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### THE WATCHMAN

By David Phillips

Pity the Mayor of New Orleans. When Hurricane Katrina struck a couple of years ago the authorities were blamed for not treating the threat seriously enough. Recently when Hurricane Gustav was on the way the present Mayor gave a very grave and colourful warning describing it as 'the mother of all storms'. As it turns out the storm was not as fierce as feared and there was not the same need to evacuate the city.

In this situation the Mayor, with his advisers, had a role very similar to the Watchman described in Ezekiel chapters 3 and 33. The watchman has the job of warning when a destroying army is approaching. Ezekiel was called to this ministry in chapter 3 and refreshed in it in chapter 33 but he was not reliant on the predictions of the meteorologists but rather on the Lord who speaks and warns of the approaching storm.

Ezekiel was a man in exile, among those captured along with King Jehoiachin and taken off to Babylon. In the fifth year of the Exile the Lord spoke to Ezekiel and appointed him a prophet, this would appear to be the year 593BC. Over the next seven years he was given a message as a watchman to the people of Israel before again the call is repeated in the 12th year of his exile. During those seven years Jerusalem and Judah endured though affairs got gradually worse but shortly after the refreshing of the call a man found his way to Ezekiel who had escaped from Jerusalem with the dire news 'The city has fallen!' Indeed not only the city but also the Temple of the Lord and as Ezekiel had been vividly shown the glory of the Lord had departed.

Ezekiel was a prophet, a watchman. The watchman was to stand on the city wall and warn of the enemy approaching. When he sees the enemy he is to sound the trumpet so that the city could prepare, people flee in from the fields, defences prepared, supplies brought in, doors shut tightly. If the watchman failed in his job the enemy would come on the city by surprise, those in the fields would be taken first and the enemy surge into the city unopposed. The people would die, and the watchman would be held accountable for failing in his job. But if the watchman blew his trumpet and the people failed to respond, kept out in the fields, did not shut the gate or prepare then when the enemy came they had no-one to blame but themselves. The watchman would have done his duty.

The message was simple, Ezekiel was a watchman and it was his duty to declare the destruction coming on the city. The trumpet he was to blow was to say 'O Wicked man, you will surely die', in the hope that the people would hear the sound and repent. The threat approaching was not the Babylonian army nor a hurricane but the storm of the wrath of God. Ezekiel is told to do his duty and even though the people fail to listen, he will have saved himself.

Christians have been quick to see this lesson as applying to our own duty and especially to the work of the preaching ministry. Indeed Caesarius of Arles seems to imply that in the 5th century the consecration service for Bishops included the reading of the passage from Ezekiel.

We can apply the role of the watchman in different ways and each has echoes in the New Testament.

#### **Warning the lost**

All Christians should be ready to give a defence for the hope that is in them and to tell others the

gospel of Christ. In this respect the duty of the watchman is to warn those who have not turned to Christ of the danger they face, to warn them, as John the Baptist did, to 'flee the wrath to come'.

Of course there is more to our message than just this. We can tell people of the incredible grace of God in Christ, of the truthfulness of what the Bible says and of the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of individuals. But we are to warn people too, and that is the job of the watchman. We cannot force people to believe, but our duty is to blow the trumpet. If they hear the trumpet and believe the gospel we can rejoice with them. But if they refuse to believe we may have heavy hearts but we will have done our duty.

Jesus put it this way when he sent out his disciples to preach and to heal in the towns and villages of Israel:

*If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town. I tell you the truth, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town. (Matthew 10.14-15)*

Shaking the dust off their feet was a clear sign to those they were leaving but it was also a demonstration that they had done their duty as watchmen and for those who refused to listen to the warning their blood would be on their own heads.

There is therefore an urgency and an immediacy to the job of the watchman, we may prefer to wait for the opportune moment, until we think we have 'deserved the right to speak' or until we have buffed up our trumpet until it gleams and we can look the part, but if the enemy is coming the watchman cannot afford to delay.

A catastrophe in another American city provides an illustration of this. Dwight L Moody was a preacher in Chicago. He had not long finished preaching on Sunday 8 October 1871 when the city fire bells began to ring. Over the following two days his house and the church were burnt to the ground along with seventeen and a half thousand other buildings. There was relatively little loss of life in the Great Fire of Chicago, probably between 200 and 300, but the incident reportedly made a great impression on Moody and on the immediacy and urgency of his call to repentance and faith. When in 1872 he visited Britain it is reckoned that he preached to around half a million people.

### **Warning the errant**

Though we can see how the example of Ezekiel applies to the need to warn the lost of the need to repent and believe Christians have tended to understand it more in terms of the need to warn those who are straying from the truth.

In the days long before Fiat and Juventus the first known Bishop of Turin was Maximus who wrote:

*Sometimes when we preach, our sermons seem rather harsh to many, and what we speak about as a rule is taken by some as if it were produced from a hard attitude. For they say, "how severely and bitterly the bishop has preached!" not knowing that for bishops speaking is more a matter of obligation than of desire. Speaking, I say, is more a matter of obligation - not because the desire to preach the truth is lacking but because the silence that comes from not speaking is driven away by the punishment of the law. . . . This then, is the preacher's situation - that he should not be silent with respect to the sins of another if he wishes to avoid sinning himself, and that he should correct his brother by reproving him so that he may not destroy what is priestly in himself. . . . Consequently it is better to correct the sinner by rebuking him than to accept the sinner's misdeed by keeping quiet.*

Maximus goes on to quote from Ezekiel and I wonder how many preachers since have heard the accusation as we often hear today that we are too severe or hard. It is certainly an accusation that is levelled against Church Society. But those who are watchmen must speak and if we do not the warning to Ezekiel is dire:

*But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, and the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes any person from among them, he is taken away in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at the watchman's hand. (Ezek. 33.6)*

The Apostle Paul in his parting words to the Ephesian elders could say:

*I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole counsel of God.*

He had fulfilled his duty as a watchman.

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