

LIVING AS EXILES
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When you hear the word *exile*, what comes to mind? For me, *exile* brings to mind someone who lives in a place that isn't their home. They may have been forcibly removed from their homeland because another nation has taken over their country, or someone may be in exile, because it's dangerous for them to remain in their country—perhaps they're being hunted by someone, or maybe they've committed a crime and are trying to avoid being arrested. Exiles don't really belong in the place where they live. Their freedom is limited, and power and control have been stripped from them. If *exile* has such negative connotations, why would I choose to label this sermon series "Living as Exiles?"

In the Bible, God's people frequently lived in exile. In the Old Testament the Israelites spent 400 years in Egypt, after Joseph was taken there as a slave. Later God's people were exiled to places like Persia and Babylon when those nations conquered Israel. And in the 1st Century, when the New Testament was written, God's people lived under the oppression of the Roman Empire. The words *exile* or *in exile* occur nearly 150 times in the Bible—mostly in the Old Testament, but the concept is in the New Testament as well.

As I was thinking about exiles last week, I had a troubling realization. While none of us wants to be an exile and we prefer being in control of our lives and having freedoms, we often don't handle comfort and security well. A quick survey of the Old Testament illustrates this. It was often when God's people were most secure and powerful that they succumbed to pride and blatantly disobeyed God. And if we honestly assess our own lives, we'll probably see the same pattern. When things are hard and we're struggling, it's natural to turn to God, pleading for his intervention, because we know we're unable to help ourselves, but when things are going well for us, we become enamored with our success and lose sight of our need for God.

Think about Jesus' Church in our world. While we celebrate our many freedoms in this country—including religious freedom—and would fight to hold on them, the Church in America's relationship with God could probably best be described with words like complacent,

prideful, lethargic, and even anemic. Meanwhile, in places like China, India, Southeast Asia and the Middle East, where religious freedom doesn't exist, the Underground Church is thriving, and the faith of individual believers is vibrant.

None of us desires persecution or having our religious freedom restricted, but if we're honest we have to acknowledge that faith in Jesus often thrives in less-than-ideal circumstances, like being forced to live in exile. New Testament writers like Peter, Paul and John understood that truth. In his first letter the Apostle Peter addresses his readers as, "*To God's elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia...*" And while Jesus doesn't specifically use the word, *exile*, the idea comes through clearly in his well-known prayer in John chapter 17. Jesus prayed,

I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. – John 17:13-16

Listen to the exile language? "*The world has hated them, for they are not of the world...*" "*My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.*" "*They are not of the world, even as I am not of it.*" As followers of Jesus, you and I are exiles—living in a temporary place, while we await eternity in our permanent home. So, how do we live as exiles—engaged in the world in which we live, while recognizing there is so much more beyond this life? During this 4-week sermon series we're exploring the lives of the Old Testament characters, Joseph, Daniel, Esther and Nehemiah. They were God's people, Israelites, who thrived while living in foreign nations that worshiped anything and everything but the one true God. I intentionally use the word *thrived*, because these four people rose to prominent positions of influence as leaders in pagan countries, while remaining true to God and maintaining their allegiance to Him. Last week we examined Joseph's life and today we're going to look at Daniel. As we examine Daniel's life, I'll highlight some traits I believe are crucial for us as exiles. In fact, I'll list these traits now, so we can keep them in mind as we walk through Daniel's story. As we seek to live faithfully as exiles, we can learn from Daniel's FOCUS, his TACT, his HUMILITY, and his INTEGRITY.

To help us get into Daniel's story I'd like you to follow along as I read verses 1-7 of Daniel chapter 1...

In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. ² 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.

³ Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king's service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility— ⁴ young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians. ⁵ The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service.

⁶ Among those who were chosen were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. ⁷ The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego. — Daniel 1:1-7

The information we're given in verse 1 allows us to pinpoint these events in 605 B.C., 600 years prior to Jesus' birth. Without getting too deep into the weeds here, the Babylonians ruled Israel for approximately 45 years and then the Persian Empire overthrew Babylon and ruled Israel beginning in 539 B.C. (Keep the Persians in the back of your mind, because they play an important role in Daniel's later life.) The Babylonian strategy for its subjugated people, as we see in these verses, was to bring some of the best and brightest to their capitol city, where they could be assimilated into all the ways of the Babylonians. So, the Jewish young men Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were transported to Babylon, where they lived as exiles.

As I pointed out last week, it's easy for us to read these stories quickly and not take into account the deep emotions of the people involved. Daniel and other young men, probably in their mid to late teen years, were uprooted from their homeland, taken from their families, and dropped in a city and a culture that was completely foreign to them. They were given new names, ate new foods, were given new clothes, were taught new ways, heard a new language, and were encouraged to worship different gods. It's hard to imagine the culture shock they experienced. Most of these young men probably weren't thinking about their faith in God. After all, hadn't God abandoned them? Wasn't God responsible for their nation being defeated and for them being taken to a city 1,600 miles away? Faith in God for most of these young men probably took a back seat to trying to stay alive and make major adjustments in their lives.

In verse 8 we read about Daniel and his three friends' response.

But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way.⁹ Now God had caused the official to show favor and compassion to Daniel,¹⁰ but the official told Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you."

¹¹ Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah,¹² "Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink.¹³ Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see."¹⁴ So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days.

¹⁵ At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food.¹⁶ So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead.

¹⁷ To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds. – Daniel 1:8-17

Daniel's resolve to remain faithful to God even in these challenging circumstances is noteworthy. While most of the other exiles probably felt like they had no choice but to go along with what the Babylonian officials said was required of them, Daniel sought to remain true to his values and looked for another option. I'm also struck by Daniel's tact in walking through his request. He understood that his request might not be granted, and he didn't have much leverage. Rather than demanding his own way, Daniel asked for permission and then when the official expressed his reservation about not giving Daniel and his friends the royal food, Daniel proposed a test. He asked that he and his friends be given vegetables and water for 10 days and that their health and appearance be compared with the other exiles who ate the king's food. At the end of the 10 days, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego looked healthier than the other young men, and so they were allowed to eat the diet they requested.

I love Daniel's resolve and focus. Amidst his uncertainty and fear and homesickness, he kept his focus on God and he continued to live faithfully as a follower of God. I also appreciate the tact Daniel showed in approaching the guard who was responsible for him and his friends. Daniel could have made demands or threatened not to eat the food that was brought to him. Instead, he asked the guard to grant an exception and when the guard expressed some resistance, Daniel proposed a test. He stepped out in faith and asked God to come through for him and his friends by giving them greater health than the other exiles, and God was faithful.

My observation is that followers of Jesus often lack tact when it comes to trying to live out our faith well as exiles in a world that can be hostile to us and our beliefs. We're quick to make demands and threats that put others in an uncomfortable position, rather than treating people with courtesy, respect and tact and allowing God to work on our behalf. When we claim our rights or threaten lawsuits or try to intimidate others, we're taking matters into our hands, rather than allowing God to work on our behalf.

As we get back into Daniel's story, I want us to see something I pointed out last week in Joseph's story—Daniel's story is compressed into 6 chapters, so it's easy to lose sight of the passage of time, but approximately 60 years passed from the time Daniel was taken as a captive to Babylon to when he was thrown into the den of lions—which we'll talk about in a few moments. Daniel lived faithfully in the Babylonian Empire and later in the Persian Empire from the age of approximately 15 until he was well into his 70s. And through it all he maintained a posture of humility and integrity that is amazing.

In chapter 2 we read about a dream King Nebuchadnezzar had which none of us his wise men could interpret. The king was so upset by the ineptitude of his wise men that he ordered all of them to be killed. When Daniel learned what was going on he offered to interpret the king's dream. Listen to the humility Daniel exhibited before the king...

The king asked Daniel (also called Belteshazzar), "Are you able to tell me what I saw in my dream and interpret it?"

²⁷ Daniel replied, "No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about, ²⁸ but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries. He has shown King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen in days to come. – Daniel 2:26-28

Daniel refused to take credit for himself. He humbly pointed to his God as the only one who could accurately interpret dreams.

In Daniel chapter 5 we read about some strange writing that mysteriously appeared on the wall of a banquet hall where King Belshazzar was celebrating with his nobles. The writing troubled the king, and no one could interpret it, until Daniel was finally brought to the king. King Belshazzar offered fine clothes and jewelry and a promotion to the third highest ruler in the kingdom if Daniel could interpret the writing, but Daniel said, "*You may keep your gifts for yourself and give your rewards to someone else. Nevertheless, I will read the writing for the king*

and tell him what it means.” And as Daniel interpreted the mysterious words he gave glory to the most high God.

And that brings us to Daniel chapter 6—what Daniel is best known for, being thrown into the lions’ den for his refusal to stop praying to his God. In the first verses of chapter 6, we’re introduced to a new ruler, Darius, King of the Persian Empire. It had been over 50 years since Daniel was brought to Babylon and the Persian Empire was the world’s super power. Amazingly, Daniel is still in a position of influence. That would be like our Secretary of State serving for over 50 years and staying in power even after our country was overtaken by a foreign power.

Most, if not all of us, are familiar with the story of Daniel being told he couldn’t pray, but he continued to be faithful to his God by praying three times a day in front of his open window that faced Jerusalem. As a result, the king, who had been tricked into making a law that would ensnare Daniel, had no choice but to throw Daniel into the lions’ den. Daniel was thrown to the lions, but God protected him by closing the lions’ mouths. That’s a great story and you can read it in its entirety in Daniel chapter 6, but I want to focus on the first 5 verses of the chapter...

It pleased Darius to appoint 120 satraps to rule throughout the kingdom, with three administrators over them, one of whom was Daniel. The satraps were made accountable to them so that the king might not suffer loss. Now Daniel so distinguished himself among the administrators and the satraps by his exceptional qualities that the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom. At this, the administrators and the satraps tried to find grounds for charges against Daniel in his conduct of government affairs, but they were unable to do so. They could find no corruption in him, because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent. Finally these men said, “We will never find any basis for charges against this man Daniel unless it has something to do with the law of his God.” – Daniel 6:1-5

Daniel’s success stirred up jealousy and envy among the other rulers, but they couldn’t find anything to pin on Daniel, except his faithfulness to his God. This is extraordinary. Daniel had served in high political office for nearly six decades and his rivals couldn’t find any dirt on him.

The only way they could think to trip him up was over his committed devotion to his God. Daniel’s example of how to faithfully serve God while living in exile is exemplary. As a young man of maybe 16 years of age he displayed focus and resolve to be faithful to God while his world was being turned upside down. And over the course of serving God in a foreign government for six decades he embodied humility and integrity.

There is so much that Daniel did well, and there are more godly characteristics of his I could point out, but I'd like us to reflect specifically on Daniel's FOCUS, his TACT, his HUMILITY & his INTEGRITY by considering a series of questions.

- How do I give priority to my relationship with Jesus and living as his faithful follower? Are there steps I can take to **strengthen my focus**?
- How does Daniel's **tactfulness** speak to me? How can I grow in placing my trust and faith in God, rather than relying on my own ability to make things happen?
- How can I embrace the **humility** and servanthood of Jesus?
- Are there gaps in my **integrity**? What steps can I take to ensure I walk faithfully and honestly before God and people?

As you process those questions, I encourage you to take tangible steps this morning in cementing what God is speaking to your heart. You can ask a person you're sitting near or one of our prayer partners to pray with you. You can kneel at one of the prayer benches and pray by yourself. Or, you can come forward during the singing of our response song as a sign of commitment before God.