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Biblical Voices on God's Presence in the Face of Tragedy

Session Three: April 27, 2010

By the Rivers of Babylon

God Goes Into Exile

food for thought...

“At Sunday worship, as in every dimension of our existence, many of us *pretend to believe* we are sinners. Consequently, all we can do is pretend to believe we have been forgiven. As a result, our whole spiritual life is pseudo-repentance and pseudo-bliss.”

—Brennan Manning,
The Ragamuffin Gospel

“The God of curved space, the dry God, is not going to help us, but the son whose blood spattered the hem of his mother’s robe.”

—Jane Kenyon,
Looking at Stars

[*God, to Samuel, when the people request a king “to be like other nations”:*]

“Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you.”

—1 Samuel 8:7-8

A (Very) Brief History of the Exile

Here’s the short version: the nation we know as Old Testament Israel enjoyed a brief period of peace, relative prosperity, and at least nominal unity under three kings, Saul, David, and Solomon. After Solomon’s death, a rebellion split the country more or less along tribal lines into a *northern kingdom* (which traced its roots back to ten of the original tribes) called Israel, and a *southern kingdom* (which associated itself with the tribes of Judah and Benjamin) called Judah.

The northern kingdom, Israel, lasted as an independent nation for about two centuries (approx. 924BC-722BC), before being overrun by the Assyrian empire. For much of Israel’s history, prophets arose who could see these events coming and warned the people to turn back to God in the hopes of avoiding such a national disaster. Citizens of the northern kingdom were scattered throughout Assyria, and new inhabitants were brought in by the Assyrians to repopulate the land. The northern kingdom was never restored as an independent nation, and those who eventually did come back to the land brought with them a mixed bag of their old faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the cultures of the lands they had come from.

Meanwhile, the southern kingdom, Judah, had a parallel story. It lasted as an independent nation, with its capital in Jerusalem, for closer to 300-350 years, until it was finally overrun by the Babylonian Empire. The Babylonians had a practice of carrying away the best and the brightest of its defeated opponents, and so a large number of Judah’s inhabitants were carried off into exile in three waves—in 605BC, 597 BC, and 586BC. It was in this last wave that the capital city of Jerusalem was destroyed, the Temple razed, and the monarchy (along with the Davidic dynasty) cut off. While there was never a real return for the northern exiles, the people of Judah were allowed to return home around 537BC, when the Babylonians had been defeated by a new empire, the Medo-Persian Empire. The people of Judah would only know self-rule very briefly nearly two centuries before Christ, after several other empires had come through, before being conquered once again by the Romans.

Theologically speaking, the exile presented several major crises for the people of Judah. The idea itself was unthinkable at first: did their defeat (and the destruction of their Temple) mean that their God, Yahweh, was dead? Or, if Yahweh was not dead, was their relationship with God cut off forever? Their system of sacrifice to atone for sin was ended, their king, whom they believed to be divinely protected, was deposed, and the terms of the covenant were obliterated. And not only that, the people were now living away from the one place they believed their God to specially dwell. On all counts, hope was lost and relationship with God gone.

The Worst God Can Do

At least to read the witnesses of the Old Testament, the threat of exile hung off in the background from the earliest days of its national memory. The most basic terms of its covenant with Yahweh were, "I will be your God, and you will be my people." And it was understood that if the people persistently refused to be God's people (*by turning to other gods, rejecting God's vision of life lived in neighbor-love, or trusting their own power rather than that of Yahweh*), they were in effect rejecting the whole covenant relationship. As God poignantly puts it to Samuel, centuries before the exile happens, the people's desire to be "like the other nations" is simultaneously a rejection of God. And so ultimately, after enough wake-up calls, warnings, and pleadings, God tells the people, "Fine. Have it your way. I will give you exactly what you ask for." The people have been acting as though they do not want Yahweh in their lives, and so Yahweh withdraws and lets them see exactly what it is like without that divine presence and protection. So let's be honest here: as much as God gets pegged as being strict and arbitrarily wrathful in the Old Testament, in truth, God only ever gives the people exactly what they have asked for. Of course, the frightening thought is that this is often the very worst thing God can do to us.

When It Is [At Least In Part] My Fault, Is There Still Hope?

Our first two sessions looked at stories of people who were, generally speaking, righteous and undeserving of their suffering. Both Joseph and Job give us pictures of how to endure *unjust* suffering, whether it comes from others' scheming (e.g., Joseph's brothers) or from beyond human causation (e.g., Satan's attacks on Job). But quite often our lives are messier than that, and we are at least complicit in the pain we suffer. Relationships are two-way streets, and when they break down, usually we have had a hand in it. And quite often, sinful actions—or even just plain foolish actions—carry painful consequences that we have no choice but to live with. The exile was much the same: as much as it was about international politics and power, it was about the people's persistent rejection of God. In other words, God's people had to own their responsibility for the exile. And yet... even at the outset of their life in exile, the prophets offered hope that God could yet bring about a new beginning. But it would be a radical new thing: Ezekiel envisions God picking up and moving with the people into exile (Ez. 10-11), and an act of resurrection needing to happen (Ez. 37). Jeremiah sees it in terms of a divorce and then the remarriage (unthinkable in that time!) of God and his people (see Jer. 3-4). In each of these visions of hope, however, it requires God's people to be stripped of all pretense and to be radically re-made by God.

But It's Bigger Than Me, Too...

While the exiles came to interpret the exile as divine punishment for their repeated unfaithfulness, they did not necessarily take it to mean that the ones who had gone into exile were worse sinners than those who had been left behind. There was collateral damage in the exile, and it was more complicated than God simply cherry-picking the worst offenders and sending them into Babylon. It's possible, then, for us to recognize the natural consequences of events and actions without seeing everything as necessarily either a punishment or reward for my individual choices. We are affected by the larger actions of our communities and country, in much the same way that our families endure ups and downs together rather than as isolated individuals.

At Some Point, We Have to Stop Keeping Score...

As we saw at the end of Job's story, a system with air-tight rewarding of good behavior and punishment of bad behavior has no room for mercy, no breathing space for grace. If we see ourselves as Joseph or Job, perhaps we think we want such a system—if we are innocent victims, all we want is vindication for ourselves. But if we are at all like Job's friends, or the people of Judah sent into exile, we become utterly dependent on a new beginning that is undeserved. The only hope the prophets saw for exiled Judah was a future of *grace*, where God would put behind them the sins of the past and would give the people a new covenant, a new heart, and a new beginning. The story of the exile, then, begs for grace, and forces us out of asking for a world where everybody gets exactly and only what they deserve. The exile forces us to come face to face with our own guilt and complicity in the pain of this world, and then from there to seek a real, radical new beginning that can only be *given*.
