

FAITHFULNESS IN EXILE

Jeremiah 29:1–14 • Char Brodersen

Introduction: Good morning, church! If it's your first time joining us, welcome! As many of you know, we are spending this year building out our biblical theology—seeing how the whole story of Scripture fits together and finds its fulfillment and goal in and through Jesus Christ. We've taking a few week's break from the biblical narrative to look at the Wisdom Literature, but this morning, we want to pick back up the narrative as we consider the time in Israel's history where they went into exile in Babylon. We're calling this series the Story of Faithfulness.

Let's recap a bit so we can understand where we are at in the story of Scripture.

We remember that God called Abraham and his family to be his special people through whom he would bring blessing to the whole world. They would be given special land, God's presence, God's instruction, and God's blessing to be a blessing to the ends of the earth.

Hundreds of years pass—during which Abraham descendants are enslaved in Egypt, rescued, and redeemed by God through the Exodus. They are given the law, the covenant, and the tabernacle—to be God's special people to represent him to all nations on the earth. Next, they receive the Promised Land, led by Joshua and the judges, the kingdom of Israel is united under King David, the temple is built in Jerusalem, the kingdom comes to its zenith under King Solomon, then comes the unfaithfulness of the kings. The kingdom is split in two—Israel and Judah. They turn to idols and alliances with the nations; the prophets come and continually warn and direct back to the covenant. The kingdom of Israel is destroyed and goes into captivity in Assyria, and in 605, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, comes and conquers the southern kingdom of Judah and leads their king, the royal family, and the royal court of artist and musicians, all the wealthiest of the land (who were not slaughtered in the siege) into captivity to Babylon. In the year 586, Nebuchadnezzar would return to Jerusalem, leveling it and completely destroying the temple. God's judgment had finally come upon his people's unfaithfulness just as he promised it would. They are taken out of the land, away from the presence, into exile in Babylon.

For a minute, let's talk about exile and Babylon because these are reoccurring themes, ideas, and places in the biblical story.

Exile is not being introduced here as a new idea—this is exactly what happened to Adam and Eve after they had sinned and rebelled against YHWH. They were exiled from the garden, and they went east of Eden. God had warned his people Israel, when he gave them his covenant, that if they disobeyed, they too would forfeit their right to the land and be led into captivity in exile (Deuteronomy 28:41, 64).

Babylon shows up again later in Genesis 10, and it is the first kingdom mentioned in Scripture, and there is mighty leader—Nimrod—a hunter in the face of God (might be a play on words here that he hunts people, oppresses peoples under him—the antithesis of what it means to rule and steward like God; much more like a Pharaoh character).

When Babylon is mentioned again in chapter 11, it is clearly in direct defiance to God's way of ruling and goes against God's mandate to humanity to multiply and fill the earth—one people, having one language. Many believe that this is a forced indoctrination that is happening here—a forced uniformity—they come together to build a city and a tower that reaches to heaven in order to make a name for themselves. You know the story, God comes down and judges their work, confusing their language, and scattering them. God is not opposed to civilization, of course, but to civilizations that glory in their own efforts to make a name for themselves.

Babylon is referred to one more time and then won't show up again in the narrative for hundreds of years. Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, the one whom God will bless and use his family to bring blessing to the whole world, is first called by God when living in Ur, a chief city of Babylon. Abraham is a Babylonian who is called out to belong to God and serve God's kingdom purposes ... to bring redemption to God's world.

In Judeo-Christian tradition, the term Babylon came to apply not just to the ancient city and the whole Babylonian Empire but to all nations and empires on earth that are Babylon-like, especially ones that are very wealthy, powerful, militaristic, and oppressive. And it's easy to see why this would be the case of the Jewish people.

So here God's people are—taken away into exile into Evil, Pagan, Powerful, and Oppressive Babylon. This begins 70 years of captivity known as the exilic period. They may have lost their right to the land, their autonomy under their kings, their temple at Jerusalem, BUT God has not left them. He goes with them into exile (which is made very clear in the exilic books of Ezekiel, Daniel, and Esther). And though they've lost so many of their blessings, they have not lost their call to be a blessing to the nations of the world. The topography and culture might have changed, but their identity and calling has not.

I. Israel's Recontextualized Identity and Calling

- A. When the kingdom of Judah was taken into captivity, they refused to go into the actual city of Babylon and instead had settled outside of the city walls by the river. The reason is because they believed that it would only be a short while and the captivity would soon be over. In fact, they even had "prophets" in their midst telling them so. Their message was resistance, revolt, and rebellion. But they aren't speaking on behalf of YHWH. God's message and instruction is different and unexpected. Because of this, God spoke to the Prophet Jeremiah and instructed him to write a letter to these captives, telling them the exact opposite of what their prophets had told them concerning the captivity. The letter is recorded for us in Jeremiah 29 (**Let's stand and read it together**).
- B. There are some incredibly fascinating things that are highlighted in this instruction from YHWH.
 1. First, they need to understand that this is the YHWH's doing. He says, "I carried you into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon." This is a powerful reminder that those who rule the world are simply vehicles of God's judgment in the world. It might look like Babylon's gods had toppled Israel's God, but in fact, it was God who delivered his people over to judgment. He is in control.
 2. Second, since this is the Lord's doing, they are not to resist. Instead, they are to settle into their new home—build houses, plant gardens, marry, and give in marriage. This is quite fascinating instruction when you realize that this is what God says to the nation in Deuteronomy 20. When they go out to battle, they are to ask if any has recently built a house, planted vineyard, or married. In that case, they are not to go to war—they are to enjoy peace and the fruit of their labors. In fact, he says this exact thing in the next verses—seek the peace of the city.
 3. Third, they are to do what God has always commanded humans to do—increase in number. This is that same divine mandate that was given to Adam and Eve, to Noah, and to Abraham. It's not just about increasing the population of Israel—it's about their call to extend God's rule to the ends of the earth. Being exiled doesn't change or stop their identity and calling it, just recontextualizes it!
 4. Finally, they are to "seek the peace and prosperity of the city" to which YHWH has carried them into exile. Pray to YHWH for it "because if it prospers, you too will prosper." This would have been absolutely astonishing instruction given what we know about the Babylonians and their history—they are wicked pagans, they are proud and powerful, oppressive and idolatrous. And yet, God wants his people to witness his way, to be model citizens who seek the peace and prosperity of Babylon. Of course, this would not be by Babylonian definitions of peace and prosperity, but peace and prosperity according to YHWH's ways and instruction.

- a. **“This is what the Lord says: ‘When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’”**
- b. It’s so enlightening to read these well-known verses in context, isn’t it? God’s plans for Israel—for their future, for their hope—is his plan of redemption and salvation that he originally promised to Abraham. Though it may look like it’s been lost, or forfeited by Israel, it is not! God is accomplishing his plan of redemption—the exiled nation of Israel is being called to trust God in this. As we’ve said before, our God does his best work in the dark.

II. A Creative Minority

- A. Jonathan Sacks, the UK’s former Chief Rabbi, coined the term, A Creative Minority, to describe the way the Jews have existed throughout history. Beginning with the Babylonian exile, they maintained their distinction but not by just surviving, but contributing to the flourishing of the world through redemptive participation. He writes,
 1. *“To become a creative minority is not easy because it involves maintaining strong links with the outside world while staying true to your faith, seeking not merely to keep the sacred flame burning but also to transform the larger society of which you are a part. This is a demanding and risk-laden task.”*—Jonathan Sacks, *On Creative Minorities*
 2. This creative minority is exactly what we find in both the book of Daniel and Esther. Daniel and his friends were thoroughly immersed in Babylonian culture. They were taught both the language and literature of Babylon. They were advisers to the king of Babylon and rulers in the Babylonian government. They had Babylonian names, Babylonian dress, and YET, they remained totally faithful to YHWH—to worship and represent him alone, to their Jewish practices and ethics. They lived by temple time and Jewish religious rhythms. They did all this in *community*, but sought and worked for the peace and prosperity of Babylon. Even in the face of persecution, and even death, they did not cave, but stood firm in their Jewish Identity, Faith, and Calling.
 3. So, part of what the exilic writings of Daniel and Esther have done for the people of God for centuries, and I hope that they will do for us, is wrestle with these questions—How do we live faithfully to Jesus as exiled people, in a culture that has a competing vision of what it means to be human, that has a competing vision of human flourishing? A competing vision of freedom. A competing vision of life and goodness, righteousness and justice? How do we live in a culture like this and not just exist, but flourish and cultivate a kingdom of God presence in this culture? How do we, like the people of God in exile, seek the peace and prosperity of the city—not fleeing culture, not fighting culture, but being faithful to Jesus in culture?
 - a. This conversation is so very important at this moment in our history and especially in an election year. Every time we have a presidential election in this country, each side is trying to co-opt Christianity and the church for their political party and purposes. There has been much talk on the right that feeds the frustration of the loss of influence and honor that Christianity used to hold in this country, and talk of taking the culture back. And maybe some of you are feeling this shame and disdain in your own jobs, communities, and the broader cultural conversations. The temptation is that the further out Christians are pushed from the public square, the angrier, retributive, and frantic our rhetoric and actions become.
 - (i) How should followers of Jesus respond to this disenfranchisement?
 - b. Many in our time have seen incredible similarities between the Babylonian captivity and the post-Christian era that the church is now living in. Many have grieved the loss of Christendom and Christian influence in our country and culture through politics and have seen this as a kind of judgment of America—“the once Christian nation.”

- c. Again how should followers of Jesus respond to this?
- (i) Do we flee culture, like the Jews of the exile were tempted to do—camping outside the city?
 - (ii) Do we take up arms and take back our nation and reinstate Christian morality for all?
 - (iii) Or do we see a blueprint and pattern here in Jeremiah 29 and these exilic books for how God would call his people to live in a place where they don't have political power, influence, and honor and can still carry out their identity and calling as the people of God?
 - (iv) The New Testament writers see the Church as living out this same identity and calling as Israel in their captivity.
 - (v) Peter the apostle writes his first epistle and opens with these words, **“To God’s elect, exiles scattered throughout the (Roman Empire …)”**
 - (a) In chapter 2 (and all throughout the letter), he writes to this church using language that God said about the nation of Israel,

“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God’s slaves. Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor.”

—1 Peter 2:11–17

- (b) The church, the people of God, are called to be a colony of the kingdom of God, whatever culture they live in—be it conservative or liberal, Christian influenced or anti-Christian. Our identity and calling as the people of God does not change. We, like the Jews of the Exile, are to pray and work for the peace and prosperity of the places God has called us, to see God’s kingdom come and his will be done on earth as it is in heaven. We are to be involved and engaged in the life of our city and culture, working in it for goodness and peace and praying for it. At the same time, we are not to adopt its cultural ideals and convictions or lose our distinctive identity as God’s holy people.

III. Living as a Creative Minority

- A. Jon Tyson, pastor of Church of the City in New York City, has written a definition of A Creative Minority for the church. He writes, *“A Creative Minority is a Christian community in a web of stubbornly loyal relationships, knotted together in a living network of persons who are committed to practicing the way of Jesus for the renewal of the world.”*—Jon Tyson, *A Creative Minority*

- B. Years ago, as I studied these exilic books along with 1st Peter, I was so moved by this vision of God's people—that wherever they find themselves, that whatever the circumstance—our identity and calling does not change. We are called to belong to Jesus, to live out his way of life, and to represent and work for his kingdom and glory. I tried to capture this vision in our mission statement: A Jesus-Formed Community on Mission.
1. *A Jesus-Formed Community on Mission is a group of people whose vision, values, and culture center on the person of Jesus and intentionally practice of his way of life.*
 - a. *We believe that God the Holy Spirit transforms people who center their lives on the person of Jesus and follow his way of life. And as people are transformed more and more by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit through aligning their lives with Jesus' way of life, this begins to spill over into all their relationships, into their neighborhoods, into their work, into their public service, and throughout the rest of their lives.*
 - b. Let's unpack this and look at the connections to the creative minority pictured in the book of Daniel.
 2. **Jesus-Formed**—Just as Daniel and his friends were loyal to YHWH, giving their allegiance to him, so also Jesus alone deserves our allegiance. We do not give it to any country, to any political party, president, king, or philosophy. Jesus alone.
 - a. Just as Daniel patterned his habits and ethics around Torah and Temple, so we pattern our lives after the way of Jesus.
 - b. These habits and spiritual rhythms of Daniel's life show up in the narrative again and again. He determines to not be defiled by unclean foods that are forbidden in the Torah (1:8–15), He practiced a life of prayer morning, noon, and night since his youth (6:10–11). Finally, and this one is mind-blowing, Daniel orders his prayer life around Temple sacrifice (9:20–21). At this time, the 70 years of exile are coming to an end and Daniel is praying and interceding to discern what is next for the people of God—and he's praying at the time of the evening sacrifice. Are there evening sacrifices at this time? No. How long has it been since the Temple was destroyed? Nearly 70 years, and yet Daniel still orders his life according to its times of worship and sacrifice.
 - c. The same is true for Jesus-followers—No matter where we are, who is in charge, what fashionable, legal, or illegal—our lives are patterned after the life of Jesus, after his way of life. We are his disciples and his disciples alone.
 - (i) Our discipleship consists of Being with Jesus, Becoming Like Jesus, and Doing what he did.
 - (a) **Being with Jesus**—As we spend time in the presence of the Lord Jesus—contemplating his love, his words, his ways, and his works—the image of Jesus leaves its imprint on our lives! We are Jesus-Formed.
 - (b) **Become Like Jesus**—Practice his way of life, his rhythms, his teachings, follow him!
 1. I believe that the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) is the most important teaching of Jesus for disciples in forming Jesus-like character. It is where we learn the way of Jesus, the way of the kingdom of God. It's how we practice the way of Jesus, our teacher.
 2. Practicing the way of Jesus is not about trying or earning, it's about training—training to become who he has redeemed and called us to be. The way of Jesus, the fruit of the Spirit, the character of Christ are the gymnasium for the

disciple of Jesus. By practicing the way of Jesus, we do what Paul exhorted Timothy to do—**“to train for godliness.”** This is how we grow in character to become more like Jesus, through practicing his way of life—by practicing forgiveness, non-retaliation, meekness, peacemaking, mercy, sincerity, purity, fidelity, fasting, prayer, simplicity, love of God, love of neighbor AND enemy.

3. Becoming like Jesus has the idea of apprenticeship—to practice the way of Jesus so that it becomes a part of who we are; it becomes second nature—that’s how our character is formed.
- (c) **Do what Jesus did**—Alert people to the presence and power of the kingdom of God! Cast out demons and proclaim the kingdom of God. As we spend time with Jesus, practicing his way of life, we are sent by Jesus out into the world to put the life of Jesus on display.
1. Disciples are called to do what Jesus did. What did Jesus do? He went around doing good and healing all who were afflicted by the devil, for God was with him (Acts 10:38). Everywhere Jesus went, he represented God’s kingdom reign. He alerted people to the presence of the kingdom of God with his words, his ways, and his works by denouncing evil and corruption and healing the effects of sin and suffering.
 2. Jesus preached the gospel; he taught the way of the kingdom of God. He healed the sick; he cast out demons; he performed justice; he ate and drank with people who were far from God; he prayed, and he prophesied. He stood up against religious hypocrisy and pride; and he spoke truth to political power.
 3. That is what Jesus did. As disciples, he trains us and sends us out to continue this kingdom representation.

3. Community

- a. Though these books bear a single name, we know from even the stories that these contain that these people did not do the work of a creative minority alone. Esther had the beautiful influence and support of her cousin, Mordecai. Daniel, of course, had his three friends. You might remember the story of their steadfast faithfulness to YHWH when they were commanded to bow to Nebuchadnezzar’s image of gold. They were a community that practiced this life and collectively bore witness to God and his kingdom.
- b. So also with us—A Jesus-formed community is a community whose culture and values center on the person of Jesus and the practice of his way of life. I can’t think of a clearer description of this than in the book of Acts. Acts 2:42 describes the early church as devoting themselves to the apostles’ doctrine, to the common life, or fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers.
- c. The early church centered their lives, both public and private, around the Jesus story (apostles’ doctrine), the Jesus way of living (fellowship), Jesus’ sin-atoning, life-giving death (the breaking of bread), and their access to God as Father through Jesus (the prayers). This was a Jesus-formed community.
 - (i) Listen further to the description of this community: **“All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”**—Acts 2:44–47

- d. For the early church, the Jesus' story was not something that they subscribed to intellectually, it was a way of life. It was something they practiced in their daily lives with one another.
- e. Their lives became marked by generosity and self-sacrifice—bearing one another's burdens, making sure that no one lacked anything, no one considered anything their own but shared it freely as there was need.
- f. This Jesus-formed community was a place where the effects of the gospel were felt physically, needs were met, no one considered anything as their own, there were no divisions among them. They lived simply, they practiced gratitude, they were in awe of God and his glory, signs, and wonders were being done and God was adding believers to the faith daily.
 - (i) Our conviction is that every disciple of Jesus needs to cultivate a Jesus-community with a small band of other Jesus-followers in order to help them grow to be more like Jesus. You cannot be made more like Jesus in isolation or a vacuum. You need others to practice the way of Jesus with.

4. On Mission

- a. Just as Daniel and his friends lived out their allegiance to YHWH—their identity and ethics as God's people in community—they gave witness to God's glory and kingdom, and people took notice. We have quite a few stories of their enemies trying to use their piety against them (their goodness was known; they had a great reputation—they couldn't bring real accusations against them). But not only that, there are four different stories where Daniel and his friends interact with these pagan kings of Babylon and Persia, and by the end of each of these stories, YHWH's kingdom, power, and glory are being preached proclaimed on the lips of these kings! (Daniel 2:47–49; 3:26–30; 4:34–37; 6:25–28)
- b. In that same way, it is the community of God's people living out our discipleship to Jesus in every facet of our lives that causes people to ask questions to which the gospel is the answer!
- c. Witness is something the church does through the community cultivating a Jesus-like lifestyle—which must be public.
- d. But what if we thought of witness less in terms of street evangelism and more in terms of influence, like Daniel and his friends?
- e. Again, Jon Tyson, pastor of Church of the City in New York City, says, *“The word influence is derived from a Latin root meaning to ‘flow.’ This ‘flowing’ does not connote power, coercion, or control, it suggests effortlessness. We want to influence people by being ourselves, where such creativity comes out of our community that people are drawn to it. Redemptive participation means that we do not hate the world, we are not protesting it, we are participating in it with a vision of the way of Jesus.”*—Jon Tyson, *A Creative Minority*
- f. Also from Mel Lawrenz, he says, *“Influence is not a weaker word for leadership. It is hidden power behind leadership. We've used the word influence for a long time, but I believe we have not appreciated the depth of what it means. We think of influence as having an effect or of getting people to do things. It is so much more. The word influence means something that flows in and causes changes, usually a force that is imperceptible or hidden. Influencers are people who lead by living in proximity to scores of ordinary people who are looking for some source of wisdom, discernment, power, truth, and other qualities that begin a transformative work in their lives. Just think of the effect if massive numbers of believers woke up to their potential to exercise spiritual influence in the schools where they teach, in the boardrooms where they deliberate, in the clinics where they care for people's health, in the churches where they serve, in the assemblies where they legislate, in the homes where they raise children.”*—Mel Lawrenz, *Spiritual Influence*

- (i) In this congregation, we have many influencer—healthcare workers, teachers and educators, business owners and managers, counselors and social workers, parents and grandparents. May the Spirit give us insight, wisdom, and clarity on how to use that influence for God’s redemptive purposes.
- g. Theologian and Missiologist, Michael Goheen, reminds us:

“Witness means embodying God’s renewing power in politics and citizenship, economics, and business, education and scholarship, family and neighborhood, media and art, leisure and play. It is not just that we carry out evangelism in these areas of life. This is important but not enough. It means that the way we live as citizens, consumers, students, husbands, wives, mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, and friends witnesses to the restoring power of God.”

—Michael Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture*

- h. My deep conviction as I read Scripture is that:

Jesus Formation + Jesus Community = Mission

- i. The mission of God is something that flows from the life of a disciple and the Jesus community.

Conclusion

No one wants to live in exile. It isn’t a positive thing to be disenfranchised, to feel like a foreigner, like you don’t fit, especially in your country of origin. It doesn’t feel good to be powerless.

But our King—the One who overcame the world, the One who defeated death and sits on the throne of the cosmos—overturns all that when he proclaims: Flourishing are the poor in spirit; flourishing are those who mourn; flourishing are the meek, flourishing are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; flourishing are the merciful; flourishing are the pure in heart; flourishing are the peacemakers; flourishing are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake. To them belongs the earth, the filling, the mercy, the face of God, the title—the children of God, the kingdom of heaven. Yes, you people are the light of the world. A colony of heaven in a country of death.

This way of Jesus may not feel good, powerful, or pragmatic. But it is faithful. It is Jesus’ way. May we follow him.

Communion

As we come to the table this morning—let us ask the Spirit to guide each of us individually, our community collectively into the way of Jesus—to heal what is broken by sin and selfishness, to break and heal whatever is fueled by pride or fear, and that everything we do might be an act of faithfulness to our King.

We know that because of human sinfulness and brokenness, there is not one of us who has lived up to the ideal of what God created us for—to love him supremely and to love our neighbor as ourselves. So as we come to the table this morning, we come as a people in need of forgiveness and in need of redemption and salvation. And that is what Jesus offers us at this table—forgiveness, redemption, and salvation. His life for our life; his righteousness for our sin and brokenness.

Prayer

*Most merciful God,
we confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done,
and by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
We are truly sorry, and we humbly repent.
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,
have mercy on us and forgive us;
that we may delight in your will
and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your Name. Amen.*