

Ezekiel Part Eight

“A Little Sanctuary”

“The LORD replied: Ezekiel, son of man, the people living in Jerusalem claim that you and the other Israelites who were taken to Babylonia are too far away to worship me. They also claim that the land of Israel now belongs only to them. But here is what I want you to tell the Israelites in Babylonia: It's true that I, the LORD God, have forced you out of your own country and made you live among foreign nations. But for now, I will be to you a little sanctuary wherever you are, so that you can worship me.”

(Ezekiel 11:14-16)

There were three deportations of Jews from Judea to Babylon from approximately 597 BC to 582 BC. The Babylonians took the wealthy, certain skilled people, and the nobility into exile. They left behind the uneducated, the poor, and those that the conquerors felt did not have anything to offer them. The small remnant that was left behind in Jerusalem formulated some radical beliefs during the time their brethren were far away in captivity. They claimed that the Judeans taken into exile in Babylon were too far away from Jerusalem to have a living union with God. They also claimed that the inheritance and the land belonged to them alone, and not the ones who were carried away to Babylon. In Ezekiel 11:15 God Himself informs Ezekiel of what is going on in the people back in Jerusalem concerning this view towards their brethren in Babylon.

In verse 16 God continues on to share with Ezekiel how He truly feels concerning His people that were in captivity at that time. God did not want His people in captivity to misunderstand His heart and their relationship with Him. He did not want the reports from His people in Jerusalem to discourage the hearts and faith of His people in captivity. God wanted the captives to get their information from Him, and not the gossip and opinions coming from the remnant in Jerusalem. Therefore the Lord speaks to Ezekiel saying, “Although I have cast them far off among the heathen, and although I have scattered them among the countries, yet will I be to them as a little sanctuary in the countries where they shall come”.

Around this same time Jeremiah was ministering to the remnant still left in Jerusalem. Jeremiah was a man of God who heard from the Lord and knew His heart. Jeremiah wrote a letter from Jerusalem to the captives in Babylon expressing the way God felt towards His people in captivity. Listen to some of the words from Jeremiah's letter to the captives; “I know the plans I have in mind for you, declares the LORD; they are plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope. When you seek me and come and pray to me, I will listen to you. When you search for me, yes, search for me with all your heart, you will find me” (Jer. 29:11-13). Verse 20 goes on to say, “Hear therefore the word of the Lord, all you exiles whom I have sent away from Jerusalem to Babylon”. The exiles in Babylon needed to hear the word of the Lord that was coming from Jeremiah and Ezekiel. They needed to hear the desire and purpose in God's heart for them.

The people of God that were in captivity had to make a decision concerning which report they would believe. They could choose to believe the viewpoint of the remnant in Jerusalem that said they were cut off from God and no longer heirs of the land of promise. Or they could believe the Word of God through Ezekiel and Jeremiah that declared God was with them as a little sanctuary in the midst of their exile and chastisement. Ezekiel and Jeremiah were affirming that God's heart had not changed during times of crisis and chastisement.

The people had a choice to make, and that choice was going to affect their lives in profound ways. Would they choose to live their days in Babylon as separate from God in a spirit of rejection? Would they lose faith in all that God had once shared with them concerning His love, purpose, and covenant? Or would they see past their failure into God's heart and the eternal purpose in which He sent them into captivity? God wanted to reveal Himself to them in captivity the same way He had tried to reveal Himself to them in Jerusalem, as their Life. HE wanted to be their true sanctuary and the One Who found sanctuary in them. They were to be His true temple and not a building in Jerusalem. He was to be the glory that filled that Temple, and not all the religious rituals and fleshly ambitions that took His place. In Babylon the people had an opportunity to find Him again in living union rather than religious shadows. They had been exiled from a place and a building, but not from God. God was not trying to push them away from Himself, but place them in a position where they might return to Him Whom they had rejected and forgotten.

This Old Testament account of the Babylonian captivity is a picture for us today of the Cross at work in the lives of Believers. The Judeans in Babylon had previously been living in Jerusalem in severe idolatry. The temple had been defiled, the priesthood destroyed and the prophets spoke lies. Flesh had overtaken all that belonged to God. The Cross needed to be applied to God's people in a way that would remove all the flesh and make way for God (Christ in us) to be the glory. Hebrews 12:6 says that whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives. Our Father does not spare us from the in-working of the Cross, but applies it because He loves us and wants to bring us forth in the image of Christ. Although many mis-interpret God's dealing with us as rejection, we must hear what the Word of God says.

No matter where we are or what condition we are in, if we have received the Lord Jesus Christ as our Life, then we are His. The Word of God says that we have been raised up together with Him as His Body (Eph. 2:6). When Paul was speaking concerning the relationship Christ has with His church, he said that no man ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it. It is because we are accepted in Christ that God deals with us. The world, our own minds, and other believers may view us as cut off and rejected, but God deals with us by bringing His Cross to bear in our lives because we belong to Him. He is answering our heart's cry for "more of Jesus, less of me". And through it all, we are in God and He is in us. He will be unto us as a little sanctuary in the midst of the darkest trials of our lives. Though He spares us not from the work of the Cross in our lives, we must still believe His Word that declares, "I have loved thee with an everlasting love" (Jer. 31:3). We can abide in Christ through every stormy dealing knowing that we are complete in Him and accepted in the Beloved. As we embrace our union into Christ at all times, we will find ourselves enveloped in a faith that allows our circumstances to become the cocoon in which the "caterpillar" transforms into a "butterfly". We see this process happening in Ezekiel 1:5 when the living creatures emerged out from a fiery storm cloud transformed and bearing God's glory. This heavenly vision given to Ezekiel in the beginning of his ministry represented the eternal work God wanted to do in His people while they were in Babylon. God was not rejecting them or punishing them, rather He was working diligently to transform them into the vessel of His glory they were made to be. Paul understood this when he exhorted the saints in Corinth to trust that the light affliction they were going through was working in them a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory (II Cor. 4:17).

When we hear the heart of God in the midst of our tribulation, our faith turns from rejection and depression into anticipation of His glorious increase. God is for us, not against us. His Spirit is ever at work to bring forth more of Jesus in us. May we work together with God, knowing His heart and submitting to His dealings till Christ be truly formed.

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