1 Then the word of Jehovah came unto me, saying, 2Son of man, speak to the
children of thy people, and say unto them, When I bring the sword upon a land,
and the people of the land take a man from among them, and set him for their
watchman; 3if, when he seeth the sword come upon the land, he blow the
trumpet, and warn the people; 4then whosoever heareth the sound of the
trumpet, and taketh not warning, if the sword come, and take him away, his
blood shall be upon his own head. 5He heard the sound of the trumpet, and
took not warning; his blood shall be upon him; whereas if he had taken
warning, he would have delivered his soul. 6But if the watchman see the sword
come, and blow not the trumpet, and the people be not warned, and the sword
come, and take any person from among them; he is taken away in his iniquity,
but his blood will I require at the watchman’s hand.

7So thou, son of man, I have set thee a watchman unto the house of Israel;
therefore hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me. 8When
I say unto the wicked, O wicked man, thou shalt surely die, and 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 thy hand. 9Nevertheless, if thou warn
the wicked of his way to turn from it, and he turn not from his way; he shall
die in his iniquity, but thou hast delivered thy soul.

10And thou, son of man, say unto the house of Israel: Thus ye speak, saying,
Our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we pine away in them; how
then can we live? 11Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord Jehovah, 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? 12And 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; and as for the wickedness of the wicked, he shall not fall
thereby in the day that he turneth from his wickedness; neither shall he that is
righteous be able to live thereby in the day that he sinneth. 13When I say to the
righteous, that he shall surely live; if he trust to his righteousness, and commit
iniquity, none of his righteous deeds shall be remembered; but in his iniquity
that he hath committed, therein shall he die. 14Again, when I say unto the
wicked, Thou shalt surely die; if he turn from his sin, and do that which is
lawful and right; 15if the wicked restore the pledge, give again that which he
had taken by robbery, walk in the statutes of life, committing no iniquity; he
shall surely live, he shall not die. 16None of his sins that he hath committed
shall be remembered against him: he hath done that which is lawful and right;
he shall surely live (ASV, 1901).
Ezekiel 33:1-3

1 And the word of Jehovah came unto me, saying, 2Son of man, speak to the children of thy people, and say unto them, When I bring the sword upon a land, and the people of the land take a man from among them, and set him for their watchman; 3if, when he seeth the sword come upon the land, he blow the trumpet, and warn the people (ASV, 1901);

This often quoted and misquoted verse establishes the office of a responsible watchman (Hebrew tsafa, a sentinel or sentry) in Israel. God is affirming the establishing the office of one who will be assigned by the people of the country to sound the warning of imminent danger. It was customary to place the sentinel on the city wall in the time of a threatened attack from an enemy (II Samuel 18:24-25; II Kings 9:17; Jeremiah 4:5; 6:1; Hosea 8:1; Amos 3:6; Habakkuk 2:1).

Ancient cities were very vulnerable to attack at any time. Therefore the watchman was a very important civic responsibility. The amount of time the citizens who were outside the city walls had to get back in to safety was dependent upon the vigilance and timely warnings that came from the sentry.

Interestingly the word land is non-specific and therefore means generically any country. Since He is speaking directly to the prophet Ezekiel we can infer from the context that in this specific situation it pertains to the nation Israel. It further clarifies the sovereignty of God in that He is saying to Ezekiel, “When I bring the sword upon a land.” He is demonstrating His sovereign control over the earth even through the movement of armies in war against nations. This discussion begins with issues related to temporal issues. The same truth of responsibility is pertinent to spiritual ones as well (I Timothy 5:22; I Peter 5:2). All Christians are watchmen in the spiritual battle.

Ezekiel is hearing this for the second time and realizes that this will apply to him as he was commissioned as a watchman in the first section of this book (Ezekiel 3:16-21). He had been also primarily commissioned as a prophet bringing God’s judgment but that ministry was complete. Further when he was first appointed a sentry he was not told to let the children of Israel know this. Now however he is commanded to speak to the children of thy people, and say unto them. Jerusalem had already been invaded. This message was a different kind of watchman. While the general focus did not abandon personal responsibility its central tenor turned to God’s restoration of the nation Israel. God wants His people to be saved and would rather the suffering that He brings upon them could be avoided.

INDIVIDUALS HAVE PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Ezekiel 33:4-6

4Then whosoever heareth the sound of the trumpet, and taketh not warning, if the sword come, and take him away, his blood shall be upon his own head. 5He heard the sound of the trumpet, and took not warning; his blood shall be upon him; whereas if he had taken warning, he would have delivered his soul,
If an individual genuinely hears the warning sound of the impending danger and does not seek safety it is his own fault. He had the warning and was clearly given in that He heard the sound of the trumpet. There is a dual responsibility here both of the watchman and of the people. The watchman is required to sound the note of warning, and the people are to act accordingly seeking safety. So once the watchman had performed his duty and sounded the warning the responsibility to act fell on the one who heard the warning trumpet blast. There is no question of responsibility here. Once the warning had been given the individual who chose not to heed it had sealed his own guilt. It is quite clear that if he had obeyed the warning he would have escaped the coming affliction. The responsibility of the watchman though is stronger than that of the individual being warned. God says that if he does blow not the trumpet, he will suffer a stronger punishment. Because of his negligence God says that he would be “taken away in his iniquity.” God is clearly saying that he would be made to pay with his life. God said, “his blood will I require.” This is in accordance with the ancient law first given to Noah after the Flood and then finely defined in the Mosaic Law.

Genesis 9:5-6

5And surely your blood, the blood of your lives, will I require; at the hand of every beast will I require it: and at the hand of man, even at the hand of every man’s brother, will I require the life of man. 6Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man (ASV, 1901).

THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE WATCHMAN

Ezekiel 33:7-9

7So thou, son of man, I have set thee a watchman unto the house of Israel; therefore hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me. 8When I say unto the wicked, O wicked man, thou shalt surely die, and 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 thy hand. 9Nevertheless, if thou warn the wicked of his way to turn from it, and he turn not from his way; he shall die in his iniquity, but thou hast delivered thy soul (ASV, 1901).

The office first given to Ezekiel in chapter three is now officially reaffirmed. This office of the sentry was to impart the needs of the spiritual realm. God is making is quite clear that the unrepentant sinner could meet with a violent death. Just as the previous verses cited a dual responsibility of the watchman and the hearer this section does too. However here Ezekiel is named watchman unto the house of Israel and the ones who will not listen are called the wicked. This responsibility to guard the spirits of the flock outweighs any temporal or earthly responsibility. The failure to warn a person of their spiritual condition could lead to that person losing their life in the second death (Revelation 20:14). In this instance the watchman who fails to warn is responsible. If on the other hand the sentry
warns an individual and he does not heed the warning then the sentry has kept his own
soul from the second death. But the wicked will suffer because they did not heed the
warning. As for Ezekiel he did what the Lord commanded him to do and so did Jeremiah.
It was the leaders in Israel that led the people astray and contributed to the downfall of the
nation. In the spiritual realm we see the apostle Paul making this statement.

Acts 20:26-31

26 Wherefore I take you to record this day, that I am pure from the blood of all
men. 27 For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God.
28 Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the
Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he
hath purchased with his own blood. 29 For I know this, that after my departing
shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. 30 Also of
your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away
disciples after them. 31 Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of
three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears (KJV).

The teacher of God’s Word has the same responsibility as God gave Ezekiel. He is to
provide the warning by teaching you all the counsel of God. God has also made it quite
clear through the book of James that the teacher will receive the greater judgment and
therefore has the greater responsibility in the Church than others.

James 3:1

Be not many of you teachers, my brethren, knowing that we shall receive
heavier judgment (ASV, 1901).

GOD TAKES NO PLEASURE IN THE DEATH OF THE WICKED

Ezekiel 33:10-12

10 And thou, son of man, say unto the house of Israel: Thus ye speak, saying,
Our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we pine away in them; how
then can we live? 11 Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord Jehovah, 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? 12 And 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; and as for the wickedness of the wicked, he shall not fall
thereby in the day that he turneth from his wickedness; neither shall he that is
righteous be able to live thereby in the day that he sinneth (ASV, 1901).

Ezekiel at God’s command is to tell the nation Israel including himself that their
transgressions and our sins are upon us. It is their own fault that they are suffering (pine
away in them). The Divine retribution is a result of their own wickedness. Further God
tells him that, “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.” He says that He wants them
to turn from their wickedness and that they do not have to die both physically and
spiritually. Their problem is one of unbelief. They don’t believe that repentance can help
them. Therefore they don’t want to repent. Many people want to make God in their own
image and therefore decide what He should require of them. The Jews needed to be
shocked into a sense of genuine realization of what God actually requires. The destruction
of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. did just that. It left them in an unprotected
state and made them realize the enormity of their sins. God is calling for repentance
affirming that He does not desire to punish them.

No righteous deeds in the past can help against the transgression of the present. And also
no wicked deeds done in the past supersedes to prevail over a man who is presently
repentant and acting in a God fearing righteous manner. What this means is that no false
or fake admonitions of repentance will prevent Divine punishment to one who has become
wicked. The reverse also applies. To one who followed the ways of the wicked and then
truly became saved and accepted the imputation of God’s righteousness he will be
forgiven. God’s Law requires continued not sporadic adherence to its precepts. A saved
individual will continue to be obedient to God’s Law. A false convert may try and be
obedient to it by sooner or later will lapse back to disobedience. By their fruit we will
know them (Matthew 7:16). God knows the heart and can discern the righteous from the
wicked.

GOD COMMANDS RIGHTEOUSNESS

Ezekiel 33:13-16

13 When I say to the righteous, that he shall surely live; if he trust to his
righteousness, and commit iniquity, none of his righteous deeds shall be
remembered; but in his iniquity that he hath committed, therein shall he die.
14 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; 15 if the wicked restore the pledge,
give again that which he had taken by robbery, walk in the statutes of life,
committing no iniquity; he shall surely live, he shall not die. 16 None of his sins
that he hath committed shall be remembered against him: he hath done that
which is lawful and right; he shall surely live (ASV, 1901).

No man can assume that previous good deeds grant him a license to sin. God is telling
Ezekiel that the thought of having the favor of God is dependent on genuine salvation and
following after obedience to Him in faith to receive His Grace. God hates the outwardly
righteous. He knows the heart and one cannot hide from Him. The Mosaic Law said this
as much too.

Numbers 5:5-7

And Jehovah spake unto Moses, saying, 6 Speak unto the children of Israel,
When a man or woman shall commit any sin that men commit, so as to
trespass against Jehovah, and that soul shall be guilty; 7 then he shall confess
his sin which he hath done: and he shall make restitution for his guilt in full,
and add unto it the fifth part thereof, and give it unto him in respect of whom
he hath been guilty (ASV, 1901).

In other words genuine repentance is a sure sign that one is saved. The primary duty, when
a man turned from evil, was, to overcome his disobedience to God in his sin and make
restitution for it. We have the New Testament examples of the words of John the Baptist to the tax collectors.

Luke 3:12–14

12 And there came also publicans to be baptized, and they said unto him, Teacher, what must we do? 13 And he said unto them, Extort no more than that which is appointed you. 14 And soldiers also asked him, saying, And we, what must we do? And he said unto them, Extort from no man by violence, neither accuse any one wrongfully; and be content with your wages (ASV, 1901).

And the response of Zacchæus to the Lord Jesus

Luke 19:8-9

8 And Zacchæus stood, and said unto the Lord, Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor, and if I have wrongfully exacted aught of any man, I restore fourfold. 9 And Jesus said unto him, To-day is salvation come to this house, forasmuch as he also is a son of Abraham. 10 For the Son of man came to seek and to save that which was lost (ASV, 1901).