



SCATTERED AMONG THE NATIONS

2 Kings 17:1-15 and Jeremiah 29:1-14

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When I was in Kenya last month, the armed guards at All Saints Cathedral would not allow me to walk half a mile back to my hotel through downtown Nairobi. They said, “Do not go. You *will* be mugged.” For an entire week, soldiers carrying semi-automatic weapons guarded us because they said our lives were in danger.

We take safety for granted here in the United States. Joke all you want about corruption among our elected officials, but thugs and violent criminals simply haven’t overrun our city, where there are serious consequences for wrongdoing. If you commit a crime, it’s very likely that you’ll be arrested and punished.

Law enforcement is foundational for a stable, prosperous society. Of course, there’s plenty of room to debate whether our laws are too restrictive when it comes to protecting civil liberties. But virtually everyone agrees that some kind of law enforcement is necessary, including punishment for criminal wrongdoing. Without law enforcement, our country would quickly disintegrate into anarchy.

But there’s a reversal of popular opinion when we shift from civics to theology. Police are good, but our culture feels quite strongly that God ought not be in the law enforcement business. We’ve got everything under control down here, and we certainly don’t need God punishing people for sins. Whenever the topic of God’s judgment comes up, we go on a counter-offensive and put God on trial, asking, “Aren’t you supposed to be kind and gracious? If you’re so loving and merciful, why do you insist on punishing people for sin?”

In our survey of the Old Testament we’ve now come to one of the saddest chapters in the story, namely, the exile of Israel. This episode foregrounds hard questions about God’s grace. How could a loving, merciful God bring the hammer down on his own people? That’s what we’ll consider after a quick review.

SALVATION, THEN FAITHFULNESS, THEN FRUITFULNESS

When we studied the Ten Commandments we learned that God’s Law wasn’t a prerequisite for salvation. Rather, God first rescued his people from slavery in Egypt, and then he gave them his Law as a wedding present, to define how they might live faithfully with one another. We talked about the *Housing First* program to address homelessness in American cities, and how it mirrors the grace of God because it begins by offering homeless persons a place to live, and then helps them with job training and mental health counseling and so on. Previous programs required

good behavior prior to belonging. *Housing First* is almost twice as effective as previous programs because it begins with belonging and then moves on to good behavior. In other words, it begins with salvation before community rules.

But with *Housing First*, as with most any other program or community, rules for behavior are normal and necessary. Without community rules, you can't have community. Anyone who has lived with a difficult and uncooperative roommate has learned this the hard way. Because life in community assumes both law and law-keeping. The larger the community, the more need for authority structures and some kind of law-enforcement to keep it from breaking down. With the *Housing First* program, if participants don't eventually conform to the rules of the community, program directors ask them to leave the community so that they don't spoil it for everyone else. That's law-enforcement. Likewise, ever since mankind fell into sin, God has been rescuing people from darkness and bringing them into communities of light in which there must be law-enforcement in order for the community to function.

When we studied Exodus 19:4-6, we saw that God first saved his people from slavery in Egypt, then he gave them his Law so that they might live faithfully with him.¹ But God's ultimate objective was not law-keeping *per se*. He wanted the Israelites to grow up to be a kingdom of priests. By following God faithfully, they were to become his ambassadors to all the world. Salvation, then Faithfulness, then Fruitfulness.

Fruitfulness was God's primary objective from the beginning, when God tasked our first parents with *multiplication* and *stewardship* of the whole earth.² Multiplication and stewardship are painful and difficult in a fallen world, but it's still what God wants. God's good creation is filled with rebels. He wants it to be filled with faithful stewards. So God saved Israel from slavery in Egypt. Then he blessed them with his law and called them to Faithfulness and Fruitfulness as a Kingdom of Priests so that our rebellious world might be won over to him.

This pattern of Salvation, then Faithfulness, then Fruitfulness is a constant theme in the New Testament as well. Think of Jesus' Parable of the Sower, in which the seed that falls on good soil bears fruit up to one hundred fold.³ Think of the Parable of the Talents, in which God rewards some for fruitfulness and disciplines others who bury their talents.⁴ Think of the Apostle Paul's famous assurance of God's grace in Ephesians 2:

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

¹ "Priests for all Nations," sermon at Church of the Resurrection on October 6, 2013.

² Genesis 1:28.

³ Matthew 13:1ff.

⁴ Matthew 25:14ff.

If God's aim were only salvation, why wouldn't he immediately take us to be with him after conversion? It's because he has work for us to do. He expects the same growth in us as he did the Israelites. God saves us and puts us into a community, with community rules, so that we might grow and bear fruit. Salvation, then Faithfulness, then Fruitfulness.

THE EXILE: TOUGH LOVE FOR THE UNFAITHFUL & UNFRUITFUL

Unfortunately, God's people never grew up. Like a middle-aged man still playing video games and living on a weekly allowance from mom and dad, Israel lingered in adolescence for a thousand years, never becoming the kingdom of priests they were called to be.

King Solomon had enormous potential. The Queen of Sheba came to see for herself, and she was left breathless at Solomon's wisdom, wealth and achievements. Her visit was a foretaste of the fruitfulness God intended and a glimpse of the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him.

But as all nations came to Israel, King Solomon wasn't content to be a conduit of God's blessings to them. Instead, he became greedy. He began collecting foreign wives and concubines, and with them, foreign religious traditions. In short order, Solomon was erecting pagan shrines throughout his kingdom. He also developed an appetite for forced labor in order to keep his empire ever expanding. The northern tribes in particular suffered greatly under the weight of heavy taxes levied by Jerusalem to the south.

After Solomon died, his son Rehoboam did not listen to the people as they cried for relief. Instead, Rehoboam piled on an even higher tax burden, and in due time there was civil war. Jeroboam rallied the northern tribes, and they rebelled against the House of David in 922 BC. From that time on, the nation was divided into Israel to the North, aka Ephraim, with Samaria as capital city, and Judah to the south, with Jerusalem as capital city.

The Old Testament books of Kings and Chronicles tell the sad history of the decline of these two rival kingdoms. The north deteriorated more quickly, particularly under the reign of Ahab. He took a foreign bride by the name of Jezebel, and she led the north in converting to the cult of Baal. Her influence over the northern kingdom was catastrophic. The Lord pursued them at every turn, and there were wonderful moments of reform and revival, e.g. Elijah's victory over the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. But the north was hellbent on self-destruction, and eventually they were overrun by the Assyrian empire.⁵

The southern kingdom of Judah persisted a little longer, but ultimately they also ended with the same fate. The Assyrian empire foundered and was swallowed up by the Babylonians. In 586, the city and the temple in Jerusalem were completely destroyed, and all the people were deported to Babylon.⁶

⁵ 2 Kings 17:6.

⁶ 2 Kings 25:8-12.

The Bible is very clear about why all this happened. It wasn't due to bad luck or a faulty military strategy. Rather, God did it. God, the Law-enforcer, brought the hammer down on his people. The exile was God's judgment on sin.

And this occurred because the people of Israel had sinned against the Lord their God.⁷

This brings us back to our initial question: How could God do this? How could a loving, merciful God bring the hammer down on his own people? Three observations:

1. God was incredibly, amazingly patient with them. Moses warned the Israelites that God would exile them if they persisted in unfaithfulness.⁸ That was at least 700 years prior to the fall of Samaria. During the intervening years there were many messengers who reminded God's people of God's covenant with them. These included high-profile preachers like Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Micah, Hosea and Jeremiah. The Old Testament prophets weren't fortune tellers specializing in wild-eyed, apocalyptic visions of the future. Rather, they were God's covenantal attorneys. He sent them as his official spokesmen to remind them of their covenant relationship. Consequently, when the exile finally came, nobody could say that they didn't know it was coming. God was incredibly, amazingly patient with them.

2. At some point, the need for action outweighed any further extension of grace. This is why most of the prophetic books have been preserved for us in the Bible, as the prophets pointed out the most egregious areas of apostasy. When you read Micah, or Isaiah, or any of the other prophets who wrote during this period, you'll see some common themes:

- **Corrupt rulers**, who favored the rich and exploited the poor.
- **Corrupt judges**, who gave 'justice' to the highest bidder.
- **False prophets**, who peddled a prosperity gospel rather than warning of God's discipline.
- **Idolatry**, whereby the people became worshippers of other gods. They gave lip-service to the Lord, but God wasn't impressed. In fact, in many cases the surrounding pagan nations were more righteous than the Jews.

With all these areas of spiritual and societal brokenness, God's heart was broken.⁹ His character simply wouldn't allow things to deteriorate any further. There comes a point when the need for discipline outweighs any further extension of grace.

3. True love always involves discipline, sometimes in the form of 'tough love.' When God brought the hammer down on his own people, it was the most loving thing to do. This is

⁷ 2 Kings 17:7. Consider the larger indictment in vv 7-23.

⁸ Deuteronomy 28-29.

⁹ Note that the sins leading to the exile were both "spiritual" and "social," both vertical and horizontal. They were spiritually apostate because of idolatry, **and** their society was in turmoil such that the poor were exploited at every turn. In our day, when we are continually parsing between "liberals" and "conservatives," it's important that we see God's fury was a both/and regarding both "spiritual" and "social" evils.

because true love sometimes requires tough love. A loving wife won't remain idle while her husband falls prey to alcoholism. A loving friend won't allow another friend to be consumed by bitterness or despair. A loving parent won't allow his or her children to grow up without discipline. In fact, an undisciplined child simply never grows up.

*My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
nor be weary when reproved by him.
For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives.¹⁰*

The exile wasn't a case of God severing his relationship with his people. Rather, he disciplined them so that they might get back on track in moving from Salvation, to Faithfulness to Fruitfulness.¹¹ The exile was God's tough love for his unfaithful, unfruitful people.

BEARING FRUIT IN BABYLON

The good news of Christianity is that God didn't give up on his people. At the right time, he sent his beloved son into our inhospitable world. Jesus was displaced from his home with God, with all its comforts, and "he pitched his tent with us."¹² Jesus voluntarily became an exile, so that on Good Friday we might be released from exile. He paid the penalty for our unfaithfulness and our fruitlessness so that we might be his ambassadors to a world crushed under the weight of sin.

Jesus sends us among the nations *to bear fruit*, i.e. to baptize the nations in his name and teach them everything he commanded.¹³ That's no hardship or burden, because Jesus promises to go with us wherever we go. This is the grace of God for broken sinners like you and me. How could we expect to succeed where the Israelites failed? If it weren't for the Holy Spirit, we would be without hope. But as Christians, no matter where we go, the Spirit of the Lord Jesus goes with us, so that we can be faithful and fruitful in any and every place. This includes the most seemingly God-forsaken places around the majority world. And it also includes that less-than-perfect job here in Washington, working for a less-than-perfect boss. No matter where we go, the Lord goes with us, so that we might be his faithful and fruitful ambassadors everywhere.

Jeremiah sent very similar instructions to the Jewish exiles in Babylon, and his letter is recorded in Jeremiah 29. Believe it or not, the false prophets who had been promising prosperity instead of exile kept on doing so even after the exile had happened! So Jeremiah says:

Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, declares the Lord.¹⁴

¹⁰ Prov 3:11,12, quoted in Hebrews 12:5-6.

¹¹ See Deuteronomy 30:1-10 in which Moses explained this beforehand.

¹² John 1:14 wooden translation.

¹³ Matthew 28:18-20.

¹⁴ Jer 29:8-9.

In spite of what the false prophets were saying, the exiles would not be in Babylon for only two years. Rather, it was going to be a very long time:

When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.¹⁵

In other words, God's plans for welfare and not evil included a "tough love" exile in Babylon.¹⁶ But that's okay, because the exiles would be able to practice in Babylon what they should have been doing in Israel, as we'll see spelled out more clearly in vv. 29:4-7. This, by the way, is the same word that the Lord has for us today. The Lord has us here in Washington for a reason. What are we to do in the place where God has stationed us?

Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce.¹⁷

This is a call to godly **stewardship**. (The gardening line gives it away.) Just as God commanded Adam and Eve to work and tend his royal garden, we are called to tend and care for whatever God places under our stewardship. Settle down, plant, invest, build, grow, tend, maintain, and expand such that whatever God has entrusted into your care will flourish and bear fruit.

Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease.¹⁸

This is the call to **multiplication**. As you steward whatever God has entrusted to you, you will need helpers. Note that God is not rescinding his prohibition against intermarrying with the pagans. He is not telling them to give their sons and daughters in marriage to the Babylonians. Rather, this is a call to multiply god-fearing stewards. The earth is already filled with rebels who don't know God, particularly in a place like Babylon. They shouldn't contribute any further to this problem. Rather, the fields are white for harvest. More believers are needed who know how to glorify God with the bounty.

Again, here in Jer 29:4-6 is a reiteration of the cultural mandate from Gen 1:28. In Babylon, far east of Eden, God's expectations remain the same. Godly stewardship and multiplication are still what God expects of his people.

Ultimately what God wants through their faithfulness and fruitfulness in Babylon is a transformed city:

¹⁵ Jer 29:10.

¹⁶ Jer 29:11-14.

¹⁷ Jer 29:5.

¹⁸ Jer 29:6.

*But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.*¹⁹

In other words, “rejoice the city.”²⁰ If you will seek the peace and prosperity of your captors and your pagan neighbors, you will prosper as well. By the way, here’s the key to rejoicing the city: *pray* for it. Because as you steward what God has entrusted to you, as you share your faith and disciple your kids and others, and as you seek the peace and prosperity of your neighbors, there will be many, many things to pray about. In turn, as you pray about these many, many things, the Lord will show you how to steward what he has entrusted to you, he will show you how to share your faith and disciple others, he will show you how to seek the peace and prosperity of your neighbors. This is the key to fruitfulness wherever God plants you. Faithful action leads us back to the Lord in prayer, which then compels us toward more faithful action. We bear fruit in and through this daily rhythm of prayer and action. And watch what happens to the city!

The Lord God is calling us to the very same vocation. Build houses, plant gardens, raise up new disciples, pray and seek the peace and prosperity of the city where he has placed us. And remember that Jesus is with us in this work. May his Kingdom come, and his will be done in Babylon as it is in heaven.

¹⁹ Jer 29:7

²⁰ See Amy Sherman, *Kingdom Calling* (IVP, 2011). Or Tim Keller’s 1/16/05 sermon entitled *Creation Care and Justice* on Proverbs 11:10