

Strengthened by God

“. . . Israel is hardened and obstinate. But I will make you as unyielding and hardened as they are. I will make your forehead like the hardest stone, harder than flint. Do not be afraid of them or terrified by them, though they are a rebellious house. . . . The Spirit then lifted me up and took me away, and I went in bitterness and in the anger of my spirit, with the strong hand of the Lord upon me.” Ezekiel 2:8-9, 14

Ezekiel was born in 622 BC, the same year that the book of the law was discovered in the temple during the reign of King Josiah (2 Kings 22). For a family of priests living in Jerusalem (see Wright, 17) it was a very special year to give birth to a son who would follow in his father's priestly calling. “‘May God strengthen him.’ This was the prayer with which Ezekiel's parents launched their newborn son into the world when they named him. It was an appropriate prayer and God would answer it in ways that they could never have envisaged in the year of his birth” (Wright, 17). Ezekiel's birth marks a brief period in Judah's history when true spiritual renewal took place. King Josiah ordered the destruction of pagan shrines and he did away with the pagan priests. He removed “from the temple of the Lord all the articles made for Baal and Asherah and all the starry hosts” (23:4). He tore down “the quarters of the male shrine prostitutes, which were in the temple of the Lord and where women did weaving for Asherah” (23:7). The King stood before the people and read from the Book of the Covenant and pledged “to follow the Lord and keep his commands, regulations and decrees with all his heart and all his soul” (23:3). However, there is little evidence that the king's reform movement had any long term impact. Five years earlier, in 627 BC, Jeremiah was called to be a prophet. He would spend the next forty years in Jerusalem denouncing idolatry in the hearts and minds of the people.

Twenty-five years after Josiah's reforms, Ezekiel was deported by Nebuchadnezzar to Babylon along with “all the officers and fighting men, and all the craftsmen and artisans” (2 Kings 24:14). But Yahweh still had a plan for Ezekiel, as he does for us, when it appears that our hopes and dreams are dashed. His birth was marked by Josiah's reforms and great hope for Judah's future, but his call to ministry was marked by five years in Babylonian captivity, when it looked like the covenant people of God had no future at all. Ezekiel had hoped to serve the Lord as a priest in the Jerusalem Temple, instead he served the Lord as a prophet among the exiles on the outskirts of Babylon. It was there that “the hand of the Lord was upon him” (Ez 1:3). In the year that he would have officially become a priest, he became a prophet, one of the strongest, God-hardened communicators the world has ever known.

“May God Strengthen You”

It is helpful to become personally acquainted with people whose faith and trust in Christ

translates into strength and resilience. We can learn from their example. Three weeks before her 21st wedding anniversary, Evelyn Husbands lost the love of her life, space shuttle Columbia Commander Rick Husbands. It has been nearly a year since the explosion of the Columbia just minutes before the shuttle was scheduled to land. Since then Evelyn has delivered a powerful message of the faithfulness of God even in the midst of intense suffering. “Most of you aren’t going to lose the person you love most on national television,” she told an audience of women in California. “But every person will face tragedies and little everyday crises. Your only consistency is Jesus Christ.” For Evelyn, strength in the midst of pain has come from experiencing God’s comfort in the past and crying out to God in the present. “Deep inside, I knew God was going to walk me through this somehow,” she says. “I knew it because he’d walked with me through other crises earlier in my life.”

*After five years of marriage and trying to start a family, two miscarriages sent Evelyn into depression. Evelyn remembers praying, “‘God, take away my desire to be a mom if it isn’t your will, because this is just so painful.’ I had to let go and trust God with my future.” That experience helped Evelyn deal with the loss of her husband. “The past year I’ve had to take hold of God’s hand and step out in faith into absolute darkness,” she says. “I’ve gone way beyond polite stages with God. I’ve yelled and cried out to him with a deeper, gut-wrenching cry than ever before. But he’s proven to me he’s there, holding my hand as I take each step forward. That’s why when you walk through a crises, it’s important to have a foundation of faith already established. Because you have to know **whose** hand you’re holding, in order to step into the darkness of an uncertain future.”*

It has been the sudden, unexpected encounters with grief that Evelyn has found most overwhelming. Like the time shortly after the accident that she went with her 7 year-old son Matthew to the grocery store and there at the check out counter she saw a magazine with a picture of Rick on the front and a bold headline that read, ‘The last seven horrifying minutes for the space shuttle crew.’ She saw Matthew looking at it. By the time they got out of the store, she was an hysterical, sobbing mess.

From the beginning Evelyn relied on her long standing commitment to Christ, her experience of his comfort through past crises, and her awareness of his presence. On the Today Show she recited Proverbs 3:5-6 and the producers flashed the verse on the screen. In the midst of the pain she has trusted in the Lord and used the pain as a catalyst to reach others who are suffering. She treasures the journal Rick started for her in the weeks leading up to his space mission. Rick also videotaped devotionals for Laura and Matthew to watch every day during his space flight. “Now they have on tape an hour-and-a-half of their dad talking to them about God,” Evelyn says.

*“Three years ago, I went with Laura’s fifth-grade class on a field trip to D.C., and Laura and I visited the Challenger memorial,” Evelyn says. “I remember standing there with my arm around Laura begging God, **Never let it be us.** In light of what happened, you’d think I’d be disillusioned with God. But strangely, it hasn’t been that way at all,” she says. “I’ve learned Jesus was a man of sorrows who’s well acquainted with my grief. He knows how deeply I’m*

mourning. And he's been with me every moment. He's also given me a real chance to honor him through this situation. That's what I'm trying to do.” (Corrie Cutrer, “Finding Purpose in Pain,” Today's Christian Woman, Jan/Feb, 2004, 55-57).

I would like to introduce to you another person who was God-strengthened and whose life will deepen our faith and fortitude in the Lord God if we have the courage to follow his example.

The prophet Ezekiel has long been eclipsed by his contemporaries, Jeremiah and Daniel, and all but forgotten by the Church. I suspect that Ezekiel may be one of the most understudied books of the Bible. Some time ago a friend picked up my Bible and was paging through it. My well-worn, heavily underlined Bible showed little evidence of my having ever studied this sixth century B.C. prophet. “What’s wrong with Ezekiel?” he said. I don’t think you’ve ever studied this book.” He was right about that. I don’t think I will ever fully grasp the meaning of Ezekiel’s many God-inspired images or understand why God had him do some of the things he did. He hammers away at the judgment theme, nation upon nation, until I want to say, “Enough!” But even then, I am not sure the dire consequences for rejecting God have sunk into my consciousness.

Ezekiel is preoccupied with two great themes that we can readily appreciate, the glory of God and the depravity of man, but he is led by the Spirit to develop these themes in such an extreme way that his work leaves most of us uncomfortable. His praying imagination reveals the mystery of God and the mess of the human condition in ways that most of us find difficult to understand.

Of all the prophets, Ezekiel may be the most difficult to identify with. Whereas Jeremiah freely expressed his feelings, Ezekiel kept his thoughts to himself. He shared his prophetic vision but he was quiet about its impact on his own personal life. Daniel was a fellow exile in Babylon, but he might as well have lived a thousand miles away, because he served in the king’s palace and Ezekiel camped out with the exiles. The prophet Daniel impresses me as a great example of how a person devoted to God can live faithfully while working at the center of worldly power. He was as sensible and exemplary as Ezekiel was weird and eccentric.

Yet my sense is that Ezekiel’s strangeness may prove significant for our postmodern, digitally-driven, information age. I believe that there is a connection between Ezekiel’s message to exiles, who had all but stopped listening to God, and God’s message to restless nomads today who have lost touch with reality and no longer believe in the God of creation and covenant. Or, if they believe in a god it is the god of their own imagining, not the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, or the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Ezekiel was called to deliver a full message “of lament and mourning and woe” to a rebellious nation (2:9). The description of the exiles as rebellious, a verdict repeated six times, counters our natural sensibilities that would pity political refugees and lend them a helping hand. But the word of the Lord insisted on seeing them not as victims of Babylonian aggression but as an obstinate and stubborn people in revolt against God. Nor had their thousand mile journey from Jerusalem to Babylon and their experience in make-shift labor camps along the irrigation canals from the

Tigris and Euphrates, softened their hearts and made them more receptive to the Word of the Lord. On the contrary, Ezekiel was warned not to be afraid, “though briars and thorns are all around you and you live among scorpions” (2:6).

A God-hardened Communicator

The Lord made it clear that Ezekiel’s apparent lack of success in changing lives was not his fault. He lacked neither the divine authority, the human courage, nor the Spirit-led creativity necessary to drive God’s message home, yet he knew from the beginning that he was being sent to a people who were “obstinate and stubborn” (2:4). His authority rested squarely on the Lord and he delivered God’s message relentlessly for some twenty years (593 BC - 573 BC) without the benefit of acceptance. Everything he said was prefaced by, “This is what the Sovereign Lords says” (2:4; 3:11, 27, etc). This phrase occurs some 217 times throughout the course of his prophecy. He was also conscious of being moved or “lifted up” by the Holy Spirit (2:2; 3:12, 14, 24; 8:3; 11:1, 24; 37:1; 43:5). It is significant that Ezekiel’s mission was not about changed lives as much as it was about the exiles knowing that a prophet had been among them (2:5) and that the Lord had spoken in his zeal (5:13; 6:10, 13). Ezekiel’s success was measured not in human receptivity but in human recognition of the reality of God (“Then they will know that I am the Lord” 7:27). The message was so bold and in their face that they could not deny that the Lord was speaking through Ezekiel, even if they did not respond positively to the message.

In Ezekiel the message and the messenger were one, a fact that resulted in an extraordinary burden on the prophet. This was especially apparent in the singular reference to Ezekiel’s family life. The word of the Lord came to Ezekiel saying, “Son of man, with one blow I am about to take away from you the delight of your eyes. Yet do not lament or weep or shed any tears. Groan quietly; do not mourn for the dead. Keep your turban fastened and your sandals on your feet; do not cover the lower part of your face or eat the customary food of mourners” (24:15-17). Ezekiel bore the loss of his dear wife without the benefit of public grief and support. He embodied the hidden pain and grief of a people who were about to be denied the ability to grieve the loss of Jerusalem and their family members. There may be no more painful object lesson in the Bible. Jeremiah was told not to marry, but Ezekiel’s wife was taken from him and he had to pretend that life went on as normal. “So you will be a sign to them,” said the Lord, “and they will know that I am the Lord” (24:27).

This is what makes the book of Ezekiel especially interesting and convicting. It is a tour de force of divine communication through a God-hardened prophet who shares God’s passion for truth among a people who have hardened their hearts against God. Of all the prophets in the Bible, Ezekiel may be the most creative and extreme. This strange and unusual prophet is a communicator par excellence. He conveys the message of God through such a variety of means and medium that he becomes a personal illustration of God’s tireless effort to communicate even to people who refuse to listen. Ezekiel’s multi-media presentation includes mystical visions of God, bizarre visual drama, graphic messages of judgment, vivid dreams of gross forms of pagan idolatry, extended R-rated sexual allegories of Jerusalem’s spiritual adultery, descriptive political

parables capturing the rise and fall of world powers, simple proverbs underscoring personal responsibility, poetic laments against Israel's princes, historical chronicles of Israel's rebellion, and startling prophecies of hope and future reconciliation.

For over a year he spent his days as a mime laying on his side symbolizing the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem. Later he re-enacted the exile in order to reiterate God's strategy of judgment. Like Jeremiah he condemned the false prophets for their visions of peace when there was no peace and denounced the daughters of Israel for their magic charms and spiritual seduction. His description of two adulterous sisters, representing Israel and Judah, is crude and vulgar ("...She lusted after her lovers, whose genitals were like those of donkeys and whose emission was like that of horses" 23:20). Often he spoke in simple parables, using ordinary images, like eagles, vines, a cooking pot, a watchman, shepherds and sheep, to make his point. At other times, he was in the Spirit experiencing the hope of the resurrection in the valley of dry bones (37:1-14).

Ezekiel was never dull. If we are tempted to find him repetitive, even boring, it may be the result of reading his text out of context. Our complacency, even indulgence, shifts the hammer blows of judgment and graphic description of idolatry onto someone else. We have to be careful here. What we may read with idle curiosity and indifference may mirror the response that Ezekiel received in his own day. Unlike Jeremiah, he said very little about how his message was received by his fellow exiles. As we have said he was not given to personal lament. But in one remark, said almost in passing, Ezekiel comments on the people's dismissive attitude when he said, "Ah, Sovereign Lord! They are saying of me, 'Isn't he just telling parables?'" (20:49; see 33:30-33).

Ezekiel confronted what we experience today: the easy, dismissal of God's revelation, the reduction of truth to just "it's-all-a-matter-of-opinion," and the subjective bias in favor of what feels good. Ezekiel knew that God's truth was a matter of hard fact. It may have been sweet to the taste, "as honey in my mouth" but it was difficult to swallow (2:3) and agitated him so much that he "went in bitterness and in the anger of [his] spirit, with the strong hand of the Lord upon [him]" (2:14).

Ezekiel's prophecy ends on two extended pictures, one negative and the other positive. The first picture is one of utter, apocalyptic judgment. The judgment oracles against specific nations (25-32) is climaxed and intensified by the final judgment (38-39) against a vague and mysterious enemy, "Gog, of the land of Magog." Ezekiel's shocking picture of the final judgment depicts the Sovereign Lord inviting "every kind of bird and all the wild animals" to gorge themselves on the flesh and blood of the hosts of evil (39:17-20). The second picture is an exhaustively detailed vision of the new temple and the return of God's glory. "The perfect numerical symmetries and geometric design of the visionary temple provide, in the priestly categories of Ezekiel's whole worldview, an appropriate outworking of the great promise: "My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people. Then the nations will know that I the Lord make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them forever" (37:27-28; Wright, 329). The ultimate fulfillment of this promise is found not in a literal temple in Jerusalem, but in Jesus Christ, and "the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:14).

God's Lightning Rod

Ezekiel's mind and heart were not captivated by the Babylonian culture. The heavens were opened and God revealed himself to Ezekiel. He did not live in a closed universe of cause and effect. Life could not be explained by nature alone or by politics or by economics or any earthly thing. There is always more to life than what is immediately before us or subject to our investigation and Ezekiel experienced that truth in a spectacular vision of the glory of God over all creation. "Among the exiles by the Kebar River," Ezekiel discovered the most real world and the truth that reality is greater than fantasy. "The hand of the Lord was upon him" and as Ezekiel explained, "the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God."

Among earth-bound exiles, suffering from a closed universe of despair and denial, he experienced the fury of the living God, whose glory transcends the earth, whose majesty hovers above the entire created order. After making us aware of the fiery center that looked like glowing metal, the vision begins with a description of living creatures (1:5-14), followed by a description of energy or wheels within wheels, a kind of gyroscope of motion (sort of like the atomic symbol) (1:15-18). This is followed by a description of the integration of living creatures and perpetual energy (1:19-21). Above it all is a dome, "an expanse, sparkling like ice and awesome," and above the expanse a voice, a throne, and a person. Ezekiel says, "This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. When I saw it, I fell facedown, and I heard the voice of one speaking" (1:28).

Visions of the glory of God are not meant to be diagramed but they are meant to be discerned. The array of metaphors in Ezekiel's Spirit-inspired visual poetry deserve to be understood. At the center of the windstorm—an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light, was a fire that looked like glowing metal. In the fire "*was what looked like* four living creatures." The four living creatures had a human appearance, but what Ezekiel describes doesn't seem very human. We immediately try to picture this literally, but we were meant to picture this scene imaginatively.

Four living creatures, each has four faces, four wings, extended legs, unbreakable feet, and great hands. They move in formation. Ezekiel zooms in on the faces (1:10). Each being has four faces and although we have never seen anything like this literally we can understand what Ezekiel sees imaginatively. Four, signifies completeness, all directions are covered, north, south, east and west. The description is oriented around the human face, then on the right, a lion, on the left an ox and finally the face of an eagle. Each is symbolic of excellence in a species. Two wings are spread and two wings are covering.

Creation is energized by the Spirit and moves powerfully and orderly. There is nothing dull or static about creation, these living creatures appear like fire and move like lightning. If our senses have become dull to nature's wonder, Ezekiel's vision of God's glory reminds us of creation's

awesome reality. The rise of information has led to the decline of meaning. We are out of touch with the wonder and power of God's universe. We would prefer to watch the IMX version of Yellowstone than to hike its trails. As time goes on, the weight of glory is replaced by the lightness of being. We have learned to see the world in the light of technological information instead of seeing creation "by him and for him. . . and in him all things hold together" (Col 1:16-17).

We were meant to be shocked out of our small views of God and creation by "Ezekiel's famous vision of four fantastic glowing winged creatures coming at him out of a thunderstorm, surrounding some kind of flickering, dazzling fire, and with wheels alongside them whirling mesmerically in all directions, and with a transparent sky-dome traveling above them, with the throne of God Himself resting on it and visible through it." Ezekiel's experience "of the self-sustaining life, endless energy, attentive presence, limitless power, and sovereign lordship of Yahweh," leaves him facedown on the ground (J. I. Packer, "God's Lightning Rods," Wheaton, 2001, 10). He heard a voice speaking to him, saying, "Son of man, stand up on your feet and I will speak to you" (1:28).

God's revelation is like a lightning storm and Ezekiel becomes the lightning rod, grounding the awesome truth of God in the real world of discouraged, hopeless and obstinate exiles. The unapproachable power of God's truth is transposed by Ezekiel into simple object lessons, parables of warning, messages of judgment and visions of hope. This is where the disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ was meant to become like Ezekiel. J. I. Packer offers three ways that today's Christian can follow Ezekiel's example and become like a lightning rod for God's revelation.

"First, we are called to stand out for God, as the lightning rod stands out from the building's roof" (Packer, 10). Just as Ezekiel stood out from among the exiles, "we are called to stand out from the casual, unthinking, unbelieving, unspiritual mass of society" (Packer, 10). In a materialistic, hedonistic, self-indulgent world, the Christian was meant to live by faith. We were not meant to hide the light of Christ under a bushel, but to "declare the praises of him who called [us] out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9).

"Second, we are called, in the manner of a lightning rod, to offer no resistance to what comes down from God to us—words of abiding truth, warnings of retributive disaster, and visions of how God one day might restore what is being ruined in this post-Christian age. . ." (Packer, 11). Like Ezekiel we are called to take in God's intelligible revelation as if it were food. We are to live on the Word of God, not guesswork. It is to become our very life. Eating God's revelation is the ultimate picture of personal participation. We cannot stand aloof or sit in judgment on the truth of God when we are eating it up!

Third, we are called to function like a lightning rod. A lightning rod protects a building by absorbing the electrical charge that might otherwise destroy it. Likewise, Ezekiel mediated the message of God through a multi-media presentation of vivid object lessons, powerful parables and in-your-face warnings to a people who needed exactly what he had to offer. Ezekiel's

faithfulness to the Word and his ability to communicate it served as God's gracious provision to the lost exiles whether they responded positively to the message or not. Likewise, the Lord Jesus communicates his "salt and light" Gospel message through us in a variety of ways. As salt prevents decay, light dispels darkness. Preservation and illumination describe the influence of the Christian even in a hostile world. Like Ezekiel we are called to communicate God's Word creatively, forcefully, thoughtfully and prayerfully. Ezekiel was unique in his ability to communicate in so many different ways, but the same Holy Spirit that inspired him, inspires us, and guides us in designing meaningful and effective forms of communicating God's truth.

This is part of the irony of the prophet Ezekiel. For all of his unusual ways and seemingly eccentric methods of communication, we are to become like him. We are to be like lightening rods, standing above the crowd, conducting the truth of God, and then mediating that truth in a variety ways, to a lost and hurting world.

God's Watchman

Three elements defined Ezekiel's God-hardened life: worship (1:28), the Word (3:3), and witness (3:14-15). If we are going to be strong in the Lord it is essential that we experience these three elements personally. It does not work for us to live vicariously through the spiritual lives of others. There is no anecdotal story that serves as a substitute for our personal adoration of God. And no number of well-crafted sermons will ever replace the importance of prayerfully hearing the Word personally. We simply cannot live off the spiritual experience of others. Until we are truly humbled by the living God, consumed by his Word and resolved to bear witness to his truth, we are not engaged in the life our heavenly Father intended for us. Nor does it work for us to experience God for ourselves alone. The goal of worship is not an enriched spiritual life, but a life useful for God's Kingdom work. Devotion that leads only to personal feelings forsakes God's call to action. These three elements formed the matrix for the call of God in Ezekiel's life, even as they form the matrix for the call of God in our lives. Their synergism set the stage for Ezekiel's divine appointment as a watchman.

"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" (3:17).

By addressing Ezekiel as "son of man," the Lord made Ezekiel's life and vocation a model for all those who look to God to fulfill their humanity. Through Ezekiel's experience we are reminded that the life we seek is not the one we try to make for ourselves but the one that God has provided for us. It is not the life we achieve, but the life we receive from God that counts. All the initiative lies with God, as does the substance of the message and the sustaining energy to fulfill God's will. Ezekiel's life shows the followers of Jesus Christ, who is the ultimate Son of Man, the difference between a career and a calling. Ezekiel instructs us in the relationship between devotion and duty. When life is defined by the providence of God rather than an ego-driven-ambition or self-serving pleasure, it is filled with a sense of duty and responsibility. When we respond to the call of God, we do not escape from reality, we embrace of reality. We are led

to do what we would never have done if left to ourselves.

Ezekiel was called to be a watchman for the house of Israel. He was to pay attention to the word of the Lord and give the covenant people of God a warning from the Lord. The source of the warning came from God. But what was the nature of the warning? Remember that Ezekiel was in the midst of a disheartened group of exiles who had endured the thousand mile march from Jerusalem to Babylon and had languished for five years in a foreign land. What could be worse than their squalid labor camp existence under Babylonian captivity? The exiles must have thought that the last thing they needed was a watchman. They no longer feared a surprise attack or an advancing army? Not only had they been conquered by the Babylonians, they had experienced the judgment of God. What dangers could they possibly face? What was left for them to fear? They needed a hero, or so they thought, not a watchman. Perhaps, if they needed anyone they needed a priest, definitely not a prophet! But what they got was a God-hardened watchman.

The hardships of life may be overwhelming, as they were for the exiles, but ironically harsh circumstances and physical privations may only accentuate the need for a watchman. The greatest danger facing humanity is not terrorists or rogue states or malignancies or heart attacks. No. The greatest danger is the judgment of God. Not only was the Lord God the source of the warning, but God was the reason for the warning as well. In other words, God told Ezekiel, “‘Warn them about me; Warn them against me.’ Yahweh himself was the enemy Israel needed to be warned about!” (Wright, 66). Jesus emphasized the same truth when he said, “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Mt 10:28). If the exiles thought they had grounds for disappointment with God, Ezekiel’s warning must have caused them to reconsider. Instead of reinforcing the popular optimism that predicted an early return to Jerusalem, Ezekiel prophesied the fall of Jerusalem and the judgment of God. He was tasked with the difficult responsibility of delivering a message that few accepted. Yet the positive side of Ezekiel’s ministry was to cause people to accept responsibility for their actions, repent of their evil, and turn to God in obedience. Ezekiel made it clear that Yahweh would settle for no less.

If Ezekiel was called to be a watchman for the house of Israel, are we called to be watchmen for the household of faith? Is there a connection between God’s commission of Ezekiel as a watchman and the Great Commission given by Jesus to his disciples (Mt 28:19-20)? The role of the watchman seemed clearly in the mind of the apostle Paul when he listed for the Galatian believers “the acts of the sinful nature” and concluded, “I warn you, as I did before, that all those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Gal 5:21). It is reflected in his warnings: “I am not writing this to shame you, but to warn you, as my dear children” (1 Cor 4:14); “Warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone” (1 Thes 5:14). Paul went so far as to advise believers to hand a professing believer over to Satan so “the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord” (1 Cor 5:5). He advised Timothy, “Warn them before God against quarreling about words” (2 Tim 2:14). The metaphor of the watchman parallels the apostle Paul’s challenge to Timothy to guard what had been

entrusted to his care (1 Tim 6:20; 2 Tim 1:14). It is consistent with Jude's warning to "contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3). The apostle Peter challenged believers, "be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by error of lawless people and fall from your secure position" (2 Pet 3:17).

Like a watchman *on duty*, we are entrusted with a life-saving responsibility. People's lives depend upon us. To be a good watchman does not require ingenuity or eloquence or bravery or strength, but it does require that we remain alert to the will of God and the welfare of the people of God. Vigilance is more important than valor and concentration outranks courage. The task itself may be simple but the responsibility is great.

It is important that the simple task be kept simple and not made more complicated by our opinionated scrupulousness. The questions asked by the watchman are not complex and philosophical. If we are not careful the life-saving responsibility of the watchman can be turned into the life-destroying scrutiny of a hypocrite. Instead of "speaking the truth in love," it is easy to begin sounding like a gong or clanging cymbal (Eph 4:15; 1 Cor 13:1). Jesus called the Pharisees "blind guides" because they concentrated on minor things, like tithing their spices, while they neglected the weighty matters of God's law—"justice, mercy and faithfulness." If we twist the meaning of watchman, we could end up the like the Pharisees, who "strain out a gnat but swallow a camel" (Mt 23:23-24). Aesop's Fable of the boy who cried "Wolf" when there was no wolf can be likened to the over-scrupulous believer who amuses himself by agitating others over minor issues so that when the real danger threatens no one believes him. The watchman who cries "wolf" because he is either too easily threatened or because he likes to generate excitement, becomes something of a wolf in sheep's clothing that must be guarded against.

Like a watchman *on duty*, our personal integrity, that is, our authenticity as Christ's disciples, depends upon warning others of dangers that they may not be aware of. In no uncertain terms, the Lord made it clear to Ezekiel that he would be held accountable for failing to warn people of their evil ways. Failure to speak out in order to dissuade the wicked from their evil ways carried dreadful consequences. If he refused to warn people, Ezekiel himself would be held accountable for the death of the wicked. "If the watchman sees the sword coming," said the Lord, "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" (33:6).

Some may question whether Christians are held to the same standard of accountability that Ezekiel was. Apparently the apostle Paul thought so, because when he gave his farewell to the elders of the church at Ephesus, he seemed to have Ezekiel in mind. "I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all people. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. . . . So be on guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears" (Acts 20:26-31; see 23:1).

Being a watchman is a heavy responsibility. One that we either tend to take too lightly or try to

avoid altogether. Granted it is difficult in a postmodern, relativistic culture to warn people of the consequences of sin and the judgment of God, but now more than ever the role of the watchman ought to characterize our evangelism and our ethics. The good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ is always set against the reality of sin and the holiness of God. Evangelism, has essentially two sides: the herald proclaims the good news of Jesus Christ and the watchman shouts the warning of God's judgment against all who refuse to accept responsibility for their sin and repent and turn from their wicked ways.

Called of God to be a watchman, Ezekiel was accountable for sending the life-saving message, but he was not accountable for how the exiles responded to the word of the Lord. The success of his ministry was measured by his faithfulness to the message and not by the receptivity of the people. The Lord warned him that he was being sent to his own obstinate, stubborn and rebellious people. It was not Ezekiel's fault that they rejected the warning of the Lord. In chapters 18 and 33 we get a glimpse into the mind of exiles and discover why they refused to heed Ezekiel's warning. The first reason is summed up in a little proverb that was popular among the exiles,

“The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.”

In order to exonerate themselves they blamed their ancestors. It was their parents fault and they were innocent. With a simple saying they threw out Ezekiel's case against them. His year long re-enactment of the siege of Jerusalem, his messages of judgment, his graphic description of idolatry in the temple, and his lurid allegory of Judah's faithlessness, were all summarily dismissed by the exiles who were unwilling to accept any responsibility for their actions. They were not to blame; they were the victims! It was easier for them to live in denial than to hear Ezekiel's message.

Much of today's disappointment with God rests on this blame-shifting tactic. Christopher Wright describes our human propensity to divert attention from personal responsibility:

“We lay the consequences of our personal and collective wickedness at the door of our genes, or our environment, or government failures, or market forces, or global trends, or psychological stress, or anything else that is sufficiently vague and removed from uncomfortable proximity to our own choices and actions. And of course, we blame God. That is, if God exists. And paradoxically, furthermore, all the things that we blame God for are a kind of proof that he does exist anyway. So we encounter that popular perversity of people blaming the God they don't believe exists for allowing or causing things that he should have stopped if he did” (189).

Acting as the Sovereign Lord's attorney, Ezekiel responded by making a strong case for personal responsibility and for personal conversion. He declared the Lord's perspective: “For every living soul belongs to me, the father as well as the son—both alike belong to me. The soul who sins is the one who will die” (18:4). Each person before God shall be held accountable for their actions and the sins of the previous generation do not determine the moral destiny of the next generation.

Ezekiel's thesis is simple, "The soul who sins is the one who will die" (18:20).

The second reason for ignoring the Lord's warning was even more subtle and deceptive. They turned Ezekiel's powerful prophetic message into a form of entertainment. Ezekiel had become a hot topic of conversation among the exiles. He was the talk of the town. Everybody loved him, but nobody got the message. This is how the Lord assessed the people's reaction to Ezekiel:

"Your people meet on street corners and in front of their houses and say, 'Let's go hear the latest news from God.' They show up, as people tend to do, and sit in company. They listen to you speak, but don't do a thing you say. They flatter you with compliments, but all they care about is making money and getting ahead. To them you're merely entertainment—a country singer of sad love songs, playing a guitar. They love to hear you talk, but nothing comes of it. But when all this happens—and it is going to happen! —they'll realize that a prophet was among them" (Ezekiel 33:30-33, The Message).

The burden of responsibility that Ezekiel bore as a watchman for the house of Israel is shared by brothers and sisters in Christ. We are watchmen for the Household of Faith. The meaning in the metaphor is that we are our brother and sister's keeper. The age old question of Cain is answered today by those who say, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to humanity by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Like Ezekiel's multi-faceted, multi-media presentation of the word of the Lord, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is communicated today through a great variety of means, including humanitarian aid, one-on-one evangelism, justice seeking initiatives, worship services, student groups, home Bible studies, preaching, counseling, and salt and light ministries. Through this kaleidoscope of communication people are warned and challenged to come to Christ. Watchman of all types are saying in effect, "The time has come. The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mk 1:15). Evangelistic integrity and Household of Faith security calls for vigilance, creativity and sensitivity to make this warning clear. In Christ, I am my brother's keeper, my child's parent, my church's pastor, my wife's soulmate, my co-worker's colleague, and my neighbor's friend. As a husband, father, friend and pastor I am a watchman on guard for the sake of the Gospel.

Ezekiel was a God-hardened communicator and a faithful watchman warning his people of God's judgment, but above all else he was God's prophet of grace. As tough as his ministry was, it was all about the mercy of God. If only people would accept their responsibility, repent of their sins and turn to God. "Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked?" declared the Sovereign Lord. "Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their wicked ways and live?" (18:23). The apostle Peter recalls Ezekiel's words when he says, "But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Pet 3:8-9).

God's Glory

The sustaining grace of Ezekiel's twenty long years of painful prophetic ministry was his experience of God. Our first impression of Ezekiel may be that he was *eccentric*, and then upon closer examination we may see him as *intimidating*, but in the end we find him and his life *compelling*. People like Ezekiel, who have experienced God deeply, testify to the meaning and purpose of life as God intended it to be. He found the courage to face an obstinate and stubborn people and persist in effectively communicating the Word of God because of his personal experience of the glory of God. He had the emotional strength to take the blow of the death of his dear wife and carry on, because of his vision of God. He had the determined resolve to set his face against the enemies of God because he had the defining experience of falling face down before the glory of God (1:28; 3:23; 9:8; 11:13; 43:3; 44:4). He was able to face up to life because he fell face down before God. This was the key to Ezekiel's impressive spiritual strength. His vision of God and his glory was greater than the burden of his people's rejection, the pain of his wife's death, and the strain of communicating a message of judgment. Humility before an awesome God transposed Ezekiel's life, which was undoubtedly written off by his enemies as humiliating and eccentric, into a powerful life of sustained ministry. Only the glory of God inspires a life lived unto the glory of God.

We often hear people say that they want to make a difference, but the only difference that truly counts is the difference inspired by the glory of God. True significance is never independent of the glory of God, but always dependent upon our experience of God. This theme runs through the Word of God. Long before Ezekiel, Moses learned that the only way to face up to life is face down before God. We are told in Exodus that the Lord spoke "to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend" (Ex 33:11). Out of this intimacy, grew Moses' conviction that he could not possibly lead the people of Israel apart from the assurance of the Lord's presence. This is why he said to the Lord, "Now show me your glory." And the Lord said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence . . . but you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live" (Ex 33:19-20). Moses caught a glimpse of the backside of God's glory. It was all he could handle, but it was everything he needed to inspire and sustain his life's work.

Isaiah described a similar experience. He "saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple," and he heard heavenly beings calling out, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." The experience overwhelmed him and he cried out, "Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty" (Isa 6:1-9). With his sins atoned for, Isaiah responded to the Lord's call, saying, "Here am I. Send me!" He learned the invaluable lesson that the only way to face up to life is face down before God.

Whenever Ezekiel fell face down before God he was told to get up by the power of the Spirit of God. The strength to stand for God was directly connected to his humility before God. "Son of man, stand up on your feet and I will speak to you" (2:1; see 3:24; 43:5). Ezekiel testified to the

source of his strength, when he said, “the Spirit lifted me up, and I heard behind me a loud rushing sound—May the glory of the Lord be praised in his dwelling place!” (3:12). Once again, Ezekiel’s experience illustrates a pattern we find throughout God’s Word. James wrote, “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you” (James 4:10). And the apostle Peter said, “Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time” (1 Peter 5:6).

Our initial impression of Ezekiel’s description of the glory of God is that we will never experience what he experienced, but we should not be so quick to draw that conclusion. The various dimensions of God’s glory experienced by Ezekiel have their parallel in the Christian’s experience as well. In Ezekiel’s opening vision of the glory of God, the throne of God is surrounded by a vast universe which is paradoxically centered on a figure like that of a man (1:26). We read Ezekiel’s vision and we think of it as so strange and surreal that we could never come close to this vision of God. There are four living creatures symbolizing life—human and animal, wheels within wheels in perpetual motion and infused by the Spirit of God, symbolizing the vast mystery of creation. High above all this, on what looks like a throne “was a figure like that of a man” surrounded by the radiance of his glory.

Was Ezekiel perplexed by the meaning of his vision of God’s glory? Most of his description corresponds well to the psalmist’s worship experience, when he wrote, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hand. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world” (Ps 19:1-4). But the element in his vision which may have been most difficult for him to comprehend was not the all seeing, all rational, gyroscope of energy or the “roar of rushing waters, like the voice of the Almighty,” but “a figure like that of a man” at the center of everything and presiding over creation. We are quick to identify the human being at the center above all creation. Through the reality of the Incarnation of God, the New Testament transposes Ezekiel’s vision into a shared vision of messianic glory.

Ezekiel’s vision of God’s glory looks forward to the reality of the Incarnation of God. His prophecy prepares for the events that surrounded the angelic announcement of “Glory to God in the highest.” Ezekiel’s experience is one with the apostle John’s testimony, when he said, “The Word became flesh and lived for awhile among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14). The prophet’s vision of God’s glory is consistent with our experience of Christ. We experience what Ezekiel experienced because, “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word” (Heb 1:3).

The second important dimension of God’s glory that Ezekiel experienced was his vision of the glory of God departing from the temple. After warning Israel of their wickedness for a full year, Ezekiel experienced an awful vision of returning to Jerusalem in order to witness the departure of God’s glory from the temple. The message of the Sovereign Lord through Ezekiel had been clear:

“You have not even conformed to the standards of the nations around you. . . You have defiled my sanctuary with all your vile images and detestable practices, I myself will withdraw my favor; I will not look on you with pity or spare you” (5:7, 11). Ezekiel’s praying imagination pictured the glory of God slowly rising from the inner court and dramatically moving to the entrance of the temple. The departure of God’s glory recalled another low point in the history of Israel when the Philistines captured the ark of the covenant long before the temple was ever built. News of the ark of the covenant’s capture led to priest Eli’s death and the naming of his grandson, Ichabod, which meant, “The glory has departed from Israel” (1 Sam 4:21). Ezekiel’s vision of the glory of God departing from the temple not only pointed back in time, but it also pointed forward in time. It is consistent with Malachi’s prophecy, which took place after the second temple had been built under Ezra and Nehemiah’s leadership. One hundred and fifty years after Ezekiel, the same problems persisted, leading Malachi to express the Lord Almighty’s verdict, “Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar! I am not pleased with you and I will accept no offering from your hands” (Mal 1:10). It is also consistent with Jesus’ action, when he cleared out the money changers in the temple and denounced the people for turning the house of God into a marketplace (John 2:16).

The departure of God’s glory in Ezekiel’s vision because of idolatry is consistent with the apostle Paul’s description of God’s wrath against all the godlessness and wickedness of humanity who suppress the truth by their wickedness. “For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened” (Rom 1:21). This is why he said, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). Ezekiel was haunted by the painful vision of God’s glory departing from the temple. It is a fear that we should share. If the priests in Hosea’s day could exchange God’s glory “for something disgraceful” so could we who profess faith in Christ today (Hosea 4:7). If the people in Jeremiah’s day could “exchange God’s glory for worthless idols” so could we who say we follow the Lord Jesus (Jeremiah 2:11). The apostle Paul lamented the fact that “many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame” (Phil 3:18-19). It is a terrible thing when God removes his presence from us because of sin.

Ezekiel believed that the glory of God was revealed not only positively but negatively. Far from being incompatible with judgment and punishment, God’s glory is revealed when God puts down evil and punishes wickedness. Following Ezekiel’s description of the ultimate defeat of the evil forces of Gog of Magog, the Sovereign Lord declares, “I will display my glory among the nations, and all the nations will see the punishment I inflict and the hand I lay upon them” (Eze 39:21). One way or another, “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:10-11).

The third important dimension of God’s glory experienced by Ezekiel was his vision of the restoration of God’s glory. Contrary to what people might think, Ezekiel was not a prophet of doom and gloom. This third and final dimension of God’s glory argues in favor of this God-

hardened communicator being best remembered as a prophet of hope. Twenty years after his first vision of God's glory, Ezekiel receives a new vision of God's indwelling presence among his people. "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you;" says the Sovereign Lord, "I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to obey my laws" (Eze 36:26-27; see Jeremiah 31:31-37 for a similar thrust). On New Year's Day, twenty-five years after the exile, Ezekiel's prayerful imagination pictures the fulfillment of this promise in "the perfect numerical symmetries and geometric design of the visionary temple" (Wright, 329). He envisions a new temple with a sanctified sanctuary, a pure sacrificial system and a just division of the land. Everything is perfect, right down to the last detail. Once again, Ezekiel is flat on his face (43:3). Twenty years of exhausting hard-fought ministry had not "dulled his sense of awe and terror at the sight of the glory of God" (Wright, 334). May such passion for God from beginning to end be true of us!

Ezekiel's prophecy gathers up all the Old Testament ideals for the temple, the priesthood, the sacrificial system and the land, in a way that points beyond a literal reconstruction of the temple. He used his priestly world view to envision the perfect fulfillment of God's promise, but it was not his purpose to provide an architectural blueprint for rebuilding a physical temple. Nor did he give any indication of any human involvement to bring about this new temple. The indwelling presence of God, as envisioned by Ezekiel's prophecy, was fulfilled in the coming of Jesus, who completed all that the temple stood for, in ways Ezekiel may not have imagined. The figure like that of a man took on a significance that extended well beyond what Ezekiel was privileged to see by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In the book of Hebrews, Jesus is presented as the completion of the priestly sacrificial system. Christ is the mediator of the New Covenant, the great High priest, who offers himself, once and for all, as the perfect sacrifice for our sins. Through Christ we enter into his rest and through the blood of Jesus we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place. Everything in the old priestly world-view, the Jewish race, the land, the temple, the sacrifices, the priesthood, and the rituals, have been fulfilled and transcended in Christ. "Christians have no territorial center, no physical land or place that is the focus of faith and worship, because Jesus Christ has taken on the full theological and spiritual significance of all that land, city and temple had held for Israel and opened that significance up to people of all nations" (Wright, 341).

The New Testament applies Ezekiel's temple imagery to the Church, the Body of Christ, and the Household of Faith. All those in Christ are "member's of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord" (Eph 2:19-21). Ezekiel's vision of a people who no longer defile God's holy name (Eze 43:7) is fulfilled by a people who in Christ have crucified the sinful nature (Gal 6:8). His vision of the new temple and of those who are "faithful to its design" (Eze 43:11) have become the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19).