

Ezekiel

Week 17

A Watchman and Shepherd

Chapters 33-34

Introduction

After the judgment oracles of Ezekiel 1–24 and the oracles against the foreign nations in chapters 25–32, we finally get to the good news in chapters 34–48. The turning point in the saga is chapter 33, and it comes with the arrival among the exiles of the news of Jerusalem's fall. That bad news clears the ground for the proclamation of something new¹

Ezekiel the Watchman (33:1-20)

This oracle initially holds a similar theme to that in 3:16–21. Ezekiel is to act as a watchman for Israel. Along with the job come both responsibilities and penalties. (It may be noted that no reward is explicitly mentioned.) Ezekiel is to relay the nature of his task to Israel.²

role of watchman. The watchman stood at the place in the city where he would have the most strategic view of the surroundings and watched for any approaching enemy army. He reported either by word of mouth or by trumpet. His task was simply to sound the alarm of the approaching enemy. He was absolved of responsibility if the city dwellers refused to heed his call. ³

The oracle goes on to attack two notions about the nature of Israel's sin. The first (10–11) was a kind of fatalism, where people maintained they were trapped in their own wrongdoing, that God even was glad to see them in such a state (and thus, if God wanted it that way, there was no point in even trying to change). This idea is rebuffed: God takes no pleasure in the death of even the wicked. It was up to them to change their ways.

Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article XI, 81

Everything which prepares and fits man for damnation emanates from the devil and man through sin, and in no way from God. Since God does not want any man to be damned, how could he prepare man for damnation? God is not the cause of sin, nor is he the cause of the punishment, the damnation. The only cause of man's damnation is sin, for the "wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). And as God does not will sin and has no pleasure in sin, so he also does not will the death of a sinner and has no pleasure in his damnation. He does not will that "any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9). It is written in Ezekiel, "As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live" (Ezek. 18:23; 33:11).⁴

¹ Duguid, I. M. (1999). *Ezekiel* (p. 382). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

² McGregor, L. J. (1994). *Ezekiel*. In D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, & G. J. Wenham (Eds.), *New Bible commentary: 21st century edition* (4th ed., p. 737). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

³ Matthews, V. H., Chavalas, M. W., & Walton, J. H. (2000). *The IVP Bible background commentary: Old Testament* (electronic ed., Eze 33:2–6). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

⁴ Tappert, T. G. (Ed.). (1959). *The Book of Concord the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. (pp. 629–630). Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press.

The second notion was that people built up a store of merit (*cf.* 18:21–32). Thus a lot of good deeds could be used to offset a lot of bad ones. Such a view meant that there was no hope for the person whose life had been principally evil—that person would be unable to offset the evil done with enough good. Furthermore it meant that those who thought they had built up enough merit could indulge in whatever sins they liked provided they did not exceed their quota. This notion is also rejected. A sincere repentance can overcome any history of wrong-doing. Willful evil cannot be offset by past charitable actions.⁵

The problem that the people face is not that of God’s justice, of which they complain in 33:17. His ways are indeed just, even more than just, since the path to life is continuously held open to rebels. The problem is with the people’s lack of righteousness; they have followed an unjust way (33:17). They have consistently chosen the path to death over the path to life. That is what makes it bad news that God will judge each according to his own way (33:20)! Nonetheless, the point of the case studies is that there is a remedy for the bad news. The possibility of repentance is Ezekiel’s answer to despair, though the need for perseverance is also there to counteract any tendency toward presumption.⁶

Jerusalem Struck Down (33:21-33)

The date is January 19, 585 b.c. It is about five months after the fall of Jerusalem. News that the city has been struck down marked a new epoch in Ezekiel’s ministry. Not only did he become the prophet of restoration, but in preaching redemption, he also was no longer to be restricted in communication as before.

Ezekiel had to confront two groups (vv 23, 30) with the demand that they change their attitude and conduct. The impenitent survivors of the fall of Jerusalem made the arrogant claim that they would have possession of the land simply because Abraham, who received it by promise, was only one individual whereas they are many. But they will find out that willful perpetrators of crime will not inherit the Kingdom. By their impenitence (vv 23–29; *cf.* 18:6–13; 22:6–12), they excluded themselves from its blessings, even though Ezekiel, the prophet of restoration, offered these blessings to all people.⁷

The people are, in fact, corporately in a situation analogous to the first case study described by Ezekiel. They are relying on earlier righteousness—in this case, that of Abraham—to see them through in the face of present disobedience. The prophet describes their disobedience in the stereotypical terms of “eat[ing] meat with the blood still in it and look[ing] to ... idols and shed[ding] blood” (Ezek. 33:25), or “you rely on your sword, you do detestable things, and each of you defiles his neighbor’s wife” (33:26). Should such covenant-breakers inherit the blessings of the covenant and possess the land? By no means! Rather, these covenant-breakers will continue to inherit the three classic curses of the covenant: the sword, wild animals, and plague (33:27; *cf.* Lev. 26:22, 25). The land will

⁵ McGregor. 737

⁶ Duguid. 384

⁷ Engelbrecht, E. A. (2009). *The Lutheran Study Bible* (p. 1364). St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House.

continue to suffer God's judgment until it becomes a desolate wasteland (Ezek. 33:28–29; cf. Lev. 26:32–33). All their hopes will come to nothing.⁸

The second group, Ezekiel's fellow prisoners, was to be told that God's Word of promise is not a cheap commodity. They thought his preaching to be like the singing of love songs (v 32), to which they could listen for their amusement yet without committing themselves to do what his message required of them.⁹ The fulfillment of Ezekiel's message vindicates his reputation as true prophet, not entertainer. The statement alludes to his commissioning scene (see Ezek 2:5) and structures the content of chs. 1–33 as a distinct unit of the book.¹⁰

False Shepherds and the True Shepherd (34)

Ezekiel 34 is a dual oracle of judgment and salvation. It is an oracle of judgment on the shepherds and fat sheep who have oppressed the flock, and of salvation for the rest of the flock through the personal intervention of the Lord as their shepherd.¹¹

The image of the people of God as a flock of sheep occurs several times throughout the Bible. In this oracle, the current shepherds—*i.e.* the rulers of Israel—are rebuked for their self-interest and lack of care for their subjects. Furthermore, some sheep had grown fat at the expense of others *i.e.* some people had acquired wealth and power by oppressing others who were poorer and weaker. Ezekiel warns that justice will be restored.¹²

The title *shepherd* was a well-known ascription of both kings and gods in the ancient Near East. Frequently, in this role the earthly king stood as a representative of the divine shepherd who had appointed him.

In Ezekiel's oracle of judgment, however, the Lord is coming *against* his shepherds—the former kings of Judah—because they have failed to fulfill their role of shepherd properly. The proper task of a shepherd was to care for the flock, that is, to protect it from dangers on the outside and dissension within—gathering those who strayed, leading the flock to good pasture and clean drinking water, and taking special care of the poor and the weak. On the contrary, these shepherds have viewed their position as an opportunity for personal gain, ruling harshly and brutally, feeding only themselves, not the flock, and even slaughtering the choicest animals (Ezek. 34:2–6).¹³

It would do little good for God to replace Israel's bad shepherds with other earthly rulers. Human society cannot lift itself out of the quicksand of pervasive corruption. God Himself must come to the rescue, which He has done in the person of His Son (Jn 10) and in the power of His Holy Spirit.¹⁴

⁸ Duguid. 385

⁹ Engelbrecht. 1364

¹⁰ Barry, J. D., Mangum, D., Brown, D. R., Heiser, M. S., Custis, M., Ritzema, E., ... Bomar, D. (2012, 2016). *Faithlife Study Bible* (Eze 33:32–33). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

¹¹ Duguid. 394

¹² McGregor. 739

¹³ Duguid. 394

¹⁴ Engelbrecht. 1365

Not only did the shepherds abuse the flock, but members of the flock abused one another. There were stronger and fatter ones who oppressed and injured the weak and lean ones. God threatens to execute justice on those who prey on the weak.¹⁵

The warning turns into a promise for the future (21–24). Not only will the Lord save his sheep, he will also appoint his servant David to be shepherd over them, and make a covenant of peace with them. As in other oracles, the name is symbolic. The reference to David does not mean that the ancient king David will be literally resurrected and set up as ruler. Its primary force is that the coming ruler will have the exemplary attributes of David—someone in whom the Lord delighted and who triumphed over the foes of Israel. David is also referred to in 37:24–26, where his rule is described as lasting forever. The same passage also refers to the everlasting covenant of peace which the Lord will make with his people, a theme almost identical to that in 34:25–30. Both passages clearly are looking forward not just to Israel’s immediate future but also to her long term future. God would make peace with the people, and he would appoint a shepherd to rule them.

The oracle brings a promise of hope. Even if God’s people were scattered and oppressed they would one day receive justice. Readers of the NT will see that day as the time of the return of Jesus Christ, a promise sealed by his first coming, death and resurrection.¹⁶

Yahweh’s true flock is a distinct, smaller part of the larger flock. He will recognize and save those who are His (compare John 10:14).¹⁷ If God is to break the power and reign of sin, He must send into this world His own vice-regent, His servant David. This future human-divine Shepherd and Prince will not destroy the sheep but feed them with bread from heaven (Jn 6:32–40).¹⁸

Restoration of Israel’s relationship with Yahweh brings the covenant blessings promised in Lev 26:3–13. Ezekiel has skillfully reworked the blessings from Lev 26:3–13 into a future picture of hope for Israel.¹⁹

covenant of peace. God pledges Himself to bring back the harmony and bliss He once provided in an unmarred paradise. His flock will know the peace that “surpasses all understanding” (Php 4:7). Israel’s restoration is the rescue from estrangement from God. He will welcome the redeemed into the eternal Kingdom of His beloved Son, where there are pleasures forevermore (Col 1:13; Ps 16:11). He heals and makes whole again the brokenness of human existence. Man can be at peace with God and with himself. Because its provisions will never be abrogated, Ezekiel calls it an everlasting covenant (cf 16:60; Is 24:5; 55:3; 61:8; Jer 32:40).²⁰

¹⁵ Engelbrecht. 1365

¹⁶ McGregor. 739

¹⁷ Barry. 34:22

¹⁸ Engelbrecht. 1366

¹⁹ Barry. 34:25-31

²⁰ Engelbrecht. 1366