

Lesson 10

Hope During the Exile

Introduction

Following the reign of Solomon, the nation of Israel began a slow descent toward destruction. Around 920 BC, the kingdom divided during the reign of Solomon's son, Rehoboam. The north, led by Jeroboam, moved into immediate spiritual apostasy with the king setting up an alternate system of religion. Jeroboam made two golden calves and declared they were the source of power that got Israel out of the land of Egypt. (Hosea declared these calves to be idols, Hosea 13.2.) The priestly role of the Levites was rejected, with Jeroboam himself operating as high priest, 1 Kings 12.26-33. The people wholeheartedly adopted this false religion, and from here the course was set. *Jeroboam drove Israel from following the LORD and made them commit great sin. The people of Israel walked in all the sins that Jeroboam did. They did not depart from them, until the LORD removed Israel out of his sight, as he had spoken by all his servants the prophets. So, Israel was exiled from their own land to Assyria until this day,* 2 Kings 17.21-23. The destruction of the northern kingdom is dated around 720 BC.

As for the southern kingdom, their pathway toward destruction was not quite so steep and narrow. While Judah had its share of bad kings, there were several long periods where the nation remained relatively faithful to God, inspired by good kings who trusted in Yahweh. But, during the reign of Manasseh, God finally had enough and determined to destroy Judah for their grave sins, 2 Kings 21.10-16. The end came a century later, in 587 BC, when Nebuchadnezzar led the Babylonians against Judah.

The Babylonian aggression against Israel actually took place over several decades. In 606 BC, Jewish nobles and many leading people were carried off to Babylon. One of the most notable persons involved in this deportation was Daniel, who would serve as prophet for the people throughout the 70-year period of the exile. "Puppet" kings were installed by the Babylonians, who demanded tribute from the nation. After a round of rebellion by the Jews, the next wave of Babylonian deportations happened in 597-96 BC. Ezekiel was part of this deportation and served in a very prominent role as a messenger to the captives during the six-year period leading up to Jerusalem's destruction (593-587 BC). While Ezekiel was prophesying in Babylon, Jeremiah was being used by God in Jerusalem. There were other prophets too, like Zephaniah and Habakkuk. The bulk of their message was that God was just in sending the people into exile because they disregarded God's law. But, as complete as the message is about their destruction and the reasons therefore, we also observe in their messages small glimpses of something glorious in the future.

Understanding the Perspective of the Exiles

Reading through the first half of the book of Ezekiel reveals a stubborn hope among the exiles that their stay in Babylon would be temporary - that somehow help would come from Egypt or somewhere else to overpower the Babylonians and allow them to return to their homeland. Ezekiel's message (and that of

all the prophets of this time) was relentless. There was no hope. Jerusalem would be completely destroyed and the people were not going anywhere for a very long time. The common thinking was that Jerusalem could not be destroyed. It was the city of God. The temple was there. God had always protected the city. But over and over again the message is that the end was coming.

Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: Because you are more turbulent than the nations that are all around you, and have not walked in my statutes or obeyed my rules, and have not even acted according to the rules of the nations that are all around you, therefore thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, even I, am against you. And I will execute judgments in your midst in the sight of the nations. And because of all your abominations I will do with you what I have never yet done, and the like of which I will never do again. Therefore fathers shall eat their sons in your midst, and sons shall eat their fathers. And I will execute judgments on you, and any of you who survive I will scatter to all the winds. Therefore, as I live, declares the Lord GOD, surely, because you have defiled my sanctuary with all your detestable things and with all your abominations, therefore I will withdraw. My eye will not spare, and I will have no pity,

– Ezekiel 5.7-11.

Later, God assures the people these things would come to pass:

I am the LORD. I have spoken; it shall come to pass; I will do it. I will not go back; I will not spare; I will not relent; according to your ways and your deeds you will be judged, declares the Lord GOD,"

– Ezekiel 24.14.

Perhaps one of the more difficult chapters in Ezekiel is chapter 24. Both of the actions of this chapter take place on the day the siege of Jerusalem began and the day after. These happenings were intended to address those who trusted in the strength of Jerusalem. In the first section, Jerusalem (the bloody city) was likened to a rust covered pot and its citizens to the chunks of meat therein. Each piece of meat being removed from the pot represented the systematic and indiscriminate deportation of its citizens. What meat and bones remained inside the pot would be burned up, and the pot itself would be melted down. It was over. The time for prophetic admonition had passed and God was going to pour out His wrath on the nation. But the second section is even more perplexing to modern readers of the book. Ezekiel received word that his wife was going to die suddenly. When it happened, he was not to mourn publicly over her death. He was to groan silently, 24.15-17. In the morning, he delivered the prophecy to the people. That evening, she died. Ever obedient, he carried out the Lord's commands, 24.18.

The people knew Ezekiel's actions had to have a prophetic meaning. He explained that his conduct after the death of his wife illustrated the reaction the Jews would have months later when they would receive word of the destruction of the temple. The temple was, in their minds, a guarantee of the security of Jerusalem and a source of great pride. It was the *pride of (their) power, the delight of (their) eyes, and the yearning of (their) soul*, 24.21. It would be totally destroyed. Not only that, but their sons and daughters who still lived in Jerusalem would die by the sword. **The news from Jerusalem would be so utterly shocking, that when they heard the news they would behave as Ezekiel had behaved at the death of his wife.** They would experience a grief that is beyond tears, a despondency that could not be expressed outwardly. The only outward expression which would be heard among them would be a quiet moan, 24.22.

Before, during, and after the destruction of Jerusalem, the prophets give us details about the spirit of the exiles:

- Isaiah 49.14: *But Zion said, The LORD has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me.*
- Jeremiah 33.24: *Have you not observed that these people are saying, 'The LORD has rejected the two clans that he chose'? Thus they have despised my people so that they are no longer a nation in their sight.*
- Ezekiel 33.10: *And you, son of man, say to the house of Israel, Thus have you said: 'Surely our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we rot away because of them. How then can we live?'*
- Ezekiel 37.11: *Then he said to me, Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.'*

As a nation, the captives regarded themselves as dead and disjointed. They were convinced God had forsaken them and any hope of restoration to their land was lost. It is in the midst of this ultimate despair, gloom, and darkness that God uses the prophets to point to a future time of restoration and a coming Messiah.

Interpreting the Prophetic Visions in the Exilic Prophets

The glimpses of hope we find in the prophetic messages of the exilic prophets have been referred to as a *playground* of religious error. Many look at the prophecies in Ezekiel and Jeremiah and see a literal, future fulfillment at a time period yet to be experienced. As a result, many a religious charlatan has profited off of making vague predictions by pointing to passages in Scripture that may provide “signs” that these things are about to come to pass. The problems with interpreting these things from a literal fulfillment perspective are many. And, they are an outright abuse of the context. When reading any prophecy from the Old Testament, the meaning for the people of that time **must always** be kept in view. For example, in Ezekiel’s prophecy there are many clues that suggest these things had direct meaning to the people of that day. For example, Ezekiel 36-37 is often used to emphasize the gift of the Holy Spirit on people during the age of Christ. While there are certain similarities, the **promises here are concretely and specifically for Israel during Ezekiel’s day.**

Let’s examine again, Ezekiel 37.11. *Then he said to me, “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.’*

- *The whole house of Israel* is both Israel and Judah.
- *Our hope is lost*: For many, any hope of a return home died with the fall of Jerusalem.
- *We are cut off*: They associated themselves with one who is dead and buried. They absolutely had no more hope.

In 37.12, the NRSV translates God’s word this way: *I will bring you up and I will bring you back.* 37.14 also helps keep this in context. The best application of these passages is directly related to the people then. 37.14 looks back to Genesis 2.7 and restates God’s original intention with mankind. He wanted to

establish a deep, reciprocal relationship. As we move into the second part of Ezekiel 37, it becomes very clear that the prophetic message had a direct application to the people of that time. God would reunite the two divided kingdoms, 37.16-23.

Glimpses of the New Testament System

While the main application of Ezekiel 34-37 should be made to the people living at that time, there are definite similarities to the New Testament system and to the ultimate fulfillment of God's plan through Jesus.

Ezekiel 34 - The Future Shepherd

The first 10 verses of this chapter are a condemnation on the shepherds of Israel who led the nation astray. They would be cast out for their self-serving ways and during the time of the exile God Himself would serve as the shepherd over the sheep, 34.11-22. God would destroy the powerful ones and rescue His true sheep. Some believe 34.17-22 applied to the time between the testaments when the Jewish people suffered at the hands of their own leaders as well as foreign powers. But, beginning in 34.23, God foretells about a time when He would place His flock under *one shepherd, my servant David*, 34.23. This shepherd would personally feed the flock. He would be from the line of David and be *a prince among them*, 34.24. This fits perfectly with Jesus, who was a descendant of David, Matthew 1.1, and who claimed to be the good shepherd, John 10.11, 14. The idea of God restoring the Davidic dynasty (2 Samuel 7.11-16) is very prominent in the inspired writings of the exilic and post-exilic prophets.

Ezekiel 24.25-31 parallels Jeremiah 31.31. Both sections mention a *covenant of peace*. Using language of the day, Ezekiel symbolically describes what this would be like. God Himself speaks and says:

- He would *break the bars of their yoke and deliver them from the one who enslaved them*, 34.27.
- They would *dwell securely* and no longer be afraid, 34.28.
- They would know God is *with them*, 34.30.

Think of how these things could be poetic descriptions of *spiritual Israel*, the church of Jesus Christ, which enjoys peace, security, and blessing under the present-day rule of Jesus, who sits at the right hand of God.

Ezekiel 37 - One King Shall be Over Them

Ezekiel 37.21 clearly refers to the people of the exile. Around 40 years after this prophecy, God would gather the people of Israel from exile and *bring them to their own land*. The reference in the second part of 37.22 has its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus. *And one king shall be king over them all*. During His earthly ministry, Jesus repeatedly said *the kingdom is at hand*. When He died, rose, and was resurrected, He began His kingdom rule over spiritual Israel, His church, Ephesians 1.20-23. Notice how what is mentioned in the verses after 37.23 have a likeness to our experience today in the church.

- 37.23: God's people would share a common aversion to idolatry. They would be saved by God and cleansed from their sins. Think of how this parallels with Titus 3.1-7 and Colossians 1.11-13. They would have a very special relationship with God, 2 Corinthians 6.16-7.1.
- 37.24: They would be united in loyalty to the rightful king who is in the lineage of David. Every citizen would be committed to the *rules* and *statutes* of God. Think of Ephesians 4.1-2.
- 37.25: They would share a common inheritance, living on that land *forever*. This language points to a new order of things and has a definite spiritual application to the church age where the reign of Christ is universal, Matthew 28.18.
- 37.26: God's people would be governed by an everlasting *covenant of peace*. This is the New Covenant of which Jeremiah prophesies, Jeremiah 31.31. Jesus is the mediator of this covenant and the apostles were ministers of it, 2 Corinthians 3.6. God places His people in His kingdom and will dwell among them, 1 Corinthians 3.16; 2 Corinthians 6.16-18; Ephesians 2.21; Revelation 21.3.
- 37.28: God Himself is the *sanctuary* for the people. It is His presence. In the person of Jesus, God dwelled in the midst of His people, John 1.14. The *forever sanctuary* mentioned here is best interpreted as the spiritual temple described by the New Testament writers.

Conclusion

On the surface, the exilic prophecies may seem depressing and redundant. Due to the stubbornness and closed hearts of a rebellious people, the prophets were called on by God to suffer mistreatment and rejection as they repeatedly proclaimed the fact of impending doom. But, the message was not all bad. Woven through these passages are threads of hope and restoration. God's plan of redemption could not even be altered by a sinful, spiritually adulterous people. He would bring His intentions to fruition. See Jeremiah 31.31-34; 32.40; 33.14; Hebrews 8.8-12; 9.15; 10.16-17.

Praise God for His wonderful wisdom, planning, and actions. He is indeed the God of endurance, encouragement, and hope, Romans 15.5, 13.

For Thought and Reflection

1. Do some research and see if you can name the prophets of the exilic period. List them below.
2. Why would the Jews have placed so much home in Jerusalem and the temple?
3. How complete would Judah and Jerusalem's destruction be? List a few passages to prove your answer.

4. What is the meaning behind the boiling pot in Ezekiel 24.1-14?

5. Why was Ezekiel instructed not to mourn publicly for his wife? What did this symbolize?

6. After the fall of Jerusalem, what was the attitude of the Jews in exile? Why is it important to understand this as we begin to examine the promises of restoration in the latter chapters of Ezekiel?

7. What is most important to keep in mind while looking at prophetic visions in the exilic prophets?

8. How can a likeness to the church age and Jesus be seen in Ezekiel 34?

9. How can a likeness to the church age and Jesus be seen in Ezekiel 37?

10. In light of the awfulness of Israel's sin, what does it say about our God and His desire to restore His people? How does this give you hope as you live your spiritual life today?