



FOCUS VERSE

Psalm 30:5

For his anger endureth but a moment; in his favour is life: weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.

LESSON TEXT

Jeremiah 18:1–6

1 The word which came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying,

2 Arise, and go down to the potter's house, and there I will cause thee to hear my words.

3 Then I went down to the potter's house, and, behold, he wrought a work on the wheels.

4 And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter: so he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it.

5 Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying,

6 O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the LORD. Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel.

Ezekiel 37:1–10

1 The hand of the LORD was upon me, and carried me out in the spirit of the LORD, and set me down in the midst of the valley which was full of bones,

2 And caused me to pass by them round about: and, behold, there were very many in the open valley; and, lo, they were very dry.

3 And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord GOD, thou knowest.

4 Again he said unto me, Prophesy upon these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.

5 Thus saith the Lord GOD unto these bones; Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live:

6 And I will lay sinews upon you, and will bring up flesh upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and ye shall live; and ye shall know that I am the LORD.

7 So I prophesied as I was commanded: and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold a shaking, and the bones came together, bone to his bone.

8 And when I beheld, lo, the sinews and the flesh came up upon them, and the skin covered them above: but there was no breath in them.

9 Then said he unto me, Prophesy unto the wind, prophesy, son of man, and say to the wind, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.

10 So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army.



FOCUS THOUGHT

Though God used different personalities in different places to speak His Word, the message was always a call to repentance and an offer of spiritual transformation.



CULTURE CONNECTION

Strong Leadership for Strong Personalities

When Abraham Lincoln was elected as the sixteenth US president, he appointed three of his former rivals to his advisory cabinet: Attorney General Edward Bates, Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase, and Secretary of State William H. Seward. It was an unprecedented move, according to historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, who published a prize-winning study of Lincoln and his cabinet called *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*.

In 2005, on the NPR interview program “Fresh Air,” host Terry Gross asked Goodwin about the way Lincoln effectively brought together these erstwhile competitors. Her answer is enlightening: “Well, what he had going for him, which I think is so unusual in political life, is that he had a set of emotional

strengths that today we might call emotional intelligence. So when all sorts of rivalries sprung up with these guys, and when they got hurt with one another, when they would call each other names . . . he was somehow able to be in the center of that storm. . . . he was just kind and sensitive to them” (www.npr.org).

Within a local church, strong personalities will likely generate some conflict. It is mostly healthy but can become a serious problem. (See Acts 15:39; Galatians 2:11.) We need to recognize that strong, passionate personalities are part of God’s gifts to His church; yet we need to remember that Christian care and compassion still remain our mandate as followers of Christ—and our key to healthy leadership.

OUTLINE

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- B. Exilic Life at Home and Abroad

II. PROFILING THE PROPHETS

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- B. The Prophet Ezekiel

III. HARMONIZING THE MESSAGE

- A. The Potter’s House
- B. The Valley of Dry Bones

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

It is almost an axiom of biblical leadership that God often calls men and women of differing temperaments, skills, and backgrounds to work together in promoting the kingdom of God. Notice the distinctive ways Ezra and Nehemiah dealt with the crisis of foreign intermarriage among the returnees (Ezra 9:3–4; Nehemiah 13:23–25), the tension between Mary’s and Martha’s approaches to service (Luke 10:38–42), and the actual parting of the

ways between Barnabas and Saul over John Mark (Acts 15:36–41). Yet, even in all their differences, God used them all to accomplish His will.

This lesson will take a closer look at another pair of biblical leaders—the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel—and the crucial roles they played in God’s plan to preserve a faithful remnant during the tumultuous period of the Exile. Though speaking to different audiences in different circumstances, both prophets called for a renewed heart of obedience to God.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

A. The Meaning of Exile

It is not saying too much to claim that the Exodus from Egypt and the Exile into Babylon form the historical-theological “poles” of the entire Old Testament. In a way, these paired events present us with something of a divine

conundrum. The Old Testament clearly claims that the same God who delivered Israel from captivity in Egypt sent Israel back into captivity in Babylon. Furthermore, in both instances, God was acting in faithfulness to His Word.

“And it came to pass in process of time, that the king of Egypt died: and the children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage, and they cried, and their cry came up unto God by reason of the bondage. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God looked upon the children of Israel, and God had respect unto them” (Exodus 2:23–25).

The divine actions that followed—the ten plagues, the Red Sea crossing, the Sinai theophany—are presented as God’s “fulfillment” of His covenant promises.

In the same way, at the end of the Pentateuch as Moses spoke to the people of Israel before their entry into the Promised Land, he warned them:

“Then the LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other, and there you shall serve other gods, which neither you nor your fathers have known—wood and stone. And among those nations you shall find no rest, nor shall the sole of your foot have a resting place; but there the LORD will give you a trembling heart, failing eyes, and anguish of soul. Your life shall hang in doubt before you; you shall fear day and night, and have no assurance of life” (Deuteronomy 28:64–66, NKJV).

Ponder for a moment the fact that Israel’s exile was predicted before she ever set foot in the Promised Land. God knew the waywardness hidden in the heart of His chosen people and had already prepared the way in which He would deal with it.

There is a certain “poetic justice” to the Exile. Many today are appalled at God’s

approval of the Canaanite genocide in the Book of Joshua; how could a loving God command the slaughter of innocents and such wanton destruction? However, the Exile shows that God holds His chosen people to the same standard and metes out the same punishment. The judgments of the Exile show that God is not capricious or bloodthirsty; He is just, fair, and above all, holy.

B. Exilic Life at Home and Abroad

There are some important misconceptions about the period of the Exile that must be addressed. One common misconception is the idea that the Babylonian exile entailed a deportation of the entire Judean population. First, such an action would have been a logistical impossibility. Second, it would have served no real purpose and would have only burdened Babylon with an enormous indigent population.

Another common misconception is that the Exile was a one-time event. In fact, the Babylonian exile actually occurred in three distinct phases, following a practice that has been described as socio-political “decapitation” (forced deportation of skilled workers and key social leaders) where each phase represented a scaled-up attack on national morale and sovereignty as the cuts in leadership and social infrastructure went deeper and deeper.

Iain Duguid, in the *NIV Application Commentary*, combats this second misconception by explaining the Babylonian philosophy of exile: “They took the leaders and skilled workers from the subjugated nations and brought them from the margins of the empire to the center, to Babylonia itself. There they treated them reasonably well and allowed them to settle in ethnic groups and to advance within the Babylonian system. The goal . . . was to incorporate these diverse people groups in the service of the empire by bringing their various talents and gifts into the center, while allowing them to retain their own ethnic identities.”

The first phase of the Exile happened when Nebuchadnezzar defeated Pharaoh Necho at the pivotal Battle of Carchemish in 605 BC, which effectively gave Babylon control of the entire Levant (the lands adjacent to the eastern Mediterranean Sea) (P. A.

Beau-lieu, *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books*). It was around this time that a young Daniel and his three friends were taken into exile as part of a larger plan to take the best and brightest of the elite families from these territories, effectively make them “Babylonians,” and then train them for service in the ever-growing bureaucracy. (See Daniel 1:3–4.)

The second phase of the Exile occurred in 597 BC in response to King Jehoiakim’s rebellion. Judah, which had avoided direct confrontation with the Babylonians up until this point, became the focus of Babylon’s attention. Nebuchadnezzar’s intentions were plainly punitive; he was not simply trying to supply Babylon with bureaucrats; he was trying to permanently cripple Judean social and political infrastructure to prevent further rebellions. Therefore, Nebuchadnezzar deported Jehoiakim’s son, Jehoiachin, after only three months as king, plus many other members of the royal family and the Judean elite, leaving no one “save the poorest sort of the people of the land” (II Kings 24:14). In this second phase of the Exile, the Jerusalem priest Ezekiel was sent into captivity.

These exiles were not directly integrated into the growing Babylonian political system. Rather, it seems from Ezekiel’s account that they were assigned to live essentially in ghettos, or segregated communities—allowed to maintain their distinctively Jewish identity and practices, and were, according to Ralph Alexander, “regarded more as colonists than slaves” (*Expositor’s Bible Commentary*).

The final phase of the Exile coincided with Nebuchadnezzar’s return, after a final rebellion under King Zedekiah, to fully destroy the city of Jerusalem. This final military action included a final deportation that left the city almost completely empty and destroyed. (See Jeremiah 39:1–9.) Most importantly for this lesson, the prophet Jeremiah was given the opportunity to travel to Babylon with the exiles but chose instead to remain behind in Jerusalem with the people. (See Jeremiah 40:1–6.)

It is important to keep in mind that the prophets Ezekiel and Jeremiah preached from opposite “ends” of the exilic experience. Ezekiel’s messages were directed

toward a people living in relative ease and prosperity in the land of Babylon. In many of his prophecies was a sensible undercurrent of motivation to “jar” these complacent people—the wealthy elite of decadent Judah—from their spiritual apathy. (See Ezekiel 16.) Jeremiah, on the other hand, preached to a people just ravaged by the unfathomable cruelties of siege warfare, a people left leaderless, helpless, and hopeless. Thus Jeremiah proclaimed the words of God between heart-rending sobs of grief. (See Jeremiah 9:1–2; 14:17.)

II. PROFILING THE PROPHETS

Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel gave quite detailed “portraits” of the prophets themselves—more so than almost any other Old Testament prophetic book. Considering these profiles is an important component for understanding both the distinctions and commonalities of their prophetic messages.

A. The Prophet Jeremiah

For good reason, the prophet Jeremiah has earned the moniker “The Weeping Prophet.” Not only do his prophecies contain emotional outbursts (Jeremiah 4:19–20), but the book also records the prophet’s own prayers (the so-called “Confessions of Jeremiah”).

Jeremiah was a member of a priestly family from the city of Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin (Jeremiah 1:1). This would indicate Jeremiah was a descendant of Eli and Abiathar, the ruling high priests in the days of Samuel and Saul. Abiathar became an important ally of King David (I Samuel 22:20). Tragically, after serving faithfully as the high priest during David’s storied reign, Abiathar became ensnared in Adonijah’s failed coup (I Kings 1:7, 19). When Adonijah requested Solomon’s permission to marry David’s concubine, Abishag, Solomon saw the request as a subversive maneuver, had Adonijah killed, and banished Abiathar and his descendants from the Jerusalem high priesthood, thus fulfilling Samuel’s word of judgment against Eli (I Kings 2:26–27).

In other words, Jeremiah was from a disgraced and exiled priestly family. The history of Israel’s overconfident abuse of the Ark in

the days of the judges was personal history to him and probably influenced his sensitivity to the egregious abuses of the Temple in the days leading up to the Exile. (See Jeremiah 7:1–15.)

Furthermore, Jeremiah represented the last of Eli's lineage. In Jeremiah 16:2, God commanded the prophet: "Thou shalt not take thee a wife, neither shalt thou have sons or daughters in this place." Unmarried and childless, Jeremiah would have no one to inherit his property or carry on his legacy. At his death, the line of Eli would be expunged from Israel. No wonder Jeremiah felt so deeply the threat of Jerusalem's destruction, for he pre-figured and embodied it in his own life.

Jeremiah's message was one of acquiescence to Babylon as God's instrument of judgment against Judah for her obstinacy and rebellion. Habakkuk and Zephaniah had seen divine judgment looming on the near horizon; in Jeremiah's day, that threatened storm had broken. Judah's downfall was certain, and the only way forward was to submit to the rule of Babylon.

"Thus saith the LORD, He that remaineth in this city shall die by the sword, by the famine, and by the pestilence: but he that goeth forth to the Chaldeans shall live; for he shall have his life for a prey, and shall live. Thus saith the LORD, This city shall surely be given into the hand of the king of Babylon's army, which shall take it" (Jeremiah 38:2–3).

Obviously, such a message cut against the political grain of the day, particularly since many influential members of the royal court still hoped for a military alliance with Egypt. Jeremiah's words were taken as evidence of cowardice and, worse, treason. In fact, Jeremiah was arrested and imprisoned upon trying to leave the besieged city on the charge that he was "going over" to the Babylonians. (See Jeremiah 37:11–15.)

B. The Prophet Ezekiel

Though not quite as much is known about Ezekiel, the available information creates an interesting comparison with his companion

prophet Jeremiah. As is evident from the book's introduction, Ezekiel was also a priest in active ministry in the Jerusalem Temple. Thus, he was socially part of the "elite class" that carried the blame for Jerusalem's downfall and the Temple's destruction. Almost a century before, the prophet Isaiah had issued a clarion call to repentance and restoration:

"Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth: they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear them. And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood. Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow" (Isaiah 1:14–17).

Certainly, Ezekiel was not in agreement with their sentiments or actions, but he was familiar with their rejection of all covenant obligations, their extravagant wastefulness, and their blatant disregard for the value of human life.

Observing that Ezekiel left Jerusalem nearly a decade before its fall, Ronald Clements points to another importance influence: "Jeremiah . . . was well aware of the developing political situation in Judah when Zedekiah was enticed into rebellion. . . . Ezekiel, on the other hand, heard only whispers of this situation" (*Westminster Bible Companion*). We forget that Ezekiel had to wait for years before his predictions of Jerusalem's downfall could be confirmed and his prophetic status validated. Ezekiel had to endure many things in the meanwhile—the mockery of his theatrical actions, the repudiation of his predictions by other "prophets," and the sudden death of his wife; he was truly an outcast among outcasts.

The harsh realities Ezekiel faced served to shape the major contours of his prophetic message. He consistently reiterated the theme of individual responsibility. Ezekiel had to confront these elite, so used to "passing

the buck,” with the harsh reality that they were the ones responsible for Jerusalem’s downfall and would therefore suffer death in exile. In a particularly haunting passage, Ezekiel attacked the exiles’ misapplication of an ancient proverb to their current status:

“What mean ye, that ye use this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying, The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge? As I live, saith the Lord GOD, ye shall not have occasion any more to use this proverb in Israel. Behold, all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sinneth, it shall die” (Ezekiel 18:2–4).

III. HARMONIZING THE MESSAGE

Without a doubt, Jeremiah’s and Ezekiel’s ministries were among the most difficult in all of Scripture (perhaps second only to Noah). The people to whom they preached were lost in a morass of immorality and idolatry. Even more shocking, they still considered themselves to be the Lord’s chosen! They were suffering a spiritual malady that would certainly fit within the Pauline category of a “strong delusion” (II Thessalonians 2:11).



“One of the most consequential ideas embedded in modern institutions and traditions and habits of thought is theological. Stated bluntly, it is the assumption that even if God exists he is largely irrelevant to the real business of life. To put this somewhat more tactfully, contemporary society and culture so emphasize human potential and human agency and the immediate practical exigencies of the here and now, that we are for the most part tempted to go about our daily business in this world as though God did not exist, or at least as if his existence did not practically matter. In short, one of the most insidious temptations fostered within contemporary secular society and culture, a temptation rendered uniquely plausible by

the ideas and assumptions embedded within modern institutional life, is the temptation to practical atheism” (Craig M. Gay, *The Way of the [Modern] World*).

Thus the messages of Jeremiah and Ezekiel included powerful calls to repentance and spiritual restoration. At the end of the day, both Jeremiah and Ezekiel recognized that Israel’s ultimate salvation did not depend on her own righteous behavior but on a divine transformation of the heart.

A. The Potter’s House

One of the most powerful messages in the Book of Jeremiah is his vision at the potter’s house (Jeremiah 18). As Jeremiah watched the potter work, the vessel developed a structural flaw, forcing the potter to crush the vessel and completely remake it. Jeremiah saw, as Walter Brueggemann said, that “the potter completely controls the clay, can reshape it . . . [and] will completely reshape the clay until the potter has it the way he wants it” (*Exile and Homecoming*).

After observing this process, the Word of the Lord came to Jeremiah:

“O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the LORD. Behold, as the clay is in the potter’s hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel” (Jeremiah 18:6).

There were two issues in play. One was the will of the potter; the other was the malleability of the clay. This was not simply a claim of divine sovereignty over human willfulness, but a symbolic way of defining the nature of covenant relationship, made clear by the follow-up explanation:

“At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy it; if that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them. And at what instant I shall speak

concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it; if it do evil in my sight, that it obey not my voice, then I will repent of the good, wherewith I said I would benefit them” (Jeremiah 18:7–10).

In the immediate context of Jeremiah’s situation, the vision at the potter’s house demonstrated that Israel would go through the crushing experience of the Exile. However, the ultimate result would be not obliteration but a rebuilding in the Potter’s hand. If Israel would finally and fully yield to God, she would ultimately find salvation!

B. The Valley of Dry Bones

The vision of the valley of dry bones was, like Jeremiah’s vision of the potter’s house, crucial to Ezekiel’s prophetic message. Iain Duguid pointed out that the “valley . . . location also provided the backdrop for the prophet’s vision of God’s glory in [Ezekiel] 3:22” (*NIV Application Commentary*). The valley of dry bones had become a symbol for Israel’s current spiritual state—not just spiritually dead, but long-since spiritually dead with no real hope of returning life. (See Ezekiel 37:11–14.)

Key to understanding Ezekiel’s vision is to note that these bones remain unburied. This image harks back to Moses’ warnings in Deuteronomy 28:25–26:

“The LORD shall cause thee to be smitten before thine enemies: thou shalt go out one way against them, and flee seven ways before them: and shalt be removed into all the kingdoms of the earth. And thy carcase shall be meat unto all fowls of the air, and unto the beasts of the earth, and no man shall fray them away.”

Israel had reached this “dry bones” status because of her refusal to abide by the Lord’s covenant. We should hear uncertainty when Ezekiel responded to God’s query about the possibility of these bones ever living again: “O LORD GOD, thou knowest” (Ezekiel 37:3).

Yet, as the prophet obeyed God’s command and began to speak the divine word to the valley of bones, something miraculous happened. The scattered bones began to reconnect until full skeletons were formed and then recovered with flesh and skin. As Ezekiel faced the valley full of corpses, God commanded him to prophesy one more time:

“Then said he unto me, Prophecy unto the wind, prophesy, son of man, and say to the wind, Thus saith the LORD GOD; Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live” (Ezekiel 37:9).

As soon as Ezekiel spoke these words, the corpses sprang to life and stood, “an exceeding great army” (Ezekiel 37:10)! The point of this prophecy is driven home rhetorically by the play upon the various meanings of the Hebrew term *rûa*, which can be translated as “wind” or “breath” or “spirit.” Duguid perceptively noted that, as with the creation of Adam in Genesis 2, “which was a two-stage process involving first his formation and then his filling with the breath of life, so the re-creation of this mighty army is [also] a two-stage process of forming and filling” (*NIV Application Commentary*).

Ezekiel not only saw Israel in her current sin-deadened state but also saw God’s plan to resurrect and re-create His chosen people. The connection with Jeremiah’s vision at the potter’s house is not difficult to make. Both visions followed a narrative pattern of crushing/death/judgment followed by remaking/resurrection/salvation. God’s prophetic words through Jeremiah and Ezekiel both proved the inescapability of coming judgment but offered the assurance of renewed salvation on the other side.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Though faced with opposite sets of social and political circumstances, the Word of God shared by Jeremiah and Ezekiel beautifully harmonized, pointing out the necessity of covenant obedience, the reality of divine

judgment on sin, and the ever-present hope of salvation for those who truly repent. It is therefore no surprise that both Jeremiah and Ezekiel described the coming saving work of God in terms of receiving a “new heart.” (See Jeremiah 31:31–34; Ezekiel 36: 26–27).

He turned that disfigured wall into one of his most successful depictions of Highland life” (Charles Swindoll, *The Quest for Character*).



“J. Stuart Holden tells of an old Scottish mansion close to where he had his little summer home. The walls of one room were filled with sketches made by distinguished artists. The practice began after a pitcher of soda water was accidentally spilled on a freshly decorated wall and left an unsightly stain. At the time, a noted artist, Lord Landseer, was a guest in the house. One day when the family went out to the moors, he stayed behind. With a few masterful strokes of a piece of charcoal, that ugly spot became the outline of a beautiful waterfall, bordered by trees and wildlife.

If we were to be completely honest, we would have to admit to ourselves that much of the trouble we face in our lives is of our own making. Our laziness or inattention earns us poor reviews at work; our selfishness and lack of kindness strains our relationships with friends and family members. It is difficult to confess and much easier to blame. (See Genesis 3.) Yet, if there is any harmony between the messages of the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel, it is this: The only way to experience the saving, reconciling, restoring power of God’s Spirit is to confess and repent. As true as it is that we trouble ourselves with our own poor decisions, it is equally true that much of the pain we face would be healed if we would simply turn back to God with open hearts and outstretched hands. ■

REFLECTIONS

- Professor Craig Gay’s concept of “practical atheism,” defined essentially as believing in God but living life in a way that such belief has no direct impact on daily life, sounds frighteningly close to Judah’s self-deceived status during the ministries of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Would you agree that many “Christians” today fall into the category of “practical atheists”? Why or why not? How should the church face and defeat this deceptive lifestyle?
- Think about the current members of your church’s ministry team (or, alternatively, think about your current and immediately past pastors). What sorts of differences in temperaments and abilities do you notice or remember? How do you see the variety of strengths and giftings positively impacting your local congregation?
- Why is it so important for the church, even with a variety of leaders, to maintain one consistent message? How do we make sure the variety of giftings does not overwhelm the unity of mission?