

I have a confession to make. They say that confession is good for the soul, don't they?

Sometimes pastors utilize the pulpit as a confessional where, instead of having members come and confess to the pastor, the pastor confesses to the members. And that's what I am going to do this morning.

I'm almost afraid to confess this to you out of fear that you will drive me away and not allow me to be your pastor anymore. Some of you already know what I am about to share. Some have witnessed me participating in this vice first-hand. Others perhaps have already read about it. I don't know if *Insight* magazine comes to this church or not, but if you happen to read that wonderful publication—which, for those who don't know, is for teens—you may have noticed my ugly mug on today's cover. And in that issue, I make the same confession so the cat is already out of the bag. Hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of teenagers across America have already read, or will read, my confession, so I may as well share it with my own congregation.

But I need assurances that you will not kick me out of the pulpit, though. Can you assure me of that? I don't make promises, and I don't expect anyone else to, so I won't make you promise; but will you tell me that you will choose not to call the conference and have me fired? Well, without further ado, this is my confession. Are you ready for it?

I used to be in a **“Rock Band.”**

Like I said, some of you already knew that. And some of you witnessed the pain of it first-hand. But as I somewhat joke about this idea this morning, I don't want to make light of it, either, as you will soon find out.

As a young boy and teenager, I was a “**goody-too-shoes**” for the most part. Perhaps Becky or Holly could tell you otherwise, but I didn't like getting into trouble. I didn't really have a “rebellious” streak that I experienced in my younger days, with the exception of this one thing.

My sophomore year in high school, I had the brilliant idea of starting a band. The problem was, I didn't play an instrument that lends itself to such a production, nor did the other friends of mine who wanted to start this group play anything either. But we decided to start a group anyway. I soon got a guitar and started teaching myself how to play, and the others in the group did as well. I soon began writing songs also and we practiced in my friend's garage, which stood adjacent to our school. No one could drive to our school, or walk to it, without hearing our racket coming from the garage.

Our first goal was to perform at the talent show that our school was having, and we worked towards that. When the evening came for the show, we performed our hearts out.

At the talent show, wouldn't you know it, we won the grand prize, narrowly edging out West Lebanon's favorite daughter, Rebecca Cross, if I remember correctly. I can still remember seeing my dad, sprawled out on the gym floor, after the grand prize was announced. He lay there in shock, surprise, utter dismay, and probably a little bit of embarrassment. But just a quick side

note: although my dad definitely disagreed with my decision to pursue such a course, he didn't stop loving me because of it. He didn't give me a big, long lecture of the evils of what I was doing. I knew he didn't agree with my choices on this, so I didn't need him to sermonize on me. He just patiently bore with me with long-suffering.

And after winning grand prize, I was convinced that stardom was soon to follow! I thought we would make it big time and I would be a famous musician!

As I said, I am not condoning my decision to follow such a path. In fact, that is the precise point of sharing this little story with you. I had it in my mind that I was going to become this world-famous star—or, at the very least, be a star at my school. I coveted and craved recognition. But, in all honesty, that acclamation that I so deeply desired never came. And I realized that to pursue such a path was empty.

Eventually I gave up on those aspirations and, for a time, I shifted those aspirations onto a “milder” form of “rock music.” When I went to Andrews, I started a “**Christian rock band**” with a few of my close friends. (My dad, by the way, always maintained that the term “**Christian rock**” is an oxymoron, and he could very well be right.) We enjoyed a little local acclamation around Andrews University, and we even recorded a CD. But the stardom that I craved never came. And I soon realized that such pursuits left me feeling empty.

I believe that the whole time, as I walked down the path towards music “stardom,” God was urging me to turn around. Maybe I was just immature at the time and I have since matured. But

maybe God was trying to speak to my conscience, wanting me to realize that there was very little fulfillment to be had in such a path.

So I quit the “**Christian rock band.**” I came to the place where I realized that to be in such a group did not match my Christian aspirations and that type of environment wasn’t conducive to Christian growth. I am not here, at this point, to discuss the merits or evils of Christian music. Perhaps there is a place for that at some point. And I am not to say that those who are involved in these pursuits are on the wrong path. Maybe they are; maybe they aren’t. But I think that, for me, God was trying awfully hard to help me turn around from the course that I was pursuing.

What does this have to do with **Ezekiel**? Well, based on the scripture reading, I am sure you are already with me on my point. And so let us open our Bibles to this wonderful book once again. Let us turn to **Ezekiel 33**, and this morning we are just going to look very quickly at one verse. I just realized the irony, by the way, of the title of today’s sermon and the story I opened up with. As I somewhat decry the “evils” of a life in rock music, I guess it is only appropriate—or perhaps inappropriate—that the title of my sermon was the title of a song by a group back in the 1960s.

But very quickly, let us look at **Ezekiel 33:11**. In this one little passage, only five or six lines long, we read a very important truth. The verse starts out by saying, “**As I live . . .**” Quite simply, this is the Lord making an oath here. He is assuring us of the truthfulness of what He is about to declare. And so He says, “**As I live, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked.**”

Friends, this is such an important thing to understand. Over the years, there has been such a distorted picture of God that has presented—and we see that it is not new to our day. Ezekiel’s audience was dealing with it as well. For some reason, we have this picture of a God who delights in letting the wicked “fry.”

As I’ve shared with some of you in our Mid-Week service, I have been dialoging back and forth with a young man who has many differing views than me on Christianity. He’s a really nice guy; lives here locally. But his theological paradigm maintains that, at the very beginning, God predestined some to be lost, and some to be saved. Perhaps it’s simplifying it a bit, but with such a mindset I can’t help but believe that God would take pleasure in the death of the wicked! After all, with such a paradigm in place, the death of the wicked would be nothing more than an outworking of what God has already determined and desired. And why would that not be something to celebrate?

“I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked,” God declares, however. But somewhere, somehow, the world around us has been given the impression that God is so excited about the extermination of sinners. In fact, one of the most repulsive allegedly “Christian” ideas that atheists, agnostics, and skeptics react against is the idea that the wicked are going to burn in hell forever. Much of the Christian world has given them a picture of a God who puts sinners on a rotisserie, and makes them fry—without allowing them to die—forever and ever as He smiles away, glad that He can finally pay them back for the 70+ years that they sinned.

What a disgusting picture of God! And I freely admit that if the Bible taught this about God, I would be an atheist, too.

Fortunately, God has raised up a people in these last days who understand the character of God and know that this is not what the Bible teaches. The Lord does not delight in the death of the wicked. He does not want to pay them back for 70+ years of sinning with an eternity of frying. **“I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked,”** God declares.

I can't help but think of an awful tradition that is performed every year during Easter in a community in the Phillipines. Maybe you've heard about it. I found this article, datelined **March 21, 2008**, that briefly describes the ritual:

Thousands of tourists braved the tropical heat Friday to flock to this poor farming community about an hour's drive north of Manila to witness the religious rites.

The re-enactment of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is part of a bloody annual spectacle that shocks outsiders in this devoutly Roman Catholic nation.

Neighbours costumed like Roman centurions dragged Enaje and the other penitents through the village streets and toward a barren hill where three wooden crosses and a large crowd of at least 2,000 tourists awaited.

He screamed in agony as seven-inch (18-centimetre) metal nails were driven into both palms and feet while lying spread-eagled over the cross.

The wooden contraption was stood for about five minutes before it was hauled down again and the nails pulled out. The process was repeated for the other volunteers.

Hours ahead of the ceremony, scores of other local men whipped themselves bloody with strips of bamboo attached to strings to atone for their sins.¹

They've missed something, haven't they? **“I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked,”**

God declared. I am not even sure He has pleasure in the pain of anybody—wicked or righteous.

¹ <http://www.france24.com/en/20080321-holy-week-gets-holier-easter-philippines-crucifixion-whipping-filipinos>

And what's where some of us can be subtly be deceived also. When we think that certain things have befallen us because God is trying to make us stronger, we subtly believe that God takes pleasure in taking us through the fire. But God doesn't take pleasure in any of our pain. Like a Father that desperately wants to protect us from pain, He allows things to happen to us—not because He takes pleasure in these things—but because He knows it is sometimes a necessary thing.

So what about you? Do you have a picture of a God who takes pleasure in our suffering?

The verse doesn't end there, of course. Going back to our opening story, God's ultimate desire is that we would all turn from our destructive ways. Too many times we are on a one-way street that is headed for disaster.

I came across a tragic story that happened just about a week ago in New Jersey. A young boy, just 24 years old, got onto the **Garden State Parkway** in New Jersey, heading the wrong direction. It is not clear why or how he got onto the Southbound lane, driving north. Alcohol may have been involved, but it was also late in the evening, after midnight. The young man drove for **nearly two miles** in the wrong direction, before he collided head-on with a 67-year old man heading in the right direction. The collision instantly killed the 67-year old man, and it sent the young man flying out of his car, where he was run over and killed by another car.²

To say that such an event is a tragedy would be a gross understatement. Here was a young man that was headed in the wrong direction, heading for sure destruction. I'm sure there were road

² <http://www.app.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080404/NEWS/80404026>

signs on the off-ramp that he had to have seen—and ultimately ignore—telling him that he was headed in the wrong direction. And that’s why God, in His mercy, puts up roadblock in our way as we head down the one-way street to destruction. He jumps in front of us, over and over again, trying to get us to turn around.

“Turn, turn from you evil ways!” He cries out.

About a hundred years ago, one inspired author wrote these very poignant words:

Toil, patience, self-sacrifice, reproach, poverty, the contradiction of sinners against Himself, was the portion of Christ, and it must be our portion, if we ever enter the Paradise of God.

Yet do not therefore conclude that the upward path is the hard and the downward road the easy way. All along the road that leads to death there are pains and penalties, there are sorrows and disappointments, there are warnings not to go on. God’s love has made it hard for the heedless and headstrong to destroy themselves. It is true that Satan’s path is made to appear attractive, but it is all a deception; in the way of evil there are bitter remorse and cankering care. We may think it pleasant to follow pride and worldly ambition, but the end is pain and sorrow. Selfish plans may present flattering promises and hold out the hope of enjoyment, but we shall find that our happiness is poisoned and our life embittered by hopes that center in self. In the downward road the gateway may be bright with flowers, but thorns are in the path. The light of hope which shines from its entrance fades into the darkness of despair, and the soul who follows that path descends into the shadows of unending night.³

Did you catch that? We are not to **“conclude that the upward path”** to heaven is the hard, and the downward path to heaven is the easy. We have had it backwards all along if we have this impression. God has placed roadblocks along the pathway to destruction. There is a reason that Proverbs declares that the **“way of the unfaithful is hard.”⁴** A life that is divorced from Christ is unfulfilling, unpleasant, and leaves us wanting more. All the while, God is trying to get our attention, urging us to turn around. **“Turn, turn, turn!”** He says.

³ Ellen White, *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1896), 138, 139.

⁴ Proverbs 13:15.

He is trying to make it difficult to lose us. Never will we encounter more heartache and strife than when our lives are without Christ. True peace and rest comes only when we align ourselves to our Savior.

I love these words that I stumbled across this past week, written by a well-known Christian author written over a century ago within our own faith community. With clarity he wrote:

“There are two yokes—the yoke of sin (Satan’s yoke), and the yoke of Christ. The yoke of sin is hard to bear—Satan is a hard master; but the yoke of Christ is easy, and His burden is light.”⁵

Isn’t that what Jesus declared so long ago anyway? We read it for our call to worship: **“Come unto Me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. . . For my yoke is easy and My burden is light.”**

Friend, is life hard for you? Perhaps you’ve wandered away from God and you have found that everything you do leaves you empty, hurting, and pained. That is because Satan’s yoke is hard to bear. He is not looking to give anyone a break. He doesn’t play favorites. He wants to make everyone’s life miserable.

At the same time, God loves you too much to simply stand by and watch you drive down that one-way street to destruction. He sees the danger that lies ahead; knows that you are heading in

⁵ Ellet J. Waggoner, *The Gospel in Galatians* (Oakland: Pacific Press, 1888), 10. Republished by the Judgment Hour Publishing Company, 1977.

the direction of a head-on collision. And because of His love, He cannot let you get away without a fight. He went to Calvary for you so that He could make it hard for you to be lost. And from that cross 2000 years ago, He yells out to each and everyone of us, **“Turn, turn, turn!”**

Of course, we need not be outside the church to be carrying a hard yoke and a heavy burden. Many of us **“inside the fold”** have the impression that the Christian life should be one of pain and discomfort. We think it should be hard to be Christian. We think it should be hard to be saved. But we have received a bad picture of God. The narrow path is the easy one. It’s the path that we enjoy company with God, and take His easy yoke upon us. **“My yoke is easy and My burden is light,”** Christ says.

This is not to say that there won’t be challenges. This is not to say that we won’t lose loved ones, or that everything will go a-okay. It is to say, however, that as Satan constantly bombards us with challenges, we will be able to have peace throughout the storm because Christ has experienced the cross for us. The same Jesus who declared that His yoke was easy and His burden was light, is the same Jesus who assured us that He would give us His peace.

Do you want that peace? Do you want to experience the easy path that Christ leads us on?

Through His mercy and love, He invites us to **“Turn”** from our destructive ways. That’s all there is to it. His goodness takes us by the hand and turns us around, only to see that God’s way is the easy way.

I want to end somewhat close to where I began—talking about a man who knows a thing or two about the music industry. I saw this article this past week in *Christianity Today* about one of rock n’ roll’s most successful guitarists. Before I read a few things about his experience, I want to make it clear that I am not condoning rock music in this sermon! There just happens to be a few stories illustrating the message of this passage this morning.

The article was about **British musician, Eric Clapton**. I trust that no one here has heard of him! Growing up in Surrey, England, his life turned crazy when, at age 9, he found out that he was born out of wed-lock to his “auntie” and an unknown Canadian soldier. He felt alone in life and found solace in the music world. His music career soon met with success, but with that success came also the lure of fame and fortune does to a person. As the article noted:

As Clapton’s legend grew, so too did his destructive behaviors. [He soon] became addicted to heroin, kicked it, but moved on to alcohol, sexual promiscuity, and a string of failed relationships. “Bad choices were my specialty,” he said. In 1987 he hit the bottom. Failing through a month of rehab, he fell to his knees and finally “surrendered” to God, dedicating his sobriety to his newborn son, Conor. Four years later, when Conor died in a fall from the window of a 53rd floor of a Park Avenue apartment, Clapton admitted, “There was a moment when I did lose faith.” Still, he found the strength to present a session to his Alcoholics Anonymous meeting on “handing your will over to the care of God.” Afterward, a woman confessed that he had taken away her “last excuse” for drinking, a confirmation to Clapton that “staying sober and helping others to achieve sobriety” is “the single most important proposition” in his life.

Here was a man who struggled through life. He tried everything that he thought would alleviate his pains and hurt, yet all the while God was pleading with him to **“Turn, Turn, Turn!”**

In his autobiography, Clapton elaborates on the beginnings of his prayer life — that 1987 rock-bottom moment at the rehab treatment center.

“I was in complete despair,” Clapton wrote. “In the privacy of my room, I begged for help. I had no notion who I thought I was talking to, I just knew that I had come to the end of my tether ... and, getting down on my knees, I surrendered. Within a

few days I realized that ... I had found a place to turn to, a place I'd always known was there but never really wanted, or needed, to believe in. From that day until this, I have never failed to pray in the morning, on my knees, asking for help, and at night, to express gratitude for my life and, most of all, for my sobriety. I choose to kneel because I feel I need to humble myself when I pray, and with my ego, this is the most I can do. If you are asking why I do all this, I will tell you ... because it works, as simple as that."⁶

To you feel God talking to you this morning, friend? He desperately wants you to turn. He's pleading with you to do it. Will you respond?

⁶ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/aprilweb-only/115-32.0.html?start=2>. Accessed on 11 April 2008.