

Bite Size Bible Study

Character of God #234

By Lee Logue

One of my favorite things when reading the Bible is to tease out an understanding of God's character. I do this because of the admonition in Leviticus 19; *Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.*

I understand this to mean that I should work toward making my character resemble God's character. But I can only do this with the help of the Holy Spirit, who in part guides my understanding of scripture.

In light of that introduction I would like to pass along some of what we have been studying in the Saturday Bible Study; namely, what and why was there a Babylonian Exile.

We often think of the destruction of the Temple and the Babylonian Exile as a bad thing and wonder why God would allow such a thing to happen.

Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple in 586 B.C.E., but the Judean Exile had already begun as early as 597 B.C.E., with the removal to Babylon of Judahite king Jehoiachin and others.

Nebuchadnezzar took Jehoiachin captive to Babylon. He also took from Jerusalem to Babylon the king's mother, his wives, his officials and the prominent people of the land. The king of Babylon also deported to Babylon the entire force of seven thousand fighting men, strong and fit for war, and a thousand skilled workers and artisans. 2 Kings 24:15–16 NIV

The Biblical text continues, recording the cataclysmic destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE, *he set fire to the temple of the LORD, the royal palace and all the houses of Jerusalem. Every important building he burned down.* (2 Kings 25:9 NIV), and the subsequent removal of the population, along with the Temple furnishings and treasury.

Spoiler Alert: God caused it.

Don't believe it? Let's read the letter that Jeremiah was instructed to send to those in exile in Babylon.

A Letter to the Exiles

Now these are the words of the letter which Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the rest of the elders in exile and to the priests, the prophets and all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into captivity from Jerusalem to Babylon. ²(This was after King Jeconiah and the queen mother, the eunuchs, the princes (court officials) of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen and the smiths had departed from Jerusalem.) ³The letter was hand-carried by Elasah the son of Shaphan and Gemariah the son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to Babylon to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, saying,

⁴“So says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the captives whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon, ⁵‘Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their fruit. ⁶Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there and do not decrease [in number]. ⁷Seek peace and well-being for the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf; for in its peace (well-being) you will have peace.’

Jeremiah 29:1-7 AMP

God says He, and only He, was responsible for them going into captivity. Nebuchadnezzar was only the instrument He used to accomplish His decision.

He has done this because they were continuously breaking the covenant that they had agreed to and the agreed upon consequences were now being invoked. Yet He was not abandoning them but still want them to have peace and prosperity (Shalom).

He instructs them to:

1) Build houses and 2) settle down; 3) plant gardens and 4) eat what they produce. 5) Marry and have sons and daughters; 6) find wives for your sons and 7) give your daughters in marriage, so that 8) they too may have sons and daughters. 9) Increase in number there; 10) do not decrease.

Even though they will be grieving the loss of the Temple and their homeland, He wants them to be at peace and live a full life. They will be there 70 years (as we shall see) and this means several generations will come and go. He is not looking for their destruction but, in today's vernacular, giving them a “time out.”

As the letter continues in vs. 10-14, He tells them of the “light at the end of the dark tunnel”.

¹⁰“For thus says the Lord, ‘When seventy years [of exile] have been completed for Babylon, I will visit (inspect) you and keep My good promise to you, to bring you back to this place. ¹¹For I know the plans and thoughts that I have for you,’ says the Lord, ‘plans for peace and well-being and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. ¹²Then you will call on Me and you will come and pray to Me, and I will hear [your voice] and I will listen to you. ¹³Then [with a deep longing] you will seek Me and require Me [as a vital necessity] and [you will] find Me when you search for Me with all your heart. ¹⁴I will be found by you,’ says the Lord, ‘and I will restore your fortunes, and I will [free you and] gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you,’ says the Lord, ‘and I will bring you back to the place from where I sent you into exile.’

Jeremiah 29:8-14 AMP

We read in verse 7 that they were to pray for Babylon.
7Seek peace and well-being for the city where I have sent you into exile and pray to the Lord on its behalf.

How can they pray for the very ones who have done what they perceive as such an evil deed? They destroyed God's Temple and the Holy City.

Although it had not been a part of their culture up to now, they had been instructed to love their neighbor. But up to now their neighbor was only a fellow Hebrew – not a Gentile.

You shall not take revenge nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor (acquaintance, associate, companion) as yourself; I am the Lord. Leviticus 19:18 AMP

Now they are being told to pray for the very people that had been so cruel to them and destroyed their Holy City.

Many years later Jesus was teaching the same lesson. In his Sermon on the Mount, he talked about the real love for one's neighbor and the reason we were to do so. Jesus was speaking to both Hebrews and Gentiles so now neighbor was anyone who you had contact with.

Love for Enemies

⁴³“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

⁴⁵that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? ⁴⁸Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Matthew 5:43-48 NIV

Seeing Jesus' character through the stories of the Old Testament gives us a clearer understanding of God. We see His character in the ways in which He dealt with His chosen people. Punishment where punishment was do, but only to further the development of their character. A character that approaches His own character. He lives in Shalom and desires that we live there too. That can only be done when we think and act in the way in which He designed us.

You don't ask a Ferrari to drive across the Atlantic Ocean, likewise we should not do things that we were never designed and created to do. We were created to be images of God, not beings of evil desires and actions.

Then, since God loves all of His creation, maybe we should try to emulate His Love and closely consider how we are treating each other and the rest of His creation.

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