

Ezekiel 33
Psalm 90
Luke 3

“The Watchman Cries Out”

January 2, 2011

Sometimes when I'm preaching a long series on a book of the Bible,
I like to take some time to review where we've been –
to give something of an overview.
Ezekiel makes it easy!
Because Ezekiel 33 is an overview of the first 24 chapters.
Ezekiel 33 is something of a summary of Ezekiel's ministry to the exiles in Babylon.
So in one sense, this just looks like a summary of the whole message of judgment
that we have seen for the last six months!

But there is a new context.

Ezekiel 1-24 was a relentless message of coming doom, with very little hope.
Ezekiel 33 is positioned just before the oracles of hope and salvation (34-48).
In other words, Ezekiel 33 is designed to show Israel that there *is* hope in the message of doom.
The way of the cross *is* the only way to glory.

Jerusalem in Exile is told that if they will abandon their evil ways,
acknowledge the justice of the LORD in his judgment against them,
and commit themselves to him,
then there will be a glorious future before them!

But the only way to glory is the way of the cross.
And we are reminded of this in Psalm 90:

Sing Psalm 90
Read Luke 3

Jesus began his ministry when he was 30 –
just like Ezekiel.
Jesus taught that judgment was coming upon Jerusalem – upon the temple –
just like Ezekiel.

The reason why you need to understand Ezekiel's message
is because Israel's exile represents humanity's exile.

If you want to understand *our* condition – our estate of sin and misery –
then it's not enough to read Genesis 1-3,
you also have to read Ezekiel.
Jesus came to redeem his people from the exile.
Jesus came to restore the kingdom of God –
and because Jesus has received all that God promised Israel,
he also now brings the blessings of Abraham to the nations!

And therefore,
you need to repent and believe the gospel!

Ezekiel 33 shows us this by its alternating focus on the watchman and the people.

1. The Watchman: Sound the Warning! (1-9)

Ezekiel 3

Verses 1-9 are identical to Ezekiel 3 – bracketing the judgment oracles

¹The word of the LORD came to me: ²"Son of man, speak to your people and say to them, If I bring the sword upon a land, and the people of the land take a man from among them, and make him their watchman, ³and if he sees the sword coming upon the land and blows the trumpet and warns the people, ⁴then if anyone who hears the sound of the trumpet does not take warning, and the sword comes and takes him away, his blood shall be upon his own head. ⁵He heard the sound of the trumpet and did not take warning; his blood shall be upon himself. But if he had taken warning, he would have saved his life. ⁶But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, so that the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes any one of them, that person is taken away in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at the watchman's hand.

This is virtually identical language to Ezekiel 3.

The chief difference is that in Ezekiel 3 God said this for Ezekiel's benefit only.

In Ezekiel 33, God tells Ezekiel to say this to the people!

Here, at the very time when the siege of Jerusalem is coming to an end,
after seven years of warning the exiles that judgment is coming,
Ezekiel now says to the exiles,
this is what I've been doing!

I've been warning you –
as a watchman blows the trumpet to warn the people of impending danger.

And over the last seven months, I have been warning you.

The prophet in the OT – as the pastor today –
is called to warn people that judgment is coming.

Verses 2-6 focus on the watchman's call to the people of God.

The pastor is a watchman who must call the people of God
to beware of the dangers that surround them.

And as verses 7-9 show,
the watchman's job is also to call the wicked to repent.

⁷"So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. ⁸If I say to the wicked, O wicked one, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. ⁹But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, that person shall die in his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul.

If I do not warn you against the prevailing evils of the day,

or if I warn you against all the evils “out there”
but never call your attention to *your* sins!
then if you die, your blood will be on my hands.
If I do not warn you against the idols of the nations –
and of your own predilection for following them,
then I will have to answer for you in the final day.

That is why Hebrews 13:17 says,
“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls,
as those who will have to give an account.
Let them do this with joy and not with groaning,
for that would be of no advantage to you.”

God will not condemn me for your sin –
but if I fail to warn you – if I do not call you to faith and repentance –
then my Master will not be pleased with my failure to listen to his voice!

But while Ezekiel message has been a relentless message of judgment,
the reason why God sends such a message is so that people will listen and repent!

2. The People: Repentance is the Way Back (10-20) Ezekiel 18

Verses 10-20 summarize Ezekiel 18 – reminding Israel that there *is* hope for the one who repents

¹⁰“And you, son of man, say to the house of Israel, Thus have you said: ‘Surely our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we rot away because of them. How then can we live?’ ¹¹Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?”

The language of verses 10-20 is virtually identical to chapter 18.
There are sections that are verbatim the same.

But there is a *huge* difference in context.

In Ezekiel 18 the context is the people’s complaint:

“the fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge.”

In Ezekiel 18 the context is that the people are saying that God is unjust.

We don’t deserve this!

In Ezekiel 33:10, the people are saying something *entirely* different:

“Surely *our* transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we rot away because of them.
How then can we live?”

OUR Sins crush us.

In others words, some people have heard the message of Ezekiel 18 and repented!

There is an acknowledgement that we are like our fathers!

We have sinned against God.

And so Ezekiel insists that a life of repentance is the only way back.

Because God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked.

And God has sent the watchman to call the wicked to repentance!

¹² "And you, son of man, say to your people, The righteousness of the righteous shall not deliver him when he transgresses, and as for the wickedness of the wicked, he shall not fall by it when he turns from his wickedness, and the righteous shall not be able to live by his righteousness when he sins. ¹³ Though I say to the righteous that he shall surely live, yet 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. ¹⁴ 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, ¹⁵ if the wicked restores the pledge, gives back what he has taken by robbery, and walks in the statutes of life, not doing injustice, he shall surely live; he shall not die. ¹⁶ None of the sins that he has committed shall be remembered against him. He has done what is just and right; he shall surely live.

Notice that Ezekiel does not consider “righteousness” and “wickedness” to be fixed categories.

If the righteous sins, then he becomes wicked.

If the wicked repents and does what is right, then he becomes righteous.

Your present status guarantees nothing.

Some have said that once you “pray the prayer” you’re in!

You have eternal security!

But that is not the message of Ezekiel!

Ezekiel would be a big fan of the P in Tulip –
the perseverance of the saints.

You may be righteous (and for Ezekiel that means that you are living in proper relation to God and man – it does not mean sinless perfection.

Today we might even call it “outwardly righteous”),

but if a righteous man sins, his previous righteousness cannot save him.

Likewise, a wicked man is not doomed – but may turn from his wickedness and do what is right!

God warns people and says “you shall surely die” precisely in order to call them to repentance!

God said to Ninevah through Jonah that in 40 days Ninevah would be destroyed.

But Ninevah repented, and so God spared them.

You could call it a plain case of “failed prophecy”!

But God’s purpose in warning of the coming judgment

is to bring you to repentance,

so that you might *not* die!

That is why God has sent me to you today:

so that *you* might repent of your sin, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and be saved!

¹⁷"Yet your people say, 'The way of the Lord is not just,' when it is their own way that is not just.
¹⁸ When the righteous turns from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for it. ¹⁹ And when the wicked turns from his wickedness and does what is just and right, he shall live by this.
²⁰ Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' O house of Israel, I will judge each of you according to his ways."

In verses 17-20 Ezekiel returns to the complaint about God's justice.

It is so much easier – and so much more delightful to the heart –
to tell self-confessed sinners of the *mercy* of God,
than to defend the justice of God to the self-righteous!

In chapter 18 Ezekiel drew on Leviticus 18:5 to answer them –
the man who does these things shall live by them.

Ezekiel comments on this verse, that it does not mean perfect, perpetual righteousness.
Because when the righteous man sins, he will die,
and when the wicked man repents and does what is right, he shall live.

The people of Israel have complained that they have been judged for their fathers' sins.

Ezekiel replies that that God will judge everyone according to his ways.

There will be a day when God will open the books that contain all that you have done,
both good and bad,
and he will judge you accordingly.

Some people seem to think that so long as their good deeds outweigh their bad deeds
they'll do okay in the judgment.

But James reminds us that if we break one command
we are accountable for the whole law.

We are lawbreakers.

We have sinned.

And the wages of sin is death!

There will be a judgment according to works,
where you will have to give account for every idle thought and word.

Paul deals with this in Romans 10,

where he quotes Leviticus 18:5 and says that righteousness of the law says
that the man who does these things – who obeys God's commands –
will live by them,

but the righteousness of faith focuses on the incarnation, death, resurrection,
and ascension of Christ.

The righteousness of the law focuses on me and what I have done.

The righteousness of faith focuses on Christ and what he has done.

On the cross Jesus paid for all your sins.

And because he obeyed the Father – because he was made under the law,
and perfectly obeyed the law in every way –
therefore when you believe in him – when you are united to him by faith –
his righteousness is imputed (is reckoned or credited to you).

And that means that not only are *you* justified –
not only are you declared righteous in Christ –
but your works also are justified.

After all, if we are going to stand in the final judgment –
if God is going to judge us according to the deeds done in the body –
then not only do our sins need to be forgiven,
but also all the imperfections and shortcomings in our *good* deeds!

God will judge all people according to their works.
But the only way that you can stand in that judgment
is if you are cleansed by the blood of Christ,
forgiven of all your sins.

3. My Mouth Was Opened (21-22)

Ezekiel 3 and 24

Verses 21-22 fulfill Ezekiel 3 and 24 – the opening of Ezekiel’s mouth with the destruction of Jerusalem

²¹In the twelfth year of our exile, in the tenth month, on the fifth day of the month, a fugitive from Jerusalem came to me and said, "The city has been struck down." ²²Now the hand of the LORD had been upon me the evening before the fugitive came; and he had opened my mouth by the time the man came to me in the morning, so my mouth was opened, and I was no longer mute.

On January 8, 585 BC, a refugee from Jerusalem gave the word that the city had fallen.
God had said this day would come,
and now the LORD vindicates his prophet
by bringing to pass what he had said.

And even as the LORD had promised in Ezekiel 24,
his mouth was opened.

For seven years, Ezekiel had been mute.
For seven years, the only times that he spoke
were those times when God commanded him to speak.
Ezekiel himself had enacted the siege against Jerusalem
at the beginning of those seven years.
And just two years ago he had watched his wife die –
no, we should say it more strongly,
he had watched God take away the delight of his eyes.
And he had watched in silence,
for he was mute;

he was not permitted to say good-bye to his wife.
But instead, God told him to prophecy of the impending destruction of Jerusalem,
and the death of their loved ones who had been left behind.

Immediately, the discourse changes.

Whereas before the focus was on rebuking the people
for thinking that Jerusalem would last forever,
now Ezekiel begins to deal with the new question:
so what does the promise to Abraham mean?

If we *thought* it meant that we got to stay in the land forever,
and we were *plainly* wrong about that!
Then what *does* it mean?

4. The People: What Does the Promise to Abraham Mean? (23-29) Ezekiel 5-6 and 11

This is a good question.

Verse 24 summarizes the attitude of the remnant that remained in the land.

God has forgotten the exiles – he has sent them away for their sin –
we must be the remnant of the chosen people!

(this reminds us of Ezekiel 11, where the remnant started seizing the lands of the exiles
with the claim that “obviously” God was on *their* side!)

And their statement in verse 24 sounds a lot like Isaiah 51:2-3

“Look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth.
When I called him he was but one, and I blessed him and made him many.
The LORD will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on all her ruins;
he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the LORD.”

But Ezekiel rejects their interpretation of Abraham.

And in verses 25-29 Ezekiel summarizes the abominations and judgments of Ezekiel 5-6

²³The word of the LORD came to me: ²⁴ "Son of man, the inhabitants of these waste places in the land of Israel keep saying, 'Abraham was only one man, yet he got possession of the land; but we are many; the land is surely given us to possess.' ²⁵Therefore say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: You eat flesh with the blood and lift up your eyes to your idols and shed blood; shall you then possess the land? ²⁶ You rely on the sword, you commit abominations, and each of you defiles his neighbor's wife; shall you then possess the land? ²⁷Say this to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: As I live, surely those who are in the waste places shall fall by the sword, and whoever is in the open field I will give to the beasts to be devoured, and those who are in strongholds and in caves shall die by pestilence. ²⁸ And I will make the land a desolation and a waste, and her proud might shall come to an end, and the mountains of Israel shall be so desolate that none will pass through. ²⁹ Then they will know that I am the LORD, when I have made the land a desolation and a waste because of all their abominations that they have committed.

The first batch of exiles (Ezekiel and his friends) sinned and were exiled.
The second batch of exiles (those who just arrived in verses 21-22) sinned and were exiled
Those who remain in the land have also sinned – and so they too will fall under judgment.

What does the promise to Abraham mean?
For you – who are left behind in the land?
Nothing.

The promise to Abraham means nothing – and gives you *no* right to anything.
Why?
Because you have sinned and committed abominations:
you lift up your eyes to idols – you love other gods more than Yahweh
you shed blood – you commit adultery – you rely on the sword,
you trust in your own strength to get your way.
Therefore, the promise to Abraham means nothing.

God said to Abraham, “walk before me and be blameless.”
You – so far from being blameless – are wicked and miserable sinners!
Therefore the promises to Abraham have no application to you!

Are you sure that we are still in the Old Testament here?!
This will be Paul’s point!

The promises to Abraham can only be received *by faith!*
You have to listen to God’s word,
repent of your sins,
and believe his promises!

And then *act* like you believe it!

If you are committing adultery –
if you are using violent words or deeds to harm others –
if you are setting aside your love for God and neighbor
in order to pursue your own pleasures –
then repent!

You know that what you are doing is wrong.
You know that you are being selfish.

I wish I could stop there –
but Ezekiel 33 doesn’t conclude with you.

Ezekiel 33 concludes with me!

5. The Watchman: Stay on Message (30-33) **Ezekiel 2-3 and 20**
Verses 30-33 reflects on Ezekiel 20:1-3, 31, and the hardened hearts of Israel (2:3-7 and 3:4-11)

³⁰"As for you, son of man, your people who talk together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, say to one another, each to his brother, 'Come, and hear what the word is that comes from the LORD.'³¹ And they come to you as people come, and they sit before you as my people, and they hear what you say but they will not do it; for with lustful talk in their mouths they act; their heart is set on their gain.³² And behold, you are to them like one who sings lustful songs with a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument, for they hear what you say, but they will not do it.³³ When this comes—and come it will!— then they will know that a prophet has been among them."

Verse 30 reflects the new situation that Ezekiel faced.

As long as Ezekiel's tongue was tied – as long as he was silent –
he could only speak in those few moments when God opened his mouth.
But now he can say whatever he wants!

And so the people will now flock to him.
After all, the fall of Jerusalem confirms his status as a prophet!
And so they will come and "sit before you as my people, and they hear what you say."

Part of it is that their whole world has fallen apart!

Jerusalem has fallen and rather than being restored to the land,
the exiles have been joined by another rag-tag deportation.
They come to the prophet to hear what he will say – what is the word from the LORD?

But they will not do it.

They are greedy for gain – they are only interested in their own ways.

And so God says that Ezekiel is to them

"like one who sings lustful songs with a beautiful voice
and plays well on an instrument."

In other words, you are a good entertainment value!
People will be humming your tunes –
but they will not pay attention to the lyrics!

In Ezekiel 2-3 God warned Ezekiel that people would be hostile and hard-headed.

Now God warns that people will flatter and praise him –
but they still won't do what you say!

The test for any pastor is what to do when the people do not do what you say!

Will Ezekiel change the message – soften it, make it a little easier?
Or will he continue to be faithful to preach what God has called him to preach?

God says to Ezekiel, in effect, stay on task – stay on message –

don't be discouraged because they don't do what you say.

God will do what he has promised.

He will accomplish his purposes.

Christopher Wright adds:

“But the popularity of a great preacher is also dangerous for the listeners.
There is the danger of imagining that just because you have gone with the crowd
and attended the meetings, sung the songs, got the blessing,
gone to the front, bought the T-shirt ...
that you have actually *done* something
in response to the claim of God on your life.
We so easily substitute the form of religion
for the power of radical, life-changing obedience
to the demands of the kingdom of God.” (226)

Why do you come to hear the preacher?

Some people listen eagerly.
They are always trying to learn something new.
They listen for some new thing that they hadn't heard before.

But my task is not to tell you something new.

My task is to tell you what you are to believe concerning God
and what duty God requires of you –
or to use Jesus' words:
“teach them to observe all that I have commanded you.”

Unless and until you are putting into practice
the teachings of Christ and his apostles and prophets,
you are not acting like disciples, but like the exiles in Babylon –
eager to hear the unchanging “word of the LORD”
without changing!