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**010 – Eternal Security and Perseverance:
Ezekiel 33:12-19**

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Introduction

Ezekiel's prophetic ministry ran from 593 to 571 BC. During his ministry, Judah underwent tremendous hardship as the nation's people were carried off into exile by Babylonian invaders. Like Jeremiah, Ezekiel prophesied of both judgment and the hope of restoration. However, he did not offer an expectation for a quick return to the land of Israel. God gave him visions revealing the future restoration of the nation of Israel and the reunification of both the northern and southern kingdoms (Ezek 37:1-28). Like Daniel, Ezekiel's ministry began while he was a captive in Babylon. As a priest (1:3), Ezekiel's

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prophecies are permeated with priestly topics like sacrifice (43:1-46:24), temple (40:1-42:20), priesthood (40:45-46; 43:18-27), righteousness (3:20-21, 18:5-27, 33:12-19), purity (22:26; 36:25, 33; 43:20-26), and holiness (20:40-41, 36:21-23).

In addition to priestly themes, Ezekiel showcases the concept of personal responsibility. Two major passages dealing with this significant teaching are 18:1-32 and 33:7-20. The latter passage contains the text under examination (v12-19). Before we analyze those verses, however, we must understand the context leading up to them.

A. The Watchman’s Warning—Ezekiel 33:1-9

Chapter 33’s introduction (v1-9) reveals the Lord’s command that the prophet speak to the exiled Israelites (v2). This is “significant in view of the fact that Ezekiel had been forbidden to speak to his people from 24:26-27 until Jerusalem was captured and the news reached him.”² What would the prophet say as he broke his long silence? Surely his words would be as significant as his act of speaking.

First he reminds the people of his divine call to be a watchman for the people of Israel (v2-9; cp. 3:16-21). As a watchman, the prophet’s task is to preserve lives by warning of imminent wartime catastrophe. If the people take the warning seriously and take action to avoid destruction, the watchman’s task will prove successful. However, if the people refuse to listen to his warning and continue their daily activities as though nothing would happen, his task would be fruitless. In either case, if he sounds the warning, the watchman is cleared of any guilt and is not held accountable for what happens to the people. They are responsible for the outcome of their rejection of the watchman’s warning.

What is the catastrophe in this context? It is a violent death in wartime (v4-5). Heeding the watchman is a matter of life and death. In verse 8 the Lord Himself applies the analogy to the situation that the exiles face. If they do not listen to Ezekiel’s warning, their blood will be shed and they will be held responsible for their deaths.

² Charles Lee Feinberg, *The Prophecy of Ezekiel: The Glory of the Lord* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969): 188.

News of the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple might produce a careless attitude among the exiles. After all, what is occurring in Israel is far away and they are already in exile. Therefore, they might think that they are safe from an equally violent fate. Such is not the case, however. National catastrophe might appear to be the end of the matter, but corporate judgment does not nullify individual judgment. Because of unbelief and rebellion against the Lord, the nation collapsed. Likewise, an unbelieving or rebellious individual citizen faces the penalty of physical death (Deut 24:16). Even if a person is a believer who has the lofty position of Moses, he faces the same penalty for disobedience (cp. Exod 4:24).

At Sinai the Israelites learn that anyone who ignores or rejects divine instruction is subject to deadly peril (Exod 19:12). In the same way, under Mosaic Law, specific acts of disobedience require the death penalty (e.g., Exod 31:14; Lev 20:2, 9, 10, 13, 15; 24:16; Num 15:32-36). In such cases there is no question that death refers to physical death—those laws do not speak of spiritual death. Obedience to God’s words is a matter of physical life or physical death (Deut 30:14-15). Even before the Israelites enter the promised land, God sets the choice before them:

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants (Deut 30:19; cp. Jer 21:8).³

The choice is theirs to make—they are responsible for the outcome. This is the same choice that wisdom writers depict by means of two paths: one of righteousness to life and the other of evil to death (Prov 11:19). As Hildebrandt observes, Ezekiel “is responsible for the very lives of individuals whom he is obligated to stimulate to heed the word of Yahweh.”⁴ In essence, the prophet presents the exiles with the same choice between two paths. One leads to live and one to death.

³ The English translation cited in this study are from the New American Standard Bible.

⁴ Wilf Hildebrandt, *An Old Testament Theology of the Spirit of God* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995): 188.

B. The Exiles' Exclamation—Ezekiel 33:10

The Jewish exiles listen to Ezekiel's proclamation that the wicked will die for their sin (v9). Their response is not to argue that their parents are to blame (as in chapter 18), but to confess their own guilt and to express despair (33:10). In fact, they recognize that they are literally "rotting" in their transgressions.⁵ This is the fulfillment of Leviticus 26:39, which Moses proclaimed nearly 900 years earlier. Every Old Testament occurrence of the Hebrew root word for "rotting" depicts the effects of sin. It refers to "physical decay, either as a literal experience or as an image of the loss of life and existence."⁶ It seems that the exiles are fully aware of their peril. They feel the impending judgment and they sense its physical dimension regarding their continued existence. They understand that it is the fruit of their own transgressions and sins. They acknowledge rebellion against their sovereign covenant Lord and coming short of the righteous living that His Law demands. Now they appear to be teachable. They seem ready to listen because of their desperate plight and their personal despair of survival.

As in Leviticus 26:39-45, there is still hope. Divine retribution has the repentance of the Lord's people as its ultimate goal. Repentance will allow the reactivation of covenant blessing. Thus, restoration is possible. Before repentance can take place, however, the people must accurately assess their standing before a holy God. They must contemplate the reasons for their exile and for the devastation of their land, their city, and their temple. Then they must confess their corporate and individual guilt (Lev 26:40). Ezekiel proclaims the same message that Moses had given in Leviticus 26.

C. The Prophet's Proclamation—Ezekiel 33:11-19

Responding to the despairing words of the exiles, the Lord instructs the prophet to tell them that God takes no pleasure in their deaths (v11). Block rightly declares that the prophet's words mean that God "is not a sadistic ogre, who finds pleasure ... in watching the

⁵ Feinberg, *The Prophecy of Ezekiel*: 190.

⁶ A. H. Konkel, "qqm," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis* (5 Vols., ed. by Willem A. VanGemeren; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997): 2:1093.

wicked die.”⁷ Survival requires repentance. The exiles must turn from their sinful ways and turn to their sovereign Lord. Why would any of them wish to die (cp. 18:31)? Their deaths are needless. Their deaths are not inevitable. They still have an opportunity to turn disaster away from their own heads. Twice the Lord tells them to repent: “Turn back, turn back from your evil ways!” (33:11). The doubled command expresses a sense of urgency. Now is the time—they should not put it off any longer.

In order to explain the concept of responsibility, the Lord Himself provides Ezekiel with case studies that demonstrate that God holds even the righteous accountable for the wickedness they commit (v12, 18). On the other hand, the wicked person who repents will live (v14-16). Indeed, repentance is the point of the message that Ezekiel delivers. He explains that it is not just the wicked person who must repent, however. A righteous person, if he or she has sinned, must also repent. Failure to repent demonstrates a lack of a proper spiritual perspective. An exile might live a seemingly righteous life and still be put to death for one deed of rebellion against the authority of the Lord.

Moses learned that harsh lesson. He did not lose his salvation, he merely lost his life and the attendant opportunity to enter the promised land. One disobedience limited his earthly existence and brought him to the grave early (Num 20:2-12).

Alexander summarizes the prophet’s warning with the following words: “Turn now to the Lord! Why die?”⁸ This dying is not spiritual death; it is physical death: “Would he personally turn from sin to God and physically live ... or would he not?”⁹ In this context and in this setting involving the Jewish exiles in Babylon, physical life is the reward for repentance, but the unrepentant will experience physical death. Ezekiel 33:13 is not a reference to losing one’s salvation. As Taylor states,

Verse 13 does not mean to say that the godly man forfeits his salvation by committing sin: it has nothing to do with the early church’s fear of

⁷ Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25-48, New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998): 247.

⁸ Ralph H. Alexander, “Ezekiel,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (12 vols., ed. by Frank E. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids, MI: Regency Reference Library, 1986): 6:905.

⁹ Feinberg, *The Prophecy of Ezekiel*: 190-91, who agrees.

post-baptismal sin or with more recent issues of ‘once saved, always saved’. It simply states in reverse the principle of individual responsibility. Repentance is incumbent upon all men; unwillingness to repent is a denial of the true spirit of faith in God’s mercy.¹⁰

There is nothing in this text about eternal life or eternal salvation. Divine judgment in this context is not eternal judgment or the future judgment of Revelation 20:11-15. It is judgment in this life, not the next. Some might prefer to speak of this as chastisement, if a righteous person is the one involved. Death is the natural consequence of their behavior.

Yes, disobedient exiles can expect to experience the natural, temporal consequences of their sinful behavior. God does not cancel the certain and natural consequences that He has appointed for disobedience. Laney says it this way: “God does not interrupt the natural consequences of foolish and sinful actions.”¹¹ Hodges explains that forgiveness should be viewed as a removal of estrangement between two parties rather than a remission of a penalty. The Lord may allow an individual to reap severe consequences from his or her wicked behavior. Confession of sin does not insulate someone from all the unfavorable consequences (even physical death) that their sinful behavior sets in motion. For example, a believer may confess to and obtain divine forgiveness for homosexual activity, but he may still contract AIDS and die.¹²

Even under the Law of Moses sin or wickedness could result in a death penalty and it was a matter of individual responsibility (Deut 24:16). The intertextual reference in 2 Kings 14:6 (paralleled by 2 Chron 25:4) shows that Amaziah and his counselors understood the text in Deuteronomy to deal with physical death. The writer of Hebrews confirms this understanding in 10:28, “Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on *the testimony of two or three witnesses.*” Death as judgment for a righteous person who is disobedient is also a New Testament concept. It involves what John

¹⁰ John B. Taylor, *Ezekiel: An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries; Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1969): 215.

¹¹ Carl Laney, “God’s Self-Revelation in Exodus 34:6-8,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158/629 (Jan 2001): 50.

¹² Zane C. Hodges, “We Believe In: Rewards,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 4/2 (Autumn 1991): 9, fn. 5.

calls “a sin unto death” (1 John 5:16-17; cp. 1 Cor 11:30). Such chastisement (temporal judgment) comes to true believers who are unrepentant and persistent in their sin (cf. 1 Cor 5:5; Jas 5:20).¹³

Ezekiel 33:15 ties repentance to works that exhibit the authenticity of repentance. That is the question to be asked about the exiles: Will their guilt feelings lead them to authentic repentance? If so, they must act in a fashion consistent with true repentance (cp. Matt 3:8). The order in which Ezekiel presents the case histories indicates that his focus is on the wicked, not on the righteous. He begins with righteous individuals who depart from righteousness (33:13) and concludes with wicked individuals who repent (v14-16). Verses 7-9 also deal with the wicked.

In addition, the exiles’ exclamation confirms their proper classification (v10). Observing this progression in the text, Block concludes that “Ezekiel hereby expresses willingness to treat his audience not as apostatized righteous persons but as wicked persons, for whom repentance can change the disposition of Yahweh.”¹⁴ The exiles whom the prophet addresses have accurately assessed their wicked condition. Their judgment is imminent and inevitable. If even the righteous person cannot escape the consequences of rebellion, how can the unrighteous hope to escape? Their situation is serious. The option is singular: repent. Like Christ, Ezekiel does not intend to summon the righteous to repentance—he summons sinners (Luke 5:32). Repentance will lead to life only if that repentance is authentic, proven by a changed life. Walking “by the statutes which ensure life” (Ezek 33:15) is a direct reference to the obedience that a truly repentant person must exhibit. Only then will he or she not die.

What about that overwhelming sense of guilt and their rotting lives? Even though the exile had a long history of sinful behavior, repentance will lead to survival (v16, 19). Practicing righteous living

¹³ See Norman L. Geisler, “A Moderate Calvinist View,” in *Four Views on Eternal Security* (ed. by J. Matthew Pinson, Counterpoints Series; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002): 108, and Robert Glenn Gromacki, *Salvation is Forever* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1973): 138, 141. Hodges says, “When Paul warns about immorality within the Christian community, he also warns about divine retribution for this. ‘The Lord,’ he says, ‘is the avenger of all such’ (1 Thess 4:6). James, in turn, warns that sin can lead to physical death (Jas 1:14–15; 5:20), just as the OT frequently so warned (Prov 10:27; 11:19; 12:28; 13:14; 19:16)” (in “We Believe In: Rewards,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 4/2 [Autumn 1991]: 9).

¹⁴ Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25–48*: 248.

authenticates his or her repentance. Therefore, “he shall surely live.”¹⁵ Hope of deliverance from catastrophe and annihilation is present. God speaks truth with authority and clarity. Those who refuse to believe it will suffer the consequences.

Evidence of true repentance might also require the exile’s acceptance of the natural consequences of his or her sin: “conversion and the necessity of continuing to bear God’s punishment are not mutually exclusive.”¹⁶ Like a convicted murderer awaiting execution, salvation and forgiveness do not nullify the death penalty. An example of such consequences can be observed in the case of Rehoboam’s servitude to Shishak (2 Chron 12:1-12). The leaders of Israel “humbled themselves” (as in Lev 26:41) and the Lord granted them a stay of full execution, but left the nation in subjection to Shishak as a means of teaching the converted leaders the seriousness of disobedience to the Lord and the pleasantness of walking in obedience (2 Chron 12:6-8, 12).

Confirmation of the rebellious nature of the exiles is evident from their accusation against their sovereign Lord: “The way of the Lord is not right” (Ezek 33:17). Note the obstinate rebellion in their choice of the divine title “Lord” (*Adonai*). It is the title of sovereign authority, of their Master. What arrogance! The phrase “is not right” in verses 17 and 20 denotes an “adjustment to ordinary standards” (meaning the Israelites’ ordinary standards).¹⁷ They measure the sovereign Lord by their humanistic standards and find him wanting—in their opinion. They accuse the Judge of all the earth of doing what is not right (cp. Gen 18:25; Deut 32:4). In truth, they are the ones whose behavior is not right (cp. Rom 3:4). Again, their doom is assured (Ezek 33:20), because their character and their deeds are corrupt. All of the evidence points to their unrepentant attitude. If any exile “abandons a righteous lifestyle in favor of wickedness, this is grounds for the death sentence.”¹⁸ Therefore, that will be the inevitable outcome.

¹⁵ This is the reverse of “you shall surely die” (Gen 2:17). The same emphatic construction combining the infinitive absolute with a cognate (from the same root) form of the finite Hebrew verb signals the force of the declaration.

¹⁶ Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (2 vols., trans. J. A. Baker, Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961): 2:471.

¹⁷ Alexander, “Ezekiel,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*: 6:905.

¹⁸ Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25–48*: 252.

Conclusion

Ezekiel 33:12-19 deals with the fact that “the wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23). Every piece of evidence in the text points to the basic unrighteous character and lifestyle of the Jewish exiles whom Ezekiel confronts with the Lord’s words. Because of their wickedness, they will die. They will not survive. Like the generation that fell in the wilderness, they will die outside the land of promise because of unbelief. The text does not speak of eternal life or eternal salvation. It speaks only of the issues of physical life and physical death. Even if the exile is a righteous person, one act of rebellion will result in death and elimination from any future restoration to the land. Like Moses, they will die for not obeying God’s words. They have committed a sin unto death and, like the Corinthian believers who took of the Lord’s table unworthily, they will sleep the sleep of death. By their own words they are condemned. They confess their transgressions and sins. They accuse their righteous Lord of injustice. They fail to treat God as holy (cp. Num 20:12). He Who spared not Moses and Aaron will not spare these exiles. They will suffer the natural, temporal consequences of their stubborn and arrogant transgressions.

Nothing in Ezekiel 33:12-19 can be rightly used to support the concept of a believer losing their salvation. A careful exegetical analysis of the text leaves no room for such an interpretation or application.