RETURN FROM EXILE

OVERCOMING
Loss, Failure & Personal Setbacks

a spiritual recovery guide by
F. Remy Diederich
Dear Pastor:

Thank you for your interest in using my sermon series for Lent. I preached these messages a few years ago and got a great response. In fact, over time the teaching developed into my recent book, *Return From Exile*.

Following are four messages to be used during the season of Lent. You can use them in any order that you wish. “Going Deeper” questions follow each sermon. These are for small groups to meet and discuss the sermon.

The book, *Return From Exile*, is written as a forty day devotional. You might want to make the book available to your church prior to Ash Wednesday, or even on Ash Wednesday, for people to go deeper with the theme of overcoming loss for the entire Lenten season. But the sermon series doesn’t require the book. *

My hope is that God will use these sermons, through you, to help your church overcome their loss, failure, and personal setbacks through the resurrection power of Jesus.

Feel free to contact me with any questions at remydiederich@yahoo.com.

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* If you want to purchase the book in bulk, you can buy it at the Create Space e-store (https://www.createspace.com/6386451) at a 25% discount using this code: UVMH5T4C. The book is also available at Amazon.com in paperback or on Kindle.

**Return From Exile**

- Part One: *Laid Bare*
- Part Two: *How to Return from Exile*
- Part Three: *Called to Exile*
- Part Four: *The Way of Brokenness*
How many of you know what the word “Lent” means? Does Lent mean:

a. “40 Days” in Latin
b. Springtime
c. Crucifixion
d. Suffering
e. The fuzzy stuff that collects in your belly button (nope, that’s “lint”)

It means springtime. I didn’t know what it meant either until I looked it up a few years ago. Isn’t it interesting how we can celebrate this season year after year and not know what it means or what it’s all about? Credit that to the wonders of religion!

So, let me explain how we got the word, “lent”. For centuries the church used the 40 days leading up to Easter as a time to remember the 40 days that Jesus spent in the desert where he was tempted by the devil.

The Spirit led Jesus into the desert where the devil tempted Jesus for forty days.
Jesus ate nothing during that time, and when those days were ended, he was very hungry. Luke 4:1,2

The church called these 40 days by a Latin word: Quadragesima. But during the Middle Ages they started using the word, “lent”, meaning “spring” because it happened every spring and it was a lot easier to say! Spring and the Forty Days became synonymous.

Now, as you probably know, many people fast something during Lent to remember that Jesus went without food or water. I’d imagine some of you are fasting for Lent. Some people fast meat. Some fast coffee, or alcohol, or chocolate.

So what does exile have to do with the season of Lent? Everything. When Jesus walked into the desert for 40 days of fasting he chose to send himself into a time of exile. Jesus voluntarily cut himself off from three things: people, water, and food. And then he was subjected to temptation. It was all very symbolic of what exile means.

Exile is a place where you are cut off from your sense of place: your sense of belonging. It’s a place where you lack all that you need. It’s a time of isolation and suffering. Exile is often associated with the desert or wilderness in the Bible.

It’s an over-simplification, but Jesus was showing people that he identified with and understood the exiles in Israel’s history. I don’t know if you realize this but much of Israel’s story has to do with exile. The theme of exile runs through the entire Bible. It starts when Adam and Eve were driven from the Garden of Eden. You might say that all of humanity has been in exile since that time.
Plus, Abraham was called into exile; he was called to leave his country and his people and move to a desert land that was experiencing a famine. Then the Israelites were sent to Egypt in another kind of exile. When they came out of Egypt, the Israelites refused to enter the Promised Land, ending them up in a time of exile in the Sinai Peninsula. And much later in their history, the kingdom of Israel was split in two: the northern kingdom was sent into exile to Assyria and the southern kingdom was sent into exile to Babylon.

Whenever I see a big theme like this I’m convinced that God is trying to tell us something. There is something God wants us to understand about exile. One of the things is: God uses exile. Time in exile is never wasted. I used to lament about my wasted years in high school. I did stupid things: sold drugs, got arrested, etc. But when you give your life to God he redeems everything you’ve ever done. God works everything for your good.

To help understand exile I read through the book of Ezekiel. Ezekiel was a prophet and he was part of the group of people who were sent to Babylon in exile. One thing I noticed is that there are different reasons for exile. I came up with five reasons:

The first kind of exile comes from unbelief. That’s what happened to God’s people when they failed to enter the Promised Land. They doubted God’s ability to help them.

The second kind of exile comes from sin and rebellion. That’s what you see in Ezekiel. God’s people lost the right to live in the Promised Land not merely for doubting God but for worshipping false gods. I’ll talk more about rebellion in a minute.

Third, exile comes from bad choices. It’s not about unbelief or rebellion. You just made some decisions that set you back and put you in a time of exile.

Fourth is bad luck. Some people end up in exile through no fault of their own. Sometimes bad things just happen for no reason.

The fifth kind of exile is self-imposed. That’s what Jesus did and Abraham did. They ended up in a hard place because God called them to a hard place and they obeyed.

Now, every one of us ends up in exile at some time in our life, for at least one of these reasons. If I asked you to raise your hand if you feel like you are in some kind of exile, my guess is at least a third of us would raise our hand. You feel cut off. You feel displaced. You probably feel alone and misunderstood. Some how you ended up far from where you want to be and you aren’t sure how to get back on track. You wonder if you’ll ever get back on track. You might even wonder if God has left you.

I want to help you find your way back. You see, God always brings his people back from exile. He never leaves us in exile. Exile is only for a season. But exile has a very specific

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1 "Then they will know that I am the LORD their God because I made them go into exile among the nations, and then gathered them again to their own land; and I will leave none of them there any longer. Ezekiel 39:28"
purpose and we can learn something about from the word itself.

When God sent his people to Babylon in exile he spoke to the prophet Ezekiel:

...son of man, pack your bags to prepare yourself for exile and go into exile (Hebrew: galah) ... Ezekiel 12:3

I looked up the Hebrew word that means “go into exile”. It also means to “expose, lay bare, uncover, reveal, or even, be stripped.” In fact, here’s another verse using “galah” but the word isn’t translated exile:

I will tear down the wall you have covered with whitewash and will level it to the ground so that its foundation will be laid bare (galah). Ezekiel 13:14

God is speaking metaphorically to his people. He’s telling them that he’s going to expose their true heart. He’s going to allow hard times to come to prove to them who they really are. The word “galah” has a double meaning. It means exile but it also means to be laid bare because that’s what happens in exile: your heart is laid bare.

For good or for bad, exile reveals what’s in your heart. Here in Ezekiel, exile revealed a heart of rebellion. But when Jesus went into exile, exile revealed his heart of obedience.

Let me ask you this: what has exile revealed in your heart? If you’ve been divorced, what did getting divorced reveal about your heart? If your finances are upside down: what has that revealed about your heart? If you’ve lost your health: what has that revealed about your heart? If you are single and don’t like being single, what is being revealed in your heart?

You see, each one of these is a kind of exile. There are many kinds of exile. Just about any loss can send you into exile. These are the kinds of things that the season of Lent causes us to think about. Like Jesus, we enter a time of self-imposed exile to consider our dark side. We don’t fast chocolate or coffee to earn brownie points with God. We fast to identify with loss and expose our weaknesses. We lay bare our foundation. Sometimes our lives are so busy and so cluttered that we never come face to face with whom we really are. We never see our heart. But exile shows us our heart.

Psalm 107 speaks about people living in exile and what they can do to recover;

Some wandered in desert wastelands, finding no way to a city where they could settle. They were hungry and thirsty, and their lives ebbed away. Psalm 107:4,5

Do you remember what I said at the beginning about what defines exile? No food, water, or people. That’s exactly what it says here. Plus it says that: Their life ebbed away. “Ebbed away” means “overwhelmed to the point of giving up.” Exile sucked the life out of them.

It goes on to talk about two different kinds of exile. One is, what I’ve been talking about here: rebellion.

Some sat in darkness and the shadow of death, prisoners suffering in iron chains, for they had rebelled against the words of God and despised the counsel of the Most
The shadow of death means these people feel overwhelmed and suffocated by their pain. It feels like they can’t go on. Each day they think things can’t get any worse but each day they do.

You might be in a similar place today. Maybe darkness and the shadow of death describe your situation. You might be filled with regret over what you’ve done. You aren’t in iron chains but you feel as trapped in life as if you were. The psalmist continues...

So God subjected them to bitter labor; they stumbled, and there was no one to help.

Sin is a heavy taskmaster. Sin is like a loan shark. A loan shark offers a desperate person the money they need now if they promise to pay a higher interest rate later. Why does anyone do that? Because they think the risk is worth it. They are so desperate they convince themselves that they’ll be able to make enough money to pay off the loan shark.

That’s exactly the lie we believe about sin. We think the risk of sin is worth it. We always think that sin won’t do to us what it does to others. Somehow we’ll be the exception. We’ll beat the odds. But when we don’t, we pay the price. We end up in chains, just like it says here.

But this is what I want you to see. These exiles didn’t lose hope. What did they do?

Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble...

The last thing people in exile often do is call out to God because they think God has washed his hands of them. They assume God wants nothing to do with them. So they give up. But the psalmist wrote this song to tell us that’s not true. God exposes our sin to get our attention and call us back to him. He doesn’t expose us to shame us or abandon us. So don’t give up.

When God exposes your dark side, don’t give up, but also, don’t cover up. That’s the other temptation, right? You’ll be tempted to lie your way out of it...to deny it or excuse it or minimize what you’ve done. The rationalizations and justifications will come up in your mind effortlessly. But don’t go there.

The best thing you can do is come clean. If you want to leave your exile, own up to what you’ve done. Admit it and deal with it. Take the consequences now because, trust me, consequences grow exponentially over time. The longer you wait to come clean the bigger the fall in the end.

Come clean today and it might be a little embarrassing. If you wait five years it will not only be embarrassing but you might lose something important to you: like your family or your job or maybe even your life. I’m not exaggerating. I have stories to prove it.

Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress.

If you are in exile today, do you want to be saved from your distress? That’s exactly what
God wants to do.
He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death and broke away their chains.

The word “brought” and “broke” are powerful and active. God reaches into the mess you are in and pulls you out of it. Then he sets you free from your chains.

The psalmist writes with confidence here. He seems to know something about God...maybe it’s because he’s been through his own exile. But he closes by saying...
Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men, for he breaks down (demolished) gates of bronze and cuts through bars of iron. Psalm 107:14-16

God doesn’t just knock down doors made of wood. He obliterates gates of bronze. Then he cuts through bars of iron. When it comes to rescue, God holds nothing back.

Many of us here today are in exile. I don’t know how you got there: I don’t know if it’s from your rebellion or unbelief or bad choices or God’s calling or just a bad break. But the writer seems convinced that God will break through gates of bronze and bars of iron to set you free. That’s pretty impressive. I think that’s worth asking God to do in your life as well.

Prayer: Jesus, in this season of Lent, we are conscious of your faithfulness and our unfaithfulness. Where we have failed you and ended up in exile you have succeeded. But it’s because of your faithfulness that we can now ask to be rescued from our distress. We don’t ask on account of what we’ve done. We ask on account of what you’ve done. Come...break through the gates of bronze and the chains of iron. Deliver us and help us to find our way back to you. Amen.

Going Deeper

Use the follow questions for personal reflection and/or to discuss with family, friends and small group.

1. Think of a time when you felt like you were in “exile”, that is, a time when you were physically, emotionally, or spiritually displaced or disconnected. Describe that situation, how you got there, how you felt, and what you did about it.
2. Think about and list as many exile stories as you can from the Bible; both corporate exile and personal exile, when individuals experienced the pain of being displaced and cut off from where they wanted to be.
3. Read Psalm 107:1-5. How does the psalm describe exile?
4. Read Psalm 107:6-32. Note that in vss. 10,17, and 23 he describes three kinds of exiles and their response. How are they different and how are they the same?
6. What does this psalm teach you about exile and your response to exile?
7. If you feel like you are in exile today, what steps can you take based on this psalm.

Pray for people in your group who feel like they are in exile.
Return From Exile
Part Two: How to Return from Exile

Outline:

How to Return from Exile:
1. Name it.
2. Grieve it.
3. Learn from it.
4. Reframe it.
5. Expect to return from it.

Message:

What comes to mind when you here the word exile? You might think of someone booted from their country, like the Dali Lama. He was exiled from Tibet and now he is a man without a country. In the Bible, Israel was often in exile...forced out of their land to live in Egypt or Assyria or Babylon.

But living in exile isn’t just about leaving your country. Exile can happen on a personal level whenever life throws you a curve and you end up in a place you never planned on being. Exile is a place of feeling displaced, disconnected, confused, and often depressed.

Last week I said that I could probably tell the story of my life as a series of exiles. Let me start by telling you about one of these stories.

Many years ago I was on staff at a small church in Minneapolis. It was a tight knit group of about 70 people that had been together for seven years. The pastor was a close friend and a neighbor. He was also a mentor to me. We spent a lot of time together. But suddenly, he became very controlling and I had to confront him.

When I challenged what he was doing he said I could either agree with him or leave the church. That shocked me. I couldn’t believe he would say that. I couldn’t believe he could be so quick to throw me under the bus as both a friend and a co-worker. But given his ultimatum I had to leave. I couldn’t endorse how he was treating people.

When I left the church I entered a time of exile. I was displaced, disconnected, confused and often depressed. One day I was fully engaged in ministry in a community of friends and the next day I had no community and no ministry with no place to go. I was disoriented, lost, and hurt. Lisa and I were so wounded it took over five years for us to reenter the world of church.

In the Bible, exile involves people leaving their country and walking through a desert to a place of imprisonment in another country. The desert symbolizes the isolation and hardship of exile.
When you and I end up in exile, we aren’t in a literal desert, but we still end up in a dry place emotionally and spiritually. Like exiles, we are often cut off from people, and though we may not hunger and thirst like desert people do, we hunger and thirst for things like; peace or love or health or stability or purpose or comfort.

Exile is a place where fear and sadness often flood your mind. Just when you think it’s gone it comes back with a vengeance. You feel trapped and even fear that God has left you.

We all experience exile. Here are seven types of exile that we experience:

- Emotional: depression, PTSD, anxiety disorders, panic attacks, bipolar disorder
- Spiritual: bad church experience or just feeling disconnected from God
- Relational: divorce, estrangement from children/parents, death of a loved one, a bad marriage.
- Financial: debt, loss of job.
- Career: bad fit. 70% of people feel like they aren’t in the right place.
- Health: inability to have children, chronic pain, terminal disease.
- Season of life: Life between college and marriage and/or career, managing old age.

Today I want to give you some practical advice about how to find your way back from exile. I realize there are no easy answers but I have five steps for you to consider:

**If you want to return from exile you need to first, name it.**
A few people stopped me last week after my message. They said, “Thanks. It helps to know that I’m in exile.” I’m not sure why that is…but sometimes it’s just good to have a name for what you’ve got.
It’s like going to the doctor when you are sick and they tell you that you’ve got the latest Asian flu. There’s nothing you can do about it but some how it helps to give it a name. It helps to know that you aren’t weird or abnormal. What you’ve got is common to all people and you’ll eventually get over it.

**Second, if you want to return from exile you need to grieve it.**
I don’t think most people understand how important it is to grieve their loss. Maybe it’s our Scandinavian/German heritage that tends to just want to suck it up and keep going. But you can’t just suck it up and be healthy.

To grieve means to identify a loss and appreciate the impact it’s had on you. And then, instead of ignoring the impact, you give yourself permission to feel the pain, be sad about it, and come to terms with the new life that comes through loss.

That’s really important to understand. If you just suck it up and move forward like nothing’s happened, you aren’t living in reality because something HAS changed. When you experience loss, life ISN’T the same. Don’t kid yourself. If you keep acting like nothing’s changed you will eventually go off the tracks. Some time, some place, you’ll hit a wall and it won’t be pretty.
We don’t always know how to grieve but Jewish culture has a grieving process. They aren’t afraid to express their pain. Let me give you an example from the Bible.

In the sixth century BC, Babylon rolled into Jerusalem and totally destroyed the city. They killed a third of the people, they took a third of the people back to Babylon in exile and they left the poorest third in Jerusalem. The prophet Jeremiah wrote a poem expressing the pain of the experience, called Lamentations. It starts like this:

Jerusalem once was full of people,
but now the city is empty.
Jerusalem once was a great city among the nations,
but now she is like a widow.
She was like a queen of all the other cities,
but now she is a slave.

Do you see what he’s doing here? He’s naming his loss. He’s not in denial. He accepts his new reality. The city is deserted. They lost their former glory. They are now slaves. Let me keep reading...

She cries loudly at night, and tears are on her cheeks. There is no one to comfort her; all who loved her are gone. All her friends have turned against her and are now her enemies.

Judah has gone into captivity where she suffers and works hard. She lives among other nations, but she has found no rest. Those who chased her caught her when she was in trouble.

The roads to Jerusalem are sad, because no one comes for the feasts. No one passes through her gates. Her priests groan, her young women are suffering, and Jerusalem suffers terribly.

Her foes are now her masters. Her enemies enjoy the wealth they have taken for her many sins. Her children have gone away as captives of the enemy.

The beauty of Jerusalem has gone away. Her rulers are like deer that have no food. They are weak and run from the hunters.

Jerusalem is suffering and homeless. She remembers all the good things from the past. But her people were defeated by the enemy, and there was no one to help her. When her enemies saw her, they laughed to see her ruined. Lamentations 1:1-7

Did you notice all the “no” phrases? No one to comfort, no rest, no one comes, no food and no one to help. Jeremiah identifies all the loss in his life and then grieves it.

You might say, this is so negative. If God is in your life, shouldn’t you be more positive? Well, no. Not at first. It’s important to start by being honest. Jeremiah didn’t exaggerate or complain. He just stated the facts. He refused to sugar coat what happened.
I’ve sat with a lot of people in pain. The last thing you want is someone to walk in the room and try to make everyone happy and put a positive spin on everything.

If you need to cry, cry.

If you need to swear, swear.

If you need to yell, yell.

That’s a part of grief. God can handle it. He appreciates the honesty. He’s not looking for smily faces and Bible quotations when he knows your heart has just been torn in two. If you try to keep all of that bottled up it’s only going to cause problems later.

Jeremiah wrote from Jerusalem. But another writer was in Babylon at this time. Listen to what he said:

> By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion....If I forget you, Jerusalem, ...May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth ..., Remember, LORD, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell. "Tear it down," they cried, "tear it down to its foundations!" Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy are those who repay you according to what you have done to us. Happy are those who seize your infants and dash them against the rocks. Psalm 137:1,2,7-9

This is pretty shocking to find in the Bible. People ask, How can this be in the Bible? This is horrible. No. This is human. This is what humans say when they are overcome by grief. It’s not true but it’s true to how they feel in the moment. It’s true to the grief they are experiencing. It’s true to the sense of justice they feel.

If you want to move through your grief and not just stuff your grief you need to give yourself permission to express your dark side. When you express your dark side you see how much you need God. When you admit your anger and fear and sadness it’s a lot easier to turn to God...to ask God to come and help you find the path out of exile.

**Third, if you want to return from exile you need to learn from it.**

Last week I told you that the word for exile in Hebrew is *galah*. *Galah* means “to go into exile”. It also means to expose, lay bare, or reveal. I thought that was interesting because when you are in exile your heart is often laid bare. You see things about yourself that you wouldn’t normally see.

But it’s not just our hearts that are laid bare; it’s God’s heart that is laid bare too. The Bible tells the story of a man called Job. Job was stripped of everything valuable to him. He had his own personal exile experience and out of that he concluded this:

> God reveals (galah) mysteries from the darkness and brings the deep darkness into light. Job 12:22

In other words, God reveals himself to us in dark places.

*Galah* means a lonely desert experience, but it also means a time of revelation. Exile reveals my heart but it also reveals God’s heart. God reveals himself to us in exile in ways that he
doesn't reveal himself on the mountaintop. When things are going well, we don't always hear God. When times are tough, our ears are often more finely tuned to hear what God has to say.

Most of the book of Lamentations is about mourning. I read the first few lines. There are five chapters of complaint and mourning. It ends like this:

*Why do you always forget us? Why do you forsake us so long? Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may return; renew our days as of old unless you have utterly rejected us and are angry with us beyond measure. Lamentations 5:20-22*

Based on the open and close, you'd think the book has nothing good to say, no hope to offer. But there's something interesting about the way the book is written. Jewish poetry is often written in a way that highlights the main point. The casual reader would miss this. But at the center of the book Jeremiah tells us what he's learned to be true about God.

*...my soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself; "The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him." The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; Lamentations 3:20-25*

The book is laid out like this;

Great is Thy Faithfulness

The way it's laid out points the reader to the faithfulness of God. Jewish readers see this. They understand how it's written. Out of all this pain come these incredible words of faith and hope.

Here, Jeremiah says that exile isn’t the worst place. Why? Because there are lessons you learn in exile you can’t learn anywhere else. But you need to be alert and look for them. You have to listen and not sit around and feel sorry for yourself. Good things can happen in exile. God reveals himself in exile.

**Next, if you want to return from exile, reframe it.**

Once you understand that exile isn’t the end of the world it helps to reframe the whole experience. Reframing means you stop seeing things from your human perspective and start to see things from God’s perspective. Once you see things from God’s perspective things can turn around for you.

A simple analogy is what happens in sports. Have you ever seen how players react when they get pulled from a game? The coach pulls them out: maybe they messed up, maybe they got hurt, or maybe they just need a rest.
Some players pout. Some get angry. But what does the smart player do? The smart players talk to the coach about how to get back in the game. Or they might go sit on a stationary bike to keep warmed up. Or they might talk to another coach about how to improve their game.

That’s what we need to do in exile. Don’t pout. Don’t get angry. Don’t give up. Just get ready to get back in the game. I think too many people give up just when God is about to put them back in the game.

**Finally, if you want to return from exile, expect to return from it.**

Like I said at the beginning…there’s no formula for coming out of exile. There is no timetable. I can’t promise you when it will happen. But the record shows that God always brings his people out of exile and he brings them out better than when they entered.

They will know that I am the LORD their God because I made them go into exile among the nations, and then gathered them again to their own land; and I will leave none of them there any longer. Ezekiel 39:28

I know a number of us are in exile today. The good thing is: God knows that too and he has a plan for you to return from exile. His faithfulness is great and his mercies are new every morning.

Prayer:
Father, in the middle of heartache Jeremiah was able to say: Because of the LORD’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness... The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him. Father, be with those of us in exile today. Fill us with hope and thanksgiving. Reveal yourself to us. Show us the path out of exile. Amen.

**Going Deeper**: Use the following questions for personal reflection and/or to discuss with family, friends, or small group.

1. Last week I had you consider an exile story from your past. Think of a new one (most of us have several). Again, talk about the situation, how you got there, what it felt like, and how you processed it. Are you still in exile today?
2. Remy mentioned five steps to return from exile. What are they?
3. Which of the steps stood out to you most? Why?
4. Does it help to simply “name” something as exile? Why or why not?
5. Many people don’t know how to grieve a loss. It seems too negative. What did you learn about grieving a loss from this message. What might that look like in your situation?
6. The word for “exile” in Hebrew also means to “reveal”. Our heart is revealed but so is God’s heart. What have you learned, or what do people learn in the Bible, from exile?
7. Part of reframing exile is developing gratitude. Why is gratitude important to returning from exile?
8. Pray for people to move through at least one of these steps toward exile.
Return from Exile
Part Three: Called to Exile
Good Friday Devotional

Over the last two Sunday’s I’ve been looking at the idea of exile. Many of the great Bible stories are stories of exile. When the Israelites lived in Egypt, that was an exile. When they wandered in the Sinai Wilderness for 40 years, that was a exile. And when Jerusalem was destroyed, many Israelites were sent to Babylon to live in exile.

So, exile is a common theme in the Bible. But it’s a common theme in our lives as well. Exile happens to us when life throws us a curve, when we end up in a hard place that we weren’t expecting. It might involve a broken relationship, like a divorce. It might be financial…like being unemployed for an extended season. Or it might involve the loss of health.

Exiles are dark times. Painful times. Times full of questions and doubt. We wonder where God is…why God allowed hard times to come. Some people refer to exile as “the dark night of the soul”. Maybe you are in the middle of an exile experience right now.

We’ve looked at a few reasons why people go into exile: one is rebellion against God. This is what happened in the Bible. When God’s people rejected him, hard times followed. Exile reminded people how much they needed God.

Sometimes you end up in exile because of bad decisions…maybe foolish decisions. Exile is just the consequence of not choosing well.

And then some times exile happens unrelated to anything you’ve done. Sometimes bad things ust happen. The chips fall and they don’t always fall in your favor.

But the exile I want to look at today is the exile that God calls you to live. God’s call doesn’t always lead to fun and happiness. Sometimes it leads to a season of sacrifice and suffering.

My oldest daughter’s family has been staying with us this week. They have two young children and I’ve been reminded how parenting young children is a calling to sacrifice. Their life is not their own. They don’t get the sleep they want. They don’t get much normal adult interaction. They negotiate on who gets to have the first nap! You could say they are in a season of exile.

Of course, we are here today to celebrate the ultimate exile. Jesus was cut off from both God and humanity on Good Friday.

Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane. Matthew 26:36

Gethesene means “oilpress”. Gethesemene was an orchard of olive trees where they would press the olives to produce olive oil. Every olive grove had an olive press.
Look at this picture. The press involved putting olives in the basin and then a large stone would be slowly rolled over the olives...crushing the olives and releasing the oil. It's no coincidence that Jesus chose this place to pray. The oil press reflects what Jesus was feeling. The weight of the world was pressing down on him. In fact, look what it says....

He began to be sad and troubled.

The word “troubled” means to be severely depressed. Then Jesus himself says he’s not just sad, but he says...

My soul is deeply grieved (overwhelmed) to the point of death. Matthew 26:37

A man by the name of Luke wrote another account of this scene. He tells it like this:

Jesus withdrew about a stone’s throw beyond the disciples, knelt down and prayed, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done."

Luke 22:42,43

Jesus was fully God but he was fully human too. The Bible tells us that Jesus emptied himself of his godlikeness and fully embraced his humanity. So he felt the same crushing weight that you and I do when we face impossible situations, (only worse, of course, because his weight was the weight of the world’s sin.) Just like us, he wanted to give up but he wanted to please God more. So he commits himself to do God’s will. Not my will but yours.

And look what happened when he made that commitment.

An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. Luke 22:43

He was strengthened but the problem didn’t go away. God didn’t take the problem away. He gave Jesus what he needed to keep going.

And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground. Luke 22:44

When olives come under pressure they drip oil. When Jesus came under pressure, he dripped blood...that’s how intense his exile was: the pain, the separation, the depression.

So what can we learn from this? Jesus suffering shows us three things: first, we learn that Jesus’ suffering validates our suffering. Sometimes we think we are suffering because there’s something wrong with us. We think that normal people don’t struggle.

And then we feel weak or guilty for wanting to give up on life. But Jesus suffered and he wanted to give up too. He understands the pressure you are under and let’s you know that it’s okay to feel that way.

Second, we learn that Jesus’ suffering had a purpose...to restore us to God. There’s a letter in the Bible that goes into great detail about what happened when Jesus suffered and died. It makes this amazing statement:

By one sacrifice Jesus made us perfect forever... Hebrews 10:14
The word perfect here means “complete, lacking nothing”. Now, your wife might not think you are lacking nothing or you might not think this about your teenager. But this is what God thinks about you!

This is one of my favorite verses in the Bible. So many people spend their life trying to be good enough to earn God’s approval. That’s never going to happen. There’s nothing you can do that’s good enough to achieve God’s bar of excellence.

So God did it for us. God sent Jesus to make us perfect. When God looks at us we lack nothing. We are perfect in his sight. That’s what makes Good Friday, good.

When Jesus died, we were set right with God. We can quit working so hard to please God. And we can quit worrying that we aren’t good enough because we’ve been made perfect.

The third thing Jesus’ suffering shows us is that good things can come from exile. If the salvation of the world came through the cross then good things can come from whatever exile you are walking through right now.

Right now we are going to celebrate communion. We are going to celebrate that we’ve been made perfect forever and that we are no longer far from God.

But in saying that...I bet some of you can’t believe that. Maybe you’ve been told different. Maybe you think you are far from God and that you don’t deserve to know him. You might even think that God hates you for what you’ve done.

So I just want to challenge you here. I want you to reflect on what I’m saying. Don’t just go through the motions. People all over the world are going through the motions of communion...they are treating it like a meaningless religious ritual.

But I don’t want that for us today. I want this to mean something. I want you to walk through this time with a smile on your face because of what Jesus did for you.
Return from Exile
Part Four: The Way of Brokenness
Text: 2 Samuel 15 and 16

Outline:

1. Brokenness is when you no longer insist on being in control but yield your life to God.
2. God showed his covenant love to David in his brokenness with:
   - Protection
   - Presence
   - Provision
   - Proving
   - Wisdom
   - Restoration

Message

Today is the last day of our series on exile. I hope you found it helpful. I’ve said before that I shared these stories because they have shaped my faith and I hope they will shape yours as well.

I want us to look at King David today. It’s a fascinating story because he relinquished his throne and went into a self-imposed exile, but God brought him back. Today we’ll see how God helps us to return from exile.

Let me give you the backstory first. David was king of Israel, 3000 years ago. God raised him into power, but when David got into power he didn’t handle it very well. Just because he was king and he loved God didn’t guarantee he was a great guy. In fact, David committed adultery, he committed murder to cover up his adultery, and he was MIA with his children: that is, Missing in Action.

One of his son’s, Absalom, was so upset with David that he sat at the city gate and, like a good politician, found people that weren’t happy with David and told them that if he was king, all their problems would be solved. This went on for four years. The Bible tells us that Absalom, “…stole the hearts of the people of Israel.” 2 Samuel 15:6

But even though everyone could see what Absalom was doing, David did nothing about it. He said nothing about it. He was totally passive. So Absalom’s anger reached a tipping point and he rallied his supporters for a revolt. And then the Bible tells us:

A messenger came and told David, “The hearts of the people of Israel are with Absalom.”
I have to stop here before continuing because we need to feel the weight of what I just read. *David lost the heart of his people.* After thirty years of serving Israel, he lost their heart. This is like being married for thirty years and finding out that your spouse left you for your best friend. This had to be a huge punch to his gut.

Then David said to all his officials who were with him in Jerusalem, “Come! We must flee, or none of us will escape from Absalom. We must leave immediately, or he will move quickly to overtake us and bring ruin on us and put the city to the sword.” 2 Samuel 15:13,14

This is indeed what happens in an affair. The people felt David was ignoring their concerns and so they turned to Absalom because he promised to pay attention to them.

When David saw that the tide had turned against him, he walked away. It’s hard to believe this could ever happen. We have to grasp the magnitude of this moment.

This was KING DAVID, the pride of Israel. There was a time when people lined the streets and sang David’s praises. He was the people’s choice. But David was not only absent in the life of Absalom, he was absent in the life of the people. He lost touch with them and he lost their hearts.

David was so defeated. So ashamed. So full of self-doubt, that he walked away to live in self-imposed exile. Can you imagine what it took for David to walk out of Jerusalem? Can you imagine the shame he must have felt and the humiliation to admit that he had failed at being, not only king, but as a father?

David was a broken man. He walked into the hills weeping. The people that went with him were weeping too.

The whole countryside wept aloud as all the people passed by. 2 Samuel 15:23

It was a dark day.

It’s easy to understand what happened to David. When he was a young man, he was a rock star and he believed the great things people said about him. He minimized his weaknesses, assuming they would fall away over time. But as time went on...as the challenges of life became greater and more complex...he wasn’t the rock star he thought he was. He chalked up more losses than wins.

So I totally get why David left Jerusalem a broken man. I talked about brokenness a couple months ago. I defined brokenness as when you no longer insist on being in control, but yield your life to God. This is what David did. When David walked away, he was choosing to give up control. He yielded to God. He was willing for whatever God would send his way, even if that meant to live in hiding the rest of his life.

You might read this story and feel sorry for David, but his brokenness was a good thing. When someone is truly broken there is something special that happens in their life. There
is a new tone in their voice. A new attitude. A new perspective on life. And there’s a peace that settles on them that seems to pervade their entire being. They lose the hard edge and self-assurance that distanced them from people before. Jesus called it being “poor in spirit.” It’s when you aren’t impressed with yourself any more.

When David walked out of Jerusalem he was admitting his fault. He was sending himself into exile with no hope of a future. But there’s a great quote earlier in the book of 2 Samuel that tells us God’s heart:

*Like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be recovered, so we must die. But that is not what God desires; rather, he devises ways so that a banished person does not remain banished from him. 2 Samuel 14:14*

This means that some of our mistakes are like water spilled on the ground. You can’t get them back in the bottle. That means you can’t fix what you broke. There are long-term consequences for your bad choices. But God doesn’t want you to pay the consequences forever. God’s heart breaks for the banished person and wants to restore them. This is God’s heart for everyone who feels like they are living in some kind of exile of failure.

You might be in that kind of exile today. You might have failed in a relationship. Maybe you are newly divorced. Maybe your career hasn’t gone the way you planned. Or maybe you made a fool of yourself at school. There are lots of ways to lose your way in life, but whatever your situation, you need to know that God doesn’t want to leave you in exile. He wants to speak to you in your exile and bring you back.

That was God’s heart for David. David’s exile wasn’t meant as a punishment but as a time of teaching and eventually restoration. Exile was a time for God to reveal his covenant love to David. So let’s see what we can learn about God’s covenant love from David’s exile.

**Protection**

The first thing I see here is that God shows David his protection. As soon as David left the city, the battalion that guarded David showed up.

*...all the six hundred Gittites who had accompanied him from Gath marched before the king. 2 Samuel 15:17*

Now, it’s not clear, but the Gittites were from another country. It appears that they were indebted to David for some reason and so they recently came to Jerusalem to be David’s personal guard. So David spoke to their leader and said:

*Why should you come along with us? Go back and stay with King Absalom. You are a foreigner, an exile from your homeland... Today shall I make you wander about with us, when I do not know where I am going? Go back, and take your people with you. May the LORD show you kindness and faithfulness. 2 Samuel 15:18-20*

He’s saying, “Look, I don’t deserve your kindness. I’ve screwed things up big time and I can’t expect you, or anyone, to be kind to me, but I pray that God will be kind to you.”
I don't know if David would have said this in the past. I think, in the past, David would have expected people to guard him. In fact, he might have demanded a thousand soldiers and not just 600. He thought he deserved it. But broken people aren't like that. Broken people aren't demanding. They are grateful for the smallest kindness. Instead of demanding, they bless people with kindness.

That's what David did here. He wished the Gittites the kindness and faithfulness of God. David was personally experiencing God's kindness and faithfulness and so he wished it upon the Gittites. You see, broken people trade in kindness and faithfulness. It's what they are known for.

The leader responded:

As surely as the LORD lives, and as my lord the king lives, wherever my lord the king may be, whether it means life or death, there will your servant be. 2 Samuel 15:21

This must have been a huge encouragement to David. God used these men to show David that not everyone was rejecting him. He wasn't alone. God would continue to protect him in his exile.

**Presence**

As David continued down the road, he ran into another group of people: the priests.

Zadok was there, too, and all the Levites who were with him were carrying the ark of the covenant of God. They set down the ark of God, and Abiathar offered sacrifices until all the people had finished leaving the city. 2 Samuel 15:24

The ark of the covenant represented the presence of God. This was God's way of showing David that God was with him. Just because David messed up didn't mean God was going to abandon David.

Some of you might need to hear this. Some of you grew up thinking that God is only close to you when you are good and far from you when you are bad. That's not true. God is always close to you. You never lose his presence unless you outright reject him. And even then I believe God is still within earshot of you. He is eager to return if you change your mind about him.

But look at what David said. He didn't want to presume upon God, that is, he didn't expect God would be with him. It's like David gave God an excuse to leave. So he told the priests:

"Take the ark of God back into the city. If I find favor in the LORD's eyes, he will bring me back and let me see it and his dwelling place again. But if he says, 'I am not pleased with you,' then I am ready; let him do to me whatever seems good to him." 2 Samuel 15:25,26

Again, this is the kind of thing that broken people say: let God do to me whatever seems good to him. But unbroken people rant about how unfair God is. Unbroken people complain about how everyone has betrayed and abandoned them. They complain about the cruelties of exile.
But not David. David didn’t take God’s presence for granted. So Zadok and Abiathar (the priests) took the ark of God back to Jerusalem and stayed there. But David continued up the Mount of Olives, weeping as he went; his head was covered and he was barefoot. All the people with him covered their heads too and were weeping as they went up. 2 Samuel 15:29,30

Provision
God showed David his love by protecting him and being present with him. Next God shows his covenant love to David with an abundance of provision:

When David had gone a short distance beyond the summit, there was Ziba, the steward of Mephibosheth, waiting to meet him. He had a string of donkeys saddled and loaded with two hundred loaves of bread, a hundred cakes of raisins, a hundred cakes of figs and a skin of wine. The king asked Ziba, “Why have you brought these?” Ziba answered, “The donkeys are for the king’s household to ride on, the bread and fruit are for the men to eat, and the wine is to refresh those who become exhausted in the wilderness.” 2 Samuel 16:1,2

What’s so humbling about exile is when God shows up like this with such abundance. You know you’ve blown it. You know that no one owes you anything except maybe blame, yet God shows you his kindness by providing for you in a special way.

When Lisa and I lived on our farm, we were dirt poor. Lisa and I were raised in middle class homes where we never went without. But during our years on the farm we went in the red financially every month. I felt like the biggest loser...and it had nothing to do with my weight! Our poverty made me feel like a failure.

But we met a family at church that was very wealthy. They moved away a long time ago. But they were here long enough to show us kindness. They had kids our age. And they’d invite us over to their big house located in a beautiful setting. They feed us nice meals, and we’d watch movies with them on their big screen TV before big screen TV’s were common. I felt like I think David must have felt...just so grateful to have a little oasis of abundance in the middle of our exile. That was God’s provision for us in a barren time.

Proving
The next encounter that David had wasn’t so warm and fuzzy.

As King David approached Bahurim, a man from the same clan as Saul’s family came out from there. His name was Shimei son of Gera, and he cursed as he came out. He pelted David and all the king’s officials with stones, though all the troops and the special guard were on David’s right and left.

As he cursed, Shimei said, “Get out, get out, you murderer, you scoundrel! The LORD has repaid you for all the blood you shed in the household of Saul, in whose place you have reigned. The LORD has given the kingdom into the hands of your son Absalom. You have come to ruin because you are a murderer!” 2 Samuel 16:5-8
You might wonder what this has to do with God’s covenant love. If God loves you, shouldn’t he eliminate these people from your life? I think God brings people like this into our lives to prove us. It’s like he allows someone to speak the cold, hard truth to us. It’s God’s way of saying, “This guy is right. You are a murderer. You deserve to be cursed. But I’m a god of mercy and grace. Even though he’s right, I haven’t forsaken you.”

Do you see that? These people test your faith. You can let them defeat you, or you can use them as a reminder to stop and thank God for his goodness.

Broken people don’t need to defend themselves or argue with their accusers. They can simply agree with them, saying, “You are absolutely right. I am everything you say I am and more. You don’t know the half of it. I deserve God’s harshest judgment, but I’m counting on his mercy and grace to give me a fresh start.”

David’s leaders weren’t very happy with Shimei, or David’s casual response, for that matter. They said to David:

Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Let me go over and cut off his head. 2 Samuel 16:9

But listen to how a broken man responds:

“My son, my own flesh and blood, is trying to kill me. How much more, then, this man! Leave him alone; let him curse, for the LORD has told him to. It may be that the LORD will look upon my misery and restore to me his covenant blessing instead of his curse today.”

So David and his men continued along the road while Shimei was going along the hillside opposite him, cursing as he went and throwing stones at him and showering him with dirt. 2 Samuel 16:11-13

David was fine with this because he believed that God’s grace was bigger than Shimei’s curse.

Wisdom

Now, while all of this was happening out in the hills, Absalom was back in Jerusalem plotting how he would capture and kill his father. But David had some friends who had infiltrated Absalom’s inner circle and they gave him bad advice. Plus they were able to send detailed intelligence to David regarding Absalom’s plans.

I’ll let you read about all of the intrigue at home. But my point here is that God showed his covenant love to David by giving him wisdom about what to do. As a result, Absalom was defeated and David was able to return to Jerusalem.

Restoration

My final point is that God’s covenant love brought restoration to David. Do you remember the quote from earlier?
That’s exactly what happened with David. God made a way for him to return. And God will make a way for you to get your life back too, even if you made a royal mess of your life.

Look at what it says here about David:

He won over the hearts of the men of Judah so that they were all of one mind. They sent word to the king, “Return, you and all your men.” Then the king returned ... They rushed to the Jordan, where the king was. They crossed at the ford to take the king’s household over and to do whatever he wished. 2 Samuel 19:14-18

David was welcomed home from his exile. The worst-case scenario didn’t happen. God’s covenant mercy triumphed over judgment and he restored David to his throne.

What I want you to see is that the story of David isn’t a story of David’s faithfulness to God. Maybe you thought it was. That’s what you learned in Sunday school. No. The truth is that David was all too human, just like you and me. The story of David is about God’s faithfulness to David, in spite of his failures.

The apostle Paul put it best.

If we are faithless, God remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself. 2 Timothy 2:13

In other words, God can’t stop being who he is. God is faithful by nature. He loves us unconditionally by nature. He can’t NOT do that. It was true for David and it’s true for you and me as well.

So I hope you will take advantage of all the love that God has for you. Don’t give up on yourself. Don’t stay in your self-imposed exile trying to punish yourself. Let God bring you out of your exile, restore you, and use you to do great things.

Prayer: Father, thank you for your faithfulness to David. Help us all to believe you offer that same covenant love to us. Help us to not neglect so great a love. For those of us in some kind of exile of failure today, might we find you close by, to lead us and restore us in the days ahead. Amen.

Going Deeper: Use the following questions for personal reflection and/or to discuss with family, friends, and/or small group.

1. Has there been a time of failure in your life where you felt like you were in exile, that is, lost and lacking direction? Describe.
2. Imagine being David at the moment he decided to leave Jerusalem for fear of his son attacking the city in revolt. What would run through your mind?
3. Read 2 Samuel 15:1-12. Imagine being Absalom. What do you think was going through his mind as he sought to spur a rebellion against his father?
4. Read 2 Samuel 15:13-16:14 and discuss the various encounters that David had, looking for how God showed David his faithfulness and kindness in exile.
5. What do you think of David’s encounter with Shimei? How would you have handled that situation? Read 2 Samuel 19:16-23 to see how Shimei changes his tune yet David is still gracious to him.
7. What are your biggest take-aways from your study of Samuel, that is, what are the “anchor lessons” that you learned to help shape your faith?

Note: I’d love to hear back from you on how the series went! Thanks! Remy Diederich