

Exile

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[0 : 00] Well, today we are continuing our series called The Story of the Old Testament. We're looking at some of the big moments that take place across the Old Testament.

And as we do so, we want to learn more about what happens at these moments. We want to try and see how all of these fit together. And above all, we want to see how it's all pointing forward to the coming of Jesus Christ in the new.

We've made our way quite far on in this story, and so we've just got another, I think, two more sermons after this one. So we're needing the end of the story. Our title today is Exile, and we can read again from the beginning of Lamentations 1.

How lonely sits the city that was full of people? How like a widow she has become? She who was great among the nations? She who was a princess among the provinces has become a slave? She weeps bitterly in the night with tears on her cheeks? Among all her lovers she has none to comfort her? All her friends have dealt treacherously with her?

[1 : 08] They have become her enemies? Judah has gone into exile. As with previous sermons, we've done.

We're going to just ask four questions to take us through. What's the story so far? What's the story at this point? What's the bigger story? What does it mean for your story?

So the story so far, if you're maybe just joining us for the first time today, or maybe if you want to be reminded of where we've reached, let me tell you the story of the Old Testament.

I don't know how vivid your imagination is, but as much as you can, I want you to try and picture in your minds what has been happening. But bear in mind that I'm giving you the time-lapsed, fast-forward version.

In the beginning, God speaks and the universe explodes into existence. So think of stars appearing, billions of them, planets emerging, galaxies forming.

[2 : 06] The universe is created as this astonishing mass of energy and potential. Near, one of these stars is a planet where dry land is separated from water.

Mountains are made, rivers begin to flow, trees and plants shoot up from the ground. Fish start to swim, birds start to fly, animals run on the face of the earth. It's a stunning, thriving habitat of color, beauty and life.

And the climax of it all is humanity. Men and women made in the image of God, placed in this beautiful planet to enjoy a stunning homeland that God has made.

And from the stars to the sun, to the planet earth, to the seas, the mountains, the plants, the animals, it all builds up to the creation of a people made to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

And so I don't know if you watch programs like Blue Planet or all these other things that see just the majesty of creation, it all builds up to the creation of humanity. And humanity stands on the threshold of all these extraordinary blessings that God has provided.

[3 : 21] And at that moment when everything is very good, humanity looks at God and spits in his face.

He sins, rebelling against God and bringing a curse on all creation. And that great family of humanity created by God to live in this beautiful homeland is now a broken mess alienated from God and hostile to one another, living in a battle ground.

God's beautiful creation has been broken. Humanity has rejected its creator. But the story of the Old Testament is that God does not give up.

In the midst of the brokenness and chaos, he calls a man, Abraham, living in the deserts of Arabia. He brings him west and in his amazing grace, God promises him a son and a land to live in.

And through his family, God's purposes are going to be fulfilled. After years of waiting, that son is finally born and the children of Abraham grow into a clan, but they are forced into slavery in Egypt. [4 : 41] They are oppressed, but they grow. And now they're as big as a nation. And God calls Moses to lead the people out of slavery into the promised land, the land that was promised to their ancestor, Abraham.

And in a mighty display of God's power, this vast family nation escapes from Egypt and now they are free. And so God gives them commandments for how to live as God's people.

And the intention of those commandments is for them to stand out from the rest of the world. After 40 years as nomads, they enter the promised land. But in doing so, they fail to drive out their enemies who already live there.

And they're constantly tempted to become like the nations around them. They were commanded to conquer, but instead they compromised. They were expected to be different, but they were constantly tempted.

They were constantly wanting to blend in. God wanted to be in a covenant relationship with them. But all too often for these Israelites, being in covenant with God became inconvenient to them.

[5 : 50] But still God does not give up. He made Abraham into a family. He made that family into a nation. He gave that nation a land and eventually that nation becomes a kingdom.

But over the last three weeks, we've seen that although that kingdom started with David, who in so many ways was a man after God's heart, the kingdom did not last.

From David onwards, it gradually fell apart. It's easy to get lost in all the names and dates. So let me just put them in front of you to see them.

David was succeeded by Solomon. Solomon was succeeded by Rehoboam. But in Rehoboam's reign in 931 BC, the kingdom divided in two.

And from that point on, you ended up with the family nation separated. And you had a northern kingdom on one side called Israel.

[6 : 51] It was ruled by, initially by Jeroboam, but there was a series of different family dynasties who were kings over that nation. The capital was predominantly in Samaria.

All of the kings were bad in terms of their attitude towards God. In the south, the Davidic line continues through Rehoboam and his descendants.

Some of these were good kings. Many of them were failures. None of them were quite like David. The north was conquered by Assyria in 722 BC.

That's in the days of Isaiah, the prophet. The south, known as Judah, was conquered by Babylon over a 20-year period leading up to 586 BC in the days of Jeremiah.

And if you were able to go back in time and stand in Jerusalem in 586, you would be standing in a city of ruins.

[7 : 55] Most of the inhabitants have been taken away as captives. The great family nation of Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and David is history.

God's people are in exile. In fact, they are all the way back in the land that Abraham had been called out of 1500 years earlier.

We've been saying throughout this series that the story of the Old Testament is like a downward line with we spikes going upwards, but the general trajectory is negative.

The exile is the lowest point of all. At this point in the story, everything looks as though God really has given up.

So what is the story at this point? Well, we read from two passages. Neil read from 2 Kings 24 and 25. That passage gives us the facts about what happened.

[9 : 04] The exile was the culmination of a period of about 20 years. So in 605 BC, Babylon, the Babylonian empire rises to dominance over the whole ancient Near East.

For those of you who are interested, there was a massively important battle at Karchimish, where the Babylonians defeated an alliance of the Egyptians and the Assyrians.

If you think of it like this, it would maybe be like over the last 50 years, Russia and America have been the two superpowers in the world.

Imagine that in the next 50 years, they slowly became weaker, then began working together, and then a new superpower, say Brazil or India or China, came and took their place as the dominant world power.

That's what happened. And 605 is a key year because then it's at that moment when Babylon becomes dominant. The new emperor took the throne in that year.

[10:06] His name was Nebuchadnezzar. As part of that dominance, he began to take people hostage from the various territories around him. And so in 605, some of the Israelites were taken to Babylon among them was Daniel.

In 597, so eight years later, he comes to actually take control, to take over Judah properly. And he captures Jerusalem.

He takes the king, Jehoiakin hostage, and he places Zedekiah on the throne instead of him. And so what you have there is what you call a vassal king.

So it's basically somebody appointing a king who's not really a king because they're under the control of the emperor. And be a bit like if, supposing the American president could appoint our prime minister and basically control them.

More hostages are taken to Babylon among them was Ezekiel. And as Neil read for us, Zedekiah rebelled. So he was supposed to be this loyal faithful king to Babylon.

[11:09] He rebelled. So Nebuchadnezzar's forces return around the year 588. For two years, they sieged Jerusalem, which basically meant that they slowly starved the city.

And in 586, Jerusalem falls. In the fifth month of the seventh day of the month, the 19th year of King Nebuchadnezzar, so if you go from 605 to 586, 19 years, if I got my maths right, the captain of the guard, Nebuchadnezzaradan, the captain of the guard, a servant of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem.

He burned the house of the Lord and the king's house and all the houses of Jerusalem. Every great house, he burned down.

All the army of the Chaldeans who were with him, Chaldeans is just another word for Babylonians, who were with the captain of the guards, broke down the walls around Jerusalem. And the rest of the people who were left in the city, the deserters who deserted the king of Babylon together with the rest of the multitude, Nebuchadnezzaradan, the captain of the guard, carried into exile.

So in 597, Jerusalem was captured. In 586, Jerusalem was destroyed.

[12:22] That's what happened. Second Kings is giving us the facts. The other passage we read was from Lamentations. Now Lamentations is a city of poems written in the aftermath of 586, probably or certainly very possibly written by Jeremiah or certainly by somebody who was closely acquainted with him.

And Lamentations is a small book. It's one that we probably don't read very often, but it is a hugely important book for understanding the story of the Old Testament at this point, because Second Kings gives us the facts.

Lamentations tells us how it felt. And as I read these words, I want you to imagine your standing in Jerusalem.

How lonely sits the city that was full of people. How like a widow she has become. She who was great among the nations.

She was a princess among the provinces has become a slave. She weeps bitterly in the night with tears on her cheeks. Among all her lovers she is none to comfort her. All her friends have dealt treacherously with her.

[13:31] They've become her enemies. Judah has gone into exile. And if you go and read the rest of Lamentations, it's a hard book to read.

It describes the horror of the situation in very vivid and powerful terms. I can only touch on things very briefly. Now, let me just highlight some of the things that Lamentations speaks of.

It talks of famine and destruction. So Jerusalem was now in ruins. It's basically been starved to death for two years. And the people there are in desperate poverty and need.

It speaks of loneliness and separation. So not everyone was taken into exile. Many of the poorest and weakest were left behind. But that meant that families had been torn apart. Mothers left without their children.

The city was now exposed. And all that remained were those who were the most frail. And as verse five says, her children have gone away.

[14:34] You know, our children are downstairs for half an hour at Kids' Church. And it's great that they can be there and you'll all get them back at the end of the service. What would it be like if they were gone for good?

That's what it was like for them in Jerusalem in 586. Not just young children, teenagers, young adults. There's a sense of betrayal and shame.

On many occasions, the people had made the huge mistake of thinking that if they colluded with other nations like Egypt or Assyria, that they would be able to help them and protect them.

And God, to deliver them, they kind of thought they could go to other nations. But when the Babylonians came, none of these nations helped them.

And so the people on the one hand felt betrayed. On the other hand, they knew that they'd made a terrible mistake. And so they felt a huge sense of shame. Verses seven and eight captures this.

Jerusalem remembers the days of affliction and wandering.

[15 : 36] All the precious things that were hers from days of old. When the people fell into the hand of their foe, there was none to help her. Their foes gloated over her. They mocked at her downfall. Jerusalem sinned grievously.

Therefore she became filthy. All who honored her despised her, they've seen her nakedness. And she herself groans and turns her face away.

But verse seven also highlights another thing that Lamentations talks about. Memories.

The community, the security, the prosperity, the joy that this city once had is now only a memory.

Now all of that can seem like a million miles from Scotland in 2021. But I want to say two things very quickly before we go on to our next heading.

[16 : 30] The first thing is this. When we read about the exile or indeed about any devastating event, whether it's in the Bible or in another part of history or in the news, we must always remember that although that's happened long ago or far away, it is still talking about people.

And it's vital that we don't forget that. But it's probably even more important that we remember that although you read a passage like Lamentations one and think, well, that seems like ancient history to us, there are many people in the world today for whom Lamentations one is probably the most relevant chapter in the whole Bible.

When we hear of facts about suffering in places like Syria or Yemen or Somalia, God forbid that we forget to think about how that must feel.

The other thing is that we might be thousands of miles and thousands of years from the fact of Second Kings 24 and 25.

But I am pretty sure that for many of us, the feelings of Lamentations one are a lot more close at hand. So we might not be in famine and rubble, but maybe you feel like your life has fallen apart.

[18 : 01] Maybe you feel alone. You might be surrounded by a city, but you feel totally isolated. Maybe you are separated from people you love. Maybe you are grieving for people you desperately miss.

Maybe you feel ashamed of yourself. Maybe you've made big mistakes. Maybe it feels like other people are looking at you and gloating. Maybe you've been betrayed by somebody who you expected to look after you.

Or maybe it's the case that the things you long for most are memories of days that won't come back.

The story of the Old Testament reaches its lowest point at the exile. If you have had a rubbish week or a hard month or a really awful year, then maybe this is the point at the story of the Old Testament that God is talking to you.

Never forget that God knows the facts of your situation, and he knows exactly how you feel.

[19 : 17] What's the bigger story? Well, as we said already, the exile is the point when it really looks as though God has given up. The family is broken. The nation is defeated. The land is occupied.

The temple is a heap, and the kingdom has been crushed. Where is God in all of it? Well, lamentation says two crucial things about God. You can see them in verse 18 and verse 21.

I'd intended to put these in the screen, but I forgot to do so. So I'll read them out to you so that you can hear them. Lamentations 18 says the words at the start, the Lord is in the right.

And then lamentations 21 says that the Lord has brought the day that you announced. Thank you. There we are.

21 it says, you've brought the day that you announced. So these two things, the Lord is in the right, and he's brought the day that he announced. These statements are highlighting to us the fact that God had repeatedly warned the people that this was going to happen.

[20 : 25] And this was in fact part of his covenant promises. If they abandoned God's covenant, they would lose the privileges that they'd been given. And the key point that we need to remember is that this judgment that came in the exile was not a sign that God was abandoning his covenant promises.

It was actually a sign that he was sticking to them. He was being consistent with what he had warned. And that's why the people who stood in Jerusalem were not saying, why did God allow this?

They were saying, why didn't we listen to him? But if God had warned that this would happen, if God was right to allow it to happen, what's going to happen now?

What is the bigger story? Well, imagine that there was Facebook back in the days of laments. And imagine you uploaded all the pictures of the destruction and you posted a comment on how you were feeling.

What's the kind of things that people would say? Well, I think it's very likely that the kind of things that people would say would be the kind of things that you really wanted to hear because that's often what we tend to get.

[21 : 33] And that's exactly what happened all these years ago. The people who were taken in 597, so that was before Jerusalem had been destroyed, but those people who'd initially been taken into exile, some of them began to claim that they were prophets.

And they began to say, listen, this is only going to last a couple of years. God's going to crush the Babylonians and everything's going to get back to normal. Everything's going to be fine. And of course, that was what everyone wanted to hear.

And you can read about all those predictions in Jeremiah chapter 28, which we don't have time to look at, but you can look up later on if you wish. But of course, that's not what was going to happen. And so in Jeremiah 29, the prophet Jeremiah sent a letter to these exiles, telling them what God was actually saying about what would happen.

And I do want to read these words to you because they're really important. So let's read these words together. I've missed out verses two and three just to save a little bit of time. These are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders of the exiles, to the priests, the prophets, and all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.

[22 : 44] And we can put in brackets in 597 BC. So that's the people who'd gone initially, Ezekiel and others. The letter said this, Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon, build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat their produce, take wives and have sons and daughters.

Take wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage that they may bear sons and daughters and multiply there and do not decrease, but seek the welfare of the city where I've sent you into exile and pray to the Lord on its behalf.

For in its welfare, you will find your welfare. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name.

I did not send them, declares the Lord. The lie that's been referred to is the lie. This is going to be over in just a couple of years. The people had gone into exile because of deafness.

Now they would endanger of responding to it with blindness. God had made it clear what the people wanted to hear wasn't going to happen. It wasn't going to be over in two years.

[23 : 53] They had to settle down and get on with life because the situation was not about to change. But that's not all that God says in this letter, because in the next two verses you find one of the most famous statements in the whole of the Old Testament.

For thus says the Lord, when 70 years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord. Plans for welfare and not for evil to give you a future and a hope.

And what I hope you can see is just how amazing God's timing is because Jeremiah 29:11 is one of the most famous verses in the Old Testament. It's such an amazing promise.

But in the big story of the Old Testament, when did it come? It came just before things were at their very worst.

[25 : 05] And that plan for a future and a hope was the plan that God had always had from the very moment when humanity first spat in God's face. And that plan runs right through the Old Testament. It's the plan as we've been saying that points forward to Jesus Christ. And in Jesus, the kingdom is reestablished. The family is restored and expanded and the whole of creation is being brought back and restored to be our promised homeland.

And it means that there's a future that is full of hope and it's all because God never, ever gives up. And it's an amazing reminder that with God, what he wants to do is actually way better than what you want to hear.

And that's why if you feel lost or isolated or full of regret, God is not saying, oh, well, it's not too bad. He's saying, I've got a plan to give you a future and a hope. At the exile, the people would have felt like they had completely blown it.

[26 : 14] And maybe you feel like that too, God is saying to them and to you, you blowing it is not the end of the story. And his salvation, his plan of salvation is clear, deliberate, definite.

It is centered on Jesus Christ. It's been offered to you today, which brings us to our last question. What does it mean for your story?

Time has run out as I expect, as I thought it might. So I just want to ask three questions in conclusion. And what I hope you'll see, or I certainly hope it'll be the case, that the answer to all of these questions is no.

So question one, the passages we've been looking at today describe a scene of desperation and destruction. Our lives can feel like that. The mission field around us that God's placed us in can often feel like that.

But if you are confronted with desperation and destruction, does that mean that God has given up?

[27 : 23] Question two, in all the passages that speak about the exile, it's made absolutely clear that the reason it happened was because the people refused to listen to God over many, many years.

One of the main reasons why they didn't listen to him is given to us in Lamentations chapter one, verse nine. It says that the people took no thought of their future.

The mess of the exile arose because people stopped listening to God and they stopped thinking about the future. They stopped listening and stopped thinking and they only realized they were doing it when it was too late.

And so in terms of your salvation, I have got to ask, are you going to do the same? And question three, the exile is the lowest point in the Old Testament story.

But in the midst of that sorrow and heartbreak, there's an amazing message of hope, a clear message of hope. God has not given up. God has got a plan that plan centers on Jesus Christ. He's come to bring salvation to all who put their trust in him.

[28 : 33] He's come to give healing and hope to all who are lost. And so my last question is this, as Jesus offers that salvation again today, as Jesus holds out his hands in compassion to everyone in the building, to everyone watching at home, as Jesus promises a future and a hope, as Jesus says, trust me and follow me this week and for the rest of your life, as Jesus says, all of these things.

Is he talking to someone else? The answer to all of these questions is the biggest no of your life.

The story of the Old Testament is that God does not give up. The story of every Christian is that God does not give up. He's offering you salvation today because he has not given up.

Amen. Let's pray. Father, we thank you so much that you're the God who does not give up.

Help us to understand what the events of the exile and what the story of the Old Testament is teaching us. Help us to see that these things are pointing us to your Son, our Lord Jesus.

[30 : 05] And help us to respond to your call to follow him. Amen.