

Message #2

Ezekiel 1:1-3

Have you ever pursued something or been involved in something that you considered to be the thing to do and then discover it was not the thing to do? Have you ever had a dream to do something you never did? Perhaps you thought you would have a career in some area and then things happened and you ended up going totally a different direction in life? Perhaps as a young man or young lady you thought life would turn out different than it actually did.

One of the most amazing missionary stories of a change of focus is the story of David Livingstone. David Livingstone was totally convinced that God was calling him to China. In the year 1830, at age 17, he entered the University of Glasgow to study medicine and theology so he could go to China. For eight years he was totally focused on going to China. He studied medicine, language and theology. Just as he was getting ready to go, the Opium Wars were taking place in China and the London Missionary Society decided we are not going to send you to China, we are going to send you to Africa. For years and years his focus had been on China and at the last minute his plans were changed and he went to Africa.

That is exactly the same kind of thing that happened to Ezekiel. In fact, this is how the book of Ezekiel opens. Ezekiel opens with a change of plans. What we see here and what we learn here is this:

WHEN A SERVANT OF GOD FINDS HIMSELF IN SOME PLACE OR SITUATION THAT HE NEVER THOUGHT HE WOULD BE, HE NEEDS TO KNOW THAT GOD IS STILL SOVEREIGN AND HE HAS A SOVEREIGN PLAN TO USE HIM RIGHT WHERE HE IS.

When this book of Ezekiel opens, we are introduced to Ezekiel and the background and circumstances that led to everything in his life that is about to happen.

There are four introductory historical facts we learn in these opening verses:

HISTORICAL FACT #1 – We are introduced to the date of the book. **1:1-2**

Ezekiel is very precise in dating things and he begins by informing the readers that this all started in the 30th year, on the 5th day of the 4th month in the 5th year of Jehoiachin's exile.

Now the 30th year probably refers to the age of Ezekiel. In other words, Ezekiel was 30-years old when he received this vision and all of this happened. This was exactly the age of Jesus Christ when He saw heaven opened at His baptism (Matt. 3:16; Luke 3:21).

Now what is significant about this age information is that 30 years of age was the age when priests entered into their priestly ministry for Israel (Num. 4:3, 23, 30, 39, 43; I Chron. 23:3). Priests were to serve from age 30 to 50 doing their ministries at the Tabernacle and later the Temple. It was their job “to oversee the work of the house of the LORD” (I Chron. 23:4).

What we specifically learn from verse 3 is that Ezekiel was a priest. This is probably why Ezekiel is so focused on the future Temple in Jerusalem that will be eventually built (Ezek. 40-43). He was very familiar with the Temple and the Furniture and the ceremonies.

As he was growing up in a priestly line, he was obviously anticipating the time when he would be 30-years-old. That would be the year when Ezekiel would begin serving his term as a priest. But that is not what was going to happen to Ezekiel. His plans would be dramatically altered.

We know from **verse 1** that Ezekiel was “among the exiles” and we learn from **verse 2** that this happened in the fifth year of King Jehoiakin’s exile. **King Jehoiakin was exiled or deported to Babylon from Jerusalem in 597 B.C., so the 5th year of this exile places this around 593 B.C..**

Ezekiel had been deported to Babylon during Nebuchadnezzar’s second deportation in 597 B.C..

Nebuchadnezzar made three raids on Israel:

Raid #1 - 605 B.C. when he took Daniel and some Temple items (II Chron. 36:5-8).

Raid #2 - 597 B.C. when he took Ezekiel and remaining valuable Temple items (II Chron. 36:9-18).

Raid #3 - 586 B.C. when he destroyed Jerusalem (II Chron. 36:19-20).

According to II Kings 24:12-17, it was during the second deportation when Jehoiachin, along with his house, his officials and many leading men, was deported and taken captive. At this time all remaining Temple items were taken and every gold item that Solomon had made for the Temple was cut in pieces and taken.

It must have been sad for Ezekiel to see this. He was planning on serving at this Temple and he saw everything fall apart. Ezekiel was taken to Babylon. His dream and focus of being a priest in the beautiful Temple of Jerusalem was shattered at age 25.

It must have been an emotional moment because Ezekiel’s entire career was seemingly over. His dreams of serving as a priest for God in the Temple were gone. There was no temple for him to serve in and no temple responsibilities for him to carry out in Babylon.

Undoubtedly Ezekiel knew why this had all happened. The reason why Israel had been exiled was because she was under the judgment of God (Lev. 26:33; Deut. 28:64). So Ezekiel’s dreams had been shattered as a result of the judgment of God and for a brief while, he was just another one of the exiles. **However, God’s hand was on him.** God had other plans for Ezekiel. He still had an amazing plan for his life. In fact, it was in this very context when God would reveal some of the most amazing prophecies to Ezekiel.

What Ezekiel did not realize is that God still had an incredible plan for his life and a ministry. Even though things were dark for Israel, **God was about to change his whole focus—Ezekiel would not be a great priest, he would become a great prophet.** This was very rare.

There are only three priests who became prophets during the Babylonian captivity period:

1) Jeremiah; 2) Zechariah; and 3) Ezekiel. So this is a rare work of God.

Ezekiel would give his first prophecy when he is 30-years-old and he will give his last prophecy when he is about 52-years-old. So for 22 years, Ezekiel's ministry was totally different. He was a priest, but what he became was a powerful prophet.

Charles Spurgeon always dreamed of going to college. He trusted Christ at age 15 and he went to church and learned much from his grandfather. He was asked to preach in a church at age 20 and he did and the rest is history. He never did go to college, but he became one of the great students of Scripture with an incredible library and he became the "prince of preachers."

C. I. Scofield was an attorney and he was a good attorney. He was elected to the Kansas House of Representatives and at age 29 he was appointed as U.S. District Attorney in Kansas. But he trusted Jesus Christ as Savior and he got involved with carefully studying the Scriptures under the guidance of his Pastor in St. Louis, James H. Brookes, a powerful systematic Bible expositor and dispensational theologian. In the next years, C. I. Scofield would end up a minister in churches; he would write the Scofield Reference Bible; he would write a course for Pastors; he would start a mission agency CAM Missions and he would become the mentor of Lewis Sperry Chafer, who started Dallas Theological Seminary. What an amazing change of careers.

That is the story of Ezekiel. He was planning on becoming a priest, and he ended up a prophet.

You put God first in your life and you get serious about carefully understanding His Word and you never know where that will take you. God may use you right where you are or He may totally change everything.

HISTORICAL FACT #2 – We are introduced to the location of the writer. **1:1**

Most Jewish exiles at this time lived in Babylonia, which is modern day Iraq. During the days of Ezekiel, there were primarily three locations where Jews lived: Egypt, Judah and Babylonia. Ezekiel lived in Babylonia.

These specific visions came to Ezekiel while he was among all the Jewish exiles who lived by the "river Chebar" (Kebbar) in Babylonia. As we pointed out last week, the Chebar River was a large canal that made a semicircular loop around the city of Babylon, in what today is known as southeastern Iraq. Babylon was located about 53 miles south of modern day Baghdad. Tel Aviv (Aviv) (3:15) was located about 50 miles south of Babylon.

The canal tied into the Euphrates River north and south of Babylon, which became a key water supply line. This canal was navigable and brought water into the city of Babylon and all surrounding areas.

Actually this was not a bad place to live. If you were going to live in captivity, this wouldn't be all that bad. This is where Ezekiel was when all of this started. This "river Chebar" is a key place all throughout this book (**Ezek. 1:1, 3; 3:15, 23; 10:15, 20, 22; 43:3**). This will be a spot where God will reveal Himself and His plan to Ezekiel.

Do you want to know what that tells us? We do not have to be living in the ideal religious place to be greatly used by God. We can be used by God anywhere, even in Kalamazoo. God may use you greatly when you are living in a secular world doing a secular job. You could be locked up in jail and still be a great instrument in the hands of God.

That is the story of Ezekiel. He is by the Chebar River and this is the last place you would think God would powerfully work and it is the last place you would think logically that God would sovereignly be. But this is where He was.

So this is where Ezekiel was. He had been taken captive at age 25 and is now living 50 miles south of Babylon by this canal. In fact, there is no evidence that he ever visited Jerusalem again after he moved to Tel Abib.

We cannot confine God and His Word to just sacred places like Jerusalem. God's Word and God's power are able to do wonderful things in various places all over the world.

HISTORICAL FACT #3 – We are introduced to the writer of the book. **1:3**

The pronouns "I was" and "I saw" refer to Ezekiel. So Ezekiel is the writer of the book. We specifically learn that the writer's name is Ezekiel, which means God strengthens and that Ezekiel was a priest who was the son of Buzi.

Ezekiel's father, Buzi, was apparently in Zadok's branch of Aaron's family. Some have suggested that Buzi may have been the son of Jeremiah.

HISTORICAL FACT #4 – We are introduced to the circumstances of the book. **1:3**

Ezekiel says that when he was "among (betok) the exiles" or "in the midst of the exiles." In other words, Ezekiel was among the thousands of citizens of Jerusalem who had been deported to Babylon. Ezekiel uses this word 116 times, which is more than all of the other O.T. books combined. It shows us something important. **Ezekiel saw himself as someone living in the midst of the people. He was one of them. He was an exile, too.**

He was a priest and he was a prophet, but he saw himself as one of them. He was not some prima donna pope. He did not walk around demanding that people bow down to him and kiss a ring. He lived with the people; ate with the people and taught the Word of God to the people.

Now life for the Jewish people was not bad. It was not like they were living in a concentration camp. Nebuchadnezzar was actually good to the Jewish people, which is why God blessed him.

Any political leader will prosper who is good to Israel and good to Christians.

They had many freedoms to own their own homes; to pursue their own businesses; to have their own personal interests and even travel freely. Actually Jeremiah has sent a letter from Jerusalem to the people in Babylon and told them this (Jer. 29:4-7).

So Ezekiel would become a very important man to these exiles. God would use him to communicate His Word on all kinds of subjects. God would reveal His plan through Ezekiel.

Now while Ezekiel was living life in the midst of the people, “The word of the LORD” came “expressly” to Ezekiel. Later the verse says, “the hand of the LORD came upon him.” **The Word of the LORD refers to God’s Word and the hand of the Lord refers to God’s power.**

Ezekiel obviously felt or sensed a real urgency or weight of something from God. He was overwhelmed by something sensory that he knew was from God. God’s hand was upon him. This phrase occurs seven times in **Ezekiel 1:3; 3:14, 22; 8:1; 33:22; 37:1; 40:1.**

Any man who has God’s hand on him so that he can proclaim His Word is a blessed man and a very unique man.

God does not leave His people without a man to communicate His Word. His people were exiles and they needed to know God’s Word and God had His man Ezekiel right there to teach them.

Now what we learn about God is that He gives His Word through His messengers in any context and in any geographical location. All people of all nationalities need to hear the Word of God whether they are in times of freedom or slavery. This is what God raised up Ezekiel to do. **Israel was enslaved and God raised up a man to communicate His Word.**

Just recently there has been much talk about Martin Luther King Jr., who most people hold up as a great hero of black people. Frankly, as far as God is concerned, he is no hero because not only did he not point black people to Jesus Christ so they could be saved from their sins, he led them away from Christ.

I read an amazing article entitled “*Was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. A Christian.?*” You can look it up on-line. It was written by a black woman and Christian scholar who did tremendous research and concluded, Dr. Martin Luther King was no Christian.

She said he was a blasphemer and heretic. She said when she was growing up all she heard for 32 years was that King was a great civil rights leader. She said he did do some good things. She said I do appreciate the fact that I don’t have to sit in the back of a bus. I could go to the University of my choice. I married the man I wanted. But she said as she examined his works, she concluded he was a pathetic preacher and theologian who has done much harm to the black people.

She concluded he was not a Christian. She examined King's writings and concluded He denied the authority of the Bible; He denied the virgin birth; He denied the resurrection of Jesus Christ. She said what makes me so mad as a black woman is that these religious black movements are not leading the black people to heaven, they are leading them to hell. She said if you follow their teachings, they do not proclaim the truth of the Word of God. As a leader, he should have been preaching the Word of God to the downcast. Instead he was promoting a message of social reform. She said had King preached the truth of God's Word, the black people would have been much better off than they are now because he did not do it.

God wants His people knowing His Word. He raises up men not to preach social reform, but to preach His Word so that people can be right with Him. **Israel was enslaved to the Babylonians and God raised up Ezekiel not to promote some civil rights march, but to teach His Word and reveal His Word.**

Now what Ezekiel saw is described in **verse 1:**

(Observation #1) - He saw the heavens opened. 1:1a

The opening of heaven is not found in any other O.T. writing. Ezekiel is the only prophet of whom it is said he saw the heavens opened. Ezekiel had nothing to do with this action.

Ezekiel is 30-years-old and he saw the heavens opened while he was on the banks of the river. It has often been observed that Jesus was about 30-years-old when He saw the heavens opened while on the banks of the Jordan (Matt. 3:16; Luke 3:21). What this teaches us is that his prophecy is coming straight out of heaven and it is closely connected to Jesus Christ.

(Observation #2) - He saw visions of God. 1:1b

Now for Ezekiel, this opened heaven brought about the Word of God; the visions of God and the hand and power of God.

So God singled out Ezekiel at age 30 and He is going to reveal visions to Ezekiel that he will in turn communicate to the people.

- 1) He receives a vision of the glory of the LORD. 1:3-28;
- 2) He receives a vision of the scroll in a hand. 2:9-33
- 3) He receives a vision of the glory of the LORD on the plain. 3:22-23
- 4) He receives a vision of a defilement of the Holy Temple. 8:1-18
- 5) He receives a vision of the destruction of the people in Jerusalem. 9:1-11
- 6) He receives a vision of the destruction of Jerusalem. 10:1-22
- 7) He receives a vision of a destruction of wicked leaders and departure of God's glory. 11:1-25
- 8) He receives a vision of the dry bones. 37:1-10
- 9) He receives a vision of the New Temple, New Worship, New Restored Land. 40:1-48:35

God gave Ezekiel these visions and God's power would be with Ezekiel as he communicated God's Word.

Now the visions that Ezekiel sees are visions of God and His governmental dealings with Israel. God will give His Word through Ezekiel. That Word will reveal His immediate will; His near future and His far future program.

So Ezekiel's job as a prophet will be to go to Israel and communicate the things God reveals to him about what He is presently doing; why He is presently doing what He is doing and about what He is going to do in the future.

Now Israel is not living where she is supposed to be living; in fact, she is living in a foreign land. However, God raised up men to proclaim His Word to them, while they were in captivity.

Being in exile does not mean you don't have a home. Being in exile does not mean you don't have any roots. Being in exile means you know where you are supposed to live, but you can't go back yet.

We know where we are supposed to live. We are citizens of heaven. But we can't go there yet. In the meantime, God has given us His Word. By carefully studying His Word we learn to cope as we live out our days in exile.