

The People of Judah Are Exiled

Purpose

To understand that suffering comes in many forms.

Hearing the Word

The Scripture for this lesson is printed below.

2 Kings 25:8-21 (NIV)

8 On the seventh day of the fifth month, in the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, Nebuzaradan commander of the imperial guard, an official of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem.

9 He set fire to the temple of the Lord, the royal palace and all the houses of Jerusalem. Every important building he burned down.

10 The whole Babylonian army under the commander of the imperial guard broke down the walls around Jerusalem.

11 Nebuzaradan the commander of the guard carried into exile the people who remained in the city, along with the rest of the populace and those who had deserted to the king of Babylon.

12 But the commander left behind some of the poorest people of the land to work the vineyards and fields.

13 The Babylonians broke up the bronze pillars, the movable stands and the bronze Sea that were at the temple of the Lord and they carried the bronze to Babylon.

14 They also took away the pots, shovels, wick trimmers, dishes and all the bronze articles used in the temple service.

15 The commander of the imperial guard took away the censers and sprinkling bowls—all that were made of pure gold or silver.

16 The bronze from the two pillars, the Sea and the movable stands, which Solomon had made for the temple of the Lord, was more than could be weighed.

17 Each pillar was eighteen cubits high. The bronze capital on top of one pillar was three cubits high and was decorated with a network and pomegranates of bronze all around. The other pillar, with its network, was similar.

18 The commander of the guard took as prisoners Seraiah the chief priest, Zephaniah the priest next in rank and the three doorkeepers.

19 Of those still in the city, he took the officer in charge of the fighting men, and five royal advisers. He also took the secretary who was chief officer in charge of conscripting the people of the land and sixty of the conscripts who were found in the city.

20 Nebuzaradan the commander took them all and brought them to the king of Babylon at Riblah.

21 There at Riblah, in the land of Hamath, the king had them executed. So Judah went into captivity, away from her land.

2 Kings 25:8-21 (KJV)

8 And in the fifth month, on the seventh day of the month, which is the nineteenth year of king Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, came Nebuzaradan, captain of the guard, a servant of the king of Babylon, unto Jerusalem:

9 And he burnt the house of the Lord, and the king's house, and all the houses of Jerusalem, and every great man's house burnt he with fire.

10 And all the army of the Chaldees, that were with the captain of the guard, brake down the walls of Jerusalem round about.

11 Now the rest of the people that were left in the city, and the fugitives that fell away to the king of Babylon, with the remnant of the multitude, did Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard carry away.

12 But the captain of the guard left of the poor of the land to be vinedressers and husbandmen.

13 And the pillars of brass that were in the house of the Lord, and the bases, and the brasen sea that was in the house of the Lord, did the Chaldees break in pieces, and carried the brass of them to Babylon.

14 And the pots, and the shovels, and the snuffers, and the spoons, and all the vessels of brass wherewith they ministered, took they away.

15 And the firepans, and the bowls, and such things as were of gold, in gold, and of silver, in silver, the captain of the guard took away.

16 The two pillars, one sea, and the bases which Solomon had made for the house of the Lord; the brass of all these vessels was without weight.

17 The height of the one pillar was eighteen cubits, and the chapter upon it was brass: and the height of the chapter three cubits; and the wreathen work, and pomegranates upon the chapter round about, all of brass: and like unto these had the second pillar with wreathen work.

18 And the captain of the guard took Seraiah the chief priest, and Zephaniah the second priest, and the three keepers of the door:

19 And out of the city he took an officer that was set over the men of war, and five men of them that were in the king's presence, which were found in the city, and the principal scribe of the host, which mustered the people of the land, and three-score men of the people of the land that were found in the city:

20 And Nebuzaradan captain of the guard took these, and brought them to the king of Babylon to Riblah:

21 And the king of Babylon smote them, and slew them at Riblah in the land of Hamath. So Judah was carried away out of their land.

DAILY BIBLE STUDY

March 23 2 Kings 23:34–24:7

March 24 2 Kings 24:8-17

March 25 2 Kings 24:18–25:7

March 26 2 Kings 25:8-21

March 27 2 Kings 25:22-30

March 28 2 Chronicles 36:17-21

March 29 Ezekiel 36:33-38

Seeing the Need

I love action movies. You know the kind: An average guy gets thrust into the role of hero to try to save someone or something. He eventually overcomes the

evil with only a scratch over his eye and maybe a bruised shoulder. At the beginning of all of these movies, however, the bad guys seem to have all of the power. They attack everyone who gets in their way. Then they methodically loot the bank or seize the nuclear weapon or kidnap an unsuspecting soul and head for a secret location, where they think they'll never be discovered.

It happens every time. And every time, I am taken to the edge of a cliffhanging moment. Then the hero miraculously wins the day; all are rescued; the world is saved; and, usually, the hero gets the girl. Make-believe stories and movies like these are meant for entertainment; and even as dramatic as they get, we know they are not real. The suffering and struggle we find in them are just part of the script. We can imagine that, after the director yells "Cut!" the villains and the hero go to lunch together and have a good time.

With 24/7 access to global news,

much of it involving suffering, it might be easy for us to turn this real suffering into a sort of screenplay. But real suffering is just that, a real, horrible, agonizing experience that can destroy lives and destroy hope. Suffering can be personal, but it can also be found in a community or in an entire nation, as we experienced on September 11, 2001.

Second Kings 25:8-21 offers a plain and chilling account of the suffering of the nation of Judah and the fall of the great city of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians. It describes suffering on a massive scale that forever changed and informed the people of Israel about their life in this world. As you read this account, pay close attention to the incredible detail the writer offers. It's a sad and powerful story, with an important meaning for us today.

A Bit of Background

I've always read with interest the stories of German men, some in their 90s now, who are finally arrested for having served during World War II as Nazi guards at concentration camps. Even more than 70 years after their crimes, after having lived entire lives, the consequences of their actions arrive with significant accuracy and power and result in these men standing trial and often facing imprisonment for the rest of their lives. After so many years, they probably thought they would never face punishment.

By 930BC, the united kingdom of Israel had gone through internal struggles and had split into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of

Judah. Israel was then conquered by the Assyrians in 722BC. Judah, as we read in 2 Kings 25, was conquered in 586BC and the people led into captivity by the Babylonians.

This explains what happened to the region, but it doesn't explain why. The "why" unfortunately is simple: The people turned away from God, and the rulers did evil in the Lord's eyes. We can all recall the wonderful story of the Israelites crossing the Jordan River into the promised land of Canaan, a land that they believed God had given to them through Abraham. They were God's chosen people, chosen to be a blessing to the world. They were the example of how people can be in covenant with the God of the universe through the commandments and the Law. They were a nation founded by God.

Sadly, over the course of generations, over and over again, the chosen people chose not to follow God. Instead, they chose to follow their own devices and desires. They broke the commandments, including worshipping false foreign gods. They, and especially their kings, continually acted as though God didn't matter. They shattered the covenant time and time again. Sure, there were some kings like Josiah who worked to lead the people back to God; but after their deaths, the people reverted to living apart from God.

Second Kings 23:26 says that, in spite of Josiah's faithfulness, "the Lord didn't turn away from the great rage that burned against Judah . . . and said, 'I will remove Judah from my presence just as I removed Israel. I will reject this city, Jerusalem, which I chose, and this temple

where I promised my name would reside.’”

Whether we consider it to be a consequence or a punishment levied by God doesn't matter. After generations of the people rejecting the prophets' calls to turn back to God, God decided to send them away from all they knew and all that was comfortable. This means of suffering was laid upon them to change their hearts and minds to live more humbly and faithfully as God's people.

If you had been living in Judah at that time, what would be the last thing you would expect to happen? It probably would be to lose your sense of normal: food, shelter, language, possessions, and the Temple. The Judahites' impending suffering was greater than anyone could have imagined, especially since woven into their cultural minds was the promise of the Promised Land. That was God's key gift to them, and soon they would no longer have it.

What suffering might you undergo but never expect? What emotions would arise for you and others?

Ruthless Destruction

One of the parsonages we lived in was situated on a corner lot. It had been nicely landscaped, with large areas of trees and bushes dividing up the grassy areas. It took forever to mow and water, but it was pretty, almost like a park.

One morning, after a rainy couple of days, I went outside to get the paper, and I saw it. Someone, in the middle of the night, had driven their truck right across our yard and had dug deep ruts in the

grass. Instead of simply using the street, they cut across our yard. It wasn't an accident. They purposely decided to be vandals.

It doesn't take much for me to recall the feelings I had inside. I was furious and helpless at the same time. We had no way of finding out who did it, and it would take a lot of time to repair the damage; and there was no guarantee they wouldn't do it again. The action by someone who thought they would just have fun or use their power to destroy brought a real measure of suffering to my heart for a while. It was a bad thing, and I could do little about it.

Nearly the entire reading of the Scripture for this lesson sounds chilling. It recounts a step-by-step progression of destruction of Jerusalem and all that the nation of Judah held dear. The act was recorded in careful detail (2 Kings 25:8). First, this “commander of the guard” and “official of the Babylonian king” burned everything, from the Temple to the palace to all of the houses (verse 9). Next, he and his army tore down the city wall (verse 10). Then, they exiled all of the people, except for a few to farm and work the vineyards (verses 11-12).

We find the greatest detail in the description of the utter destruction of the beloved Temple Solomon built. The Chaldeans (another name for the Babylonians) ransacked and looted it, taking “the bronze . . . the pots, the shovels, the wick trimmers, the dishes, . . . the fire pans and the sprinkling bowls, which were made of pure gold and pure silver” (verses 13-14). “The bronze in all these

objects,” the text tells us, “was too heavy to weigh” (verse 16).

Finally, the commander of the guard rounded up the leaders of the Temple and the officers and military personnel and drove them to Riblah, in what is Syria today. Verse 21 is brutal in its simplicity: “The king of Babylon struck them down, killing them.” Those who would possibly have had the power to regroup the people or maintain the traditions were wiped out.

Please understand the grave meaning of these actions. The city was not just taken over but was ransacked and then torn down. The Temple, the center of worship life, was also torn down, and the precious holy things were stolen and carted off. The leaders were murdered. Can we understand suffering on this scale, not only the immediate pain of losing so much but also the suffering of losing the connection with the past and the sense of being set adrift?

It indeed was a ruthless act. The king of Babylon wanted to be completely thorough in his control of that region, and the way to do that was to disintegrate the entire culture of Judah and take those with any type of skills or talents and use them to further build up his own kingdom. If this were the only part of the Bible we had available to read, our faith would most likely be found only in despair and great sadness.

Let’s recall the context once again. Why would God allow this to happen? It’s important to acknowledge that God was not being mean in this situation. The chosen people had become a covenant dis-

aster, with the entire nation living in a way that seemed to say, “We care nothing for God.” The only way left to somehow preserve the chosen people was to destroy everything that might come between them and the God who loved them.

Even the Temple had become a substitute for their relationship with God, since the people, if they worshiped at all, simply went through the motions of worship without making it real. God acted to allow the suffering that would eventually bring the people to a new relationship with God.

Would there be a reason for God to allow this kind of suffering for us?

The Exile

Our family lived in Australia when I was a boy, and it was a marvelous time. I enjoyed my friends there and the “funny” way they talked. Although, since we were the only Americans on the base where we lived, our English dialect was probably the funny one!

It was later, as I learned more about Australia, that I discovered a sad and fascinating fact: The first British arrived in Sidney on a fleet of 11 ships in 1788, carrying convicts, exiled for life from their homes to a faraway land.¹ I wonder what that would have felt like.

I remember how strange it was to move from the Red River Valley of North Dakota, populated by Scandinavian descendants, to the Black Hills of South Dakota, where on Sunday mornings you would find the tops of coat racks filled with cowboy hats. A number of times, I thought I should click my heels and find

my way back “home,” because the manners, interactions, and even the cultural expectations there were so different from North Dakota. I wasn’t exiled, but it seemed close. The times I went home were wonderfully familiar and gave my heart joy.

Second Kings 25:21 closes with another simple but chilling and profound statement: “So Judah was exiled from its land.” An entire nation, an entire culture, was ripped away from them. Remember that Babylonians and Jews did not speak the same language, nor did they eat the same food or keep the same calendar. The Babylonians also did not understand the idea of sabbath or any of the other commandments and rules the Jews followed. Nothing in Babylon felt like home.

Perhaps you’ve seen the musical *Fiddler on the Roof* and can recall that as the people are being forced from their village of Anatevka, they sing of the sense of mourning from having to leave their longtime home. The need for the familiar in a sea of foreign is critical for all of us. Even after a wonderful vacation, people often say, “It will be so nice to sleep in my own bed.”

After the killing and slaughter of the leaders of Judah, when the people were taken to Babylon, they were not tortured, brutalized, or imprisoned. They were the same as they always had been, except for one thing that brought incredible suffering, sadness, sorrow, and pain. They

couldn’t go home. They couldn’t experience the normal of their normal life. And even if they went home, there was nothing left of what they had known as home.

So the people of Judah, in one chapter of Scripture, experience death, destruction of their home and center of worship, and exile to a foreign land, so different and strange from what they had known.

We live in a far different time. Because of our ability to travel and to know the world through television, print, and internet sources, we are better connected with people and places that seem strange to us. When I go to the mall and walk around, I can hear people speaking as many as 10-12 different languages. The people of Judah knew only Judah. Their suffering was honest, true, and heart-breaking.

It would eventually end. In 70 years, over two generations later, the people would finally be free to return home to a place most of the nation had never seen. Perhaps that would have been the greatest moment of suffering, the feeling that the place to which they returned was not home, but it felt like it since their parents were born there. It should have been home, but it too felt like a foreign land. But God was still their God.

Have you ever experienced a kind of exile from all that you know or love?

God of all, keep me safe, and let me always find my home in you; in Jesus’ name. Amen.

1 From gutenberg.net.au/first-fleet.html.