

# Understanding the Bible #7 – Change

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

## Bible Reading

<sup>1</sup> *But now, this is what the Lord says –*

*he who created you, Jacob,*

*he who formed you, Israel:*

*“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;*

*I have summoned you by name; you are mine.*

<sup>2</sup> *When you pass through the waters,*

*I will be with you;*

*and when you pass through the rivers,*

*they will not sweep over you.*

*When you walk through the fire,*

*you will not be burned;*

*the flames will not set you ablaze.*

Isaiah 43:1-2

Last time we looked at the way the Bible helps us to understand the true meaning of peace (*shalom*)

and how it relates to the concept of exile in the Bible, how starting from Adam and Eve’s expulsion from Eden, humans have been looking for a place that they can call ‘home’, a place where they feel secure and content.

Our last session finished with the book of Judges, which documents the time that followed the invasion of Canaan. It describes the way Israel, having been rescued from slavery in Egypt and being given a place where they are finally free to live in relationship with the God who rescued them, decide to become just like the surrounding nations, worshipping their gods rather than the true God.

God regularly provides them with opportunities to return to him, but the Israelites keep sliding back to being just like their neighbours.

And it wasn't just the gods of the other nations that infiltrated Israel, the people of other nations came with them, first through trade and inter-marriage, and then by the Philistines, a warrior nation with origins in Europe who around about the late Bronze Age (c. 1200 BC), began a campaign of raids against Israel much like the Vikings did against European countries.

In the book that follows Judges we get a tiny respite with the story of Ruth, which makes it clear that even in Israel's darkest times God never gives up on trying to help those who put their trust in him.

And then we move to the book of Samuel which opens with how Samuel came to be Israel's last 'Judge'. Samuel is an exemplary Judge, faithful to his God, despite being brought up in a situation where his peers are faithless and corrupt.

He even manages to convince the people of Israel to (for a time) turn back to God, and as a result Israel enjoyed a time of peace.

Samuel had two sons, and he appointed them to succeed him as leaders of Israel. However, unlike their father, they were greedy and dishonest.

The elders of Israel realise this and ask Samuel to appoint a king to lead Israel (Tellingly, the leaders say, "a king... such as all the other nations have.").

Samuel is not pleased about this, and so he talks with God about it. Interestingly, God tells Samuel to listen to the people's demands, and he also gently rebukes Samuel for his pride...

*<sup>7</sup> And the Lord told him: "Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. <sup>8</sup> As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they*

*are doing to you. <sup>9</sup> Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will claim as his rights.”*

1 Samuel 8:7-9

God knows that Samuel is more annoyed at the people rejecting Samuel's decisions than he is at them rejecting God as their king. I bet that stung. It certainly stung me when I realised how often I am more upset by people not listening to me than I am when they disobey God! And so Samuel warns the Israelite leaders about the disadvantages of having a human king (summary: A monarchy will cost them a fortune). But the Israelites want a human king to lead them into battle. Samuel tells God (it is possible God already knew) and God tells Samuel to let them have it their way.

And so we get the tragic story of Israel's first king, Saul, who starts out well, but soon loses track of God's guidance, and succumbs to personal ambition, paranoia and a loser's death.

So God tells Samuel to anoint David, a shepherd boy, the youngest of his family, to become Israel's second king.

David became Israel's most beloved king. And many Bible passages see him as being a foretaste of God's Messiah, or 'anointed one'.

The Greek for Messiah is *Christos*, which is why we talk about Jesus *Christ*... Jesus the Messiah, God's ultimate king who has achieved for the whole world what David did for Israel, defeating enemies and bringing peace.

David acts as a 'type' for Jesus in scripture. Think of the battle between David and Goliath. David and Jesus were both born in Bethlehem. David and Jesus both won battles against forces that threaten us, David against a giant, Jesus against the forces of evil.

David's triumph was shared by the Israelites. Jesus' victory can be shared by anyone who chooses to accept his offer of love and forgiveness, enabling us to be free from the fear of life's 'giants'.

David's rise to kingship was not a smooth one, Saul was still in power when David was first anointed, and although Saul was delighted that David defeated Israel's Philistine enemies, he was less happy about David's growing popularity with the people of Israel.

But eventually (around 1000BC) David was crowned Israel's king, and he began to unite the 12 tribes of Israel into a single nation. Under David's leadership, Israel flourished and enjoyed a time of security and prosperity.

David captured a hill fort called Mount Zion and set it up as Israel's capital city, Jerusalem, which means 'city of peace'... the word *salem* is derived from *shalom*.

Jerusalem was intended to be the focus of God's ancient promise to Abraham that he would be a blessing to all nations, bringing God's *shalom* to the world.

And remember, *shalom* is not just 'absence of trouble', it is the confidence that God has things under control, even when things don't seem that way. King David (with a lot of help from God) gave Israel peace in the middle of a very unpeaceful world. In a similar way, we can know God's peace, even in difficult situations, through our relationship with King Jesus.

## **David's fall, Solomon's rise**

Sadly, as David grew older, he took his eyes off the God who had been so faithful to him. Despite being described both in the Old and New Testament as 'a man after God's own heart' (1 Samuel 13:14, Acts 13:22), David commits adultery (modern people might call it rape) with Bathsheba, and then (when he discovers that Bathsheba is

pregnant) tries to cover it up by giving her soldier husband Uriah leave from a battle between Israel and the Ammonites.

However, Uriah refuses to break his oath of celibacy (common for Israelites during times of war), and, infuriated, David arranges for Uriah to be killed when he returns to the siege of Rabbah.

God sends a (very brave) prophet called Nathan to call David to account for his sins. David confesses his sin, and Nathan tells him that, while David's sins will be forgiven, God's blessing is going to be removed from his kingship.

David was not a perfect man, but he knew where to go when he had messed up. Rather than sulk, or run away from God, he acknowledges his disobedience. And even though Nathan announces that Bathsheba's baby will die, he fasts and spends days pleading with God for the child's life, knowing that there have been times in Israel's history when God has 'changed his mind' (and remember, this is not God being fickle or fallible, it is God being relational).

Tragically the child does die, but Bathsheba, who was now one of David's wives, becomes pregnant again, and this son was called Solomon. Sin has consequences, but God is able to bring good out of even our worst failures.

## **Solomon**

Solomon is a name that is associated with two things, wisdom and wealth. And biblically, they came in that order. Solomon succeeded David as Israel's king, and early in his reign God appears to him in a dream and says,

*“Ask for whatever you want me to give you”*

1 Kings 3:5b

Solomon shows wisdom by asking for wisdom,

*“give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong”*

1 Kings 3:9

God is pleased that Solomon didn't go for the obvious requests of long life, wealth or the death of his enemies, and agrees to give him great wisdom, as well as wealth and prestige.

And, for the beginning of his reign at least, Solomon did regularly demonstrate that he possessed great wisdom. The book of Proverbs is based on Solomon's teachings as well as his reflections on other wise people's teachings. It is full of sayings that touch on many areas of our lives, including money, sex, work, emotions, parenting and socialising.

Biblically, the root idea of wisdom goes back to creation, with the world we live in being likened to an expertly woven garment.

Our lives are composed of a network of related threads, and when we live wisely, actively involving God in our lives and decisions, these threads create a fabric that is both beautiful and resilient, some of the elements that create *shalom*.

But when we make poor choices, ignoring God's guidance, the threads that create the fabric of our lives begin to unravel.

Wisdom is more than just intellectual knowledge. As the quote goes, *‘Knowledges is knowing that a tomato is a fruit. Wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad.’*

And, no, you won't find that quote in Proverbs, or anywhere else in the Bible :-)

You can know a million facts, but still make poor life choices. Wisdom is an integrated mixture of knowledge and how to apply it to our lives in a godly way.

## **Solomon builds the Temple**

As well as composing wisdom literature, Solomon also organised the building of an impressive temple. His father David had wanted to build it, and had created extensive plans for it, but God told him that this was his son's job.

The Temple was constructed at the top of the hill that his father David has built Jerusalem on. It was a place where a wide range of activities occurred, including teaching and legal functions. But its main function was to be a place to worship Israel's God.

At the centre of the Temple was a room called The Most Holy Place. Separated from the rest of the Temple by a thick curtain, it symbolised God's throne room, and was considered so special that only the high priest was permitted to enter it, and even he was only allowed in once a year.

When the building work was completed on the Temple, Solomon conducted a lavish ceremony. God signified his approval by creating a huge cloud that emanated from the Most Holy place and drove everyone out of the building. God was in the house. The Temple symbolised God's presence, the place where heaven touched earth.

And the Temple symbolised the way God wanted the whole earth to be. Humans were created to be God's representatives, God's priests enjoying and sharing his presence, living examples of *shalom*.

But after being banished from Eden, *shalom* was broken, humans had been banished from their intended home. Solomon's temple was a symbol of hope that God had not abandoned his people. Here was a symbol of God's intended (and promised) *shalom*. The interior even had carved decorations that reminded the occupants of Eden, including pomegranate trees, oxen, flowers and cherubim.

Hundreds of years later, as Jesus died on the cross, the thick curtain that separated The Most Holy Place from humans was torn in two,

from top to bottom. (Matthew 27:51). The curtain symbolised the barrier between God and humans that the fall had created. The death of Jesus destroyed that barrier, opening up the possibility of humans having access to his presence. The answer to our deepest needs, the personification of *shalom*, waits to greet us.

Solomon, like his father, lost his way in later years. As a young man he chose wisdom, but as the years went by he succumbed to the lure of money, status and pleasure.

The book of Ecclesiastes is attributed to Solomon, and it explores a wide range of life issues, including whether being rich and successful makes you happy, with the answer being ‘not necessarily’.

Ecclesiastes is a complex book, but one thing it definitely tells us is that wealth and power do not guarantee *shalom*.

## **Exile**

After the reigns of David and Solomon, Israel declined. From about 900 BC the Bible describe a growing tendency toward idolatry, division, civil war and defeat by their enemies.

Israel’s kings, with a few exceptions, ignored God’s laws and embraced the ways of the surrounding nations, despite being warned against it by a number of prophets.

After the death of Solomon, Israel split into two ‘nations’, Judah (and most of Benjamin) in the South with Jerusalem as their capital city, and the rest of the tribes in the North. 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. Most of the survivors were then deported to Babylon.

So, around 2000 BC, Abraham initially moved from Ur, which became Babylon (modern day Iraq), to Harran, and then to Canaan (Israel).



1500 years later, the descendants of Abraham are taken back to where Abraham originally came from.

Seen from a secular historical perspective, this event is another story of an emerging super-power (the Babylonian empire) invading a smaller nation, grabbing its treasures and exploiting its workforce.

The Bible acknowledges this perspective while adding another one. When you read the books of Isaiah and Jeremiah you hear their repeated warnings that Israel is ignoring and disobeying God, replacing him with gods that are not gods at all. And that God will not allow this to continue indefinitely. As we've seen before, God is gracious and long-suffering, but he is not impotent.

God has given Israel a homeland, along with guidelines on how to live there in proper relationship with him. And Israel have made a covenant, a binding agreement, to live by those guidelines.

And Israel had broken the covenant. Again and again and again.

Part of that covenant contained promises as to what God would do if Israel broke the covenant. And exile was part of that promise.

And so the majority of Israel's population find themselves as slaves in a foreign country. Exiles. And, like so many of us, despite ignoring God for centuries, they cry, 'Why did this happen?' and in particular, 'Where is God?'

Now, God could justifiably turn around and say, 'I warned you, many, many times'. Which, through the prophets, he had. He could also have stepped away and left Israel to its misery. But our God is not that kind of God. Through the prophets he acknowledges the exile as punishment for Israel's disobedience. But he also assures them that he is going to be with them during it.

Hence today's reading:

*But now, this is what the Lord says –  
he who created you, Jacob,  
he who formed you, Israel:  
“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have summoned you by name; you are mine.  
When you pass through the waters,  
I will be with you;  
and when you pass through the rivers,  
they will not sweep over you.  
When you walk through the fire,  
you will not be burned;  
the flames will not set you ablaze.”*

Isaiah 43:1-2

The exile was an extreme punishment from God. And yet God never deserts his people. In some ways, the exile allowed him to draw closer. For any of you who remember the wonderful musical ‘Fiddler on the Roof’, there is that moment when Teyve is talking to God and he says, *“I know. You are very busy now. Wars, revolutions, floods, plagues... all those little things that bring people back to you...”*

Or as C.S. Lewis wrote:

*God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain.*

Probably the saddest book of the Bible, aptly called Lamentations, was written about the exile. The author is traditionally said to be Jeremiah, and the subject matter certainly fits what we know about him.

Jeremiah knew why God had done what he did, he had spent years warning the Israelite kings that it would happen if they didn’t change there ways. And he had been made to suffer for it, belittled and struck by his peers, imprisoned and thrown into a cistern to die. But now,

walking around the smoking ruins of Jerusalem he cries out to God in his distress and despair.

If you get the time this week, read the book of Lamentations, or at least chapter 3. I'm going to read some excerpts, see how Jeremiah refuses to give up on his belief that God is in control of the things that happen in this world, and that he is good.

*I am the man who has seen affliction  
by the rod of the Lord's wrath.*

*He has driven me away and made me walk  
in darkness rather than light;*

*indeed, he has turned his hand against me  
again and again, all day long.*

*He has made my skin and my flesh grow old  
and has broken my bones.*

*He has besieged me and surrounded me  
with bitterness and hardship.*

*He has made me dwell in darkness  
like those long dead.*

Lamentations 3:1-6

*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;*

*it is good to wait quietly  
for the salvation of the Lord.*

Lamentations 3:21-26

And that is the correct response to when things go wrong in our lives, whether they have been self-caused (as in the case of David), caused by other people (as in the case of Jeremiah) or whether the cause seems just plain random and unfair. We need to turn to the only one who can ultimately help us.

There are some truths about God that you only really understand when God is all you have left... even when you don't feel like he is there... God is there... he loves you, and he is faithful.

The exile was not what God wanted for Israel. But he used it to shape those who were willing into people who understood that God is not like other gods, he is not limited by geography. Israel had come to believe that Israel, and in particular Jerusalem, were invulnerable, that because God 'lived there', that he would never allow it to be destroyed.

But God is bigger than Jerusalem. He doesn't need Jerusalem to be God. Books like Daniel show that he is bigger than the Babylonian empire, the mightiest nation of its time, and that he uses faithful people to make this known, people like Daniel, who refused to bow down to anyone but God.

## **Rebuilding the ruins**

After over 50 years of exile, God provides the Israelites with the chance to return to their home country. Again, God uses historical situations to make this happen. In 538 BC the Persians defeated the Babylonians. Cyrus the Great was the Persian ruler, and he had a policy of allowing people to live in their own lands (under his rule, of course!).

Over the next couple of decades a large number of people did make their way back to Israel, and in particular, Jerusalem. This was a new generation, one who had only know what it was like to live in Babylon. They would have heard stories about Israel and Jerusalem, but it probably didn't prepare them for just how much work would be needed to restore the damage done by the Babylonians and the resultant 70 years of disuse.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah (they were originally one book) describe the rebuilding process, and it is an excellent example of the way God works.

Ezra and Nehemiah both work hard, and intelligently. Despite knowing they are doing what God wants them to, they face constant obstacles and resistance. And when this happens they ask for (and receive) God's help. In the same way, God wants us to use our brains and our physical energy to serve him. We will also come across obstacles. And we also need to be asking God for help.

But despite all their efforts, it was not the restoration that many Israelites had expected. Prophets like Ezekiel had received visions from God of amazing things that were going to happen, but they didn't. Israel was still waiting to find a place of true *shalom*.

And we'll see how that began to be resolved in our next session.