

Lesson 18: The Exile and Daniel (Daniel)

The Exile

Judah has now joined Israel in exile. Because of their disobedience and lack of trust, and their failure to listen to the prophets, the Israelites are now in slavery in Assyria and Babylon, separated from Jerusalem and the Temple. The kings of Judah failed to obey the law and led the people in the worst forms of pagan idolatry. The history of the infidelity of God's chosen people and God sending prophet after prophet to call His people back to Him is the history of much of the Old Testament. Through the prophets God tries desperately to win the hearts of His children, but the kings and the people fail to respond. Ahab failed to listen to Elijah; Hezekiah only listened half-heartedly to Isaiah; Jeremiah lived during the righteous reign of Josiah, but his sons, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin and Zedekiah all failed to take heed of Jeremiah's call to repentance.¹ The time of the Exile is a great humiliation to the Israelites. Jeremiah prophesies that the Israelites will be in exile from Jerusalem for seventy years.² They were expecting to rule all nations as an international kingdom, but now they are held in slavery as the weakest nation. Something has gone terribly wrong.

How could this happen? Why would God allow them to be taken out of the Promised Land? Certainly it was largely because of their disobedience. God, speaking through Jeremiah says, "Yet you have not listened to me, says the Lord, that you might provoke me to anger with the work of your hands to your own harm."³ We are reminded that when we break the moral law we are not left unaffected. In fact, it might be said that in our disobedience the law breaks us. Sin, rather than bringing us happiness, leads us to frustration and discontent. As we have already seen, obedience to God's laws is not so much for His benefit as for ours. God wants us to live uprightly not because He simply wants us to obey, but because it is the path to our happiness.

The fact that the Israelites are now in exile because of their sin is pretty clear, but why is the exile from Jerusalem happening now, at this particular time? A key part of the Law is to honor the Sabbath and practice the Jubilee. God gave the Sabbath as a sign and a means to remain free from slavery to sin and the world. During the Sabbath the Jews are to give themselves and the land rest from work so that they could dedicate that day to the worship of Yahweh. The Israelites, however, had not been keeping the Sabbath, or other parts of the Law, and so God takes them out of the land and forces them to give the land a rest – a sort of forced Sabbath. For generations they had not observed the Sabbath, and so God says that the land will have a seventy-year break from their presence because that is how many Sabbaths they have not obeyed the Sabbath. The physical exile is the sour medicine needed to draw the people back to God and His commands so that they may spiritually live in the presence of the Lord.

¹ Jeremiah 25:1-14

² Jeremiah 25:11-12; 2 Chronicles 36:21

³ Jeremiah 25:7

There were a total of three deportations of the Israelites from Judah. The first is in 605 BC during the reign of Jehoiakim.⁴ In this deportation, the prophet Daniel is taken as a young boy into Babylon. In 597 BC, Jehoiachin is taken into Babylon along with the prophet Ezekiel. And the final deportation takes place under Zedekiah in 587 BC, which is when the destruction of the Temple occurs. Daniel and Ezekiel are the two prophets of the Exile and live out most of their lives in Babylon. These two prophets give a very clear picture of what the Exile was like. Jeremiah, we may remember, is not taken to Babylon. He is left in Jerusalem with the poorest of the poor from the now scattered tribe of Judah. Near the end of his life Jeremiah is taken to Egypt and it is very possible that he knew another young prophet of his day, Ezekiel, before Ezekiel is taken into exile in the second deportation. The first we hear of Ezekiel is in 593 BC when he begins twenty-two years of preaching in Babylon.

The Exile Continues

To understand the Exile it is necessary to read the prophet Daniel. He is in exile in Babylon (modern day Iraq) and the Babylonian king gives him a special privilege of education and the luxury of the royal food and drink. Daniel, however, refuses to eat the king's food because it comes from meat sacrificed in the pagan temple. (All meat markets in the ancient world were in the temples of the idols, and so to eat this meat would be to participate in the culture of pagan idolatry.) Daniel does not want to take part in this and so he does not accept the food of the royal court.⁵ From a young age he proves himself to be a faithful Jew.

Toward the end of his life the Babylonian empire is conquered by Cyrus and the Persians; this occurs in the year 539 BC.⁶ Daniel has spent his entire life in exile, hoping that he would see the time when Israel's purification would end. It is now almost seventy years since the Exile began and, knowing Jeremiah's prophecy, Daniel is hopeful that God will soon restore Judah to the Promised Land. So turning to God in prayer, Daniel begs, "O Lord, according to all your righteous acts, let your anger and your wrath turn away from your city Jerusalem, your holy hill; because of our sins, and for the iniquities of our fathers...and cause your face to shine upon us."⁷

In his prayer Daniel acknowledges that Israel is in this mess because of their sin, and though they have not been faithful, God has.⁸ Many Jews at this time are questioning why God is allowing their suffering to continue. They challenge God's fidelity to the covenant. Daniel responds by affirming that it is the people of Israel who broke the covenant, not God. "All Israel has transgressed thy law and turned aside, refusing to obey thy voice. And the curse and oath which are written in the Law of Moses the servant of God have been poured out upon us, because we have sinned against him."⁹ Daniel, in brutal honesty, goes on to admit that even after seventy years of exile the

⁴ 2 Chronicles 36:5-8

⁵ Daniel 1:1-9; see also 1 Corinthians 10:18-20

⁶ Daniel 9

⁷ Daniel 9:16-17

⁸ Daniel 9:7, 9

⁹ Daniel 9:11 which harkens back to Deuteronomy 28:15

people have not learned their lesson, and they continue to break the Law. He says, "...Yet we have not entreated the favor of the Lord our God, turning from our iniquities and giving heed to thy truth."¹⁰ If the covenant is broken it is because the people of Israel continue to separate themselves from God through their sin and idolatry.¹¹ While Daniel admits the guilt of the people, he also affirms God's fidelity. Daniel uses the Hebrew term *zadek* (righteousness) to describe the Lord's faithfulness to the covenant. It means an unconditional fidelity to the covenant. Daniel is answering the question coming from the people by suggesting it is the people who have been unfaithful, not God.

Although he is not personally culpable for the Exile, he accepts responsibility for participating in the sinfulness of the people and prays that the Exile will end.¹² This is an important lesson for us today. While we may not participate directly in the corruption of our culture, there is some degree to which we are responsible. We often hear today, "I wouldn't do that, but I'm not going to tell someone else not to do that. I don't want to impose my morality on anyone." This attitude is not a virtue in that it allows sin to grow. If we do not (prudently) rebuke our neighbor or fellow citizen when there is obvious sin, then we allow sin to take hold. If more righteous people would speak up then perhaps our own nation would have greater respect for life and the other goods of creation that are abused by a secular culture.

The Law is clear that until the people turn from their sin they will not return to the Promised Land.¹³ Daniel prays with intensity that God will not delay in sending them back to Jerusalem.¹⁴ Yet, the people have yet not learned to give their whole heart to God. As he prays the angel Gabriel appears to him.¹⁵ What an intense moment this must have been. Daniel is in deep, passionate prayer when unexpectedly an angel shows up. Gabriel does not bring to Daniel the happy message that he would bring to Mary at the Annunciation. Gabriel says that while the seventy years are up the Exile is not finished. "Seventy weeks of years are decreed concerning your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy one."¹⁶ The message is a somber one for Daniel to hear: the people are not yet ready to live in the presence of God and so He will continue to wait, and now it will take seventy weeks of years (weeks is another way of saying seven), which is 70×7 years = 490 more years of exile. This is unfortunate but necessary in order to purify the people of their sin. It is not that God is untrue to His word, but that His justice is based on our fidelity. If we fail to turn our hearts to Him, He will not force Himself on us. This extension of the Exile is to prepare the hearts of the Israelites for God.

¹⁰ Daniel 9:13

¹¹ Daniel 9:7-14

¹² Daniel 9:3-6

¹³ Deuteronomy 30:1-3; 19-20

¹⁴ Daniel 9:14-19

¹⁵ This is the first time the angel Gabriel appears in the Scriptures. He is charged with making God's purposes known as he will also do when he delivers messages to Zechariah (Luke 1:11) and Mary (Luke 1:26).

¹⁶ Daniel 9:24

The full prophecy,¹⁷ while cryptic, is a precise foretelling of when the Messiah will come, when he will die, and what will occur immediately following his death. It is hard to imagine Christ's coming to be foretold in detail down to the specific year, and yet this is what we have here, over five hundred years before Jesus is born. It states that from the time the command is given to "return and rebuild Jerusalem"¹⁸ 49 years ("seven weeks") will pass before the completion of the building of the walls of Jerusalem (409 BC), and 490 years will pass before the Messiah comes. The command is given by King Artaxerxes in the year 458 BC. 490 years from 458 is 26 AD, which is the exact year (give or take a few months) that many scholars have dated the beginning of Christ's public ministry with his baptism by John the Baptist.¹⁹ The prophecy also states that after "half of the week" (3 ½ years) the Messiah "shall cause sacrifice and offering to cease," and that the desolation will continue to the end. It is about three years and four months after Jesus' baptism that he is crucified, at which time the Temple veil is rent in two as a sign that the Temple sacrifices would cease.²⁰

Then within one generation of Christ's crucifixion the Romans came and destroyed the Temple and the entire city of Jerusalem in 70 AD, and sent the Jews into exile, fulfilling the verse, "And a people with their leader that shall come, shall destroy the city and the sanctuary; and the end therefore shall be waste, and after the end of the war the appointed desolation."²¹

This is a precise, if cryptic, prophecy of the coming of the Messiah. It is understandable, then, why the Jews of Jesus' time were expecting something to happen. There was an anticipation of a Jewish king who would restore the Temple and reclaim the Promised Land with a triumphant and final victory over all other nations. The expectation, of course, was correct, they just misunderstood the type of Messiah and victory that God had in mind.

Daniel's Visions

Another key part of Daniel's prophetic work during the Exile is his interpretation of King Nebuchadnezzar's dream. The king has a dream and asks men of his council to tell him

¹⁷ Daniel 9:24-27

¹⁸ This occurs in 458 BC by the King Artaxerxes I, see Ezra 7:11-26.

¹⁹ including the ancient Church historian Bishop Eusebius

²⁰ The fact that the Temple sacrifices ceased at the time of the crucifixion is further confirmed in a passage in the Talmud (a written collection of ancient Jewish tradition). The Talmud mentions the "miracle of the scarlet thread," in which a scarlet colored thread would miraculously turn to white as the sign that God had accepted the sacrifice. However, the Talmud reports that forty years before the Temple was destroyed (which happened in 70 AD, exactly forty years after the crucifixion), the great miracle of the scarlet thread ceased to occur. The passage reads: "Originally they used to fasten the thread of scarlet on the door of the Temple court on the outside. If it turned white the people used to rejoice, and if it did not turn white they were sad...For forty years before the destruction of the Temple the thread of scarlet never turned white but it remained red." (*Rosh Hashanah 31b*) According to the New Testament (cf. Matthew 27:52; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45) at the precise moment that Jesus dies on the Cross the curtain of the Temple is torn in two, symbolizing the efficacy of the sacrifices of the Old Covenant, which explains the change in the scarlet thread from white to scarlet.

²¹ Daniel 9:26. Today the only thing that remains from the Temple's destruction in 70 AD is the Wailing Wall.

what the dream was and to interpret it. None can, and Nebuchadnezzar proclaims an edict that the wise men were to be slain. Being one of the wise men who were to be slain Daniel immediately went to the king to ask for time to give the king the interpretation. Then Daniel turned to God in prayer and God revealed to him the dream and its interpretation.²² This is another example of the power of prayer. The dream is not revealed to Daniel until after he petitions God in humble prayer.²³

Nebuchadnezzar's dream is of an enormous statue constructed of four different materials. The head is made of gold; the breast and arms of silver; the belly and thighs of bronze; the legs of iron and the feet partly of iron and partly of clay. Then in the dream a rock is cut from a mountain (not by a human hand) and it struck the statue and broke it in pieces, scattering the pieces. The stone then becomes a great mountain that fills the whole earth.

Daniel interprets the dream as an image of four empires that will rule over Jerusalem. While it is not explicit in the text, subsequent history shows that the gold kingdom is Nebuchadnezzar and the kingdom of Babylon; the silver kingdom is the Medo-Persians; the Greeks and Alexander the Great is the bronze kingdom; and the fourth kingdom of iron and clay is the Romans, which will crush the first three as iron breaks everything, but it will be partly strong and partly brittle. Finally, at the time of the fourth kingdom, that of Rome, God Himself will set up a kingdom, which will never be destroyed and will cover the whole earth. Daniel does not ascribe to each kingdom the historical form that it will take, but this is an outline of Jerusalem's future history. Daniel's interpretation comes true in the universal kingdom of the Catholic Church, which covers the entire world. It is the mountain upon which the Kingdom of God is established.²⁴ No other kingdom or civilization has survived through the centuries, except for the Catholic Church, which is God's Heavenly Jerusalem.

In another vision Daniel sees four different beasts that come out of the water and walk the land.²⁵ The four beasts represent four different kingdoms coming out of the nations of the Gentiles and conquering Israel, the Promised Land. In the vision a creature, looking like a man, comes and destroys the beasts. The title given to the figure as the mediator of salvation is "the Son of Man."²⁶ This is the same title that Jesus gives himself.²⁷ The two visions of Daniel are intimately related. The four earthly kingdoms will not last but the heavenly kingdom will last forever. In the first vision the kingdom comes as a stone, in the second it is the Son of Man. Jesus himself makes the connection in the parable on the wicked tenants.²⁸ The stone that was rejected is now the cornerstone.

²² Daniel 2:25-45

²³ Saint Jerome said that, "Daniel would not have seen the vision if he had not first refined his soul by fasting" (*De jejunio*, I, 9). Daniel's prayer of praise (3:35-68) is included in the Divine Office for Sundays and feast days, and is recommended as a prayer of thanksgiving after Mass. This prayer acknowledges all the great things God did in the past on behalf of His people and is prayed by the Church today.

²⁴ Cf. Isaiah 2:2-5; Micah 4

²⁵ Daniel 7:1-28

²⁶ cf. Daniel 7:13

²⁷ cf. Matthew 12:8; 16:27; Mark 8:31; 14:62; see also CCC, #440

²⁸ Matthew 21:33-46

Because of Daniel's prophecies many Jews at the time of Jesus are expecting the Messiah. There is a renewed sense of hope that God will rescue His people. In particular, the Jews are looking for the anointed one to reestablish the kingdom of Israel and defeat the pagan nations. That is why there were many people in the first century who claimed to be the messiah. Many of them were killed and are lost to history. One, however, was killed and rose from the dead and appeared to more than 500 people at once.²⁹ Jesus is the Messiah that the first century Jews were expecting and, far from being lost to history, he became the cornerstone of human history. Jesus is the Son of Man prophesied and who established a kingdom that lasts forever and that kingdom was the Catholic Church

The Jews were so certain that the prophesy of Daniel would come true that they rebelled against the Roman Empire (66 – 70 AD). Their rebellion is what leads to the final destruction of the Temple in 70 AD. They were right to expect the Messiah, but they misinterpret the meaning of Daniel. The 490 years finished not with the reestablishment of Israel as it had been under David or Solomon, but with the establishment of a heavenly kingdom for all ages. Jesus warned that the Temple would be destroyed, but it would be rebuilt in his resurrected body to continue mystically in the Catholic Church, which is the kingdom of Heaven on earth.

The Gospels and Jesus' own promise about his second coming shed a great deal of light on the book of Daniel and its imagery regarding the restoration of Israel and the Temple. In light of the New Testament, Daniel can be understood perhaps to be speaking more about the Last Judgment than about the end of the Exile itself. The Exile makes sense only in light of Christ and the plan of salvation. The Catechism says:

The forgetting of the Law and the infidelity to the covenant end in death: it is the Exile, apparently the failure of the promises, which is in fact the mysterious fidelity of the Savior God and the beginning of a promised restoration, but according to the Spirit. The People of God had to suffer this purification. In God's plan, the Exile already stands in the shadow of the Cross, and the Remnant of the poor that returns from the Exile is one of the most transparent prefigurations of the Church.³⁰

²⁹ 1 Corinthians 15:6

³⁰ CCC, #710