

How Did We Get Here?

3-Year Bible Reading Plan

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This evening as you're being seated, I want to encourage you to turn to a passage of scripture that I have used this introduction many times lately, that you probably have never done so in an environment such as this. The book of Ezekiel, one of the great mystery books, one of the great confounding books of the Bible. Tonight, we're going to be in chapters 23 and 24 and allow me to go ahead and confess that tonight's really part 2 from this morning. Those of you that were not able to be with us this morning either in person or online, we addressed the question of why the Israelites were in Babylon, and just to give you just a brief synopsis there, I think it's important to understand that the Babylonian captivity was not a result of a few weeks, months, or years of rebellion. It was not a response to a season of rebellion. It had been centuries of rebellion. For hundreds of years, the Lord had tried to get their attention, but as we addressed this morning, the prophets went their separate ways, the priests no longer drew a distinction between the holy and that which was vile, the political leaders and even the people en masse, so to speak, had become corrupt with the Babylonian way. As we're going to see tonight, it was not something that happened overnight, it was a slow, steady drip, so to speak.

Well, tonight we're going to be in chapters 23 and 22 and I know they technically follow chapter 22 where we were this morning, or we're going to be in 23 and 24 tonight, but this really is part 2, and I've kind of addressed it "How Did We Get Here?" We talked about this morning why we're in Babylon, now we're going to actually kind of peel away the layers and say how did we get here. Now remember, this morning, we're drawing a very distinct parallel between the Babylon of ancient Israel days and the Babylon of current days. They're eerily eerily similar.

When you turn to chapter 23 of the book of Ezekiel, I want to begin before we get to the "meat" of the message by calling your attention to verse 4. I'm not going to read verses 1 through 3, and if you've read them in advance, you'll understand why I'm not reading them publicly based on some of the language that is used and the forthrightness therein, but in verse 4 of Ezekiel 23, the Lord begins to identify Israel by a respective name, in fact, there's a parable that's used of two sisters and in verse 4 it says,

4 And the names of them were Aholah the elder, and Aholibah her sister: and they were mine, and they bare sons and daughters. Thus were their names; Samaria is Aholah, and Jerusalem Aholibah.

Now we don't have to guess what they are. The Lord made it very clear to us that the parable he's giving of these two sisters, that the first one or the older one is Samaria, and the younger one is Jerusalem. Why is this important? Because you read through chapters 23 and 24, you discover that this older sister is who we know as that northern kingdom that fell to Assyria and the younger sister is Jerusalem, the southern kingdom that has pretty much fallen into the hands of Babylon.

Now they're about 15 years into the 70 year captivity. The temple has not been destroyed as of yet but every other aspect of their culture has been. I want you to notice in verse 5 what the Lord says about the older sister, then we're going to talk about the younger sister, and then we're going to get to the meat of the message. It says,

5 And Aholah played the harlot when she was mine; and she doted on her lovers, on the Assyrians her neighbours,

Who was it that took the northern area into captivity? The Assyrians, their very ones who she thought she had a viable meaningful relationship with. You know, it's interesting that particularly in the Bible, names have a significant meaning. I think that my parents named me very sarcastically, the name Jeffrey means "God's peace." Just work with that for just a moment. Oftentimes we don't utilize names in our culture as much for their meaning as maybe their family tradition, or as the meaning in our lives and such, but the name Aholah means "her own tent." Now that's important because if you go back hundreds of years before Ezekiel, you do realize at one point that Israel was one unified body and we had Saul, the king, that went sideways, and then we had David who expanded, then we had Solomon, but then what happened? Everything split. In fact, it's been almost 400 years since that departure and what did Israel, the northern tribes, do? They created their own place of worship. They created their own temple style. They created their own separate entity. In other words, when her definition is "her own tent," let me put it in our terminology: they took their ball and played somewhere else. They said, "We don't want to be in the right place, we're gonna be in our own place." You would think over time that the southern kingdom would have learned their lesson by watching their northern cousins literally, but obviously they did not. 722 BC, they are taken captive by the Assyrians and the southern kingdom acted as if, "Well, that would never happen to us," yet here we are in Ezekiel and there they are.

In verse 11 of chapter 23, it says,

11 And when her sister Aholibah [who is the southern kingdom, Jerusalem] saw this, she was more corrupt in her inordinate love than she, and in her whoredoms more than her sister in her whoredoms.

Can we all just agree that is not a compliment? In fact, the name means "one who commits adultery." Wow. The Lord called it out. He said the northern kingdom has basically set up their own tent and decided to do their own thing, but the southern kingdom, you've got Jerusalem, you've got the temple, and so you've just decided to step out and cheat on me. Here in chapter 23, there is this parable of these two sisters and it's really an incredible indictment on those whom Ezekiel is with because he is in captivity with the second sister. He's in captivity with the younger sister. He's in captivity with those of the tribe of Benjamin and the tribe of Judah, those who say it'll never happen to Jerusalem.

So how did they end up there? How do we, today, end up in the same place as they are just in a completely different environment? Well, the first thing that we discover is in verse 18 of chapter 23. By the way, I'm not going to read both chapters at length, we're just going to kind of skip through here. I'm actually going to back it up to verse 17. It says,

17 And the Babylonians came to her into the bed of love, and they defiled her with their whoredom, and she was polluted with them, and her mind was alienated from them. 18 So she discovered her whoredoms, and discovered her nakedness: then my mind was alienated from her, like as my mind was alienated from her sister.

The first kind of how this happened is what I want to call discovery. When I say discovery, they did not confess, they did not reveal their poor position with the Lord, it was revealed unto them. You see, the Israelites of days gone past have the same disease that we have today, we never learn from history. We always look back and say it'll never happen to us. We always look back and say, oh, but it's a different day today. I mean, think about the perspective they had. They had their cousins to the north who had been taken by captivity by the Assyrians 150 years earlier, they're doing the exact same things they were and thinking it won't happen to us. Nebuchadnezzar came knocking on the door 15 years before this chapter commences, he's already started taking the bricks down and they're like, "Ah, it's still going to work out." We never seem to learn from history, but the real point of discovery is this, that we find out with the southern kingdom that much like us as individuals, that when you begin to get squeezed, what's in you comes out.

Now the last year has been an incredible, shall we say, microcosm of this. Can we all agree it's been a tough year? It doesn't matter what your background is, it doesn't matter what your socioeconomic level has been these last 12 months, it's been tough in all respects. Do you know what we're discovering? What's really inside of people. If you really want to know what's in somebody, squeeze them real good, because when you squeeze them, it does come out.

Now yesterday this occurred in my life. I've already shared this on a personal level, now I'm going to share it in a corporate level. My wife loves to scare me, and I'm easily scared. She's snickering right now. She likes to hide behind doors, she likes to hide

behind corners so that when I am not suspecting, she jumps out and scares me. Three times yesterday she got me and she got me good. But I'm here to come clean, I didn't say anything I shouldn't have. That's an incredible thing. Why? Because I got squeezed, I got scared, and what came out was actually not half bad, but can we all agree over the last year we've seen some people produce some stuff that's pretty nasty, isn't it? When you squeeze somebody, it comes out.

Guess what? The southern kingdom is getting squeezed. Their buildings are coming down. That which they cherish is being... Their brightest minds are now being re-educated and relocated into Babylon. They no longer have Jerusalem as the center of their worship or their life, now everything's moved to Babylon and they're getting squeezed and what does it say in verse 18? We found out she's committed whoredoms. We're discovering that she was more in love with Babylon than she ever was with the Lord.

There's an old adage that says that Christians are a whole lot like teabags, you really don't know how strong they are until you put them in hot water. Well, the same thing could be said for Israel in Ezekiel and our world today. We, the church, now remember we're always drawing a parallel, we, the collective church, we've been getting squeezed for a long time and can I confess, what's coming out of us is not good. Twenty years ago, when we suffered the attack of what we know as 9/11, we had to open the doors, so many people came in church. This last year, we suffered an attack that was a microcosm, it was invisible to the naked eye, and rather than flooding the churches, we didn't attend them. Something to think about, isn't it? We got squeezed, did we not? We've been getting squeezed and we're discovering much like Israel what we're really truly made of. We'll revisit that in a moment.

The second thing of how they got there and how we got there is in verse 38 of chapter 23. it says,

38 Moreover this they have done unto me: they have defiled my sanctuary in the same day, and have profaned my sabbaths.

When I mention the word or say the fact of they have defiled, they have used it for a purpose that it was not intended. They have changed, like it says, they defiled the sabbath. They were not longer obeying those sabbath laws. They were no longer utilizing the temple for what it was intended for. They were using it for their own good and their own personal agenda. Ladies and gentlemen, the only entity that Jesus Christ shed his blood for was the church, and when you use the church for your own personal agenda, you have prostituted the church, and today there are many people who use their position and their "churches" to propagate their agenda and not the gospel. They do it under the guise of the church. Anytime you're watching national news, a lot of times there is somebody who is always introduced as "the Reverend So-and-so." Aha, just because you've got a title doesn't mean you're propagating the gospel. Just because you have a position as the pastor of a church doesn't mean you're propagating the gospel. Oftentimes we, like the Israelites, we hide behind our churches, we hide behind our titles and at the

end of the day all we're propagating is our personal, carnal agendas. What did you have in Israel? They said, "Oh, but I'm a priest. I'm a prophet. I work in the temple." And the Lord says, "Yeah, but you've defiled it. You've profaned it."

Do you remember back in chapter 8 of Ezekiel when the Lord allowed him to see in that Holy of Holies, that the priests were actually turned backwards? That their back was to the altar of the Lord and their face was to the east, that contrary way of the Lord. Again today, we find that the church as an entity has often been defiled and profaned by personal agenda and not the propagation of the gospel.

The next verse, verse 39, it says,

39 For when they had slain their children to their idols, then they came the same day into my sanctuary to profane it; and, lo, thus have they done in the midst of mine house.

And I touched on this, this morning, and I'm going to do a little more tonight. I called it the "death to the future." If you go to Caesarea Philippi in the Middle East in what we call the Holy Land, it's a very northern part. If you go on a tour of the Holy Lands, and I hope again to lead a tour out of here but, again, we've got to get there and we've got to get home, that's part of the problem, but when you go to Caesarea Philippi, you're actually there where what we know as the Jordan River actually comes out of the Golan Heights. Now you think about the Jordan River, it's kind of peaceful, serene, you know, you've got the baptism of John the Baptist, it goes into the Dead Sea, but when you go to Caesarea Philippi, you discover that the Jordan River does not come out like a water fountain, it comes like a fire hydrant. I mean, it is literally coming out of the mountain. It is cold and it is moving fast.

Well, there in Caesarea Philippi is where in biblical days all the religions of the world would worship. I mean, it was one big coexist conference is what it was. Everybody together. And there's a place that they will show you that those who worshiped Moloch came and threw their babies in. It's called the pit of fire. They would take their newborn babies, they would toss them to death hoping to appease the gods, that by giving up my child, I will gain something greater in return. It says here they actually killed their children to their idols, okay? I don't know a whole lot of individuals in our culture that worship the idol of Moloch but how about the idol of self? How about the idol of financial success? How about the idol of corporate success? How about the idol of personal privilege? How about the idol of convenience? How about the idol of it doesn't fit in the plan that I had?

I mentioned this morning that it doesn't make any economic sense that in a consumer based economy we would eliminate future consumers before they breath a breathe. It doesn't make any sense and I know that you've heard a bunch of stories about people who were in this position or who are in that position, but if you speak to anybody who is in the business of caring for those who have fallen into the trap of verse 39, most of them will tell you that it was an act of personal convenience, is why they followed through with

what they did, and we have become a society that not only legalizes it but marches for it and we celebrate the killing of our future children. Now folks, I know it's not politically correct and I just don't care because God said they've killed their children to their idols. We're no different than the worshipers of Moloch, we're just a little more refined. We don't go to a public place and throw them in a pit, we go into a doctor's office and exit 60 minutes later.

It says they came and they profaned it and they've done in the midst of mine house. Let me tell you what the Lord is saying there, is that, yes, that is a specific example but let's broaden the base, that his people are committing sins on Saturday and coming to church on Sunday like it's no big deal. It doesn't matter. It's just another day on the calendar. You want to know how we ended up in Babylon? 1. We started getting squeezed. 2. We started using our faith expression for our own personal benefit. 3. We're sacrificing the future for our present pleasure. 4. We're going to fast forward into chapter 24, verses 6 through 8. It says,

6 Wherefore thus saith the Lord GOD; Woe to the bloody city, to the pot whose scum is therein, and whose scum is not gone out of it! bring it out piece by piece; let no lot fall upon it. 7 For her blood is in the midst of her; she set it upon the top of a rock; she poured it not upon the ground, to cover it with dust;

I used the phrase or the word that we've become a culture, we've become a world, we, the people of faith, much like Israel in the days of Ezekiel, have become destructive. Do you hear the violence that's being written. It talks about being a bloody city. It talks about having it out in the open, something that is not being ashamed of. How do you get to a place like that? How do you see what we see here in verse 6 of chapter 24? How do we see people taking each other's lives and not being held accountable for it? It's real simple, they had become a people who refused to discipline. You do understand the book of Hebrews 12, it says that when the Lord disciplines us, it's because he loves us, and when we don't hold people accountable for their actions, we say we love them but we're really saying much the opposite.

I talked to an individual that's a part of our faith family this last week, this individual works in an area that is specializing in children. She said she had a three year old and the parent and in the course of dealing with a certain situation, this professional here in our congregation had to interrupt and say, "Can I ask a question? Which one of you is the parent today? Which one of you is the adult?" Because it was very evident that the three year old was holding the parent hostage to the situation.

That is but just a simple example that we've become a culture that does not believe in disciplining the wrong but rewarding the rebellious, but let's make it close and personal to our home. Today, I'm being collective, I'm being generic, I think we'd all agree that if somebody holds somebody else within a family of faith accountable for their sin, they're often called narrow-minded, bigoted, judgmental and Pharisaical. "Well, who are you to judge?" You know, the Bible does say in Matthew 7, "Do not judge," the problem is we

don't read the rest of it. It says, "Do not judge lest you be judged for with the same judgment you judge, it shall be mete unto you." Do you know what Matthew 7 is saying is don't you dare call somebody out for something that you're doing yourself. It doesn't say you don't judge, it says you're not a hypocrite in doing so.

One of my mentors of the faith, a man by the name of Dr. Roy Fish, esteemed evangelism professor at Southwestern Seminary for some 50 years, made it a practice to be an interim pastor. Here at First Opelika, you've had many of them through the years. It's a ministry which people come sometimes for several months, sometimes several years. They service a wonderful transition from the former leadership to the newer leadership. One of the things that he shared is he felt that, and by the way, I never had Roy as one of my interim before me, but he said that one of the things that he felt called by God to do was to, to quote Ezekiel, get rid of all the scum before the new pastor came. He called them blessed subtractions. There is the door. It is our prayer that we'll see you no more. He actually had a man arrested in a worship service for public disobedience. I know you're thinking, "How dare he?" Every person I've ever talked to who pastored after Roy Fish interim said it's the best church they've ever pastored in their life. Why? It says here if you don't get rid of the scum. Don't you love how the Bible just calls it what it is?

Now by the way, 1 Corinthians 5 says if there's somebody in rebellion, if there's somebody who's living a life that's contrary to the things and the ways of God, you're always disciplining with the hope of restoration. I mean, you're not getting rid of them just to expose them, you say, "We want your life right. We want you right with the Lord." The problem is Israel didn't call anybody out. They just let it go. It's just not that big a deal. But in verse 7 they became desensitized. The blood is in the midst of her; she set it upon the top of a rock; she poured it not upon the ground, to cover it with dust." In other words, they didn't even bother hiding their sin anymore.

You know, there used to be a day where if we wanted to do something that was contrary to the things of God, we snuck out to a seedy part of town where nobody was watching so that nobody would have a record thereof. We've now become a culture that says, "Oh, no, no, let's just flaunt it in front of everybody." It's not just a matter of our there, it's also somewhat in here, is it not? That we, as I addressed this morning, we have so broadened the base to keep the "institution" going that we've excused sin, endorsed sin, promoted sin, so that we would not be deemed as judgmental and Pharisaical.

You know, it's interesting, Jesus called sin what it was. Do you remember the woman that was caught in adultery? By the way, you do know the story should be the couple that was caught in adultery but that's a whole other message. When she was thrown at Jesus' feet, do you remember the last thing Jesus said to her? He said, "Don't get caught again." I'm just seeing if you're awake. He said, "Go and sin no more." Now was he gracious to her? Oh, was he. He kept her from getting killed. Was he kind? Was he compassionate? But I'm going to tell you one thing, he called it out, did he not? "Go and sin no more."

What is it saying here? They didn't even hide it. In fact, it says they didn't even bother to bury the bodies, they just let it out there for everybody to see. They had become so

carnal, they had become so Babylonian that they actually celebrated their rebellion, they celebrated their carnality. Now I realize that you and I as a culture, not so much in our specific culture as our national culture, are just now days removed from a celebration that we call Mardi Gras. You do understand that its roots are in a celebration called Carnivale which means the celebration of the flesh. The celebration of the flesh.

And that has become the culture in the world and yet today, unfortunately, even within the "faith realm," we rarely, if ever, see anybody called out. And I can prove it. How many more scandals in the media is it going to take of "fallen ministers" for us to realize that we should have called it out a whole long time before? Why did it get to this point? I can tell you why it got to that point: big personalities and big pulpits. Do you know what we've done? We've created and I say this because we've created celebrities, is what we've done. Celebrity churches. Celebrity pastors. Celebrity ministries. And what happens when someone becomes a celebrity? They get their own dressing room. They get their own this, they get their own that, and pretty soon they become a falling star after they've become a star.

What did they do? They just paraded it for everybody. Last but not least, verse 13 and 14. It says,

13 In thy filthiness is lewdness: because I have purged thee, and thou wast not purged, thou shalt not be purged from thy filthiness any more, till I have caused my fury to rest upon thee. 14 I the LORD have spoken it: it shall come to pass, and I will do it; I will not go back, neither will I spare, neither will I repent; according to thy ways, and according to thy doings, shall they judge thee, saith the Lord GOD.

Let me tell you what the Lord is saying: you are a corpse that is rotting, you just don't want to admit it. Now how is this for winning friends and gaining influence? How is this for positive preaching? But the problem is we're in the same place the Jewish people were. Literally Babylon is surrounding us and we're trying to pretend that there's not a problem. But what was happening? They were decomposing, they were dying right before them.

There are very few books that I would hold near and dear to my heart close to scripture, by the way, there's the Bible and then everything else, but when you start talking about everything else, there is a book that in recent years has been revolutionary to me, it's called "The Coming Evangelical Recession." Anybody remember 2008 economically? Pretty bad, wasn't it? Yeah, it was a bad year. Why? Because everything looked good on the outside but all the fundamentals were corrupt, correct? All of a sudden it got discovered, it got exposed, got squeezed, and what came out? A mess is what came out. This book was written some years ago about what we know as the evangelical church, the American church, so to speak, that we were in the exact same position as the economy was some 12-13 years ago, everything looks good on the outside but inside we're a mess. And one of the things or one of the many things that it exposed is that we think we're healthier than we truly are.

Today, if you subscribe to what we call a simple biblical worldview, meaning that the scripture is true and trustworthy from beginning to end, that Jesus Christ was conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin, that he lived a sinless life, died a sacrificial death, and he physically returned from the dead three days later. Now can we all agree that's like second grade Sunday school around here, right? Do you realize that today in America the number of people who can agree to all those things is now less than 10%? Less than 10%. By most sources, we're about 8. As the old adage said, we're not in Kansas anymore.

One of the other things he said was that the church is not as powerful nor as influential nor is it as respected as it used to be. I don't know how to take this but at the end of 2020, the Gallup poll once again commenced a study to the most respectable occupations in America. You're probably not going to be surprised in a year of a pandemic that the top three were nurses, pharmacists and doctors, the most trustworthy. Pastors now find ourselves right between attorneys and judges. Yeah. Did you know in the 1970s, pastors were number 1 on that list. The one person that you could trust more than anybody was a pastor, and now we're between attorneys and judges? I'll just save the jokes for after the service.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are in Babylon. We are decomposing at a fast rate. Let me remind us as we close of what chapter 22 said, the Lord is seeking for somebody to stand in the gap, the Lord is seeking for someone to be different and somebody to be distinct. The question is will we be Babylonian or will we be biblical? Let me warn you because I know what's going to happen, I've been in this environment a lot of times in my life. We go, "Oh, I'm going to be biblical." Here's the problem: to be biblical, it's going to hurt. It's going to hurt your feelings. It's probably going to hurt your finances. It's going to hurt your reputation. It's going to hurt your integrity at some level because you no longer are going with the flow, you're no longer going to be a part of the populace, you're no longer going to be a part of the mass movement. All of a sudden, you're going to be, that's right, that canker sore in the world's eyes. You're going to be that one who just won't let the rest of us do what we want to do. You're going to be that one who's always standing in opposition. You're going to be that one when everybody else goes, you stay. Yeah, you're going to be that one.

Can I be honest with you this evening? There's a lot of pressure on being that one. There's a lot of pressure on being the one who will not go with, who will not join with, who will not "link arms and sing Kumbayah." We have an entire culture both outside and inside the walls of the collective church that has decided to go down the road of Babylon. And the church, oh, don't get me wrong, we look good, don't we? We've got buildings. We've got campuses. We now all have media ministries. We've got all this stuff but we've really got to ask ourselves what do we really have? Let me remind you lest you go out discouraged that Gideon showed up to the battle with 30,000 men. He said, "God, we're ready. We're ready to take on the Philistines." God said, "You know, there's a lot of guys here that really don't want to be here. There's a lot of guys here that are more Philistine than they are Jewish, so why don't we reduce the numbers?" They reduced it down to about 3,000 people. Gideon said, "Oh Lord, this is going to be tough! But we've got

3,000, they're going to be good." He said, "Nah, there's still too many people." Y'all remember the number, right? 300. 300 people took on an army of tens of thousands. Jesus decided to invest his entire ministry and the future of the church in 12 men. Not 12,000. Not 1,200. But 12. The Apostle Paul put everything he had into Timothy, one guy. He said, "You are my spiritual child." He preached at a lot of places but he said, "You, buddy, you are it."

You see, Babylon says, "Oh, it's all about the numbers." God says, "No, no, no, it's all about the faithfulness." God can do more with little than we can do with a lot. Maybe it's 300, maybe it's 12, maybe it's one, all I know is this, that in order for his purpose to be accomplished he needed those that were of a pure heart and mind, not just those that wanted to be a part of something. That being said, the 300 won the battle. The 12 helped start the church. And Timothy changed the world. So the question is do we want to be popular or do we want to be on God's side? I know what the Sunday school answer is but it's awfully tough when we walk out of these walls.