David.

Jesus is the son of David and the church is being set up as a new Davidic house. It might also be a reference not to the tabernacle, but to the tent that David set up for the Ark of the Covenant. This was not the place of regular sacrifice, but it was a place of song and of prayer.

The Ark of the Covenant had also been associated with Gentiles like Obed Edom, the Gittite, foreigners dwelling in the land of Israel. Jesus of Nazareth, the new messianic king, is forming a new house of prayer for all nations, in which Jews and Gentiles are brought together in song and praise around the presence of the Lord. In verse 18 there is a likely reference to Isaiah chapter 45, verse 21.

The inclusion of the Gentiles then was always part of God's purpose. God had declared this beforehand. While this might have taken them by surprise, God had foretold this beforehand, and when they look back in the scripture they find confirming evidence.

They lay four requirements upon the Gentiles. They must abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things that have been strangled, and from blood. These issues also come up in Paul's Corinthian correspondence, and they seem to have different rationales.

His condemnation of sexual immorality in 1 Corinthians is far more categorical in chapters 5-7. However, idol meat is treated very differently by Paul in his argument. The arguments on that front seem to involve giving up rights for the sake of others.

The explanation that James gives here for the judgment seems to be driven in part by sensitivity to the Jews. As there are faithful, observant Jews in every city, it is important not to cause needless scandal or offence. So it is important that Gentiles act in a way that, without adopting all the practices of the Torah, that they act in a way that is sensitive and mindful of the scruples of their Jewish neighbours.

This is one of the ways that they would express their love for each other in the body of Christ. A question to consider. What are some of the ways in which we might be in danger of downplaying, distorting or disguising key elements of the Christian message in order to blend in with our neighbours and avoid persecution?