

Ezekiel 20:18-32—The History of Israel’s Rebellions and God’s Great Mercy—Part 2

Memory Verse

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. ²⁷ I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.

Revision—Outline of Ezekiel chapter 20:

1. Introduction—the elders come to Ezekiel to enquire of God (1-4)
2. Israel’s rebellion against God in Egypt (5-9)
3. Israel’s rebellion against God in the wilderness (10-17)
4. **Israel’s rebellion against God in the promised land (18-32)—today**
5. The future judgement/separation of Israel at the end of the Tribulation (33-38)
6. The restoration/regathering of Israel—present day and Millennial Reign (39-44)
7. Coming judgement upon the land of Judah—Babylonian exile (45-49)

Last week we learned that when the elders of the nation of Israel came to Ezekiel to enquire of God, God told them that He wouldn’t answer them because of their persistent unfaithfulness. God then went on to describe how they were rebellious in Egypt, and then also in the wilderness, even after they had seen all the good that God had done for them and His might power displayed when He brought them up out of Egypt.

We saw that their refusal to cleanse themselves of the idols of Egypt, which represent worldly things, caused God to become very angry with them, angry enough to destroy them. However, God didn’t destroy them, not because they didn’t deserve it, but because of His Name’s sake. God had publicly made a promise to bring His people out of Egypt, so He was obliged to do so—God always keeps His promises—He can’t lie.

Then they were rebellious in the wilderness, and again angered God so much by their persistent unfaithfulness that God wanted to destroy them; but again, God didn’t. Why, because God had made a promise to bring them into the promised land, and so **for His Name’s sake**, He didn’t destroy them in the wilderness, so He could keep His promise.

However, what we saw in the wilderness is the terrible consequence of being a hard-hearted, compromising Christian; the first generation of Israelites who were freed from bondage in Egypt never got to enjoy the benefits and privileges of entering the promised land. Instead they wandered around in a barren wasteland for forty years, until all except two of the males, 20 years and above, from the first generation, had died (see Numbers 14:29-30).

We learned from this that there is a legitimate wilderness experience, where God teaches us His word, and we learn that He loves us and is faithful to His promise to never leave us nor forsake us (see Hebrews 13:5). In effect, we learn to trust God and depend upon Him.

However, if we choose to love sin and not leave worldly things behind, then we will never grow and mature and will remain as “learner” or “baby” Christians, never able to be effectively used by God, because, like the first generation of the children of Israel, our unbelief causes us to remain dominated by our sinful nature, and we will waste our lives chasing sinful things. *We won’t enjoy the world because we don’t belong to it any more, and we won’t enjoy our relationship with Christ, because we are not fully committed to Him.*

4. Israel's rebellion against God in the promised land (18-32)

Ezekiel 20:18-20 NKJV—God appeals to the next generation in the wilderness to obey Him

18 “But I said to their children in the wilderness, ‘Do not walk in the statutes of your fathers, nor observe their judgments, nor defile yourselves with their idols. **19** I am the Lord your God: Walk in My statutes, keep My judgments, and do them; **20** hallow My Sabbaths, and they will be a sign between Me and you, that you may know that I am the Lord your God.’

v **18 But I said to their children in the wilderness, ‘Do not walk in the statutes of your fathers:** It was too late for the first generation of Israelites, they had had their chance to enter the Promised Land at Kadesh Barnea, but they refused to enter, not being willing to trust God to overcome the giants, strong warriors, and fortified cities. Therefore, God told the next generation of Israelites to learn from the example of their fathers, and to not be like they were—unbelieving and defiled by the things of the world.

v **19 I am the Lord your God: Walk in My statutes, keep my judgments, and do them:** God gives the next generation of Israelites, most of whom were born and raised in the wilderness, the same opportunity to walk in His ways, to follow the path that leads to life in the promised land. The same is true for us today—God gives every person the same opportunity to follow and obey Him. Will I choose to love and obey God or love the things of the world instead?

Ezekiel 20:21-24 NKJV—God's mercy towards Israel in the wilderness

21 “Notwithstanding, the children rebelled against Me; they did not walk in My statutes, and were not careful to observe My judgments, ‘which, if a man does, he shall live by them’; but they profaned My Sabbaths. Then I said I would pour out My fury on them and fulfill My anger against them in the wilderness. **22** Nevertheless I withdrew My hand and acted for My name's sake, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the Gentiles, in whose sight I had brought them out. **23** Also I raised My hand in an oath to those in the wilderness, that I would scatter them among the Gentiles and disperse them throughout the countries, **24** because they had not executed My judgments, but had despised My statutes, profaned My Sabbaths, and their eyes were fixed on their fathers' idols.

v **21 Notwithstanding, the children rebelled against Me:** Amazingly, the second generation was almost as bad as the first, but at least they had a little more faith and were prepared to trust God enough to enter the promised land. Again, we see that our ability to enjoy God's blessings is dependant on how much faith we have.

v **21-22** We see the same pattern; God letting them know that He was so angered by their unbelief and sin that He wanted to destroy them, but He didn't because of **His Name's sake**. God had made a promise to bring them into the promised land, and so He did.

v **23 I raised My hand in an oath to those in the wilderness, that I would scatter them among the Gentiles and disperse them throughout the countries:** Just like God judged the first generation by not allowing them to enter the Promised Land, God also pronounced a judgement on the next generation; if the nation persisted in their rebellion against Him, then they would eventually be scattered among the nations. They would no longer be able to enjoy the good things that God had searched out for them and wanted to give them.

Application: The importance of finishing well

These warnings and predictions of exile and being scattered among the nations are found in Deuteronomy 4:25-31 and 28:63-68. In effect, God was warning the people, even before they went into the promised land, that if they didn't continue to trust Him, they they would lose the privilege of living in God's Promised Land. This is a warning to us that we need to finish well or we will lose our reward also—*Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but that we may receive a full reward.* (2 John 8) We would do well to learn from the example of the Israelites.

“In the future, when you have children and grandchildren and have lived in the land a long time, do not corrupt yourselves by making idols of any kind. This is evil in the sight of the Lord your God and will arouse his anger.

²⁶ *“Today I call on heaven and earth as witnesses against you. **If you break my covenant, you will quickly disappear from the land you are crossing the Jordan to occupy.** You will live there only a short time; then you will be utterly destroyed. ²⁷ For the Lord will scatter you among the nations, where only a few of you will survive. ²⁸ There, in a foreign land, you will worship idols made from wood and stone—gods that neither see nor hear nor eat nor smell. ²⁹ But from there you will search again for the Lord your God. And if you search for him with all your heart and soul, you will find him.*

³⁰ *“**In the distant future [latter days or end times], when you are suffering all these things, you will finally return to the Lord your God and listen to what he tells you.***

³¹ ***For the Lord your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon you or destroy you or forget the solemn covenant he made with your ancestors.*** (Deuteronomy 4:23-31 NLT paraphrase)

Consider how this message from God would have stung the Israeli elders sitting before Ezekiel. They were in exile—they were living proof that the nation had persisted in their sins.

Actually, Ezekiel's generation was only a partial fulfilment of this. The complete fulfilment would happen in A.D. 70 when Rome destroyed Jerusalem and dispersed all the Jews to many different countries around the world and not just to Babylon.

Application: Fulfilled prophecy

We are a very privileged generation to be able to see God bring the nation of Israel back into their land, the Promised Land, for the second time. Remember, this is not because they deserve it, but simply because God promised to long ago (An example is Isaiah 11:11-12, where God promises to bring them back a second time from many different nations). Again, the modern nation of Israel is living proof that God keeps His promises **for His Name's sake**, and not because they or we are worthy or deserving of any of His benefits and blessings. The promise in Deuteronomy 4:30—*In the distant future, when you are suffering all these things, you will finally return to the Lord your God and listen to what he tells you*—will be fulfilled when Jesus comes back at the end of the seven year Tribulation.

Ezekiel 20:25-26 NKJV—Sin becomes it's own punishment

²⁵ *“Therefore I also gave them up to statutes that were not good, and judgments by which they could not live; ²⁶ and I pronounced them unclean because of their ritual gifts, in that they caused all their firstborn to pass through the fire, that I might make them desolate and that they might know that I am the Lord.” ’*

v 25 **I also gave them up to statutes that were not good:** You have probably heard it said that the worst thing that God can do is let us have what we want—*the sin we enjoy will eventually kill us*. The case in point here is that the Israelites followed the customs and religion of the nations around them, even to the extent that they murdered their own babies—they were literally killing themselves off. These worldly values have not changed—the world system has little to no respect for human life. *But what is sad is that the church today is fast becoming like the world*. Don't you think that if God judged Israel for being like the world, then the church will also be judged for being worldly?

v 26 **That I might make them desolate and that they might know that I am the Lord:** While the consequences of their sins were a painful consequence in and of themselves, God's judgement would also eventually come—exile from the land.

Ezekiel 20:27-28—Examples of Israel's sin in the promised land

²⁷ “Therefore, son of man, speak to the house of Israel, and say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God: “In this too your fathers have blasphemed Me, by being unfaithful to Me. ²⁸ When I brought them into the land concerning which I had raised My hand in an oath to give them, and they saw all the high hills and all the thick trees, there they offered their sacrifices and provoked Me with their offerings. There they also sent up their sweet aroma and poured out their drink offerings.

v 28 **They saw all the high hills and all the thick trees, there they offered their sacrifices:** It's hard to imagine such ingratitude. God graciously and mercifully allows them to enter the beautiful and fruitful Promised Land, but they then quickly turn and use the blessings that God gave them to worship other gods. However, before we are too hard on them, we as believers are also prone to do the same thing. I have often been ungrateful and taken for granted the good things that God has given me (money, job, family, job, hobbies, time, health, holidays, sport etc) and used them for my own pleasure and benefit, instead of giving thanks for them and using them for God's glory.

Ezekiel 20:29-32 NKJV—If we persist in sin then God won't reveal Himself to us

²⁹ Then I said to them, ‘What is this high place to which you go?’ So its name is called Bamah to this day.” ³⁰ Therefore say to the house of Israel, ‘Thus says the Lord God: “Are you defiling yourselves in the manner of your fathers, and committing harlotry according to their abominations? ³¹ For when you offer your gifts and make your sons pass through the fire, you defile yourselves with all your idols, even to this day. So shall I be inquired of by you, O house of Israel? As I live,” says the Lord God, “I will not be inquired of by you. ³² What you have in your mind shall never be, when you say, ‘We will be like the Gentiles, like the families in other countries, serving wood and stone.’

v 29 **What is this high place to which you go?** Typically, Israel would use the tops of hills and mountains as places of idol worship, where they would offer sacrifices and incense to other gods. It ended up being that any place that was used for idol worship, regardless of its elevation, came to be called a “high place”. Bamah simply means, “high place”.

v 29 **Are you defiling yourselves in the manner of your fathers:** Now Ezekiel gets to the point. After describing the idolatry of the nation of Israel over the centuries, Ezekiel asked the elders sitting with him this very pointed question—“**Are you defiling yourselves in the manner of your fathers**”. In other words, “*aren't you just as guilty*

as your ancestors?” God can see right through their charade, their outward form of religion. God knows that their hearts are hard. The only message that God is going to give them is a reminder of their sins, and that they need to repent if they are going to hear from Him again.

Application: The Word of God reveals our heart

For the word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires. ¹³ Nothing in all creation is hidden from God. Everything is naked and exposed before his eyes, and he is the one to whom we are accountable. (Hebrews 4:12-13)

I would say that this is the hardest part concerning reading the Bible; the Bible, the Word of God, convicts us of our sin. It's often not what we *want* to hear, but it is what we *need* to hear. The law is like a spotlight that reveals every dark and hidden secret in us.

Here, the word of God to the elders through Ezekiel would have been a crushing blow to their ego and self-esteem, but it's exactly what they needed to hear. The Word of God reveals our sin so we can repent of it and come back into relationship with God. Beware though, because if we don't repent, our hearts will grow even harder and the consequences even worse—*“Be careful then, dear brothers and sisters. Make sure that your own hearts are not evil and unbelieving, turning you away from the living God”* (Hebrews 4:12).

Fortunately, the Israelites while in exile did soften their hearts and repent of their idol worship. *“Yet God used the period of exile to refine and change Israel. When they emerged from their Babylonian exile, they no longer had the same problem with idolatry as they had before. They certainly had other sins and failing, but seemed to be “cured” of their outward idolatry after pagan gods.”* (David Guzik)

v 31 **So shall I be inquired of by you, O house of Israel?** Now we go full circle, right back to the start of the chapter where the elders came to Ezekiel seeking a word from God. The important principal here is that *we will not receive any further revelation until we have already obeyed what God has already shown us.* God gives us one command at a time, one thing to change or fix at a time. We need to be faithful and we need to be patient, both with ourselves and with others—change doesn't happen overnight, though it will happen in a true believer because God is working in us to change us.

v 32 **What you have in your mind shall never be, when you say, ‘We will be like the Gentiles, like the families in other countries, serving wood and stone’:** This shows both the depth and the source or root of their sin—the desire to be like the world. It's hard to imagine the people of God thinking this, but they did, and so do we—if we allow ourselves to be ruled or dominated by our sinful nature. You see, our sinful nature naturally loves the things of the world, and hates the things of God—this is another example of our moral bankruptcy, a clear illustration of the truth that, “And I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature” (Romans 7:18a). So the next time you hear that inside voice say to you, “you know, I'm not such a bad person after all,” tell it—“yes you are!”, and don't let your wicked and deceitful heart, your sinful nature deceive you. We desperately need God to transform us into His image by first of all changing the way we think—*“Don't copy the behaviour and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect”* (Romans 12:2).

Application: Egypt, the wilderness, and the Promised Land

Last week we were learning about God bringing the Israelites out of the **land of Egypt**, into **the wilderness**, and then finally into **the promised land**. Remember that these three places are types or pictures that we can apply to our own spiritual journey:

★ **The Israelites in bondage to Pharaoh in the land of Egypt**—Pharaoh is a type of satan and Egypt is a type or picture of the evil world system controlled by satan. We are all born in slavery/bondage to sin and satan is our enemy. Salvation, the exodus (exit) or escape from Egypt, is pictured by:

- forgiveness of sins: represented by the shed blood of the Passover lamb **applied** to the door posts—*For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.* (Matthew 26:28 NKJV)
- our baptism or incorporation into the body of Christ: represented by the crossing of the red sea—*For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ.* ¹³ *For by one Spirit we were all **baptised into one body** [the body of Christ]—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit.* (1 Corinthians 12:12-13 NKJV)

*Or do you not know that as many of us as were **baptised into Christ Jesus** were baptised into His death?* (Romans 6:3 NKJV)

★ **Wilderness wandering**—a time of preparation or training where, by growing in our understanding of God's word, we learn to **walk by faith** (see Romans 10:17), and not by sight, emotions, feelings, or circumstances. **In the wilderness we learn to trust God to:**

- fight spiritual battles and overcome the enemy—*Do not be terrified, or afraid of them.* ³⁰ *The Lord your God, who goes before you, He will fight for you, according to all He did for you in Egypt before your eyes.* (Deuteronomy 1:29-30 NKJV)
- provide for us and protect us in any circumstance—*and in the wilderness where you saw how the Lord your God carried you, as a man carries his son, in all the way that you went until you came to this place.* (Deuteronomy 1:31 NKJV)
- overcome habitual sin—*I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the wicked one.* (1 John 2:14b NKJV)

Then I said to them, 'Each of you, throw away the abominations [vile images] which are before his eyes, and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt. I am the Lord your God. (Ezekiel 20:7 NKJV)

- be content: seek God's will and don't worrying about pleasing ourselves—*Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'* ³² *For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.* ³³ *But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.* (Matthew 6:31-33 NKJV)

★ **The Promised Land/Land of Canaan**—Entering the promised land (crossing the Jordan) requires more faith than initial salvation (crossing the Red Sea), thus why the wilderness experience is required to prepare us for entry into the promised land.

"Learning the lessons in the wilderness is a prerequisite for entering the promised land"

Consider that when God brought them out of Egypt, He made a dry path through the Red Sea *before* asking them to cross over; this required little faith, as they were literally walking by sight—“I can see how God will deliver me, so I’ll trust Him.”

However, when it came time to enter the promised land, the Israelites had to cross over the overflowing Jordan river, which was basically impossible to cross. God told Joshua that the river would stop flowing only when the feet of the priests carrying the ark stepped into the raging river (see Joshua 3:12-17); this would have required much greater faith, literally not walking by sight but by faith—“I can’t see or I don’t understand how God will deliver me, but I’ll trust and obey Him anyway.”

“I won’t be afraid to get my feet wet if I trust that God won’t let me drown”

Life in the promised land is characterised by:

- A. **Walking/living by faith**—after the Israelites crossed over the Jordan there was no more manna (bread) every morning, and no more quail (meat) in the evenings for food (Joshua 5:12). They no longer knew how God would provide their needs, only that He would. This what it means to live by faith and not by sight (see 2 Corinthians 5:7).

I have been crucified with Christ [in Him I have shared His crucifixion]; it is no longer I who live, but Christ (the Messiah) lives in me; and the life I now live in the body I live by faith in (by adherence to and reliance on and complete trust in) the Son of God, Who loved me and gave Himself up for me. (Galatians 2:20 AMP)

Galatians 2:20 is loaded with wonderful truths. In it we have the four big questions answered regarding **living by faith**:

1. **How am I freed from the power of sin (slavery in Egypt)?** Salvation must happen first; I must *exit* Egypt, the house of bondage, before I can *enter* the Promised Land (via the wilderness). Sin’s power over me was broken when Jesus won the victory over satan and paid the penalty for my sins when He died on the cross in my place—“[My old life has] been crucified with Christ [in Him I have shared His crucifixion]”
2. **Where does the power to obey God come from?** It’s by God living His life through me—“it is no longer I who live, but Christ (the Messiah) lives in me”
3. **How do I experience this power?** By living by faith, which means relying on and trusting in God and no longer myself—“and the life I now live in the body I live by faith in (by adherence to and reliance on and complete trust in) the Son of God.” After all, why ask God for help if I think I can do it myself?

Practically, this means coming to the simple but humbling realisation that, **I can’t but God can**—*Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency [our power, strength, and ability] is from God* (2 Corinthians 3:5 NKJV)

4. **What is my motive for living for Christ?** Love and a thankful heart. Because it was Jesus “Who loved me and gave Himself up for me.”

- B. **Surrender of my will to God’s (death to self)**—*Then He said to them all, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me* (Luke 9:23 NKJV).

[It was by faith Moses] thought it was better to suffer for the sake of Christ than to own the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking ahead to his great reward. (Hebrews 11:26 NLT paraphrase)

Why does surrendering my life to God take faith? *Because I have to believe that what is coming in the next life is better than what I can have down here in this life.*

If I truly believe that God has something better waiting for me in Heaven, my great reward which I get to enjoy for eternity, then I will be willing to give up the temporary pleasures of sin that I could be enjoying down here, for example: TV, movies, worldly entertainment, drugs, alcohol, gaming, lust, greed, pleasure, fame, riches, and a pain free and easy life. **When I refuse to forsake the world, I am demonstrating that I do not really believe God's promises.** Hebrews 11:26 shows us that Moses *demonstrated his faith* in God's promise of a future and eternal great reward *by being willing to give up the things of the world.* An example of a promise of future glory and reward is:

For our present troubles are small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory [reward] that vastly outweighs them and will last forever! ¹⁸ So we don't look at the troubles we can see now; rather, we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever. (2 Corinthians 4:17-18 NLT paraphrase)

- C. **Spiritual warfare**—The New Testament describes Christians as soldiers in God's army fighting *spiritual* battles. In contrast, the Israelites were God's army fighting *physical* battles as a picture or type of spiritual warfare. We can learn much from their example and experiences.

Now therefore, arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, to the land which I am giving to them—the children of Israel. ³ Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given you, as I said to Moses. (Joshua 1:2-3)

- **What was God preparing the Israelites for in the wilderness?** WAR! When we have come to that place of surrender and dependence on God, He then sends us into the the Promised Land so we can fight in the battle proper; but only once we are ready to engage our spiritual enemy using spiritual weapons. This is why we have to learn to stop depending our ourselves and trusting in our own strength, otherwise we will try to fight the spiritual battle in our own strength using human resources—and fail miserably.

A final word: Be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power. ¹¹ Put on all of God's armour so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies of the devil. ¹² For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places.

¹³ Therefore, put on every piece of God's armour so you will be able to resist the enemy in the time of evil. Then after the battle you will still be standing firm. (Ephesians 6:10-13 NLT paraphrase]

- **Who and what are we fighting for?** For the Kingdom of God and our King, Jesus, "*the commander of the army of the Lord*" (see Joshua 5:13-15). There is much at stake. We are ambassadors for Christ. God uses us to reveal light, truth, and freedom to people, while satan wants to keep them blind, captive to sin, and condemned. This battle is over the eternal souls of men, as well as for the growing and maturing of the church, the very precious body of Christ.

- **Why does the battle go on our whole lives?** There are two main reasons. Firstly, like when the Israelites fought against Ai (see Joshua 7), they did it on their own strength and there was sin in the camp; therefore they were soundly defeated. It wasn't until they repented of their sins of idolatry and self-sufficiency that they experienced victory.

Secondly, while some battles, like the battle of Jericho (see Joshua 6), will be over and done with quickly, some battles will rage our whole lives. Why is this?

I also will no longer drive out before them any of the nations which Joshua left when he died, ²² so that through them I may test Israel, whether they will keep the ways of the Lord, to walk in them as their fathers kept them, or not.” ²³ Therefore the Lord left those nations, without driving them out immediately; nor did He deliver them into the hand of Joshua. (Judges 2:21-23 NKJV)

So what we see here is that we need continuing trials so we will continue to depend on God. Our sinful human nature loves to take credit for God's accomplishments, and if all is going well, that is just what we do, taking all the credit for ourselves. Therefore, God allows difficult circumstances or the desire for a worldly thing to remain. In these cases we must **daily** rely on God's strength.

Every day is a test—will I continue to love God and therefore obey Him, regardless of the consequences, or will I seek temporary pleasure and also try to escape the difficult circumstances so I can live an easy and pain free life. Remember what Paul wrote concerning his continuing trial:

But [Jesus] said to me, “My grace (My favour and loving-kindness and mercy) is enough for you [sufficient against any danger and enables you to bear the trouble manfully]; for My strength and power are made perfect (fulfilled and completed) and show themselves most effective in [your] weakness.”

Therefore, I will all the more gladly glory in my weaknesses and infirmities, that the strength and power of Christ (the Messiah) may rest (yes, may pitch a tent over and dwell) upon me!

10 So for the sake of Christ, I am well pleased and take pleasure in infirmities, insults, hardships, persecutions, perplexities and distresses; for when I am weak [in human strength], then am I [truly] strong (able, powerful in divine strength). (2 Corinthians 12:9-10 AMP)

Application: The underlying cause of an illegitimate wilderness experience.

We finished last week by talking about what it means to have an illegitimate wilderness experience. God takes every new believer into the wilderness, so to speak, but it's never His intent to leave us there, in what is really a *living-by-faith boot camp* for new believers. It's like completing a driver training course—you're driving a car, but not on public roads. The good thing is that if you make a mistake and go off the road, you won't hurt yourself or others. However, the bad thing is that it's a very boring existence, going around and around in circles, seeing the same sights, and turning the same corners every few minutes. If you want to get into the action, you must first graduate from the driving school so you can drive on the public roads and actually go somewhere and so do something useful.

We finished last week by going through a list of signs or symptoms of being a baby or carnal or immature Christian—someone who has not yet graduated from God's living-by-faith boot camp. Let's have a look at two Scriptures that show us why so many believers are still doing laps on the driver training circuit.

1 Corinthians 3:2-3 NLT paraphrase

I had to feed you with milk, not with solid food, because you weren't ready for anything stronger. And you still aren't ready, ³ **for you are still controlled by your sinful nature**. You are jealous of one another and quarrel with each other. Doesn't that prove you are controlled by your sinful nature? **Aren't you living like people of the world?**

Hebrews 5:12-14 NLT paraphrase

You have been believers so long now that you ought to be teaching others. Instead, you need someone to teach you again the basic things about God's word. **You are like babies who need milk and cannot eat solid food**. ¹³ For someone who lives on milk is still an infant and doesn't know how to do what is right. ¹⁴ **Solid food is for those who are mature**, who through training have the skill to recognise the difference between right and wrong.

What can we learn from these two Scriptures? *It is impossible to be a mature believer if I don't bother to discipline myself to study the Word of God for myself.* I can listen to other people's Bible teaching all I want, and while there is benefit in that, it doesn't take the place of reading the Bible for myself. *My growth as a believer is limited by two things: my understanding of the Word of God and my obedience or application of it.* I need to read the Word of God with a soft and surrendered heart, which is the opposite of being hard hearted and controlled by my sinful nature. The Holy Spirit promises to teach us as we make the time to read God's love letter to us.

But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you. (John 14:26 NKJV)

Make them holy by Your truth; teach them Your word, which is truth. (John 17:17 NLT paraphrase)

Why are there so many believers who are basically biblically illiterate? One of the biggest reasons is that the church they go to is not teaching the Word or encouraging people to read it for themselves. As a result they are led astray and deceived by every new doctrine of men. This was my experience as a new believer, *though I still must take responsibility for not reading it myself when prompted to by the Holy Spirit.*

Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. ¹² *Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ.* ¹³ **This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ.**

¹⁴ **Then we will no longer be immature like children.** We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth. ¹⁵ *Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church.* (Ephesians 4:11-15 NLT paraphrase)

So for me to grow, I must first repent of any sin so that my heart is soft. Only then will God's Word take effect in my heart as I take the time to read it and meditate on what God is speaking to me through it. *Will I make my relationship with God the most important part of my life?*