
Thinking Rightly about Exile

Jeremiah 24:1-7; 29:1-14

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Introduction Interpreting the dramatic setbacks of life:

- Tom Hanks in *Castaway* – Wilson, the volley ball cast away with him
- The Russian exile Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote in *The Gulag Archipelago*.

Do not pursue what is illusory—property, position, all that is gained at the expense of your nerves, decade after decade, and is confiscated in one fell night. Live with a steady superiority over life—don't be afraid of misfortune and do not yearn after happiness; it is, after all, all the same—the bitter doesn't last forever and the sweet never fills the cup to overflowing.

It is enough if you don't freeze in the cold, if thirst and hunger don't claw at your insides. If your back isn't broken, if your feet can walk, if your arms bend, if both eyes can see, and if both ears can hear, then whom should you envy? And why? Our envy of others devours us most of all.

Rub your eyes and purify your heart—and prize above all else in the world those who love you and wish you well. Do not hurt them or scold them, and never part with them in anger; after all, you simply do not know, it may be your last act.

Exile is a haunting word. Exile is a word that evokes aloneness, punishment, shame, disgrace. It is a “being sent away.”

As we open the book of Daniel, we are in what is known as the Babylonian exile of Israel. It is around 605BC. Babylon's Nebuchadnezzar ruled with an iron scepter. Their ferocious army blanketed all of the Middle East. They had swept into Israel and conquered Jerusalem. God had brought this judgment upon them because of their rebellion against Him and their failure to keep the Sabbaths. Israel were covenant breakers. They had brief times and small remnants of repentance, but on the whole, they were a whoring, idolatrous, rebellious lot. So God determined to destroy the people and the land. Yet He determined to preserve a remnant alive in exile.

But God's people living in exile have to think rightly about it. They can and do have many questions.

- Have we been abandoned?
- Is God's purpose and plan for us ended?
- How and when will we be restored?

Let's think about what it means to think rightly about exile.

You are in a Good Time**Jeremiah 24:1-10**

To think rightly about exile, you must realize that *YOU ARE IN A GOOD TIME*.

The Illustration of God's People**(v.1-3)**

After Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had taken into exile from Jerusalem Jeconiah the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, together with the officials of Judah, the craftsmen, and the metal workers, and had brought them to Babylon, the LORD showed me this vision: behold, two baskets of figs placed before the temple of the LORD. ² One basket had very good figs, like first-ripe figs, but the other basket had very bad figs, so bad that they could not be eaten. ³ And the LORD said to me, "What do you see, Jeremiah?" I said, "Figs, the good figs very good, and the bad figs very bad, so bad that they cannot be eaten."

Jeremiah locates us in time. It is after the first deportation to Babylon. King Jeconiah, the nobility and the best of the tradesmen have been taken into captivity, including Daniel and his three friends. Nebuchadnezzar's puppet king, Zedekiah, slimes Israel's throne with Obama-like alliances, betrayals and deceits. To all accounting, it is a very bad time.

In a vision, Jeremiah sees a simple basket of figs. In the basket lies a cluster of beautiful, succulent figs just ready to be eaten. But there alongside are figs gone rotten, squishy and spoiled. Here are the fruits of the harvest, some good and some bad. This is what Jeremiah sees.

Now, if these figs represent two groups within Israel, who is represented by the bad figs, these taken into captivity or those left in Jerusalem? O, of course those who have been carried away. Except that isn't how it is.

Verses 8-10 tell us that the bad figs represent those who have been left alive in the city.

"But thus says the LORD: Like the bad figs that are so bad they cannot be eaten, so will I treat Zedekiah the king of Judah, his officials, the remnant of Jerusalem who remain in this land, and those who dwell in the land of Egypt. ⁹ I will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth, to be a reproach, a byword, a taunt, and a curse in all the places where I shall drive them. ¹⁰ And I will send sword, famine, and pestilence upon them, until they shall be utterly destroyed from the land that I gave to them and their fathers."

While this might be thought of as a blessing, it is not. There in the city of Jerusalem, God would punish the remnant with such horrific destruction that it would become a cliché, "Destroyed like Jerusalem."

The Evaluation of God's People**(v.4-5)**

⁴ Then the word of the LORD came to me: ⁵ "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Like these good figs, so I will regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I have sent away from this place to the land of the Chaldeans.

See how God regards them! Here is the surprise: those who have been taken into captivity are the good figs. They have been sent away by God to preserve them. God regards them with delight. They are the ones who, like good figs, bring joy and delight to Lord of the harvest. He has sent them into exile, not to judge them, but rather to preserve them as His own. In God's sovereign ordination of their lives at this moment, He has chosen to send the best of His harvest to lie in captivity.

The Work in God's People

(v.6-7)

.⁶ I will set my eyes on them for good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up, and not tear them down; I will plant them, and not uproot them.⁷ I will give them a heart to know that I am the LORD, and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart.

In exile God promises what He will do for His people. Where God's providences locate His people, His promises are to comfort and to sustain them. It is a good time for them because God is giving them real promises to live by, to depend on and to hope for.

He has set His eyes on them for good. This is a good time for them. God will bring them back. He will gather them to Himself. But there in Babylon they will be planted, not torn down. They will be preserved, not destroyed. There they will thrive where God has sent them.

This is a good time for them for there during these years God will turn them back to Himself. He will give them a heart for God. He will cause them to come back to the Lord with all their hearts.

This is a good time. It is always a good time when God is at work in His people. Even when He ordains exile for them, they are being fashioned by His sovereign plan and provision. What we will read in Daniel is God's heart changing and life challenging work. It will be through the prophetic ministry of Daniel that God will direct the course of this heart transformation. At the center of that message will be God's people in exile for the conversion of the nations.

But the great danger is that we will not be a repentant people who live out of new hearts.

Exile is a good time for God is at work to transform His people.

You are in a Good Place**Jeremiah. 29:1-14**

To think rightly about exile you must realize that *YOU ARE IN A GOOD PLACE*.

The Word to God's People**(v. 1-3)**

These are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders of the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. ² This was after King Jeconiah and the queen mother, the eunuchs, the officials of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen, and the metal workers had departed from Jerusalem. ³ The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah the son of Shaphan and Gemariah the son of Hilkiyah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to Babylon to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon.

Through the prophet Jeremiah comes the Word of God to the exiles in Babylon. God speaks to them through a letter. We are reminded again that this is a bad time to a people who might appear to be in a bad place. But the Word of God is going to define their identity and to describe their responsibility. It is going to admonish them and to assure them. It will correct them and comfort them.

But the Word is delivered by people who serve the prophet and thus serve God. Shaphan stands out in the book of Jeremiah as a humble and courageous servant of Jeremiah who risks much in ministry. His son, Elasah, brings the message of the prophet. Thus, as the servant of the Lord, he is serving the Word.

The Responsibility of God's People**(v.4-7)**

It said: ⁴ "Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵ Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. ⁶ 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; multiply there, and do not decrease. ⁷ But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

The Word of God declares the responsibility of God's people in exile. Three major ideas frame those obligations.

God's people must affirm the providences of God (v.4). It is God who sent them into exile. It is His good, sovereign and wise ordering of all their situation. God's people must learn to align their own hearts with this great truth if they are going to think rightly about the hardships of their place.

God's people must multiply and thrive in midst of exile (v.5-6). God has placed them in Babylon so that they can prosper and multiply. There they are to carry on normal lives, to marry, have children and do their work. Exile is not a place to sulk or to escape. When God's people think rightly about exile, they will live in a way that pleases God.

God's people must seek the good of those they live among (v.7). God's people living among the Gentiles, among the nations of the world, must seek their good. They must pray for it and pursue it within their means. This may not always be what the world wants. At the center of this is the responsibility of God's people to speak about God while living among the nations.

This is exactly what shapes Daniel living in exile. His life and work exemplify courageous obedience to God, hopeful expectancy until the end and doing good

for all the different Gentiles he is in contact with. He hears and heeds the Word of God and thus pleases God in exile.

The Warning to God's People (v.8-9)

⁸ 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, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, ⁹ for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, declares the LORD.

The Word of God warns God's people of a grave danger while in exile. There will be false prophets who will speak lies, deceive the people, undermine their hope and destroy their purpose in exile. They will speak as though being in exile is a bad thing, a thing to be rejected. They will preach and prophesy that the people are to expect an immediate deliverance. They will try to teach the people an over realized eschatology – they will encourage the people to live well now in view of a future yet to come.

These false prophets will be right among the exiles. The true Word of God comes from the distance and is delivered by messengers. The false prophets will claim an immediate and interactive word from God. Be warned: this was true then and it is true now. The sure Word of God is completed in the past, speaking in the present through the Scriptures and is preached and taught by the messengers God has sent. There are many who are false. God flatly says, "I did not send them."

The Plans for God's People (v.10-11)

¹⁰ "For thus says the LORD: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for wholeness and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.

The Word of God confirms the plans God has for His people.¹

There is a definite period for the exile (v.10). It is going to last seventy years. It cannot be shortened. It will not be lengthened. This is both a challenge and a comfort. It means that most of the current generation will not live to see the end. It does mean that future generations may well see the return.

There is a distinct purpose for the exile (v.11). We are reminded that the exile is the good of God's plan. It is there that they will be sheltered from the fierce wrath of God wielded by the slaughtering hand of Nebuchadnezzar at Jerusalem. It is there that they will live in relative safety and prosperity unlike the horrific suffering experienced by those not in exile. It is through the remnant who went into exile that God intends to preserve His people and magnify His Name.

The good plans God has for His people, whether of Israel in Babylon or us in this age, is in regards to the times of the Gentiles. He planted them there for their

¹ I reject the sort of handling of this paragraph that individualizes and personalizes the "plans for good" that God has without due consideration of the corporate and eschatological context and meaning. The parallel here is not some personal, individualistic good that God has planned for me in this world, but the ramifications of His eschatological plan and purpose that is summed up in Christ and His kingdom.

preservation and the salvation of many in Babylon. God has planted us here for the propagation of the gospel and the advance of His kingdom.

The Privilege of God's People (v.12-14)

¹² Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me. When you seek me with all your heart, ¹⁴ I will be found by you, declares the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

The Word of God describes the privileges of God's people.

They will pray to God and He will hear them (v.12). Going into exile did not feel like God was answering their prayers. Their prayers would now turn with longing to the return and restoration.

They will seek after God and He will be found by them (v.13-14). Here is a privilege with gospel dimensions. Their pursuit of God in prayer will result in God allowing Himself to be found by them. Make no mistake. This is an awesome thing – that God is found in the pursuit by His people.

They will return to God and He will restore them (v.14). This will be a near and distant reality. They will return to the land. But even more importantly, the fullness of a return and restoration that could but dimly be seen here will unfold. We are living in the beginning of that return and restoration. It started with the incarnation of Jesus and will come to glorious consummation at the return of Christ and the new heavens and new earth.

Three horizons are in view here. There is the near horizon of a return in seventy years to the land from which they have been exiled. The path of time wove through that hillside in Ezra and Nehemiah's day. There is the middle horizon of a visitation by God that will bring them spiritual restoration and the beginning of the realization of all His promises in the covenant. The New Testament writers who recorded and reflected upon the coming of Jesus paint in the language of God visiting us in Christ. There is the distant horizon toward which we gaze and toward which we move when the exile is over and we all, all God's people are gloriously gathered in.

Live for God in the place He has you until He gathers us all again.

Conclusion Now how does all this connect to us? Is primary interest in Daniel because of its prophetic material? What follows in the book of Jeremiah are the New Covenant restoration promises. It locates the true return of God's people in the comings of the Messiah, the Christ. All that was promised while in the land and all that is promised while in exile, will be fulfilled, not just in a return to the land, but in the return of the King. That is why Jeremiah and Daniel are for us in our good time and our good place.

We are living in the Babylonian exile of the church. In this present time we are away from our own homeland in heaven, our city of Mt. Zion and our dearly beloved King. The Apostle Peter plays this theme through symphony of 1 Peter:

CH 1: Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who are elect exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, ² according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood: May grace and peace be multiplied to you.

¹⁰ Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, ¹¹ inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. ¹² It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.

¹³ Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. ¹⁴ As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, ¹⁵ but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, ¹⁶ since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."

CH 2: ⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

¹¹ Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. ¹² Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

CH 4: ¹² Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

CH 5: ¹⁰ And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal *glory* in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. ¹¹ To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

¹² By Silvanus, a faithful brother as I regard him, I have written briefly to you, exhorting and declaring that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it. ¹³ She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings, and so does Mark, my son. ¹⁴ Greet one another with the kiss of love. Peace to all of you who are in Christ.

Do you see it? To the chosen exiles from the chosen in Babylon, live as exiles with an elegant holiness, empowered grace, proclaimed gospel, honorable suffering, heavenward gaze, looking for the promise of His coming, His revelation, His deliverance, His glory.

So the Word of God to us from Daniel reframes our thinking about living between the comings. Here in exile we are settle in, live our identity, do good for our neighbors, speak of the glories of God to the nations and hope, hope, hope in the future coming and final coronation of the King.

It is a good time for us:

To rest in the providences of God that ordain our situation and order our reality;

To trust in the promises of God that sustain our faith and comfort our souls;

To hope in the purposes of God that transform our hearts and purify our lives.

It is a good place for us:

To thrive in the provisions of God that identify our dependencies and meet our needs;

To serve in the plans of God that describe our mission and direct our ministry;

To speak in the proclamation of God that evangelizes our world and edifies our brothers;

To suffer in the power of God that emboldens our witness and humbles our courage;

To stand in the presence of God that defines our hope and delights our hearts.