

EZEKIEL

Hard to Heart

“Someone to Watch Over Me”

33:1-20

Living in or near the foothills of Southern California, I can recall several fires during which we were warned to evacuate. On more than one occasion members of my family heard the warning but refused to heed it. During the Panorama Fire, for example, my brother hid when the knock came, acting like he'd already left. He stayed to fight the flames. Miraculously, his house was spared while those on either side of him were devoured by flames and heat.

The emergency services personnel - both fire and police - had done their duties. It was up to the residents to act accordingly. If they died, it was on them; it was their decision.

In chapter thirty-three we have a review of Ezekiel's call as a watchman to Israel. He has been warning the people for some seven years. In verses twenty-one and twenty-two word will reach the exiles in Babylon that Jerusalem has fallen to the invading Babylonian army. Thus everything Ezekiel had been prophesying had come to pass just as he'd said. He had been faithful as the watchman of Israel.

We heard this, almost verbatim, in chapters three and eighteen. Why the repetition?

- For one thing, repetition is good - especially when it comes to spiritual things, to spiritual truths.

- For another thing, even though Jerusalem falls just as prophesied, God was still reaching-out to the exiles, seeking their repentance.

Ezekiel 33:1 Again the word of the Lord came to me, saying,

Ezekiel 33:2 "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,

Ezekiel 33:3 when he sees the sword coming upon the land, if he blows the trumpet and warns the people,

Ezekiel 33:4 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.

Ezekiel 33:5 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.

This is Watchman 101. In those days the cities erected towers either free standing or on the walls and set watchmen to watch for the approach of enemies. It wasn't much of a warning, but it could mean the difference between life and death.

You'd be going about your business when all of a sudden you'd hear the unique trumpet blast that warned of an impending enemy.

We still have this kind of warning system today. Civil defense sirens, or air raid sirens, are still around. So is the emergency broadcast system. Then there are more hi-tech warning systems - like the automatic phone-dialing systems that call everyone to urge them to evacuate.

The simple point Ezekiel was making is that it was up to you whether or not you heeded what you heard. It was your personal responsibility.

Ezekiel 33:6 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.'

The watchman had his responsibility, and it was a very serious one. Should he be absent from his watch, or fall asleep, or simply ignore what was occurring, his life was required.

Ezekiel wasn't a military watchman. He wasn't up in a tower of brick and mortar. He was a spiritual watchman to God's people.

In verses seven, eight, and nine God explains the responsibility of the spiritual watchman.

Ezekiel 33:7 "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.

Ezekiel 33:8 When 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.

Ezekiel 33:9 Nevertheless 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.

It's important that we bear in mind that none of this has anything to do with eternal salvation. God was warning His people about temporal, earthly punishment that was the result of disobeying His Law. But no one was saved by obeying the Law, and no one was lost by disobeying it.

People are always, throughout history, saved the same way. They are saved by grace through faith. They believe God and He accounts it to them as righteousness. He declares a sinner righteous, He justifies a believing sinner, based on what Jesus Christ has done.

During the time of Ezekiel the rule of life for God's people was the Law. Some of them were saved; some of them were not saved. But all of them were required to obey the Law of Moses or suffer the consequences laid out in the Law for disobedience.

For example: The Babylonian captivity that was occurring in Ezekiel's time lasted seventy years. Why seventy years? Well, it was because the Law commanded the Israelites to leave the land lie fallow every seventh year as a Sabbath year to the Lord. The Jews had ignored the Sabbath year for a period of years. Thus, under the Law, they 'owed' God those Sabbath years!

Ezekiel lay on his right side for 390 days for the 390 years of iniquity of the children of Israel. Then he lay on his left side for 40 days for the 40 years of the iniquity of the people of Judah. The total years of iniquity were 430 years.

For 430 years the Jews ignored the Sabbath years and the years of Jubilee. Each 49-year Jubilee cycle contains eight sabbath years. So, if my math is correct, there were a total of seventy Sabbath years during those 430 years.

Thus you read in Second Chronicles 36:21,

2 Chronicles 36:21 to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed her Sabbaths. As long as she lay desolate she kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years.

It was life-under-the-Law. We're not under the Law but we can still make application.

I think the best way to approach this is to listen to something the apostle Paul said. Addressing the elders of the church in Ephesus, he told them in Acts 20:26-27,

Acts 20:26 Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men.
Acts 20:27 For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God.

It's a very Ezekiel-like statement. Paul was referring to this idea of being a spiritual watchman. We should think of ourselves as those called to sound the warning. Our warning is to declare what God has said about life, death, and eternal life because men are not just in danger of dying, as bad as that might be. They are in danger of dying eternally for want of the knowledge of the Gospel. We are to think of our sharing the Word as a matter of life-and-death.

Beginning with verse ten God turned His attention back on the hearers.

Ezekiel 33:10 "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?'" '

In an earlier passage the exiles had complained that the sins they were being held accountable for were not theirs but were their father's. Now they acknowledge the sins are theirs, but the new complaint is that it is too late to do anything about them.

One thing you see over and over in the Bible is that it is hard for people to take personal responsibility for their sin. It started in the Garden of Eden with Adam blaming Eve and Eve blaming Satan. You see it with Moses' brother, Aaron, who explained his sin of making the Golden Calf the Israelites were worshipping by making the astounding statement, "I threw the gold in the fire and this is what came out!"

One thing to admire about David is that he stepped-up and acknowledged his sins.

One reason I think Christianity might be a little anemic today is that we live at a time when people are finding all kinds of new ways to blame other people or other conditions for their sins. Everyday it seems a new syndrome is 'discovered' that explains why I sin, why it is not my responsibility. Instead we ought to confess, which means to agree with God, so that His forgiveness can cleanse us and put us back in the game.

Ezekiel 33:11 Say 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?'

The Babylonian captivity was a discipline for their disobedience. But individual Jews need not die on account of the discipline. The events leading up to the captivity, and the years it lasted, could be times of obedience and relative success for individual Jews. Indeed, when the captivity finally ended and Jews could return to Jerusalem, many chose instead to remain outside of the Promised Land.

We are talking in these verses, then, about the quality of their lives under the Law on the earth. No one should expect either *preferential* or *deferential* treatment.

Ezekiel 33:12 "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.'

By the "righteous man" it's clear God meant someone who was counting on being more good than they were evil to cancel out any current or on-going transgression. It sounds weird, but this is essentially the thinking of most people. They might admit they are not perfect, but they think they are better than most and thus resist the idea they are sinners.

The "wicked" man could count on God's mercies if he were to repent.

Jerusalem would fall. It was time for a fresh start. Your previous righteousness was not enough to 'cover' your sins. Your previous sins could be confessed and repented of.

There's no direct application of this to us, except to note that Christians can get to the point where we rest on our past achievements. We can relax, retire even, from serving the Lord. God forbid!

Ezekiel 33:13 When 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.

Ezekiel 33:14 Again, when I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' if he turns from his sin and does what is lawful and right,

Ezekiel 33:15 if 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.

Ezekiel 33:16 None of his sins which he has committed shall be remembered against him; he has done what is lawful and right; he shall surely live.

It may seem to favor the wicked but not really. It gives everyone a level playing field, a fresh start.

The fall of Jerusalem, announced a few verses hence, was a game-changer. Any hope the exiles had of God changing His mind about the Babylonian captivity would be dashed. A fresh start, a new perspective, would be needed.

Over the years I've talked to a lot of believers who needed a fresh start. God was good to give it to them.

I've also known some who thought they needed a fresh start but really just wanted a change of scenery for some reason. A change of scenery won't change what's going on between you and the Lord.

Ezekiel 33:17 "Yet the children of your people say, 'The way of the Lord is not fair.' But it is their way which is not fair!

Ezekiel 33:18 When the righteous turns from his righteousness and commits iniquity, he shall die because of it.

Ezekiel 33:19 But when the wicked turns from his wickedness and does what is lawful and right, he shall live because of it.

Ezekiel 33:20 Yet 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."

God was clear in His Law. You sin, you die. You turn, He lets you live.

It seems fair, but fair or not, it's the way things were in the sixth century. .

If you ask me, **life seems more unfair under grace!** The wicked prosper, the righteous suffer. Among believers we see good guys and gals struggling while others who should be disqualified are prospering.

When things seem unfair, I have forgotten that my life is hid with Christ's. I have forgotten that I can have fullness of joy because I am walking with Him. I have forgotten that He has designed my circumstances perfectly, to continue my being transformed from glory-to-glory into the image of Jesus.



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