

Israel's Watchman, Ezekiel

Ezekiel 33

Ezekiel 33:21-22 – *“And it came to pass in the twelfth year of our captivity, in the tenth month, on the fifth day of the month, that one who had escaped from Jerusalem came to me and said, ‘The city has been captured!’”* ²² *Now the hand of the Lord had been upon me the evening before the man came who had escaped. And He had opened my mouth; so when he came to me in the morning, my mouth was opened, and I was no longer mute.”*

Background Notes

Back in Ezekiel 24, the Lord told Ezekiel that when the news of the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple reached the captives in Babylon, his “mouth would be opened.” He would no longer be mute, but would be able to speak freely. In chapter 3, Ezekiel was told that as a sign to the people, he would only be able to speak when he had a message for them from God.

In chapter 33:21-22 the news of Jerusalem's fall arrived in Babylon, after a number of months. (Remember, they didn't have cell phones or cable news in those days!) The news came through a refugee who escaped the Babylonian slaughter. Finally Ezekiel was free to speak. His silence was no longer needed as a sign, because all that he had warned and prophesied about the fall of Jerusalem had come true.

Beginning in chapter 33 and throughout the rest of the book, Ezekiel's message became more comforting and encouraging. It was now about Israel's future restoration.

Doctrinal Points

1. God deals with individuals as well as with nations.

Ezekiel 33:1-20 - *“Again the word of the Lord came to me, saying, ² ‘Son of man, speak to the children of your people, and say to them: ‘When I bring the sword upon a land, and the people of the land take a man from their territory and make him their watchman, ³ when he sees the sword coming upon the land, if he blows the trumpet and warns the people, ⁴ then whoever hears the sound of the trumpet and does not take warning, if the sword comes and takes him away, his blood shall be on his own head. ⁵ He heard the sound of the trumpet, but did not take warning; his blood shall be upon himself. But he who takes warning will save his life. ⁶ But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, and the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes any person from among them, he is taken away in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at the watchman's hand.’”*

⁷“So you, son of man: I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; therefore you shall hear a word from My mouth and warn them for Me. ⁸When I say to the wicked, ‘O wicked man, you shall surely die!’ and you do not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at your hand. ⁹Nevertheless if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered your soul.

¹⁰“Therefore you, O son of man, say to the house of Israel: ‘Thus you say, “If our transgressions and our sins lie upon us, and we pine away in them, how can we then live?”’ ¹¹Say to them: ‘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. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?’

¹²“Therefore you, O son of man, say to the children of your people: ‘The righteousness of the righteous man shall not deliver him in the day of his transgression; as for the wickedness of the wicked, he shall not fall because of it in the day that he turns from his wickedness; nor shall the righteous be able to live because of his righteousness in the day that he sins.’ ¹³When I say to the righteous that he shall surely live, but he trusts in his own righteousness and commits iniquity, none of his righteous works shall be remembered; but because of the iniquity that he has committed, he shall die. ¹⁴Again, when I say to the wicked, ‘You shall surely die,’ if he turns from his sin and does what is lawful and right, ¹⁵if the wicked restores the pledge, gives back what he has stolen, and walks in the statutes of life without committing iniquity, he shall surely live; he shall not die. ¹⁶None of his sins which he has committed shall be remembered against him; he has done what is lawful and right; he shall surely live.

¹⁷“Yet the children of your people say, ‘The way of the Lord is not fair.’ But it is their way which is not fair! ¹⁸When the righteous turns from his righteousness and commits iniquity, he shall die because of it. ¹⁹But when the wicked turns from his wickedness and does what is lawful and right, he shall live because of it. ²⁰Yet you say, ‘The way of the Lord is not fair.’ O house of Israel, I will judge every one of you according to his own ways.”

In most of the book of Ezekiel, we see God’s moral dealings with nations - not only with Israel and Judah, but also in chapters 25-32 with the foreign nations as well. In Ezekiel 33, we see that God dealt with individuals as well as with nations.

In this chapter, Ezekiel was reminded of his call to be a watchman. Do you remember that Ezekiel was called to be a watchman for the house of Israel back in chapter 3? As a watchman in that day stood on a city wall or tower and had the responsibility to warn the people with the blast of a trumpet if he saw danger approaching, so Ezekiel was appointed by God to be a watchman for the people of Israel. If the people were involved in wickedness, He was responsible to warn them of the approaching judgment of God.

It’s important to notice that **God does not take pleasure in the death of the wicked** (v11). This truth is also taught in chapter 18. 2 Peter 3:9 says that “*God is longsuffering toward us not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.*” So God does not take vindictive pleasure when He must judge evil people. He is not willing that anyone should perish - but God must judge sin because He is a moral God.

The emphasis in this chapter is that God holds individuals accountable for their actions and behavior. The warning from the watchman goes out to all those who are involved in sin, but God holds individuals responsible to respond to the warning and to turn away from their wickedness. If they turn away and do what is right, God will withhold His judgment. But if they don't turn away, and they continue in unrighteous living, the judgment of God will lead to death.

This is also true of formerly righteous people who turn to wickedness and begin to practice iniquity. This will lead to their deaths. Remember the context here. This judgment of death does not have to do with *eternal* life and *eternal* damnation, but *physical* life and *physical* death - particularly in view of the Babylonian siege and fall of Jerusalem.

Furthermore, in the context here, this message is to God's people, not the pagans of the foreign nations. The same general truth is addressed to God's people in the New Testament. If an individual believer continues in sin, it may lead to physical death – it could be called “disciplinary death.” Addressing believers, 1 John 5:16 says, “*There is a sin leading to death.*” And remember Ananias and Sapphira in Act 5, who committed sin that led to their deaths. So did some Corinthian believers (1 Corinthians 11:30). James 5 indicates that disciplinary sickness leading to death can be removed through repentance, confession, and prayer.

The emphasis on individuals in Ezekiel 33 also extends to our individual responsibility as watchman to warn people of God's judgment to come. If we warn them, we are not held accountable, regardless of their response. If we do not warn them, we are accountable - not as to our salvation, but as to our service record at the judgment seat of Christ. In Acts 20:26, the apostle Paul was able to say that he was “innocent of the blood of all men.”

So the Bible teaches that God deals with individuals as well as with nations.

2. God determines what is right in every situation.

Ezekiel 33:23-29 - “*Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying: ²⁴“Son of man, they who inhabit those ruins in the land of Israel are saying, ‘Abraham was only one, and he inherited the land. But we are many; the land has been given to us as a possession.’*”

²⁵“*Therefore say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God: “You eat meat with blood, you lift up your eyes toward your idols, and shed blood. Should you then possess the land? ²⁶ You rely on your sword, you commit abominations, and you defile one another’s wives. Should you then possess the land?”*”

²⁷“*Say thus to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God: “As I live, surely those who are in the ruins shall fall by the sword, and the one who is in the open field I will give to the beasts to be devoured, and those who are in the strongholds and caves shall die of the pestilence. ²⁸ For I will make the land most desolate, her arrogant strength shall cease, and the mountains of Israel shall be so desolate that no one will pass through. ²⁹ Then they shall know that I am the Lord, when I have made the land most desolate because of all their abominations which they have committed.”*”

In the first half of this chapter, when God was explaining His moral ways of dealing with individuals, many of the people found fault with God as to His ways of justice. Look back at verse 17: *“Yet the children of your people say, ‘The way of the Lord is not fair.’ But it is their way which is not fair!”* And verse 20: *“Yet you say the way of the Lord is not right or fair.”* What the people meant by this statement was what many people think today, that God should judge on a “works” scale. Many people think God would be unjust to judge an unrepentant wicked person when most of his life has been filled with “good deeds.” They also think God would be wrong withhold judgment from a person who has been wicked all his life, but turns to the Lord at the end of his life! That’s not fair! **God’s answer is that He is the One who determines what is right and fair - not man.**

This same truth is brought out in the second half of the chapter. The escaped refugees from Judah’s fall to the Babylonians were saying that if God gave Abraham, as a single individual, the right to live in the land, how much more did they as a group have a right to live in the land (v24)? God’s answer was that Abraham was righteous, and they were unrighteous. The Lord then proceeded to list the sinful practices in which these escaped refugees were still involved (v25-26). For this continuing wickedness, they would die - even though they thought they had escaped death when Jerusalem fell (v27). The land would become desolate because of their abominations (v28-29).

God had declared it, and **God** determines what is right in every situation.

Practical Application

Why do you go to church?

Ezekiel 33:30-33, *“As for you, son of man, the children of your people are talking about you beside the walls and in the doors of the houses; and they speak to one another, everyone saying to his brother, ‘Please come and hear what the word is that comes from the Lord.’”* ³¹ *So they come to you as people do, they sit before you as My people, and they hear your words, but they do not do them; for with their mouth they show much love, but their hearts pursue their own gain.* ³² *Indeed you are to them as a very lovely song of one who has a pleasant voice and can play well on an instrument; for they hear your words, but they do not do them.* ³³ *And when this comes to pass—surely it will come—then they will know that a prophet has been among them.”*

In these verses the Lord was speaking about Ezekiel's fellow captives in Babylon. They would come and listen to Ezekiel preach, but they would not practice what he preached. Apparently Ezekiel had a nice voice and was a good speaker. The people enjoyed listening to him as entertainment - but they didn't give him or his message proper respect. Ezekiel was a prophet who was speaking the message of God (v32-33).

Do you see the application here for us? Why do we go to church? For entertainment? For the music program? Because the speaker is amusing or entertaining or interesting? Do we go, even though we have no intention of changing our lifestyle?

Why do **you** go to church?