

“The Desire of God”

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“I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked” (Ezekiel 33:11).

Ezekiel 33:7-20

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(Corinth sermons are available in audio and print forms at corinthtoday.org/sermons.)

Decision America

Franklin Graham is coming to Hickory this Thursday evening, L. P. Frans Stadium, 7 PM. The event is sponsored by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, continuing a long tradition of public events designed to draw large crowds to hear the Gospel. I plan to be there and to invite others, and I hope you will, too.

As I wrote in our church newsletter, I’m aware of a range of responses in the Christian community when we mention the name, “Franklin Graham.” The most common response is some form of, “He’s not his father.” Franklin Graham would be the first to agree. He’s not Billy Graham and he’s not trying to be.

I have personal empathy for Franklin Graham because when I came to Corinth as pastor in 1993, I was still being compared to Dr. Althouse who had died 25 years earlier. I have advance empathy for whoever follows me as senior pastor for the same reason.

I’m more aware than anyone that I am a flawed leader and messenger, and that is true of Franklin Graham and was true of Billy Graham and Dr. Althouse. Fortunately, God does his work through flawed messengers or we’d all be in trouble. So I ask you to support the Decision America event even though I would say some things differently than Franklin Graham will say them. If you’re not going to use this opportunity to share Christ with neighbors, what is your alternate strategy?

Franklin Graham believes his calling is similar to that of Ezekiel. In two different passages in the book of Ezekiel God designates the priest-turned-prophet as a “watchman.” In a moment we will talk about some of the qualities essential to the watchman. “Popular” is not one of them. “Perfect” isn’t either. Nor is it that one’s message lines up exactly with mine.

Speak up!

There are three main sections in Ezekiel, and all of it pivots on Ezekiel 33:21, when the first survivor arrives in Babylon from Jerusalem shouting, “The city has fallen!” A wave of emaciated refugees would follow, forced to walk 700 miles from their home city, dazed, dejected, and weakened after 18 months of siege and five months of travel. What they had believed impossible had happened: God’s home, the temple in Jerusalem, had been ransacked and burned after the Babylonian army finally broke through the wall. Their king had been forced to watch his sons die in front of his eyes, and then he was blinded.

The first 24 chapters of Ezekiel predict this spiritual and political catastrophe. Ezekiel’s actions border on the psychotic, at least to the exiles already in Babylon. They think he’s crazy not only because of what he says – that God’s glory will abandon the temple and the city – but because of how he says it: often without words. God is going to allow the destruction and desolation of Jerusalem because of its idolatry.

In chapters 25-32, Ezekiel includes a litany of judgments against Israel’s neighbors, especially Tyre and Sidon, city-states to the north, and Egypt, the perennial power to the south. The purpose of these judgments is to assure Israel that when God regathers them they will no longer have to deal with threatening neighbors. God wants them to live in safety and prosperity (28:26), free from “malicious neighbors who are painful briars and sharp thorns” (28:24).

Chapter 33 turns the corner because after Jerusalem falls, Ezekiel’s message will mostly be one of hope and restoration in chapters 34-48. Hope is ahead! But first, there’s a final summary of who Ezekiel is and what God wants from his people in response. This is what we read a few moments ago in 33:7-20.

When God first called Ezekiel (3:16-19), he designated the prophet as a “watchman.” Nobody in ancient times needed an explanation of what that meant. Walled cities felt secure not only because of the walls, but because of the vigilance of 24/7 sentinels. Someone was always looking for the approach of an enemy or a threat. The night watchman – then and now – was especially critical because darkness could easily mask a serious danger. Typically, the watchman’s response was a trumpet call.

A watchman requires several qualifications: observant, vigilant, discerning, accountable, decisive, courageous, credible, persistent, accurate. Aesop’s famous tale about the boy who cried wolf describes a watchman no one wants. The danger must be

real, and the message must be clear. Once the role of watchman is accepted, there is awesome responsibility.

This is what God says to Ezekiel. “Your role as Israel’s watchman requires that you *speak up!*” There’s a certain irony in Ezekiel’s role. He is delivering warnings to Israel *from God* with a warning *about God*. That’s like Al Qaida sending a message to the CIA with their intent to launch an attack. It’s not their modus operandi.

When God designates Ezekiel as a watchman, the call is accompanied by a stern warning. God’s instruction is clear and direct, and Ezekiel is to pass it on. If he does not, God says to Ezekiel, there will be two consequences: “That wicked person will die for their sin, *and* I will hold you accountable for their blood” (33:8). If, however, Ezekiel speaks up, then the wicked person might still die, but Ezekiel will be exonerated.

A watchman is not responsible for what people do with the message. A watchman is responsible to (1) watch, and then (2) speak up.

History is full of examples of unheeded watchmen. Adlai Stevenson warned President Kennedy not to go to Dallas. Cyril Evans warned the Titanic of dangerous icebergs. John O’Neil warned the Bush Administration about Yemeni terrorists plotting to hijack planes. President Roosevelt’s office received a warning of Japanese plans to attack the Hawaiian Islands three days before Pearl Harbor. In 1905, Akitsune Imamura warned Japan that a major earthquake would strike within 50 years, killing more than 100,000 if Japan did not properly prepare. 120,000 died in the 1923 earthquake.

In each case, the ultimate responsibility did not lie with the watchman, because the warning was passed on. It’s sobering to be a watchman. It’s a sobering to be a pastor or a parent or a teacher. It’s not always easy to discern what to say or when to say it. James writes, “Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly” (James 3:1).

Shape up!

If the responsibility of the watchman is to “speak up,” the responsibility of the hearer is to “shape up.” At least that’s the case with Ezekiel’s ministry. Ezekiel is off the hook if he issues a clarion call about what God’s going to do and why. Israel’s responsibility is just beginning when they hear the message.

Chapter 33 largely repeats an earlier message in chapter 18. Repetition is common among watchmen, among prophets. In the earlier passage the focus was more on individual responsibility. The popular phrase today is “God has no grandchildren.” You don’t get by on your parents’ faith or goodness.

Here the message is more about past behavior vs. present behavior vs. future behavior. If you used to be good but now you're bad, you still need to repent. If you're good now but you turn bad, you will still need to repent.

How many politicians, celebrities, and business icons have had to learn that a lifetime of achievement can be wiped away by one misbehavior? Lori Loughlin was one of the darlings of Hallmark movies until she was caught up in the college admissions scandal. Antonio Brown was a star receiver in the NFL until sexual assault allegations cost him two jobs. Robin Hayes went from elder party statesman to a courtroom where, when a judge asked him if he was guilty of a \$2 million bribery scheme, the answer was not, "I did a lot of great things in public service." It was, "Yes, sir."

Ezekiel says, "If a righteous person turns from their righteousness and does evil, they will die for it. And if a wicked person turns away from their wickedness and does what is just and right, they will live by doing so." We get caught up in debates over once saved, always saved. Those are the wrong questions. The right question is this: "Am I relying on yesterday's righteousness to cover today's sin?"

We concoct excuses for dismissing the watchman. One of our favorites is that the watchman is flawed – a hypocrite, not worthy of my attention. No watchman is flawless. My judgment of the watchman may be an excuse for not shaping up.

Ezekiel urges the people: "Turn!" It is a call to repentance. Warren Wiersbe notes there is a difference between repentance, remorse, and regret. Remorse is feeling bad about the sin. Regret is stronger, an admission of guilt. Neither one is repentance, which is to *stop doing what offends the holiness of God*.

The people say as we are prone to say, "That's not fair! God's not just! My sins don't deserve that!" In an earlier Ezekiel sermon, we said that it's not up to us to put God in the dock, to judge his fairness. Ezekiel's heart cry is this: "Why will you die?"

If you think Ezekiel is being unreasonable harping incessantly about sin and idolatry, perhaps it will help to compare it to an intervention. When an addict's attachment to what will destroy him or her becomes extreme, the closest family and friends gather around to say, "We have agreed that we are going to stop enabling your behavior. It's time to get help. We will no longer support your self-destruction." Generally, there is an intervention specialist to help both the addict and the loved ones engage the process so that it's about life and health not just condemnation.

Ezekiel is the intervention specialist in chapter 33. "Turn! Don't die!"

The desire of God

It's a mistake to turn us all into Ezekiel or make a direct comparison between 21st century America and 7th century B.C. Israel. Yes, we all have a responsibility and "speak

up” but God gave a direct word to Ezekiel about a specific circumstance. But he hasn’t given one to me and it is rare for God to speak so directly and explicitly. It requires a lot of discernment and patience to know when to speak up and when to shut up about someone else’s sin. I think I’ve probably made more “watchman mistakes” than any other kind – either by speaking too much or too little.

So the situation has changed and the people have changed, but God hasn’t changed! What we see in this text is a clear indication of the desire of God. Did you miss it? It’s in verse 11: “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.”

These words remind me of what Peter says in the New Testament: “The Lord isn’t really being slow about his promise, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent.” (2 Peter 3:8-9, NLT).

The desire of God is life. Physical life or spiritual life? Yes! Abundant life now or eternal life with him? Yes! Personal happiness and fulfillment or healthy relationships? Yes! The Hebrew word is *shalom*. The New Testament equivalent in English is peace.

The Jewish people were about to experience all of that crashing and burning. God ached for the devastation of a dream he himself had promised them. And everything God had promised them – from “the land flowing with milk and honey” to security and prosperity under the leadership of God’s king, with harmony and hope was his desire for them. He deeply grieved that it was all going up in smoke over their disobedience. If you don’t hear God weeping in Ezekiel, you missed the main point.

But all of that is a setup for Jesus! It’s a setup because that vision of peace and joy and meaning and life and hope and right relationship with God and others is still God’s desire – but it’s no longer limited to the nation of Israel. It is a universal desire. And the rebellion and idolatry which grieved the heart of God because it brought death instead of life is no longer limited to twelve tribes bowing down before physical statues. The New Testament describes it as a universal problem with universal consequences.

This is why Christ came. The message Jesus came shouting to the masses at the beginning of his ministry is Ezekiel’s message: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand! Turn, turn from all the idols of the heart to which you’ve attached yourself! Turn before it’s too late! If you don’t turn now, you risk hell.”

God is still saying, “I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked!” What’s new as Jesus’ life, death and resurrection unfold is that God has made a way in Christ for all your sins and wickedness to be wiped clean. That’s why we gather around this table today. Ezekiel is my watchman, as are Jeremiah and Hosea and Paul and Peter and James who all point to Jesus as my only hope. In him alone I see and hear the desire of God for me to live forever. Amen.