

# The Only Way Of, and To, Life

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[ 0 : 00 ] Let's turn to our Bible reading for this evening, and Willie is continuing his series through Ezekiel, and we are in Ezekiel chapter 33 this evening.

So do turn to Ezekiel, we have plenty of Vista Bibles at the side, at the back, so please do grab a Bible if you don't have one with you. So Ezekiel 33, and I'm going to read a couple of verses from chapter 24 before that.

We are picking up chronologically from the end of chapter 24. The last eight chapters or so have been a bit of a break chronologically, and so we're picking up things here which is in the midst of Jerusalem, about to become under siege.

By Babylon. So I'm going to read the end of chapter 24, then we'll turn to chapter 33. So 24, verse 25. As for you, son of man, surely on the day when I take from them their stronghold, their joy and glory, the delight of their eyes and their soul's desire, and also their sons and daughters, on that day a fugitive will come to you to report to you the news.

On that day your mouth will be opened to the fugitive, and you shall speak and be no longer mute. So you will be assigned to them, and they will know that I am the Lord.

[ 1 : 36 ] Chapter 33. The word of the Lord came to me. 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, and if he sees the sword coming upon the land and blows the trumpet and warns the people, then if anyone who hears the sound of the trumpet and does not take warning, and the sword comes and takes him away, his blood shall be upon his own head.

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.

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. 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.

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.

[ 3 : 12 ] But his blood I will require at your hand. 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.

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? 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? 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. 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.

[ 4 : 33 ] But in his injustice that he has done, he shall die. 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, 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. 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. Yet, your people say, the way of the Lord is not just, when it is their own way that is not just.

When the righteous turns from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for it. And when the wicked turns from his wickedness and does what is just and right, he shall live by this. 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. 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.

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.

[ 6 : 01 ] The word of the Lord came to me, The 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 to us to possess. 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? You rely on the sword. You commit abominations, and each of you defiles his neighbor's wife. Shall you then possess the land?

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 fields, I will give to the beasts to be devoured.

And those who are in the strongholds, and in caves shall die by pestilence. And I will make the land of desolation and a waste, and her proud might shall come to an end.

[ 7 : 08 ] And the mountains of Israel shall be so desolate that none will pass through. 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.

As for you, son of man, your people who talk together about you by the walls and 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.

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.

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. When this comes, and come it will, then they will know that a prophet has been among them.

Amen. May God bless his words for us this evening. We'll do turn to Ezekiel chapter 33, which really brings us to a turning point in Ezekiel's ministry.

[ 8 : 36 ] In fact, as Paul said, it takes us back to chapter 24, which is the real transition point with the news of Jerusalem's attack and besieging by Nebuchadnezzar's armies.

God told Ezekiel about that the very day that it happened. Chapter 24, verse 2, and Ezekiel passed on to his people that terrible news, which of course was eventually confirmed sometime later, as news eventually got through to the exiles in Babylon.

And that, of course, vindicated Ezekiel's words. But then, they had some two years of agonizing waiting.

Would Jerusalem prevail? Surely she would, as God's prized jewel of a city. But Ezekiel had another bombshell message for his people, of course, and that was the message that we saw portrayed in the most painful of ways, personally for him, in the sudden death of his wife.

The delight of his eyes was taken from him. And that was his message to the people. The delight of all their eyes was going to be taken away. Their land, their city, and even, horror of horrors, God's own temple was going to be destroyed.

[ 10 : 00 ] And God told Ezekiel at the end of chapter 24, as we read, that one day, a survivor of the massacre would come to Babylon and confirm that awful news. And on that day, that fateful day, God said that Ezekiel's mouth would be opened and he'd be no longer mute.

Remember from his first call, God had made him mute so that he wasn't able to utter any words at all except for the grim oracles of judgment that God put in his mouth to give to his people.

And for five awful years, that was his only task. Well, I can tell you it's not a pretty grim task to me just for many months to pass on Ezekiel's oracles of judgment.

But at least outside the pulpit, I've had some relief. I've been able to have some happier conversation. But five years, imagine, speaking nothing but those awful words of judgment.

But that mute misery does end here in chapter 33, verse 22. In between chapter 24 and 33, we've had this interlude, what Chris Wright calls a literary as well as a chronological pause, marking this turning point in Ezekiel's ministry.

[ 11 : 16 ] And it's as if it's there to let the full horror of it all sink in to all of his readers ever after.

And yet, these oracles against the nations are the beginning of the message of ultimate return for God's glory.

He will restore the honor of his name among all the nations, but he will do that both through judgment on all evil in all nations. So there's absolutely no hope for God's people to look for help there.

Judgment, but also through the restoration and the renewal of his kingdom and his true people. And that latter message of hope beyond judgment cannot be properly heard by people until they've fully digested the reality of their utter helplessness and hopelessness because of their sin.

And only when they were reduced that last to nothing would God, who made the world out of nothing, work in them a decisive message of recreation.

And that's so often the case, isn't it? It's often only when we face that painful reality that that's the beginning of us facing up to our personal responsibility to God and before him.

[ 12 : 38 ] And only then, stripped of every last drop of pride and presumption, only then can we actually hear God's words of warning for what they really are. words of warning to turn us away from our evil ways, which are ways of folly and ways of death.

And to turn to his way, which is the way of faith and which is the way of life. Because only his way is the way of life and only his way is the way to life.

Walk in the way everlasting. That was Jeremiah, the prophet's message, repeatedly to his people all through his ministry. Walk in it and find rest for your souls, he said. But the people said, we will not walk in it.

And so now again, after this dreadful reality of judgment coming upon them, and the affirmation of this painful reality, Ezekiel urges on them again with words of powerful rebuke.

He urges on them their pressing responsibility to turn from their way and turn back to God's way so that they might live and not die. And that's what God wants.

[ 13 : 52 ] That's what God commands. And in words of both real comfort and real challenge, he tells us that that God sees and God knows our true path.

And he will judge each according to his ways. So let's look at the chapter and see what we're to learn about God's call to this only road to life.

We need to start in the middle at verses 21 and 22. So look there because these are like a fulcrum on which the whole passage is balanced either side. It's a message about the fall of the city.

Then on either side, there's a section with God's words, God's revelation and his call to respond.

The very structure of the passage reminds us that the reality of man's misery is nevertheless always surrounded by the revelation of God's message.

And it's in that and that alone that lies our hope. So look at verses 21 and 22. They speak of a painful reality. The painful reality of sin and its sequelae.

[ 14 : 58 ] These verses tell us of the painful reality, the fall of Jerusalem, that both vindicates God's prophet but also renews his ministry and his call. The date in verse 21 is probably about six months after the final fall of Jerusalem which had been besieged for about 18 months.

And finally, the journey of a new train of refugees, beleaguered captives reaches Babylon. And one of the first of these ragtag exiles presumably confirms all of their worst fields.

The city has been struck down. And Ezekiel, of course, had been expecting it. And verse 22, in fact, tells us that God's hand had been upon him the evening before to tell him that it would be this very day that the news came.

That language of the hand of God upon him recalls the language at the very beginning of the book, God's visionary appearance to the prophet. And here God is just telling him exactly what he said

and we read in chapter 24, verse 26.

It was going to be fulfilled. A fugitive, a captive, will come to you to repeat the news. And on that day, your mouth will be opened and you'll no longer be mute.

[16:11] And so Ezekiel was ready immediately then to utter the words of these chapters. Notice that verse 1 of chapter 3 begins, Son of man, speak to your people. So both verses 1 to 20 and verses 23 to 33 are all words spoken in this new phase of his ministry.

The great vision, remember, at the start of Ezekiel's ministry was to shut his mouth. He could speak only these words of relentless judgment. But now, although yes, he would still give words of warning, he would still give diatribes, we'll see that in chapter 34 against the leaders of the nation, the shepherds.

But nevertheless, now, under God, he would be able to focus much more on the hope, the new day of God's saving righteousness. But the question is, would people listen?

Would they hear him? Would they actually believe anything that he said? Well, this news of Jerusalem's fall was, in fact, a great vindication for Ezekiel. Way back in Deuteronomy chapter 18, Moses had promised that God would always have true prophets like him to speak to his people, and they would know that they were true prophets when their words came true.

And Ezekiel's words had now been proven true. Look at verse 33 at the end. When this word comes, and come it will, they will know that a prophet has been among them.

[17:40] Well, that's true, isn't it? when a Christian leader over time is proven to be speaking God's truth, and they've demonstrated that they understand not just what God is saying in his word, but what God is doing in his world, and they're like the men of Isaac or of old who understood the times and knew what Israel would do.

Well, people begin to listen, don't they? Begin to take them more seriously. Maybe it's grudgingly, but they pay attention to what they say. And indeed, that's true of all of us in our Christian witness. If we're faithful, if we're consistent in both speaking God's truth and living God's truth, well, that truth will be vindicated, won't it, before people's eyes by God.

He promises to do that. That should encourage us to go on speaking God's truth and living God's truth in love. It will win respect, won't it, amongst fair-minded people, open-minded people.

And that should encourage, I think, particularly also new believers among us, perhaps who are facing a difficult time from unbelieving family or friends. The Lord will vindicate his people.

[18:47] And certainly he vindicated his prophet here. But will the people respond any better? Even if perhaps they do respect God's prophet more.

Because in a sense, up until now, the whole of Ezekiel's ministry has really just been preparatory. And that's the wonderful thing. We have 32 chapters of prophetic doom.

But that does not end his ministry. Actually, the fall of Jerusalem is really the precursor for a truly glorious ministry of restoration and renewal and indeed complete recreation, not just of Jerusalem and Judah, but of the whole wide world.

Ezekiel was given only the judgments of these chapters for five relentless years. But here's the thing, his ministry after that was three times longer and it was filled with nothing but glorious hope. If you get to chapter 40, you'll find that the date of the final oracle is 20 years after his first call. So his gloom might fill more chapters in the Bible, but the glory filled three times as many years of his ministry.

[19:58] We mustn't forget that or miss that. It's important. But of course, when the message of God does speak of hope and of a future, well, that brings its own dangers to human beings whose hearts are, sadly, hardwired to twist the truth of God into falsehood.

we're hardwired to turn the liberty of God into license. There's always the danger of stoking fantasy and false hope that, oh, the worst is past.

Things can only get better and better. There's always the danger also of flattery towards God's prophets and his preachers because then you find popularity in a much more positive message.

Well, that can make them who are preaching believe far too easily that they are seeing a great renewal of faith when actually their response might just be very fickle and very shallow.

And that's why you see verses 21 and 22 here which tell of the people's experienced reality of this great change in their situation and the nature of God's message to them. That's why it's surrounded by God's explanatory revelation which was clearly against all such false hope and the flattery that speaks of that just fickle response.

[ 21 : 22 ] That's the message in verses 23 to 33. And it also warns that real faith, real response is always seen in real fruit, in the fruit of real repentance.

And that's the clear message of verses 1 to 20. So let's look now at verses 23 to 33 which is a message of powerful rebuke. It's a powerful rebuke to fantasy and to flattery.

These verses give a powerful rebuke that repudiates all the false hopes of a shallow theology. And it warns also against all the fickle responses even to true and genuine gospel hope when it's proclaimed.

Verses 23 to 29 are a rebuke, you see, to the remnant who are left behind in Judah, who escape the massacre. And it is to extinguish any false hope that they had which actually were just deluded fantasy.

It gathers up and sort of summarizes Ezekiel's whole message thus far of judgment as it applies to those who are survivors in Judah. Verse 27 tells it straight.

[ 22 : 35 ] He's saying to them, you have not escaped in order to inherit this land. You also are finished. Now if you read in 2 Kings chapter 25, you'll see there that it tells us the Babylonians left behind a few of the poorest people of the land in order to work the fields for them.

And somehow these people seem to have thought to themselves that that meant that they were now going to be possessors of the land, that they were to be the future of God. Verse 23, you see, the land is surely given to us to possess.

There was something of the same fantasy, remember, back in chapter 11 when they were saying, oh, we are the choice meat in the middle of the cauldron. But it was all total delusion. There's nothing about just being the poor of the land that makes you righteous, that makes you somehow undeserving of any punishment for your sin.

That's a lie that's been very persistent throughout history, isn't it? Right up to the Marxist ideologies of our modern era. There's no virtue in just being at the bottom of the heap. And God had expressly quashed all such ideas of fantasy.

The false prophets peddled it, of course, and the people lapped it up. You can read Jeremiah chapter 29, for example, later, you'll see it. They would not heed God's clear warning to them.

[ 23 : 56 ] And instead, they seem to have latched on to a word of Isaiah's that comes from the beginning of Isaiah chapter 51, about God calling Abraham and about him only being one man when he called him, and yet he blessed him and multiplied him.

And they took that word totally out of context. It was a word of comfort for Zion for long, long, long after the judgment of exile. But they just applied it directly to themselves in an utterly superficial way, a totally unwarranted way.

And that's what they're doing here in verse 23. Oh, Abraham was one man, yet he got possession, but we're many, so God must be surely giving the land to us. But you see, if you take random verses of the Bible totally out of context and apply them to yourself, well, you can make the Bible say absolutely anything you want it to say.

And we have to be very careful as Christians not to treat God's word as that we were consulting a fortune teller. That's what many Christians do when they say they're seeking God's guidance.

All they're doing is feeding their own fantasy. Sometimes their own outright sin. You can appeal, can't you, to, oh, a verse that God gave me.

[ 25 : 10 ] Because I've been praying about this a lot and God's given me this verse and its guidance. But you see, very often praying about something a lot is actually just feeding your own self-delusion.

It's just trying to justify an action that you want to take and rationalize it as though God somehow was on your side. That's not just wrong, it's just self-indulgent.

But when that's your heart attitude, you see, it's so easy, isn't it, to see a verse jumping out at you from the Bible and telling you what you want God to tell you. So you're praying a lot about this.

Lord, my marriage really isn't what I hoped it would be. And I know, Lord, you can't possibly want me to be miserable like this. And my work colleague and I, we just have so much more in common. We chime so much. And she's desperate for me to leave my wife and go and live with her. I need some guidance, Lord. And you turn to your daily Bible readings and your readings through 1 Samuel and 1 Samuel and so suddenly you come to chapter 14 and verse 7 and it just leaps off the page at you because it says, do all that is in your heart.

[ 26 : 21 ] Do as you wish. Behold, I am with you, heart and soul. And you say, oh, that's the guidance I need. I've been praying about it. God is with me. That's what they're doing here, you see, in verse 24.

Surely this is given to us to possess. But it's delusion. And when you are deluding yourself like that, it's not guidance you need.

It's a slap in the mouth. It's a punch in the gut from a real friend. to tell you to snap out of that delusion. That is not God's word to you.

That is the devil twisting God's word and playing to your delusion. The devil loves to twist the scriptures like that. He's been at that since the very beginning. Read Genesis chapter 3. Read Matthew chapter 4.

He even tried it on the Lord Jesus himself. Or read John's gospel chapters 8 and 9. Where Jesus encounters people doing exactly the same in almost the same words as here in this chapter.

[ 27 : 23 ] Abraham is our father, they said to Jesus. We are the inheritors of all that God promised to him. As they were full of pride in themselves and hatred at the same time for Jesus, the son of God.

No, said Jesus, your father is the devil himself. You don't do as Abraham did. He loved God and he longed for my day, but you are full of lies and hate like your father, the father of lies, who has been a murderer since the beginning.

Utter self-deception and fraud, you see, just like here. Look at verses 25 and 26. They claim Abraham, but they characterize Sodom. They could live in utter defiance of the word of God and the will of God and yet claim somehow to be the inheritors of God's gospel promise to Abraham.

But there, you see, is a gospel of utterly cheap grace, which is all fantasy because God's grace is covenant grace. God's grace always calls for a response. He calls to obedience.

He calls us to bow to the covenant Lord, who is our great redeemer, yes, but he will therefore be our governing Lord. Lord. And God's grace promises blessing the only way that that blessing can be received, which is through the obedience of real faith.

[ 28 : 52 ] But where God's covenant call is met with disobedient unbelief, well, there can only be not blessing, but curse. And that is exactly what God promises here in verses 27 to 28.

Sword, wild beasts, and pestilence. Three characteristic punishments of God's covenant. Read it in Leviticus 26 and many other places.

And in case you think that we today are somehow safe from this kind of thing, well, try reading the New Testament. Hebrews is full of such warnings, aren't they? Not to trifle with the far fuller salvation that we have manifest now in these last days in Christ himself.

Paul, likewise, warns very strongly, doesn't he? Not to treat the new covenant in Christ's blood in an unworthy manner. If you do that, he says, the first Corinthians 11, you drink judgment on yourself. Now some Christians get confused about what Paul's talking about there, is that the warning is that non-Christians might inadvertently damn themselves by taking communion in a state of ignorance. Paul's point is quite, quite different from that.

[ 30 : 00 ] He's warning Christians. Not to take the cup in a state of arrogance. Despising the cross in their manner. Which is indeed a very, very serious thing to God.

The risen Lord will not tolerate that kind of proud arrogance at his table. So for those who think themselves above their peers, in knowledge or in piety or in religious practice or anything else, he's warning them very, very seriously.

And all through the Bible we find a rebuke for exactly that kind of self deception and fantasy.

Whether it's those who claim a great heritage like these, but in fact are hardened in pride, far from living out the love of God, they're just like the Pharisees, ancient or modern.

Or on the other hand, you can have those who claim a great heritage but are living in defiance flatly of the truth of God. I think many of our national churchmen today who love to parade past the statue of John Knox outside the General Assembly, love to talk about a great Reformed and Reformation heritage, but would have John Knox himself in apoplexy at their apostate words and their actions.

They use Jesus' words. You see, they love to venerate the tombs of dead prophets, but they persecute and murder those who are alive, who are speaking those same words today. But God rebukes and God will destroy all false hope, all shallow theology like that, that is built on nothing but cheap grace.

[ 31 : 44 ] It's a fantasy, it's a delusion, and it leads only to destruction. It's a very dangerous thing. We need to take this warning ourselves, all of us, don't we?

It's a dangerous thing to some, I think, that you're the true remnant, that you're the pure remnant, that you're the ones truly essential to God's future. Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall, says Proverbs.

God will always extinguish that kind of fantasy and false gospel. And God will also expose flattery and mere fickle responses even to a ministry of the true gospel.

And that's what he warns Ezekiel about as a real danger among the exiles who are to be the future, who are to be God's true remnant. And that's what verses 32-33 are about here.

See, this new situation must have been a great relief to Ezekiel. You can imagine him being almost euphoric, having survived five years of that dreadful ministry.

[ 32 : 50 ] That must have been a horrible ministry to deliver. It was received, wasn't it, with great hostility. Do you remember how back in chapter 2 and 3, God warned him, it's going to feel like crawling through thorns, sitting on scorpions.

You're going to meet people with foreheads like flint, he said, with hearts like stone. Do you fancy that? If anybody deserved a sabbatical, surely it was poor old Ezekiel.

The least one. And yet now, you see, look at verse 30. Now it's going to be the talk of the town.

Everyone's saying, come, let's hear what the word is from the Lord, from Ezekiel.

Suddenly people were praising him, seemed to value him. And no doubt that was both due to his undeniable stature now as a preacher of truth, but also, of course, because his message was going to be a lot more positive.

People would love to hear that kind of much more winsome message. They're going to be much happier with that than they were with what Ezekiel had been speaking before, all that uncomfortable preaching, that very political preaching.

[ 33 : 56 ] I'm sure some of us will probably feel like that. I'm sure the rest of Ezekiel will be much, much easier for us to hear than what's gone before. It'll certainly be a lot more pleasing to preach, I can tell you that.

But you see, God is saying to Ezekiel, don't be fooled too easily. Verse 31, you see, they'll lap it up, but they're not really heeding me. They're going to hear it, but they won't do it.

The hearts aren't really set on things everlasting, but he says they're set on gain, earthly gain. So they'll love your positive message, verse 32. In fact, you'll be to them like a singer of love songs.

You'll be somebody with a beautiful voice and a lovely accompaniment. They'll lap up the eloquent preaching. They'll talk you up to everyone, but they won't do what you say because their hearts are still rooted in the treasures of this world.

They talk as if they want their lives to serve God, but really, to use Jesus' words, they're just serving mammon. So don't be fooled.

[ 35 : 02 ] It's always a danger, isn't it, to be fooled by flattery, to be fooled by fickle responses of people who seem to believe very easily. And Jesus reminds us, that's why, isn't it, that he says ministry will be judged by its real fruit.

A tree is known by its fruit, not by the first flush of its flowers. I've got a pear tree in the garden and it's disappointed me so many times. Sometimes it has a wonderful blossom in the spring, and I think terrific when I have a great year for pears.

Sometimes not a single one. I still don't understand why. They're not pollinated, whatever it might be. But that's the way with the gospel too, you see. The seed has got to bear fruit.

And Chris Wright says, because enthusiasm has always been easier than obedience, the wise prophet or minister heeds God's word to Ezekiel. Don't allow yourself to be taken as an entertainer. And that's a danger, isn't it, to any servant of God today. And it's also a danger to any listener to God's word because it's very easy to substitute the excitement of a crowd for real engagement with God in a faithful response, in an obedient response.

[ 36 : 16 ] Chris Wright again, this is the perennial danger of the compulsive convention goer. That of enjoying the sound of God's word, but never actually putting it into practice.

James says such behavior is like looking in a mirror and then forgetting your appearance. Jesus, more starkly, called it life-threatening folly. Matthew 7, 24.

And Jesus himself faced exactly that response, didn't he? All too often. People crowing about the wonderful unction of his preaching. We love great Bible preaching.

And yet they showed out a contempt for the thing that was being preached, the message to actually change them. Why do you call me Lord, Lord? He said. But not do what I say.

Tickling your ears with mere oratory that doesn't transform your heart in real obedience. According to Jesus, that is to utterly ignore the thing that really matters.

[ 37 : 21 ] Building real foundations of obedient faith. faith. And unless that is done, it's like building a house utterly on quicksand.

So be careful about idolizing, about adulating platform speakers, especially big ones. And in these days, platforms abound, don't they? On the internet.

Easily. We can all flock to our favorite preacher who will tickle our ears with the kind of preaching we want to hear. But remember that Paul said to the Corinthian church, that is a mark of the absolute opposite of real maturity.

I follow Paul. I follow Apollos. I follow the reverent big man. That's just worldly folly. It's God who does the work. Whoever has a role in planting and watering and so on and laboring.

And Paul says it will be the day of judgment, his judgment, that discloses what was really fruitful and what was just wind. That's a warning, isn't it, to all of us, to preachers and to listeners.

[ 38 : 28 ] Charles Spurgeon put it in his own inimitable way when he said, beware of going to this meeting or that. And we could add this website or that. Beware of listening to mere twaddle and contributing your part to the general blowing up of windbags.

And that's still, I think, an important warning to us today. God will extinguish all fantasy, all false hope, and he will expose all flattery, all fickle and superficial froth.

And what God desires isn't enthusiasm, but obedience. Not the flattery of superficial faith, but the fruit of real and serious faith. And that brings us, you see, to verses 1 to 20, where the themes that we've already seen back in chapter 3 about God's watchman, and chapter 18 about individual responsibility.

They're reiterated here again to underline, this is the third thing, a pressing responsibility. The pressing responsibility to respond to God's revelation.

And these verses, again, press on to Ezekiel, the responsibility of the true gospel preacher to both woo and to warn God's people in love. And they press on to the people, their responsibility as hearers, to know that the response of true faith is always, always judged by its fruit, by the fruit of true repentance.

[ 39 : 59 ] As I said, verses 1 to 9 are clearly spoken after Ezekiel's lips are opened, and he tells them, first of all, in verses 1 to 6, this parable of the watchman. Now, we've seen this before in chapter 3.

But there, remember, it was a private word from God to Ezekiel about his call to be the one who watches and who gives God's warning to Israel. But here it's made public. Verse 2, say to them, tell them, tell them, this is what you've been doing for these five years, and you have been faithful in warning them.

So the responsibility is on them to respond to those warnings. That's the message. You were warned by me about Jerusalem's fall, and it has fallen.

But the point is, and this is the force, isn't it, of verses 7 to 9, that ministry is not over with the fall of Jerusalem. Ezekiel is still God's watchman. And now there is indeed a message of hope to be proclaimed, but as we've seen, not one of false hope, not one of cheap grace.

God's gospel is always a word of challenge. It always demands response. And so the most gracious wooing of God to his people will always carry a warning. Verse 7, whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them a warning from me.

[ 41 : 17 ] And the warning is, you are responsible. You must hear God's word, and you must heed God's word. You must turn from your way and turn to God's way.

So you see, the century is never off duty, is he? The challenge of God's word is new every day, even as God's grace and mercy is new every day.

And that's why in the New Testament, Paul consistently urges Timothy and Titus, the next generation of gospel leaders, in exactly the same way. Do the work of an evangelist, he says to Timothy, and keep doing it.

Wooing with the words of life. But he goes right on, keep warning people not to turn aside to myths, not to turn aside to the things they're itching ears or want to hear.

So the persistence of the watchman is his ongoing responsibility. And the preaching of the watchman must keep pressing his hearers with their ongoing responsibility to respond and keep responding individually and as a whole.

[ 42 : 21 ] And that's the message that's driven home again in verses 10 to 20. See, again, we're met with the same message that we saw back in chapter 18 about personal responsibility. God, it seems, doesn't have a problem with repeating some of his sermons until his people get the message until they respond.

But in fact, the same message is now meeting a rather different situation. So there's a different emphasis needed. The same gospel of God, you see, will always trouble those who are comfortable and comfort those who are troubled.

Back in chapter 18, if you remember, the people shifted the blame constantly for their position and their situation in exile onto the previous generation. Oh, we're suffering, he said, because our fathers ate the sour grapes.

But look at verse 10 here. It's quite telling. Clearly at last, at least some of them have recognized, they say, that it's our sins and our transgressions that are upon us.

We're suffering for our own sins, do you see? And so they're despairing and they're now asking, well, can we then live? Is the situation hopeless?

[ 43 : 30 ] It seems to be. But no, says verse 11, there is hope. And God says, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked. You can turn back and live.

So turn back. Why will you die? It's a wonderful appeal, isn't it? Not cheap grace. Verse 13 very clearly warns, doesn't it? Against presumption, against self-righteousness.

That'll count for nothing if you're turning away from God in your hearts and in your actions. But all the weight here, all the emphasis. Look at verse 12.

Look at verses 14 to 16. It's all on the possibility, indeed, on the priority of God to turn sinners away from death.

Even the worst of sin, he says, can come back to the way of life. The wicked turns from his sin, verse 14, and walks, verse 15, in the statutes of life, not doing injustice.

[ 44 : 27 ] He shall surely live. He shall not die. None of the sins that he's done shall be remembered. He shall surely live. That's God's desire.

That's what he wants. That is what God's will. Not despair, but turning people to do the will of God. But notice that that real pardon always entails real repentance.

The obedience of real faith. Not just talking about faith, actually doing it. All through verses 12 to 20 here. It's so real, isn't it? It's so tangible, what's being spoken about.

It's a language of turning around. Of walking. Of living. Of living. Of going in a different way. Of going God's way and not our way. Verse 15.

Walking in the statutes of life. Not doing injustice. Turning around. Verse 19. Turning from wickedness. Doing what is just and right.

[ 45 : 24 ] That's got absolutely nothing whatsoever here to do with earning righteousness by works. It's just the obvious evidence that righteousness by faith is actually real.

That it's not shallow. That it's not a sham. That's what the whole New Testament gospel repeats again and again and again. Real faith bears real fruit. Always. Bear fruit.

In keeping with repentance. With John the Baptist's message in Matthew 3. Then Jesus comes along and says, Repent. And then in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7, he describes what that fruitful life of repentance looks like.

And he concludes that sermon by saying, Doesn't he? It's not about saying, Lord, Lord. Oh, Lord, Lord. It's all about doing. Doing the will of my Father in heaven.

That's real faith. Being a hearer. Not a doer. That's how the Apostle James puts it. Not deceiving yourselves. It's not the hearers of the law who are justified and righteous before God, says Paul in Romans 2.

[ 46 : 31 ] It's the doers of the law that will be justified. Some, he says, who boast in God's law, teach God's law to others even, they do the very opposite.

So they dishonor God and God's name is blasphemed because of them. You sport your pious words, God says to them. But I see your perverse works and that is what I will judge you by because that shows me the reality of your heart.

The whole Bible is utterly, utterly consistent. My true family, says Jesus, are those who hear the word of God and do it. It's real.

The parable of the talents, Matthew chapter 25, Jesus says when the master returns, he'll judge his servants high. By what they have done with what he gave them. Have they borne fruit?

Or is there nothing? Real faith is faith that bears fruit. Real repentance is that which brings real turning away from sin and death.

[ 47 : 36 ] Away from our ways. Away from the world's ways. And walking instead the opposite way, in God's ways. Verse 15 here, walking in the statutes of life.

Apostle Paul puts it this way, doesn't it? You are slaves to the one you obey. And it's either sin, which leads to death, or it's obedience to God, which leads to righteousness.

There's only two ways. Only two ways. And God knows our way. And our ways. And he says here through Ezekiel, look at verse 25.

I will judge each of you according to his ways. Not notice his words. Words can appear full of devotion, can't they?

Lord, Lord. But mask nothing but a fearful delusion. But not so our way. Not so our ways. The Lord knows the ways of the righteous, says the psalmist.

[ 48 : 41 ] And what a great comfort that is, isn't it? To those who do truly love him. He knows the way that I take, says Job. And when he has tried me, I will come forth as gold. For all my stumblings, I trust him and he knows my heart.

That is a great comfort. Those are the words of somebody whose faith is real. Who knows the Lord. And who has confidence that the Lord knows him and where his heart really is. And Ezekiel's words here are a great comfort to those who are deeply convicted.

Maybe even those who are despairing about their own sin. There is hope. There is grace and mercy. There is a way to life. And it's the way of life.

Walking with the Lord himself. The Lord of life. Walking with the one who in the person of his own son on this earth came to say, I am the way and the truth and the life.

Come to me and walk my way and I will lead you in that path of life. There is great comfort in the way of life for all who are convicted of their own sin and their folly.

[ 49 : 50 ] But there is also a challenge. And the challenge is particularly to those who may feel deeply confident in themselves. It's also possible, says the Lord, to be utterly deluded.

It's also possible to be hearing God's words but not doing it. It's possible to be thinking that your words about God are what matter and not the ways of God obvious to him in your heart and in your life.

Not so. Look at verse 33 as we close. I will judge each of you according to his ways. There is only one way of life that leads to life.

And that is the way of fruitful faith. And so Jesus said, by this is my Father glorified that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

Well may God help us all so to do. Let's pray. Almighty and merciful God of whose gift alone it comes that thy faithful people do unto thee true and laudable service.

[ 51 : 21 ] Grant, we beseech thee that we may so faithfully serve thee in this life that we fail not finally to attain thy heavenly promises.

Through the merits of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. Amen.