

How to Live in Babylon: Called to Be a Watchman

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3-Year Bible Reading Plan

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This morning, if you're a guest or visitor with us, I want to welcome you to join those who have been here for the entirety of their life in hearing a statement in this place that may have never been spoken before.

Please turn in your Bibles to the book of Ezekiel. For those of you who are wondering why Ezekiel, well, when you go through a Bible reading plan, you have to read all 66 books of the Bible and Ezekiel actually comprises 48 chapters of your Old Testament. It's one of those books that is shrouded with mystery, to be quite honest with you. There are many people who began the journey of Ezekiel but they bow out quickly. There is images and there is concepts that just to be quite honest with you, cause us to ask more questions than to provide answers. It's one of those books in the Bible that oftentimes, I hate to say we see it as irrelevant but maybe not practically applicable to our lives, and yet today we're going to discover that even though whom we know as Ezekiel, the priest of God, what we know as the scripture, the 48 chapters of Ezekiel came to us thousands of years ago, you may be surprised today to realize how practical it is.

You see, Ezekiel has a unique standing in history. The overwhelming majority of the prophets in your Old Testament either warned us of what was about to come or said maybe we should learn our lesson from what just occurred. Most of them say judgment is coming or let's not let it happen again. Ezekiel is one of those rare characters who finds himself in the midst of what we know formally as the Babylonian captivity. For 70 years the Israelites were not in their homeland, they could not worship as they chose to worship, they could not live as they desired to live, the language was different, the education was different, the smells were different. Everything was different and yet he communicates how does one navigate Babylon.

Allow me to draw a parallel. It hasn't just occurred in the last few weeks, last few years, or even the last few decades, but over a slow course of time, as a person who is a believer in Jesus Christ, you now find yourself living in Babylon. You now find yourself living in a place that doesn't sound like it used to. It doesn't look like it used to. It isn't constructed as it used to be. You and I used to live in a place where what we know as church was priority, we even put them at the center of every town we constructed, and now we're questioning how long if we will be able to continue to worship publicly in the way in

which we do. Ladies and gentleman, Ezekiel has 48 chapters. It will take us six weeks to navigate. Rather than getting caught up in all of the visions that cause more questions than answers, allow me to challenge us to see what does it really look like to navigate Babylon? What does it look like that we haven't moved our physical address to realize that we've been relocated, so to speak, in our culture?

So today as we walk through just the first three chapters, we're going to discover that heaven hasn't changed a bit. That's something that we need to take note of and it gives us hope. Do you realize it didn't matter if Israel went into captivity in the Babylonian captivity of the 6th century BC or what you're experiencing personally yourself? No event on this earth is so dramatic that it changes heaven at all. That's something that we need to understand. In chapter 1, we're going to talk about the majesty of heaven but then we're going to get to chapter 2 and we're going to find out what is this mess that we've got on earth. And then in chapter 3, we're going to see that you and I as believers in Jesus Christ, we have been called to a very specific position, we've called to be a watchman, we've been called to be "the middleman" between the majesty of heaven and the mess of earth.

I want to pick it up in chapter 1 of Ezekiel. We're going to begin in verse 24. Now let me set the stage. Ezekiel finds himself obviously in captivity. The Lord comes to him while he's out by the river. He has this amazing, incredible vision. He sees what many people believe to be the throne of God, and there in this majestic expression there are four cherubim, as we call it, one at every corner of the throne. Technically they are cherubim, singular, they are cherubim in plurality. They have four different faces. They have four wings of which are connected to each other. It is a majestic sight. It is an incredible sight. Then we discover that underneath that picture of the throne is this famous wheel inside of a wheel with eyes all around it. Now I know some of you came this morning going, "I want to know what that is," and I'm here to tell you, I don't have a clue. But nonetheless, but above, above there is a crystal sea and there's a throne of glory. It sounds a little more familiar to most of us, does it not? And what we know or whom we know as Ezekiel has this incredible vision and I want to pick it up in verse 24. I want you to see the description of how we understand the majesty of heaven. It says,

24 And when they went [that's these cherubim], I heard the noise of their wings, like the noise of great waters, as the voice of the Almighty, the voice of speech, as the noise of an host: when they stood, they let down their wings.

Fast forward to verse 28,

28 As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness round about. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. And when I saw it, I fell upon my face, and I heard a voice of one that spake.

Let's talk about that description that Ezekiel sees, though we read it in brief. The first thing we notice: it's pretty incredible. You've got a wheel inside of a wheel with eyes all

about. You've got these angelic hosts, these cherubim who only show up in very rare instances in scripture. But I want you to notice something about verse 24. Now this is something that's going to make most of, particularly of us lifelong Baptists, a tad bit uncomfortable. Did you notice the volume of heaven? It's loud. You see, most of us, now not all of us, most of us come from a faith expression that has its roots in the European Reformation where church is about being quiet, and where church is about being soft and expressionless. You know, I've also heard people say oftentimes even on this campus, they say, "You know, I grew up in a small church. I don't know if I can handle a big church." I've got news for all of us: heaven is big and it's loud. Notice how many times it says "and they shouted with a loud voice." You get to Revelation 9, there's an angel that shouts so loud, it says in heaven, earth, and even under the earth they could hear what he said.

That being said, it is an incredible experience of what he's seen, but to be quite honest, it's pretty indescribable. As I mentioned earlier about the famous wheel inside the wheel with the eyes, the more you read Ezekiel, the more questions you will have. We truly understand what Isaiah said, "His ways are not our ways. His thoughts are not our thoughts." And as much as we could imagine what the majesty of heaven will look like, it will not compare to whatever you can fathom it to be. I'm reminded in 2 Corinthians 12, the Apostle Paul says that he had this vision and I love what it says in parentheses there. It's his words and he says, "I don't know if I was in the body or out of the body, I just know it was real." He goes up into the third heaven, the throne room above the crystal sea. He is there where what we just read and he comes back and allow me to paraphrase the Apostle Paul, "I couldn't describe it if I had to." It was unbelievable.

So the majesty of heaven, as incredible as it is, it's pretty indescribable even with our best efforts, but I want you to notice the response of Ezekiel in verse 28. I want you to notice what he said: nothing, nothing at all. You know, oftentimes we have conversations and I know we mean well by this, but we have conversations such as this. "Well, one day when I get to heaven, I've got some questions for God." Or, "One day when I get there, I've got something I need to say to him." You know, I've got news for you, when you do, you're not going to say a word. Here is Ezekiel seeing the majesty of heaven and he doesn't say, "Oh, God, hold on, I've got a list of questions I need you to answer." You don't see him respond verbally at all, much like Psalm 46:10, "Be still and know that I am God."

The second thing you'll discover at the very end, the Lord opens his mouth and from the rest of the book of Ezekiel he never questions, he never doubts, he never disputes what God tells him to do. This is incredible because some of the things that Ezekiel is going to be called to do, some of the information he's going to be told to communicate, some of the things that he is going to experience are not going to be pleasant. In fact, he is going to lay on his side for 390 days and have the Lord feed him supernaturally. I don't know any of us that would sign up for that task and yet he never complains. Why? Because when you're in the presence of, in the majesticness of God, all of a sudden our questions are answered and all of a sudden our personal desires go quickly out the window, do they not?

Let me share with you how powerful this is. When you get toward the end of your Bible in the book of Revelation, there's this incredible scene, we call it the Great White Throne Judgment. It says, "I saw the sea and hell give up their dead, and I saw the people stand before God both the small and the great, and the books were opened and those that were not written in the book of life," listen to this, "were cast into the lake of fire for all of eternity." Do you know what's interesting? Nobody argues and everybody does it. Why? Because when you're in the presence of God and you see him for who he is, you don't argue, you just do as he commands. Here is Ezekiel who, as we see, will be called to do some of the most incredible deeds and speak the most phenomenal words in all of the Bible, but when you see the Lord as he saw the Lord, our mouths are shut and our feet simply do as he's asked.

It's chapter 2 where it gets really interesting. This is where the Lord says, "You're going to be a prophet in Babylon. You're going to speak to the people of God in the midst of a place that is faithless and contrary to every imagination of the Lord." And I want you to see in chapter 2 what I like to call the mess of earth. The picture that we have here is no different than the world we're walking in today. Oftentimes, I think, we think things have changed. Oh, they've changed, we've got new names, we've got new locations, and we have more technology, but our root problems remain the same. Beginning in verse 3 he says,

3 And he said unto me, Son of man, I send thee to the children of Israel, to a rebellious nation that hath rebelled against me: they and their fathers have transgressed against me, even unto this very day. 4 For they are impudent children and stiffhearted. I do send thee unto them; and thou shalt say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD. 5 And they, whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear, (for they are a rebellious house,) yet shall know that there hath been a prophet among them. 6 And thou, son of man, be not afraid of them, neither be afraid of their words, though briars and thorns be with thee, and thou dost dwell among scorpions: be not afraid of their words, nor be dismayed at their looks, though they be a rebellious house.

I want you to see how the Lord describes the activity of earth, how he describes the culture, and what we're going to see is what Babylon looked like over 2,000 years ago doesn't look a whole lot different than the world you and I are trying to navigate today.

Notice it says there in verse 3 and 4 that they are a rebellious people. Humanity's had this problem since time beginning. Fast forward from the garden of Eden, when we get to what we know as Noah's flood in Genesis 6, it says every thought of man was completely and totally wicked in all of its capacity. We have not as a human race improved on that at all, we've just gotten more creative. We're rebellious, that means that if God says yes, humanity says no. That means if God says go, they say no. He says right, they say left. Babylon is a place where every deed, every action, every word and every thought is contrary to the will, the way and the word of God. It's not just a historical problem of thousands of years ago, it is a present reality today. You and I live in a world where it

seems like almost every construct, every philosophy, and every thought goes contrary to the word of God. We are living in modern day Babylon.

But it's not just that they're rebellious, I love this word in verse 4, they're impudent. You say, "What does that mean?" It means they're unashamed. It means they don't try to hide it anymore. Now I mentioned to you that the current Babylonian state didn't happen in the last couple of weeks, months, or even decades, it's been a long time coming. You know, I want you to think back and for those of you who were not alive 50, 60, 70 years ago, surely you've had conversations with relatives or read the history books, but you got back half a century ago and I want you to think about the behaviors, the lifestyles, the decisions that humanity did that were contrary to scripture. It typically happened late at night, in a place that was hidden, and if it was a building, it didn't have windows. It was hidden, was it not? It wasn't spoken about publicly. It wasn't even addressed at the dinner table, was it? We just allowed it to be on the "outskirts."

Now here's the thing I want you to hear. It doesn't matter if you're in Babylon 2,000+ years ago, Rome 2,000 years ago, or yesterday in our culture, these rebellious acts have always existed. It's not like we've invented new sins, but we've become impudent. You say, "What does that mean?" You see, even half a century ago in this culture, if you wanted to live your life contrary to God, you had to go someplace late at night, that was hidden and secret, where nobody could see. But what do we do today? I'll tell you what we do, we sanction parades through major cities, we celebrate it, we defend it, and we legally advocate for it. We've become impudent, haven't we? We've said, "No, no, no, you don't have to go in the still of the night to a dark building, just get on the internet and let it fly." We've put it out there for everybody.

But there's one third description, he calls them stiffnecked. What a description. It's the same description that Moses called the Israelites in the book of Exodus. You say, "What does that mean?" It means they're not going to change. It means they are bent and determined to continue to live as they're living, do as they're doing, and there's – listen – nothing you can do to stop them. You see, you and I must face the reality as believers in Jesus Christ, as a part of a faith community, you and I quantitatively are outnumbered, qualitatively we are out-volumed, and Babylon is stiffnecked. I want you to hear something: Israel spent 70 years in Babylon and Babylon never changed. It never changed. They didn't quit doing what they were doing. They didn't cease what they were doing. The revival that took place was among the remnant of people of faith in Babylon but Babylon itself never changed at all.

Now I know some of you are thinking, "Well, that doesn't leave a whole lot of hope." Well, we're get there in a moment. How does Ezekiel or how does the response of the mess of earth? I want you to notice how Babylon hears truth. If you, as a believer in Jesus Christ, are going to live truth and speak truth, I've got news for you, what does it say there? They're not going to hear you. It's going to go in one ear and out the other. That's what he says, right? If they forebear, if they hear.

And when they don't listen to the message of truth, notice what their speech is: thorns, briars, scorpions. You know the old adage: sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me. It may be the biggest lie from the pit of hell we've heard in a long time. Thorns briars, in other words, the speech and the communication, what we as people of faith say will go unheard and what they say will hurt like the sting of a scorpion. Is this seeming relevant to us yet today? It seems like the more and more we pronounce the truth of God, the less and less it is paid attention to, and yet Babylon has every seat at the table.

But there's another interesting thing, in fact, it comes up several times here in Ezekiel. Notice it says at the end of verse 6, do not be dismayed at the looks though they be a rebellious house. It also comes back up again in chapter 3, that look of disdain, that look of, "Who do you think you are," that look of, "How could you actually believe that?" You see, one of the "powers" that comes with being the numerical, shall we say, champion is that everybody looks like you and sounds like you and acts like you, and here in Babylon the Jewish people, they were in the statistical minority and in our Babylon today, if you claim, "Thus saith the Lord," whatever you speak from the word of God, this world will look at you like you have lost your mind. "How could anybody with a rational mind believe that? How could anybody with any sense of cognitive ability actually believe that?" Does this sound familiar or is it just me? We live in a world for every piece of information we hear that's of the word of God, it's like we get 1,000 that is Babylonian in nature.

So there's this tension here in the first two chapters. You've got this majesty of heaven but you've got this mess that's on earth. So how do we do it? How do we live? How do we navigate? Well, chapter 3, beginning in verse 16, there's this passage, it also parallels several passages in the book of Isaiah. It's the call of a watchman. It says,

16 And it came to pass at the end of seven days, that the word of the LORD came unto me, saying, 17 Son of man, I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel: therefore hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me. 18 When I say unto the wicked, Thou shalt surely die; and thou givest him not warning, nor speakest to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life; the same wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand. 19 Yet if thou warn the wicked, and he turn not from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but thou hast delivered thy soul. 20 Again, When a righteous man doth turn from his righteousness, and commit iniquity, and I lay a stumblingblock before him, he shall die: because thou hast not given him warning, he shall die in his sin, and his righteousness which he hath done shall not be remembered; but his blood will I require at thine hand. 21 Nevertheless if thou warn the righteous man, that the righteous sin not, and he doth not sin, he shall surely live, because he is warned; also thou hast delivered thy soul.

Now let me unpack this message of the watchman because this is the takeaway: we know that heaven is majestic, we know that earth is a mess, but how do we do it, how do we navigate it, what does it look like, what do we say, how do we respond? Well, I want you to notice the description of a watchman. You may not be familiar with the job description per se, so allow me to give us a brief introduction. In biblical days, the average city would have a perimeter of it of a very large wall. It was a defense mechanism. It was against those that were contrary to, shall we say, the well-wishes of those that were inside. The watchman, and by the way depending on the size of the city determined how many there were, the watchman would stand on the wall and he had simply a two-fold job description. Job description 1: sound the warning for anything that would be contrary to the city or the village that is outside the walls that wants to get inside. Job description 2: if by chance those on the outside get to the inside, you need to be the play-by-play color commentator of the fight that's about to happen.

Now let me share with you how that works out. They saw the Philistines or whomever it may be getting all in line. It was the watchman who communicated how many, what weapons, how they were arranged, where they were set about, so that those on the inside could prepare for the attack. I've got news for you: Israel was already in Babylon, we're already in Babylon, we don't have to scream about the enemy getting in, they're already here, folks. There's no reason to say, "It's coming," because it's here. It's the second part of the job description that is so critical. The job of the watchman was to cry out to those who dwelt in the city, and allow me to extrapolate a little bit, "Bruce, watch your backside! Martha, they're on your left!" Their job was to be the eye in the sky. Their job was to warn other believers, "Don't listen to that. Don't fall for that. Don't believe that. Don't read that. Don't go there." Do you get the vibe? The message of the watchman in Babylon is to other believers, "Quit looking at Babylon and listen to the voice of the Lord."

Now those who were in the city had a choice. You read it, they could either pay attention or not. They could listen to that one that was on the wall and either do the advice they gave or think, "Oh, I got this." But they didn't have the eye in the sky, did they not? Let's talk about the consequences for just a moment. What would happen per se if the battle didn't go well? Well, the watchman who did his duty, the watchman that cried out the battle plan endeared a certain respect from those who invaded the city. Now by the way, this is not unique to the Jewish culture of days gone by, just a historical reality, that if the watchman stayed true to his job and did not void his job, those who attacked the city would actually let him go. They would not hold it against him and put him with those who had lost their lives. But let's say the watchman got scared. Let's say the watchman decided, "You know what? I'm a little nervous. The battle's not going well. I think I'm going to run and hide." You know what the penetrating enemy did? They would find that watchman and his job was to bury the dead. Most watchmen who voided their job either went mentally insane or took their own lives and I think you can see why. Notice what he says, "You warn them, you can wash your hands, but if you don't, their blood is on your hands." Do you see that imagery of what happened back in those days historically?

So what about the response? What's the response of a watchman? As a watchman today in Babylon as a believer in Jesus Christ, let me encourage you to do three very simple things. The first is this: open your ears not to the media but to the Bible. Open your ears not to what comes across as the loudest but that which is actually true and correct. Open your ears.

Secondly, open your mouth. Now notice the call of the watchman isn't to scream at Babylon how wicked they are. Did you notice that? The job wasn't to get out in the street and say, "Oh, Babylon, you're wretched!" No, no, no, no. The job was to other believers, other Jewish people to say, "Why are you listening to that? Why are you going there?" It was to warn those who were of faith to not fall for the tricks of Babylon.

And last but not least, to have this perspective, that you in your home, your family and in your culture at large will not allow a single body to be buried. In other words, you're going to stand on that wall. You're going to give that direction. Even though you see that victory is hardly attainable, even though you see that Babylon has the upper hand, you do not quit, you do not stop, you do not give up, you just keep on keeping on because one day there's going to be an account to God and the question is: did you do as God called you or did you run for the hills? And those who run are the ones that had to bury the dead.

Now you and I have this unique position. We know the majesty of heaven that is before us, we know the mess of earth that is around us. We have been called to be the watchmen. The key is not how they respond, the key is the faithfulness to the message that God has given us.