

Ezekiel 33: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Ezekiel chapter 33 And did not take warning.

His blood shall be upon himself. But if he had taken warning, he would have saved his life. But 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. 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.

If 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.

But 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. 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.

[1 : 34] How then can we live? Say 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?

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. 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.

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, 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, 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.

Yet your people say, The way of the Lord is not just, when it is their own way that is not just. When the righteous turns from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for it, and when the wicked turns from his wickedness and does what is just and right, he shall live by this.

[3 : 04] 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 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.

Now 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.

The word of the Lord came to me, 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. Therefore 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? You rely on the sword, you commit abominations, and each of you defiles his neighbour's wife. Shall you then possess the land? Say 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.

[4 : 21] And I will make the land a desolation and a waste, and a proud might shall come to an end, and the mountains of Israel shall be so desolate that none will pass through.

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. 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.

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.

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.

When this comes, and come it will, then they will know that a prophet has been among them.

Ezekiel chapter 33 appears to function as a seam in the book.

[5 : 27] It opens the final section of the book after the oracles against various nations in chapters 25 to 32. However, it also recalls much of the first part of the book in chapters 1 to 24 in a pronounced fashion.

Daniel Block writes, Chapter 33 verses 1 to 9 echoes chapter 3 verses 19 to 21, but with a new urgency. Chapter 33 verses 10 to 20 summarises chapter 18 verses 1 to 32.

Chapter 33 verses 21 to 22 fulfills chapter 24 verses 25 to 27, and ends the prophet's silence reported in chapter 3 verses 22 to 27.

Chapter 33 verses 23 to 29 summarises the same charges of idolatry and abominations, and announces the same judgment proclaimed in chapters 5 to 6, while also alluding to chapter 11 verses 14 to 21.

Chapter 33 verses 30 to 33 reflects chapter 20 verses 1 to 3 and 31, and announces the fulfilment of the prediction of his audience's hardened hearts.

[6 : 36] Chapters 2 verses 3 to 7, and 3 verses 4 to 11. The chapter is divided from the part of the book with which it has the strongest affinities by intervening material, but it is adopted into the body of material that follows it.

It might be seen to function as a bridge between chapters 1 to 24, and 34 to 48. There is a clear connection between verses 1 to 9, and chapter 3 verses 17 to 21.

Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning for me. If I say to the wicked, you shall surely die, and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way in order to save his life, that wicked person shall die for his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand.

But if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness or from his wicked way, he shall die for his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul. Again, if a righteous person turns from his righteousness and commits injustice, and I lay a stumbling block before him, he shall die. Because you have not warned him, he shall die for his sin, and his righteous deeds that he has done shall not be remembered, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the righteous person not to sin, and he does not sin, he shall surely live, because you took warning, and you will have delivered your soul.

[8 : 03] Here Ezekiel's original call is renewed and recalled. However, in contrast to the first call, here there is a message concerning a hypothetical watchman primarily directed to the people.

Later, in verses 7-9, this is applied to Ezekiel in particular. Here the analogy of the watchman is developed more in verses 2-6, in which the responsibilities of a typical watchman is laid out.

He must blow the trumpet to warn people at the first sign of trouble. If he fails to do so, the responsibility for the death of people will be upon his shoulders. If he does so, and they do not respond, then they are the ones responsible.

In verses 7-9, we can observe close parallels with the earlier statements of chapter 3. Ezekiel's particular charge is as the watchman of the house of Israel, delivering the word of the Lord to them. The message here is presumably one that would have been publicly shared with the people in the context of the earlier message concerning the generic watchman in verses 2-6.

[9 : 05] The nature of Ezekiel's mission, the mission he had been performing for the past seven years, is being made public and explicit. As in chapter 18, the message of verses 10-20 here offer

hope to a people in despair who may feel a fruitless remorse for their past deeds, but feel that change or any reversal of their fate is now impossible.

These verses contain two arguments presented by the people and the prophetic challenge and response to them. The first is that of verse 10. Surely our transgressions and our sins are upon us and we rot away because of them.

How then can we live? The claim is not the same as that of chapter 18 in which the people blame the sins of their fathers for their current predicament. The fathers ate sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge.

Rather, here they despairingly blame themselves regarding their situation as hopeless and beyond recovery. A similar response to that of chapter 18 is given. The Lord does not desire his people's death.

The house of Israel must beware that they do not permit despair to deny them the future that God's gracious forgiveness could open up for them if they would only turn from their evil ways.

[10:18] The task of the watchman is to alert the people to the urgency of their present moment. The righteous must not become complacent or presumptuous. Past righteousness is of little value to the man who apostatizes.

God's statement that a righteous man is in good standing with him, that he will surely live, will be revoked if that righteous man turns away from his righteousness. Such a man will die.

One's own standing is not something to trust in. It will merely make you presumptuous. The wicked man, on the other hand, must not become despairing or fatalistic. There is always a way back to God for the penitent.

His condemnation need not be regarded as the final word. Indeed, his condemnation should be that which spurs him to repentance. Were he to repent and do what is just and right, all of his past sins would be forgotten.

The second argument or objection of the people is found in verse 17. The way of the Lord is not just. As in the preceding section, this section closely follows parts of chapter 18.

[11:22] The people want to claim that the Lord's ways are arbitrary or unjust. The Lord counters this accusation by claiming that it is rather they whose ways are unjust.

He reiterates the principle described in the preceding section. They are in a situation where their ways and by implication their destinies could turn. They could either change for their blessing or for their judgment.

They should neither be despairing nor complacent and presumptuous. It is not the Lord holding them back from returning to him. The Lord does not desire their death. Rather, it is their own stubborn hearts.

Ezekiel had been rendered mute save for those occasions when the Lord opened his mouth to deliver a message back at the time of his first call in chapter 3 seven years ago.

In chapter 24 verses 25 to 27 he had been promised the opening of his mouth as a sign to the community of the exiles. As for you, son of man, surely on the day when I take from them their stronghold, their joy and glory, the delight of their eyes and their soul's desire, and also their sons and daughters, on that day a fugitive will come to you to report to you the news.

[12:32] On that day your mouth will be opened to the fugitive, and you shall speak and be no longer mute. So you will be assigned to them, and they will know that I am the Lord. By opening the mouth of Ezekiel in the evening, at the very start of the day on which the fugitive came, there was an advance warning, and the fulfilment of the earlier prophecy was more compelling.

In verses 21 to 22 we see the prophecy that was made coming to pass. A messenger comes with the news of the city of Jerusalem's downfall. The chronology is perplexing here, as the twelfth year might seem to date this about a year and a half after the fall of Jerusalem, an unrealistically long period of time.

Leslie Allen discusses a number of possibilities. A minority textual tradition has this as the eleventh year, which would make more sense chronologically, but is very weak textually.

Another possibility is that the dates of the book, save for chapter 24 verse 1, which draws on 2 Kings chapter 25 verse 1, are dated by the exile, whereas that date, in chapter 24 verse 1, is dated according to the regnal year reckoning of Judahite kings, the dates being measured from the first full year of the king's office.

This would account for the extra year and give us a far more realistic dating of the coming of the messenger, one that tallies quite well with the time that it took Ezra to make that journey. Both the advent of this messenger, bearing such important news, and the releasing of Ezekiel's speech, herald a new phase of Ezekiel's public ministry.

[14 : 04] This is a further proof, should one be needed, of the power and truth of the word of God delivered through Ezekiel, and would have strengthened his public standing as a prophet. However, although Ezekiel's mouth is opened, the situation on the front of the remaining people of Judah does not look good.

First, in verses 23 to 29, we see the situation of those remaining in the land of Judah. A second great deportation of people occurred with the fall of Jerusalem, leaving but a small rump left in the land.

These were almost entirely the poor people under the governorship of Gedaliah. Looking at the waste of the land and the numbers that they have, they fancy that they can possess the land. If their father Abraham got possession of the land as only one person, things look far more propitious for them as tens of thousands of people.

Yet they are people who continue in the defiling ways of those who preceded them. The ways that got them expelled from the land. The description of this situation in the book of Jeremiah is of one where there was great potential.

The land was being given its sabbaths and the poor were enjoying its produce. There was potentially an element of jubilee taking place. However, a people committed to such idolatry and uncleanness was not going to possess the land for long.

[15 : 19] The Lord was still looking over the land and judging those within it, although they were not mixed with other people transplanted from elsewhere. As the Assyrians had mixed the northern kingdom of Israel, those remaining in the former kingdom of Judah had no good reason to be confident in their future as a people, as long, that is, as they continued in their idolatries and uncleanness.

The land had been devastated and left a waste. Although they might have thought that surviving the two previous attacks of the Babylonians, they were in a good position, they too would be removed from or destroyed within the land.

In verses 30 to 33, we see that things were not much better among the exiles in Babylon. While on the surface they seemed to be interested in hearing the word of the Lord, they were not truly heeding it.

Rather, they seemed to regard Ezekiel more as a source of entertainment and diversion. However, the Lord, according to his promise, would once more vindicate Ezekiel, bring the word that he had spoken through him to pass.

When that took place, the people would know for a fact that a prophet had been among them. A question to consider. Why do you think that Ezekiel's mouth was opened at this particular point?