Daily readings to prepare for session 5

Day 1: Prophecy, call and hope – peace within the storm.

Read: Jeremiah 29.4–11

Reflect:

'Life isn't about waiting for the storm to pass … It's about learning to dance in the rain.' (Vivian Greene)

This week we discover the overarching theme of exile as we prepare for the next session of The Bible Course.

The exile was the darkest period of Israel's history. The Babylonians sacked Jerusalem, smashed up the city that Davidhad established and burned down the temple Solomon built. Jerusalem was left in ruins and God's people were deported to live in a foreign land.

But exile is more than just an event in the big Bible story; it's a deep metaphor for what we experience today. Life and its challenges remind us that things aren't as they should be. We live in exile right now.

Yet into the darkness, hope shines. God raised up prophets who warned of judgement but he also promised that the best was yet to come. Knowing this, we can learn to dance, even in the rain.

Jeremiah writes a letter to the exiles. What hope does he give them?

Jeremiah writes to those in exile to say God will not forget them. In fact he says that in exile God still has a plan. When 70 years have passed he will come for them and bring them back. Israel may have dark days ahead, but God is with them even in exile and he gives them hope of a better tomorrow.

When the tunnel gets dark, God promises there is light at the end. Jesus' death and resurrection tell us that there isalways a future and a hope. Jesus has promised to return, too, bringing us back to God. Exile is not forever.

What does Jeremiah 29 teach us about living well in exile today?

Remember, Israel spent 70 years in exile; 70 years of being away from home. Christians are referred to as 'exiles' in the New Testament. We live away from home, because our true home lies in the new heavens and new earth. Those 70 years of waiting can't have been easy, and neither is our waiting today. But the story of the Bible should inspire us towait well. We can win away from home!

God asked Israel to seek the peace and prosperity of the city. He didn't ask them to wait until the storm passed, butencouraged them to dance in the rain! God wanted Israel to shape and improve the city of their exile. Christians are exiles, but we're also called to be influencers.

Respond:

What could it look like for you to dance in the rain today?

Day 2: Elijah, King Ahab and the fire – it's decision time

Read: 1 Kings 18.1–39

Reflect:

Are you a natural decision-maker or not? Where you choose to eat out or what film you watch is probably of little consequence but when it comes to spiritual indecision in the Bible, the consequences are far greater.

What does God do about Israel's indecision?

God formed and called Israel to live under his rule and reign. Kings governed Israel and were subject to God too. Throughout the whole land, God's word was meant to be the final authority. But King Ahab and many others had littleregard for God and his word. Ahab's marriage to Jezebel saw the introduction of Baal worship in Israel. So God sent the prophet Elijah as his mouthpiece. Despite the risks, Elijah spoke words of warning, calling the people to make a choice.

'How long will you waver between two opinions?' (verse 21)

Imagine a bird walking along a branch that forks. The people of Israel were doing the spiritual splits – they'd got feet in both camps. So the prophet challenged them to make a decision. An altar was set up and the prophets of Baal prayed, danced and cut themselves. Nothing happened. Then as Elijah prayed, the God of Israel sent fire from heaven that consumed the altar. On that decisive day God showed who Israel should choose to follow.

What does this story mean for us today?

Perhaps you've also been wavering – doing the spiritual splits, scared to fully commit. It's a painful way to live. With God it's all or nothing. We can't have him and other gods too. But the best thing about going all in with the God of the Bible is that he won't let you down. When the odds were stacked against Elijah, God caused fire to fall. He proved his trustworthiness to Israel then and he will do the same for you today. If we go all in with him, we find he's already all in with us. Just look to Jesus.

As Paul said in Romans 8: 'If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?'(verses 31–32).

Respond:

What choices do you need to make so that you're living wholeheartedly for God?

Day 3: The prophet, adultery and reunion – the faithfulness of God

Read: Hosea 1.1–11; 3.1–5

Reflect:

The Bible is a love story but not in the Hollywood sense. It's probably the messiest love story ever told. At times it's deeply heartbreaking, but this is what makes it the love story of the ages.

The story of Hosea is the love story of the ages in a single book of the Bible. It's about a prophet who lived in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Following Israel's split, the ten northern tribes no longer had access to Jerusalem and the temple so they decided to set up alternative worship sites. They made two golden calves to worship. The Bible refers to this as idolatry and it's expressly forbidden in the Ten Commandments.

One of the prophets God raised up was Hosea. Hosea was about to embody the love of God towards his wayward people, highlighting the heartbreak caused by Israel's choices.

What do we learn about God and Israel in Hosea's story?

God told Hosea to marry Gomer, who cheated on him with other men despite Hosea showing her kindness and love. Her adultery leads to her enslavement. In the culture of that time, Hosea could have had her put to death. Instead, God meets with Hosea and says: 'Go again and love the adulteress woman, who is loved by another man [love her] even as the Lord has loved Israel' (Hosea 3.1). Hosea's repeated forgiveness towards his adulterous wife, mirrors God's love, patience and mercy towards his unfaithful people.

What does this story mean for us now?

To God, idolatry is like spiritual adultery. To love anything or anyone more than God is like cheating on him. Most of us don't have golden calves in our living rooms but in our hearts we can be worshipping idols just the same. We pursue substitutes for the real God in status and image; property and possessions; hobbies and holidays. But eventually we wake up to the reality that only the love of God truly satisfies. And that's the shocking message of Hosea: God remains faithful even when we cheat on him.

Hosea goes through the shame of buying back his own wife from prostitution. Imagine the talk around town. Picture the stares on the walk home. Hosea goes to extreme lengths to win back his wife. So has God through Jesus, who endured the shame of the cross so that we could be won back as his.

Respond:

Sometimes we convince ourselves we could never be loved by God. The story of Hosea is a picture of God's love for you. Maybe it's time to let yourself be loved?

Day 4: Hezekiah, Isaiah and the siege – God delivers his people

Read: 2 Chronicles 29.1–11; 32.1–23

Reflect:

Losing a job, the loss of a loved one, or stress and anxiety can all cause us to feel overwhelmed. Perhaps you've had to deal with news, even this week, that was so hard to stomach you felt you could go no further. If you're in this space,you're not alone.

What was Hezekiah's desperate situation?

When the Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom, they also besieged Jerusalem in the South. The king of Judah at the time was Hezekiah. He was understandably afraid and considered early surrender. Assyria was a world power and its people thought the God of Israel was just like the gods of other nations they had defeated – a work of human hands (2 Chronicles 32.19). They'd soon find he wasn't.

When surrounded by enemies, Hezekiah experienced God's protection surrounding him.

What do the responses of Hezekiah and God teach us today?

Fear could have paralysed Hezekiah. Instead, it dropped him to his knees. He and the prophet Isaiah cried out in prayer to heaven (2 Chronicles 32.20). But they weren't praying as a last resort; prayer was their primary weapon.

Hezekiah's backstory shows us that his heart was turned to God. Chapter 29 relates his first moves as king. He cleansed the temple, not of cobwebs but of idols. Hezekiah made sure the people's story would not be the same as that of the previous generation, who had turned their faces away from God. Hezekiah's example can be ours too. We are not tied to generational trends. Things can change!

Hezekiah did what was 'right in the eyes of the Lord' (2 Chronicles 29.2). He trusted God and saw a nation turn back to him. But still, the enemies came. Committing to life under God's rule doesn't necessarily spare us from attack. Instead of turning in on himself and despairing though, Hezekiah sought God. God heard his cries and, without breaking a sweat, he sent the enemy packing. Nothing that threatens you can stand against the God of the Bible. Take heart: God fights the battles of his people.

Respond:

Hezekiah both prayed and took action to repair the weak parts of the wall (2 Chronicles 32.5). Prayer and practical steps are not at odds with one another. Why not look to do both today?

Day 5: Defeat, exile and Babylon – when darkness falls

Read: 2 Chronicles 36.1–23, Psalm 137.1–9

Reflect:

When darkness falls, where do you run to?

It matters little who you are, what you do or what your status is. Things go wrong, the bottom can fall out of life, darkness falls on us all. But when darkness fell on Israel it should not have come as a surprise.

What was Israel like in the days before the exile?

The exile was not a random event in Israel's history. As strange as it sounds, God made sure the people of Israel would be granted their desire to live without him as their ruler.

It's OK to struggle with this, but the Bible is clear that God was just giving the people what they wanted. He was not quick to cast the people out of the land; rather, he sent messenger after messenger to warn them of the danger because he had 'pity on his people'.

The prophets were like God's lifebelt for Israel to take hold of so they could be pulled out of deadly waters. But they refused to listen. With all their might they tried to stay afloat, but going our own way without God invariably ends up drowning us. The people of Israel were only in darkness because they'd turned away from God who is light!

What does Psalm 137 teach us about the experience of exile? How can we have hope today?

Heartbroken and homesick, the psalmist invites us into the pain of exile. This is a psalm of lament, filled with a longing for home and a desire for God to enact justice, punishing the enemies of his people who gloated over their misery. From the place of darkness and pain, the psalmist turns to God for comfort, trusting that he will make things right.

God's love is a loyal love. He doesn't forget Israel, even when they forget him. He moves the heart of Cyrus, the new king of Persia (2 Chronicles 36.22), and orders the return of God's people to their land.

Who would do that for a people who were so unfaithful? Only the God of the Bible. When we are unfaithful, he remains faithful to his promises – God always stays true to his character. When the storms come, it's knowing where you're headed (the end of the story) and who you belong to (you're loved by God) that gets you through.

Respond:

It is right to lament. Passages of lament in the Bible help us express our emotions to God when we're hurting. Read Psalm 137 again and let yourself feel the pain of exile.

Day 6: The servant, suffering and hope – the Messiah is coming

Read: Isaiah 52.1–53.12.

Reflect:

We are hope-based creatures, constantly creating stories or pictures of the future. Hope for the marathon runner is the picture of the finish line. For those of us going through the daily grind, it might be the holiday or the house that the grind pays for. There's no force in life more powerful than hope. The people of God were about to need it more than ever.

Isaiah wrote to the Southern Kingdom of Judah warning them that unless the people turned back to God, his patience would run out. But into the darkness, hope shines.

What is the hope of Israel in exile according to Isaiah?

Speaking through Isaiah, God described a person he called his 'servant' who would one day free the people from the chains of oppression. What a picture to cling to – God was promising to send a rescuer!

In Isaiah 52, God told Jerusalem that a new time was coming so his people should put on their 'garments of splendour'(verse 2) and be ready to burst into song and dance (verse 9). And he says the same to us today.

How can God say this to suffering people?

God knew what he was doing and what Judah needed – a king who would fight and overthrow their oppressors, but not in the way they expected. The Messiah – God's chosen and anointed one – fought not with swords and spears but with silence and suffering. God was raising up a saviour-king like a root out of dry ground and there would be nothing warrior-like about him (Isaiah 53.2–3). Instead, he would be despised and cast out, but through his suffering, the servant was to achieve the greatest victory of all.

What does this hope of a servant mean for us today?

Isaiah points us to Jesus, the one who laid down his life, suffering on our behalf, to save us from exile – our separation from God and his Kingdom. On the cross we see him take the punishment for our sin so that we can be at peace,reconciled with God. The hope for the world is in Jesus, the servant-king, because one day, just as Jesus has been exalted (Isaiah 52.13), God will exalt those who trust in him.

Despite deep injustice and suffering, Jesus was faithful to God and to us to the very end. Knowing he was faithful then,do we really think he'll abandon us now? He will not.

Respond:

Jesus was a man of sorrows. Whatever you're going through, Jesus knows what it's like.

Day 7: Return, rebuild and wait – the best is yet to come

Read: Nehemiah 1.1–2.20

Reflect:

When was the last time you were deeply moved on behalf of others? Could our 24/7 access to news and social media be leading to compassion fatigue? Does frequent exposure to the suffering of others around the world lead to a hardening of our hearts and a sense of helpless apathy?

Nehemiah's story points to a desperate need to recover our sense of compassion – because true compassion always leads to action.

What moves Nehemiah compassion?

Nehemiah was working in a highly respected role as cupbearer to King Artaxerxes in Babylon (around 445–444 bc). He could have ignored the reported troubles in his homeland but his heart was so attuned to the promises of God that he couldn't help but weep when he heard about the sorry state of Jerusalem and its ruined walls. Nehemiah mourned for days, fasting and praying, confessing the sins of the people of Judah and asking God to hear his prayer for help and restoration.

Do we weep over the state of our cities, towns and villages – our world? Do we cry out to God for change and restoration?

What can we learn from Nehemiah's prayer?

On his knees, Nehemiah confessed Israel's sin and asked God to remember his promise that if his people turned back to him and kept his commands he would gather them from wherever they'd been scattered and bring them back to Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1.8–9).

God is still in the restoration business today; our sin has taken us far from him, but God doesn't change in his desire tobe reconciled with us.

Nehemiah asked the king to let him go to Jerusalem. When he arrived, he found a city without walls, unprotected. Living there would have felt as unsafe as sleeping in your house with the front door wide open. Many of the returning exiles lived out in the countryside in fear.

Despite opposition and the scale of the task, Nehemiah inspired the people to rebuild. Then, he and Ezra the priest worked to reform the people according to the Law of Moses. Ezra read it, explained it and led the people in repentance and recommitment.

Respond:

Do you see ruins that need rebuilding in the world? Let the story of Nehemiah take you from dreaming a dream to living it. Let compassion take you to God in prayer and move you to action today.