

# TURNING POINT

SERIES: KNOWING THE GOD OF  
JUSTICE AND HOPE



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Ezekiel 33  
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## *Ezekiel 33*

I once heard an oncologist say that he loves working with cancer patients because when they find out they have cancer, “they get rid of the [garbage] in their lives, and they start to really live.” What will it take for us to start to really live? For some of us, it’s a crisis.

In Ezekiel 33, the Israelites face a crisis. Will they do what they haven’t done up to this point in the book of Ezekiel? The Lord, through the prophet Ezekiel, has urged them to “turn” from their wicked ways and “live”—really live. He will do so again in this chapter. Will they do so?

Ezekiel 33 is a transitional chapter. Chapters 4–24 featured judgment oracles against Israel. Chapters 25–32 featured judgment oracles against the nations. Chapters 34–48 feature oracles of salvation. Something needs to happen before we get to salvation oracles, however: a crisis.

## Commissioned as a watchman

### **Ezekiel 33:1-9:**

**The word of the Lord came to me: 2 “Son of man, speak to your people and say to them, If I bring the sword upon a land, and the people of the land take a man from among them, and make him their watchman, 3 and if he sees the sword coming upon the land and blows the trumpet and warns the people, 4 then if anyone who hears the sound of the trumpet does not take warning, and the sword comes and takes him away, his blood shall be upon his own head. 5 He heard the sound of the trumpet and did not take warning; his blood shall be upon himself. But if he had taken warning, he would have saved his life. 6 But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, so that the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes any one of them, that person is taken away in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at the watchman’s hand.**

**7 “So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. 8 If I say to the wicked, O wicked one, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. 9 But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, that person shall die in his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul.”**

The Lord had already commissioned Ezekiel as a “watchman” (Ezekiel 3:17). The difference now is that the Lord tells him to go public with his commission.

As a watchman, he simply obeys orders, speaking to the people when the Lord tells him to speak. Specifically, his commission is to warn certain people that they will die unless they turn from their wicked ways. The Lord pictures himself along the lines of an enemy poised to attack his people unless they turn from their wicked ways. Up to this point, the prophet has been faithful to his call as a watchman, as is evident from Ezekiel 4-32.

In Ezekiel 33, as in Ezekiel 18, the prospects of life and death are held out for the exiles. They are experiencing the death of the exile, but they can still experience the life of God even during what otherwise seems to be a living death.

## We’re all watchmen

Personally, I feel that the Lord has called me to be something of a watchman. The burden I feel is to faithfully preach what the Lord has given me to preach from the Scriptures and specifically from whatever text is before me, even if it’s challenging and even if I don’t like what it says.

Therefore, in light of Ezekiel 33:1-9, I feel that I must warn you that if you have not turned from your way and given your life to Christ, you will die in your iniquity—meaning, you will not be raised to eternal life with Christ. But if you turn from your way and give

your life to Christ, you will live—meaning, you will really live, both now and in a new and eternal body at Christ’s coming.

I feel the burden of a watchman. How about you? We’re all watchmen, aren’t we? We do our best, led by the Spirit, to speak truth at the right time and in the right way. As Paul says, “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person” (Colossians 4:6). Notice that a watchman doesn’t speak indiscriminately; he speaks when called to speak. To be a watchman, you must cultivate spiritual attentiveness. After all, a watchman must . . . watch.

You probably don’t go up to every person at Starbucks. But maybe while you’re there, someone catches your eye, you sense some kind of opening, and feel something like a nudge to approach that person or to be open to his or her approach. Maybe you say something. Maybe you listen. You’re a watchman.

How does Israel respond this time to Ezekiel?

## Turn and live

**Ezekiel 33:10-16:**

**“And you, son of man, say to the house of Israel, Thus have you said: ‘Surely our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we rot away because of them. How then can we live?’ 11 Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel? 12 “And you, son of man, say to your people, The righteousness of the righteous shall not deliver him when he transgresses, and as for the wickedness of the wicked, he shall not fall by it when he turns from his wickedness, and the righteous shall not be able to live by his righteousness when he sins. 13 Though I say to the righteous that he shall surely live, yet if he trusts in his righteousness and does injustice, none of his righteous deeds shall be remembered, but in his injustice that he has done he shall die. 14 Again, though I say to the wicked, ‘You shall surely die,’ yet if he turns from his sin and does what is just and right, 15 if the wicked restores the pledge, gives back what he has taken by robbery, and walks in the**

**statutes of life, not doing injustice, he shall surely live; he shall not die. 16 None of the sins that he has committed shall be remembered against him. He has done what is just and right; he shall surely live.”**

The exiles—here called “the house of Israel”—show an awareness that has heretofore escaped them. Instead of being unaware of or defending their wicked ways, the exiles feel the weight of their transgressions and sins and believe that they are rotting away because of them. But are they repentant? There is an admission of sin but no evidence of repentance. There is a cry of pain but not a cry for the Lord. They ask, “How can we then live?” How? Well, the Lord commands Ezekiel to tell them how.

First, the Lord says, as in Ezekiel 18:23, that he takes “no pleasure in the death of the wicked.” If the exiles are to “live,” they first need to understand that the Lord doesn’t want them to die. If earlier he pictured himself as enemy poised to attack, he was a reluctant enemy, a heartbroken enemy—in reality, a friend who had to act like an enemy as a last recourse to help his people.

What does the Lord take pleasure in? He takes pleasure in his people. Israel is the Lord’s “inheritance” (Psalm 78:71, Jeremiah 10:16, Jeremiah 51:19). He is pleased when his people turn from their wicked ways so that they may “live.” He is pleased when they thrive. Observe how he pleads with his people: “turn back, turn back.” Observe how he wants life for them: “for why will you die, O house of Israel?”

They will live if they turn back, but to turn back, they need to see the heart of the one who is telling them to turn back. They need to see that the Lord takes pleasure in them, that he wants them to live, that he wants them to thrive.

Although the Lord entertains the possibility of both the wicked and the righteous changing in verses 12-16, he does so for the sake of the wicked, to persuade them to turn from their wicked ways.

## The heart of God

One of the reasons people don’t repent is that they can’t see—or don’t want to see—God as he is. They have a false image of God. First, they view God as restrictive. They believe that he demands that they change, especially their pleasure-seeking ways, and toe the line. Second, they view God as punitive. They believe that he punishes them if they don’t change their

pleasure-seeking ways and toe the line. Therefore, they want little or nothing to do with God, and they want little or nothing to do with repentance. To them, “turn and live” means “turn and die”: turn and live a boring, up-tight, straight-and-narrow life.

What do we see of God in verses 10-16? We see that he takes pleasure not in our demise but in our restoration. In love, he warns us about the dangerous path that we’re on. He pleads with us, like a broken-hearted father, to turn back from a path that would lead us to destroy both others and ourselves. He wants more than anything for us to live—for us to thrive—and he knows, far better than we, what will make us thrive. We thrive, more than anything, on his love. The pleasure that we must seek is knowing him in ever-deeper ways. Can you see?

Augustine was an avowed hedonist until he saw God’s heart. He writes in *Confessions*:

*“How sweet all at once it was for me to be rid of those fruitless joys which I had once feared to lose! . . . You drove them from me, you who are the true, the sovereign joy. You drove them from me and took their place, you who are sweeter than all pleasure.”*

In other words, the words of the oncologist, he got rid of the garbage in his life, and he began to really live.

And the Israelites: will they begin to really live?

## Sorrowful but unrepentant

**Ezekiel 33:17-20:**

**“Yet your people say, ‘The way of the Lord is not just, when it is their own way that is not just. 18 When the righteous turns from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for it. 19 And when the wicked turns from his wickedness and does what is just and right, he shall live by this. 20 Yet you say, ‘The way of the Lord is not just. O house of Israel, I will judge each of you according to his ways.’”**

Remember when the people were lamenting, “Surely our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we rot away because of them”? Remember when they asked, “How then can we live?”? The Lord has answered their question, but instead of responding by turning from their wickedness, in response to the Lord, they turn and accuse him of injustice. It looks as if they were sorry

for their suffering, even recognizing that their suffering resulted from their sins, but it doesn’t look as if they were sorry for their sins. Even now, they remain sorrowful but unrepentant. Still, the Lord holds out hope for them: “when the wicked turns from his wickedness and does what is just and right, he shall live by this.”

If we don’t see the heart of God, we may then turn and blame him even for the problems that we have created for ourselves. Our repentance, like that of the exiles, will be shallow and, most likely, short-lived. We will feel bad for ourselves that we’re responsible for wronging someone, but we won’t feel bad for them.

Next, Ezekiel hears some news that will change everything. It constitutes a turning point in the book of Ezekiel, but will it be a turning point for Israel?

## News from Jerusalem

**Ezekiel 33:21-22:**

**In the twelfth year of our exile, in the tenth month, on the fifth day of the month, a fugitive from Jerusalem came to me and said, “The city has been struck down.” 22 Now the hand of the Lord had been upon me the evening before the fugitive came; and he had opened my mouth by the time the man came to me in the morning, so my mouth was opened, and I was no longer mute.**

On January. 8, 585 B.C., Ezekiel hears the news that Jerusalem has fallen. Two years earlier, the Lord told Ezekiel that Babylon had begun laying siege to Jerusalem. In fact, the Lord even told Ezekiel that this day was coming: when a survivor of the siege would deliver to Ezekiel the news of Jerusalem’s destruction (Ezekiel 24:1-2, 25-27). All the false hopes of Israel have come crashing down with the walls of Jerusalem.

## When hopes crash

When your false hopes come crashing down around you: what an opportunity! What an opportunity to turn to the Lord and find him. What an opportunity to recognize that he takes pleasure in you. What an opportunity to recognize that God wants more than anything for you to thrive on his love. What an opportunity to recognize that you thrive only when you long for him. What an opportunity to seek pleasure in knowing him in ever-deeper ways. To paraphrase John Piper, don’t waste your crisis.

Pray. Lament. Cry out. Go for walks. Journal. Open up to friends and counselors.

Piper himself, after he was diagnosed with cancer, said, “This news has, of course, been good for me . . . . The times with Christ in these days have been unusually sweet.” On the verge of surgery, he penned these words: “Satan’s and God’s designs in your cancer are not the same. Satan designs to destroy your love for Christ. God designs to deepen your love of Christ. Cancer does not win if you die. It wins if you fail to cherish Christ. God’s design is to wean you off the breast of the world and feast you on the sufficiency of Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

Paul’s false hopes came crashing down when Jesus met him on the road to Damascus. He had been something of a superstar, with pedigree. Later, however, he said that he considered both his heritage and his accomplishments as “rubbish” so that he could “know” Christ (Philippians 3:7–11). He got rid of the garbage and started to really live.

Although I came to Christ in my high school years, two years after I graduated from college, I wasn’t sure what I believed anymore. Whatever hopes I had at that time gathered around a woman I began seeing. Right about that time I also moved from the Bay Area to Redding, in the northern reaches of the state, to work as a reporter for the newspaper there. Just then, I heard some devastating news: the woman that I was seeing informed me that she didn’t want to see me anymore and that she was seeing another man.

I was devastated. I was alone in a new place. I sank into a depression, the deepest and longest of my life. I lost my appetite, not to mention a lot of weight. On the whole, I didn’t want to be alive. For me, it was a crisis. Looking back, I wonder what I was so depressed about. But we are what we are when we are, and God meets us where we are.

My false hopes came crashing down around me. What an opportunity!

How do the Israelites respond to their opportunity?

## **Inhabitants of Jerusalem respond**

**Ezekiel 33:23-29:**

**The word of the Lord came to me: 24 “Son of man, the inhabitants of these waste places in the land of Israel keep saying, ‘Abraham was only one man, yet he got possession of the land;**

**but we are many; the land is surely given us to possess.’ 25 Therefore say to them, Thus says the Lord God: You eat flesh with the blood and lift up your eyes to your idols and shed blood; shall you then possess the land? 26 You rely on the sword, you commit abominations, and each of you defiles his neighbor’s wife; shall you then possess the land? 27 Say this to them, Thus says the Lord God: As I live, surely those who are in the waste places shall fall by the sword, and whoever is in the open field I will give to the beasts to be devoured, and those who are in strongholds and in caves shall die by pestilence. 28 And I will make the land a desolation and a waste, and her proud might shall come to an end, and the mountains of Israel shall be so desolate that none will pass through. 29 Then they will know that I am the Lord, when I have made the land a desolation and a waste because of all their abominations that they have committed.”**

In response to the fall of Jerusalem, the Lord directs Ezekiel to orient himself first toward the survivors of the siege in Jerusalem and its environs. They sense an opportunity. Indeed, they have an opportunity—to repent and turn to the Lord—but that’s not the opportunity they take advantage of. As survivors, they sense an opportunity to possess the land. They seek economic gain, not the Lord. They reason that if Abraham, their patriarch, possessed the land as one man, then they should possess the land because they are many more than one man.

They reason wrongly. First, Abraham never possessed the land; he sojourned in it (Genesis 15:12–21). Second, more doesn’t necessarily mean better, or more privileged. Third, they think they should possess the land regardless of their unfaithfulness to their covenant with the Lord. Fourth, where is the Lord in their reasoning? The word “given” may imply a giver: perhaps they think the Lord has given the land to them. In any event, the Lord proceeds to tell them why they shouldn’t—and why they won’t—possess the land. They want to possess the land, but they don’t want to be possessed by the Lord.

They have broken covenant with the Lord, they are guilty of all manner of abominations, and they will suffer as a result (Leviticus 26:22, 25). True, they have survived the siege, but they won’t survive “the sword,” “the beasts,” and “pestilence.” The Lord will make the land, which they desire to possess, a “desolation and a waste.”



## Spiritual reasons for rebuilding false hopes

Some people, even when false hopes come crashing down around them, miss the opportunity to turn to the Lord and find him. Instead, they try to build up their false hopes all over gain.

Often, those false hopes have to do with what they consider to be some sort of gain, however they define it. Like the remaining inhabitants of Jerusalem, they will even find spiritual reasons for their pursuits, and there are more than enough false teachers around who will encourage them to do so. You can listen online to Paula White tell you “Why God Wants You to be Wealthy.” (Please don’t.) You can read Paul Zane Pilzer’s *God Wants You to Be Rich: How and Why Everyone Can Enjoy Material and Spiritual Wealth in Our Abundant World*. (Please don’t.)

Then again, Jesus said, “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?” (Matthew 16:26)

Finally, in response the fall of Jerusalem, the Lord directs Ezekiel to orient himself toward the exiles in Babylon.

## Exiles respond

**Ezekiel 33:30-33:**

**“As for you, son of man, your people who talk together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, say to one another, each to his brother, ‘Come, and hear what the word is that comes from the Lord.’ 31 And they come to you as people come, and they sit before you as my people, and they hear what you say but they will not do it; for with lustful talk in their mouths they act; their heart is set on their gain. 32 And behold, you are to them like one who sings lustful songs with a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument, for they hear what you say, but they will not do it. 33 When this comes—and come it will!—then they will know that a prophet has been among them.”**

The exiles are no better than their brothers and sisters back in the land. It looks as if they’re better: they have the advantage of a prophet in their midst, and they listen to what he has to say. But their mouths, with the way they talk, and their hearts, with what they want, give them away. Indeed, they listen to Ezekiel, but they don’t do what he says.

To the exiles, Ezekiel is like an entertainer, a rock star. The fact that they’re listening to a prophet helps them sustain the illusion that when they listen to him, they’re listening to the Lord. They sit before Ezekiel “as” the Lord’s people. In reality, listening to Ezekiel gives them spiritual cover for their lustful talk and wicked hearts, which are “set on their gain.” Ezekiel is telling them to set their hearts on a different kind of gain—so that they might turn and live—but they maintain that they’re doing what they’re supposed to do simply by listening to him.

## Spiritual cover for rebuilding false hopes

Some people, like the inhabitants of Jerusalem, try to rebuild their false hopes and find spiritual reasons for doing so. Others, like the exiles, try to rebuild their false hopes and find spiritual cover for doing so. They go to church. They listen to sermons, even hard-hitting sermons, like those of Ezekiel. They might even enjoy going to church and listening to sermons. But their hearts are not set on seeking the Lord; instead, their hearts, like the hearts of the exiles, are “set on their gain”—again, however they define it. They have, in Paul’s words, “the appearance of godliness” while “denying its power” (2 Timothy 3:5).

To hear the word of God over and over again and to not respond to it, however, is to risk becoming insensitive to it. Jesus warns us: “And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand” (Matthew 7:26).

Then again, when the house built on sand comes crashing down, along with your false hopes: what an opportunity!

Alas, the Israelites miss their opportunity. Ezekiel 33 constitutes the turning point in the book of Ezekiel but not a turning point for the Israelites.

I had a friend, who has gone to be with the Lord, who would regularly tell me, “Scott, whatever it takes”—meaning, he was willing to go through whatever it took to bring him closer to Jesus. In contrast to my friend’s adage, for some people, it’s not whatever it takes, it’s whatever they can take.

## He was there

When my false hopes came crashing down in Redding, I didn’t know where to turn. So I turned to God. I went for long walks, sometimes long after dark—seeking, crying, and praying. I began attending a church,

the members of which sang simple songs of worship that helped me cry out to God.

I needed the God I wasn't sure I believed in, and when I turned to him, he was there. I sensed his presence and his love. He was there when I walked into the night. He was there when I sang my broken heart out.

God didn't heal me all at once. It took about a year. Because he didn't heal me all at once, I continued my desperate meetings with him, and he kept showing up—not necessarily to heal me but to be with me. I guess you could say I started to really live.

In a crisis, get rid of the garbage. Start to live—really live. Or, don't wait for a crisis. Start now. Today could be a turning point for you.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Piper, John. "Don't Waste Your Cancer." *desiringGod.org*, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/dont-waste-your-cancer>  
Accessed October 2017.