

What do you need to know when your world is turned upside down? Ezekiel 33.

The Turning Point [33:21]

What do you need to know, what should you do, when everything you have taken for granted, the foundational assumptions on which you have built your life, are knocked away in a moment?

What do you need to know then?

And where can you find a better foundation, a surer foundation on which to build your life?

With the uttering of one doom laden sentence "The city has been struck down"

Ezekiel 33:²¹ 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."

The exiles in Babylon, those to whom Ezekiel has prophesied for the last seven years, have to face the end of everything they have taken for granted and the destruction of their cherished hope.

No King of the line of David reigning in Jerusalem – David's dethroned descendant a prisoner of the pagan Nebuchednezzar

no temple. The footstool of the LORD that was meant to make the city inviolable – in ashes, and with it no sacrifice or worship

no city of Jerusalem, Zion – the city of God – in ruins, and their families dead or enslaved

no land, the land the LORD had promised their fathers, the land to which they longed to return, lost to them forever

Where could they now find hope for release and return, for freedom and consolation, for their continuing existence as a people?

It is hard to exaggerate the impact of that one sentence.

What do the exiles need to know when all they had taken for granted was taken away?

For some this pandemic has also shaken the assumptions on which they have built their lives.

You know those assumptions. You may have shared them

We are in control and can plan our lives and achieve what we desire, and we will always enjoy freedom to go where we want, speak with whom we want, see our friends and family whenever we want

IF we work hard, invest in our super, we will be ok, able to enjoy that long retirement we are counting on, entitles to.

Our government and health systems can keep us safe and prosperous

And our prosperous life shows we are good and deserve good

What do we need to know when our foundational assumptions are challenged – in this case by a virus that has removed our freedoms, destroyed the prosperity of many, threatens our health and our lives

In Ezekiel 33 we have what God thought the exiles needed to know when everything they had taken for granted was taken away. It is the one unit, built around that sad declaration “The city has been struck down.”

It starts with reminders – God thinks they could withstand the shock if they remembered and believed what God had already said

and it ends with warnings about false responses to the news of God’s judgment, response that would only make their situation worse.

And what God thought the exiles needed to know is what we need to know if we are to live with a secure hope and an unshakeable foundation for our lives when our world is shaken and false hopes destroyed, whether that is by a pandemic, or drought, or financial crisis, or illness, or loss

Just as the warnings are warnings we must heed.

Ezekiel – A watchman whose warning should be acted on vv. 1-9 [Ezekiel 3:16-21]

A Familiar story vv. 2-6

Ezekiel 33: The word of the LORD came to me: ² “Son of man, speak to your people and say to them, If I bring the sword upon a land, and the people of the land take a man from among them, and make him their watchman,

Ezekiel starts with a story of an appointment by a community of a watchman, someone who was to stand in the watchtower at the city gate and warn of approaching enemies. It was a familiar story to a people whose land was often subject to raiders and invaders, and it sounds a familiar story to us, for we have already heard in chapter 3 of God’s appointment of Ezekiel as a watchman.

But here it is different. That message in chapter 3 came to Ezekiel alone. This message in chapter 33 is for all. And in the initial telling of the story to the people no one is named – it is just the story of the appointment of a generic watchman.

It makes the point that it is the watchman’s responsibility to warn, and the people’s responsibility to heed that warning if they are to live – in fact the people’s responsibility is what is emphasised – vv. 4-5

⁴ then if anyone who hears the sound of the trumpet does not take warning, and the sword comes and takes him away, his blood shall be upon his own head. ⁵ He heard the sound of the trumpet and did not take warning; his blood shall be upon himself. But if he had taken warning, he would have saved his life.

And the story assumes v. 3 that the LORD is sovereign over what happens to a people – ‘if I bring the sword upon a land’

But Ezekiel moves on from the generic watchman to apply the story to himself and the people

The story applied vv. 7-9

Ezekiel 33: ⁷ “So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. ⁸ If I say to the

wicked, O wicked one, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand.⁹ But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, that person shall die in his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul.

The LORD who brings the sword is the LORD who has appointed Ezekiel watchman for the people of Israel. With His judgement the LORD also provides a way of escape, of saving their lives.

Ezekiel's responsibility to warn is stated, here entirely focused on warning the wicked.

And in v. 9 the peoples responsibility to act on the warning is repeated.

But after 7 years of solemn and forceful warnings, no one could have doubted Ezekiel's faithfulness to His commission.

The emphasis of this watchman story falls on the responsibility of the hearers to save their lives by acting on Ezekiel's warning. God gives His messengers for a purpose, but there is only benefit if people listen and act on what is said.

Where the watchman is faithful the responsibility is on the listener

What did the people need to know?

That God is in control, He executes His judgements, and that He sends His messengers to turn them away from their sin. They can escape judgment if they will listen.

But God has sent us someone better than the prophets. In these last days, the author of Hebrews says, He has spoken to us by His Son, the Lord Jesus [Heb. 1:1-2]

God sends the gospel of His Son into the world. He sends it with a purpose, to warn us that God has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness by His Son Jesus, and to call us to turn back to Him by believing the gospel that Christ has died for our sins, and has been raised and exalted as Lord with all authority.

This is what we need to know, to remember, when our assumptions are shaken

We can have a sure foundation by acting on what the gospel says

But as we have seen in Ezekiel 18, Ezekiel was not sent into the world with only a message of coming judgment. He was sent to the exiles with a message of hope for those who would repent, and after years of hardhearted rejection it appears they might now ready to listen to him.

Ezekiel – A messenger of hope to the despairing vv. 10-20

Ezekiel 33:¹⁰ "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?'

v. 10 brought low

'How then shall we live?' A haunting question. The people are in despair, overwhelmed with loss. They recognise their misery is a consequence of their sin and can see no way out.

v. 11 Hope in God

But the LORD responds

¹¹ *Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?*

HE is for life. They do not need to stay in despair. He offers life to them in place of their living death, rotting away in their sin

All they need do is turn back to the LORD, that is, To repent. They must give up rebelling against Him by choosing their own way rather than obey His law, and say He is their King and they will live His way

To give life and hope is not too hard for Him, no matter how hopeless our circumstances seem to us, and Ezekiel repeats a large part of chapter 18 to bring home that our past and the present it has created for us need not imprison us

vv. 12-16 a message of life for the repentant repeated [Ezekiel 18]

Ezekiel 33: ¹² “And you, son of man, say to your people, The righteousness of the righteous shall not deliver him when he transgresses, and as for the wickedness of the wicked, he shall not fall by it when he turns from his wickedness, and the righteous shall not be able to live by his righteousness when he sins. ¹³ Though I say to the righteous that he shall surely live, yet if he trusts in his righteousness and does injustice, none of his righteous deeds shall be remembered, but in his injustice that he has done he shall die. ¹⁴ Again, though I say to the wicked, ‘You shall surely die,’ yet if he turns from his sin and does what is just and right, ¹⁵ if the wicked restores the pledge, gives back what he has taken by robbery, and walks in the statutes of life, not doing injustice, he shall surely live; he shall not die. ¹⁶ None of the sins that he has committed shall be remembered against him. He has done what is just and right; he shall surely live.

There is conditionality in God’s judgements.

Life is found, and depends on, keeping on trusting Him and doing His will.

But the focus here is not on the righteous v. 13 who turns away from God to trust in himself

The emphasis falls vv. 14-16 on the LORD’s mercy to the repentant, the wicked person who heeds God’s announcement ‘You shall surely die’ and turns back to the LORD. The repentant person puts her faith in the LORD, and lives now as His person, doing His will – she commits herself to the covenant and its standards of righteousness and justice, especially here in the economic sphere – refusing to enrich herself by wrongfully taking what is another’s.

The person who turns back will surely live, says the LORD

You would think this would now be welcomed as good news by those languishing under the LORD’s judgment on their sin.

Yet they find fault with the LORD.

A message found fault with vv. 17-20 [Leviticus 26:40-45, Deuteronomy 30:1-10]

Ezekiel 33: ¹⁷ “Yet your people say, ‘The way of the Lord is not just,’ when it is their own way that is not just. ¹⁸ When the righteous turns from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for it. ¹⁹ And when the wicked turns from his wickedness and does what is just and right, he shall live by this. ²⁰ Yet you say, ‘The way of the Lord is not just.’ O house of Israel, I will judge each of you according to his ways.”

‘The way of the LORD is not just.’ They still feel let down by God. They wanted the LORD to be wholly for them, their God who should be protecting them no matter what.

There should be no conditionality in the covenant. The LORD should just put up with, overlook, their sinful behaviour.

But the LORD says they are the ones who have not measured up to the standard of their covenant with Him, the standard of wholehearted commitment to the LORD.

In judging sin, especially their idolatry, and pardoning the repentant He is doing exactly what He has said He would do in the covenant – as we can see when we look at Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 30.

He is just and will judge them justly

I will judge each of you according to his ways.”

He does not show partiality. They have no privilege they can rely on.

As their world is shaken the exiles need to know they can confess their wickedness and turn back and find life, or they can keep on finding fault with God – and face a just judgment

What will they do in their hopeless state?

What will we do when we face hopelessness as a result of our own bad choices, our own false religion?

Will we keep blaming God, saying God has no right to judge us, no right to humble us

That He Should just be there for you, to support you in your choices, give you a good life

Or confess our sin and turn back to God because We know God offers life to the humbled and repentant, offers it now in the gospel of His Son Jesus which tells us Jesus died for sinners, died to bring us forgiveness

We need not be held captive by our past rebellion, need not die eternally

But He offers it on His terms, not ours

Repentance and faith in Jesus, where we turn back and confess we have been wrong to run our lives our own way and now live with Jesus as Lord, doing what He teaches

Listen to the God who does not delight in death, but life – and find life

Would the exiles believe Ezekiel?

Would they turn to the LORD

They had been thinking of the LORD as some national deity, always bound to protect His people and His land. Their defeat, the destruction of His temple, made them think that He was a defeated god, less powerful than the god's of the Babylonians,

Their wrong views of God set them up to make the wrong choice in their need, to think that the way forward was to go away from the LORD, not to turn back to Him.

So the LORD in Ezekiel gives them proof of the truth of His word

Ezekiel – A vindicated prophet vv. 21-22.

Ezekiel 33:²¹ In the twelfth year of our exile, in the tenth month, on the fifth day of the month, a fugitive from Jerusalem came to me and said, "The city has been struck down."

²² Now the hand of the LORD had been upon me the evening before the fugitive came; and he had opened my mouth by the time the man came to me in the morning, so my mouth was opened, and I was no longer mute.

Here is a double vindication of the word the LORD had spoken through Ezekiel.

What Ezekiel has prophesied persistently over seven years– that Jerusalem would be judged for its sins and destroyed – is proved true.

Ezekiel had dated his prophecies. They were given before the *twelfth year of our exile, in the tenth month, on the fifth day of the month,*

And it had now happened as Ezekiel had said. Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians. He spoke the truth.

And on the evening before the messenger arrives 'the hand of the LORD' was on Ezekiel, and by the morning of the messenger's arrival he could speak again freely – just as the LORD said would happen in Ezekiel 24.

Ezekiel 24:26-27.

As the LORD had said Ezekiel is now a living sign of the truthfulness, the reliability of the Word of the LORD

And a sign that the LORD has more words to say, words which will soon become words of hope

The exiles needed to know the LORD speaks the truth – for as they see the Word of the LORD fulfilled they know they have been wrong about the LORD.

He is not some small national god.

He is the God of the whole earth.

The conquering Babylonians have been doing His will.

What He says, happens

And He is just, wholly righteous

Acting as He said in faithfulness to His covenant.

And that meant that just as His warnings were true so His promise of mercy to the repentant was sure

He really will give life

He will forgive the wicked who repent

When their world was shaken they needed to know the Lord's word was true so that they would turn back to Him, not away from Him

And as our world is shaken, we need to know the LORD's word is true, so that we keep turning to Him, abandoning wrong beliefs about God.

There are lots of wrong beliefs around

God is out of the picture, irrelevant, not interested in whether we live according to His law or not

That if he is at all real he is there to look after us, stop bad things happening to us

Or He is God we can buy off with a little attention on the occasional Sunday or Christmas or easter while we get on and live the life we want to, pursuing wealth or pleasure or career satisfaction

But the gospel word is a true word

And the Lord has Given us a better proof and a better sign of that

He has raised Jesus from the dead, as Jesus said He would. He speaks the truth

And He gives His Spirit to every believer in every age, every new birth a sign of the truthfulness of the gospel

And the death and resurrection of Jesus tells you

God is not distant and uninvolved

He is not indifferent to sin, to people's rebellion

He is almighty, He is for life

And He has sent the true word of the gospel into the world to offer life and hope to the despairing

How will the exiles react to the vindication in history, in the fall of Babylon, of Ezekiel's prophesying. How will they react to the demonstration of the truth of God's word and the certainty of His judgment?

God warns us here of two false responses, two ways of making a bad situation worse

Warnings about false responses vv. 23-33

The false confidence of survivors vv. 23-29

Firstly there is the false confidence of survivors.

God reveals to Ezekiel the reaction of those few who have been left in Israel, the inhabitants of these waste places in the land of Israel.

They are saying *'Abraham was only one man, yet he got possession of the land; but we are many; the land is surely given us to possess.'*

They are full of confidence. Hadn't they survived when so many had perished. That must mean that somehow they were better, they were the favoured ones

And they will seize their opportunity. If Abraham alone could possess the land, well together they certainly could

They make no reference to the LORD. They are confident in themselves that they can take what is only the LORD's to give, while all the while living as people who despise the LORD. They are acting as if the LORD is out of the picture, and so think they will be spared judgment while all the time practicing those things that provoke judgment

²⁵ *Therefore say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: You eat flesh with the blood and lift up your eyes to your idols and shed blood; shall you then possess the land?* ²⁶ *You rely on the sword, you commit abominations, and each of you defiles his neighbor's wife; shall you then possess the land?*

Its as if they think the LORD has suddenly grown tired or inattentive. They are wrong.

²⁷ *Say this to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: As I live, surely those who are in the waste places shall fall by the sword, and whoever is in the open field I will give to the beasts to be devoured, and those who are in strongholds and in caves shall die by pestilence.* ²⁸ *And I will make the land a desolation and a waste, and her proud might shall come to an end, and the mountains of Israel shall be so desolate that none will pass through.* ²⁹ *Then they will know that I am the LORD, when I have made the land a desolation and a waste because of all their abominations that they have committed.*

Experiencing judgement doesn't spare you from further judgment if you continue unchanged, unrepentant.

Sometimes those who suffer judgment think it gives them the right to be left alone. They've done their time and are now free, to be able to get on with their own lives, continuing with the same sins that provoked the first judgement.

They have wasted their suffering

If you drink and drive and crash and badly injure yourself, why should you think that if you continue to drink and drive you won't crash again.

If you rebel against God, defy God, and it brings you into misery, and you feel God against you – why do you think that will change if you continue to defy God

Those who survive judgment should see it as a God given opportunity to get right with God, not to continue to defy him.

If as a nation we get to the other side of this and all we can say is 'Look, we can beat this together' and keep on living our godless lives, we should expect more judgment

And it would be a tragedy for you individually if you do not see surviving this as an opportunity to turn back from sin and worldliness to trust and follow Jesus wholeheartedly.

Let's say someone emerges from this pandemic, or even a Covid infection, economically, emotionally, and physically intact.

Should they say – life is mine now, and I am going to keep on doing just what I want, living to please myself?

No. They should say – I have seen that I am not in control. Loss and death are never far away. I should heed the warning and get right with the almighty God who kills and makes alive, who wounds and who heals, while I can

And I can, for the word He speaks of mercy and eternal life through His Son Jesus is true

The survivors in Judah were wrong in thinking they could secure for themselves what was only God's to give, keep living as if God had not spoken, not pronounced His judgment on their godlessness.

But the exiles also model a false response to the demonstration of the truth of God's word

They show respect, without change, turn the watchman into an entertainer

Respect without change vv. 30-33

Ezekiel 33: ³⁰ "As for you, son of man, your people who talk together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, say to one another, each to his brother, 'Come, and hear what the word is that comes from the LORD.' ³¹ And they come to you as people come, and they sit before you as my people, and they hear what you say but they will not do it; for with lustful talk in their mouths they act; their heart is set on their gain. ³² And behold, you are to them like one who sings lustful songs with a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument, for they hear what you say, but they will not do it. ³³ When this comes—and come it will!—then they will know that a prophet has been among them."

Ezekiel is now in fashion with the exiles.

They come, and sit – sit as my people, they hear

They are respectful, attentive

But, v. 31 and 32, they are unchanged – "they will not do"

Why won't they do it? They love their sensuality, their lustful talk, and their greed – remember it was economic sins Ezekiel used to give examples of repentance.

Theirs is the response of the disoriented refugee. Having lost everything – they are determined to live for themselves, to make the best of things for themselves.

All there is, is to live for now, live for good experiences, find a new security in money

Ezekiel has a place in that, because he is quite a show – for now, to be appreciated for his delivery, or style, or wit, or whackiness

And then forgotten, having no impact on how they live

You read 'they will not do it' and think – how can there be hope for this people

They have a clear and purposeful word from God

They have a word that offers life to the repentant

They have a word that has been proved true, from a prophet who every time he opens his mouth is a sign of the truthfulness of God, of the trustworthiness of His word

But they won't change, they won't turn from the sins they love

How can there ever be hope for this people?

Yet there is hope, a clear hope that Ezekiel will give in chapters 34-48.

This insight into the exiles and their attitude tells us that hope will be in the LORD, not the exiles

They are not given promises that follow, promises of new life for the nation, because they are a repentant people, as if their repentance has somehow earned a change of heart in God.

The great promises, the wonderful hope God gives to His people in the chapters that follow

Come from God. This is a gracious hope, one that comes because of who the LORD is. He is a God of steadfast love and mercy, righteous and faithful to His covenant. He is zealous for His glory, that He be known as He is by all the nations

vv. 30-33 tell us if there is to be hope for Israel it will be Hope from the LORD, given in His grace and faithfulness, not because of them.

What do you need to know?

Hope in God

And that is true for us, one of the things we must know as our world is shaken

If there is to be hope for us, it must be in the LORD, in His graciousness and faithfulness.

Who knows what things will look like for us, individually and collectively, on the other side of this pandemic.

There may be a recovery of prosperity and freedom, or there might be further blows as God seeks to humble us and turn our hearts to His Son

Whatever, believers can hope in the LORD because HE is who He is. He will be faithful to His promises – to keep us, to deal with us in grace.

The Lord Jesus will be our faithful shepherd always

And this hope doesn't depend on how satisfied or dissatisfied we are with our behaviour through this time.

The lock down may have exposed frailties and sins in our lives, as well as unexpected resilience and faithfulness

And if our confidence was in our sense of our own goodness or our own competence – that God will be favourable to us because we are good people, or effective, that God was sticking with us because we were sticking with Him – that confidence may well have been shaken

We need to know – hope for this life and the next is found, not in our faithfulness, but in the LORD Himself

In the LORD being true to Himself – faithful to His word, always gracious and compassionate

If you have taken to Lying awake, wondering what will become of you and your children and grandchildren, in Jesus you can have hope in the LORD – so think on Him, who has mercy on those who turn to Him

The stubbornness of unbelief [John 3:18-21, 2 Cor. 4:1-6; Romans 10:1]

But another thing we need to learn from Ezekiel and his dealings with the exiles is the stubbornness of unbelief.

Weren't you amazed that they could keep treating this watchman, with his life and death message, his proven truthfulness, as a source of entertainment

That they so loved their sensual pleasure and their money and freedom to get money however they chose – that they would refuse to act and turn back to God and save their lives?

But this is what happened when Jesus came, and He was a better teacher and preacher than Ezekiel, and his words were accompanied by many might works. Yet the gospel says people loved darkness rather than light and wouldn't turn and believe in Him.

Why – because they loved their sins more, and did not want them exposed

John 3: ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. ²¹ But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God."

Paul says

*2 Corinthians 4: ³ And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴ In their case **the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.***

People are blind, deaf and dead

We see it

We are speaking to them, hopefully, of sin and judgment, and forgiveness and life through Jesus' death and resurrection

We share the gospel word God has vindicated in the resurrection of Jesus, and continues to do so

And there are so many testimonies of people finding life and hope in Jesus, your own included – and yet they will not believe

What can we do?

Those of you who watch Gardening Australia would have seen Costa, the host, introducing Tino's segment by saying 'Soil, soil, soil, and soil, and soil

For that it is the foundation of everything in the garden

What can we do? We can pray, and pray, and pray, and pray, and pray

Pray like Paul who when confronted with the unbelief of his kinsmen said

Romans 10:¹ Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.

Would it not be an indictment upon us if we are not asking the LORD to do what only he can do

Give sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, life to the dead

Be hearers who do [Matt. 7:24-27, 28:19-20; James 1:22-25]

And finally we must take the warning of vv. 30-33 to ourselves

We must not turn listening to the word of God into entertainment

We can

We can become connoisseurs

Sit there keeping score, counting and savoring the stories and the illustrations, or thumbing through thick bibles to criticise the exegesis

But not doing what the word says

But our Lord warns us that a sure foundation in the moment of testing, of trial – whether that is a pandemic, or a financial crisis, or a war, or our death

Is only known by those who listen and do

Matthew 7:²⁴ “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. ²⁶ And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. ²⁷ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”

It is only as we listen and act that we benefit from the gospel warnings, experience the mercy God offers to those who repent and believe, know the sure truth of God's word and come to have an unshakeable foundation and a sure hope

You see it is a Wonderful and Perilous to be in a bible teaching church

Wonderful – hear the truth on which you can base your life

Perilous – easy to become like Ezekiel's hearers

Week by week you are being tested – and the responsibility for hearing and doing is yours

So today will you hear and act on what God says you need to know

That His warnings are true

That His promise of mercy is sure

That the teaching of His Son is true and the way to life

When all that you have taken for granted is removed

When the foundations are shaken

Will you find that unshakeable foundation and enduring hope in believing and doing all that Jesus has commanded