



Hope for the Future

God's Presence Brings Life

About the Story

Israel was divided into two kingdoms after King Solomon died (922 BCE): Israel in the north, and Judah in the south. The northern kingdom fell to the Assyrians in 722 BCE. For a while, the kings of the southern kingdom Judah tried to avoid being conquered by the Assyrians by paying tribute to Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, even going so far as to worship his pagan idols. King Johoiakim of Judah rebelled against the Babylonians in 597 BCE, and the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem, sent 10,000 members of Judah's upper class into exile, and put Zedekiah on the throne. Ten years later, King Zedekiah rebelled as well, leading Nebuchadnezzar to destroy Jerusalem and the temple, and take the majority of Judah's population into exile. He left only the poorest of the population behind to work in the fields.

The Point:

God provides a future full of hope. Sometimes we find ourselves wishing that we were anywhere but where we are. Jeremiah challenges us to see that God is with us, and may be using us to bring healing and hope to those we are with.

Jeremiah spoke God's word to the exiled upper classes soon after they had been moved from Jerusalem. He declared that Nebuchadnezzar was the agent of God's punishment because the people had not followed God's ways as they ought to have. Nonetheless, God was not abandoning them, and promised to stay with them. Through Jeremiah, God goes so far as to tell them that settling down in their new country will benefit both their new homes and themselves. While there will be "false prophets" who will tell the people that God will deliver them sooner, God affirms that their exile will last several generations.

Opening Prayer

Dear God, when we are in painful situations, it is easy to blame you for putting us there, and to worry that you have abandoned us. Help us to see your presence is always with us and to seek ways to make things better—not just for ourselves, but for all involved. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

Supplies:

- Index cards
- Pens or pencils

Into the Story

Write on index cards descriptions of one or two places you would not like to be (boot camp, away from home, in an elevator with a stranger, lost in a city, on vacation with people you do not like, etc.). Pile the cards together take turns picking one. Tell everyone why the situation you pick might be difficult for you and what you might need to improve the situation. Allow everyone to have at least one opportunity to share. Keep the cards for use later.

Last Week/Next Week

Last week, God's people were promised that a light would shine in the midst of their darkness—a darkness they caused by not worshipping God. In today's lesson, those who have been sent into exile in Babylon due to their disobedience are promised God's presence and care. Next week, in a vision of dry bones, God promises to give the exiled people new life.

Learning the Story

Because they have not followed God's laws, the people of God are sent into exile. Although they are being punished, God encourages them to make the best of it, and promises to stay with them. After seventy years, they will be returned home.

Read Jeremiah 29:1, 4-6 – God tells the people to settle in for the long haul...in exile.

- ❓ While it was Nebuchadnezzar who took the people of Israel into exile, God claims responsibility. What is it like to be in a difficult position and believe that God put you there?
- ❓ “The exile” becomes an important part of the history of God's people. When you tell the story of your life, what challenges do you include?
- ❓ Although they are being punished, the people are encouraged by God to make new lives and be happy. Do you think you could do this, especially if you are far from home?

Read Jeremiah 29:7-9 – God warns the people not to put their faith in false prophets.

- ❓ The Hebrew word translated as “welfare” in verse 7 is *shalom*, which can also mean peace and wholeness. The people are told that their own wholeness, *shalom*, is based upon how well they care for the city of their enemies. Can you imagine how praying for enemies—personal or political—could bring you peace?
- ❓ The “false prophets” that God describes are those who tell the people what they want to hear. How do you discern who is telling you the truth?
- ❓ When we get into trouble, it is tempting to want to follow the lead of someone who promises an easy way out. Most often that just gets us into more trouble. What gives you the courage to stay and do what is right?

Read Jeremiah 29:10-14 – God promises never to abandon the people.

- ❓ The people of God have historically considered the land of Israel to be their homeland. Where is home for you? Is it a place or a state of mind?

Bible Connections

- ✚ God's plans for God's people are often not what they expect, but are always good (Genesis 50:20, Deuteronomy 4:29-31; Isaiah 55:6-9).
- ✚ God claims the Israelites, and promises to be their God (Exodus 6:7, Jeremiah 30:22).
- ✚ Jesus promises the disciples that he will always be with them (Matthew 28:30).

- ❓ God promises that the people will be able to return home after 70 years. Do you think after all that time that they will want to? Are there any members of your family that consider another country or place their true “home”? What is that like for you?
- ❓ Military personnel and their families are among those who have no choice about leaving one home behind and finding a new one. Which of these verses could be particularly comforting for them?
- ❓ Thousands of people are forced into exile every year because it is no longer safe to remain in their homes. If you were God, what would you want Jeremiah to tell them?

Living the Story: Fellowship

Many times, people experience Jesus “showing up” through their relationships with others.

Take a few minutes of silence to remember people who have “been” Jesus for you. Write their names down on one side of an index card. On the other side of the card, write people or times when you were able to “be” Jesus for someone else. When everyone is finished, give each person an opportunity to share a short story of their experience of Jesus through one of the people you wrote down. Then give the opportunity to share a time when you were able to be Jesus to someone else. End with a prayer of thanksgiving for these saints, and ask for further opportunities to serve others.

Supplies:

- Index cards
- Pens or pencils

Closing Prayer

Gather into a circle. One by one look at the person to your left and say, “No matter what happens, God will be there for you, and I will pray for you.” When everyone is through, close by saying, “Amen.”

Bible Nuts & Bolts: The Exile

Being exiled to Babylon could have been a disaster for the Jews. Jerusalem had been the capital city of Judah, and the temple was the center and focus of worship. Also known as the “Babylonian captivity,” the exile was a period of great despair for many, and some adopted the religion of their captors. For others, living as refugees brought the people of God together as they solidified worship, practice, and tradition without the great temple.

Soon after they arrived in Babylon, Jeremiah spoke God’s word to the exiles, urging them to hold on to their faith that God had not abandoned them, despite appearances to the contrary. Many of the psalms reflect the anguish of the Jews in exile (see Psalm 137). Expecting a messiah (an anointed one) to rescue them, they will be surprised when God later speaks through the prophet Isaiah and names King Cyrus of Persia, another pagan, as the one who will rescue them. God’s people will return to Jerusalem in 538 BCE.

At Home

- ✚ Pay attention to the people you see every day. Is there someone who seems lost or unhappy? Find out how you might make them feel less alone.
- ✚ If you are in a difficult situation, use a journal to ask yourself this question every day: “How is God with me?” Write a prayer affirming God’s presence at the end of each entry.
- ✚ Learn about the needs of a city near you. Perhaps there is a church or an organization you might volunteer with.

Daily Readings**Sunday—Read Jeremiah 29:1, 4-14**

Despite being sent into exile, God’s people are promised God’s protective presence and care. Take some time today to thank God for being present in your life.

Monday—Read Jeremiah 29:15-23

Jeremiah tells the people that the ones they left behind in Jerusalem will be destroyed. Have you ever escaped a disaster—a flood, hurricane, or tornado? How did it feel to hear about the ones who stayed behind?

Tuesday—Read Jeremiah 30:1-11

God promises to deliver the people of the northern kingdom (Israel/Jacob) as well as those from the southern kingdom—but not before there has been tremendous pain. How can you reassure someone who is in trouble by promising a bright future without minimizing their current pain?

Wednesday—Read Jeremiah 31:1-14

God will restore the people to their homes. This time of year, weather can get quite chilly in the northern hemisphere, which is particularly challenging for people experiencing homelessness. If this is the case where you live, find out if your church can supply warm clothing to a shelter.

Thursday—Read Jeremiah 31:31-40

God promises a new covenant. The people have not done well on their record of keeping the first covenant God made with them. They might now be in exile, but God promises not to abandon them. Ever. What verse in this passage really stands out to you? Why?

Friday – Read Ezekiel 1:1-3, 2:1-10

Ezekiel is called to be a prophet. Reflect on a time that you were tasked with being the bearer of bad news. How did it feel? How did the hearers respond?

Saturday – Read Ezekiel 3:1-11

Ezekiel eats the scroll. Reflect on what God might be trying to communicate to you that you are having a hard time hearing—pray for God to help you open your heart to God’s message.