

Today In Your Reading...

Ezekiel was given an incredible vision of the end times, which is the pinnacle of his prophecies. Scholars believe these prophecies describe details of the Millennial Reign of Christ, that 1000-year period of peace after the Lord has defeated His enemies and established His kingdom on earth. A messenger from heaven gave Ezekiel a tour of the future Temple in the new Jerusalem, even providing him with exact measurements of walls, gates, rooms, courtyards, and more. Of course, this Temple will be symbolic only, as Christ has already dealt with sin.

However, our reading today was dominated by a letter written by King Nebuchadnezzar. The letter was sent to "the people of every nation and language throughout the world" (*Daniel 4:1*). It recounted a terrible yet terrific experience in his life. "I want you to know about the miraculous signs and wonders that the Most High God has performed for me" (v.2). What happened?

The Lord gave the King another frightening dream, which Daniel was able to interpret. The dream was of a giant tree, a symbol of Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom. The tree provided shelter and food for all the people of the earth. However, **the tree was chopped down and reduced to a stump**. After seven years, the tree grew back to its former glory.

Daniel explained the dream as a warning from God to Nebuchadnezzar. Because of his great accomplishments, particularly in regards to the city of Babylon and his mighty kingdom, he had exalted himself too highly. As a reminder that it is the God of heaven who reigns supreme and bestows kingdoms on whomever He wishes, the Lord reduced Nebuchadnezzar to a raving lunatic for seven years, forcing him to live away from society. He thought more like an animal, eating grass like a cow and living in the open field.

It took seven years for Nebuchadnezzar to renounce his pride, "look up to heaven," and submit himself to God. His sanity returned and he was restored to his former greatness. God had gotten his attention. He now "praised and glorified and honored the King of Heaven, for all His acts are just and true, and He is able to humble those who are proud" (v.37).

Daily Reflection

"Humility," wrote Noah Webster, "is freedom from pride, a modest estimate of one's own worth." How exactly are we to estimate our worth? Webster continued, "It is a lowliness of mind, a deep sense of one's **unworthiness** in the sight of God" (*1828 Dictionary*). Nebuchadnezzar wrote, "God's rule is everlasting; His kingdom is eternal. The people of earth are **nothing compared to Him**" (v.35).

How does comparing yourself to God help to develop humility in you?

How can you make this a daily practice in your life, developing the quality of humility?

Nebuchadnezzar had to be "**chopped down**" before he developed humility. If necessary, for your own benefit, **the Lord will reduce you to "a stump."** Humble yourself before the Lord, or He will do it for you.

The Hill of the Holy

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September 4 — *Ezekiel 40:38-43-27*

Day 247 — 118 Days to Go

Today In Your Reading...

Ezekiel continued sharing his vision regarding the future Temple in Jerusalem. The first Temple was built by King Solomon and was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians. The second Temple was built by Zerubbabel when the Jews return from exile (we are not there yet). It will later be beautified by King Herod and destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD.

The third Temple will be built in the end times, but it will be desecrated and destroyed by the Anti-Christ. The Temple of Ezekiel's vision is the fourth one. It is constructed after Jesus returns, delivers His people from the forces of the Anti-Christ, and establishes His millennial kingdom. This kingdom will never be destroyed.

What is the purpose of this vision to Ezekiel? Why would God provide these details and then ask the prophet to share them with the people? It was simply to encourage the people of God with glimpses of the future. Their nation would survive. Exile was not the end. *God is faithful and He would fulfill His promises to them.* They would prevail over their enemies, and He would redeem them of their sins, such as idolatry and other detestable acts. His glory would return to dwell with them (*43:1-7*).

Finally, this vision gave the people more insight into the mission and ministry of the Messiah. He would make all things right. He would deal with their iniquities, and He would dwell among them in glory and majesty. "This is the basic law of the Temple — *absolute holiness!* The entire top of the hill where the Temple is built is holy. Yes, this is the primary law of the Temple" (*43:12*).

Holiness was the objective of the Tabernacle and first Temple. Holiness will be the goal of the second and third Temples. However, in their sinfulness, God's people could not sustain these high

expectations. They were incapable of continually pleasing their holy God and could not worship Him from a pure heart.

Because of their shortcomings, our God would send His Son to deal with our problem with sin. **Only in Christ are we made holy.** Apart from Him we can never achieve right standing before God. Only by His blood are we made clean. Only by His sacrifice are we washed of our iniquities.

Daily Reflection

As I read this vision, I couldn't help but think of *Psalms 24*. "Who may climb the mountain of the Lord? Who may stand in His holy place? **Only those whose hands and hearts are pure,** who do not worship idols and who never tell lies. They will receive the Lord's blessing and have right standing with God their Savior. They alone may enter God's presence and worship the God of Israel" (*v.3-6*).

On your own, *you could never make your heart pure.* Someone else has to do it, and someone else has. **Holiness is not something you achieve; it is something you receive.** Christ has dealt with your imperfections and rendered you perfect in the eyes of His Father. Though you were once unclean, you are now clean forever! You are able to ascend that holy hill, enter into the Temple, and stand in the presence of your Holy God, not because of anything you have done, but because of what Christ has done for you. Praise God for your holiness!

"Anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun! *All of this is a gift from God,* who brought us back to Himself through Christ... For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be an offering for our sin, so that **we could be made right with God** through Christ" (*2 Corinthians 5:17, 18, 21*).

Temple Trouble

September 5 — *Ezekiel 44:1-46:24*

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Day 248 — 117 Days to Go

Today In Your Reading...

We continued Ezekiel's vision of a Temple (40-48), which might be the most difficult passage in the Old Testament to understand. The difficulty lies in deciding whether or not the elements of the vision are literal or figurative. Is the Temple a real place, or is it just symbolic? **We don't know.** The vision includes a vast amount of details to be figurative, in my opinion, but I could be wrong. Like I said, **we don't know.**

Two other difficulties arise in the vision. First, the Temple is designed for the Jews to worship the Lord, to restore their festivals, offerings, and sacrifices. Where are the Gentiles in this vision? **We are not told.** However, what little information we have about the millennial kingdom seems to be focused on the restoration of Israel and not so much about the Church.

Second, and perhaps the most obvious question that surfaces here, why are there sacrifices and sin offerings? Didn't Jesus finish this practice with His death on the cross? Wasn't the veil that separated God and His people torn in half that day? Absolutely. So why the need for the Jews to continue this bloody ritual? **We don't know.** Perhaps it is more commemorative and symbolic in nature, remembering what Christ, their Messiah, did to pay the penalty for their sin.

If we look carefully at the festivals that are celebrated in the vision, there is a notable absence of the Day of Atonement, that day when the sins of the people were forgiven because of the blood of the lamb. "Christ did not enter heaven to offer Himself again and again, like the High Priest here on earth who enters the Most Holy Place year after year with the blood of an animal. If that had been necessary, Christ would have had to die again and again, ever since the world began. But now, **once for all time**, He has appeared at the end of the age to remove

sin by His death as a sacrifice... Christ was offered **once for all time** as a sacrifice to take away the sins of many people" (*Heb. 9:25-28*).

Daily Reflection

While it is important for us to wrestle with Bible difficulties like this, at the end of the day, we must admit that **we just do not know enough** to determine for sure what is being described. Difficulties do not imply that God's Word is deficient in some way; rather **they are evidence that our human understanding is limited**, and that is okay.

We do not need to know everything. We can trust God with the future and focus, instead, on what we do know, that God and His words are trustworthy and reliable, that Christ has redeemed us from our sin for all time, and that He will fulfill His promises to us.

One day, we will know all that He wants us to know; but for now, we must trust that we know all that He intended for us to know at this point. It is enough to recognize what He's done on our behalf, to restore us to Himself and free us from an eternity of bondage.

Visions and prophecies are full of mysteries. While they might be fun to ponder and speculate, **we can never know** with certainty their meaning or purposes. What we can know and understand is that God is sovereign, He has a plan, and we are a part of that plan. All we need to do is admit our near-sighted knowledge and trust Him. The future will take care of itself.

"Trust the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make straight your paths" (*Proverbs 3:5, 6*).

The Lord Is There

Today In Your Reading...

We finished the book of *Ezekiel*. Though most of his prophecies were doom and gloom, he ended his ministry on a positive note, detailing for us the restoration of Israel and Jerusalem in the end times. We have already discussed the fourth Temple. Today Ezekiel focused on the rest of the city and the surrounding area.

The highlight of this revival is that the presence of God, which had left the city of Jerusalem earlier in the book because of the wickedness of the people, returned to stay forever. In fact, to commemorate this glorious occasion, the city was renamed "Yahweh Shammah," which is **"The Lord Is There"** (48:35). This name is fitting, indeed, as it has been, from the beginning, the desire of the Lord to dwell with His people. He walked with Adam in the Garden, He dwelt in a desert Tabernacle during the exodus, and He had a sanctuary in the Temple of Solomon. He even came to live among the people through His Son Jesus, and, finally, He indwells His followers today through the Holy Spirit.

Again, how fitting it is that the Lord would dwell with His people at the end of time and bless them with peace and prosperity. The culmination of all His promises — the Abrahamic Covenant, the Mosaic Covenant, the Levitical Covenant, the Davidic Covenant — are all fulfilled at this time.

The Lord is faithful and He is telling His people that He would do what He had said to them.

As a sign of this renewal, Ezekiel was shown a river flowing from under the city of Jerusalem to the east. Its waters heal the land, including the salty waters of the Dead Sea. Though nothing grows there now, in that day it will be filled with fresh water. Its shores will be lined with fruitful trees, and it will overflow with fish. God's presence will bless the entire land.

Our section today ended with an obscure passage regarding the son of Nebuchadnezzar, Evil-merodach, the next king of Babylon. Evidently, he felt compassion towards Jehoiachin, the former King of Judah, who had been in prison now for 37 years. "He gave Jehoiachin preferential treatment over the other exiled kings. He supplied him with new clothes to replace his prison garb and allowed him to dine at the king's table for the rest of his life. He also gave him a regular allowance to cover his living expenses until the day of his death" (2 Kings 25:28-30).

Why is this event recorded for us? It is God's way of telling us that the line of David has survived the judgment of Judah. Remember, God promised David that he would always have a descendant at the head of His people. Jehoiachin and his family would survive the exile in Babylon. Though neither he nor his sons would return home to Judah, his grandson Zerubbabel would (1 Chronicles 3:17-19; Ezra 2:1, 2).

Daily Reflection

What aspects of heaven are you most looking forward to experiencing?

How does one wrap up the book of *Ezekiel*? I know no other way than what he did, celebrating the truth that God is faithful, that He will fulfill all of His promises to us, His people, and that one day we too will get to be with Him forever! While we will experience so many wonderful things in heaven, the best of them will be the fact that **the Lord will be there!**

Today In Your Reading...

We were transported to Babylon, where the prophet Daniel has been since he was exiled by Nebuchadnezzar as a young man. He has risen to power because of his wisdom, courage, and character, and because the spirit of God was with him, granting him favor before all. While in exile, the Lord gave Daniel several visions of the near and distant future.

The first vision was that of four beasts (7:1-14). Like the statue dream of Nebuchadnezzar (*Daniel 2*), which highlighted four metals, the four beasts portrayed the four world empires that would rise to power (v.17). Because we live on this side of Ancient History, we now know whom these beasts represented. Babylon was the lion with eagles wings (v.4), the Medo-Persians were pictured as the bear (v.5), Greece was the leopard with four wings (v.6), and the Romans were indescribable, "terrifying, dreadful and very strong, having huge iron teeth" (v.7).

The mystery here lies in the ten horns of the fourth beast (v.8), particularly one horn that destroys the others and defies the Most High. This horn represents the Anti-Christ of the end times, one who will rise to power and persecute the people of God. Eventually, his power will be taken away by the Son of God, who will be given "authority, honor, and royal power over all the nations of the world" (v.13, 14).

Daniel's second vision was that of a ram and a goat (8:1-14). This prophecy was a closer look at the rise and fall of the Medo-Persian Empire, the ram that "butted everything out of its way. It did as it pleased and became great" (v.4, 5). However, a goat with a giant horn appeared (the Greeks with Alexander the Great) that destroyed the Medes and Persians and became very powerful (v.7, 8). But, at the height of its power the large horn was broken and replaced by four new

horns. Here was a prophecy of Alexander's early death (age 33) and the dispersion of his empire to his four generals. One of the horns was predicted to defy God and trample His people. It is believed that this was a prophecy of Antiochus Epiphanes of the Seleucid Empire, who would later desecrate the second Temple and treat the Jews with cruelty. Of course, all of this was a foreshadowing of the future Anti-Christ.

Daily Reflection

The personal story today was that of King Belshazzar, a prideful, foolish man who defied God and profaned the holy objects from the Temple during a party one night. A messenger from God inscribed a warning on the wall of his palace — "Mene, Tekel, Parsin," — meaning his days were numbered, he had been weighed or judged and found guilty, and his kingdom was to be divided that night (5:25-28).

When Daniel was called on to interpret the message, he reminded Belshazzar of another prideful king, Nebuchadnezzar, and how God had humbled him. Then, he chastised Belshazzar for not learning this lesson from the past. "You are his successor. You knew all of this, yet you have not humbled yourself. You have defied the Lord of heaven... and **you have not honored the God who gives you breath of life** and who controls your destiny!" (v.22-24).

If an objective observer were to evaluate your life, who would he find that you honor with your time, your money, and your efforts? Your God or yourself? **What does the evidence say?**

Living with the Lions

Today In Your Reading...

We covered the events of the end of Daniel's ministry in Babylon. Though he had been exiled as a young man by Nebuchadnezzar (*Daniel 1*), he was now an old man. His ministry had spanned seventy years and several kings. In fact, he witnessed the fall of the Babylonians and the rise of the Medo-Persians (539 BC). Every king found Daniel to be set apart, distinguished by incredible wisdom, faithfulness, integrity, and conviction, all of which were fruit of his relationship with the Lord.

Did you notice that Daniel read the prophecies of Jeremiah (9:2) and called them the words of God? He recognized that the Lord had used this man to deliver His messages to His people. One of those messages was that the Jews would only be in exile for seventy years. Thus, Daniel began to pray towards that end, for the return of the people to Judah and Jerusalem.

Sure enough, the very next year (538), the Lord stirred up Cyrus the Great, King of Persia, to release the Jews to return home (*Ezra 1:1-4*). God's anger had relented and the exile was over. More than 42,000 people returned with Zerubbabel, specifically commissioned to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. What an exciting time!

Not only did Daniel witness the beginning and the end of the Babylonian Captivity, he was privileged to see visions of the future. We have already read his prophecies of the four empires that would rise to power (*Daniel 2, 7, 8*), which included a vision of the end times, but now he would receive his most important message, the arrival of the Messiah. "Seven sets of seven plus sixty-two sets of seven will pass from the time the command is given to rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One comes. After this period, the Anointed One will be killed, and a ruler will arise whose armies will destroy the city and the Tem-

ple (9:25, 26). Here is a prophecy of the arrival of Jesus, His death on a cross, and another destruction of Jerusalem, this time by Titus and the Romans in 70 AD.

Daily Reflection

Daniel, indeed, had an incredible ministry, all of which took place in a secular setting. Typically, when a God-follower is placed in a godless environment like Babylon, his commitment to God disappears. Whether it is the temptation to surrender to the world's pleasures or it is the pressure of the world's animosity towards the things of God, *most often Christians surrender their convictions and blend in to be left alone.*

That was not the case with Daniel. **He impacted the world more than the world impacted him.** His unwavering commitment to the Lord had tremendous influence on those around him. He never surrendered his convictions, even under pressure of death. The result was not only the respect of his co-workers but *the glorification of God in a secular setting.*

What about you? How strong are your convictions? Would your commitment to God survive the pressures of the secular world?

Perhaps you live or work in the secular world, among people who believe differently than you. Don't be discouraged. God has placed you there for a reason, *to be a light for Him.* Don't surrender your convictions. Instead, be courageous and take a stand for Him, no matter the consequences. **Determine to glorify God even if it means that you have to face the lions!**

Momentum Killer

September 9 — *Ezra 2:1-4:5*

Today In Your Reading...

What an exciting day! After seventy years, the first group of exiles returned home to Judah and Jerusalem. Under the leadership of Zerubbabel, who was a descendant of King David, nearly 50,000 people, including Levites, Temple singers, servants, and gatekeepers converged on the holy city. It had to have been quite a sight to see!

By order of King Cyrus of Persia, the primary mission of this first return was to rebuild the fallen Temple in Jerusalem (*Ezra 1:1, 2*). As soon as the people arrived, "some of the family leaders gave generously toward the rebuilding of God's Temple on its original site" (*2:68*). Once the people settled in to their homes, the work began. The first thing they fixed was the Altar of Offering, so that they could reinstate their daily and annual sacrifices. The second step was repairing the foundation of the Temple. Once these objectives were met, "All the people gave a great shout, praising the Lord! The shouting could be heard far in the distance" (*3:11, 12*).

In the midst of the return, the rebuilding of the Temple, and the celebration, two incidents occurred that are important to note. First, exiles from other cities returned home as well. Some even claimed to be of priestly lineage. However, they had lost their genealogical records and could not even prove that their families were descendants of Israel. Therefore, Zerubbabel and Jeshua, the High Priest, would not allow them to serve in the Temple (*2:59-63*).

Second, when the enemies of Judah heard that the people had returned and that they were repairing the Temple, they came to Jerusalem "to join" them. However, they were really there to derail the project by distracting and discouraging the people. Zerubbabel and Jeshua saw through the ruse and refused to let them help.

Daily Reflection

What is the significance of the fact that the Altar and Temple foundation were the first priority of the people upon their return?

Did Zerubbabel make the right decision not allowing those who had lost their records to serve in the Temple? Why or why not?

Did Zerubbabel and Jeshua make the right decision not allowing their enemies to help in the Temple repairs? Why or why not?

Both of these incidents were **the enemy's way of stopping the momentum of God's people**. They had finally been released from exile, they were excited to get home and honor the Lord by rebuilding the Temple, and, immediately, *their spiritual enemy tried to stop them*.

*Satan and his evil hordes hate it when they see you get excited about spiritual things. **They will seek to derail, distract, or destroy your momentum** and keep you from giving attention to God. Stay focused. Don't let them stop you!*