

Life as an Exile

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Preacher: Derek Lamont

[0 : 0 0] Okay, we're going to return to our theme. We're not going to look in great detail at this chapter, which I'm sure will disappoint some of you because it's a very famous chapter, but we will be kind of fusing it into the theme, which is our overall look at the story of the Old Testament. And what we've been trying to do, whether we've been doing it effectively or not, well, we hope by the Spirit of God, is that we're trying to give the big picture of particularly the Old Testament as it points forward to the coming of Jesus.

And that's good, isn't it? It's good to get the big picture. It's good to get the big picture of the story of the Bible, but it's also good to get the big picture in our own lives sometimes. I think sometimes that we get so tunnel visioned by the little, every day things that we forget the big picture of our lives from God's perspective in us as well. I don't know how many of you have been a line of duty fans, but in that storyline, there's lots of minute detail that it's impossible to keep up with and to understand. But we were hoping that at the end of that particular episode or that theme series that we would get the big picture. Who is the great mastermind? Who is the H character? Who is the one that was behind all the corruption in the police? And it was underwhelming. The storyline was underwhelming and the last episode was underwhelming, I think, in some ways. But that's not the case with the Bible. It's never underwhelming and it's never senseless in any way and it oughtn't to be confusing for us. We see two important things that God is revealed in that online, on that storyline of the Old Testament, and we see that God reaches out. These are two really important things. We understand that the Old Testament very clearly reveals to us the character of God. It spends a lot of time reminding us that God is one, that there's only one God, that there's not a multiplicity of gods, and this is a God whose character is being revealed. He exists. He exists before us. He will exist after us. And we are His image bearers. And the Old Testament reminds us that we can't take His place. We can't, we try. And that's right from the very beginning what's gone wrong, isn't it? We usurp Him, we ignore Him, we rage at Him, humanity misunderstands Him, misrepresents Him, replaces Him. But the trouble is it brings an injustice and a lack of love into the world in which we live, or at best a self-serving justice and a self-centered love that rejects His Lordship in our lives. And we recognize that bad stuff happens as a result of that, and death lurks.

And the Old Testament has a great, it spends a great deal of time reminding us of our accountability to this great God. The judgment is unavoidable, that He is a holy God. So you've got these, even if you include the New Testament, you've got 66 books written over 1,500 years with numerous authors, but there's one thread, it's the story of God and His character. And not only our accountability to Him and His justice and holiness, but also His saving purposes to bring us back. And we do well to sit up and take note of that in terms of the big picture, because in revealing this holy and sinless God is also this God who reaches out with an unstoppable love. Like His justice, His love is unstoppable. Two great themes of the Old Testament, and we've seen, haven't we, right from the beginning, that this love that

He has, which responds to the failure of humanity to worship and adore Him as Lord and God, motivates a plan from the seed of the woman who will come, the crucified divine Son. That's what we've been, that's been the theme all the way along that we've been looking at. He would redeem a people. And so you've got the priests in the Old Testament who point towards the need for a mediator between us and God and the need for sacrifice. You've got the kings that we looked at the last few weeks who reflect the reality of the King of Kings and the everlasting kingdom. And you've also got the prophets. And the prophets were those who communicated God to the people who exposed the sin of the people, but also talked about the mercy of God and reminded them of the hope that God was bringing. So you have these great realities in the Old Testament, and we know that it is the God of the Bible who makes the first move and who reaches out in great love, and who promises more than we can ask or even imagine. Now every Christian here has experienced that love to a degree, and it's the most significant truth that you ever recognize in terms of the big picture that you are loved eternally by the living God. And if you're not a Christian, then I would encourage you to consider the God who says, I love you this much, this much that

I came and the person of my son and the mystery of all of that to die on a tree in order to open the way back up as I paid the price for your sin. So we've seen that picture developing in the Old Testament, but I want to just mention that the Old Testament, remember still, is a shadow of what we have. It's more, God is revealing himself, but there's more to be revealed, isn't there? So it wouldn't be good if we were just Old Testament believers, because it's a shadow. Yes, God was with them. He wasn't in them individually, but He was with them. He lived among them. That's why the temple was so important in Jerusalem, because He lived in the Holy of Holies, and that spoke about His willingness to be with them, but also His separation from them, that they needed a mediator to come between them and God, between them and Him. He did speak to them, but generally He spoke through intermediaries, through the prophets. He forgave them through the sacrifice of blood of animals, but it was anticipating once for all sacrifice of Jesus Christ. But they were saved by faith, Old Testament believers.

[7 : 19] I've often wrestled with this about the difference between Old Testament believers and New Testament believers. What's the difference? Sometimes we think there's no continuity between the Old and New Testament, and we throw out the Old Testament, and apparently that's a big theological debate in the States just now. But the other danger, I think, is just making the Old Testament exactly the same as the New Testament in terms of the believers. They were believers, but we are much, much more privileged than they were. They were saved by faith. But how can I express it? Can I express it by saying they were like pre-natal believers? They were in the womb. There was a darkness in the womb, and they were anticipating waiting for something better. And we see that a lot of times in the teaching of the Old Testament and in the reality of the Old Covenant being replaced by the renewed covenant that we see in Christ. So there's that reality that we must wrestle with when we look at the Old Testament. But it has very important truths to tell us and very important lessons because it deals not only with God, but also with people. And so we come to the prophets and Jeremiah, one of the great prophets, they're called the weeping prophet. And if you've read Jeremiah or Lamentations, you know exactly why that's the case. Remember Thomas looked last week at the kings and then, or I looked at the kings, and Thomas looked at the fact that the people of God rebelled against God and were thrown out of the promised land and were exiled. So they lost the privileges and promises of the Old Testament land and God's presence with them. They were divided, the kings were rubbish kings. They rebelled against

God and they usurped God's authority. And so they were banished from the promised land and they were exiled. And the prophets were messengers from God who revealed God's purpose and God's will to the people, both for the present in their lives, for their day to day living. And also, they weren't just forth tellers, they didn't just tell the future.

In fact, they didn't do that that much. They more or less spoke on behalf of God to the people. They did also speak about the future. But the writing prophets, the ones that we have most recorded of them in the Bible, mainly wrote before and during the exile. So they wrote a very specific time in the history of God's people, people like Hosea and Isaiah and Joel and Jeremiah and Ezekiel. They mainly spoke during the exile or around the time of the exile. And there was three emphasis they had. One, and this is the one you're most familiar with, warnings of judgment. Maybe you're doing your daily readings and you're reading through lamentations and you're going utterly depressing. It's just nothing, but judgment and depression. And much of the prophets are heavy and tough going. But you know, if they're bringing a message from God, and if you know the consequences of certain action, you will use strong language, won't you, to express the danger that you're in.

For example, if you're driving a car and you're on your phone, you think, that's okay, it's fine, I'm in control, I know what I'm doing, and a policeman pulls you over and takes you out of the car and rants and raves about the stupidity of what you're doing. And this is an unwise course of action apart from being illegal. And you think, you know, chill out, what's the problem, I'm in control here. But he is coming from the point of view of maybe having to attend accidents where someone has been on a mobile phone and killed two or three people in another car, and they themselves, their bodies been broken into 100 parts. And he's the first person there on the scene. And so you can understand, can't you, why he is so frustrated and angry at the potential consequences of acting in that illegal way.

And so God is the one who knows the consequences of sin. And he knows the consequences of rebelling against him. And therefore the language is strong. He has poured out his mercy on his people. He's redeemed them, he set them free. He's brought them into a promised land, and they've just stuck two fingers up at him over many years and rejected his lordship and rejected his sovereign holiness and his grace. And so the exile is a consequence and the prophets have warned and warned and warned about ignoring God and the consequences of that. It's actually quite interesting in 2 Chronicles 36, verse 20 and 21. We're told there that God took them into exile and babbled, those who escaped from the sword and they became servants to him and his sons. And he is Nebuchadnezzar until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah until the land had enjoyed its Sabbaths all the days it laid desolate, it kept Sabbath to fulfill 70 years.

[12:50] And there's even a sense that there's some commentators who think that the 70 years of exile, which we'll go on and mention a little bit about in Babylon, these, why was it 70 years? Is it just a random figure? Well, some commentators believe it's because the 70 years makes up for the number of Sabbath rests, the one in seven years where the people were supposed to let the land rest and recover, and they were to trust God to provide for them during that year. It reflects the number of Sabbath rests they didn't enjoy and they didn't obey and they didn't trust in God and they didn't let the land go fallow. And so it's as if you're saying you haven't trusted me, even in this, even in protecting the land and giving the land of promise rest, and so you'll be exiled for that amount of time.

So it was a warning of judgment, it was a call to repentance. And more so the prophets who spoke like Jeremiah in the exile, there's also great jewels of God's mercy and of God's forgiveness. If they turned around, we've seen it in this passage that we read, if you turn around to me, if you follow me, if you're wholehearted, then I will show mercy and you will return to the land and it's this hope, not only of repentance, but of future blessing.

You know, and we've got that verse which we'll look at in a minute, just the plans I have for you. It's probably the verse that's taken out of context more than any verse in the whole Bible where people take that verse and they stick it on their wall and they think, yeah, God's got plans for me and He'll want me to succeed and be fruitful and be happy.

And yet it's in the context of repentance and of being wholehearted and of following God. And it's interesting, isn't it, that when we naturally, we focus on the mercy that Jeremiah speaks of and a passage like this and the verse like that, which is a great verse, we love it and we focus on that. But isn't it true? And one of the lessons of the Old Testament is that the mercy of God is meaningless if we just use it as a rubber stamp to be unchanged and not to think that how we live matters, that sin isn't important. If the Old Testament teaches us anything, it highlights that without God our lives are bent on destruction from the heart's out. If anything, the Old Testament teaches us it's the holiness of God and our need to turn to Him in repentance. Then we like mercy. Then mercy means something. Then mercy is important to us and significant and our cold hearts are warmed up from the inside because we understand who God is. And interestingly, the Old Testament prophets wrote to a people.

We often take our Bible readings individualistically and that's fine, it's important to do so as well. But also, there's a corporate reality when we read the Bible and when we read our place, that's why I mentioned our citizenship at the beginning. We're not simply individual believers, we belong to the family of God and the people of God and God speaks to us and our behavior individually has an impact on the community of God's people. So you can't simply live and I can't simply live as if the community of God's people is irrelevant because often our individual choices as Christians affect the gospel community because we are God's citizens together. And I think it's great that we repent individually of sins, but I also think it's great that we repent as a church of sins, that we recognize the corporate nature of coming together and of praying for forgiveness and for going our own way, for turning our back, for relegating God to the periphery of our lives, for blaming

[17:13] Him, for ignoring Him, for mocking Him, for chasing after other things. That's when mercy both individually and congregationally tastes sweet. It's when we're able to forgive one another and turn back from our sins and turn towards Him and be assured not only of God's love and forgiveness, the love and forgiveness that we receive from one another. So these are great themes in this passage. They're great themes of Jeremiah. They're great themes of the Old Testament as we move forward. There's two things particularly in this passage that I very briefly want to highlight because this is God's letter. This part of Jeremiah is a letter that God gave to the exiles, to the believers who were under judgment, who'd been taken out of the promised land and who were enslaved in Babylon. And God or Jeremiah through God, He's prophesying two temptations among the people of God. And these are two temptations that can still be relevant in our lives today. One is delusion. They could be deluded. In Jeremiah chapter 28, the chapter before this and verse 10, 11, we have another prophet, a false prophet and his name is Han and Aya. And he went to the people and he said, he took the yoke bars from the neck of Jeremiah the prophet and broke them. And

Han and Aya spoke in the presence of the people saying, thus says the Lord, even so will I break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon from the neck of all the nations within two years. But Jeremiah the prophet went his way. This false prophet went to the people who were in exile and said, look, don't worry, God loves you. You'll be out of here in two years. Babylon will be defeated and destroyed. You'll be home in two years. It's going to be great. He was a false prophet. He said, thus says the Lord, but he didn't bring a message from God because he was saying what he knew the people wanted to hear that it was going to be easy, that it wouldn't be a long struggle, that they wouldn't be in exile for a long time. So God gives them Jeremiah and Jeremiah gives them this letter from God.

And he says, no, you're going to be here for a generation. You're going to be here for 70 years. Life is going to be tough. You're going to be servile, enslaved for 70 years here. Forget about the two years going back. But he says, while you're here, make the most of it. Make them return back to me. Pray to me. Know my shalom, as he says in these verses that we know so well, build houses, verse five, live in them, plant gardens, eat the produce, take wives, have sons, daughters, and multiply there. Do not decrease. Seek the welfare of the city, which I'm bringing you into. Pray for Babylon. Pray for it shalom.

Pray for its blessing. In other words, he's saying, follow me in Babylon. Serve me, return to me. Don't be grumblers. Don't be dissatisfied. Don't be separatist. Don't be secular. I mean, sorry, sectarian. And don't be insular. He says, don't just mope around Babylon for 70 years thinking, well, I wish he was better than me. They are just desperate to hear more of the word. It's great. But you know, that is that important that he says something. Don't be deluded by how easy life is going to be that God is just going to be like some giant kind of Santa Claus figure for you and take you back into promised land in a wink of an eye. It's going to be tough. You are in exile. But as you return to me, you can know shalom and you know peace and you can know peace for your people and you can fulfill. You can fulfill all the mandates that I want you to fulfill even in Babylon. So that was one temptation to be deluded that God was different from who he was. And that he was a God that they could mold into their own image and make false prophecies about. You can apply that today. Can't you? People no longer believe the Bible. They no longer want to see what

God says. But they just mold that or change it to make it acceptable, the kind of God that we would love. He's holy. But he's merciful, isn't he? So delusion is one. The other is despair because there was I suppose the tendency towards thinking, well, we've screwed up completely.

[22 : 15] We've made a mess of our relationship with God. He's abandoned us. We've lost the promised land. He's left us completely on our own. And there was a possibility that they would despair. But then we've got these great verses for I know the plans I have for you declares the Lord plans for welfare, not for evil to give you a future and hope. So the prophets in exile did bring a message of judgment off, but also a message of hope so that the people wouldn't despair. And God is saying, look, you are still in my plans. As you turn back to me, I still love you and I still have a future for you. And as you know, wholehearted devotion and freedom, there's still you will know freedom and a great future. The promised Messiah is still to come. And Jeremiah has some beautiful links towards that. Jeremiah 31 verse 31. Behold, the days are coming. He says, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, something new, something better. He says,

I haven't abandoned you or Jeremiah 33 15 and 16. In those days, I will cause our righteous branch to spring up for David, the links back to the Kings. He shall execute justice and righteousness in those days, Judah will be saved Jerusalem will dwell securely. And this is by the name by which we go, the Lord is our righteousness. It was a future. There was a Messiah still to come. And so it was to keep them from despair. It's a great message.

Jeremiah 29. Reminding us of who God is that He's holy, that we can't just mold them in our own image. And yet that He had a purpose and plan as they returned to Him and knew His shalom. Now, just to finish, in Christ, we're New Testament believers. We have seen the new covenant come in the person of Jesus Christ. We sit at the Lord's table and God says to us, this is the new covenant in my blood. Do this in remembrance of me. We have seen the Old Testament promises fulfilled. We've seen the 70 years captivity ended and the people are remnant brought back to Jerusalem. We have seen it. We've seen God in a way that they could never have imagined God revealed in Jesus Christ, God coming in the flesh, God as the word. So no need for prophets to communicate between us and God because Jesus is the prophet. He is the word. We've seen Jesus come in His character and His work and

His death and resurrection shedding His blood. No more need for priests to be those who intermediate between us and God because Jesus is our great high priest, isn't he? And we've seen Him ascended to heaven. So we don't need a Davidic king or a king on this earth or a new land in this world in which to live because we have a spiritual kingdom to which we belong, the citizenship that we mentioned at the beginning. And a king of kings who is your Lord and who is mine. We have much, much more. And above all, you are the temple of the Holy Spirit. No need for a temple in Jerusalem, which the people in that part of the world are still fighting over. No need for it because you are the temple of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit lives in you and lives in me. God not only with us, but God in us. This church building is not a temple. It's a place that we come together to worship. But God doesn't live here like He did in the Old Testament temple. It's different. He lives in us. This is not a sanctuary. You are the sanctuary. I am the sanctuary. But we are still tempted, aren't we, to delusion or to despair one end or the other? We're tempted to just want a God that we can mold and we can drop or lift up as we want when we want. But the Old

Testament tells us He's a holy God. He's one to whom we must bow in awe and worship.

[26 : 33] But we're also tempted to despair when we fail and we struggle and we make mistakes. We think God's going to abandon me. I'm fed. He must be fed up with me. I'm going to give up. Maybe this year you felt that over this year of not just a pandemic, but maybe in your own heart you've just felt so far away and so sinful from God that there's no way back that He will abandon you. And you almost say, well, rightly so. He's abandoned me.

There's always a way back. He's a God of infinite mercy. He just longs to hear your voice and mine to say, Lord, forgive me, please. Remind me, you're my King, my Messiah, my priest, my prophet. Remind me of these things, dear Jesus. Know Him. In Christ we have much, much more. And in Christ we also are living in exile. It's a different kind of exile to the Old Testament believers at the time of Jeremiah. But nonetheless, the New Testament uses that terminology of our lives as Christians. We're living as it were in a foreign land spiritually and it can be tough and there can be tensions. And maybe we would love to have the easy life like the Old Testament believers did in exile. They just want to go back to what it used to be like, oh, the temple and Jerusalem and the promised land and the milk flowing, milk and honey. But they forgot what life was like. And we sometimes forget that life is a battle, that we are in exile to one degree and a different kind of exile, certainly. But nonetheless, in exile, we need to stop trying sometimes to make God dance to our own tune. That cosmic

Father Christmas, He wants us to live in exile. He wants us to be spiritually fruitful and to see conversions and to see the peace and the shalom for Edinburgh and for the nation.

I'm glad that Craig prayed for our politicians and for our leaders. We pray for them. We pray if they're blessed and no shalom, then as we know that, they will know that and it will be a blessing. We're to seek to share what we have with them, the gospel, the glorious gospel as we live in exile. Let's stop being tempted to be separatist or sectarian or grumble or insular or just either longing for better days in the past or just hanging on to something better in the future. And with this I finished it, but there is something better still to come. We've seen Christ and the promises of the Old Testament fulfilled in Christ. But remember the Lord's Supper, He says, until I return. And that's the big picture of life today, isn't it? You have a place in it. You have a future. You know, He is in, you are in His plans for the future. Either He will come back and claim you if you're a Christian and take you to be with Him, or when you die, you go to be with Him and when He comes back, you'll be raised with Him. So you're part of His cosmic plan as a Christian. And that's brilliant, isn't it? To know that we are part of something better, that we're not abandoned, that we're not alone, that in Christ His judgment has already taken place on our lives at the cross. If you're not a Christian, can you not please put your trust in the Christ who has paid the price for your sins on the cross, and know that you, as you return to Him whole-heartedly in repentance and seek Him to be your Lord and Savior, you will know His peace and you will know His blessing, and you will know that you're part of His plans eternally.

Isn't that great today as you go into a new week? Let's pray. Father God, help us to understand your purposes and your plans. We thank you for this chapter, just a little window into the larger message of the prophets who spoke to the people of God in exile, warnings of the holiness of God and the danger of sin, but also the reality of your mercy, great mercy if we turn to you and to be part of your plans for hope and a future in Christ.

[31 : 11] May that be our rock on which we stand. May we see that it's expanded greatly as we are reborn as Christians in the New Testament as we see Christ as our Lord and Savior. Inspire and through encourage us Lord. I pray especially for people who may be struggling and battling today as Christians who found this year extremely hard, who may be a fallen and a deep and miserable sin and feel unable to return to you. Lord, there's nothing and nothing they can do that can make your mercy and make your grace invalid if they turn back to you pleading for mercy.

May we sense that, may we know your holiness but also your grace and enable us to live out together as citizens together our lives and supporting and encouraging and building each other up and praying for one another and remembering that on this narrow road we all walk together, as we pray in Jesus name, amen.