

How to Be the Church in Babylon

3-Year Bible Reading Plan

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Bible Text: Ezekiel 40-44; 1 Peter 4:17

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This morning, it is my privilege to invite you to do something you may have never done in church before. Now that gets you a little nervous, doesn't it? Turn to the book of Ezekiel 40.

Now the reason I said today may be one of those days that you have never turned to this specific page is we've recognized over the last few weeks that the book of Ezekiel may be the least, shall we say, navigated book of the Bible when it comes to public worship and gathering and Bible studies. Well, today we actually come to the section in the book of Ezekiel that is the least of the least, chapters 40-48. And if you're a guest or visitor with us this morning, you may be wondering to yourself, "Why on earth would we be in this place?" Well, we've been walking through the Bible chapter by chapter, day by day for almost three years and this last week, now it's just my personal opinion, I'm willing to be wrong, but I think this last week may have been the toughest week in the last three years. You just thought that Exodus and Leviticus and Numbers and 1 & 2 Chronicles, but if you read Ezekiel 40-48 this week, you discovered that there was a temple that was being built and everything was a certain cubit by certain cubit, and it was this and that, and the north and the south and the east and the west, and if you'd be honest with yourselves, most days you got done and went, "I don't have any idea why I had to read that." But today as we walk through Ezekiel 40-48, we're going to see that it's more than just that physical building that the Lord had them to build. In fact, over the last few weeks as we've navigated Ezekiel, one of the things that hopefully has been brought out from the text is that the world that the Israelites lived in thousands of years ago is eerily similar to our world today.

Just as kind of a reminder today as we come to the culmination of what we know as our study of the book of Ezekiel, for hundreds of years the Lord warned them. He told that if they did not repent of their sins, if they did not turn from their wicked ways, there would be a day of reckoning. The prophets came and the prophets went, thus saith the Lord continued to ring forth off of their tongues yet they didn't listen. You would think when the tribes to the north, what we call the northern kingdom, fell into the hands of the Assyrians, you would think that that would have gotten their attention but it didn't. You see, they fell into the same trap that you and I do today, they believed that they're bullet-

proof, they believed, "That will never happen here." Hold onto that thought through the message.

But the day did come. Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians, they came into what we know as Jerusalem and over the process of about 20 years, they systematically took almost every single brick down that represented anything and everything of the people of God. They found themselves in a place where they were reeducated, repositioned and their faith rather than being at the center of the culture was marginalized at best, and actually at some points became illegal to practice not just publicly but also privately. So one of the importance of the study of the book of Ezekiel is to see it through that lens of walking through a culture that eerily is familiar.

Well, today we come to the last section of the book of Ezekiel and the Lord is going to commission them to build a temple. Now we're going to discuss this more tonight but this is a temple very different than any other. It looks different than the one that the Lord had Solomon build or the one that whom we know as Ezra rebuilt as soon as this captivity was over, it even looks and is built different than the one that is projected in the book of Revelation for days to come. This is a temple like none other and we're not going to focus today so much on the physical aspects of all the cubits here and the cubits there as much as this reality. If we're going to draw a parallel of the Babylonian world of days gone by to our world today, then we need to understand that you and I as believers in Jesus Christ, we are the temple of the Holy Spirit. According to 1 Corinthians 6, it says that when we come to faith in Jesus Christ, that we become the temple of the Holy Spirit so when you read these passages about the building of this temple, it's so easy to get lost in all the details but what we need to understand is the Lord is teaching us some lessons of what does it mean not to have a physical temple in Jerusalem but for you to be the temple of the Holy Ghost walking in a world that is becoming more and more Babylonian by the day.

That being said, what we're going to discover today is how are we to worship in Babylon? We've talked about the culture of death of Babylon, we've talked about what is happening around us, but when we speak about worship, what does it mean to worship in Babylon? Now can I define worship for you before we get to Ezekiel 40? Worship, at least the definition that I like to adhere to, is our willing response to a self-revealing God. Let me repeat that: our willing response to a self-revealing God. In other words, we can worship not just in this place and at this time, but as the temple of God that finds ourselves mobile, shall we speak, that we worship when we're in the workplace, we worship when we're in school, we worship when we're at home, we worship when we're on the ball field. As a believer in Jesus Christ, we are to "respond" to a self-revealing God any and in all places we find ourselves.

So that being said, what lessons can we learn from the building of this physical building in Ezekiel that apply to our lives today? Well, beginning in chapter 40, as I mentioned, there are eight chapters with a lot of specifics and, by the way, over the course of the message today, we're not going to read long sections of scripture, rightfully so because it's just a list of building materials and directions. I'm going to draw your attention to very

specific passages all throughout that have kind of these, shall we say, nuggets of truth within the blueprint.

The first thing we discover is the specifics. Just begin in chapter 40 and look at what it says. Here we have Ezekiel in the River Chebar like he was in the beginning. The Lord catches him up and begins to show him this vision, and you don't get many verses in to pretty soon it's this material and that material, this size and that size, and you get lost in all the cubits of this and that, we're building doors and hallways and rooms and windows. I mean, it really is kind of this heavenly blueprint for an earthly temple. Have you ever wondered why is the Lord so exhaustive with the details, with the specifics? I mean, I don't know about you but I'll speak for myself, when I read through these passages and I reread them, it's just mind-numbing. Does it really matter that it's 5 x 5 cubits? I mean, does it really matter? I mean, think about it, if we were to take the list of materials in this section and we were to go down to a local hardware store, do you know what you would find? That the measurements given are not the best measurements for our lives. In other words, when we go and we get a 2 x 4, it comes standard in a certain length, correct? Did you know that none of those standard lengths are the lengths that are listed here? If you, and some of you have, have built your own home or some of you who are builders, when you begin to work through all the specifics and the measurements, you discover that from our "building science" perspective, it's mind-numbing. Why would you build an entire structure out of materials that are difficult to find in sizes that do not come natural?

You know, it reminds me of Exodus 25. Exodus 25, the Lord has the Israelites build the tabernacle which, by the way, was the predecessor to the temple. It was the presence of God in a mobile format, not a stationary one. If you remember when the Lord brought them in Exodus 25, remember they'd come out of Egypt, he says, "Here's how I want you to make the tabernacle." He says, "I want you to make it out of a certain wood. I want you to go and get certain skins, certain colors, certain dimensions." It's the same song, second verse, except this is a permanent structure, not a transitory structure. Why does the Lord do this? Why is he so consumed with the specifics?

You know, over the course of three decades of ministry, one of the opportunities, allow me to say one of the privileges I've had is in a variety of contexts to have what we might know as musicians or well-known communicators of the word of God in a public format, whether that's conferences, concerts, worship nights, and if you've never had the opportunity to be on the backside of one of those, allow me to share with you one of the harsh realities. Every time we host an event of one of those magnitudes or every time you go to one whether it's on a church campus or whether it's a convention center, that whoever the principal party is, I can promise you that they have communicated what we call a rider in advance. You say, "What is a rider?" A rider is all the things that you have to agree to do before they agree to do what you want them to do.

Now I know what you're thinking. They need sound equipment. They need lights. They made need, you know, maybe some of them are under special dietary constrictions and such. I get all that, but then you get to what we call the fine print. Oh, and I've seen some funny ones throughout the years and I won't exhaust you with them, but I remember there

was a multi Grammy award winning band that came where I was serving once, they wanted 14, not a dozen, can't do that, they wanted 14 towels, certain brand, certain color, certain size, all folded a certain way. Now I know what you're thinking, "Man, they're full of themselves, aren't they?" I've had individuals come in and say, well, for the pre-meal they wanted six very specific types of hummus. I mean, seriously. I don't even like hummus to begin with, you need six different types before you do what you're going to do? I even know of a situation where there was a recording artist of days gone by that in their hotel room they wanted a jar with 40 green M&M's in it. I know what you're thinking, mind-numbing isn't it? It's ludicrous. Why do you need, can't you just get a batch of towels? Can't you just eat something that's decent? I mean, why do you have to go to those details? Why the specifics?

One day I had the opportunity to talk to one of those artists who I had a previous relationship with, and I said, "Friend, help me out here. I got the towels. I got the hummus. I got all that stuff. You didn't even touch it." We got all that hummus and they didn't even eat it. "Why?" Here's what he shared with me, he said, "Oftentimes when you're coming to sing, to speak, whatever it is, you're going to arrive within six to eight hours of the event taking place. There are days and days of preliminary events that have to take place in advance." They said, "One of the reasons that we ask for those mind-numbing things is that when we show up and there's 40 green M&M's in the jar, we know you took care of the big stuff. When there's 14 towels folded, because we know it is of no value to what's going to take place, we just need to know how much is ahead of us, because if you took care of the small things, then we know you took care of the big things."

You know, the same thing goes for our walk with the Lord. How many times do we say, "Well, Lord, it's not that big a deal. It's not that important. I mean, after all, it's a new day, it's a new time period. You're not that interested in 'fill in the blank.'" And I know that we're not building a physical building today, five cubits by six cubits and certain feet long, but how many times have you said, "Lord, it's really not that big a deal if I participate in that, is it? It's really not that important, I mean, after all, it's just not that big a deal." And what do we discover? That all throughout scripture it's the little things that really give a picture of where our heart is.

You know what Jesus taught us on the Sermon on the Mount, he said, "Where your treasure is, there will be your heart also." I've heard people through time say, "I don't understand the big deal about God giving. Why does God ask us to give? He owns it all anyway, why does he need it back?" You understand the Israelites didn't need to build the building because God needed the building, the Israelites needed to build the building a certain way because they needed to understand that it's not their opinion, perspective or agenda that mattered, what did God want from them. And today when we come to this passage that we may not want to read in its entirety, we discover that when we remove ourselves and our opinion and our perspective from the equation, then God has our heart. So when we talk about worshiping in Babylon, we're going to discover that it's really not about the little things as much as it is about God having our heart and the little things working out.

The second thing we discover and this is where we actually go to one of the texts, go to chapter 40, verses 44 and 45. In the midst of all of the building construction, the blueprints, all the tasks, I want you to notice what it says in verse 44, "And without the inner gate were the chambers of the singers in the inner court." The singers in the inner court. Go to verse 45, "And he said unto me, This chamber, whose prospect is toward the south, is for the priests, the keepers of the charge of the house." By the way, lest you think this is just a story of days gone by, the Bible says that as believers in Jesus Christ we are now priests unto the Lord and one day when he comes, we shall reign as kings with him. So one of the things that we discover is that when they build this building as a temple, you and I as individuals, that the Lord designed us to do something, he designed us to respond. Remember, worship is our willing response to his self-revealing.

He says they were to sing. Now this is where I can go off for a long time and I promise I won't because I don't have the ability to sing. I don't have a musical bone in my body. The only thing I can play is the kazoo. I mean, that's all I've got, all right? But did you know that Christianity is the only faith that sings? You know, that's it. We're it. I mean, think about it. All the religions of the world, they chant, they shout, but we're the only ones that sing. I mean, think about it. Why do you sing, and I'm not talking sacred music, I'm talking secular music. You sing because there's something within you, there's passion, there's emotion. Why do we participate, why are we always interested in the music that is playing? Because there is something in us, God made us to respond via singing.

Now here's what's interesting. All the way in the New Testament, Colossians 3:16, it says sing unto yourselves psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. It begins by saying sing unto yourselves. Now I understand it was written to the church at Colossae, it was written to a corporate group, but it's also saying that we sing unto ourselves. Now I may be the only one in the room that does this, surely I can't be, but I typically wake up every morning singing a song, and what I've noticed about myself is rarely do I wake up quoting what I preached. Have you ever thought about that? I know you don't quote what I preach. I'm the one who says it three or four times every Sunday, I don't even quote what I preach but I do repeat what we sing. It's interesting.

Then you get to Revelation 5:9 when we're there in the heavens with the Lord for all of eternity, you know what the Bible says? Now for those of you who are long-term Baptists, you're going to struggle with this. It says we're going to sing a new song. I'm sorry. Now I've done this survey a lot throughout the years, typically just an interpersonal conversation, I ask people, "When we get there one day and we sing a new song, what style is it going to be?" You know what the answer is? Whatever they prefer. I've got some folks think we only gonna sing Southern gospel in heaven. There are some folks who think we're only going to sing a capella. There are some folks who think we're only going to sing contemporary, whatever title you want to give to it. But I think it's interesting just like the specifics of the building, when it comes to "singing," when it comes to declaring those truths, how often and I don't think we mean to but we fall in this trap of thinking the Lord is only pleased with that which pleases me. And again, the purpose is to honor the Lord, not to please ourselves.

Can you imagine they're building this building and I can just see the contractors going, "Why does it have to be this size by this size? I don't like this size." It's because the Lord asked for that size. That's why. But we're talking about Babylon, we're talking about a world that is antagonistic to their faith. You and I are walking in Babylon. It's becoming more and more Babylonian by the day. In fact, when we talk about "singing," you know, over the last 50-60 years we've had a lot of discussion, a lot of debate, and can we just be honest, we've had a lot of fighting over this issue. My style, your style. My preference, your preference. But what if what we like no longer becomes a reality? You know, there are places in the world today that are very Babylonian, you know there are places in the world today that to express yourself as a believer in Jesus Christ is actually illegal, you can't gather in certain groups, of certain sizes, you cannot publicly display your faith in an outward means. What do we always say? "Oh, that would never happen here." Did you ever think that we wouldn't gather on this campus for 14 weeks straight? Never thought it, did you? Did you ever think that on Easter Sunday you'd be watching from home? And that was in the midst of a medical crisis, not even a cultural agenda.

I want to show you a brief clip from a movie based on a true story of an individual who was in a very non-welcoming environment to Christianity, was not a believer herself, but found herself influenced by those that were. You're about to watch a video drama of what it's like to worship in a place where it's not allowed to happen. Watch this brief clip.

Video.

We meet on market days. No one pays attention.

The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom should I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life, of whom shall I be afraid? The scriptures tell us that we're the children of light. We see and hear what our tongues cannot always speak. Let us offer a silent praise. What shall we sing?

Take my life and let it be.

End of video.

Did you notice something missing? Instruments. Volume. Everything that we love and appreciate. But what was the one thing they possessed? The message. They knew the words to what they were singing. You know, I think maybe one of the enemy's greatest tactics of the last half century is he got us so consumed with the sound that we forgot the words we were speaking. Remember, Daniel was privately praying in his house, privately, when he was thrown into the lions' den, and as our world becomes more and more Babylonian, maybe we ought to be more interested in the words that are becoming a part of our life than the sound that we so appreciate in life.

But then there's a separation. Fast forward to chapter 42. By the way, I know it kind of feels like we're at the end of the message but we're actually about halfway done. There's a lot of specifics. There's this aspect about singing, and then there's separation, that he called on them that life inside the temple was to be different than life outside the temple.

Let's draw the parallel to our lives today, that the life of a believer ought to look different, sound different and be different than the world that is around them. Look in verse 13 of chapter 42. It says, "Then said he unto me, The north chambers and the south chambers, which are before the separate place, and the holy chambers." Holiness, that which is distinct, that which is different.

Fast forward to chapter 43, verses 9 through 11. You get into chapter 43 and one of the things that we discover is the Lord makes it very clear what this separation is to look like. Now there's two aspects, there are some things that need to be removed from our lives and there are some things that are not to be allowed into our lives. In chapter 43, beginning in verse 9, he says, "Now let them put away their whoredom, and the carcasses of their kings, far from me." Notice in verse 10, it says you shall "shew the house of Israel to be ashamed of their iniquities." Now that's pretty strong language. He says, "You need to remove these things of ill repute." Let me remind you what James 4:4 says, it says, "You adulterers and adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world puts you at enmity with God?" He says, "You need to put away, you need to separate yourself from, you need to create a chasm between the 'things of this world and your temple, your life, your body, your existence.'"

Then it goes on to say and they need to be ashamed. If there's one thing we don't possess anymore, it's shame. We've discussed this all throughout the book of Ezekiel. In days gone past, 50-60 years ago, if you wanted to be up to no good, you had to do it in the middle of the night, in a seedy part of town, with people of ill reputation, but today you can do it in the quietness of your own dwelling place. And yet we're not ashamed anymore. What happens today? When somebody is discovered of living a life that is contrary to the gospel, those who point it out are condemned for being judgmental. And yet what does he say? He says remove this stuff, get it away from you. It doesn't have any place in your life. Take it out of your life. Separate yourself from it. Do you know what that means? That means as a believer in Jesus Christ walking through Babylon, there are places you don't go, things you don't do, and people you don't hang around with. I know it may not be popular, I know it may sound judgmental but he says do not allow them to be a part of your life.

But there's also a different aspect of it. Go to chapter 44, beginning in verse 7. He says, "In that," listen to what he says, listen to this accusation, "you have brought into my sanctuary strangers, uncircumcised in heart, and uncircumcised in flesh, they're in my sanctuary to profane it." We talked about this at the beginning of our study of Ezekiel. The priests who begin this whole mess, rather than addressing the sin in the life of those who brought the sacrifices, they wanted to profit off of what they were bringing, so they refused to address the sin, and so they allowed the sin to come in and when it came in, it festered like what we hate this word, the "c" word, it festered like cancer and it spread all throughout.

You know, the man who the Bible calls the man of greatest wisdom, a man by the name of Solomon, Solomon who exercised such wisdom, such ability, and yet toward the end of his life had probably one of the most unwise predicaments, he had 300 wives and 900

concubines. If I do my math right, that's about 1,200 too many opinions in his life. Now we could go all day about the aspects, but you know what's the most critical about that story is the Bible says that those ladies who he invited into his palace, they brought their idols, they brought their maliciousness, they brought their debauchery. In other words, it's one thing to say I'm not going to go there, it's another thing to say it's not going to happen here.

And can I give just a very practical piece of advice to parents, grandparents, caretakers, whoever you may be? I've got kids, I understand, the world promotes things that they don't see them as that big a deal but remember, we're dealing with the specifics here. Can I give you two phrases you need to use? The first one is really easy. Are you ready? No. The second one is this: not in my house. I remember years ago playing baseball. All the guys on my team were participating a certain activity that affected and impacted their body, and I remember asking my dad, did he mind if I did that to my body? He said, "I don't mind if you do that to your body as long as you don't mind sleeping on the porch." We need more of that, church. We need more of saying, "Do you know what? I can't change the fact that we live in Babylon but I'm not going to let Babylon come into my house."

Abednego. Will you be an Ezekiel in the midst of a world gone Babylonian? Because you'll spend more time out of these walls than you will inside of these walls, and maybe this last year may have been a foreshadowing of what is to come. We may no longer in days ahead have the privilege we've had days past, and so maybe we ought to focus on our temple a whole lot more.