

The Watchman

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[0 : 0 0] I hope that the sentiments of that gospel song are the sentiments that you come away with after looking at this passage in Ezekiel chapter 33.

In the evening, last number of weeks and for the next number of weeks, we're looking at epic images in Ezekiel. We're not going through the whole book, we're just looking at some of the pictures that Ezekiel the prophet's given to his Old Testament people at a very crucial time in their lives.

And this evening, the theme is the Watchman. Ezekiel is a Watchman saying some very important things from God to the people.

So I hope to apply that in our own lives and with our looking back with New Testament vision into what that means.

Because we know the gospel is not the power of positive thinking and it's not simply suiting ourselves.

[1 : 1 0] It's certainly not perichicking. And we're not to be cherry picking either. So we don't just take the bits that we suit ourselves.

God needs to be at the centre of our lives and of our thinking. And He'll never be there unless we can say, God, I need you.

And so there's a very significant link between the two. Now the passage that we read, or that Patrick read for us, was framed and is framed as we've looked before in an Old Testament culture and language that's very different from ours.

And it was given to people, even though there were God's people in the Old Testament, they were living in the spiritual shadows, okay? But they didn't have the cross. They didn't have all the New Testament insight that we've had.

They didn't have the Holy Spirit in the same way as we have. So there is a sense in which it's a very different scenario. But what God is saying to them through Ezekiel, the principles are very much the same.

[2 : 1 5] For us, he's speaking about judgment and hope. And really from chapter 33 onwards in Ezekiel, if you ever read through the book, the first 33 chapters are pretty bleak.

A lot of judgment and a lot of God exposing the spiritual adultery of the people which we looked at last week.

But there's more hope and restoration in the chapters from 33 onwards. But just briefly to go over the situation that Ezekiel's speaking into here, most of the people had been taken back from the Promised Land, which they'd been given, land flowing with milk and honey.

They'd been taken out of the Promised Land, which was their possession, because they had engaged in idolatry and had rebelled against God and had forgotten God, who had promised them these blessings and promised them that he would dwell with them.

But they rejected him. They took advantage of God. They ignored his grace and they lived, they kind of became proud in their own righteousness and they lived without him.

[3 : 23] There was still a few people left in Jerusalem. Ezekiel, by this time, was in Babylon. He was also in exile. But he was prophesying from exile, there was still some people left in Jerusalem.

And they were thinking, great, there's lots of houses and there's lots of buildings here that we can possess and take hold of. God, let us keep this.

And everyone else is away. There's not many of us left. And we'll never be taken from this city, never be taken from this place of promise. But Ezekiel is coming here to them and to the whole of God's people in exile as well as a true prophet.

And he's been reminded here again of his position as a watchman. The watchman was the guy that stood on the ramparts of the city walls with a trumpet.

And when the enemy was coming, he would blow the trumpet so that everyone who belonged to the city, who was outside the city, would turn into the city for safety and security and for protection.

[4 : 26] And that was his job. And the first few verses of Ezekiel 33 we read, that is God saying, Ezekiel, that's your job, that's been your job, that's what you've been doing.

You've been warning the people and if they choose to ignore that warning, then the guilt is on their own heads. If you fail to warn them, then the guilt is on your head.

And so it was a very responsible position as the prophet who was to warn of the impending judgment of God spiritually and that the enemies of God would come and defeat the people.

And they were ignoring the warnings that Ezekiel was bringing. And the chronology of this is not that clear, but the very last verse that Patrick read says, in the twelfth year of our exile, in the tenth month of the fifth day of the month, a fugitive from Jerusalem ran from the city to the exile people and to Ezekiel himself and said, the city has been struck down.

And finally, all of Ezekiel's prophecies about the city and about the city being destroyed and being pillaged and the people being taken into exile, it came to pass.

[5 : 49] It fell completely. And please don't take this comment politically. The lives of the remainers were a disaster. The ones who'd stayed in Jerusalem to this point, they didn't take heed of any of the warnings.

They thought they were safe in Jerusalem. They didn't listen to Ezekiel or to anyone else, and so they too were taken into exile. And even at this point, they didn't understand God's grace.

They didn't understand God's goodness. And verse 11 tells us that really they were demoralized and they were hopeless. They were saying, you know, surely our transgressions are sinned upon us.

We wrought away because of them, how can we live? They were trusting in the wrong place. They weren't listening to God. They just heard a message of judgment from Ezekiel.

They didn't think of what God was saying about repenting or returning and the need for a new heart and the pleading of God for them to turn.

[6 : 58] And they just felt terribly downcast by this message of judgment. And they also accused God of being unjust himself.

And that's in verses 12 to 17. God speaks about a righteous man, an inverted commas, a righteous man. That is someone not who was righteous in God's eyes, but someone who trusted in their own righteousness.

If he lived in a morally and ethically upright way, but trusted in his own righteousness and then sinned, he would die.

But the wicked man who lived a wicked life, but then repented of that and turned and bore the fruit of repentance, he would live. That's really just a gospel in the... right in the middle of the Old Testament.

And they were saying, no, no, we don't like that. They accused God of being unjust. They say it's not fair that God should be like this. He has not done what is just, they say in verse 16.

[7 : 59] It's not right that God should act in this way. Why should a good man, when he just makes one mistake, die? And a wicked man who repents and changes his life, why should he live?

They didn't understand God's grace, and that's what they are so unhappy about in the way that God is dealing with them. They think they're good. They think they don't need a Savior.

They think they're modeled up, they're God's promised people, and they can't understand why he's asking them to turn. And it's quite a complex situation we find ourselves in here.

I didn't read the end of the chapter. I probably didn't read the end of the chapter, I didn't ask them to, but there's a very interesting bit at the end where having all been taken into exile and being angry with God, saying he's unjust and not really repenting or turning, they start liking what Ezekiel has to say because what he has prophesied has come true, and that was always very important in the Old Testament for the prophets.

They didn't listen to him, but they liked what he had to say. I'm going to say a little bit more about that later because I don't really understand it. But they say in verse 32, it says, and behold, to them you are like one who sings lustful songs with a beautiful voice and plays well in an instrument, for they hear what you say but they will not do it.

[9 : 34] When this comes and it will come, then they will know that a prophet has been among them. There's something about how he was saying that they liked, they liked that it was coming to pass but they still didn't respond to the message he was bringing about turning.

Now, I've probably lost you completely. So I'm going to give you a quick modern parallel which you may or may not take. You may want to throw it away.

But just think of a... I'm trying to bring it up to date. Just think of a church community, okay? Are people who are coming to a church, they think they're living a really good kind of moral lifestyle and that God will accept them because they are moral and good people and they feel like they come from good stock and therefore that God will accept them because of their upbringing and who their mums and dads and granies were.

But under the surface of the church life, there's lots of rotten things going on. There's some marriages that are in disarray, there are friendships that are broken.

Some of the guys and girls are cheating in their workplace. They're judgmental of other people who are not like them and they're critical about those who are like them. And there's just... there's things under the surface, you know, you don't see it on a Sunday but there's things under the surface bubbling away.

[10 : 51] And they've had a procession of ministers in this church-going community that love to come to tea and enjoy all the benefits of their position but who never rocked the boat in any way at all when it came to their spiritual responsibility.

They weren't really watchmen, in other words. And then they call a young minister, good-looking guy, young family, and he's a great preacher, preaches the gospel and tells them that they're a sorry bunch and then they need to repent.

And he talks about sin and he talks about turning. And they just think he's so depressing and that he's always on about sin.

And they can't see the grace that he speaks about, they can't see the tears that he cries on their behalf and they ignore him. The God that he is describing, they think is unfair and unjust, speaks about the thief on the cross.

The guy who was a murderous thief all his life and then he gets to heaven at the end and he speaks about the rich man who's told to sell everything that he had. What kind of gospel is that?

[11 : 58] You know, we're doing our best. How dare he come in and judge us and tell us what we're doing wrong? He's a watchman. But the interesting thing, and this is where I'm trying to connect it with the end of this chapter that I don't really understand, because they say, well, you know, he speaks well and the sermons are interesting.

Maybe it's good for other people and he's powerful for others and lots of people are coming to hear him. But what he says is rubbish. We'll just carry on living the way we are and ignore what he used to say.

We'll ignore that he's got any message from God at all. So the Word is shared and preached, grace is laid out before them, sin is exposed and it makes no difference whatsoever to this congregation.

The people are not for turning, despite the warnings. That's kind of the nearest way I could get it to parallel it to the Old Testament situation.

You may, now don't spend the rest of the sermon thinking whether that's right or wrong or trying to find faults in it, okay? I was just trying to bring it out into our own context a little bit more.

[13 : 08] What we need to do, we need to take what's in this passage as best we can and allow the Holy Spirit to speak into our situation, even though we may feel very distanced from the context that this was written into.

Look, there are some changing truths for us in the New Testament church from this Old Testament story. The first is a discontinuity. We are not Old Testament prophets, okay?

We're not Ezekiels. We're not watchmen in the same way as Ezekiel was a watchman in this context. But we are New Testament ambassadors.

We're not Old Testament prophets, but we are, every one of us is a New Testament ambassador. In Corinthians 5, 20, therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ. God making His appeal through us, we implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

So there's an element of warning, of reconciliation, of prophecy, of being watchmen in an ambassadorial sense that we have to recognise in the New Testament.

[14 : 21] And I think that has to happen in two contexts. It happens within the church and within our own personal lives. So within the church family, and it's links in what I've always been saying about the accountability of being part of the denomination, there must be that gospel honesty where we're ambassadors for Jesus Christ together with one another, elders and leaders, ministers and people that we are to love one another, not with an insipid and a selfish love, but with a deep trusting, forgiving love that does what?

That allows us to call out sin and call out sin for what it is among each other. Not in a sensorial and judgmental way, but because we trust and love and support one another.

And to that degree, we are watchmen for each other. We are ambassadors for Christ. We rebuke, encourage, warn and support each other towards a life of repentance and faith.

That's what we're... we're not to be people who as Christians encourage sin together or are silent about Christ together or are worldly and distant and awkward and huffy and critical together.

We're on the front line of gospel ministry as people, and it's far too important for us then to think lightly of the things that will trip us up and destroy us in our lives.

[15 : 53] I repent of all the failings as a minister I have among you, and you must repent. And we each repent as we are watchmen for one another and expose one another's needs before the living God.

In the church family, we are to have that ambassadorial role, but I think also in our personal lives we are to have that same ambassadorial role.

And that will be very difficult if we never represent and speak about Christ together. It's going to be very difficult for us to do it in the rest of our life, but we're asked to do it.

The Bible tells us that the feet of Christians are to be beautiful because they're to bring good news, but that good news is also a good news that is couched in warning terms, isn't it?

It's not just a formula, it's not just words, but tremblingly, wisely, carefully, prayerfully, lovingly, we are to tell people about God and about the centrality of God.

[16 : 58] They're not going to be interested in His grace if we'd never talk about need. They're not going to be interested in a rescue if they feel safe or a change if they don't see any need for that.

And if it doesn't matter to us, why should it matter to them if it's not life and death, if they're not... they'll not seek to repent if they feel innocent rather than guilty.

Because there is a last great day, and your friends and my friends and our colleagues and our family will stand before God.

And I don't know how it will play out on that day. I don't know what it will be like on that day, but you can imagine it, can't you? Why? I didn't hear you say something.

Didn't you love me enough? You had that great good news? You didn't warn me about the danger that I was in? And you had that in your own heart?

[17 : 59] You changed it? You heeded the warning yourself? Why didn't you talk to me about my need? Why didn't you share about your need and your story?

And the motivation for saying that this evening isn't guilt. Guilt is a terrible motivation. I used to be afraid of that concept and it would guilt me into acting differently.

But it must be about the beauty and the power of grace that like Ezekiel enables us to be watchmen, to be ambassadors, to tell people about the glory of the gospel, about the need for the cross, and the need for our own lives to turn and to confess our sin before Him.

So we're not Old Testament prophets, but we are New Testament ambassadors. But I think we can also see that people are still saying the same things now as they were then.

In verse 10, we mentioned that verse about the discouragement that they were so sinful and wicked, he said, and you, son of man, say to the house of Israel, they have said, surely our sins are upon us, we rot away because of them.

[19 : 17] How then can we live? People are still asking that kind of, you know, how can we live? We're just too bad. You know, we're too miserable. What is the way forward?

They couldn't see the way forward. They couldn't, they weren't hearing what God had spoken about when He spoke about grace through Ezekiel. Hope is a feeling rejected and hopeless in that God doesn't care.

And people also still think in the same way as they did then that God and His representatives are there just simply to condemn them.

And that's what they'll see if it's just warnings we give, if it's just bad news we bring, if it's all negative, we have to declare the truth in such a way that they see grace in our lives and in the message that we share, otherwise it's just despair, isn't it?

So they're still saying how then can we live? And they're also still saying, and we saw in that section 12 to 17, that God is unjust, that God is unjust, that He's acting in an unjust way.

[20 : 29] And people are still saying that. People still struggle with this concept of a righteous and inverted commas person trusting in their own righteousness and then doing something wrong and not living.

Though I say to the righteous that He shall surely, yet if the trust in His own righteousness and does injustice, none of His righteousness shall be remembered but in His injustice that He has done, He shall die. I've done my best.

I've tried to be righteous. And for a few slip-ups, you're going to condemn me. So God's unjust in that way.

And also with the wicked in verse 14, and though again though I say to the wicked you shall surely die, yet He turns from His sin and does what is right and just.

And if He restores and gives back and what He's taken and walks in my statutes, He will live. How can that be? How can someone who's been so wicked have a born again experience and somehow they're all let off from what they've done in the past and they get to heaven?

[21 : 39] It's the kias or the thief in the cross or Mary the prostitute. God's unjust. How can we live? People are despairing. God is unjust. That is because we need to get to the place where we share the incredible beauty of grace.

And we need to recognize that reality and how important and significant that is.

No one deserves to live. I will judge you, he says at the end of verse 20, each according to their ways. No one deserves to live.

Life is a reality, as Thomas talked about this morning, and it's a just separation from a holy, good life giving God.

[22 : 35] Hell is actually what every one of us deserve from God. No one is righteous. No one deserves to live.

No one has that righteousness within them. That's really important because it speaks of an absolutely level playing field. And I think today, as you go into the world tomorrow and as I go into the world tomorrow in our lives, it's a really important apologetic that we recognize that we are all in this together.

It's a humbling apologetic that we honestly understand and recognize and assess our own lives that if we were to be judged according to how we lived, we too would perish.

And we too have lives that are disordered. Even though we're redeemed, we still need constantly to go back to the living God to be transformed.

So no one deserves to live, and yet God pronounces life on those who turn. God we're told in verse 11 of this chapter and also in verse 12 of chapter 18, God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked.

[23 : 56] That also is an important apologetic today. He's not a vindictive God. He doesn't take pleasure from the death of the wicked. Now ask yourself briefly, how different is that from us?

There's times in our lives where we take great pleasure in the death of the wicked, or at least in the judgment of the wicked, or someone getting exactly what they deserve because we think they deserve it.

God isn't like that. He is a holy justice and He is a holy compassion that moves Him to act and He takes no pleasure in the act of judgment and death on those who turn away from Him.

He pleads with humanity to turn. Why will you die? Turn, turn, He says. Now, however you face up to the mystery of sovereign election, we can't deny God's words here and His provision for all and the opportunity for all to be saved and the personal responsibility of people to respond to Him.

He offers them a new heart and a new spirit. Does that in chapter 81, it's the embryonic hope of the gospel in the Old Testament.

[25 : 15] New life and new birth, peace, hope and forgiveness, God's gift. He offers a new heart to everyone who turns.

So I just want to finish with very briefly speaking about the significance of repentance. This whole passage is all about the importance of turning back to the living God.

Why will you die? Turn to the living God. That is what He says all the time. I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, verse 11, but that the wicked turn from His way and live.

Turn back, turn back from your evil ways. Why will you die, oh house of Israel? Great plea, powerful, important, significant plea for repentance.

It's a key... And what I'm saying is that it's a key reality in our Christian lives as we... Not just evangelistically, but in an ongoing way. Second Corinthians 7, verse 10, for godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas godly grief, worldly grief produces death.

[26 : 24] So there's a godly grief against them that always brings us to repentance. Matthew 3, verse 8 says, bear fruit in keeping with repentance. So repentance is a vital and ongoing part of our Christian lives.

It's evidence that we're responsive to the Holy Spirit, that we recognize the need for ongoing transformation and change, and that we deal with our own hearts first.

We're not so concerned about how everyone else is living, although we're watchmen and ambassadors. We can only ever be that if we are watching and caring for our own hearts first.

Hugely significant. The heart is deceitful and desperately wicked. Who can understand it? We need to understand our own hearts. The disordered loves, the idols, the hatred, the bitterness, and appreciate the forgiveness.

Appreciate the grace and appreciate the goodness. And I wonder this evening, if you're in a position where you think, I'm just too bad to go back to God.

[27 : 33] I once believed. I outwardly, I'm still professing that I believe, but inwardly there's nothing. There's no repentance. There's nothing but rebellion and doubt and fear and unbelief.

I feel hopeless. I feel unworthy. I'm back slidden. I haven't prayed for months. My mind and my heart are miles away from the living God. I love the wrong things.

I hate the right things. Just turn. Turn back to Him. You know, God's love is bigger and wider and stronger and ready, and He's pleading with you to turn.

He doesn't want you to just get all cleaned up first. He doesn't want to wait till you've got great and strong faith. He just wants you to turn. And all the weakness that we feel and all the struggles and all the impotence that we have spiritually, it's not about ourselves and our goodness and our greatness and our own faith.

It's about our weakness and His greatness. And He wants us to turn and sing for joy as we recognize that He's always ready when we turn to Him to receive us wholeheartedly and beautifully and fully because of what Jesus has done on our behalf.

[28 : 49] It's an inversion. It's a blasphemous inversion of the gospel for us to say, I'm too bad to turn to Jesus tonight. I'm too far gone.

I've destroyed what I should have lived and I've abused His grace. You're never too bad to turn back to the living God.

And I think we desperately need to be doing that, maybe not in a dramatic way but in a very real way. Too bad or too good?

Too good so that you don't really need to turn. We don't think about turning. I wonder in our prayer lives over the last while, if you could think back on them, when was the last time you prayed for forgiveness or you prayed with a heart of sorrow and repentance?

Is it that we're blaming God like the Old Testament people for our circumstances, that He owes us, that we're trusting, deep down we're trusting in our own goodness, in our own knowledge, in our own righteousness.

[30 : 01] We're despising and judging other people but we're not really willing to look into our own heart at all. If we're too good for God, that we don't feel the need for repentance and turning on a daily basis, I think we're missing out on the beauty of grace.

We're missing out on the wholesome, healing, forgiving, humbling, life-giving reality of grace and it's a horrible and dangerous place to be.

So too good, turn. Too bad, turn. And may our lives bear the fruit of repentance. Picture here is of the wicked who changes because he's a new heart.

And as we have new hearts, that is evidenced in the lives we live. So repentance isn't about confession and then going back to the same lifestyle.

It's about understanding His grace and beginning to love the things He loves and hate the things God hates. Maybe that we practice in our lives that daily repentance which comes from having a spiritually exercised relationship with the living God, which is what God wants us to do daily, I believe, as an outworking of the truth of this passage.

[31 : 33] So let's pray briefly to Him. Lord, we pray that You would help us to understand these certainly what I find difficult passages in the Old Testament, that we would recognise our responsibility as Christians to be ambassadors similar to watchmen, that we think particularly of our neighbours, our colleagues, our friends, who we've asked by God to be salt and light among and to be ambassadors before ambassadors for Jesus and who we may have been silent before for many years and we ask that You forgive us for that, give us a humble courage and a gentle strength to be able to share our understanding of life and death and spiritual truth and God and Jesus Christ in a way that is very real, even though it may be stumbling or struggling.

Forgive us when we're not honest with each other, when we're just shallow and when we don't, when we aren't willing to be accountable to one another, to forgive one another, to be forgiven, to ask for forgiveness, to receive forgiveness, when all our talk is just really mundane and never gets into spiritual depth and fruit and our roots remain very shallow.

Forgive us for these things Lord, forgive us for the multitude of things that separate us from You and help us rather to be honest before God and to turn constantly back into the safety and security and the strength and loving and protective arms of the everlasting God and the city of God which is just established at the foot of the cross.

Remind us of these things we pray in all that we do for Jesus' sake. Amen.