

## **Ezekiel 1:28-2:2—The Call to Ministry: Counting the Cost**

### ***Memory Verses***

Ezekiel 36:26-27 NKJV

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup> I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.

### **God Calls Ezekiel to be a Prophet**

Last week we saw the amazing way God revealed Himself to Ezekiel—the awesome vision of the cherubim, wheels, platform, throne, and the likeness of the glory of the Lord. Why did God do this? Consider that Ezekiel was most likely dejected, discouraged, disillusioned, disheartened, and despondent in his current circumstances. Why? What had happened to Ezekiel? Ezekiel had been taken as a captive or prisoner from Jerusalem to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar in the second wave of deportations. However, Ezekiel was a godly man—he didn't actually deserve to be a part of God's divine discipline of the the kingdom of Judah (the southern kingdom of the nation of Israel) for their continued rebellion against God (we'll come back to this concept of "why bad things happen to good people" later). As a result, he was most likely confused, wondering about his future, saddened that he may never be a priest after having already completed 5 years of training in Judah, and probably wondering where God was in all the difficult circumstances that he was facing.

What Ezekiel didn't know was that life was going to get harder, in fact much harder. God was preparing to do a mighty work both in and through Ezekiel. Ezekiel would be given a very difficult message to deliver to a very rebellious and hard hearted people who would not appreciate him at all. He would be hated, ridiculed, jeered at, and even physically restrained. His message would go against the tide of the ever popular false prophets, and seemingly against the national interests of His own people. His own people would actually turn out to be his enemies, and to top it all off, as a part of one of his show and tell messages or action sermons, Ezekiel's wife, "the desire of his eyes," died, and Ezekiel was not even allowed to mourn for her. *Overall, doesn't this sound like what the New Testament says that Christians should expect to face (see John 15:18-21)?*

God's prophets often had a hard road to travel, but arguably Ezekiel's was one of the hardest. Living in captivity in wicked Babylon, rejected by his countrymen, given a tough and unpopular message, his action sermons often requiring a lot of physical sacrifice and discomfort, and the loss of his wife will all result in what can only be described as a very difficult and extremely lonely life for Ezekiel—if he wasn't relying on the Lord it would have been an impossible calling.

So what would give Ezekiel the strength, desire or willingness to obey God in such difficult circumstances? *Only the right perspective!* If we understand who God is, then we won't fear anything or anyone else. We will lose our fear of man and so we can be a genuine God pleaser.

Also, since we know who holds the future, then it doesn't matter how bad our circumstances may be, or how discouraged we may feel, or how deep the hurt is that cuts our heart; our future is always secure because we are safe in the hands of the Father and Son (John 10:28-29). The ultimately security for the believer is that when this life is over we have a glorious home in heaven waiting for us—we are citizens of heaven (Ephesians 2:19, Philippians 3:20) and adopted into God's eternal family (Romans 8:15, Galatians 4:5, Ephesians 1:5).

Again, why did God reveal Himself to Ezekiel in such a glorious and majestic vision? Because Ezekiel needed the right perspective. He needed to know who God was, and that God was in control, and that God loved His people (represented by the rainbow of grace around the throne). After seeing this glorious and majestic vision, and seeing God's glory, there would be no comparison; everything and everyone else simply faded into nothingness when compared to the glory and majesty of God. The apostle Paul had a similar experience. He had seen the glory of God, and therefore the things of the world had very little hold on him. He described it this way:

Philippians 3:7-11 NLT

I once thought these things [religious achievements, reputation etc] were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. <sup>8</sup> Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ <sup>9</sup> and become one with him. I no longer count on my own righteousness through obeying the law; rather, I become righteous through faith in Christ. For God's way of making us right with himself depends on faith. <sup>10</sup> **I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death, <sup>11</sup> so that one way or another I will experience the resurrection from the dead!**

This is God's desire for all of His children. Let's start reading in Ezekiel and learn about Ezekiel's calling. Remember that God is talking from above the chariot throne that Ezekiel saw in chapter 1—Remember that chapters 1-3 record one event, the time when God first revealed himself to Ezekiel.

**Ezekiel 1:28-2:4**

**This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.**

**So when I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard a voice of One speaking.**

**2:1 And He said to me, "Son of man, stand on your feet, and I will speak to you."**

**<sup>2</sup> Then the Spirit entered me when He spoke to me, and set me on my feet; and I heard Him who spoke to me. <sup>3</sup> And He said to me: "Son of man, I am sending you to the children of Israel, to a rebellious nation that has rebelled against Me; they and their fathers have transgressed against Me to this very day. <sup>4</sup> For they are impudent and stubborn children. I am sending you to them, and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God.'**

Today we we will cover some really important and interesting aspects of Ezekiel's personal life and difficult circumstances that we can apply to ourselves personally. Also from these verses we can glean some general principles that apply to every believer's call to ministry, because every believer is called to ministry to serve God in their own unique way.

## **Ezekiel 1:28 NKJV**

**This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.  
So when I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard a voice of One speaking.**

Notice here that God only started talking to Ezekiel once Ezekiel had humbled himself, and Ezekiel only humbled himself once he saw and responded to the glory (literally; weight or majesty or awe) of the Lord. This is a well proven principal; we will only have an accurate view of ourselves once we gain a right understanding of who God is. If we are in awe of God, then we won't be in awe of ourselves. This is true perspective—a perspective based on reality and not the lies and prideful deception of our sinful nature—we always tend to think of ourselves as better and stronger than we really are.

This is why true perspective always results in genuine humility. The more we really see or experience and know God, then the bigger God becomes and the smaller we become in comparison (e.g. John the Baptist—John 3:30). A proud person may know a lot of facts about God, but they don't understand who God is, especially His attributes; holiness, power, majesty, glory, splendour, might, love, humility, and kindness (e.g. the pharisees—Matthew 23:23).

v 28 **I fell on my face, and I heard a voice of One speaking:** wouldn't it have been enough for Ezekiel to have just seen the vision? No, an experience isn't enough, no matter how awesome it may be. We need the word of God so we can:

\* Know what is true and false, right and wrong.

\* Know what God's will is.

\* Understand explicitly and exactly what God is like—His nature, essence, and character—because a vision can be interpreted any old way. On our own, we interpret things based on our own very limited and often very skewed or incorrect knowledge, understanding, beliefs, attitudes, and of course our previous experiences.

The only purpose that signs and wonders have in the bible, when initiated by God, are to confirm the word of God.

## **Mark 16:20 NKJV**

And they went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with *them* and confirming the word through the accompanying signs. Amen.

Signs and wonders, even visions or dreams (see Jeremiah 23), are never a replacement for the word of God.

***Personal Application: How do we gain a godly perspective? How do we begin to experience the glory of God? Do we all need to have an amazing vision?***

How do we grow in our understanding of who God is? **By digging into the word of God—by making ourselves available for Him speak to us.** As we take the time to seek God through prayerfully meditating on the Scriptures the Spirit speaks to us and reveals Himself to us—transforming us from glory to glory by the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:18).

God makes it very clear in His word that the only people who God reveals Himself to are those who actually take the time to seek Him with their whole heart, those who are willing to respond to the conviction or drawing of the Holy Spirit, those who are willing to confess their sins and repent, turning away from sins and turning to God. Listen to what Jesus taught about seeking God:

Matthew 7:7-8 NLT

“Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you. <sup>8</sup> For everyone who [continues to] asks, receives. Everyone who [continues to] seeks, finds. And to everyone who [continues to] knocks, the door will be opened.

Now we'll look at some scriptures that describe how to seek God with our whole heart:

Psalm 9:1 NKJV

I will praise You, O Lord, with my whole heart;  
I will tell of all Your marvellous works.

This shows that God enjoys it only when our praise is genuine, when we are fully committed to Him, and our the affections of our hearts are not divided between the Lord and the world.

Now we go to Psalm 119, the great Psalm that instructs us on how to study the word of God, the attitude we should have when studying the word of God, the blessings that follow when we seek God through His word, *and how our obedience is directly linked to how sincerely we seek God through His word*. I've pulled out the six verses from Psalm 119 that directly mention seeking the Lord with our whole heart. Notice how seeking the Lord with our whole heart is directly linked to greater obedience.

Psalm 119:2 NKJV

Blessed are those who keep His testimonies,  
Who seek Him with the whole heart!

Psalm 119:10 NKJV

With my whole heart I have sought You;  
Oh, let me not wander from Your commandments!

Psalm 119:34 NKJV

Give me understanding, and I shall keep Your law;  
Indeed, I shall observe it with my whole heart.

Psalm 119:58 NKJV

I entreated Your favour with my whole heart;  
Be merciful to me according to Your word.

Psalm 119:69 NKJV

The proud have forged a lie against me,  
But I will keep Your precepts with my whole heart.

Psalm 119:145 NKJV

I cry out with my whole heart;  
Hear me, O Lord!  
I will keep Your statutes.

What can we learn from this? What is the psalmist saying? “We are as close to God at any given moment as we choose to be.” God says, “Draw near to Me and I will draw near to you” (James 4:8). The only thing limiting our closeness to God, our ability to obey Him, and our understanding of the greatness of His glory, majesty, power, mercy, lovingkindness, and holiness, is our desire or willingness to “submit to God, resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (James 4:7). Basically, the more we love the world, the less we will love God (James 4:4), the less God is able to reveal Himself to us, and therefore the less we will be able to obey Him.

How willing we are to give up the things of the world (ungodly relationships, TV, music, videos, books, internet, games, social media, sin, etc) is a measure of how genuine our desire to draw near to God is. As we replace these worldly things with the things of God (prayer, scripture, fellowship, evangelism, helping others, etc), we will experience more of His presence and therefore His glory. However, God never forces us to love Him more. It is always our choice. The bottom line is this:

*Every choice I make is either to love this world and the things of this world, or love God and enjoy intimacy with Him.*

***A personal testimony—my story about my struggle to give up TV—counting the cost of being a disciple of Christ.***

Imagine that someone gifted you with 7,500 hours. Not sleep time, not eating time, not work time, but those precious hours of free time that we can use to learn, grow, and achieve. I was gifted with 7,500 hours, and I choose to waste them watching TV. That’s right, at least 7,500 hours wasted. (5 hours a week x 50 weeks a year = 250 hours. 250 hours x 30 years (15-45 yrs old) = 7500 hours. Think about it, that’s me spending 7500 hours programming my mind with the things of the world: lust, violence, immorality, greed, decadence or pleasure seeking, selfishness, and bad attitudes and values—and I wondered why during those years that I had trouble with my desire for spending time with God and digging into His word. I also wondered why I was so prone to sin and being selfish. For all those years I was typically spending 5 hours a week feeding my flesh, strengthening the desires of my sinful nature, and grieving the Holy Spirit. So much for me living a life worthy of the calling to which I was called (See Ephesians 4:1).

Yes, I was still reading my Bible and going to church etc. In fact for 4 of those years I was preparing sermons each week. Talk about being a hypocrite—telling others to draw near to God on Sundays while I spend hours and hours indulging my flesh, feeding and fulfilling the desires of my sinful nature. Now, did I see it like that when I was indulging my sinful nature in worldly entertainment? No. I had many justifications, excuses really—nothing actually true, but I convinced myself that TV and movies weren’t so bad and were necessary for good mental health (an escape from reality). Today, I’m still far from perfect and still have other things that I’m struggling to submit to God, but I am making progress, and I’m not looking back—as Paul said in:

Philippines 3:12-16 NLT

I don’t mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me. <sup>13</sup> No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: **Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead,** <sup>14</sup> I

**press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize** for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.

<sup>15</sup> **Let all who are spiritually mature agree on these things. If you disagree on some point, I believe God will make it plain to you.** <sup>16</sup> *But we must hold on to the progress we have already made.*

Our sanctification is a lifelong process. *But we can speed it up if we want to!* I love what Ray Comfort says, “save yourself some pain.” If we are to draw near to God, then we must unplug from the things of the world—which includes being careful with who we spend our time with—ungodly company will corrupt us. The faster we do this, then the less we suffer because of the consequences of our sin—remember when tempted that satan comes only to steal, kill, and destroy (John 10:10).

1 Corinthians 15:33-34 NKJV

Do not be deceived: “Evil company corrupts good habits.” <sup>34</sup> Awake to righteousness, and do not sin; for some do not have the knowledge of God. I speak this to your shame.

Again, God is not forcing us to do this, but it is His desire for us, and we will benefit greatly from it. We will become a vessel of honour, prepared and ready for the Master’s use (2 Timothy 2:21). In essence this was what God was doing with Ezekiel—God was calling him away from the world and into a deeper relationship with Himself. The battle is always a battle for our hearts, our affections. Who will we choose to love more?

Why go through all this? What does this have to do with Ezekiel? Everything! What we will see in the book of Ezekiel is a man just like us, who was willing to serve God with his whole heart because he loved God with his whole heart because he made the decision to seek the Lord with his whole heart. That’s why he was able to be used by God in such a mighty way. Remember the quote by Dwight Lyman Moody:

***“The world has yet to see what God will do with a man fully consecrated to Him”***

This is the challenge for us today and through the coming weeks as we study Ezekiel. God wants to use us as much as He used Ezekiel—in fact even more. Like Elijah (James 5:17), Ezekiel was a man just like us, and yet God used Him. God could use Ezekiel and Elijah because they were consecrated (set apart) to Him. They were consecrated (holy) to God because they set their affections (their hearts) on God, and made the tough decision to, on a day by day basis, forsake the temporary pleasures of the world (Luke 9:23—Then [Jesus] said to them all, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.”).

The questions for each of us are simple. How available do I want to be so God can use me? Will I continue to seek satisfaction and gratification from the world or from the Lord? Will I continue to serve myself or serve the Lord? Remember that, if we by faith give up the things of the world, then we will discover that at God’s right hand are pleasures forevermore. However, we will never realise or experience what God has to give us unless we are first willing to let go of the passing pleasures of sin. ***Will I believe that the pleasure God offers is greater than what the world offers?***

Psalm 16:11 NKJV

You will show me the path of life;  
In Your presence is fullness of joy;  
At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

The good and eternal gifts that God gives are always better than the temporary gifts that the world loves to distract us with.

**Ezekiel 1:28b-2:2 NKJV**

**So when I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard a voice of One speaking.**

**2:1 And He said to me, “Son of man, stand on your feet, and I will speak to you.”**

**2 Then the Spirit entered me when He spoke to me, and set me on my feet; and I heard Him who spoke to me.**

v 1 **Son of man:** “This is the first of 93 times God used this phrase to address Ezekiel. It is a title that emphasises that he is a man among men, and something of a representative of humanity.” (David Guzik)

“The phrase *son of man* is a Hebraism which emphasises Ezekiel’s insignificance or mere humanity. ‘Son of’ indicates ‘partaking of the nature of’ and so when combined with *adam*, ‘man’, it means nothing more than ‘human being’.” (Taylor)

v 1 **Son of man:** “*Son of Man* was also a phrase Jesus used to refer to Himself, recorded some 80 times in the Gospels. Yet Jesus’ use of the phrase is more connected with the idea from Daniel 7:13, where *Son of Man* describes the divine Messiah.” (David Guzik)

v 1 **Stand on your feet:** “Service, not servility, was what God desired from this man. In those days servants always stood in the presence of their Master.” (Smith)

God is also calling us to stand on our feet. Once we bow down in submission to God, the next step is to stand up so we can serve Him.

***Personal Application: God’s commands are God’s promises of provision and enablement***

Notice that God first commanded Ezekiel to stand up, and then the Spirit entered into Ezekiel (came upon him) and literally stood him up. This is always the pattern. God first commands and only then will God provide everything required to make it happen. Again, God gave Ezekiel a command, and then through the Spirit gave Ezekiel the strength to perform that command. Most of the commands in the scriptures are humanly impossible to perform the way God intends them to be. For example, loving our enemies, forgiving from the heart those who hurt us, dying to self, enduring persecution etc. All we need to obey the Lord is to trust the promises in His word and submit to and rely on the Holy Spirit.

“If God has called you to do a certain thing, He’ll give you the power to do it. The best position you can come to is to recognise that you are not able in your own strength to do the job the Lord has given to you.” (McGee)

***Personal Application: Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people—how God uses trials to shape and mould us?***

Just to put things into perspective, the reality is that none of us are good in the sense that God is good or perfect, therefore none of us deserve to receive anything good from God—the wages of sin is death. This means that if God gave any of us what we actually deserve, we would go straight to hell. The fact is though that every good and perfect gift comes from the Father above (see James 1:17), who blesses both the good and evil (see Matthew 5:45—we follow God’s example and act according to His nature when we love our enemies).

However, practically speaking, we look around and we see people who are trying to do the right thing but suffer abuses and setbacks that are out of their control, while others who really don’t care about others and are openly corrupt seem to be getting along just fine. This was Ezekiel’s predicament. The corrupt priests were allowed by Nebuchadnezzar to continue serving in the temple in Jerusalem, but Ezekiel, himself also a priest in training, was one of those righteous people who were taken captive. For Ezekiel, this would have been a bitter pill to swallow. It would have seemed completely unfair. Can you imagine Ezekiel thinking or praying, “Please God, don’t let the Babylonians take me away as a prisoner. I’ve done all I can to serve you and be faithful to you. Please don’t let this ruthless dictator take me to a strange land where I will be a slave, hundreds and hundreds of kilometres away from my homeland and the temple I love so dearly and so look forward to serving you in.”

This is what I imagine Ezekiel’s perspective to be after he was taken captive. But sometime after the second wave of deportations, God gave Jeremiah a revelation or prophecy that turned everything on its head. Listen to what God spoke through Jeremiah to all the Israelites (both those still in Judah and those already taken captive) sometime after the second wave of exiles (including Ezekiel) were taken captive to Babylon.

Jeremiah 24:1-10 NLT —*The Parable of the Good and Bad Figs*

After King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon exiled Jehoiachin son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, to Babylon along with the officials of Judah and all the craftsmen and artisans, the Lord gave me [Jeremiah] this vision. I saw two baskets of figs placed in front of the Lord’s Temple in Jerusalem. <sup>2</sup> One basket was filled with fresh, ripe figs, while the other was filled with bad figs that were too rotten to eat.

<sup>3</sup> Then the Lord said to me, “What do you see, Jeremiah?”

I replied, “Figs, some very good and some very bad, too rotten to eat.”

<sup>4</sup> Then the Lord gave me this message: <sup>5</sup> “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: **The good figs represent the exiles I sent from Judah to the land of the Babylonians. <sup>6</sup> I will watch over and care for them, and I will bring them back here again.** I will build them up and not tear them down. I will plant them and not uproot them. <sup>7</sup> I will give them hearts that recognise me as the Lord. They will be my people, and I will be their God, **for they will return to me wholeheartedly.**

<sup>8</sup> **“But the bad figs,”** the Lord said, **“represent King Zedekiah of Judah, his officials, all the people left in Jerusalem,** and those who live in Egypt. I will treat them like bad figs, too rotten to eat. <sup>9</sup> I will make them an object of horror and a symbol of evil to every nation on earth. They will be disgraced and mocked, taunted and cursed, wherever I scatter them. <sup>10</sup> And I will send war, famine, and disease until they have vanished from the land of Israel, which I gave to them and their ancestors.”

If you were Ezekiel, what would your response be to Jeremiah's message about the good and bad figs? Would it change your perspective? Would it give you hope? *If you believed God's word it would.* **This is a case where the circumstances don't change, but our understanding or perspective of those circumstances does change by hearing and understanding the word of God.** Ezekiel now understands that:

- \* God removed him from Judah to spare him from the terrible judgement that was coming upon those living in Jerusalem.
- \* God was watching over them and caring for them, even in a foreign land (God's heart was for them, despite their circumstances).
- \* God would one day take them back to Judah (though not in Ezekiel's lifetime—many of God's promises are often big picture or eternal—they are bigger and go beyond our temporary circumstances. E.g. God promises that when a believer dies they will go to heaven).
- \* God would use their present circumstances to build them up and not tear them down.
- \* By God's grace, they will come to experience a deeper relationship with God as they repent and seek Him with their whole heart.

I wanted to share this with you all because this is true for all God's children. Don't judge God's favour towards you or love for you by the circumstances you are in. Just because God allows bad things to happen to you or allows you to be tempted doesn't mean that He is angry with you, or doesn't love you any more, or has forgotten about you. The opposite is also true; just because things are going well for you, it doesn't necessarily mean that God is pleased with you. Remember that our circumstances are not evidence, for or against, of God's love and favour towards us. ***The evidence of God's love for us is clearly demonstrated by Christ's substitutionary death on the cross—He died in our place, the innocent for the guilty (see Romans 5:8).*** We walk by faith and not by sight (see 2 Corinthians 5:17)—we are looking for the eternal reward.

The following is a letter that Jeremiah sent to the captives which contained another message from God. Like the message we just read, it also was sent after the second wave of exiles were sent as captives to Babylon.

*Jeremiah 29:1-23 NLT—A Letter to the Exiles living in Babylon*

Jeremiah wrote a letter from Jerusalem to the elders, priests, prophets, and all the people who had been exiled to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar. <sup>2</sup> This was after King Jehoiachin, the queen mother, the court officials, the other officials of Judah, and all the craftsmen and artisans had been deported from Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup> He sent the letter with Elasah son of Shaphan and Gemariah son of Hilkiyah when they went to Babylon as King Zedekiah's ambassadors to Nebuchadnezzar. This is what Jeremiah's letter said:

**<sup>4</sup> This is what the Lord of Heaven's Armies, the God of Israel, says to all the captives he has exiled to Babylon from Jerusalem: <sup>5</sup> "Build homes, and plan to stay. Plant gardens, and eat the food they produce. <sup>6</sup> Marry and have children. Then find spouses for them so that you may have many grandchildren. Multiply! Do not dwindle away! <sup>7</sup> And work for the peace and prosperity of the city where I sent you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, for its welfare will determine your welfare."**

<sup>8</sup> This is what the Lord of Heaven's Armies, the God of Israel, says: "Do not let your prophets and fortune-tellers who are with you in the land of Babylon trick you [into thinking that you will go back home within two years—see Jeremiah 28:1-9]. Do not listen to their dreams, <sup>9</sup> because they are telling you lies in my name. I have not sent them," says the Lord.

<sup>10</sup> **This is what the Lord says: "You will be in Babylon for seventy years. But then I will come and do for you all the good things I have promised, and I will bring you home again. <sup>11</sup> For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. <sup>12</sup> In those days when you pray, I will listen. <sup>13</sup> If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me. <sup>14</sup> I will be found by you," says the Lord. "I will end your captivity and restore your fortunes. I will gather you out of the nations where I sent you and will bring you home again to your own land."**

<sup>15</sup> You claim that the Lord has raised up prophets for you in Babylon. <sup>16</sup> But this is what the Lord says about the king who sits on David's throne and all those still living here in Jerusalem—your relatives who were not exiled to Babylon. <sup>17</sup> This is what the Lord of Heaven's Armies says: "I will send war, famine, and disease upon them and make them like bad figs, too rotten to eat. <sup>18</sup> Yes, I will pursue them with war, famine, and disease, and I will scatter them around the world. In every nation where I send them, I will make them an object of damnation, horror, contempt, and mockery. <sup>19</sup> For they refuse to listen to me, though I have spoken to them repeatedly through the prophets I sent. And you who are in exile have not listened either," says the Lord.

<sup>20</sup> Therefore, listen to this message from the Lord, all you captives there in Babylon. <sup>21</sup> This is what the Lord of Heaven's Armies, the God of Israel, says about your prophets—Ahab son of Kolaiah and Zedekiah son of Maaseiah—who are telling you lies in my name: "I will turn them over to Nebuchadnezzar for execution before your eyes. <sup>22</sup> Their terrible fate will become proverbial, so that the Judean exiles will curse someone by saying, 'May the Lord make you like Zedekiah and Ahab, whom the king of Babylon burned alive!' <sup>23</sup> For these men have done terrible things among my people. They have committed adultery with their neighbour's wives and have lied in my name, saying things I did not command. I am a witness to this. I, the Lord, have spoken."

Again, we can learn so much about how to deal with our difficult circumstances as well as some unexpected difficulties we will often face. What does God tell the captives in Jeremiah chapter 29:

- \* v 5 **build homes and plan to stay**: Don't try to run away or escape the trial. Settle down and settle in for the long haul. Be productive in your current predicament, as difficult as it may be.
- \* v 7 **And work for the peace and prosperity of the city where I sent you into exile**: Don't fight against the trial, but rather work with it as best you can. Work hard to be a blessing to those who God has allowed to hold you captive and as much as it depends on you get along with them (see Romans 12:18). God puts us in dark places so we can be lights in a dark world (see Matthew 5:14).

\* v 7 **Pray to the Lord for it, for its welfare will determine your welfare:** It's so important that we pray for God's help for our situation, whether it be: family issues, work problems, broken relationships/friendships, or physical, emotion, spiritual, or financial hardship etc. We need to think beyond ourselves. God is a generous and gracious God, and He wants to use us to be a blessing to those around us, even if they are wicked and cruel Babylonians (so to speak) who are holding us captive. God is saying here that when they are blessed, we are blessed.

\* v 8-9 **Do not let your [false] prophets... trick you:** People will be trying to get you to give up, to seek the easy way out, to quit trying—**they will be trying to help you escape the trial, instead of supporting and encouraging you in your walk with God as you go through the trial**—get rid of these sympathisers who will only make you feel sorry for yourself and encourage you to throw a pity party for yourself.

For example, there are many today, even in the church, who will encourage two people with a struggling marriage to divorce because life would be easier for them if they did. These people may mean well, just like the false prophets probably did, but they will bring disaster because they will distract you from God's will for your life and so will delay the opportunity for growth that would have come if you had stuck with God's plan for your life (God will have to set up another trial for you). **God's promise is to be with us in the trial and to carry us through the trial, not to always deliver us from the trial.** Consider what Paul says in:

2 Corinthians 4:7-12 NLT

We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves.

<sup>8</sup> We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. <sup>9</sup> We are hunted down, but never abandoned by God. We get knocked down, but we are not destroyed. <sup>10</sup> Through suffering, our bodies continue to share in the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be seen in our bodies.

<sup>11</sup> Yes, we live under constant danger of death because we serve Jesus, so that the life of Jesus will be evident in our dying bodies. <sup>12</sup> So we live in the face of death, but this has resulted in eternal life for you.

\* v 11 **For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope:** Remember that God's good plan for His nation was for them to live as captives in a foreign land with their own land in ruins. If you had asked any of the Israelites living as captives in the land of Babylon they would have questioned God's good plan—it wasn't comfortable or easy and there was a lot of sadness and pain (see Psalm 137). It would have taken a lot of faith to submit to God and accept that it was the best thing for them.

However, with hindsight we can see that it really was the best plan—it cured the nation of Israel of their idols, something that had been a curse for the nation for over 1,000 years (see Isaiah 2:8-9, Jeremiah 18:15) and had caused their downfall repeatedly. The 70 year captivity fixed their obsession with worshipping dumb idols—God said, "if you want idols, it's idols you'll get, I'm sending you to the land of idols to cure you of your obsession with idols. After all these idols, you'll never want to see another one" (see Jeremiah 50:38). It's like when you work at McDonalds or Red Rooster, initially getting to eat the food is great, but after smelling it and preparing it day after day you never want to eat it again.

## Conclusion

1. We must remember that God's plans are always what is best for us, even if they are not easy or comfortable, and they cause us pain. God is doing a work *in* us that will benefit us personally, and also doing a work *through* us which is for the benefit of those around us. We just need to trust God that He knows best and learn to submit to His will. This means that we don't try to escape the trial but instead ask God for the strength to go through the trial or difficulty.
2. God's calling us to serve Him will involve great sacrifice. The more of the old life we are willing to sacrifice, the more available we will be for God to use us.
3. If we are to obey God consistently, we must first seek Him through His word with our whole heart (see Psalm 119). If we want to live a fulfilled life we need to seek God with our whole heart, and not be double minded (See James 1:8 and 4:8)
4. Where God commands He also enables and provides. God's commands are also His promises. By His Holy Spirit coming upon us He will empower us to do, say, or think whatever His word commands.
5. To have an accurate view of ourselves, we must first have an accurate view of God. God reveals Himself to us we seek Him through prayerful meditation on and study of the Scriptures. Coming to an awareness of God's greatness results in genuine humility.