



A NATION BANISHED: THE PEOPLE IN EXILE

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Ezekiel, Daniel & Jeremiah
Paul Taylor
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It's the time of the year for the Academy Awards. The nominations were announced several weeks ago and the awards will be presented in late February. One of the big movies this year is called *Life of Pi* which received 11 nominations. It's the story of a young boy trying to survive a shipwreck with a unique collection of companions. It's a beautiful movie with an unfortunate conclusion about religious faith.

There's one scene in the movie right after the young boy, Pi, has been stranded out at sea. This scene opens up into the vast open sea. Nothing is around. It is an incredibly beautiful scene, but it is also treacherous. Pi is out on the sea with nothing. Everything has been stripped away from him. But he is not alone. His companion is an adult Bengal tiger. It's a dangerous situation. Everything has been stripped away except what could be a dangerous enemy.

So this morning we're going to be asking the question, "What happens when everything is taken away?"

As most of you know, we are in the middle of a nine month series at PBC called *EPIC: The Astonishing Story of God and the World*. We've been telling the story that the Bible tells. We've divided it up into ten eras to help us track along with the story and today we find ourselves at the end of the era that we have called *A Nation Banished*.

Over the last three weeks, we saw the two kingdoms of God's people spiral further and further down. Two weeks ago we watched as the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel and took everyone away. Last week we witnessed the unthinkable: the holy city of Jerusalem, where God had his own dwelling place, conquered and destroyed by the Babylonians. All the rest of the people of God were carried away into Babylon.

This week we're looking at the period that God's people spent living outside their land. It is usually referred to as "the exile." For 70 years, the people of God were banished from their land as a punishment for falling away from God. This was a terrible time. The land had symbolized everything about God's promises to his people. It was one of the first things he promised them. And now they had lost it. These were dark days. Today we see the people in exile.

And so we get to our question, "What happens when everything is taken away?"

What did Pi do on that lonely boat in the middle of the ocean when everything was taken away? He looked up. He looked for something more. He had nothing. So he turned to God. That's all he could do.

For God's people, the exile turned into an opportunity. It gave them a chance to discover who they were apart from all the things that they thought defined them. It gave them the chance to look up in a new way.

The prophets played a powerful role in helping God's people to do that. This morning we're going to look at three of them who spoke during the time of the exile. We'll look at Ezekiel first, then Daniel, and then Jeremiah. Along with Isaiah, these authors have the longest books of prophecy in the Old Testament. Each book is incredible, rich with story and theology. It's a bit crazy to look at all three in one morning. But it also gives us the chance to make some interesting observations by considering them together.

As we see what God's people learned in exile it will be important for us as well. That's because this time period is similar to where we find ourselves today. During the exile, God's people knew they belonged to God, but they didn't have a place that they could call home. They were aliens, homeless, and disconnected. That's how the New Testament describes us. The apostle Peter calls us "aliens and strangers in the world" (1 Peter 2:11). The author of Hebrews explains why we are aliens: "For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come" (Hebrews 13:14).

We are living in exile, waiting for the day when we will go to the home that is being prepared for us. We live in a foreign land. We do not belong here. We belong somewhere else. So just as the exile is an opportunity for God's people in the 6th century BC to discover something about God himself, this time is an opportunity for us. We need to learn the same lessons that God's people learned in exile. We need to learn what to do when everything is stripped away and we have nowhere else to turn. We need to learn to look for God.

Ezekiel shows us Something Else

We're going to start by looking at the prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel was a priest. He was married. He was carried away into Babylon during the second wave of deportations from Jerusalem to Babylon. Imagine being a priest and knowing that the temple has just been destroyed. What does a priest do without a temple? Ezekiel's role transforms into that of a prophet as he is living in exile. His book opens with an incredible vision of God. Let's start by reading that and then making some observations.

Ezekiel 1:1-9:

¹In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month on the fifth day, while I was among the exiles by the Kebar River, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God.

²On the fifth of the month—it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin—³the word of the LORD came to Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, by the Kebar River in the land of the Babylonians. There the hand of the LORD was upon him.

⁴I looked, and I saw a windstorm coming out of the north—an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light. The center of the fire looked like glowing metal, ⁵and in the fire was what looked like four living creatures. In appearance their form was that of a man, ⁶but each of them had four faces and four wings. ⁷Their legs were straight; their feet were like those of a calf and gleamed like burnished bronze. ⁸Under their wings on their four sides they had the hands of a man. All four of them had faces and wings, ⁹and their wings touched one another. Each one went straight ahead; they did not turn as they moved.

This passage opens with Ezekiel among the exiles by the Kebar River. Some people have suggested that this river was used by King Nebuchadnezzar as a canal to travel throughout his kingdom. The Jews were put to work helping to dig it out and fashion it for this purpose. So it's possible that Ezekiel is working by this river.

This is a surprising place for a vision. Ezekiel was a priest, displaced from his temple. He and his fellow Jews were living outside of the Promised Land. They were digging a canal for the king who had conquered them as they traveled throughout his expansive kingdom. This is as bad as it gets; a priest of Yahweh digging a canal for the King

who ransacked the temple.

But in these circumstances, God shows up. “The word of the LORD came to Ezekiel the priest.” “The hand of the LORD was upon him.” The vision itself goes on far longer than what we read. It's a fascinating vision full of heavenly creatures. A lot of what Ezekiel sees is familiar—animals and faces and eyes and wings. But a lot of it is completely unfamiliar; something completely outside of the normal experience.

This is the glory of God. This first vision has the effect of introducing Ezekiel to God's glory in the most unlikely of places. Part of the point is for Ezekiel to realize that what he is experiencing right now isn't all there is. Ezekiel used to live in a world of worship, sacrifice, and service to Yahweh. But now, digging a canal as the bad guy's slave, it would be easy to think that the previous world is gone. That it doesn't exist anymore. But God gives Ezekiel a vision and the first thing he wants Ezekiel to grasp is that there is something other than what he is experiencing.

I remember when our children were very young. We had three within three years—all in diapers at the same time. We never slept a full night, there was never a moment's quiet and everyone always seemed to have needs. People told us that it would get better, but honestly—we didn't believe them. That experience was so real that it seemed like it would never end. But it did. Being parents of elementary aged kids is so much different. I'm starting to play games with them that I enjoy.

I couldn't believe that life would ever be different, because we tend to think that what we are going through is the only real thing—whether it's good or bad. That's why we need to be reminded that there is something else. There is another reality: God and his kingdom and his spiritual servants. That's what this vision gives Ezekiel and it's what we need to hear too. In the midst of everything in our world that calls out for our attention, we need to learn to look for something else.

When you are in exile, when everything that defined your life has been taken away, when nothing remains of what you thought made life worth living, when you are empty, you have the chance to look for something else. You are open to another kind of reality. You are open to God in a different way.

Think of it this way. Your desire points you to something. Hunger points you to food. Thirst points you to water. Sexual desire points you to sexual intimacy. Loneliness points you to community. So when everything is taken away, your desire points you to something else. You are

receptive to God. It's a valuable time.

This is part of the reason behind spiritual disciplines of taking something away. Some spiritual disciplines add and activity: like prayer and worship. Other spiritual disciplines take something away: like fasting and solitude. You take something away so that desire points you to something else. When you go without food, your desire for food is still there. It reminds you that there is something out there that you need. It makes you more receptive to something other than whatever it is you are experiencing.

That's what the exile does for God's people. Incidentally, we aren't too far from the traditional season of lent. That's the forty days, not including Sundays, before Easter. Sometimes people choose to give something up for lent as a way of finding a deeper connection with Christ during that season. That can be a really meaningful thing to do because it can open you up to what God showed Ezekiel. Life is more than what you're going through right now.

What are you experiencing right now? Financial problems? Financial success? Relational conflict? A new romance? An old romance? Boredom? Busy-ness? It doesn't matter whether it's good or bad or somewhere in the middle. Does it feel so real that the things of God seem like an afterthought? That's the danger of the world we live in.

Our experiences can often seem more real than the spiritual reality that Ezekiel sees. So we need to look for it. We need to be aware of it. We need to open ourselves up to the presence of God. Spend some time in quiet. Turn off your phone or computer. Skip a meal to pray. Open yourself up to God's reality that is sometimes hard to see, but always there for us to find.

Look for something else.

Daniel shows us someone bigger

We've looked a bit at Ezekiel. Now I want us to think about another prophet who wrote during the time of the exile and that's Daniel. He was very different from Ezekiel. Ezekiel was a priest. He was a religious person. He was married. He had experience. Daniel was young. He was an up-and-comer and a bright kid with a promising future ahead of him. He was taken to Babylon the first time people were deported because he had so much potential. Babylon wanted the best and brightest to work for them.

Ezekiel went from being a priest in the temple of God Most High in the holy city of Jerusalem to digging out canals for the evil king of Babylon. His was a path of

disgrace. Daniel's experience was the opposite. He started as a smart young kid with no prospects in a backwoods nation that was falling to shambles and became a personal assistant to the most powerful person in the known world. His story was rags to riches. Daniel had the best deal of any young person in the world.

But Daniel was a Jew. He still worshipped Yahweh. As we read his story, we wonder how long he can keep that up as he rises in the ranks of Babylon. The question for Daniel is whether he will trade in what it means to be a Jew in order to maximize his success. Will he stop being one of God's people to become one of Babylon's people?

The inspiring answer throughout this book is "no." Daniel doesn't give up worshipping Yahweh. He stays faithful in incredible ways. We'll look at one story this morning as a primary example. At this point, Daniel has reached a prominent position under King Darius of Babylon. He was one of three people that reported directly to the king. But it made some people mad that a foreigner had such a high position. So they conspired to bring him down.

These people had king Darius sign a law that no one was allowed to worship any other god for thirty days, under penalty of death. They knew that Daniel wouldn't obey it. And he didn't. Just like he always did, Daniel knelt down and prayed toward Jerusalem three times a day. So they caught him and turned him into the king. And the king was forced to punish Daniel by throwing him into a den filled with lions. This is what happens.

Daniel 6:16-23:

¹⁶So the king gave the order, and they brought Daniel and threw him into the lions' den. The king said to Daniel, "May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!"

¹⁷A stone was brought and placed over the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet ring and with the rings of his nobles, so that Daniel's situation might not be changed. ¹⁸Then the king returned to his palace and spent the night without eating and without any entertainment being brought to him. And he could not sleep.

¹⁹At the first light of dawn, the king got up and hurried to the lions' den. ²⁰When he came near the den, he called to Daniel in an anguished voice, "Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been

able to rescue you from the lions?”

²¹Daniel answered, “O king, live forever! ²²My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in his sight. Nor have I ever done any wrong before you, O king.” ²³The king was overjoyed and gave orders to lift Daniel out of the den. And when Daniel was lifted from the den, no wound was found on him, because he had trusted in his God.

Daniel had it made in Babylon. He was second in command to the most powerful person in the world. But he was also a Jew and was faithful to Yahweh—the creator of heaven and earth. Eventually he faced a conflict between the power of Babylon and the power of his God. He faced a power struggle.

Everything in Daniel’s experience suggests that the king of Babylon is more powerful than the god of Israel. Babylon had conquered Israel. They destroyed the temple. All of Daniel’s personal success was due to the power of Babylon. The fact that his life was so good didn’t seem to be due to Yahweh—it seemed to be due to Babylon.

But in the face of this power conflict, Daniel chooses Yahweh. He makes a decision that says something very clearly. His choice proclaims that he thinks Yahweh is more powerful than the king of Babylon. That’s a gutsy thing for Daniel to claim. There is no evidence of that being true.

Daniel trusts someone bigger than the most powerful person in his world. When he does that, he reminds the other exiles that there is a power above the power of Babylon. He reminds us of the same thing. He reminds us that we worship a God who is bigger and more powerful than the most powerful forces in our world. And as Daniel trusts that God, we are invited to do the same thing: trust someone bigger.

Our culture worships so many gods. Many of them are very, very powerful. Having a lot of money in our culture gives you the power to do a lot of different things. You can eat differently, you can vacation differently, you can dress differently, you can socialize with different people. Money is a powerful god in our culture.

Being highly educated in our culture gives you a lot of power. If you go to the right schools and earn the right degrees and distinguish yourself in the right way, then that opens a lot of doors. It can lead to professional opportunities, financial success, and respect in the community. Education is a powerful god in our culture.

There are others: personal appearance, social connections, professional achievement to name a few. Our culture is filled with powerful gods. And if those gods were the most powerful things around, then your strategy for life is simple. Figure out which god you have the best chance of getting on your side. Pick a god to please and that’s how you live your life.

Are you living your life that way? Are you tempted to live that way? Here’s what we need to know. There is someone bigger. There is a God whose power is greater. There is someone who will take care of you more fully than money or education or looks or achievement ever can. And if you’re going to choose the most powerful God, he’s the one you should choose.

Daniel went on to prophesy that eventually even the king of Babylon will be defeated. And the king after him will be defeated in time, and the king after him, and so on. But there is a king whose reign will never be destroyed. He is the king whom Yahweh will send.

This is good news. The gods of our culture are powerful, but they are ruthless. As long as you serve them, they will take care of you. But as soon as you let up, you will be burned. If you don’t have money or education or looks or any of those things, those gods won’t give you a second glance. But the God of Yahweh is loving and compassionate. He will take care of you no matter who you are.

Don’t worship the gods of our culture. They won’t last. It seems like they will. No one in Babylon could ever imagine that kingdom falling. It was unbeatable until it was beaten by the Persians. The gods of our culture seem like they are the most powerful options out there. But they aren’t. There is someone bigger.

In times of exile, we learn that there is something more than we are experiencing. We look for something else. In times of exile, we learn that there is a power greater than the power we see. We can trust someone bigger.

Jeremiah shows us sometime later

We are on a whirlwind tour of the prophets of the exile. After looking at Ezekiel and then Daniel, now we’re going to take a look at Jeremiah. He actually started prophesying before Jerusalem was destroyed. His main message was that the city would be destroyed. God asked him to help the king at the time realize that it was God’s will for Jerusalem to fall. But no one would believe him. It wasn’t a very popular message.

When Jerusalem was destroyed, Jeremiah was left behind. He got to stay with the poor people for a while and then eventually, he went down to Egypt instead of going into exile. This guy was a true prophet. He lived on the edge of society. Most people didn't trust him. People were always trying to kill him. He was the real deal.

Jeremiah had a lot to say to God's people about why the exile happened, what to do during it, and how to carry on. But one of his most powerful statements comes not in describing the exile, but in talking about the future.

Jeremiah 31:31-34:

**“The time is coming,” declares the LORD,
“when I will make a new covenant
with the house of Israel
and with the house of Judah.
It will not be like the covenant
I made with their forefathers
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt,
because they broke my covenant,
though I was a husband to them,”
declares the LORD.**

**“This is the covenant I will make with the house
of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD.
“I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.
I will be their God,
and they will be my people.
No longer will a man teach his neighbor,
or a man his brother, saying,
‘Know the LORD,’
because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest,”
declares the LORD.**

**“For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more.”**

Jeremiah starts off, “the time is coming.” This is one of the things that God asked prophets to do: speak of the future. Tell people what is going to happen.

By the time that Jerusalem was destroyed, it was clear that the old way of life didn't work. God had chosen a people. He had given them land. He had given them a law to guide them. He had given them leaders. He gave them some great kings. But it wasn't working. They couldn't live up to God's requirements. Life wasn't working like it was supposed to. The arrangement that God had made through Abraham and Moses wasn't producing the desired result.

God's people weren't blessing the nations. They were being conquered by them. The Jews had hit rock bottom. They needed something new.

And that's what Jeremiah offered them. He told them that God had plans to give them a new covenant. They had failed the old covenant, so God would replace it with a covenant that they couldn't fail. He would put the law in their hearts. He would forgive their sins. He would give them his constant presence. He would give them a firm identity: they would be the people of Yahweh. And he would be their God.

The exiles needed to know that there was something else true than what they were experiencing. They needed to know that there was someone bigger than the powers that enslaved them. And they needed to know that there was something coming later that would be better. They needed something to look forward to. They needed hope.

This is what we need as well. We might convince ourselves that life is working, but watch the news for a while. Things aren't working out like they are supposed to. We are killing each other. We are enslaving each other. We are starving, hurting, and broken. We need to know that God has plans for our future. We need to know that God will act in history, in this world, to make things right. And that's exactly what we are told. We are told to expect something later.

This message is really powerful when everything has fallen apart around you. The early Christians hung onto the promise of Christ's return with a fervent hope. If you're going through something difficult, then you really appreciate knowing that something later is coming. Hard times often feel like they will never end, and the promise of something later can sustain you.

But some of you aren't going through hard times right now. There are hard things in your lives, but you wouldn't describe it as a hard time. When that's the case, it gets a lot harder to look forward. Why bother hoping for something later when what's going on now is pretty good? That's the place that a lot of Christians find themselves in. Speaking of Christ's return just feels so far away. It feels crazy.

But for us, living at the time we do in history, the life of faith is the life of waiting for Christ to return. One of the biggest mistakes we can make is to just try and make life work perfectly. Fix everything, focus on the here and now, spend all our energy trying to make life work. That's a mistake because this time is only temporary. This too shall pass. Something later is coming. Everything we do needs to take into account the reality that there is another

time that is coming.

Conclusion

We started off by considering a young Indian man named Pi who had survived a shipwreck. He had to figure out what was left when everything was stripped away. He ended up turning to God and offering himself up to God's purposes. When everything was taken away, he looked up.

The people of God lived for 70 years in exile. They had been stripped of everything. And during their time in exile, they became a different kind of people. They learned some lessons. They learned to look for something else: that there was more to their lives than what they were experiencing. They learned to trust someone bigger: that no matter how powerful the king of Babylon seemed, their God was stronger. And they learned to expect something later: this would not be the case forever; God had plans to act for their sake in the future.

Our initial question was, "What happens when everything is taken away?" That's an important question. Some of us feel like we've had everything taken away.

But a lot of us aren't in that place. For a lot of us today is just another Sunday in a long string of days. Maybe things are great. Most likely some things are great and some things are hard. It's a mixture and we probably wouldn't describe our lives as living in exile.

I remember as a younger Christian listening to sermons about hard circumstances and wondering whether I'd be able to maintain my faith if my life became really difficult and I faced hard circumstances. I don't worry about that so much anymore. I've been through enough that I've seen my faith grow during those times. Now I worry about being able to continue in faith when things get easier. Will I still remember God when my life is humming along?

The exile gave God's people the chance to learn these lessons. We need to learn them regardless of what we're experiencing. We live in a world that tries at every turn to counter each one of these truths. The world we live in tells us that this is all there is. The world we live in tells us that the gods of our culture are the most powerful ones out there. The world we live in tells us that now is all we have.

Have these ideas worked their way into your life? Are

you focused on what seems real here? Are you oriented only towards the powers that rule this world? Do you make decisions only based on this life: the here and now. You may not feel like you are in exile, but if you have faith in Jesus, you are not home. You are you not where you belong. You were meant to live in the Promised Land. And this isn't it.

We cannot believe the lies of this world. They are dangerous. This is not all there is—there is something else. The gods of our culture aren't all that powerful—there is someone bigger. Now is not all we have—there is something later.

And so we live amidst lies but choose to believe the truth. We remind each other of what we know to be true. We look for God's reality. We trust God as more powerful than any of the gods in our culture and we expect God to act in history to finish his promise. We wait for Jesus to return.

When everything is stripped away, all you can do is look for something else, trust someone bigger, and expect something later. May we learn those lessons during this time of our exile. And may we come home soon. Come Lord Jesus, come.