

Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost

September 9-10, 2023

*A Warning Worth Heeding*

From the plains of Babylon, Ezekiel looks back upon the defeat of Judah at the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC (Before Christ). Then, he prophesies the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. His prophecy is a stark reminder of the judgement of Israel for not walking in God's Statutes. It's not a hard time to remember, but it is a time that is hard on the memory, and a constant lesson that God did not abandon His people; rather, His people abandoned the one true God.

Ezekiel's prophecies fall into three distinct categories: judgement against Israel, judgement against other nations and, finally, a vision of the restoration of Israel.

It is difficult to read today's account, for it is supposed to begin the vision of the restoration of Israel, and yet...

...it has a particular warning for pastors. The almighty Yahweh has not hidden his desire for His people, as He says, "Attend to my people or I will attend to you..."

And this is not the kind of attention you would ever want from Adonai!

When Yahweh speaks to Ezekiel; He speaks to His Watchman with a clarity that should make any spiritual counselor attentive to His Words. Because God has appointed all His Watchmen the words they hear come from the mouth of God and will teach His people...and that teaching can be many things...

It can be simple instruction and guidance in the tenants of Faith.

It can be admonition to the sinner, forgiveness to the penitent and encouragement to the faithful.

But sometimes, and Ezekiel's prophecy is one of those times...it can be a grave and stern warning...never to be taken lightly or flippantly.

I'll never forget, several years ago, a pastor at our gathering of pastors presented a paper suggesting it was time to relax our judgment on a particular sin. The utter shock in the room at his assertion was felt by over 40 pastors and immediately challenged save for two that defended his points.

After a lively discussion and more than a couple of emotional outbursts, the oldest pastors sat aghast, the youngest pastors sat mute, and a few in the middle were just ramping up for round two of remonstrations of the paper pushing pastor. That is when the Emeritus President of our District spoke up, like the Watchman over all of us God sent him to be, “You are proposing a permissiveness God has never permitted before; should you take this journey, we cannot be compelled to accompany you on it.” The simple tone of his voice and the finality of his statement was clear. “Sin is still sin and Christ forgives above all. This discussion is ended.”

All I could whisper under my breath was a relieved, “AMEN.”

Oh, how Ezekiel’s prophecy could have admonished and counselled the wayward thinking of that pastor that day! But maybe, just maybe, the spirit of Ezekiel’s prophecy resonated through the Emeritus District President’s words and turned him from his perilous prognostications. All I know, is, my devotion to Ezekiel’s prophecy brought back the memories of that day in a powerful way, and I am sure I heard the voice of a Watchman, as God intended, to turn His children from sin.

And let me be clear: that warning was not directed at me at all, but I still felt the chilling effect of its clarity.

No doubt many Watchmen stood on the plains of Babylon, and even if Ezekiel’s prophecy was not meant for them, they doubtless felt the chilling effect just as I did.

God’s Word is just that, the Words of God. To ignore it, to deny it or foolishly decry it, would be akin to the naiveté of a toddler handling molten lava like play dough and expecting not to get burned. But to be the one tasked with warning those erring in sin and choosing not to do so; that one makes the molten-lava-handling toddler look like a Rhoades Scholar! Which, believe it or not, can be done.

Not so many weeks ago, I saw a metal worker with molten metal hot and orange pouring down a sluice to the mold below. To my shock, the metal worker was slapping his hand on the orange molten metal so hard it was like splashing his hand in water. What was amazing is he did it several times and he withdrew his hand unharmed every time. I figured he must be able to do that on the same physics principal people can walk on burning coals.

“...the secret of the firewalk lies in the low thermal conductivity of the embers and the short contact time between the person’s feet and the hot embers.

...an important factor to consider is the length of time that the person's foot is in contact with the embers...The trick lies in taking a fluent brisk walk—with each step taking less than half a second of contact with the charcoal. During a 10-15 feet firewalk run, each foot will be in contact with the embers for a total time of only a few seconds or less.

Even with this information, firewalking can still be dangerous if done without proper care and technique...Even more dangerous is the risk of tripping and falling onto the hot pieces of ember, which can be extremely painful, and even fatal!"

(<https://www.scienceabc.com/humans/how-do-some-people-firewalk.html>)

So even with the trick of how to do it relatively safely, it is still an extreme risk, none-the-less.

I know what you're thinking. "Come on, Pastor, no toddler would do that!" To that, I reply, "But no one whoever knew the real consequences of sin would ever sin again, and yet we still do!"

Ezekiel raises the goosebumps on the nape of every shepherd's neck and details the consequences of not sounding the alarm. "There is danger, Damnation is the consequence, please I'm begging you turn from your wicked ways!"

How we take danger seriously in our lives today!

We wrap our children in safe communities with safe schools and activities impenetrable to evil. We send our sons and daughters out the door with every trusted safeguard before leaving the confines of our castles. We insure against calamity, lock our doors against intruders, and prepare for every possible mishap.

But how often we forget...and then regret...our lack of care for our eternal wellbeing. Our devotion is devoid, our prayer is perfunctory and our salvation is less the superlative in our daily living. The winsome warnings of Ezekiel are hardly heeded, and sins...well just don't feel so sinful anymore.

The Watchman Calls ALL OF US!

And the true Watchman knows that every one of our sins require blood upon His hands.

So who will be held accountable for those who refused their calling? Who will take the blame for all our willful mishaps? Who will suffer the consequences we all deserve by our own most grievous fault?

In the Old Testament, the altar of the Temple in Jerusalem ran wet with the blood of the rams that were sacrificed for the sins of Israel. But as Ezekiel prophesied, the city would be destroyed and the temple brought to the ground! He then prophesied an ultimate permanent sacrifice that covered the sins of everyone for all time.

Luther said, “This vision, as Ezekiel himself shows in chapters 8-9, signified the end of the priesthood, the worship and the church organization instituted and given them by Moses. For all of these were instituted only until Christ should come”

The Father sets a Watchman, who warns us, who took our blood upon our hand, and died for us. Jesus watched and waited from the very beginning of creation. All throughout the Old Testament He warned God’s people. And, finally, He sacrificed like no sacrifice could before Him.

Only the death of our Lord Jesus can demonstrate the true severity of our sins. Christ came to save sinners, to turn us from our wicked ways by making us sinners into saints.

Christ is the Watchman that replaced every watchman before Him.

Christ’s death makes it clear that the blood of our guilt was put upon Him.

And His eternal countenance was in turn put upon us.

And Christ’s Resurrection Made *All His Warnings Worth Heeding*.

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