

# 6 The Prophets and Exile

This is the sixth talk outline in The God Story Sermon Series. The related chapter in The God Story book is Chapter 6, *The Prophets and Exile*. The books in the Bible this chapter corresponds with are 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Amos, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggiah, Zechariah, Malachi.

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## Teaching Outline

### Key aims

To explore the role of the prophets through Israel's monarchy and how they communicated the longing love of God despite Israel's rebellion. To understand the story of Israel's exile, God's hand upon them in captivity and their eventual return.

### The God Story storytelling method

The God Story Storyteller understands that to teach The God Story effectively a dual teaching method is required. This is the art of teaching in a way that both **unfolds the eternal purposes of God through history and also releases them into personal encounter**. Practically this will mean prayerfully considering in each talk outline what parts you want to 'go deeper' in and what parts you want to mention at a headline level. We trust the Spirit will inspire and guide you to find the right cadence as you aim to give a passionate sweep of the unfolding narrative while also narrowing the focus in certain places to emphasise personal application and encounter.

## Key Bible passages

You may want to read a short passage of scripture before you begin your talk. The passages below are the ones we believe are most relevant to this particular talk.

We recommend you choose one of these:

Ezekiel 37:1-12

Ezekiel 47:1-12

Isaiah 43:14-21

Isaiah 49

Jeremiah 3:6-25

Jeremiah 31:27-40

## Teaching notes

The notes provided will equip you to understand more of the context and more of the story as you prepare your talk. Generally speaking the talk outline follows the structure of the corresponding chapter in The God Story book. We feel the key sections in the Talk Outline below relate to the main flow of the unfolding scriptural narrative and so we have included key Biblical passages and quotes from The God Story to assist you in this. We recommend using these sections to shape your talk but please choose the parts which you feel are most helpful for your context.

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**Continue to the sermon** 

# Introduction

## Recap of previous session(s)

In the previous chapter we considered a broad sweep of almost 800 years in Israel's lifespan. We moved from Joshua leading the Israelites over the Jordan and into the Promised land, to the time of the Judges where much compromise had taken place, to the story of Israel's monarchy. Under David's leadership we witnessed the rise of Israel and his establishment of a 'presence culture' at the centre of Israel's life. Despite David's grave sins which grieved God deeply, God saw something in David's heart that was after his own. Because of this God established an everlasting covenant with David. David's son, Solomon initially built well upon these foundations, building and dedicating the temple but unfortunately his heart turned from the Lord and with that came the division of the kingdom of Israel. For the most part the kings of Israel over the next few centuries did not follow in the ways of David and the slow but painful and tragic demise of the monarchy of Israel takes place.

## Talk Overview

We have explored an overview of the rise and fall of Israel's monarchy, explaining the division of Israel and highlighting the obvious role of the kings within this. But it's important to understand that throughout these years another group of men and women feature prominently in the biblical narrative. These individuals - the prophets - were raised up to communicate (and often embody) God's word and God's passion to the nation and the monarchy. The prophets provide us with an honest and raw look into God's pain and heartbreak during the rise and fall of Israel as they passionately sought to call the nation back to God. After repeated warnings and many breathtaking signs of God's commitment to Israel through the prophets, God will eventually give Israel up in the hope of winning her back. God's people will be driven into exile but incredibly, God will go with them, and after a time of healing and repentance will bring her back. Many of the Israelites will eventually return home but they will remain under foreign control for many more years. Fervent initial attempts to rebuild the temple and restore their former glories will dissipate, leaving the Israelites clinging to the hopeful words the prophets had spoken, particularly those prophecies which indicated a coming deliverer.

### 1 The prophets

Describe how the prophets were individuals who help us understand what God was experiencing in his heart and what God wanted to say during the rise of Israel and its tragic demise

- + Explain how sixteen of these prophets wrote down what they spoke and they play a highly significant role in The God Story. (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Amos, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malach)

- **Key verse:** 'For the Lord God does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets'. (Amos 3:7)

#### ≡ Key quote

*"The prophets were not simply a mouthpiece for God. These were men and women who had personally encountered the fierce reality of the living God. Their lives were bound up in the burden of God's heart and they embodied the vicarious nature of his love....Put simply, through the prophets Israel knew not only what God was saying but what God was feeling."*<sup>1</sup>

- + Teach the two-fold purpose of the prophets' role:
  - **Calling Israel back to covenant faithfulness:** warning Israel of the consequences of rejecting Yahweh and his promises for their lives.
  - **Calling Israel forward to covenant promise:** consoling and comforting the people, exhorting them that they dare not lose hope.
- + Traditionally the prophets have been distinguished between major and minor prophets
  - **Major:** Isaiah, Jeremiah (also Lamentations), Ezekiel, Daniel.
  - **Minor:** Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

## 2 Northern kingdom (The kingdom of Israel)

Timeframe: 931 BC - 722 BC

- + Describe how starting with Jeroboam (1 Kings 13-14) the Northern Kingdom had 19 evil kings. They developed their own system of religious festivals characterised by syncretism and idolatry. All the other kings to varying degrees followed this pattern (i.e. 'the sins of Jeroboam' is a repeated refrain).
- + Highlight some key moments and the standout prophetic voices throughout this period to the Northern Kingdom.
  - Elijah and Elisha during the evil reign of King Ahab and the Phoenician Princess Jezebel - worshipper of Baal (1 Kings 17-21)
    - **Elijah:** demonstrates God's authority powerfully through his showdown with the priests of Baal at Carmel (1 Kings 18)
    - **Elisha:** Highlight how Elisha takes Elijah's mantle and receives a double blessing moving in many power miracles
  - Amos
    - Highlight how this simple man (farmer) was called by God to prophesy judgement on Israel if they did not turn from their flagrant injustice against the poor and marginalised. Amos helps us understand what true worship in God's eyes involves and exposes religious pretence. (Amos 5:21-24)
  - Hosea: focus on the fact Hosea is the last of the prophets to the Northern Kingdom.
    - Emphasise the Northern Kingdom's consistent and wilful rebellion over many years yet through Hosea God's breathtaking attempt, one more time, to win her back.
    - Explain how God does this - by calling Hosea to embody God's loyal, unfailing love to Israel (i.e. His wayward wife) by first of all asking Hosea to marry a prostitute and then asking him to take her back after she commits adultery.
    - Read Hosea 2:2-23 and focus upon God's unremitting love and broken-hearted passion to have his bride back.

- + The Fall of Northern Kingdom: Despite the tangible signs of God's longing to restore the Northern Kingdom explain how they ultimately bring upon themselves the consequence of their actions.

- Assyria conquers the Northern Kingdom Israel. (722 BC)

- *"The Assyrians had a ruthless policy of leaving no remembrance of other nations. The people of the Northern Kingdom were either captured, killed or assimilated into the Assyrian Empire. Devastatingly, the ten tribes will never return."* <sup>2</sup>

### 3 Southern kingdom (The kingdom of Judah)

Timeframe: 931 BC - 586 BC

- + Explain the significance of the fact that the kings of Judah followed the Davidic line - remember God's promise to David (2 Sam 7).
  - Of the 20 kings, 12 evil, 6 good, 2 very good - Hezekiah and Josiah who led significant reforms and brought renewal to Israel.
- + May be helpful to explain the wider geopolitical context: Power had shifted from Assyria to Babylon under the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar forming a formidable empire. Babylon targeted the Kingdom of Judah over a 20 year period.
- + Explain how God warned the Southern Kingdom about the fate of her Northern sister in order to sharpen her focus and obedience. Isaiah and Jeremiah were the main prophetic voices at this period in the Southern Kingdom's monarchy calling their people not to follow the Northern Kingdom's example.
- + **Jeremiah:** God grieving His own dream: Explain how Jeremiah is sometimes known as 'the weeping prophet' because his life is an embodiment of God's grief over his waywards sons and daughters. Describe how Jeremiah lives through the final days of the Kingdom of Judah and helps us understand what God is experiencing on the eve of the Southern Kingdom's capture.
  - Read Jeremiah 3:6-11

## ≡ Key quote

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*"Through Jeremiah we are listening to God grieving his own dream. What makes it worse is that no one listens to Jeremiah even though Judah's actions have wounded God even more deeply than their Northern neighbours had. The Southern Kingdom must also face the consequences of their wilful rebellion."*<sup>3</sup>

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- Siege of Jerusalem: Explain how King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army lay siege on Jerusalem and three stages of capturing the City take place.
    - 605BC: first invasion where urban elites are carried off to Babylon, including the prophet Daniel
    - 597BC: the second invasion when Jehoiachin the last Davidic was taken. Estimated 10,000 deported including the prophet Ezekiel
    - 586BC: the ultimate fall of Jerusalem. Zedekiah who had been set as puppet king was blinded and dragged to Babylon. The temple was destroyed and only the poorest are left.
- + Highlight how this point is the lowest of the low for Israel.

## ≡ Key quote

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*"Picture the sad new reality. Abraham's children of promise, God's treasured possession, now find themselves completely humiliated, back in Babylon, the very place their great ancestor was called out from more than 1500 years before. Slaves to another master once again. Abraham's legacy of faith, it appears, is now left in tatters as Israel enters the darkest chapter of their existence as a nation. The Exile may not be as severe as the flood of Noah's day but it speaks to the same tragic theme of 'un-creation'... All the major promises contained within the covenants to Abraham, Moses and David have been stripped away. The exiles do not have land, there is no temple and their last Davidic king, Zedekiah, was publicly blinded and bound...The children of Israel had never been farther from home."*<sup>4</sup>

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## 4 God's love as wrath

- + Take some time at this point to teach carefully a theology of the wrath of God. Explain how God's judgement on Israel and Judah is in the end an act of love. Remind people how God sent prophet after prophet (Jer 4:4) to warn the Children of Israel and woo them back to Himself but they repeatedly and unashamedly turned their backs on God, ignoring the warnings of the consequences of their actions.

### ≡ Key quote

*"The Father's only chance of winning his people back in the long term is to let them go in the short term. Israel will experience God's love as judgement....God is always oriented to humanity in love. God never stops being Love. Therefore, God's actions are never to get back at us, only his consent for us to suffer the consequences of our reckless and idolatrous rebellion. This is what we call the wrath of God. Israel has invited God's judgement upon herself."*<sup>5</sup>

## 5 Deconstruction and reconstruction

It's important to emphasise, in human terms, it is a marvel Israel survived. So how did she survive?

### ≡ Key quote

*"Believe it or not, it was her faith. Faced with foundational questions of survival and a crisis of identity and theology, for the children of Israel Babylon became the birthplace of a resurgent and renewed faith."*<sup>6</sup>

### » Application opportunity

*The Israelites' time in exile teaches us that the questions we ask in a time of crisis reveal who we really are and what we really believe in a way that no other season of life can. In this place the false identities we have become attached to are laid bare and the projected distortions of who we think God is are exposed.*



- + Explain the importance of the principle of lament for the children of Israel and the many examples of this in the Psalms (e.g. Psalm 137) and Lamentations. Point out how Israel learned to pray out their pain, grief and questions in this period and this was the starting point for being healed. Exile would become the place of reconstructed faith but only after a healthy period of deconstruction had taken place. (see Jer 1:9-10)

### ≡ Key quote

*"Reconstruction would come if they trusted the process. Jeremiah's words, 'I will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile,' offered this hope. Israel had not acted as God's children should. They were experiencing God's wrath as purifying love. But they were still his children, the apple of his eye. In Babylon, stripped of everything, God was reconstructing his treasured possession."*<sup>7</sup>

## 6 The remnant – Daniel

Explain how the group of Israelites who walked through this reconstructing period in exile was relatively small. The Bible calls this concentrated core who were faithful to the work of repentance required in exile, a remnant. Daniel is a great example of this.

- + Emphasise how Daniel's prodigiousness (along with his three friends) was valued by the Babylonian establishment but though he was surrounded by the power and prestige of the empire he courageously chose not to assimilate to the culture. Key verse: Dan 1:8, 'chose not to defile himself.'

### » Application opportunity

*Focus on Daniel's counter-formation discipleship and how we can/should apply this to our lives today.*

- + Further explain how Daniel was also given heavenly insight into the powerful empires which come and go in the years to follow (Assyria-Babylon-Persia-Greece-Rome) but how God's kingdom would never be destroyed.
  - Explain how the remnant in Israel was inspired by the faith and words of leaders like Daniel and the other prophets helping her rebuild the foundations of her faith.

# 7

## Promises in exile – Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Isaiah

Re-emphasise the hugely significant role the prophets had in exile. They had prophesied about the consequences of disobedience which had come true (exile) but they also communicated the hopeful reality that God would not leave them in exile.

### ≡ Key quote

*“A close look into each prophet will reveal references to a new way, a new king, a new temple, a new creation and ultimately a new covenant. These words and pictures, pieced together, formed a prophetic mosaic of energising hope for the children of Israel. Into the wilderness of exile God had initiated something fresh.”<sup>8</sup>*

- + **Jeremiah:** prophesied how the Israelites would be a people of shalom even in the midst of exile (Jer 29:1-14) and how God was going to initiate a New Covenant (Jer 31:31-34)
- + **Ezekiel:** saw wild and beautiful visions of a mobile throne (Ezek 1), a new covenant community rising out of a valley of dry bones (Ezek 37) and a river of life flowing from a new temple (Ezek 40).
- + **Isaiah:** with vivid and startling language Isaiah defibrillated the hearts of the weary exiles. Isaiah focused on how the incomparable God was coming to shepherd his weary people, deliver them and bring them home.
  - ‘a new thing’ was happening - something beautiful in the wastelands of exile would spring up from the ground. (Is 43:19)
  - ‘a light to the nations’ (Is 49) - God’s deliverance for the Israelites was also pointing to a long term redemption for the Gentiles

# 8

## The suffering servant

Highlight the big question surfacing for Israel was, ‘If the prophets are right that something “new” is happening, how would it come about?’

- + Teach on the significance of the ‘servant’ passages in Isaiah’s prophetic work at this point in The God Story narrative. Here the focus is on a figure who would undergo unthinkable suffering in order to bring about God’s rule and reign.

### ≡ Key quote

*"A suffering servant would be the living instrument through which God's victory over the rulers of the world will be enacted. The promise of God would come at a price, an immeasurable and unthinkable price. But a price this suffering servant would be willing to bear."*<sup>9</sup>

- + Important to point out the 'who' and 'how' questions related to this servant figure were the cause of much debate for the next few centuries. General consensus landed on some kind of deliverer the Israelites could anticipate in the future. The title of this person would be 'The Messiah'.
  - (\*You may want to explain more of The Messiah theme coming through the Old Testament pages at this stage. We explain this in more detail in The King chapter.\*)

## 9 Return and rebuild

Explain how Babylon was eventually defeated by the Persian empire and through Cyrus, the King of Persia, the Israelites were allowed to return to Jerusalem. Point out that while many Jews actually stayed others were stirred up to go back and rebuild the temple of Israel.

- + Outline how Zerubbabel led the first envoy back to Jerusalem in 539 BC and began a restoration project for the temple. The prophets of that moment, Haggai and Zechariah, urged the people to follow Zerubbabel's lead and fulfil this project.
- + Despite the initial optimism for the rebuilding of the temple, explain how this eventually dissipated and expectations of restoring former glory were unmet.
- + **Ezra and Nehemiah:** Teach how these two contemporaries breathe fresh life into the restoration of Israel.
  - **Nehemiah:** had risen to prominence in Persia but was deeply moved by God to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the City's walls. *"Through exceptional leadership skills, effective organisation and bloody-minded defiance, Nehemiah refused to allow the city of Jerusalem to be known as a reproach."*<sup>10</sup> He mobilised all the Israelite families to rebuild the walls.

- **Ezra:** if Nehemiah was God's man for the public square, Ezra was God's man for spiritual renewal. Nehemiah rebuilt the walls, Ezra reformed their hearts. *"In line with Moses who 1000 years earlier had powerfully reminded the Israelites of their true identity, Ezra's inspired preaching bolstered a disillusioned people, anchoring their lives in the hope of the big story of salvation their destiny was tethered to."*<sup>11</sup>

## 10 Famous last words

- + Explain how it's quite difficult to describe the years after Nehemiah and Ezra - an overriding sense of anti-climax after the return from exile.
  - On one hand a dangerous obsession with the law had developed among some.
  - On the other hand an overriding feeling of emptiness filled the spiritual atmosphere.
- + In reality Israel was back in their own land but still under foreign control. Emphasise how Messiah expectation therefore began to grow. A big question loomed though:

### ≡ Key quote

*"Could the children of Israel understand a Messiah who was also a suffering servant, a great King who would make his way to his throne riding on a colt? To answer these questions we have to wait. Four hundred years."*<sup>12</sup>

- + Explain how God is about to go quiet but before he does, God speaks one more word of promise through the prophet Malachi:
  - *"See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction."* (Mal 4:5-6)
  - These are the last words of the Old Testament. Encourage people to enter into the 'waiting' as God goes quiet.

## Questions for Reflection or Further Application

Discuss how encouraging it is to know that God's presence flows to us even during our seasons of exile. What does it look like for you in your everyday life to seek the shalom of your town or city?

## Three Sacred Themes

The closing page of each chapter in *The God Story* book includes a summary shaped around three sacred themes which we believe helps knit the overarching storyline together. Feel free to use this as an extra resource to *The God Story Sermon Series* if you feel this would be helpful to summarise each talk. You will find this for *The Prophets and Exile* on p.111.

## End of sermon

<sup>1</sup> Alain Emerson and Adam Cox, *The God Story; Encountering unfailing love in the unfolding narrative of scripture*; (London, Form SPCK Group 2024), p.94-95

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.97

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p.99

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p.99

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p.96

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.100

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p.101

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p.106-107

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p.108

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p.109

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p.109

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p.110

\*All Bible passages quoted are taken from NIV unless stated.