

# God on Film: Responding to Corruption

## Sermon 6-18-17

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#### **Ezekiel 22:23-31**

<sup>23</sup>The word of the LORD came to me: <sup>24</sup>Mortal, say to it: You are a land that is not cleansed, not rained upon in the day of indignation. <sup>25</sup>Its princes within it are like a roaring lion tearing the prey; they have devoured human lives; they have taken treasure and precious things; they have made many widows within it. <sup>26</sup>Its priests have done violence to my teaching and have profaned my holy things; they have made no distinction between the holy and the common, neither have they taught the difference between the unclean and the clean, and they have disregarded my sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them. <sup>27</sup>Its officials within it are like wolves tearing the prey, shedding blood, destroying lives to get dishonest gain. <sup>28</sup>Its prophets have smeared whitewash on their behalf, seeing false visions and divining lies for them, saying, "Thus says the Lord GOD," when the LORD has not spoken. <sup>29</sup>The people of the land have practiced extortion and committed robbery; they have oppressed the poor and needy, and have extorted from the alien without redress. <sup>30</sup>And I sought for anyone among them who would repair the wall and stand in the breach before me on behalf of the land, so that I would not destroy it; but I found no one. <sup>31</sup>Therefore I have poured out my indignation upon them; I have consumed them with the fire of my wrath; I have returned their conduct upon their heads, says the Lord GOD.

#### **Message:**

Our video clip today comes from the movie, "The Hunger Games." This movie takes place in the future where there was some sort of apocalyptic war that ravaged the land. Order was established and the nation was called Panem. In Panem there are 12 districts and the Capitol. Continuing from Suzanne Collins' explanation, "Each year two young representatives from each district are selected by lottery to participate in The Hunger Games. Part entertainment, [part] retribution for a past rebellion, the televised games are broadcast throughout Panem. The 24 participants are forced to [kill] their competitors while the citizens of Panem are required to watch. When 16-year-old Katniss' young sister, Prim, is selected as District 12's female representative..." watch what happens next. (Play video at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e3PJ3Du\\_zDc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e3PJ3Du_zDc)). You may be saying, "In what disturbed world does this sort of thing happen?"

This is appalling.” And you are right, this is appalling. To make matters worse, this lottery scene they call “The reaping.” Reaping the harvest of youthful participants in this killing competition. If you watch the movie further, you continue to get a similar vibe. That to the rich and privileged this is merely a spectacle and entertainment. They don’t seem to wrestle in their conscious with the reality that these youth are dying so that more may live. It’s an entertainment business to them. In what world can such corruption, injustice and lack of value for human life exist? Sadly, in our world. In Ezekiel’s world.

Just as a refresher, Ezekiel is a Judean priest part of the southern kingdom of Israel or also known as Judah. The Judeans are the Israelites leftover in Jerusalem after many of the other Israelites have been exiled. The overarching question is, “If some Israelites are outside the land of Israel and some are within Jerusalem, then where is God?” Because their theology of this time period was that God literally resided in Jerusalem or more specifically, the temple. And Ezekiel is challenging this thinking or theology within Jerusalem. Starting in verse 23, *“<sup>23</sup>The word of the LORD came to me: <sup>24</sup>Mortal, say to it: You are a land that is not cleansed, not rained upon in the day of indignation. <sup>25</sup>Its princes within it are like a roaring lion tearing the prey; they have devoured human lives; they have taken treasure and precious things; they have made many widows within it.”* “You are a land that is not cleansed...” Ezekiel is beginning to outline the corruption he sees in Jerusalem. That unlike the Davidic Dynasty, the rulers and wealthy of his day are not watching out for those “below them” or those who may not have the same securities as the rich. Ezekiel is very provocative in his imagery, “...they have devoured human lives...” And he goes even deeper naming that not only are they not watching out for the poor and those deemed lesser, they are intentionally building their wealth off the less fortunate. One of the comparisons you can make to modern times is social media. I think part of the reason that people can say some really vile and mean things on social media is because there is this distance between people. What I say on Facebook to someone who lives across the country, whom I do not know and cannot visibly see their emotional reaction, I can say some really mean and hurtful things without any real consequences. My reputation is not usually hurt. I do not feel guilty for my hurtful words. In fact, I may feel more justified and self-righteous. What I may not see is the hurt in their eyes. Or the tears running down their face. Or their eyebrows turned inward expressing anger. Or another example is that when leaders make decisions that ostracizes the least fortunate among us, they don’t visibly see the damage they inflict. While they live in comfort and luxury earning money off the backs of the less fortunate, they don’t see that they barely have enough food in the fridge. Or that their children have clothes that are too small. Verse 27, *“<sup>27</sup>Its officials within it are like wolves tearing the prey, shedding blood, destroying lives to get dishonest*

gain.” What Ezekiel is challenging, is that if there is this level of corruption in Jerusalem, then how can God reside in Jerusalem with supposedly God’s people? We may ask ourselves that similar question, if there is corruption and injustice within the community of Christ, within the state, within the country, then is Jesus actually residing among these leaders, officials and rulers?

Notice though that Ezekiel doesn’t let the average person off-the-hook. Just because the leaders are corrupted and operating unjustly, doesn’t give the average person or the less fortunate the right to also conduct themselves in corrupt ways. Verse 29, *“<sup>29</sup>The people of the land have practiced extortion and committed robbery; they have oppressed the poor and needy, and have extorted from the alien without redress.”* Even those who are ailing in this world are robbing from one another and scavenging off others. Even their fellow Israelites who may be as poor off as them. Just because we are being treated poorly by the higher-ups, the leaders and governing bodies, doesn’t mean that we can justify corrupt and immoral behavior among our local communities. Just because the rich are prospering doesn’t give us the right to rob them or to attempt to destroy their wealth. Or to hurt the life of our neighbor.

Ezekiel goes even a step further in our passage. Okay, it’s pretty bad if the leaders of Jerusalem and Judah have sold-out to the Babylonians and built their wealth on the backs of the less fortunate. It’s pretty bad if the less fortunate are hurting one another and rebelling against the powers that be. But it’s totally another thing if the religious leaders of their day get involved in the same immoral and corrupt behavior. Starting in verse 26, *“<sup>26</sup>Its priests have done violence to my teaching and have profaned my holy things; they have made no distinction between the holy and the common, neither have they taught the difference between the unclean and the clean, and they have disregarded my sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them.”* Continuing in verse 28, *“<sup>28</sup>Its prophets have smeared whitewash on their behalf, seeing false visions and divining lies for them, saying, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD,’ when the LORD has not spoken.”* The religious leaders are not exempt from corruption. They are just as susceptible, if not more susceptible, to the corruption of sin and the distortion of things that were once good. I covet your prayers because the evil one likes to tempt and corrupt the most devoted among us. That’s often how things come towering down. You’ve probably seen it in many churches. A pastor is tempted to engage in immoral behavior and once he/she is found out, the whole church falls apart in distrust of spiritual leadership that takes decades to recover and heal from. If even the religious leaders of Ezekiel’s days are falsifying what God is saying and are being tempted to operate in corrupt ways, then how can God be in Jerusalem? If God were in Jerusalem, the religious leaders, especially, would be engaging more in-line with the heart of God.

Ezekiel continues to relay God's words in verse 30, *"<sup>30</sup>And I sought for anyone among them who would repair the wall and stand in the breach before me on behalf of the land, so that I would not destroy it; but I found no one. <sup>31</sup>Therefore I have poured out my indignation upon them; I have consumed them with the fire of my wrath; I have returned their conduct upon their heads, says the Lord GOD."* God was looking for anyone who was righteous and holy among them to repair and restore Jerusalem's faith unto Him. But he could not find anyone. Ouch. In all of Jerusalem, God couldn't find one Holy person to stand-up in His name. That's pretty demoralizing.

How did it get to this point? This point where God could not find anyone Holy enough to stand-up in His name. I imagine it's like most things. Slowly and under-the-radar we succumb to the temptations of the evil one. It's not as bludgeoning as we watch stark contrast of good and evil in the Hunger Games. Or as visible and apparent as the Lord is naming through Ezekiel right away. Injustice slowly creeps in and is subtle. If you've ever watched the political drama "House of Cards" on Netflix, over the course of the show you see how power and legacy becomes a justification to perform all kinds of evil things. That the end justifies the means. Or as some would say, "If one needs to die for the many to live, then it is for the greater good." Or one example in our day and age is how we justify killing in this nation. We say that to have a child aborted is killing the innocent and not valuing the sacredness of life. But then we deem someone who has murdered many worthy of death. And maybe some of you would say that's justice. But if we are looking through God's eyes. If we believe that every human life matters. Not just the children and innocent. But every life. Then isn't the most corrupt among us capable of redemption? That God can redeem the most vile and despicable among us? Surely the only true justice is God's justice. While God has the power and right to kill and wipe us all off the face of the earth for our sinfulness, He for some reason doesn't do that anymore. And I'll talk more about this next week, but the thing about God's wrath is that it has limitations. Once He kills a human being, that's it. There are no more chances. There is no more opportunity for redemption. There is no more opportunity for grace and mercy. And this is why God chooses not to err on the side of punishment and damnation. To exercise His wrath loosely. Because if He is slow to anger, is merciful and gracious, the opportunities for redemption are boundless. Beautiful and wonderful things can be born from the most once-corrupt people among us.

When Jesus died on the cross, He didn't just die for the innocent or the helpless. Jesus died for the most corrupt among us. The most vile and violent among us. That God's desire is to redeem each and every one of us. That the only justice that is just is God's justice. Because we are all susceptible to the temptations of sin and corruption.

One of the interesting questions of the Judean theology is, “If God didn’t protect Judah from the Babylonians, what does that say about God’s covenant with the Israelites?” And we may be asking a similar question in our day and age, “When God does not protect me from (Fill-in the blank. Tragedy. Pain. Struggle. Death.), is God still faithful and trustworthy?” I think God’s protection is a very difficult Christian concept. We all want God’s protection. We all desire it. But how is it that God chooses to protect in some instances and not others? Why do weather disasters happen? Why does God allow some hurricanes to hit in certain places and not others? Why does God let some people get into horrific car accidents and not others? Why does God let some people experience sexual abuse and not others? Some of us may believe that if we pray more, read our Bible more and come to church more often, that we somehow earn God’s special protection. And that’s how the Israelites felt in their covenant with God. But the truth is, according to Ezekiel, that God wasn’t the one who abandoned the Israelites. God wasn’t the one who left them to succumb to the Assyrians and Babylonians. In fact, it’s just the opposite. It was the people who voided the covenant with God. They have sinned and done deplorable things. So it was they who broke the covenant and broke God’s protection. God cannot uphold his end of the bargain if the people disobey. It’s like a child wanting the protection of a parent, but the child doesn’t avoid dangerous things as the parent instructed. Naturally, bad things will happen to the child despite the parent’s effort to protect. But God doesn’t operate in transactions. That if we do this, then God will give us that. At least not since Jesus Christ came and died for all of our sins. The transaction, if there ever was one, was already paid through Jesus Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. Because the truth is that we cannot measure up to God’s standards on our own merit. It’s only through Jesus that we can be justified before God.

So what do we do in the face of such corruption? Do we stand on the sidelines hoping that God somehow corrects things? Do we totally withdraw and leave areas of corruption and let the corrupt fend for themselves? Or do we do something about it? Again, the reality is that there is no true justice without God. No human law system will be truly just. Does that mean we should do nothing? No. I believe we should name those who are corrupt and call them to be men and women of God. But I will give you a word of caution, make sure you have the right lens to be so bold as to call the corrupt to submit to Christ. Make sure it’s not just coming from a particular political view or just merely personal preference. Make sure that the lens you have is the God lens. Make sure that you have the heart and mind of Christ. And some of the ways you can check this is by checking with other faithful believers in Christ. You can check this by praying. If you believe our leaders are corrupt, are you praying for them? Are you praying for them to see and be the mind of Christ? Imagine if the people of God would get on

their knees, weep and cry out for our leaders in prayer. Imagine what God could do.

Ezekiel lived in a world where the people of God had turned their backs on God for power and wealth. We live in a society, today, that isn't so different. That people are willing to sacrifice others for their gain. They are willing to overlook the poor, disabled and destitute for their personal gain. That they would turn a blind-eye to those in need. As appalling as the world of Panem in the "Hunger Games" is, if we think about it enough, we also live in a world that justifies horrific things for personal gain. How many of us justify the clothes we buy without any knowledge of where it comes from? That kids with tiny fingers being paid for cents on the dollar to make our clothing. We may be taking advantage of the "least of these" around the world without even knowing it. I'm just as guilty. But we cannot ignore this ugly reality. Katniss couldn't ignore the ugly reality of Panem any longer. Ezekiel couldn't ignore the atrocities his society was committing any longer. And we should not ignore the awful things of our world any longer. How can we be the light of Christ in the midst of darkness and corruption? Pray. Pray hard. And with the courage and strength from God, speak up in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.