

Ezekiel 33:7-11

⁷But I have appointed you, son of man, to be a watchman for the house of Israel. So whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you are to warn them from me. ⁸When I say to a wicked man, “Wicked man, you shall surely die,” if you do not speak to warn the wicked man against his way, that wicked man will die because of his guilt, but I will also hold you responsible for his blood. ⁹But if you do warn the wicked man to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, he will die because of his guilt, but you will have saved your life.

¹⁰So you, son of man, say the following to the house of Israel.

This is what you people are saying: “Certainly our rebellion and our sins weigh us down, and because of them we are rotting away. How then can we live?” ¹¹Say to them, “As I live, declares the LORD God, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from their way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why should you die, O house of Israel?”

Why Should You Die?

I.

There he stood. On top of the city walls...again. Another shift of guard duty in the middle of the night. The watchman, they called him. Most of the time guard duty is boring, but it's a job of utmost importance.

Night after night, no night vision goggles, no radar, no high-tech equipment of any kind. All you had to scan the horizon was your own two eyes. You stood there with a sword strapped to your side, but almost never drew it out of its scabbard. You had a ram's horn slung by a strap over your shoulder to sound the alarm, but you almost never blew it.

That was the job. Stand guard. If there was an imminent threat, sound the horn—as loudly as you could. Why should people die with no warning? Having sounded the alarm, the watchman would be among the first to run toward the threat and into the battle.

The watchman reminds me of today's firefighters. When a building is burning, you don't run *into* it—that would be incredibly risky. But that's exactly what firefighters do—not because they're reckless. They run in because they ask “Why should anyone die?” They know someone is in there that needs to be rescued.

25 years ago this week I was at a Pastors' Conference, just as I will be this week. I stood in a lobby watching breaking news from New York. A plane was lodged near the top of one of the towers of the World Trade Center. As the broadcasters were talking, another plane flew into the picture and hit the other tower. It was immediately clear: terrorism.

But the New York firefighters didn't spend time thinking about the cause. Their main concern was “Why should people die?” While terrified people ran *down* the stairs, out of the smoke and debris and fire, 343 firefighters ran *into* the building and *up* the stairs. There were other people who didn't realize the danger. Why should they die? Those people needed to be warned; they needed to be rescued. That's courage. Running *toward* the very thing that is killing people. Running to help.

Ezekiel wasn't to be a firefighter running into a burning building, but he *was* a prophet of God in a long line of prophets. God told him: “I have appointed you, son of man, to be a watchman for the house of Israel. So whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you are to warn them from me” (Ezekiel 33:7, EHV).

A watchman doesn't get to stand at a comfortable distance and watch the scene unfold. He has to walk—or even run—*toward* the danger, look right at it, and do something about it. Ezekiel wasn't given the option of being a watchman among many other professions to consider. God *told* him that this was his task; he was appointed to be God's watchman.

“When I say to a wicked man, ‘Wicked man, you shall surely die,’ if you do not speak to warn the wicked man against his way, that wicked man will die because of his guilt, but I will also hold you responsible for his blood” (Ezekiel 33:8, EHV). Ezekiel was to relay the information God gave him. He couldn’t run down the stairs while others were in danger.

“But if you do warn the wicked man to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, he will die because of his guilt, but you will have saved your life” (Ezekiel 33:9, EHV). Not everyone listens to the warning. Some people think the danger is being exaggerated. That’s not the fault of the watchman—the warning has been given, just as God wanted.

God’s question hangs over the warning: “Why should you die, O house of Israel?” (Ezekiel 33:11, EHV).

II.

Why should you die? Jesus says in today’s Gospel: “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his sin” (Matthew 18:15, EHV). It all sounds so simple when you hear it just like that. But what about when it comes time to put it into practice?

You have a family member who is making horrible choices—a bad relationship, an addiction, a pattern of anger, the pattern of a slow drift away from God’s Word and worship and the fellowship of believers. Perhaps it’s a friend who is doing something that isn’t just unwise, it’s sin, and it’s dragging other people down with them.

The danger isn’t a burning building, it’s a person who doesn’t want to hear that what they’re doing is wrong. Everything in you says: “It’s not my place. Who am I to say anything? Just let it be.” Or perhaps: “I don’t want to make things worse.” Or maybe: “They’ll figure things out eventually.”

But Jesus says, in effect: “Don’t just stand there and watch your fellow Christian walk toward spiritual death.” Why should your friend die? Go after them.

That’s what happened in today’s Second Reading. Perhaps Paul didn’t really feel qualified to confront Peter. Peter was the Apostle who had been with Jesus from the beginning. He was the one who spoke boldly at Pentecost and witnessed 3,000 people coming to faith in one day. But Peter’s actions were endangering the faith of other Christians.

So, Paul said: “When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly wrong” (Galatians 2:11, EHV). Paul wasn’t trying to prove he was smarter than Peter. He didn’t enjoy confrontation. He just wanted to ask: “Why should all those souls die?” Why should their faith be threatened? Sinners need to warn sinners.

The people in Ezekiel’s day already felt the weight of their situation. God told Ezekiel that they were saying: “Certainly our rebellion and our sins weigh us down, and because of them we are rotting away. How then can we live?” (Ezekiel 33:10, EHV).

At the time God told Ezekiel to be a watchman, the people had already been conquered. They were living in exile. They knew something was wrong. It was the result of ignored warnings. Prophet after prophet had called them to turn—but they had not turned. Now, they were living with the consequences, and the future looked even darker.

We face a similar challenge. Sin left unchecked still leads to exile—a spiritual exile. Neglect of the Word, gossip that tears down a neighbor’s reputation, the quiet assumption that we get to decide when life begins or ends, the idols of comfort and entertainment that crowd out the things of God—none of these are small. Left alone, left unrepentant, these things rot us from the inside and result in eternal exile in hell.

So it is that the task of being a watchman is hard. Perhaps you sat across the table from someone you care about and tried to speak the hard truth. You’ve watched a fellow Christian drift away, and the words stuck in your throat. You’ve heard the accusation: “Who are *you* to judge?”

We’re all hypocrites. Ezekiel was a sinner, just like those he was trying to warn. Paul was a sinner, trying to warn his fellow sinner, Peter. You and I are sinners. Jesus said: “If your brother

sins against you, go and show him his sin” (Matthew 18:15, EHV). The purpose is not to prove how much better you are. Jesus tells us the purpose: “If he listens to you, you have regained your brother” (Matthew 18:15, EHV).

Or, as God told Ezekiel: “Say to them, ‘As I live, declares the LORD God, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from their way and live’” (Ezekiel 33:11, EHV).

What was true for the people of Israel is also true for us. Heritage won’t save you. Looking to your own efforts won’t save you. Looking the other way won’t save you. God’s Law remains clear, as God said through Ezekiel in an earlier chapter: “The soul who sins is the one who will die” (Ezekiel 18:20, EHV).

III.

But that’s not what God wants. The same God who pronounces that sin brings with it death also says: “As I live, declares the LORD God, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from their way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why should you die, O house of Israel?” (Ezekiel 33:11, EHV).

Why should you die?

There is a paradox in these verses. God is against us because of our sin. His Law is not a suggestion; his judgment is real. But this same God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. His deepest desire is that the wicked turn and live.

Why should you die? The warning itself is an act of God’s mercy.

God does not pretend sin is a small thing. God says he hates sin; he judges sin; he punishes sin.

Jesus walked straight into that wrath, on purpose, for you. He did not run down the stairs with everyone else, saving himself. He did not come down from the cross, even when soldiers taunted him to do so. Hanging there, the sentence “you will surely die” landed on him. He carried what your sin earned so it would not fall on you. That’s the Son of God, walking up the stairs into a fire he did not start, to carry people out who had no hope on their own.

So what happens to the sinner who turns? King David said in today’s Psalm: “How blessed is the person whose rebellion is forgiven, whose sin is covered. ²How blessed is the person whose guilt the LORD does not charge against him” (Psalm 32:1-2, EHV). *Covered*. Not managed or overlooked or excused. Covered by the blood of the very Son the Father did not spare.

“Why should you die?” is not God backing you into a corner. It’s the voice of the One who already died in your place, asking you not to throw away what he bled to give you.

IV.

That changes everything about what it means for *you* to now be a watchman. You are not running toward your brother’s or sister’s sin o prove how much better you are. You already know that isn’t true—you are one who has already been rescued, one who needed someone to come and get you out.

Now you go the same way a firefighter enters a burning building: not for glory, but because you know the way out—the way to safety.

Jesus gives you the method: “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his sin just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have regained your brother” (Matthew 18:15, EHV). You don’t want to make sin a public spectacle. You want to win your brother back to the faith. “Why should you die?” you are asking. “Turn and live.” If that doesn’t work, you bring one or two others; if that doesn’t work, the whole church. The goal is always to rescue, not ruin.

So look around this week. You don’t need special equipment or more training. Just look to see if there is someone who needs to be asked: “Why should you die?” Give the brother or sister in your path the reminder that Jesus has already answered with his own blood. Remind them to turn and live. Amen.