

What's the Message – Lesson 78

We begin our study of Unit Six with a look at the prophet who served during the Babylonian captivity – Ezekiel.

Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Savior. We pray today that the Lord would enable us all to see that we have violated His will and commandments, and like Judah, deserve His justice and punishment. But know and be confident that the Lord is also gracious, and ready to forgive those who truly repent and turn back to Him. Amen.

In the first three verses of the book of Ezekiel, we are told that he was a man who had been a priest in the temple at Jerusalem, and was part of the first group deported to Babylon along with king Jehoiachin. This immediately tells us that he was part of the elite of Judah, considered to be among the leaders of the country. But he was not called by God to be a prophet until the fifth year of his captivity, when he was among the exiles in the land of the Chalde`ans by the river Chebar. So just where, exactly, is that?

Well, a little research explains that the river Chebar was actually an irrigation canal that was connected to the Euphrates River near the Babylonian city of Nippur. And Nippur and Babylon are south of present day Bahgdad. Ezekiel served as a prophet for 22 years, and directed his words to both the people who still remained in Judah as well as those who had been part of the first deportation.

Like Jeremiah, Ezekiel had severe words of warning to those who thought they had escaped God's punishment. He wrote back to those still in Jerusalem and condemned them for their stubborn disobedience. A classic example of this kind of prophecy is found in chapter 7, where we read:

The word of the Lord came to me: And you, O son of man, thus says the Lord God to the land of Israel: An end! The end has come upon the four corners of the land. Now the end is upon you, and I will let loose my anger upon you, and will judge you according to your ways; and I will punish you for all your abominations. . . . Then you will know that I am the Lord. But the Lord also warned Ezekiel that the people of Judah were of a stubborn and rebellious house. As we read in chapter three:

Son of man, go, get you to the house of Israel, and speak with my words to them. . . . But the house of Israel will not listen to you; for they are not willing to listen to me; because all the house of Israel are of a hard forehead and of a stubborn heart. This same idea is repeated in chapter 12, but I think you get the picture. And there was more. Ezekiel was also instructed to speak out against the false prophets who were leading the people “back home in Jerusalem” astray with lies they had made up.

As we read in chapter 13: *Thus says the Lord God, Woe to the foolish prophets who follow their own spirit, and have seen nothing! Your prophets have been like foxes among ruins, O Israel.* As we know from our studies of Jeremiah, who was back in Jerusalem watching things develop from the opposite viewpoint, it was men like the false prophets mentioned here who encouraged king Zedekiah to withhold the annual tribute due to the king of Babylon.

Then Nebuchadnezzar did exactly what had been prophesied, and carried out the Lord’s judgment by turning Jerusalem into a ruin and carrying off the bulk of the remaining population. As God had said many times before, and does so again through Ezekiel, *I will requite your deeds upon your head, says the Lord.*

It was the end of the Southern Kingdom. A governor was appointed to be in charge of what was left, and this man was soon assassinated by a small group of rebels who then fled to Egypt. Only the poorest of the poor nomads wandering through the territory now occupied the land. And with that brief introduction, Teacher, we have established the background of the situation in which Ezekiel preached. But how can this be relevant to us? Teacher, what’s the message that we can take from this?

It is a sorry tale, indeed. Here we have God’s chosen people, a nation who had established itself as one that was productive and prominent, now subjugated and completely overrun by a pagan country with pagan gods. Many in Israel must have drawn the conclusion that the gods of Babylon were mightier than Yahweh. It was a time to test the ancestral faith of Israel. It was a challenge aimed at its very roots. As John Bright writes: “The way was open

to a wholesale loss of faith. . . . The pagan, be he ancient or modern, will understand it as the function of religion to repay him in tangible terms for his worship. He will desire this cozy understanding with his god: that his prayers will return him protection, his dollars more dollars. Nor will he be likely to stick with a religion that does not do this. It was a great temptation, therefore, for a Jew – in whose paganized mind Yahweh had failed him – simply to sink into the background and cease to be a Jew. No doubt many did.”

But there must have been others among the exiles who would not go quite that far in their assessment of what had happened. Many whined that God was not fair, he was punishing them for the sins of their fathers. But Ezekiel attacked this kind of thinking with a fury. In chapter 18 there is this striking statement from God: *Yet you say, Why should not the son suffer for the iniquity of the father? When the son has done what is lawful and right, and has been careful to observe all my statutes, he shall surely live. **The soul that sins shall die.** The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself. Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live? . . . Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God; so turn (to Me) and live.*

Is this statement of Ezekiel, made over 2500 years ago, not just as applicable and pertinent today in our lives as it was then?

Next time we shall learn more from the wisdom of Ezekiel.