

# The Voice of Warning

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While the duty to warn is felt especially keenly by prophets, it is a duty shared by others as well.

The prophet Ezekiel was born about two decades before Lehi and his family left Jerusalem. In 597 BC, at age 25, Ezekiel was one of the many carried captive to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar, and as best we can tell, he spent the rest of his life there.<sup>1</sup> He was of the Aaronic priestly lineage, and when he was 30, he became a prophet.<sup>2</sup>

In commissioning Ezekiel, Jehovah used the metaphor of a watchman.

“If when [the watchman] seeth the sword come upon the land, he blow the trumpet, and warn the people;

“Then whosoever heareth the sound of the trumpet, and taketh not warning; if the sword come, and take him away, his blood shall be upon his own head.”<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, “if the watchman see the sword come, and blow not the trumpet, and the people be not warned; if the sword come, and take any person from among them, ... his blood will I require at the watchman’s hand.”<sup>4</sup>

Then speaking directly to Ezekiel, Jehovah declared, “So thou, O son of man, I have set thee a watchman unto the house of Israel; therefore thou shalt hear the word at my mouth, and warn them [for] me.”<sup>5</sup> The warning was to turn away from sin.

“When I say unto the wicked, O wicked man, thou shalt surely die; if thou dost not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand.

“Nevertheless, if thou warn the wicked of his way to turn from it; if he do not turn from his way, he shall die in his iniquity; but thou hast delivered thy soul. ...

“Again, when I say unto the wicked, Thou shalt surely die; if he turn from his sin, and do that which is lawful and right; ...

“None of his sins that he hath committed shall be mentioned unto him: he hath done that which is lawful and right; he shall surely live.”<sup>6</sup>

Interestingly, this warning also applies to the righteous. “When I shall say to the righteous, that he shall surely live; if he trust to his own righteousness, and commit iniquity, all his [righteous deeds] shall not be remembered; but for his iniquity that he hath committed, he shall die for it.”<sup>7</sup>

Pleading with His children, God tells Ezekiel, “Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?”<sup>8</sup>

Far from being anxious to condemn, our Heavenly Father and our Savior seek our happiness and plead with us to repent, knowing full well that “wickedness never was [and never will be] happiness.”<sup>9</sup> So Ezekiel and every prophet before and since, speaking the word of God out of a full heart, have warned all who will to turn away from Satan, the enemy of their souls, and “choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men.”<sup>10</sup>

While the duty to warn is felt especially keenly by prophets, it is a duty shared by others as well. In fact, “it becometh every man who hath been warned to warn his neighbor.”<sup>11</sup> We who have received a knowledge of the great plan of happiness—and its implementing commandments—should feel a desire to share that knowledge since it makes all the difference here and in eternity. And if we ask, “Who is my neighbor that I should warn?” surely the answer will be found in a parable that begins, “A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves,”<sup>12</sup> and so forth.

Considering the parable of the good Samaritan in this context reminds us that the question “Who is my neighbor?” was tied to the two great commandments: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself.”<sup>13</sup> The motivation for raising the warning voice is love—love of God and love of fellowman. To warn is to care. The Lord instructs that it is to be done “in mildness and in meekness”<sup>14</sup> and “by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness ... , and by love unfeigned.”<sup>15</sup> It can be urgent, as when we warn a child not to put his or her hand in a fire. It must be clear and sometimes firm. On occasion, warning may take the form of reproof “when moved upon by the Holy Ghost,”<sup>16</sup> but always it is rooted in love. Witness, for example, the love that motivates the service and sacrifices of our missionaries.

Surely love would compel parents to warn their closest “neighbors”—their own children. This means teaching and testifying of gospel truths. It means teaching children the doctrine of Christ: faith, repentance, baptism, and the gift of the Holy Ghost.<sup>17</sup> The Lord reminds parents, “I have commanded you to bring up your children in light and truth.”<sup>18</sup>

A crucial element of the parental duty to warn is to point not only the demoralizing consequences of sin but also the joy of walking in obedience to the commandments.

Recall the words of Enos about what led him to seek God, receive a remission of sins, and become converted:

“Behold, I went to hunt beasts in the forests; and the words which I had often heard my father speak concerning eternal life, *and the joy of the saints*, sunk deep into my heart.

“And my soul hungered; and I kneeled down before my Maker, and I cried unto him in mighty prayer and supplication.”<sup>19</sup>

Because of His incomparable love and concern for others and their happiness, Jesus was not hesitant to warn. At the outset of His ministry, “Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”<sup>20</sup> Because He knows that not just any path leads to heaven, He commanded:

“Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat:

“Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.”<sup>21</sup>

He devoted time to sinners, saying, “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”<sup>22</sup>

As for the scribes and Pharisees and Sadducees, Jesus was uncompromising in condemning their hypocrisy. His warnings and commandments were direct: “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.”<sup>23</sup> Surely no one would accuse the Savior of not loving these scribes and Pharisees—after all, He suffered and died to save them too. But loving them, He could not let them go on in sin without clearly correcting them. One observer noted, “Jesus taught his followers to do as he did: to welcome everyone but also to teach about sin, since love demands warning people about what can hurt them.”<sup>24</sup>

Sometimes those who raise a warning voice are dismissed as judgmental.

Paradoxically, however, those who claim truth is relative and moral standards are a matter of personal preference are often the same ones who most harshly criticize people who don't accept the current norm of “correct thinking.” One writer referred to this as the “shame culture”:

“In a guilt culture you know you are good or bad by what your conscience feels. In a shame culture you know you are good or bad by what your community says about you, by whether it honors or excludes you. ... [In the shame culture,] moral life is not built on the continuum of right and wrong; it's built on the continuum of inclusion and exclusion. ...

"... Everybody is perpetually insecure in a moral system based on inclusion and exclusion. There are no permanent standards, just the shifting judgment of the crowd. It is a culture of oversensitivity, overreaction and frequent moral panics, during which everybody feels compelled to go along. ...

"The guilt culture could be harsh, but at least you could hate the sin and still love the sinner. The modern shame culture allegedly values inclusion and tolerance, but it can be strangely unmerciful to those who disagree and to those who don't fit in."<sup>25</sup>

Contrasted to this is "the rock of our Redeemer,"<sup>26</sup> a stable and permanent foundation of justice and virtue. How much better it is to have the unchanging law of God by which we may act to choose our destiny rather than being hostage to the unpredictable rules and wrath of the social media mob. How much better it is to know the truth than to be "tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine."<sup>27</sup> How much better to repent and rise to the gospel standard than to pretend there is no right or wrong and languish in sin and regret.

The Lord has declared, "The voice of warning shall be unto all people, by the mouths of my disciples, whom I have chosen in these last days."<sup>28</sup> As watchmen and disciples, we cannot be neutral about this "more excellent way."<sup>29</sup> As Ezekiel, we cannot see the sword coming upon the land "and blow not the trumpet."<sup>30</sup> This is not to say that we should bang on our neighbor's door or stand in the public square shouting, "Repent!" Truly, when you think about it, we have in the restored gospel what people, deep down, really want. So the warning voice is generally not only civil, but in the Psalmist's phrase, it is a "joyful noise."<sup>31</sup>

*Deseret News* opinion editor Hal Boyd cited one example of the disservice inherent in staying silent. He noted that while the idea of marriage is still a matter of "intellectual debate" among elites in American society, marriage itself is not a matter of debate for them in practice. "Elites get and stay married and make sure their kids enjoy the benefits of stable marriage.' ... The problem, however, is that [they] tend not to preach what they practice." They don't want to "impose" on those who really could use their moral leadership, but "it is perhaps time for those with education and strong families to stop feigning neutrality and start preaching what they practice pertaining to marriage and parenting ... [and] help their fellow Americans embrace it."<sup>32</sup>

We trust that especially you of the rising generation, youth and young adults on whom the Lord must rely for the success of His work in future years, will sustain the teachings of the gospel and the standards of the Church in public as well as in private. Do not abandon those who would welcome truth to floundering and failing in ignorance. Do not succumb to false notions of tolerance or to fear—fear of inconvenience, disapproval, or even suffering. Remember the Savior's promise:

"Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.

“Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.”<sup>33</sup>

Ultimately, we are all accountable to God for our choices and the lives we live. The Savior declared, “My Father sent me that I might be lifted up upon the cross; and after that I had been lifted up upon the cross, that I might draw all men unto me, that as I have been lifted up by men even so should men be lifted up by the Father, to stand before me, to be judged of their works, whether they be good or whether they be evil.”<sup>34</sup>

Recognizing this, the Lord’s supremacy, I plead in the words of Alma:

“And now, my brethren [and sisters], I wish from the inmost part of my heart, yea, with great anxiety even unto pain, that ye would ... cast off your sins, and not procrastinate the day of your repentance;

“But that ye would humble yourselves before the Lord, and call on his holy name, and watch and pray continually, that ye may not be tempted above that which ye can bear, and thus be led by the Holy Spirit ... ;

“Having faith on the Lord; having a hope that ye shall receive eternal life; having the love of God always in your hearts, that ye may be lifted up at the last day and enter into his rest.”<sup>35</sup>

May we each be able to say to the Lord with David: “I have not hid thy righteousness within my heart; I have declared thy faithfulness and thy salvation: I have not concealed thy lovingkindness and thy truth from the great congregation. Withhold not thou thy tender mercies from me, O Lord.”<sup>36</sup> In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

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