

The Grievs and Gifts of Exile

Psalms 137, 126

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,



I've been reflecting a lot on what God has been doing with us these past two years, how we are to understand and give meaning to our experience, especially as Melbourne has languished through one of the world's longest periods of lockdowns. I've come to think that the theological theme of home and exile is a really helpful way for us to understand these times, and God's work amongst us.

Psalm 137 captures the grief of exile. This psalm emerges out of the experience of God's people in exile in Babylon for 70 years.

Psalm 137 plaintively laments:

- 1 By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.
- 2 There on the poplars
we hung our harps,
- 3 for there our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of
Zion!"
- 4 How can we sing the songs of the Lord
while in a foreign land?



During lockdown I had an experience that was similar in some ways. As the months went on, I found myself struggling to pray, to read the Bible, to connect with God. I wrote in my journal:

"Lord, I want to hunger for your Word, but I don't. I want to pray for our church plants and mission. I want to share your broken heart for the lost. But I can't."

I wondered: What's wrong with me? Am I being rebellious? Is my heart hard? Am I just lazy?

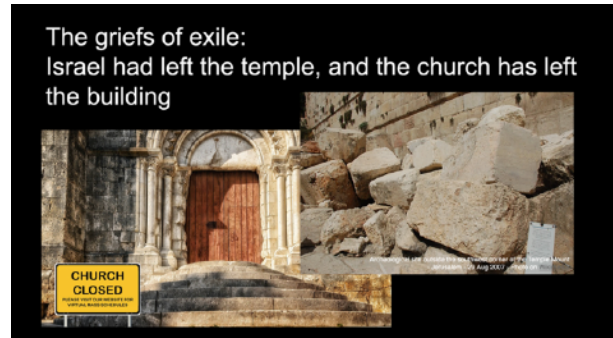
Perhaps you have had similar experiences during lockdown. How can I nurture my faith when the rhythms are not there? How can I be faithful when everything is so different? How do we pray and worship when our Christian practices aren't possible? It was while I was pondering on this that I remembered Psalm 137. 'How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?' (Psalm 137:4)

Finally I understood! My experience wasn't rebellion, or sin, or laziness, or hard heartedness, but *exile*. *Exile* is a profound experience of dislocation. It is a sense of being ripped away from what is familiar, normal, and comfortable.

Even though we've been 'at home' in our houses, we've been ripped away from what is normal, comfortable, and sustaining, particularly in our Christian life. Our rhythms have been shattered. We have been experiencing *exile*.

Exile brings *grief*. And yet through exile, God also brings great *gifts*. There are many griefs and many gifts of exile, but today I want to focus on just two: the grief of church and temple, and the gift of synagogue and change.

For the Jews in Babylon, the destruction of the Temple was a huge grief. The Temple had been the centre and symbol of their faith, the dwelling place of God on earth, the place where people met God, to worship, to sing, to find forgiveness. How could they sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? How could they still worship when the Temple did not exist? The old rhythms of corporate worship could no longer sustain them. Israel had left the temple.



During our long Covid lockdowns, we've grieved that we couldn't meet together for public worship. How could we sustain our faith when we could not gather in person for corporate worship? When we could not celebrate Holy Communion, the embodiment of God's grace in Jesus? When the cells of the body of Christ were stuck at home? It's the longest time in my life that I've gone without Holy Communion. I didn't realise how much I was missing it until I was able to have it again. Israel had left the Temple – and during our Covid lockdowns, the church has left the building. The old ways couldn't work for us in this strange landscape.

Jeremiah told the exiles to build houses, become at home in their new city, and settle in for the long haul. God would have them in Babylon for seventy years (Jeremiah 29:4-10). God's plans were long term, not instantaneous.

Here in Melbourne, we've had it somewhat easier. It's only been forty weeks of lockdown. But it seems like a long time, especially when every day seems the same as every other day. We've had days that seemed to go forever, and months that seemed to disappear.

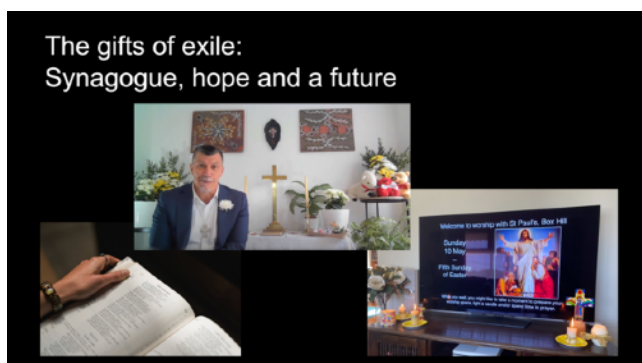
For many people, lockdown has been a massive crisis. Health care workers; school teachers with young children; the 40% of Australian workers who are 'newly vulnerable' in an economic sense, those who have lost work through lockdowns. However, for some people, lockdown hasn't been so much a crisis as a long, slow, grinding trauma, with no particular 'event' to pin the trauma on.

We've all missed the normal celebrations and rituals of life, the human interactions and spontaneity that help us flourish. We haven't been able to visit with others. We humans need more than food. We need interaction, relationship, joy, celebration and commiseration. These things make us truly

human. They're what we're created for. And missing those things is one of the griefs of exile.

Even in exile, God is still the Lord of history. He is the one who works all things together for the good of those who love him.

Right in the middle of Jeremiah's prophecy of seventy years of exile, we find this great promise of God: 'For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans to prosper you



The gifts of exile:
Synagogue, hope and a future

and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.' (Jeremiah 29:11).

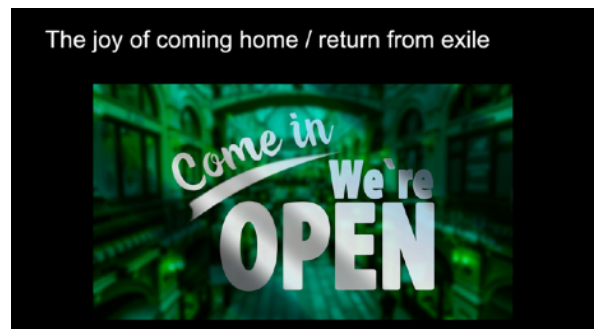
Hear this well. It is in the midst of exile, that God promises to bless his people. In the midst of exile, God promises them hope and a future. God's plans include what he will do through exile. The gifts of exile could not be given without the griefs of exile.

In Babylon, the Israelites developed new ways to worship and nurture their faith. Much of the Old Testament was gathered together, written, edited, and reflected for new generations. With the Temple destroyed, the Jewish people developed **synagogue worship**. They discovered that a small group of people, gathered around God's Word, was a legitimate, real, and nurturing expression of their faith. Synagogue worship became a practice which sustained them over hundreds of years, across multiple continents.

During our long lockdowns, God has helped us rediscover **'the church in the home.'** Our gathered worship has been in our lounge rooms. Like the exiles, we've learned that a small group or family gathered around God's Word is a legitimate, real and nurturing expression of church. We've been reminded again of Jesus' words, 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them.' God has helped us rediscover that **we don't go to church; we are the church.** Our adult children who might never 'go to church' [that is, the worship service in the building] have listened to the Word of God, heard the Gospel and wrestled with what God is doing. Unchurched people who'd never come to a church building have taken the plunge of joining online worship from their homes. **The church (the people of God) has left the building.** Don't underestimate this gift!

Exile helps us change. It challenges the way we've always done things. **I've seen faithful pastors and church leaders embrace changes for the sake of the gospel that would have been impossible without Covid lockdowns.** Christians have stepped up to show love and care for their struggling neighbours in ways they never would have done otherwise. **In 'unprecedented times', God's people have stepped up through the power of the Holy Spirit to embody and proclaim the gospel in 'unprecedented ways'.** Like Daniel and Esther, changing the culture of Babylon, they've taken the opportunities presented by exile to serve God's will and show his glory.

Maybe you remember this day: Sunday October 17th. When Premier Dan Andrews announced on this day that Melbourne's lockdown would end, he also announced that we could go even further and have up to ten people in our homes! As my family watched this announcement, our mouths were filled with laughter. This was literally more than most of us hoped for at this time. We finally had hope that our sense of dislocation, our long slow grief, might be ending.



Psalm 126 tells of the wonder and joy of those exiled to Babylon when they were able to return home.

A song of ascents.

- 1 When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dreamed
 - 2 Our mouths were filled with laughter,
our tongues with songs of joy.
- Then it was said among the nations,

"The Lord has done great things for them."

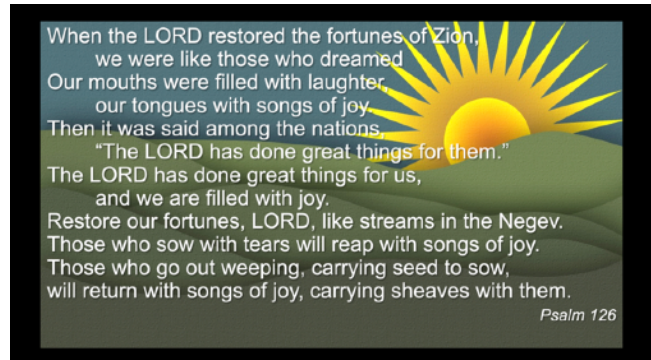
3 The Lord has done great things for us,

and we are filled with joy.

4 Restore our fortunes, Lord, like streams in the Negev.

5 Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy.

6 Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.



However here's a word of caution, and an invitation to reflect.

When the exiles returned to Israel, the land they came back to was not the same as the land they left. The Temple was still in ruins. Jerusalem's walls needed to be rebuilt. They could not just pick up where things had left before the siege of Jerusalem and the exile. **Similarly, in a post-Covid world, the land we come back to after things open up in the**

wake of the pandemic, is not the same world we left. December 2019 is no more, no matter how much we might long for it to return.

There is great joy in being released from exile. But there are also great spiritual dangers, for us in 'coming home' as we are released from lockdowns. I just want to briefly mention two of these dangers. Ever since Adam and Eve were ejected from the garden home where they walked with God, we humans have longed for home — to be home with God. Yet we've always experienced dislocation, grief, and exile. Sometimes we've tried to fill our yearning for home in ways that don't honour God.


The first danger I would call 'Rushing home so fast we miss what God is doing.' This danger is about thinking we can go back to doing things the way we did before, or thinking 'this is all over'. It's about not reflecting and learning from what God has been doing in us during our exile. It's about putting 'home' and 'comfort' and 'normality' above the work of God.

There is a deep work of grief and lament and rebuilding that needs to happen in this new and changed world we come home to. To rush back to normality, to fail to reflect, to pray, to receive the gifts of exile is to move ahead of God. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to ask questions such as these:

What is it that God is calling us to leave behind in exile?

What is it that God is calling us to change as we come home?

Rushing home so fast we miss what God is doing



- What is it that God is calling us to leave behind in exile?
- What is it that God is calling us to change as we come home?
- What is God doing in this time?
- What are the new opportunities that God is giving us?

What is God doing in this time?

What are the new opportunities that God is giving us?

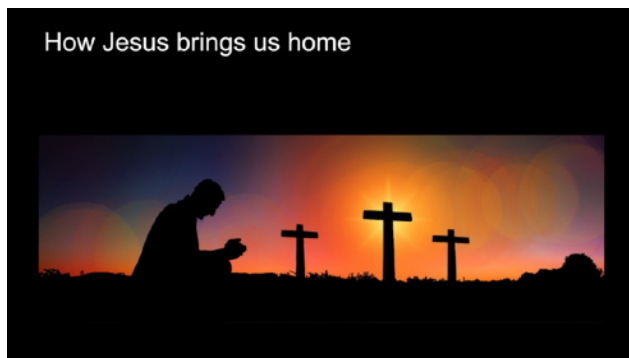
The second danger I would term 'Loving Zion more than the God of Zion'. It's about letting the desires of our hearts be in the wrong order. The yearning for home, comfort, familiarity is a powerful urge. And it can cause people to lose sight of the God in whom we find our home. This danger is about putting our freedoms, and the joy of restrictions having eased, and our love of home and comfort, above our love of God.



Don't get me wrong. Zion is beautiful.

Coming home is a good thing. For instance, being able to worship God together in our church buildings, is a good thing. But to see this as the ultimate thing is to commit idolatry. We *know* now, through deep and prolonged experience, that 'church' is not an hour and a half in a beautiful building on a Sunday. We *are* the church. We are the body of Christ 24/7, both gathered and scattered. We carry the presence of Jesus with us in our lounge rooms and families, in our workplaces and Zoom meetings, on public transport and in parks.

Let's not get sucked into thinking that *this building* is the only place we can experience the presence of God. Jesus promises that 'where two or three are gathered there I am with them'. Let's not speak of 'going to church' — that is a physical impossibility. Rather, let's pray for the Holy Spirit to strengthen and intensify the truth in our minds and hearts that we *are the church*. And we, the church, are strengthened and sanctified through gathering together for worship, whether in person or online.



So how will we, as God's faithful people, avoid the dangers of 'coming home' after our lockdown exile? What will keep us from loving home more than the God who brings us home?

I want to show you briefly that the biblical narrative of 'home and exile' is only resolved in Jesus. In a profound way, it is only the good news of Jesus through which we can avoid the dangers of our yearning for home.

Remember that Jesus left his home in glory, at the right hand of the Father, and 'made his dwelling among us' as a baby, born in Bethlehem. He left his home with God so we could be welcomed into God's home.

Jesus, during his earthly ministry, said, 'The Son of Man has no place to lay his head.' He had no place of rest — in order that we would always have a place of rest with God.

At the end of his life, Jesus was exiled — thrown out of the city of Jerusalem — and not just exiled from Jerusalem, but exiled from the very presence of the Father, as he bore our sins upon the cross. He was separated from God so that you and I would know that nothing can separate us from the presence of God, not death or life or angels or demons, not lockdowns or the grief of loss and exile, not even the powers of hell itself. The church may have left the building, but God has never left the church.

And Jesus came to make his home on earth so that one day, as the very end of the Bible tells us, one day the dwelling of God will be with people, and God will dwell among us and be our God, and we will be his people, and there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, as Revelation 21 powerfully reminds us.

It is only trusting in Jesus, his substitution and exile, that keeps us from getting our priorities and the loves of our hearts in the wrong order. It is only in Jesus that we can fully see the plans and purposes God has for us, plans to give us hope and a future. It is only in Jesus that we find our heart's true longing, to be welcomed home with God. Only in Jesus can we love the God who brings us home, more than the idea of home itself.

Only in Jesus can we truly come home to God who loves us!

May we know this truth and experience it deep in our hearts.

And the peace of God, which passes all our understanding, will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord, the one who brings us home.

Amen.

Video of the service including the above sermon: https://youtu.be/_t9Kx7I0qxM