

Ezekiel's Responsibility

Devotional Reading: Jeremiah 17:5–10

Background Scripture: Ezekiel 18:1–32; 33:1–20

Today's Scripture: Ezekiel 33:7–16a

I. Watchman to the Exiles

Ezekiel 33:7

⁷ “Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the people of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me.”

7a. This half-verse offers three phrases that are familiar by this point in the book of Ezekiel.

7b. The second half of the verse leaves no doubt regarding Ezekiel's role as watchman: he is to warn the people of approaching consequences for sinful behavior. Again, this is nothing new to Ezekiel; the command seen here reinforces the one already given in Ezekiel 3:17.

II. Warning the Unrighteous

Ezekiel 33:8–9

⁸ “When I say to the wicked, ‘You wicked person, you will surely die,’ and you do not speak out to dissuade them from their ways, that wicked person will die for their sin, and I will hold you accountable for their blood. ⁹ But if you do warn the wicked person to turn from their ways and they do not do so, they will die for their sin, though you yourself will be saved.”

8. A repeated theme in this book is that of personal responsibility for sin. And for the prophet Ezekiel to turn a blind eye

toward such sin will result in his bearing some level of responsibility for the resulting deaths (*I will hold you accountable for their blood*). In a spiritual sense, we would place such intentional blindness in the category of a “sin of omission”—failing to do something required by God. In an earthly sense, this might be similar to “negligent homicide,” where a person's conduct disregards the life and safety of others.

9. This verse repeats Ezekiel 3:19. The prophet will not bear any responsibility for the death of the unrepentant if Ezekiel has done his job of communicating the divine will. We may wonder why such a prophetic warning is even necessary! Have the covenant people not had the Ten Commandments and the Law of Moses for centuries at this point? Indeed, they have. But things can get “lost in the shuffle” in various ways (2 Kings 22:8–13, etc.). And we humans seem to have a desire to interpret actions and attitudes in sinful ways (Isaiah 5:20, etc.).

III. Warning the Israelites

Ezekiel 33:10–16a

¹⁰ “Son of man, say to the Israelites, ‘This is what you are saying: “Our offenses and sins weigh us down, and we are wasting away because of them. How then can we live?” ’ ¹¹ Say to them, ‘As surely as I live, declares the

Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, people of Israel?

¹² “Therefore, son of man, say to your people, ‘If someone who is righteous disobeys, that person’s former righteousness will count for nothing. And if someone who is wicked repents, that person’s former wickedness will not bring condemnation. The righteous person who sins will not be allowed to live even though they were formerly righteous.’ ¹³ If I tell a righteous person that they will surely live, but then they trust in their righteousness and do evil, none of the righteous things that person has done will be remembered; they will die for the evil they have done. ¹⁴ And if I say to a wicked person, ‘You will surely die,’ but they then turn away from their sin and do what is just and right—¹⁵ if they give back what they took in pledge for a loan, return what they have stolen, follow the decrees that give life, and do no evil—that person will surely live; they will not die. ¹⁶ None of the sins that person has committed will be remembered against them.”

10a. See commentary on Ezekiel 33:7a, above, regarding these two phrases.

10b. God anticipates an if-then response from the people, and he begins to prepare his prophet to answer it. The *if* part indicates that the truth of the people’s personal responsibility for their *transgressions* and *sins* is beginning to sink in.

When a person is in a very negative situation, there’s typically an attempt to discover why. Often this involves “playing the blame game,” as others are seen to be responsible. But, as Ezekiel 18 also tells us, God will have none of this! As the people begin to “get it” in this regard, they

will wonder what they can do to reverse the situation. Change will seem hopeless given the fact that they now are low on strength (*wasting away*) to change things as they languish in exile. Their experience of wasting away was itself part of the covenantal curses (Leviticus 26:39).

How Ezekiel is to respond to the if-then question is established in the next verse.

11. The oath-phrase *as surely as I live* occurs 16 times in Ezekiel—far more than in any other book of the Bible. With its use, God takes an oath in the only worthy name: his own. Since people swear oaths by something higher than themselves and nothing is higher than God, God swears an oath in his own name. This solemn oath is God’s assurance that he is willing and able to reclaim the repentant person’s life. But there must be a permanent turning from sin.

The one who created us takes no delight in our suffering, even when it is deserved. As 2 Peter 3:9 puts it, God is “patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” Unlike Jonah, who wanted sinners destroyed, Ezekiel agrees with God. The prophet’s words aim to help the people change, not merely to condemn. He holds out hope that God’s words can again be honored.

This hope extends not just to individuals, but to the people as a whole. The rhetorical question *why will you die* becomes both an invitation to live and a recognition that change is possible.

12a. The phrase *your people* would more literally be translated “sons of your people.” The phrase is interesting because of its rarity.

12b. This verse can be summed up this way: whichever way you turn, the past doesn’t count. If a *righteous* person rebels, his past life of *righteousness* won’t count. If a *wicked* person *repents*, her past life of wickedness won’t count. For its part,

the Hebrew word translated *righteous* is rendered differently in other passages, depending on context. In Ezekiel 45:10, it is translated three times as “accurate” (as in “fair”). In Proverbs 8:15, it is translated “just” as in “justly.” In all instances, the reference is to something positive.

12c. The prophet’s earlier use of this vocabulary in the lengthy chapter of Ezekiel 18 adds a nuanced, realistic view of human affairs. Proper treatment of others and devotion to God can break cycles of injustice and impiety. Those cycles do exist and have real power unless vigorously identified and resisted.

13. This verse stresses a contrast that has been previously sketched (Ezekiel 18:24; etc.). It will be stressed again centuries later in the era of the new covenant. As we see God promising life to the *righteous person*, we hasten to stress that the phrases *will surely live* and *will die for the evil they have done* refer primarily to eternal life and eternal condemnation, respectively. The pages of the Bible bear witness to many instances of godly, righteous people who were persecuted to the point of losing their earthly lives as they lived out Matthew 10:28.

Digging deeper into the intent of this verse, we may wonder what kind of sin the phrase *do evil* refers to, and it’s easy to draw the wrong conclusions. A righteous person will still sin, but less and less so as spiritual maturity progresses. But people don’t actually *become* righteous under either the old or new covenant; the reality of sin prevents that. Rather, God has a plan that allows us to be *counted as if* we were righteous. Romans 4, quoting Genesis 15:6 and Psalm 32:1–2, explains this. For those in Christ, the debt for all our sins—past, present, and future—has been paid by the blood of Christ. What God speaks through Ezekiel, rather, seems to deal with a decisive change in

allegiance by a person, the new allegiance being to wickedness and iniquity.

14. These two verses revisit a topic already discussed; in this case the reference is to Ezekiel 18:27; 33:8, above. A choice of taking the path of the *wicked person* is not an irreversible one. For the wicked to switch to the path of the righteous is possible, as it involves both attitude and action. The attitude is to *turn away from their sin* as the person renounces that path. The action embraces positive behaviors that are consistent with those of a righteous person according to God’s expectations.

15. We can’t miss the mirror image of Ezekiel 33:14–15 as these two verses reflect 33:13. This verse deals with some wrongs to be made right as the formerly wicked person walks the new path. *The pledge* refers to collateral or security taken for something that is on *loan* to someone else.

The observation “the borrower is slave to the lender” (Proverbs 22:7) reflects the fact that the lender has a lot of power over the borrower. This power is subject to abuse. In an era without banks or other lending institutions, loans were person to person for purposes of survival, not for raising capital to start businesses. This tempted lenders to use failure to repay as an excuse for oppression.

The wicked pay no attention to restrictions in the Law of Moses either as they relate to retaining a pledge or to requirements for restitution. The phrase *return what they have stolen* is another indicator of the right behavior of one who changes from the path of death to the path of life.

16a. God’s wrath awaits the unrepentant. But once repentance comes, God holds no grudges, unlike people. Divine forgiveness is not a “one and done” feature of God’s love. It is ongoing, and its “talk” must be accompanied by its “walk” for a God-honoring outcome.

Involvement Learning

Ezekiel's Responsibility

Into the Lesson

Look up images of various “warning signs.” For each image, answer the following questions:

Why is the sign needed?

What would happen if the sign wasn't there?

What would happen if a person ignored the sign?

We all know that warnings are valuable and maybe necessary. Today, we'll study one of God's spokesmen who God charged to warn his people. We'll see how the man's actions might be an example for us.

Into the Word

Read Ezekiel 33:7–16a. What are the if-then statements in Ezekiel 33:7–16a?

Which statement(s) describe(s) the consequences of righteous behavior?

Which statement(s) describe(s) the consequences of unrighteous behavior?

What is the role of the “watchman” in this text?

Key Verse

“Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the people of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me.”

—Ezekiel 33:7

Into Life

List modern-day situations that require a spiritual “watchman” or “lookout.”

Describe a situation requiring you to speak the truth in love and warn others of danger, even when the news is unwelcome.

Thought to Remember

Speak and act as a watchman