

Finding Your Story in HIStory:
What Do You Do If You Find Yourself in Exile?
Jeremiah 29:1-14

March 11, 2012

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Text Introduction: We are in the middle of a series we are calling “Finding Your Story in HIStory.” Our aim is to show what God is doing in history to pursue a relationship with His creation—especially His most prized creation—humanity. We have been hitting some of the high points of the Old Testament to observe this history. We have followed the nation of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, and noted that they would establish themselves as a nation. We have seen them with a desire to be like all of the other nations as they demand a king. We have heard of their deep rebellion against God—a rebellion that would eventually lead to their being invaded by a foreign enemy, and many of them enter a time of exile out of their Promised Land. This was the ultimate consequence of their sin against God. Along the way, God constantly called out to His people through prophets. Today, we want to consider our own story as we consider the period of the exile of the nation of Israel. For our start, we turn to the prophet Jeremiah. His ministry begins before the exile, but continues into the exile. For that reason, his prophecy contains a letter written to those already in exile. Hear what the letter says as we perhaps might face our own periods of spiritual exile.

Text: ¹ This is the text of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the rest of the elders of the exiles, the priests, the prophets, and all the people Nebuchadnezzar had deported from Jerusalem to Babylon. ² This was after King Jeconiah, the queen mother, the court officials, the officials of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen, and the metalsmiths had left Jerusalem. ³ The letter was sent by Elasah son of Shaphan and Gemariah son of Hilkiah whom Zedekiah king of Judah had sent to Babylon to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. The letter stated:

⁴ This is what the LORD of Hosts, the God of Israel, says to all the exiles I deported from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵ “Build houses and live in them. Plant gardens and eat their produce. ⁶ Take wives and have sons and daughters. Take wives for your sons and give your daughters to men in marriage so that they may bear sons and daughters. Multiply there; do not decrease. ⁷ Seek the welfare of the city I have deported you to. Pray to the LORD on its behalf, for when it has prosperity, you will prosper.”

⁸ For this is what the LORD of Hosts, the God of Israel, says: “Don’t let your prophets who are among you and your diviners deceive you, and don’t listen to the dreams you elicit from them, ⁹ for they are prophesying falsely to you in My name. I have not sent them.” This is the LORD’s declaration.

¹⁰ For this is what the LORD says: “When 70 years for Babylon are complete, I will attend to you and will confirm My promise concerning you to restore you to this place. ¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you”—this is the LORD’s declaration—“plans for your welfare, not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. ¹² You will call to Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you”—this is the LORD’s declaration—“and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and places where I banished you”—this is the LORD’s declaration. “I will restore you to the place I deported you from.”

Introduction:

We need to consider this experience from two different perspectives. What if the exile, like the nation of Israel, has been created by own sin? Then, what if our exile is created, like that generation who would be born in exile, by the sin of others?

If your exile experience is the consequence of your sin, you must repent!

Actually, there is not a lot to say here. We must repent.

An Example: King Manasseh—2 Kings 33 (especially 2 Kings 33:10-13)

Manasseh was wicked. In fact, there is an ancient tradition (not a Biblical tradition, but nonetheless, a historical tradition) about Manasseh that illustrates his wickedness. According to one story, Manasseh put the prophet Isaiah to death when the prophet was 92. According to that story, he had Isaiah gruesomely sawed in half. The early church fathers believed this event is being referenced in Hebrews 11:37 which indicates some people of faith had been sawed in two. Whether this is true, we can never know for sure, but we do know even from the text, that Manasseh was certainly a wicked king. In fact 2 Chronicles 33:9 tells us that Manasseh caused Judah “to stray so that they did worse evil than the nations the LORD had destroyed before the Israelites.”

Manasseh is brought briefly into exile. We read that beginning in verse 10.

¹⁰ The LORD spoke to Manasseh and his people, but they didn't listen. ¹¹ So He brought against them the military commanders of the king of Assyria. They captured Manasseh with hooks, bound him with bronze shackles, and took him to Babylon. ¹² When he was in distress, he sought the favor of Yahweh his God and earnestly humbled himself before the God of his ancestors. ¹³ He prayed to Him, so He heard his petition and granted his request, and brought him back to Jerusalem, to his kingdom. So Manasseh came to know that Yahweh is God.

One word—repentance.

If you are here today and your exile is the result of your sin, your only hope is immediate and complete repentance. I have heard recently about how Christians in Romania are called, by non-Christians, “repenters.” Repentance ought to be so dramatic in our lives that those looking on would call us repenters.

But, our periods of exile are not always caused by our own sin. Often times, our spiritual exiles are caused by the sin of another. Many Israelites by birth would have been born into exile. After all, the period of the exile is given as 70 years. The letter to the exiles that we have read from Jeremiah seems to be spoken directly to those who have in a sense inherited their exile.

Whether your exile is the result of your sin or not, live life!

In a sense, all of us who are believers in Jesus Christ are living in a form of exile, so this message takes on great meaning for us.

The Apostle Paul hinted at this when he said, as is recorded in Philippians 3:20, “²⁰ but our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.”

The writer of Hebrews addressed this as recorded in Hebrews 11:13. ¹³ “These all died in faith without having received the promises, but they saw them from a distance, greeted them, and confessed that they were foreigners and temporary residents on the earth.”

And most direct, Peter said, as recorded in 1 Peter 2:11, ¹¹ “Dear friends, I urge you as strangers and temporary residents to abstain from fleshly desires that war against you.”

God’s Instructions: (Jeremiah 29)

Live life...

- Productively—Get busy living! Obviously, those in exile were impatient to return. But God says, “Get busy right where you are.” In fact, they were so impatient that they were turning to false prophets who were offering hope that they would return soon. God reminds them that they better settle in to their new surroundings. Faith is not believing God to get you out of your situation; it is believing that God will work in your situation. There is powerful application to our lives right here. Don’t like your job? If it is the place where God has called you or allowed you, get busy. Don’t like your school? If it is the place where God has called you or allowed you, get busy. Don’t like your marriage? Now, you are there. Get busy! Dare I say, don’t like your church or your pastor? If it is the place where God has called you, quit grumbling and get busy! If you cannot be faithful to God where you are right now, you will not be able to faithful to God somewhere else.
- Prayerfully—One of the best ways to get busy in your exile is to get busy praying.
- Patiently

The word “patience” probably causes all of us to panic. We think patience in inactivity. We think patience is depressing and maybe hopeless. But for the one who believes in God, waiting patiently for God is filled with promise.

A Godly Example: Daniel (Daniel 1)

The first chapter of Daniel reminds us that Daniel lived in the time of the exile. Daniel lived his life

Productively—He denied himself the King’s choice food, but He contributed to the king in his ability to interpret dreams.

Prayerfully—If you do not know any other story of Daniel, I bet you know about Daniel and the Lion’s Den. Why was Daniel thrown to the lions? Because it was his habit to pray.

Patiently—Daniel 9 develops for us that Daniel began to understand that the 70 years of captivity were coming to a completion, so he began to pray even more earnestly that God would prepare Israel to repent and return.

Conclusion: Don’t ever forget that even the exile is God’s passionate pursuit of you. Back in Jeremiah 29:4 at the beginning of the letter, we read: “To all the exiles I deported.” God is in charge!