

Part 1: An Overview of the Redemptive-Historical Story of the Old Testament

D. Dissolution and Restoration

11. Exile and Return

One of the best events in Israel's history was their entrance into the Promised Land in fulfillment of one of God's main promises to Abraham; it was where they could fully be the people that God intended them to be. And one of the very worst events in Israel's history (our subject for today) came at the end of their dissolution—their exile from the Promised Land and the corresponding lack of God's presence and blessing.

This exile came at the hands of the Assyrians by 722 BC for many people in the northern part of the divided kingdom of Israel. There is no record of what happened to them afterwards. Hence the mystery of the so-called lost tribes of Israel.

In the southern half of the divided kingdom—Judah—the exile came more than a century later at the hands of the Babylonians. Some members of the royal families were taken to Babylon in 605 BC when Judah became a vassal of that world power; among them were Daniel and his three friends.

But the exile began in earnest in 597 BC when Nebuchadnezzar responded to a revolt of Judah by returning to devastate the country. At this time, large numbers of Judah's citizens were deported, especially the wealthiest and most prominent people—those who represented a potential threat to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar appointed Zedekiah as his representative to rule over those left behind.

Most of the exiles were allowed to form their own community in Babylon and keep their religious and cultural practices. However, they did not offer sacrifices, since the only legitimate place to do that was the temple in Jerusalem. Over time, some adopted the Chaldean religion, but most of them remained united in their faith in the Lord. Their faith was challenged, to be sure. Their defeat by Babylon and loss of their land might have prompted them to wonder whether God's promises were still valid. But at least, Jerusalem and the temple were still intact, even if they were half a world away.

One of the exiles was Ezekiel, the son of a priest and a member of Jerusalem's aristocracy. Five years after reaching Babylon, Ezekiel was called by God as prophet to the exilic community, a ministry that would continue until his death about 570 BC.

Ezekiel's messages from the Lord helped the exiles to know that their suffering was the judgment of God for their sin in refusing to be the people he had called them to be. But he also declared God's continuing purposes for his people, speaking to them of hope and future restoration after judgment. He reminded them as well of God's dealings with all the nations.

Ezekiel's clear and dazzling visions of the glory and splendor of God's presence were accompanied by warnings of impending destruction of the temple and the beloved city of Jerusalem. This destruction was precipitated after another revolt by Judah against Babylon in 586 BC (2 Kings 24-25). Influenced by false prophets and against the warnings of Jeremiah, Zedekiah joined a coalition of other nations who also wanted to escape Babylonian control (Jeremiah 27:1-3). The Babylonians responded by besieging Jerusalem.

About this same time Ezekiel's wife died (24:16-18). But God told Ezekiel that he was not allowed to mourn as a sign and example for the exiles who would not be allowed to mourn the destruction of the holy city and the temple. That destruction was accomplished a short while later as the final stage of the Lord's judgment. Afterwards, yet more people were taken into captivity with only a few of the poorest left behind to serve as farmers and vinedressers (2 Kings 25:12).

The distress of the exiles is expressed in several psalms. Listen, for example, to this excerpt from Psalm 137 (vs. 1,5,6): *By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion... If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy.*

And here's part of a prayer found in Psalm 74 (2-9): *Remember the nation you purchased long ago, the people of your inheritance, whom you redeemed—Mount Zion, where you dwelt. Turn your steps toward these everlasting ruins, all this destruction the enemy has brought on the sanctuary... They burned every place where God was worshiped in the land. We are given no signs from God; no prophets are left, and none of us knows how long this will be.*

Ezekiel was very clear about the reasons for God's judgment against his own people. And Psalm 106 shows this same understanding (vs. 34-42): *They did not destroy the peoples as the LORD had commanded them, but they mingled with the nations and adopted their customs. They worshiped their idols, which became a snare to them. They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to false gods. They shed innocent blood, the blood of their sons and daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan, and the land was desecrated by their blood. They defiled themselves by what they did; by their deeds they prostituted themselves. Therefore the LORD was angry with his people and abhorred his inheritance. He gave them into the hands of the nations, and their foes ruled over them.*

The books of Daniel and Esther, also about the experiences of certain exiles, don't deal specifically with the reasons that God's people were in exile. But they do speak to two issues that were important for all of them to understand, no matter where they lived. The first was that, however bad things looked, God was still in control of time and people and events.

At first in Daniel it doesn't look at all as if God is in control. Quite the opposite; it looks as if the Babylonians are in control – and later, as if the Medes and Persians are in control. But time and again in the stories found here, God shows that He is the one who is orchestrating the events, including the rise and fall of kings and kingdoms. The repeated lesson is that God alone is worthy of all worship and service. And those who will not do this must at least be silent before him and submit to his will.

The book of Esther shows this too, even though God is never mentioned. For one thing, the strong implication is that Mordecai and Esther's actions are prompted by their faith in the Lord. The most likely explanation of why Mordecai the Jew wouldn't bow to Haman is because Haman was a descendant of Agag the ancient king of people who were sworn enemies of the Jews, the Amalekites. God instructed on at least two occasions that the Amalekites be utterly destroyed. The first time was to Moses during Israel's wilderness years (Deut 25:19). And centuries later, God repeated this command to King Saul (1 Sam. 15:3), who, however, did not obey him. As a result, Samuel told Saul, "He has rejected you as king."

There are two conflicting world-views represented in Esther. One is Haman's, who believed that he could do whatever he wanted to anyone who offended him, and thought that on that basis he could annihilate the Jews. The other world-view held that events were subject to God's control and that people needed to respect God and cooperate with him. The end of the book of Esther is pretty clear without actually saying so, that the improved lot of God's people in Xerxes' empire, and also Mordecai's promotion to second in rank to Xerxes himself, is due to God's sovereign control.

The second important issue for the exiles—following from the sovereignty of God—was to understand that they had to be faithful, no matter what circumstances they found themselves in. Mordecai proved his faithfulness in refusing to honor Haman, and in his other actions, including his question to Esther that encouraged her faithfulness (4:14): *Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?* This is still a good question, and an appropriate one for all servants of God, a reminder that God has put you where you are for a reason.

And, of course, that faithfulness is what Daniel and his friends were concerned for as well. Their faithfulness was challenged—and the challenge met—in several matters. For example:

- The matter of Babylon's food and drink, which for Daniel and his friends, likely epitomized the pagan uncleanness they associated with captivity in a foreign land. So they wanted to abstain from it as a way of remaining faithful to the God of Israel.
- The matter of bowing down to Nebuchadnezzar's image of gold. Daniel disobeyed because God's law prohibited Israel from worshiping any god besides the Lord and also the use of images.
- The matter in which prayer was prohibited prayer to anyone but Darius. Daniel was not at all Pharisaic about praying in public. But neither was he afraid to keep up the connection that he had established with God, and give him the honor that belonged to him.

There was no guarantee that failure to comply with any of the demands placed upon Daniel and his friends would not cost them their lives. But, they knew that death in God's service is preferable to life outside of it. In fact, the big lesson of the exile is that life lived in service to anyone but God can't help but end in death. But, as it turned out, God was pleased each time to preserve the lives of his faithful servants, and increase both their honor and his own glory in the eyes of the world that sought to control them.

Toward the end of his life Daniel discovered from his study of Jeremiah that the nation of Babylon was about to be made desolate and that this would coincide with the end of Israel's desolation (cf. Dan 9:1-2; cf. Jer. 25:11-12). Jer. 29:10-14 reads, *"When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you...and will bring you back from the place from which I carried you into exile.*

I want to comment briefly on v. 11, "I know the plans I have for you..." This is a favorite verse for many Christians today, who take from it the comfort that God knows each of us individually and has good plans for us. This is undoubtedly true. But that is not what Jeremiah was saying.

He was speaking of God's plans to bring his people out of captivity and return them to the Promised Land, where they would have another chance to serve him wholeheartedly as the community he had originally called them to be—the God-blessed children of Abraham living in harmony with their God in such a way that they would become a blessing to the whole world. Do not neglect the original context and meaning of Scripture in order to jump right in to “what it means for me.” Because you and I can't understand the full riches of what it means for us without understanding the redemptive-historical story.

Another question that might occur to us regarding Jeremiah's prophecy is this: “Why did God choose seventy years as the length of time to punish his people?” We must confess that we really don't know. But 2 Chron. 36:21 says this about the length of the exile: *The land enjoyed its sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed in fulfillment of the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah.*

Through Moses, God had said that every seventh year, the land into which he was leading his people was to have “a sabbath of rest, a sabbath to the Lord” (Lev. 25:4). This, like the weekly Sabbath, was to be a testimony to Israel's dependence on the Lord's provision, and a way to give him special honor and worship. If Israel had followed this law of God, giving the Lord the honor due him, they would not have incurred the judgment that led them to forfeit the land for seventy years. So in the end, God had his way; the land did have its sabbath rests and, the implication is, God's people had better pay closer attention to keeping the Lord at the center of their life after their return.

Back to Daniel. What did he do when he discovered the imminent end to the captivity of his people? He went to God in prayer, confessing the sins that had caused God to punish his people, and praying that God would indeed fulfill his promise to restore them. One can never go wrong praying as Daniel did, according to the already revealed will of God; indeed, that is precisely what the majority of our prayers should be about. More about this in a lecture to come: “The Prayers of God's Servants.”

Daniel himself probably never left the country to which he had been exiled—Babylon, now Medo-Persia. But the return would begin in a year or two with a group of about 50,000 (Ezra 1:11). They found difficult conditions back in the homeland. The cities of Judah had been torn down; they were rubble. People left behind lived in villages and rural areas. Most of these had been the poor of Judah. But they had intermarried with the surrounding tribes and pretty much lost their identity. Those in the north were called Samaritans – who had a blend of non-Jewish and Jewish blood and cultural practices. There were some similarities between their worship practices and those of the Jews, but enough differences so that the Jews regarded them as illegitimate.

So while many of the challenges to the returning exiles were physical, the bigger ones were spiritual – How to reestablish the true worship of God in their homeland. The main concern was to rebuild the city of God and the temple of God so that all the promises of God, made earlier to Abraham and Joshua and David, etc. could be fulfilled and so God's people could achieve the status and the inheritance that they believed was their destiny.

Consequently, after the people had some time to settle in their own towns, they regathered in Jerusalem to reestablish the sacrifices that had been neglected. And along with this they celebrated the Passover and other feasts.

A few months later they started to rebuild the Lord's temple. They had an offer of help in this from some other residents of the land, who said they also had an interest in serving the Lord and had, in fact, been sacrificing to him for a long time. But that offer was quickly rejected by the heads of Israel; even if it had been sincere, which they doubted, they knew that these neighbors had no interest in serving the Lord to the exclusion of other gods and according to the demands of his law. That was proved afterward by their use of physical intimidation and political maneuverings to stop the rebuilding efforts.

The Israelites found it very difficult to maintain their own homes and businesses and also donate time to work on the temple. So they stopped work on the temple to give themselves more time for personal pursuits. Even so, their life in the Promised Land remained difficult and not all that much like the place God had promised it would be.

A decade later, the Lord sent the prophet Haggai to tell the people that the reason they weren't doing well was that they had worked on their own houses to the neglect of the Lord's house. In response to Haggai's message, Scripture says that the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel the governor and Joshua the high priest, and the spirit of all the people so that they set to work again to rebuild the temple and stayed at it for another six years. The new temple was a poor imitation of the grand structure that Solomon had built, but it was finally completed, about twenty years after their arrival in the land.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah describe the contributions of two other men to the reestablishment of life as God intended it. Ezra led another contingent of exiles back to Israel about three decades after the completion of the temple. "Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel." One of the things that came to bother him greatly was that the returning exiles, and even the priests among them, had not avoided intermarriage with the neighboring peoples who served other gods. And so Ezra led the people in addressing this issue. They confessed their sins, and afterwards the leaders of Israel agreed to investigate the violations case by case and deal with this matter so that their service to the Lord would not be compromised.

Just a few years later, Nehemiah, who had risen to high office in his adopted land, heard about some continuing troubles that God's people were having involving the still broken down walls and gates of Jerusalem. This matter was heavy on his heart and mind. After much prayer God gave him an audience with his master, King Artaxerxes, and his subsequent blessing and financial support to go to Jerusalem as governor and builder of the city walls.

Nehemiah had to deal with many problems among God's people and much opposition from Israel's neighbors. But by assigning armed men to protect the builders and other wise precautions, the walls of Jerusalem were completed and its gates rehung.

The re-establishment of God's people in the Promised Land would face many more hurdles. And the sinfulness of the people was a persistent problem, as human sinfulness always is. But this restoration would continue and become another link in the chain of something far more expansive than they knew. It foreshadowed God's plan to bring many more than a few thousand people out of spiritual exile—coming from a place where God was not known or honored or worshiped, and starting over, by the grace of Jesus Christ, with a new life lived in service to a new master.