

Advent of Exile

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[0 : 00] Yes, thank you, Jesse. Again, my name is Alan. I am one of the pastors here, and it's a great honor to be able to come up here and present the Word of God to you. He did mention that we are kicking off our Advent series, which we typically do here in the month of December.

But Advent is not Christmas. It's the season preceding Christmas. Advent literally means coming. It's the season of waiting for the coming of the Messiah.

Because just as Jesus came the first time as a baby, He is also coming again as a triumphal King. Just as Israel, the people of God, waited for the Messiah to come, so also the church, the people of God, you and I, are waiting for His return.

Our waiting and longing is, in many ways, a reflection of Israel before Christ. Over the next three weeks, we're going to do an Advent series that explores how the ancient people of God waited for the Messiah, and see how they can help us wait for Him today.

You may have noticed that the Bible does not rush to Christmas. It takes its time. It takes its time from the beginning. There are hints pointing to a Savior. But those hints, those predictions, crescendo once you get to the age of the kings and the prophets in the Old Testament.

[1 : 16] The nation of Israel swells in terms of power, wealth, and influence, and that brings lots of problems, as is often the case today. They deal with pride. They deal with arrogance.

Those kind of things. It is in the writings of the prophets at that time that we get some of the clearest and most explicit predictions, prophecies, and longings of a future Savior.

Now, when you read your Bible, it seems like Jesus shows up right after the prophets. The last one is Malachi, and then, boom, the New Testament. Matthew's Gospel opens up with the birth of Jesus.

I mean, it is the next page in the Bible, right? Yeah. But what you can miss is that there was almost 400 years between the prophets and the coming of Jesus. That crescendo of anticipation was met with centuries of nothing.

Absolute silence. Those 400 years were not filled with great movements of God or other signs and wonders. They were filled with silence. Nothing. Kind of like the atmosphere in your home after you and your spouse have a nice discussion.

[2 : 24] But for 400 years. That's the case in my house. And then I rise above because I'm bigger. And I apologize. And I'll later apologize for that.

We live in a day where we expect everything right now. Got to have it. You know, got to have it right now. Cookout. McDonald's. Starbucks. Amazon Prime. If I don't get my package in two days, there's going to be a price to pay, baby.

I'm calling. But God doesn't work on our timetables. And waiting reminds us of that. God does his work in us in the waiting. Before Jesus, the light of the world finally comes, the people of God are first brought to some very dark places.

Now, the darkest moment for the people of God had to be when they went into exile. The ten northern tribes of Israel were wiped out and were never again reformed. Only the tribe of Judah was left.

And then, tragically, they were conquered by the Babylonians. Their temple was destroyed. They were dragged out of the promised land and into a foreign land. The promise of a coming Savior had never seemed further away.

[3 : 36] They had to be thinking at best he was a distant hope or at worst an absolute lie. We need to see this because we will also have dark moments like this as God's people.

And we need to know how to keep waiting for God. Keep longing for Jesus. That is what the season of Advent has historically been about, rather than an extended prologue to Christmas.

Fleming Rutledge said, Advent is designed to show that the meaning of Christmas is diminished to the vanishing point if we are not willing to take a fearless inventory of the darkness.

We have got to be honest about how dark the times are. No, we are not experiencing 400 years of silence and being conquered by a foreign nation. But we are still waiting.

And we still walk through periods of darkness and apparent distance from God when it seems like all hope is lost. That is why in your more liturgical churches, the building is often kept dark on the first Sunday in Advent.

[4 : 36] Advent is learning to wait in the dark. Over the next three weeks, we will look briefly at how God's people anticipated the Messiah through this story of exile. Today, we are going to look at the period leading up to the exile.

Next week, we will look at the time spent in Babylon. And the following week, we will consider the return from captivity and the years leading up to Christmas. In each phase, we will look at some of the things that were said and written in anticipation of the coming king.

How they waited then could help us learn how to wait now. Today, we consider the advent of exile, waiting for judgment.

Yes, you didn't mishear me. It is not talking about hope and peace and joy like we typically talk about. We are talking about judgment. So, rah, rah. There are 16 prophets whose works are contained in the Old Testament who have their name as the title, the writing prophets.

Depending on how you do the dating, roughly 10 or 11 of them prophesied in the 150 years leading up to the exile. There was a concentration of prophetic ministry warning people of the coming judgment.

[5 : 52] Nearly all of them anticipated judgment of some kind, but each with their own flavor. Amos was the first, outraged at injustice. Hosea writes soon after and focuses on the unfaithfulness of Israel.

They are not devoted to the Lord like he is to them. They are like promiscuous wives. Micah rails against social injustice and corrupt leaders. Zephaniah, judgment must come so that transformation can happen.

Throughout these and others, you find different kinds of critiques, but also calls to repent, to turn to the Lord, or else the day of the Lord will come. Something which many of them prophesy about and almost always is in terms of judgment.

Today, we are going to focus in particular on Isaiah and Jeremiah. Isaiah, their writings are by far the biggest in this period, but they also stand out for other reasons. Isaiah was one of the prophets who most clearly anticipated an exile, and he did so 150 years before it happened.

Jeremiah anticipated the exile, but then also lived through it. We are going to look at these two prophets and consider three reasons they give for why God's judgment comes. Number one, judgment is a result of not trusting God.

[7 : 07] Isaiah writes over a long span of time, and there are two interesting episodes that happen with two different kings in the southern kingdom of Judah. First is with a king named Ahaz.

Now, Ahaz ruled at a time of great geopolitical turmoil. He had a real pickle. The northern kingdom of Israel and Syria had allied against him.

He is terrified. Starting Isaiah 7, 3 through 9, it says, And the Lord said to Isaiah, Go out to meet Ahaz, you and Sheer Jehoshab, your son, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the washer's field.

And say to him, Be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands. At the fierce anger of Rezan and Syria, and the son of Ramallah.

Because Syria, with Ephraim and the son of Ramallah, has devised evil against you, saying, Let us go up against Judah and terrify it, and let us conquer it for ourselves, and set up the ton of Tabeel as king in the midst of it.

[8 : 12] Thus says the Lord God, It shall not stand, and it shall not come to pass. For the head of Syria is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is Rezan. And within 65 years, Ephraim will be shattered from being a people.

And the head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is the son of Ramallah. If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all. Isaiah is saying, Don't fear.

Trust God. These other nations are going to be destroyed by Assyria. If you don't have faith in God, you have nothing. The Bible also talks about it is impossible to please God without faith.

But Ahaz is really afraid. In verse 10 it says, You may think, well, that's a very evangelical, holy way to respond.

I'm not going to put the Lord to the test. But he said, put me to the test. Ask for a sign from the utter depths of hell to heaven itself, and I will do it. To prove my faithfulness to you.

[9 : 26] But he was afraid. The crazy thing is, this was absolute hypocrisy. Ahaz doesn't trust the Lord. He's actually been trying to manage the whole thing himself.

2 Kings 16 tells us that he goes of his own accord and takes the gold and silver out of the temple and the king's house and gives to the king of Assyria to rescue him.

God was going to use Assyria to rescue Ahaz anyway. But Ahaz couldn't simply trust. He couldn't sit back and just watch. And before you beat up on Ahaz, let's be honest. Most of us probably wouldn't sit back and watch either.

So before you start putting your shake my head emojis on Facebook, let's try and understand the magnitude of what he was facing. He was the king. He was responsible for that kingdom and all those people's safety.

I'm not sure I could do that. My wife and I are building a house and we've been freaking out about appliances coming in because there's a shortage. We've gone to three different stores over eastern North Carolina to get appliances.

[10 : 28] Can you imagine the magnitude of what this guy was facing? Understand that in many ways Ahaz was a savvy and competent strategist, a man whose leadership many of us would have praised, but his first priority as king wasn't to be a great strategist.

It was to trust God. And so Isaiah prophesies through the rest of chapter 7 that there are terrible consequences that will come now. Assyria tried to destroy Jerusalem and failed, but the people of Judah suffered horribly because the king wouldn't trust.

But something interesting about this is that God did not so much a range of punishment as much as he allowed the natural course of events to take place. God's plan was to miraculously save Jerusalem, but Ahaz didn't want it or have the faith to believe that it would happen.

The punishment for not trusting in God was the natural and expected consequences of trusting in the Assyrians, who were some of the most violent people who had ever lived.

We also see that not only does judgment come from not trusting, judgment is a result of not worshiping God. King Ahaz has a son named Hezekiah, and he's a much better king.

[11 : 48] However, he gets sick and is told he is going to die. He begs God to save him, and God gives him 15 more years of life. So he has this miraculous recovery.

Well, word spreads about this miracle, and the king of Babylon sends envoys or ambassadors to come meet Hezekiah, and it does not go well. The envoys come, and Hezekiah has been so successful, he is a proud and arrogant man.

And he is flattered that visitors from such a powerful place have come to him. Here's what happens in Isaiah 39. At that time, Merodach Baladan, the son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent envoys with letters and a present to Hezekiah, for he heard that he had been sick and had recovered.

And Hezekiah welcomed them gladly, and he showed them his treasure house, the silver, the gold, the spices, the precious oil, his whole armory, all that was found in his storehouses.

There was nothing in his house or in all his realm that Hezekiah did not show them. Then Isaiah the prophet came to king Hezekiah and said to him, What did these men say?

[12 : 59] And from where did they come to you? Hezekiah said, They have come to me from a far country, from Babylon. He said, What have they seen in your house? Hezekiah answered, They have seen all that is in my house.

There is nothing in my storehouses that I did not show them. Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, Hear the word of the Lord of hosts. You kind of know this is not going to be good.

Behold, the days are coming when all that is in your house and that which your fathers have stored up till this day shall be carried to Babylon. Nothing shall be left, says the Lord.

And some of your own sons who will come from you, whom you will father, shall be taken away, and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.

Wow. Isaiah says, You're impressed with them? You want to show off to them? You want to give the Babylonians your worship? That's what showing off is.

[13 : 58] Showing off is worshiping someone else's opinion of you. You'll give them more than that. You'll give them everything. And 150 years later, that's exactly what happens.

Again, the judgment here is allowing Israel to simply experience the natural consequences of their actions. If you worship the power of this world, don't be surprised when that same worldly power turns on you.

There are trust issues. There are worship issues. But that's not all. Something else we see in this period is that judgment is a result of mistreating people. Decades after Isaiah, the prophet Jeremiah is ministering in Judah and gets started during the reign of King Josiah, who was one of the few good kings.

Josiah instituted a number of reforms to bring people back into proper worship of God. But worship is actually not enough on its own. It must affect how you practically live your life.

Jeremiah 22, 1-5 says, Thus says the Lord, Go down to the house of the king of Judah and speak there this word, and say, Hear the word of the Lord, O king of Judah, who sits on the throne of David, you and your servants and your people who enter these gates.

[15 : 17] Thus says the Lord, Do justice and righteousness and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the resident alien, the fatherless and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place.

For if you will indeed obey this word, then there shall enter the gates of this house kings who sit on the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, they and their servants and their people.

But if you will not obey these words, I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that this house shall become a desolation. The next generation, Josiah's sons, did exactly this.

Continuing in verse 13, or yeah, skipping down to verse 13, it says, Do you think you are a king because you compete in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness?

Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy. Then it was well. Now, is not this to know me, declares the Lord, but you have eyes and hearts only for your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood and for practicing oppression and violence.

[16 : 33] And so God does exactly what he said he would. A hundred years after the Assyrians had laid siege to Jerusalem, the Babylonians do the same. But this time, God does not protect the city.

After a decade of conflict and siege, starvation, and even cannibalism, the city finally falls in 587 B.C.

The Babylonians destroy the city. They destroy the temple. They turn it into a desolation like Jeremiah had said they would. They haul off everyone and everything back to Babylon just like Isaiah said they would, marching them all the way back to Babylon.

Babylon. That's 540 miles. Imagine your family being forced to leave everything you love and start walking with the destination of New York City.

Now to modern ears, this sounds horrible and makes God seem monstrous. But you must keep in mind that judgment is never punishment out of nowhere. In the Bible we see, judgment is when God lets you have your own way.

[17 : 40] If you trust in other things, God hands you over to them and they will crush you. If you worship other things, God hands you over to them and they will crush you.

If you create a culture of mistreatment, God lets you experience the culture you have created and you suffer mistreatment. Jeremiah 22, 8 and 9 says, and many nations will pass by this city, referencing Jerusalem, and every man will say to his neighbor, why has the Lord dealt thus with this great city?

And they will answer, because they have forsaken the covenant of the Lord, their God, and worshiped other gods and served them. The God of this world is violent and a destroyer.

God dealt with his people by giving them what they asked for. God gave them a covenant, a promise, but they didn't want that. They wanted other things. And one thing this story shows us is that judgment is both dreadful and necessary.

The prophets knew that something special was coming on the other side of judgment. Zephaniah knew there'd be a day when God would be in the midst of his people, quieting them with love, rejoicing over them with singing.

[18 : 54] Their shame would be changed into praise and glory, but first, the day of the Lord needs to come. God's people have insistently asked for other things. They need to know that those things can't save them or satisfy them.

First Peter 4 says that judgment begins with the family of God. We do not have to enjoy it, but we know that it is necessary. It is purification.

God is getting his church ready. Like the Israelites, we also don't trust God like we should. Like them, we don't worship God like we should. Like them, we don't treat others like we should. Sometimes people think of God's judgment as condemnation, but that is not always the case. Something can be judged good or bad, and the negative judgments do not always mean condemnation.

Sometimes judgment can be discipline. There are warnings all through the New Testament that God disciplines the one he loves. What do we do?

[19 : 56] What we do can be judged in this life, and it should. How will we turn? How will we repent unless the things we trust in are allowed to fail us?

As we take a fearless inventory of the darkness, we acknowledge that we have participated in it, and so judgment and discipline remain necessary, even though they are sometimes dreadful. But unlike them, we know that God does not actually let us keep having our own way. Remember, judgment is when God lets us have our way. mercy and grace is when God has his way. Something that many people don't realize is that some of the most famous verses in Isaiah, the ones we love to hear at Christmas in particular, are actually mixed in with the condemnation of King Ahaz. God tells Ahaz he is going to give a sign, and Ahaz doesn't care to ask for one, much less see it.

Well, God says, I'm giving you one anyway. Isaiah 7, 13-14 says, And he said, Hear then, O house of David, is it too little for you to weary men that you weary my God also?

[21 : 04] Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel. Do you realize that this great promise is given as a rebuke?

God says, You will not have your way for long. Soon I'm going to have my way. And then Isaiah goes on to rail about the coming suffering. In chapter 8, 21-22 it says, They will pass through the land greatly distressed and hungry, and when they are hungry they will be enraged and will speak contemptuously against their king and their God and turn their faces upward.

And they will look to the earth, but behold, distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish, and they will be thrust into thick darkness. Skip to chapter 9, verse 1 says, But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish.

In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

Now look, verse 2 it says, Isaiah starts talking about the future as if it has already happened. This is really cool. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.

[22 : 20] You have multiplied the nation. You have increased its joy. They rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil.

For the yoke of his burden and the staff of his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle, tumult, and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire.

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end. On the throne of David and over his kingdom to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore.

The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. God is telling his people through his prophets that enough will be enough, and he is going to have his ways. The Lord of hosts will do all of this.

[23 : 26] Friends, in many ways we wait like the Israelites waited. We know that we wait for a coming rescuer whose government will have no end, but we also wait knowing that judgment must come.

Fleming Rutledge says, God will save us from the judgment, but he will not save us without judgment. God being who he is cannot allow evil to exist forever.

Something has to be done about the human heart, which constantly misleads and deceives.

Something has to be done about the rule of sin and death in the world that God made, the world that God still loves in spite of everything.

The secret of being a faithful follower of the Lord Jesus is that we know that he is the one who will judge the living and the dead, and that we will be saved from ourselves by the one who has loved us to the last breath of his own life.

As the band comes up this morning, there's a couple of ways we can look at responding. For those of you in the room or listening that are not yet a Christian, not yet a Christian, the worst judgment of all is still coming.

[24 : 38] It is the truth. It's not fear-mongering. It's not hell and brimstone. It is the absolute truth of God. But it can be avoided. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has been given.

You may be here today thinking that you have life under control, but I assure you, tough times will come. You may be here having lost all hope. You have put your faith, hope, and trust in the things of this world, and they are now gone.

They have crushed you. I assure you, Jesus Christ will remain standing when all else fails. I would be happy to talk with you about that after the service, if that is you.

If you're here in the Christian, when it comes to judgment, I feel like we should be like Jeremiah. We should be brave enough to tell the truth, but at the same time, not rejoice when other people suffer. Jeremiah wrote the book of Lamentations about the fall of Jerusalem. Let us not celebrate when God hands people over to their own wishes. Let's pray for them and lament for them.

[25 : 45] Let's mourn for them. Let's be a light in a dark world. Let's point people to Christ, not to ourselves, but to build, but to Christ and Christ alone.

Let us pray. God, we are just so thankful for this time of the year where we do get to remember, where we do get to long and wait for you, our coming king. But for many people, maybe people here in this room are listening, they have no hope.

They don't realize what judgment is coming. God, I pray that you would reveal yourself to them and to us in a powerful way as we look at the Israelites going through exile and how you're speaking to us.

Be with us today, God. Change us. Lord, I pray that people would bow their knee and call you Lord and Savior during this time of the year, Lord, where 2020 has been an absolute rough year, where everything has been stripped away.

All the norms are gone, but yet you are faithful. You are still here. We have seen more baptism this year than we had all of last year, all of the whole history of One Harbor Havelock.

[26 : 57] We've seen more baptism this year. We are so thankful for that faithfulness, God. We are so thankful that those people will never experience death, hell, and the grave, God. Lord, I pray for many more like that.

Pray for many more lives to be changed. Make us more like you. Help us to be a light in a dark world. Help us to proclaim the good news, the hope of Jesus Christ to those who will hear, even to those who will not hear.

Let us not be ashamed. Let us not fall into that time where we are just falling apart and we're just not confident in who we are and that you are our Lord and Savior.

Be with us, God, as we leave here today. I'm thankful for who you are. In your name we pray. Amen.