

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
"The Empire Experiment"
5th in the Series *Between Egypt and Babylon*
Psalms 78-79
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Last week I promised to give you 1,000 years of biblical history today. I know that's a lot to absorb. But that's how we get... "From Egypt to Babylon."

Remember, we're trying to recognize how these two events, Egypt and Babylon, shape the imagination of the whole Bible... and are always there in the background of how the biblical writers are telling the story.

Together, Egypt and Babylon, not only act as bookends to the rise and fall of the Israelite Nation, but they also mark the rise and fall of a particular kind of religion in the Bible: a religious nationalism. Or you might say, a nationalism that is propped up and supported by religious ideology.

But to see that, we've got to cover these 1,000 years.

Which is what I'm going to try to do today.

I'm going to map out the highlights between entering the Promised Land... and the beginning of the Babylonian exile 1,000 years later.

And since it's so much to absorb, I developed a little trick to help you stay with me. On the off chance you start dozing off,

I had electric shocks installed in all the pews.

So, here we go:

Once they entered the Promised Land,
there were different judges guiding the 12 tribes.
Then there were three kings... and a solidified kingdom.
Then the kingdom split in two.... and there was a rise in a whole bunch of prophets.
Then the northern kingdom, known as Israel was destroyed.
Then the southern kingdom, known as Judah, was destroyed.
And the empire experiment came to an end.

Whelp.

We made it. From Egypt to Babylon.

You still with me?

I guess those electric pews worked.

That really is the story in a nut shell:

There are a bunch of judges.
Then three kings... and no I'm not talking about the restaurant in Des Peres.
Then the kingdom splits
and there are prophets.
Then the north kingdom of Israel is destroyed by Assyria.
Then the southern kingdom of Judah, is destroyed by Babylon.

And the remnants of Abraham's descendants...
the remnants of the people who were once enslaved in Egypt...
are now exiles in Babylon.

And that's the story.
You got it? We can all go home.
Or we could fill in a few details. Let's give that a try.

But to do this, I'm going to ask you to grab your Bible or one of those pew Bibles in front of you...
and turn to the Book of Joshua.

Joshua leads the 12 tribes into the Promised Land. They divvy up who gets what land between the tribes, and then Joshua calls them all together to renew their covenant with Yahweh with these great words:

"Choose this day who you will serve. As for me and my house we will serve the Lord."

That's the Book of Joshua,
now turn the page to Judges.

So, then we move into the Book of Judges... and now we're in the years of the Judges. And these 12 tribes aren't really a nation or a kingdom at this point. Really, they're just 12 separate tribes with some shared history back in Egypt. And they fight with each other. And they fight with the Philistines.

And the entire Book of Judges is a single cycle that repeats itself.

And the cycle goes like this:

1. They stop being faithful to Yahweh.
2. They get conquered by someone.... or there is some suffering.
3. They repent and cry out to Yahweh for help and deliverance.
4. God sends a judge to rescue them. One is Samson. Another is Gideon. Another is Deborah.

God sends them a judge.

5. And the judge helps them win some kind of battle. And then all is made well again...

until the next time... when they stop being faithful to Yahweh, and the cycle starts again.

It's a cycle that sends the tribes almost out of control, into chaos, by the end of the book.

That's the time of the judges.

Then there's the little Book of Ruth. It's another story set in the same time period. But it's a different kind of story.

Ruth is a story of a foreigner who moves into Bethlehem. She's a Moabite. And her story is the story of an outsider who becomes the ultimate insider... She becomes the great grandma of King David.

It's like a little folk tale to remind us of the importance of the foreigners in our midst. Remember that ethos keeps showing up? You were once slaves in Egypt. Don't forget what it's like to be the foreigner in the land. Be sure to care for the orphans and the widows and the foreigners.

You never know. They may become the source of our salvation. Remember Ruth? She became the great grandma of King David.

Then 1-2 Samuel, which starts off with the birth of **the last judge: Samuel**.

But in Samuel's time, the people are tired of being this loose confederation of tribes. They want to become like all the other strong nations around them.

Samuel tries to tell them it's a bad idea. Chasing after military and political power... it never goes well for the people of God. Don't do it!

But they won't listen.

And Samuel is distraught about all this.

But God tells Samuel to go ahead and appoint them a king. "They aren't rejecting you, Samuel. They are rejecting me." This is what God says about their desire to become an empire. "They are rejecting me."

So, Samuel does what the people ask...
and he appoints Saul the first king.

Remember, there were the judges, then the three kings.

Saul is the first king.

But Saul never really wanted to be a king to begin with. He actually tries to hide from them at first. It's a funny story.

But he does. And as time goes on, all this power goes to his head. And eventually Saul has some kind of breakdown under the weight of it all. He gets real paranoid and tries to even kill his son's best friend and his best soldier, a young man named David.

Saul also doesn't follow what God asks... and so Samuel... who's still around at this point, starts a coup by anointing David as new King.

And then there are a bunch of stories of Saul trying to kill David, and David hiding, but always taking the high road, until the day when Saul and his son Jonathan finally die in battle.

Now: Israel King 2: David is a poet, and musician, and military giant.

A bunch of the Psalms are attributed to him. But even more importantly, he's a great military leader.

David finally subdues all of Israel's enemies and secures their borders. He moves the capital of their nation to Jerusalem. And there is peace and prosperity.... finally, for the first time since they entered the Promised Land.

David was kind of everybody's hero.

Well, everybody but Uriah, or course. **You see, David rapes Uriah's wife, Bathsheba... and then has Uriah killed to cover it up. So, David wasn't Uriah's hero. But with everyone else, he's pretty popular.**

Unfortunately... things go downhill from there.

Then, if you keep reading into 2 Samuel... you'll read about all the dysfunction of David's sons. One rapes his half-sister. Another declares war on his daddy to try to take the throne. The whole thing plays out like total "Game of Thrones" stuff. David's family is messed up.

And then, on David's deathbed, Bathsheba has a half-delirious King David appoint her boy, Solomon, the new King. And so, it was.

King 3: Solomon, the second son of David and Bathsheba comes to power... and I told some of his story a few weeks ago. He asks God for wisdom... and he gets some kinds of wisdom, and is attributed with some of the Proverbs... But as it turns out, he's not so wise after all.

He too... stops being faithful to Yahweh later in life.

He enslaves the foreigners in their midst and even uses some of the Israelites as cheap and forced labor to build the Great Temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem.

But this is the period where the Israelite Empire becomes world renowned.

It's a great empire, but things under the surface aren't so good.

You with me still?

So, we had the judges, and then the three kings,
and then the Kingdom splits in two.

When Solomon dies...his son wants to keep his dad's forced labor policy. Only the northern 10 tribes won't have it.

So, they split off and become their own kingdom with their own king... and apparently, they take the naming rights with them, because they are known as Israel in the rest of the Old Testament. So, often when you read "Israel" (especially in the prophets) we're talking about the 10 northern tribes.

Meanwhile, the Southern Kingdom, made up of the two southern tribes, becomes known as Judah or Judea and includes Jerusalem.

And Judah's kings... keep ruling in Jerusalem... and they keep worshipping at Solomon's temple... and they're pretty sure they're worshipping in the only real place where God dwells. Everyone up in the North is an apostate.

You see, the temple in Jerusalem... wasn't just any church building. It was Vatican City. No, it was more than that even.

The temple was believed to be the location on earth where God dwelt. If you wanted to know God's address, you just had to google Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. It was the home of God... in a very powerful, particular way.

Now during the time of the two kingdoms, there are a lot of ups and downs in their devotion to their ancestral God, Yahweh. There are lots of other gods that are also appealing, like Baal and Ashura, because they are the gods of economic success, as I talked about last week. And the leaders of the day keep getting pulled into worshipping them all.

So, there is a rise in a new kind of religious voice... **The voice of the prophets**. And some worked in the temple and in the king's courts, but many did not. Many came from the outside... critiquing all that.

The prophets actually have all kinds of nuanced things to say... each speaking to different kings in different generations, some in the northern kingdom, some in the southern kingdom... and it can get

kind of confusing unless you're really doing your homework and know which prophet is speaking to who and when.

But in general, the prophets are criticizing the worshipping practices and the economic practices of the kings and elites... when those practices are ignoring the poor and the marginalized. Again, the same theme.

And the prophets critique this repeatedly, because the people assume they have God's blessing in what they are doing.

The prophets keep telling us that our actions matter more than our words.

We can't worship and tithe on Sunday, but then go about neglecting the marginalized and poor and think we're OK with God.

Because, remember what we learned in Exodus? Yahweh is the god of the marginalized, the god who hears the cries of the oppressed.

So, if we're ignoring those cries... then we are ignoring the heart of God. And Yahweh is not really impressed with how many Sundays we are showing up for church... or how big our offerings are.

This is one of the overarching themes of the prophets.

They keep warning us... about the empire imagination... that sacrifices faithfulness to the heart of God, on the altar of our own power, and security, and wealth.

This is the prophecy in the Old Testament.

So, you've got prophets speaking in the northern kingdom

And some prophets in the southern kingdom...

Different prophets in different generations... and as time passes, the northern kingdom, known as Israel, ends up being attacked and destroyed by Assyria, the new global superpower.

So, for a while, there is no more Israel. There is now only Judea in the south. And the Judean's become known as the Jews. The Jews are the people from Judea.

And they're pretty sure that Israel was destroyed because they were apostates all this time: ***Shouldn't have broken off to begin with. We're God's remnant. We're God's true chosen. We are still worshipping at the temple. It's the only place that really counts.***

This is what they believe.

And that's fine and all.... until a few generations go by and a new superpower comes on the world stage: Babylon.

And the southern kingdom is attacked by Babylon.

But of course, they won't fall. The temple is the home of Yahweh, remember? It can't be touched by these foreigners. **"We have God on our side!"** That was the rallying cry.

Only... things didn't work out like they were convinced they would.

Jerusalem is burnt to the ground,
and the temple is destroyed—
and the Jews are carried off into exile.

And that is the story of the empire experiment.

We've gone from Egypt to Babylon... and most of you are still with me.
I only had to use my electric zapper on 3 of you.

In case you've gotten a little lost, just remember:

There were judges guiding the 12 tribes.

Then there were three Kings... and a solidified kingdom.

Then the kingdom split in two.

Then there are a bunch of prophets and kings....

Until eventually the northern kingdom was destroyed.

Then the southern kingdom was destroyed,

And we end up exiled in Babylon.

That's the story. The empire experiment...

And there are two things from this story that I want you to walk away with today:

1: First, you need to know that it's there in Babylon, stunned, and shocked, and confused... that they try to make sense of all this story. It's sitting by the rivers in Babylon that they begin to collect scraps of their ancient stories, and write them all down, and put them together into much of what the Old Testament is today.

Which means... the Bible began to be written... and continued to be written throughout the New Testament by those who are the marginalized and oppressed.

The Bible was written...

by a people on the bottom of society... without any power, trying to make sense of God and their story.

So, is it any surprise then, that this theme keeps coming back?:

"Do not neglect the marginalized!

Remember what it was like in Egypt. You were once foreigners in a foreign land in Egypt.

So, take care of the orphans, and the widows, and the foreigners in your midst."

The people writing their stories down ***are foreigners*** in a foreign land again... Just like they were back in Egypt. And so, it's like they are whispering back to their ancestors: ***"We forgot. How could we have forgotten?"***

We'll look at more of what that means later this month, but for today, simply begin to let it sink in that the bible is written ***from the perspective of the marginalized and foreigners.***

Because, you see, this is one of the major reasons that most American Christians misread the Bible, even many pastors. We read from the perspective of those on top... and so we end up ignoring the parts that don't seem to apply to us... or the parts that make us uncomfortable or would undo our place in this world.

But to read the Bible well, to read it faithfully, we have to read it from the perspective of those on the bottom because those are the ones who wrote it.

So, that's the first thing. Like I said, we'll explore that more later in the month.

2: But the second thing I want to invite you to see today... is that an empire religion... is a great temptation... but will never reflect the heart of God.

When you look at the whole of the biblical saga, this epic story from Genesis to Revelation, what you find is that this part of the story... is a kind of experiment with creating an empire based on our faith in God.

And it does not work.

There are some profound reasons for that.

For starters, the interests of the empire will inevitably conflict with the interests of God.

It happens over and over again in this story. The interest of the empire:

the economic interests,

the political interests,

the military interests... of the empire... conflict with the interests of God.

And when that happens, one of two things tend to take place in the biblical story, just as they do today.

1: We just look the other way... and hope God will understand.

or

2. We just start to believe that whatever is good for the empire (as we define it) is God's will because this empire is God's will. And so, we begin to use God... to justify the actions of the empire.

It's also what the leaders in Jerusalem did before it was destroyed by Babylon. They convince their selves that God is on their side... so their cause must be righteous! Even though the prophet tried to warn them against it.

But they didn't listen.

"No, God is on our side." So, the interest of our empire... must be God's will.

The two become one thing for us.

It's one of those toxic patterns that plays out in Bible, and it still plays out in our world again and again. It's such a human fallacy... we hardly notice it.

In a country like **India**, you see it in the rise of Hindu Nationalism.

In countries like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, you see it in an Islamic Nationalism that uses God as justification for the actions of the state.

In modern Israel, you see it in the rise of Zionism.

And you see it here... in the US, with the rise of Christian Nationalism.

Sure, in all these places it looks and plays out differently. Please don't hear me saying that the US is the same as Pakistan in all things. If that's all you heard me say, you're misunderstanding me.

What I'm saying, is the pattern of Religious Nationalism is the same.

There is a belief that our nation is an expression of God's will on earth and so God is on our side.

So, the interests of our Empire...

and the interest of my God... become one and the same in my mind.

It's so easy for that to happen. It happens across cultures and religions, and it is so spiritually toxic for us... because it becomes harder and harder for us to distinguish our God from our country. It gets really hard for us to tell the difference between where our Christianity ends, and our national identity begins.

And whenever those two start to become one... something quite dangerous starts to happen. Whether we're in India, or Pakistan, or Israel, or part of European Christendom, or American Christendom: ***In all these places***

religion becomes a tool to legitimize the power of the state and ignore the marginalized.

In other words, God becomes a tool in the service of the state, instead of the other way around. It's the other great danger that the epic story of the Bible keeps trying to warn us about. The empire experiment doesn't work.

**So, as we move from Egypt to Babylon today,
let me invite you to remember always that...**

...there is one God, who is **above all**

...all nations, and kings, and kingdoms, and presidents, and political parties, and parliaments, and prime ministers. There is One God, who **is above all.**

And there is one God, who is **in all**...

all creation: wind and fire, earth and water...

and in all people: black, and white, and brown,

American, and Chinese, and African.

The one God above all, is in all.

And this One God is the **creator of all**...

all cultures, and languages, and tribes, and lands...

One God... over all, and in all, and creator of all...

all the earth,

and all the mystery of the galaxy,

and stars, and universe.

And this one God will not be reduced to a single empire or nation.

And this one God will not be reduced to a single political agenda or ideology.

Because this one God... is above all. And beyond all.

**And at the same time, in all and loves all,
and who desires grace, and life, and creativity, and beauty, and joy,
and justice, and mercy for all...
including you.**

And so, this one God, who so loved the whole world, *gave us Jesus...* so that in Jesus, we might finally discover that God is in joy, and laughter, and food, and wine, and celebration, and wedding feasts,

and God is in the leper and bent over woman, and bleeding woman,
and in those who have been marginalized and hear the cries of the oppressed,
and God is even there with you, in the suffering that comes into our lives – the suffering that looks like a cross. And God is in grace and forgiveness that calls out to the world.

God sent us Jesus... so that we might know ***God's fierce love for all...***

[Table]

To help us not forget: ... Jesus gave us this table, a table that is the sign of his kingdom... And a meal... for all who would pledge their allegiance to his kingdom... and his way.

**And on the night Jesus was to be betrayed... he took the bread.
Remember who your King is.**

**And he took the cup...
... for all.**

Remember what kind of Kingdom this is.

Remember... Jesus said, remember... my fierce love for the whole world.
including you.

Amen.

Hymn of Preparation, 782 "Come Share the Lord"