

Series Title: Far from Home

Primary Aim: In this series we will explore the theme of exile as a metaphor for what it might mean for us to live godly lives within a society that is increasingly opposed to Jesus. This is a metaphor taken up by the writers of the New Testament. Peter for one, describes his readers as exiles scattered through various regions (1 Peter 1:1) and he calls on them to live as foreigners and exiles (1 Peter 2:11). Rather than devoting our focus to that material we are going to concentrate on some of the remarkable literature (esp. Daniel, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Esther, Habakkuk) which was written during the period when the Southern Kingdom, Judah was exiled to Babylon. Our aim will be to draw out principles that can help us to live godly and missionally focused lives.

1. Living in Exile

Passages: Genesis 3:23-24, 1 Peter, Philippians 3:20, 2 Corinthians 5:6-10

Blurb: The aim of this introductory session is to primarily to frame the metaphor of exile. First, we will contrast the idea of *spiritual exile* (e.g., banishment from Eden in Genesis 3:23-24) with that of *physical exile* (e.g., the remnant of Judah in Babylon in 2 Kings 24-25, 2 Chron 36). The impact of any kind of exile is not to be underplayed. To be in exile is to be separated from one's home and usually involves a sense alienation, lack of belonging and of being far from home. Sometimes exile may involve some degree of choice, but in the case of Israel's exile to Babylon, it really was the last place that they wanted to be. They were away from the Promised Land and away from God's temple (and later destroyed). As believers we too are far from home. Paul declares that we are now citizens of heaven – not fully at home in the world because we do not ultimately belong here.

2. Refusing to Compromise

Passages: Primarily Daniel 1, but also lessons in Daniel 3 and/or 6

Blurb: Daniel is part of a small group of Israelites carried off to Babylon in around 605BC when King Jehoiakim is forced to become a vassal state to Babylon. He was one of the first to be taken into exile. Having been trained to serve God in Jerusalem, he is now told to serve the pagan King Nebuchadnezzar. He has to learn about their language, culture, foods, gods and was even given a Babylonian name. In that situation, Daniel was faced with two choices – compromise and assimilate to the culture or risk his life and make a stand against it. We know the story – again and again Daniel and his friends entrust their lives to God and refuse to compromise. Daniel trusts that God is still King even in Babylon, and he experiences Him do some extraordinary things!

3. Making ourselves at Home / Making a home for ourselves

Passages: Jeremiah 29 (plus context in 25, 28 & 32)

Blurb: Jeremiah 25 records a confrontation between Jeremiah and Hananiah following the latter's false prophecy that God would rescue Israel from captivity within 2 years. Instead, Jeremiah prophesies a whopping 70 years in captivity. During this time God tells them to build houses, settle down, plant gardens and given their children in marriage. They were to face up to reality and seek the peace and prosperity of the land they were in. Just as God blessed Abram and called him to be a blessing, so they were to be a blessing to the nation who had taken them captive. God says He will bring them back and has plans to give them a hope and a future. As exiles we too need to hope in the Promises of God for us both now and for the future.

4. Finding Comfort in Exile

Passages: Selected sections from Isaiah 40-55

Blurb: These chapters begin with the words "Comfort, comfort my people" (40:1) written for God's people in exile. Isaiah had prophesied to Hezekiah in 39:5-7 about the coming exile, but ch. 40 appears to skip well beyond his lifetime to the time of exile. The focus here is primarily about their hope of returning to the land of Israel. In 43:9,18-19 the Lord speaks of not dwelling on the past, because he is doing a new thing. He's going to pour Water on the thirsty land (43:20), His spirit upon their descendants, and His blessing on their offspring (44:3). Their return is pictured in vivid images (41:16-17) and there are frequent references to the Exodus (43:2) and even to Eden (51:3). There are also striking references to King Cyrus (44:24-45:13) who was the one who finally authorised their return. This section also includes the 4 servant songs (42:1-9; 49:1-7; 50:4-11, Isa 52:13-53:12) which are explicitly linked with Jesus in the New Testament (Matt 8:14-17; Luke 22:35-38; John 12:37-41; Acts 8:26-35; Rom 10:11-21; 1 Pet 2:19-25). The section finishes with promises of blessing, peace and prosperity for the exiles (54:2-3, 55:1-5, 23-24).

5. Restoring a Broken World

Passage: Isaiah 60-62

Blurb: At the heart of the Kingdom of God are the people God's 'servant' (Jesus) will create: these Oaks of Righteousness who are a planting for the LORD. Through their ministry as priests, shepherds, labourers and builders they will see restoration, renewal and rebuilding of the brokenness all around them. This session is all about ministering in the Kingdom of God. This Kingdom is described as glorious and experiences firsthand the lavish blessing of God. There is also a complete turning of the tables for those who oppose the Kingdom. Isaiah foresees a glorious future aptly described by the new names which God gives to His people – He will delight in us, and we will experience everlasting union with Him.

6. Where is God in Exile?

Passages: Lamentations 5, Psalm 137, Book of Habakkuk

Blurb: Exile was not easy for those of God's people taken into captivity. Lamentations describes Israel as deserted, widowed, weeping, mourning, grieved, afflicted, rejected, betrayed, distressed and groaning (all ch. 1). Later in ch 5. Israel is described as disgraced, joyless, forgotten and forsaken. Strong words which are echoed in Psalm 137. They give us insight into what this meant for them and must have raised lots of challenging questions. Similar questions had been asked some years previously by the prophet Habakkuk who wrestled with why God did not act and about God's intention to send the wicked Babylonians in judgement. Following the dialogue with God we see a response of faith in Habakkuk 3 and the highpoint of Lamentations comes in 3:21-66 when the writer (Jeremiah?) remembers that because of God's great love and compassion they are not consumed. He says that God does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone (v33) and asks rhetorically if both calamities and good things come from God (v38). He urges Israel to examine their ways and return to the Lord in repentance and faith.

7. Sanctuary for the exiles

Passages: Ezekiel 1, 11 & 36, 40-48

Blurb: Ezekiel was taken into exile at the age of 25, but it is not until age 30 that God gave him a vision of His majesty (Ezekiel 1:1). God demonstrated that he was not a God confined to the Promised Land but was Lord of all. The tabernacle/temple played a critical role in the communal worship of the people of Israel. So, it was a really big deal when it got destroyed by the Babylonians. God tells them (11:16) that though he sent them into exile, he has been a *sanctuary* for them in those places. The first 11 chapters of Ezekiel focus on how the temple had been defiled, while the final 8 chapters focus on a vision of a new temple. This vision describes a temple that technically has never been built. However, it appears to have been referring to the New Testament church (1 Peter 2:4-5). This church is made up of living stones, those who have a new heart, a new spirit and who are now a *temple* for the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:16-17, 6:19-20), who lives in us (11:19-20, 36:24-28).

8. Prayer and the Purposes of God

Passage: Daniel 9:1-19

Blurb: It seems that Daniel had been reading Jeremiah (25:11-13, 29:10?) and had understood that the exile would last 70 years. This motivates him to pray and specifically to plead with God in sackcloth and ashes. His prayer is essentially a passionate call on God to do what He had promised to do. Knowing God's purposes seems to motivate Daniel to pray into the purposes of God. Daniel was exiled in 605BC, but it was not until 597BC that the temple was ransacked and not until 587BC when Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed. The difference between these three dates would make quite an impact upon when the 70 years were finished and so Daniel prays. Here at the start of the reign of Darius the Mede (Daniel 5:31, 9:1), it was now only 3-4 years until 70 years had passed since Daniel's arrival. We know that Babylon fell to Cyrus in 539BC and soon after that, he decreed that any captive Jew could return home to rebuild the temple. As far as we know, Daniel did not return from exile.

9. Having the courage to Act

Passage: Story of Esther

Blurb: Esther was in exile in the land of Persia after they had supplanted the Babylonians as the ruling power. Despite her beauty and her place in a harem, her position was anything but ideal for a young Jewish woman. But in time an opportunity presented itself for her to become Queen after Queen Vashti was deposed. The Jews were however in grave danger because of Haman's evil plan to eradicate them completely. Mordecai, however, was quick to act and convinced Esther that she should risk her life by approaching the King. He reasoned that she might have come to this position for such a time as this (4:14). Despite few references to God in the book of Esther, what is clear is that God was orchestrating events behind the scenes. God remained faithful and came through for His people even in exile. What positions has God placed us in so that we could speak out for Him?

10. Homecoming

Passages: Ezra, Haggai, Revelation 21-22, 2 Corinthians 5:6-10

Blurb: Cyrus decreed that the Jews could return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and so 42,360 returned to begin the work. However, opposition halted the work, before Haggai & Zechariah helped get things restarted during the reign of King Darius. Ezra 3 tells us how some wept at the new foundations because they had seen the former temple. We find something similar in Haggai 2:3, before God declared that the glory of this house would be greater than the glory of the former house (2:9a). This temple was later improved by Herod, but it was also the temple Jesus came to. Gradually God's people returned to Jerusalem and the city walls were rebuilt under Nehemiah. This homecoming foreshadowed a greater homecoming when Jesus comes back. John's vision tells us that there will be a new Heaven and a new Earth. God will once again dwell with His people and the old order will pass away. Ultimately, that will be the day when exile will come to a final end and we will be home.