

EMBRACING EXILE

*Living Faithfully as God's
Unique People in the World*

Small Group Leader's Guide



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How to Navigate This Guide and Get the Most from Your *Embracing Exile* Small Group



Your Prep Work

In advance of each meeting, read the book chapter and corresponding leader's guide session, as well as preview the weekly small group video.

Structuring Your Small Group Session

Every community is different, and there is no perfect formula when it comes to structuring a small group session. However, we wanted to provide you with a model we think works. You can stick to the script, adapt, or chart your own way through the material.

1. Begin the session with prayer. Thank God for being present, and invite his Spirit to speak to each individual heart.
2. Next, open up conversation by asking the **icebreaker**. (Hint: Icebreakers are meant to get everyone talking, so we provided easy questions with a personal angle. Consider going around the room so each group member has the chance to speak.)
3. Since not every group member will have finished the assigned reading, give a brief summary of the chapter and highlight ideas that stuck out to you from the text. You can also pull ideas from the **Topic Summary** included in this guide for each week, or even read the summary verbatim to the group. **Related Scriptures** have been provided for your reference.
4. Watch the weekly **small group video**.
5. Use the **Introductory Questions** Dr. Daniels poses at the end of each video to launch into group discussion. These questions, and a few more, are included in this guide.
6. As time allows, move on to the **Digging Deeper Questions**. (Hint: There are a lot of question options throughout this guide—don't feel that you have to answer them all! As the leader, you know what kinds of questions your group best responds to. Pick and choose what's right for your community.)
7. Challenge your group with the **Call to Action**.
8. Close in prayer and remind participants to read the next chapter.

SESSION 1

Introduction and Chapter 1, “Strangers in a Strange Time”

Before your weekly meeting, participants should have read the introduction and chapter 1 in Embracing Exile: Living Faithfully as God’s Unique People in the World.



*To open session 1, ask your group the following icebreaker question: What images come to mind when you hear the word *exile*?*

Review the following summary in preparation for your session. Share portions with the group as you desire:

Topic Summary

God’s people experienced times of exile throughout Scripture. In *Embracing Exile*, Dr. Daniels discusses a passage from Jeremiah 29 that lays a foundation for the upcoming weeks of our study. The year is 587 BC, and King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon has conquered Jerusalem and taken God’s people into captivity. It’s a definitive moment in the Old Testament because the people are thinking, *We had it all together, and now it’s all falling apart. We were God’s people, but maybe he’s abandoned us. Why, O God, have you forsaken us?*

Exile is a powerful theme in the Old Testament. As Christians, we, too, live in a kind of exile in our current culture, though it’s not a perfect metaphor. Here’s where it breaks down:

- We haven’t gone anywhere. No ruler or government has come and taken us to a foreign land. Some of us have lived in the same place our entire lives.
- We as Christians still have a lot of influence on today’s culture. At times in our history, we have even been the oppressors.
- As we look around our world, we find people who really are marginalized and living in present-day exile. That makes whatever we want to say about our own marginalization seem silly.
- If we feel that we are losing something, our first reaction can be to fight desperately to make sure we don’t lose it.

And yet, the theme of exile still can help us to reflect on some of the disconcertedness that we feel within this culture. That sense of dispossession helps us to begin to read the prophets anew and to release some of the ways we have been shaped by our own culture. Understanding ourselves in the context of exile gives us a pair of glasses to begin to reinterpret the world. We can look at the powers and principalities around us who beckon us to drink the cup of life they offer, and with these glasses, we can see that it is a cup of death.

What the prophets are trying to tell us is that this sense of unease may be good for us. When we find ourselves increasingly at the edges of society, when the dominant culture feels strange, that is the very time that we are able to discover what God wants to do with us. The prophets see exile not just as punishment but also as something that opens God's people to new possibilities.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says this: "Exile is the way to new life in new land. One can scarcely imagine a more radical, less likely understanding of history. In covenantal categories, embrace of curse is the root to blessing. In New Testament categories, embrace of death is the way to life."¹

Brueggemann continues: "Jeremiah announces the central scandal of the Bible, that radical loss and discontinuity do happen and are the source of real newness. So he holds what surely must have been a minority view, that the *exiles* are the real *heirs*. And conversely those who cling to the land are the ultimate exiles."²

God has not forsaken us. In exile, God is trying to do something new in us.

Related Scripture

Joshua 24; 1 Samuel 8; Zechariah 9:9, 12, 16; 1 Peter 1:1, 22–2:10

Watch Dr. Scott Daniels's video, session 1, "Strangers in a Strange Time." Discuss the following ideas with your group:

Introductory Questions

At the end of the video, the author asks a few key questions. Use this time to discuss the following:

- After listening to Dr. Daniels talk about "exile" in the context of the church, how has your idea of exile changed?
- Do you feel a sense of uniqueness or strangeness in this time? Describe what that is like.
- How do you think the church is responding to its 587 moment?
- What do you sense God is doing in his church during this time of exile?

Digging Deeper Questions

- What can we learn from modern-day exiles? What practices help them to keep their unique way of life alive in the world?

- The book gives two potential examples of 587 moments for the church in America; can you think of any other possibilities? What about examples in your local church?
- In this chapter, Walter Brueggemann is quoted saying that “exile is the way to new life in new land. . . . embrace of curse is the root to blessing. . . . embrace of death is the way to life.”³ In what ways do these upside-down realities challenge you?
- If exile is the “worst of times,” then the assumption is that kingship is the “best of times.” Or is it? Can you think of examples in the Bible when the people of God abused their power? What about in more recent history, perhaps even during the “good old days”?
- Conversely, can you think of times, both in the Bible and in more recent history, when the people of God have been at their best in exile?

Call to Action

As Christians, we feel like strangers living in a strange time. We face uncertainty, disconnectedness, a sense that everything is upside down. How are we responding to it? Are we challenging it? Fighting it? Or are we trying to discover the newness of what it means to be God’s people in this particular time and place? Maybe we’ve reached our 587 moment, our point of no return, or maybe it’s on the horizon. Either way, Scripture and history tell us that we can’t reverse the trajectory. So what are ways we can rediscover the uniqueness that God has for us during this strange time?

Close your group in prayer, and remind group members to read chapter 2, “Now You Are God’s People,” for next week’s session.

SESSION 2

Chapter 2, “Now You Are God’s People”

Before your weekly meeting, participants should have read chapter 2 in Embracing Exile: Living Faithfully as God’s Unique People in the World.



To open session 2, ask your group the following icebreaker question: Think of a time when you felt a blessing arise out of a difficult or challenging situation. Share with the group.

Review the following summary in preparation for your session. Share portions with the group as you desire:

Topic Summary

God is separating out a unique people in the world. He is filling them with his Spirit. And through them, the world will be blessed.

The hymn of creation begins this story of separation, filling, and blessing that we see echoing throughout the story of God’s people. In the beginning was chaos, narrated in the creation hymn with the Hebrew words *tohu* and *bohu*, which are embodied in darkness and the waters of the deep. The ancient Hebrew people saw large bodies of water as places of mystery, threat, fear, and chaos. Into this *tohu* and *bohu* enters God’s *ruach*, or breath, so that the very Spirit of God blows across the waters of chaos and defeats it by creating something out of nothing.

God creates by

- **Separating:** light from dark (day one), sea from sky (day two), and dry land from sea (day three). The first three days are an attack on the *tohu*, the formlessness.
- **Filling:** the light and dark with the sun, moon, and stars (day four), the sea with fish and the sky with birds (day five), and the dry land with animals and humans (day six). Days four through six are an attack on the *bohu*, the emptiness.
- **Blessing:** a day of rest and peace. God has defeated the *tohu* and *bohu*.

If the Scripture was written, read, and kept by God’s people in order to help form the next generations of faithful followers, then the form or pattern of the story is critical (especially for people who were oral learners). The people of God tell the story of creation in this particular way because they wanted their children to interpret the world God created through the three words of *separation*, *filling*, and *blessing*.

The stories of re-creation follow the same pattern. God asks Abram and Sarai to *separate* themselves from their places of protection and provision. In turn, God promises to *fill* their lives with his presence. And out of that covenant relationship between God and his people, the whole world will be *blessed*. We begin to see that separating, filling, and blessing is not just the pattern through which God created originally but also the pattern through which God brings about and will continue to bring about his new creation.

In the New Testament, the Greek word that is translated “church”—*ekklēsia*—literally means the “called-out ones.” A group of both Jews and Gentiles were called out—*separated*—from the world and then, like the apostles at Pentecost, were *filled* by the Spirit in order to be sent out as a redemptive *blessing* to the world.

Since the beginning, God has been defeating the powers of chaos and sin through separation, filling, and blessing. The problem is that most of us have not really been shaped to believe or to imagine the gospel in those terms.

This may stem from AD 325, when the Roman emperor Constantine gave Christianity a favored place in the Roman world. In a short span of time, the Christian faith moved from its exiled Jewish and persecuted apostolic roots and started running the empire. Then during the Enlightenment, the rise of individualism isolated people from one another and formed people who were self-centered. Today’s love of consumerism in the technological age encourages a world where everything becomes a self-centered choice and even relationships become one more thing to consume.

What has developed over centuries is the idea of church as a place where individual citizens of a particular culture come to consume the things of Jesus—offered to them in order to make their lives work better or to help them feel better about their lives. Embracing exile may help us rediscover the church as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation” (1 Pet. 2:9, CEB). Now God can form us again as his countercultural people.

Related Scripture

Gen. 1:1–2:3; 12:1-3

Watch Dr. Scott Daniels’s video, session 2, “Now You Are God’s People.” Discuss the following ideas with your group:

Introductory Questions

At the end of the video, the author asks a few key questions. Use this time to discuss the following:

- What does it mean for us as a people to be separate or separated out?
- What does it mean for us to be filled?
- What does it mean for us to be a blessing to the world?
- How do we become the church and not just go to church? How can we reimagine what church is?

Digging Deeper Questions

- Think of other biblical stories—can you identify the themes of separation, filling, and blessing?
- How does the meaning of the Bible’s opening chapter change if we understand it as informing us why creation happened and, most significantly, what kind of people we should be in light of the way God created?
- If Constantinianism—the church’s impulse to run the empire—is dead (or at least dying), how does that free up the church to become a unique people witnessing to a countercultural way of life?
- If the Enlightenment led to rugged individualism, how do we rediscover ourselves as not just persons following Jesus but a people who form the body of Christ?

Call to Action

If God’s story is one of separating, filling, and blessing his people, then rescuing individuals, or “saving” particular people to get them into eternity, has never been the primary work of God. He isn’t redeeming individuals but forming a unique people to learn his ways, be filled with his Spirit, and be a reflection of his blessing in the world.

Close your group in prayer, and remind group members to read chapter 3, “This Is My Story,” for next week’s session.

SESSION 3

Chapter 3, “This Is My Story”

Before your weekly meeting, participants should have read chapter 3 in Embracing Exile: Living Faithfully as God’s Unique People in the World.



To open session 3, ask your group the following icebreaker question: Everyone loves a good story. Name one of your favorite stories—book or movie—and explain why.

Review the following summary in preparation for your session. Share portions with the group as you desire:

Topic Summary

As the people of God, we have a particular story, but we live in a culture that seems to have lost its shared story. Sociologists might refer to this story as a *worldview*. Some scholars call it a *metanarrative*. This life story narrates who we are, what we’re doing, and what we’re going to do.

Our life story answers these kinds of questions:

- **Who am I?** What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to be created in the image of God?
- **Where am I?** What does it mean to live at this place in this time? What is this place that I find myself in? What does it mean to be a citizen of my country? What does it mean to be a citizen of the world?
- **What’s the problem?** How is culture becoming more fragmented? What should we do to try to fix the problem?
- **What time is it?** What does it mean to live during this era in history? How are we part of God’s larger story in this time and place?

In communities of people, we tend to find similar life stories. We share certain values, certain convictions, and certain understandings of the way the world works. In today’s world, however, we live at the intersection of all sorts of stories, and these stories often compete with each other for our allegiance.

The people of Israel have a shared story, but in Babylonian exile, their story is no longer the dominant story, no longer the story that defines how people live. Like the Israelites, we live in a sort of exile in which our story often feels strange. We struggle to convince our children, and even ourselves, that we should be faithful to our story. We feel ourselves lured into other stories.

These competing stories are forms of idolatry. The lure is to worship and live into other stories, such as these:

- **The success story:** We should accumulate as much money, status, and power as we can because this proves our worth.
- **The sensuality story:** We all have appetites for experiences and pleasures, and we can pursue them without limit or consequence.
- **The humanist story:** We should all do our best and make progress because progress is what will move us forward.
- **The fragmented story:** We mix a little bit of the success story, a little bit of the sensuality story, and a little bit of the God story because in our culture, there isn't a "story."
- **The damaged story:** We are erased from the story because we are worthless and meaningless and unlovable.

The author of Hebrews speaks of great men and women of faith who lived into God's story. The writer then implores us to get rid of all of the other stories that shape us and to live into this same unique story—the story of Jesus. Jesus is the main character—and also the Author of the story—who for the sake of love took on the cross and now sits at the right hand of the Father, urging us to be faithful to God's call on our lives.

Related Scripture

Genesis 1; 11; Hebrews 11

Watch Dr. Scott Daniels's video, session 3, "This Is My Story." Discuss the following ideas with your group:

Introductory Questions

At the end of the video, the author asks a few key questions. Use this time to discuss the following:

- What are some of the central themes of the Christian story? What makes our story unique?
- What competing stories do you find yourself lured by? (See page 56 in the book.)

Digging Deeper Questions

- Ethicist Alasdair MacIntyre says, "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'"¹ In what story or stories do you find yourself?
- As an exercise, take a few minutes to sum up your story in a single sentence. Share with the group if you feel comfortable.

- *Oxford English Dictionary*'s word of the year for 2016 was *post-truth*. Do you see this idea evidenced around you? How can we faithfully live in a postmodern landscape where there is no single, binding story of truth?
- Theologian N. T. Wright compares the place we find ourselves to a play with a missing act. The divine drama has acts 1, 2, 3, and 4 and the promise of act 6, but act 5 is missing from the pages.² How can we immerse ourselves in the existing story so well that we can improvise act 5?

Call to Action

We are called to embrace the uniqueness of our particular story. The elders in Hebrews 11 went to crazy places and did crazy things because they believed this story so much. Their lives were the story. What would it mean to know our story so well that we, too, can live it out in the places where we find ourselves today? How do we become people of the story?

Close your group in prayer, and remind group members to read chapter 4, "Holiness Takes Practice(s)," for next week's session.

SESSION 4

Chapter 4, “Holiness Takes Practice(s)”

Before your weekly meeting, participants should have read chapter 4 in Embracing Exile: Living Faithfully as God’s Unique People in the World.



To open session 4, ask your group the following icebreaker question: Name one spiritual practice that comes easy for you and one that causes you difficulty. (Note to leader: You may need to give a few examples of spiritual practices if your group is not familiar with the term. See pages 75-76.)

Review the following summary in preparation for your session. Share portions with the group as you desire:

Topic Summary

Holiness takes practice. In fact, it takes practices—things we do to form us into the kind of people God wants us to be.

It would be great if we could just think different thoughts, but the reality is, we are habituated people whose lives are formed and shaped by particular things we do day after day.

Take the practice of Sabbath, for example, when we remember that our lives are not defined by what we produce and consume but by our connection to God. Peter Scazzero talks about a hierarchy of ways we respond to such a practice. We may become aware of Sabbath, start thinking about it and telling others about it, even value it and long for it, but it’s not going to matter until we reprioritize our lives. Scazzero calls this the “action-behavior gap.”¹

In Kierkegaard’s parable of the ducks, the duck pastor opens the duck Bible and preaches about how ducks have wings to soar above the earth, to see the world from a new perspective, and every Sunday the ducks get blessed and quack their amens. Then the duck pastor closes the duck Bible, and all the ducks get up and waddle home.²

Discipleship is more than knowing and believing; it is hungering and thirsting so much that we reprioritize our lives. James K. A. Smith writes, “Jesus doesn’t encounter Matthew and John—or you and me—and ask, ‘What do you know?’ He doesn’t even ask, ‘What do you believe?’ He asks, ‘What do you want?’ This is the most incisive, piercing question Jesus can ask of us precisely because we *are* what we want.”³

The world is full of “cultural liturgies,”²⁴ Smith says, rituals that habituate our lives even when we are not aware of it. The apostle Paul, in the book of Romans, describes this as being squeezed into the world’s mold (see 12:2, PHILLIPS).

At the mall, for example, we find little chapels with three-dimensional icons of the “good life” that lure us in. An acolyte greets us and welcomes us into worship and leads us through the racks as we search for what we desire. Once we find it, we go to the altar to meet with the priest and we have an exchange, and the priest wraps up this exchange in the colors of the season and then blesses us with a benediction to come and shop again.

This liturgy of consumerism so pervades our lives that worship has become just one more thing we consume. Many contemporary churches have responded with “attractional” practices directed toward meeting our consumerist desires, which have formed fickle church shoppers and nitpicky Christian consumers.

What should happen in Christian worship is a set of practices that not only form us to be the people of God but also counterform us to not be people of the culture. Through repetition, these counterformative practices shape the hearts of the people of God to desire what is holy.

We enter the sanctuary and hear the call to worship, reminding us that we need our ears and our hearts attuned to the voice of God. We pass the peace of Christ to each other, acknowledging that we live in a divided world and that for the peace of Christ to reign in the world, it has to start with us. We lift our voices in worship, confessing that we are not the center of the universe but that our lives orbit around the King of Kings and Lord of Lords who sits on the throne. We give our tithes and offerings, recognizing that everything we have is a gift from God. We pray together, admitting that we have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and trusting that his grace not only pardons but also transforms us. We partake of the Eucharist, a means of grace forming us into the body of Christ, remembering that the source of life is Christ’s broken body and shed blood and that we are connected to each other. We receive a benediction, understanding that the God who loves us and blesses our lives now sends us to be a blessing to the world.

A people who embrace exile have to participate in practices that form and habituate the life of the church and those within it. It’s not enough just to think we have wings, or even to believe we have wings—we have to use our wings.

Related Scripture

Romans 6:15-23; 7:4-6; 12:1-2

Watch Dr. Scott Daniels’s video, session 4, “Holiness Takes Practice(s).” Discuss the following ideas with your group:

Introductory Questions

At the end of the video, the author asks a few key questions. Use this time to discuss the following:

- How do you think the world forms us? (For example, now everyone's life is made entirely public on social media, or we have grown accustomed to constant noise.)
- What are ways we can be counterformed? Are there any spiritual practices you feel would be beneficial to you personally?

Digging Deeper Questions

- Have someone in the group read the duck parable found in the first paragraph on page 64 of the book. What is an area in your own life where you have trouble believing the good news that you have wings and can take flight? In what ways can the church better use its wings?
- In the book, Dr. Daniels references this James K. A. Smith quote: "Jesus doesn't encounter Matthew and John—or you and me—and ask, 'What do you know?' He doesn't even ask, 'What do you believe?' He asks, 'What do you want?' This is the most incisive, piercing question Jesus can ask of us precisely because we *are* what we want."⁵ How does this quote speak to you? Discuss the ways longings and desires shape us as people.
- By using the phrase "cultural liturgies"—which includes shopping, advertising, entertainment, community events, education, and so on—Dr. Daniels reminds us that everything is spiritual and can form us. If you were to view every action as an act of worship, how might that affect your decision-making?
- Spiritual practices aren't only individual; they are also corporate. Think back on the list of community practices Dr. Daniels mentions in the book. Which practices would be helpful to integrate into your group?

Call to Action

Being reformed and reshaped as the people of God means we acknowledge that Paul is right—it's easy to "be conformed to the patterns of this world" (Rom. 12:2, CEB). It's easier to think that this is my story and that I'm letting God be part of it than to think that it's his story and that we are entering into it. If we don't discover practices that begin to form in the muscle memories of our hearts, we won't live this story. How can we break ourselves of our cultural liturgies so that we don't just think about his story, believe his story, and tell his story but also begin to participate in and practice his story?

Close your group in prayer, and remind group members to read chapter 5, "Blessing Babylon," for next week's session.

SESSION 5

Chapter 5, “Blessing Babylon”

Before your weekly meeting, participants should have read chapter 5 in Embracing Exile: Living Faithfully as God’s Unique People in the World.



To open session 5, ask your group the following icebreaker question: How old were you when you got your first job? What kind of job was it? What do you remember most about it?

Review the following summary in preparation for your session. Share portions with the group as you desire:

Topic Summary

The instinct of people who are living in exile is to find a way to escape. So when a letter comes from the prophet Jeremiah, the people, who are desperate for a word from the Lord, don’t expect to hear this: Live life, build homes, plant vineyards, have children, be a blessing to Babylon.

What!

The shocking thing about this prophetic word to the exiles is that it doesn’t encourage the people to look for, pray for, or try to discover a way out. Rather, the people are invited to settle down and work.

This takes us back to Genesis 1, where we first hear the story of the God who is separating, filling, and blessing. In verse 28, God says to Adam and Eve: “Be fruitful, and multiply” (KJV). “Fill the earth” (CEB), “and subdue it” (KJV). “Have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the [birds] of the air” (KJV), “and everything crawling on the ground” (CEB).

- “Be fruitful, and multiply” (KJV). It would be very easy for people in exile to say, “I don’t want to bring a child into this broken, ugly, evil Babylonian world.” To do the opposite reveals something tenacious about the people’s hope, not in their children, but in God.
- “Fill the earth” (CEB). We are created to use the giftedness given to us by God to contribute to the goodness, the beauty, and the well-being of the world.
- “Have dominion” (KJV). This is not a directive giving permission for humans to exploit the earth (or the earth’s creatures) in whatever way they see fit. Rather, the obligation placed upon humans as God’s image or reflection is to have dominion over—to give loving care to—all things, participating in God’s gracious oversight of all he created.

The command from Genesis to “fill the earth” (CEB) is the essence of what the prophet Jeremiah is telling the people in exile. The Greek word *oikonomia*, which means “household,” is the root of the word “economy.” The idea of economy is that our lives are intertwined and connected and that things to which God has called us make us part of a great household who care for one another and even minister to one another through our work.

Most Christians today believe that the work of priests or ministers is sacred and connected to God and that the day-to-day work of the laity—especially the work done outside the walls of the church—is secular. We have come to see the work of our hands as temporary, transitory, and thus somewhat meaningless.

But Genesis tells us, and the prophet Jeremiah reminds us, that work done well for the sake of the *oikonomia* is not simply secular; it has the hints of God’s mercy and care—hints of his holiness—reflected within it. The uniqueness of the things that we have created is offered not only back to God but also to each other.

As God’s people, perhaps especially in exile, the line between the sacred (church/home) and the secular (work) needs to be blurred, if not eliminated. We don’t just go to work and get a paycheck so that we can buy the stuff we want and enjoy the weekend. We are created to be coworkers and cocreators with God.

The Lord’s command through the prophet is not to try and escape exile. Nor is it to live isolated and hidden lives until exile is over. Rather, the word is to settle down, build homes, plant vineyards, bless Babylon, seek its welfare, seek its shalom. Seek the good of the place where God has placed you.

Related Scripture

Genesis 1:26-28; Isaiah 40; Jeremiah 28; 29:1, 4-7

Watch Dr. Scott Daniels’s video, session 5, “Blessing Babylon.” Discuss the following ideas with your group:

Introductory Questions

At the end of the video, the author asks a few key questions. Use this time to discuss the following:

- Considering what we now know about the significance of work—not just as a way to make money or an opportunity to evangelize—what do you believe is the significance of the work God has given to you?
- Answer the following question in three parts: What are ways (1) you, (2) your small group, and (3) your church can “bless Babylon”?

Digging Deeper Questions

- In the book, we read that God’s command to the Israelites was not to escape or hide out until exile was over. Instead, he commands them to “promote the welfare of the city” where he sent them (Jer. 29:7, CEB). How does this shape your imagination about exile?
- Your work—however exciting or mundane it seems—is shaping you and the kingdom of God for eternity. How does that change the way you view your job?
- Think about people who, in their work, have been a blessing to you, and share one of their stories.
- In the book, we read that the word *economy* stems from the Greek word meaning “household.” Do our current economics reflect this idea?
- Read the following N. T. Wright quote found in the book: “Jesus’s resurrection is the beginning of God’s new project not to snatch people away from earth to heaven but to colonize earth with the life of heaven. That, after all, is what the Lord’s Prayer is about.”¹ How does this idea speak to you?
- Some of us see the earth as simply a place humans are renting for a while, and therefore they don’t have to be overly concerned with its well-being. But if this is not simply a rental, if it is the place for which we have been created and for which Christ gave himself, how does that change the way we see and understand the word “dominion” (Gen. 1:28, KJV)?

Call to Action

What are God’s instructions to exiles? Build houses in Babylon. Get married and have children. Seek the welfare of those around them. In other words, go to work. The goal of God’s people in Babylon is not to plan their escape. The goal is to live and work as salt and light in order to bless Babylon and to allow people to see the good work that they do as a reflection of the glory and goodness of God. Are we working in ways that reflect the love, the mercy, the justice, the goodness, and the hospitality of God? Or are we working in ways that fail to reflect his redemptive hopes and his saving purposes?

Close your group in prayer, and remind group members to read chapter 6, “Raising Resident Aliens,” for next week’s session.

SESSION 6

Chapter 6, “Raising Resident Aliens”

Before your weekly meeting, participants should have read chapter 6 in Embracing Exile: Living Faithfully as God’s Unique People in the World.



To open session 6, ask your group the following icebreaker question: As a group, list what you think are some of the advantages and disadvantages of being a young person growing up in the twenty-first century.

Review the following summary in preparation for your session. Share portions with the group as you desire:

Topic Summary

The biggest challenge for us as people in exile is how to raise resident aliens, that is, foreigners living in a country where they are not citizens.¹ How will we raise our children to maintain their uniqueness without being absorbed and assimilated into the culture?

In *Embracing Exile*, we read that actions flow from three core areas: our values, our identity, and our convictions. The author then cites the book of Daniel as an example of what it looks like for God’s people to hold on to their values, identity, and convictions while living in Babylon. The book of Daniel recognizes that if the Judeans weren’t careful, at some point their children would cease to be Judeans living in exile in Babylon and would instead become Babylonians who occasionally attended synagogue.

- **Daniel and his three friends are invited to the table of Nebuchadnezzar.** This is not a story about a vegetarian diet being superior to a carnivorous diet but about these four young Hebrew men recognizing that the meat of the king’s table will lead to the corruption of their desires.

Like the culture of Babylon, the culture around us traffics in desire. Desires and values are nurtured and trained, and ultimately, we are what we love. We act out of our values. Eating matters.

- **Nebuchadnezzar gives Daniel and his friends new names.** The king wants their primary identities to be less associated with Yahweh and their past in Judah and more connected with their new “home” and the gods of Babylon. Similarly, the most famous narrative in the book of Daniel—the casting of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego into the furnace of fire for not

bowing to Nebuchadnezzar's image—is a story about the struggle for identity. Nebuchadnezzar wants them to show that, despite their commitment to Yahweh, their primary identity and primary allegiance are to Babylon.

Christians today suffer from this same “we” confusion. We live in a nation that is defined by and obsessed with boundaries and borders, and that is odd for us—or it should be. What makes us God's people is gathering around tables where everyone is welcome, where there are no boundaries other than recognition of our need for God. We act out of who we believe ourselves to be. Identity matters.

- **The young Hebrew men are taught the Aramaic language.** The book of Daniel is the only book of the Bible left in two languages, perhaps because the very language of the book itself points to the challenge of living simultaneously in two linguistic worlds—the Hebrew language of faith and the Aramaic language of the empire. In the final chapters of Daniel, apocalyptic language allows the Judeans in exile to imagine Babylon not as an eternal, benevolent, and life-giving force but as a temporary and hideous beast headed for destruction and over which the Son of Man has and will have final authority.

How we worship and how we speak with our children are crucial. We need to raise children who are able to interpret and to discern the nature of the culture, to live as people marked by the Lamb in an empire trying to mark them by the beast. We act out of our interpretations of the world. Language and imagination matter.

We must form our children as those whose values, identity, and convictions align first and foremost with Christ and his people. If we do not, it is too easy to lose the uniqueness of living as Christians who happen to reside in America, and eventually, we will discover that we—and our children—have become Americans who attend church when time permits.

Related Scripture

Joshua 4:1-7; Daniel 1-12

Watch Dr. Scott Daniels's video, session 6, “Raising Resident Aliens.” Discuss the following ideas with your group:

Introductory Questions

At the end of the video, the author asks a few key questions. Use this time to discuss the following:

- Think about primary identity for a moment. What is the difference between being Christians who happen to live in America and being Americans who just happen to attend church?
- How is raising children who are Christians similar to raising resident aliens?
- What do you need the church to be for your family and your kids?

- What are some of the things you've done as a family that have helped shape the identity of your children? If you're comfortable sharing, is there anything you would have done differently?

Digging Deeper Questions

- Persecution was a reality for the Judeans in Babylon, but assimilation and comfort were equally large threats to their way of life. Think about the story of Daniel. Can we root for our children's success in the American economy and continue to shape their unique identity as the people of God?
- Nations have military forces, but the church lives as a people who have laid down the sword and taken up the cross. America has a president, but the church proclaims that Jesus Christ is Lord no matter who lives in the White House. What does it mean to be proud of the country of our birth yet not conflate it with the eternal kingdom?
- In the book, Dr. Daniels writes that the primary commodities of life are time, money, and energy. When your children observe your life, where do they see you investing those commodities? Which of the three is most challenging for you in modeling to your children sacrificial living for the kingdom?
- What would raising our kids to follow Christ mean if we not only paid attention to their actions but also tried to shape their values, their identity, and their convictions?

Call to Action

It's difficult to navigate our kids through the visions of the "good life" that sometimes overlap or compete. What we need is a particular story that constantly forms them. Just to tell them the story is not enough. They have to make decisions in their life based upon that story. Talk about ways in which you have helped shape your children as people of the story. Confess to each other things you wish you had done differently. Pray for your children, your grandchildren, and other young people in the extended family of God, that their values, identity, and convictions will be determined by their relationship with God.

Close your group in prayer, and remind group members to read chapter 7, "More Than Survivors," for next week's session.

SESSION 7

Chapter 7, “More Than Survivors”

Before your weekly meeting, participants should have read chapter 7 in Embracing Exile: Living Faithfully as God’s Unique People in the World.



To open session 7, ask your group the following icebreaker question: When is a time God “showed up” or came through for you?

Review the following summary in preparation for your session. Share portions with the group as you desire:

Topic Summary

Even though we find ourselves in exile, we still have an important mission from God. As people who feel a sense of exile, we sometimes think we’re supposed to form a kind of holy huddle and wait for the winds of Nebuchadnezzar to blow over, for God to redeem us, for us to get back to the land, for everything to be okay.

Instead, God wants to use what happens in exile as the source of salvation, not just for Judah but also for all people on the earth. “It is not enough,” God says, “. . . to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the survivors of Israel” (Isa. 49:6, CEB). He wants to make his people a “light to the nations” (v. 6, CEB).

For centuries, those of us in the West have supposed we lived in a Christianized culture, so our evangelism consisted mainly of

- **Colonialism:** The Western church sent missionaries to “proclaim the gospel” within a culture, but we also brought our Westernized understandings of culture with us. Because we came in positions of power, we often ended up abusing our power and misusing the people we encountered. We need to confess and repent of this violence and injustice often done in the name of Christ.
- **Revivalism:** We held revivals because, in a Christianized culture, we assumed there was something out there in people’s hearts—it just needed to be revived. What we discovered over the last couple of decades is that those tendencies of “If you build it, they will come” have worked, but usually those who come are from somebody else’s church. In a post-Christian world, most people that we encounter don’t have a whole lot of spark to revive. The language, the beauty, and the realities of the gospel are foreign.

Our imaginations will have to change. So what kinds of images and visions might a church that is embracing exile adopt as central to its mission?

1. The Embodied Word

In Ezekiel 3, God tells Ezekiel to eat the scroll. The idea is that Ezekiel would eat the word and become the word. The church can't just be a place that we go. A people who live in exile recognize that the word becomes flesh—that they have to *be* the word. They cannot just yell the word, Facebook the word, or blog about the word but must be the living word, people who eat it and embody it. The great evangelistic strategy God has always had, maybe especially in exile, is for people to look at us and say, “Whatever that is, that’s what I want.”

2. An Open Table

We gather around the Table of the Lord and take in the Lord’s broken body and shed blood so that, by grace, we will become one body—the body of Christ broken for the world. The table reminds us that God’s grace is at the center and that more seats are always available, so we are constantly inviting people to come into the body of Christ with us. The gathering of people from different generations, different ethnicities, different cultures, different tastes, different political perspectives, and different social standings into one body displays the work of God’s Spirit. This is the community of witness a divided world must see and be invited to enter.

3. Clean Hearts

We are called to be holy, purified from the inside out, to become God’s reflections in the world. In Ezekiel 36, God tells the people, essentially, “The world thinks I’m a rotten God because you have been a rotten people. I need to restore my reputation in the world, and here’s how I’m going to do it—by sanctifying and restoring you.” The church that embraces exile needs to be separated and filled so that it can be a blessing to the world.

4. Dirty Hands

Being people of compassion and mercy and working for God’s transformation where he has placed us is not a new church growth strategy. We don’t do it because it “works.” Neither is the call of the church to make the world a better place to live. The church gets its hands dirty because it’s who God has formed us to be. We are a people who love because we have been loved.

Embracing exile is not a pause in the missional purpose of God’s people. Embracing exile may in fact be setting God’s people free to rediscover their true mission and the powerful reasons for their divine creation in the first place.

Related Scripture

Isaiah 49; Ezekiel 3; 36; Jonah

Watch Dr. Scott Daniels’s video, session 7, “More Than Survivors.” Discuss the following ideas with your group:

Introductory Questions

At the end of the video, the author asks a few key questions. Use this time to discuss the following:

- Which of the four metaphors—embodied word, open table, clean hearts, or dirty hands—speaks to you? Why?
- How has God used seasons of exile or discomfort to shape your heart and fill you with his Spirit?
- In what ways do you think God is reshaping the church through its current exile so that the glory days are no longer behind but the best days are ahead?

Digging Deeper Questions

- If God wants to use his people in exile as a “light to the nations” (Isa. 49:6, CEB), how might our historical methods of evangelism fall short?
- Christians may not have side curls or prayer shawls, like Orthodox Jews, but when you have encountered Christians whose uniqueness stands out, what has it looked like?
- What does the Table of the Lord look like in your own life? In your local congregation? Is anyone welcome? Are seats made available?
- What are some “It’s Him again”¹ moments in the life of your local congregation?
- To truly embrace exile, we must do more than adopt a theory; we must adopt practices that will lead to heart change. What are some practical things you or your community can do to begin embracing exile?

Call to Action

When Israel thinks about exile, what they can’t get over is that it should have been the end. Their lives should have come to an inglorious conclusion somewhere on the shores of Babylon, but God used exile to reform them, to reshape them, to make them a people that they never could have been without exile. He brought them into a kind of life where the glory days were no longer behind them but, truly, the best days were ahead of them. Let us pray together that we would be able to embrace this strange moment, as odd and as disconcerting as it is, and to discover anew that we are God’s unique people in the world.

NOTES



Session 1

1. Walter Brueggeman, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 115.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.

Session 3

1. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 216.
2. See N. T. Wright, "How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?" *Vox Evangelica* 21 (1991): 7-32.

Session 4

1. See Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006).
2. Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story* (Nashville: Word, 2000), 81-82.
3. James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 1-2.
4. Ibid., 23.
5. Ibid., 1-2.

Session 5

1. N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 293.

Session 6

1. See Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989).

Session 7

1. See Cornelis van Peursen, *Him Again!* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1969).