

**“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.”**

“A watchman for the house of Israel.”

In the day of Ezekiel, watchmen were indispensable. During harvest season, watchmen would stand on high ground or a temporary structure to look over the crops so that no one would rob or destroy them. That was rural Israel.

In urban Israel, watchmen were also indispensable. All year around, the people needed watchmen. Larger cities had fortified walls with walkways and towers on them. A watchman would scan the landscape day and night—all year around.

A watchman would look out on the horizon for bad news—danger, threat, and the enemy. And when the watchman cried out the danger, he did so in order to protect and prosper those under his watchful eye.

A watchman would also look out for good news—the king’s return, soldiers returning from battle, and a messenger with glad tidings. The watchman had the privilege of announcing a message that would give cause for celebration!

Watchmen were the surveillance satellites of the ancient world. They were the radar scanners—scanning the hills, seas, and skies. Some watchmen were called to protect a particular farmer’s crop. Some watchmen were called to a particular city such as Jerusalem.

But Ezekiel is called to be “a watchman for the house of Israel”—a whole nation! No tower is high enough to give him a view of the whole nation! Not even this high pulpit is high enough to scan all of Forest Park—let alone a whole nation. And even if it was, no human eye can discern danger from that great of a distance.

And so it is for the watchmen of Christ’s Church. It is an impossible task. There is no lofty tower to view the lives of all of God’s people. There is no extra sensory perception to read the human heart with the office of the keys.

There is no way for the watchman to see the threat of danger lurking behind dark shadows. There is no way to anticipate extraordinarily good news. The eye of the pastor is a human eye and cannot gather the information needed for the task. Like all servants of God, the watchman is unworthy. No one is capable of doing it alone.

13 years ago, when I was in my last year at Dallas Theological Seminary, I went to a worship conference. I was struggling in my faith. I was a very confused Presbyterian. At this conference, I heard a speaker who played a part in helping me find some comfort, hope, and anchor me in the Word of God.

This speaker was the “Chief Musician” at a vibrant church in Austin, Texas—Redeemer Presbyterian Church—Dr. Leonard Payton. Over the years, this worship leader and I continued to get together and talk on the phone.

Dr. Payton had a following of young seminarians and pastors. I would frequently hear him on the radio and see his name listed at various conferences. But what I appreciated about him was that he loved God's Word and God's people.

As I begun my ministry as a church planter, Dr. Payton played a significant role in how I planned worship services and viewed my ministry. He already was very pastoral in his relationship to me—though not yet ordained.

He had the good sense to tell me then—and remind me again just two days ago—how bad of a Presbyterian I really make. Dr. Payton and a pastor from Las Cruces, New Mexico, Pastor Ralph Patrick—who also served Bethel, Chicago—encouraged me to become a Lutheran pastor.

As God's watchmen, they gave me a vision of something better suited for me. And although I am very appreciative of my Presbyterian heritage, they also gave me something that was better suited to the Word.

Like all servants of God, the watchman desperately needs good news. He needs the assurance and encouragement that God will enable him to fulfill his calling. And the verse right after the watchman's call is the good news we all need to hear:

**“I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel...Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me.”**

The good news is that God does not expect for Ezekiel or any watchman to see all that needs to be seen. He doesn't even expect Ezekiel to use his eyes at all. God is calling him to use his ears.

The landscape this watchman looks over is not the hills, valleys, plains, and seas of Israel—this watchman looks over the landscape of the Word. He scans the Scriptures, listens and then speaks—not his opinion but God's changeless Word. He is not a free agent. He is not an opinion columnist.

The watchman does not speak by what he sees in the world but what hears in the Word of God. And, so, when we hear this Word, we hear and recognize the voice of our Good Shepherd. He is the Lord's watchman “with the help of God.” In Isaiah ch. 55 (vv. 10-11) God describes this word that comes out of his mouth:

**“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”**

This is good news! God sends his word to promote life, health, and peace. When God warns of danger, it is not to beat us down, belittle us, or cramp our style. When God warns, he does so to preserve and protect our lives

Pastor Payton will take a vow to be faithful to the Scriptures—to study, to pray, and serve God's people and the Lord in accordance with the Word of God. And we will promise to support and pray for him “with the help of God.”

Sometimes being the Lord's watchmen can be overwhelming—especially during those long, dark nights. But with the prayers and encouragement of God's people, it is enough to warm the

watchman's heart and help him serve with joy. Our confidence is not in the watchman but in the Word and God's faithfulness to both the watchman and the people he serves.

It is **“the Word of God that is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword”** (Heb. 4:12). It is the Word of God that Paul said **“[he] planted, Apollos watered, but God caused the growth”** (1 Cor. 3:6).

As Psalm 127 puts it: **“Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.”** Here is an encouraging thing—the Lord builds the house—the Lord watches over the city!

It is God who can see all the activities of humankind—even under the cover of darkness. It is God who can hear what is whispered in the corners. It is God who can read the thoughts in every human heart.

He watches—not to keep a record of wrongs—but watches over us as our Advocate, Savior, and Friend. “He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked.” He takes pleasure in those who escape the dangers of the devil, the world, and even our own sinful nature. He takes pleasure in our having peace, comfort, and assurance of grace.

As the great Watchman—our heavenly Father—looks over the landscape of humanity, he sees our brokenness. He sees the wolves threatening us, his sheep. But he does not just watch over us—he saves and sustains us.

He sent us his Son, Jesus Christ. And also like a good watchman, Jesus was lifted up high—high on a hill right outside of Jerusalem—the hill's name is Golgotha, Calvary, the place of the skull.

But he did not ascend there to get a better view of the mob or a bird's eye view of humanity. He was lifted up high to be the faithful over-Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep—bringing forgiveness, life, and salvation to the whole world.

And from where I am standing, I can only be encouraged and optimistic. Here's a man I'm confident who listens to the Word and loves God's people. And here's a congregation I'm also confident who listens to the Word and is eager to be served.

As a good watchman, Pastor Payton sees the enormous treasure that St. John already is and the gold mine of opportunity in the community around this parish. And we have the assurance that God's Word and Spirit are there to equip him to serve.

God's Word is going out from his mouth. The watchman is listening. We are listening. God is speaking. God is working. His word **“shall not return to [him] empty, but it shall accomplish that which [he] purposes, and shall succeed in the thing for which [he] sent it.”**

We should all expect great things.