

PROMISED LAND 2: Lesson Twelve, The Exile ***Ezekiel, Daniel, Esther***

Subject: God spoke to His people while they were under His hand of judgment in exile.

Main Idea: God wants us to “settle down” in distressing circumstances and learn the lessons He has for us in them.

Principles:

1. *Distressing circumstances offer us the opportunity to become passionate about God’s presence.*
2. *Distressing circumstances are an opportunity to regain perspective.*
3. *Distressing circumstances are an opportunity to resubmit to Christ’s lordship and recommit to His service.*

Introduction

The people of Israel broke the Lord’s covenant with them and entered Babylon as exiles under God’s hand of discipline. 136 years earlier, the terrorizing Assyrians had carried the Israelites of the Northern Kingdom into captivity, and then, as we discovered in the last lesson, the Judeans of the Southern Kingdom also fell and the Babylonians deported them. During the years of their exile, the name Judean was shortened to “Jew,” and from this point forward, the Bible no longer refers to them as “Hebrews” or “Israelites.”

Undoubtedly, some had been more guilty and deserving of God’s judgment than others. Even a few righteous people were swept away in the Exile. Innocent or guilty, they all endured the consequences. Surely every thinking Jew wondered, “What now? How long will we remain in these distressing circumstances? Does God still love us?” Even more importantly, “Now that we are here in Babylon, what does God *expect* of us?” Perhaps you have asked similar questions in distressing circumstances.

As it turned out, Jeremiah sent a letter to the exiles that answered these questions. The Lord wanted them to “settle down” in Babylon under His hand of discipline (Jeremiah 29:5, 8, 40:9). “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you... to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29). Instead of fighting against their circumstances, God told them to settle down under His hand of judgment. He had their future under control. For the present, there were lessons to be learned.

He also has lessons to teach us in our times of trouble. Whatever our circumstances, God wants us to “settle down” and learn what He has to teach us in them. Are you too busy fighting your problems to learn from them? Perhaps God is telling you to just settle down and learn what He wants to teach you in the present. If we don’t, our suffering becomes a wasted opportunity.

God worked through three particular individuals to teach His people what they needed to learn from their exile: Ezekiel, Daniel, and Esther. Ezekiel was a priest, Daniel was Jewish royalty (or at least nobility), and Esther was an orphan. Yet, God used all three in big ways to influence their contemporaries.

I. Two World Empires in View

A. Babylon and the Jews' Captivity

- i. Life in Exile: Psalm 137 was penned by one of the exiles. It begins, "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion" (Zion is the name often used in the Bible for Jerusalem, particularly the Temple Mount). Although the exiles grieved, life in Babylon was not completely difficult for them. The Babylonians allowed peoples they exiled to develop their own communities and accumulate wealth (Jeremiah 29:5-7). Ezekiel occupied his own home (Ezekiel 8:1). Archaeologists have uncovered a tax receipt from this period that indicates a Jewish family held a controlling interest in a business enterprise.ⁱ According to the Jewish historian Josephus (XI.i.3), when Cyrus later permitted the exiled peoples to return to their homelands, many Jews did not do so simply because they did not want to leave their possessions behind.ⁱⁱ Those who were born in captivity knew it as their home, but the older generation still longed for Jerusalem.
- ii. The Overthrow of Babylon: After the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian Empire quickly weakened. Nabonidus was the last real ruler of Babylon, reigning from 556-539 B.C. However, Babylonian records (deciphered from cuneiform) indicate that Nabonidus spent at least a part of his reign in the oasis of Tema in the Arabian Desert. His son Belshazzar was co-regent in Babylonia. According to Daniel 5, Belshazzar witnessed a body-less hand writing a strange message on the wall in the royal palace and offered to make Daniel the *third* highest ruler in the kingdom if he would interpret the writing (5:16, 29). He offered the third highest position since he himself already occupied the second highest position, under his father Nabonidus. Daniel interpreted the message as foretelling the overthrow of Babylon, and according to Daniel 5:30, Belshazzar was slain and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom that very night. The Babylonian Empire fell to the Medo-Persians with minimal opposition.

B. The Persian Empire and the Jews: The Medo-Persian Empire extended from India to Ethiopia, making it much larger than either the Babylonian or Assyrian Empires. Although it was a dual power, the Persians were the stronger of the two. Esther the Jewess became a Persian Queen.

- i. Darius the Mede: Daniel names Darius the Mede as Babylon's conqueror. Three Persian kings went by the name "Darius." However, none of them ruled at the time Babylon was overthrown and thus far, no extra-Biblical record has shed light on the identity of Daniel's "Darius." It is sometimes assumed to be another name for Cyrus the Great, the first king of the Medo-Persian Empire, or an alternate name for the general named

Gubaru, whom Cyrus appointed as governor of Babylon. What we do not yet fully understand is no cause for alarm. At one time the accuracy of the Bible was questioned for its reference to a people known as Hittites. Then in the mid to late 19th century, archaeologists confirmed that the Hittite Empire existed for nearly 400 years!

- ii. The Proclamation of Cyrus the Great (539 B.C.): More than 150 years before Cyrus' birth, Isaiah named him as God's instrument in freeing the exiles to return and rebuild Jerusalem and the Lord's Temple. The "Cyrus Cylinder" that was discovered by archaeologists in the late 19th Century, confirms that Cyrus adopted a new policy toward the peoples the Assyrians and Babylonians had displaced, permitting them to return to their homelands and encouraging them to worship their own gods. The Post-Exilic period will be the subject of the next lesson.

II. Ezekiel's Influence

A. Ezekiel, the Man

- i. Personal Information: Ezekiel was a priest (1:3 [or studying to be a priest]) when he was taken into Babylonian captivity in 597 B.C., along with King Jehoiachin and 10,000 other leading citizens of Judah. His familiarity with the Temple and the system of sacrifices is evident in his writing. He was a married man, although his wife died suddenly while Jerusalem was under siege (24:16-27). As stated, he had his own home in Babylonia and was well respected by the Jewish community (8:1, 14:1, 20:1).
- ii. Titles: The titles "Watchman" of Israel and the "Son of Man" are frequently used of Ezekiel in the book. The latter is a title Jesus also applied to himself. In both cases, the term emphasized their humanity (even though Jesus was also fully divine). Scholars have dubbed Ezekiel the "Father of Judaism," since the Jewish faith and synagogue system (as it exists today) developed in the time of the Exile. Some suggest that the synagogue system grew out of the meetings of Judah's elders in Ezekiel's home. He is also known as the "Prophet of Personal Responsibility" and the "Father of Apocalyptic."

B. Ezekiel's Message

- i. Chapters 1-24: The dismantling of society in Jerusalem occurred in stages. Ezekiel's captivity occurred *prior* to the Fall of Jerusalem and destruction of the Temple. The first section of his book predicts these events and ends with their fulfillment and the death of Ezekiel's wife. Each person's accountability for his or her own sins is emphasized in this section.

- ii. Chapters 25-32 contain prophecies against the nations surrounding Israel. They were warned not to gloat over Israel's fall because their own day of judgment was coming. These prophecies were a comfort to Israel, but not only that: their fulfillment would prove to all these nations that the Lord is God.
- iii. Ezekiel 33-48: The last section of the book contains controversial prophecies about Israel's future, including a lengthy section describing a new Temple to be built, a new set of rituals, and a new description of the land belonging to God's people. It promises restoration of Israel's fortunes under a Messianic king whose reign would be unending. A correlative to the New Covenant foretold in Jeremiah 31 is also included in this section of Ezekiel (36:24-28). In it, Ezekiel foretells the time when God's people would be given new hearts and the Lord would put His Spirit in them.
- iv. Forms of Prophetic Ministry: At the Lord's instruction, Ezekiel delivered his messages in a variety of forms.
 1. *Oral and Written Prophecies*: At times, they were oral or written prophecies. One interesting prophecy describes the glory and downfall of the King of Tyre (Ezekiel 28). The passage contains some parallels to a description of the king of Babylon given by Isaiah (14:12-16). Many scholars have concluded that Isaiah and Ezekiel intended for their readers to have understood that they were drawing a comparison between the fall of these kings and the fall of Satan. Nowhere in the Scriptures is the origin of evil directly addressed. Ezekiel 28 indicates that Satan was created as a guardian cherub of unusual perfection and beauty who fell because of his own pride.
 2. *Living Imagery*: On other occasions, the Lord directed Ezekiel to take symbolic actions as signs to the exiles of things to come, things they would have relayed via messages to their relatives who were still in Judah. Once, he was to lie on his side and eat defiled food for 390 days, then roll to his other side for another 40 days (symbolizing the number of years of Israel and Judah's sin). God also told him to shave his head and beard and scatter the hairs to the wind to symbolize the dispersion of the people of Jerusalem.
 3. *Visions*: Ezekiel also saw visions. These visions occupy a significant portion of the book.
 - a. *Throne Room* (Ezekiel 1): In Ezekiel's first vision, he was carried to the Lord's throne room. He saw four living creatures (as did John in his Revelation [4:6-8] of the throne room). Wheels within wheels, seemingly indicating freedom of movement, propelled the creatures. He also saw the Lord

- on His throne. Ezekiel used phrases like, “it had the appearance of (or the likeness of)” to describe what he saw because it was so far beyond description in human language.
- b. *Departure of the Lord’s Glory from Jerusalem* (Ezekiel 9-11): In another vision, Ezekiel was carried to Jerusalem. He witnessed the Lord’s glory being removed from the Temple and out of Jerusalem, indicating that the Lord was abandoning the Temple and the city.
 - c. *Valley of Dry Bones* (Ezekiel 37:1-14): Ezekiel saw a vision in which a valley filled with dead dry bones was brought to life. It was a prediction of the restoration of the spiritually dead and exiled in Israel, but also an affirmation of our future bodily resurrection.
 - d. *Ezekiel’s Temple* (Ezekiel 40-48)
 - i. Chapters 40-48 contain Ezekiel’s vision of a new Temple, new rituals, and a new description of Israel’s land. These chapters were considered by the Jewish community to be so mysterious that they were almost not included in the Bible. Three main lines of interpretation have developed.
 1. The first interprets Ezekiel’s description as a blueprint for the Temple that was later built in Jerusalem under Zerubbabel’s leadership after the Exile. (This event is covered in the next lesson.) Objections to this view include the fact that the dimensions and grandeur of the Temple built by Zerubbabel is nothing like that of Ezekiel’s description.
 2. A second interpretation is figurative. The Temple refers to the body of Christ in the Church age and heaven in the age to come (eternity). Some argue these truths alone cannot be all that was intended, since Ezekiel was given such specific measurements for the Temple.
 3. A third view is that Ezekiel is describing a literal millennial Temple that will be built during (or just prior to) the time of Christ’s return. One of the arguments against this view is that Ezekiel 43 describes sin offerings being made in this Temple. The Book of Hebrews says that Jesus fulfilled this requirement in His death

on the cross and there is no further need for sacrifice (Hebrews 10:11-18).

- ii. Regardless of one's viewpoint about Ezekiel's temple, throughout the Bible, the Temple (and the Tabernacle) was the place where God dwelt among His people. The theme of God dwelling among us summarizes the story of the entire Bible! Prior to the Fall, God walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. One day when we are in Heaven, we will enjoy His physical presence forever. In the meantime, He has put His Spirit in us and made our bodies His temple (1 Corinthians 3:16-17).
- iii. Ezekiel 47 describes the new city in terms very much like those of the heavenly city in Revelation 22. Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on the banks of the river that flows from the threshold of the Temple. Their leaves will not wither nor will their fruit fail. After the dimensions of the new city are described, the final verse of Ezekiel says, "And the name of the city from that time on will be: THE LORD IS THERE" (48:35).

Summary Statement: The Book of Ezekiel begins with a vision of the Lord's throne room and ends with the Lord's presence among His people. The Lord's message to the exiles through Ezekiel might be summarized, "I want you to settle down and learn to enjoy my presence."

Principle: *Distressing circumstances are an opportunity to become passionate about God's presence.*

Illustration: A headache or a backache may cause you to turn to the aspirin bottle or another remedy. The pain of circumstances is intended by God to cause us to turn to *Him*. He is as close to us at every moment as our very breath. Pain is an opportunity to develop the healthy habit of practicing His presence.

Application: How often in each day do you pause to talk with God about what is going on around you *that very moment*? When you are in public, are you listening to hear from Him about someone He may want you to approach or something He may want you to say? Do you think to stop and thank Him for the sights you see, the aromas you inhale, and the sounds you hear around you? When you lie down in bed at night, do you take time to turn your thoughts to Him before you sleep? Do you thank Him for the new day the moment you awaken? The more we settle down and move through each day with an awareness of His presence and control, the more we will experience His gifts of joy and peace.

Transition: The Lord also spoke to the exiles through the life and prophecies of Daniel.

III. Daniel

A. Daniel the Man

- i. Deportation: Daniel was Ezekiel's younger contemporary by perhaps 10 or 15 years, but Daniel was already in exile when Ezekiel arrived there. He and his three friends had been part of the first deportation that occurred in 605 B.C. This was a deportation of royalty and nobility and therefore, Daniel was at the very least a nobleman, if not a member of the royal family.
- ii. Service: While Ezekiel ministered to the exiled people, Daniel ministered in the royal court from the days of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, into the time of the Medo-Persian Empire. He must have lived until he was about 90 years old. Over that time, he had a powerful testimony and influence on a foreign culture and certainly on his own people as well.
- iii. Reputation
 1. Daniel was young when deported. His appointment to the king's service, gave him opportunities to console himself with the indulgences enjoyed by Gentile royalty. Daniel knew the palace food was defiled, according to the Mosaic Law, and since he took God's word seriously, he resolved not to eat it. Even though he served at the highest level of society, he lived a countercultural lifestyle in order to represent the Lord in the land where God had placed Him. How easily he could have turned to the deceptive philosophies of the culture and the shallow, self-serving comforts that were offered to him! But instead, Daniel turned to the life-giving disciplines of prayer and study, believing *God* would satisfy him. And God did not disappoint him! He shared with Daniel the very secrets of His plans and purposes for world history. He also gave Daniel unusual wisdom and used him in a powerful way to influence the entire kingdom (6:25-27).
 2. Daniel's reputation spread quickly. By the time Ezekiel arrived, Daniel was already known throughout the land. Ezekiel references him three times in his book (14:14, 20, 28:3).
- iv. Influence of Jeremiah: The lives and ministries of Jeremiah and Daniel overlapped. According to Daniel 9:2, Daniel understood "from the Scriptures, according to the word of the Lord given to Jeremiah the prophet" that the Jews exile would last seventy years. This amazing statement tells us that Jeremiah's prophecies were already being accepted as scripture only a half century after they were given. One of the primary tests of a writing having scriptural authority is that it was recognized from early on as such.

B. Daniel's Message

i. Language and Construction

1. The Book of Daniel is unique in that it was written partly in Aramaic (the language of the Persian Empire) and partly in Hebrew. Perhaps the Hebrew portions were written primarily with a Jewish audience in mind and the Aramaic portions for a broader, Gentile audience.
2. The themes of some of the chapters of Daniel mirror one another. For example, chapters 2 and 7 describe the passing of four empires. Chapters 3 and 6 contain stories of God's miraculous deliverance (Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the fiery furnace and Daniel from the lions' den). Chapters 4 and 5 tell stories of God's humbling of pagan kings (Nebuchadnezzar's humbling through a mental illness that caused him to live like an animal and the writing on the wall witnessed by Belshazzar at his opulent feast).
3. Daniel's book is presented to us in two evenly divided parts. The first six chapters are narratives about Daniel's influence in the courts of Babylon and Persia. The powerful witness and miraculous events surrounding the lives of Daniel and his friends proved to the exiles that God was not only present in Jerusalem. The second six chapters contain visions Daniel received of future events. The visions of successive kingdoms culminate in the eternal Messianic Kingdom promised to David. Even though the Jews were presently under God's hand of discipline, these visions would have encouraged them that God's unconditional promises would never fail.

ii. Apocalyptic

1. *Use*: More so than Ezekiel, Daniel's book is truly apocalyptic. Apocalyptic literature was written in times of persecution to strengthen those in crisis and help them see God's control over human history. It contains veiled symbols and messages that the group being addressed was probably meant to understand. Good and evil are clearly distinguishable, numbers often have symbolic meanings, and emphasis is placed on the resolution of world history. While it is important to study and apply all parts of God's word, whenever symbolism is involved, we are wise not to become overly dogmatic about our interpretations.
2. *Daniel's Visions of Kingdoms*: Daniel interpreted and received visions of five kingdoms.
 - a. The first kingdom is Babylon (2:38). The gold head of the statue in chapter 2 and the winged lion in chapter 7 are symbols of it.

- b. The second empire, represented in chapter 2 by the silver chest and arms of the statue, in chapter 7 by the bear-like beast, and in chapter 8 by the two-horned ram, is the Medo-Persian Empire (8:20).
- c. The third is the Greek Empire. The bronze thighs and belly of the statue in chapter 2, the speedy winged leopard in chapter 7 and the goat in chapter 8 represent it (8:21). Much more attention is given to this empire, since it would rise in the Exiles not too distant future.
 - i. *Alexander the Great*: History has confirmed the details of Daniel's vision concerning Greece. At age 21, Alexander the Great (the leopard with four wings and four heads of 7:6 and the prominent horn of the goat in 8:5-8) quickly overran the Persian Empire in a series of decisive battles. However, "at the height of his power" (8:8), Alexander died at age 33 of malaria and complications from alcoholism, and his empire was torn into four parts (the four prominent horns of 8:8), each ruled by one of Alexander's generals: Ptolemy, Cassander, Lysimachus, and Seleucus.
 - ii. *Antiochus Epihanes and the Antichrist*: Palestine (the "Beautiful Land" [8:9]) lay between the territories dominated by Ptolemy (of Egypt) and Seleucus (of Syria), and was fought over by these two rulers and their successors. Daniel gave prophecies concerning the wars between the Seleucid and Ptolemy dynasties in astonishing detail in chapter 11. The most notorious king in this time period was the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes (the "contemptible person" of 11:21), who came to power in 175 B.C.
 - 1. The Jews knew him as "the Madman." He attacked and burned Jerusalem, set up a statue of Zeus in the Temple, desecrated it by sacrificing a sow on the altar, and killed thousands of Jews.
 - 2. There is no doubt that Antiochus is the individual described. However, most scholars agree that Antiochus prefigured the Antichrist, the one the New Testament calls "the man of lawlessness" (2 Thessalonians 2:4-12) who will appear at the conclusion of world history. Therefore, some of these prophecies apply to one, the other, or both individuals.

- d. There is general agreement that the fourth kingdom is the Roman Empire. By the second century B.C., Rome superseded Greece as the dominant world power. The statue's legs and feet of iron and clay in chapter 2, the beast with ten horns in chapter 7 represent this fourth kingdom.
 - i. This empire is portrayed in Daniel's visions as enduring until the time when the fifth and final kingdom is ushered in. Bible students have suggested a variety of ways and forms in which the Roman Empire still exists today.
 - ii. Near the end of this fourth kingdom, Daniel saw that a little horn will arise from it (7:8), another depiction of the Antichrist (also 9:27). Daniel says he will speak boastfully and wage war against the holy people (7:20-21) until he is overthrown by "one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven" who is given "authority, glory, and sovereign power" and whose "dominion will never end" (7:13-14). This can only be a reference to the overthrow of the Antichrist by the Lord Jesus.
- e. The fifth and last kingdom is the Kingdom of Christ. Daniel was told, "His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship and obey him" (7:27). Jesus inaugurated His kingdom in His first coming and will complete it at the time of His second coming.

Summary Statement: How can the Lord's message to the distressed exiles through Daniel be summarized? "I have a bigger picture in view."

Principle: *Distressing circumstances are an opportunity to regain perspective.*

Application: When pain makes us near-sighted, we suffer needlessly. But when we keep our eyes on the big picture, pain is transformational! The most valuable gems come from crystals that are formed under the earth's surface by crushing pressure and intense heat. Pressure and fiery trials are one of God's best strategies for transforming us as well. In order to cooperate with His process, we need to look beyond our pain and learn to see the bigger picture. God is more concerned with our Christ-likeness than our personal comfort. He always has that big picture in mind.

Have you lost perspective? If so, some of your emotional pain may be entirely unnecessary. Will you determine, with the Lord's help, to settle down, regain perspective, and learn all He wants to teach you in your trial?

Transition: A third individual whose life impacted the Jews was Esther.

IV. Esther

A. Background

- i. Historical Period
 1. According to the first verse of Esther, the story took place in the time of the Persian king Xerxes (the Hebrew transliteration of his name is Ahasuerus), approximately 60 years after Cyrus had permitted the Jewish exiles to return. She and her uncle Mordecai were among the many Jews who remained in the land of their exile by choice. Nevertheless, God protected them.
 2. Even though Esther lived in the post-exilic period (her story probably belongs between the events of Ezra 6 and 7), it is included in this lesson since it tells us something about what life was like for the Jews of the Diaspora. Haman told Xerxes, “There is a certain people dispersed and scattered among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom whose customs are different from those of all other people and who do not obey the king’s laws; it is not in the king’s best interest to tolerate them.” This tells us that Jewish communities were dispersed *throughout* Persia, and that, even though their communities were separated, they still *maintained their unique customs*. Additionally, we know that anti-Semitism had become widespread. The Jews’ persecutors numbered in the thousands (9:16).
- ii. Author: Although the author of the Book of Esther is unknown, it must have been someone who knew quite a bit about Persia. Jewish tradition proposes Mordecai as the author. The name of God appears nowhere in the book. However, God’s providential control is suggested throughout. He was sovereignly overseeing the circumstances and timing of events to bring Esther to power “at such a time as this” (4:14) and to protect the Jews living in Persia.
- iii. Xerxes
 1. Xerxes (Ahasuerus) reigned from 485-465 B.C. As stated, the Persian Empire far exceeded the boundaries of either the Assyrian or Babylonian Empires. Susa was one of three capitals. Xerxes was known for his love of opulence. The extravagance of the palace, the feasting, and the contest for queen portray this in Esther. The historian Herodotus recounted quite a few bizarre episodes related to his wives and concubines. ⁱⁱⁱ

2. Xerxes' particular ambition was to conquer Greece. He had some initial success but then a series of defeats caused him to withdraw. It is possible that the great feast thrown by Xerxes in Esther 1 was an attempt to boost moral and gain support for Xerxes' campaign against Greece. As it turned out, it was a campaign he lost. Esther became queen in Xerxes' seventh year, after the Greeks had soundly defeated him. Some have suggested that the contest to find a new queen was proposed in order to cheer him up.

B. Plot

i. Esther and Mordecai's Exaltation

1. Esther was a Jewish orphan who became Queen of Persia by means of a beauty contest. Mordecai, the Jewish uncle who raised her, was a minor court official. For unknown reasons, he told Esther to keep her Jewish identity a secret. She would have been born in exile and familiar enough with the local customs to seem Persian. With anti-Semitism abounding, Mordecai may have been sure Esther had no chance of becoming queen if her nationality was known.
2. Shortly after Esther became queen, a man named Haman was elevated to a very high position in the land. Haman was an Agagite, an Amalekite descendant. Enmity between the Jews and Amalekites had existed since the days of Moses (Exodus 17:15). Haman felt slighted by Mordecai (who refused to bow before him) and hatched a plan to destroy not only Mordecai but also all the Jews in Persia in vindication. He cast lots to determine the day on which the Jews' enemies would be ordered to annihilate them, tricked the king into signing an edict endorsing it, and had the edict sent throughout the land.
3. Mordecai informed Esther of the edict and suggested that she had come to the throne "for such a time as this" (4:14). Esther risked her life to unveil the true intent of Haman to King Xerxes. As it turned out, the very night before she made the revelation, Xerxes *happened* to be unable to sleep and *just happened* to learn through some middle-of-the-night reading that Mordecai had been responsible for uncovering an assassination plot against him. Xerxes determined to honor him the next morning.
4. That next day, Xerxes also learned the truth about the vile Haman and his vicious plot from Esther. In addition, a court attendant informed him that Haman had built a pole on which to impale Mordecai, the very man Xerxes wanted honored. Xerxes had Haman immediately impaled on that very pole. He then exalted Mordecai to the position that had been Haman's.

ii. Purim:

1. The Jews in Persia had lived for months believing they were about to be exterminated. Since any edict of the king could not be overturned, Mordecai came up with a plan to pen a second edict granting Jews the right to defend themselves and even to kill their enemies.
2. The Feast of Purim was established to celebrate this turn of events. “Purim” comes from the Babylonian word “Pur,” which means “lot” (a reference to the lots cast by Haman). Some think one purpose of the Book of Esther is to explain the existence of this Feast. In Jewish synagogues, the entire book of Esther is read at the Feast of Purim. A tradition has developed in which the congregation cheers aloud whenever Mordecai’s name is mentioned and they boo or hiss when Haman’s name is read.

Summary Statement: Esther’s courageous submission to the Lord’s purposes for her life prevented the Jews of the Diaspora from being annihilated. What messages did the Lord send to His people through Esther? Certainly, they were reminded that, although the Lord retained the right to discipline them, no one else touched them without His permission. Esther’s example also reminded them of the importance of submission to God’s purpose for their lives. If they submitted to Him, He would still use them in mighty ways, as He had Esther.

Principle: *Distressing circumstances are an opportunity to resubmit to Christ’s Lordship and recommit to His service.*

The very term “Lord” implies our submission. Our sin nature resists submitting, but when we fully submit, God will use us in ways that exceed our wildest imagination (Ephesians 3:20). Instead of backing off our service to Him, tough times are the time to dig in deep and recommit to His service. That is what Esther did. That is also what the Jews in Jerusalem needed to do. As we will learn in the next lesson, they were so discouraged by political opposition that it was keeping them from finishing their God-assigned tasks.

Application: Are trials of some kind keeping you from the tasks God has assigned you? Have you backed off, as Esther was tempted to do, out of fear or discouragement? Corrie Ten Boom, a Christian survivor of Hitler’s concentration camps, once said, “Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God.”^{iv}

Conclusion

Times of distress are opportunities for great spiritual growth and blessing, if we only settle down and learn the lessons God has for us in them. What would you need to accept as under God's sovereign direction in order to stop wrestling inwardly or outwardly and be settled? Your current living situation? Your singleness or marriage? Your role at work? Your age or stage of life or limitations? Your routine or lack of routine? Will you trust in God who has said, "For I know the plans I have for you... to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11)?

ⁱ Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (pp. 221-22), as quoted in Denyer, David A. *The Lot of the Exiles*. Personal library of teaching notes. Alliance Theological Seminary.

ⁱⁱ Denyer, David A. *The Lot of the Exiles*. Personal library of teaching notes. Alliance Theological Seminary.

ⁱⁱⁱ Breneman, M. (2001). *Vol. 10: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (279). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

^{iv} "Corrie Ten Boom." BrainyQuote.com. Xplore Inc, 2015. 5 May 2015.