

## Why the Hope Initiative?

We, as a church, are in exile. We've been torn from the lives we used to know and been forced to live in a new "place" with new customs, new viewpoints, and new lifestyles. Exile means losing our traditional connection to family, friends, community, and identity. Many of us have experienced seasons in our lives that involved some form of personal exile - physical, emotional, financial or spiritual. But for most of us communal exile is a new experience.

Early on in this exile, we waited. We waited for someone with more knowledge or expertise to guide us through this time. We found ourselves looking for a path back to the way things used to be. Then, we looked for leadership to a "new normal". What we soon found was that everyone was floundering as much as we were. As time wore on, we began to hear the old familiar call to hope in the Lord. Like David in Psalm 39, we asked "And now, O Lord, for what do I wait? My hope is in you".

The only logical place to go from there is to the Scriptures. As a society we've been calling this exile unprecedented. But as people of faith, we know there is nothing new under the sun. We know God's people have experienced exile before and we know that God spoke to his people in the midst of exile. God provided instructions on how to live in exile through the prophet Jeremiah.

*Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." ([Jer. 29:4-7](#))*

What is striking and completely counterintuitive is that God does not call his people back to where they were before. Instead, he urges them not to think about a quick return but to settle in for the long haul (in this case 70 years!) He directs them to immerse themselves in the new place they find themselves in - continue to live their lives while seeking the welfare of the people around them. In seeking the well-being of others, they are told, they will thrive as well.

But God doesn't just leave them hanging, he fills God's people with hope by assuring them that after a period of time,

*“I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you...plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” Jer 29:10-11*

And, God did bring the people back to Jerusalem where they built a new temple believing that returning to the status quo would be enough.

But, in hindsight we know that this future and hope promised by God was more than just a peaceful existence in Jerusalem with a newly built temple. In fact, the peace they were seeking didn't last long. They were conquered again and the temple destroyed under Roman rule. God had bigger and better plans for His people. He promised them a future and a hope that is fulfilled in Jesus himself. The prophet Isaiah consistently points God's people to seek more than just the land - but to seek the Lord himself.

Our story of deliverance from this exile (and all others) rests in Jesus alone. God promises us a future and a hope and always out-delivers on His promises. Acts 4:12 reminds us that *“salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.”*

The story of the Israelites exile and return can help us reflect on our time in exile. Rather than focus on a quick return to the way things used to be, we can envision a bigger, better future for ourselves, our community and the church. How are we as individuals and the Atonement community being called to live during this time? What are we doing to ensure the welfare of others and of ourselves? Where are we thinking too small in terms of God's promises of a future and a hope? How can we focus more on the Lord than the land?

This is a call to be part of the God's vision going forward. We're going to try to provide tools to help the Atonement community see God's presence and to follow God into the future He has planned for us.