

Exile and the Promise of Restoration

Time and again, God was faithful to keep His promises to His people. He multiplied Abraham's descendants into a great nation; He planted the Israelites in the land of Canaan, and He established David's kingly line. But God had also promised Israel that if they disobeyed, they would be conquered by a foreign nation, pulled from their homeland, and led into exile. God had promised this judgment if Israel disobeyed Him, and after generations of patiently waiting for His people to repent, God remained faithful to His promise. It's hard to read the Old Testament without being blown away by Israel's constant disobedience. As Moses led the Israelites through the wilderness, they continually complained. When Moses went onto Mount Sinai to receive the Law from God, they created a golden idol and worshipped it. When God placed them in the land of Canaan, they kept turning away from Him to worship idols. Idolatry shows up throughout Israel's history. Though there were times of reform, Israel seemed bent on rejecting God. God dealt with this idolatry patiently, but His justice would not be detained forever.

The Curse for Disobedience

When God made His covenant with Moses and Israel, He gave them the Law to show them exactly what was expected of them as the people of God. He promised them that if they obeyed His Law, they would be blessed and would live in the land of Canaan in peace and security. But if they disobeyed, God promised them that they would experience His judgment rather than His blessing. Among other things, this meant that they would be pulled away into exile.

Q1 Read Deuteronomy 28. Based on what you have studied in the previous sessions, how did the blessings offered in verses 1–14 become a reality in the life of Israel?

Q2 Summarize the judgments in verses 15–68 that God said would come upon Israel if they disobeyed.

The Promise of Exile

Every one of the judgments listed in Deuteronomy 28 is terrifying. Israel was defined by their unique relationship with God. They were known for receiving special favor from God, so the thought of experiencing God's judgment rather than His blessing would have been devastating. The promises of agricultural failure and military defeat were bad enough, but the exile brought a much deeper level of judgment. Israel would be abandoned by God, defeated by a distant enemy, and then torn from the land that God had given them. Without the presence of their God and the land He had given them, Israel would lose their identity. Imagine the horror of hearing these words from God: The LORD will bring you and your king whom you set over you to a nation that neither you nor your fathers have known. And there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone.... Because you did not serve the LORD your God with joyfulness and gladness of heart, because of the abundance of all things, therefore you shall serve your enemies whom the LORD will send against you, in hunger and thirst, in nakedness, and lacking everything. And he will put a yoke of iron on your neck until he has destroyed you. (Deut. 28:36, 47–48)

If Israel would not serve their God, they would end up serving their enemies. They would worship carved images, crying out to blocks of wood and stone to deliver them. Notice that when God spoke these words, it was merely a warning: Israel had not even entered the Promised Land by this point. Yet Israel's disobedience was inevitable, and the only real surprise was how long God waited before punishing Israel.

A Divided and Defeated Kingdom

We mentioned in the previous session that the book of Joshua shows Israel's taking over the land of Canaan, and that the book of Judges records the chaos, apathy, and idolatry that characterized Israel after they had settled into the land. We also talked about David's becoming the king of Israel and God's promise to establish His kingly line. But a mere generation after David's kingship, the Israelites became so stubborn and power hungry that they ended up dividing into two camps: the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Israel never fully recovered from this split. The northern kingdom (Israel) was almost completely godless—they followed ungodly kings into every form of sin. The southern kingdom (Judah) had a few good kings and experienced some good years, but overall they followed the same pattern of ungodliness and idolatry. In 722 BC, Assyria conquered the northern kingdom of Israel and carried them away into captivity. The southern kingdom of Judah should have learned from Israel's mistakes—God allowed them to hold on for over one hundred years longer, but eventually they suffered the same fate. In 597 BC, Babylon conquered Judah and carried them off into captivity.

Q3 Read 2 Kings 17:1–23. This passage describes Israel's being taken into exile. The author did not simply describe the event; he included a theological explanation for what happened. According to this passage, why was Israel sent into exile?

God's judgment on Israel was totally appropriate in light of what they had done, but it is important to recognize that this was never God's intention. In other words, God didn't want to send His people into exile. Hear the anguish in God's voice as He lamented the loss of His people: How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. (Hos. 11:8) God hated the exile, and the history of Israel shows that He moved slowly and regretfully toward it. God kept sending prophets to warn His people, but they refused to listen. Ultimately, Israel chose exile for themselves, and God remained faithful to His promise to punish Israel for their rebellion.

Q4 In light of Israel's persistent rebellion, why do you think it still grieved God to send them into exile?

Israel in Exile

With the exile, Israel's future seemed uncertain. But God was still working. God still spoke to the exiles through the prophets. Even after removing Israel from their land, God still called them to repent and promised them a future. How could God still love and pursue His people at this point? They did not love Him, and they proved that through constant rebellion. They had long since turned from God to trust in themselves. They followed foreign kings and worshipped false gods. They deserved the wrath and judgment that God showed them. But they still were not

completely destroyed. Why not? The Old Testament is filled with stories of God's destroying entire nations for their godlessness. Why didn't God do this with Israel? God had too much at stake to destroy Israel. His purposes of redemption were wrapped up in the nation of Israel. They were His people—He had created them, claimed them, and was working out His plan to restore the world through this unique group of people. Israel was known as God's people. When Israel was conquered and taken into exile, the other nations assumed that it was because their God wasn't strong enough to give them military victory. Listen to the way God explained this situation: In accordance with their ways and their deeds I judged them. But when they came to the nations, wherever they came, they profaned my holy name, in that people said of them, "These are the people of the LORD, and yet they had to go out of his land." But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they came. (Ezek. 36:19–21) In this passage, God made it clear that Israel deserved their punishment. But He also gave the ultimate answer as to why He was not going to give up on His people: His name. He was going to preserve them out of concern for His holy name.

Q5 Read Ezekiel 36:16–38. Why was God promising to restore Israel? Why is this significant?

Q6 Look closely at verses 25–27. God promised to cleanse His people, to give them a new heart, and to empower them by His Spirit. What is the significance of these promises?

The New Covenant

While Israel was in exile, God made promises to Israel in Ezekiel 36 and other passages. He guaranteed that He would bring them back to the Promised Land. He would once again be their God, and they would be His people. In many ways, God was reaffirming the covenants He made with Abraham, Moses, and David. Without question, Israel's exile would not last forever. In fact, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah record God's amazing provision in sending Israel back to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall and the temple, both of which had been destroyed. But even still, something was missing. Only a relatively small number of Israelites returned to Jerusalem at this time; the rebuilt temple could not match the grandeur of the temple that Solomon had built; the glory of God did not return to the temple, and the kingdom of God was not restored to Israel. God's people knew there had to be more. And there was. God made huge promises to Israel in Ezekiel 36:25–27 and restored hope to a desperate nation. Israel had become defiled through their idolatry, but God promised to cleanse them. Israel had a heart of stone that was incapable of loving God, but God promised to remove that heart of stone and give them a living heart made of flesh. Israel had proven that they were incapable of obeying God's commands, but God promised to place His Spirit within them and enable them to follow His commands. These promises show that God's plan for His people would involve a lot more than simply bringing them back from exile. God was going to recreate His people. They were going to be changed from the inside out. Recall from the previous session that God made a promise to David that his kingly line would continue. Even though the kings who followed David failed to be good stewards of God's kingly authority, the prophets believed and taught that a king would come who would establish God's perfect reign over His people. This king would be one of David's descendants, and he was sometimes simply called by the name David. Soon after promising to restore and recreate His people, God told Ezekiel that this coming king would establish a new, eternal covenant with His people: My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd. They

shall walk in my rules and be careful to obey my statutes. They shall dwell in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children's children shall dwell there forever, and David my servant shall be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will set them in their land and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD who sanctifies Israel, when my sanctuary is in their midst forevermore. (Ezek. 37:24–28). The promise of a new covenant raises an obvious question. What was wrong with the old covenant? The answer is simple: sin. Because of their sinful hearts, the people of Israel were constantly breaking God's covenants with them. Throughout most of its history Israel was idolatrous and immoral. The sad reality is that they were incapable of anything different. Despite the hundreds of times that God's prophets called the people to repentance, they continued in their rebellion. But that was all going to change. Listen to the way Jeremiah described this new covenant: Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. (Jer. 31:31–34). The new covenant was different in significant ways. In the old covenant, the law was written on stone. In the new covenant, the law would be written on human hearts. Under this new covenant, God's people would no longer get caught up in external religion; they would experience spiritual change—they would be made spiritually alive. Obedience would no longer be a condition for entering the covenant; obedience would be a promise that God's people would experience through the new covenant. Under the old covenant, God's people came into contact with Him through the mediation of flawed men (the priests). These flawed men would offer up continual sacrifices, and God would patiently pass over their sin. But under the new covenant, God's people would encounter God directly through the mediation of a flawless man—Jesus Christ. And this flawless man offered Himself as a sacrifice once and for all. Jesus's sacrifice did not pass over sin; it paid for sin and permanently removed it.

Q7 Take some time to meditate on Ezekiel 36:25–27 and Jeremiah 31:31–34. What makes this new covenant so unique and important?

It is easy to read the Old Testament and get fed up with Israel. We get tired of their rebellion and want to scream, "Why don't you understand this? Stop worshipping idols! Turn to God!" And to a certain extent, the Old Testament is meant to show us how unwise and destructive our sin can be. But we need to be careful not to be too harsh with the Israelites. In reality, their problem is our problem. We need to be careful not to get so caught up in their stubborn rebellion that we overlook our own. In fact, Jeremiah described Israel's sin in universal terms: The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? (17:9) We all face the same problem. Sin is not some external factor that we encounter from time to time. It pervades every

human heart. Israel's sin is our sin—we were all covenant breakers by nature and incapable of obedience. And because we faced the same problem that Israel did, the new covenant is good news for us as well. We can now enjoy the benefits of being recreated by God, changed from the inside out. This new covenant would include the key elements of the older covenants that God had made with Abraham, Moses, and David. It still centered on God and His people—notice that important phrase, “I will be their God, and they shall be my people”—and it still promised restoration for Israel, but the new covenant also included hope and healing for all the nations of the earth (Isaiah 42:6, 49:6, 55:3–5, 56:4–8, 66:18–24). God's plan of redemption had always been to redeem all of His creation, but Israel had lost sight of this calling. The new covenant would bring together Jew and Gentile. When Adam and Eve rebelled against God, the whole world fell under the destructive power of sin. But now with the new covenant, all creation would experience God's power to redeem and restore.

The New Covenant in Jesus's Blood

As the Old Testament draws to a close, we see Israel's future was still uncertain. But we are left with two very important promises: (1) God was going to send His Messiah, a King from the line of David, and (2) God was going to make a new covenant with His people that would recreate them and enable them to follow His rule. From the moment of His birth, Jesus demonstrated that He was God's Messiah. His ministry demonstrated that He was Israel's true King. And before Jesus was crucified, He gathered His disciples together and celebrated the Passover. Remember that the Passover celebrated God's act of redemption in setting His people free from slavery and that immediately after this exodus, God had established His covenant with Moses and Israel. When Jesus celebrated the Passover with His disciples, He broke the bread and passed around the wine and told His disciples that these elements would now represent His crucified body and His shed blood. With great significance, Jesus took the wine and said, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20). With Jesus, the new covenant had arrived. And we will continue to discuss the beauty of this as we study the New Testament.

Q8 As the Old Testament comes to a close, we see that God promised to send a King in the line of David and to make a new covenant with His people. How should these promises affect our lives today?

Q9 Spend some time in prayer. Ask God to address the sin in your heart and to give you a heart that loves Him and submits to His rule. Thank Him for His promises of redemption and for the amazing reality of the new covenant established in the blood of Jesus.