

How to Survive in Babylon

3-Year Bible Reading Plan

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This morning, it is my privilege to invite you to open your Bibles to the book of Ezekiel. Now if you're a guest or visitor with us today, you may be wondering why Ezekiel? Well, last week, we began kind of a six week journey within the bigger picture of reading through the scriptures for the entirety over about a three year period of this book of the Bible that is mysterious to some, troublesome to others, it contains visions and dreams and such that produce more questions than answers, but more than that, one of the things that we're desiring to see is how is it that the world that Ezekiel was given this vision within is so parallel to the world that you and I are navigating today.

The book of Ezekiel is one of very few places in the entirety of the Bible that the Lord spoke to his people, through his prophet while they were in exile. This wasn't the proverbial warning shot, if things continue to go bad, then it's going to "get worse." No, they were already there. Babylon was their new residence. They were no longer in a place that was conducive to their faith. They were no longer in a place that when they said, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one God," that they could comprehend. There were language barriers, cultural barriers, and most important, there were faith barriers. And so we're kind of discussing what does it look like to live in and navigate Babylon because you and I as believers in Jesus Christ, whether we like it or not, we are navigating Babylon today. We no longer with confidence can say we live in a culture that promotes, advocates, endorses, or even celebrates the truth of Jesus Christ and the teachings of God's word, and yet we are much like they were.

You know, we talk about that Babylonian captivity, that 70 years in that foreign land, and for some reason our Western mindset just goes to, "Well, it started and ended and in between was 70 years." You see, it wasn't quite that simple, in fact, in just a moment as we turn to chapter 11 of the book of Ezekiel, we're going to find ourselves kind of in the great between, and here's what I mean: 10 years before what we're about to read, the Babylonians first came into Jerusalem. They came in and they began with what you would expect. It was a military strike. Buildings of great importance found themselves destroyed. Men with great minds were captured, relocated, renamed, and re-educated in Babylon. Ten years after what we're about to read, the temple is going to be torn down.

Why is this critical? Why is this important? Not just to show to us that it was a slow strategic overtaking by Babylon but we're about to see a people, the Israelites, at the proverbial 11th hour of their lives and we're going to discover that they have the same struggles that we do, and I want to talk today about how do you survive in Babylon. I mean, how do we wake up every day, how do we watch what's happening and realize simply what is the problem and what is the promise. It's going to be that simple this morning. The problem is, no pun intended, that if I were to ask you what the problem is, you'd probably fail the test because we always like to presume that the problem is anything and anybody different than our own reflection in the mirror. In Ezekiel 11, beginning in verse 1, it says,

1 Moreover the spirit lifted me up, and brought me unto the east gate of the LORD'S house, which looketh eastward: and behold at the door of the gate five and twenty men; among whom I saw Jaazaniah the son of Azur, and Pelatiah the son of Benaiah, princes of the people. 2 Then said he unto me, Son of man, these are the men that devise mischief, and give wicked counsel in this city: 3 Which say, It is not near; let us build houses: this city is the caldron, and we be the flesh. 4 Therefore prophesy against them, prophesy, O son of man. 5 And the Spirit of the LORD fell upon me, and said unto me, Speak; Thus saith the LORD; Thus have ye said, O house of Israel: for I know the things that come into your mind, every one of them. 6 Ye have multiplied your slain in this city, and ye have filled the streets thereof with the slain. 7 Therefore thus saith the Lord GOD; Your slain whom ye have laid in the midst of it, they are the flesh, and this city is the caldron: but I will bring you forth out of the midst of it. 8 Ye have feared the sword; and I will bring a sword upon you, saith the Lord GOD. 9 And I will bring you out of the midst thereof, and deliver you into the hands of strangers, and will execute judgments among you. 10 Ye shall fall by the sword; I will judge you in the border of Israel; and ye shall know that I am the LORD. 11 This city shall not be your caldron, neither shall ye be the flesh in the midst thereof; but I will judge you in the border of Israel: 12 And ye shall know that I am the LORD: for ye have not walked in my statutes, neither executed my judgments, but have done after the manners of the heathen that are round about you. 13 And it came to pass, when I prophesied, that Pelatiah the son of Benaiah died. Then fell I down upon my face, and cried with a loud voice, and said, Ah Lord GOD! wilt thou make a full end of the remnant of Israel? 14 Again the word of the LORD came unto me, saying, 15 Son of man, thy brethren, even thy brethren, the men of thy kindred, and all the house of Israel wholly, are they unto whom the inhabitants of Jerusalem have said, Get you far from the LORD: unto us is this land given in possession. 16 Therefore say, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Although I have cast them far off among the heathen, and although I have scattered them among the countries, yet will I be to them as a little sanctuary in the countries where they shall come.

As I mentioned, the book of Ezekiel is known for its very eclectic visions and dreams and wild imagery, but tucked there in the middle historically between the first wall being torn down and the final wall being torn down is this very strategic vision that God gives to Ezekiel, and important for us to grasp. What was the problem? What was going to lead to the temple being taken down? And even in the midst of it being eradicated, what were the promises that God gave his people?

So let's start with the problem. Verse 3 makes it very clear what the problem is. This may be shocking to some of you but the problem was not the Babylonians, the problem was not Nebuchadnezzar, the problem were not those men who took their lives, their homes, and their finances. According to verse 3, the problem was them. I want you to notice what it says toward the end, it says, "You say that it is not near, let us build houses for the cauldron is our city and we are the flesh thereof." Why is this so important? For hundreds of years God had warned them about this. You know the old adage, the only thing men don't learn from history is to learn from it. Isaiah had screamed at the top of his lungs. Jeremiah, Hosea, Amos, you name them, they had all said, "It's coming. You'd better repent. You'd better turn of your wicked ways or God is going to judge us." It wasn't just the prophets, 150 years earlier the Assyrians came into the northern kingdom. It's almost as if the Lord gave them this very clear projection of, "This is what it will look like if you don't change."

Notice what they said, "It is not near to us." Let me put that in our common vernacular, "It'll never get that bad. That'll never happen." In other words, we think we're bullet-proof, don't we? And here in the Western world, particularly the North American continent, let me get specific, in the Bible Belt we are spoiled spiritual brats. "Not gonna happen here. Not gonna take our churches. Not gonna take my Bible." Same problem they fell into, "It'll never happen here." You know what they say, "Look at the city, look at the walls, look what we have. That temple, there's no way."

Here's the problem: there's precedence for this happening. Notice what it says in verse 8, "You feared the sword and I'll bring the sword upon you saith the Lord GOD." I mean, just think about the biblical record of times where humanity did not think that God would do as he said he would. Can I bring up the obvious? Garden of Eden, you eat the bad one, not gonna work out well. Oh, lest we don't learn from that one, how about Noah? 120 years, repent of your ways or you're going to die. I mean, that's a 120 year warning. How about the tower of Babel where the Lord said, "If you don't separate and go your different ways, I will come and I will judge you." That's three stories in the first 11 chapters. It continues, the entire Old Testament is this saga of humanity not believing that God will really do what God said he's going to do.

But what do we do? Verse 8, we fear the sword. There is a very distinct difference between the fear of God and the fear of man. They had the fear of man and it matriculates itself. Do you remember what the Israelites told the Lord about a king? Do you remember that? Remember the Israelites came and said, "Oh, we don't like the judges. They're too strict on us. We want a king." And God said, "You don't want a king. If I give you a king, he'll take your children, he'll take your money, he'll take everything from you." And they

said, "Oh no, we want a king," listen to this, "because we want to be like the rest of the world." That's what it says in verse 12, they started looking like them.

But let's go back to this fear of God versus fear of man. I'm going to make it pretty simple today. How do you know whom you fear? The fear of God is positive and the fear of man is negative. Allow me to illustrate. When you fear God, you go in spite of what it looks like. When you fear man, you don't because of what it might look like. Let me make it a little more practical. There's a game that I used to be pretty proficient at, I don't play it much anymore, it's the great game of golf. It's a frustrating game if you've never played it. That being said, let's just imagine, and I'm sure if you've never played the great game, you've at least seen it or fallen asleep to it on Sunday afternoon surely, but I want you to imagine that you're on a par 3, that means you hit it from the tee box directly to the green. It's the shorter of the holes. And I want you to imagine that that green, the target is completely surrounded by water. You know what the worst thing you can do when you walk up to the tee is? Say, "Don't hit it in the water." What happens when you say don't hit it in the water? You hit it in the water. Fear of man says, "Don't hit it in the water." Fear of man says, "lest this happen." Fear of man says, "This could occur." Fear of God says, "Hit it on the green." That's the goal.

What did Jesus tell us in John 10? "The thief comes to steal, kill and destroy, I've come to give you life that you may have it more abundantly." Let me flesh that out for a minute. Fear of man is, "I don't want that taken from me." Fear of man is, "I don't want that to occur to me." Fear of man is, "Oh, lest that fall upon me." Fear of God says, "How do I experience life?" Fear of God says, "How do I experience abundance?"

You see, anytime we say don't hit it in the water, we're gonna hit it in the water. Or for those of you who need it even more simple: don't think of the number 9. I did it, didn't I? Think of the number 8. You did that as well, didn't you? Do you see the difference? You see, one is concerned about what might happen or not happen, the other is just doing what I'm supposed to do. They were so concerned with falling by the sword of the Babylonians that they never feared God and believed that he could have delivered them before it ever started.

The precedence is a long saga, but I want you to see the payoff. How did it work out for them? Verse 12, "ye shall know that I am the LORD: for ye have not walked in my statutes, neither executed my judgments, but have done after the manners of the heathen that are round about you." How did it work out for them? As I mentioned, we're kind of in the middle here, 10 years before the first brick came down, 10 years after the last brick is going to come down. If you read the rest of Ezekiel and the rest of biblical history, you'll discover that that temple that David desired to build, that temple that Solomon spent an incredible fortune and time and labor on, every single brick was taken to the ground, every ounce of gold was taken by the enemy. It wasn't just their businesses, it wasn't just their houses, it wasn't just their men of renown, now the very central aspect of their worship was not just removed from but taken down to the ground. Why? Because they wanted to be like everybody else around them. "If you do not my judgments, if you do not my statutes, this will occur."

You know, it's interesting and I don't think many of us give a whole lot of thought to our spiritual approach and the physical consequences. You know, in the book of Leviticus 18, it's one of those chapters in the Bible that if you don't think the Bible's intriguing, read chapter 18. How's that for a teaser? You want to discover everything that you should not do with another human being? Oh, it's there in Leviticus 18, in fact, it even gives you ideas you may never have thought of. But the Israelites had. At the end of Leviticus 18 there's this very graphic description. It talks about a lifestyle and decisions and behavior that the Lord called an abomination but Babylon and our culture calls a celebration. We tend to end at the end of that part, but then it goes on to say, "Because you've done this, you have defiled the land and you will be removed from it." Isn't that interesting that the Lord says, "Okay, if you don't hear from me, if you don't turn from your wicked ways, if you don't change your course of action, then that which you hold most dear, that which you value so much will be defiled and removed from your life." But what did they say? "Oh, not here. That'll never happen here."

Ten years with hundreds of years of warning, an example in the northern kingdom and what did he say earlier as we read? Dead bodies all around. I know you probably get tired of me using this illustration but it's just one of my favorites. Samson, who kills 1,000 men with the jawbone of a donkey, 999 dead guys and the last guy says, "I can take him." How many more stories, how many more illustrations, how many more consequences are we going to have to endure before we finally get the point? The problem wasn't the Babylonians. The problem were the "people of God" who refused to live like the people of God. The problem wasn't them, the problem is us. The problem isn't who's outside these walls and not listening, the problem is who's inside these walls and who is watching. They were in Babylon not because the Babylonians were strong, they were in Babylon because the believers were weak and you can quote me on that one.

So here's the promise. Beginning in verse 13, Ezekiel cries out and he says at the end of verse 13, "Ah Lord GOD! Will you make a full end of the remnant of Israel?" Here's the promise: God has always had a people, he has always had a people who have been faithful to him, the biblical word is the remnant. Now we hear about carpet remnants and whatever it may be. We know by definition a remnant is a very small portion of the larger picture. The remnant is few in the Bible, in fact, to be very specific with you, in Isaiah 6 prophesying this very event, the Lord told Isaiah that, "Those that will hear you is a tenth, a tithe, one out of every ten." And yet we know that even Gideon did more with 300 than he did 30,000. The remnant is few and the remnant are faithful. The promise is that if you and I so desire to be faithful to God and to be fearful of him rather than man, that we will be as the remnant because what does God say? "I never get rid of the remnant." God says, "No matter if you're in the heart of Babylon, in the heart of a jail cell, if you're a part of the remnant, I will always be faithful to your faithfulness."

Now there's precedence here. In fact, we go back again into the Old Testament biblical record, let me call your attention to the book of Exodus. The book of Exodus, we know the story well. The Israelites are 400 years in Egyptian captivity, in bondage and slavery. One day the Lord appears unto Moses with a bush that is burning and not consumed. He

says, "Go back to the Pharaoh, declare, 'Let my people go.'" He went back and a series of events began, plagues as we call them. The water turned to blood. There was lice, and frogs, and disease, and pestilence, and darkness, and even death. It's a story that's been told so much, we almost know it too well. But in the middle of that saga, as the plagues began to increase, the Lord did something amazing in Exodus. He established a place called Goshen. Goshen was the place where when the plague arrived, it did not impact. In other words, when the plague of darkness hit, Goshen was well-lit. When death was all around Egypt, there was life that was in Goshen.

What is he promising his people? "Even in Babylon, even when the temple has been torn down, if you stay faithful, I can make you like Goshen." Let me ask a question, it's rhetorical but it's honest: have you declared your home Goshen? Have you declared that it may go completely sideways out there but it's not going to in here? How about we broaden the sphere here? And I understand this can't just be me, it's got to be collective. How about in a world of Babylon, how about we all say, "Not in this place. Not in this faith community. Not in this church. Not in this community. Not in my school. Not at my business." You see, here's the beauty of Goshen, the beauty of Goshen is it can be wherever the remnant of God's people are. You can be in the middle of a jail cell, you can be the middle of Babylon and what does he say? "I never leave my people." You see, there's precedence that when the world is completely destroyed around us, that we can have Goshen in the midst of us. "Not my home. Not my church. Not my community."

So what's the payoff? I purposefully did not read verses 17 and following earlier because I just want to highlight some phrases. Notice it says in verse 17,

17 Therefore say, Thus saith the Lord GOD; I will even gather you... 19 I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within you; and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them an heart of flesh. 20 That they may walk in my statutes, and keep mine ordinances, and do them: and they shall be my people, and I will be their God. 21 But as for them whose heart walketh after the heart of their detestable things and their abominations, I will recompense their way upon their own heads, saith the Lord GOD.

I love that phrase, "I will." Here's what's important: he does not communicate through Ezekiel, "you will," or "they will," he says, "I will."

One of my favorite stories in the Bible actually takes place in Deuteronomy 34. It's the death of Moses. I know you're probably wondering, "Why is that one of your favorite stories in the Bible?" Not because of what it says in Deuteronomy 34 but what it says in the little book of Jude toward the end of the New Testament. It says that Michael, the archangel, disputed with the devil about the body of Moses and did not bring a railing accusation against him but said, "The Lord take care of this." Why is that important? Because if there was anybody who had the ability and the authority to take down the opposition that was around it, it would be Michael. He's one of only three angels in the Bible that's named. He's the angel that fights the Prince of Persia, the Prince of Grecia. I

mean, he is probably the strongest one we've got and he says, "I'm not fighting this battle. God, you're going to have to do this."

You see, I think one of the great struggles that we have, at least with so much of our background and our education and our experiences, is that we're always formulating a new strategy. "Oh, I see this is happening around us. Maybe if we'll just do this. Maybe if we'll just do that." You know what Michael did? He took a step back and said, "God, you're going to have to fight this battle because I can't do this." That's what the remnant does. The remnant says, "I'd rather fear God than fear man." The remnant says, "I'd rather trust God to deliver me than the means and the ways by which someone has encouraged me. I would rather the trust of the hand I can't see than the one that is holding out to me."

Notice the payoff, "I will. I will." So let's make it relevant as we draw this to a close. What does that mean today as you and I are walking through contemporary Babylon? What does that mean for you and I today as we see the issues and the items and that of our faith eroding around us? If we so choose to say, "I'll be the remnant, I will make Goshen a reality in my life," what's going to happen? Are you ready for the answer? I don't have a clue. You say, "Why not?" Because I don't get to write after "I will," and you don't get to. You see, that's one of the problems of our prayers. Most of our prayers aren't really seeking what God wants, most of our prayers is, "God, this is what I need, I need you to rubber stamp it now." When we say, "God, I will," what we're basically saying is saying, "God, I'm going to let you write what this looks like."

Can you imagine if the Apostle Paul had negotiated his way out of prison, the guard would have never come in and said, "What must I do to be saved?" You see, oftentimes we so fear the sword that we fall to the fear of man. What did he challenge them? "If you'll be the remnant, if you'll be Goshen, I will." Here's the beauty of where we are today, he hasn't written, I mean, he's told us prophetically what's going to happen, we know the Lord's going to come, we know vengeance is going to be on his enemies, we know deliverance is to his people, but he hasn't given us the details for you and I of what all that looks like in our everyday life and that's why we struggle because we want the details, we want the spreadsheet, we want it all laid out and he says, "Just trust me." You see, the problem is we've trusted in ourselves and others, the promise is if we'll just turn it over to God, he will work this out. But to survive in Babylon, if you do it according to the Babylonian way, it never works out. The land will be defiled yet again and we will have not learned our lesson. The great Presbyterian Scottish preacher by the name of E. M. Bounds said, "Man is always looking for better methods. God is seeking after better men."