



Enter the Story

Exile

A narrative about God's broken heart and how pain must come before healing.

THE BIBLE

Jeremiah 1, 7-8, 24, 26, 36
2 Kings 22:30-34. 23:25-24:17
2nd Chronicles 36

Prepare for the Story

ICEBREAKER

If you could travel anywhere in the world, where would you want to go? If there were one place you would never want to visit, where would that be?

Rewind the Story

Can someone highlight what has happened in the story so far ...

- The Last Kings of Israel – Alliances and Allegiances
- Judah's Tale of Two Kings – Ahaz & Hezekiah
- Manasseh -Judah's worst king
- Reform – Josiah, the boy king

Hear the Story

Scene One: Jeremiah's Calling

During the reign of King Josiah of Judah, the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah, saying, "*I knew you before I formed you in your mother's womb. Before you were born, I set you apart, and I chose for you to be a prophet to the nations.*"

Jeremiah was shocked and replied, *"LORD, I can't be your prophet. I am far too young."* The LORD replied, *"Do you trust me? You must go wherever I send you and say whatever I ask you to say. Don't be afraid of anyone because I will be with you, and I will be the One to protect you. Let me show you what I mean; I will give you the words to say because I am appointing you to stand up to the rulers who are leading my people astray. Some you must uproot and tear down; others you will build up and plant."*

Then the LORD asked Jeremiah, *"What do you see?"* The first image that Jeremiah saw was that of a branch from an almond tree. The LORD said, *"This picture is to remind you that I am watching, and I will certainly carry out my plans."* (*The word for watching and the word for almond tree sound very similar in Hebrew)

Then the LORD asked Jeremiah, *"What do you see now?"* Jeremiah saw a pot of boiling water spilling from the north. The LORD confirmed Jeremiah's vision, *"From the north terror will boil over out on the people of this land. The armies from the kingdoms of the north are coming for Jerusalem. Get up and go tell the people everything I tell you. Do not be afraid of them; today I have made you like a mighty fortified city. You will stand against the whole land – the kings, officials, priests, and the people of Judah. They will fight you, but they will fail. For I am with you, and I will take care of you!"*

Scene Two: A New King in Judah

The beginning of Jeremiah's ministry was the easiest season he would see. Under the rule of Josiah, their mission was aligned. But after Josiah was killed on the battlefield by the King of Egypt, his son, Jehoahaz, assumed the throne. He ruled for only three months until the King of Egypt captured him and put him in prison. In his place, the Pharaoh installed his brother, Jehoiakim, forcing Judah to serve Egypt and demanding that they pay tribute.

In order to get the silver and gold demanded as tribute, Jehoiakim collected taxes from the people of Judah, requiring them to pay in proportion to their wealth. While his father had moved the nation back to worshipping Yahweh and following the LORD's commands, Jehoiakim did not follow in his father's ways. He did what was evil in the LORD's sight and led the people of Judah astray.

At this time, the LORD sent a prophet named Uriah to warn the people and convince them to change their ways. But when the king heard about the message Uriah was preaching, he sent someone to kill him.

Uriah heard about the plan and managed to escape to Egypt. But the King sent several of his best men to capture Uriah. They took him prisoner and brought him back to the king. Jehoiakim killed Uriah with a sword and then had him buried in an unmarked grave.

Scene Three: Jeremiah's Message for Jerusalem

So early in his reign, the LORD sent Jeremiah to stand in the courtyard of the Temple to make an announcement encouraging the people to turn them from their evil ways, hoping to avoid the disaster that was to come because of their sins.

Jeremiah said, *"This is what the LORD says: If you will not listen to me and obey the directions I have given you if you will ignore my servants, the prophets - then I will destroy this Temple as I destroyed Shiloh, the place where the Tabernacle was located. And I will make Jerusalem an object of cursing in every nation on the earth."*

When the priests and the people heard Jeremiah's message, they were furious and mobbed him. They wanted to kill him, so they dragged him before the city officials and presented their arguments. They said, *"You heard it yourselves; he's a traitor. He is prophesying against the city."* Then Jeremiah spoke up in his defense, *"The LORD sent me to prophesy against this Temple and this city, every word I said, is from God. But if you stop sinning and obey the LORD, He will change his mind and you can avoid disaster. As far as I am concerned - do whatever you want to with me. But if you kill me, you will be killing an innocent man. And you will have to answer to the LORD, because He is the one that send me."*

One of the officials hearing the arguments spoke up, recalling something that had happened with the prophet Micah during King Hezekiah's reign. The prophet had spoken against the city and warned them of disaster, but the King did not have Micah killed. So he said, *"The King and the people heard this message and turned from their sins and worshipped the LORD. They begged for mercy. And the LORD changed his mind. We shouldn't kill this man; if we do, it will bring terrible things on us."* This man persuaded the court not to turn Jeremiah over to the people or to the King.

Scene Four: The Anger of the Lord

Despite Jeremiah's faithfulness in delivering the LORD's message, the people persisted with their idolatry. The more Jeremiah shared the message, the more his heart broke for the people and their unrepentant hearts. He prayed for them often.

So often, in fact, that the LORD told him to quit praying for them. *“Do not weep or pray from them, and don’t beg me to help them; I don’t want to hear it. Don’t you see the things they are doing? Do you see how the children gather wood, the fathers build sacrificial fires, and the women knead the dough to make offerings to this so-called god they refer to as the ‘Queen of Heaven’? For all I care, they can pour out their offerings to these worthless gods. It’s not only Me they are hurting... more importantly, they hurt themselves.”*

“Here is what I have to say to them, ‘Take your burnt offerings and your sacrifices and eat them yourselves! You have become your own gods. When I led your ancestors out of Egypt, it was not burnt offerings and sacrifices I wanted. The only thing I asked for was for them to trust and obey me. I promised if they would do that, then I would be their God, and I would take care of all their needs.”

“But they wouldn’t listen; they kept doing whatever they wanted. They followed the stubborn desires of their evil hearts – and because of it, they have gone backward instead of forward. I keep sending prophet after prophet to try and get you stubborn people to see the truth ... but you are more stiff-necked than your ancestors.”

“Jeremiah, go ahead and tell them everything I’ve said, but don’t expect them to listen. Shout to them, and make it as obvious as possible. Shave your head, put on sackcloth, and weep for the people to see ... but it won’t matter because these people will not obey Me. They can’t even see the truth anymore because it is no longer spoken among them.”

“They are too far gone. They have set up despicable idols right in the middle of the Temple that bears my name. They have built pagan shrines in the valley of Ben-Hinnom, where they burn their sons and daughters in the fire. Mark my words: a day is coming when I will put an end to all the singing and laughter in the streets of Jerusalem. The joyful voices will no longer be heard in the towns of Judah because the land will lie in complete desolation.”

“On that day, the enemy will break open the graves of the kings and officials, the priests and the prophets. They will spread out their bones on the ground before the sun, moon, and stars – these so-called gods that my people have loved and worshipped ... and they will not be gathered up again – instead, they will be scattered on the ground like manure ... and those that manage to survive will wish that they were dead instead of being taken to where I will send them.”

Scene Five: Jeremiah's Scroll

During the fourth year of Jehoiakim's reign, the LORD gave this message to Jeremiah, *"Get a scroll and write down all my messages against Israel, Judah, and the other nations. Begin with the first message I gave you back in the days of Josiah, and record everything I have told you. Write it down so the people can hear my words again; perhaps they will repent when they hear what is coming. If they will repent, I will forgive their sins and their wrongdoings."*

So Jeremiah did what the LORD instructed and made sure that the scroll was read to the people in the Temple. One of those who heard what was being read from the scroll came it brought it to the attention of the city officials. So, the officials asked for the entire scroll to be read to them. When they heard the entirety of the prophets' warnings, they panicked. "We must tell the king what we have learned." So they took the scroll and read it in the presence of the king."

As it was nearly winter, and the king was sitting near a fire for warmth when the scroll was read to him. Each time a section of the scroll was read to him, he took his knife, cut the section off, and threw it into the fire. Section by section, he did this until the whole scroll was burned up.

Neither the King nor any of his closest advisors showed any signs of fear or repentance over what they had heard. Some of the officials begged the king not to destroy the scroll, but it didn't stop him. Instead, he sent some of his men to find and arrest Jeremiah, but the LORD had already hidden him.

Scene Six: Exiled in Babylon

During the reign of Jehoiakim, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, invaded the lands that Egypt had previously captured and took them as his own, so Jehoiakim served Nebuchadnezzar and began paying tribute to him. But after three years, Jehoiakim turned against him and rebelled.

The LORD sent Babylonian, Aramean, Moabite, and Ammonite raiders against him to destroy Judah, which the LORD had promised through his servants the prophets. Jehoiakim's rebellion was unsuccessful, and Nebuchadnezzar captured him, bound him in shackles, and took him to Babylon.

With his father being captured by Nebuchadnezzar, Jehoiachin became Judah's next king when he was only eighteen years old. Like his father, he did evil in the eyes of the LORD. After capturing the father, Nebuchadnezzar advanced on the son - putting Jerusalem and put it under siege and bringing it to its knees in only three months.

As the LORD had promised, Nebuchadnezzar removed the treasures from the Temple and from the royal palace. He cut up the articles of Gold that Solomon had made when he first built the Temple, and He took the spoils of war, including the items from the Temple of the LORD to Babylon, and put them in his palace.

But Nebuchadnezzar took more than treasure from the city. He carried all of Jerusalem into exile. He took all the officers and fighting men, all the skilled workers and artisans. A total of ten thousand of Jerusalem's best and brightest people went with his army back to Babylon. He also took Jehoiachin and his family away in shackles. Only the poorest of people were left in the land. And he took Mattaniah, Jehoiachin's uncle, and elevated him to the throne – to serve the interests of Babylon in the region, and he changed his name from Mattaniah to Zedekiah.

Scene Seven: Two Fig Baskets

After the people were carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar, the LORD gave Jeremiah a vision. Jeremiah saw an image of two baskets of figs placed in front of the temple. One basket was full of the best figs, while the other was filled with rotten ones.

Then the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah and said, *"The good figs represent the exiles I sent from Judah to the land of the Babylonians. I will watch over and care for them; I will bring them back here again. I will build them up and not tear them down. I will plan them and not uproot them. I will give them a new heart. They will be my people, and I will be their God because they will return from exile with their hearts fully devoted to me."*

"But the bad figs, they represent King Zedekiah, his officials, and all those left in Jerusalem. I will treat them like bad figs, too rotten to eat. They will be a symbol of evil to every nation on earth. They will be disgraced and mocked, taunted and cursed, wherever I scatter them, and they will not find rest until they vanish from the land of Israel, which I gave to their ancestors."

Retell the Story

- When did the word of the LORD come to Jeremiah?
- What was his first reaction? What changed his mind?
- What kind of kings were Josiah's sons?
- What warning did Jeremiah share with the people at the Temple?
- How did God feel about the response of the people to Jeremiah's messages?
- What happened with Jeremiah's scroll?
- What happened to King Jehoiakim when he tried to rebel against Nebuchadnezzar?
- What happened to Jehoiachin & the people of Jerusalem?
- What did Jeremiah's vision of two fig baskets represent?

Discuss the Story

- What is your first reaction to this story? How did this story make you feel?
- What stood out to you from this story? What did you notice for the first time?
- What from this story made you wonder?
- Why do you think Jeremiah doubted his calling from God? Why do you think God used visions and pictures to convince him?
- What do you make of the fact that during Josiah's reign, which was one of the rare good seasons of leadership, God called Jeremiah to warn the people of the coming dangers if they didn't change?
- Is there anything significant about the pattern we see in the line of Kings where the children of the "good kings" choose to go the other way and end up being evil kings?

- Through the messages that Jeremiah shares, what seems most important to God? How would you describe God's reaction to the people?
- Why do you think King Jehoiakim would ignore the warnings of the prophets?
- What purpose might God have had with the punishment or consequence of His people being exiled?
- Did you hear anything that reminded you of **other** stories?
- From this story, what did you notice about humans?
- What do you notice from this story about God's character or qualities?

Join the Story

1) The Nature of a Calling

In the period of the Kings, we see a number of individuals "called" to be prophets. God chose them, gave them messages, and directed them on how to share the message, where to share it, and even when to share it. Do you think that God has a specific calling for every person or only special people? Is there a general "calling" that all of God's people share? Explain your thoughts.

2) God's Feelings

In most of the Old Testament stories about God, there is very little sense of God's "feelings," but in Jeremiah, we see some expression of how God feels. Does God feel? If so, can God experience feelings in the same way we do? Where do our feelings come from? Are feelings good or bad or something else entirely? What can we learn about ourselves from these types of passages?

3) The Purpose of Exile

In this narrative, the process of exile for God's people, while painful, also carries purpose. AS you consider the exile of Jerusalem, what purposes do you see at work? Why might God choose this path to aid His people in getting back on track? What has your experience been like? Have you found more growth in easy or challenging seasons? Have you turned to God when things have been perfect or where there has been struggle? Share a bit about your experience.

Pray

God,

When we reflect on the redemptive history recorded in the scriptures, we see so many surprising setbacks and breakthroughs. Your Word invites us to view the events and circumstances of our lives through a long-term lens. There is wisdom in seeing the arc of the story You are telling, not just throughout history but in our lives. You have given us purpose; help us see that you are working all things together for our good and Your glory. Teach us to appreciate the hard seasons as much as if not more so than the easy one Amen.