

EXILE

Study Guide

Introduction

From the eighth century BC the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah were menaced by super-powers like Assyria and Babylon, and gradually got weaker. The northern kingdom of Israel was the first to fall - after 20 years of attacks by Assyria during which some of its people were taken into captivity, its capital Samaria fell in 722 BC. Many of the remaining people were dispersed throughout the Assyrian Empire, and others were brought in to replace them. As a nation, Israel was over.

Judah lasted longer, but at the end of the seventh century its decline began. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon besieged Jerusalem in 605 BC. Repeated attempts to resist him led to repeated defeats. Large numbers of the Judeans were taken into exile in Babylon in 597 BC, 586 BC - when Jerusalem was sacked and burned - and 582 BC. Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, tried to escape but was blinded after seeing his sons slaughtered (2 Kings 25.7).

For the stories of the last years of the kingdom of Judah and the Exile, read 2 Kings 25, 2 Chronicles 35-36, and the book of Jeremiah. The book of Daniel is set during the Exile, as is Psalms 137, which begins with 'By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion', and the book of Ezekiel.

However, in 539 BC the Persian King Cyrus defeated the Babylonians and allowed the Jews to return. These stories are told in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

The Exile was important for lots of reasons. It meant the temporary end of Temple worship and the sacrificial system, which meant that the people had to think about what was really important in their faith. Could they really worship God without the things that had always supported them in their believing? It also saw the emergence of real scholarship, as scribes who could understand and interpret the Hebrew Scriptures - like Ezra - grew in prestige and significance. It meant that Jews were able to survive as a nation without being attached to the geographical land of Israel.

Christians have drawn on the image of Exile to express our own relationship to the world. 1 Peter 2.11 says, 'I appeal to you, my friends, as strangers and refugees in this world!' Revelation 17.5 refers to 'Babylon the Great', the oppressive power that dominates our earthly exile.

As the people of God, we're not entirely at home in this world. But God brought the exiles home, and he has a home in heaven for us.¹

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¹(Introduction taken from <https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/explore-the-bible/bible-articles/story-of-the-bible-the-exile/>)

Israel Exiled to Babylon

2 Chronicles 36

As the introduction to this study series suggests, God has given Israel and Judah (the nation has split in two) chance after chance to repent and receive his blessing. They continue however to do “evil in his sight.” God’s people don’t want him, they want to live their way, they are running away from God. So he lets them go. He removes himself, as they desire, and the result is death and exile. Babylon, the mighty ancient civilisation, invade and destroy Israel. The people are either killed or scattered. It looks like the end of the story. Yet God is faithful, even with a remnant of his people in exile, and has a plan to bring them home.

Read 2 Chronicles 36:15-23

First reading - did anything jump out at you? Thoughts? Questions? Confusion?

Observation Questions - (getting to know the text)

Has God given his people warning of the consequences of their actions?

How have the people responded?

Who has invaded Israel and capture Jerusalem?

What is the result of the invasion?

Interpretation Questions - (what does the text mean?)

Why would God want to warn his people about the consequences of their actions?

Why do you think the Israelites respond to God by “despising his words and scoffing at his prophets?” (16)

What is the significance of the Temple being sacked and burned down? What does this communicate to Israel?

How do you feel about God’s judgement of Israel? What might it bring about?

Do you think there are consequences for sin?

Why do you think the author mentions the land “enjoying sabbath rests?” (21)

Application - (what is God saying to me and what does it look like in my life?)

In your own life, to what extent have you seen the consequences of sin affecting the original sinner and future generations?

Earlier in v13, King Zedekiah is called “stiff necked and hard hearted,” and would not turn to the LORD. Furthermore the priests and leaders follow the ways of the surrounding nations and lead the people to do the same.

Is there anything you need to watch for in your own life? Are we seeing any of this happen in the church today?

Even as this happens, God has a plan to bring back his people. Do you believe that God is kind and does have good plans for your life?

Living in Exile

Daniel 1-2

The writer of Daniel begins by insisting on the sovereignty of God in bringing about the judgement they have suffered. God is faithful to his word and told Israel long ago of his desire to bless them, should they walk with him. However he also warned them that should they run from him then they would run away from his blessing and into the curses of the fallen world. Therefore, Daniel 1 begins by recounting the judgement of Judah that was suffered in Chronicles 36. Namely that Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon has come and destroyed Jerusalem, burned the temple and carried off some of the best and brightest back to Babylon. The story that unfolds in Daniel is one of living in that exile. Will God still hear and act for his people?

Read Daniel 2:1-49

First reading - did anything jump out at you? Thoughts? Questions? Confusion?

Observation Questions - (getting to know the text)

What is the outline of this story?

What does Daniel do in response to the king's demand?

Who does Daniel pray with?

What is the result of Daniel's interpretation?

Interpretation Questions - (what does the text mean?)

Why can't the astrologers and magicians interpret the king's dream? What might this indicate about the power of mediums and spiritualists today?

"There is no-one on earth who can do what the king asks!" (10). How does this truth shape Daniel's response to the situation?

Read v19-23, how does Daniel's view of God help him in his perilous situation?

What does this tell about the importance of prayer, both individually and with others? The interpretation of the dream reveals that great kingdoms come and go, how should this truth shape us?

Nebuchadnezzar's dream comes true, this means that God has spoken his word to a pagan king. What should we think about this? What does this say about God?

What does Daniel model to us about faithfulness to God whilst living in exile?

Application - (what is God saying to me and what does it look like in my life?)

What are the pressures you are facing at the moment? Have you taken them to God in prayer? Have you invited others to pray with you for a breakthrough or solution?

It is really hard to live in exile, what are the temptations you face at the moment, how can you stay faithful to God?

God speaks to us in lots of different ways. How do you hear God speaking? What areas of hearing God speak would you like to grow in?

Who are you praying for at the moment who doesn't yet know Jesus? Why not begin to pray, that like Nebuchadnezzar, they might meet the power of God and fall on their knees before him.

The Perils of Exile

Daniel 6

Kingdoms rise and kingdoms fall. That was the message of the dream in chapter 2. So it has come to pass. The Medes have now conquered Babylon under King Darius. Daniel is now an old man, still living in a foreign land. Maybe he now thinks that God has forgotten him? Maybe he has forgotten about the God of his youth? It seems in this chapter that neither has occurred and that God is going to prove himself faithful again.

Read Daniel 6

First reading - did anything jump out at you? Thoughts? Questions? Confusion?

Observation Questions - (getting to know the text)

How is Daniel doing in Exile?

What gets Daniel in trouble?

How does the king respond to Daniel breaking his law?

How does Daniel fair in the Lions Den?

What is the result of God's work in Daniel life? How does the king respond?

Interpretation Questions - (what does the text mean?)

Daniel has a high powered job, working for a foreign nation. What is the tension between working in a secular environment and supporting all it stands for?

How does Daniel live in the light of this tension? What pressures does he face?

3 ways to engage with culture

Reject - The bible says certain things are sinful and wrong. These must be rejected.

Redeem - Some things however can be reclaimed for God. Some of the psalms were once poems to other gods, and were rewritten about Yahweh. Christmas was once a pagan festival about light in darkness. They have been redeemed.

Receive - Some things are God's good gifts to humanity and can be joyfully received. We must make sure however that we don't make these good gifts a new god.

What do you think has kept Daniel faithful to God throughout his life?

How do you think Daniel felt about being thrown into the Lions Den?

Application - (what is God saying to me and what does it look like in my life?)

What are the pressures facing Christians at the moment? What needs to be rejected, redeemed, and received?

How does prayer shape your daily life? Is safety ever an idol for you?

How does your life point to a faithful and loving God and what he has done for you?

Have you experience persecution for being a Christian? How did you react to it?

A Letter to the Exiles

Jeremiah 29

The exiles must have been feeling terrible. Their home was destroyed, many would have lost family members, the Temple was no more, and they had a new foreign king. Yet God promised Abraham that the nations of the world would be blessed through him. Israel, his people, would not be banished forever. They did however need a 70 year humbling and reset. At the end of that time however, God tells them that he will be faithful to them and bring them home.

Read Jeremiah 29:1-14

First reading - did anything jump out at you? Thoughts? Questions? Confusion?

Observation Questions - (getting to know the text)

Who is Jeremiah sending this prophetic letter to?

What are God's commands to Israel in Babylon?

What does God warn his people to watch out for?

How long will Israel be in exile for?

What is God's promise to Israel?

Interpretation Questions - (what does the text mean?)

In what ways do God's commands to Israel in v4-7, mirror his commands to Adam and Eve in the garden? What does this say about the reasons for the exile?

What does it look like to 'seek the prosperity of the city?' And how should they do it?

Just as in Genesis, there is a warning in v8-9 about being deceived, why?

Why do you think Israel need 70 years in exile, before returning home? Can exile ever be a good thing?

In v11 what does God want Israel to know about himself? What hope does it give the Church today?

Why is it important to live with hope?

Application - (what is God saying to me and what does it look like in my life?)

Living in exile is a huge 'reset moment' for Israel, God is reminding them of his intended purpose for their lives (think Genesis echos). They are blessed to be a blessing. Is there any part of your life that needs a reset moment?

How are you being a blessing at the moment?

How can we ensure that we live for God where we are, rather than seeing our present situations as something to simply be endured?

How can we seek the prosperity of the place where God has called us?

Instead of running from God, what would it look like to 'seek him and find him' this week?

A Marriage like Exile

Hosea

This time we're looking at God speaking to the Northern kingdom of Israel, rather than Judah, as Jeremiah was. Keen to spell things out for Israel, God uses the life of one his prophets to show Israel exactly how they have treated him. It doesn't make for great reading for Israel, but hidden in the text is a promise, a promise that one day a perfect King will rule on David's throne and he will make everything right.

Read Hosea 1:1-3, 2:5, 14-20, 3:1-5

First reading - did anything jump out at you? Thoughts? Questions? Confusion?

Observation Questions - (getting to know the text)

What is the overall story of Hosea and Gomer?

What does Gomer do to Hosea?

What tempts Gomer away?

How does Hosea get Gomer back?

Interpretation Questions - (what does the text mean?)

How is God's relationship with Israel like a marriage?

What does this story tell us about the way Israel have treated God?

How have Israel been unfaithful to God in that past and what tempted them away?

What is your reaction to the image of God as a lover, a faithful husband, and someone who seeks to 'allure' his people, and betroth himself to them?

What do you think Hosea felt like having to buy his wife back from another man?

Why is there a cost to redeem her? What cost does God pay to redeem us?

Application - (what is God saying to me and what does it look like in my life?)

God clearly see idolatry (putting things before him) as adultery, how seriously do you take this in your own life?

What is the quality of God's love on display in this story? How might it change the way you respond to or reflect on God's love for you?

Have you ever had to forgive someone who really betrayed and hurt you? What did it cost you to forgive them? In what ways did you perceive God at work in your decision to forgive?

Jesus paid the price to redeem us after we ran away from God and into the arms of lesser lovers, is this truth bringing your joy and hope today?

Exile and Return: Returning Home

Ezra 1

God keeps his promise to the Israelites and through Cyrus King of Persia, then 60 years later King Artaxerxes, his people come home. The first wave rebuild the Temple under Zerubbabel and the second bring about social, and political reform and rebuild Jerusalem's walls, under Ezra and Nehemiah (Originally one book in Hebrew). The return shows that Jeremiah's prophetic word was true. There are a few problems though.. Other prophets of the day said that Israel would be a place for all the nations, and where there were no walls. Yet Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah, send away natives and foreigners and build up the walls! It seems Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah, got some stuff right and some stuff wrong. All their stories have some highlights but ultimately end on a downer. This shows us that God's people need more than a renewed home, they need a renewed heart. Yet God has a plan for that and it is on the way.

Read Ezra 1

First reading - did anything jump out at you? Thoughts? Questions? Confusion?

Observation Questions - (getting to know the text)

Who is the Letter from King Cyrus for?

How are the surrounding nations told to interact with returning Israelites?

What are the exiles sent to rebuild?

What do Israel get back, which was taken by Nebuchadnezzar?

Interpretation Questions - (what does the text mean?)

What does the text help us to understand about biblical prophecy?

Do you believe that God can use and work through heads of government or people in positions of great influence and power?

Why does God preserve a remnant instead of starting again? What does this tell us about his character? How does this encourage you?

How does God's favour rest on his people for their return?

Do you think the low-key nature of the return suggests that some of God's people had become apathetic in Babylon? What are some of the tell-tale signs of apathy in the church today?

Do you think we often only see God's work in hindsight?

Application - (what is God saying to me and what does it look like in my life?)

This is clearly a life-changing word from God spoken to Israelite exiles, in what ways have you found God's word to be life changing?

Looking back, where can you see God's hand at work in your life, bring you 'out of exile'. Can you share this testimony with someone this week?

Are you finding it hard to trust in God's provision? Can you give an example? How might this story grow your faith?

Exile & Return: Rebuilding Home

Nehemiah

Nehemiah starts out with great plans and a sense of God's calling on his life. He has great faith and believes, in spite of opposition, that God will prosper Jerusalem and make him successful. He gathers exiles together and unites them in the cause of rebuilding the ruined city. Sadly, like many/most of the characters we meet in scripture, he goes a little off-piste towards the end of the book and starts trying to control peoples behaviour using brute force and shouting! Still, we can learn plenty from him about trusting that God will be faithful to the plans on his heart.

Read Nehemiah 2:11-20

First reading - did anything jump out at you? Thoughts? Questions? Confusion?

Observation Questions - (getting to know the text)

What is Nehemiah explaining in this passage?

What is the state of Jerusalem's walls and gates?

How does Nehemiah recruit other Israelites to his cause?

What is Nehemiah's response to the opposition he encounters?

Interpretation Questions - (what does the text mean?)

Why is it important for Nehemiah to share his testimony here?

Why is it important for Nehemiah to follow through on the plans God has placed on his heart?

Why is it sometimes necessary to tell people the truth about the poor state of a place, situation, or community?

What is the most challenging thing about facing opposition when trying to follow God's call?

Look at the list of people in chapter 3 who come to rebuild, why do you think they were included in Scripture?

Application - (what is God saying to me and what does it look like in my life?)

What plans has God placed on your heart, have you told anyone about them? Is it time to share them with others?

When have you had to speak the truth to someone in love? Why did you do it? Was it hard? How did it go? Would you do it again?

Who is standing against you at the moment? How are you feeling discouraged right now? Share it with your trusted church community, so that you can stand together.

Look at the list of names in chapter 3, you can see how many hands it takes to succeed in rebuilding Jerusalem. Try inserting names from your church in their places, is your church a place where lots of people serve? How might you serve your church community today, to join in with God's rebuilding work?

Exile & Return: Repenting

Nehemiah and Ezra

There is a beautiful moment just before things go a little south at the end of the book of Nehemiah. The people are gathered together and Ezra reads the Book of the Law. There is genuine convicting, weeping for the sins of the people, and heart felt repentance for running away from God. Sadly, just as things look up, the people quickly resort to breaking God's commands and doing their own thing. Still God has bought his people back to the land, and through this people, his ultimate blessing for the world will come.

Read Nehemiah 8:1-12

First reading - did anything jump out at you? Thoughts? Questions? Confusion?

Observation Questions - (getting to know the text)

What does Ezra read to the people?

How do they respond at first?

What are they encouraged to do instead of weeping?

What do the people go and do?

Interpretation Questions - (what does the text mean?)

Why is it important for God's people to keep God's word central in their lives together?

Why do you think the people weep at the hearing of God's Law?

Is repentance an important part of a relationship with God?

Why is it important for Israel to be still in God's presence? (11)

How does repentance lead to joy?

Why is it important for His people to celebrate when God moves them to repent?

Application - (what is God saying to me and what does it look like in my life?)

How do you approach the bible? Do you make it conform to your standards, or do you seek to be formed by it's standards?

When was the last time the Holy Spirit led you in repentance? How did you experience joy as a result?

In what ways might unrestrained joy bring you strength or protection from trouble?

How do you celebrate God's work in your life? Is it time to throw a party?