

Out of Exile

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Preacher: Jesse Kincer

[0 : 0 0] So this is the last sermon in our Advent series, and if you have a Bible, you can turn to Ezra chapter 3 and verse 10. If you don't have a Bible, no worries. We're going to show the verses up on the screen as well. Before we jump into it, let's do a quick recap of the ground we've covered in the previous two sermons that we've been through in Advent. And so first, we looked at the history of Israel, a sermon Alan preached a couple weeks ago, and their history leading up to the exile.

And it explains why God brought his people into exile, and it was because he visited them to actually bring punishment, because they persevered in unrepentant sin and idolatry. And it reached a point where he said, you know what, you guys aren't listening to my appeals to turn and repent from these things. And so he brought them out of their homeland and into exile. And what we learn from that is like, you know what, God, when he visits us, it's always good, but it's not always what we expect. But it ends up being for our benefit, our ultimate good. And even God's punishments over us, they are good for us. Israel's eviction from their homeland showed them how serious their sin was. And it's what led Israel into repentance. And in that place of repentance, they were in exile. And so they were kind of living in this space out of their homeland, away from the things that they knew and were familiar with in another country that spoke another language with different customs. And they were waiting. They were there in exile waiting in repentance for God's restoration. But that didn't mean spiritual idleness. God, no, they were meant to both pursue God, but also to be a blessing to those that they were around. So it was a call to patient perseverance. And, you know, that waiting in exile, it teaches us to wait on God. Sometimes he's silent, like Andrew was talking about last week in the sermon, and trust in his timing. And while we wait, we can be a blessing. So now we're at the present. We're going to look at this passage of Scripture that happened when God brought his people back from exile. Okay? So this is happening. God brings his people back.

[2 : 1 0] Ezra 3, verse 10, it says this, And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals to praise the Lord, according to the directions of David, king of Israel. And they sang responsibly, praising and giving thanks to the Lord. They were saying, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel. And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping. For the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away. This is God's word. When God brought his people back, this rebuilding of the temple started happening. And it was actually one of the primary initiatives when they returned. It wasn't just, hey, go build your own home, settle in. It was, hey, we need to start restoring this temple. And why was that so significant? Why was that first order of business? Well, it's because this, we have to recognize that that was a big part of what it meant to be an Israelite. The temple was a huge part of their identity. It was a huge part of their culture.

It's what set them apart as a nation from the nations around them. And so this rebuilding of the temple was far more than just trying to make the neighborhood look better again. It was rebuilding and renewing Israel's very identity and Israel's very purpose of existence. And those two things are always central in God's work of restoration.

When we think about identity, right, God restoring identity, when we think about identity, identity answers the question, who am I? Who am I? What am I here for? And our identity, you and me

today, is just like what Israel was wrestling with back then. And our identity only has solid footing when the answer to that question, who am I, is I am a child of God by the grace of God.

That's what our identity is, guys. First and foremost, above anything. And out of that identity flows everything. It flows our purpose. It flows the answer to the question, what am I here for?

Because what I'm here for is I belong to God. I am not my own, which means I don't live for myself. I live for God's glory. And the more you live in God's restoration, the more you want to celebrate him.

[5 : 07] It's important to celebrate God and the evidence of his grace. I love what it says about the crowd here in Ezra chapter 3, right? It says they sang responsibly. It wasn't this like quiet, meek, like little singing, how come that I adore him? Now, man, they were going for it. I mean, imagine this spectacle with me, okay? Thousands of people gathered together in one place, probably more like a stadium than anything else. You had every generation there, young and old and in between, singing with all their might, for he is good. They're talking about God, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel. And they sang so loud. And their responsiveness was so loud, it could be heard far away. You know, I've learned a lot in my years walking with Jesus.

I've been walking with him for a while. And this is what I do know. The more I discover the depths of God's grace, the more boldly I want to praise him. And I'm sure that many of us in the room that have been following Jesus for some time say amen to that. The more we realize and the more we discover how amazing God's grace is and how actually deep it is, man, the more we want to boldly respond in praise. And that's not just with our voice singing on a Sunday. That's actually with our life. We want to live a bold life that declares the glory of God. It changes the game.

In 2016, the Chicago Cubs ended a 108-year championship drought, right? I knew some Cub fans. Boy, were they annoying to be around during that time. But the Cub Nation, they had waited a long time, right? They had waited a long time before they saw their team restore the city to a championship pedigree. And what happened when they did? Man, the city came out in celebration. Big parade, lots of noise, lots of raucous just celebrating what had happened all together. How much greater the nation of Israel would have to celebrate than just winning a sports trophy? And they had been restored. See, exile, what it did, it didn't just rob them of the place they called home. It robbed them of dignity. They had become a reproach among the nations. Have you ever seen those sports fans on TV? You know, the sports fans, and they follow a team that's just really, really bad, and they're in the stands, and they have like a paper bag over their head because they're so bad. They're just like, hey, I'm a fan of this team, but I don't want anyone to know who I am.

That's a bit like what Israel was going through during those 70 years of exile. They were the punching bag. They were slaves. They were a joke. They were conquered people that had been scattered throughout the nations. Look at what Jeremiah 24 says about them. But thus says the Lord, like the bad figs that are so bad they cannot be eaten, right? He's like, hey, Israel, you like rotten fruit that nobody likes. So will I treat Zedekiah, the king of Judah, his officials, the remnant of Jerusalem who remain in this land, and those who dwell in the land of Egypt. I will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth, to be a reproach, a byword, a taunt, and a curse in all the places where I shall drive them.

[8 : 55] Imagine that's your identity for seven years. When you're walking around as an Israelite or as a Jew, people are looking at you, and all they can think of is shame. They look at you, and they see something to pity. They look at you, and they think like, oh my goodness, you have a curse mark on your head.

You are like the dung heap of the nations. And that's what Israel lived with, the proverbial paper bag over their head for 70 years. But look at the promise of God's restoration after those 70 years of exile. Jeremiah 29 verse 10, it says this, For thus says the Lord, when 70 years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise, and bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, the plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

I will be found by you, declares the Lord. I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord. And I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile. See, this moment here in Ezra is people, God's people celebrating more than just a foundation being laid for a building. They are celebrating God's restoration and renewal. They're looking and seeing Jeremiah's promise being fulfilled right here. Their reproach among the nations was being rolled away. But this speaks to us today too. This isn't

just for Israel back then. This is speaking of something that God does. See, prior to salvation, we live in exile as well, right? Prior to crossing that line of faith, we are outside of God's kingdom. We are exiled from it. We are outside of His grace, and what we do is we live under the reproach of sin's guilt and shame. But Jesus came and He changed the game. He brought us into God's kingdom. By faith in Him and His salvation, we're no longer exiles.

We've been restored. Look at what 1 Peter says in chapter 2, but you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. He's talking about us. He's talking about His church, a people for His own possession, that you may proclaim the excellences of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.

Once, you were not a people, but now you are God's people. Once you have not received mercy, mercy. But now you have received mercy. And this is why we gather together. Like, we come together on Sundays to do this, and it's a non-negotiable. We come to celebrate God's grace. But while we celebrate, we have to be careful that we don't think that God is finished, that this is it. See, there is a danger in turning our celebration into settling. So, we look at Ezra, and we see God's people, they celebrated the temple's foundation being laid. That's appropriate, right? But the foundation, we have to recognize, is not the final product, right? How many of us live in homes that the only thing is the foundation that exists? There's a lot more work still to be done for those people, right? Yeah, the temple's foundation's there, but there's walls that got to go up. There's windows that got to go in. There's roofs that got to go in. There's a lot more work to be done. So, we should celebrate every evidence of God's grace in our lives. Hey, every foundation moment, don't despise the day of small beginnings, the Bible tells us. Yeah, celebrate those things. But we mustn't set up permanent camp at any point and say, you know what? This is far enough. We've arrived. That's it. [13:23] You know, over 15 years of marriage, Haley and I have had some significant moments of God breaking through and changing us and making our marriage better. Typically involved me becoming a better husband. But there was no point along the way that I just stopped and said, you know what, Hales? This is as good as it's going to get. I'm stopping right there. Can I be honest? Going through those moments where God changes us and works on our hearts and brings that transformation, those things aren't easy. It's nice to get on the other side of it, but going through it, man, it's a lot of dying to self. It's a lot of being honest with yourself and being more self-aware and coming to grips with some ugly truths and looking in the mirror and seeing, you know, like, hmm, that part of me is really ugly. You know, that isn't good. But we don't settle right there.

As tempting as that may be, it's not boom, there was the big breakthrough. We finally arrived. Let's establish this as a status quo. Let's build houses on this mountain right here, and that's it. Man, we don't do that. We shouldn't do that. Churches, we are tempted to do this too all the time though. You hit some benchmark of success and you think, okay, all right, we've come far enough.

Let's just stop here. Let's take the foot off the gas pedal. But what we have to do is we have to think and recognize that as disciples of Jesus, we are on this journey, kind of like what the Israelites went through in the wilderness, right? They came out of Egypt. But making it out of Egypt and getting into the wilderness, that wasn't the end destination. They were journeying there all the way into the promised land. And so coming out of exile because of Jesus is starting this journey, and we're journeying through. Sometimes we push pause and slow down. We set up camp for a little bit, but it's never our permanent location. It's never our permanent residence. We're journeying all the way through, following God all the way into the promised land. And it's tempting, man, when we find that one spot, especially if you've been journeying for a while and it's been hot, and all of a sudden we hit like a river or an oasis, you know, like the water's flowing, the food's good, like everything seems to be clicking. Man, we want to stop and say, you know what, we want to make that the promised land.

We want to stop and say, you know what, this is enough. But we have to remember our identity as exiles is we are sojourners. We are pilgrims passing through this place. We never settle.

So, spiritually speaking, disciples of Jesus, we're always becoming more and more like Jesus. We don't stop and say, you know what, I have arrived, fully sanctified. You are welcome, people.

[16:18] Now, we don't ever get there. Man, Jesus, we're always being changed and transformed more into His likeness. And that is our highest name. He is our highest name. That's who we are becoming more and more like by the work of the Spirit in our lives. And until the day we die or Jesus returns, God is building us, restoring us, renewing us, stone upon stone, glory upon glory, grace upon grace. That is what we're promised in His Word. So, the point is we don't stop and settle with

the current status quo, right? We avoid that danger, but there's another danger, and that danger is getting sentimental.

Don't get sentimental about the past. Keep moving forward with God. My parents' generation experienced a unique move of God back in the 60s and 70s. Some of you young guys, that was all the way back in the 1900s, believe it or not. That's when vinyl and eight tracks were your only option for listening to music a long time ago. But it was called the Jesus People Movement, and there was just an interesting outpouring of the Holy Spirit happening that day. I mean, there were signs and wonders, miracles happening.

It was a time of revival. I remember my dad telling me, you could stand up on a street corner or in a church and preach a terrible sermon, and somebody would get saved. He's like, that's just because of what the Holy Spirit was doing in that time. They told me of times where, man, you'd be in a church service, and God's presence would just come so thick and so tangible and so amazing that it would be two hours, it would feel like 10 minutes. It would go by like that. Now, that's awesome.

But what happened, and what I saw happen with many of the people in my parents' generation is, man, that experience turned into unhealthy sentiment because God stopped working in that way. He didn't continue that on. And what they wanted to do is they just wanted to live in the past. They wanted to live in the good old days. They remembered the old temple like the old men and priests in that Ezra passage. Man, that old temple, it was bigger and it was grander. Now, you and I, we have to be on guard because we can easily fall into looking back and longing for the good old days.

[18 : 34] As much as we can settle with the present, we can also let the past give us a disdain for the present. See, Israel did that in the wilderness, right? Walking outside in the morning, manna again? Are you serious? Hey, Obadiah, remember when we used to sit around these pots in Egypt, like beef, stew, all you can eat. Remember that? Remember the good old days? Remember how wonderful that was? All we have here is this manna, this provision of God.

The old days looked better than God's provision in the present. What was the result? A grumbling heart. That's tough to avoid. Sentiment for the past seems very justifiable to our hearts. We look back and we see, man, God was doing more. He was changing lives. He was impacting people. He was moving and we could see it. It was amazing. Things were just so much better back then. Why would it be bad to want to live in the glory days? Try to resurrect the glory days because here's why it's bad. That is not where God has us now. That is not where God has you now. That is not what God is doing now. You and I don't get to dictate to God what he should be doing in any given moment in history. So then, what should we be doing? Celebrate God's grace every day and trust that his future grace is even better. Jesse, are you sure that's okay? Absolutely. This is what keeps us from settling. This is what keeps us from getting sentimental. And this is what the Bible teaches us in Israel coming out of exile. Yes, we see God's restoration, present grace, celebrate, enjoy it. But we have the privilege to know the rest of the story and recognize that there's a lot more to come and they hadn't even seen nothing yet. The old men almost had it right. The current temple wasn't as glorious as the former, right? I don't know if they got like the tiny house construction crew to build that temple or something. I don't know what was going on.

But what we do know is that those old folks were not, they were looking back and saying, you know what? This is okay. But guys, the former was so much better. And it wasn't just about the temple's smaller footprint. They were crying also. They were weeping also about the downsize in the temple's glory. See, when the temple was destroyed, see, when God took them into exile, the temple was fully destroyed and the temple was also raided. So all the gold and the silver and the precious artifacts that filled the temple were taken away. All the ornate workmanship that was put into the temple was lost. So the old men were also crying about that. They were crying about the loss of the glory that filled the temple.

Look in Haggai 2. It's a prophet during that time in Ezra. He says this in verse 1, in the seventh month on the 21st day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai, the prophet. He says, speak now to Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua, the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to all the remnant of the people, and say, who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? Then God asked the question, how do you see it now? Is it not as nothing in your eyes? God's saying, I saw you cry when you looked at those foundation stones. I know what those tears were about. Then God lifts their eyes to see a new and better future. Verse 4, yet now be strong, O Zerubbabel, declares the Lord. Be strong, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land, declares the

Lord. Work, for I am with you, declares the Lord of hosts. According to the covenant that I made with you when you came out of Egypt, my spirit remains in your midst. Fear not, for thus says the Lord of hosts, yet once more, yet once more, future grace. In a little while, future grace. I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land, and I will shake all nations so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory, says the Lord of hosts. [23 : 33] The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, declares the Lord of hosts. The latter glory of this house, the former that you're looking about and longing for, man, the latter glory is going to be so much greater than what you're looking back and longing for. In this place, I will give peace, declares the Lord of hosts. The promise God is making to them is the same promise for us today. God's future grace is going to be even better than today's. That is living by faith. We are called to live by faith. We are called to trust that tomorrow's glory, tomorrow's grace that we are going to step into is going to be better, is going to be greater, and that God is going to bring it to pass. And this is what the season of Advent is all about. It reminds us that Jesus did come. He came. He stepped into our exile to bring us out. He is the foundation stone of our faith, we're told, right? And on Jesus, the church, you and me, all believers, are being built up into a spiritual house where God dwells.

The apostle Peter teaches us that in his letter. And when we consider this, we celebrate. God's present grace that we receive now by faith in Jesus, the glory that we step into and we can know of him and behold of him is absolutely amazing. But Advent also reminds us that Jesus is coming again.

There is a future grace and a future glory that we can't even begin to fathom. Our imagination isn't even good enough to try to figure out what that might be like.

We get a taste of it now, but it's going to be exponentially better, exponentially greater. Revelation 21, the very end of the Bible. God kind of closes it out this way. He gives us a peek into what this looks like, this next Advent of Jesus coming.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. And they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more.

[26 : 31] Neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. Are we out of exile today? Yes and no.

Yes, because we are in God's kingdom right now. We are out of darkness. God's presence is with us. It fills us, it leads us, it guides us. But the answer is also no, because we are still journeying toward that day when Jesus returns and brings the fullness of his glory.

That second coming that we long for, and it says the best, the best is yet to come. Today is amazing. Celebrate the grace and the glory of God today. But the best is yet to come. If I could have the band come up.

If you're here, you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, you hadn't crossed that line of faith, man, one, so glad that you came, you're listening to this. And I want to tell you this, celebrating God's grace first requires stepping into his grace. And maybe in your heart, you're thinking, how do I do that, Jesse? Well, first, you can't earn it, right? It's not what you do.

It's not how much you give. It's not how perfect you could be. It starts with two things. You simply believe that Jesus is Lord, that he died on the cross, and you confess your sins.

[28 : 17] And God's promise to you in his word is that when you do that, you will be saved. And our promise to you and God's promise to you is that when you do that, you will feel the burden. You will feel the reproach of guilt. You will feel the reproach and shame of sin roll away because that's what believing in Jesus does. He saves you. He takes your sins away.

And you will experience the love and joy of God that he has for you. So I want to encourage you today, if you aren't a Christian, man, put your faith in him. Today is the day of salvation. Don't walk out here and put it off to tomorrow. For those of us in the room that are Christians, man, live your life celebrating without settling. Live your life celebrating but not falling in to sentiments of the past. And be thankful for the present grace of God in your life, but always move with God into his future grace. Let's pray.

So Lord, we thank you for the amazing gift of Advent. Lord, we thank you that it reminds us that you came and that you're coming again. Help us to live in that reality of, yes, you've come, but we're yet

to experience the fullness of that. Help us to enjoy the present grace and live in the present grace of God and yet long for the future grace, knowing that the best is yet to come. Amen.
Amen.