

The Power of the Prophets

Worksheet for Week 6

Israel's Life after Death

When we left our story last week, Jerusalem burned and the exiles had begun their long journey into Babylonia. This week, we'll see God's faithfulness at work as the people of God are restored to their land.

Exile!!

It is probably difficult for us to grasp the shock of exile. Some time around 800BC, Homer, the Greek epic poet, wrote "for there is nothing dearer to a man than his own country and his parents, and however splendid a home he may have in a foreign country, if it be far from father or mother, he does not care about it." We live in a very mobile society. Corporate moves are a staple of our lives. Somehow, we must emotionally connect with the ancient Israelites and the depth of their despair.

Just imagine . . . you are a member of the house of Judah, living in Jerusalem. God, the LORD, the creator of everything, has chosen you to be his people! And he has given you the land of Canaan. He has given you a king, having promised centuries before that someone from the house of David would forever sit on the throne of Israel. But now . . . the hated Babylonians are running through the streets of Jerusalem. In the distance, you see the temple burning. In your heart, you know that the most sacred of all objects in Israel, the Ark of the Covenant, is lost. Surely, the pagans will simply carry it off and melt it down. You harbor the hope that God will come riding in at the last minute to save you ~ again. But not this time . . . instead, soldiers appear at your door ordering you and your family to join the caravans headed into exile in Babylonia. As you leave Jerusalem, you see that only the poorest of families are left behind. The city lies in ruin. Death lies all around.

Those who went into exile had an easier time than did those who were left behind. Jeremiah urged the exiles to make homes and to plant gardens in Babylonia. Some Jews fled Judah and headed south into Egypt. Jeremiah spent some time in exile there; he may even have died there.

Life after death!

Not long after the sacking of Jerusalem, the Babylonian empire collapsed. King Cyrus of Persia entered the capital city of Babylon in 539BC, about fifty years after the exile from Jerusalem. Rather than exiling conquered peoples, Cyrus' approach was to leave them in their homes under the iron fist of the Persian conquerors. Thus, in 538BC, Cyrus issued an edict allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem and Judah. From the Jew's perspective, God had used the Babylonians to punish his people for their sins and God had raised up Cyrus (the "anointed one" of Isaiah 45) to restore God's people to their homeland. It is important to realize that this whole process of exile and return was not as tidy as it might seem. Many Jews did not return to Jerusalem. During the half-century in exile, they had built new lives. The book of Esther is set in the Jewish community that stayed in what became the Persian Empire. Esther became the bride of the Persian king!

The 'returnees' set about the rebuilding of Jerusalem and of the temple. Led by Zerubbabel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and others, the city walls were rebuilt and a temple was constructed. There was little available wealth for this rebuilding, so the temple was a shadow of the temple built by Solomon, but, nonetheless, the people of God again had a place upon which to center their religious rituals.

But . . . Judah was no more a tiny province in the vast Persian Empire. Judah was not independent; they had no king. Before the exile, Ezekiel had seen a vision of God's glory departing from the temple (Chapter 10). There was no sign that God's glory had returned to his people. Yes, the Jews were back on the land, but was the exile really ended? If the Jews had been exiled because of their sins, wouldn't the return from exile mean that their sins had been forgiven? If their sins had been forgiven, why weren't all the nations streaming to Mt. Zion (Micah 4)?

It just didn't seem that this new life, though back on the land, could really be the fulfillment of all the hopes spoken to them by God's prophets. Yes, it was a life after death, but was it really the end of the story? As the decades and centuries wore on, with one oppressor after another in control, it became increasingly clear that the exile was not really over, that God's kingdom was still to come. Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi would paint pictures of this kingdom, offering hope to the Jews that this "life after death" was still not the end of the story.

Bible Readings for Week 6

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Ezekiel 10 God's glory departs from the temple before its fall</p>	<p>Day 2 Isaiah 40:1-2; 41:2-3, 8-10 Israel has served her term and God raises up Cyrus to send Israel home; Israel is still God's chosen!</p>
<p>Day 3 Haggai 1:1-11 The temple is to be rebuilt to the glory of God.</p>	<p>Day 4 Zechariah 2:1-5 What sort of promise is here? What will this day be like?</p>
<p>Day 5 Malachi 3:1-4; 3:13-4:6 God will again come to his temple; Elijah will come before the day of the Lord, a day on which the righteous and the wicked will be separated.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>