

# Understanding the Bible #6 – Exile

Based on *The Bible: A Story That Makes Sense of Life* by Andrew Ollerton

## Bible Reading

*<sup>22</sup> The Lord said to Moses, <sup>23</sup> “Tell Aaron and his sons, ‘This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them:*

*<sup>24</sup> ““The Lord bless you and keep you; <sup>25</sup> the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; <sup>26</sup> the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.””*

*<sup>27</sup> “So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.”*

Numbers 6:22-27

First of all, sorry to anyone who thought the service was finishing super-early during the reading, probably because you are familiar with it being used as a benediction at the end of the proceedings.

The text is a priestly blessing, given to Moses by God for Aaron and his sons to use when praying for the Israelite community.

The reason for the reading is that I’d like to begin this week’s talk by looking at another ‘big concept’ that runs through the Bible. And that theme is ‘peace’.

In the Old Testament, the word that we translate as ‘peace’ is ‘Shalom’

It is used as a greeting by Jews to this day, and brings to mind the idea of health, wholeness and wellbeing. It is the concept of things being the way they ‘should’ be.

*Shalom* has a sense of both beauty and security. It is used to describe an expensive piece of pottery, or an impregnable wall. It is both beautiful and dependable, sensitive and strong.

To experience true *shalom* is to live with inner and outer peace. It is an overwhelmingly positive concept, a place where rightness, justice and beauty have replaced the ugliness of conflict and chaos.

And it integrates the natural environment, human relationships and our personal inner lives into a cohesive, harmonious whole. It is how life on this planet was intended to be.

But life on this planet is not how it was intended to be.

Deep down we are all aware that things are not right with this world. Life, even in Costa Del Northolt, is not *shalom*. There is something in all of us that longs for more peace, both for the world and for ourselves.

And despite western society enjoying greater levels of comfort and affluence than at any time in history, the amount of anxiety and loneliness grows. Physical comfort has not brought us *shalom*.

In a previous talk we looked at how the human race began its life in a beautiful garden, living in perfect relationship with their creator. This was *shalom*.

However, humans disobeyed God. And as a result they were banished from the Garden of Eden, and their *shalom* was shattered.

And yet, as we've explored in subsequent talks, God didn't give up on the human race. In fact he chose to create a special people, Israel, who would demonstrate God's love and beauty to the world around them.

In the last talk, we looked at how Moses led Israel out of Egypt.

and how Joshua was commissioned to lead Israel into the Promised Land of Canaan.

It was meant to be a new Eden. But after several centuries of Israel disobeying God, often under the leadership of ungodly kings, despite God sending prophets to warn them of the consequences, the land he had given them falls apart.

The Northern kingdoms were invaded by Assyria in 721 BC, and effectively ceased to exist as a recognisable people group. And 150 years later, in 587 BC, the Babylonians invaded Jerusalem and

destroyed Solomon's temple, and, echoing Adam and Eve's banishment from Eden, the majority of the surviving population were exiled to Babylon.

Which brings us to our next big theme.

In the Bible the theme of exile is about the trauma of being physically expelled from the place you call home.

To help understand where this is going, let's look at three facts.

1. We were made for this world, but it is often hostile to us.
2. We were made for community, but many of us feel lonely.
3. We were made for God, but he often seems distant.

Why is this so? One of the Bible's answers is that we are exiles. We are not living in our true home. We were built to live in a place that we can't seem to get back to.

Humans have a deep sense of how things should be. How often do we hear people use phrases like, 'It's not right though is it?' about a political scandal, or Putin's invasion of Ukraine?

Thousands of years after Eden, you'd have thought humans would have got used to the way life is. But they haven't. There is a deep sense within most of us that the world should be better than it is. It is the God-given desire for *shalom*.

Humans often try and satisfy the longing for peace with material substitutes and distractions. The 'idols' we were looking at last time.

But even when we do the 'right' things; working hard, living honest and generous lives, we regularly get the feeling that things aren't the way they should be.

It is because humans are 'in exile' from where they're designed to be.

God knows this, and from when Adam and Eve first rejected him, he has been working on a solution.

Isaiah is one of the Old Testament prophets who looked forward to a time when God would solve the problem of the human race's self-imposed exile.

Isaiah 9:1-6 reads:

*<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan –*

*<sup>2</sup> The people walking in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
on those living in the land of deep darkness  
a light has dawned.*

*<sup>3</sup> You have enlarged the nation  
and increased their joy;  
they rejoice before you  
as people rejoice at the harvest,  
as warriors rejoice  
when dividing the plunder.*

*<sup>4</sup> For as in the day of Midian's defeat,  
you have shattered  
the yoke that burdens them,  
the bar across their shoulders,  
the rod of their oppressor.*

*<sup>5</sup> Every warrior's boot used in battle  
and every garment rolled in blood  
will be destined for burning,  
will be fuel for the fire.*

*<sup>6</sup> For to us a child is born,  
to us a son is given,  
and the government will be on his shoulders.  
And he will be called*

*Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

OK, so you're ahead of me... yes, Isaiah, writing around 800 BC, was talking about Jesus, the person who would bring true *shalom*, the one who would lead his people to a place that they could call home.

The Prince of... PEACE! *Shalom*... wholeness, wellness, non-exilednessnessness.

And Jesus, through his death, resurrection, ascension and giving of the Holy Spirit, has provided us with the means to experience a peace that is bigger than our circumstances.

But how?

To help answer this we're going to look at the the period of time in Israel's history from when they entered the Promised Land (c. 1300 BC) to when they were taken away in exile to Babylon (c. 600 BC).

It is a long and complex story, marked once again by Israel's failure to follow God's ways, and how God again and again tried to pull Israel back to a proper relationship with him.

## **Joshua and the Judges**

So, we've talked about the Exodus, God getting Israel out of Egypt and moving them towards the Promised Land, a place where they would be free to live lives in relationship with God.

And we've touched on exile, Israel not honouring their relationship with God, resulting in the Israelites once again being held captive in a land that's not theirs.

We're now going to go back to the place we reached in our last talk, where Moses hands over leadership of the Israelites to Joshua as they prepare to invade Canaan.

God provides a similar miracle for Joshua as he did for Moses to enable the Israelites to cross the Jordan River and begin their conquest of the land where God promised Abraham his descendants would one day live. That's why it's called 'the Promised Land'.

God's intention is that Israel will work at becoming a 'model nation', showing the rest of the world what it means for humans to live in a proper relationship with the creator of the universe. Israel was to become God's light to the world, with the Promised Land becoming a revived Eden, a place of *shalom* in a chaotic and sinful world.

This also makes sense of why Canaan was chosen as the location.

The Promised Land is situated on the crossroads of three continents, Europe, Africa and Asia. God wasn't putting the Israelites on a safe and secluded island, he wanted Israel to engage with the rest of the world, to be a light to the nations. So where better than in the middle of some of the busiest trade routes in the world?

But there was a problem. Canaan was already occupied by the descendants of Canaan, son of Ham, grandson of Noah. Seven nations in total, the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites.

And although the Bible says they were terrified of the Israelites, having heard about what their God had done to the Egyptians, and seeing the way their God had allowed them to cross the Jordan River, they were not going to give up their land without a fight.

Now, especially at a time when Russia is attempting to invade Ukraine, this part of the Bible brings with it a lot of questions. How can a God who loves his creation tell his people to declare war on another nation?

If you're looking for easy answers to this one, you'll have to go somewhere else. However, here's a few points that may help.

1. We tend to think of ‘cities’ as huge areas like London, housing thousands or even millions of civilians. At the time of Joshua, cities were often garrisons or forts occupied by military personnel. Even the first city that Joshua destroyed, Jericho – (yes, ‘Joshua fit the Battle of Jericho’, that Jericho) – which was the largest fortress in Canaan, covered an area of about 6 football pitches with 4 metre high walls. You could have squeezed 7 Jerichos into Westfield shopping centre.

2. God put firm boundaries on the extent of the conquest, and several of the tribes in the region were not to be harmed:

*But in accordance with the command of the Lord our God, you did not encroach on any of the land of the Ammonites, neither the land along the course of the Jabbok nor that around the towns in the hills.*

Deuteronomy 2:37

3. The occupation of Canaan is part of God’s long-term plan, and it involves him judging the Canaanites for their worship of other gods. 400 years earlier, God tells Abram that Israel will serve a nation as slaves, but that they will come out of slavery and return to Canaan ‘for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure’. So it would appear that 400 years before Joshua’s invasion, the Amorites (one of the 6 nations living in Canaan) were living in ways that displeased God, and that they didn’t change their ways. God is patient, but he is also just.

4. God lays out strict rules for Israelite warfare, including:

*When you march up to attack a city, make its people an offer of peace. If they accept and open their gates, all the people in it shall be subject to forced labour and shall work for you.*

Deuteronomy 20:10-11

The book of Joshua doesn’t include detailed accounts of when these offers were made, but Joshua 11:19 indicates that the offer was made and consistently refused.

*Except for the Hivites living in Gibeon, not one city made a treaty of peace with the Israelites, who took them all in battle.*

Joshua 11:19

Much of the language used to describe the conquest uses words like ‘driving out’ and ‘dispossessing’, e.g.

*I will send my terror ahead of you and throw into confusion every nation you encounter. I will make all your enemies turn their backs and run. I will send the hornet ahead of you to drive the Hivites, Canaanites and Hittites out of your way. But I will not drive them out in a single year, because the land would become desolate and the wild animals too numerous for you. Little by little I will drive them out before you, until you have increased enough to take possession of the land.*

Exodus 23:27-30

This is the language of conquering and exile, not total destruction. In fact, only three fortresses are mentioned as being totally destroyed: Jericho, Ai, and Hazor.

5. God is God. He is perfect love. He is perfect relationship. If this series has taught us anything, it is that God’s love does not allow him to ignore things that contradict his perfection.

And the Canaanite religion involved some very nasty stuff, including shrine prostitution and child sacrifice.

And it is important to remember that God judges Israel just as strictly as he judges the other nations. When Israel consistently disobeys God, he judges them as well.

So when we look at the conquest of Canaan and compare it to Russia and Ukraine, maybe we should see things from God’s perspective. This world was created perfect. Humans were given everything they needed to live wonderful lives in relationship with their creator/sustainer.



But they rejected him, and decided to worship the creation rather than the creator. We looked at some of the Egyptian gods in the last talk, all of them based on created things. The Canaanite religion had a four-tier hierarchy headed by El and Asherah, fertility gods who are the father and mother to dozens of other gods, who represent a wide range of activities, including hunting, fertility, war, weather, healing and even dancing.

God's 'country' has been invaded by false gods, and he reacts to defend it.

God is not like Putin, invading someone else's country,

God is more like Zelensky, mounting a counter-offensive against a host of false gods who have invaded his territory and deceived humans into living lives that are not the way they were designed to be.

And God chooses to use Israel to reclaim it. Which sometimes makes me laugh. And more often, makes me want to weep, as I realise that God continues to use weak, selfish humans as his ambassadors, and that I am one of those humans he has chosen. Me, scheming, judgmental, self-centred, fallible Brett Jordan.

And so, to return to our overview of the Bible.

Despite many missteps, Israel did invade Canaan, and they divided it up between Israel's tribes and settled into their new home. Israel went from being a nomadic people to becoming a nation, with a God-given set of laws to follow. (Laws which are still the basis for most of the laws in the western world today).

Toward the end of Joshua's life he summons the leaders of Israel and encourages them to obey the God who had brought them to this place.

Joshua 23 records this battle-scarred veteran's last words, a summary of which is:

*Remember it was God who fought for you.*

*Remember that God will continue to fight for you.*

*Be strong.*

*Obey all the commands that Moses received from God.*

*God has kept all his good promises.*

*If you don't obey his good commands, he will keep his bad promises.*

Joshua 24 records him summarising Israel's history, emphasising how God had continually intervened on their behalf, and reaffirming Israel's agreement to turn away from idols and serve only God.

Joshua is not naive. He knows how weak the Israelite people are. He knows that many of them still have idols in their tents and houses.

Joshua 24:19-24 reads:

*<sup>19</sup> Joshua said to the people, "You are not able to serve the Lord. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. <sup>20</sup> If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you."*

*<sup>21</sup> But the people said to Joshua, "No! We will serve the Lord."*

*<sup>22</sup> Then Joshua said, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the Lord."*

*"Yes, we are witnesses," they replied.*

*<sup>23</sup> "Now then," said Joshua, "throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel."*

*<sup>24</sup> And the people said to Joshua, "We will serve the Lord our God and obey him."*

Not long after this Joshua dies, and the people of Israel did everything just as they had promised, and they all lived happily ever after.

And that's it folks. End of this series.

Except Israel didn't do what they said they would do. The book that follows Joshua is Judges, which records Israel's history from 1350 -

1050 BC. Judges could be a (very long) country song, anything that can go wrong, does go wrong.

Israel – called to be a solution to the world's problems – soon becomes a part of the world's problems. God's people decided they wanted to become like everyone else, and, guess what? They ended up being just like everyone else.

And, just like everyone else, they descend into a downward spiral of murder, rape and civil war that makes Game of Thrones look like something you see on CBeebies.

Judges records a pattern. When Israel compromises with the surrounding culture, they end up oppressed. So God raises up a leader (a judge, hence 'Judges') to intervene, with various levels of success.

But, after each judge dies, the next generation goes back to their old ways, often worse than before. And so Israel drifts further and further away from *shalom*.

It is easy for us to shake our heads and wag our fingers at Israel. But we need to ask ourselves whether we are wholeheartedly following God's will for our lives. Or do we always have our eyes open to alternatives? Are we working on incorporating God's *shalom* into our lives, or do we keep idols of lust, greed, envy and bitterness in our heart to bring out when we feel they are justified?

Like Israel, we mess up, ask for forgiveness, and promise God that this time we'll keep our part of the bargain. And God does forgive us, and we are grateful and joyful... and then we go back to our idols again.

The sad thing is that because we are Christians, we don't even enjoy the sinning properly, because deep down inside we know that what we're doing is hurting God as much as it is hurting us. And so we neither enjoy sinning, or *shalom*.

So why not make a fresh start today?

A long time ago I wrote a simple prayer. I liked it enough that I made it into a bookmark. The prayer goes like this, feel free to join in with me as I read it.

### **This Day**

*I will live this day to the best of my ability.*

*I will keep in mind the many good things God has given me.*

*I will remember that God knows what it is like to be human; to be fulfilled and frustrated, joyful and sad.*

*I will accept Jesus's complete forgiveness for all my sins.*

*I will not be crushed by any guilt he does not want me to carry.*

*I will not put off tasks that can – and should – be done today.*

*I will not let the world's problems overwhelm me.*

*I will not worry about those things I have no ability to change.*

*I will remember that God wants to be Lord of everything I do.*

*I will set aside time to read the Bible and talk with God.*

*I will do something to help, strengthen or encourage someone.*

*I will do my best to restore, or stop, wrong relationships.*

*I will remember that I have people who love me.*

*I may falter or despair today. If this happens, I will take the problem to God first.*

*I will keep in mind that God can transform even my worst mistakes into something good.*

*I will not forget that God is my perfect Father. He loves me and will never let me go.*

Living God's way is challenging, and we will fail. But the story of Israel that we read in the Bible reveals a God who doesn't give up on his people. And as Christians we have been given the power of the Holy Spirit to help us.

Our lives do not have to be a catalogue of failures. God can help us to break negative cycles in our lives. We are never too old to change.

The next session will be about the next stage in Israel's history, when they decide they want to become a monarchy.