

How To Survive Exile

Scattering = Exile

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Anyone with a knowledge of history, if they've read any of the accounts of the times of kings and kingdoms, knows that one of the more dire sentences that is imposed, not only upon a citizen of a land but maybe an enemy of the state, is that of exile. Exile was something that everyone dreaded.

Kings often exiled high-ranking nobles from the kingdom to reduce the threat of their often very significant political powers and political influence so that they wouldn't always be dragged down by this other party. Even today some nations use exile as a form of punishment. Sometimes there are people that because of their stature cannot be executed, and they don't really want to imprison them and make a martyr out of them, so they allow them to go into exile.

For instance, the Dalai Lama has been living in exile from Tibet which has been taken over by the Chinese for very many years. So he has not been able to go back to the land of his birth and do what Lamas do. But there are others. For one thing you've probably heard of Salmon Rushti. He's a man of Iranian descent, and although he fled the country, he is now in exile; he can't go back to Iran, and there's a death threat on his head. If any Iranian national catches him, he has every right to go ahead and kill him, according to Iranian law.

It's quite a punishment, never to be able to go home. Think about it. What would it feel like to you if you were suddenly taken from your home and banished from your country into one you knew very little about, maybe nothing about? Maybe just taken to the nearest port, put on the nearest ship, and told, "Don't ever come back." You'd be stripped of all your goods, maybe all you had, the clothes on your back. You would have no income any more. You couldn't work. Maybe you were even separated from your family.

Say you're a man and you did something the government didn't like and they put you on a boat but they didn't further penalize your family. You'd have to go to some foreign country—Canada (just kidding Canadians)—and be a fish out of water for the rest of your life possibly. What if you would never see them again because of that exile? It's almost like dying except that you have to live with the trauma and the loss of these things: goods, home, family, for the rest of your natural life.

We don't think of exile that way normally—as a cruel form of death. That's pretty grim if you ask me—never being able to return home. But for us I don't think it should be quite as hard to imagine because in a spiritual sense we've been experiencing it now for five, seven, ten, or however many years that spiritually we have been in exile from the home—the church home—that we once knew and loved and felt very comfortable in and thought would never end.

Not only are we like Abraham—strangers and pilgrims in a land that is not ours, looking for a city, not knowing where we are going—but we've also been exiled from the fellowship of the great part of our brethren in the body of Christ, separated by miles, separated by church affiliation, often separated by doctrine, by purpose, or whatever it happens to be that causes our separation. Scattering really is exile. It's just a different form of it.

But when you read the Bible, look at the prophecies—it doesn't leave us in exile. The Bible is a much more hopeful book than that. Not only does it give the prophecies of our deliverance and our return from exile to glory, but it also instructs us on how we should conduct ourselves while we're in the midst of, and enduring, our exile.

And it's this latter part, enduring the exile and how to conduct ourselves during exile, that I'm going to speak upon today. How do we survive spiritual exile? That's the question for today.

Let's begin in Genesis 3. I want to show that exile is a form of punishment that God has used from the very beginning. Here in Genesis 3, in the book of beginnings, we have the first instance of exile imposed by God Himself.

Genesis 3:22-24 Then the LORD God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil. And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever"; therefore the LORD God sent him out of the garden of Eden to till the ground from which he was taken. So He drove out the man; and He placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.

Exile from the Garden of Eden, from all that was wonderful and good that God had created in that perfect environment in which He had placed Adam and Eve and they couldn't go back, ever. God placed an angel with a flaming sword that would turn whichever way we—man—joked to get back, and it would deny us paradise for now.

This context shows three reasons we can glean to determine why God uses exile. The first one is very evident—it was punishment for their sins. "*Look, you guys took the tree of the knowledge of good and evil when I said you shouldn't take of it.*" That's sin. That's breaking a direct command of God. So exile was the punishment.

What else is here? Well what did their exile do? It separated them from access to Him. So the second thing that exile does is separate man from God. Now He doesn't like that. He doesn't want to be separated from us, but because of sin, it just happens. It has got to happen because He does not like sin in the least. So it's kind of a corollary to the first point. The first point is directly because of sin and the second point is to separate us from Him.

The third point is one you have to read into it, but it's obvious from the intent and the way God is. God imposes exile to spur repentance because it should be the natural inclination of men who have known God and all the glorious things that we can have in His presence, to get back into His good graces.

So the first point is we are exiled because of sin. The second point is we are exiled because we have to be separated from God. And the third point is because God wants us to repent.

I mentioned that the book of beginnings also begins our education on exile. But are you aware that there are several exiles within the book of Genesis itself?

Genesis 4:9-12 Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" He said, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" And He said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground. So now you are cursed from the earth, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield its strength to you. A fugitive and a vagabond you shall be on the earth."

So not only were the first two people on this earth exiled, but also their firstborn son was exiled even further, and he had to wander in the east with a mark on his head, like Salmon Rushti. I don't know if you've considered this but Noah was exiled in Genesis 7:1-4. Did you ever think of Noah going on the ark as an exile? He was. He was exiled from all the land and the people that he had ever known, from the civilization that he had grown up in.

This was a different kind of exile, but think of it: He had been five hundred, six hundred years in that society, living in that land, and God sends him out to do a job for Him and when you come right down to it, he was exiled. It was a good thing, but it was still the end of everything that he had ever known.

What about chapter 11, the tower of Babel.

Genesis 11:6-8 And the LOORD said, "Indeed the people are one and they all have one language, and this is what they begin to do; now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them. Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech." So the LOORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they ceased building the city.

They couldn't talk to one another any more—only little groups that God intended to be exiled from that central spot in Babylon. And then they were sent away, never to see one another again, never to have that unity that they had in Babel, all having one speech and one purpose to build the tower. How about chapter 12?

Genesis 12:1 Now the LOORD had said to Abram: "Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you.

He was exiled from Ur of the Chaldeans and Haran across the river. He had to leave everything. He took his family with him, but when they left Haran, he left his father's dead body behind.

And then he had to go from all his kindred at that point and go out with Sarah and his servants into this wild Canaan, this land that was not his, and live there as a stranger and a pilgrim, pretty much for the rest of his life. I don't think there's any record of him ever going back to Haran.

When something needed to be done to make contact with them he sent Eliezer. For example he sent Eliezer to get Rebekah as a wife for Isaac. He was sent into exile as well. The father of our faith lived through many, many years of exile from the land of his birth.

What about Ishmael? Sarah was getting a little frustrated with having Ishmael and Hagar around so she told Abraham that he had to go. Abraham didn't like it because this

was his son.

Genesis 21:12-14 But God said to Abraham, "Do not let it be displeasing in your sight because of the lad or because of your bondwoman. Whatever Sarah has said to you, listen to her voice; for in Isaac your seed shall be called. Yet I will also make a nation of the son of the bondwoman, because he is your seed." So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water; and putting it on her shoulder, he gave it and the boy to Hagar, and sent her away. Then she departed and wandered in the Wilderness of Beersheba."

Another person exiled from all that was home and all that was loved—there's still more. A lot of exile happened around the life of Abraham.

Genesis 25:6 But Abraham gave gifts to the sons of the concubines which Abraham had; and while he was still living he sent them eastward, away from Isaac his son, to the country of the east.

More exile—all the sons he had by the concubine Keturah. Now their exile was cushy because he gave them gifts and great wealth and sent them away. But still, they were exiled away from Abraham and away from all that they had known.

Genesis 27:41-45 So Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father blessed him, and Esau said in his heart, "The days of mourning for my father are at hand; then I will kill my brother Jacob." And the words of Esau her older son were told to Rebekah. So she sent and called Jacob her younger son, and said to him, "Surely your brother Esau comforts himself concerning you by intending to kill you. Now therefore, my son, obey my voice: arise, flee to my brother Laban in Haran. And stay with him a few days, until your brother's fury turns away, until your brother's anger turns away from you, and he forgets what you have done to him; then I will send and bring you from there. Why should I be bereaved also of you both in one day?"

"Look, you got to go because if you don't you're going to kill each other." Exile for Jacob, Israel. This is the beginning of the parallel of the church, the whole church being exiled. Jacob was exiled...think of it: while he was yet unconverted, while he still had a great

deal to learn. And it was through this process of exile that God finally conquered him.

One more. We've gone through most of the book of Genesis here. Chapter 47 comes on the tail end. This is Joseph.

Genesis 37:26-28 So Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is there if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother and our flesh." And his brothers listened. Then Midianite traders passed by; so the brothers pulled Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

Only Isaac, out of all those fathers, was not exiled. But in a sense he was part of his father's exile, although he never knew those other lands. Think of it: Abraham, Jacob and Joseph all had to go through exile at some part of their life to learn the lessons that God wanted them to learn so that they would look for the city that He had placed before them and grab hold of eternal life.

One more exile for Israel:

Genesis 46:1-7 So Israel took his journey with all that he had, and came to Beersheba, and offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac. Then God spoke to Israel in the visions of the night, and said, "Jacob, Jacob!" And he said, "Here I am." So He said, "I am God, the God of your father; do not fear to go down to Egypt, for I will make of you a great nation there. I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also surely bring you up again; and Joseph will put his hand on your eyes" [meaning he'll close your eyes in death]. Then Jacob arose from Beersheba; and the sons of Israel carried their father Jacob, their little ones, and their wives, in the carts which Pharaoh had sent to carry him. So they took their livestock and their goods, which they had acquired in the land of Canaan, and went to Egypt, Jacob and all his descendants with him. His sons and his sons' sons, his daughters and his sons' daughters, and all his descendants he brought with him to Egypt.

Once again (this time by their own choice), a self-imposed exile, from Canaan to Egypt. Now this was like we see here in verse 3 that God Himself wanted this to occur, that He had plans for Israel and they had to go through this period of Egypt as part of that plan. And they didn't understand at the time, but this voluntary sojourning in Egypt later led to

their forced slavery. They didn't know this coming in. It was still 400 years until that time that they would be put under bitter slavery, where the Pharaoh would call for all the sons of Israel to be killed after their birth.

And you know that it was only by God's mighty power in the Exodus that they were ever able to come out of Egypt. They could not have done it on their own. They were half Egyptian by that time in their minds, maybe even more than that. They didn't want to leave really. Sure they loved the idea of freedom, and Moses taking them out of Egypt, but as soon as they got out there they wanted to go back.

That's really ironic how hard it was for them to return to their homeland because they had forgotten that their real homeland was in the land of Canaan, not in Egypt. They had taken the place of their exile as home. They had become so enmeshed in the culture of Egypt that they considered it their own. And only a month out they forced Aaron to bring some of that culture back in the form of a golden calf.

They had blended in with Egypt. So God put this in the Bible as a warning and He also told them directly. Let's go to Deuteronomy 28 and see that by the end of their wandering, He had set down a warning. Actually, He also had warned them right at the beginning in the book of Leviticus, but I want to pick up this one in Deuteronomy 28. He warned them that if they went astray again that He would once again send them into exile, and this is really a very terrible curse.

Deuteronomy 28:58 "If you do not carefully observe all the words of this law that are written in this book, that you may fear this glorious and awesome name, THE LORD YOUR GOD,"

This ties in very well with Mike Ford's sermonette, because remember that Hilkiah in the time of Josiah found the book of the law. Many people say that it was this book of Deuteronomy because here it is specifically called "the words of this law that is written in this book." Whether it was that or the whole Pentateuch is really neither here nor there. But what happened to Judah when they forgot to use the words written in this book?

Deuteronomy 28:59 "then the LORD will bring upon you and your descendants extraordinary plagues; great and prolonged plagues; and serious and prolonged sicknesses."

Deuteronomy 28:62-68 "You shall be left few in number, whereas you were as the stars of heaven in multitude, because you would not obey the voice of

the LOORD your God. And it shall be, that just as the LOORD rejoiced over you to do you good and multiply you, so the LOORD will rejoice over you to destroy you and bring you to nothing; and you shall be plucked from off the land which you go to possess. Then the LOORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other, and there you shall serve other gods, which neither you nor your fathers have known; wood and stone. And among those nations you shall find no rest, nor shall the sole of your foot have a resting place; but there the LOORD will give you a trembling heart [you'll be terrified], failing eyes, and anguish of soul. Your life shall hang in doubt before you; you shall fear day and night, and have no assurance of life. In the morning you shall say, 'Oh, that it were evening!' And at evening you shall say, 'Oh, that it were morning!' because of the fear which terrifies your heart, and because of the sight which your eyes see. And the LOORD will take you back to Egypt in ships, by the way of which I said to you, 'You shall never see it again.' And there you shall be offered for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, [and this is how bad it gets] but no one will buy you."

That is low—not even good enough to be sold as slaves. That's how far God is willing to go to make exile sink in. Because of sin He'll have to do this as punishment. He has to separate us away from Him for a time. But the purpose (the third thing) is to get us to repent, to bring us back to Him. And if this is what it takes, He's willing to do it.

And I thought it was very ironic that He said that He would rejoice in it. He would rejoice in bringing us low. I don't think this is a fiendish type of joy that He gets out of making us hurt, but maybe He'll rejoice because He can see the end and know that at least another step has been gone through. And He'll put His whole heart into it to make sure that we come out of it His people on the other end.

Well, let's look at what happened in Israel in II Kings 17. They didn't listen to this. Israel never really had the ability to obey. God kind of makes this comment in Deuteronomy 5:29, "Oh, if they only had the heart to obey." But they really didn't. He hadn't given them His mind really. They had the law but they didn't know how to apply it.

Though they had short periods of obedience to God, it was very soon that they would sink into disobedience and God would have to send someone to save them for a time. But it was only a matter of time, a matter of generations before God had had enough and Israel and Judah had to be removed from His sight into exile.

II Kings 17:5-8 Now the king of Assyria went throughout all the land, and went up to Samaria and besieged it for three years. In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria took Samaria and carried Israel away to Assyria, and placed them in Halah and by the Habor, the River of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes. For so it was that the children of Israel had sinned against the LOORD their God, who had brought them up out of the land of Egypt, from under the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt; and they had feared other gods [notice the link back to Egypt again], and had walked in the statutes of the nations whom the LOORD had cast out from before the children of Israel, and of the kings of Israel, which they had made.

II Kings 17:18 Therefore the LOORD was very angry with Israel, and removed them from His sight; there was none left but the tribe of Judah alone.

That's how thorough He was just to wipe them all out of Canaan and send them into the cities of the Medes and into Assyria—exiled. And there they are (not specifically there)—they are still in exile in one respect. God has led them to the lands that He was holding for them.

The descendants of Israel, who went into exile, don't know that their homeland is back in Canaan. They've never gone back. That's how thorough God's exile of Israel was—they forgot everything, and just as He prophesied back in Deuteronomy 28, they went into other lands and they took other gods of wood and stone and they just completely forgot their past.

Now let's go to II Chronicles 36 and we'll see the same thing happen to Judah. Judah was a little better than Israel. They kept the covenant a little bit longer than Israel, but again with them it was only a matter of time. We'll start in verse 15.

II Chronicles 36:15 And the LOORD God of their fathers sent warnings to them by His messengers, rising up early and sending them, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place.

See, God didn't just let them go into sin. He sent messenger after messenger, prophet after prophet, judge after judge, king after king (as we heard already this morning) and they never listened. Maybe for a short time, they would put on a face of being righteous.

But because He loved them, God sent these men, and women. (We learned about

Huldah this morning, and a judge like Deborah.) But they never listened. And so even though God had compassion on them and wanted to save them from this, they were not willing.

II Chronicles 36:16 But they mocked the messengers of God, despised His words, and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the LOORD arose against His people, till there was no remedy.

There was nothing more that could be done. They were sick from the top of their heads to the sole of their feet. There was no way even God could cure them at that point except by sending them away, and that's what He did.

II Chronicles 36:17-18 Therefore He brought against them the king of the Chaldeans, who killed their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion on young man or virgin, on the aged or the weak; He gave them all into his hand. And all the articles from the house of God, great and small, the treasures of the house of the LOORD, and the treasures of the king and of his leaders, all these he took to Babylon.

He didn't even spare His own temple, or the things in the temple. Think on that.

Jeremiah 7:4 ". . . The temple of the LOORD, the temple of the LOORD, the temple of the LOORD are these..."

God said, "*I will make this place like Shiloh if you don't turn around and obey.*" And they didn't. And so He did. Jerusalem—the temple mount—became like Shiloh. And He didn't even spare the little tools that they used in the temple. Everything was taken, in a way, to Babylon.

II Chronicles 36:19-21 Then they burned the house of God, broke down the wall of Jerusalem, burned all its palaces with fire, and destroyed all its precious possessions [all, everything gone, destroyed]. And those who escaped from the sword he carried away to Babylon, where they became servants to him and his sons until the rule of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfill the word of the LOORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed her Sabbaths. As long as she lay desolate she kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years.

Judah was exiled only seventy years, but Oh, how bitter it was. They were taken away in about three waves. First, some—some of the best. And then again (a little bit later) when they rebelled, the cream of the crop, that was left, was also taken away.

And still Judah rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar, and they rebelled against the word of God which, through Jeremiah, was telling them to submit to King Nebuchadnezzar; "*He's My servant.*" And they put Jeremiah in prison because he was speaking treason, according to them. But he wasn't. God was their King and He was saying, "*I have chosen Nebuchadnezzar. Follow him and you will avert this calamity.*" And they still wouldn't even listen to that. And so they went into exile.

Nebuchadnezzar finally came back in about 585-586 BC and he just razed the place. He had enough of those Jews who were like a mosquito around his ear and he just—"WHAM"—crushed them, and took what remained of the weak back to Babylon to be his slaves (the worst of Judah).

We'll see how terrible that exile was in Psalm 137, because the crushing blow that God sent Judah worked for some. We've read the book of Lamentations. We could go there and hear Jeremiah's sore crying and tears, his grief over what was happening to Jerusalem. But Psalm 137 is very succinct.

Psalm 137:1 By the rivers of Babylon, There we sat down, yea, we wept when we remembered Zion.

They just balled their eyes out. It was gone. There wasn't even a hope of going back to the buildings that they had remembered. They were gone. The land was desolate. Who knows what kind of scorched earth policy Nebuchadnezzar used? The beauty of the land had just been raped and when they thought about Zion, the temple, that beautiful city on a hill, they just sat down and sobbed.

Psalm 137:2-6 We hung our harps upon the willows in the midst of it. For there those who carried us away captive asked of us a song, and those who plundered us requested mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" [snicker, snicker]. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? ["We can't do it. Zion is gone. The place is there but everything that was on it was scraped away."] If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill! ["I'd rather lose my right hand than forget everything that God did there."] If I do not remember you, let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth ["I'd rather

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not speak ever again, than forget the glories of Jerusalem"]; if I do not exalt Jerusalem above my chief joy.

That's the bitterness of exile that God forced Judah into. Have you felt that way? Have you sighed and cried for the abominations of the church? That's what those of Judah who really learned the lesson of the exile did. It just broke them down and they couldn't get up. They had to sit down and weep.

There is something to exile, to scattering, that God finds very good. It's not all grief. We know that God does not do anything that is not for our good—either immediately or ultimately. We saw earlier that one of the results of exile, if a person responds to it, is repentance. That's what God is looking for.

He wants this grief to be turned, like Paul said it should be, into zeal, into putting your whole heart into your sorrow and then into the fruit that should be built from it. He wants you to get angry that you allowed things to get that far and to just clear it out.

David Maas has a very good article on using anger to scour away sin, to be righteously indignant. Use it like Drano to clear the pipes and then to use that zeal to be righteous and holy once again and to do the things that God says.

So we saw that God will do whatever it takes to get us on the same page with him, and if it means turning our lives upside down, turning us inside out, He'll do it, because He loves us. He's still got us in the palm of His hand. We're still the apple of His eye, but He's not like a modern liberal who won't punish. He is a God who knows how to produce sons and daughters, and sometimes the worst punishments produce the best results. The person who is being punished cooperates and learns the lesson, and He's willing to take it that far.

And so this is what God has done to His church, at this end time. Our home was the Worldwide Church of God, founded by Herbert W. Armstrong back in the late twenties and early thirties. And we came into that church and we were welcomed as family. How many things did we do together?

Our churches were large. We had lots of fun socials. We had lots of good conversation. We heard tremendous sermons, maybe from time to time. Hopefully more often. We grew close to many people. They became like family to us.

And then apostasy set in and God took Zion, in a figurative sense, and He scraped it

clean. Not physically, spiritually . . . over a short period of time. First he took away some and they went off into their own exile and formed little groups. And then there was another wave and he took away some more, and they went and formed other little groups elsewhere—many of them unwilling to join the others who had gone out before. God sent them in a different direction, on a different track and put them in their own little groups. And then finally He said, "*Enough!*" and the floodgates were opened and those who left, left, and those who remained, I feel, He let go. I don't know if He's forgotten them. He probably hasn't because He still says He wishes everyone would come to repentance.

But it's my personal feeling that the Worldwide Church of God is no more a Sabbath and commandment-keeping church. I don't think they can really be truly called a church of God anymore. Maybe some of you don't agree. It's just an opinion, but to me they're like the First Baptist Church of Anytown, USA. All you have to do is read their Statement of Beliefs.

That's that. That was our church. That was our home. Now we just have various affiliations. Some of us have made closer bonds with one another, but many people still flit here, flit there, they'll do this, they'll do that, they'll remain independent. They haven't found a home. Many of them don't want to find a home because they've been burned, as their house was burned around them, and it's sad.

You can see that the sentiment in Psalm 137 could be applied to this situation as well, depending on your feeling for what that church was to you. And I don't have good news.

Daniel 12:6-7 And one said to the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the river, "How long shall the fulfillment of these wonders be?" [Daniel was in the presence of a few angels here and possibly the one who was over the waters of the river was Christ Himself. But he says here, verse 7] Then I heard the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the river, when he held up his right hand and his left hand to heaven, and swore by Him who lives forever, that it shall be for a time, times, and half a time; [and this is the part I was getting to] and when the power of the holy people has been completely shattered, all these things shall be finished.

I don't think it has been completely shattered yet. Like I said, I don't have good news. If I read the Bible with the proper insight it's going to get worse before it gets better. Has the church been completely shattered yet? I don't know. It seems to me the answer is no. We keep seeing more disintegration, more people breaking off, more people going their

own way because the distrust, the confusion, the offense, and the disagreements have not subsided. We still haven't all learned to get along, and as long as there is strife, there is going to be separation, more separation, and more separation. Not one stone will be left.

But that doesn't mean that we cannot begin rebuilding amongst ourselves. The darkest time is always just before the dawn, as the saying goes. We must keep in mind that God has scattered us out of love and goodness. In that sense, the scattering is a good thing because He loves us and wants us to repent and begin rebuilding as much as lies within us, in our little group here and personally.

There is good news. Maybe this will be encouraging for you. This is what we would call a parable, a vision, of the two baskets of figs in Jeremiah 24. And this I think applies very well to us, and I hope this is encouraging to you.

Jeremiah 24:1 The LOORD showed me, and there were two baskets of figs set before the temple of the LOORD, after Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had carried away captive Jeconiah the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, and the princes of Judah with the craftsmen and smiths, from Jerusalem, and had brought them to Babylon.

This was the exile I believe in which Daniel was taken away. So this was the first cream of the crop that he took away the first time he came through. Now listen to what God says about what He had just done.

Jeremiah 24:2-10 One basket had very good figs, like the figs that are first ripe; and the other basket had very bad figs which could not be eaten, they were so bad. Then the LOORD said to me, "What do you see, Jeremiah?" And I said, "Figs, the good figs, very good; and the bad, very bad, which cannot be eaten, they are so bad." [And here's the interpretation.] Again the word of the LOORD came to me, saying, "Thus says the LOORD, the God of Israel: 'Like these good figs, so will I acknowledge those who are carried away captive from Judah, whom I have sent out of this place for their own good, into the land of the Chaldeans. For I will set My eyes on them for good, and I will bring them back to this land; I will build them and not pull them down, and I will plant them and not pluck them up. Then I will give them a heart to know Me, that I am the LOORD; and they shall be My people, and I will be their God, for they shall return to Me with their whole heart. [Now, the bad side, the flip side.] And as the bad figs which cannot be eaten, they are so bad'; surely

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thus says the LOORD; 'so will I give up Zedekiah the king of Judah, his princes, the residue of Jerusalem who remain in this land, and those who dwell in the land of Egypt. [Some had escaped to Egypt and He says, I've given up on them. He says,] I will deliver them to trouble into all the kingdoms of the earth, for their harm [not for their good, for their harm], to be a reproach and a byword, a taunt and a curse, in all places where I [God] shall drive them. [You wonder who's behind this?] And I will send the sword, the famine, and the pestilence among them, till they are consumed from the land that I gave to them and their fathers.'"

This is fulfilling Deuteronomy 28. But He sent the good ones away early, for their good, because He has a plan for them, and He will bring them back and give them a heart that they could truly be His people. Isn't that encouraging? Our exile was not all bad. It was part of God's plan to bring us back to Him in time. He wanted to get us out before we were contaminated by the bad figs, that were so very bad that all He could do was destroy, like the old one rotten apple in a barrel. It's the old spirit of Laodiceanism that will creep in if we're surrounded by it, or it will actually overtake our own spirit and destroy it if we allow it to remain.

God wants us to return to Him with a whole heart and now He's given us the environment to do it—in exile.

What follows is the meat of the sermon which I have to do in ten minutes, but it won't be hard because I think you'll understand the principles. First, I want you to notice the timing here in Jeremiah 29. Jeremiah sets the stage for when these words were uttered.

Jeremiah 29:1 Now these are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem unto the residue of the elders which were carried away captives, and to the priests, and to the prophets, and to all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had carried away captive from Jerusalem to Babylon;

Remember what we saw there in Jeremiah 24 when he set the timing on that? He repeats this.

Jeremiah 29:2 (This happened after Jeconiah the king, the queen mother, the eunuchs, the princes of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen, and the smiths had departed from Jerusalem.)

Jeremiah 29:16 ...therefore thus says the LOORD concerning the king who sits on the throne of David, concerning all the people who dwell in this city, and concerning your brethren who have not gone out with you into captivity;

What's the timing? Same timing as "the good fig, bad fig vision." This was after the early ones were taken away for their good and before the bad ones were destroyed. Now, if we want to put it in terms we can understand, this was after the apostasy, but before the great tribulation of the Day of the Lord. That's the way I look at it. If you want to make a parallel between then and now, we're in it. It's like Jeremiah is writing this letter to us. We don't have seventy years, God willing, but it still fits because we're in exile, and this is what Jeremiah says to do.

Now at first it seems to run counter to what we should be doing. For instance, the first chapter of Haggai says don't build your house, build My house. But remember we are looking at this from a spiritual standpoint, not physical. So we have to translate Jeremiah's physical suggestions, physical advice, into spiritual advice. And if we come at it from that angle it fits very well.

Jeremiah 29:4 Thus says the LOORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all who were carried away captive, whom I have caused to be carried away from Jerusalem to Babylon:

This goes to the entire church, the greater church of God, the scattered church of God, the ones who have been scattered out of our former home into the wilds of this world to fend for ourselves. Some of us have banded together into small church groups, some larger, some smaller. Others are remaining by themselves, and many of these, I'm afraid, will melt back into the world. But it's directed at us—at all of us—who have been sent away, and it's good advice.

Listen to this:

Jeremiah 29:5 Build houses and dwell in them;

Now if we are to try to get ourselves spiritually back on track, it doesn't seem that building a house would be the right thing to do because it would distract us and take all our time. But like I warned you before, this is a spiritual house that He is talking about. This really centers around family. That's what a house is—the house of Judah, the

house of Israel were families grown large.

Remember Psalm 127?

Psalm 127:1-5 Unless the LOORD builds the house, they labor in vain who build it; unless the LOORD guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows; for so He gives His beloved sleep. Behold, children are a heritage from the LOORD, the fruit of the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one's youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them; they shall not be ashamed, but shall speak [or contend] with their enemies in the gate.

So what God tells us through Jeremiah here is not to build physical houses, but a family, a clan, a dynasty, so that we'll have the strength of all those others who will support us. We need sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, to stand with us in the gates as we contend against the enemy. That's a gift of God if we'll take it. He says it's a heritage of the LOORD.

Strong family ties in the LOORD—even in your physical family—are a stronghold and a refuge in times of trouble. Sometimes if we didn't have our families, we wouldn't have anything. The anchor would be pulled off and we'd float adrift. And God says in this time of exile to strengthen your family, both your physical family and your spiritual family, because I am building a house.

Ephesians 2:19-22 Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner stone, in whom the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place [habitation] of God in the Spirit.

So in this time of exile, it is a good idea to strengthen the ties that bind us together—you and me. We start in our physical families, and then we gather others in around us, our friends here in the church. And those ties—"a three fold cord is not quickly broken"—will help us with stand the depredations of the enemy.

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You might want to jot down I Peter 2:4-5, 9-10, where Peter tells us that we are being built into a spiritual house.

Jeremiah 29:5 . . . plant gardens and eat their fruit.

Another one, where, if you did these things physically, it would seem very distracting. You're spending all of your time out in your garden. But put this another way: I want you to sow and I want you to reap. What's He saying spiritually? Produce fruit. Grow, overcome, produce fruit. That's a wonderful thing to do in a time of exile because that's why we've been put there. To repent, and then to begin to overcome those things and produce fruit and grow.

Jesus Christ our Savior says the exact same thing in John 15:1-8.

John 15:1-8 "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch [that's permanent exile] and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. [Now listen to verse 8.] By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so [therefore, because of this] you will be My disciples.

It's only through the bearing of fruit that we really show that we are Christ's, and that's the second thing here that Jeremiah told us to do while we are in exile. So the first thing is to establish strong ties with one another, overcome, and bear fruit.

Jeremiah 29:6 Take wives and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, so that they may bear sons and daughters; that you may be increased there, and not diminished.

What? Jeremiah tells us to get married and have kids, and have our kids get married

and have kids? Think spiritually. What does this mean? This is another family suggestion. But the key here is in the final thought, "that you may be increased there, and not diminished." What is he telling us? Well I would have to say it means increase your members. Grow.

Now I know, myself, I've done it the physical way. We've had two children in this church. But I know others who have married someone who comes right out of the world and they are now converted members of God's church. It's not the normal way that it should be done, but it happens every once in awhile. And if God is working, if God is calling that person, He finds a way.

I think that this one has to do with the "going-to-the-world aspect of God's church." The first two points relate to feeding the flock, and then he mentions the third point—"increase if you can." *"I'd rather you not be diminished,"* He says. So, if possible, increase by marrying, by having children, however it works. But always, the point is...conversion. We don't do it just to add members. We're adding to the flock of God here.

It's very hard to do both, the feeding of the flock and the going to the world. So if I see any indication here, the first two points relate to feeding the flock. Get yourself in good spiritual condition, and then if you can increase your numbers. And that's what we've tried to do.

Matthew 6:24 says you cannot serve God and mammon. It's hard to do two things at once well. You have to make a choice. What's the most important thing? And if this is any indication in verses 5 and 6, I would say that God says the first thing to do, the most important thing to do is get yourself straight with God. And then what resources are left over can go to increasing your numbers.

But those other two points are more important right now: "because I sent you into exile because of sin. So get rid of the sin first. Get rid of the problems and then you'll have the resources (spiritual resources) to increase your numbers." I don't want to dwell on that too much. Mark 10:28-30, if I can pull this principle out of context, Peter says, "Master we've left all to follow You." And He says, "Don't worry Peter, for whatever you have lost I will give you mothers and brothers and sisters and fathers a hundredfold." So He will increase us. It's just a matter of when.

Jeremiah 29:7 And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the LORD for it; for in its peace you will have peace.

The fourth thing has to do with our witness to the world and our response to the world. So the first two points would have to do with feeding the flock, and getting ourselves back into spiritual shape. The third point is about going to the world and increasing our numbers. And the fourth point is about how we react to the world.

And he says do it in peace. Wish peace upon all men. That's in Romans 12:16-21. He says to live peaceably with all men as far as lies within you. That's a very important point, because peace trickles down. Peace in the nation will trickle down to us. If we have an environment of peace, we can accomplish the overcoming and the growing and the producing of fruit.

James 3:18 Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

We have to be among the peacemakers, even living in a world full of strife, and we've got to seek God's hand in this and ask Him to give peace where we are so that we can then have the time and not the distractions of strife to use in producing fruit, getting our families in order and being able to increase our numbers. If there is not peace, those things become much harder to do. So we need the peace. We need to be peacemakers. That's one of the beatitudes. "Blessed are the peacemakers." It's a very important point that we have peace.

Hebrews 12:14 Pursue peace with all people [men], and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord:

See how important peace is to producing holiness? Pursue peace with all men and holiness, because if we don't do these things we won't see God. Peace is important. If you go from James 3:18 into the next chapter, he pretty much curses those people and calls them adulterers and adulteresses because they were full of strife with one another. They were warring with one another. They didn't have peace. They weren't producing righteousness.

The last piece of advice is in Jeremiah 29:8-9. It's a warning.

Jeremiah 29:8-9 For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are in your midst deceive you, nor listen to your dreams which you cause to be dreamed. For they prophesy

falsely to you in My name; I have not sent them, says the LOORD.

The final thing is to beware of false preachers bringing you dastardly doctrines and false hope and sweet words, silky words, smooth words of honey. God says, "*I haven't sent them.*" And it's very interesting that He says, "*Don't even listen to your dreams which you caused to be dreamed,*" because you had too much salsa, or last night you had "death-by-chocolate" before you went to bed.

Be wary of your dreams. You'll know if God has sent a dream. God is a revealer of secret things and He'll let you know (or He'll let whomever He gives the dream to know that it's from Him). I don't think there will be any mistaking it. But if it's a matter of heartburn, we can deceive ourselves into thinking that something has been divinely given that is totally false. And you always test the spirits, you prove all things, and you'll be able to tell a salsa dream from a real dream.

Let's end in Jeremiah 29:10 because I want to end this sermon in hope. Remember what God said, that He had sent these people into exile for their good?

Jeremiah 29:10-14 For thus says the LOORD: After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place. For I know the thoughts [this word is better translated "plans, I know the plans] that I [have for you] think toward you, says the LOORD, [plans] thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. I will be found by you, says the LOORD, and I will bring you back from your captivity; I will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you, says the LOORD, and I will bring you to the place from which I cause you to be carried away captive.

"I'm going to bring you home. You will no longer be in exile. I will give you the promised land. I will give you My rest (Hebrews 4)." We have been seeking "the rest of God,"—the true Sabbath, in His kingdom. And He says, "I will give it to you because I have good plans in my heart for you. I want these good things to be given to you. So keep on. Build your families. Strengthen the ties between, not only your family, but other families of My people."

Overcome, grow, produce fruit, and that way you will have that heart that will seek Him

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in everything. And if you can, grow in numbers. "I want you to be increased and not diminished if its possible. And be at peace with other men, and have the peace around you that you can grow in righteousness and holiness and come into My image."

When we do those things, and God's time is right, He will bring us out of our exile. And not until then. He's the one, the Master Timekeeper, and when He says it's the right time, it will be the very best time for us to come out of exile. And from wherever He has scattered us, He will bring us back and set us and give us true rest in His kingdom.