

# EZEKIEL'S TIMELESS MESSAGE

## *What Is the REAL “Work of the Watchman”?*

**God said to the prophet Ezekiel, “I have made you a *watchman* for the house of Israel; therefore you shall hear a word from My mouth and warn them for Me.” What kind of warning was this? Was it primarily geopolitical in nature? Did it involve dire warnings about coming earthquakes, famines, disease epidemics, floods, droughts, and other disasters? Was it an ancient form of the sensational “headline theology” that is so popular among a large number of evangelical preachers and writers today? What does the watchman’s message have to do with the mission of the New Testament church?**

**I**s there a special office of “watchman” in the New Testament church? Has God “anointed” someone as a special end-time “watchman” whose unique calling involves analyzing world news in the light of Bible prophecy? Does Jesus’ admonition to *watch* (Matthew 24:42) correlate with Ezekiel’s commission as “watchman” (Ezekiel 3:17–21; 33:1–20)? Did Jesus mean that His disciples should be spending considerable time *watching world events*? And is a “watchman” someone who watches world events in order to warn people of impending calamities?

If we are to properly understand the book of Ezekiel, the prophet’s commission, and precisely *how* his message applies to us, then we must first understand the prophecy from the perspective of the people to whom it was originally sent.

### **Ezekiel’s Commission**

Ezekiel, who was both a priest and a prophet, was among the captives who were taken to Babylonia in 597 B.C. It was there that God commissioned him to begin prophesying concerning the immediate future and ultimate destiny of his people.

Ezekiel’s message was primarily for the exiles in Babylonia, though it is possible that his warnings filtered to Palestine, where his

contemporary, Jeremiah, was simultaneously proclaiming essentially the same message.

The prophet was to tell his fellow captives about the divine judgment that would soon befall Jerusalem and Judah. But his message was not restricted to the bad news of what happens to a people who are unfaithful to God’s covenant; Ezekiel was to proclaim the glorious *good news* of God’s promise to eventually regather the outcasts of Israel and Judah, establish His everlasting covenant with them, and restore them to national greatness (37:25–28).

God said to the prophet, “Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; therefore hear a word from My mouth, and give them warning from Me” (Ezekiel 3:17).

In ancient times it was common practice for nations to appoint guardians to watch the borders of their territories and warn the people of approaching danger. It was the watchman’s duty to sound the trumpet and warn the people the moment he saw the enemy coming. If he saw the enemy coming, yet failed to sound the alarm, his failure was considered a criminal act, and every death brought by the enemy’s sword was a murder charge for the watchman.

### **The Parable of the Watchman**

The responsibility of the watchman is described in the parable of Ezekiel 33:1–6. In the parable, the nation occupying the land is the object of divine retribution and the invading army is the instrument of punishment. The watchman’s responsibility is to sound the alarm the moment he sees the enemy approaching or receives word of a threat from the enemy. If he fails to warn the people and someone is killed in the invasion, the watchman is held responsible.

The watchman of the parable is compared with the prophet Ezekiel and his God-given commission to serve as “a watchman for the house of Israel.”

Just as the watchman of the parable was to issue a warning when he saw approaching enemy forces, Ezekiel was to warn the wicked among his people of the certainty of death if they failed to turn from their sinful ways.

“Therefore you shall hear a word from My mouth and warn them for Me. When I say to the wicked, ‘O wicked man, you shall surely die!’ and you do not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at your hand. Nevertheless if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his

way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered your soul" (Ezekiel 33:7-9).

Ezekiel's message was given with a view toward God's promises to fully restore the people to their own land. The message is clear: The people could either die in their sins, or they could turn from their iniquities and live, and reap the covenantal blessings God had promised long before. Having already experienced the devastating results of breaking God's laws, each captive would have a new perspective as he pondered the choice set before him.

### Who Was "Israel"?

While Ezekiel was aware of the distinction between the northern kingdom of Israel and southern kingdom of Judah (Ezekiel 4:5,6; 37:15-19), he often used the term *Israel* in its broad, general sense, and applied the term to his contemporaries, both the exiles in Babylonia and the inhabitants of Palestine. This is important because some have erroneously assumed that when Ezekiel spoke of Israel, he was speaking exclusively of the "lost tribes" of the northern kingdom who had been taken into captivity by Assyria in 722 B.C., and who would eventually migrate westward into the British Isles.

It is important to realize that many of the Israelites whose fathers had been carried away in the Assyrian captivity never lost their "covenant people" identity. When Assyria fell to Babylonia in 605 B.C., the Israelites who had been under Assyrian rule were now under Babylonian rule. The eventual return from the exile would include a great multitude from both the house of Judah and the house of Israel. These were the people—individuals and families representing *all* the tribes of Israel and Judah—Ezekiel had in mind as he proclaimed his divinely inspired message to his fellow captives.

Notice the broad sense in which the term *Israel* is frequently used in

Ezekiel's message:

The prophet was to deliver his warning "to the children of Israel" (2:3), but he was instructed to "not be afraid of them nor be afraid of their words...or dismayed by their looks, though they are a rebellious house" (2:6). In time, they would know that a prophet had "been among them" (2:5). Here, the phrase *children of Israel* refers to the covenant people in the Babylonian captivity, the people whose "words" Ezekiel would hear, and whose "looks" he would see. He only saw the Jews of Judah and Jerusalem in vision, but was not literally "among them."

God's judgment on the "mountains of Israel" (6:3) pertains to the people dwelling in "the land," which would soon be made "more desolate than the wilderness toward Diblah" (6:14). This is clearly speaking of the promised land, or "land of Israel" (cf. 7:2,7,23). Notice that "mountains of Israel" is associated with "the land" that was about to be made desolate. This is speaking of a people dwelling in the land, not a people that had been deported many years earlier.

In his visionary trip to Jerusalem, Ezekiel saw the "great abominations that the house of Israel commits" in the Temple (8:3-6). When Ezekiel, in a vision, saw the slaying of the wicked inhabitants of the city, he lamented, "Will You destroy all the remnant of Israel in pouring out Your fury on Jerusalem?" (9:8). God's reply connects the "house of Israel and Judah" with "the land" in which the Temple stood (verse 9). If "Israel" were defined narrowly as the far-removed, "lost" tribes of the northern kingdom, such language is meaningless.

This historical background is important because before we can understand how a prophecy applies to our generation, we must first have a good overview of the conditions that prompted the prophecy in the first place. Ezekiel prophesied to a nation that had turned to idolatry and immorality, thus breaking the

covenant and bringing upon itself the curses described in Deuteronomy 28. Interestingly, the watchman's message emphasizes *individual* responsibility. After all, a nation is only as strong as the individuals who make it up, and the influence of a few good men can have a powerful effect upon the larger community.

### Individual Responsibility

Read Ezekiel 33:7-9, and notice that the watchman's message is aimed at the individuals who make up the captive nation. It is a message of *personal repentance*. God says, "O house of Israel, I will judge *every one of you* according to his own ways" (verse 20).

Previously, the people had blamed their fathers for the problems they were facing. "The fathers have eaten sour grapes," they said, "And the children's teeth are set on edge" (18:2). But God rebuked them for this erroneous charge, declaring that each person lives or dies on the basis of his own behavior, not the behavior of someone else (18:3-18).

By the time Ezekiel was told to warn the people to turn from their evil ways, many had finally realized that their problems were their own fault and not the fault of their fathers. They said, "If our transgressions and our sins lie upon us, and we pine away in them, how can we then live?" (33:10).

God's response to this admission of guilt and seeming hopeless condition is the heart of the watchman's message:

"Say to them: 'As I live,' says the Lord GOD, 'I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why would you die, O house of Israel?'" (verse 11).

### A Timeless Message

While the watchman's warning was given to an ancient people suffering the consequences of their own wrongdoing, and pertained primarily to the loss or preservation of their

physical lives, its core message of *repentance and remission of sins* is timeless, and is essential to the commission Jesus Christ gave to His church.

The resurrected Christ said to His disciples, “Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that *repentance and remission of sins* should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:46,47).

John the Baptist, in preparing the way before Jesus, “came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, ‘*Repent*, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!’” (Matthew 3:1).

The message of repentance was central to Jesus’ own teaching. Like His forerunner, He admonished, “*Repent*, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17).

On the first Pentecost after Christ’s death and resurrection, the inspired apostle Peter admonished, “*Repent*, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the *remission of sins*; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).

Later, addressing a different group, the apostle said, “*Repent* therefore and *be converted*, that your sins may be blotted out...” (Acts 3:19).

These and many other scriptures prove conclusively that the message of repentance and remission of sins is and always has been a fundamental part of the work of God upon this earth—and it’s the heart and core of the *real* message of the watchman.

### **The Gospel According to Ezekiel**

Ezekiel’s message is not all bad news. As stated previously, the prophet was to proclaim the good news of God’s promise to regather the scattered people of Israel and Judah, reestablish His covenant with them, and restore the land of Israel to national greatness.

Listen to God’s promise as stated

in Ezekiel 11:17–19:

Therefore say, “Thus says the Lord GOD: ‘I will gather you from the peoples, assemble you from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel.’ And they will go there, and they will take away all its detestable things and all its abominations from there. Then I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within them, and take the stony heart out of their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in My statutes and keep My judgments and do them; and they shall be My people, and I will be their God.”

After further expressing His disapproval of Israel’s unfaithfulness, God again reiterates His promise to renew His covenant with her. In Ezekiel 16:60–63, God says,

Nevertheless I will remember My covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish an everlasting covenant with you. Then you will remember your ways and be ashamed....And I will establish My covenant with you. Then you shall know that I am the LORD, that you may remember and be ashamed, and never open your mouth anymore because of your shame, when I provide you an atonement for all you have done....

Again and again, God pronounces severe judgments against Israel and Judah, but in the midst of these dire descriptions are assurances of Israel’s return to the land and restoration to fellowship with God. Notice the physical and spiritual blessings promised in Ezekiel 36:24–30:

For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put

My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. Then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; you shall be My people, and I will be your God. I will deliver you from all your uncleannesses. I will call for the grain and multiply it, and bring no famine upon you. And I will multiply the fruit of your trees and the increase of your fields, so that you need never again bear the reproach of famine among the nations.

Remember, as Ezekiel proclaimed God’s message to the captives in Babylonia, Jeremiah was proclaiming essentially the same message in Palestine. Both warned of the final destruction of Jerusalem and Judah; both spoke of a future time of restoration when God would reestablish His covenant with Israel and Judah; both spoke of a Davidic king who would rule from Jerusalem (Ezekiel 37:24–28; Jeremiah 31:31–34; 33:14–16).

The “everlasting covenant” Ezekiel spoke of is the “new covenant” Jeremiah and the writer of the book of Hebrews described (cf. Hebrews 8:6–13). God’s promise to renew His covenant with the children of Israel is based upon the promise He made to Abraham centuries earlier.

God promised Abraham that He would multiply his descendants and make them into a great nation, and that through his offspring all the families of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:2,3). This, in a nutshell, is the gospel of the Kingdom of God!

The government of God upon this earth will begin with the restored nation of Israel and spread to all nations. Israel, as model nation, will be the means through which all the families of the earth will partake of the blessings promised to Abraham. Israel’s King—Jesus Christ—will begin His righteous reign in the promised land, and will ultimately bring all nations under His rulership.

Ezekiel 37 describes the reconsti-

tution of Israel and Judah as a single nation under one King. Chapters 38 and 39 describe God's fierce judgment against the enemies of the newly constituted nation. The remaining chapters of the book provide a detailed description of the restored city and temple of the future Messianic reign.

That's the *good news* of Ezekiel's message—and it is an integral part of the message God's church today is commissioned to proclaim throughout the earth. It is essential to the *real* "work of the watchman," which is a *collective* work, not the job of one man.

### Meaning of "Watch"

According to some would-be prophets, the work of the watchman involves "watching" for prophetic fulfillments in the daily newspaper, and assuming prophetic significance for every earthquake, drought, flood, or other disaster that makes the headlines. Incredibly, even when a particular "watchman" has a long history of failed predictions, people will continue to follow him, claiming that he has some special "anointing," which is reflected in his oratory skills and "gift" for analyzing news events "in the light of Bible prophecy." The "watchman" shouts a loud and reverberating "I TOLD YOU SO!" on the rare occasion of an accurate prediction, but seems to easily forget the many times he was wrong.

Beware of those who come along and, with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other, attempt to read prophetic fulfillments into the headlines. Such are the tactics of the false teachers Jesus warned His disciples about.

When the disciples inquired about the sign of Christ's coming and the end of the age, Jesus said, "Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many" (Matthew 24:4,5).

True to Jesus' warning, many claiming to be the Messiah (Christ)

*did* come on the scene during that period. To get people to follow them, they resorted to sensationalism. Notice:

"And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet" (verse 6).

Read that again! Did Jesus say, "When you hear about wars and rumors of wars, you should KNOW that the end is near!"? No! He said *just the opposite!* He said, "See that you are not troubled...the end is *not yet*." It was the *false* Christs who claimed that wars, rumors of wars, earthquakes, and other bad-news events were "signs" of the end of the present age and nearness of the Messianic kingdom! They were the first-century counterparts of today's advocates of "headline theology."

The tactics of today's sensationalists have changed little. They insist that Jesus' admonition to "watch" is a command to watch for prophetic fulfillments in the daily headlines. That is NOT what Jesus meant!

To "watch" is to be alert, or prepared. Jesus said, "Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming" (Matthew 24:42). This does not mean that we should watch for prophetic fulfillments in the headlines so that we will know how much time we have left before the Second Coming. It simply means that we should make sure we are prepared *at all times* because we do *not* know when Christ will return. The command to "watch" is another way of saying, "Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil...[and] that you may be able to withstand [or stand your ground] in the evil day, and having done all, to stand" (Ephesians 6:11,13).

The true "work of the watchman" is not a "work" of attempting to read

prophetic fulfillments into the daily headlines. It is not a "work" of watching the weather, or reporting on the pope's latest visit, or shouting about El Niño or the latest natural disaster. It is a work of preaching *repentance and the remission of sins* to as many as possible, and of providing faith-enhancing instructions for those who turn to God.

### Don't Put It Off!

We do not know how much time we have left. The final tribulation period may be only a few years away, or it may be in the distant future. We simply do not know. Our job is not to worry over *when* the end of the age might occur, but to be prepared at all times. After all, we are mortal; we're *dying!* Any one of us could die at any moment. We simply have no guarantees. And *that* is precisely why you need to act now!

Don't put it off any longer! Turn to God in genuine *repentance*; resolve that you are going to begin obeying Him; accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, trusting Him to blot out your transgressions and give you the help you need in living a godly life; and then give us a call, and we'll do our best to put you in touch with someone who can counsel you for baptism.

Will you choose life by turning from your sins and trusting in God's provisions for redemption, or will you choose the way that leads to death? That's the question Ezekiel set before the people, and it's the question that has been set before you today.

The choice is yours. Which will it be?

Choose life! ☐

All Scripture quotations were taken from the New King James version.

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