

EZEKIEL TEACHES PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Ezekiel 18:1-32;
33:1-20

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

You, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. (Ezek. 33:7)

Daily Bible Readings			
M	Nov. 17	1 Pet. 4:1-11	Love Others despite Suffering
T	Nov. 18	1 Pet. 4:12-19	Rejoice to Share Christ's Sufferings
W	Nov. 19	Ezek. 18:1-9	Each Will Answer for His or Her Sin
Th	Nov. 20	Ps. 38:1-2, 10-22	I Confess My Iniquity
F	Nov. 21	Gal. 6:1-10	Restore One Another in Gentleness
Sa	Nov. 22	Matt. 7:1-6	See to Your Own Sins First

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

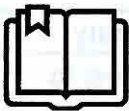
This lesson explores one final aspect of the internal problems faced by Judah during its decline. The people were treating one another unjustly, deceiving themselves about their actions and their consequences, and refusing to hear any words that would bring them back to God. The core of the problem was that the people were refusing to accept personal responsibility for their past and future.

Ezekiel asked the people to be honest with themselves about what they were doing and why. He asked them to stop placing responsibility for their actions on others. He was concerned with people who looked *backward* in order to fix blame on their ancestors. This is why the prophet strongly emphasized personal responsibility in the *here and now*.

Ezekiel never meant to imply, however, that we do not have to look ahead and consider the consequences of our actions for future generations. The reality is that children often suffer for the "sins" of the parents. We have examples of this on the individual level (such as an infant born with complications because of both parents' lifestyles) and the global

level (such as ecological damage that takes several generations to repair). These issues were not Ezekiel's concern, however, so he did not address them. We would be wrong to take Ezekiel's message out of context and to read it as a license for us to be uncaring about the effect of our actions on future generations.

Merciful God, you came into this world to show us how far you would go to restore us to you. We come today offering humble repentance and seeking forgiveness for our sins. We have been disobedient, doing those things we are not to have done. We have also been complacent, ignoring opportunities that you set before us to do good. Cleanse us from our sinful ways, O God, so that we may be the faithful people you created and redeemed us to be. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

Ezekiel 33:7-16a

33:7 So you, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. ⁸If I say to the wicked, "O wicked ones, you shall surely die," and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand. ⁹But if you warn the wicked to turn from their ways and they do not turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but you will have saved your life.

¹⁰Now you, mortal, say to the house of Israel: Thus you have said: "Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?" ¹¹Say 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 their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel? ¹²And you, mortal, say to your people: The righteousness of the righteous shall not save them when they transgress, and as for the wickedness of the wicked, it shall not make them stumble when they turn from their wickedness, and the righteous shall not be able to live by their righteousness when they sin. ¹³Though I say to the righteous that they shall surely live, yet if they trust in their righteousness and commit iniquity, none of their righteous deeds shall be remembered, but in the iniquity that they have committed they shall die. ¹⁴Again, though I say to the wicked, "You shall surely die," yet if they turn

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

from their sin and do what is lawful and right—¹⁵if the wicked restore the pledge, give back what they have taken by robbery, and walk in the statutes of life, committing no iniquity—they shall surely live; they shall not die. ¹⁶None of the sins that they have committed shall be remembered against them; they have done what is lawful and right; they shall surely live.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?

We often think of a prophet as one who foretells the future. The biblical understanding of a prophet is one who speaks for God—communicating God’s message to God’s people. In Scripture, this sometimes involved announcing expected future events. More often, it was a pronouncement about the will and purpose of God and the responsibility of God’s people to act in accordance with that will and purpose in the current situation. The central concern of the prophet was reestablishing a connection between God and the community.

In a situation such as the one Ezekiel faced, prophecy also holds a warning. This is why God describes the prophet as a “sentinel” (Ezek. 33:7). The Hebrew word used here refers to one who “looks out” or “keeps watch” with the intent of announcing disaster before it arrives. We may think of soldiers stationed along a problematic border or early-alert systems in place for dangerous weather. Like a sentinel, Ezekiel was called to watch for threats (both internal and external) and to warn the people so that they could seek safety if they chose to do so.

In our Background Scripture (Ezek. 18), Ezekiel gives an example of three generations to make his point. Each individual in this family will be judged according to his own choices, rather than those of his ancestors. The second generation will not benefit from their father’s righteousness, nor will the third generation be blamed for their father’s ungodliness.

Although Ezekiel’s example may make perfect sense to us, it represented harsh words to those in exile. They found their punishment in Babylon easier to bear because, at heart, they believed it was not their fault. They could look back on former generations and blame them for events that led to the current exile. Ezekiel’s accusation that people were hiding behind the law—and his call to accept personal responsibility for their spiritual lives—proved painful. Ezekiel knew that no reconciliation or personal change comes without painful honesty.

Thus, in Ezekiel 33:7–16a, the prophet urged the people to hear his message and to heed its content. There is still time, Ezekiel promised, to turn from your sin-filled ways and to heal the separation and wickedness in your lives. What you will discover, he promised, is “a new heart and a new spirit” (18:31). Salvation depends on the decision of the people to repent, to turn from the old ways, and to begin accepting responsibility. God holds each individual accountable.



Have you ever acted as a sentinel for someone? Why did you, and what happened?

A MODERN DILEMMA

Our society has learned some of the consequences of this same problem. Almost everywhere, people tackle the task at hand with minimal thought of unexpected repercussions. Politicians make promises to get elected, then wonder why they are not trusted when they cannot fulfill those promises later. Manufacturers dump hazardous wastewater to save costs, then are astonished when sickened townspeople sue them. Restaurant owners offer insultingly low wages, claiming that tips will make up for it, and then complain when no one applies for empty positions.

We have become a nation of “victims,” where people don’t claim responsibility for themselves or their neighbors. In addition to the occasions cited above, personal experience brings the following examples to mind:

- a troubled teen blamed her shoplifting on “absentee parents”
- a woman who lost a promotion to someone better qualified blamed sexism for her failure to advance
- a man who received poor job performance reviews for years blamed his job loss on reverse discrimination
- a student who hated studying blamed poor grades on the educational system
- a man who beat his wife blamed her for provoking him.

This is not to say that such problems are not real; they are. Poor parenting, sexism, racism, inadequate education, violence, and other problems are, sadly, a large part of our world. The problems are also often systemic and greater than we are. Yet, this does not give us the right to sit back and do nothing about our

lives and situations. Every time we say “poor me” or “it’s someone else’s fault,” we become part of the problem. We must each take responsibility to some extent for who and what we are.

Neither do we have the luxury of ignoring the plight of others. If we refuse to work for change on someone else’s behalf because “that’s just the way it is,” we are—in effect—playing the victim role ourselves. When we say “it’s not my responsibility” or “but there’s nothing I can do,” we are buying into the notion that we are not responsible for our neighbor or the actions of our society. Ezekiel challenges such notions. We are each called to take responsibility for ourselves and our neighbor as a sign of our love for God. This is what Jesus meant in Matthew 22:34–40 (Mark 12:28–34; Luke 10:25–28) when he summed up the law by quoting Deuteronomy 6:5: “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. . . . You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

? What examples come to your mind of people who avoid taking personal responsibility?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

Ezekiel’s message is clear. There is no in-between. One must choose either to be righteous or not. The prophet made it clear that one cannot choose an unrighteous life and then say “but it’s not my fault.” Each individual must examine the characteristics of his or her life, face the reality of what this implies, and accept responsibility for it.

I think Ezekiel would agree with this paraphrase of the poet John Donne—“No person is an island.” We are each called to be responsible to and care for one another. There are true victims in the world (often symbolized in the Bible by aliens, widows, and orphans), and we are responsible for them. There are people who, despite their own best efforts, continue to be victimized by our society and its structures. We are called to work alongside them for change on their behalf.

One way we fulfill our personal responsibility as God’s people is by working within the church’s mission to strive for God’s justice in our society and in the world. For some congregations, this presents a unique problem for evangelism. Some prospective members won’t join a church if they are expected to be involved in the world on Jesus’ behalf. They want a church where they can feel good, not where they will be faced with demands. While this

mindset has always been present, it is especially prevalent in our modern society.

One writer addresses the problem this way:

Can church feel good? Of course. But there's more to the story here. The purpose of the church isn't to make you feel good, but to magnify the name of Jesus through worship and teaching of his Word. There will be times of feeling good, but there will also be times of conviction and sacrifice that will undoubtedly bring on major life-changes. It's not always easy, but it's definitely worth it.¹

? If the church never calls its people to turn from our selfish ways, what good is it?

No wonder modern congregations often struggle to maintain a tricky balance between meeting people where they really are and, at the same time, being true to what the Bible teaches about Christian responsibility. Regardless of the effect on rolls and membership, however, we cannot afford to forget these words from Luke: "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required, and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded" (12:48).

? What do you see as your responsibility in terms of caring for others? How are you enacting this? What responsibility do you think others have toward you?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes from the Uniform Series provide additional information about today's Scripture.

1. Ezekiel 18 asserts that each life is a separate act of divine creation and is responsible for its spiritual responsibilities. God provides a genuinely open future for each individual based on what that person has become.
2. The people claimed that YHWH was unfair. God turns the charge around and addresses them. When the righteous fall away, they are punished, and when the wicked repent, they are saved. YHWH has been fair, but the people have not.
3. In repentance, we move beyond mere regret, embarrassment, or shame. In true repentance, I implore God to rid me of "all the offenses I have committed and get a new heart and a new spirit" (see 18:31).

1. Jarrod Wilson, "The Problem with 'Feel Good' Church," *Outreach Magazine*, November 5, 2018, bit.ly/TPWarticleOM.