

Directed

Ezekiel in Ezekiel chapters 33 and 34 speaks of the prophet of God as a watchman.

Son of man, speak to your countrymen and say to them: 'When I bring the sword against a land, and the people of the land choose one of their men and make him their watchman, and he sees the sword coming against the land and blows the trumpet to warn the people, then if anyone hears the trumpet but does not take warning and the sword comes and takes his life, his blood will be on his own head. Since he heard the sound of the trumpet but did not take warning, his blood will be on his own head. If he had taken warning, he would have saved himself. But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet to warn the people and the sword comes and takes the life of one of them, that man will be taken away because of his sin, but I will hold the watchman accountable for his blood.'

Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. When I say to the wicked, 'O wicked man, you will surely die,' and you do not speak out to dissuade him from his ways, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the wicked man to turn from his ways and he does not do so, he will die for his sin, but you will have saved yourself.

Ezekiel 33:1-9

The Lord announced that he was to bring a sword against the people of Israel.

The word of the LORD came to me: "Son of man, prophesy and say, 'This is what the Lord says: "A sword, a sword, sharpened and polished -- sharpened for the slaughter, polished to flash like lightning! Shall we rejoice in the scepter of my son Judah? The sword despises every such stick. The sword is appointed to be polished, to be grasped with the hand; it is sharpened and polished, made ready for the hand of the slayer. Cry out and wail, son of man, for it is against my people; it is against all the princes of Israel. They are thrown to the sword along with my people."

Ezekiel 21:8-12

What an illustration! What fear it was designed to put into the hearts of the people who had turned from God! And to whom was God going to give the sword that had been prepared? The whole of Ezekiel 21 speaks of this sword of judgment which God was to bring upon several peoples he deemed worthy of punishment. This is such a powerful illustration which shows how furious God is to those who live in sin against him.

The prophet of God is to be a watchman for the people. The watchman was sort of a standard in times of war or peace. He was there to warn of anyone riding near. He was the sentinel of news, whether good or bad. He could not be one who kept a poor watch or slept on the job. The safety of the people depended upon him. The picture, then, is of a watchman over the physical things of the kingdom. God is saying that the watchman has a tremendous responsibility to warn the people of coming danger. Since the salvation of the people is in his hands, his own blood will be required if he does not give the warning. But if no one pays any attention to him, then he will not be held accountable. It is obvious to me that God is not just

talking about physical danger, but that this is a picture, using something that the Jews were extremely familiar with, particularly at this time. What God really is concerned with is turning the people away from spiritual danger, convincing them to repent and live the way of the Lord. Ezekiel tried and tried to get the people to turn back to God, but they would not listen.

There is a message for us today, too. We are also watchmen, in a sense, for it is just as much our duty to warn those around us of possible dangers, and to spread the good news that might be. The Bible gives us the vantage point that we need to see the danger of living in sin and the path that must be taken for safety. We also can see that the news is predominantly good! But we must have the attitude as if we were dealing with physical dangers and good, and show our feelings and act accordingly. We must not forget that we have a great commission, and a great mission to prove in our lives the excellency of the Christian life.

Complaining

Ezekiel, as the watchman, had a particular message:

Son of man, say to the house of Israel, '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?"' 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, O house of Israel?' "Therefore, son of man, say to your countrymen, 'The righteousness of the righteous man will not save him when he disobeys, and the wickedness of the wicked man will not cause him to fall when he turns from it. The righteous man, if he sins, will not be allowed to live because of his former righteousness.' If I tell the righteous man that he will surely live, but then he trusts in his righteousness and does evil, none of the righteous things he has done will be remembered; he will die for the evil he has done. And if I say to the wicked man, 'You will surely die,' but he then turns away from his sin and does what is just and right-- if he gives back what he took in pledge for a loan, returns what he has stolen, follows the decrees that give life, and does no evil, he will surely live; he will not die. None of the sins he has committed will be remembered against him. He has done what is just and right; he will surely live.

Ezekiel 33:10-16

The message is simply, turn to God and he will forget your sins; turn not and he will utterly destroy you, though he gains no pleasure in this. A very profound and important message indeed. But it was one that the people in Ezekiel did not heed. The question is one of living and dying: We all have the choice. With the tremendous weight of sin on our backs, "how can we then live?" It is only through the lifting power of Christ that we can live what Christ calls in John 10:10, "the more abundant life." This then, is the message that we have from God.

There is a response to Ezekiel from the people that is very interesting, and it is found in verses 17-20, "Yet your countrymen say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' But it is their way that is not just. If a righteous man turns from his righteousness and does evil, he will die for it. And if a wicked man turns away from his wickedness and does what is just and right, he will live by doing so. Yet, O house of Israel, you say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' But I will judge each of you according to his own ways." Look how the people have twisted the straight ways of God by demanding things to go their own way. They want to be able to live any way that they choose and still reap the blessings and protection of the Lord. How many times do we consider this idea: "How could God have let this happen to me?" "Is there no just God in heaven?" And yet at the root of our inability to cope with our problems is a basic underlying selfishness. The world does not revolve around us personally, but around mankind as a whole. God will make things right totally in the last days, where as he says here, he will judge each of us according to the way we live. Justice and mercy will meet perfectly here, and we will finally understand what these words really mean. We will be able to see exactly how just God really is.

Listening

We have discussed the duty and responsibility of the watchman to give the message of the Lord. There is an equal responsibility given to those who hear the message. Let us see if the people of Judah listened to the prophet Ezekiel, Ez 33:30-32, "As for you, son of man, your countrymen are talking together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, saying to each other, 'Come and hear the message that has come from the LORD.' My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before you to listen to your words, but they do not put them into practice. With their mouths they express devotion, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain. Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice." What God is really saying here is that his people have always shown a certain hardness of hearing when they are told to do something that they do not want to do. This same kind of passage is repeated throughout the Bible. For instance, let us read Is 6:9-10 concerning the response of the people, "He said, 'Go and tell this people: "Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.' Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.'" This is echoed in Matt 13:14-15, where Christ makes it very evident that it is the people that have refused to hear. We read it again in Acts 28:26-27. In Is 29:13 we read, "The Lord says: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." In Jer 6:10, we read, "To whom can I speak and give warning? Who will listen to me? Their ears are closed so they cannot hear. The word of the LORD is offensive to them; they find no pleasure in it." Then finally, in Zech 7:11-12, we read, "'But they refused to pay attention; stubbornly they turned their backs and stopped up their ears. They made their hearts as hard as flint and would not listen to the law or to the words that the LORD Almighty had sent by his Spirit through the earlier prophets.'" So we see again and again God speaking to people who refused of their own will to hear.

God has always tried to get man to respond to his love. He even went so far as to send his son to die for us to prove that love; but man keeps refusing to respond in obedience to his will. It is true that God is a God of grace, but he wants us to obey, too. Ezekiel paints a very interesting picture in vss 31-32. It is almost as if he is saying that they really enjoy hearing a good sermon, but in reality it means nothing when it comes to making a change in their lives. It never becomes a part of them. It is like a piece of art that looks pretty to them, but they never can figure out quite what the artist is trying to say. They feel, however, that just by hanging a few 'classy' pictures in their den, they will be justified. But it is not and never will be so.

God demands that he be listened to, and he always has. One of the passages so revered by many of the Jews was called the 'Shema' because of the first word in it; 'Hear'. Reading from Deut 6:4, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." What we are talking about is a quality of mind: openness. We must be open to receive the word, but most have their minds already made up. They have decided what they want to believe instead of letting the evidence speak for itself. The ears that are dull of hearing have been hardened so that they can only accept what they want to hear. This closed mind makes it impossible for anyone like this to respond to the word, and this is what God wants so badly from us. As Ezekiel says, "They hear what you say, but they will not do it."

The relationship between hearing and doing is expressed in the New Testament in Luke 8:4ff, the parable of the sower and its explanation. In Luke 8:21 Jesus says, "My mother and

brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice." And in 1 John 3:18, "Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth." The principle is universal; the whole Bible is salted with the idea. Our hearing and understanding must lead to a proper response to God and his will. In Ezekiel 3:27 we read, "But when I speak to you, I will open your mouth and you shall say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says.' Whoever will listen let him listen, and whoever will refuse let him refuse." The idea is very plain here that the people have a choice; they are not forced one way or another.

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