

## Ezekiel 3:16-21—Part 1—The Watchman’s Message: Repentance

### *Memory Verse*

Ezekiel 36:26-27 NKJV

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup> I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.

### **What is a Watchman?**

Before we get to today's passage in Ezekiel 3:16-21, where God makes Ezekiel a watchman for the nation of Israel, we'll jump to a parallel passage in chapter 33 where there is a real world example of what it means to be a watchman, sentry, or lookout. By first understanding what being a watchman means using a real world example, we can understand what it means for us in the spiritual realm. We'll also learn about genuine repentance and God's heart towards His people—why He is so passionate about warning them.

**Ezekiel 33:1-9 NKJV**

Again the word of the Lord came to me, saying, <sup>2</sup> “Son of man, speak to the children of your people, and say to them: ‘When I bring the sword upon a land, and the people of the land take a man from their territory and make him their watchman [sentry or lookout], <sup>3</sup> when he sees the sword [enemy army] coming upon the land, if he blows the trumpet and warns the people [of the imminent danger], <sup>4</sup> then whoever hears the sound of the trumpet and does not take warning, if the sword [enemy army] comes and takes him away, his blood shall be on his own head [his own responsibility]. <sup>5</sup> He heard the sound of the trumpet, but did not take warning; his blood shall be upon himself [his own responsibility]. But he who takes warning will save his life [escape from the enemy].

<sup>6</sup> But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, and the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes any person from among them, he is taken away in his iniquity [sin]; but his blood I will require at the watchman's hand [the watchman will be held responsible for the citizen's death].’

<sup>7</sup> “So you, son of man: I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; therefore you shall hear a word from My mouth and warn them for Me. <sup>8</sup> When I say to the wicked, ‘O wicked man, you shall surely die!’ and you do not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity [sin]; but his blood I will require at your hand [Ezekiel will be held responsible]. <sup>9</sup> Nevertheless if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered your soul [Ezekiel will not be held responsible].

The real world example here is that of a city appointing a watchman, sentry, or lookout to guard the city. The watchman's responsibility is to keep a lookout for danger and then warn the people if the enemy was approaching. There are three possible outcomes:

1. The watchman **did warn** the people, the people **did listen**, and their lives were saved (they weren't killed or captured by the enemy).

2. The watchman **did warn** the people, but the people **did not listen**, and they *perished* (they were killed or captured by the enemy).
3. The watchman **did not warn** the people, the people **were not warned**, and they perished (they were killed or captured by the enemy).

In the first two scenarios, the watchman fulfilled his responsibility when he warned the people, and it was then up to the people to respond. Whether or not they did or didn't respond, the watchman had been faithful to warn them and **was not responsible for those who died** because they **didn't listen**.

In the third scenario, the watchman is guilty of gross neglect. He failed in his responsibility to warn the people. It's like you see your neighbour's house on fire, but can't be bothered warning them, resulting in them perishing inside the burning house while they slept. Because they were not warned, they died. **In this case the watchman is held responsible for their deaths.**

This is a real world example of a spiritual truth as described in verses 7-9 above, "**therefore you shall hear a word from My mouth and warn them for Me.** <sup>8</sup> **When I say to the wicked, 'O wicked man, you shall surely die!' and you do not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity [sin]."** Ezekiel is called to warn the people of the dangers and consequences of their sin. Sin is rebellion against God, and it kills.

### **God as the first watchman**

God warned Adam concerning eating the forbidden fruit, "in dying you shall die." Here we see the first watchman, God Himself, warning Adam of the deadly consequences of sin.

Genesis 2:16-17 NKJV

And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; <sup>17</sup> but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it **you shall surely die** [Hebrew literally reads: for in the day that you eat of it **dying you shall die**]."

### **The first death—physical death**

God clearly told Adam that rebellion or disobedience against Him would result in death. Now, what does "**dying, you shall die**" mean? "**Dying**" refers to a gradual process, like we would say that a person is **dying** of cancer. In Adam's case the curse of sin caused the ageing process to begin in Adam's body—Adam from that point on would start to age and eventually die physically. Physical death is called the *first death*. The same is true for everyone born since then, we are all ageing, our bodies are all dying (see Romans 8:20-22).

### **The second death—spiritual death (Lake of Fire)**

The "**you shall die**" means that Adam would die as soon as he disobeyed God. This can't refer to Adam's physical death, because Adam lived for another 930 years. So what kind of death could this be referring to? Spiritual death—separation from God—Adam's love relationship with God was broken. Remember that Jesus defined eternal life as *knowing God* (John 17:3), meaning to be *in relationship with God*. Any person who is not in relationship with God is spiritually dead. Their sin has separated them

from God (see Isaiah 59:2). This is why the Bible calls the Lake of Fire (Hell) the second death (see Revelation 2:11, 20:6, 20:14, and 21:8), because everyone who ends up in the Lake of Fire (Hell) are irreversibly separated from God for all eternity (see Mark 9:42-48).

Because of Adam's sin, we are all born sinners, spiritually dead, and therefore separated from God (see Psalm 51:5). This is why everyone needs to hear the gospel message (the good news) so that they can be saved from the second death by repenting (turning from their sins and turning to God), and believing (trusting) that Jesus' death on the cross was the full payment for the sins of all mankind (see Mark 1:15 and John 3:16). A person's separation from God becomes permanent when they die not having repented and received forgiveness from God while they had the chance. We only get one life, only one chance to choose our eternal destiny (see Hebrews 9:27).

### **Applying the illustration to the spiritual reality**

This real world example is especially significant because in Ezekiel's day, there was literally an army coming—the Babylonians—but they would only come if the people refused to humble themselves, repent (turn from their sin, and turn to God), and seek relationship with, and help from, God. ***Simply put, if the nation of Israel repented of their sin and turned to God, then God would not have to use the Babylonian army to judge or discipline them—they would be spared.*** They could remain in the promised land, enjoying relationship with, and the protection of, their God.

This picture of the Babylonians coming to destroy the nation of Israel is a great analogy of the dangers of sin for us today. Destruction and captivity (Hell or the Lake of fire) don't happen instantly, but will come eventually if a person never repents. People who choose not to repent will eventually be killed and captured because of their sin; they will remain separated from God forever, confined to the Lake of Fire (Hell) for eternity.

## **God's Heart and Motivation Behind Sending Ezekiel to the People**

Before we get into Ezekiel's responsibility as a spiritual watchman for the nation of Israel, we need to first see the big picture as to why God gives Ezekiel this responsibility in the first place.

### **Ezekiel 3:16-21 NKJV**

**Now it came to pass at the end of seven days that the word of the Lord came to me, saying, <sup>17</sup> “Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; therefore hear a word from My mouth, and give them warning from Me: <sup>18</sup> When I say to the wicked, ‘You shall surely die,’ and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life, that same wicked man shall die in his iniquity [sin]; but his blood I will require at your hand [you will be held responsible]. <sup>19</sup> Yet, if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered your soul [you are not responsible for his eternal damnation].**

**<sup>20</sup> “Again, when a righteous man turns from his righteousness and commits iniquity, and I lay a stumbling block before him, he shall die; because you did not give him warning, he shall die in his sin, and his righteousness which he has done shall not be remembered; but his blood I will require at your hand. <sup>21</sup> Nevertheless if you warn the righteous man that the righteous should not sin, and he does not sin, he shall surely live because he took warning; also you will have delivered your soul.”**

Why would God want Ezekiel to be a watchman? Why is God so insistent that we as believers must warn those around us of the deadly consequences of sin? Why does God make such a big deal out of this? Why does He make it such a huge responsibility, ***“but his blood I will require at your hand [you will be held responsible]”***?

The answer is found when we see God’s heart and motivation for giving Ezekiel this formidable responsibility. It comes down to this principle: where there is greater privilege, opportunity, and authority, there comes with it greater responsibility. Because God loves the people He created so much, warning them about the eternal consequences of sin is His first priority. Why? Because God wants people to spend eternity with Himself and not with Satan in Hell—it is literally a matter of eternal life and death. If it’s so important to God, then it should also be important to us, as God’s heart becomes our heart. Let’s have a look and see why warning people about sin is so important to God. Remember that “turn from... his wicked ways” is another way of saying “repent”—turn from sin and turn to God.

Ezekiel 33:11 NKJV

Say to them: ‘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 [repent] and live.*** Turn, turn from your evil ways [repent—turn from sin and turn to God]! For why should you die, O house of Israel?’

Lamentations 3:33 NKJV

For [God] does not afflict willingly, nor grieve the children of men.

Lamentations 3:33 NLT paraphrase

For [God] does not enjoy hurting people or causing them sorrow.

Ezekiel 18:23 NLT paraphrase

“Do you think that I like to see wicked people die? says the Sovereign Lord. Of course not! *I want them to turn from their wicked ways [repent] and live.*

Ezekiel 18:30-32 NLT paraphrase

“Therefore, I will judge each of you, O people of Israel, according to your actions, says the Sovereign Lord. **Repent**, and turn from your sins. *Don’t let them destroy you!* <sup>31</sup> *Put all your rebellion behind you, and find yourselves a new heart and a new spirit.* For why should you die, O people of Israel? <sup>32</sup> *I don’t want you to die, says the Sovereign Lord.* Turn back [repent] and live!

Hosea 11:8 NLT paraphrase

“Oh, how can I give you up, Israel?

How can I let you go?

How can I destroy you like Admah  
or demolish you like Zeboim?

***My heart is torn within Me,  
and My compassion overflows.***

2 Peter 3:9 NLT paraphrase

The Lord isn’t really being slow about His promise, as some people think. No, He is being patient for your sake. *He does not want anyone to be destroyed,* but wants everyone to **repent**.

1 Timothy 2:4 NKJV

***[God] desires all men to be saved*** and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

## **Because of His great love for us, God's desire is for all to be saved**

Do you notice just how compassionate and merciful God is? His heart literally breaks for those who are rejecting Him (...*My heart is torn within me, and My compassion overflows*—Hosea 11:8). God loves the people He created and therefore He does not want them to perish (remain separated from Himself for eternity in Hell). God as the ultimate loving and compassionate Father only wants the best for the people He made—which is for them to be adopted into His family and become His children again (Romans 8:15-16). Remember that our one purpose in life is to find complete fulfillment in our relationship with God—this is what brings much glory to God (see Isaiah 43:7).

## **God is a holy and just God, and so must judge sin**

But at the same time God is a just and fair judge and must punish the wicked. This is why mankind was separated from God, even though God still loved them. Just as God is infinitely loving, so He is infinitely holy or perfect. He must judge sin to be true to Himself.

Psalm 7:11-17 NLT paraphrase

<sup>11</sup> **God is an honest judge.**

***He is angry with the wicked every day.***

<sup>12</sup> If a person does not repent,  
God will sharpen his sword;  
he will bend and string his bow.

<sup>13</sup> He will prepare his deadly weapons  
and shoot his flaming arrows.

<sup>14</sup> The wicked conceive evil;  
they are pregnant with trouble  
and give birth to lies.

<sup>15</sup> They dig a deep pit to trap others,  
then fall into it themselves.

<sup>16</sup> The trouble they make for others backfires on them.  
The violence they plan falls on their own heads.

<sup>17</sup> ***I will thank the Lord because he is just;***

***I will sing praise to the name of the Lord Most High.***

Notice that God is angry with the wicked every day—God hates sin. If someone tried to force you to eat fresh dog poo you would probably vomit because it would be so disgusting. Sin has the same effect on God—it's disgusting and revolting to Him. He is so holy that He can't even look upon sin—"*You are of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on wickedness*" (Habakkuk 1:13).

At that same time, the Psalmist is thankful that God is holy and therefore hates sin. Why? Well, just imagine what Heaven would be like if God allowed sin there? Would you still want to go to heaven if there were liars, murderers, thieves, etc there? Heaven is only such a wonderful place because it's perfect, and it's only perfect because it's the home of the perfect God. Heaven is a reflection or picture of who God is—beautiful, creative, pure, joyful, loving, truthful, and fruitful.

*So here is the dilemma. God loves all people, but hates sin. However, all people are born sinful and therefore can't live with Him. Humanly speaking, there is no way out this dilemma, but God has a solution.*

## **Out of His great love for us, God makes a way for all to be saved**

Thus why Jesus came down from Heaven to earth to be both God and man. He is the only man who lived a perfect life, and is therefore the only One able to be the full payment for all our sins—“*Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*” (John 1:29). Jesus is the perfect, sinless, spotless, and blemish free lamb, the only one that could, and would, be accepted by God the Father as the payment for the sins of all mankind. Understand that God (Jesus) went to great lengths and suffered excruciatingly when He paid the ultimate price—His very life—to make it possible for people to escape the judgement of eternal condemnation in the Lake of Fire (Hell).

God’s love for all people is infinite—proved by the fact that He gave the greatest gift—the giving of Jesus’ human life when He died on the cross—to make possible the salvation of all men, even before they loved Him, when they were still His enemies.

Romans 5:8 NKJV

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Romans 5:6-11 NLT paraphrase

When we were utterly helpless [no hope of saving ourselves], Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. <sup>7</sup> Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. <sup>8</sup> But God showed His great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. <sup>9</sup> ***And since we have been made right in God’s sight by the blood of Christ, He will certainly save us from God’s condemnation.*** <sup>10</sup> For since our friendship with God was restored by the death of his Son while we were still his enemies, we will certainly be saved through the life of his Son. <sup>11</sup> So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God.

Verse 9 make it very clear that the blood of Christ, Christ’s substitutionary death on the cross, ***saves us from God’s condemnation***—that is, being found guilty of breaking God’s moral law and therefore deserving to suffer eternal damnation and separation from God in the Lake of Fire (Hell). Instead, because Jesus paid our fine, our sin debt, those who accept this free gift get to go to Heaven when they die and spend forever in the presence of God, because “our friendship with God was restored by the death of his Son while we were still his enemies.” It doesn’t get any better than this. This is truly wonderful news, good news, the gospel.

## **Repentance**

### **Why do we need to repent?**

The verses we read previously make it clear that God’s great desire for us to repent is ubiquitous, being found throughout the entire Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments, and is also applicable to all people groups—Jew and gentile. And why does God go to so much trouble and spend so much time telling people to repent of their sins? Because sin separates us from God, it kills our relationship with God. If our sin debt or problem is not dealt with in this life, there will be hell to pay—eternal suffering in the Lake of Fire. This is why a gospel message that doesn’t emphasise repentance from sin is a false gospel. Over and over again in the Bible, people are told that if they want to be saved, they must first (repent) turn from their sins and turn to God.

## **What does true repentance look like?**

Repentance is not about doing more good works, or improving and changing ourselves so that we become acceptable to God, or trying harder to be good, but rather a person has a change of heart towards God—they humble themselves, admitting their spiritual poverty or bankruptcy, and the kingdom of heaven becomes theirs (Matthew 5:3). This is what a repentant heart looks like—humble and submitted to God, a heart that says, “not my will but Yours be done” (see Matthew 26:39), a heart that is willing to be corrected and willing to change to become more like Christ. Genuine repentance is an (internal) change of heart towards God that leads to a lasting change in our behaviour.

In contrast, false repentance is a temporary change in behaviour caused by external influences. It's like the worldly guy who changes his behaviour so he can win the christian girl who goes to church. He temporarily gives up his drinking and swearing while around her, and even pretends to enjoy going to church. But when they get married, he reverts to his old behaviours.

Another form of false repentance is the fear produced by legalism. It's the “you must do this or you will go to hell” type thinking. These people go to church, change their diet, and adopt certain religious practices, but not because they want to, not because they love God and want to bless Him, not because they have a new heart that truly desires these things, but only because of fear. If they weren't made to think that they had to, then they wouldn't.

In contrast, a person who is genuinely saved will have been given a new heart with new desires by God—*they can't help but change to become more like Christ because they have given God permission to produce this change in them*. Remember that a changed life is evidence of a changed (repentant) heart—as James says, “faith without works is dead” (James 2:14-26).

***Although God is the One who changes us to become more like Himself (a process called sanctification—Philippians 1:6, 1 Thessalonians 4:3), we must first be willing to change—this is what genuine repentance is, the willingness or desire to change to become like Christ—it's a change of heart towards God that leads to a changed life. You could say that true repentance is us humbly giving God permission to change us to become like Himself.***

Remember that that to live with God in Heaven, we must be like Him—perfect in thought, word, and deed. However, our sinful human nature is just the opposite. Imagine the following conversation. I call it, “the invitation”:

God says to each of us, “*I fervently love you and greatly desire for you to spend eternity in heaven with Me. However, sin has corrupted your nature. You were born sinful, wicked, and evil in everything you think, say, and do. Therefore, because I am holy and perfect and you are not, you can't come into my presence. Your sin has separated you from Me. You need to allow Me to change you to be like Me again.*

*Also, you are guilty of a great many crimes against My moral law, and so you deserve to be punished. Your sin has separated you from Me. But because I love you, I paid your sin debt by becoming a man and dying in your place.*

***Would you please repent, that is, humble yourself and be willing to give up your sinful ways and give Me permission to change you from loving sinful things to loving Me (remember that you can't change yourself)? Also, will you trust that My sacrifice on that cross was the full payment for all your sins? If so, if you both repent and believe, then I will adopt you back into my family and you will live with me forever.”***

## **Why do most people refuse to repent?**

And here is the stumbling block that stops most people from accepting God's invitation to spend forever with Him as His son, "**Would you please repent, that is, humble yourself and be willing to give up your sinful ways and give Me permission to change you from loving sinful things to loving Me (remember that you can't change yourself)?**" The problem is that most people don't want to change and/or won't humble themselves to recognise or admit that they are sinful. They are not willing to change. Their sinful nature loves sinning and they simply don't want to stop. It's not like people actually want to go to hell—everyone wants to go to heaven—but they are simply not willing to forsake their sin. To them, enjoying the lusts of the flesh (the desires of our sinful nature—see Galatians 5:16-21) for a few years down here is more important to them than eternity with God forever. Jesus made this clear in:

John 3:18-21 NKJV

"He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. <sup>19</sup> And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup> For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. <sup>21</sup> But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God."

Remember that we can't change ourselves, and God won't change us against our will. Again, repentance is not about doing more good works, improving ourselves so that we become acceptable to God, or trying harder to be good, but rather, **a changed life is evidence of a changed or humble heart—a heart that is submitted to God and wants to be like God.**

## **Repentance continues after a person is saved.**

*Remember that while it is **initial** repentance and belief brings us into relationship with God (see Mark 1:15), it is **continued** repentance maintains our relationship with God.*

Jude 20-21 NKJV

But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, <sup>21</sup> **keep yourselves in the love of God**, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.

John 15:10-11 NKJV

**If you keep My commandments, you will abide [remain or stay] in My love**, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love.

<sup>11</sup> "These things I have spoken to you, **that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full.**

Philippians 4:8-9 NKJV

Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things. <sup>9</sup> **The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you.**

*This is not about losing our salvation, but rather losing the peace and joy of our salvation. As Jude implies, if we are not building up our faith, then we are allowing sin to tear it down. We are either growing closer to God as we become more pure, or further away from Him as we become more sinful.*

Maintaining our relationship is simply staying or remaining or abiding in His love. Sin is what causes us to not abide, to not be in the love of God, to not continue to experience the love of God and the peace and joy that follows. Repentance is what brings us back into fellowship with God, back into His love, as we deal with and get rid of the sin that keeps us from His love.

We need to keep repenting because God is in the business of changing people, from sinful to perfect, and to do that He must gradually reveal to us more and more of the depths of the depravity of our sinful nature. Our sinful tendencies need to be continuously recognised, repented of, and put to death—this is the process of dying to self, taking up our cross daily, and following Jesus (Luke 9:23). It's a lifelong process.

Like in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-31), God is watching and waiting, always ready to run and meet us as soon as we come to our senses, when we realise that our sinful ways are only hurting us and the temporary pleasure simply isn't worth it. Again, we come to our senses when we realise that all we need, and all we are really looking for, can only be found in a close love relationship with our Heavenly Father.

## **Conclusion and Summary**

### **God's Heart**

It's so important to understand God's heart towards us, that He loves us, and that it grieves Him to have to discipline us, and even more so to have to condemn us to Hell for eternity. Bringing people back to Himself is God's greatest desire, the driving force behind all prophecy and His activity among us. God enlisting us to be His soldiers in this war over the souls of men is an incredible privilege, one we need to take seriously.

### **God's Message**

The picture of Ezekiel being God's mouthpiece to warn the people to turn from their evil ways so that they could stay in the land and be spared the Babylonian invasion helps us to understand our spiritual predicament—if I repent, submitting to God, I can avoid certain judgement, eternity in the Lake of Fire.

### **Our motivation to be a watchman is love, a genuine concern for their eternal destiny**

Consider a soldier on the battle field facing great danger, and knowing that he could be killed at any moment as he fights for his country. You ask him why is he willing to make the sacrifice. He would reply, "It's a sacrifice that I'm willing to make. I love my family and I love my country. I would do anything to protect them from the enemy."

Once we repent and believe, coming back onto God's team, adopted back into His family, then we should have the same kind of sacrificial love for people as God does—we should be willing to share the gospel with anyone, no matter what the cost. God's heart becomes our heart as we are transformed into His image. Then our calling as a watchman, with our message of repent and believe, becomes more of a privilege and honour than it does a responsibility or sacrifice.

2 Corinthians 5:20 NLT paraphrase

So we are Christ's ambassadors; God is making his appeal through us. We speak for Christ when we plead, "Come back to God!"