

EXILE AND BEYOND—3

Exile and the Universal Human Condition

We began to see at the end of the last session that what God put Israel and Judah through in the experience of the exile, and the promise of return to something greater and better, is characteristic of the condition of the whole human race. We also saw that it was encapsulated in the events of Jesus' death and resurrection, and of our belonging to Jesus in that reality.

We saw it at the beginning in the expulsion of the man and the woman from the garden of Eden on account of their sinful disobedience and defiance of God (see Genesis 3:22–24)—along with the promise that an offspring of the woman would ultimately crush the power of evil (Genesis 3:15). It can also be traced in the departure of Abram from country, tribe and family to seek the promised land (described as a new Eden; see Deuteronomy 8:7–10; compare Genesis 2:8–16) and ultimately to be a blessing to the whole earth (see Genesis 12:1–3; **23:4**; also **Acts 7:2–7**; **Hebrews 11:8–16**; **4:7–11**). Jesus also spoke of the human condition in exilic terms in the parable of the lost son (Luke 15:11–32). And he said that he himself as Son of Man, on the way to the cross, had 'nowhere to lay his head' (Luke 9:58).

We saw also that as Christians we also are in this larger exile, still awaiting coming out of exile, in its ultimate fulfilment, as citizens now of the promised home with God that is to come (as in Revelation 21:2–4, 22; 2 Peter 3:13). See **Philippians 3:13–14**, **18–4:1**. Peter addresses Christians as 'exiles' in **1 Peter 1:1–5**, **17–21**; **2:11**. This appears to be addressed to Christians from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. Our exile consists of living in a world to whose ways we no longer belong, described by Jesus as 'An evil and adulterous generation' (Matthew 12:39); by Peter as 'this corrupt generation' (Acts 2:40). See **Galatians 1:3–5**. Jesus prayed to the Father: **John 17:13–15**. How are we to conduct ourselves as exiles in this world? Perhaps we can learn something from the experiences of Israel in exile.

The Nature of Babylon

'Babylon' in the Bible is not just the Chaldean nation under Nebuchadnezzar and his successors. It has come to stand for much more. It harks back to ancient Babel, whose inhabitants defied God's command to 'fill the earth' (Genesis 1:28; 9:1) and ganged up against God to 'make a name for ourselves' (Genesis 11:1–9). Historical Babylon was a centre of occult practices (see **Isaiah 47:12–13**), under God's judgment: see **Isaiah 13:11**, **19**; 21:1–10; 47:1–15; **Jeremiah 50**, **51** (but interestingly not in Ezekiel, who was living there at the time!). The Book of Daniel characterises Babylon and its rulers as proud, idolatrous, and defiant of God (see Daniel chapters 3–5). In the Revelation to John 'Babylon' has come to represent all tyrannous, corrupt, exploitative and oppressive regimes—see Revelation 17, 18; especially **17:1–6**, **12–14**. But it contains the seeds of its own destruction, under the judgment of God: **17:15–18**; **18:1–3**, **9**, **15–19**). It's nature and its fall are in stark contrast to the holy city which is eternal (Revelation 21, 22).

Living in Babylon

The first thing to acknowledge is 'The Lord knows those who are his' and 'Let everyone who calls on the name of the Lord turn away from wickedness' **2 Timothy 2:19**. The Lord is able to look after his own, even in the midst of disaster. See **Jeremiah 39:11–18**; **45:1–5**. See also **Ezekiel 11:14–21**.

The next thing is, as Jesus said, 'Let your light shine' **Matthew 5:14–16**; **Philippians 2:14–16**. This includes willingness to speak out in the power of the Holy Spirit: **Acts 1:8**. Paul the apostle in **Romans 10:5–13** locates the going-out of the gospel in the post-exile period of **Deuteronomy 30:6–14**.

One would think that, given the nature of Babylon, that we should have nothing to do with it. Jeremiah was given to pass on other advice: **Jeremiah 29:1–9**. (Perhaps this is why Ezekiel, living in Babylon, was not given any prophecies about Babylon’s destruction.) This letter had later ramifications: see Jeremiah 29:24–32. By the same token, we will need to refrain from the world’s practices that go against God: see Daniel 1:8–20; 3:1–30; 6:1–28. Hence we are to be loyal to the authorities, while ready to critique them where they go against God. See **Matthew 22:15–22; 23:1–2; John 18:33–38; 19:7–12; Acts 4:18–19; 1 Peter 2:13–17**.

So we are to be in the world, but not of it, with a certain healthy detachment from the things we are involved in, even as we live fully in them: **1 Corinthians 7:29–31**.

There is also an injunction to ‘Come out of her’ **Jeremiah 51:45**. This is an invitation to come out of Babylon’s bondage, and not be caught in its downfall—see **Isaiah 48:20**. It is also a call not to participate in the evil ways of Babylon, as we look towards the strength and purity of being one with God: see **Revelation 18:4–5; 1 Peter 4:1–5, 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1; Isaiah 52:9–12**. Which comes before Isaiah 52:12–53:13—which makes it all possible!