

Living with God Through the Exile

Jeremiah 24

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Since we met last Sunday the Covid-19 virus has been labeled a Pandemic. There are now 316, 506 cases with 13,599 deaths and those numbers change by the hour.

This crisis is unlike anything we have seen since the early 1900s.

We are being told to shelter in place, to maintain social distance, and to keep any gathering very, very small.

Instead of our churches swelling in attendance in response to a crisis, our churches are empty.

There is no school, no church, no sports.

Restaurants, bars, stores, concerts, conventions, are all either canceled or scaled back in hours.

We are all in a self-imposed exile.

We have been carried away from life as we know it, and this may last for some time. We don't have any way of knowing when life will return to normal.

Some people are freaking out. Some people are angry. Some people are grieving. Their graduation, a chance to play for a championship, or their dream wedding has been canceled.

Some people have been laid off from work. Some are worried about paying their bills, their 401k's, and of course, their health.

Some people are ignoring the warnings. Some people are showing their greed and panic and purchasing more than they need. Some people are acting like this is the apocalypse.

Me? I'm listening to Hank Williams Jr., who sings "A Country Boy Can Survive."

"I got a shotgun, a rifle, and a 4-wheel drive, And a country boy can survive, country folks can survive."

That's my philosophy.

If you can fish and hunt, you can survive, and I can do both.

I'm not trying to minimize the anxiety that everyone is feeling. I'm just trying to bring a little humor to the table, along with some fish, quail, turkey, and venison.

For many, it's going to get worse before it gets better.

The longer we have to be separated from one another and our regular lives and live in exile, the more difficult it's going to get.

That's the reason we need to turn to the Bible so we can learn from some people who lived through an exile worse than ours.

Who were these people?

The people were Jews who lived in Jerusalem in 597 BCE when King Jehoiachin was king of Judah. In that year, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon invaded the city of Jerusalem and carried the king, officials, craftsmen and the artisans away to Babylon.

Jeremiah warned the Jewish people that this was going to happen if they didn't keep God's commandments.

Listen to these words in Chapter 6.

Look, an army is coming
from the land of the north;
a great nation is being stirred up
from the ends of the earth.
23 They are armed with bow and spear;
they are cruel and show no mercy.
They sound like the roaring sea
as they ride on their horses;
they come like men in battle formation
to attack you, Daughter Zion.”
24 We have heard reports about them,
and our hands hang limp.
Anguish has gripped us,
pain like that of a woman in labor.
25 Do not go out to the fields
or walk on the roads,
for the enemy has a sword,
and there is terror on every side.
26 Put on sackcloth, my people,
and roll in ashes;
mourn with bitter wailing
as for an only son,
for suddenly the destroyer
will come upon us. (Jer 6:22-26)

Part of the reason these words fell on deaf ears is that there was a feeling among the Jewish people that God resided in the temple and because God resided there, they thought they were safe.

Inside the temple was the Ark of the Covenant, and the Ark of the Covenant housed the Ten Commandments, Aaron's rod, and a jar of manna collected from the days of Moses.

The Ark of the Covenant resided in the Holy of Holies. This place represented the presence of God to the Jews. No one believed that any nation could displace them because they had God on their side.

The Philistines once captured the Ark of the Covenant for a brief time before they sent it back to the Jews, because everywhere the Ark went, people mysteriously died.

So the Jewish people believed God was on their side, and God was. The trouble was that with every passing year, fewer and fewer Jews were on God's side.

I believe God is on our side. But God is also on the side of every nation if we believe that God desires that everyone is saved. 1 Timothy 2:4 says that God "wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth."

The problem is that with every passing year, fewer and fewer Americans seem to be on God's side.

While Americans cannot flock to church during this pandemic, is it possible that Americans might come to God?

Last Sunday and Monday, over 200 of you joined our live feed. That's as many as we typically have in worship on Sunday.

I hope that you as you sit in your homes today, through this message and text, you will all ponder what is truly important in life right now.

"Professor George Barton wrote that disaster and sorrow compel a soul or a nation to seek anew the foundations of life. Times of sorrow are accordingly times of religious growth."
(https://www.jstor.org/stable/3141403?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents)

Disaster and sorry don't automatically make people grow spiritually. Some people move away from God during these times. Others decide to draw closer to him. Which will it be for you?

We see this distinction very clearly in Jeremiah 24. Before Jerusalem was destroyed and 70 years of exile began, a smaller group of Jews were taken away into exile during the reign of King Jehoiachin. God showed Jeremiah two baskets of figs. One basket was good, and it represented those that were taken away into exile. But after they were taken away, they begin to grow closer to God.

The other basket was the bad figs, and they represented those that were left behind and refused to heed the warnings of Jeremiah, even after seeing many of the best and brightest carried away to Babylon.

Let's read beginning with Chapter 24:1

"After Jehoiachin son of Jehoiakim king of Judah and the officials, the skilled workers and the artisans of Judah were carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon..."

So notice here who the Babylonians took away into exile – the officials, skilled works, and the artisans. All of these people were people that could make the society of Babylon better.

When the American Colonization Society gathered up freed slaves to send them back to Africa and began the first colonized republic in Africa, they only gathered the freed slaves that could read and write and had trade or skill.

We continue reading now the rest of verse one.

...the Lord showed me two baskets of figs placed in front of the temple of the Lord. **2** One basket had very good figs, like those that ripen early; the other basket had very bad figs, so bad they could not be eaten."

3 Then the Lord asked me, "What do you see, Jeremiah?"

“Figs,” I answered. “The good ones are very good, but the bad ones are so bad they cannot be eaten.”

4 Then the word of the Lord came to me: **5** “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘Like these good figs, I regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I sent away from this place to the land of the Babylonians.[b] **6** My eyes will watch over them for their 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 me, that I am the Lord. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart.

8 “‘But like the bad figs, which are so bad they cannot be eaten,’ says the Lord, ‘so will I deal with Zedekiah king of Judah, his officials and the survivors from Jerusalem, whether they remain in this land or live in Egypt. **9** I will make them abhorrent and an offense to all the kingdoms of the earth, a reproach and a byword, a curse and an object of ridicule, wherever I banish them. **10** I will send the sword, famine and plague against them until they are destroyed from the land I gave to them and their ancestors.’”

So what can we learn from this as we deal with our own exile experience?

1) You can find something good in your exile experience.

Every one of you can find something good that God has given you, shown you, or taught you through this exile experience. It would be helpful and useful if each of you would share what God is showing you in this exile experience by posting your comments to our Facebook page under this sermon post.

One husband and father told me this week they were enjoying family meals together. Someone else told me she was more thankful than ever for teachers.

Every day you are going to hear how bad everything is from someone.

Every day that you turn on the news, 95% of what you hear is going to be bad, and you are going to hear that someone who is to blame. You will hear what should have been done that was not done. You are going to hear something that just does not seem to be true. You are going to hear predictions that sound discouraging.

If you are home and if you listen to a steady stream of news, I assure you that you are not getting your soul fed. Hours and hours of that will eventually turn whatever good figs you have to rotten ones. I encourage you to get enough news to know what’s going on and then fill your heart and your mind with something else.

2) God is going to watch over you.

Jeremiah was told that God was going to watch over the exiles, and he regarded them as good.

Do you believe that God is going to watch over you while you are in exile during this time of Covid-19?

Believe it. God will watch over you.

Many will experience hardship, pain, and suffering. Can you imagine the difficulty and suffering these Jewish exiles went through?

Many were separated from their families.

They lost their identities, homes, and their freedom.

But God said he was going to be with them.

God is going to be with us, and we need to listen to what God has to say to us.

I talked to a businessman this week who said he was sure he was going to have to lay off some of his employees, but he said he was learning some lessons during this time about running the business that he believed would make him a healthier business owner moving forward.

During this time, what will God teach us about our lives? When it is time to resume life back into our regular routines, will we carry any lessons with us? Will we have learned anything? Will God have taught us anything?

Perhaps we will have learned that some of the things we thought we could not sacrifice to serve God, worship God, or help our fellow man, we actually can sacrifice.

People place a lot of things ahead of God, and God is supposed to be first in our lives, but God often takes a back seat.

Many of the things we think we cannot live without can be shut down in a New York minute.

3) God wants to build us up.

God told Jeremiah this about the good figs. "I will build them up and not tear them down; I will plant them and not uproot them."

Isn't this interesting?

Don't you feel when you are in the exile that you are being torn down? Everything around you is stopping. Life as you usually experience it is coming to a halt.

Yet God told Jeremiah that he was going to build up the Jews during the exile.

Church, I want you to know that you can emerge from this exile stronger than when you first went it. I am talking about you as an individual, you as a family, and us as a church family.

What the Evil One means for harm, God can take it and make something good come out of it if we allow Him to. "28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who[a] have been called according to his purpose." Romans 8:28

"All Things" in this verse includes Covid-19. God can work through this and make our country better if Americans allow it.

Perhaps our leaders and all citizens will emerge more humble, more thankful, more cooperative, and more generous.

We can only hope.

In verse seven, God told Jeremiah about the Good Figs, "I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the Lord."

4.) We need a heart to know God.

This is what America needs. This is what your neighbor needs. This is what you need. This is what I need. "A heart to know God." When we are healthy and busy, and life is normal, our hearts are busy chasing many things, and God is easily overlooked.

Adversity can lead us to think about what is most important.

In the next chapter, we see that King Nebuchadnezzar came back down and destroyed Jerusalem. He then destroyed the temple. People were separated from the temple for the first time.

For the first time in their lives, the Jewish people didn't have a framework for worship. Up until that time, worship was confined to one place.

Their worship was composed of rituals, and they had to have the assistance of a priest to make contact with God.

Now, away from the temple system of worship, they were lost. But God says to Jeremiah, "Don't worry, I will give them a heart to know me."

During the exile an amazing and remarkable thing happened. The hearts of the people changed. Their worship changed. They understood that God didn't just reside in the temple. They discovered that God was Emmanuel. They found that God was with them in exile.

Later Jeremiah talked about a new covenant that God made with the house of Israel. He said "I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. **34** No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more." Jeremiah 31:33b-34

Would that have happened had there been no exile?

Clearly, disaster and sorrow compelled these exiles to seek new foundations of life.

But not everyone.

Not everyone became God's people.

Not everyone allowed Him to be their God. Not everyone returned to Him with all their heart.

Remember, God showed Jeremiah another basket of fruit, one that was rotten.

That basket was Zedekiah, the king that came after King Jehoiachin. King Nebuchadnezzar handpicked Zedekiah to be the next king, so for the next eleven years, King Zedekiah served at the mercy of the Babylonians.

He made a powerplay toward the end of his rule by trying to get the Egyptians to side with him against Babylonians, but it did not work. In the end, the words of the prophets were fulfilled.

King Zedekiah watched as his sons were put to death.

The Babylonians put out his eyes and carried him into exile where he remained until he died.

Their exile experience was different; it seems they were not teachable. They kept working against God and refusing to listen to the prophet as he gave them warnings to turn to God, which they continued to ignore.

Jeremiah was threatened with death for the prophecies he continued to make.

But Jeremiah was a man unmoved by the threats.

In response, he said, “Now reform your ways and your actions and obey the Lord your God. Then the Lord will relent and not bring disaster he has pronounced against you. As for me, I am in your hands; do with me whatever you think is good and right. Be assured, however, that if you put me to death, you will bring the guilt of innocent blood on yourselves and on this city and on those who live in it, for in truth the Lord has sent me to you to speak all these words in your hearing.” (Jer. 26:14-15)

I am not a prophet, but it is safe to say that one day, that Covid-19 will be behind us.

What will we have learned from this period in our lives? Will we have learned anything useful or valuable our ourselves or about God?

Will we leave behind any bad habits? Will we have started any new ones?

During the exile, the Jewish people discovered that even though they were scattered and even though they were displaced from the temple that God was still with them. They discovered that God was still in their hearts.

They discovered that they could gather in smaller groups, and during this time, the synagogue was born. A synagogue is a house of assembly or a house of prayer or worship.

Some of you are discovering that you can do family devotions in your home. Some of you are discovering that you can teach and should be more intentional about teaching your children about God in your home.

Some of you will discover how important it is to you to connect with other people after you have had to stay away from one another for a long time.

If we allow God to teach us during this time of being in exile, we will be like the good figs Jeremiah spoke about in Jeremiah 24.

Meanwhile, just because we are separated, we continue to need each other. We are not islands unto ourselves. Coming together is important, but until that is allowed again, it will be good if we adopted these words that Paul wrote when he was separated from his friends from Thessalonica:

“Do you have any idea how very homesick we became for you, dear friends? Even though it hadn’t been that long, and it was only our bodies that were separated from you, not our hearts, we tried our very best to get back to see you. You can’t imagine how much we missed you!”
1 Thessalonians 2:17