

WHAT THE BIBLE IS ALL ABOUT - WHERE AM I IN GOD'S BIG STORY?

Bitter Exile, Joyous Return

2 Chronicles 36:11-23

Dr. Doyle Sager, First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, Missouri

September 28, 2014

AUDIO: fbcjc.buzzsprout.com/7678/207779

Who here has not been in exile at one time or another? Left out of a slumber party, didn't make the team, divorced, shut out of a relationship, fired from a job, experienced unwelcome change due to health or age. Or your rights have been violated, sexually or physically abused. Like the Israelites who were carried off by a foreign, invading nation, we cry out, "Where's God in all this?" We've all known the tearing away of the familiar, of all we have known that gives us a sense of identity. In this "post-modern" times, when everything that had been nailed down is torn loose, up for grabs, it seems nothing is certain.

The Israelite people knew about exile. Look at a map and you'll see that the people of the conquered southern kingdom of Judah were forced to march 500 miles from their homeland to Babylon, present-day Iraq. But then another nation, Persia (present-day Iran), came along and conquered Babylon. So that in 538 B.C., King Cyrus of Persia allowed the Israelites to return to their homeland. All told, they were in exile about 70 years.

So what were the lessons for the people of God through this bitter time? **FIRST LESSON: In exile, we learn that broken times can be growing times.** Sooner or later, we all come up against stuff we can't fix by our own strength. We spend most of our lives avoiding these mountains and dreading them. But these broken experiences force us to look creatively for new solutions.

Consider this. During the time of exile, synagogues sprang up in various locations, because the Temple had been destroyed and people were scattered. Furthermore, during the time of exile, most of the Hebrew Bible as we know it (our "Old Testament") came together and was compiled. Walter Brueggemann. talks about how the people of God went through three stages during the exile: orientation, disorientation, re-orientation. Notice how the formation of synagogues and the collection of scripture were examples of them re-orienting their lives. Orientation, disorientation, re-orientation. Can you relate to this in your own life? Or maybe you haven't arrived yet at re-orientation!

Mike Yaconelli once wrote, "Faith is not the way around pain, it is the way through pain. Faith doesn't get rid of the opposition, it invites it over for dinner."

SECOND LESSON: In exile, we learn how to thrive as a minority. The people of God were far away from their laws, their privileges, their worship. And yet they bore witness to the living God. I get a little worried that we American Christians think we have to have all the laws and all the privileges coming our way. The truth is, our faith has always done better when it is a

minority, on the edges. Bible historian Herbert Tarr has pointed out that the people of Judah (the southern kingdom) were the only people group from antiquity who were exiled from their homeland and national religion but maintained their identity and faith. All the others were swallowed up and assimilated by surrounding culture [*An Introduction to the Old Testament*, by Walter Brueggemann, p. 381].

THIRD LESSON: In exile, we learn that God is the lord of history. Imagine fish in the ocean...a small one is eaten by a large one. Then a larger one eats that one, and so on. Don't miss the macro-history we have just walked through. Assyria conquered the Northern Kingdom in 722 B.C., then Assyria was overpowered by Babylon which conquered the Southern Kingdom 150 years later. Then Babylon was swallowed up by the Persians. It was the Persian king who decided to let the Israelites return to their homeland. In fact, in Isaiah 45:1, Cyrus is called God's "messiah" (anointed one), for God's purposes. History is His story!

It might be important at this point to note that in the Hebrew Bible, 2 Chronicles is the last book of the Bible. That is, these words in our text are the last word. Note the transition from gloom (vv. 19-21) to hope and renewal (vv. 22-23). The old promises are still in effect; God is still in charge; history is His story! Hardship stayed the night, but joy came in the morning! The God of the resurrection works in this world. Do you want a summary of this entire sermon series? Of the entire Bible? Here it is: God wins!

Stanley Hauerwas is a theologian who rejects the notion that the world changed on Sept. 11, 2001. He says no, the world changed in 33 A.D. The question is how to talk about what happened on 9/11 in light of what happened in 33 A.D. [*God's Politics*, by Jim Wallis, p. 167]. Terrorists may bomb, but God is the lord of history. ISIS may behead innocent people, but God is the lord of history. Human leaders may disappoint or deceive us, but God reigns. You may have experienced deep darkness and great injustice, but God is the lord of history. You may wonder when your exile will ever end, but it will, because God is the lord of history!