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Forging a Servant of God, Part 6

A most intriguing or, should I say, convicting passage in Ezekiel is Ezekiel 34.

Ezekiel 34:1-2a, "Then the word of the Lord came to me saying, 'Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to those shepherds, 'Thus says the Lord God...'"

What makes this passage so important to us is that in the Old Testament and New Testament there was NO OFFICIAL OFFICE OF SHEPHERD! Accordingly, God's choice of address here would include any and every individual in a position of trust or authority in the life of someone else in the Kingdom of God; like husbands, parents, elders, deacons, Bible study leaders, Sunday school

teachers, and so much more. I want you to see that “shepherd” is a catch-all word used by God to summarize the essence of the activity of leadership and so influence in the Kingdom of God.

This is also the case when it comes to the designation of “watchman” in the book of Ezekiel. Though Ezekiel was called to the ministry of a prophet; nevertheless, the Lord summarized his Commission with one word, “watchman”! This represented the essence of what Ezekiel was to be about as a man called to the ministry of a prophet. As such, God exhorted Ezekiel, and us through him, with this admonition:

Ezekiel 3:17a, “Son of man [once again stressing his insignificance outside of Christ and so his need to depend upon the Lord in his ministry], I have appointed you a watchman to the house of Israel...”

Ezekiel 33:7a, “Now as for you, son of man, I have appointed you a watchman for the house of Israel...”

This essentially is the Commission that rests upon all of us in the Kingdom of God. As we have and will continue to see, we are our brother’s and sister’s keeper!

In light of this, we ought NOT to be surprised that in this extended treatment of Ezekiel’s call as a Prophet (Ezekiel 1-4), the Lord summarized Ezekiel’s commission with, “I have appointed you a watchman for the house of Israel!” Such was Ezekiel’s call; and, as we just saw, such is our call as well!

The Work of a Watchman

Now as it relates to our Commission as servants of God, service in the Kingdom of God ultimately is the work of a watchman, Ezekiel 3:16-21.

Ezekiel 3:16-17, “Now it came about at the end of seven days [in which Ezekiel enjoyed deep fellowship with God] that the word of the Lord came to me, saying, ‘Son of man, I have appointed you a watchman [N.B., we would have expected ‘prophet’ here, instead we read, ‘watchman!'] to the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from My mouth, warn them from Me.’”

At the outset, we must understand that the calling and ministry of a “watchman” was NOT the exclusive prerogative of a prophet. Again, just as there was NO official office of Shepherd in the Old Testament, so also there was no official office of Watchman.

Because this is the case, let’s step back from this passage a moment and ask, “Who then does this reference when it comes to the body of Christ today?” Initially we might think of the elders and deacons; office bearers/leaders, and that would be correct. Yet as we have seen so many times now, membership in the body of Christ involves responsibility for the well-being of each other in

the Lord.¹

Ephesians 4:11-12: “And He gave some *as* apostles, and some *as* prophets, and some *as* evangelists, and some *as* pastors and teachers, FOR the equipping of the saints [now notice, the passage is linier... Leaders equip the saints so that the saints might do...] for the work of service [which results in], to the building up of the body of Christ.”

From this passage, we conclude, if you have been saved by grace you have an obligation to the people of God which is here called, “the work of service!” In his rebuke to the Corinthians, Paul wrote:

1 Corinthians 5:1-2a, “It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father’s wife. And you [2nd Plural- speaking of the entire body, not just the leadership] have become arrogant, and have not mourned instead...”

When it came to the spiritual welfare of the rebellious Christian, whose responsibility was it? From this you must see that it is the entire body’s responsibility! Truly, if you are a member of God’s household, you have been placed *on watch*, to help guard the body of Christ from sin, the devil, and the world!

Hebrews 3:12-13, “Take care, brethren [this is directed to the entire body], lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is *still* called ‘Today,’ lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”

Notice the statements which “chiastically” bracket the main exhortation.

Hebrews 3:12, “...an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God.”

Hebrews 3:13b, “...lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”

How are these horrible sins averted in the body of Christ? By v. 13a, “But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is *still* called ‘Today’...” As children of God we have a corporate responsibility for each other. In fact, notice how the pericope ends:

Hebrews 3:14, “For we [all] have become partakers of Christ, if we [all together] hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end.”

Truly, all of us have responsibility when it comes to the growth and maturation of the body of Christ (Matthew 18)! This means that — and this is the point — all of us are “watchman” and are charged with the welfare of Christ’s people! In fact, look with me for a moment at the word for “watchman”, **הִצְפָּח** (*tsaphah*).

Watchman, is a broad expression, referencing anyone and everyone in a position of responsibility when it comes to a group of people. In the ancient world a lawyer could be watchman, as well as a nobleman or a king. A servant could be a watchman! The uneducated, poor, or rich—it didn't matter — could be a watchman! If a boat, camp, or city needed protection at night, any and all could be appointed to serve a stint *on watch*.

Ezekiel 33:2, "Son of man, speak to the sons of your people, and say to them, 'If I bring a sword upon a land, and the people of the land take one man from among them and make him their watchman.'"

Again, this "one" could be a wealthy land owner or a beggar, there is no office in mind here! Accordingly, you must see that the focus of this word is NOT on the identity of the watchman, BUT on his calling! Daniel Block described it this way:

The noun *šōpēh* derives from a common root meaning 'to look out, to spy, to keep watch.' The role of the watchman in ancient Near Eastern defensive strategy is best illustrated by the parable provided in full in 33:1–6. Persons chosen for sentry duty were generally stationed on lookout towers strategically placed on the walls of the city, the roofs of gatehouses (2 Samuel 18:24), or towers outside the city (2 Kings 9:17). The watchman's charge involved paying careful attention to the enemy's movements. In the face of an imminent attack, he would blow his horn (*šōpār*), summoning the soldiers to arms, and civilians to take cover (Ezekiel 33:3–6). (Block, 1997, p. 144)

And so, translated to ministry, understand that this is the prerogative and so responsibility of EVERY ONE commissioned by God to care for the souls of others, which is all of us! In light of this, what is our calling? What is the calling of a "watchman"?

Ezekiel 3:18-21, "When I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die'; and you do not warn him or speak out to warn the wicked from his wicked way that he may live, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. Yet if you have warned the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness or from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered yourself. Again, when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity [obviously from this the designation of 'righteous' speaks of the faithful child of God²], and I place an obstacle before him, he shall die; since you have not warned him, he shall die in his sin, and his righteous deeds which he has done shall not be remembered; but his blood I will require at your hand. However, if you have warned the righteous man [the opposite of the wicked] that the righteous should not sin, and he does not sin, he shall surely live because he took warning; and you have delivered yourself³."

From this passage we conclude that the calling of a "watchman" is to participate in the sanctification process of the individual members of the body of Christ. How do we do this? By "speaking up" and so "warning" one another when it comes to the deceitfulness of sin, its poison, and how it can take over a soul! By encouraging one another to trust Christ, to remain vigilant at

all times, and so follow the Lord whatsoever way He may lead! Daniel Block enlightens:

Before [Ezekiel] commences his ministry, however, Yahweh formalizes his induction with a speech intended to impress on him his pastoral accountability. The address is creatively constructed as an extended metaphor, with the prophet's role compared to that of a sentry. (Block, 1997, p. 143)

In this regard, notice the primary objects when it comes to being a watchman in the Kingdom of God; it is twofold:

1. Righteous: צַדִּיק (tsaddiq); in Scripture, the primary focus of this term references covenant faithfulness. When we read that Abraham or David were righteous, this does NOT mean they were perfect in themselves, BUT faithful to the calling God has placed on their lives. Such is the idea here. God here is talking about what we would call the healthy child of God. Though they are sinful and at times struggle with sin, they have NOT given themselves to sin. Rather, they mourn and battle against it!
2. Wicked: רָשָׁע (rasha); the English is rather misleading when it comes to this word. When we think of a "wicked" man or woman, we tend to think in extremes like Hitler, Jack the Ripper, and anyone else whose name denotes evil. Yet the word in the Hebrew does NOT denote this! The word is a covenantal designation describing the breakdown of social relationships due to the actions or attitude of an individual.

G. Herbert Livingston put it this way:

In the Old Testament, the root rāša' appears as the most important antonym of šedeq 'righteousness'... In contrast to šdq it denotes the negative behavior of evil thoughts, words and deeds, a behavior not only contrary to God's character, but also hostile to the community and which at the same time betrays the inner disharmony and unrest of a man. (Harris, Gleason L. Archer, & et.al., 2003, p. 863)

In a Judicial Context, the word is used to describe the side that loses when it comes to a court case, as in Deuteronomy 25:1. As such, while the word can and does refer to the harmful activity of the non-believer toward the child of God (Genesis 6:5; Psalm 94; Habakkuk 1:13), it most often is used in Scripture of the rebellious child of God struggling with sin. Speaking of the worship of God's people, we read this in Proverbs:

Proverbs 21:27a, "The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination..."

Non-Christians were NOT allowed to sacrifice in the tabernacle or temple, only God's people were permitted. Accordingly, the designation of "wicked" must here be in reference to them! Isaiah speaks of the rebellious people of God this way:

Isaiah 55:6-7a, "Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near.

Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts..."

Clearly, the designation of "wicked" in Scripture references the child of God who has given themselves to sin! In a lamentation to the Lord for the difficulty he was experiencing at the hands of his own countrymen, Jeremiah prayed this way:

Jeremiah 12:1-2, "Righteous art Thou, O Lord, that I would plead *my* case with Thee; indeed I would discuss matters of justice with Thee: Why has the way of the wicked prospered? *Why* are all those who deal in treachery at ease? [So who are these?] Thou hast planted them, they have also taken root; they grow, they have even produced fruit. Thou art near to their lips but far from their mind."

Clearly Jeremiah is speaking in reference to his countrymen who hypocritically worshipped God with their lips, but then gave themselves to selfishness which resulted in personal advancement, wealth, and so blessing for them, BUT ALSO in violence amongst the people of God! We see it in the prophecy before us when Ezekiel speaks of Jerusalem:

Ezekiel 5:6, "But she has rebelled against My ordinances more wickedly than the nations and against My statutes more than the lands which surround her; for they have rejected My ordinances and have not walked in My statutes."

Clearly the word was used in reference to God's people! Accordingly, when the Bible speaks of the "wicked" — as it does in our text — it primarily speaks of the rebellious child of God who has forsaken their faithfulness to the Lord and His people, and so has given themselves to a life of self-service and so self-gratification. Again, it is the opposite of the "righteous" referenced in vv. 20-21!

From this you must see that the primary activity of a "watchman" is NOT that of evangelism (so often this text is used to guilt people into sharing the gospel). RATHER we are talking here about overseeing and so caring for brothers and sisters who are struggling in their walk! As children of God Our Commission is to speak up and so endeavor to encourage them unto godliness, trust, hope, and righteous living. That is the call of "the watchman" in the body of Christ!

Responsibility of a Watchman

This brings us to the "controversial" part of the exhortation God gave to Ezekiel, specifically v. 18:

Ezekiel 3:18, "When I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die'; and you do not warn him or speak out to warn the wicked from his wicked way that he may live, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand."

What does this mean? Does this apply to us? This is where Bible study and application gets a little dicey. We recognize that this passage was directed exclusively at Ezekiel. So, what is said here

first and foremost related to his call (and for that matter, all the other prophets who are frequently identified as “watchman” in Scripture⁴)! In this regard, it is notable/shocking that the form of the sentence in this text is typical of verdicts declared by a judicial authority to a criminal guilty of a capital offense.⁵ In other words, if Ezekiel shrunk back in fear of man or sheer laziness and so did NOT proclaim the word of God, he would be guilty of a capital offense! Lamar Cooper explains:

Indifference that fails to save a life is comparable to negligent homicide. The prophet would be guilty of murder by his failure to fulfill his calling. According to the law of retribution, he was liable for the loss of life payable by the forfeit of his own (Genesis 9:5–7). (Cooper, 1994, p. 86)

In this regard, we are in error if we apply this judicial sentence to ourselves in the case of irresponsibility! Yet that does NOT mean that this passage is not relevant when it comes to our ministry. We understand that in the context of Bible study EVERY passage is applicable to us in some way. THE model for all Bible study is set for us in Ezra.

Ezra 7:10, “For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to practice *it*, and to teach *His* statutes and ordinances in Israel.”

Effective Bible study always involves personal application! So how do we apply a passage like this which includes the description of a threat against a specific office? I answer that by taking one step back from the text and noting how we do reap death in our lives and ministry when we neglect our call to engage in the pastoral care of the body. In this regard, follow with me; what if, out of fear, laziness, or indifference, we ourselves do NOT endeavor to encourage or cajole a struggling saint to grow in grace? If you’ve been in ministry long you will have seen it many times, that individual will flounder AND the body of Christ will suffer as a result!

Let’s think of this in light of a football team. If you are part of a sport’s team and it loses, each team member loses. While not all have the responsibility to throw the ball or tackle the opponent, responsibility for the win or loss of a competition rests on everyone’s shoulder!! Paul himself appealed to this in his exhortation to the men in marriage.

Ephesians 5:28, “So husbands ought also to love their own wives *as their own bodies*. He who loves his own wife loves himself.”

Do you see how Paul masterfully exhorts married men unto faithfulness? In marriage, there is a *corporateness* which means any neglect for any reason will ultimately come back to harm both partners! Accordingly, we take the threat issued toward Ezekiel quite seriously. While it does NOT speak to us of a judicial consequence in the case of neglect⁶, nevertheless it DOES speak of accountability and so responsibility when it comes to the sins and struggles of others in the body!

- If the rebellion of a Christian is met with rebellion from us; meaning we do NOT act to encourage, help, rebuke, or protect them, which is the aim of every spiritual gift and

calling given to us by God!

- If the rebellion of a Christian compromises the ministry of which we are apart!

Then biblically we too will suffer much of the same consequences as the rebel, which in Scripture includes but is not limited to:

- Leanness of soul.
- Coldness in our lives toward the Lord.
- Empty worship.
- Powerless ministry.
- And so much more!

And so, in our application of this text we acknowledge the corporate responsibility and consequences that will impact both the church and ourselves when brothers and sister are allowed to live with compromise! Paul reinforced this concept speaking of the church:

1 Corinthians 12:26, "And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if *one* member is honored, all the members rejoice with it."

There is a corporateness to Christianity which precludes Island living! As this church is as much your family as it is mine, if compromise or worldliness is allowed to fester, we all will suffer! And Paul warned the churches of this in Galatia:

Galatians 5:9, "A little leaven leavens the whole lump *of* dough."

Paul told Timothy of the consequences of unchecked sin:

2 Timothy 2:14a, 16-17, "Remind *them* of these things, and solemnly charge *them* in the presence of God not to wrangle about words which is useless, *and leads* to the ruin of the hearers... But avoid worldly *and* empty chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene."

The seriousness of the believer's commission rests upon us individually and corporately! Being part of the body of Christ involves an implicit obligation toward each other, the work and calling of a watchman! If we forsake this calling, not only will the body suffer, BUT SO WILL WE!⁷

This fourth and final element to the commissioning of a servant of God teaches us that the men and women, gifted by the Spirit of God have been given the responsibility for the welfare of everyone in the body of Christ! Ezekiel summarizes all these points:

Ezekiel 22:23-31, "And the word of the Lord came to me saying, 'Son of man, say to her, 'You are a land that is not cleansed or rained on in the day of indignation.' There is a conspiracy of her prophets in her midst, like a roaring lion tearing the prey. They have

devoured lives; they have taken treasure and precious things; they have made many widows in the midst of her. Her priests have done violence to My law and have profaned My holy things; they have made no distinction between the holy and the profane, and they have not taught the difference between the unclean and the clean; and they hide their eyes from My sabbaths, and I am profaned among them. Her princes within her are like wolves tearing the prey, by shedding blood *and* destroying lives in order to get dishonest gain. And her prophets have smeared whitewash for them, seeing false visions and divining lies for them, saying, "Thus says the Lord God," when the Lord has not spoken. The people of the land have practiced oppression and committed robbery, and they have wronged the poor and needy and have oppressed the sojourner without justice. And I searched for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the gap before Me for the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found no one. Thus [notice the corporateness here] I have poured out My indignation on them; I have consumed them with the fire of My wrath; their way I have brought upon their heads,' declares the Lord God."

What is it at this time that was missing from the people of God which could have postponed the horrible judgment that was about to come upon the people of God in 586 BC? There was NO "WATCHMAN" in Israel (he was in Babylon by the River Chebar [Ezekiel] or at the bottom of a pit suffering at the hands of his countrymen [Jeremiah])!

Yet the passage does NOT use that language here. Rather, God chose to switch the metaphor to a soldier standing in the gap of a city wall that had been exposed on account of a battering ram. Think of the scene: An army has approached one of many cities in a region- each of the cities oddly bearing the same name, "Church." Siege warfare sets in such that a battering ram is set against the city wall in order to breach the city- metaphorically we call this "sin." In time, part of the structure gives way (a Christian in the body compromises their faithfulness). What is needed? Someone who is willing to stand in the gap of the city wall and individually take on whatever and whoever might seek to enter!

In this regard let me ask you, "What is going to happen to the soldier called upon to stand in the gap?" Hand to hand warfare for the survival of the city! It most certainly WON'T be easy, bloodless, or without pain, difficulty, and suffering. It undoubtedly WILL involve great effort, vigilance, all manner of skill, fortitude, and courage! And it could even maim the willing soldier! Yet if the Lord is willing, the city will be spared!

This is what it means to stand in the gap! That is what it means to be a watchman! That is what it means to be a brother or sister in Christ! That truly is The Commission given to every member of the body of Christ!

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End Note(s)

¹ cf. also Galatians 6:2; Romans 15:1; James 1:27!

² cf. Isaiah 1:16ff; Amos 5:14ff; Micah 6:8.

³ John Taylor wrote of this, "To say, however, that Ezekiel by his warnings would save his soul (19, 21, AV) is most misleading. The Hebrew word *nepeš* has a wide range of meaning, from 'throat' to 'person', but it means 'soul' only in the sense in which we call a person 'a soul'. Hebrew has no knowledge of a soul as a part of a man's make-up. Man was *nepeš*, a person, a unity. RSV is therefore right to translate you will have saved your life." (Taylor, 1981, p. 72)

⁴ "Watchman" was a common one for the true prophets of Yahweh (cf. Isaiah 56:10; Jeremiah 6:17; Hosea 9:8). Of all people at the time, God called them to specially care and so protect the body of Christ from itself!

⁵ By a king: 1 Samuel 14:44; 22:16; 1 Kings 2:37, 42; by the leaders of the people: Jeremiah 26:8; by God: Genesis 2:17; 20:7; 2 Kings 1:4, 6, 16.

⁶ Although, it could result in a judicial sentence! On account of the unchallenged sin of some in Corinth, many Christians were sick, weak, and some even died (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:30)!!! So it could refer in our lives to a judicial sentencing. Having said this, just because a person stood liable to death, that doesn't mean they actually would be killed. That Ezekiel here would be liable to death if he failed to warn the wicked does NOT mean that God would kill him. It most certainly does indicate how serious a thing it is to fail to fulfill the call God has placed on our lives in caring for the body of Christ!!!

⁷ It is no surprise that Ezekiel's "watchman" oracles book end the judgment section of this prophecy (Ezekiel 5-32). In light of what will come not only to the people of God but also Ezekiel if the nation persists in its sin, God Commissioned a Watchman to warn His people!