

Class 7 Devotional
The Exile: Surviving Religious Trauma

Ezekiel 34:1-4 (CEB) The Lord's word came to me: Human one, prophesy against Israel's shepherds. Prophesy and say to them, The Lord God proclaims to the shepherds: Doom to Israel's shepherds who tended themselves! Shouldn't shepherds tend the flock? You drink the milk, you wear the wool, and you slaughter the fat animals, but you don't tend the flock. You don't strengthen the weak, heal the sick, bind up the injured, bring back the strays, or seek out the lost; but instead you use force to rule them with injustice.

There are many dark experiences that could be labeled traumatic, but one most everyone would agree deserves that description is exile. To be forcibly taken from family, home, and any sense of security into an unfamiliar, unwelcoming, and hostile environment flips one's world upside down in the worst way possible. The poets of the Bible vividly describe the grief and anger felt as a people violently deported by Babylon¹. Yet, through His prophets, the Lord proclaims that this is not the only trauma His people have faced; Israel has already been subject to abuse and injury.

As read above, the perpetrator of injustice that God calls out is not Babylon. Rather, it is the shepherds of Israel—priests, prophets, princes—who were entrusted with power to lead the flock in the Lord's instructions and serve them with all compassion. Yet, instead the shepherds have tended themselves! Kings fatten and extravagantly clothe themselves at the cost of the impoverished. Priests fail to teach and uphold God's law, neglecting His commanded care for the marginalized. Complicit prophets provide convenient prophecies to maintain the status quo rather than “face the music” of the Lord's clarion call for repentance. This is a system of influence that promotes idolatry, a culture of hegemony that is utterly corrupt.

Can you imagine being under leadership like this? Unfortunately, some of us may not have to spend much time imagining. We have been there. Though religious trauma in 21st century American churches is certainly not the same as a depraved national system of Israel, there are still many experiences of leadership hijacked by Satan's agenda that leave many scarred. In the worst cases, narcissistic leaders with nefarious intentions use position and influence to abuse others mentally, physically, and spiritually. In other cases, well-intentioned church leadership can end up steeped in competition, consumerism, and intimidation to achieve certain ends instead of serving Christ in Christ's way².

If you've read the Bible through, you have probably noticed that nearly every effort to lead people to God has resulted in religious trauma. Leaders and followers of YHWH alike have been wounded deeply: starting in Eden, in the lives of the Patriarchs, through the Exodus, into the promised land, under Judges, in the Kingdom of Israel, in exile, and even in the New Testament church. Perhaps we shouldn't be so surprised by the universality of trauma among humanity. Trauma is an unfortunate reality of our current world—even if we are not pursuing God. If we normalize the need for healing, we can integrate trauma recovery into our spirituality. We all need that type of healing. Without it, we blindly continue the cycle and continue to operate in a dysfunctional way.

Inevitably, we experience a dysfunctional culture or leader that has left us traumatized. Trauma itself is a loss of trust, breaking of relationship, and sense of powerlessness that are all manifested in one's body. Trauma can be experienced in flashbacks, avoiding places associated with a traumatic time, sudden anger, or memory loss, as just a few examples³. To face the complexity here, some of us may recognize that we played a role in facilitating a toxic culture under corrupt leadership. Perhaps we feel shame for how we sat by passively when we saw friends and family harmed spiritually. This is moral injury—which is an experience of guilt for violating one's moral conscience when under another's authority⁴.

These are intense and perplexing realities to contemplate, which this short devotional cannot possibly convey completely. It takes a lifetime of faith with trained counselors, much reflection, and healthier

community to understand and find life on the other side of that darkness. However, there is a word of healing we can find from the prophet Ezekiel:

This is what the Lord God says. I will seek out the lost, bring back the strays, bind up the wounded, and strengthen the weak. But the fat and the strong I will destroy, because I will tend my sheep with justice. Ezekiel 34:15b-16 (CEB)

God wants Israel to know that He is not the kind of shepherd they experienced in their idolatrous princes, priests, and prophets. Rather, God aims to be the Good Shepherd they were not by doing everything they neglected to. He is one who seeks out the lost, brings back the strays, binds up the wounded, and strengthens the weak.

Remind you of anyone?

How about Jesus! The one who came to “seek and save the lost”⁵, who healed many, and who welcomed the outcasts. Jesus’ parables, particularly in Luke 15, speak to God’s true desire to seek out the broken, rejected, and overlooked. Jesus is the Shepherd who gets up on a cross rather than put another on the cross for his selfish gains.

Understandably, it is difficult to recover this view of God having seen an immoral culture formed in the name of God and His Kingdom. Yet, to differentiate the actions of men from the real purposes of God is to discover life and truth in that darkness. It is at least a place to begin healing to recognize this was never God’s will for His church, and it certainly was not the shepherding of Jesus.

For us who recognize our own action or complicity contributing to the poison in a church’s soil: we must take an inventory of what has crept in our hearts, eliminate excuses, observe the impact of our actions, and make every effort to be formed in the way of Christ’s blood-soaked cross. Otherwise, let us not forget, *“But the fat and the strong I will destroy, because I will tend my sheep with justice.”*

Questions to ponder:

- *Have you experienced church leadership or culture that was neglectful or abusive? If yes, what about it missed the mark or inflicted spiritual damage?*
- *Were there anyways you facilitated or were complicit in a toxic church culture? What can you learn from this moving forward?*
- *Do you find it hard to trust God’s love and justice having experienced spiritual trauma? Why?*
- *What have you done to better understand and work through trauma you have experienced?*

Notes

1. See Psalm 137 or Lamentations for example.
2. Scot McKnight and Laura Barringer, *Pivot: The Priorities, Practices, and Powers That Can Transform Your Church into a Tov Culture* (Carol Stream: Tyndale, 2023), page 21.
3. Charles Kiser and Elaine A. Heath, *Trauma-Informed Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023), pages 31-32.
4. *ibid*, 39.
5. Luke 19:10.