

How to Recognize Babylonian Worship?

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3-Year Bible Reading Plan

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Ezekiel 8, I've entitled tonight how to recognize what we might call Babylonian worship. Now we've been talking about navigating Babylon, what does it look to live in Babylon, the world around us as a parallel to Babylon. You may think that this is somewhat of an odd title Babylon and worship, how those two go together, what you may not realize is during what we know as the Babylonian captivity, there are a lot of elements that Babylon instrumented that were very worshipful in nature. Allow me to remind you in Daniel 2 when Nebuchadnezzar creates this huge gold statue, that's an idol, he commands them at the sound of all the instruments, music, to bow down, an act of worship. Even though it was state sponsored, even though it was secular in its nature and pagan at its heart, it was still expressions of worship. When you go later in the book of Daniel, which by the way, is a parallel to Ezekiel, we find that Daniel is in the lions' den. Why was he in the lions' den? Because Darius was convinced to make a law that nobody could pray to anybody but him, again, an act or a disclosure of worship. Again we go to the book of Revelation. In Revelation 17 at the end, this mystery Babylon, behind the scenes of whom we know as the Antichrist and how he does all that he does, there's a description of a worship expression even in those last days. So we see that even though Babylon, shall we say, stifles true biblical worship, all activity is worshipful at its nature. You and I today, we're going to worship somebody or something, the question is whom or who or what or where is it directed.

Now before we read chapter 8, I hope that you read through this as a part of our Bible reading plan. If you did this week, you probably read it and said, "Okay, I'll pick up chapter 9 tomorrow." Let me kind of give you a heads-up about what we're about to read. As I mentioned this morning, Ezekiel finds himself kind of this in between place. He's 10 years after the first brick came down, he's 10 years before the last one. We see the migration of the people, the slow, steady, strategic tearing down of what we know as Jerusalem, but more importantly we discover in chapter 8 that that which led to their demise has been there for a very long time, and the worship that we're about to analyze is not actually taking place in Babylon, it's taking place in Jerusalem. It emulates what it is. That is why when the priests go to Babylon, they fit in so well because they were already Babylonian in their worship style and in their preferences.

Now that being said, chapter 8 is unique because there's a vision that he's about to see where the whole, or shall I say the temple is going to have a hole in it and he's going to be able to see into what we know as the Holy of Holies. Again, typical Ezekiel. It's kind of ethereal, it's kind of eclectic, it kind of really doesn't make sense. And so tonight as we read through this, don't get caught up in, "Well, how did that happen and where did that happen, and how did he get....?" Just focus on what he sees and then what he sees and how it will teach us.

Beginning in verse 1 of chapter 8,

1 And it came to pass in the sixth year, in the sixth month, in the fifth day of the month, as I sat in mine house, and the elders of Judah sat before me, that the hand of the Lord GOD fell there upon me. 2 Then I beheld, and lo a likeness as the appearance of fire: from the appearance of his loins even downward, fire; and from his loins even upward, as the appearance of brightness, as the colour of amber. 3 And he put forth the form of an hand, and took me by a lock of mine head; and the spirit lifted me up between the earth and the heaven, and brought me in the visions of God to Jerusalem, to the door of the inner gate that looketh toward the north; where was the seat of the image of jealousy, which provoketh to jealousy. 4 And, behold, the glory of the God of Israel was there, according to the vision that I saw in the plain. 5 Then said he unto me, Son of man, lift up thine eyes now the way toward the north. So I lifted up mine eyes the way toward the north, and behold northward at the gate of the altar this image of jealousy in the entry. 6 He said furthermore unto me, Son of man, seest thou what they do? even the great abominations that the house of Israel committeth here, that I should go far off from my sanctuary? but turn thee yet again, and thou shalt see greater abominations. 7 And he brought me to the door of the court; and when I looked, behold a hole in the wall. 8 Then said he unto me, Son of man, dig now in the wall: and when I had digged in the wall, behold a door. 9 And he said unto me, Go in, and behold the wicked abominations that they do here. 10 So I went in and saw; and behold every form of creeping things, and abominable beasts, and all the idols of the house of Israel, pourtrayed upon the wall round about. 11 And there stood before them seventy men of the ancients of the house of Israel, and in the midst of them stood Jaazaniah the son of Shaphan, with every man his censer in his hand; and a thick cloud of incense went up. 12 Then said he unto me, Son of man, hast thou seen what the ancients of the house of Israel do in the dark, every man in the chambers of his imagery? for they say, The LORD seeth us not; the LORD hath forsaken the earth. 13 He said also unto me, Turn thee yet again, and thou shalt see greater abominations that they do. 14 Then he brought me to the door of the gate of the LORD'S house which was toward the north; and, behold, there sat women weeping for Tammuz. 15 Then said he unto me, Hast thou seen this, O son of man? turn thee yet again, and thou shalt see greater abominations than these. 16 And he brought me into the inner court of the

LORD'S house, and, behold, at the door of the temple of the LORD, between the porch and the altar, were about five and twenty men, with their backs toward the temple of the LORD, and their faces toward the east; and they worshipped the sun toward the east. 17 Then he said unto me, Hast thou seen this, O son of man? Is it a light thing to the house of Judah that they commit the abominations which they commit here? for they have filled the land with violence, and have returned to provoke me to anger: and, lo, they put the branch to their nose. 18 Therefore will I also deal in fury: mine eye shall not spare, neither will I have pity: and though they cry in mine ears with a loud voice, yet will I not hear them.

Now I realize this is a whole lot to unpack in a very brief amount of time but the first thing I want to address is this, that everything that Ezekiel saw that was happening was not visible on the outside per se. When people would walk by the temple, when they'd walk by Jerusalem, they would look up at that great structure and say, "Everything looks just fine," but as you "dig through the wall," as you find your way into the inner court, you discover that what was happening on the inside, what was happening as a part of those worship experiences was corrupt and to the point where God calls it an absolute abomination. And so what we see happening in this vision in chapter 8 is then taken into Babylon and it fits seamlessly into what Nebuchadnezzar had already established.

So if you and I today are going to be not only as believers in Jesus Christ distinct in our lifestyle, distinct in our worship, distinct in your faith, we must be able to have discernment and recognize what does Babylonian worship look like? What does it look like to sing and to pray and to bow and to say all the right words in all the right places but for all the wrong reasons? So I kind of want to just walk through chapter 8 very briefly tonight and just address the concerns that the Lord brought up in their lives so that they will "resonate" in ours.

The first thing I want to share is that this Babylonian worship is not some new thing. Solomon taught us nothing is new under the sun. What you and I are trying to navigate even though it may be a global pandemic, Babylonian worship has been here for a very very long time. In fact, if you want to be very strict about how long it's been here, then you go all the way to the book of Genesis and a man by the name of Nimrod. Nimrod is who initiated everything that Babylon took and they ran with. But in verse 3 it says, "the spirit lifted me up between the earth and the heaven, and I saw the visions of God," and it talks about "the image of jealousy" that was before him. This takes us back to the very first not earthly but chronological Babylonian worship. It took place in the book of Isaiah 14 when whom we know as Lucifer, the lighted one, who later in Ezekiel 28 it talks about his tabrets and his voice and his incredible expressions of worship, it says there in Isaiah 14, he says, "I will say in my heart, I will exalt above the throne of God. I will place my throne above his. I will place my authority above his authority." Is that not an act of jealousy? Jealousy is when you want that which is not rightfully yours and you'll do whatever it takes to get it, and here it talks about, "I saw a spirit of jealousy."

So when whom we know today as Satan desires our attention and our worship, it's out of a spirit of jealousy. When Babylonian worship takes place, it is a jealous worship because they're desiring the attention and the affection that is reserved for God alone. So when we talk about what we're going to talk about tonight, this is not something new. This is not "contemporary, 21st century, Western civilization." No, this has been around for millennia and technically speaking even longer than what you and I know as humanity.

The second thing that is not strictly from this passage but I think is necessary to understand, Babylonian worship is very persuasive. In the book of Jude, we referenced it briefly this morning, it talks about the angels that left their first estate. When Lucifer enacted that first act of jealousy, when he initiated that first rebellious act, that first Babylonian worship, if you'll allow me to say so, it was not done in isolation, it was not done in "solitary confinement." The Bible says in multiple places, not only Jude, 2 Peter, 1 Peter, other places, that there was a host of angelic beings that joined him in the rebellion.

Now there is great debate about Revelation 12 where it talks about the third of the stars of heaven or the third of the angels. John Milton in his classic work, "Paradise Lost," claimed that was the number of angels that fell with Lucifer. There are many that would claim that's actually a prophetic passage about those that are still yet to fall but can we all agree there was a bunch of them? He actually persuaded those that were created by God according to Hebrews 1, to be his ministering spirits. He persuaded them to rebel against their Creator and to follow him even though he had no resume to prove it. Think about that. If he had "sold" this idea of a "heavenly coup" to the angelic host and they had asked him, "What is your resume for success?" It would have been a blank page and yet somehow he sold it to them. You know, it reminds me of some of the old phrases, you know, he can sell ice to an Eskimo, whatever it may be, these expressions, he's persuasive.

Why is that important? Because Babylonian worship is incredibly persuasive and we see that people are easily attentive and attractive to it. There is a pretense, though, there is a marker, so to speak. Verses 9 and 10, he talks about the wicked abominations that they do, "I went in and saw; and behold every form of creeping things, and abominable beasts, and all the idols of the house of Israel, poured upon the wall round about." Now I know you may be thinking to yourself, well, I've been in a lot of worship services, I see a lot whether it be on the internet, tv, I have friends in different places around the world, and particularly in the Western world what we know as idolatry, a physical specimen of public worship is not as prevalent as it might be in the Eastern world and you're absolutely right. If you go to the Eastern world and you talk about Eastern religions, they often have artifacts or items of attention or affection in their homes, in the street, in their places of worship, they will bow down, they will burn incense, but the word idolatry or an idol is not limited to a physical item of interest, so to speak. In fact, the broad yet biblical definition of an idol is anything that gets in our way of or obstructs our view of the one true God. And so there can be idols aplenty, that's why 1 John 5:21 says, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols."

But when we talk about worship and we look at verse 10, creeping things, abominable beasts, idols, house of Israel portrayed on the walls about, it's interesting how oftentimes the physicalness, the materialisticness of our worship can become Babylonian. Let me make this very simple: when you care more about the "building of worship" than the one you worship, it is idolatrous. And we joke about being a Baptist, that we've had all these church splits over the color of the carpet and all that, what we're basically confessing to is idolatry, that we were more interested in that which surrounded us, what the walls looked like, what the colors were made of, what the fabrics were than the reason that we gathered together. You see, we talk about Babylonian worship and we go, "Oh, that's somebody else." No, it might be us.

Moving on to verse 11 and 12, it says, "there stood before them seventy men of the ancients of the house of Israel, and in the midst of them stood Jaazaniah the son of Shaphan, with every man his censer in his hand; and a thick cloud of incense went up. Then said he unto me, Son of man, hast thou seen what the ancients of the house of Israel do in the dark, every man in the chambers of his imagery? for they say, The LORD seeth us not; the LORD hath forsaken the earth." There is a reason we call it a sunrise service and it's not just because the ladies were there in Matthew 28 and Luke 24 and such, and they discovered that the tomb was empty at the break of day. Yes, that's a theological reason but the other reason we call it that is because he is the light and in him is no darkness at all.

Lest you think I'm advocating for only "worshiping" during the "sunlight hours," let me refer you to Acts 20 where it says that Paul, yes, you guessed it, preached all night long. But there was a guy by the name of Eutychus who was sitting in the window who fell and he died. They laid upon him and he rose. Let me just warn you: if you're going to go to an all night service, just don't sit in the window seat, so to speak. That's not usually a very good idea. But the thing that I want you to notice is the privacy. They did it in the dark. In other words, what was really happening behind the scenes was to where the truth, the motive, and the intent could not be discovered.

Now this is where I want to spend just a moment because it's real easy to focus on actual physical light. Obviously we have light in this room, there's sometimes that we have worship opportunities where it may be a little bit dimmer, a little bit darker, and can we just be honest, everybody's got their preference when it comes to that but this is what I want to share with you which is so important: when it comes to the reading, the studying, the preaching, the hearing, and the doing of the word of God, do you actually have the ability to see what's written? In other words, when somebody gets up before you and says, "Just trust me, this is what God said." Don't trust them. Why? I want to see chapter and I want to see verse.

And I'm a big fan of technology, don't get me wrong, I love the access that we have to technology. I mean, I have the ability to stalk my own teenagers on an app. I know everywhere they're going. I know how fast they're driving. I love technology but do you realize that technology, at least in the written form, it's pixelization, it's pixels, it's not real. And I will tell you, on more than one occasion, I've discovered that some of the

electronic Bibles don't have the same words as the paper Bibles. They can change them and you don't know any the better. When somebody says, "Trust me, this is what it says." Or, "Trust me, this is what God said." You need to be very leery.

It happened in the dark. In other words, the priests, the leaders were coming out to the public and just saying, "Just take our word for it. This is what we're supposed to do." It was their idea, their construct, and anytime anything happens when it comes to our expression of faith, we ought to be able to ask what book, what chapter, and what verse do you base this expression on. By the way, if you have somebody who is rebellious in their life, comes to you for wisdom, seeking your stamp of approval on what you know is not of God in their life, there's a real easy retort. Just say, "Okay, friend, that's what you would like to do. Can you please recite the verse of scripture in context that God gave you to validate your decision?" You know what you will receive in response? An entire moment of silence because it's how frequently we say, "But God said," or, "I believe," when there's no scriptural validity. So when I say privacy, done in private, understand it's their own private interpretation, in the darkness of their own thoughts with no scripture to validate what they're doing.

Next in verse 14, it says, "he brought me to the door of the gate," and there are these women, "they're weeping for Tammuz." And I use the word "perverted." It's one of those words that has a lot of connotations to it, but in this case I'm actually going to look at it very much literally. The word means "to twist or to turn." What's interesting is that this god Tammuz, this idol Tammuz is the Greek equivalent is Adonis. It was the god of physical beauty, the god of attraction, and the god of fertility. In other words, Babylonian worship flaunts appearances. It flaunts attractiveness. It says the way it looks on the outside is more important than the reality of what is on the inside.

Now don't get me wrong, I believe that when we gather to worship, that for the sake of all of us we ought to shower and bathe and do our best there, but I think you know what I mean. It's when we sensualize our "gatherings of faith" we really have to question. There is a very famed secular music artist who has supposedly, I'm just going to take his word for it, has come to faith in Christ about the last five or six years, a man who lived his life on the road, giant, enormous stage productions of very carnal expression. And one of the, shall we say, chastisements that he has made in recent days about the contemporary, when I say contemporary, don't think style, think 21st century church, is how often the words we say, the actions we do could just have easily been done at his former engagements. Just leave it there because I want to close on verse 16 because this is where it all climaxes.

It says, "he brought me into the inner court of the LORD'S house, and, behold, at the door of the temple of the LORD, between the porch and the altar, were about five and twenty men, with their backs toward the temple of the LORD, and their faces toward the east; and they worshipped the sun toward the east." Now I know you're thinking, "I've never done that. I would never do that. If I saw anybody that was turned in this manner, obviously I would say something, I would address it." And I understand but let's kind of unpack this in the last few moments that we have. I've entitled it Pharisaical. You see,

Pharisaical means there is an appearance of righteousness but there is nothing. In fact, Jesus in Matthew 23 called the Pharisees white-washed tombs. They looked pretty on the outside but they're filthy on the inside. And it talks about that here they are in the inner temple, notice that nobody can see the direction they're facing because they're on that inner chamber. They're hidden. Ezekiel had to even dig in to see what was happening. They went in, they came out, and everybody just presumed everything was great, but you'll notice that their back is to the altar of the Lord, their face is to the east, and here lies kind of the crux of Babylonian worship being Pharisaical. It may take place in the right place, at the right time, and it may even have the outward appearance of everything that we would expect, but it's the exact opposite of what needs to occur.

I don't know if you've ever done a study in scripture about the directions of east versus west, but allow me to briefly describe. As a general rule, anytime somebody is traveling from east to west, they're headed towards the presence of God, west to east, much the opposite. When Cain was removed from Eden, remember which direction he went? To the east. He went eastward, did he not? When the Lord established the temple which the vision is given of here in Ezekiel, when these priests would enter the Holy of Holies, they would enter from east to west. The Israelites, we spoke about it briefly this morning when they came out of the Egyptian bondage and slavery and they wandered in the wilderness, God took extensive lengths to make sure that the direction that they entered the Promised Land was east to west. You do realize that the shortest route was actually south to north. They wouldn't have had to cross what we know as the Jordan River. It would have been a whole lot easier but God pictured for them coming from the east to the west. East to west is always the direction of the Lord, west to east is always the direction of man. By the way, let me fast forward to the last book of the Bible. When the Lord tells us to watch for the Lord, he does not say watch the western sky, does he? He says keep your eye on the eastern sky. And as you read Zechariah and Revelation, that is the direction by which the Lord Jesus Christ descends at his Second Coming.

Now why is this important? I want you to notice their position. They're facing east. They were going the way of the world. True biblical expressions of faith always will go the opposite of the world, it will go against the grain. Now I'm going to get a tad bit scientific before we draw to a close tonight. The last time I checked and I am not a scientist by any means so I'm going to use vague general precepts, what we know as planet earth where we are right now is spinning at a rate of roughly 1,000 mph, what direction? West to east, is it not? You realize that by simply seated or standing still, you're going the wrong direction. The only way to go the "right direction" is to actively go contrary to. Why is that important? Because the easiest way to get trapped into Babylon is just to put it in neutral and just to say, "Just let it be. It's not a big deal. I'll just ride it out." Well, when you ride it out, what are you doing? You're going west to east. That's why in the old days they would say, "Go west, young man."

At the end of the day, we could get into all the nuances of chapter 8 and what "Babylonian worship" would look like if you'd really get in the details, but what it really looks like are those that claim to be worshiping the one true God who look like the world, sound like the world and are actually going the direction of the world. In the place and at

the time appointed by God, Ezekiel saw much contrary to. May we not be guilty of the same.