

OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY 4

BABYLONIAN EXILE TO JESUS

Turn in your Bibles to Lamentations 3...

Every year on [Tish'a B'Av' - or the ninth of Av](#) - a date on the Jewish calendar - Jews all over the world pack into synagogues for a day of mourning and sorrow. They read Jeremiah's book of **Lamentations**, and mourn the destruction of their Temple.

It's an irony of history, that Solomon's Temple fell to the Babylonians, and then the rebuilt Temple fell to the Romans in 70 AD, on the exact same date - [the ninth of Av](#). It's now an infamous day in the history of Israel.

In the year 586 BC, Nebuchadnezzar the Babylonian general laid siege to the city of Jerusalem. He cut off her supply lines. Life on the inside became unbearable. Jews were starving - many resorted to cannibalism.

After the siege, the walls were breeched, the Temple burned, the people were pounded into submission, and most of the surviving Jews were carted off as slaves.

Nebuchadnezzar took Zedekiah, the king of Judah at the time, and tortured him. He killed his three sons before him, and then plucked out Zedekiah's eyes, so the last thing the king saw was the murder of his sons.

As the slaves were taken to Babylon, they left Jerusalem from the north, where the Damascus Gate is today. There alongside the road is a hill, and in that hill there's a cave. Today, the cave is called Jeremiah's grotto, for it was there that the Prophet sat and wept as God's people were taken back to Babel.

As they paraded by he wrote his sad Lamentation...

He writes in 3:14-20, "I have become the ridicule of all my people - their taunting song all the day. He has filled me with bitterness, He has made me drink wormwood. He has also broken my teeth with gravel, and covered me with ashes. You have moved my soul far from peace; I have forgotten prosperity. And I said, "My strength and my hope have perished from the Lord." Remember my affliction and roaming, the wormwood and the gall. My soul still remembers and sinks within me." Pretty depressing, *don't you think?*...

But in verse 21 the tone dramatically changes, "This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope. Through the Lord's mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "Therefore I hope in Him!" The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul who seeks Him. It is good that one should hope and wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord." Jeremiah sees into the future, and it's not as bleak as the past. There is hope.

Yahweh is a merciful God. He's faithful to His people. They should *“wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.”*

And this is what the Jews in Babylon did. Psalm 137 was sung by one of the exiled Jews in Babylon.

It reads, *“By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept when we remembered Zion. We hung our harps upon the willows in the midst of it. For there those who carried us away captive asked of us a song, and those who plundered us requested mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”*

They were homesick - *weeping for Zion*. Song and mirth were impossible. They hung their harps on the tree limb. *How could anyone ask them to make merry?*

“How shall we sing the LORD'S song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill! If I do not remember you, let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth - if I do not exalt Jerusalem above my chief joy.” The psalmist was a Jew living in Babylon, but his heart longed for his homeland - for Jerusalem and the land of Judah. As Jeremiah said, *he was waiting quietly for salvation.*

The Babylonians first invaded Judah in 605 BC.

The Jews who were deported to Babylon lived there for 70 years. For a generation they were faced with the challenge of retaining their faith and convictions in a hostile, pagan

environment. And there was no better example of that kind of commitment than **Daniel**.

Daniel is an example for you and me.

It's interesting, for the first 200 years of American history Christians have been the majority. Christianity was respected, and its values upheld by the society.

But today, that's changing. Christian morals, even Christian marriage, is being rejecting by a society that's growing more pagan and atheistic. Today, Christianity is becoming the **minority status**. That's why Daniel is for us today! He teaches us how to live as a minority.

When he was a young man, maybe 14-15 years old, he was uprooted from his home and taken captive by King Nebuchadnezzar to serve in Babel's royal court.

On several occasions Daniel could've compromise his loyalty to God. But 1:8 tells us, "**Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself...**"

The food he was given to eat was a violation of Jewish law. Daniel appealed to his authorities, and proposed a test... For ten days they let Daniel eat acceptable foods to see if God didn't make him as healthy and strong as the others. God blessed a young Daniel's commitment, and caused him to prosper.

Over a period of years, time has a way of whittling away spiritual commitment, but not with Daniel. *The old Daniel* was as devoted to God as *the young Daniel*.

Daniel was over 80 years old when his enemies talked King Darius into issuing a foolish decree.

For thirty days all Babylon was forbidden to pray or petition anyone but the king. Of course, they all knew Daniel's habit was to pray three times each day.

When Daniel heard of the law, guess what he did? *Did he try to hide his faith?* Nope. *Did he try to fight the law in the courts?* No... He simply did what it was his habit to do. The Bible tells us, "he knelt on his knees... and prayed and gave thanks before God..."

Daniel was arrested and thrown in a den of lions.

It's amazing, but there is no record of him being the least bit afraid. God had delivered Daniel so many times before he knew his plight would be determined not by *the claws of the lions*, but *the hand of God*.

Someone has suggested that if the lions had eaten Daniel they would've choked, *for he was all backbone*.

He was a brave man. Daniel 6:23 tells us the outcome... The next morning, Daniel was "taken up out of the den, and no injury whatever was found on him, because he believed in his God." Always remember, even if they throw you in a den

of man-eating lions - **to be in God's will** is the safest place you can be!

I ran across a letter from a soldier on the battlefield. It was sent to his 10 year old son. The father wrote, "The first prayer I want you to say for me is not, 'God, keep Daddy safe', but 'God, make Daddy brave'. And if he has hard things to do, make him strong to do them.

Son, life and death don't matter. But right and wrong do. Daddy dead is Daddy still, but Daddy dishonored before God is something too awful for words."

This letter could've been Daniel's prayer... or it could've been the prayer of his three Hebrew friends...

Imagine, seeing 300,000 people stretched out across the desert floor - all bowing down to an image of the Babylonian king. Now look closer, peer in... and you can see three lone men. They're still standing.

These men refuse to worship the king's idol. They're Hebrews who worship Yahweh, the one, true God.

Hananiah, Azariah, Mishael - or known in Babylon as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego - are arrested and thrown into a furnace of fire. God chooses to deliver His faithful followers - and seen in the midst of the fire is a fourth person *"like the Son of God."* The only thing the flames burn are the ropes that had the men bound.

Yet before they're tossed into the flames, they express their faith, "Our God who we serve is able to deliver us, from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. **But if not**, let it be known to you, O king, we do not serve your gods..."

Real faith is not based on the outcome of our trial or our circumstances, but on the truthfulness of God.

God alone is worthy to be worshipped and served, and even if He chooses not to deliver us, **real faith says we will never, ever compromise our faith.**

Daniel was not only a man of faith and conviction, but a man of vision. God revealed to him glimpses into the future. He foresaw the world-governing empires that would follow **Babylon - the Persians, Greeks, and Romans**. He even saw **the world empire that's still future - the end times empire of the Antichrist.**

But Daniel saw even further - to the end of the age - to the final kingdom - **the kingdom of God.**

All his visions of the future were a sign to Daniel and to his people that ultimately, God is in control of the affairs of mankind. "**History**" is in reality "**His Story.**"

And that God wasn't finished with the Hebrews. Even in the midst of their captivity and bondage, God made startling new promises of their future glory...

To Ezekiel in Babylon, and to Jeremiah in Jerusalem, God promised the Hebrews **a New Covenant**.

With the Covenant given to Moses, God wrote His will on stone tablets. But with the New Covenant the Holy Spirit writes God's will on our hearts.

Jeremiah 31:33 speaks of this amazing New Covenant, "I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they all shall know Me, from the least to the greatest of them, says the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more." What a wonderful promise - what God forgives, He forgets!

Ezekiel 36:26 promises, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh."

God takes hearts that are as hard as a rock, and makes them as soft as a baby's tender bottom.

He makes us sensitive to His will, and to the welfare of each other. God puts a love in our hearts for Him, and for our fellow man. This is the New Covenant God paid for - and gives to us - by the blood of Jesus Christ.

On the night before Jesus was crucified, He took the cup that He said represented His blood and uttered these words,

“For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.”

Jesus made a new way for God to deal with people.

The New Covenant took the place of the rules God had given to Moses. The Old Covenant told us what to do, but didn't give us the power to do it. Folks were shielded from God's wrath, but didn't experience God's love. Their sin was covered, but it was never forgotten.

In contrast to the Old Covenant, the New Covenant *changes the hearts of men - it puts people in touch with God - and it blots out our sin forever and ever.*

The New Covenant is another of the foundational covenants God made with His people. It consists of three promises: **Regather, Regenerate, Reestablish.**

While in a hopeless Babylon, God promised His people three wonderful promises... He will **regather** His people to their land - **revive** their hearts through the blood of Jesus - **reestablish** His kingdom to Israel.

Remember this covenant, because it's the background for the rest of the Bible... The remainder of the Old Testament discusses how the Hebrews were **regathered** from Babylon to the land of Judah.

The Gospels and the New Testament letters explain the work that Jesus did to **regenerate** our hearts.

And the book of Revelation is about how God plans to **reestablish** His kingdom on the Earth and forever.

Remember the New Covenant... we are a part of it - it's our hope - **regather, regenerate, reestablish.**

New Covenant (nail prints in palms) **Regather, Regenerate, Reestablish**

As I said the remainder of the Old Testament deals with the first part of the New Covenant.

At the time the Jews were in Babylon, but God made a promise that they would be **return** to the land that He had given to Abraham... *There was only one problem... What about the mighty Babylonians?*

At the time Babylon was the most powerful city in the world. It was considered impossible to overthrow. It's walls were over 300 feet high, and 87 feet thick.

Even if another nation was foolish enough to attack, Babylon had food reserves that would last 20 years.

But Babylon's enemies were smart. The Persians diverted the river that flowed under Babylon's walls.

Their army marched into the city through the dried up riverbed. The Medes and the Persians conquered Babylon without even firing a shot. The Babylonians, and their army, were taken totally by surprise.

The only people who had a sense of what was happening were those who attended the king's party, *that very night*. It was a drunken orgy, and the Babylonian king had mocked the God of Israel.

He poured wine into the vessels Babylon had taken from God's Temple in Jerusalem. He was mocking and blaspheming God, using holy vessels as beer mugs.

Suddenly, a hand appeared writing a message on the wall. When King Belshazzar saw God's handwriting he was afraid. We're told in Daniel 5:6, "the king's countenance changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his hips were loosened..."

In other words, the handwriting and God's warning scared the stuffing out of him! He soiled his britches.

The message read, "Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin". Mene means number. Tekel, weighed. And Upharsin, divided. In other words, the Babylonian king's hours were numbered. He'd been judged or weighed. And his kingdom would soon be divided among his enemies.

God's words were fulfilled that very night...

The King of Persia was named Cyrus, and one of his first decrees was to allow the Jews to return to their homeland. Cyrus even bought supplies for the journey.

It's amazing, but in Isaiah 44-45, 100 years before Cyrus was born, God mentioned him by name, and even described

in detail the events that would surround the fall of Babylon and his benevolence to the Jews.

The first Hebrews to return to Judah did so in 535 BC, under the leadership of **“Zerubbabel.”**

Governor Zerubbabel’s top priority was to rebuild the temple. As soon as he arrived, he laid the foundation stone for a new temple. But the work was more difficult than he thought. And here’s a vital point, **“As soon as God begins to bless, the enemy starts to battle.”**

For the seventy years the Hebrews were in Babylon, new people had moved into their former homes. The Samaritans didn’t want the Jews returning to their land.

The Samaritans used three methods to hinder the work of rebuilding the Temple... **infiltration, irritation, and intimidation.** These are important for us to know...

For Satan will try to use these same three methods to hinder the building of the church. He doesn’t want the church to expand! He tries to sabotage our efforts.

First, he’ll try to **infiltrate**. Enemies of the Jews try to join Zerubbabel to undermine God’s work. Pastors too, need to beware of folks who join the church to hinder and interfere. It’s possible they were sent by Satan.

Second, the enemy will try to **irritate**. Ezra 4:4 tells us, that the people who had moved into the land - and who didn’t

want the Jews returning home - “**tried to discourage the people of Judah. They troubled them in building...**” They threw up all kinds of roadblocks.

Third, the enemy tries to **intimidate**. The opposition wrote a letter to the King of Persia to force a stoppage of the work. They shut down the work for fifteen years.

In the meantime though, God raised up two prophets to assist the Jews in rebuilding the Temple and their land. **Haggai** and **Zechariah** supported Zerubbabel.

Zechariah 4:6 tells us, “**This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: 'Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,' says the LORD of hosts.**” The building of the temple will not be accomplished by human ingenuity - or human strength - it will take a work of God’s Spirit.

And the same is true for us and our Temple building efforts... *Church work is God’s work*. Don’t trust in your own might or wisdom, let’s seek the help of His Spirit.

Zechariah encouraged Zerubbabel, whereas Haggai rebuked the people. He saw them building their own expensive houses, while God’s house lay in ruins.

He warns them that God will cut off His blessings until they put Him first. The Jews resumed the work in 520 BC - and completed the Temple five years later.

Just as the Jews were taken to Babylon in three waves, they returned from Babylon to Judah in three different waves, over a period of about 90 years...

In 535 BC, **Zerubbabel** returned to **rebuild the Temple...** In 458 BC, a priest named **Ezra**, returned to **encourage the people...** And in 445 BC, **Nehemiah** returned to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem.

Zerubbabel rebuilt the Temple... Ezra rebuilt the people... And Nehemiah rebuilt the walls...

Rebuild Temple (here's the church)
Zerubbabel

Rebuild People (here's the people)
Ezra

Rebuild Walls (arms like basketball rim)
Nehemiah

Sadly, not all the Jews returned to the land of Israel.

The book of **Esther** speaks of the Jews who stayed in Persia. The story of Queen Esther demonstrated how God took care of His people, even in unbelief.

Nehemiah is an interesting story, and a study on effective leadership. He was living in Shushan, the winter palace of the

Persian king. He was the king's cupbearer - a prominent position - a royal attache'.

And he was trusted - Nehemiah was the person who sipped the king's drink to make sure it wasn't poisoned.

The story begins when Nehemiah receives a report on the progress of the rebuilding of Jerusalem... *and the news was disturbing...* A delegation of Jews, just back from Judah, told Nehemiah, in 1:3, "The survivors who are left from the captivity... are there in great distress and reproach. The wall of Jerusalem is also broken down, and its gates are burned with fire."

In the next verse Nehemiah tells us how he reacted, "I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven."

Nehemiah had a prominent position in the court of Persia. He ate the finest foods - lived a life of luxury - but what was going on in Judah broke his heart. Nehemiah sat down and wept... "for many days."

God burdened this brother's heart.

One of the greatest honors that can come upon us is to receive a **God-given burden** - *for God to harness our lives to a specific purpose*. When God calls you to help shoulder a burden, He's counting on you to be trustworthy. He's enrolling you in His service.

For me, my life would be meaningless, and hollow, and shallow without a specific burden from God.

In 1980 God put a burden on my heart to start a CC in my community. And over the last 39 years that burden has only grown in intensity. *I'm praying that like Nehemiah, God will place a specific burden on you?*

After waiting on God, and praying about the need, the Lord led Nehemiah to return to Jerusalem, and lead the effort to rebuild the walls of the city.

The first thing we notice about Nehemiah was his organizational abilities. He divides the wall into small sections; then assigns a section to a different family.

I'm sure you've heard the saying, "*How do you eat an elephant?*" The answer, "*One bite at a time.*" That's how Nehemiah built the wall - one section at a time.

And this is good instruction for us. God wants His people to be organized. Believers want to serve the Lord. God puts it in their hearts. But they need good leadership. Leaders who will challenge them - and help them find their place on the wall - and then give them specific directions on how to help in the building.

As with Zerubbabel, Nehemiah also encountered opposition. Because of the threat of physical attack, he set guards along the wall to protect the workers.

We're told in Nehemiah 4:17, "Those who built on the wall, and those who carried burdens, loaded themselves so that with one hand they worked at construction, and with the other held a weapon."

Nehemiah had his workers carry a sword in one hand and a shovel in the other. They **battled and built**.

As Christians this should be our mentality. It takes both *a sword and a shovel* to grow and do God's work.

If all we do is build, then when we're not looking Satan will come and tear it down... If all we do is stand guard we'll never get anything built. *We need to both battle and build. We need a sword and a shovel.*

Once the walls were up around Jerusalem, the city became a safe place again. *Businesses resumed. Communities formed. Public gatherings took place.*

Now that basic needs were provided, the people could focus on their higher calling of worshipping God.

In Nehemiah 8, Ezra the priest stands before the people and reads to them God's Law... And it caused the people to weep. When they heard God's Word they realized how far they'd fallen from God's standards.

But Nehemiah and Ezra commanded the people not to mourn. Rather than focus on how far they needed to go, they should also focus on how far they've already come - the progress that had just been made.

And I think this is good advice for us.

So often we look at where we are compared to where we need to be *and get discouraged*. But if we'll look at where we are compared to where we were *we'll be encouraged...* Yes, we need to be challenged to grow, but we also need to celebrate our growth!

I love Nehemiah's words in 8:10, he says, **"Do not sorrow, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."** It is the Lord's joy that gives us wings to rise above difficult circumstances. His joy strengthens us in times of trial and persecution. Joy is the Christian's secret strength!

Trouble might surround you, but the Christian still has a reason to rejoice. We have heaven in our hearts.

Hebrews 12 tells us Jesus endured the cross, and despised the shame, **for the joy that was set before Him**. Joy was Jesus' strength! *And it's also ours!*

The shortest verse in the English Bible is John 11:35, **"Jesus wept."** But the shortest verse in a Greek Bible is 1 Thessalonians 5:16, **"Rejoice evermore."**

Jesus experienced sorrow for a season, so we could rejoice forever. Hey, it takes 72 muscles to frown, but only 14 to smile. A lot less effort goes into a smile...

I like to define the word **"rejoice"** as **"take joy."** We don't always find ourselves joyful, but joy is always there for the

taking. Sometimes we have to reach up and grab it! God wants us to *rejoice* - *take joy in Jesus!*

Before Nehemiah left Persia to rebuild the walls, he had promised the Persian king that he would return and file a report. And that's exactly what he did...

But while he was gone, the Jews compromised their faith. They drifted from following God. And God raised up the **Prophet Malachi** to call them to repentance.

It's interesting, there were three issues Malachi addressed... *the Jews failure to keep the Sabbath day holy... their negligence to pay tithes and offerings... and their intermarriage with the pagans around them...*

And the Jews took heed to Malachi's warning!

In fact, so much so, that by the time you get to the first century, and the days of Jesus, these three issues were the primary focus of Jewish religion...

Judaism had added scores of oppressive rules governing the **Sabbath**... they **tithed** to the point of counting out every tenth grain of spice... and they had such a **deep disdain for Gentiles** they didn't want to be under the same roof as a Gentile, let alone marry one. **Jesus has to address their over-emphasis.**

The prophecy of Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament, both in terms of order and chronology. It's followed by a period we call **the 400 silent years**.

No other prophetic word comes from God for four centuries. The New Testament book of Hebrews puts it this way, "God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son..."

There were no more spoken words, or written words from God, until He spoke to His people, Israel, and the world, through the living Word of God, Jesus Christ!

Silent Years (finger on mouth, shhh)
400 years

For 400 years the world waited for the next and greatest revelation from God - **the coming of His Son**.

Micah 5:2, written around 740 BC, predicted the *where* of Jesus' birth, "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting." Other prophecies foretold *when* and *how*..

Isaiah 7:14, "the LORD... will give you a sign: Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel." Which means, "God with us!"

Finally the day came. Mary delivered a baby boy, and named Him, *Jesus*. All the Old Testament - *the prophecies, the covenants, the commandments, the priests, sacrifices, and feasts, the Tabernacle and Temple, the characters and story lines* from Genesis to Malachi, **the whole Old Testament** pointed to Jesus.

Now the Lord of glory has come!

Birth Of Jesus (rock baby)

Ezra 9:8-9 help sum up this last period of Old Testament history... Ezra says to Israel, “*And now for a little while grace has been shown from the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a peg in His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and give us a measure of revival in our bondage.*”

He’s saying, that by His grace, God has given us a new start. We’ve put down a peg in the land. We’re back. And now we want God to enlighten our eyes...

Ezra continues, “*For we were slaves. Yet our God did not forsake us in our bondage; but He extended mercy to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to revive us, to repair the house of our God, to rebuild its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem.*” Even after idolatry and rebellion God was willing to forgive.

And this is good news for us. God loves us, and has a plan for us. And even though there are times when we fail to cooperate with God, and hinder what He wants to do - nevertheless, His plan remains the same.

If we let Him, God will do a good work in us!