

Faith Adapts to Crisis

Turn to Exodus 19. We have certain ways in which we live out our faith in Christ. What happens when these get taken away? Right now, because of this virus, we cannot meet together, we cannot sing together, or pray together, or eat together. We can't hug each other or be hospitable to each other.

These are God-given ways to encourage each other and build up our faith and show that we follow Christ. What happens when they get taken away? What does faith do in crisis?

For some, faith dies away. Jesus talks about seed on shallow soil, it produced a plant that withered when there was trouble. Jesus talks about seed that was planted where there were thorns and thistles. Thorns and thistles include the cares of life. The cares of life are intense right now, and they choke the plant. For some, faith dies away in crisis.

But for others, faith adapts, it finds new ways to live like God's people. Today we will talk about the crisis of the exile. When the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and the temple of God, and took the exiles to Babylon, in about the year 600 BC, those who trusted in God were in crisis.

Israelite faith rested on four pillars, occurring in this order: the covenant with God, the land God gave, the line of kings God gave, and the temple of God.

Pillar 1: Covenant with God Exodus 19:3-6

Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, across the Red Sea, and to Mt Sinai in the wilderness. When Israel got there, God offered Israel to be his covenant people.

Then Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites."

Israel said, "yes, God, we will be your people, and we want you to be our God.

Pillar 2: The Land God Promised Joshua 21:43-44

So the Lord gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their ancestors, and they took possession of it and settled there. The Lord gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their ancestors. Not one of their enemies withstood them; the Lord gave all their enemies into their hands.

Pillar 3: God's Protected Line of Kings 2 Samuel 7:11b-16

This what God told king David, through the prophet Nathan: *'The Lord declares to you, David, that the Lord himself will establish a house for you: When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with a rod wielded by men, with floggings inflicted by human hands. But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.'*

So, now Israel has Yahweh as their God, they live on the land God gave them, helping them take it from their enemies, and they have the line of David kings that God promised to establish forever. One more ...

Pillar 4: God's Temple in Jerusalem 2 Chronicles 6:7-11

This is Solomon speaking to the people when he finished building the temple in Jerusalem, when he was dedicating the temple: *My father David had it in his heart to build a temple for the Name of the Lord, the God of Israel. But the Lord said to my father David, 'You did well to have it in your heart to build a temple for my Name. Nevertheless, you are not the one to build the temple, but your son, your own flesh and blood—he is the one who will build the temple for my Name.'* *"The Lord has kept the promise he made. I have succeeded David my father and now I sit on the throne of Israel, just as the Lord promised, and I have built the temple for the Name of the Lord, the God of Israel. There I have placed the ark, in which is the covenant of the Lord that he made with the people of Israel."*

So these four are the core of Israelite faith. They are God's covenant people, living on the land God gave them, led by the king God gave them, worshipping God in the temple God ordained, led their by the priests God had put in place. From the time Solomon built the temple, to the Babylonian exile was most of 400 years. During that time, this is how their faith worked.

These thing made them feel safe. What could possibly go wrong? What went wrong was the covenant made on Mt Sinai. When God offered the covenant, God included, "if you will obey me and keep my covenant," then this will all work. But they didn't.

Of the ten commandments, the first four teach us to honour God, and the last six teach us to treat each other well. Israelites walked away from all this. They worshipped other gods, and they mistreated each other. Not a little bit, a lot. God has never been a perfectionist. Israel violated the covenant badly for a long time. They thought God would not leave them, but they left God.

All the prophets were preachers, calling them back to the covenant. For the prophets, foretelling the future was just a sidelight. The prophets kept telling them that if they did not live like God's covenant people, they would lose it all.

Israel remember the part about "you will be our God, and we will be your people," but they forgot about "if you will obey me and keep my covenant."

Crisis of the Exile Around the year 600, the Babylonians destroyed this. They tore God's temple down, looted the gold, burned the rest to the ground. They took one David king captive to Babylon, and killed the next one. And they took the people off the land God had given, and marched them to Babylon.

God let the pagans destroy his house. God let the pagans end the David line of kings. God let the pagans take God's people off the land God gave. And now they are in exile in Babylon. They felt abandoned by God. Were they in any sense still God's people? Was he still their God at all?

And if he was still their God, what on earth would serving him look like, without the temple at which to meet God, without God's David king to lead them, without enjoying the land of Canaan which God gave them? Now in Babylon, having lost all this, what did it mean to be an Israelite that worshipped the God of Israel, Maker of heaven and earth? That was the big problem.

The prophets helped them understand that this disaster was not because God had rejected them, which was their first assumption, but rather than they had rejected God. They always included that that God was not finished with them, God still had plans for them. God would restore the covenant, bring them back to their land, send the David Messiah, and rebuild the temple.

The Exiles Adapt The exiles who followed God did three things. One, they met in synagogues, and two, they became of people of the Book. Before the exile, the important God gatherings, sacred congregation, happened at or near the temple. Now, they just met in an ordinary building.

Scripture had not been central before the exile. Maybe you noticed that. We are still the people of the Book. They were not, but they became that. At the start of the exile, they will have had the five books of Moses, Gen Exod Lev Num and Deut. They will have had quite a few of the psalms, and also some of the earlier prophets.

So they read the Scriptures, and taught them. They set up a three year cycle of Scripture readings. They sang the psalms, and they prayed to God. So one, they met in synagogues, and two, they became a people of the Book, because that they still had. They paid much more attention to God's laws, to keeping the covenant, to obeying God fully.

And three, they longed for the Messiah. They hoped for the great David king that God would send, who would rescue them, take them back to the land, give them victory over their endless enemies, and restore proper worship to God.

When the Medes and Persians defeated Babylon, about 60 years after the exile, they sent back to Palestine as many Jews as wanted to go. Many returned to the promised land at that time, but many did not. They were settled, and doing alright, so they stayed. And they moved around.

By NT times, there were Jewish synagogues in most cities in the Roman empire, they were in Egypt, and north Africa, and still Babylon. There were synagogues in Galilee, and Jesus normally went to the local synagogue on the Sabbath. The Gospels make that clear.

And when the first missionaries went around, Paul and Barnabas and Silas and others, they always started at the local Jewish synagogues. Not all cities had them. There does not seem to have been a synagogue in Athens, or in Philippi. But most cities had them.

And many synagogues had Gentiles associated with them, Gentiles who were impressed with the God of Israel. The Jews welcomed these Gentiles to the synagogue, people like Cornelius. They Jews would never eat a meal with such people, but the synagogue was not a sacred building, it was just a gathering room, and Gentiles joined them. Cornelius is the most well-known of these.

Church is Synagogue – The first churches will have been Jewish synagogues that were persuaded by missionaries that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ. Many Jewish synagogues thought Jesus was a deceiver, and put out the believing Jews. But they just went and started another synagogue made up of Jews who thought Jesus was the Christ. Matthew and James and 1 Peter were written to large groups of such synagogues.

“Synagogue” and “church,” *ekklesia*, mean much the same, a gathering, a group, a congregation. The early church was modelled on the synagogue service of the time. The believers gather to read the Scriptures, and teach them, to pray to God, to sing the psalms, and to wait for the Messiah to return.

Synagogues began because God’s people were exiled, and we Gentiles who trust in Christ are still God’s people in exile, we are strangers and foreigners, our citizenship is in heaven, our first city is a heavenly city. The exiles adapted, and their crisis produced some durable changes.

Isolation is the new exile And now, for the time being, we must live in our own households, we have been exiled in our own dwelling. There is a great loss here. Since this began, I’ve been thinking about the summary of church life at the end of Acts 2, where the 3000 new believers did everything together. We cannot do any of the things in that long paragraph! What will we do?

Let’s assume that this will last longer than we think. It might not, but it might. We don’t know. What we do know is that our God is the Maker of heaven and earth, he is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, which means this is right in line with his purposes. It is a worldwide situation, and it is from God, to shake us up. And it is working.

Every single one of us is still able to worship and serve our Lord. That has not been removed.

It is changing, but that has happened many times. It happened to the Babylonian exiles, it happened when Paul was put in prison for a long time, this happens fairly often to God's people. The good ways in which we worshipped and served the Lord are no longer possible. The Lord had blessed them, and now they are gone. But we can still serve the Lord and follow him.

What should our priorities be?

One, as always, treat each other as we want to be treated. Jesus took the great command, "love your neighbour as yourself," and came at it a different way. His way begins with a question: how would you like to be treated? Not, how are you being treated, but how would you like to be treated? Do that to others. This is all the law and the prophets, and it's the core of Jesus.

If God ever did anything to force us to live this out in our own households, this is it. We all have a tendency to act better in public than with each other. God has removed that. Now, if we are not doing it with our own household, we're not doing it at all.

This can be very difficult. I understand that. I'm no different. At the least, let's be courteous to each other, always courteous, be hospitable to each other. Let's everyone assume we'll need to do a lot of forgiving with our roommates.

As well, let's do what we can to stay in touch with our church body. Phone, go for a walk, zoom, Sunday worship and sermon, email, etc. None of this will work for all of us, but the Lord says that our love for each other is how we show ourselves to be his, so let's find ways.

This is hard in different way for those who live alone, and I know that some important things are happening to include those who live alone. Keep that up.

Two, prayer. In times of crisis like this, prayer is even more important than usual. In Gethsemane, Jesus told the disciples to watch and pray so they would not enter into temptation. Let's pray for ourselves, and for each other. This crisis has much potential for both faith and spiritual disaster. Pray for yourself, and for your prayer partner household, and others.

Three, Scripture. Find a way to expose yourself to the Bible. I have never stressed private Bible reading, but in these days it is more important to get the words of God floating around in our minds. If reading does not work, there are websites where you can listen to someone else read it. Or read it to each other. Let's keep the words of God in our minds.

Pray the psalms, don't just read them but pray them. Then you stay faithful in prayer and you are bringing God's words into your life. Can you pray out loud. It's the only way that works for me.

Sing songs. I have some simple songs that I sing while I drive down the road in my truck. It is noisy, and I sing real loud, with all my heart and soul. I sing "Jesus loves me" and "This is the day that the Lord has made" and "Praise God from whom all blessings flow."

Others songs like that. It is good for God to hear our praise when no one else listens. It's just for him. Like praying in your closet, only singing. If I am discouraged, which happens often enough, I sing defiantly. I can't stop that darkness, but it shall not stop me from singing praises to my God and to my Lord. But defiance usually turns to thankfulness.

Four, bring your tithe and offering to God. At the core, we give as worship to God, we tell him we know he's the Provider, and we bring a gift to our King. Let's put our faith into action. We give to worship him, and honour him, and show him that we trust him.

Five, have the Lord's Supper. If there is any way you can to this with someone else, that would be best. But many people have done this alone. I have. We say every Sunday that we'll do this until the Lord returns. He hasn't returned, so we will continue with the Lord's Supper. It is a way of telling God, that the Jesus Story is still the big story, the covid story is nothing in comparison.

Tell God you know His Son's Story is the real story, by having the Lord's Supper.

Bring your tithe and offering to God, show him you still trust him and honour him.

Find a way to keep Scripture floating around in your mind. If you've been doing this all along, this won't be so hard. If not, this is the right time to start.

Pray for yourself, and for each other, our faith will not weaken but endure. Pray the psalms, and pray with thanksgiving.

Out of reverence for the Lord, treat each other as you'd like to be treated. Submit to each other, and forgive each other, out of reverence for the Lord. Be hospitable with each other, out of reverence for the Lord. Amen.

PRAYER O God, you are the great God, the great King above all gods. The depths of the earth are yours, and the mountain peaks belong to you. The sea is yours, because you made it, and your hands formed the dry land. And you are our God, and we are the people of your pasture, and the flock under your care. And now, some of us are doing alright in this crisis, but others of us Lord are in much distress. This brings troubles into their lives that they hardly know how to bear. We all need your grace so that our faith will endure, and we will survive, and you will be honoured and glorified.

BENEDICTION – May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace as we trust in him, so that we may overflow with hope, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Go in God's peace, to love and serve the Lord.