



grow. pray. study.

April 26, 2020 “Prisoners of Hope”

Scripture: Isaiah 40:31, Jeremiah 29:11, Zechariah 9:12

Questions in this GPS marked with an arrow bullet point are particularly recommended for group discussion. Group leaders may add other discussion questions, or substitute other questions for the marked ones, at their discretion.

### A need for hope: Judah’s decline and exile

As we turn to prophetic words of hope, we first review the tragic events that made hope so necessary. The little kingdom of Judah lost its way spiritually after their last good king, Josiah, died fighting an Egyptian incursion (cf. [2 Kings 23:28-29](#)). As they ignored their covenant with God, first Egypt and then Babylon put puppet kings on the throne and warned against any rebellion. 2 Kings 25 tells of the final disaster in 586 B.C. Babylon destroyed Jerusalem, carried thousands of its people away, and “Judah was exiled from its land.”

- This is hard to read. But disaster did not come “out of the blue.” The prophet Jeremiah had warned that even the beautiful Temple Solomon built was no guarantee that God would keep protecting those who ignored God’s calls for justice and faithfulness (cf. [Jeremiah 7:1-10](#)). How can the tragedy of Judah’s descent into exile speak to you when there is tension between God’s ways and the pressures and demands of the human culture around you?
- “*Judah was exiled from its land*: A final tragic declaration by the historian leaves the reader wondering whether there might be any hope for Judah.” \* Right then, it looked as though God’s big promise to Abraham—“I will make of you a great nation and will bless you” (Genesis 12:2)—had failed. Imagine how you’d have felt as a citizen of Judah being marched into exile and keep those feelings in mind as we read the prophetic messages this week.

**Prayer:** O God, your great heart must have wept as your children wandered away from you and into disaster. And yet, even as many of them must have felt like giving up, we know you never did, and I thank you for that. Amen.

\* Gordon Matties, study note on 2 Kings 25:21 in *The CEB Study Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013, p. 616OT.

### Hope—after a long exile

**TUESDAY 4.28.20 Jeremiah 29:1-14**

This section of Jeremiah backed up a bit. Babylon first took Hebrew exiles away in 597 B.C. while leaving the puppet King Zedekiah in Jerusalem. Jeremiah sent a letter to those exiles urging them to settle down for a lengthy stay in Babylon. That message was not popular. Self-proclaimed prophets like Hananiah and Shemaiah thought the exile would end quickly. Shemaiah wrote from Babylon asking the high priest in Jerusalem to imprison Jeremiah (cf. [Jeremiah 28:1-3, 29:24-32](#)).

- Jeremiah told the exiles God had “plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope.” But first he said, “When Babylon’s seventy years \* are up.” Jeremiah’s words presuppose that there’s no quick fix for the community’s situation. This doesn’t mean the situation is hopeless. It does mean people

need to be prepared to take the long view.” \*\* Could anything requiring “the long view” actually give you hope? What makes trusting patience essential as you walk with God?

- Verse 13 summed up Jeremiah’s message of judgment and hope: “When you search for me, yes, search for me with all your heart, you will find me.” How do you understand the meaning of searching for God “with all your heart”? What times or events in your life have driven you to seek God with all your heart? What steps helped you do that?

**Prayer:** Loving God, with all my heart I want to be a part of your hope-filled future. It’s often hard for me to wait, so keep teaching me to trust your timing more than my restless demands. Amen.

\* “seventy years, i.e., a long time or a lifetime; see Jeremiah 25:11.” Louis Stulman, study note on Jeremiah 29:4-14 in *The CEB Study Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013, p. 1255OT.

\*\* John Goldingay, *Jeremiah for Everyone*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015, p. 146.

## **A new covenant after exile’s lessons are learned**

### **WEDNESDAY 4.29.20 Jeremiah 31:10-14, 17, 31-34**

As in yesterday’s reading, Jeremiah’s message was one of hope: “The LORD will rescue the people of Jacob... They will come shouting for joy on the hills of Zion.” But it was long-term hope, not immediate: “Your children will return home!” And the key was for the people to choose a new covenant with God. This covenant would engrave God’s instructions on their hearts as they understood God’s profound desire to forgive and restore them.

- Jeremiah had voiced shock on God’s behalf at the people’s choice to worship the pagan non-gods rather than their covenant God: “Has a nation switched gods, though they aren’t really gods at all? Yet my people have exchanged their glory for what has no value” (Jeremiah 2:11). How would that change? “God intends to pardon the people’s waywardness and restore them to their country. Maybe that has the power to change them.” \* When have you experienced the transforming power of God’s forgiveness?
- Jesus’ followers saw in Jeremiah’s new covenant words a picture of Jesus’ mercy and forgiveness ([Luke 22:20](#), [1 Corinthians 11:25](#), [2 Corinthians 3:5-14](#), [Hebrews 8:8-12](#), [9:15](#), [10:16-17](#)). But Jeremiah’s original promise was to “the people of Israel and Judah.” “Christians enjoy a wondrous relationship with God through Jesus Christ, but their participation in the new covenant in no way excludes the initial recipients and their heirs.” \*\* How might the new covenant promise help bridge centuries of fear and distrust between Christians and Jews, rather than widening it?

**Prayer:** Lord God, you are “the God who stays.” \*\*\* Thank you for drawing me into the company of all who respond to your love and live in the grace and beauty of your new covenant. Amen.

\* John Goldingay, *Jeremiah for Everyone*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015, p. 160.

\*\* Louis Stulman, sidebar “The New Covenant” in *The CEB Study Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013, p. 1261OT.

\*\*\* Writer(s): Matthew West, Jonathan Smith, Andrew Pruis. Song lyrics from <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/matthewwest/thegodwhostays.html>.

## **Hope from a vision of God’s life-giving breath**

### **THURSDAY 4.30.20 Ezekiel 37:1-14**

Babylon exiled the prophet Ezekiel along with many other Israelites in 597 BC. Twelve years later a survivor from Jerusalem’s destruction in 586 gave Ezekiel the news that the city had fallen, with even the Temple destroyed. That news must have deepened the exiles’ sense of hopelessness. But Ezekiel had a series of visions of hope. The most vivid of those visions is today’s reading—the famous vision of God bringing a valley of dried out bones back to life.

- Genesis showed two steps in creating life: “the LORD God formed the human from the topsoil of the fertile land and blew life’s breath into his nostrils” (Genesis 2:7). And in vision Ezekiel saw the bones covered with skin but not yet alive. “When the breath entered them, they came to life” (verse 10). “*rûah* in the Hebrew original, has three meanings in English....They are ‘breath,’ ‘wind,’ and ‘spirit.’” \* Verse 14 told the hopeless Hebrew exiles that God’s spirit would bring them back alive as a people. How central is God’s spirit in giving you, and our entire congregation, true spiritual life?
- Ezekiel’s dramatic, visionary image delivered the message that God offers hope even when we can see none. When have you seen God take a “dry bones” person, relationship or situation that seemed beyond hope and bring new life to it? With whom can you share the good news of God’s life-giving hope?

**Prayer:** “Breathe on me, Breath of God, fill me with life anew.” \*\* I need your Spirit filling me each day, Lord Jesus, and I open myself to it again today. Amen.

\* Douglas Stuart, *The Preacher’s Commentary Series, Volume 20: Ezekiel*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1989, p. 335.

\*\* Edwin Hatch wrote this hymn in 1878, and it is now printed in 295 different hymnals, according to [https://hymnary.org/text/breathe\\_on\\_me\\_breath\\_of\\_god](https://hymnary.org/text/breathe_on_me_breath_of_god).

## Hope for those returning from exile

### FRIDAY 5.1.20 Isaiah 40:27-31

Today’s readings likely came from a time when the Israelites were returning to their ruined land (or about to return) after decades in exile. There were no “Babylon to Jerusalem” flights—words like “stumble” and “walk” reflected the only way most exiles got home. The walking exiles were weary and feared that God was too. But Isaiah said God “doesn’t grow tired or weary.” Israel (and we) could always trust in God, because God-given hope (not hope in our own power) renews our strength.

- Can you recall times when you have felt like the Israelites in Isaiah 40:27: “My way is hidden from the LORD, my God ignores my predicament”? Are there areas of your life that feel that way to you right now as we all deal with the conditions created by the Covid-19 outbreak? In what ways can you reconnect with the Creator who “doesn’t grow tired or weary” of caring for you?
- Isaiah wrote, “His understanding is beyond human reach” (verse 28). Our need to control, our challenge with “letting go,” inevitably runs into our inability to control time and disease. Even the best health and fitness programs cannot (honestly) promise to fully halt aging or infection. How can really trusting in a God who’s vastly wiser than you are renew your strength by setting you free from the need to try to control life’s uncontrollable realities?

**Prayer:** Lord God, full of eternal energy, you remain the same creative, caring God you’ve always been. Help me learn more and more to trust your timeless love. Amen.

## “Prisoners of hope” in hardships after exile

### SATURDAY 5.2.20 Zechariah 9:9-12

Zechariah preached soon after Israel’s return from exile (see [Ezra 5:1, 6:14](#)). There were many challenges in rebuilding the city the Babylonians had sacked, but this prophet called on people to rejoice because God was with them (cf. [Zechariah 2:10-12](#)). He returned to the call to rejoice at the start of today’s reading. One result of God’s presence (at the end of the exile, and more broadly when the promised deliverer, the Messiah came) was that prisoners were set free. That promised freedom (spiritual more than just physical) was why Zechariah called them “prisoners of hope.” (Four weeks ago on Palm Sunday, we remembered that Jesus so clearly drew on Zechariah’s word picture that both [Matthew 21:4-7](#) and [John 12:14-15](#) quoted verse 9 in the story of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem.)

- Imagine yourself as an Israelite who had come back from exile in Babylon just a few weeks or months before hearing these words. How did Zechariah encourage his contemporaries? How would this message have lifted their spirits and given them strength to move ahead with the tasks of rebuilding? Now imagine that you were one of Jesus' followers in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. How does knowing Jesus and seeing him set many different people free from prisons of their own or others' making deepen your insight into Zechariah's phrase "prisoners of hope"? Now imagine yourself as someone dealing with the consequences of a wide-spread shutdown due to a deadly contagious virus. (Oops—no imagination needed.) In what way(s) can your trust in the God Zechariah served empower you, too, to live as a prisoner of hope?

**Prayer:** Lord, you know the times right now when I feel cooped up, constrained, unable to do some of what I want to do. By your presence with me, help me to rejoice greatly even now, to be not just a prisoner, but a prisoner of hope. Amen.

**Prayer Requests** – [cor.org/prayer](http://cor.org/prayer) *Prayers of peace and comfort for:*

Kendra Welsh and family following the death of Don Wright (father), 4/5/2020

Cindy Vickers and family following the death of Fay Foos (grandmother), 4/12/2020

Danita Stolle and family following the death of Juanita Stolle (mother), 4/19/2020

Sharon Johnson and family following the death of Irv Johnson (husband), 4/21/2020

Marlin and Karen Stanberry and family following the death of Kari Stanberry (daughter), 4/22/2020