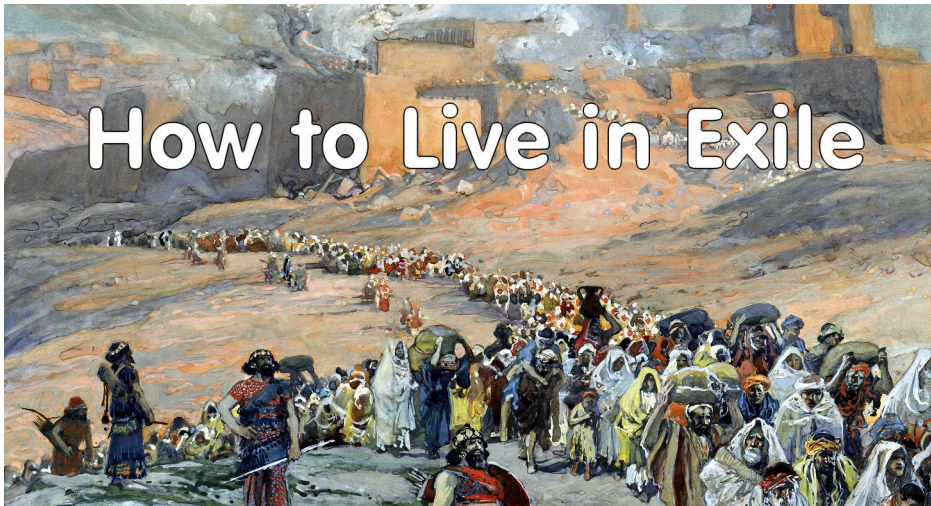


"In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice" (Romans 11:5)

Vol. 43 No. 3

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How to Live in Exile

Reflections on Israel's captivity in Babylon that relate to our own lives today

by
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For most of us these days, we find ourselves living in circumstances that we have never experienced before. In many respects, it is like living in a form of exile. While sheltering in place doesn't mean relocating anywhere physically, we still find ourselves exiled away from actual face to face social interaction.

Biblically speaking, the most significant form of exile is that of the Jewish people being taken to the land of Babylon in the sixth century B.C. Most often, we tend to focus on the way that they ended up in captivity as a result of forsaking the LORD as the one true God.

We also tend to focus on the return of the Jewish people from exile to the land of their heritage and the rebuilding of the temple and the spiritual revival that went along with it. This is an important recognition, for it demonstrates

how God keeps His covenants, including His promise that the land of Canaan was given as an everlasting possession to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It was imperative, then, for God to bring them back to the land and to restore their fellowship with Him.

So, in order to understand what God is doing in this world, it is essential to grasp these key principles of discipline in the form of exile and restoration in the form of return. These are principles that apply not just to Israel, but to believers in Yeshua (Jesus) from every background because they are fundamental in nature.

We all face God's discipline and restoration in our lives because He is a holy God, and a God of justice and righteousness, yet He is also a God of grace and mercy. So we need to recognize that discipline and restoration arise

from His very nature.

But one thing that is often overlooked is what Scripture teaches us about living during the exile itself. The Prophet Jeremiah addressed this very issue in a letter written to the exiles that is recorded in his 29th chapter.

At that time, the first captives had been taken away, while Jeremiah remained behind in the land of Judah. Later, there would be two more waves of deportations, culminating with the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. So while the letter that Jeremiah wrote is directed to the initial people in exile, it would also apply to the rest of the people who would be forced to join them.

The reason for this letter was the reality that the people would be in Babylon for the rest of their lives. For even if you were young when taken captive, like the prophet Daniel, you would be too



Clay cuneiform tablet written in Akkadian describing life in the City of Judah in Babylon where Jews established their community while in exile.

- Bible Lands Museum, Jerusalem

old at the end of captivity seventy years later to make the long and arduous journey back to Jerusalem and then to serve in various construction tasks for the rebuilding.

In other words, once in exile, that was the only environment that you would ever experience personally again. With that background, Jeremiah's letter is marked by three exhortations.

Live life as normally as possible

Jeremiah called upon the people to establish homes that were just like those they had in their homeland. They were to act as families normally do, characterized by marriage and raising children. And they were to get involved in their local communities, even praying for their shalom, meaning peace or welfare (29:5-7).

Archaeological evidence shows that they did those very things. Clay tablets have been discovered, dating to this period of time. You can see some of them at the Bible Lands Museum in Jerusalem. They show where the

various Jewish communities were located. They named their communities after their towns in Judah. One was named Tel Aviv. Another one on the shore of the Euphrates River was called *Al Yahudu* in the local Akkadian language, meaning "City of Judah."

The tablets describe how banking and commerce were done with Jews. They became merchants, craftsmen, scholars, fishermen and farmers who leased land. Some became royal officials, just like Esther and Mordecai in the book of Esther. The people continued to identify themselves as priests, singers, gatekeepers and temple servants according to their familial heritage.

So because of this commitment to maintaining their former lives as much as possible, a distinct Jewish identity was never completely lost.

In fact, among the many groups who were taken captive by Babylon, the Jewish people were the only ones who did not become absorbed into Babylonian and later Persian culture, thus disappearing as a distinct people group. 2500

years later, the same is still true.

Aside from having an appreciation for the way that the Jewish people survived, in spite of many circumstances that could have easily eliminated their memory, we can also benefit from drawing a parallel from this history to our own situation today. We have limits placed upon us, but it is good for us to live our lives as normally as possible:

- This is still a time to take care of your home and your responsibilities.
- We can spend time communicating with family and friends.
- We can call people we haven't spoken to in some time. This presents a great opportunity to find out how you can pray for them.
- We can seek the peace and welfare of our communities by doing what the authorities are telling us.
- And we can pray for the welfare of our communities, especially for those serving on the front lines and those who are making important decisions.

We may be in exile, but like Jeremiah has shown us, we can make the best of this situation by doing some fairly normal things that are helpful and a blessing to others.

Remain spiritually healthy

In chapter 27, Jeremiah describes how there were prophets saying that the captivity would not last long. No doubt that sounded good to the people who had been taken away. They believed that soon they would be right back in Jerusalem. But two chapters later, Jeremiah warns the people not to believe those prophets because the LORD never sent them.

These days, an abundance of prophecies and pronouncements are circulating regarding the current pandemic. Some are convinced that this is the beginning of the End Times. Others are saying that this is the fourth horsemen of the Apocalypse (but the pale horse in Revelation 6:8 brings death by the sword, hunger and wild beasts. The original language says nothing about disease).

Another prophecy claims that the pandemic will end suddenly without any efforts by people. That would be nice, although this is the same prophet who previously declared that mental illness would disappear by 2017 and telemarketers would vanish by 2015. Even though this particular prophet is not a believer in Yeshua, some believers are passing around this prophecy right now.

The point is that just like in Babylonian exile, our modern exile has brought out prophecies and teachings that are all over the place theologically. Typically they proclaim things that people want

to hear, not what they need to hear. And because these messages are incompatible with one another, that should tell us that at least in part, as God declared through Jeremiah: “They prophesy falsely to you in My name; I have not sent them” (29:9).

Yes, this current pandemic could be what Yeshua called a birth pang that precedes the End Times. Yes, it is consistent with the nature of sin. And yes, God does judge sin and we are foolish to believe that our nation or any nation is exempt from the consequences of sin. It is not out of the question to conclude that we are in our form of exile because of the presence of sin in this world.

The problem, however, is attributing it to one particular sin as some have done. Most importantly, we need to recognize the great impact that sin has on this world. For when Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, it introduced death and disease into creation. The mutation of viruses is one of those manifestations of the corruption of creation as a result of sin. And throughout history, humanity has suffered because of it. Thus the coronavirus serves as a tragic reminder of the fallen nature of this world and our vulnerability to the consequence of sin. For that reason alone, we can see the need for God’s mercy.

We are living in a time when it is important to strengthen our spiritual health in a number of ways:

- We need to turn aside from those proclamations that are sensational but not edifying for us personally.
- We need to be spending time in God’s Word, which does not deal in speculations, but in pure simple truth. You may never have another time when you

will have a greater opportunity to do that, because many of the distractions of life have been stripped away.

- Moreover, we need to keep on worshiping the LORD, and staying connected with other believers, even if it is done virtually.
- And how true it is that we need to be praying for the mercy and the restoration of God on a daily basis.

Make your life purposeful when the exile ends

Beginning in the book of Deuteronomy, God promised time and time again that when Israel would be chastened and sent into exile, it would always be followed by restoration. That is promised by Jeremiah as well, with a return after 70 years (29:10). Then we are given the reason for the return:

“For I know the plans that I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans for peace and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope” (29:11).

God’s plans were not for the Jewish people to stay in Babylon. Jerusalem was always the focal point of God’s great redemptive plan. And the Jewish people were the nation of promise through whom Messiah would come and the all the families of the earth would be blessed.

So the point is that while the Jewish people were held captive in Babylon, they needed to hold on to the big picture. They needed to recognize that God would make it possible for their nation to be restored, centered around Jerusalem once again. They would have to wait upon His timing, but the certainty of His promise could

give them “a future and a hope” as long as they knew the plans that God had for them.

There is always something bigger, something greater than our immediate circumstances. A lesson can be learned from the Holocaust. Viktor Frankl was a Holocaust survivor who later became an expert on evaluating the experiences of other survivors. He concluded that those who maintained hope in the future were more likely to survive. He also determined that an important factor was having a desire to bear witness after it was all over about what happened.

The same is true for us today. We need to find a purpose in what we are experiencing. It could be a commitment to continue reaching out to other people after the social distancing is over. It could be a change of perspective, such as being more openly appreciative of the blessings that we have. It could be having a realization that life is fragile and momentary and building on that with a dedication to worship and to serve God with greater passion. It could be making a commitment to get to know your neighbors better, with the hope of sharing the Good News of Yeshua with them.

The possibilities are numerous, but the point is that we need to recognize that the current

circumstances of our life are not the end of the story. So how can we know what God’s plans are for us? Jeremiah provides us with the first and most important step. God said:

“call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart”

(Jer 29:12-13).

Normally we think of this as a promise of finding God spiritually in a general sense whenever we seek Him. And while I believe that is very true, the context here deepens our understanding.

This is a reminder that especially in the midst of exile, God wants people to turn to Him and to seek His will for our lives. And we do that through our prayers. Thus now is the time to be seeking what His plans are for us. Now is the time to ask Him for understanding, because the likelihood is that you will forget or fail to do so when the exile ends. I trust that He will reveal to you a great purpose for your life personally, just as He did for Israel long ago.

Our greatest concern is not about knowing things of an apocalyptic nature, but how we are living our lives now in the midst

of this exile and also when it is over. But in a way, it will never be over while on this earth. For we who are believers are all exiles throughout our lives. That’s what Peter calls us in 1 Peter 2:11. And as Paul writes:

“Our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Messiah Yeshua” (Phil 3:20).

In that regard, we will always be called to seek the welfare of our communities, and to stay spiritually healthy, and to make our lives purposeful. But it is especially true in these times when we are in what you might call a double exile. That is a challenge that I am confident we all can face when we search for God with all our heart.



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