

# YOBL

## Year of Biblical Literacy

## Week 26: Prophets in Pain - Part 2

### Daily Reading for Week

- Jeremiah 23-25, Psalm 19
- Jeremiah 26-29, Psalm 20
- Jeremiah 30-32, Psalm 21
- Jeremiah 33-36, Psalm 22
- **Jeremiah 37-39**, Psalm 23
- Jeremiah 40-44, Psalm 24
- Jeremiah 45-48, Psalm 25

### Focus of time together

To try to really grasp the events and emotions of Israel's exile in order to orient ourselves in the world of Jeremiah and the prophets.

### Opening Prayer

Read Psalm 130 as your opening prayer.

### Intro to Discussion

You may have found you have been disoriented and weary of the prophets, especially in Jeremiah. You're not alone! In *Interpreting the Prophets*, scholar Aaron Chalmers says: "Many Christians remain confused and frustrated by these works. They are full of dramatic imagery whose meaning is not always clear. Sometimes there appears to be little rhyme or reason in the flow of their thought. They include numerous references to events from Israel's history and life, the significance of which we do not grasp. It is perhaps little wonder, therefore, that the prophets are so frequently misunderstood and misapplied by many within the Church."

Specifically, to understand the prophets we need to understand Israel's exile. Jeremiah in particular lives through and helps chronicle the many phases of exile. Before we begin, let's take a few extra minutes to try to understand what the exile really entailed. First, there was a severe drought which led to severe and large-scale famine. As an agrarian culture entirely dependent on each year's harvest for food, a few years of drought meant absolute tragedy. The first several chapters of Jeremiah take place in the context of this drought. Though unrelated to any of the political or military strife that is yet to come, this drought was the first part of Judah's divine punishment for their sin and

idolatry.

In addition to this natural disaster, incredible social chaos had begun to unfold. Sandwiched between the mighty empires of Egypt and Babylon, tiny little Judah laid exposed and vulnerable to violent exploitation. During the next couple decades, which the book of Jeremiah chronicles, the country became a place of utter chaos and injustice. Jews who lived rurally on farms and in small villages had zero protection from military troops and armed villains. Violence spread throughout the countryside, and the people themselves devolved into a state of self-destructive chaos. There was no justice in the land. Someone could enter your home and murder your family and no government or police force was there to help. Many who could afford it fled to Jerusalem to live behind the protection of the city walls, but many others suffered and perished. Perhaps compare it to living in Syria or the ISIS-haunted Middle East — or, sadly, in Israel today.

Consequently, Babylon, the biggest bully of them all, resolved to overthrow Judah entirely by sacking Jerusalem, which was their capital and fortress. Ancient warfare was slow and painful. When Babylon set out to “attack” Jerusalem, this means that they dispatched an army of soldiers with loads of supplies to set up camp around the walls of the city. As the army approached, the Jews fled in retreat to Jerusalem, after which they shut the gate. But all of the food supply was outside in the fields. So Babylon simply waited while the people of Jerusalem slowly starved to death. Tragically, the terrible prediction that mothers would eat their own children (Jeremiah 19:8-9) began to come true (Lamentations 2:20). Anyone who tried to flee from the city was killed by the troops outside, and those who stayed faced the horror of famine (Lamentations 1:20). After four months, many inhabitants of Jerusalem decided to make a break for it. They waited until nighttime and broke a hole in the wall and ran (Jeremiah 39:2, 52:6-9). Even the king fled! Some escaped, but many were captured. And while they ran, the Babylonian army came flooding into the city, setting buildings on fire, murdering many, and capturing Jewish survivors. The fatal blow came when the mighty and sacred Temple — Solomon’s great house for God — was pillaged and destroyed. Mighty Babylon levelled little Judah to the ground.

Finally, for those who weren’t executed on the spot, two forms of exile occurred: most were forcefully deported to Babylon while the poor were left in Judah to try to keep the vineyards and crops alive. Those who remained did so having lost their family, their homes, their government, and to the Jewish mind, even God’s presence since the Temple had been destroyed. Those who were deported would have struggled to survive as poor, marginalised foreigners in a land not their own. Much like the diaspora of Africans sold in the slave trade, this exile violently weakened the Jews’ sense of national and religious identity. The people of God were made nobodies. To try to picture this, consider the horrors of the Holocaust, American slavery, or the Cherokee Nation’s Trail of Tears. Consider also the millions of undocumented immigrants currently living in America with the fear of deportation.

This was Israel's experience that we summarise as exile. It was indeed a very dark period of history. And particularly, it was a dark lowpoint in the Bible's story of God's people. Much earlier in the story, after their rescue from Egypt, God warned Israel that if they broke their side of the Sinai Covenant, "I will scatter you among the nations and will draw my sword and pursue you. Your land will be laid to waste, and your cities will lie in ruins" (Leviticus 26:33). Despite this early warning, Israel arrogantly believed that because God chose them as the nation to demonstrate His saving love to the nations, they would always be safe from destruction and exile. This belief continued into the time of Jeremiah despite continued warnings and corrections from different prophets. Exile seemed an impossible outcome, but it was actually forewarned from the beginning. In other words, we should read the book of Jeremiah and the rest of the prophetic books which take place in the context of exile in light of this overarching story.

## **Whole Group Discussion (40 minutes)**

### **Questions for Interpreting Scripture**

*These questions are to help us slow down, to taste and notice Scripture, savour its richness and meditate on its complexity of meaning.*

Aaron Chalmers, in *Interpreting the Prophets* describes the experience of those that were led away as follows:

"We need to be careful of glossing over the significant suffering and trauma which would have been raised by the experience of exile. Recent anthropological research has shown that such forced migrations constitute a serious socio-psychological crisis which would have 'forced the deportees into destabilizing recalibrations of their communal and theological understandings' (Moore and Kelle, 2001: 364). The loss of their homeland, the destruction of the Temple, and the physical sufferings and psychological terror inflicted by enemy armies must have led to intense theological ferment among the exiles in Babylon as they sought to find meaning in the series of tragedies they had suffered and discern the future of their relationship with Yahweh."

1. How does walking through the details of Israel's exile and trying to wrap your mind around the felt experience help shine new light on what you've been reading?
2. Have someone read Psalm 137, a psalm written in exile, aloud. How does a sufficient understanding of the sheer agony of exile help you understand and even empathise with the brutally honest prayers of this psalm?

In the intro we recognised how difficult and disorienting the prophets can be. Because of this, we often read a book like Jeremiah and halfway through feel desperate to grab onto any verse that can be meaningful for us today, even if we aren't quite sure of its context. It's not a coincidence that one of the most popular verses from Jeremiah is 29:11: *"For I know the plans I have for you" declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me and I will listen to you."*

3. When you consider that this is written to someone who just experienced being captured by the enemy and led into exile, how does it change your understanding of this popular verse?

## **Small Group Discussion**

Consider the modern examples we referenced in the intro to try to contextualise the different phases of Israel's exile: starving to death in famines, fleeing from the horrors of ISIS, being deported from your homeland and forced to assimilate into a foreign culture, or being made into a slave.

1. Which of these forms of suffering strike at your heart?
2. What would such an experience make you feel?
3. In that situation, what would you want to tell God?
4. What would give you hope?
5. What would you want God to do if you knew this was going to be your reality for 70 years?

## **Closing Prayer**

Often, it is incredibly difficult to look suffering in the face. We tend to want to distract, medicate, deny, shutdown, etc. Instead, the prophets model for us what it means to honestly face suffering and to bring our cares to God. Spend one minute in silence and then pray honestly to God what you feel about the suffering around you. Confess any resistance you have coming up and ask God for help.