

# EZEKIEL'S RESPONSIBILITY

"Why couldn't you just send her money for a ride?" Kiyanna asked as she was fastening her seatbelt.

"She doesn't have the right app, and she's broke" replied Yvette. "Thanks again for riding with me. I didn't want to go by myself."

Yvette's friend had called her thirty minutes prior with yet another financial emergency. But this was a big one! Her friend had lost a bunch of money at the blackjack table.

"How far is this casino?" asked Kiyanna.

"It's a twenty-minute drive," Yvette said, repositioning her cell phone on its mount.

"I don't know why you keep bailing her out," said Kiyanna. "You're enabling her. How does she maintain a living?"

"She works and lives in her mother's house, which is paid off."

Yvette's friend was an only child, and her mother died five years ago. She never knew her father and was not especially close to her extended family.

"Her mother used to warn her years ago about throwing money away on lottery tickets," said Yvette. "She started right out of high school. She'd say it was just something fun to do."

However, this "fun" had escalated to occasionally playing slot machines. Then, she was frequenting the casinos within a radius of her home. Yvette didn't know exactly when her friend graduated to the blackjack table, "where the real money is."

"This situation does not end well, Yvette," Kiyanna said. "When are you going to see that?"

**1 Why do people ignore warning signs?**

**2 Share about a time you questioned a warning sign. What happened?**

**3 What is an example of a spiritual warning sign?**

<sup>7</sup> So thou, O son of man, I have set thee a watchman unto the house of Israel; therefore thou shalt hear the word at my mouth, and warn them from me.

<sup>8</sup> When I say unto the wicked, O wicked man, thou shalt surely die; if thou dost not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand. <sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, if thou warn the wicked of his way to turn from it; if he do not turn from his way, he shall die in his iniquity; but thou hast delivered thy soul.

<sup>10</sup> Therefore, O thou son of man, speak unto the house of Israel; Thus ye speak, saying, If our transgressions and our sins be upon us, and we pine away in them, how should we then live? <sup>11</sup> Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?

<sup>7</sup> “Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the people of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. <sup>8</sup> When I say to the wicked, ‘You wicked person, you will surely die,’ and you do not speak out to dissuade them from their ways, that wicked person will die for their sin, and I will hold you accountable for their blood. <sup>9</sup> But if you do warn the wicked person to turn from their ways and they do not do so, they will die for their sin, though you yourself will be saved.

<sup>10</sup> “Son of man, say to the Israelites, ‘This is what you are saying: “Our offenses and sins weigh us down, and we are wasting away because of them. How then can we live?”’ <sup>11</sup> Say to them, ‘As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, people of Israel?’”

## A Watchman for Israel

*Warn the people.* This is the call for the prophet Ezekiel. He is a prophet to a people in exile, where he receives this important mission from the Lord. He shall proclaim God’s message to those who habitually disobey God’s commands. Even in life under Babylon’s rule, God’s people need a messenger.

This humble “son of man” (which means the same as *human being*) is called a watchman in this text (also in Ezek. 3:16–17). It underscores his role as a herald of warnings from the Lord. In the ancient Near East, every major town has a watchman stationed at the city

gate, someone responsible for the safety and protection of the people. If any kind of danger is advancing upon the city, a watchman can spot the signals from far away. He can sound the alarm to bar the gates and to protect everyone from an attack to come.

But God uses the symbol of a watchman to refer to the people's need for repentance. Because sin is like an attacking army, the prophet can watch for signs that God's people are heading into catastrophe. As their watchman, Ezekiel is tasked with warning the wicked against continuing to do what is wrong. If he fails in his role—metaphorically, if he falls asleep instead of watching carefully—the lives and safety of others would be upon him (Ezek. 33:8). God would still punish the wicked, but it would be Ezekiel's failure too. Conversely, if Ezekiel warns Israel to turn away from sin, but the people refuse, they will die in their sin while Ezekiel's own life is spared (Ezek. 33:9). Ezekiel would be blameless if he has done the job of giving the warning.

The exiles in Babylon might think of themselves as blameless. They see consequences for sin everywhere, but they do not connect the dots to their own behavior. They say, "How . . . can we live?" (v. 10). Through Ezekiel, God expresses a desire for reconciliation. God does not even enjoy punishing the wicked (v. 11). Rather, God wants the people to turn and to avoid death as a consequence.

**1 What is the role of a watchman?**

**2 What would Ezekiel warn people against?**

**3 How does God feel about punishing and killing "the wicked"?**

<sup>12</sup> Therefore, thou son of man, say unto the children of thy people, The righteousness of the righteous shall not deliver him in the day of his transgression: as for the wickedness of the wicked, he shall not fall thereby in the day that he turneth from his wickedness; neither shall the righteous be able to live for his righteousness in the day that he sinneth. <sup>13</sup> When I shall say to the righteous, that he shall surely live; if he trust to his own righteousness, and commit iniquity, all his righteousnesses shall not be remembered; but for his iniquity that he hath committed, he shall die for it. <sup>14</sup> Again, when I say unto the wicked, Thou shalt surely die; if he turn from his sin, and do that which is lawful and right; <sup>15</sup> If the wicked restore the pledge, give again that he had robbed, walk in the statutes of life, without committing iniquity; he shall surely live, he shall not die. <sup>16</sup> None of his sins that he hath committed shall be mentioned unto him:

<sup>12</sup> “Therefore, son of man, say to your people, ‘If someone who is righteous disobeys, that person’s former righteousness will count for nothing. And if someone who is wicked repents, that person’s former wickedness will not bring condemnation. The righteous person who sins will not be allowed to live even though they were formerly righteous.’ <sup>13</sup> If I tell a righteous person that they will surely live, but then they trust in their righteousness and do evil, none of the righteous things that person has done will be remembered; they will die for the evil they have done. <sup>14</sup> And if I say to a wicked person, ‘You will surely die,’ but they then turn away from their sin and do what is just and right—<sup>15</sup> if they give back what they took in pledge for a loan, return what they have stolen, follow the decrees that give life, and do no evil—that person will surely live; they will not die. <sup>16</sup> None of the sins that person has committed will be remembered against them.”

## Evaluating Behavior

If God does not enjoy punishing “the wicked,” how does God feel about people who flip from one way of living to another? That is the question addressed in this section. In the first case, say a person has been righteous before God for their entire life, but that same person starts a new sinful pattern. As Ezekiel communicates, their formerly righteous behavior does *not* outweigh their sin. As he says, “The righteous person who sins will not be allowed to live” (v. 12). No person is above the fray and immune to being judged harshly for

sin. Otherwise, a person could reason, “I’ve done enough.” Rather, God will deliberately “forget” any former righteousness, if a person walks into a new path of sin (v. 13).

Alternatively, say a person has been wicked in the past, but this person repents. Ezekiel uses a specific example: If someone returns ill-gotten goods (something stolen or accepted in a manipulative trade), and if that same person has truly reformed their ways so as to follow God’s decrees into the future, “that person will surely live; they will not die” (v. 15).

These statements all reveal a defense of God’s *fairness*. The exiles might try to blame God or the Babylonians for their plight. They believe God’s judgment is harsh and that they have no room to repent. However, the message to them is to be compassionate and merciful. All they need to do, regardless of past behavior, is to return to the faithful service of God.

Those who consider themselves righteous cannot rest on past behavior, or worse, turn to sin (Ezek. 33:13). No matter how righteous they believe themselves to be, the Lord calls them to follow His commands, to repay any debts, and to practice justice. Instead of death, in this new reality of exile, God continues to offer life.

**1 Why is it important for the exiles to take responsibility for their own actions?**

**2 How is the message of repentance a message that offers hope?**

**3 What kinds of behaviors might people be tempted to trust as evidence of past righteousness?**

## Grading on a Curve?

I remember a class that I took in high school. The teacher had designed the course to stretch his students. For quizzes and tests, the topics were so challenging that most classmates and I worried we had gotten less than half of them right. We soon learned that the same teacher graded on a generous curve. “The highest score on this test was seventy-four percent,” he would say, “so anything above sixty-four is an A.”

I fear that many of us treat God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness the same way. We might think to ourselves, *I’m doing so much, how could I possibly be facing consequences?* We forget that the righteous requirement of God is, as expressed by Jesus, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). It might not feel fair to be accountable for it all, but we are.

But in the new covenant context, God has given His Word, and more than that, God has given faithful men and women who teach and proclaim the gospel of Jesus. Like Ezekiel, who held the role of watchman, the apostle Paul says, “I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” (1 Cor. 9:16). When the heat is on, when all eyes are watching, and at great peril to themselves, godly men and women remain “on the wall” to declare the truth of the good news. They warn of the consequences of unfaithfulness, and they proclaim God’s offer of life.

**1 In your experience, where and when has God used a “watchman” (male or female) to warn against danger ahead?**

**2 How have you ever tried to grade yourself on a curve?**

**3 How has the role of messenger changed in a new covenant context, when we have the gospel of Jesus to share?**



## Bringing a Message of God's Salvation

God calls Ezekiel to serve as a watchman in a particular time and place. But God expects all people to speak the truth in love and to seek the good of others. With the Word of God and the person of Jesus before us as examples, each of us has a circle of influence where we can share the good news of God's salvation.

**My circle of influence is my \_\_\_\_\_ .**

**(Examples: church, business, home, school, community)**

*Father, help me to be a faithful witness of Your mercy and desire that all should turn to You to receive new life.*

### Key Text

So thou, O son of man, I have set thee a watchman unto the house of Israel; therefore thou shalt hear the word at my mouth, and warn them from me. —Ezekiel 33:7 KJV

“Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the people of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me.” —Ezekiel 33:7 NIV

### Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

**Week of November 24 through November 29**

**Mon.** Ezekiel 37:1–7—God Breathes New Life.

**Tue.** Ezekiel 37:8–14—A Resurrection of Hope.

**Wed.** Isaiah 55:1–9—The Thirsty Will Be Refreshed.

**Thu.** John 7:2–10, 37–39—Rivers of Living Water.

**Fri.** Revelation 21:1–7—Hope for God's New Creation.

**Sat.** Revelation 22:1–5—The Tree of Life.

**Next Week:** Ezekiel 47:1–9, 12

*We will turn to hopeful message of what God can do. Ezekiel uses water as an image of life. Can you think of any other verses about streams of water?*