

Summary for Session 15: Exile

Prep work: Passages from 2Kings, Jeremiah, Daniel, and Ezekiel.

DVD: Jeff introduces the period of the Exile by reminding us that God's Chosen People are now physically where they are spiritually—far from God (present in the Temple).

They have regressed physically to where they have regressed spiritually—back to Babylon, where Abraham was first called out of pagan Ur to the Promised Land. There is hope; however, for exile can teach one what one loves, and this Exile is a chance for the Israelites (used henceforth to describe the entire Chosen People, not just the Northern Kingdom) to rediscover their love of God and His Law. As a side note, Jeff points out that there are many supplemental books to this period, mostly the writings of the prophets and some of the Wisdom literature.

While the Northern Kingdom of Israel was sent into exile by the Assyrians in one large mass almost one hundred twenty years before, Judah's deportation occurred in three waves. Their conquerors, the Babylonians, first took the best, brightest, and wealthiest of Judah for their own. Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, tries to strip the exiles of their identity: he changes their names, their dress, and tries to get them to flout their dietary restrictions. Clinging to the Law of God (*Torah*) and resisting the temptation to become too comfortable in exile will become critical for the Israelites to remain a unified Chosen People.

Jeff remarks that one of the books of this period, the Book of Daniel, is an apocalyptic account, meant to be figurative rather than historical, and highlights certain realities.

Daniel was one of those in the first wave. While he is placed in Nebuchadnezzar's court, he resists attempts to deny his identity and remains true to his heritage. Daniel and his fellow Israelites in the court, known to history by their Babylonian names—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—quickly become known as the wisest in the court. When Nebuchadnezzar has a terrifying dream and demands his viziers not only interpret but also tell him what the dream was (or face death), only Daniel is able to pronounce what the dream was and what it means. In Nebuchadnezzar's dream, there is a giant statue whose head is made of gold, whose chest and arms are made of silver, whose belly and thighs are made of bronze, and whose calves are made of iron with feet made of iron and clay. A stone knocks down the statue at its base, causing the rest of it to crumble into dust. The stone, however, becomes a mountain that fills the whole earth. Daniel explains that the different parts of the statue with different materials represent succeeding kingdoms, with Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylons as the head. The stone is a kingdom to be set up by God that will make obsolete the other kingdoms and remain forever. For us living after the fulfillment of this prophetic dream, we can understand more fully the symbolism in the dream.

Jeff pauses at this point to bring up a debate about footnotes. Different editions of the Bible will have different footnotes, and the important thing to remember is that the notes are not part of the official canon; they simply offer an interpretation of Scripture based on who is editing the edition. These notes may disagree with other notes from other editions, but they will never contradict Catholic teaching on matters of faith and morals. The *imprimatur* and *nihil obstat* designations do not signify an agreement with the

opinions expressed in the notes, just that they are “free of doctrinal or moral error.” Jeff then submits his agreement with the following interpretation of the prophecy. The materials represent succeeding world powers: the golden head of the statue signifies the empire of Babylon; the silver chest and arms, Persia; the bronze belly and thighs, Greece; and the iron calves and iron/clay feet, Rome. The stone is Jesus Christ, who has been cut “by no human hand” and who will establish the Kingdom of God which will endure forever. This image became associated with the long-awaited Messiah for the Jews. Jeff notes that during Jesus’ trial before the Sanhedrin, many were giving false witness that Jesus said he would destroy the Temple and build another within three days “not of human hands” (Mark 14:58). Such a statement would have been understood by 1st Century Jews to be Jesus declaring he is the Messiah and thus blaspheming. Also, the image of a stone becoming a mountain is called to mind when Jesus says to Peter “upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18).

The Book of Daniel contains another prophetic dream: Daniel sees four beasts rise from the great sea: a lion with eagles’ wings, a bear, a leopard, and a final beast with ten horns described only as “terrifying, horrible, and of extraordinary strength” (Daniel 7:7). The final beast is slain and the other three are subdued before Daniel sees “one like a son of man” who receives “dominion, glory, and kingship” and “his dominion is an everlasting dominion” (Daniel 7:13-14). Similar to the first dream, the beasts rising from the murky sea of Gentiles represent successive empires—the lion is Babylon, the bear is Persia, the leopard is Greece, and the terrifying beast is Rome. The son of man becomes another image of the Messiah, who will be an everlasting king over all. Jesus does, in fact, use this title more than any other in referring to himself in the Gospels.

The final chapter of Daniel that Jeff examines ties in to other prophets of the period: Jeremiah, who stayed with the remnant in Jerusalem to prophesy, and Ezekiel, who was part of the second wave of exiles sent into Babylon. Earlier in this session, Jeff brings up Jeremiah’s words castigating Judah for their abominable treatment of their fellow Jews. The last king of Judah, Zedekiah, had proclaimed a jubilee year, which meant that all the Jews in bondage to other Jews were to be freed. The people did free them that year, but took them back into slavery after the jubilee was over. Jeremiah writes of God’s anger at their heartlessness, especially in light of the fact that He had freed them from the slavery of Egypt! Jeremiah reminds them that they have been chosen by God to free others from slavery, not hold them in bondage (Jeremiah 34: 8-22). Jeremiah prophesies that because of their sins, the people of Judah will be placed in bondage, themselves, for 70 years under Babylon (Jeremiah 25:9-12). Ezekiel adds to this, writing that “there is no one to stand in the gap” and mitigate God’s wrath (Ezekiel 23:30). Daniel, reviewing Jeremiah’s text, is pleading with God for mercy for His people when the angel Gabriel comes to him and announces that 70 years of exile is not enough to teach the Israelites; it must be “seventy weeks of years” (70 x 7) before they will finally understand they must follow God. After this time, however, “everlasting justice will be introduced” and “a most holy one will be anointed” (Daniel 9:24-25). What is the significance of 70x7? Seven was considered a number of wholeness, or completion. Multiplying it by itself would

symbolize the most whole and perfect solution imaginable. Also, 490 years brings us close to the time of Jesus, the true Messiah. Finally and perhaps most enlightening, 70x7 should remind us of Jesus' words to Peter about forgiveness (Matthew 18:21-35). A true jubilee year is about mercy and forgiveness; the requirement to give freedom to slaves is symbolic of the true freedom we experience when we forgive and when we ourselves have been forgiven. This is what Jesus was reminding Peter of—the failure of his forefathers to forgive and release is what led them into the bondage of exile; do not make the same mistake as they.

The second wave of deportations into exile included Ezekiel. Like Jeremiah, Ezekiel chastises the leaders and the people for their sinfulness and explains why the exile is a just punishment. Ezekiel also shares the promise that God will rescue His people from exile and build them back into His Chosen People once more. In Chapter 34, Ezekiel compares the leadership of Judah to shepherds guarding God's flock of Israelites.

These shepherds have done a terrible job, and Ezekiel writes that they did not “strengthen the weak nor heal the sick nor bind up the injured. [They] did not bring back the strayed nor seek the lost, but [they] lorded it over them harshly and brutally” (Ezekiel 34:4). Because they have been such poor leaders, the sheep are now scattered everywhere. However, God promises that “I myself will look after and tend my sheep...the lost I will seek out, the strayed I will bring back, the injured I will bind up, the sick I will heal” (Ezekiel 34:11,16). If this idea of a Good Shepherd seems familiar to us today, it was also familiar to 1st Century Jews as another vision of what the Messiah would be. In Luke, Jesus (well-schooled in the Law and the Prophets) uses a rabbinic teaching tool known as *hekesh* (literally “to bang together) to pull two prophecies of the Messiah into one description of himself: “for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost” (Luke 19:10). Jesus sees very clearly that although the Jews did come back to the Promised Land after the exile, their hearts never fully returned to God. In that sense, then, they have been and still are in the bondage of exile. Using the title “Son of Man” from Daniel 7 and the image of God as the Shepherd from Ezekiel 34, Jesus states that he is the One the Jews have been waiting for—the Messiah who has come to bring them back to God.

Jeff closes the session by reviewing the third wave of exile. The Babylonians take over Jerusalem, destroy the temple, and find the last king of Judah, Zedekiah, who is in hiding. He and his people are led into Babylon for their time of exile. Jeff urges us to ask whether we, too, are in spiritual exile. Like the Israelites, are our hearts far from the Lord? He brings up the story of Daniel in the lion's den (Daniel 6), which is meant as an allegory for the Israelites. They have been dragged by the lion (Babylon's symbol for itself) to its den (exile) to be destroyed, but by being faithful to God, they can make it out unscathed. Jeff remarks that there are many ways our society tries to drag us into its den and destroy who we are. Will we let them, or will we, like Daniel, trust in God and remain faithful to Him?