

Ezk 33 – The Watchman

Ezekiel had been called by God to deliver a message of judgment to his people. We saw in the opening chapters that some of the ways God told him to deliver that message were rather strange. Throughout the book, Ezekiel carried out his task faithfully, and now God spoke about the importance of the work Ezekiel had been doing.

He used the example of a watchman, whose job was to warn the people of coming danger. If he did his job well, sounding the alarm when he saw the danger, then the people were responsible for their own lives if they ignored the warning. However, if the watchman saw the danger, but didn't sound the alarm, then he was responsible for the blood of all the people who perished. Ezekiel was set as a watchman for the house of Israel, warning them of God's judgment. God would hold him accountable for his action or inaction.

What was his message? We find it in v. 10-11. The sins of the people were rotting them away. God gave a glimmer of hope, however, pointing out that He took no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but would rather see the wicked turn away from sin and live. Part two of his message was "turn back from your evil ways". We saw this same message in chapter 18, "repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord God; so turn, and live." This has been God's appeal to people all through history – turn away from wickedness, so I can turn away my wrath and give you blessing.

The next portion emphasizes personal responsibility for repentance. Now, before I dig into this, I want to explain an important principle regarding salvation. Rom 8:29-35 says that those who are called are justified and glorified. Once we are in Christ, nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus. Or, as Php 1:6 says, "He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion." The work of salvation is a work of God that is sure and eternal. We need not fear losing it. Now, with that foundation, what does Ezekiel say? "The righteousness of the righteous shall not deliver him when he transgresses...and the righteous shall not be able to live by his righteousness when he sins...if he trusts in his righteousness and does injustice, none of his righteous deeds shall be remembered, but in his injustice that he has done he shall die." In the OT there wasn't the same assurance of salvation we have in Christ, because the one sacrifice for all sins forever had not yet been made. There was a need for continual sacrifice, ongoing works of righteousness. Sin wiped away the former things, and a new sacrifice was needed.

So how does this apply to us, if our salvation is secure? Back in Rom 8, Paul said "So then brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live." We don't lose salvation by our sin, but we may pay serious consequences for it. God expects us to live righteous lives. John addresses the same in his first epistle (1:6), "If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth." What do we need to do when we sin? V. 9 "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Back in Ezekiel, we find the prophet also addressing the wicked: "as for the wickedness of the wicked, he shall not fall by it when he turns from his wickedness...again, though I say to the wicked, 'you shall

surely die,' yet if he turns from his sin and does what is just and right... he shall surely live; he shall not die." Confession and repentance is the common denominator, whether your life is characterized by righteousness or wickedness. Both receive the same reward from God – forgiveness of sins.

Some people struggle with that, saying, as in v. 17 – "the way of the Lord is not just." They'll say things like, "that person doesn't deserve forgiveness" – but that's the whole point: none of us does. We are all sinners. It's like the parable of the laborers in the vineyard in Matt 20. Some laborers were hired early in the morning to harvest grapes. Mid-morning, the master hired others, and they went. Again at noon and 3pm other laborers were hired. At the end of the day, the owner said to his foreman, "Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first." Those who were hired near the end of the day received a denarius, and when those hired early came, they expected to be paid more, so they grumbled, saying "you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day..." The master replied that he was just, giving each exactly what he had promised. In salvation, we all receive the same reward, forgiveness of sins, when we confess and repent of them.

I close with a return to the watchman motif from Ezk 33. As believers in Christ, you and I have all been made watchmen, with a responsibility to warn others of the judgment to come. I'm not talking about national judgment, though our nation is surely facing that. I'm talking about the individual judgment on sin. If we don't warn our friends, our neighbors, our family, etc., and they die in their sins, who is to blame? God says He will require us to answer for it.