

EZEKIEL 33
THE WATCHMAN

It's wartime; there's an air-raid! Whenever there was an air-raid the siren sounded to warn you that it was about to become dangerous. There would be a warden whose job it was to sound the siren and when the siren sounded, you would go to the shelter. The shelter was supposed to be a safer place, underground perhaps, smaller, not so susceptible to bomb damage. Now imagine that the warning has been given to the warden and it's his job to sound siren, but he doesn't do it; he doesn't warn you that the air-raid is imminent and people get caught out by the raid needlessly; he has failed in his duty; he has not carried out his responsibility and he is somehow responsible for the loss of life or injury; today he would be sued by his victims. Or, imagine that the warning sounds, but you choose to ignore it; you've heard the siren, but you still wander about the streets as if there is nothing wrong; you run a serious risk of damage, but you have made your choice! The warden has done his job!

Ezekiel was the watchman for Israel, the warden, the sentry on the city wall, warning people, telling people the news. For 5 years, Ezekiel had been telling people of Israel in exile in Babylon that God was judging them and that city was about to be destroyed. They didn't listen; they chose to think that he was mad, deluded! They said he was wrong and they chose not to listen. On Jan 8th 585 BC that all changed; a new set of exiles came from Jerusalem and the exiles in Babylon they heard that the city was destroyed; this other set of exiles arrived in Babylon telling the people there that all of Ezekiel's words had come true. The man they had accused of crying wolf – the wolf had arrived at the city gates and the city is destroyed. For the next 15 years Ezekiel will still act as watchman, but his message will be different – it will be a message of hope, that God will bless His people again, the city will be rebuilt; God will be amongst His people again. He still needs to watch for the danger signs and still needs to tell people to be careful, faithful, humble, but the man who preached judgment and gloom now preaches hope and grace.

The people ought to have listened. What is the best response to the watchman? Listen to this from the end of chapter 33: "*As for you...*" (33:30) Ezekiel is the talk of the town; people are talking about him everywhere; he is the most popular man in the city; they have got the convention t-shirt printed 'I've heard Ezekiel!'; he is public attraction number one. Is that it? Is that the best reaction? Yet, "*they hear...*" (33:32) For people really to have listened to Ezekiel, they would have put his words into practice; they would have changed way they lived; they would have turned away from sinful ways and turned to love God and be the kind of people God wanted them to be. That's best listening the people could give to Ezekiel. Enthusiasm is always easier than obedience, but obedience is always better!

Every preacher is like a watchman. It is not my job to tell you what you want to hear; it is my job to proclaim gospel of Jesus Christ. For most of the time, that means sharing good news with you, telling you of God's grace to us in Jesus, that Jesus came into our world, died on cross, rose again for us and is the Saviour and Lord for us and we should believe the good news, and find life in all its fullness in Jesus. It is great to proclaim that good news and let that good news touch our hearts to bless us. There are times, however, when the Bible leads us into darker waters (and we have seen some of that in this series in Ezekiel): there is the call to change, to turn away from sin, to repentance, and the reality of judgment – I have to tell you these things too, otherwise I fail in my responsibility. When the word of the Lord challenges us about something we're getting wrong, I have to preach that passage too, otherwise I fail to do my job, even if that makes us uncomfortable!

The Church in general is also the watchman. For our community, our culture, the Church as a whole has the responsibility to act as watchman. There is a responsibility on the whole church to tell people good news of Jesus Christ or to challenge accepted values and standards in our society. We have been thinking earlier of some ways and groups (SU's es-team, the Scottish Bible Society, Mission Aviation Fellowship) that do that in specific ways, but the whole church is to be the watchman. We all have the responsibility to tell people we know what the gospel is, when the opportunity arises. It is not your job or mine to persuade people to believe, but it is our responsibility to tell people. There is a story of one missionary who visited some remote tribe to begin to settle into the community with view to sharing the gospel and the tribal chief said 'if this is such good news, why has it taken 2000 years for you to tell my people?' The last thing people in our community should be able to say is 'nobody told me; I didn't know!' If people say that, we have failed in our church-watchman responsibility.

We also need to listen. The preacher had been preaching his heart out, but it had been a hard sermon to preach; he was saying some very hard things to the congregation and being critical of elements of the congregation's life; he had been challenging people to make profound changes to way they live. He went to the door of the Church at the end of the service, expecting all sorts of flak from people because of what he said and people came out and said 'nice sermon, minister!' He wondered: had they been listening to a word he had said? He was "*to them...*" (33:32) The real response to the preacher is to listen and to put the word of the Lord into practice, to do what the bible teaches, to make the changes Bible wants us to make. That is the best compliment we can make to any preacher; that is real listening.

I can't make you follow Jesus Christ; Ezekiel couldn't make people believe his message; we can't make people become Christians! But I can tell you about God and His grace, about Jesus and His work; Ezekiel did tell his people the word of the Lord that he had been given; we can and must tell people in our community what Christians stand for. That is the watchman's responsibility. Then it is up to those who hear to listen, to react, and to take to heart what we hear. Commit yourself today to look for an opportunity to tell someone else something about Jesus; pray for that opportunity to arise; think about what you would say when that opportunity does arise and pray for courage to take it! That's what this sermon is all about; do that and you will have been listening well.