

Out of the Ghetto

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[0 : 00] This is a passage from the prophecy of Isaiah. Isaiah lived in the 8th century at a time of great turmoil and crisis, and he prophesied to the people that he lived immediately when he was alive, but then he also possibly wrote down prophecies which were addressed to people who would be living a long time in the future, two centuries later.

And those were the people who were living in the time of the exile. The people to whom these words are addressed when it says, Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness, would have been living in Babylon, would have been living in exile a long way from their homeland, and would have been aware that the reason that they were there was because of the way in which they turned away from God, and after many warnings and prophecies and calls from prophets and through God's word for them to return to God, they had been under the judgment of God and God had sent them away into exile.

Now, I'm sure many of us have lived abroad, been abroad maybe on holiday, but being in exile is a little bit different to that. It's about being away from home when you don't want to be away from home, when you long to be back where you are familiar, and particularly in this case, longing to be back in the place where God had promised to bless.

And so in these verses here when Isaiah is speaking, he's addressing these exiles, and he wants to convince them that even though they are despondent, even though they don't have a lot of hope, even though the promises of God seem very unrealistic, to remind them of the fact that God will surely comfort Zion.

God really will do what he's promised to do. As we look at these verses, I'd like to ask really two questions.

[2 : 10] First of all, to explore a little bit about what it means to be in exile, or to use another expression, what does it mean to live in the ghetto, and I'll explain a little bit more what I mean by that.

And then I want to explore how it is that we can get back from exile, how we can return from exile, how we can get out of the ghetto.

So what does it mean to be in the ghetto and how do we get out? What does it mean to be in the exile and how do we get back? And the first thing that we can say about talking about what it means to be in exile, to be in the ghetto, is that we live as a marginalised minority.

We live as a marginalised minority. If we look around the world, whether it's Scotland or Russia, or many places around the world, there are lots of places where the Christian church has become or is a very small percentage of the population.

Now, we're all encouraged by reports from South Korea and Brazil and Nigeria and possibly other places where we hear about large numbers of people becoming Christians, and that is encouraging and we do need to hear that.

[3 : 23] But we also need in Scotland and in Russia to recognise the reality that we are a minority. We are a very small percentage of the population. In biblical terms, we are the remnant, the rump of what was once a large community of Christians.

And this is expressed in all sorts of different ways. We can express this in percentage terms. We can express this in terms of public opinion. We can express this in terms of what people would expect to be doing on a Sunday.

We can expect this in terms of our immediate neighbours and friends and acquaintances. In all sorts of ways, we experience this being in a minority.

And that's an experience that we find in the Bible as well. It's not something foreign to the Bible. There were various situations and we can think of the time of the Kings as well, in Elijah.

We can think of the time of the exile when God's people were a minority. And in God's providence, although we read great promises about the numbers of believers and how there will be a great multitude in heaven, it's not simply a straight curve if you can see the church growth.

[4 : 39] In God and His providence, as allowed times when the church reduces down to much smaller numbers. So the first thing is that we're a marginalised minority.

That's a reality that we have to accept and have to think about what we do about. The second thing we can see in this passage is seen in some expressions that Isaiah uses to describe the situation of the people.

And if you look with me in verse 3, he talks about Zion. And Zion, of course, is the mountain where the temple was built. It's Jerusalem. And he talks about how Zion is in ruins and about the wastelands.

Now what this is describing is in physical terms, is that the temple had been destroyed and the land which had been cultivated for hundreds of years by the people of God was now being left as a wasteland.

And it's describing how there were times in the past when God's people experienced greater blessing than now. There was something built which is now in ruins.

[5 : 48] There was something cultivated which is now a wasteland. So just as we come to the terms of the fact that we're a marginalised minority, we also need to come to terms with the fact that we've known better days, that there have been times when the church has prevailed in a greater way in Scotland, in Russia and in other places.

In Russia, the heyday of the Gospel churches were the 1920s, just after the revolution. The revolution in 1917 when the Communist Party came to power.

And initially the Gospel churches, the evangelical churches, were seen as not being part of the establishment that had been overthrown. And there was huge freedom. And on many occasions representatives of the new ideology would hold public debates with Christians about whether God exists and is he part of the modern world.

And there were some great evangelists who were able to bring across the message of the Gospel and see large numbers of people become Christians. It's estimated that in the 1920s there were between one and two million evangelical Christians in Russia.

And in the part of Russia where we live, in Siberia, the Communist Youth Organisation which was called the Komsomol, was actually smaller in number than the two.

[7 : 08] There was an evangelical youth organisation and a Baptist youth organisation which were called Yivsomol and the Babsomol. And so these organisations were actually bigger in number than the Communist Youth Organisation.

It was only at the end of the 1920s that there was a crackdown on the evangelical churches. But lots of Christians in Russia will also remember this heyday, remember when the church grew and prevailed, when people were becoming Christians, when Christians were travelling out preaching the Gospel.

And then they look around and say, well what we can see now are ruins and a wasteland that we've seen better days. A third thing that we can see about what it means to be in exile, what it means to be in the ghetto in inverted commas, is to be seen in verse 7.

If you look in verse 7, this is something else I think which we all experience. So God is addressing the people in verse 7. Hear me you who know what is right, you people who have known my law in your hearts, do not fear the reproach of men or be terrified by their insults.

And one of the things that in lots of places around the world, the Christian church finds itself at loggerheads with the surrounding culture. So we're not only a minority, but we're a minority that's in some degree of conflict with those around us.

[8 : 33] And I think if we're self-critical we can see ways in which as Christians we need to change and be more humble, be more open to those around us, being able to see the other side of the argument. But we also see that there is part of what it talks about in the Bible, is that there is a certain conflict which is inevitable between the Christian church and the surrounding world.

And it's interesting that around the world the term extremism is very often applied to Christians. Christians who have not been involved in violence in any way, but are seen as being extremists in this culture, in this country it's tended to be around issues of gender and sexuality.

But in Russia it's over a different set of issues, issues to do with national identity, to do with statehood and to do with the sense in which Christians are living with different values than those around them.

And they're seen as being a threat, seen as being something that isn't part of the mainstream. And as Christians we need to accept that the Bible does talk about this conflict.

It doesn't invite us to be brash or aggressive or self-righteous, but it does acknowledge the fact that there will be this conflict and there are other commands which will come to later, do not fear the reproach of men.

[9 : 59] And there's another thing I think which we can say about living in the exile, living in the ghetto. And that is that very often when people are rejecting the Gospel that there will be an argument that Christians, as Christians, were on the wrong side of history, that things have moved on, that this isn't the time for the Bible and God in the way that you understand it, that we're on the wrong side of history.

And I'm sure many of you, many of us have seen on television or read or in conversation, we've heard this argument. I was watching BBC Two coming back to Scotland.

You don't get BBC in Russia. Maybe some people think that's a good thing. But anyway, there was a program, I think it was on Newsnight, and there was a lady who was talking about child issues and child raising.

And she said, the following words, she said, the adage, spare the royal and spoil the child, has no place in a modern Scotland.

And I think that she didn't know where that was from. She didn't know it was from the Bible from the book of Proverbs. But she was talking about how discipline, and particularly physical discipline, but discipline of any kind, I think, was out of date, that does Christians, if that's what we believe, then we're out of place in a modern Scotland.

[11 : 34] And in a similar way, in different contexts, the Christian church finds itself faced with this argument. We've moved on from that. That's not what it's about. This isn't the moment for these things that are important for you.

And particularly as the country where we live, Russia, has become resurgent, has found its place on the world stage, found its voice on the world stage, and there's a feeling of growth, economic growth, and a sense of Russia, again, becoming great, that Christians can find themselves on the wrong side of history.

We're not about that now. We're doing different things. And so in all these different ways, we find ourselves in exile in the ghetto. So there aren't that many of us. We've known better days.

We're at loggerheads with the surrounding culture, and we're accused of being on the wrong side of history. Now, there's a Jewish writer called Joseph Vila, who's talked about the Christian ghetto.

He's talked about the particular phenomenon in what's now called post-Christian Europe, where the Christian church finds itself in this position of exile of ghetto. And he describes, in an article, he describes three walls of the ghetto.

[12 : 52] And if you can imagine, these are three things which end up fencing us as Christians off from those whom we want to reach with the gospel, making those whom we want to reach out, alienated from the church and from the gospel.

And these are three ways in which we can find ourselves in the ghetto. And he lists these as the following three. The first is that we can sometimes lose our ability to explain to those outside what it is that we believe.

So we can say, well, that's my faith, or it means a lot to me, or this is how my life has changed. But we're unable to actually give a reason to explain what it is that we believe the gospel message to those who are outside of the church, who are the other side of the wall.

And this Jewish writer says that that's one of the walls that's separating the Christian church from the surrounding culture, this inability to explain.

The second wall he mentions is how we can fall into the trap of seeing our Christian faith as something private. Our Christian faith as something is for me personally, but it's not something that has any role in the public square.

[14 : 10] So for example, I might have my prayer and Bible time before I go to work, but then while I'm at work, it's as if God is completely absent from that situation. He's got nothing to say.

I might look for opportunities to share the gospel with my friends and colleagues at work. But the fact that I'm a Christian has no impact on how I work, on how I understand what I'm doing. And in the same way, in all sorts of ways, the Christian gospel and the Christian church becomes marginalized because we say it's just about my private life.

It's just about what happens within my soul or maybe within my church. But as soon as we exit the church, then we're out in the big bad world and that has nothing to do with God or the gospel.

And the third thing that Joseph Vila says, the third wall of the Christian ghetto is what he calls holiness. Now, he's writing as a Jewish writer, and what he's saying is that we mustn't reduce our Christian faith down to behavior.

So we shouldn't say, well, the most important thing is about putting our Christian faith into practice in everyday life. Now, of course, we realize that's extremely important. But what he says, and I think he's right in saying that, is if we make it all about how I live my life, then someone is perfectly within their rights to say, well, that's a great lifestyle.

[15 : 32] I'd really like that, but I don't need God to live that lifestyle. And so when he's talking about holiness, he says the importance of public worship, the importance of standing before a holy God and recognizing that it's all about God in the first instance, and any behavior and principles and relationships that come out of that.

But the central thing is meeting the living God, being in his presence, and worshiping him. So those are what he mentions as the walls of the Christian ghetto.

So from the book of Isaiah, we find ourselves in a similar way to the people who would have heard these words. We find ourselves in a position of exile. What do we do about it?

And of course, there's one sense in which there's nothing that we can do about it. It's only God who can do something about it. And this chapter is all about God promising that he will comfort his people.

And the word comfort in the book of Isaiah is the opposite of judgment. It's what God does to restore his people after they have been judged. The second half of the prophecy of Isaiah begins with the words, comfort my people.

[16 : 42] Bring them back. Restore them to their homeland so that they will experience once again God's blessing. Another set of words that's used in this passage is about justice and righteousness, how they will go out from God's throne.

Listen to me, my people. Hear me, my nation. The law will go out from me. My justice will become a light to the nation. So in some ways, there's nothing that we can do to bring ourselves back.

We rely on God to be doing it. And in the book of Isaiah, all of God's actions in saving are associated with the figure who is described as the servant, which is, of course, speaking about the Lord Jesus Christ.

And it's through the servant that God will bring his people back from exile and will bring his comfort to the exiles. At the same time, we are called to respond to what God is doing, to believe in what God is doing.

We're to cooperate. And we read these words elsewhere in Isaiah. Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the word of his servant? So just as it all depends on God and his saving action, so also there are things that we can do to come back from this exile.

[18 : 00] So what is it that we can do? Well, let's begin by verses 1 to 3 in this passage. The first thing that God calls us to do to come back from the exile is to remember who we are.

Or more specifically, to remember what God used to make us. What God used to make us. And this is this verse, look to the rock from which you were cut and the quarry from which you were hewn.

Now naturally, we would read those verses to think. Remember how great you are. It's very popular now to be tracing family trees and to see the great ancestors that we had to trace our family tree and maybe to get a coat of arms for our surname.

And there's a poem by Burns, what's like us, who's like us and let's remember how great we are. But actually God's not calling the people to do that here.

He's doing the very opposite. What he's saying is look to Abraham and Sarah. Look to how humble, how unpromising was the beginning of God's people.

[19 : 16] And when you see that, when you realize what God used to make his great people, then you'll realize that God is able to fulfill his promises even for you.

So if we read these verses again, look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn. Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who gave you birth and then these words, when I called him, he was but one.

And I blessed him and made him many. So what God through the prophet Isaiah is saying is, realize what unpromising raw materials God used to make his people.

He started with Abraham and Sarah to old age pensioners and there was a long time that they waited to have their first child to begin this promised people of God.

But it says, I blessed him and made him many. So the first thing we need to do is we need to remember how God takes this unpromising raw material and he does great things with it.

[20 : 26] That's what we need to remember if we're going to get back from the ghetto, not to have this big, up sense of how great we are and our great Christian heritage, but rather as we look back to the past to see how God has worked in grace to use people like Abraham and Sarah to build his people.

The second thing we need to do is we're going to think about getting back from the exile, about getting out of the ghetto, is that we need to realize once again that the church is never supposed to be inward looking.

It's never supposed to be about herself, about itself. It's one of those phenomenon of modern globalized societies is the selfie.

So this word in Russian is sil-fi. You can take a sil-fi. And it says a lot about where we are as a culture, that we're obsessed with ourselves and we want it all to be about us.

And sometimes in church we can make church about ourselves. We can crawl our way to the Sunday service and just to hear something that would help us to cope for the next week so that we can make it to the next Sunday.

[21 : 42] But ultimately we've got no vision beyond God meeting our own needs. And from the very beginning of when God called Abraham, there was always that promise, and in you all peoples of the earth will be blessed.

There was always that promise that isn't just about the immediate recipient, it's about God's blessing going further. And we see this in verses 4 to 6.

Listen to me, my people, hear me, my nation. The law will go out from me. My justice will become a light to the nations. My righteousness draws near speedily.

My salvation is on the way. And my arm will bring justice to the nations. The islands will look to me and wait in hope for my arm. And in these verses there's a contrast between my people, the church, and the peoples, the nations, those outside the church.

And God's word and law and light will be spread far wider than simply those who are already now in God's church. And so we're never justified in living to defend the fort, just to stand our ground.

[23 : 00] We've always got to remember that God's promises are for those outside the church. Those who are yet to be called, those who've yet to come in. So we can't be a selfie church.

We can't be a selfie church. We've got to be a church that's remembering always, as we're in exile, as we're in the ghetto, that it's not just about helping us out, but it's about reaching those around us.

I'd like to tell you an example of just how the church, even when the church is very small, can have a huge impact on society.

And the situation was that my wife and I were attending adoption classes before our youngest daughter was adopted. And so we're in a group of 14 people in Novosibirsk.

And the statistics are that if you're talking about evangelical Christians, evangelical Christians or Protestant Christians would represent half of 1%. If that's one person in 200 in society, you would expect to be an evangelical Christian.

[24 : 05] And that's more or less borne out in terms of people's neighbors and class size and so on. That seems to be about the right statistic, that there's one evangelical Christian for every 200 people living in Russia, and particularly in Novosibirsk.

So there's a random group of 14 people who were looking to adopt children from the orphanage. And there was an opportunity at the start of this class to introduce yourself.

And it's all quite embarrassing because you've got to talk about yourself to people you've never met before. But you think, well, this is an opportunity to say at least something about the gospel. I can't miss this opportunity to say I'm a Christian and maybe to say something that would be helpful to other people.

And I think the exercise was to draw a picture. So I drew a picture and drew a fish on there and there was a Bible. And as I was explaining the picture to the group, I sort of said, well, the Bible is very important for me and I'm a Christian and so on.

And so Oksana was next to me and she also obviously tried to say something about being a Christian in a way that might be accessible to non-Christians around us. So we keep going around the group and then the next person, you know where this story is going, don't you?

[25 : 15] So the next person said, oh, you know, I had a bit of a difficult start to life and my first marriage broke up and things were going pretty badly. I was addicted and then there was a big change in my life and gold came into my life and we go, all right, okay, interesting.

That's three out of 14, four, five, six, seven evangelical Christians out of a group of 14 adoptive parents. So there should only have been one, less than one in that group, but half of the people who were coming forward to adopt children into their families were evangelical Christians and there was another couple from the Roman Catholic Church.

And then what that says is that the Christian church, if we understand what God is doing, we can punch over our weight, we can have an influence way beyond what you would expect if we remember these promises that we're not to be a selfie church, we're a church that knows that God's promises are not just for my people, but for the people's, not just for my nation, but for the nation's overall.

There's another thing that we can do if we want to get back from exile as God works in our lives, how we respond to our part. And we find that in verse seven as a command.

God says, commands us, do not fear the reproach of men or be terrified by their insults. It's one of the realities of being a minority that sometimes you get shouted down.

[26 : 43] Sometimes people don't want to listen. You get stonewalled. There's a wall of emotion and sometimes you think, I just don't have the courage to stand up and speak out. But God says, do not fear the reproach of men or be terrified by their insults.

And God's word in that sense commands us as Christians to embrace the conflict. Now that's not about being confrontational. That's not about being aggressive.

But it is about recognizing that this is normal. And as a Christian, I'm called to stand. When people object and despise, we're not to cower and withdraw or be silent, but we're to graciously stand our ground and to engage.

In one of my daughters, well, the school in my daughter's study, I teach an English class once a week as a favor for the school. And usually the lesson is simply teaching the English lesson.

And this time the students arrived a little bit earlier. And I asked them whether they had an opportunity to use their English in any other setting than the school lesson. And various people said that they'd been on holiday and they'd maybe used Skype and the Internet.

[28 : 02] And then one of the girls in the class, she said, well, actually I use English when there are visitors who come to my church. That was extremely brave. She didn't have any cause to say that in front of the whole class, but she was telling the whole class that she's a Christian and goes to church.

And I was able to say, oh, that's great. I'm a minister of a church. And just in a sentence, be able to talk about being a Christian in the public square. But there are all sorts of situations that we all face where we could say something or we could not say something.

And as Christians, we need to learn to embrace that conflict and to stand up and to say something graciously, realizing that sometimes there'll be a cost for saying it, but not to be scared and not to be intimidated.

Another way of looking at it is this. If you think about all the different situations where change has happened in any society of any kind, change always happens when someone is willing to pay the price to stand up and be counted to suffer.

And it's only at that point where you actually, the conflict actually happens, that change can happen. No conflict, no progress. Or as the early church used to say, the blood of the martyrs is the seed.

[29 : 13] That when someone was martyred for the Christian faith, far from the Christian faith, losing out, the Christian faith had stood to the last. And often that would be a very strong evangelistic witness.

Or we can remember the words of Jesus. Jesus said, love your enemies. And if you can't recognize you've got enemies, then you haven't got anyone to love. So we need to embrace that conflict.

We need to recognize that there are people who are opposed to God and the Gospel and be willing to stand, graciously to stand, and if possible to win them over.

And then the last thing that we can see as to how we can get back from exile, we can see in verse 8. And these words, they're quite strong words about those who would oppose God's Gospel.

But there's a contrast, isn't there? There's a contrast between now and eternity. There's a contrast between who looks to be winning at the moment and the fact that God will ultimately be vindicated.

[30 : 18] My righteousness will last forever and my salvation through all generations. And sometimes in order to get out of the gutter, we need to step back and we need to think that the particular source of conflict between us and those around us now, it's momentary.

It wasn't 10, 20 years ago, it wasn't like that, 100 years ago, it wasn't like that. These are momentary agendas. These are short-lasting values. They came yesterday, tomorrow they'll be gone.

But God's righteousness remains forever. And that was a word to those exiles and that's a word to us as exiles, to be able to have that perspective. And church on a Sunday morning sometimes is about that.

It's about hearing God's truth. But sometimes it's just about realigning that perspective and seeing things as they really are. And very often as we come to church or as we spend time together as Christians, we can regain that eternal perspective to see what really matters and what's really going to last.

And so as we look at all these different things that we've seen in the book of Isaiah, how they were exiled in the ghetto, but also that God was speaking about bringing them back, how that would not last forever and that God would bring them back.

[31 : 37] If we look at the commands in this passage, we see that there are lots of commands to listen and to look, to listen and to look. Now if you think about it, what is it that you listen to and what is it that you look or watch throughout the week?

And there's a huge range of different messages that we receive. And God calls us here to hear His voice and to look and to pay attention to those things which He mentions here.

To look at our past, where we came from. To look at nature, which seems now very imposing, but actually it says even the created order is very temporary compared to God's eternal kingdom.

And to listen, to listen to God, to what He says to us. And so as we close this section of looking at God's word this morning, I want to call on you to look and to listen.

And sometimes we need to filter out some of those other voices, some of those other things that are calling for our attention and to listen and to look for what God is saying. And that God in His grace would bring us as Christians in the world forward out of the exile, out of the ghetto so that we can move forward and see His promises fulfilled.

[32 : 58] Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn. Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who gave you birth. When I called him, he was but one. And I blessed him and made him many.

The Lord will surely comfort Zion. Amen. Let's pray together. Our Father God, we give you thanks for your word and we particularly give you thanks when your word speaks relevantly into our lives and when we can connect what you talk about in the Bible with the circumstances that we face every day.

Lord, we want to thank you that your promises are not given simply to our disembodied souls but they're given to us as a people and to your world. And that you fulfill your promises not only in the privacy of our times alone with you but you fulfill your promises in our world and in our lives.

Lord, we bring before you the situation where the Christian church in Scotland and in Russia in many other places is a minority. And Lord, we pray that you would fulfill all your promises and that we would be cooperating with you as you do that that we would be responding in the ways described in this passage.

Lord, we pray that you would glorify your name in our day and age and in our countries in Jesus' name. Amen.