

Why Are We In Babylon?

3-Year Bible Reading Plan

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This morning, if you're a guest or visitor with us, you're going to hear a statement that you may have never heard in the setting or in an environment such as this and that is, turn your Bibles to the book of Ezekiel. Now I know it's not one of those books of the Bible that we oftentimes spend a lot of time in and don't be apologetic if you need to go to the table of contents to find it, but it is 48 chapters in length so it gives us a little bit of ability to do so.

Today we're going to be in Ezekiel 22 and even though the book of Ezekiel is filled with mysterious visions and sights that are just confusing at best and confounding at worst, today we're going to be in a passage that's actually somewhat familiar. In fact, there's a famous verse in Ezekiel 22, it says, "I sought for a man to stand in the gap but I could find none." That's actually found today in Ezekiel 22 but we're going to look at it in its context, so to speak, and one of the things that we're going to discover today is why the Israelites were in Babylon. That's the question that we must ask, why did they end up in this position, because Ezekiel is one of the only people that the Lord uses in the Bible who spends the entirety of his ministry in captivity. I mean, think about it, he didn't have the privilege of walking in Jerusalem and on the Temple Mount saying, "Thus saith the Lord." He was behind "enemy lines" declaring, "Thus saith the Lord."

One of the things that we've done over the last couple weeks is draw a parallel between Ezekiel's life and ours, that you and I as believers in Jesus Christ whether we understand or not, we're kind of walking in a Babylonian world ourselves. Think about this. The Israelites were in a land, didn't speak the same language, and their faith was not the centerpiece of the culture. As a believer in Jesus Christ, you would have to admit that faith in him and "Thus saith the Lord" is not the center of our culture and our society. In fact, we would have to also say that we've become quickly a world that says that if you stand for the truth of God's word, then you will face detriment and opposition, and such were the Israelites in Babylon. They found the place in a foreign place, as far as their faith is concerned, and so we find ourselves in the like place today.

Ezekiel 22. We're up against the clock. What I mean by that is even though the captivity was 70 years in length, it was actually 20 years from when the first brick was taken down to the last brick was eradicated. We're getting toward the end of those 20 years and one of

the things that you see is that the Jewish people continued to not believe that God was actually going to go through with this. They continued to resist. They continued to rebel. This is what we might call the 11th hour here and yet they're still steadfast in the rebellion. Today in Ezekiel 22, we find out why this occurred. It says in verse 23,

23 And the word of the LORD came unto me, saying, 24 Son of man, say unto her, Thou art the land that is not cleansed, nor rained upon in the day of indignation. 25 There is a conspiracy of her prophets in the midst thereof, like a roaring lion ravening the prey; they have devoured souls; they have taken the treasure and precious things; they have made her many widows in the midst thereof. 26 Her priests have violated my law, and have profaned mine holy things: they have put no difference between the holy and profane, neither have they shewed difference between the unclean and the clean, and have hid their eyes from my sabbaths, and I am profaned among them. 27 Her princes in the midst thereof are like wolves ravening the prey, to shed blood, and to destroy souls, to get dishonest gain. 28 And her prophets have daubed them with untempered mortar, seeing vanity, and divining lies unto them, saying, Thus saith the Lord GOD, when the LORD hath not spoken. 29 The people of the land have used oppression, and exercised robbery, and have vexed the poor and needy: yea, they have oppressed the stranger wrongfully. 30 And I sought for a man among them, that should make up the hedge, and stand in the gap before me for the land, that I should not destroy it: but I found none. 31 Therefore have I poured out mine indignation upon them; I have consumed them with the fire of my wrath: their own way have I recompensed upon their heads, saith the Lord GOD.

Now as I mentioned, this is historically or contextually the Jewish people in the midst of a Babylonian captivity, but today is a special day, you're going to get two messages in the time of one. In other words, what I want to do today is look at this passage, I want to look at who is involved, what needs to happen, how it took place, why it's important, in the Jewish people's lives during the Babylonian captivity, then I want to come and revisit that same procedure and look at our lives today, and what we're going to discover is why they were in Babylon is the same way that you and I are as well.

Let's look at the "who." Who are the principle characters in answering this question? Well, the Bible just kind of lays it out in this passage: there are prophets, there are priests, there are princes or governing authorities, and then there are the people at large. And I kind of want to unpack what that means because we often think of the Babylonian captivity of, "Oh, it was a response to the last decade, maybe the last few years." The problems had been there for a long time.

We think about the prophets. Sure, there's Ezekiel and Isaiah and Jeremiah and Nahum, Hosea, and we know the ones that are named in the Bible, but you know in 1 Samuel 10, whom we know as King Saul is walking down the road and the Bible says he comes across a company of prophets. According to Luke 9 when Jesus fed the 5,000, a company

is 50 people, and so just in that day, there were at least 50 of these. What does it say here? There was a conspiracy. Do you know what a conspiracy is? It's basically a group of people all of like-mindedness walking in the same direction, speaking the same information. In other words, it's saying over hundreds of years, hundreds if not thousands of prophets conspired.

Now what did they do? Well, we saw it later in the passage where it says that they spoke to the princes but the Lord had not commissioned them to say, "Thus saith the Lord." Here's what the prophets did, the prophets made the decision that it was no longer important, it was no longer valued to hear directly from the Lord because now we have greater understanding, now we have greater context. They started asking the same question that Satan asked humanity in the garden of Eden, "Yea, hath God said?" The entire Babylonian captivity began with the people of God, particularly the prophets of God, questioning the word of God. They no longer said, "Thus saith the Lord," they started saying, "Thus says our culture. Thus says our day. Thus says the world that is around us." What did that do? It began a very slow, steady stream of misinformation, and over time what happens is you spend enough time hearing the wrong information, you start making the wrong decisions.

So what did the priests do? Well, it says here they profaned it. They no longer separated between the clean and the unclean, the holy. Let me explain what that looked like. You see, the priests in Israel's Old Testament days would kind of be like the pastors of today. They were the ones that were over the spiritual development, the growth of the people, but what's unique about the priests is they did not have a specific home to themselves or income, they lived off the land that the Lord provided, and the way that they survived is people brought their tithes to the temple. Now we talk about a tithe all the time and 10%, Malachi 3, let me kind of share with you what that meant. That meant that when we, the people, brought our sacrifice to the Lord. Now remember, there's seven major feast days, there's all kinds of sacrifices, there's lambs, there's turtledoves, all those things, that when we would bring them, they would offer 9/10 of it to the Lord but keep 1/10 of it for themselves. That's how they ate. That's how they were provided for. That's how they were nourished. For lack of better terms, that was their sustenance. They lived off the "sacrifices of the people."

Now let me tell you how that flushed out. Because they no longer divided between the holy and the profane, they no longer divided between the clean and the unclean, let me tell you what the priests started doing: instead of holding true to what, "Thus saith the Lord," was, we're now able to make our own rules. The prophets had established this and they started realizing something, or shall I say, they stopped doing something. You see, when somebody came and brought their sacrifice, when somebody came and presented their offering to the Lord, if they were in unrepentant sin, if they were living in sin and they were just checking off the religious box, do you know what the Bible said to do? Turn them away. Here's the problem: that which they're bringing is supper for tonight and, by the way, this is going to help fund my college account.

Let's just pretend it's not that big a deal. Let's just say, "Oh, it's not that big a deal. I mean, after all, we've evolved, we've become more knowledgeable. The prophets, they're not standing hard and fast on these things, so why should we?" And what you see here is in a context of "spiritual expression." They started saying, "It doesn't matter how you live your life. It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you write the check to pay off the building." That should hurt, people. Why? Because the priests were guilty of accommodating sin and not calling it out for their own personal benefit. You see, the prophets had already said, "Oh, you don't have to be hard and fast on the word of God. It really just depends on how you look at it." The priests said, "I'll tell you how I look at it, I'm hungry and I want to pad my bank account." So they did.

So what's the next step? Verse 27, it says the princes, and by the way, let me give you a little asterisk here. Old Testament Israel was really kind of a theocracy where the religious leaders and the political leaders were kind of one and the same. It says the princes or the governing authorities in the midst thereof like wolves ravaging the prey, they shed blood to destroy souls, to get dishonest gain. Now I know that doesn't sound like any politician that you've ever heard of in your life, you know, destroying souls for dishonest gain. What you discover here is that when there is no longer anybody standing in the street saying, "Thus saith the Lord," and when there is no longer someone who's "in the temple" saying, "We will not accept the unholy," what does the world do? It does anything it wants to, that's what it does.

So those who were in power said, "Aha, I can now have what I've always wanted and I can do what I've always wanted to do." Notice it says they're shedding blood. You say, "Why is that important?" Because in the book of Deuteronomy it says if one of the prophets misses his prophecy, in other words, they have to be 100% right, stone them to death. Yet look at the very next verse, verse 28. They listened to these prophets, they spoke when God didn't speak, but they didn't shed their blood, did they? Why? Because it benefited them. It was profitable to them. They wanted to preserve the life of those who promoted their agenda and end the lives of those who were contrary therein.

When it says that they were spilling blood for dishonest gain, the Bible laid it out very clearly, if you've "committed this crime," this is the time. They said, "Oh, it's not that big a deal. He's one of ours." But there would be others who were adversarial who would say, "You know what? We need him to be silenced. We need him to be quiet so we're actually going to 'shed blood' even though the Lord never said to do so." Why? Dishonest gain, and what you see here is because the scriptures have been relegated to subjectivity and because the priests or the pastors no longer were willing to call out sin, the world promoted its own carnal agenda.

Now let's talk about the "rest of us." What about the general populace? Verse 29, "The people of the land have used oppression, and exercised robbery, and have vexed the poor and needy: they have oppressed the stranger wrongfully." Can I speak in the New King James Southern Version? It was a hot mess, that's what it was. And yet what you just read sounds like the headline of every newscast today. They did that which was right in their own eyes. Why? Because if what they do pads the pockets of those who are in charge,

they're going to be allowed to get away with it, and they're going to be allowed to get away with it because the preachers aren't going to stand in the way and the prophets have said, "Oh, well, it really just determines on how you look at it." They got themselves in a mess.

So what does the Lord say? We're talking just literally days before this final captivity has come to a conclusion. Verse 30, "I sought for a man to stand in the gap and I didn't find one." What did God say? He said, "I need somebody to stand in the gap." What do we discover? There was nobody eligible. There was nobody qualified, not even Ezekiel. And by the way, some of his contemporaries were Jeremiah, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. You say, "Man, these are some great stalwarts of the faith." But do you know what the problem is? That none of them were really qualified to fix the problem. What you see happening here in Ezekiel 22:30 is really a prophecy of the Messiah. Who would it be that would stand in the gap? Who would it be that would hedge up between the holy and the unholy? It would be Jesus Christ. The Messiah is the only one who can fix the sin problem. He's the only one qualified. The Bible says in Hebrews 9:22, without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins. Somebody has to meet the qualification.

So what you see here is when it comes to fixing this "sin problem," that even though they're going to go through 50 more years, even though they're eventually going to be released by the Persians, it didn't solve their sin problem and the mistakes that the prophets made, the mistakes the priests made, the mistakes that the people and even the princes made, will be repeated even up until this day. Why is it so important? Why? Because we can't do it ourselves. Oftentimes we trust in those that hold office. Oftentimes we put trust in those who have high positions. Oftentimes we put trust in those who we think have the answers. But what do we discover? There's no one qualified. There's no one capable.

So what we know as the Babylonian captivity was a picture prophetically of what Jesus Christ and who Jesus Christ is for our lives. That's message number 1. Let's go to message number 2. How does this story look like your story? How does their situation look like our situation? You may not realize it but we're in the exact same scenario. You realize the Babylonian that we're walking in today, the fact that biblical Christianity is no longer the center of our culture, biblical Christianity is more oppressed than it is celebrated, this didn't just happen in the last few years, this didn't just happen even in the last few decades. We like to say so but this has been happening for a long time.

Now forgive for a moment but I'm going to get in my little nerd world for a minute. Just for a minute, I promise, because it talks about the prophets, those that say, "Thus saith the Lord." You may or may not be aware of this but about 150-200 years ago within our context of our culture, the prophets, those who searched the scriptures began a practice, now this is the formal term, I'll kind of unpack it, we call it textual criticism. That even sounds kind of eerie, doesn't it? Can I tell you what that means? They started looking at the Bible and saying, "Well, did God really say that? Did he really mean it?" And if you look back when this all began a couple hundred years ago, you know, it's really convenient that the parts that humanity doesn't like, we all of a sudden say, "Well, that's

not important," and the parts that we really like, we say, "Oh, that's a good one." And so we begin to look at the Bible and do the same thing as the garden of Eden, did God really say that? And what did we do? We began to question. We began to put doubts. Is the Bible truly reliable? Can we really know what Jesus said? Is this really the way the Lord organized it? And we got academic and we got critical and we began to question.

So what happens when the prophets no longer say, "Thus saith the Lord"? What do the priests do? We read it earlier in verse 26, they no longer separate the clean from the unclean; they no longer separate the holy from the unholy. So about 100 years ago, early 20th century, this is a collective statement, that pastors in general, churches in general started widening their net. Why? Because the wider the net, the more fish, the more fish, the more money, the more money, the bigger buildings. In other words, do we really need to call out sin because those people that are living that life, they sure do have a lot of money? Do we really need to stand hard and fast on Jesus because there's some movers and shakers who aren't so fond of him and we really need them to be a part of our perspective?

Do you see how that works? And what happens is and I had a guy years ago in one of the first churches I pastored, he said, "Jeff, they me warn you of something. Anytime that the pastor of the church quits talking about sin or the blood of Jesus, you're going sideways quick." And I will give you some wisdom and advice. I know we have a lot of visitors with us today, but that being said, if you're a part of a local congregation, if you're a part of a ministry, whatever you want to call it, and they do not regularly or if ever talk about sin, disengage. Disengage. Why? Because that's the problem. If they don't talk about the blood of Jesus, disengage. You say, "Why?" Because that's the solution. If you don't address the problem of sin and you don't talk about the solution of the blood of Jesus, then why are you there? You are now a part of a social club that just happens to be non-profit. So that's what happened, and so what did we collectively do? We built our kingdoms at the expense of calling out sin and the exclusivity of Jesus.

There's an old statement that I use that as goes the church house, so goes the court house and the White house. Allow me to take you to verse 27. Let's talk about the leaders. Let's talk about the princes. It says they have shed blood to destroy souls for dishonest gain. Now I know that at this worship hour, we're Baptists and our stomachs are starting to growl. Oh, I wish I could keep you here about three hours but I won't do so but let me just unpack something. Did you know that in our culture today, I am not an economist but I have friends that are, did you know that our economy is about 75% roughly based on consumerism, meaning if we don't buy it, we fall apart, the wheels come off the proverbial track. We must consume to keep our economic engine going.

Now I'm going to make a statement. I know it's not in the Bible but it should be. Have you ever heard the statement, if it doesn't make sense, somebody's making money? We live in a consumer based economy so the more consumers we have, the better economy we should have, yet we have those who are in charge who have said it's okay to end the future consumer's life before they ever breathe their breath. How much sense does that make? I'll tell you how much sense it makes, somebody's making money because we

have said, "Oh, it's all about the consumer," but we've got laws to say, "Get rid of the consumer," which by the way, last time I checked, is shedding blood for dishonest gain.

If somebody is making money, it's probably not going to make sense. Got kind of quiet, did it not? Do you know why? Because it's our fault. It's the prophets. It's the preachers. It's the church. We went silent on truth and that's the byproduct. Well, what about the people at large? We've read it already, verse 29: oppression, robbery, vexing, opposition. It sounds like everything we hear everyday from any media that we listen to. All the culture is doing is what we have allowed it to do. Do you see how this has worked out? This is why we're in the mess. So here's the question: what needs to happen? We need somebody to stand in the gap. We need somebody to say enough is enough, we cannot keep doing this.

I'm going to take you back to a historically based individual. There's a lot of legend around his life but there's more truth than non-truth. His name is Telemachus, a little small Italian monk. He died either about 394 AD or about 401 AD. We don't really know the exact date but it is his death that makes him so historical. He didn't write anything famous. He didn't do anything famous. He just lived a very quiet and meager life and one day he made a pilgrimage to the great city of Rome. As he made his way to Rome, he found himself at what we know as the Colosseum, he bought a ticket to get in. Of course, he was late to the games, so he had what we call the nosebleed seats. He's up top. He had heard stories and rumors but it was before his eyes, there in the gladiatorial ring where grown men ending each other's lives so that people could gain financial wealth. Isn't that what we just read?

So what did he do? He began to shout out, "Stop the madness!" Well, nobody cared, nobody listened. I mean, after all, they were here to see a good fight and a good match, they didn't care what this little monk said. So he made his way down about halfway down and he declared the same thing, "Stop the madness!" Nobody cared. He got down to the front row and he said, "Stop the madness!" Nobody listened. So he did what he should have done, he jumped the rail, got in the middle of the gladiators, looked them both in the eye and said, "Would you two quit this!" One of them took a sword, thrust it into Telemachus, and his life ended right there on the dirt. Legend has it that's the last gladiator match ever fought in the Roman Colosseum.

So what needs to happen? We need somebody to say stop the madness. We need somebody to stand in the gap. We need somebody but here's the problem: it's the how. The how is the biggest problem because I can see the wheels turning. You see, we're in Babylon and when you live in Babylon, you think like Babylon. Some of you are thinking, "We need to get a coalition together. I know a good lawyer. We can get a 501C3, a non-profit. We need to get organized." No, you don't. Can I share with you the how? I'm going to take you to the book of Acts 4. The early apostles found themselves in the same situation, same circumstance. You know, in Acts 1 before Pentecost there's only 120 of them plus the women in the Upper Room. They're outnumbered. They're out-manned. They are the minority position when it came to belief systems but the Lord showed up marvelously in chapter 2, what we know as Pentecost, but the culture didn't

like it. So what did they do? They put them in jail. They imprisoned them hoping that would silence them. The end of chapter 3 into chapter 4, these early apostles, they get out of prison, the church collective is so grateful to see them, they start gathering and saying, "Woo, we're so glad you're back home!" What do you need to do? I want you to look in chapter 4, in fact, I'm going to focus on verse 31 if you're turning in your Bibles. They did not get "organized." They did not establish an entity or a group. Do you know what they did? They prayed. You say, "Why is that important?" Because it is a non-Babylonian methodology, i.e. prayer, that's the only solution to this mess.

Verse 31 it says, "And when they had prayed," not organized, when they prayed the building shook. Have you ever been in that prayer meeting? I haven't. The building shook. It says that "they were all filled with the Holy Ghost," in other words, they were more interested in what God wanted for their lives than what they wanted for their lives, then it says, "they spoke the word of God with boldness." You know, when you get to chapter 5, it's not 3,000 people that get saved, it's 5,000 people that get saved. Why? Because they did it God's way much like the archangel in the book of Jude who calls on the Lord himself against the enemy whom we know as Satan.

Why is this so important? Because none of us, according to what we've learned today, none of us know anybody who knows anybody who hasn't lived in Babylon. All of us have been in Babylon, all of our ancestors the last couple of hundred years have been in this Babylonian mentality and our natural disposition is to do it the Babylonian way but God says, "No, no, no, just call out to me. Let me fight the battle."

Speaking of the battle, I want to close in Ephesians 6. It's a famous passage, you're probably familiar with it, the whole armor of God: the belt of truth, breastplate of righteousness, helmet of salvation, shield of faith, sword of the Spirit which is the word of God, and your feet being shod with the preparation of the gospel peace. It's an incredible picture of how to live in the midst of the wiles of the enemy, but have you ever noticed, I know we talk about the fact that it's mostly defensive except the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God, but there's a very clear exposed area of the body: the knees. The knees have no protection whatsoever. Now if you've played any sport, you know that this is critical. If you're going to jump, you need your knees. If you're going to run, you need your knees. If you're going to kick, you need your knees. You even need your knees if you're going to throw because you've got to plant your legs. Knees are critical. Why would God not protect the knees? Because Ephesians 6 isn't about an actual physical battle, it's about a spiritual battle. And watch this, I know those of you listening on the radio, it's a little bit difficult, but if you wear the armor of God and you do what God called us to do and that's to take it to him, if you get on your knees, then the only unprotected part is now hidden from sight.

You see, the problem is we've been in Babylon so long we want to organize and get out there and get with it. What we really need to do is hit our knees and say, "God, we need you to intervene." "I am looking for somebody to stand in the gap. Would that person be you?"