

Sermon – The Prophets and Exile Sunday February 9, 2025

Introduction

Imagine you're a tree. You've been growing in a beautiful garden for years. Your roots go deep, your branches stretch far and you give shade, fruit and shelter to everyone around. But over time, your roots weaken, your branches wither and you stop providing shade, fruit and shelter.

Then one day, someone rips you out of the ground. You're completely uprooted and exposed. You feel confused, disoriented and hopeless.

This is a picture of how the Israelites felt during the darkest time in their history. Like the tree, the Israelites were uprooted and taken from their land. Their city was destroyed. Their temple was decimated. Their identity was shattered.

The term used to describe this is Exile. The exile was a time of immense suffering. Like you and me when we're lost, heartbroken and confused, they began asking questions.

- What went wrong?
- Why did this happen?
- Has God abandoned us?

Sermon Series

We're in a series called The God Story. We're exploring the grand narrative of Scripture and looking at how from beginning to end, the Bible tells the story of God's purposes for you and me and for the world he created.

Understanding The God Story helps us to make sense of our own stories because it shows us how our stories are part of God's bigger story. And it's into this bigger story, The God Story that God invites you to become the person he created you to be and live out the purpose he created you for.

Recap of Last Week

Last week, we talked about the *Rise and Fall of the Kingdom of Israel*.

- God raised up Saul as the first king. Saul started off well, but he didn't obey God with his whole heart.
- So God raised up David, who was a man after his own heart but later fell into sin.
- Then God raised up Solomon. And though Solomon loved God, he loved wealth and women more.

So after Solomon died, the kingdom split in two. Ten of the twelve tribes formed the Northern Kingdom of Israel. And the remaining two tribes formed the Southern Kingdom of Judah.

Today we're talking about *The Prophets and Exile*. This is the period of Israel's history when they were removed from their land and forced to live as captives in Babylon. But why did this happen?

It happened because the people had turned their backs on God.

- They worshipped the gods of the surrounding nations - even though God told them to only worship him.
- They exploited the poor and marginalized - even though God told them to treat them with justice and compassion.
- The leaders also exploited the people for their own gain - even though God told them to live righteously and to lead the people to worship God.

So how would God bring them back? He sent prophets to speak to them.

The Prophets

We often think of a prophet as a fortune teller who predicts the future.

But in the Bible, a prophet is a spokesperson for God. Someone who speaks God's words to the people, often in times of crisis and spiritual decline.

Now prophets would give two types of messages. The first type is a message of warning.

- They warned the people when they were violating God's covenant.
- They confronted them about their sin.
- They called them to repent – to turn *away* from their sins and turn *back to* God.

So did the people heed these warnings? No. They were too stubborn. Despite the repeated warnings from the prophets, they continued to live in idolatry, corruption and sin.

So how would God respond? Would he abandon them and start over? No. Because of God's love and faithfulness, he was determined to win them back. But how would he do this?

Emerson and Cox, the authors of *The God Story* write: The Father's only chance of winning his people back in the long term is to let them go in the short term. Israel will experience God's love as judgment.

This judgment would come in the form of exile.

- First the Northern Kingdom would fall to Assyria in 722 BC. The Assyrians captured, killed or assimilated the Northern Kingdom and none of the ten tribes ever returned.
- The Southern Kingdom had more time to get their act together. But eventually, they too were punished. Babylon would invade and destroy Judah. And by 586 BC, Jerusalem was completely besieged and burned to the ground.

Many were killed and those who survived were taken captive. Only the poorest were left. People starved in the streets; mothers considered eating their own children. Israel had hit rock bottom - this was the darkest chapter in her history.

Emerson and Cox describe it like this: Abraham's children of promise, God's treasured possessions, now find themselves completely humiliated, back in Babylon, the very place their great ancestor was called out from more than 1500 years before. Slaves to another master once again. Abraham's legacy of faith, it appears, is now left in tatters as Israel enters the darkest chapter of their existence as a nation.

You and I have probably never witnessed the destruction of our homeland. You and I have probably never been taken into captivity. But you and I have probably all hit rock bottom at some point. Maybe you're there right now. Maybe you're in a kind of exile.

Maybe it's a relational exile. You feel rejected and betrayed. You feel isolated and misunderstood. You feel lonely and out of place.

Maybe it's an emotional exile. You want God's peace but you can't overcome your fears. You want God's joy but can't overcome your depression.

Maybe it's a spiritual exile. When you pray, it feels like God can't hear you. When you read the Bible, it feels like God isn't there. You feel like you're in a spiritual desert; you've lost your way and you don't know who you are. You want to feel God's presence but you don't know how to do it.

- What do you do when it feels like your world has fallen apart?
- What do you do when life doesn't go the way you planned?
- What do you do when you've lost your way and you don't know what to do?

In biblical times, when a nation was defeated like Israel was – people believed that it was because that nation's god was dead. But while the people were in exile, God shows them that he isn't dead, he hasn't abandoned them. In fact, what's actually happening is this: **In their darkest moment, God is with them and actively working out his plans to bring them home.**

Remember how prophets had two types of messages? The first type of message is what? A message of warning - warnings the people ignored which led to their exile. Now while they're in their exile, the prophets have another type of message. But it's not a message of condemnation or blame. What kind of message is it? It's a message of hope.

What is this message of hope? How can this message encourage you when you're living in a time of exile and despair?

What I want to do for the rest of our time is look at three messages from three of the major prophets. I want to show you how their words can bring you comfort, strength and hope even when you feel like you're in exile.

Jeremiah

The first prophet we're going to look at is Jeremiah. Jeremiah's ministry spans 40 years. He warned the people about God's judgment, lived through the fall of Jerusalem and witnessed the destruction of the temple. He was part of the minority that remained in Jerusalem after the Babylonians defeated Judah and deported most of the Israelites.

It's here when the people are at their lowest, that Jeremiah gives one of the most comforting messages of hope in the Bible.

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. (Jeremiah 29:11)

The people have lost their land, their identity and their purpose. Their whole world has been taken away. Maybe some of you know what that's like. Maybe some of you are there now. And yet in their darkest moment, God says:

I have a future and a purpose for you.

Turn to your neighbour and tell them, God has a future and a purpose for you!

God is saying right now...

I haven't forgotten you. I'm still working – even now. I know you feel displaced, I know you're hurting, I know you're confused. But know this - I haven't abandoned you. I still have plans for you, plans not to harm you but to give you a future filled with hope.

So even though it feels like your life has been shattered, remember that I am with you. I will help you build up your life again. Even now, I'm preparing you for a time of restoration. And one day I will bring you back home. You'll have a stronger sense of identity. You'll have a stronger faith. And you'll live out your calling as my people once again.

Like the Israelites, you and I go through hard times, and when we do it feels like we've lost everything. In those moments, it's easy to think, What's the point? Why bother?

And if you're there right now, you need to know this: God has not forgotten you. God is with you. He has a future for you, he has good plans for you.

Because even though it feels like your story has come to an end, God's story is bigger than your story.

- And His story can't be stopped by political chaos or rising inflation.
- His story can't be stopped by divorce or cancer.
- His story can't be stopped by wounds from the past or mistakes you've made.

Why? Because God's story is a story of hope. Even in your darkest moments, God is writing your story into his grand story. Because God wants to restore you. He has a future and a purpose for you.

Ezekiel

The second prophet we're going to look at is Ezekiel. Unlike Jeremiah who was imprisoned during the Babylonian invasion and remained in Jerusalem, Ezekiel was taken into captivity with the other Israelites. During this time, Ezekiel receives one of the most powerful images in the Bible.

God gives him a vision where he's standing in a valley. The valley is filled with dry bones. These dry bones represent the Israelites who have been taken into exile. Because just like the bones, the people are scattered, lifeless and without hope.

But then God says, Can these bones live? To which Ezekiel responds, God, only you know.

Then God tells Ezekiel to prophesy these words **This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath^a enter you, and you will come to life. ⁶ I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.”** (Ezekiel 37:5-6)

What happens when Ezekiel does this? Something amazing! The bones come together, they form tendons, then they’re covered with flesh. God then breathes his life into them and they stand up and become a great army.

What does this mean? God is reminding all those who feel spiritually dry and hopeless: **I can bring life to what seems dead.**

The Israelites feel lifeless. They’re defeated, they have no home, they have no temple. It feels like their story is over. But God is reminding them:

Even though your situation feels hopeless, I will restore you and breathe new life into you. I will bring you back and you will be my people once again.

How many of you are feeling spiritually dry? How many you feel like things are hopeless?

- Maybe you’re struggling with your finances.
- Maybe you’re struggling with work.
- Maybe you’re struggling with your relationships or your mental health.

Whatever valley you’re in right now, whatever dry bones surround you, remember this:

- God can breathe life into your heart.
- God can breathe life into your circumstances.
- God can breathe life into your future.

Because God brings life to what seems dead.

Isaiah

The third prophet we’re going to look at is Isaiah. While Jeremiah and Ezekiel lived during the exile, Isaiah lived before the exile. He actually witnessed the fall of the Northern Kingdom over a hundred years earlier.

And he prophesied to the Southern Kingdom that they too would suffer the same consequences if they didn’t turn back to God. He also prophesied that while they would be exiled, God would eventually restore them and return them to the land.

In Isaiah 49, we find one of the most inspiring messages about how God’s mission was so much bigger than they had realized.

**“It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
to restore the tribes of Jacob**

**and bring back those of Israel I have kept.
I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,
that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.” (Isaiah 49:6)**

The Israelites feel like they've lost their identity, they feel like they've lost their calling, they feel like they've lost their purpose. They have no land, no temple and no future. But even now, God tells them this: **I have called you to be a light to the world.**

How is this possible? It doesn't even seem like they'll ever return home. But God says:

Don't think so small. Don't think just about your own life and your own survival. Because I have bigger and better plans for you! Not only will I restore you to your land, but I will use you to bring my salvation to the world.

I will bless you but this blessing isn't just for you. I will give you hope, but this hope isn't just for you. This blessing and hope are to remind you of who you are and what you're called to do. Because even as I bless you, I want you to be a blessing. Even as I give you hope, I want you to give hope to others.

So don't get self-consumed by your struggles, because they don't disqualify you from your mission. Because I am God, and I can use even your struggles to reveal my glory, to reveal my love and to reveal my power. And that's how I'm going to bring my salvation to the world.

This message can be tremendously hopeful for us. Because when everything seems dark and uncertain, it's easy to lose our identity and purpose. But God reminds us,

- Your pain is not the end of your story.
- Your loss is not the end of your story.
- Your suffering is not the end of your story.

Why? Because God can redeem everything, even your pain, your losses and your suffering. God will write these things into his story. And when your story begins to tell the good news of God's story, you will bring light, hope and healing wherever you go. Because God has called you to be a light to the world.

We've looked at three messages of hope from the Major Prophets. In their writings, we see a consistent theme: **In the midst of darkness and suffering, God is doing something new.**

In Jer 31, Jeremiah tells us that **God is Making a New Covenant** (Jeremiah 31:31-34) that will bring us into a deeper and more intimate relationship with him.

In Ez 36, Ezekiel tells us that **God is Giving Us a New Heart and a New Spirit** (Ezekiel 36:26-27) that will replace our old heart of stone with a new heart of flesh. He will give us a new spirit that will transform us from the inside out and enable us to love God and love others the way we were always meant to.

In Is 43, Isaiah tells us that **God is Doing a New Thing** (Isaiah 43:19). Yes, God will bring the people back into the land and yes, God will restore them. But that's not all he will do. God will usher in a new era.

- It will be an era of healing and hope.
- It will be an era of justice and righteousness.

- It will be an era where God's people will be transformed and reconciled to God so that they can join him in his mission to make all things NEW!

This is our ultimate hope. This is our calling. But how will all this happen?

The prophet Isaiah describes a mysterious figure known as the Suffering Servant. He would endure intense suffering, rejection and humiliation. Why? So that through his suffering, he would bring God's healing and redemption to the world.

Who is this Suffering Servant? It's Jesus. Jesus experienced exile so that we could come home.

- He came into the world he made and lived as a stranger.
- He was misunderstood by his followers, rejected by the religious leaders.
- He was betrayed and abandoned by his own friends.

And then on the cross, Jesus experienced the ultimate exile. Because to fully identify with our rebellion, he takes on the sins of the world, including your sins and mine. The sinless Son of God who has only ever known deep intimate love with his Father now is separated from God for the first time.

Why would he choose this? He chose this so that when we hit rock bottom, when we feel defeated, when we're living in exile, we would know that:

- God doesn't run away from suffering, he enters into it.
- God is with us even in our pain.
- God has taken up our griefs and sorrows on the cross so that we can be reconciled to him.

So when you feel hopeless and discouraged, think of Jesus, the suffering servant, the one who endured the ultimate exile, and hear God's say to you:

- I have a future and a purpose for you.
- I can bring life to what seems dead.
- I have called you to be a light to the world.

Which one of these messages speaks to you the most right now? Which of these promises do you need to hold on to this week?

Even in your exile, remember that God is with you. And through Jesus, he is working even now to renew you, restore you and give you hope.

Let's pray.

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

We come to you now knowing that many of us here this morning are in a kind of exile. We're hurting, overwhelmed and confused.

For those of us who are going through a hard season and wondering what's the point, remind us that you have a future and a purpose for us. You are with us and you are working to rebuild our faith and restore our hope. Your story isn't hindered by our setbacks and failures. Because your story is a story of restoration.

For those of us who feel defeated and spiritually dry, remind us that you breathe life to what seems dead. Holy Spirit, would you breathe your life into us, breathe your life into our situations, breathe your life into our relationships. Renew us and fill us with your spirit so that we can live faithfully for you in this season.

For those of us who feel overwhelmed by our struggles and have lost our sense of purpose, remind us that you have called us to be a light to the world. That even the hard parts of our story, can be redeemed. That it's not about us, it's about you and your story. And when our story finds its purpose in your story, our lives will be a witness of your love and we'll bring hope and healing to those around us.

Thank you for Jesus, the suffering servant who experienced the ultimate exile. Thank you for his love, his obedience and his sacrifice on the cross. As we think of him, fill us with your spirit, renew us with your hope and strengthen us in your power we pray.

And all God's people said,

Amen