

## **Ezekiel 24:15-27 (1984 NIV)** **When God Seems Heartless**

### Ezekiel 24

15 The word of the LORD came to me:

16 "Son of man, with one blow I am about to take away from you the delight of your eyes. Yet do not lament or weep or shed any tears.

17 Groan quietly; do not mourn for the dead. Keep your turban fastened and your sandals on your feet; do not cover the lower part of your face or eat the customary food (of mourners)."

18 So I spoke to the people in the morning, and in the evening my wife died. The next morning I did as I had been commanded.

19 Then the people asked me, "Won't you tell us what these things have to do with us?"

20 So I said to them, "The word of the LORD came to me:

21 Say to the house of Israel, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am about to desecrate my sanctuary - the stronghold in which you take pride, the delight of your eyes, the object of your affection. The sons and daughters you left behind will fall by the sword.

22 And you will do as I have done. You will not cover the lower part of your face or eat the customary food (of mourners).

23 You will keep your turbans on your heads and your sandals on your feet. You will not mourn or weep but will waste away because of your sins and groan among yourselves.

24 Ezekiel will be a sign to you; you will do just as he has done. When this happens, you will know that I am the Sovereign LORD.'

25 "And you, son of man, on the day I take away their stronghold, their joy and glory, the delight of their eyes, their heart's desire, and their sons and daughters as well -

26 on that day a fugitive will come to tell you the news.

27 At that time your mouth will be opened; you will speak with him and will no longer be silent. So you will be a sign to them, and they will know that I am the LORD."

### **Introduction**

Reading Eze 24:15-27 reminds me of Jim Elliot—a man whom I consider a modern-day missionary martyr.

Jim felt a deep calling from God to bring the gospel to the tribal people in South America. As he continued to seek the Lord further, he became convicted to be a missionary to the Aucas in Ecuador. These tribal people lived deep in the jungle. They had once been exploited by white people who came to clear their jungle land for economic benefits. After chasing away these intruders, they hid in the jungle and kept themselves away from the outside world. The Aucas were also notorious for being savage and they would attack and kill seemingly without any provocation.

When he sensed God's conviction to reach out to these extremely savage people, Jim gathered a team which included four other men. Jim learned some phrases from an Auca girl who had been persecuted by her own people but managed to escape from them. After some protracted planning and waiting upon the Lord, Jim and his team decided that it was time to act. The team first began dropping gifts from a plane over the jungle area so as to establish friendly contact with the Aucas. After some days, when they were certain that these people felt secure enough to come out of the jungle to accept their friendly gesture, they decided to make ground contact by landing the plane.

The first Aucas to meet them on land were a man, a woman and a young girl. At that meeting, Jim Elliot took out the photo of the escaped Auca girl from whom he had learned some Auca words and showed it to them. Unfortunately, these jungle people couldn't relate pockets with clothings as they themselves wore little. When Jim took the photo out of his pocket, they misunderstood it as Jim taking the girl out of his body. And when they saw the girl in the photo, they were puzzled that she had become a shrunken and flattened person.

They went back to their tribe to tell the others what they saw. After some discussion among themselves, they came to this conclusion—those white people were cannibals, and one of them had eaten an Auca girl and kept her in his stomach. Fearing that they themselves might be eaten alive too, the Aucas decided they must kill first in order not to be killed.

On 8 Jan 1956, a big group of Aucas made their way to where Jim and his team had encamped. When the missionaries saw them, they thought that a big welcome party had arrived. When the Aucas suddenly attacked them, they could actually protect themselves because they had some guns with them. But they had decided beforehand that they would not fire on the Aucas. These guns were meant to be fired into the air in order to frighten off the Aucas if they should be attacked. Hence, these guns did not save them even when they were being savagely speared to death.

Five godly men seemed to have died needlessly, leaving behind their young wives and children, because of their desire to serve God with their lives. Was it foolhardiness, or bad planning, or impatient action, or simply sacrificial obedience? Why didn't God stop it? Why did God seem so cruel?

(<https://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1901-2000/jim-elliott-no-fool-11634862.html>)

Ezekiel was a temple priest who became a prophet when he was in exile in Babylon. God was using him to give His messages of rebuke and restoration

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to the nation of Israel. Ezekiel was a godly man serving God. Yet in our text today, his wife died—not because Ezekiel or his wife had been displeasing in the sight of God, but because the other people were rebellious in the sight of God. Some other people had committed crime but God called the death sentence on Ezekiel's wife, thereby bringing about a very painful loss to the faithful prophet. Why didn't God stop it? Why did God seem so cruel?

Ezekiel was God's faithful prophet during the period between 592-570 BC when Nebuchadnezzar was king of Babylon. The Babylonians captured Jerusalem a second time and some Israelites were sent to Babylon as exiles. These exile people included Jeremiah, Daniel and Ezekiel. Though he was unable to continue his priestly duties in the temple, God continued to use Ezekiel by making him His prophet to the Israelite exiles in Babylon.

Chapter 24 of Ezekiel is the transitory point in this prophetic book. From Chapters 1-23, God has been using Ezekiel to speak of judgment to Israel because of the nation's rebellion against God. After Chapter 24, from Chapters 25-48, Ezekiel begins to speak of God's judgment upon the other nations, and of God's restoration of Israel.

But then, what is God trying to say in what He is doing in this transitory text in Eze 24:15-27? Let's try to understand by way of asking two questions.

### **I. What was God saying to Ezekiel (vv. 15-18)?**

Make no mistake about it—it was a message of personal loss and pain. The Lord told Ezekiel that He would soon take away his wife “with one blow” (v. 15). The phrase implies that death will come soon, and when it comes, it will be very swift and total. We are not told the cause of death—it could be a prolonged illness, an acute infection, a heart attack, or a fatal accident. Whatever it was, when it came, it delivered its fatality with just “one blow”—swift and total. To heighten the pain, God was not going to take away the pet cat in Ezekiel's house, but the very “delight of his eyes”—his dearly beloved wife.

So, God told His faithful prophet one morning in Babylon: “Ezekiel, I am going to take away your dearly beloved wife real soon.” And true enough, his wife died in the evening of the same day (v. 18). It is already very hard to take when the doctor tells you that a beloved one in the family has only three months to live. It must indeed be even harder for Ezekiel that his wife had only that few hours between morning and evening to live.

And as if this was not bad enough, God told Ezekiel: “Do not lament or weep or shed any tears. Groan quietly ... Keep your turban fastened and your sandals on your feet; do not cover the lower part of your face or eat the customary food of mourners” (vv. 16-17). What all this means is that Ezekiel was not allowed to follow the normal mourning procedures practised in the ancient Near East. Even if he wanted to cry, he must not shed his tears out but “swallow them in”. Even if he was deeply shattered, he must not cry aloud

but hide somewhere and “groan quietly”. He was to mourn in privacy and isolation without the usual rites, and social support and sympathy so crucial in such a time. Outwardly, Ezekiel was to behave as if nothing had happened.

And as if to rub more salt into Ezekiel’s badly wounded heart, the reason why he was forbidden to grieve openly and publicly is because God wanted his strange actions to be a “sign” to the rebellious exiles in Babylon (v. 24). Was Ezekiel faithful? Yes, he did all that God had commanded him (v. 18). Was God punishing him? It did seem so—God seemed to be punishing Ezekiel in spite of his faithfulness. I mean if someone is to suffer as a sign of God’s displeasure, it ought to be a disobedient one, right? If someone is to lose a wife as a sign of God’s displeasure, it ought to be a disobedient one, right? But why did God choose Ezekiel who had always been faithful first as a priest and then as a prophet during the exile? Why did God seem so heartless?

What was God saying to Ezekiel?

Godliness is no guarantee for a life without pain in this fallen world.

There are a number of ways with which people deal with pain in their lives.

- One way is to tell yourself that pain is not real. It is only an illusion. You go for an injection, the doctor or nurse will try to pacify you. He or she will say, “Now, this is going to be a little uncomfortable.” What it really means is this, “Now, you are going to be hurt.” The way to overcome pain in life is that of “mind over matter”, using euphemism, nice-sounding terms, or will-power to do just that. By this approach, pain is never healed, but only denied.
- A second approach is to learn to be philosophical about all of life, including pain. All things happen because of predetermined physical causes. We have absolutely no control over them. We just have to learn to accept what we cannot change and get on with life. In other words, even though we cannot do anything about what happens, we can control our response to what happens. Thus, this approach advocates the conditioning of human emotions to such a degree that nothing can disturb the person concerned. Try to remain calm no matter what happens and everything will eventually turn out ok. “Well, nothing I can do about it but to accept it and get on with life” is a typical philosophical response.
- A third approach is to nullify pain with pleasure. When pain is experienced, it must be balanced by pleasure. Hence, if one is suffering too much, the remedy is to increase the pleasure in one’s life—go partying, take drugs, free sex, immerse in work, etc. Such an approach really directs one to escape from the pain. It seeks to intoxicate one’s self from the full force of the pain by overwhelming it with good feelings.

But what does the Bible teach us about dealing with our pains in life? Well, a number of things.

This morning, we learn that pain is real in a fallen world. Even godliness does not rule out pain in one's life.

When God told Ezekiel not to mourn openly, He is not saying that it is not right for Christians to grieve and mourn. He was not telling Ezekiel to be philosophical about his loss and pain; express no emotions and sing, "Que sera, sera, whatever will be, will be." Grief is no sin. There is a time to cry, and even to cry out to God in the midst of pain (Ecc 3:1-9). Yes, Ezekiel's pain was real, and he suffered not because God was dealing with a specific sin in his life, but God was dealing with a bigger evil in Ezekiel's fallen world—the rebellion of his countrymen against the Holy God.

Indeed, when the evil suffer pain, we have no problem accepting that. But when the godly suffer, we have lots of questions. Ezekiel's case reminds us today that even godliness does not guarantee a life without pain. And this implies that when we are still enjoying the blessings of good health, good job and good life; when pain (like cancer, retrenchment, or divorce) has befallen on others but not on us, we must not boast and say, "God, I must be good since you are blessing me." Rather, it is in such times that we must worship and ask humbly, "God, why are you so good to me?"

Indeed, godliness is no guarantee for life without pain. But God is sovereign and He fulfils His purposes even through pain in ways that might not be obvious to us at a given time. We'll now move on and ask a second question.

## **II. What is God saying to us today (vv. 19-27)?**

The death of Ezekiel's wife and his odd response to her death were meant to be a sign prophecy to the exiles in Babylon. In particular, by the strangeness of his response, Ezekiel was to attract their curiosity—to cause them to come to him and ask in v. 19, "What does all this have to do with us?"

And Ezekiel would tell them of God's impending judgment upon them. They would soon lose the "delight of their eyes" (v. 21). This is the temple (the sanctuary of God), and it would soon be destroyed. The exiles still harboured great pride in their temple. It had represented their national and religious identities before the pagans. They were proud to show the pagans that they worshipped Yahweh and that they were His chosen people. Hence, they were very religious as far as outward rituals were concerned. However, they were hardly serious as far as their inward relationship with Yahweh was concerned. In fact, they were flirting with other pagan gods while still professing the worship of Yahweh. Often times, the kings were the main culprits and the people took their cues from them. It is because of such spiritual idolatry/adultery that God brought their enemies to oppress them and eventually to exile in Babylon.

Through the sign prophecy of Ezekiel, God told the exiles that the worse was yet to come. Not only would their temple be destroyed, but the children they had left behind would also be killed (v. 21). And when these tragic events struck, they could only “groan among themselves” in subdued and muted mourning, just like Ezekiel at the loss of the wife (v. 23). Why? I like to suggest that the scale of destruction in Jerusalem by the Babylonians would be so total and swift that the whole exile population in Babylon would be affected. And if this whole exile population were to grieve and mourn openly and loudly in Babylon over the tragedy back in Jerusalem, the Babylonians would almost certainly interpret this as some mass protest. Hence, though deeply pained by the losses in their homeland, the exiles could only groan quietly among themselves for fear of repression by their Babylonian captors.

But there were to be good news when the bad news that this prophecy had come to pass reached Ezekiel. His dumbness would be removed (v. 27). In Eze 3:26, God had made Ezekiel dumb, unable to speak. Thus, he was unable to intercede for the people. Instead of publicly ministering to the people, he was confined at home. But strangely whenever people came to him for a message from God, Ezekiel would speak ... but only words of judgment. In God’s sovereign will, the good news in the bad news of the destruction of the temple and lives in Jerusalem is this—Ezekiel’s inability to speak will be removed and he will prophesy publicly again to the people, and this time, it will be words of God’s favour upon them. Yes, God will judge but now His judgment is focused on the surrounding nations; Israel will be restored and there is hope once again (Chap 25ff).

Now, that makes God seem not so heartless after all. What then is God saying to us today? I like to suggest three things:

1. God is no unfeeling bystander in our times of pain. Ezekiel was not an “ivory tower” prophet who didn’t know what it meant to lose something/someone dear. Through the death of his own wife, he could identify with the exiles when God’s judgment came on Jerusalem. When the news of Jerusalem’s fall eventually came to him, he was one with them in their loss. He spoke to them out of his own pain and grief. He knew what they were going through because he suffered himself.

Indeed, God sometimes causes us to go through pain and loss in order to make us better servants, more humble and even more effective. We become more ready to identify with others. We do not stand above them telling them what to do. Rather, we stand with them in their trials, questioning, difficulties, and perplexities of life.

In the same way, God does care in our times of loss and pain. How do I know? Because He Himself had been there before—He had lost His only begotten Son Jesus Christ on the Cross not because He deserved to die, but He died in the place of those who deserve it, i.e. sinners of the world. And Jesus Christ came in the likeness of human flesh to

identify with us—He was tempted (though He did not sin) and He suffered the pain of death.

Heb 4:15-16 says this of Jesus Christ, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

Indeed, if God did not spare even His own Son, surely He has the right to take away the delight of our eyes, whatever that may be. In fact, God sometimes takes from us that which is precious to us. It is in those times that He wants us to say by His grace, “God, not my will, but yours be done.” He wants to use us as living signs of His grace and glory to the world around us. The world will often ridicule God and ask, “Why did God create man when He knew man would suffer?” But in His Son Jesus Christ, God turns the question around and asks, “Why did God create man when he knew He (God Himself) would suffer?” Well, the answer is that God loves and cares, and does so as one who can totally identify with our loss and pain.

2. Christians are to serve the grieving with the hope we have in Jesus Christ. We do this by **first** allowing people to grieve over their loss and pain. Grieving takes place over many stages—shock, denial, blame, resignation, rebuilding, and resolution. Recognising and allowing these stages to take their own course will be helpful. E.g. if a bereaved Christian suddenly bursts out against God pointing a finger into the sky, we don’t reprimand him as an apostate and say, “How on earth can you say such a thing to God as a Christian?!” Also, some people may take a longer time to end their grieving than others. So, we don’t callously give a deadline to a bereaved Christian and say, “Come on, it’s already 6 months since she is gone. Stand up as a man and get on with your life. Where’s your faith?”

**Second**, we serve the grieving person not by answering all the “why” questions of that person. Rom 12:15 exhorts us to “mourn with those who mourn”. Hence, the best “answers” we can give are our presence, our help, our tears and our listening ears. Remember the acronym PSLE:

- P – Presence
- S – Silence
- LE – Listening Ear

**Third**, we serve the grieving person by reminding ourselves that grieving is often associated with a sense of self-blame and guilt. Thus, we serve a grieving person by always pointing to the forgiveness of Jesus Christ as the basis for the removal of our guilt. We encourage

the person to learn to rest in the love of God. This implies that we are to pray much for those who grieve. It is at such a time that many find it difficult to pray for themselves, and even to forgive themselves.

**Fourth**, we serve the grieving person by offering hope in living—not only hope in heaven to come but also hope to live for the present moment. In other words, we try to help those who are grieving to live one day at a time. In times of pain and loss (health, job, relationship, or life), people don't need grace to live for the end; they need grace for today. In times of pain and loss, we need God's wisdom to help those affected to live one day at a time.

## Conclusion

Let me now continue with my opening story of Jim Elliot. The deaths of Jim and his missionary partners were widely covered in the media, including Life magazine. Christians all over North America began to take seriously the call of God on their lives. Many responded to the missionary call because of the inspiring commitment of Jim Elliot and his partners.

In fact, Jim's wife (Elisabeth) and another widow returned later to work among the Aucas when relationships between them and missionaries became friendly again. In time to come, the Aucas were converted to Christianity. 36 years after the deaths of Jim Elliot and his partners, the Aucas had the whole NT translated in their own language in 1992. At the celebration of this event, the chief of the Auca tribe said, "We no longer want to live as the old ones who killed each other and outsiders. We want to live by what God says. Ever since I was a small boy in this community, I have heard that we were going to get this book; now we have it!"

Well, was it right for God to let Jim Elliot and his partners die as they did? Why does God allow pain and seem so heartless at times? No easy answer.

Today we are reminded that godliness is no guarantee for a life without pain in a fallen world; that God is no unfeeling bystander in our times of pain; that Christians are to serve the grieving with the hope we have in Jesus Christ.

God is sovereign; His thoughts and ways are beyond our total grasp, but they are purposeful in that they will fulfil His intended end. And we are reassured today that in Jesus Christ, God does love and care for us in our times of loss and pain.

It is not unspiritual to ask God with a loud "why?" in such times. Why do I say that? Because when Jesus Christ was suffering His painful death on the Cross, He asked, "My God, my God, **why (why)** have you forsaken me?"

Unless you are more spiritual than Jesus Christ, I would expect you to ask the same kind of perplexing questions in your times of loss and pain.

But our comfort does not lie in getting good answers to our questions, but in the hope we have in God's Word. Israel found hope because of Ezekiel's prophecy of the nation's restoration after the destruction of Jerusalem. From the heaps of ashes, God gave them hope again. Similarly, we rest our hope in God's sufficiency in Jesus Christ because of what Jesus Christ had done and gone through on the Cross—He Himself had suffered to redeem us from the evil of sin, including that of pain and loss in life.

In His own time and way, God will claim victory for us. He is in control. He is the Almighty and Sovereign LORD both yesterday, today, and forever. Amen!