



BETHEL
PRESBYTERIAN

MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Volume 16 Issue 37

October 1, 2017

Manifesto on Church Membership, Part 3

In Scripture we are aware of such passages like these where Paul taught,

Acts 14:22b, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."

John 16:33b, "...in the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world."

Philippians 1:29, "For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake."

There is no question that trial and difficulty will be part of the Christian's life. Furthermore, there is no question that these trials and difficulties are for the purpose of tempering our faith that we might be fit for heaven!

James 1:2-3a, "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance..."

Hebrews 12:11, "All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness."

Yet herein is the problem... we don't like discipline and, living in the moment, we don't derive much comfort in knowing that what we suffer here will pay dividends in another world. So what do we do? We suffer in the flesh and then false conclusion about God – that

- Somehow God takes pleasure in our suffering and pain!
- He is a mean and wrathful Being who will never be happy until we are sad.
- The aim of the Lord in His chastisements must be to humiliate us until we are groveling in the dust.

That is why the current series we are on is so difficult. We have learned that God has deigned to preserve His church through the disciplining activity of the body of Christ. Translated by our flesh: that means our job as Christians is to go around and judge everybody, pouring salt in their wound and making them feel really bad about themselves. When pastoral care or Biblical fellowship is seen in this light, it is no wonder very few of us endeavor to speak up when a brother or sister clearly is struggling in their walk. Who wants to be a judge? Who wants to be a messenger of doom and gloom?

That is why the passage at which we are looking today is so important. It gives us practical examples of what pastoral care looks like. And how we ought to go about investing in brothers and sisters if indeed we are watchmen. And what it means to fulfill our God-given calling to the body.

We have seen that Ezekiel 33-37 was written at the time of the fall of Jerusalem (~586 BC). Accordingly, what God says here about Ezekiel was intended to be a model/an example for the newly arriving exiles from Jerusalem. What was the first message God gave to Ezekiel?

Ezekiel 33:7a, "Now as for you, son of man, I have appointed you a watchman for the house of Israel..."

God's people in exile, by application, were to take this as their marching orders when it came to their responsibility to one another. We now turn our focus to a practicum on a watchman's care, specifically when it comes to the one in despair on account of their sin.

The Despair of Sin

Ezekiel 33:10, “Now as for you, son of man, say to the house of Israel, ‘Thus you have spoken, saying, “Surely our transgressions and our sins are upon us [literally, weighing us down such that we are unable to breathe; we are going to return to this], and we are rotting away in them; how then can we survive?””

Ezekiel began his ministry as a watchman by quoting a saying/song that was being passed around and so voiced by many of the newly arriving exiles:

Our transgressions and sins suffocate us.
On account of them we are rotting away.
How then shall we survive?”

This clearly is poetry. The cadence as well as its rhyme is that of a lamentation and thus an expression of despair! This is where the exile brought so many of the arriving exiles to Babylon; they were discouraged, disheartened, downcast, despairing!

By way of note, this is the first time in this book that we read of God’s people taking blame for the misery of their estate!¹ What a contrast to the first time Ezekiel referenced the overwhelming impact that sin had on God’s people (cf. Ezekiel 18)... there they blamed others for it (cf. vv. 1-3)! Yet here, God’s people confessed that they were the ones to blame!

There were other responses to the pain and tragedy of exile (as we’ll see these in vv. 12-20), but this response constituted the healthiest one we could ever give: God’s people saw that they were the cause of their misery! Notice the words used:

- Transgressions; פָּשָׁע (*pasha*): this word is a synonym for the word Ezekiel used in vv. 2-9, “wicked” (רָשָׁע [*rasha*]). פָּשָׁע (*pasha*) is a covenantal word which speaks of a breach in a relationship on account of the rebellion or sin of one of the parties.² In fact, it is used of a vassal people revolting against their overlord!
- Sin; חַטָּאת (*chattath*): this likewise is a synonym for “wicked” and refers literally to the missing of a mark or target (as in archery). It as well is a relational word referencing the willful violation of the stipulations of a covenant; in fact, it is the most common word for “sin” in the Old Testament.

Together they picture an individual who willfully and wantonly tramples underfoot a covenantal relationship.

The result was that God’s people were “rotting away” (מָקַח [*maqaq*]). This is a strong word in the Hebrew. It is used of putrefying gangrenous flesh- with its greenish puss and its offensive odor. In fact, its usage here clearly is from the warning God issued to His people at the time of Moses. In the case of Covenant rebellion and a consequent exile, God told His people, “So

those of you who may be left [alive] will rot away because of their iniquity in the lands of your enemies; and also because of the iniquities of their forefathers they will rot away with them” (Leviticus 26:39).

That is what God’s people at this time reaped in their person: rottenness, emptiness, the eating away of their heart! Family of God, don’t miss it: This is that which God’s grace daily protects us from when we sin. Yet we must see that this is the wages of all sin. This is what we are talking about when we use the language of “A Dark Night of the Soul.”

Now that God’s people were quoting this passage in their grief tells us that they finally got it! They had awakened from their moral stupor and were now seeing reality:

- Their religious acts of devotion truly were “filthy rags before God” (Isaiah 64:6). Religious activity cannot compensate for sinful rebellion before God.
- They were where they were NOT because God had forgotten them, forsaken them, or delighted in wounding them. They had forsaken God long before and now were reaping in actuality a small consequence (considering hell/the Lake of Fire reserved for those outside of Christ).
- As sinners, they had absolutely nothing to offer God. In fact, the language, “How then shall we survive?” speaks of being spiritually and morally bankrupt.

D. I. Block describes it this way:

The quotation reflects the demoralized state of the exiles. All hope is gone; their faith has been crushed; the darkness is overwhelming. For the first time they admit their own guilt as the cause of their suffering. (Block D. I., 1998, p. 254)

Verse 11 is God’s response when the Christian is brought to despair on account of his sin. Yet before we examine it, notice: Verse 10 is where all rebellion leads in the life of a child of God; its wage is always death/misery/despair (Romans 6:23a)!

Ezekiel 33:10b, “Surely our transgressions and our sins are [crushing us]...”

During The Inquisition, the Roman Catholic Church created a prison cell of such heinous design it was greatly feared when news was spread about it. *Give me the rack before you put me that cell.* The walls were made of iron and placed on oiled hinges and silent grooves such that they were retractable. Accordingly, the prisoner would die in the cell in time, but not before he suffered extreme and prolonged mental torment.

This is how it worked. When the prisoner first entered the cell, it seemed very bright, pleasant and rather spacious. It was even furnished and decorated to provide a cheerful appearance. But then at some point, a wheel would be turned and two of the outer walls would slightly move in. Typically, it took about four days for the prisoner to notice it. Then the thought would begin to torment him. The walls in his cell were collapsing in on him. Soon the window would be gone. Soon his bed would be crushed. Soon there would only be

room for him to stand. Soon he could not move. And so he could hardly breathe.

J. R. Miller referenced this cell in a sermon as he described the impact of sin in the life of the believer. At first sin looks fun and provides much pleasure. But before long, its wages begin to crush in upon the Christian. Soon he cannot breathe (which again is the language of Ezekiel 33:10). Eventually he cannot bear its weight upon his back. Is this not what David himself found?

Psalms 32:3-4, "When I kept silent *about my sin*, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me [same language]; my vitality was drained away *as* with the fever heat of summer."

Christian, learn from the text before us, sin never gives us what we want or what we might wish for. It only leaves the child of God miserable, hurting, depressed, and in pain. May we never forget this! William Secker wrote:

Our own destruction is but the fruit of our own transgression. There is more real evil in a particle of corruption than in an ocean of tribulation! The evil of suffering is transient, but the evil of sin is permanent. The consistent Christian will always choose the worst of sorrows before he will commit the least of sins! The wicked entirely reverse this for they prefer the greatest sin to the least sufferings!... By seeking to shun an external calamity they rush into eternal misery! (Secker, 2015)

When sin brings the child of God to despair, what is the divine response? In this regard, what is the message of the "watchman"? The answer is found in God's and the watchman's response to Sin, v. 11.

Ezekiel 33:11, "Say to them, 'As I live!' declares the Lord God [don't miss the irony of this oath. As God's people were dying under the weight of their sin, God here says that He is living which means that life only is found in Him!!! Furthermore, He said...], 'I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways! Why then will you die, O house of Israel?'"

Brothers and sisters, this is amazing! In our rebellion we blame God for the difficulty that comes upon us as if He has done us wrong. And in our darkened mind as Christians we wonder how God could ever forgive us on account of our sin (v. 10). Yet what is the divine response (v. 11)?

- It hurts God to hurt us. He "takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked." Completely opposite to what the sinful heart might think, God does NOT delight in our pain.
- Furthermore, the answer for any and all who are in this place of mourning or tightness on account of sin is the turning FROM any and all forms of self (and so excuses, bartering, religious lucky charms, and the like) and so turning TO God and God alone.

Recall...

- Way before it blossoms into activity, THE fundamental essence of sin is independence or separation from God. That is why the fall occurred... Adam believed the lie of Satan and so chose autonomy from God.

Accordingly, THE heart of Christianity/life is dependence upon the Lord; not just for forgiveness, but for understanding life and how it ought to be lived! And so the “turning” here is NOT simply a turning from a sinful act or attitude, BUT a turning *FROM* autonomy in any form *TO* dependence and so reliance upon God for all things! In fact, the New Testament word is *μετάνοια* (*metanoia*) which first speaks of a change in one’s mind, disposition, and so dependence when it comes to God, going from autonomy to submission/reliance upon the Lord! This is where God would have us live in Christ, living life in dependence upon God, His word, and so His interpretation when it comes to all things!!

Psalms 36:9b, “...In Thy light we see light.”

It is important that we begin here. There could be no error in our judgment, understanding, desiring, or doing where God’s word/truth governed our minds. Listen to Paul’s exhortation when it comes to that which ought to govern our thinking.

Romans 3:4a, “...let God be found true, though every man *be found* a liar...”

God is the creator of this world. Therefore, if you and I are going to behold reality aright, it will only be through the eyes of God! This is where repentance first brings us (it did the exiles in Ezekiel’s day)! Listen to how Christ lived. When He was tempted by Satan to test God, Jesus said this:

Matthew 4:4a, “Man shall not live on bread alone [Christ here is speaking of life in its fulness, as God intended it to be. This quality of living doesn’t come from eating well!], but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.”

If we are to be healthy, our living, thinking, desiring, understanding, relying... everything must be governed and so determined by God and His word.

In this regard, God’s word and will toward the rebellious Christian is NOT death, BUT “life.”

Ezekiel 33:11b, “...Why then will you die, O house of Israel?”

As long as the exiles looked within they would suffer death. In the words of Paul, “they would be dead even while they lived” (1 Timothy 5:6). God’s answer to all of His children living this way is for them to turn back to Him. It is for them to go on a spiritual death march to self and so return to the Lord. If they did this, they once again would know life indeed!

You say, “*How can a child of God who has sinned so egregiously against Christ find grace from the Lord? Why would God forgive when the Christian knowing the Lord sinned not just once,*

but thousands of times?!” Answer: That is why we call it Amazing Grace!

Speaking of God’s response to the sinning Christian, “The Lord your God is in your midst, a victorious warrior. He will exult over you with joy, He will be quiet in His love, He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy” (Zephaniah 3:17). The translation isn’t obvious, but the final expression, “...He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy” references singing! What is God’s disposition toward the Christian struggling with sin? He sings a song of joy! Commenting on this verse, Spurgeon wrote:

In what strong language He expresses His delight in His people! Who could have conceived of the Eternal One bursting into a song? Yet it is written, ‘He will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.’ As He looked upon the world He had made, He said, ‘It is very good’; but when He looked on those who are the purchase of Jesus’ blood, His own chosen ones, it seemed as if the great heart of the Infinite could restrain itself no longer but overflowed in divine exclamations of joy. (Spurgeon, 1990, p. September 21)

This is the message that we are charged to give to each other when we fall into despair on account of sin. It is NOT judgment, wrath, or threats, BUT the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ (cf. 2 Peter 3:9)!

Just prior to the comment he made above, Spurgeon wrote:

How heartwarming to the believer is the delight that God takes in His saints! We cannot see any reason in ourselves why the Lord should take pleasure in us; we do not even take delight in ourselves, for we often have to groan, being burdened, conscious of our sinfulness and deploring our unfaithfulness... But as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so the Lord rejoices over us. We do not read anywhere that God delights in the cloud-capped mountains or the sparkling stars, but we do read that He delights in the habitable parts of the earth, and that His delights are with the sons of men. We do not even find it written that angels give His soul delight; nor does He say, concerning cherubim and seraphim, ‘Thou shalt be called Hephzibah [Is. 62:4]... for the LORD delighted in thee.’ But He does say all that to poor fallen creatures like ourselves—debased and depraved by sin, but saved, exalted, and glorified by His grace. (Spurgeon, 1990, p. September 21)

To live here very long is to begin reaping life in your person! Listen to the oath God gave His people here: God’s plans for us are never for our calamity, but always our welfare, specifically walking with Him in the path of life!

Family of God, this is what pastoral care looks like from the perspective of a watchman! We cannot nor do we endeavor to humble a man or woman on account of their sin. That is the work of the Holy Spirit! And when that work is done and the Christian awakes from his moral stupor to discover with David, “That thou art the man!”, our job it is to bring the balm of Gilead

(which is the gospel) and rub it lavishly into the wounds of the struggling saint. That is the net effect of God's word to the exiles through Ezekiel, "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live."

You say, "What does ministry look like when the child of God is NOT broken on account of his sin, but is content to live in it?" We turn to that next time!

Works Cited

- Block, D. I. (1998). *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 25–48 (New International Commentary on the Old Testament)*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Secker, W. (2015). *The Consistent Christian: A Handbook for Christian Living*. create Space.
- Spurgeon, C. H. (1990). *The Devotional Classics of C. H. Spurgeon; Morning and Evening and Morning and Evening II (Volume 1 of 12)*. Lafayette: Sovereign Grace Publishers, Inc.

End Note(s)

- ¹ Earlier expressions of guilt laid the blame on other shoulders, cf. Ezekiel 18:2.
- ² cf. Is. 1:28; 48:8; Ezekiel 2:3; Hos. 8:1.