

# God asking why

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 01 January 2000

Preacher: Rev James Maciver

[ 0 : 00 ] Now let us turn together to Ezekiel chapter 33. Ezekiel chapter 33. Looking for a little together this morning at the words we have in verse 11.

Ezekiel 33 and verse 11. Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live.

Turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways, for why will he die, O house of Israel? Now one of the things that we must always guard against in interpreting the word of God, whatever passage it is we're looking at, we have to guard against giving any meaning to the words, using our own use of such words in common speech today.

For example, the word wicked. It's a word that we commonly associate with a certain notoriety of conduct, with a certain criminal or a certain great outbreak of sin or non-conformity even to the standards of society.

But when we look at the word of God in its entirety, very frequently the word wicked is brought out not to describe those who are notoriously wicked, as we would say, but rather to describe those who do not conform to the standards of the law of God.

[ 1 : 48 ] In other words, the Bible defines the wicked as those who stand out with a proper relation to God.

It is not so much that they are characterized by gross immorality or great criminal offensiveness, but the fact that in relation to God, that is what designates them to be within that category of the wicked, that the wicked are indeed all who come into the category of the unrepentant or of those who stand in a wrong relation to God, who have not experienced that change, who have not effected that overall change, who would be broadly termed the unconverted.

All of that is included in the Bible's presentation of the term the wicked. In other words, here is a text that sets before us something as we'll see that is of universal application that applies to the wicked wherever we might find such a category of men.

The wicked as defined in opposition or in contrast to those who are found in the ways of God, who are in Christ, whatever term we care to use.

Like Psalm 1, for example, the wicked are contrasted with those whose delight is in the law of God. There are the two sides to humanity.

[ 3 : 29 ] Here is a text that broadly embraces all of humanity that stand within that category. And here is a text that addresses the wicked, that addresses therefore millions of people today, millions of decent living people, of socially accepted people, of people who stand having not caused a ripple of social disruption, who've never seen the inside of jail, who have not even frequented public houses or gambling dens or anything necessarily like that.

But all that it sets before us is all that comes within the category of a wrong relation to God. It is not in terms of human standards, but in terms of how God views the matter.

What he is saying is, he's saying here to this prophet Ezekiel, Son of man, this is the task that I have assigned to you.

And it's something that follows into, very solemnly follows into, every declaration, every preaching of the word of God, that it has to be with this tremendous impetus that seeks to warn the wicked from his way, or else God will require the blood of those who perish at the hand of those who have failed to set the matter out as it should be.

But he is saying therefore is, here is what I want you to say to these people. As I live, saith the Lord, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked should turn from his way and live.

[ 5 : 37 ] And you see, the whole burden of this text is not taken up with the final destiny of the wicked. He's not describing to us the awful eternity that awakes the wicked, that awaits those who see death in this world in an unrepentant condition.

That is not the burden of it here in this text, but the burden of this text is this great divine why. It is God's own question that is written above the unrepentant who hear this great declaration of God.

That is the burden of the text, that when God is saying, here is something that is true of me, something that sweeps aside every reasonable excuse for non-repentance, then the only thing that needs and requires to be asked is, why?

Why, says God, why will you die? We're going to look at three things. First of all, at this declaration of God.

Now we're going to look at the exhortation of God. That we find in turn ye, turn ye. Now we're going to look thirdly at the protestation of God.

[ 7 : 09 ] Why will he die? The declaration of God, first of all. As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live.

Now you see immediately how he's reinforcing his own declaration. The declaration says, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that they turn from their way and live.

But he reinforces it, and he reinforces it in the highest sense, with the highest authority, with the greatest oath of all. He is swearing by himself, as I live, says the Lord.

In other words, he wants you and I to understand today that the content of that declaration is sealed and sealed authoritatively with the very life that is in God.

As surely as it is true that God lives, so this following declaration is true, as reality is fact.

[ 8 : 20 ] As I live, says the Lord, this is what is the case. We're talking about the life that is in God. Necessary existence. You and I are not necessary in our existence. We don't need to live in order for this universe to continue to be sustained, to be brought into being.

We are not absolutely necessary to any matter of this creation. It could exist without us.

Necessary existence, necessary life is found in God and in God alone. What he is saying is, as I live, he is bringing the whole dimension of that necessary existence and he is saying, that is the reinforcement to this declaration.

What I am saying is true and I am sealing it by the fact of my own existence. Can it possibly be put in more clear and assertive terms?

[ 9 : 43 ] And you notice that associated with that, he is giving himself that full time. As surely as I live, says the Lord God.

The covenant Lord, the sovereign God, embracing covenant people, embracing all of humanity. This Lord who is over all says, as I live, this is what is true concerning me.

And what does he then declare to us? Well, what he declares to us is truly remarkable. Because what he declares is, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live.

Now you notice that's a balanced construction. There are two sides to it. It is a no pleasure on the one hand, but something on the other hand.

And it follows that when he says, there's no pleasure for him in the death of the wicked, that there is correspondingly and contrastingly that there is pleasure, that there is delight in God himself in the turning of the wicked, in the wicked's turning so that they might live.

[ 11 : 06 ] I have no pleasure on the one hand in his death, I have pleasure on the other hand in his turning and in his living. That is the logic of this divine declaration, this balanced construction.

Now it's important that we understand or grasp as much as we possibly can what God is really declaring about himself.

because it is only with a firm grasp of that that we can see how vehement, that we can see how tremendously pointed is his following exhortation and protestation.

What then does he mean by taking pleasure in something? Well, the word is commonly used in terms of taking a delight in some object or in some conclusion.

We can translate it there is no delight in something, there is delight in something else. When we're using the word delight we of course recognize its limitations in respect to God.

[ 12 : 23 ] We're not talking at any stage of what we're about to say about the secret will of God, about the decreed will of God, the will that purposes everything that comes to pass including the lostness of the wicked.

All of that belongs to the secret, to the secret counsel of God, to the decreed will of God. What God is setting out here is his revealed will. his whole disposition of grace, his whole offering of opportunity, his whole extension of mercy, his whole extension to sinners, to the wicked of the way that leads unto life.

That is what God is setting out here in this declaration that he takes delight not in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked should turn from his way and live.

he desires that they do not die, but that they live. God's desire is no less than that.

Not that the wicked die, but that the wicked turn, that the wicked turn and live. Putting it in New Testament terms, as 2 Peter puts it in chapter 3, you remember, speaking about the long suffering of God, accounting, he says, that that is salvation, for he says, God will have all men everywhere to repent, or rather he will not have any to perish, but all to come to repentance.

[ 14 : 05 ] God will not have any to perish. God desires that none should perish. God's desire is that all should come to repentance.

And indeed, we have to go one step further because the text could be construed, all that we've said so far could be construed, as saying that it is when the wicked turns, when the unconverted becomes converted, when the person who is a sinner turns to God, then God takes delight in that person, and God takes delight in that matter.

That is not what the text is saying at all. It is not that God has pleasure when the wicked turns, but that God has pleasure that the wicked turn.

It is all the difference in the world because his own desire, his own pleasure, his own delight, is not something dependent on the turning of the wicked.

He is not saying this is what I'm declaring of myself, that when the wicked turns, then I take delight in it. It doesn't have to do with the actuality of repentance at all.

[ 15 : 29 ] What he is saying is that God desires that the wicked everywhere should live, irrespective of whether they will turn or not.

That is the divine declaration. Whether you will ever repent or not, whether you will ever accept Christ or not, whether you will ever turn to God or not, his own desire is not dependent on that.

His desire is brought out in this way that says to you, I do not desire that you die, but I do desire that you turn from your way and that you live.

That is the great divine declaration and nothing less than that. And how well it's illustrated in the words of the Lord Jesus himself.

You remember that when he came to Jerusalem, when he beheld the city, you remember the word that he spoke concerning that city, the city that was for that moment at least representing the whole people of Israel, O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered thy children?

[ 16 : 47 ] As a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but he would not. You see the logic in his own declaration there, how often would I have done?

How I desire that you would come under my refuge. How I desire that you would turn from your way and live, he's saying, to Jerusalem.

And the Lord knows that there are people there in Jerusalem who will not accept his message. He knows that there are many in Jerusalem who are hastening to a lost eternity, but his desire is not dependent on their turning.

His desire is that they would turn. Oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often would I? But he would not.

So let's put it into application for ourselves today. We speak of the free offer of the gospel. We trust that it's the free offer of the gospel that we practice.

[ 17 : 58 ] that it is with the abundant freeness that God's own grace contains, that the gospel message goes forth here amongst us, wherever else it would be proclaimed.

That is what we would desire, and we would not in any way deny that freeness, but vigorously maintain it, presenting it so freely that even sinners are unconvinced of its freeness.

It has to be as free as that. But it is not a mere offer of the gospel. It is not a mere free offer, Lord, it's all of that, because it is a free offer that's accompanied with a divine declaration, a free offer that is undergirded with something that God says about himself.

And what it is he is saying to you and to me today, I am offering you salvation, I am offering you myself when I am offering you Jesus Christ, I am offering you that today freely, and I am declaring to you that this is what I take delight in, that you would avail yourself of the whole conclusion to that offering.

God is saying this is what is available for you. And this is what he is declaring in association with it.

[ 19 : 30 ] When he is saying take what I am offering, he is saying take it because I am saying to you that my desire is that you truly accept it, not that you reject it and die.

When we are talking about it, it is a real disposition on the part of God, it is not a seeming attitude, it is not something that is an apparent disposition, it is a real attitude on the part of this great God, the attitude that declares, this is my desire, this is the desire that accompanies the offer of the gospel, God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked.

My desire is not that you die, but that you do in deep terms, so that you live. The declaration of God.

And it is on that declaration, and on all that is contained in that declaration, that the following exhortation and protestation turns.

Because he's now saying exhortingly, turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways. And that turn ye, of course, describes so superbly what is included in repentance.

[ 21 : 05 ] Repentance, as the catechism puts it, is that very thing, with grief and hatred of sin, turning from it unto God, with full purpose of and endeavour after new obedience.

See how that puts it in a nutshell. With grief and hatred of sin, turning from it unto God, with full purpose of and endeavour after new obedience, here is an exhortation from God based on his declaration, the declaration that says, this is my desire, so that when he's exhorting you to turn and to turn to himself, to truly break with sin, to face himself, he's doing so in a way that builds upon his own delight.

but it is not simply an exhortation or an invitation, it is all of that. He does invite, he does himself plead, we cannot see anything less than that in the text.

God exhorting, God pleading, God inviting sinners to himself, but he does it authoritatively, because it's a demand that he makes, it is a command that he makes, because this is, as we've said, something that is delivered by the authority of God, and from the authority of God, so that it can never be a mere invitation, or a mere exhortation, it comes with all his own authority, and when he is saying, turn ye, turn ye, he is saying it commandingly, he is saying it demonstrably, with his own engaged sovereignty, it is just as true of the gospel message, that it has the fullness of divine authority behind it, as anything we find in the law, so that when God says to you or to anyone else, come, to me, when God says, turn ye, turn ye, that has as much authority and command in it, as anything that is written in the Old

Testament law, even such as thou shalt not, it comes as a divine imperative, and that means that it must never be thought of as a mere exhortation or invitation, though it includes all that invitation is, all that exhortation is, but it's commanded invitation, it's exhortation with authority, and we must never imagine that turning to God is a partial thing, that it means a little patch up or a little polishing here and there, that it means a partial turning but keeping still some direction towards where we used to face, where we are facing as we come into this world, as we stand as depraved, as fallen, as lost sinners.

[ 24 : 42 ] It is not a partial thing that he's talking about, he's not talking about a patchwork thing at all, it is a whole and a radical change with full purpose of and endeavour after new obedience, it is a whole renewal that he's talking about.

Neither does it mean that you try and prepare yourself to meet with God. Doesn't mean that you try and dress up so that you can then turn to him.

Doesn't mean that you need to do some kind of work yourself, some kind of production, some kind of conformity, and then you're able to turn to God.

What repentance is, is the sinner as he is, the wicked as they are, all that stands for turning as they are unto God, coming just as I am.

Spurgeon uses an illustration to show the ridiculousness of a sinner trying to prepare themselves so as then to be able to turn to God.

[ 26 : 01 ] And he says that an artist once came across a railway juncture and he wanted to capture that on canvas just as it was, including the road sweeper or the person who kept the place tiny.

And as he saw him going about in his work and in his overalls, he went over to ask him if he could come to his studio so that he could sit for him and be able to capture all his features more accurately and then he would transpose that onto his painting.

And the man said that he could, but on the day that he turned up, he turned up in his best suit, turned up all dressed up. And of course what the artist wanted was the appearance of the road sweeper, the person naturally as he was in himself, not dressed up in his finery, that would be out of place in the whole painting, wouldn't it?

You and I do not dress up when we come to God. We cannot dress up in order to come to God. We cannot prepare our souls to come to God.

And the glory of the free of the gospel is that you need not come to God dressed up, but that you come to God in order to be dressed up. In order that he himself would bestow upon you, if we may so put it, all the garments of salvation.

[ 27 : 30 ] It's not a matter of partial change, neither is it a matter of trying to dress up in some way to gain the acceptance of God. All that that does is add to the process of delay, to procrastination, and to try somehow to have a place ourselves in the matter.

The glory of the gospel of it is that it comes to you as you are, in your sins and in your fallenness, and to me in the same way, that it addresses us in this way, as surely as I live, says the Lord.

I desire that you turn and that you live, and in turning, you can and you must turn as you are.

Just as I am, just as I am, turn ye, turn ye, from your evil ways.

Whatever that may entail for you or I today, here is a divine imperative, exhortation, an exhortation with all the authority of heaven, an exhortation moreover that is reinforced and undergirded by the very desire and delight of this God.

[ 28 : 56 ] Turn, turn. And then thirdly, he is protesting. There is a protestation for why will you die, O house of Israel.

You see that great why now as it comes across? Because it's set against all that has gone before that. When it is the case that the desire of God is as the text brings it out, when it is the case that God is reinforcing that with his own necessary existence, when that is the case, then the divine protestation over every unrepentant soul that hears the gospel is, why will you die?

The divine question, not the preacher's question, God's question, God's protestation, following on from his declaration and exhortation, the divine why, why will ye die, O house of Israel?

And we cannot confine the die, of course, to physical terms. It is die in all that is entailed in the consequence and in the wages of sin, that which has an everlasting dimension to it, the death that is being ever separated from God.

God's saying, why? Why will you die? When we bring in the New Testament emphasis on the sufficiency of Christ, when we remember that there is everything in Christ that we require as sinners, that his atonement is the perfect sufficiency, that his own sacrifice contains everything we need, that he is able to save to the uttermost with every single detail that is necessary for salvation, based upon his own priesthood, upon his own atonement, when all of that is brought in, when we see how complete we are in Christ, how thorough is the offer of God, then the divine protestation is even more acute, isn't it?

[ 31 : 34 ] Why then will you die? There is no ground whatsoever left under our feet for taking an unrepentant stance here today.

This declaration of God followed by his exhortation and his protestation clears the ground from any shred of reason, from any single excuse that we might bring out.

The divine protestation is saying why, and that means that there is absolutely nothing left upon which we may take an unrepentant and untiring stance and attitude to God when God himself is saying why.

It is apparent that there is nothing in existence as unreasonable, as unlogical, as an unrepentant heart here today.

Why will you die? And there is one other thing that makes it more appalling and more acute.

[ 32 : 53 ] And that is that he is addressing the house of Israel. Not addressing the Moabites, the Ammonites, or any of those people who didn't have covenant privileges.

And although we've said that the wicked embraces in a universal extent all that live contrary to the ways of God, we are still recognising that this is directly addressed, O house of Israel.

You see the importance of that. They are the covenant people. They are the people whose fathers were brought out of captivity in Egypt and who are now in themselves experiencing captivity.

Some are in Babylon, some are in Egypt, and all that is a consequence of turning away from God. Yet, yet for all that the hand of grace is now stretched out to them.

O house of Israel, why will you die? We can put that in modern terms. O house of Israel, all of us who know of covenant privileges, who know what it is to be under the means of grace, to use what we call the means of grace, to have a part and association with the people of God, to be part of the fellowship of a particular congregation, to take our seat in church in the pew from week to week.

[ 34 : 31 ] He is addressing people who have privileges and people who have privileges that have not fully availed of all the privileges that were theirs.

Indeed, we're actively at that moment turning away from these privileges and in an active way despising the privileges. What he is saying is that all of these privileges do not in themselves guarantee that you and I today have a right relation to God.

We cannot have. if there has been no turning, if there is no repentance, there is not that true faith and trust in Christ Jesus, I cannot say that he is my Lord and that I am his.

Then he is saying to you, why? Why will you die, O house of Israel? Let's sum up by looking again at the burden of the text.

The burden of the text is the declaration of God. When he says, why will you die, he is setting out the ground upon which there is left no shred of reason or excuse.

[ 35 : 53 ] He is saying it is the most logical thing possible. to hear of these things concerning God and still say, no, I won't have it.

Why will you die? Is it that there is no desire in God for your salvation? It cannot be that. As I live, says the Lord, I delight not in the death of the wicked, but my desire is that the wicked would turn and live.

Is it in a lack of exhortation? It cannot be that, because here is the exhortation from God's own mouth, turn ye, turn ye. Is it lack of protestation?

No. Because God is saying, why? There is no reason. Unless reason is found in Christ's own words again to Jerusalem.

How often would I have gathered you, but ye would not? Isn't that the heart of the matter?

[ 37 : 08 ] The will not. You will not come unto me, he says, that you might have lied.

How often would I have, but you would not. Why will you perish? turn to the Lord.

Children, adults, whatever we might be, these are words today that address us. Turn ye, turn ye.

Why will you die? As surely as God lives, the sinner that does not turn will find that there is no justice that there is no judgment, that there is no verdict, like the verdict that will be pronounced by offended grace, offended grace.

But as surely as God lives, if you turn, as surely as he lives, you will live also die.

[ 38 : 28 ] Because why, why, says God, will you die? our gracious God, we cannot ever truly comprehend the extent of thy grace, the freeness offered in the way that it sets before us, such great and glorious gift.

we thank thee that it is not dependent on anything that we are that thou dost extend mercy, but that thy mercy and grace is meaningful only in the way that it comes towards those that are sinners, that have a total inability to save ourselves.

But we thank thee, O Lord, that this day thou hast extended to us anew as thou dost every day, that great and glorious offer in the gospel message, that here indeed is life, that thou hast come into this world, that we might have life and have it more abundantly.

We pray, Lord, that thou would bless that word to us, that we may not neglect any of these issues for ourselves, but resolve and act upon that resolve, that we also as another day would go to our father's house with that broken heartedness, that would realize that there is bread enough and to spare for us there, while we perish with hunger.

Grant, O Lord, to such and each and every one that seeks thee, that this day we may find the full satisfaction that is in Christ, that all our needs might be met in his sufficiency.

[ 40 : 30 ] Hear us we pray and accept our worship, cleanse all that is in it of sin and of sin, and pardon us for Jesus' name. Amen.