

Living As Exiles

Jeremiah 29:4-14

Jeremiah wrote to the exiles in Babylon with God's guidance on how to live in a difficult time and place. Christians today need to live as those exiles did, close to God and working for the good of those around them in everyday life.

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Preach notes

God had exiled His people to Babylon because they had consistently rebelled against Him. Whilst some people claimed this would only last for a short time (Jeremiah 28:11), it was actually going to be for 70 years. God told them this in a letter from Jeremiah in which He also told them how they should live in that time (Jeremiah 29:4-14)

Everyone lives with a faint sense of exile. Even people who have everything this world can offer are still unsatisfied. The Bible has an answer for this: we have been exiled from the presence of God (Genesis 3:23-24), which is where we were made to be. As C.S. Lewis put it, "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world." (Mere Christianity)

The Christian sense of exile is slightly different to this because that desire that Lewis talks about has begun to be fulfilled: we have met with the King of that other Kingdom and given our lives to Him. We belong to Him now, not the place or people we're from, not the culture or country we live in. Our longing has a focus: for Jesus to return and make everything new that we might dwell with Him in joy forever. (See John 17:14-16, 1 Peter 1:1, 17, 2:11, Philippians 3:20, Hebrews 13:14)

All of this – Old Testament exile as punishment, New Testament exile as waiting – is the setting in which we're to understand the most Instagrammed verse in Jeremiah and perhaps the Bible, 29:11. As we've seen from the story today, "the plans I have for you" meant that the trouble they were going through was going to last much longer than they'd hoped for, which doesn't usually get mentioned on Instagram. The parallels between experiencing exile and experiencing lockdown are obvious.

We're going to focus on two characteristics of faithful exiles, which will help us live through lockdown but also all our days following Jesus. They are two of five which research has shown are common to most Christians with a resilient faith (see Resources section below). We could summarise them with Daniel 11:32: "the people who know their God shall stand firm and take

action."

1. Intimacy with Jesus

Resilient exiles need to know who God is because who and what you love will dominate you. God knows this, that's why He starts this letter reminding them of who He is: "the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel". He's asserting here that He's more powerful than Babylon and reminding them of His special relationship with them. We need to know and dwell on what God is like: do whatever you can do to keep these things at the forefront of your mind: write lists, sing songs about them, Always be searching for them when you're reading His Word, read books about God.

God also tells the exiles to express their intimacy with Him by praying (Jeremiah 29:12-14). It's incredible that He says to people who had rejected and ignored and mocked Him, "Come and find Me". He does this repeatedly, see also Deuteronomy 4:29-31, John 6:37, Proverbs 8:17, Isaiah 55:6. We were made to be in relationship with God, and prayer is a key place where that happens.

It's taken me a while to get a different rhythm of prayer for lockdown but it's essential. The power of good habits and rhythms is that not only do we do benefit from doing the things but the habit itself shapes us. Habits that require commitment enable us to be more committed in other areas; those which help us prioritise something at one time of the day will keep us prioritising it at other times.

2. Faith in every part of daily life

God told the exiles to get on with doing what was normal and good (Jeremiah 29:5-7). These instructions remind us of the creation mandate (Genesis 1:28) and the promise to Abraham that the whole world would be blessed through his family (Genesis 12:3). Christians are always the light of the world (Matthew 5:14), no matter what's going on. The question we're each faced with is, What does it look like for you to bring growth and goodness where you are? Where you're living, who you're interacting with, what you're working on. The subtle thing about this is that it isn't that we necessarily start doing new things but realise how to do the things we're already doing in a new way – in a way that brings the love and wholeness of God.

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Questions for group discussion

General:

What unexpected habit – good or bad – have you formed in lockdown life?

Luke mentioned how Nathanael Smith's love of films dominated the quiz he wrote. What or who do you have to stop yourself from talking about all the time? (FYI, as well as the obvious, Luke's answers would include The Lord of The Rings.)

Jeremiah 29:11 is a favourite verse of many people and gets shared a lot on social media.

What Bible verse do you cherish and would you love to share with as many others as possible?

Personal application, perhaps best for groups of two or three people:

What helps you to think more about the nature and character of God? If you don't have an answer to this, what do you think might help?

Either we choose to make helpful habits, or unhelpful habits will make us the people we become. What would be a helpful habit for you to start, and how can you begin to do this?

Luke spoke about prayer developing our relationship with God and it is also mentioned in Jeremiah's letter as a means by which God will change the world for good (29:7). This is called intercession, and the Bible is clear that we're to pray for those we struggle with and even our enemies – which is what the Babylonians were to the Jews (Matthew 5:44). How are you praying at the moment? When do you do it, what do you pray about, how would you like to improve your prayer life?

How can you bring more goodness into your world this week (where you're living, who you're interacting with, what you're working on)? What might have to change in your attitude and expectations for this to happen?

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Resources

Research from the Barna Group found five characters of resilient young Christians:

1. Intimacy with Jesus. Really know Him, speak with Him in prayer, love Him.
2. They can think Christianly, they're culturally discerning, they've learnt how to think.
3. Meaningful relationships in the church: peer connections and mentors.
4. They're vocationally disciple: they know their faith has to be worked out in daily working life.
5. Counter-culture mission, living a very different way of life to those around them.

For more on this, you can read Faith For Exiles by David Kinnaman, the head of Barna (Baker, 2019) or: listen to an interview he did with Carey Nieuwhof

<https://careynieuwhof.com/episode288/>

Videos, talks and articles about exile

Bible Project: Exile: <https://bibleproject.com/explore/exile/>

Bible Project: The Way of the Exile: <https://bibleproject.com/explore/way-of-the-exile/>

John Piper, Christian Exiles: <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/christian-exiles/>

Steve McAlpine: Stage Two Exile: Are you ready for

it? <https://au.thegospelcoalition.org/article/stage-two-exile-are-you-ready-for-it/>

[Advance conference: Living In Exile https://www.advancemovement.com/resources/uk-conference-2019/](https://www.advancemovement.com/resources/uk-conference-2019/)

Books about the power of habit in forming us as Christians

James K.A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Brazos, 2016).
Summarised

here: <https://thinktheology.co.uk/blog/article/jamie-smiths-you-are-what-you-love-in-ten-sentences>

Justin Whitmel Earley, *The Common Rule: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (IVP, 2019). Website with resources: <https://www.thecommonrule.org/>

Books (with other resources) about living your faith out every day

Timothy Keller with Katherine Leary Alsdorf, *Every Good Endeavour: Connecting Your Work to God's Plan for the World* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2012)

Talk from the authors: <https://vimeo.com/62344054>

Resources from the Centre for Faith & Work website: <https://faithandwork.com/resources>

John Mark Comer, *Garden City: Work, Rest, and the Art of Being Human* (Zondervan, 2015)

Preaching series: <https://bridgetown.church/series/garden-city/>

Books about God so we can get to know Him better

Andrew Wilson, *Incomparable: Explorations in the Character of God* (David C Cook, 2019)

Michael Reeves, *The Good God : Enjoying Father, Son and Spirit* (Paternoster, 2012)

Jen Wilkin, *None Like Him : 10 Ways God Is Different from Us (and Why That's a Good Thing)* (Crossway, 2016)

J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Hodder & Stoughton, 3rd edition 2005)

Dane Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers* (Crossway, 2020)

Matthew Barrett, *None Greater: The Undomesticated Attributes of God* (Baker, 2019)