

What is God Doing When We Go Through Alienating Experiences?
~ Ezekiel 11:14-25

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June 05, 2022

Mikhal Dekel grew up in a Jewish family in Israel. She remembers her father as a quiet, distant, and non-communicative person. She resented him for many years and wondered why he was like that. But then she began to research his story. She knew he came from a family of Polish Jews in World War 2. She knew that a vast majority of Poland's pre-war population died in the holocaust. Yet her father survived. How?

She discovered that he, along with his younger sister, were sent with 1000 other children from Eastern Poland to Iran. Eventually, they were sent to the region called Palestine at that time arriving in 1943. Though safe from the holocaust, these children endured a lot of traumas.

Her father was 13 and his sister 8, when they were sent away. Their parents had to stay behind. So, her father, at age 13, was suddenly thrust into the role of caregiver for his younger sister. Imagine the disorientation and alienation they felt on their journey. They lost their house, their parents and their homeland. By the time they reached Israel, they had not been in school for 3 years. They didn't speak the language. They lived almost as orphans, not knowing the fate of their parents. They struggled immensely to adjust.

At that time, no one knew about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. People just expected these children to get on with lives and be thankful for their survival. Yet the many shocks and surprises along this journey took its toll on her father. By the time she had finished her research, her heart towards him had completely changed. You can find the story in her books: *Tehran Children: A Holocaust Refugee Odyssey*. The alienation and disorientation of that journey permanently impacted her father.

Now we might not have escaped the holocaust. But some life events or experiences can bring us into a state of alienation. Something unexpected happens or comes into our life. It moves us out of the "life is pretty normal" crowd. We find ourselves in a different situation that the "normal" crowd finds difficult to relate to.

Say a serious health concern comes into your family. Maybe you or someone in your family is diagnosed with something serious. You don't know much about it. Then you go on that journey of discovery learning about this condition or disease. You learn what's necessary to treat it. There's a lot of information. Then someone comes along and asks, "how are you doing?" You don't know where to start.

A loved one dies – a spouse; a child; a parent; a close friend; a close relative. You experience the alienation of life without that person. Others who have not experienced this, cannot relate to what you're going through. So, you maybe avoid social gatherings for the first time in your life. You're afraid that someone might ask something that will unleash a flood of tears.

Someone in your family goes through serious mental health or behavioral issues. Everything looks normal when you sit in your spot on a Sunday. But others don't know the struggle and pain you've experienced just this past week. You feel like an outsider.

You lose your job or you're without work. You experience the strangeness of not having to get up in the morning to go to work. You know you need to do the work of looking for work. Yet there's nothing out there in your field or you keep getting no's when you apply. Life feels abnormal after decades of work.

I think about people who at one time joined us here every week. But because of aging issues, they can't anymore. The church just goes on while they sit at home or in their room. They try to find a new church community in their facility. They suddenly experience unintentional exclusion from their church family.

Or maybe you're struggling in your faith. You're not sure about Christ. You have serious questions. You wonder if asking them will get you condemned or written off. So, you carry on as if you're settled in your beliefs. Yet you feel more distant from others who seem so assured.

There are many other examples of alienation from the "normal crowd," like you can't have children. You didn't have children in the expected time frame. Someone in your family lives an openly rebellious lifestyle towards you or the Lord. You or some loved one has special needs that most cannot relate to.

When these times come into our lives, we may wonder about God. **What is God doing when we go through times of alienation?** Questions and confusion flood our minds as we try to come to grips with this new reality in our lives. Today, we are going to get answers to this question by looking at some people who had gone through tremendous alienation.

They were the exiles living near Babylon with Ezekiel. The word exile can mean a refugee, outcast, or displaced person. To be an exile meant you had experienced banishment, deportation, expulsion, and separation. The exiles were captives that the Babylonians moved to a region around their capital. They had no choice in the matter. They had to leave behind their homes, land, and possessions. They had little hope of ever returning home for it was 1400 km journey by foot or by animal if you were fortunate.

In addition to their personal experience of exile, they corporately experienced spiritual alienation from their homeland and temple. They no longer lived in the Promised Land. They could not worship at the temple in Jerusalem where God dwelt.

Moreover, the citizens remaining in Jerusalem started thinking of the exiles as cursed. They viewed their countrymen as unclean, living in a Gentile or non-Jewish land. It seems they also thought they could take over their land and possessions. During all this alienation, Ezekiel's fellow exiles wondered what God was doing.

Yet God had not forgotten them. He speaks words of hope and comfort for Ezekiel to pass on to the exiles. We will see the Lord's actions and promises to His exiled people and to us. Then we will think about how we can reconnect or remain connected to the Lord through times of exile and alienation. From the Lord's words, I pray you will receive His comfort for any alienating experiences you face today.

Ezekiel 11:14-25 (ESV) (Page 594 at the bottom right).

¹⁴ And the word of the LORD came to me: ¹⁵ “Son of man, your brothers, even your brothers, your kinsmen, the whole house of Israel, all of them, are those of whom the inhabitants of Jerusalem have said, ‘Go far from the LORD; to us this land is given for a possession.’ ¹⁶ Therefore say, ‘Thus says the Lord God: Though I removed them far off among the nations, and though I scattered them among the countries, yet I have been a sanctuary to them for a while in the countries where they have gone.’ ¹⁷ Therefore say, ‘Thus says the Lord God: I will gather you

from the peoples and assemble you out of the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel.’¹⁸ And when they come there, they will remove from it all its detestable things and all its abominations.¹⁹ And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh,²⁰ that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God.²¹ But as for those whose heart goes after their detestable things and their abominations, I will bring their deeds upon their own heads, declares the Lord God.”

²²Then the cherubim lifted up their wings, with the wheels beside them, and the glory of the God of Israel was over them.²³ And the glory of the LORD went up from the midst of the city and stood on the mountain that is on the east side of the city.²⁴ And the Spirit lifted me up and brought me in the vision by the Spirit of God into Chaldea, to the exiles. Then the vision that I had seen went up from me.²⁵ And I told the exiles all the things that the LORD had shown me.

The Lord appears to Ezekiel again. In verse 14, we discover that Ezekiel's entire clan has been deported to Babylon. The Lord refers to Ezekiel's blood brothers, relatives and the whole community in exile. Then the Lord reveals the thoughts of those who remain in Jerusalem – the non-exiles. Verse 15 – “Go far from the Lord. To us this land is given for a possession.” Basically, the people in Jerusalem wrote off their fellow citizens in exile. Those in Jerusalem thought, “The exiles departed from the holy city and lived on foreign soil. So, they are unclean. They must be cursed by God and forsaken. Therefore, we can take their land.”

Can you imagine how discouraging this news would be to the exiles? Their fellow citizens have abandoned them. They've accused the exiles of forsaking the Lord. Their land is stolen. During time of alienation, we may feel discouraged because of what people in the normal crowd say. People may not steal our property. But they may write us off or exclude us from their gatherings because they don't know what to do with us. They don't know how to be around us. So, they just don't call or don't ask or avoid us because of their own discomfort with the situation. The Lord acknowledges the pain these exiles may have felt.

But then He reveals His action during their alienation. Verse 16. “Therefore say, ‘Thus says the Lord God: Though I removed them far off among the nations, and though I scattered them among the countries, yet I have been a sanctuary to them for a while in the countries where they have gone.’”

What is God doing when we go through times of alienation? He remains present with us.

(11:16). He Himself was a sanctuary for the exiles. He is an ever-present sanctuary for us. The word sanctuary means “shelter, refuge, protection, and immunity.” This sanctuary statement is quite surprising because everyone knows THE sanctuary is in Jerusalem. The temple where the Lord dwells is 1500 km away – four months journey.

Yet last week we saw the pervasive idol worship going on in and around the temple. It was no sanctuary or refuge for the people. They could only find that in the Lord. Here, the Lord reveals that they don't have to go to Jerusalem to find sanctuary. He comes to them. He is sanctuary to them wherever and in whatever situation they find themselves.

The Lord goes to the unclean land to be present with His people. The Lord leaves the defiled temple in Jerusalem to come near his people in distant lands. The people in Jerusalem thought themselves blessed because they could just look up and see the temple. Yet they misunderstood that sanctuary was not found in a place. It is found in God Himself who is not bound to a place.

Friends, think about what this means for you and me in times of alienation. Though people may struggle to comfort us; care for us and be with us; the Lord remains present with us. He is a sanctuary no matter what we face. Nothing is too difficult; too horrible; too dangerous or too perplexing for Him to draw near. In Jesus, we see this reality. He went through the most difficult, horrible, dangerous, and perplexing journey in all of history. He went to the cross. There he defeated our three great enemies: death, sin, and the devil. So, do not imagine that your alienating circumstance is too much for God. Do not conclude that God sits perplexed wondering what to do. Do not believe the enemy's lies like “God doesn't care about you. God has abandoned you. God doesn't have your best in mind.” The Lord remains present with His people no matter what comes our way. So that is the first piece of good news the Lord has for the exiles and us today.

But He goes on. Not only is the Lord presently a sanctuary with His people, **but He has also made plans and a future for them. (11:17).** Verse 17. “Therefore say, ‘Thus says the Lord God: I will gather you from the peoples and assemble you out of the countries where you have been scattered, and

I will give you the land of Israel.” Somehow, the Lord would gather up and bring back His people to the land.

We see this prophecy fulfilled about 125 years later. In the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, exiles return to Jerusalem. They return to ruins. Those self-satisfied citizens of Jerusalem lived on borrowed time. In just a few years, the Babylonians would return to completely destroy the city, temple and its walls. If you were with us this past Fall, we walked through the book of Nehemiah covering one of these returns. Exiles return to rebuild Jerusalem’s walls.

Yet this promise extends beyond the initial return from exile. It serves as a beautiful image of people coming to the Lord. He gathers us from wherever we live and brings us into the community of God’s people. When Jesus returns, we will collectively live under His reign on the new heaven and earth. That’s God’s goal – to be with His people.

This can help us navigate times of alienation in our lives. We may see them as obstacles to our goals and life trajectory. But the Lord sees them as gates that open to His pathway for us. He takes the hard realities and brings something good out of them. He doesn’t call bad things good. The sudden death of a loved one in an accident is not a good. A serious disease is not a good. A fractured relationship or a devastating situation is not a good. However, God can bring some good out of it. God can use it for our good, His glory and the good of others.

We need to remember this because sometimes, our fears become reality. We wonder “Where was God when my loved one took their own life? Where was He when that accident took my loved one’s life or health? Where was He when I was abused? Where is He when heinous sins are committed?” I don’t want to minimize any of the pain or struggle you’ve gone through. With these challenges it may help to look to Jesus Himself. Jesus knew -- and knows still – the pain of unanswered prayer when He asked if another way could be found to save us besides the agony of the cross. So we can turn to Christ Himself for His compassion and comfort.

Additionally, these same realities about God apply to the situations just describe. God was there when those events happened. He remained present as a sanctuary through it all. He is committed to

you. To healing; renewal; justice; purpose and hope. He has the power to bring something good out of some difficulty we face. So, please hear me. I am not saying trusting God means everything will turn out ok according to our definition of ok. Hard stuff still happens. Yet God remains present with us and committed to us while we sit in the middle of it.

So, what is God doing when we go through seasons of alienation. He remains close to us as our sanctuary. He works on His plans and future for us. **He gives new hearts to enable us to walk more closely with Him. (11:19-20)**. Verse 19 – “And I will give them one heart and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God.”

The mess the Israelites found themselves in happened because they failed to follow God’s ways. It wasn’t going to work for God to say, “just try a little harder next time.” They needed totally new hearts. They had hearts of stone. They were hardened to God and His ways. They resisted His good and loving commands. They needed a heart transplant. The Lord promised hearts of flesh. These hearts would be sensitive to the things of God. They would desire to follow God’s ways and walk closely with Him.

This is New Covenant language. This points to the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. So those hearing or reading this initially had 600 years to wait before God delivered on this promise. Yet it was a source of hope for the people until the time came.

I think we can learn a couple lessons from this. First, we need to step back and take a big picture view of God’s work. We want God to act right now to make my day go better. We figure that waiting a week for God to act is long enough. Yet many of God’s people waited years for answers or fulfillment of His promises. Some never saw it in their lifetimes. Yet this did not mean God was unfaithful. He would bring about His word when the time had fully come. So, we need to take the eternal view of things at times to gain perspective.

But second, if we’re Christians we have already received this promise if we know Christ. When we came to Christ, we received our new heart. We now have a heart of flesh that can be sensitive to the things of God. We have the Spirit who empowers us and fills us to walk in God’s ways. Our job is to

cooperate with the Spirit. We need to regularly draw near to the Lord; confess our sin; seek His ways and walk humbly before Him. Then we can experience the reality that we are God's people, and He is our God.

So, if I had to summarize this passage for the exiles and for us, I would say it like this.

Despite the alienation of exile, the Lord remains present and committed to His people. He remains present as our sanctuary. He commits to us with plans and a future. He gives us a new heart of flesh.

Notice what happens at the end of the passage. The Lord's glory departs and leaves the temple. In verses 22-25 it goes up and moves to the edge of the city. You can see that in the drawing in the middle part of the bulletin. God's chariot throne rises and departs from the temple. then Ezekiel returns from his vision to the exiles in Babylon. The Lord will not remain with those who reject Him. He departs perhaps to be with those who seek Him.

Now with this knowledge of the Lord's presence with and commitment to us, **How do we (re)connect with the Lord when we experience alienation?** Maybe one of these is what God has to say to you today.

- **Remember, the Lord promises His presence with us repeatedly through the Bible.**
 - Deuteronomy 31:6 – “Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the Lord your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you.”
 - Joshua 1:5 - “As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you.” - the Lord.
 - Matthew 28:20 – “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” – Jesus.
- **Rest in the Lord’s compassion and comfort for you.**
 - Matthew 9:36 - “When he (Jesus) saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”
 - Matthew 11:28, 30 – “Come to me all you who are weary and heavy burdened, and I will give you rest . . . For I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” - Jesus

- 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 – “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our afflictions.”
- **Receive the Lord’s peace.**
 - John 14:27 – “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”
 - Philippians 4:6-7 – “Do not be anxious about anything but in prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”
- **Trust that the Lord loves you and works all things out for your good.**
 - Psalm 55:22 – Cast your cares on the Lord and He will sustain you; he will never let the righteous fall.
 - Romans 8:28 – And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who are called according to His purpose.
- **Seek the Lord’s Wisdom and Guidance for whatever you face.**
 - Psalm 23:1 – “The Lord is my Shepherd. I lack nothing.”
 - Psalm 37:3-5 – “Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will do this.”
- **Share the Lord’s comfort with others going through alienation.**
 - 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 – “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our afflictions so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.”

If you have never received Christ before, you can receive Him today. He seeks that intimate relationship with you. The Lord God is willing to replace a heart of stone with a heart of flesh and fill you with His Spirit. Then you will receive power to walk in His ways. He will strengthen and uphold you through whatever you face.

You receive Christ by believing that He is God's Son. You turn away from living life apart from Him. You turn to Him and put your life trust ultimately on Him. God will give you a new heart. He will forgive your sin and guilt. You will begin the journey of walking day by day with Him.

If you're going through alienation right now, the Lord remains present as your sanctuary. The Lord continues His plans and future for you. The Lord has given you a new heart. So let us bring our alienation to Him now as we pray.