

We are starting a new series from the book of Daniel entitled "Daniel: Lessons from Exile." We are not going to be studying the entire book of Daniel, but rather are doing a study of the life of Daniel. We will focus on the first half of the book (through the first seven chapters) and will do so primarily as an exploration of the narrative account of the life of Daniel.

I've hesitated to do a study on the prophetic books, specifically Daniel, because the overwhelming focus mistakenly falls on speculative theology on when Jesus will return.

Daniel is divided fairly neatly into two sections. The first six chapters focus on the stories of Daniel and a few of his friends living in exile for about 70 years. And the second half, chapters 7-12, focus on visions Daniel received about the conflict of the Kingdom of God and the empires of the world. We are focusing on the first half of the book for this series, except a week in chapter 7 and a brief touchpoint on chapter 12.

So why the life of Daniel? If you were around in the fall, you will remember we preached a series entitled *Ekklesia: Becoming the People of God*. And in that series, we explored our cultural moment and the complexities of our modern life on following Jesus well in today's climate. The premise of the series and our vision was that we are to be a transformed people transforming the Peninsula. What we mean by that is that the church has always been and will continue to be a distinctly different alternative community that exists within the structures of our time.

We looked at the unique pressures and times we live in as Jesus' followers. I proposed that we live in what sociologists call a "Post-Christian World." And what was meant by that is not that America was once Christian and is now not. From what I can tell, there is no such thing as a "Christian nation." As I heard one pastor say, "Christian is a noun, not an adjective." There is no such thing as a Christian nation. But rather, the default belief and understanding of the world around us is unbelief in God.

That means that the majority of our cultural experience and life is bent in the other direction than God. And I don't mean that in a pejorative sense. I just mean that for the first time in America's history, and for the first time since AD 300 in Church history, the default posture toward belief and the things of God is unbelief. This is the secular age that we live in. Because of this, as we seek to follow Jesus faithfully, we bump into more and more challenges than we have in the past.

This is happening both inside and outside the church. What I mean is that terms like Christian (one never used by Jesus) and faith, etc.,

have been drained of their meaning and swallowed largely by political categories.

So what is becoming even more foreign is the idea of being a "Follower of Jesus." What I mean by that phrase is someone whose life is organized around the principles, practices, and beliefs that constituted the life of Jesus. It is the life of someone who isn't perfect but is growing toward having a similar inward disposition toward the world as Jesus had. Or what the writers of the New Testament and we call Christlikeness or Union with Christ.

If you weren't around or didn't get the chance to listen to the *Ekklesia* series, I would encourage you to go to our website and give it a listen. It was an important series where we laid down some foundational teachings on where we are going as a church. The central question we were seeking to answer in the series was, what does it mean to be the people of God?

Out of that series, we started a study in the book of Galatians, which was a study asking the question, "If we are the Ekklesia, the distinct community of God's people, what is the foundation for our community?"

Paul's letter focuses exclusively on trying to correct an issue within the church in Galatia about a lost or misplaced identity as the church. They were struggling to understand that the gospel was their central identity. And what Paul concludes is that the church is a community rooted solely in the gospel as its primary identity above all other allegiances. The central question we were seeking to answer in the Galatians series was, what is the foundation for our identity as the people of God?

And so today, we come to a series on the book of Daniel. Daniel is about a group of Israelites dragged into exile in Babylon following the Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem. It is a book that tells how Daniel didn't just survive but thrived in exile. When all the odds seemed against him, the book of Daniel details how he and his small group of friends were able to remain faithful. The central question we are seeking to answer is, "How do we faithfully live as the people of God?"

Rather than spending our time speculating on wild theories about dreams and future predictions, we will focus more narrowly on what we can learn from Daniel and his small band of exiles. How can we remain faithful to God as a minority culture living within a majority culture that contrasts with the way of Jesus?

*"In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it" (Daniel 1:1).* The story opens roughly 600 years before Jesus' birth. The setting is in what we now call the Middle East, and it was one of the most contentious times historically.

At that time, the kingdom of Israel was divided between the Northern and the Southern Kingdom. The Southern Kingdom of Israel was called Judah and was nestled between three different empires, Assyria to the north, Egypt to the south, and Babylon to the east. It was a time of enormous upheaval throughout the region.

### **Jehoiakim's Story**

The Assyrian Empire had ruled that part of the world for 150 years with a strong violent military presence. Assyria had a strong reputation of leading through harsh, uncompromising violence. Among the small nations destroyed by the Assyrians was the Northern Kingdom of Israel and its capital Samaria roughly 100 years earlier. The southern Kingdom of Israel, Judah, had been spared with its capital city of Jerusalem.

But by the time of Daniel, Assyria itself was beginning to fall, and the region became deeply unstable. In response to the growing instability was the rise of a new power under the leadership of Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian Empire to the east. Nebuchadnezzar was pushing north from the south to seize power.

On the other end of the map from the West was Egypt. Egypt sensed that this was an opportunity to reassert themselves as the dominant power, so the Pharaoh Necho attempted to join Assyria to ward off the upcoming Babylonian attack.

All of this was taking place with Judah at the center. At that time, Josiah was the king of Judah (God's people), and in an attempt to ward off Egypt, he marched to confront Necho and fails miserably. It was well-intentioned, but ultimately, he didn't stand a chance. Josiah was killed in action, and Pharaoh Necho decides to install Jehoiakim, the King mentioned here in Daniel 1, as the new King of Judah. He began his reign mainly as a proxy or vassal for Egyptian rule. You can read about this account in 2 Kings 23:29-37

Quickly following this episode, Babylon destroyed Egypt at the battle of Carchemish in 605 BC. And the result was that Babylon was the dominant power in Mesopotamia and the whole of West Asia, remaining so for about 70 years.

In the entire region, smaller states had to bow to the power of Babylon, or they would face being destroyed. Judah, the people of God in the south, were one of those states. After defeating Egypt, Nebuchadnezzar went south to threaten Jerusalem to force its subordination. On that trip, he gathered up a small number of captives off to Babylon as hostages. The group collected were what could be called the cultural elites of Judah. They were powerful, educated, and wealthy cultural influencers. This group was taken as hostages to ensure good behavior from those left in Judah.

Daniel and his three friends, who we read about in this book, are a part of that group taken by Nebuchadnezzar. It is believed that at the time of their exile, they were merely teenagers and were probably in training for government or religious service in Judah.

Pause for a second. This is the turmoil and the story in which we pick up the book of Daniel. Imagine the feeling that Daniel and his friends must have experienced. Their entire future was ahead of them with

bright and had promising careers. But rather than excelling into that future, they were ripped from everything they knew and taken into exile. Without warning, they were taken thousands of miles from home into a pagan, gentile, enemy state. It must have been a horrifying and traumatic experience for these teenage boys. This is the experience of exile... disorienting, confusing, threatening, painful, and chaotic. I imagine they were filled with questions about Nebuchadnezzar. Will he let them go free? Will he allow them to go back to Judah? Or will he continue to rule with an iron fist?

Later in the story, Babylon would totally destroy Jerusalem and everything in its wake. The army went through Jerusalem and slaughtered everything. They looted the temple and burnt it to the ground. They reduced the City of David to ashes and eventually took more people out of Jerusalem into exile. The book of Lamentations is filled with the sobbing poetry of those torn from their homes into exile. It was violent, dark, disorienting, and devastating. This is the experience of Babylon.

### **Babylon as an Archetype**

Babylon was the pinnacle of civilization and the largest city in the known ancient world. The opulence and wealth of the city were on full display in every corner. The city was shrouded with tiles and art that demonstrated their architectural and artistic brilliance. Babylon far surpassed any other city in the known world.

All through the Bible, Babylon is an archetype of all that is bent away from God. In Genesis 11, we see the origin story of Babylon with the construction of the Tower of Babel. And they intended to become god-like. *"Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth"* (Gen. 11:4). This is the driving impulse behind Babylon—to build a society apart from God. Listen to how David Kinnaman and Mark Matlock define Babylon in their book, *Faith for Exiles*.

**The Babylon of the Bible is characterized as a culture set against the purposes of God—a human society that glories in pride, power, prestige, and pleasure. Babylon makes appearances throughout the Bible, most notably (and literally) in the story of Daniel. But Babylon is there in the pages of Scripture from beginning to end. From the Tower of Babel, the 'first city of man,' on the book of Genesis to the final act of God's justice and restoration in Revelation, Babylon is both a place and an archetype of collective human pursuits set in opposition to God.**

It is the archetype of a society in rebellion to God who are trying to construct a world void of God that runs throughout the story of the scriptures. The archetype of Babylon in the scriptures is a picture of the dominant world power, opulent wealth, personal and systemic injustice, and hedonism. It is the global driver of the social, political, and economic life. Consider then our world today? Who is Babylon in this story? I am. You are. We are. The United States of America is.

Now, for us as Christians in the modern age, I want to suggest that we see ourselves as Christians living in modern Babylon. As we read this story, we need to see that America is not Israel in the story. America is not “God’s people,” and America is not the Kingdom of God. Instead, America takes up the archetype of Babylon. For all the good that America has done, it has been far from perfect with a history of evil things as well. I am grateful for this country. But as a follower of Jesus, where my highest allegiance resides with Christ alone, to live faithfully in the way of Jesus, I have to accept that I live in a modern Babylon—America.

The goal was never to restore any earthly empire, whether the Assyrian, Babylonian, Egyptian, Roman, or the American Empire. The goal was always to become faithful to the Kingdom of God that exists and transcends beyond these empires. So, this is the archetype of Babylon in the scriptures. Babylon is disorienting. Babylon is uncomfortable. Babylon is unsettling.

I think the natural question we ask is why? Why were the people of God sent into the hands of Babylon? Why were they exiled? *“And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia and put in the treasure house of his god” (Dan. 1:2).*

This provokes all sorts of questions! From where we stand today, it is easy for us to see God did it. Because we can look from the perspective of countless warnings from the prophets, countless warnings from God. All of it makes sense. God tried to warn the people to return to their covenant promises.

But as the story went, God’s people had a tense relationship with power and was constantly going the way of Empire. They were filling their time with idolatry, and its twin, injustice. The prophets continually warned the people of God that if they did not leave their idolatry and their injustice, they would be sent into exile.

Not only did the state fall, but it says *“some articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia and put in the treasure-house of his god.”* This was a familiar practice of the day that when you defeated a foreign people, you would also take articles from their religious temples as a way of showing that it wasn’t just that the nation had fallen, but their gods had also been defeated.

The experience of exile for those in Judah would have felt like a total and utter defeat of all that comprised their identity. The people of Israel were rattled with questions. How could God allow this to happen? Had Yahweh been defeated? Had he lost all control? Had he grown weak and old? Were the gods of Babylon stronger? Was there any hope for the future? Was this the result of God’s judgment, and if so, was he finished with Israel?

It is hard to express the magnitude of pain this would have caused in the people of Israel. Without question, this event was easily the most traumatic in the entire Old Testament. To give you a quick insight into the agony of this moment, flip with me over to Psalm 137. This Psalm of lament was written by some of the Israelites in exile, and it gives you a

window into the utter pain and disorientation that the Israelites felt in the wake of the exile.

**By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”**

**How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land? If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy. Remember, Lord, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell. “Tear it down,” they cried, “tear it down to its foundations!”**

**Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is the one who repays you according to what you have done to us. Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks. Psalm 137**

You can feel the rage and the confusion. You can sense the utter dismay in their tone as they struggle to understand the next steps. I want to highlight the question they pose in verse 4 because I think it is the question, we too should be asking as we approach our current moment. *“How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?” (Psalm 137:4).* The question is asking, how do we remain faithful? How do we live as the people of God faithfully practicing our faith in the environment of exile?

What does exile mean for us? Is there any connection to our experience as followers of Jesus in this day and time? This is what the life of Daniel answers for us. Daniel and his few friends demonstrate a way of life where faithfulness to God trumps all other influences. Even during exile, they were able to hold to their way of life without isolating away from culture and without merging with culture.

How do we remain faithful to the way of Jesus in a world that is trying to squeeze us into an alternative path? How do we, in a city and area we love, in a city and area that God loves deeply—how do we faithfully give witness to the way of Jesus here? Or, in the language of our vision, how do we become a transformed people that, in turn, transforms the Peninsula, but do that in a way that is faithful to the way of Jesus?

The experience of disorientation from living in Babylon is what the Bible calls “exile.” This idea of exile and its experience of the people of God throughout history and the Bible is not new. This is a metaphor worth exploring and understanding because exile is the condition in which we find ourselves. The idea of the people of God living as a minority in a majority culture that is contrary to the way of Jesus is not a new phenomenon. Although it may be a newer experience for modern generations, the concept itself is actually really old.

This is the motif, metaphor, theme that runs throughout the entire Bible that I believe is one of, if not the central metaphor that we must take up if we are to understand how we exist as the church today. And that is the

metaphor of "exile." This is the moment we have spoken of about Daniel as we've opened the narrative to him.

### Exile as our Cultural Moment

Without rehashing all of the work we did in the Ekklesia series, I think it is worth noting that exile is the best metaphor to understand our current cultural moment as followers of Jesus. We are, and particularly in the Bay Area, have been a minority culture in a majority culture that lives contrary to the way of God.

This isn't a dig against our area; I love the Bay Area and the city we live in. It is a beautiful place to call home, and Lindsey and I are committed to raising our children here for all of its complexities. It is simply that the fundamental disposition of the Bay Area is not a disposition bent toward the way of Jesus. And this is the case with America as well; we live in a post-Christian world.

### Exile as the Human Condition

The motif of exile also helps us to understand our own experiences as humans. If you remember, at the beginning of the story of Genesis, God and humanity are walking together in communion. This is what humanity was made for. We were made for connection to God. And then, when sin enters the picture and wreaks havoc on this perfect communion, God casts them out of the garden, and they are exiled from the communion and peace that once was. The rest of the story of the scriptures is about God working to reconcile heaven and earth back together, with ourselves involved in that.

The stain of sin and its ill effects on ourselves and the effects on our relationship to God can also be understood as an exile. The journey of discipleship is a journey from a state of exile into a reunion with God.

### Exile as Opportunity

One of the purposes of exile is to expose the failings of God's people and our own unfaithfulness. This is why the prophets warned over and over of the impending exile if the people of God didn't return to faithfulness to God. Exile was a means of God instituting judgment and warning over his people. It was God exposing the failures and manners in which we have drifted from faithfulness to the way of God.

Exile for Israel was always about self-evaluation and re-orientation. As the people of God, these are the tasks that we take on as we experience exile. This is our task. I am really excited to consider this upcoming moment for the church. It is a chance for us to do exactly these two things. This fall, we are launching the second half of our Beyond the Horizon Vision. It is a lot of our best thinking around self-evaluation and re-orientation to our present moment as a church and what it means for us going forward as a community of God living in this time.

### Self-Evaluation

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

How have you found yourself wrapped up more in the way of Babylon than the way of Jesus? In exile, we ask tough questions about how we have remained or drifted from the way of Jesus. It is a process where we open ourselves up to God, our community, and ourselves asking the ways where we have failed to live into the life of God's people.

### Re-orientation

Exile is also the place where we open our lives up to the work of the Spirit to reorient ourselves to how God may be reshaping us into his people. We consider new and old practices of faith, which have enabled people of faith to remain faithful throughout the various histories of exile. Self-Evaluation and re-orientation are the tasks of exile. And these are the tasks that we are asking all of us to consider as we explore the life of Daniel as a way forward for us in our moment.

Now, the question that I think we are asking is, is there any hope in exile? Is there any hope for following Jesus in a day and age like exile? This is the question we ask as we come to the story of Daniel. And I'm sure it doesn't come as a shock when I answer that question with a definitive yes.

To close, I want to give you a spoiler as a way of offering hope. Look over at chapter 6 of Daniel. At the very end of the first section of Daniel, which is the narrative retelling of the events that Daniel and his friends endured, we read this. *"So Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian..." (Daniel 6:28)*. Daniel and his band of friends in exile didn't just survive, but they found a way to thrive in exile.

These teenage boys, during the next 70 years, found a way to remain faithful to the way of God when the entire surrounding culture was bent against the way of God. They found a way through faithful attentiveness to God and their calling to resist the powerful sway of the empire seeking to overturn everything about his existence.

This is the example of Daniel, and it is a story of seeking to remain faithful when everything in you and everything around you is pulling you in a different direction. It is a story about confronting the thousands of small ways we compromise our faith, to confronting the idols of nationalism and idol worship. It is about giving witness through our words and actions to the one true living God in a world bent away from these things. It is ultimately a story of hope and remembrance that even in the most difficult of circumstances, when all appears to be lost, God is still sovereign. God is still working. God has not abandoned his people.

This is the story of Daniel, and I believe that with Daniel as our guide, we too can learn to be the *Ekklesia* of God, faithful to his ways even in the exilic experience we face. So I invite you to journey with us over the next few months, learning from Daniel the lessons from exile.

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