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Ezekiel and Work

Theology of Work Project

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*"If a man is righteous and does what is lawful and right...he shall surely live,' says the Lord God."
(Ezekiel 18:5-9)*

Introduction to Ezekiel

Living with God is not just a matter of worship and personal devotion. Living with God is also a matter of living life righteously, whether in the marketplace, at home, in church or in society. This does not contradict the teaching that salvation comes only by grace through faith in Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1), but to point out that life with God begins with belief in Christ, but comes to completion in righteous living in every sphere of life.

The Book of Ezekiel gives a compelling account of how the Jewish people suffer a severely diminished life of deprivation and oppression — and even death — as captives in the conquering empire of Babylon. When they question why God has allowed them to suffer this way, Ezekiel speaks God's answer: because of your unjust ways of living (Ezekiel 18:1-17). Israel's unrighteous ways encompassed every sphere of life: marriage and sexuality, worship and idolatry, commerce and government. Our focus is on workplace practices, and Ezekiel has much to say about the workplace. His words touch on finance and debt, economic development, honesty, allocation of capital, workplace evaluations, fair return on investment, economic opportunism, success and failure, whistleblowing, teamwork, executive compensation and corporate governance. In addition, the dramatic call of Ezekiel to become a prophet gives us one example of how God calls someone to a particular kind of work.

Ezekiel 1-17

Let us begin, as the Book of Ezekiel does, with God's call to Ezekiel to become a prophet. When we meet Ezekiel, as a descendant of Jacob's son Levi, he is by profession a priest (Ezek. 1:2). As such, his day-to-day work had previously lain in slaughtering, butchering and roasting the sacrificial animals brought by worshipers to the temple in Jerusalem. As a priest, he also served as a moral and spiritual guide to the people, teaching them God's law and adjudicating disputes (Leviticus 10:11, Deuteronomy

17:8-10, 33:10).

However, his priesthood had been violently interrupted when he was taken as a captive to Babylon in the first deportation of Jews from Jerusalem in 605 B.C. In Babylon, the Jewish community of exile was preoccupied with two questions: "Has God been unjust to us?" and "What did we do to deserve this?" The desolation of these exiled Jews is captured well in Psalm 137:1-4: "By the rivers of Babylon — there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!' How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"

In exile in Babylon, Ezekiel receives a dramatic call from God. Like Isaiah's call (Isaiah 6:1-8), Ezekiel's begins with a vision of God (Ezek. 1:4-2:8) and concludes with God's command to become a prophet. Direct calls to a particular kind of work are rare in the Bible, and Ezekiel's is one of the most dramatic. Although Ezekiel's original profession was the priesthood, God called him to a prophetic career that was primarily political, not religious. It is fitting that the vision in which he received his call includes political symbols such as chariot wheels (Ezek. 1:16), an army (Ezek. 1:24), a throne (Ezek. 1:26) and a sentinel (Ezek. 3:16), but no religious symbols. Ezekiel's call should dispel any notion that calls from God are generally calls away from secular professions and into church ministry.^[1]

Ezekiel's prophetic career begins in Babylonian exile eleven years before the final destruction of Jerusalem. His first charge from God is to refute the empty promises of false prophets who were assuring the exiles that Babylon would be defeated and they would soon go home. In the opening chapters of the book, Ezekiel is shown a series of visions depicting the horrors of the siege of Jerusalem and then the slaughter in the capture of the city.

Ezekiel 18

The exiled Jews' question, "What did we do to deserve this?" comes out of the mistaken belief that they were being punished for their ancestors' actions rather than their own. We see this in the false proverb they quote: "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (Ezek. 18:2). God rejects this accusation. The issue at stake is the exiles' refusal to take responsibility for their predicament, blaming it on the sins of previous generations.^[2] God makes it clear, however, that each individual will be evaluated according to his own actions, whether righteous or wicked. The metaphor involving a righteous man (Ezek. 18:5-9), his sinful son (Ezek. 18:10-13), and his righteous grandson (Ezek. 18:14-17) illustrates that people are not held accountable for the morality of their ancestors. God holds each individual "soul" accountable.^[3] Yet scholars are right to note that Ezekiel is still communal in focus.^[4]

Righteousness is required individual-by-individual, but God's restoration will not occur until the entire

nation of individuals adopts righteous living. In this way, God required righteous living and accountability from the exiles as a whole, independent of previous generations.

Ezekiel 18:5-9 notes a range of cultic and moral actions, both righteous and wicked. These actions become the principles by which a person is said to "live" or "die." Four of these actions are related to work: restoring a debtor's pledge, providing for the poor, not charging excessive interest, and working justly. Failure to uphold just and righteous standards — or even worse, shedding the blood of another person indiscriminately — will incur the "death penalty" (Ezek. 18:13).

The Righteous Man Does Not Oppress, But Restores to the Debtor His Pledge (Ezek 18:5, 7)

This principle combines the general sin of oppression (Heb. *daka*) with the specific sin of not returning something taken in pledge (*ḥābōl*) for a loan. To understand and apply this principle, we begin with the Israelite law regarding lending, summarized in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* this way:

The necessity for loans is recognized openly in the Hebrew Bible, where an attempt is made to prevent the practice of requiring interest from debtors. Interest on loans in the Ancient Near East could be exorbitant by modern standards (and might be required in advance, from the very principal of the loan). The attempt to convince creditors to forego potential profit was grounded in care for the community, which God had liberated from slavery. A brother might become poor and need a loan, but interest was not to be exacted, in the name of the same LORD "who brought you out of the land of Egypt" (Leviticus 25:35-38). The desire for interest is seen as posing the danger that Israel might exchange one form of slavery for another—economic—form of oppression. It is notable that the whole of Leviticus 25 concerns precisely the issue of maintaining the integrity of what God had redeemed, in respect of the release which was to occur during sabbath and jubilee years (Lev. 25:1-34), in respect of loans (Lev. 25:35-38), and in respect of hired service (Lev. 25:39-55). The right of a creditor to receive a pledge against his loan is implicitly acknowledged within the pristine requirement not to expect interest, and abusive liberties with pledges received is forbidden (cf. Exodus 22:25-27; Deuteronomy 24:10-13). But certain pledges, correctly handled, might yield their own profits, and foreigners in any case might be charged interest (cf. Deuteronomy 23:19-20); even on a strict interpretation of the Torah, a creditor might make a living.^[5]

According to the Mosaic Law, it was generally not legal for a lender to take permanent possession of an

item pledged in surety for a loan. Modern banking laws generally do permit lenders to retain (as in pawn shops) or repossess (as in auto loans and home mortgages) items given in surety. Whether the entire modern surety system is anti-biblical is beyond the scope of this article. [6]

Modern laws also place limits or regulate the process under which a lender can take possession of surety. It is generally illegal, for example, for a lender to occupy a mortgaged house and force the borrower out while the borrower is under court protection during bankruptcy proceedings. For a lender to do so anyway would be a form of oppression. It could occur only if the lender has the power and impunity to operate outside the law.

At the most basic level, in Ezekiel 18:7 God is saying, "Don't break the law in pursuit of what might seem rightfully yours, even if you have the power to get away with it." In real-life commercial practices, most lenders (loan sharks aside) don't forcibly repossess sureties outside the law. So perhaps Ezek. 18:7 has nothing challenging for modern readers in legitimate enterprises.

But not so fast. Underlying the whole Old Testament law on lending is the presumption that loans are made primarily for the good of the borrower, not the lender. The reason you lend people money on the surety of their cloak, even though you can keep the cloak only until sunset, is that you have extra money and the borrower is in need. As a lender, you have the right to an assurance that you will get your money back, but only if it has benefitted the borrower sufficiently so that he or she can pay you back. You shouldn't make a loan that you know the borrower is unlikely to be able to repay, because you can't keep the collateral indefinitely.

This has obvious applications in the mortgage crisis of 2008-2009. Subprime lenders made home loans that they knew millions of borrowers would be likely to fail to repay. To recoup their investment, the lenders relied on rising home prices plus their ability to force a sale or repossess the property in the likelihood of the borrower's default. The loans were made without regard to the borrower's benefit, so long as they benefitted the lenders. That at least was the intent. In reality, the sudden appearance of hundreds of thousands of foreclosed properties on the market depressed property values so low that lenders lost money even after repossessing the properties. God's declaration circa 580 B.C. that the oppressor's "blood will be on his head" (Ezek. 18:13) turned out to be true for the banking system circa 2000 A.D.

God's denunciation of arrangements that provide no benefit for buyers doesn't have to be limited to securitized debt obligations. Ezekiel 18:7 is about loans, but the same principle applies to products of all kinds. Withholding information about product flaws and risks, selling more expensive products than the buyer needs, mismatching the product's benefits to the buyer's needs — all of these practices are similar to the oppression depicted in Ezek. 18:7. They can creep into even well-intentioned businesses, unless the seller makes the buyer's well-being an inviolable goal of the sales transaction. To care for

the buyer is to "live," in the terminology of Ezekiel.

The Righteous Man Does Not Steal, But Instead Feeds the Hungry and Clothes the Naked (Ezek 18:7b)

This may seem like an odd pairing. Who could argue with the prohibition against robbery? But how is robbery connected with the obligation to give food to the hungry and provide clothing for the naked? As with Ezek. 18:7a, the connection is the requirement to care about the economic wellbeing of the other. In this case, however, the "other" is not the counterparty to a commercial transaction, but simply another person encountered in the course of daily life. If you meet people with an item they need but you desire, you are not permitted to rob them of it. If you meet people who lack an item they need but you possess in excess, you are required to give it to them, or at least meet needs as basic as food and clothing.

Behind this somewhat jarring admonition lies God's economic law: we are stewards, not owners, of all that we have. We are to see wealth as common-wealth because all that we have is God's gift for the purpose that there not be any poor among us (Deuteronomy 6:10-15; 15:1-18). This is clear in the laws requiring the canceling of debts every seven years and the redistribution of accumulated wealth in the Year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25). Once every fifty years, God's people were to rebalance wealth in the land as a remedy to the evils that are endemic in human society. In the intervening years, they were to live as stewards of all they possessed:

- "You shall not cheat one another, but you shall fear your God; for I am the Lord your God. You shall observe my statutes and faithfully keep my ordinances, so that you may live on the land securely" (Leviticus 25:17-18).
- "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants" (Leviticus 25:23).
- "If any of your kin fall into difficulty and become dependent on you, you shall support them; they shall live with you as though resident aliens. Do not take interest in advance or otherwise make a profit from them, but fear your God; let them live with you. You shall not lend them your money at interest taken in advance, or provide them food at a profit. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan, to be your God" (Leviticus 25:35-38).

Ezekiel's decree in Ezek. 18:7b is not directly related to the theology of work because it has little to do with the actual production of things of value. Instead, it is a part of the theology of wealth, the stewardship and disposition of things of value. But there can be a connection. What if you were to work for the purpose of meeting someone else's needs rather than your own? While that precludes robbery, it would also motivate you to work in such a way that provided food, clothing and other necessities for people in need. An example would be a pharmaceutical company that puts a compassionate-use policy

into the planning of a new drug. So would a retail company that makes affordability a key element of its business model. Conversely, this principle seems to rule out a business that can succeed only by charging high prices for products that do not meet real needs, such as a pharmaceutical company that produces trivial reformulations in order to extend the terms of its patents.

The Righteous Man Does Not Take Advance or Accrued Interest (Ezek 18:8a)

Biblical scholars have given much time to researching and speculating about whether charging interest is absolutely forbidden by Old Testament law. The most natural translation of Ezek. 18:8a may be the NASB: "He does not lend money on interest or take increase." Until well after the Reformation, Christians universally understood the Bible to prohibit charging interest on loans. Of course, this would severely hamper the productive deployment of capital, both in modern and ancient times, and contemporary interpreters seem disposed to soften the prohibition to excessive interest, as the NRSV does. To justify this further softening, some have argued that origination discounts (what we now call "zero-coupon bonds") were permitted in ancient Israel, and that only *additional* interest was forbidden, even if the loan was not repaid in a timely manner.^[7] As with the topic of surety above, it is beyond the scope of this article to assess the legitimacy of the entire modern system of interest.^[8] Instead, let us look at the outcome in either case.

If the stricter interpretation holds, then people with money will face the choice of whether or not to lend money at all. If they are not allowed to take interest, and not allowed to repossess surety, then they may prefer not to lend to anyone. But that answer is forbidden by God: "You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be" (Deuteronomy 15:8). Jesus repeats and even expands this command in Luke 6:35: "Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return." The loan is primarily for the benefit of the borrower, not the lender. The lender's fear that it may not be repaid must remain a minor concern. The potential lender has the capital, and the potential borrower needs it.

On the other hand, if we accept that the modern system of interest is legitimate, this principle still applies. Capital must be invested productively; it cannot be hoarded because of fear. This is the literal meaning of Jesus' parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30). God has promised Israel, his treasured possession, that he will provide for their needs. If individuals find themselves with capital to spare, they owe it to the God of provision to employ it — whether by just investment or by donation — for the provision of those who are in need. Economic development is not forbidden — just the opposite: it is required. But it must be of productive benefit for those who need capital, and not merely for the self-interest of those who possess capital.

The Righteous Man Does No Wrong, But Judges Fairly Between Parties (Ezek 18:8b)

As he did earlier in the book, here Ezekiel presents his readers with a general rule (not doing wrong) connected to a specific rule (judging fairly between individuals). Once again, the unifying principle is that the person with more power must care about the need of the person with less power. In this case, the power involved is the power to judge between people. Every day most of us face moments when we have the power to judge between one person and another. It could be as small as deciding whose voice prevails in choosing where to have lunch. It could be as large as deciding whom to believe in an accusation of improper conduct. Seldom do we realize that each time we make a decision like this, we exercise the power to judge.

Many serious problems at work arise because people feel that they are consistently judged to be less important than others around them. That may stem from formal or official judgments, such as performance reviews, project decisions, employee awards, or promotions. Or it may stem from informal judgments, such as who pays attention to their ideas or how often they are the butt of jokes. In either case, God's people have an obligation to be aware of these kinds of judgments and to be fair in how they participate in them. It could be interesting to keep a record of how many judgments (large or small) we participate in during a single day, then ask how the righteous person in Ezek. 18:8b would act in each one.

Ezekiel 18 is more than a set of rules for living in exile; it is an answer to the despair the exiles feel, expressed in the Ezek. 18:2 proverb, "The parents have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge."**[9]** The argument of chapter 18 refutes the proverb, not by eliminating transgenerational retribution altogether. Instead, the lesson of personal moral responsibility replies to exilic despair (see Psalm 137) and to questions of theodicy seen in the refrain, "The way of the Lord is unfair" (Ezek. 18:25, 29). In response to the exiles' question — "If we are God's people, why are we in exile?" "Why are we suffering?" "Does God care?" — the Lord rebuts not with an answer, but with a call to live justly.

In the time between past transgression and future restoration, between promise and fulfillment, between question and answer, the exiles are to live justly.**[10]** It is here that meaning, purpose and ultimate pay-off can be found. God is not simply repeating laws of good and bad behavior for individuals to follow. Instead, he is calling for a national life of righteousness, when Israel will finally be "my people" (Ezek. 11:20; 14:11; 36:28; 37:23, 27). **[11]**

The marks of righteousness in Ezekiel 18 provide a representative sample of life in the new covenant when the community is characterized by "lawful" ethics (Ezek. 18:5, 19, 21, 27). The reader is challenged to live the new covenant life now as a means to secure hope for the future. In our day, Christians are members of the new covenant with the same call in Matthew 5:17-20; 22:37-40. In this

way, Ezekiel 18 is surprisingly instructional and transferable to our own lives in the workplace, no matter the venue. [12] Living out this personal righteousness in our professional pursuits adds life and meaning to our present circumstances because it assumes a better tomorrow, ushers the future kingdom of God into the present, and provides a glimpse of what God anticipates from his people as a whole. God rewards such behavior, the type of which is possible only by means of new hearts and spirits (Ezek. 18:31-32; 2 Corinthians 3:2-6).

Ezekiel 22

If the exiled Jews in Babylon missed the positive example in chapter 18, Ezekiel 22 gives them an explicit picture of where the nation went off the rails set by God. Jerusalem is the setting as the prophet looks at the political, economic and religious factors that led to its ultimate destruction. According to Robert Linthicum, the purpose of the *political* system is to establish a politics of justice and obedience to God (Deuteronomy 16:18-20; 17:8-18). The *economic* system is called to maintain an economics of stewardship and generosity (Deuteronomy 6:10-15; 15:1-18). The *religious* system is primarily responsible to bring people into a relationship with God and to ground the political and economic systems in God (Deuteronomy 10:12; 11:28). Religion provides the fences for the community and gives meaning to life. The political system provides the process, and the economic system supports the community. When the religious system gets out of order, everything else is up for grabs. [13] According to God's law, the disparity between rich and poor (wealth and poverty) is a direct indicator of a nation's or a community's distance from God.

In Ezekiel 22, the prophet now shows the exiled Jews why God's judgment on their nation must come: from the princes to the priests to the false prophets to all the people of the land, "you have all become dross" (Ezek. 22:19). God's patience has reached its end and the wages of every form of "business" sin will bring death and destruction on the perpetrators. What is included in this catalog of sins? The use of power to shed blood (Ezek. 22:6), treating parents with contempt, oppressing the foreigner and mistreating the fatherless and widows (Ezek. 22:7), slandering with a goal of shedding blood (Ezek. 22:9), sexual sins and harassment (Ezek. 22:11), charging interest and making a profit on the poor, extorting unjust gain (Ezek. 22:12), conspiring to ravage the people, taking treasures and many precious things and making many widows in the process (Ezek. 22:25), doing violence to the law, profaning holy things, teaching error and shutting their eyes to God's Sabbaths (Ezek. 22:8, 26), officials like wolves tearing their prey for unjust gain (Ezek. 22:27), prophets whitewashing these deeds (cover-up) with false visions and lying divinations (Ezek. 22:28), and the people of the land practicing extortion, robbery, oppressing the poor and needy, mistreating foreigners and denying them justice (Ezek. 22:29).

In the end, God looked for just one righteous person who would stand in the gap, but there was no one.

It is this total disregard for righteous relationships that brings God's wrath and punishment. The chapter ends (Ezek. 22:31) with God removing his protective hand from the people as they self-destruct. How does God bring judgment? He lets the systems take their natural course without intervening. The downward spiral ends in destruction. A theology of work must lay out the honest and merciful practices God's people must follow (chapter 18). To disregard this is to court disaster.

Ezekiel 26-28

The oracles against Tyre in Ezekiel 26-28 give a further example of unrighteous living. The Tyrians gloat over Jerusalem's destruction, anticipating profit in the absence of a trade competitor (Ezek. 26:2). God promises their punishment and humiliation (Ezek. 26:7-21) for failing to aid Judah in time of need. "Tyre may be taken to represent the pursuit — through affluence, political prominence, even culture — of a security and autonomy that contradict the nature of created reality." [14] In reality, no person or nation can truly assure its own security and prosperity. Yet Tyre boasts of its commercial success, perfection and abundance (Ezek. 27:2-4). This maritime powerhouse had become such by trading with (or taking advantage of) a plethora of peoples across the Mediterranean world (Ezek. 27:5-25), only to sink under the weight of its profuse cargo. Tyre's overconfidence and selfish dealings end with a shipwreck that draws the ridicule of the nations' merchants (Ezek. 27:26-36). God calls Tyre to account for her arrogance and material craving, climaxing with a poem against the king of Tyre in chapter 28. The king credits his own godlike status for having the ingenuity and wisdom to garner great prominence and material achievements.

The lessons from chapters 26-28 for working in the world are significant. God forbids us from imagining that we are the primary source of success at work. While our hard work, skill, perseverance and other virtues contribute to success at work, they do not cause it. Underlying even the most successful self-made person is a universe of opportunities, fortuitous circumstances, others' labor, and the fact that our very existence comes from beyond ourselves.

Attributing success solely to ourselves leads to a hubris that breaks our relationship with God. Instead of thanking God for our success and trusting him to continue to provide for us, we think that we have succeeded on our own merits. But we don't have the power to control all circumstances, possibilities, people and events on which our success depends. By attributing our success to ourselves, we force ourselves to try to control uncontrollable factors, creating severe pressure to stack the deck in our favor. While we may have succeeded in the past through honest, legitimate business dealings, we may now try to improve the odds by shading the truth in our favor, by rigging the bidding behind the scenes, by manipulating others into doing our will, or by currying favor with others with a few well-placed bribes. Even if we manage to stay on the right side of the law, we may become ruthless and "violent" (Ezek. 28:6) in our pursuit of trade.

The truly wise behave righteously and in their thinking do not usurp the place of God while waiting for God to fulfill his promises. They remain true to their covenant with God who will reward faithful living with the benefits appropriate to fulfilling the covenant (see the hope for Israel in Ezek. 28:22-26). God will ultimately separate the righteous and the wicked (Ezek. 34:17-22; cf. Matthew 25:31-46). This gives great hope to "exiles" who await the consummation of God's kingdom, whether they live in the ancient world or the modern world, especially when asking questions of justice and despair. [\[15\]](#)

Ezekiel 33

Ezekiel chapters 18 and 33 serve similar thematic and structural functions within the book as a whole. [\[16\]](#) The call to personal righteousness in order to "live" and the call to repent amidst questions of God's justice first presented in chapter 18 are reviewed in chapter 33 in almost verbatim fashion. [\[17\]](#) However, chapter 33 introduces another idea not found in chapter 18: in Ezek. 33:1-9, God reviews Ezekiel's call to be a watchman or sentinel for the nation as first established in chapter 3. [\[18\]](#) Like a watchman at the city gate, responsible for warning the city's inhabitants of enemy threat, Ezekiel is personally responsible for proclaiming God's impending judgment and encouraging repentance in order to relieve himself of blame:

So you, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, "O wicked ones, you shall surely die," and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from their ways, and they do not turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but you will have saved your life (Ezek. 33:7-9).

This is an important addition to the call to righteousness introduced in Ezekiel 18 and recalled in chapter 33 on the eve of Jerusalem's destruction (Ezek. 33:21-22). God requires the sentinel to play an important role in the appeal to individual and corporate righteousness by taking personal responsibility and ownership of the exiles' repentance.

We are to identify not only with Ezekiel's audience (Ezekiel 18) but also with Ezekiel himself. We accept the God-given task of calling others to live justly and return to a right relationship with God. In the Old Testament, a few individuals were called to be prophets with the mandate to bring God's word home to his people. But as members of the new covenant, all Christians are called to the prophet's job. The prophet Joel foresaw this when he spoke God's word thus, "I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall

see visions" (Joel 2:28). The apostle Peter announced this as a present reality on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:33).^[19]

The prophetic responsibility of all Christians yields several lessons for a theology of work and bears on our witness in the workplace. God calls each of us to take personal responsibility for the fate of others. We are to be sentinels in our own right as we hold ourselves accountable for the people around us. Not only are their lives at stake; ours are as well (Ezek.33:9).

This does not come to us naturally in an age and culture that cherishes individualism. But God will indeed hold us accountable for the righteous living of others. In terms of the workplace, this means that Christians bear personal responsibility to work for justice in their workplaces. This raises a few questions we may want to ask ourselves about this responsibility. For example:

- *Are we speaking God's words to people we work with?* Christians in every workplace observe — and feel pressure to participate in — things we know are not compatible with God's Word. Do we put God's truth above the apparent comfort of fitting in? This is not a call to shrill judgmentalism at work, but it may mean standing up for the person being scapegoated for the department's failure, or being the first to vote in favor of dropping a misleading advertising campaign. It could mean admitting your own role in perpetrating an office conflict or voicing confidence that writing an honest performance review will ultimately be worth the pain it seems to incur. These are ways of speaking God's words to others at work.
- *Is our life an illustration of God's message?* We communicate not only in words but in actions. Throughout his ministry, Ezekiel was literally a walking, visual illustration of God's promises and judgments. A Silicon Valley CFO was asked by her CEO to "find" \$2 million of additional profit to add to the quarterly report due in one week. The CFO knew it would require inaccurately categorizing certain expenses as investments, and certain investments as revenues. During the week she happened to have her monthly meeting with other Christian CFOs. They gave her the courage to stand up to her CEO. On the day the report was due, she told the CEO, "Here is the report with the additional \$2 million of profit as you requested. It might even be legal, but it's not truly accurate. I can't sign it, so I know you will have to fire me." Her CEO's response? "If you won't sign it, then I won't either. I depend on you to know what you're doing. Bring me the original accurate report and we'll issue that and take our lumps for not meeting forecast profitability."^[20] In both her words and actions this CFO illustrated living according to God's word, and that influenced the CEO to do the same.

Ezekiel 33 demonstrates that while each individual is called to personal righteousness, prophets are also responsible to warn fellow exiles to act rightly. The sentinel metaphor in Ezekiel 33 reflects God's expectation for our vested interest in the life of others within our working world. This sets the stage for a similar idea in the next chapter where the metaphor changes.

Ezekiel 34

Israel's leaders are indicted for their failure to care for the nation. Ezekiel 34 uses the metaphor of shepherding to illustrate how Israel's leaders (shepherds) oppressed the people (flock) within God's kingdom. The shepherds looked only to their own interests by clothing and feeding themselves at the expense of the needs of the flock (Ezek. 34:2, 3, 8). Instead of strengthening and healing the sheep in their time of need, or pursuing them when lost, the shepherds have fiercely dominated them (Ezek. 34:4). This left the sheep vulnerable to wild beasts (hostile nations) and scattered them throughout the world (Ezek. 34:5-6, 8). Thus God promises to save the sheep from the "mouths" of the shepherds (Israel's rulers), search and care for his sheep, and bring them back from where they were scattered (Ezek. 34:9-12). He will lead them back to their own land, feed them, and have them lie down in safety in good grazing ground (Ezek. 34:13-14). Ultimately, God will judge between the fat sheep (beneficiaries and participants in the oppression) and the lean sheep (the weak and oppressed, Ezek. 34:15-22). This deliverance climaxes with the future appointment of the ultimate shepherd, a second David, who will feed and care for God's flock as a prince should under God's kingship (Ezek. 34:23-24). **[21]** This will mark a time when God will make a covenant of peace with his sheep/people that will ensure God's blessings of protection, fruitfulness and freedom in the land (Ezek. 34:25-31). By this all will know that God is with his people and is their true God (Ezek. 34:30-31).

The shepherding metaphor sends a message promising judgment on Israel's wicked rulers and hope for the downtrodden and disadvantaged of the nation. This message of leadership, drawn from shepherding, is applicable to other occupations. Good leaders seek the interest of others before "feeding" themselves. Leadership that imitates "the Good Shepherd" of John 10:11, 14 is fundamentally an office of servanthood that requires genuine care for the wellbeing of subordinates. Managing people is not about power trips or holding one's authority over others. Rather, godly and righteous supervisors seek to ensure that the people under their care are flourishing. This is consistent with best management practices taught at business schools and employed in many companies. But godly people do it out of faithfulness to God, not because it is accepted practice in their organizations.

Andrew Mein contends that most readers "pay too little attention to the way economic realities may inform any specific use of a metaphor, with the result that all of the biblical images of shepherding collapse into a rather monochrome picture of caring generosity."**[22]** While Ezekiel 34 reflects God's care for his sheep (like other shepherding passages, e.g., Jeremiah 23, Psalm 23, John 10), the chapter specifically reflects more about the economics of ancient sheep-herding and thus applies more specifically to a leader's economic responsibilities. The shepherds have violated the economics of their obligations by "failing to produce the required return on an investment and misappropriation of the owner's property."**[23]** God holds them responsible while reclaiming his flock. It is too little merely to say that the shepherds of Israel have failed to look after the interest of the sheep. Rather, the shepherds have not worked for the interests of the sheep's owner who hired them and who expects a valuable return on his investment. This understanding could be applied today to questions of executive compensation and corporate governance. Ezekiel provides no general pronouncement on such issues,

but provides criteria by which each corporation's practices could be assessed.

Thus Ezekiel 34 is a rich text for a theology of work. Leaders are to care for the needs and interests of those under their leadership (Philippians 2:3-4). Beyond that, they are responsible to accomplish the economic task they have been hired to do. We are to work for the profit and welfare of those who stand on rungs both above and below us on the corporate ladder (Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 3:22-24). Ultimately, all should work for the honor to which God is entitled.

In this light, profit or economic productivity is seen as a godly pursuit. Churches often seem to forget this, as if profit were a neutral or barely tolerable by-product of Christian work. But Ezekiel 34 implies that the worker who produces an economic loss or the manager who fails to get the team to accomplish the job is no better than those who mistreat coworkers or subordinates. Both the people and the job are important. When, centuries later, Paul writes, "Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters," (Colossians 3:23) he is standing in Ezekiel's shoes. Do the work you are paid to do (which includes making a profit as an inalienable component) as working for the Lord. If you work in a for-profit enterprise, you are responsible to God for helping to make a profit.

But if profit is an obligation to God, then the Christian is obligated to pursue only godly profits. As followers of Jesus, we owe our company a good day's work — a properly executed sales plan, a sturdy framing job, or whatever our work product is. Employers should learn to expect that from us. Also, as followers of Jesus we can never provide our company with a false environmental statement, never mislead employees or take advantage of their ignorance, and never cover up a quality control problem. Employers should expect that from us as well. What makes us good and productive workers, loyal to our companies, also makes us honest and compassionate workers, committed to our Lord.

The Covenantal Hope (Ezek 35-48)

Ezekiel's theology of work would be incomplete if not placed in the full context of future restoration alluded to throughout the book. The covenant between God and Israel seems broken by Israel's failure to fulfill its obligations. But God will restore Israel and fulfill his promises when Israel returns to him. This fulfillment is climactically expressed in the restoration oracles and new temple section of the book (chapters 35-48). Here the reader sees a more thorough picture of the future that the faithful exile is to herald in the present through righteous living and corporate responsibility.

The promise of a Davidic shepherd in the future age of restoration is inherent to God's "covenant of peace" with Israel (Ezek. 34:25) and is called an "everlasting covenant" (Ezek. 37:24-26). Ezekiel looks forward to a day when this royal shepherd-king will usher in God's promised blessing for Israel and, more important, lead her into fulfilling her calling as "God's people." [24] Ezekiel is clear that God grants this by giving them an undivided heart and a new spirit to fulfill his laws as he commanded in

Ezek. 18:31 (see also Ezek. 11:19-20; 36:26-28; 36:14; 39:29). God's people will be fully equipped for doing his will and will be sanctified by the presence of God in the new sanctuary in their midst (Ezek. 37:28). Ezekiel spends nine chapters mapping out this new temple for the day of restoration and the worship required (Ezek. 40-48). In light of the close parallels between Ezekiel 38-48 and Revelation 20-22, we may wonder if Ezekiel's vision anticipates a literal restoration of the temple, or whether this points to the greater reality of the New Jerusalem in which there is no temple "for its temple are the Lord God the Almighty and the lamb" (Revelation 21:22).

As Christians, we place our trust in the ultimate shepherding of Christ. It is he who not only fulfilled individual righteousness, but also took full corporate responsibility for humanity by shedding his own blood on our behalf. By Jesus' death and resurrection, Ezekiel's day of covenant fulfillment has dawned for the Christian. But the day is not done, and the covenant is not yet fully consummated. Ezekiel teaches us that when we are called to the workplace, we are called to righteous activity in exile as we embrace the challenges inherent in awaiting the consummation of God's kingdom. God requires a lifestyle of *individual righteousness and corporate responsibility indicative of the future fulfillment of the covenant*. By following in Jesus' footsteps, we can begin to live out God's future restoration in the workplace today.

ENDNOTES

- [1] See Theology of Work Project Key Topic #2 - [Calling](http://www.theologyofwork.org) - at <http://www.theologyofwork.org>
- [2] Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, "Proverb Performance and Transgenerational Retribution in Ezekiel 18," in *Tiered Reality*, 209, nt. 63, 509-510.
- [3] See *nephesh* < in 18:4, 20, 27.
- [4] Joel Kaminsky, *Corporate Responsibility in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 177-78.
- [5] David Noel Freedman, vol. 2, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 114.
- [6] This issue is addressed in Key Topic #11, "[Financial Arrangements](http://www.theologyofwork.org)" of the Theology of Work Project at <http://www.theologyofwork.org>
- [7] *Oriental and Biblical Studies, Collected Writings of E. A. Speiser*, ed. by Finkelstein and Greenberg,

(Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1967), 131-133, 140-141.

- [8] See Theology of Work Project Key Topic #11 - [Financial Arrangements](http://www.theologyofwork.org) at <http://www.theologyofwork.org>
- [9] One could argue that the problem was not with the proverb itself, but rather with the inappropriate application of it to the circumstances in exile. See Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 74.
- [10] On this and the integration of theodicy and ethics, see Gordon H. Matties, *Ezekiel 18 and the Rhetoric of Moral Discourse* (SBL Dissertation Series 126; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 223-24.
- [11] The false proverb of 18:2 is repeated in Jeremiah 31:29-31 where God explicitly contradicts it with the promise of "a new covenant" with Israel in the future. When Israel stops trying to shift the blame to her ancestors, then "the days are surely coming," says the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel." This covenant will accomplish the fulfillment of God's promises and the forgiveness of Israel's sins (Jeremiah 31:34).
- [12] Matties, *Ezekiel 18*, 222; Darr, "Transgenerational Retribution," 223.
- [13] Robert Linthicum, *City of God, City of Satan: A Biblical Theology for the Urban Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991).
- [14] Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel* (Louisville, KY: J. Knox Press, 1990), 118.
- [15] See the same in Malachi 3:13-18.
- [16] See Preston Sprinkle, "Law and Life: Leviticus 18.5 in the Literary Framework of Ezekiel," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 31:3 (2007), 275-93.
- [17] Cf. esp., 18:21-22 / 33:14-16; 18:23 / 33:11; 18:24 / 33:12-13; 18:25-29 / 33:17-20.
- [18] Cf. esp., 3:17-19 / 33:7-9.
- [19] For more on this, see R. Paul Stevens, *The Other Six Days* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 169-173.
- [20] Reported to the Executive Editor of the Theology of Work Project on the condition of anonymity.

- [21] The Davidic prince is certainly to be contrasted with the prince(s) of Israel denounced in Ezek. 19:1; 21:17, 30; 22:6.
- [22] Andrew Mein, "Profitable and Unprofitable Shepherds: Economic and Theological Perspectives on Ezekiel 34," *JSOT*, 31:4 (2007), 496.
- [23] *Ibid.*, 500.
- [24] See Rolf Rendtorff, *The Covenant Formula: An Exegetical and Theological Investigation*, trans. by Margaret Kohl (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998).