

The Big Mistake

“He said to me: O mortal,^[a] stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you. ² And when he spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet; and I heard him speaking to me. ³ He said to me, Mortal, I am sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation^[b] of rebels who have rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have transgressed against me to this very day. ⁴ The descendants are impudent and stubborn. I am sending you to them, and you shall say to them, “Thus says the Lord God.” ⁵ Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them. ⁶ And you, O mortal, do not be afraid of them, and do not be afraid of their words, though briers and thorns surround you and you live among scorpions; do not be afraid of their words, and do not be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house. ⁷ You shall speak my words to them, whether they hear or refuse to hear; for they are a rebellious house.”

Ezekiel is a book of the Bible that I am fascinated by.

I think that too often we immediately run to the Gospels when we want to study a biblical text, but there's a lot of value in sitting with the uncomfortable and just plain weird subjects of some of these Old Testament prophetic texts. I may be a glutton for punishment, but I subconsciously love attempting to write a message on texts from strange books. So before you tune me out, be patient. It might be worth it.

My fascination with Ezekiel began when my youth pastor told me in high school during a lesson on the strange things in the Bible, that there was a particular prophet who cooked bread over human feces. I was intrigued, as any immature high schooler might be. In seminary, my intrigue increased. I took a class called The Theology of Exile, and my professor happened to be a scholar of the psychological trauma in Ezekiel. In this class we studied the exilic texts of Jeremiah and Ezekiel and analyzed the effect of the exile on the Israelites. It gave me a whole new dimension to my favorite eccentric prophet. Most people write Ezekiel off as being bizarre and weird, which to be fair he is, but there's a wealth of knowledge in his messages.

In our text for today, we arrive at an interesting time. This is the time of the Exile, a series of events that spanned about 70 years. It's the time of the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. It's a time of immense political unrest and violence, when the military superpower Babylon wreaked havoc on the middle east. The timeline is long and complex, but essentially the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar claims power over one country after the other. This king and his tremendous military easily sieges control of Israel and its inhabitants, and over several years, takes all citizens of Israel into Babylon as captives, and the nation of Israel would virtually disappear for several centuries. It was around this time when some of the saddest biblical texts were written, like the book of Lamentations, Psalm 94 and Psalm 74. Where Ezekiel was standing in chapter 2 was just the beginning of a long, painful chapter in Israelite history. It was after 10,000 Israelites were taken captive in the "First exile", but before the second, final exile, before Jerusalem and Israel would cease to exist for generations.

Ezekiel is about 30 years old, and he's an Israelite living in Babylon, in an area called Tel-Abib, which literally means "the heap by the flood." All his life, he lived a privileged life training to be a priest. Then life handed him a major curveball when he was 26, and he was taken captive into Babylon- what is modern day Iraq. For

about four years, his life has been not at all how he planned. He's in a lonely wasteland, and he's cut off from the place where he felt God's presence: the temple in Jerusalem. And the age of thirty is when one finally assumed the role of a priest, and instead Ezekiel is stuck in Babylon working the land and being a craftsman. Not exactly what he had in mind.

When we arrive in chapter 2, Ezekiel has just had an astounding vision, one that gives a small glimpse of the glory of God, a vision that leaves him silent for a week. In this vision, the glowing figures bear a strikingly similar resemblance to the ark of the covenant, something he hasn't seen since being in the temple. It's a familiar comforting image. He's starting to realize his whole idea of God has been far too small, that God is bigger and more awesome than he could ever imagine. And he realizes that there is no place on earth where God's presence cannot be felt, even in Babylon. God is right there with him in this wasteland. AND Ezekiel has a new call. While Ezekiel had planned his whole life to be a priest, God is now calling him to be a prophet.

While Ezekiel may have come to the realization that his God is ever present and has never left his side, even in the face of destruction and exile, his fellow Israelites have not. The job laid out for Ezekiel is not an easy one.

The Israelites were a chosen people spoiled rotten. The Israelites' faith was weak to begin with, it was a culmination of generations giving God the cold shoulder in favor of living comfortable, selfish lives. Their entire culture was poisoned by a lazy faith. They were God's chosen people, but for hundreds of years, had abandoned their faith because they wanted to live their own lives, lives that weren't dictated by God's laws. And God had enough. They were God's children, but they had driven God crazy long enough with their disobedience.

Not to give the Israelites any excuse for their behavior, but let's consider these people for a second. Before we really dig in to these Israelites, let's take a walk in their shoes.

Imagine you're an Israelite. All your life, your national identity was centered on the fact that you were God's chosen people. Yet as you grow up, you see your elders and parents not following the religion of your people. Everyone around you is

bending the rules and worshipping their own idols. You see corruption all around. People worship their money and their ego instead of the Lord God. And as you grow up into an adult, bad things keep happening to you and your people. You're always in the middle of a political chess game with other nations, except you are the pawns and have no defense against attack. The terrifyingly powerful and strong nation of Babylon swoops in to replace your leaders with their leaders, and takes 10,000 of your citizens back with him to Babylon.

Whether you are an exile in Babylon or a survivor in Jerusalem, you are starting to feel like God has forgotten you, so you act out even more. You're violent, shirking all of your religious beliefs, and you worship other Gods because your God seems to be nowhere. You only whisper to God through tears when you are feeling completely defeated and alone. But you just can't seem to believe that God is there and cares about you.

And then those Babylonian puppet leaders of yours don't follow orders, and the KING of Babylon comes to your small nation full of vengeance. This king who has control of the entire Middle East sieges your city of Jerusalem for **two and a half years**. This king is cruel, and uses psychological warfare to slowly deprive the city

of food and resources until his army can break through your walls. He literally wipes your nation off the map. Your temple is destroyed, the one place where you could feel God's presence among this chaos, and your people are marched thousands of miles to live in the very nation that destroyed you. Your world as you know it is gone.

Can. You. imagine.

Now the Israelites created their own mess. They made their own bed and now they had to sleep in it. They indeed were briars and thorns in God's side.

These Israelites made a big mistake in this whole mess. Despite the fact that they are clearly in exile and their country is on the verge of disappearing, indicating some sort of punishment for their actions, actions that they think they are hiding from God, they still continue to worship their idols.

AND They believe that their punishment of exile is because of previous generations committing sin against God, **not because of their own doing.** They are enjoying their pity party and feeling sorry for themselves, believing that they are just victims in this exile situation. They aren't taking any responsibility for their own actions.

They are going on living their own lives and worshipping their own idols, and perhaps when things hit a rough patch, that's when they turn to the Lord God. They ask God for some comfort, for an answer to a prayer that they want, and they are surprised when God doesn't give **them** what they want.

It's a classic case of human blindness. We've all been there haven't we? I've been there many, many times. I catch myself falling into this blindness quite often. I've had a few prolonged periods of this human error. It's usually during a rough patch of life and I start feeling sorry for myself. I had a period like this not too long ago.

Right after Matt and I got married, I moved down to Daytona Beach, Florida where Matt worked as a youth and worship pastor. This was a time of all sorts of firsts. First time married and living with Matt, first time being unemployed for a long period of time, first time I wasn't using my seminary degree and instead was a stay at home mom to two cats. It was the first time I was living in a state I wasn't too excited about living in. **And I did not take it well at all.** I commend my husband for living through this dark time with me.

I became a lazy and apathetic person and I didn't take responsibility for my actions. I felt like a victim constantly, where bad things were happening **TO** mewhen actually some of these events were because **OF** me. I had an awful attitude, and I never took responsibility for it. When I did engage in a relationship with God in these periods, it was often to only get something I want, or when all my distractions have abandoned me and I felt truly alone.

Often I would pray to God for a specific request, and I got mad when I get a different answer than what I wanted. When I got a communications director job at a church, I constantly complained that I had to work from home because the church was an hour and a half away, and I complained that I wasn't a minister like I wanted to be. Every time someone addressed me as a pastor's wife my heart hardened with anger. It took me far too long to realize that that job had a purpose, and it ended up helping me get my job here at Calvary.

I was so blind to the truth that God is almighty wonderful and wise, and that God often knows what's best for me. And I wasn't even grateful that the Lord God answered my prayer at all. These victim complexes are so poisonous to our own happiness and personal responsibility. Like the Israelites' mistakes, they lead

absolutely nowhere. And God is standing right next to us, pleading that we open our eyes.

These rough patches are never fun places to be in. Thankfully, I've always emerged from them after a friend giving me some tough love, or on a rare occasion, I had my own epiphany experience. But they happen to all of us.

The Israelites, these people described as briars and thorns to Ezekiel, held a deep inaccurate belief that they were flawless. Being a child of God doesn't mean that we are flawless. We make plenty of mistakes and sin all the time. And God will forgive us and show us the way to a better, happier life, but we have to own up to our actions first. Being a child of God requires a lot of responsibility on our part. But the reward that is in store for us is more than we know.

When we stop feeling sorry for ourselves, when we stop playing the victim and own up to our mistakes, we start living the life that God intended for us. We stop being blind, and our eyes are opened. Our perspective isn't clouded by our poor circumstances, and instead we feel gratitude for what we do have. Instead of being consumed by our own selfishness, we do more for others and find ways to be God's

love on this earth in this moment. And instead of being a victim to others' words and actions, we step back and give ourselves the choice of letting it effect us. We live humbly and lovingly. God gives us a new fresh spirit, and like in Ezekiel chapter 37, we are dry bones that are given life again.

Believe it or not, Ezekiel is a strange book of Bible that at first read can seem depressing and bizarre. But beneath the surface, there is good news in Ezekiel after the destruction of Jerusalem. We find in chapter 11 that despite hundreds of years of disobedience, God will remove the stony heart in the Israelites and give them a new spirit and a new heart. Unfortunately, the Israelites never wised up and their beloved city of Jerusalem was destroyed. But this destruction was a cleansing experience, and it paved the way for a new Israel, an Israel who got to know the redemptive amazing love of Jesus Christ.

Learning from these Israelites' mistakes is a freeing choice for us all. May we all choose to make that choice and live the life God wants for us.

Amen.