

*Entertaining Myself to Death*  
Ezekiel 16:49-50; Romans 8:22-27  
11/15/15  
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We return again this morning to the Book of Ezekiel 16:49-50. If you are visiting with us, this is a series of sermons based on, largely, three verses. It is so because it is an interesting view into the mind of the prophet Ezekiel as he was prophesying to the nation of Judah, specifically the city of Jerusalem that had just experienced exile under the kingship of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon and of his first taking a group of elites and teachers and professors and chief religious leaders—Ezekiel being among them—and then six years later doing it again. And so they were living in exile. They were no longer the powerful nation that they had once been, Jerusalem being the home—largely seen—the home of God, the site of the temple. And now they find themselves under the rule of an evil despot. And so Ezekiel speaks to them. But when he does, he does so in surprising ways, because Jerusalem had thought—Judah had thought themselves to be special in the eyes of God, more righteous, more holy, faithful. But Ezekiel goes to great lengths to explain to them, they are not as good as they thought they were. And so he picks a favorite target, and that target was Sodom and Gomorrah, her sister—among her other sister cities.

And as I said at the outset of the series, many Christians today believe that Sodom was brought into judgment because of her sexual immorality. Well, while that may have been the fruit of many of their actions, it was not what was at the heart of their rebellion against God. And Ezekiel makes that clear. What is the sin beneath the sin? And so you will hear it here again in Ezekiel, and then we will move to Romans. And so we've looked at pride. We've looked at gluttony. Today, we look at prosperous ease. "Entertaining ourselves to death," Neil Postman once wrote. And how do we understand it in our day and age? And how do we apply the gospel? We hear that in the Book of Romans. Ezekiel 16:49-50:

"Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty and did an abomination before me. So I removed them, when I saw it."  
[Ezekiel 16:49-50, ESV]

For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.  
[Romans 8:22-27, ESV]

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me again?

Now, Lord, open our minds and our hearts, and enable us to see wondrous things in your Word, that we might see ourselves more clearly, and what it means to walk with you. Help us, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Don't you groan often? Those heavy sighs at the end of the day, or maybe at the beginning of the day, or throughout the day—we get tired and weary. We're tired of the same old story. We're tired of the same brokenness, either inwardly that we feel acutely, or in the world around us. We groan. We ache. The

reason why we groan and we ache internally—that is our soul crying out, “This is not the way it’s meant to be. This is not the way it ought to be.” Because if it was the way it ought to be, we wouldn’t be groaning. The whole expression of groaning, the whole expression of inwardly sighing and tiredness, is the very fact that we know in our very souls, regardless of where you are in your relationship with God—whether you deny him or love him—regardless of the fact, all of that groaning is an expression of “Wait a second, I don’t want this.” Meaning, where did that desire come from? If we’re simply material beings made for this here and now, the survival of the fittest, why in the world should we be complaining? It’s because imprinted on the hard-drive of our souls is eternity—something better, something more.

You think about it when you go to the zoo. I love going to the big cats section of the zoo. I love cats, and so I really love big cats. And so when we go to the zoo—I don’t know if you’ve had this experience, but I sit there and I think about the lion or the tiger, and I marvel at their beauty. For me, personally—I love animals, but there’s something about big cats, and when I see them, it takes my breath away at their grandeur. I don’t care whether they’re sitting. I don’t care whether they’re sleeping. I just look at them, and I just marvel at them.

But after that moment that I marvel at their beauty, something happens. I realize, “Wait a second. I have the luxury of looking at them behind a cage.” But here’s the first thing that comes to my mind: “How sad.” This cat wasn’t built for the cage. He knows every nook and cranny. He’s checked it out—trust me. But now he just sits there, and he looks listless. He’s bored, because he was meant for something much bigger. Who knows whether he groans. But don’t you feel like cat sometimes, caught in a very small cage? Have you ever been around a house cat in a small cage—on a plane? Trust me, they know they were meant for more. We know that, and we’re not purring. We’re crying. We’re scratching. Because we know.

But here’s the problem. It’s not that we experience groaning, or that we long for more, or that we even recognize this is not the way it’s supposed to be. The real problem is when that feeling is met with great prosperity. Not that the prosperity is a problem, but the two together. The groaning and the prosperity brought together can serve as a great eco-system—an eco-system that will bring forth the fruit of boredom and idolatry. This was the nature of Sodom. They had prosperity. They, like us, were tired of groaning. And when you groan, we all look for an answer. That’s why we talked about last week how easy it is to turn to food and drink to somehow satisfy, to cover up, to fill up, to satiate that sense of groaning, that brokenness, that hardness that we feel—that something more that we want. And so in Sodom, the case was, they too felt that brokenness and that groaning, but it was also within the system of prosperity. And so what became was a prosperous ease.

Now, where we’ve been to, we know that they were full of pride and a super-abundance, it could be translated, a super-abundance of food. The idea of prosperous ease, you’ll see there in your outline, is also the idea of prosperity and sloth together—meaning they have tried everything to try to solve that gnawing hunger that wasn’t being satisfied. And so they turn to their money, and they simply try to fill it up. And so they gave themselves to all kinds of triviality. We know this from Genesis. And that triviality was in all kinds and all forms of sexuality and wild living, which we will unpack in time.

But the reality is, the prosperous ease is this: when prosperity and groaning come together to serve as an eco-system filled with pride and a desire—the human desire—to avoid pain at whatever cost, we use the prosperity that we have to try to satiate it. But when that doesn’t seem to do it, what becomes of us is a culture of boredom, because you’ve tried everything, and you keep looking for more. This was at least the nature of what was going on in Sodom and Gomorrah.

Writers upon writers upon writers have written on this whole area of what makes people happy. Does more money? We’ve got more money than we’ve ever imagined—access to it, opportunity—but it doesn’t seem to satisfy. Consider what appeared in *The Economist* a few weeks ago. Thank you, Loren Erickson, for passing this article on to me. This author says this:

Oftentimes, there is an asymmetry in the way people compare themselves with others. We tend to look exclusively at those better off than us, rather than contemplate our position within the full range of outcomes. When the lot of others improves, we react negatively, but when our own lot improves, we shift our reference group to those who are still better off. In other words, we are never satisfied, since we quickly become accustomed to our own achievements.

Let me fill in a word—"since we quickly become bored with our own achievements." Prosperous ease is when all of us as human beings experience the brokenness and the yawning power of sin, and we simply get tired of it, and we groan. That is a part of this life. The challenge becomes when we turn to our prosperity to try to solve it. And inevitably in a prosperous society, much like Sodom, boredom becomes the reality. The next video game, the next sized TV, the next technology, the next screen.

So what is the fruit of boredom? Again, any historical analysis, one would not be surprised at what might have been seen in the city of Sodom. One, anger. Extremes. Pettiness. Perhaps cynicism. Anger. When we abuse others for our own satisfaction, it is an expression of anger at the lot we've been given, and so we will use others to try to deal with that anger.

Extremes. The extreme nature of Sodom's sin is an expression of boredom, because—as we looked at last week—the whole tolerance effect. The more and more you use something, regardless of what that something is, the more and more you use it, the more and more our bodies and our minds, our spirits, become accustomed to it. And so we keep needing to hit the juice to get back to the place of the high, or that magical space. And so we go further and further in extremes.

As a young man, I remember the first time I received a skateboard. I was four years old—my very first skateboard. It wasn't enough simply to go up and down the driveway, much to my mother's concerns and worries. My brothers taught me how to ride around parked cars. What could go wrong? And then they took me down to the biggest hill in my neighborhood, Coronado Boulevard, that was a large hill. It wasn't enough simply to skateboard on the flat, so I had to go to the steepest hill to go into a death-wobble, to run all the way home with skinned knees multiple times. It was a good gift. I remember its color. I remember the size of its wheels. I can almost smell the urethane. I loved that thing, but it wasn't enough. I needed more and more. And so why do I enjoy watching extreme sports? Because a back flip on a motorcycle isn't enough—we need to do two. What about three? There's nothing wrong with extreme sports, but it is an expression of our boredom. We go to extremes. The hit is not enough. We need another hit.

What about pettiness? In other words, pettiness is this—when we don't get what we want, regardless of what that want is, when someone stands in our way, we become hyper-sensitive, and we say, "Get out of my way," or, "How dare you?" and we get angry. That's what James says. "Why do you quarrel among you? Because you want, but you do not have." Because somebody's gotten in the way. And so when we live in a prosperous society and we feel the groaning and we're trying to fill it, but others get in the way—whatever that filling may be, whatever idol of choice it may be, when somebody gets in the way, we will come after them. And so we become hyper-sensitive, and we become petty about our complaints.

But also, cynicism—that ultimately, at some point, we will reach the point of saying, "Why bother at all?" The natural end to boredom is the cynical heart. Why should life matter? Now, I'm not reading terribly into the reality of Sodom, though you're not going to find those words describing Sodom. Because what is describing Sodom but human nature? This is us.

Consider for just a moment the fruit of boredom that we've seen over just these past two weeks. Are not the attacks on Paris, are not the attacks in Kenya and everywhere else in the world, in places like Beirut—are they not an expression of hearts that, quite frankly, recognize the world as being broken,

because you don't follow my way, how dare you? And I will do whatever is necessary to cause you pain until you do. Anger is the fruit of boredom. Do we not see that even in ourselves?

Extremes. Do we—okay, I'm going to press home for just a moment—do we really need a sixty-inch four-K television? Is there anything wrong with—you may own—nobody laugh, okay? Because I realize some of you may own these things. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with them inherently. That's not my point. My point is, have we asked the question: are we buying them, somewhere down deep, because quite honestly it's more an expression of our boredom than it is anything else? That boredom met with the reality of, "Well, I can." I feel it. I have a thirty-two-inch television given to me by a member of this congregation because my other forty-inch went dead. I'll be honest with you. I've hoped that that one would go dead. Because, honey, Best Buy is really running some good sales this week. I just want to let you know. Why? Because I want to see Alabama football on a lot bigger screen. I'm just telling you. And because I can. I can save that money. I can make an argument for it. The bigger kitchens, the new furniture, newer furniture—isn't materialism an expression, to some degree, of the extremes to which we will go?

But what about pettiness? Now, let me press home a little bit further. Now, I want to say, I've had this conversation with a number of you. So this is not representative of anyone in this congregation. But I will tell you that the whole argument over Starbucks not having Christmas decorations on their cups is an expression of an evangelicalism that is so hyper-sensitive that it's caught up in its pettiness. I am thankful that many Christians have said, "You know what? Timeout." No, the gospel awakens me to my pettiness. I don't need Starbucks to have a Christmas tree on it or to say "Merry Christmas." I don't need Apple or Google or anybody else to project the doctrines of my Christian faith to validate their validity. But an expression of our reaction to these things, oftentimes, is an expression of the fruit of boredom, and we become overly sensitive and petty.

But also, cynicism. The fruit of our boredom, I must confess, when it comes to our political engagement in the United States, oftentimes is an expression of the fruit of boredom. Why bother? Those idiots in Washington, they don't know what they're doing. It's the same old, same old. Have you had these kinds of conversations? I know I have, if I'm being honest. You see, in many ways, boredom, again, is the fruit itself of prosperous ease and the groaning inwardly and trying to solve it. This most certainly is what was happening in Sodom. But you know what? Ezekiel was speaking to Jerusalem. This is what was happening in Jerusalem.

And as we will get to the end of this series—I promise, soon—what we learn is that in fact what Ezekiel says is, "Guess what? Your sin, Jerusalem, makes Sodom look righteous." And that was the people of God. And so as I've read these verses over and over again, I've come to an internal conviction of the Holy Spirit as I look at my own life and look at these things in my own life and ask the question, "Lord, is the fruit of boredom, my anger, the extremes, or pettiness, or cynicism—how is that a fruit not born of the gospel or of wisdom or biblical discernment, but it's simply an expression of the prosperous age that we live in, trying to solve the boredom and the groaning that we feel?"

Is this the way we're called to respond to the world in which we live? How is the Lord calling us to do so? And it is this. You see it Romans 8—and I will go quickly—the groaning and the glory. Here, Paul points out the reality of this groaning. He says, "We know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth." Meaning, something else is coming until now. And he says, "But not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies." So Paul is saying even for the Christian, we groan.

And as I said earlier, this groaning is an expression that we were meant for something greater, something deeper, something better. It's the soul saying, "This is not the way it ought to be." And we long, we hope, for something better. And he says, "Even we who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan

inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” Even while we ache and groan, our hope ought to be invested in the fact that Christ is coming again, according to the Scriptures, that he will come in victory to take unto himself all men and women, boys, and girls, young and old, who belong to him, to call them sons and daughters of the Most High God. But until then, we groan.

So what do we do? How do we reach this place of finding some meaning in the groaning? Job, I think, is a really good place, because what God does in his conversation with Job is calling us back in our groaning to the character of God, so that when we feel the groaning—which we all do—instead of turning to our prosperity and asking how we’re doing that, what would it look like for us to cry out for the character of God? Consider what Job said to God, and how God responded to him in the midst of his groaning. God responds to Job in these words:

“Do you know when the mountain goats give birth? Do you watch when the doe bears her fawn? Do you count the months till they bear? Do you know the time they give birth?” [Job 39:1-2]

“Look at the behemoth, which I made along with you and which feeds on grass like an ox. What strength he has in his loins, what power in the muscles of his belly! His tail sways like a cedar; the sinews of his thighs are close-knit. His bones are tubes of bronze, his limbs like rods of iron. He ranks first among the works of God.” [Job 40:15-19a]

God calls Job and asks him, “Have you looked at it from my perspective?” And so he’s calling Job and calling us by way of this word in the midst of our groaning to turn to the character of God, who looks at us in our groaning and calls us to himself.

Here’s a question. Does God get bored? G.K. Chesterton once said this. He says:

They always say, “Do it again”; and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, “Do it again” to the sun; and every evening, “Do it again” to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we.

There is a wondrous diversity in creation, and we explore the world of plants and trees, bird and butterflies—we cannot help but be awed by the magnificence of it all. But it is hard to avoid the ugliness and evil, too. So in the midst of our groaning, of the evil and the ugliness, God, when he speaks to Job, calls him in his smallness and his futility to look at the world through God’s eyes, the one who may be eternally infinite and yet younger than any of us ever imagined. Because it is his character that pours forth in love and grace and creativity that has given us the gift of imagination.

And when God calls us to hope not for what we see but what we cannot yet see, what is he calling us to do? Imagine, dear soul, on yourself what is it that I am. Who is God? I am eternal. I am. I knew you before you were ever a thought in your parents’ mind. I know every word on your tongue before it ever leaves you. I am the Alpha and the Omega. So when he calls us in our groaning to hope in his character, he’s calling to awaken our imagination. And what does he say to Job? “Look at the world in its beauty and its magnificence, because in the world you’ll see a picture of my glory.” Because in our groaning, as we look to his character, how can we not be caught up in his glory?

Because the reality is that when we see God in all of his glory, we cannot have glory of God in creation without having the glory of God in Christ. For it is God who says to us and to our imagination, “Yes, this is not the way it was meant to be. But while you were yet my enemies, Christ, my Son, died for you.” The end of the story is not groaning. The end of the story is not death. The end of the story is not boredom. The end of the story is not material prosperity. The end of the story is restoration, setting all

things right. But we can't yet see it. But when we feel the groaning, God calls us into his character. And can we not, with our imagination, cry out to God for what we cannot yet see but can only imagine guided by the love of God? Lord, in your mercy, restore justice among men and women. Lord, in your mercy, forgive us of our prosperous sloth and ease. Lord, restore to us an imagination that imagines a world not as it is, but as you will make it—a new heaven and a new earth—not just that sin will not exist, but that all sin will be undone and all things will be made right. It's not just that death will end; no, but that bodies will be raised from the grave.

Heaven is not a place of un-death; heaven is a place of new life eternal. Do you see? It is not the place of no tears; it is the place of everlasting joy. It is not a place of no boredom; it is the place of everlasting joy. It is not just that all sin and all brokenness and all groaning will be ended; no, a whole new world is opened up and restored as it was meant to be. So let us groan together. Let us cry together. And let us groan and cry with the world. But let us also speak words of hope, that the Lord would call us in our groaning to see the glory of his restoring hand, that if while we were sinners Christ died, how much more gloriously will Christ return in all of his glory? And how much will the Lamb that was slain for our sin not be the prophet, priest, and king of a completely restored universe where he will reign forever and ever? In our groaning, O Lord, rescue us from entertaining ourselves to death and longing for life through Christ alone. Let's pray.

Father, I thank you this morning for your Word. I thank you for what you call us to. I thank you for how you confront us.