

Bible Course 5 – Exile & Prophets (Jeremiah 31)

READ Lamentations 1:1-3

This cheery passage marks the opening of Jeremiah's second book – the book of Lamentations. *What* is Jeremiah lamenting? The destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar's armies. *Why* is he lamenting? – well, he's the one who for 20 or more years was prophesying this would happen if Israel didn't turn back to God.

It is also the context for the wonderful passage we had read this morning. By this time the worst had happened: in 586BC Jerusalem was destroyed, much of the leadership of Israel was in exile, and their future was uncertain. Jeremiah has just written to the leaders of Israel in Babylon advising them (ch29); and now God speaks into this desperate situation: **a word of hope** – indeed a word of hope for *now* and not just for them, for *the whole world* and not just for Israel.

(INTRO) But let's recap slightly – we're currently telling the incredible story of Scripture and last week we told the story of the judges and kings from the triumph of the Promised Land to the chaos of a divided kingdom. We saw how much we need godly rulers and how rarely we get them, how Israel really only needed God as their monarch but they rejected Him and paid the consequences.

Along the way, God sent many prophets to warn the people and call them back – the word prophet literally means 'mouth' – they are God's mouthpieces, and they came from all sections of society, from nobles like Isaiah to scruffy shepherds like Ezekiel. (Intro Jer – GREEN)

Today we focus on the prophets and we can really sum them up in two simple headings: **first the prophets are ignored**. Whether it was Amos in the 8th century or Jeremiah in the 6th, the prophets usually have a message that people don't want to hear.

The heart of their message is really the message of the heart: people's hearts are not devoted to God, they are divided between their own inclinations and true worship, and the result is a kind of religious veneer masking a deeper corruption in society.

Interestingly the prophets often spoke into times of apparent plenty, but which were marked by deepening inequality and the abuse of power. (Sound familiar?)

And time and again the prophets' message is the same – *give all of your hearts to God*. And time again the prophets are ignored. That's why there's so many of them – 16 books, not including prophets like Elijah, Elisha, or indeed Moses and Samuel.

And there's a challenge here for us too, isn't there? Throughout the history of the church there have been similar voices calling the church back to a deeper devotion: think of Thomas a Kempis, Brother Lawrence, A W Tozer, Oswald Chambers, Andrew Murray, Watchman Nee, Richard Foster, Dallas Willard – how many of us have heard of these people, let alone read them?

We need the prophets' voice as much as ever.

So the prophets are ignored but **secondly, the prophets are right**. Jeremiah was right – profoundly and tragically so. But in most of the Old Testament prophets is not just a message of challenge and judgment, but a message of hope and grace. 'Sing for joy' Jeremiah cries into their situation. *A new hope is coming* – God's people will be restored: READ v8a. But not just to the land, also to a renewed faith. Not only will there be forgiveness, there will be a new intimacy with God: READ v33-34a.

This particular passage doesn't say *how* this will happen – elsewhere we learn that God will do this via an appointed rescuer, who we now know to be Jesus; and Jesus himself fulfils Jeremiah 31 when he promises the Spirit to dwell in us in John 14. But what we do see here is a renewal of God's promise to his people – such a significant renewal that Jeremiah even calls it a new covenant. And *it is this new covenant that we rejoice in today* – sealed in Jesus' blood and confirmed through the gift of His Spirit in our hearts.

2,500 years later we can read these words and rejoice, knowing they have been fulfilled. **But like Israel, we also experience forms of exile.** St Peter calls us in one of his letters 'strangers in the world' – or to use the literal term 'exiles'. We no longer have a particular land which we leave, but to follow God with our whole heart can also leave us feeling, in some senses, in exile in the world in which we live. We serve a higher master, we follow a higher calling, we dance to the beat of a different drum.

And that remains as true today as ever. As Christians we are more conscious than we have been for generations that we are very much in the minority and that our values are increasingly very different from those around us, or in some areas from the law of the land.

And part of Jeremiah's advice is to seek the welfare of the place in which we live – we're not just to withdraw into a holy huddle. But also, like Daniel in Babylon, we have to decide on our red lines, the places where we won't compromise, even if it brings us trouble.

Today, more than ever, we have to keep asking ourselves the question: what defines us truly as God's people? Where will we risk unpopularity or even condemnation? What are we prepared to stake everything on for God's greater glory?

The prophets remind us of that uncomfortable truth that popularity in society is not necessarily any guide at all to God's favour or blessing. If we look entirely like those around us, in effect we have nothing to say to our culture. The only thing that counts is what God thinks of us, whether we're faithful to Him.

One of my life mottos is: **Do Things For The Audience Of One**. I don't always follow it (I wish I did!) but that's the phrase I keep coming back to when I feel conflicted. With the best of my understanding, what does God want in a situation? And then when I've decided that, only then do I work out the best and most sensitive way to live that out.

So, as I close, we hold together these two profound truths. On the one hand, in Christ we have this profound experience of *coming home* – we come home to God. And that brings us peace, joy and security.

And yet in that coming home we also find ourselves *living sometimes as exiles or strangers* in the world. And that brings us challenge, and sometimes cost.

But let the prophets encourage us today. They remind us that God blesses those who give their hearts to him, and they always point us towards to the ultimate source of hope and joy – Jesus Christ himself, our rescuer, our King, to whom we give all the glory, thanks and praise. Amen.