

THE WATCHMAN

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A man got a job as a night watchman at a factory. There had been a lot of thefts by the workers on the night shift and so every morning when the night shift workers passed through his gate it was his job to check their bags and pockets to make sure that nothing was being stolen.

Things were going along very well the first night on the job until a man pushing a wheelbarrow of newspapers came through his gate. Aha, he thought, that man thinks he can cover up what he is stealing with that newspaper. So he removed the paper only to find nothing. Still he felt that the man was acting strangely, so he questioned him about the paper.

"I get a little extra money from newspapers I recycle, so I go into the lunchroom and pick up all the ones people have thrown away." The guard let him pass but decided to keep a close eye on him.

The next night it was the same, and the night after that. Week after week it went on. The same guy would push the wheelbarrow of newspapers past the guard's checkpoint. The guard would always check and find nothing.

Then one night, about a year later, the guard reported for work only to find a message had been left for him telling him to report to his supervisor. He walked into the supervisor's office and before he could say a word, the boss said, "You're fired!"

"Fired?" he asked in total surprise. "Why? What did I do?" "It was your job to make sure that no one stole anything from this plant and you have failed. So you're fired."

"Wait a minute, what do you mean failed. Nobody ever stole anything from this place while I was on guard."

"Oh, really," the boss answered. "Then how do you account for the fact that there are 365 missing wheelbarrows?"

The watchman had an important duty. It was their job both day and night to look out on the horizon for trouble. That trouble could be the enemy, an approaching storm, fire, flood, etc. If they fell asleep while on duty or neglected to warn the people it was a very serious offense.

A ships lookout is a watchman of sorts. They stand up high in the crow's nest and look out over the sea. They would warn of

approaching ships, storms and even pirates. They also got to tell some good news—Land ho!

The people in the city and the people on board ship don't have the vantage point of the watchman or lookout. God uses the analogy of a city watchman to emphasize a spiritual duty to warn the people of their sin. That same analogy applies to us today as we are to share the gospel message to others.

In a major speech to the country on March 23, 1983, Ronald Reagan outlined a national plan of defense called the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), which soon became known as "Star Wars." In the speech he said, "What if free people could live secure in the knowledge that we could intercept and destroy strategic ballistic missiles before they reached our own soil?" The plan was that instead of retaliation, any incoming missiles could be detected and destroyed by a space-based system of lasers. The cost of the new system was estimated to be over \$1 trillion. Our national safety depends on our alertness. At this very moment, every satellite, airplane and other objects in flight are being carefully tracked before they ever enter our airspace. Readiness teams stand by to launch defensive maneuvers or counterattacks. The president is ready with an ever-present special briefcase in case of an emergency involving our national defense.

But what if after all the time and money which has been spent, those responsible for watching out for our welfare saw signs that we were under attack, and yet for some reason decided not to alert the military, inform the president, or warn the American people? What if the radar screens were showing clear signs of an impending nuclear attack, the satellites were sending all the right information, the computers were functioning properly, lights were flashing and warning sirens were going off, but those responsible for passing along the warning decided they would rather remain silent than to cause national panic? What if they had fallen asleep because they stayed up too late. What if they were too engrossed in playing cards with the other members of the alert team in the lunch room to tend to their duties. What if they were on the phone with a friend, or just didn't care to take the situation seriously. What would happen to them and the people they were asked to protect?

That is the modern day parallel to the parable which God spoke about to Ezekiel. A military disaster was approaching the nation and those whose responsibility it was to warn the nation were silent. The

parable was based on the strategic defense initiative of that day. The defense system consisted of a large wall, sometimes a double wall, several feet thick. The wall was made with very large stones, and tall towers were built at the corners. Watchmen were stationed high in the towers to watch for the approach of hostile forces. Other watchmen walked on top of the wall or were posted at the gates. If an enemy was approaching they were to blow the trumpet to alert the armed troops and call out a warning to the people. If they somehow failed in their responsibility the city would be overrun and the people would lose their lives. The watchman would pay for his failure with his life.

But what if the watchman sounded the warning and no one responded? What if they had just a little more shopping they wanted to do, or the latest episode of Samson and Delilah was being played out in the town square? What if they didn't want their party to be interrupted by the negative message of the watchman? Then, the Lord said, they would be responsible for their own death as well as the destruction of the city.

There are some very important lessons that we dare not miss in this passage in Ezekiel. The first lesson we learn from Ezekiel is: We are accountable for ourselves. God said to Ezekiel, "If anyone hears the trumpet but does not take warning and the sword comes and takes his life, his blood will be on his own head. . . . If he had taken warning, he would have saved himself" (Ezekiel 33:4, 5). Each of us are responsible for hearing and obeying the Word of God. It is my responsibility as a pastor to preach the Word of God, but I cannot *make* anyone listen. I cannot change anyone's mind, and I certainly cannot change anyone's life. That is up to you. My responsibility is to be faithful in presenting God's Word; it is your responsibility to hear and obey what God is saying. The Bible says, "Each of us will give an account of himself to God" (Romans 14:12). Others may tell us and warn us, but we are ultimately responsible for where we stand with God and whether our lives match up to his commands. At the final judgment you will not be able to blame your parents for your failures. You will not be able to point out all the things wrong with your pastor or the ineffectiveness of your Sabbath School teachers. It will not wash if you try and talk about how people who were supposed to be Christians disappointed you or let you down. You will only answer for what you have done and the person you have become.

We would all like to think that we are responsible, but only to ourselves. There are many people who don't like the idea of being accountable to God. A columnist theorized that what's wrong with the world is what he calls the "Death of the Permanent Record." He gives humorous illustrations about when he was in grade-school and everyone was afraid of having their bad behavior written down on "The Permanent Record." The thought of having something you did permanently recorded and read by people who could affect your future stopped a lot of kids before they did something wrong. They didn't stop because they were so good, but for fear of having their actions written down. Green says that today people realize that there is no such thing as a permanent record. There might have been at one time, but not today—schools, and even the legal system are told they have no right to keep track. With his typical satirical wit, Green says that with today's emphasis on our rights to privacy, if a school child were ever threatened with something going on his permanent record, he would probably file suit under the Freedom of Information Act and gain possession of his files before recess.

But whether we like it or not the Bible says that there is a permanent record being kept. Listen carefully to this passage from the book of Revelation: "And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books" (Revelation 20:12). Jesus said, "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked" (Luke 12:48). If you know what you should do and do not do it, then you will be held accountable. If you know you should not be doing something and you continue to do it, then you are going to be in trouble at the judgment unless there is repentance. You need to heed the warning.

I remember the news accounts of the eruption of Mt. St. Helens in 1980. Before the eruption there were warnings from the seismographers and other scientists who kept a watch on volcanoes. People were told to leave their homes and vacate the area, but there were those who refused to leave. They would not listen to the warnings, and when, on the fateful day, the eruption blew away almost a cubic mile of the mountain, leaving a crater of enormous proportions, those people lost their lives. It was not the fault of those who watch for these things, because they had been faithful in

warning, even pleading with people, to leave the mountain. Those who refused to listen were responsible for their own deaths. In the same way, when you have been warned about the consequences of living your life away from God and you still make the decision to go your own way, you are directly responsible to God for your decision and your actions. You will not be able to blame or accuse anyone else. You alone will stand responsible.

Years ago, a story appeared in a Northwestern newspaper concerning a truck driver who, on a foggy night plunged his rig down a river gorge where he'd expected to find a familiar bridge. Miraculously uninjured, the shaken trucker managed to crawl from the wreckage and make his way back up to the road. Frantically waving his arms and screaming at approaching vehicles, he did all he could to warn them of the impending danger. "The bridge is out! Turn around!" Most of the sparse traffic on this foggy night ignored his pleas, considering him a wacko—to their own peril. Such is the situation many in our modern world face. Many have actually experienced the pitfalls this life holds and know which way is the wrong direction. But their warnings go unheeded.

But there is another important lesson here. The second lesson we learn from Ezekiel is: We are accountable for others. The Lord said to Ezekiel: "If the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet to warn the people and the sword comes and takes the life of one of them, that man will be taken away because of his sin, but I will hold the watchman accountable for his blood" (Ezekiel 33:6). Then the Lord explained to Ezekiel that *he* was the watchman in the story: "Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. When I say to the wicked, 'O wicked man, you will surely die,' and you do not speak out to dissuade him from his ways, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the wicked man to turn from his ways and he does not do so, he will die for his sin, but you will have saved yourself" (Ezekiel 33:7-9).

May I make this even more personal? We are *all* the watchman in the parable. All of us are responsible for alerting the people of the world of their responsibility before God. To truly love people is to warn them. We are all in contact with many people throughout our lives and all of us are headed into eternity. How many have heard the good news from you that they have been given eternal life? If the

people whom we rub shoulders with do not understand what it means to love God and end up in a Christ-less eternity, God will hold us responsible.

Let me illustrate this by having you imagine that several years ago someone found a cure for cancer—not just a treatment, but a 100% cure for this dreaded disease. Let's say that the scientist who discovered this cure informed a select group of people, but neither he nor they ever shared it with anyone else. Since their discovery, thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, could have been saved, but for some reason they were afraid to tell anyone else. Perhaps they were afraid that other people would think they were proud, since they had the cure and no one else did. Maybe they thought that others would not believe them, or that they would not take the cure even when it was offered. Maybe they were only concerned about themselves and thought that as long as they had the cure they would not worry about anyone else.

Of course the idea is absurd, but is this not exactly what Christians are doing? We have the most important message in the world and we are worried that other people will think that we are saying that we are better than they. We are concerned that people will not accept what we have to say. We are afraid of what they will think and what they may say. We don't think they will believe us or receive what we have to say, so why try. Besides, we tell ourselves, a person's faith should be a very private thing, and as long as we are safe we will not worry about anyone else.

We have the best news in the world and we are keeping it to ourselves. There is nothing in this world which is more important for people to hear, and for some reason we don't want to talk about it. But this parable from God to Ezekiel tells us that we will be held responsible for the spiritual destiny of others as well as ourselves. The Bible says, "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander." (1 Peter 3:15-16).

One thing we can be sure of is that it does not please God to condemn those who are lost and without him. He said to Ezekiel: "Say to them, 'As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from

their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?” (Ezekiel 33:11).

Nicodemus interviewed Jesus at night. He believed himself to be one of the elect of God to be saved and this by virtue of his privileged birth into the divinely sanctioned race of the Jews. He was the Calvinist of his day who believed in once saved, always saved—you have a lock on salvation because God had predestined the Jews for eternal life.

To Nicodemus Jesus taught the most beloved verse in all the Bible—John 3:16. “3:16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.” John 3:16-18.

Jesus died for the sins of Israel. Jesus died for the sins of the world. Therefore God can legally treat every individual as a beloved son or daughter who has been given a gift of eternal life. God and Jesus do not condemn the world. In fact, they are legally justified of their sins in Christ temporarily, as long as their finite life lasts. “Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life.” Romans 5:18. Now this is the good news of evangelism that we can share with the pagans in the world all around us. God has legally freed them of their sins because of Jesus death instead of theirs. Now we implore you to repent we an inner sorrow for sin and turn about to bear fruit that you may glorify the One who loves you so much.

For too long we have thought of the church as something for us. It has become a religious social club where we pay our dues and do things the way we like them. We seldom think of the people outside this building who are in need of God. The church is often unwilling to change anything—even if it would mean we could attract some of our unreached neighbors and win them to Christ. We would rather have it our way and be comfortable than do what it takes to win the lost. But we can never forget that we are responsible for others.

Another part of the watchmen’s duty is to tell the time of night. They are expected to be awake, and consequently prepared to give a correct answer to any one who inquires the hour. This present world,

since sin entered with all its woes, is well compared to a long dark night, which can end only with the coming of Christ and the resurrection and deliverance of the saints. All Christians have a deep interest in the approach of that glad morning, and have a chartered right to ask, "Watchman, what of the night? Watchman, what of the night?" for the Lord has said, "If ye will inquire, inquire ye." Isa. xxi, 11, 12. Now suppose you make this inquiry of a professed watchman, and his reply is, "Christ may come to-morrow or next year, or he may not come in a hundred, or thousand, or ten thousands of years." You may know that he has been asleep upon his post. If you can find a true watchman, at the present day, after so many signs and predictions have been fulfilled, his ready response to this inquiry will be, "The morning cometh, and also the night"—the morning of deliverance and everlasting joy to the saints of God, and the long night of darkness and death to the wicked—"the coming of the Lord is near, even at the doors."

Those who know nothing concerning those prophetic periods of the word of God, which show our nearness to the end, and which have already been fulfilled, are classed in prophecy with "the wicked," and not with "the wise." Dan. xii, 9, 10. Speaking of those prophetic periods which were "closed up and sealed till the time of the end," and which were consequently to be opened and unsealed at that time, the angel said, "But the wicked shall do wickedly; and none of the wicked shall understand; but the wise shall understand." Understand what? Understand their whereabouts in the course of time, by the unsealing of those prophetic periods. When? In the time of the end. This shows conclusively that all of God's people—the wise in contrast to all the wicked—will, in the time of the end, be brought into unity of faith. The wise shall understand. They cannot be said truly to understand, unless they have a correct understanding. And if they have a correct understanding, they must, of necessity, understand the matter exactly alike. This shows that the wise, in the last days, will be brought into unity of faith and expectation.

The final lesson that we learn from Ezekiel is: We are accountable for the present and not the past. God said to Ezekiel, "Therefore, son of man, say to your countrymen, 'The righteousness of the righteous man will not save him when he disobeys, and the wickedness of the wicked man will not cause him to fall when he turns from it. The righteous man, if he sins, will not be allowed to live because of his former righteousness.' . . . And if I say to the wicked man, 'You will

surely die,' but he then turns away from his sin and does what is just and right . . . he will surely live; he will not die. None of the sins he has committed will be remembered against him. He has done what is just and right; he will surely live" (Ezekiel 33:12-16).

Two kinds of people are spoken of here. One kind is the person who says, "Oh yes, I remember going to the altar of a church and receiving Christ as my Savior. I know I have strayed pretty far from that experience, but I always remember it. You know what they say, 'Once saved, always saved.'" At one time they had an experience with God and lived for him, but they are far from that experience and failed to live for God. Their lives are no longer a model of ethical and moral behavior that springs from the life of God. They think people should remember all the good things they have done instead of judging them for a few moral indiscretions which have taken place since then.

The second kind of person is the one who may have had many moral failures, but who has turned to God in repentance and faith. They are no longer living as they used to. They delight in God. One person, in spite of their righteous past, is in the process of walking away from God. The other person, in spite of their sinful past, is in the process of walking towards God. And this scripture is saying that neither of them are judged on their past behavior but on their present condition. In other words, you will not be judged on what you have done, but on the person you are becoming. It is not what you have done that is important, but who you are now. We are accountable for the present, not the past. That is why God is to be up-to-date in our lives. If you are no longer walking in that way, turn around. If you have things in your past that you are ashamed of, there is hope for you.

We are not saved by our good works. We are saved by the perfect sacrifice of Christ on His cross. We are being saved by faith as we follow Jesus our High Priest into His most holy place work in the heavenly sanctuary. We follow where the Lamb leads into all the truth He has to reveal to us. As His Spirit comforts us by convicting of sin in our lives we say, I would rather have Jesus than that in my life. The Holy Spirit cleans us up.

The evidence that we are saved by the shed blood of Calvary is we do not hinder Jesus' clean up operations in our lives. These operations of God's workmanship in our lives demonstrates in the judgment that the genuine faith of Jesus is present in our lives.

And this is all the more reason to share the good news, because what this means is that it is never too late to come to God. It does not matter what someone has done or where they have been. No one is hopeless. No one is a lost cause. Just when we think that someone is hopeless, they turn around and come to Christ with a commitment that puts us to shame.