

A BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

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SESSION EIGHT EXILE

1. Warning

Warning of Impending Captivity

Reading: Jeremiah 7:1-15; 25:1-14; 2 Chronicles 36:15-21; Lamentations 1:1, 6, 12; 5:13-18; 3:22-26

2. Encouragement

Encouragement for the Faithful Exiles

Reading: Psalm 137:1-6; Ezekiel 1:1-3; 20:33-38; 34:1-2, 6, 10-16; 36:24-28; 37:1-4, 7-10; Jeremiah 29:1, 10-14

3. Assimilation

Assimilation into Culture

Reading: Isaiah 44:6-20; Daniel 3:1, 8-14, 16-20, 24-26, 28, 6:1-2, 6-9, 13-28

4. Power Change

Persian Empire Expands

Reading: 2 Kings 25:27-30; Daniel 7:1, 9-14; 9:1, 4-11a, 17-19; Isaiah 40:1-5; 42:5-9; 43:18-19; 52:1-2; 7-10, 13; 53:4-6; 60:1-3; 51:11

Discussion questions:

What lesson must we learn from Jeremiah 'the weeping prophet'?

How does Ezekiel's hope of future restoration have present day relevance?

1. Warning

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Lamentations 1:1, 6, 12; 5:13-18; 3:22-26

While the prophets Elijah, Elisha, Amos and Hosea spoke to the Northern Kingdom, Israel and its capital, Samaria, eventually fell to the Assyrian Empire. The people of the Southern Kingdom of Judah were able to watch what happened to their Northern neighbours as Israelites were carried off into the Assyrian exile. At Jerusalem, however, despite the conquest of Israel, services carried on at the temple without interruption but the practices were corrupt. There were times when the idols and altars erected by faithless kings, particularly Manasseh, hid the true furniture but the temple still seemed the one sure, unshaken central point amid all the troubles of life. That said, the people put great reliance on the fact that they had the temple of the Lord at Jerusalem, so much so that they trusted in the building for their salvation but had no interest in spiritual renewal or godly living. They were trusting in the temple of God, rather than the God of the temple.

In Judah, God raised up the prophet Jeremiah to warn the people of their impending captivity. An important part of the book of Jeremiah is his own life and in the first five years of King Jehoiakim's reign Jeremiah suffered blow after blow. The people rejected him and his message (Jeremiah 26:1-19). Led by his own family, the people of his own village wanted to murder him (11:18-12:6), he was bitterly maligned (15:10-18), unmarried and alone (16:1-4) and even those who listened to him did so only to find fault (18:18-23). It is not surprising that the people, led by their priests and prophets wanted to kill Jeremiah when he foretold the destruction of the temple.

The Babylonians defeated the Egyptians at the battle of Carchemish, bringing to an end the domination of Palestine by Pharaoh Neco. When Nebuchadnezzar became King of the Babylonians, he invaded Judah with his allies. Against this background, Jeremiah called Judah to reconsider her past ways and turn from disobedience, as God's patience was running out.

After 23 years of faithful ministry, Jeremiah had not succeeded in bringing the people back to God. He repeatedly exhorted the people to forsake the senseless worship of idols (Jeremiah 25:6) but they were persistent in their sin. Jeremiah warned the people of Judah that judgment would come upon them through Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and that the people would go into captivity for 70 years, in other words a lifetime. Nevertheless, Jeremiah proclaimed that the same principles that worked against Judah's sin would later be effective against Babylon. The Babylonian rule would be terminated by the Medes and Persians under Cyrus. Despite bringing difficult and unwelcome news, Jeremiah did not forsake his calling. He was not above the message that he brought to the people, even though they persecuted him for bringing it. He clung to his people and went with them into exile in Egypt where he probably died.

Although the book of Lamentations is anonymous, it is a collection of five poems traditionally attributed to Jeremiah, 'the weeping prophet'. The once busy city of Jerusalem is deserted after the conquest and the exile. The majesty of Zion has collapsed and the royal household has fled for their lives, abandoning the city. All the joy of life had gone because of past sin. The people had gone into a life of drudgery and slavery. Joy and dancing are a thing of the past. The supreme sign of God's anger was that the Mount Zion, the temple mount, lay desolate and had become a home for wild animals.

Yet despite being a sad book, Lamentations is also a hopeful book. The covenant promises of God that called his people into existence are still available for those who hope in him. The Lord's loving mercy to his creation has not ended. The writer might not have had much in terms of worldly-wealth but he knows the grace and mercy of the Lord. It is against this background that we must see the precious promise of the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

2. Encouragement

Encouragement for the Faithful Exiles

Reading: Psalm 137:1-6; Ezekiel 1:1-3; 20:33-38; 34:1-2, 6, 10-16;
36:24-28; 37:1-4, 7-10; Jeremiah 29:1, 10-14

The exile displaced people from Judah to different parts of the Babylonian Empire. For many Judeans food from the well-irrigated land was plentiful and life in Babylon was good but they were aliens in a foreign land. Even in the midst of plenty they wept, being far removed from Jerusalem. When their captors asked them to sing songs of joy, one of the magnificent songs of Zion, it was not an innocent request. The songs of Zion celebrated the majesty and protection of the Lord over his people, their victories and deliverances by his mighty hand. How could the Israelites sing such songs in foreign land when their city lay in ruins? Indeed would it be right to sing holy songs on foreign, unclean soil? In despair, they hung their harps on the many poplar trees that grew by the rivers. Nevertheless, the godly remnant could focus on Jerusalem.

If an important part of the ministry of Jeremiah had been to warn Judah of their impending captivity, the ministry of Ezekiel was to encourage the faithful exiles. His task was largely to convince them that their being exiled was an act of grace on God's part. It was not God's harshest punishment upon them but the only way that he could save them from the inevitable doom that would fall upon Jerusalem. The destruction of the temple by Nebuchadnezzar was God's verdict on the past history of the nation.

Four years after King Jehoiachin had been deported to Babylon, Ezekiel received his visions of God by the Kebar River in Babylon. In Babylon, Ezekiel brought a word of encouragement to the exiled people from Judah. God, the Sovereign LORD, would rule over them 'with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with outpoured wrath' (Ezekiel 20:34) and would 'bring (them) from the nations and gather them in from countries where (they) had been scattered' (Ezekiel 20:35). The exiles might have been defeated but Judah's God is not defeated. It was only because God loved his people that he rejected their desire to be like other nations. At the end of the Babylonian captivity, Judah would be restored.

The leaders of Israel (in its most general sense and therefore including Judah) had to take responsibility for their faithlessness as shepherds. They had not cared for the flock. Instead of feeding the flock they fed on the flock, failing to provide for the needy, the weak and the sick but taking good care of themselves. Lack of leadership always causes the collapse of God's people. God promises to remove such leaders from their position and rescue his people from them. Through Ezekiel, God promised the reestablishment of Israel. They would return, be cleansed from their sin, be blessed with the presence of the Spirit and would prosper. The people would be restored to the land of Canaan, just as God had promised Abraham.

The promises God made to Israel amounted to a new covenant, written on the hearts of the people. This covenant did not replace the covenant made to Moses but extended it. Ultimately, Israel would be God's people and he would be their God but this does not refer to the return under Zerubbabel but to a complete and final return under the Messiah of which the earthly return would simply be a counterpart.

Some of the visions of Ezekiel use a form that is not familiar to us in which visions are explained by a divine interpreter. In the vision commonly known as 'The Valley of Dry Bones' Ezekiel told what he saw in the vision and then an interpretation was supplied. The recovery of the bones to form bodies was a sign of Israel's ultimate national restoration and the breath entering these bodies was a sign of spiritual renewal. Just as Jeremiah had prophesied, after seventy years, the period of exile would come to a close. God had not forgotten his people. The false prophets spoke about quick deliverance but, despite the need to wait, Jeremiah spoke of a hopeful future. Nevertheless, God's promises are sometimes, if not always, conditional. Here, God promises that when the people call on him he will hear them, if they demonstrate whole-hearted repentance. His promise to "gather (them) from all the nations and places where (he) has banished (them)" (Jeremiah 29:14) looks beyond the return from the exile to a much greater restoration.

3. Assimilation

Assimilation into Culture

Reading: Isaiah 44:6-20; Daniel 3:1, 8-14, 16-20, 24-26, 28, 6:1-2, 6-9, 13-28

One of the challenges facing the exiles was whether their God was in fact no god at all, not least because of their defeat at the hands of the Babylonians who believed in different gods. The prophet Isaiah reminded the people that God, the LORD, is Israel's King and Redeemer (Isaiah 44:6). The absurdity of idolatry is plain to see but that did not stop the exiles being under pressure to conform to the culture of their captors.

We know nothing of the early life of Daniel, except what is recorded in the book bearing his name in which he is described as one of the youths that was exiled in the reign of Nebuchadnezzar. The story of Daniel and his friends begins with four young exiles from Judah taking a stand on eating and drinking. The King of Babylon sent for some able exiles in order to further their education. One of these, Daniel, unwilling to break the Levitical food laws refused the royal food and wine. Daniel and his friends, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah (Babylonian names - Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego) were given permission to live on a vegetarian diet and water for ten days. When they were found to be in good health they were allowed to continue on this diet. Their wisdom surpassed the King's magicians and enchanters.

When King Nebuchadnezzar had a dream that he forgot, he called his wise men to interpret the dream but they said that they must know what the dream was in order to be able to interpret it. Daniel prayed to God that the dream will be revealed to him and God answered his prayer positively. Daniel was, therefore, able to tell the king his dream, which represented succeeding empires after which the God of heaven would set up his eternal kingdom. As a consequence of their service, Daniel and his three friends are promoted.

King Nebuchadnezzar made an immense image covered with gold leaf and called all his officials to the dedication of the image, commanding that everyone bow down and worship it, renouncing their private worship of any other god. Anyone failing to do so would be consigned to the fiery furnace but three Hebrew men, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to acknowledge the golden image. Foolishly, Nebuchadnezzar made his conflict with these three men into a contest with the Lord God Almighty and, having been defied in the name of the God of the Hebrews, he ordered their immediate execution, making sure that there was no possible chance of their survival.

The three men were then tied and thrown as logs into the furnace but in the fire they appeared to be walking around unbound with a fourth man, who looked like a son of the gods. The fiery furnace left them unharmed. When the three men, the fourth having disappeared, emerged from the furnace, they showed no marks of the fire and their clothes did not even smell of the fire (Daniel 3:27). The LORD God had delivered them from the fiery furnace and had triumphed over the tyrant who had defied him.

When King Belshazzar used vessels from the temple at Jerusalem to toast foreign gods human fingers appeared and wrote on the wall. Only Daniel could interpret this and said that the Kingdom would come to an end and be divided between the Medes and the Persians. Later, Belshazzar was slain under Darius the Mede.

While in the service of Darius the Mede, Daniel, who prayed three times a day, was thrown into the lion's den for praying. Even though the king did not want this to happen, the law of the Medes and the Persians could not be changed. However, Daniel, who by this time would have been over 80 years of age, emerged from the lion's den unharmed. Darius undoubtedly respected Daniel's God - the God who had enabled him to interpret the letters on Belshazzar's wall and who had made Daniel the most able administrator in the court. As Nebuchadnezzar had done, Darius made a public proclamation giving glory to the God of the Hebrews, commanding all citizens of the realm to honour and respect him.

4. Power Change

Persian Empire Expands

Reading: 2 Kings 25:27-30; Daniel 7:1, 9-14; 9:1, 4-11a, 17-19; Isaiah 40:1-5; 42:5-9; 43:18-19; 52:1-2; 7-10, 13; 53:4-6; 60:1-3; 51:11

The account of the people of Judah is brought to an end with record of King Jehoiachin, son of Jehoiakim. Jehoiachin seems to have been regarded by the people of Judah as their last legitimate king. After the death of Nebuchadnezzar, his son and successor, Evil-Merodach, released Jehoiachin from prison and gave him due royal recognition, including a place at the king's table and an allowance for the rest of his life. After this time of judgment, Jehoiachin's release is the first release of many Judah-ites or Jews.

In Babylon, Daniel has a further vision concerning the rise and fall of four empires, Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome. These destructive forces will exert their power through the centuries to come until the final triumph of the Son of Man, when the books will be opened and divine judgment pronounced (Daniel 7:11). In one of the great visions of the Old Testament, Daniel records the Son of Man approaching the Ancient of Days (Daniel 7:13-14) and receiving universal worship. This is the passage from Daniel that the New Testament quotes most frequently.

The person who appears in human form before the Ancient of Days is of heavenly origin. The scene is like a coronation. The final ruler of the world is a man (in contrast with four great beasts) and an incarnate heavenly sovereign. The Lord Jesus Christ regularly referred to himself as the 'Son of Man' and emphasised his return to earth "in clouds with great power and glory" (Mark 13:26). On trial before the High Priest and questioned as to whether he was the Christ, the Son of God, Jesus replied,

"Yes, it is as you say, but I say to you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."

(Matthew 26:64)

Daniel's earnestness and prayer and the growing realisation of the fulfilment of the divinely given hope of restoration shine through. God had freely promised full pardon and restoration to his repentant people. Yet, even before the time of exile, Isaiah had promised that God's people would be comforted. The exile should be seen not only as judgment but also as part of the saving work of God, who made possible a new Jerusalem that would emerge from the ashes of the old. While the whole passage (Isaiah 40:1-5) is figurative, the main theme is that all obstructions to the return of the exiles will be removed. In the passages that follow, Isaiah introduces the theme of a servant who suffers while ministering in his unique glory.

In Isaiah (52:1-2), the cry, "Awake, awake!", that was addressed first to God (51:9) and then to Jerusalem (51:17) is repeated. Jerusalem's garments symbolise purity and God-given holiness. Babylon is to be debased, and Jerusalem exalted. The joyful runner brings the good news of peace, salvation and the kingdom of God. The fourth servant song (52:13-53:12) is the best known. The atoning significance of the sufferings of the Servant, outlined in this passage, can only be applied to Jesus the unique Servant. It is the story of God and man reconciled.

The theme of suffering and subsequent glory, so common in the New Testament in application to Christ is presented from the perspective of the onlooker. Isaiah sees the future glory of Zion (60:1-2) and the triumphal procession of the exiles returning home (51:11). While these have their partial fulfilment in the return of the exiles, the prophet undoubtedly anticipates a much greater fulfilment through the work of the suffering servant.