

Bedford Road Baptist Church

Donald Busch & Erik DiVietro
Easter Season 2011

Exiles

A journey of faith through the darkest of times.

²⁶ Hananiah (Hebrew: Chananyah, “Yahweh is gracious”) became Shadrach, Mishael (Hebrew: Miysha’el, “who is what God is”) became Meshach & Azariah (Hebrew: ‘Azaryah, “Yahweh has helped”) became Abednego.

²⁷ Anachronism: Something that seems to be out of its proper time in history.

²⁸ 1 Timothy 6:6-8

²⁹ Proverbs 3:13-15; 15:16, 17; 16:18; 28:6

³⁰ Psalm 119:97-104

³¹ Deuteronomy 13:1-5 (dreams should never contradict the commandments of God)

³² 1 Corinthians 9:19-22

³³ 1 Corinthians 2:10-16

³⁴ Psalm 139:1-6

³⁵ 1 Kings 8:27

³⁶ Psalm 46:1-7

³⁷ Isaiah 40:15-17

³⁸ 2 Corinthians 10:4, 5

³⁹ Romans 1:20-23

⁴⁰ Nabonidus is not mentioned by name in Scripture. The reason that Belshazzar made Daniel “third ruler in the kingdom” was that Nabonidus was first and he was second.

⁴¹ 2 Chronicles 36:22, 23

⁴² Philippians 2:13

⁴³ Leviticus 23:42, 43

⁴⁴ Ezekiel 34:23, 24; 37:24, 25

⁴⁵ Ezra 6:14, 15

⁴⁶ Proverbs 21:1

⁴⁷ Philippians 4:11-13

⁴⁸ Ecclesiastes 3:11

⁴⁹ Isaiah 9:2

The History of the Exile

In 722 BCE, the northern kingdom of Israel (also called Ephraim) was completely wiped off the face of the earth by the Assyrians¹. In 703 BCE, the Assyrians besieged Jerusalem but were supernaturally defeated². A century later, the Babylonians under Nabonidus and his son-general-successor Nebuchadnezzar swept through Assyria, re-conquered the entire kingdom and laid siege to Jerusalem³. In three separate occasions (603, 598 and 586 BCE), the Babylonians marched into Jerusalem⁴. In the final siege, which lasted for a year, they blinded the king, Zedekiah, killed all of Zedekiah’s sons, sacked the Temple and then razed the city. They took the ruling elite into exile in all three stages.

THE DOCUMENTS

Documents written during the Exile comprise a large portion of the Hebrew Scriptures. About 15% of the total Hebrew Scriptures is committed to the Exile. This is a subject worth considering.

Book	Description
Jeremiah	During the reign of the last couple kings of Judah, Jeremiah foretold the Babylonian exile – even the length of it. He was later dragged to exile in Egypt.
Lamentations	Jeremiah’s song over Jerusalem after it was razed.
Ezekiel	A priest living in Babylon, Ezekiel foretold the return of the Kingdom at the end of time.
Daniel	One of the ruling family who rose to prominence in the Babylonian and Persian empires, Daniel links with Jeremiah and foretells the restoration of the Kingdom.
Ezra	A priest who accompanied the first wave of returning Jews when they rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem.
Nehemiah	A court official in Persia who led a return to Jerusalem to rebuild the city’s defenses.
Esther	A Jewish woman who became the chief wife of a Persian king and saved the people from genocide.
Haggai	Partnered with Zechariah to call the people to complete the physical building of the Temple.
Zechariah	Partnered with Haggai, but focused on restoring the priesthood of Aaron through a man named Joshua.
Malachi	Foretold the end of the Exile and the coming of Messiah, the last book of the Hebrew Scriptures written.

In fact, the Exile is one of three major events that defined the people of God – the other two being the Exodus and the reign of David. As the third and last of these events and the one

that more or less immediately precipitated the era of the New Testament and the rise of Christianity, it is worth considering.

In the Exile, the Jewish people solidified the concepts of resurrection and the Messiah⁵. It was in the Exile that they found the words to describe their longing for the coming Kingdom. These ideas were not necessary for a landed people with a standing monarchy, so while there are hints of these ideas in the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures, it is in the Exile that they become clear and plainly stated.

JUST A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Because Israel had already fallen and disappeared, we will speak of Judah and not “Israel” in our meditations. Toward the end of our meditation, we will begin using the term Jews because the tribal identity of Judah was lost and the people took on a new identity defined by their religion rather than their location. Under the Persians, the name became more abstract, which is why we refer to Jews today and not Judah.

You may also notice the absence of the word LORD in our meditations. It was during the exile that the people of God stopped using the sacred name (transliterated as Yahweh today). We have therefore made a conscious decision to only refer to Him as God to maintain this practice.

Notes

¹ 2 Kings 17:5-18

² 2 Kings 18:17-19:37

³ Prophesied in Nahum 3:5-7

⁴ During the reigns of Jehoiakim (2 Kings 24:1-4; 2 Chronicles 36:6,7), Jehoiachin (2 Kings 24:10-16, 2 Chronicles 36:10) & Zedekiah (2 Kings 25:1-11; 2 Chronicles 36:17-21)

⁵ Daniel 9:25-27

⁶ Daniel 9:1-19 (the prophet was reading the word of Yahweh to Jeremiah [reflection], he confessed the Judah's departure from God's commandments [repentant prayer] and he prayed with fasting, sackcloth & ashes [voluntary fasting]).

⁷ Isaiah 58:6-9

⁸ John 11:25

⁹ 1 John 2:15, 16

¹⁰ Philippians 3:7-11

¹¹ Romans 8:20-22

¹² Acts 3:19-21

¹³ Revelation 17:5 (Mystery Babylon – mother of harlots & of the abominations of the earth)

¹⁴ Deuteronomy 28:64-67

¹⁵ Psalm 125:1

¹⁶ Psalms 120-134

¹⁷ Deuteronomy 8:11-17

¹⁸ Ezekiel 25:12-15

¹⁹ Ezekiel 22:4, 5

²⁰ Ephesians 4:26; Psalm 4:4

²¹ Jeremiah 20:4-6

²² Proverbs 3:5-7

²³ 2 Corinthians 7:8-12 (godly sorrow leads to repentance)

²⁴ Hosea 7:11-16

²⁵ Daniel 1:3, 4

Thursday :: April 21

READING:

Nehemiah 8:1-8

MEDITATION:

Previous to this event, the Jews had been people of oral tradition. While some of the books of the Scriptures had been written down, most people could not read. They knew the stories though. Here is the beginning of the Jewish tradition of reading the Scriptures. Truly, this was a generation with no knowledge of the past. They did not know about the Exodus or the Kingdom and seem to even have had little understanding of Hebrew itself. (8:8)

Exile is often a time of relearning, of reclaiming our past. We forget ourselves in exile. We forget our rich heritage. During the restoration, it is important that we become reconnected to what has come before.

TODAY'S PRAYER

Connect us with those who have come before, O God.

Help us to see that you have always been at work and will be until the end of all things.

Friday :: April 22

READING:

Nehemiah 9:1-38

MEDITATION:

Today is the final day of meditation, although our journey of exile continues until Sunday morning. Traditionally, today is the day we remember Jesus' death on the cross. It is fitting then that we close our meditations with the story of the Jews sealing of the covenant with God. Having reclaimed their heritage, they stood ready for the restoration of their covenant with God.

Prayerfully, this season has been a time of renewal for you and for our congregation. We become reconnected with the journey of exile, even though it happened 2,600 years ago. We learn from the journey and we await the celebration of rebirth that is Easter!

TODAY'S PRAYER

And so we come to this day, Jesus, when we remember your death on the cross. Even so, Lord Jesus, come quickly.

The Practice of Exile

In most western churches, the period of forty-two days before Easter is called *Lent*. This word is simply the old Anglo-Saxon word for "spring" and has no religious or liturgical connotations. In the Eastern Church, the season is called *tessarakoste* which is Greek for "forty", applied to the approximately forty days of the season.

Regardless what we call it, this season is a time of repentance and reflection. There are usually three practices of the season: 1) regular reflection, which is what this booklet is designed to help you with; 2) repentant prayer; and 3) voluntary fasting.⁶

As stated above, this booklet has been written as a reflection or meditation guide for this season. You can read the passages listed and the accompanying meditation on a daily basis. It will take no more than half an hour.

Along with this reflection, we practice repentant prayer. We seek God's face concerning our own walk – asking God to forgive us of our sins. Some people will journal their struggles, and daily read their journal to God, knowing that through Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

Finally, the third practice is that of giving up something that is important to us – called a *fast*. Fasting can take many forms. Some give up food, others give up television or the Internet or anything that they might feel led to surrender.

This year, we challenge you to give up something that we can assign a monetary value to. It can be something as simple as suspending cable TV for the 6 weeks or cutting down your trips to Dunkin' Donuts. Whatever you decide to fast from, assign a definite values and set that money aside for a special Easter offering on Good Friday (April 22 this year). We will then give the offering to a local charity or cause⁷.

If you like, you can give to the Easter offering anytime during the season. Simply designate "Easter Offering" on your check or offering envelope, but *remember* that the Easter offering is separate from our usual giving. Don't give money that you would usually give to the regular offerings. This is a *separate, faith-based* offering and not part of your regular giving.

Tuesday :: April 19

Psalm 137

This Psalm was written around 600 BCE, as the people of Judah were taken into captivity in Babylon. It embodies the cry of the exile as no other passage of the Hebrew Scriptures does. With their great city, Jerusalem, razed to the ground and their king humiliated, the people literally had nothing left. They endured a catastrophe that to them was beyond comprehension.

As we begin our journey with Judah, remember that we are journeying with a people going into exile. We are going because they experienced repentance and longing for resurrection on a national, institutional level that we Americans really cannot understand. This means we must intentionally adopt the attitude of exile that they experienced involuntarily.

The darkness of exile is greater than any kind of personal repentance we might experience, and the valley of the shadow of death that Judah went through for seventy years was longer than any season of life we might know. We are learning exile from them and then recognizing how it might be manifest in our own lives.

And in learning from Judah, perhaps we see ourselves a little better. Perhaps we realize that we are indeed in exile. We live in a world that is tainted and marred by sin; but we tend to forget that. We want to see goodness, so we ignore the tell-tale marks of exile all around us.

In a very real sense, we are in exile. We are separated from the One who is our resurrection⁸ – Jesus Christ – and we must live in a world that has different values, different views and different priorities than he has called us to⁹. In exile, it is very easy to adopt the ways of our captors, to become associated without exile and to forget that which we are waiting for.

This season of exile (or Lent) which precedes Easter, is meant as a living, daily reminder of our longing for resurrection – our desire for full restoration to life through Jesus Christ – the re-establishment of Christ's kingdom¹⁰.

Let us expand our vision a bit here. In a very real way, all of creation is in exile from Eden¹¹. Since the first man and woman were expelled from the Garden where they walked with God, we have been in exile. As the Scriptures look forward to Jesus' return and the coming kingdom, it looks forward not to a new kingdom but to an old one.

It looks forward to the restoration of Eden¹². Every restoration that comes before – whether it is the restoration of the Jews to Jerusalem or the restoration of one who is dead in his

READING:

Nehemiah 4:1-23

MEDITATION:

God's work of restoration, even partial restoration, cannot be frustrated by even the worst enemies. He does not work according to our timetables⁴⁸, so it can appear to us that he has been stopped – but that is a matter of perspective.

Could Jesus' disciples have known that Jesus was working a restoration for the world during the three days he was in the grave? Nehemiah prefigures the patient determination we should have when we go through the darkness.

TODAY'S PRAYER

Who are my enemies, Jesus?

Help me to see the futility of their attacks

Before your gracious power.

Teach me patience as I go through darkness.

Wednesday :: April 20

READING:

Nehemiah 7:1-4

MEDITATION:

Exile is a difficult season. Many who enter exile never return. Nehemiah notes just how few people were living in the city. During the mid 7th century, Jerusalem may have had a population of as many as 250,000 people. Nehemiah remarks that the *whole assembly*, which means Jerusalem and all the outlying suburbs numbered less than 50,000 including servants (7:66).

God knows that not everyone who begins an exile with end it. Many will drop out; some will be taken home to heaven without seeing the fulfillment of his promises. But the restoration is still coming. No matter how dark death's shadow may be, the light of the resurrection will dispel it⁴⁹.

TODAY'S PRAYER

Even in the darkest night, when friends have fallen,

Help me to see your coming Dawn.

God, our hope is entirely in you and is nothing without you.

Friday :: April 15

READING:

Ezra 4:1-5:5, Haggai 1:1-11

MEDITATION:

The reconstruction of the Temple stretched from the first year of Cyrus (538 BCE) until the sixth year of Darius (c. 515 BCE)⁴⁵. It was completed by a generation of workers who had probably been born in Jerusalem, but it was still an extension of the exile. Although they lived in the land, they knew that they lived there as Persian subjects and not as children of God's Kingdom.

The older generation wept because they knew it was not a Temple of the kingdom. It was a Temple of a people enslaved to a foreign king. In some ways the partial restoration only reminded them of their Exile. It forced them to solidify their oral traditions and written records – what is today the Old Testament. Without the Exile, we would not have the Bible.

TODAY'S PRAYER

*Thank you, Lord, that you created the Exile
So that future generations would have your Word.*

Monday :: April 18

READING:

Nehemiah 1:1-2:20

MEDITATION:

The final exile we consider is Nehemiah, who served in the palace of the Persian king Artaxerxes. He is at a privileged position, and the king sends him to Jerusalem to build the defenses there. There are a lot of reasons that the king would have wanted the city properly defended, but it is Nehemiah's passion that drives the decision. Artaxerxes sees an exile who can serve, and the king's purposes align with God's⁴⁶. In exile, we are often given opportunity to serve God in places of both poverty and privilege⁴⁷. We need to be capable of accepting both forms of blessing when God opens them up to us.

TODAY'S PRAYER

*Sometimes we are privileged, and sometimes poor.
But regardless, O God, you are sovereign.
Help me to be content and active, regardless where I find myself.*

trespasses and sins to new life in Christ – is just a shadow of the great restoration, the coming Kingdom.

Monday :: March 14

READING:

Psalm 137, focusing on verse 1

MEDITATION:

In the Hebrew Bible, Babylon represents the opposite of all that is good and righteous¹³. From the very first mention (Genesis 11), it stands for chaos and unrighteousness. And here they find themselves – in Babylon.

Sometimes it is in Babylon that we learn to weep. It is when we are so far removed from God's light that we truly understand how frightening the dark really is¹⁴. In Babylon, the Israelites learned to weep. They learned the pain of not simply being *out* of God's will but actually being *removed* from his blessing. It rocked them to the very core of their being.

TODAY'S PRAYER

*Father in heaven,
Teach us to weep,
To mourn the brokenness that surrounds us,
The weakness that is all too evident in us.
Help us to know our pain,
To let it mold us and make us sensitive
To your passions lived out among us.*

Tuesday :: March 15

READING:

Psalm 137, focusing on verses 2-4

MEDITATION:

In Hebrew, the word *Zion* has a complex meaning, carrying a sense of “a monument we could never miss or forget.”¹⁵ The word came into their vocabulary after the Temple was built there. As the people would make their annual pilgrimage to the city, there came a time when the mountains of Zion loomed on the horizon. They then knew where they were going for the rest of the journey.

As they went, the people would sing. These songs, called the Songs of Ascent¹⁶, proclaimed the glory of God. And it was these songs that their captors asked them to sing.

How could you possibly sing these kinds of songs in a foreign land where you were held captive? So, the people hung their harps on the trees. They abandoned their songs. In exile, they could not march to Zion. How could they sing of a journey that had been stolen from them? What had been songs of joy were now ash in their mouths.

TODAY'S PRAYER

*Father, help me to see your monuments in my life.
Sometimes I do not see what I can't see
Because I am blinded by my own concerns
And fail to recognize how far from you I have been carried.*

Wednesday :: March 16

READING:

Psalm 137, focusing on verses 5-6

MEDITATION:

In exile, we choose to either forget our former lives or to exalt it. The psalmist fixes his mind on Jerusalem and the glory of God's presence. He takes a violent oath in his commitment to exalt the City that he is now exiled from.

Too often, we experience God's glory and blessing, but then forget it¹⁷. We allow time and other concerns to mute the crash of cymbals and the smell of the sacrificial fire. We allow Jerusalem to become just another city, just another life like the 'regular' and the 'normal' one we live in exile.

TODAY'S PRAYER

*Never let my awe of your presence be muted, God.
Help us to worship in a living, real way
So that when your presence is absent,
We are left empty.*

Thursday :: March 17

READING:

Psalm 137, focusing on 7

Wednesday :: April 13

READING:

Ezra 3:1-7

MEDITATION:

The Feast of Booths is called *Sukkot* in Hebrew. It is a commemoration of Israel's wilderness journey on the way to the Promised Land⁴³. It is also the feast that Solomon commemorated with the dedication of the first temple (1 Kings 8:2).

It is appropriate then that it is the first feast the returning Jews commemorated. This was a season of near restoration. Although free from physical exile, the Jews knew that this gathering was still temporary. The Kingdom was not restored, and so they were still in exile.

TODAY'S PRAYER

*Remind me, O God, of the temporary nature of this life.
Like sukkot, help me to see that even the greatest things of this life are just tents
Temporary places while we wait for your restoration.*

Thursday :: April 14

READING:

Ezra 3:8-13

MEDITATION:

This is a key passage in the shift that the Jews were going through in their exile. Although they had a new temple, there was a longing for complete restoration. They knew that this was only partial. The sentiment gave birth to a tremendous amount of longing for the return of David – what became the longing for the Messiah⁴⁴.

The partial restoration of *anything* in our exile should not be good enough. The true exile has a longing for God's perfect restoration that drives us to continue the restoration. We know that God's work of restorative building begins with us, but it never ends.

TODAY'S PRAYER

*I want this longing in my soul, God.
Beyond just a feeling that something isn't right with the world
I want to truly long for your resurrection – and not just in me.*

Ezra & Nehemiah

Daniel lived through the period of the exile when Judah's ruling class was in Babylon, but the story of their return and the rebuilding of Jerusalem belongs to another book – Ezra-Nehemiah. In our English Bibles, it is divided into two books but in the Hebrew canon they are one book.

Ezra was a priest who accompanied the first wave of Judahites to return. He helped them get started in rebuilding the Temple. Nehemiah went back later to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem so the people would be defended from their neighbors.

After the return to Jerusalem, it is right to call the people the Jews instead of the Judahites. Since Judah and Benjamin was all that was left, the identity of Israel was compromised. Yehudah (Judah) became Yehud under Babylon, which in turn became Iudaea under the Greeks and Romans. These are the origin of our modern word Jew.

It is important to remember that this phase of the Jews' existence was limited to Jerusalem. The city became the scope of their focus and as late as the Roman period, while Jews had spread out to populate much of the old kingdom, Jerusalem was still the center of true Judaism.

Tuesday :: April 12

READING:

Ezra 1:1-11

MEDITATION:

When Cyrus made his decree that the Jews could return to Jerusalem, the leaders of the houses (no longer called *tribes*) of Judah and Benjamin set out with “everyone whose spirit God had stirred up.” Exile is a time of dormant spirits. In our grief, we can go into a sort of spiritual neutral gear. It is important however that while we might be dormant, we are not dead so that when God opens the door for restoration, he will stir us up and we will be stirred⁴².

TODAY'S PRAYER

*When you move, O God, help me to move too.
When you are stirring our hearts, help me to be liquid and pliable.
I will wait on you, to see you do amazing things around me.
And to be a part of the restoration you are performing.*

MEDITATION:

Have you ever had someone in your life who just seemed to wait for you to fail? And when you failed, they gloated? Edom, Judah's neighbors to the southeast, had been a pain in their side for most of their history. Edom struck a bargain with Babylon and did not fall (they didn't have much to fall anyway), so as the Judahites were carried into exile, they taunted them: ‘aru ‘aru ‘ed he-y-sodh beh! (literally, “Raze it! Raze it! Down to the bedrock!”)¹⁸

In exile, everything wrong you have ever done will be brought to mind¹⁹, and everyone who has ever criticized faith uses your failures to cry out “hypocrite!” and “religious freak” will come out of the woods to taunt you.

TODAY'S PRAYER

*Brace us, O God, for the cries of derision from those who do not know you.
Do not allow the pain of exile
To make me susceptible to ridicule and accusation.*

Friday :: March 18

READING:

Psalms 137, focusing on verses 8-9

MEDITATION:

A lot has been made about the rage at the end of Psalm 137. Any criticism is all just bogus self-righteousness. The journey of exile will inevitably include rage and a desire for recompense. The Babylonians were unbelievably cruel when they sacked a city and it is very likely that they did exactly what the psalmist calls to be done to them.

It is not necessarily a sin to be angry²⁰, but it is a sin to allow that anger to rule you. If exile makes you angry, good. If that anger fuels more anger instead of helping you realize that the exile (and all that it included) was because of your own sin, it is dangerous. But when we walk through the anger and realize God is at work even in the terror, we can rise above it. Exile can become a place of redemption.

TODAY'S PRAYER

*I confess that sometimes I get angry, Lord.
The world is cruel, and when I see what sin does
I get angry.
Help me to rise above anger, to redeem even this
Through your grace.*

Jeremiah

Although we will not be teaching from Jeremiah during the Sunday messages this season, the book gives us a heartbreaking picture of the road of exile. The book itself is a series of prophecies against Judah. As a result, Jeremiah was a very unpopular person. He had his books destroyed by the king, was thrown into a well to rot, and generally was disliked by everyone who knew him. When his prophecies turned out to be true, he was even accused of treason.

Monday :: March 21

READING:

Jeremiah 39:1-40:6

MEDITATION:

Unlike most of Jerusalem, Jeremiah did not go into exile in Babylon. Because his prophecies (found in the earlier chapters) had warned Judah that they would fall²¹, Nebuchadnezzar ordered that Jeremiah be released, and so he was allowed to choose to either go to Babylon as a guest or remain in the land with the poor people who were not taken.

We can be in exile at home as well as abroad. In fact, this is more the state of exile we modern Christians will find ourselves in. Although the promised blessings have fallen down around our heads, we still remain among the ashes and rubble. We do not get the freedom of being able to go somewhere else.

TODAY'S PRAYER

God, there are mornings when the weight of exile is too much.

I wake up and look around, and everything seems to be ashes.

How can this really be your work?

I'm afraid I just don't understand.

Give me patience to see your glory in this.

Tuesday :: March 22

READING:

Jeremiah 41:1-18

MEDITATION:

Gedaliah was the Babylonian appointed governor of Judah. His murder was a lawless act done in the name of God. A troublemaker named Ishmael did it just

Monday :: April 11

READING:

Daniel 5:1-31

MEDITATION:

Nebuchadnezzar's successor, Nabonidus, was a strange man. Shortly after his coronation, he devoted himself to the worship of the moon goddess Sin, named his son Belshazzar co-regent⁴⁰ and abandoned Babylon. When the Medes and Persians rebelled against Babylon, Nabonidus returned to Babylon only to flee again.

According to Daniel, Belshazzar held a feast with the Medo-Persian armies bearing down on him. Either he was confident or completely incompetent. Either way, on October 5, 539 BCE, the armies of Cyrus the Great marched into Babylon and ended the Babylonian kingdom. (Daniel refers to the conquering king as Darius the Mede, probably an allusion to Cyrus' uncle Cyaxares who sometimes went by this title and was probably *technically* in charge of the expedition.)

This moment was significant because the following year, Cyrus made a declaration freeing the captives of Judah and allowing them to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple⁴¹.

It is important to remember however, that just being able to return was not the end of exile. Restoration does not mean that we get to live in the midst of the rubble of our previous lives. Restoration is rebuilding. Resurrection is the re-living (I know it's not a word) of what is dead.

TODAY'S PRAYER

Help me, Jesus, to be thankful for your restoration

But also to be aware of the limits to this existence.

Help me to see both the miracle and the potential,

To live in the first and continue to look for the second.

Thursday :: April 7

READING:

Daniel 4:1-37

MEDITATION:

What did it take for you to see God as who he is? To dethrone yourself from the rule of your life and realize that the Creator truly deserves honor and glory³⁹? Often, we see ourselves as the kings and gods of our own existence.

Nebuchadnezzar experienced a different kind of exile – a genuine exile from sanity – so that he could see who was truly God. Thankfully, you and I don't usually need this kind of extreme exile. Take some time to meditate on the moments in your life when God truly got a hold of your attention.

TODAY'S PRAYER

*Are you trying to get my attention, God?
How can I open my eyes wider and see your direction better?
I do not want to require extreme correction
So please show me what I'm missing.*

Friday :: April 8

Today, take a moment to contemplate the majesty of the song Daniel sang in 2:20-23. It is a simple, powerful song that reflects both God's innate power and the tangible demonstration of that power in Daniel's life.

Daniel's Song (2:20-23)

*Blessed be the name of God forever and ever,
To whom belong wisdom and might.
He changes times and seasons;
He removes kings and sets up kings;
He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding;
He reveals deep and hidden things;
He knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwells with him.
To you, O God of my fathers, I give thanks and praise,
for you have given me wisdom and might,
And have now made known to me what we asked of you,
for you have made known to us the king's matter.*

to cause chaos, the break down any order that might have been settling so that he could profit from the chaos.

Exile can be a lawless place. People take advantage of those in mourning and try to perpetuate helplessness and frustration. As we seek repentance and renewal in exile, we must guard against those who would abuse us in our weakened state.

TODAY'S PRAYER

*There are days, God,
When it seems like nothing is working right
That the whole world has descended into chaos.
How can I be more faithful on those days?
Will you show me ways to be more faithful?*

Wednesday :: March 23

READING:

Jeremiah 42:1-43:5

MEDITATION:

When we ask God for guidance, we had better be ready to obey it. Too often, we go to God looking for *permission* to do what we want to do instead of truly seeking direction²².

It really should not be surprising that the people who killed the Persian governor were going to listen to their own counsel over that of God's prophet. At the same time, if we're honest we know that we do the same thing sometimes. But if there is one place in our lives where we should be listening, isn't it when we are in exile?

TODAY'S PRAYER

*Your will, not mine, Jesus.
What is your direction for me?
I come to you seeking to cleanse my agenda
So I can clearly see yours for me.
I know that your Spirit gives gifts
Help me to know them, hone them, and use them
To fulfill your Word in my world.*

Thursday :: March 24

READING:

Jeremiah 44:1-10

MEDITATION:

Exile itself changes nothing. A season of repentance does nothing if the repentance does not come from within our human hearts²³. People observe seasons of repentance all the time and it means nothing to them. They continue with their agendas and plans, they worship their false gods. Exile is meaningless if there is not transformation.

TODAY'S PRAYER

God, transform me.

I can be blinded by the normal and accepted.

Transform me and transform others through me.

Friday :: March 25

READING:

Jeremiah 44:24-30

MEDITATION:

The people who fled to Egypt went there voluntarily. God did not send them there. Those felt they could control their own existences – even their own exile. There was just one flaw with their decision.

When exile is a judgment of God, we will find restoration at the end; but when we create our own exile by *running away* from God's judgment, destruction is assured²⁴. History shows us that these people in Egypt never returned. They never saw Jerusalem again, and they died in exile. Their children died in exile, and ultimately were absorbed into Egypt.

TODAY'S PRAYER

Am I in a place of my own choosing, God?

Or am I here because you have placed me here

And wish to bring restoration in and through me?

I can't know these things without you.

Tuesday :: April 5

READING:

Daniel 2:31-49

MEDITATION:

Nebuchadnezzar's dream has many layers of meaning, but the greatest is this – no matter how beautiful a human kingdom is, ultimately it has feet of clay. God is a mountain, which to ancient people was something as immutable and unchanging as things got³⁶.

In exile, our captors can look awfully big and powerful. By human terms, they are. But compared to a mountain, they're nothing. Man might build an amazing building like the Great Pyramid, but at 480 feet tall and 750 ft on each side, it is tiny compared to even the most moderate of mountains. A modest mountain like Mount Washington is almost thirteen times higher and hundreds of times more massive. And God made that. What human accomplishment can compare?³⁷

TODAY'S PRAYER

God, can you help me with the scale of my problems?

I know that from here, sometimes the size of things is intimidating

Thank you for your perspective. Help me to see it.

Wednesday :: April 6

READING:

Daniel 3:1-30

MEDITATION:

When we are in exile, we will be *told* to do things that dishonor our God. It is important to remember that *disgrace* does not require *dishonor*. We are called to honor our God even in our own disgrace.

Obedience has nothing to do with situation we find ourselves in. God expects the same commitment to him whether we are in prosperity or in exile³⁸.

TODAY'S PRAYER

Help me, God, not to dishonor your name.

Even in my most humble of circumstances

Even in the most difficult of times,

Help me to lift your Name up and give You glory.

Friday :: April 1

READING:

Daniel 2:20-23

MEDITATION:

If Psalm 137 is the song of those going into exile, then Daniel 2:20-23 is the song of those in exile. It is a song of celebration, a declaration of God's presence – "he knows that is in the darkness, and the light dwells with him." (v 22)

Only here do we realize that the dream Nebuchadnezzar could not remember was actually from the God of Judah. That is why none of the Chaldeans could understand it³³. Only a follower of the one true God would be able to see it. Daniel says as much later.

TODAY'S PRAYER

You truly are an amazing God.

So you can show the light of your presence even in the darkest of places.

We give you glory and majesty, Father.

Monday :: April 4

READING:

Daniel 2:24-30

MEDITATION:

Daniel tells Nebuchadnezzar basically, "God is inside your head and he told me what's in there."³⁴ This had to be a bit of a shock to Nebuchadnezzar. After all, he had *defeated* this God's people. By the rules of the ancient world, that made Nebuchadnezzar more powerful than Judah's God. But here is Judah's God telling Nebuchadnezzar that he *let it happen* and he is *still powerful* even in Babylon.

Daniel is the book where Judah's God breaks all the rules. He reveals that he is not tied to a location³⁵, that he is just as powerful in Babylon as he is in Jerusalem. This was a *revolutionary* concept at the time. It let the exiles know God is bigger than their problems.

TODAY'S PRAYER

You are truly bigger than our problems.

Help us not to forget that.

Daniel

Now we shift from the corporate pain of Psalm 137 to exile as it is lived out as one man. Daniel was exiled through no fault of his own. He was a young man, perhaps as young as thirteen, when in 605 BCE he was taken to Babylon as a hostage. More than likely he was from a privileged family – perhaps even one connected to the king. One thing for certain is that Daniel was chosen because he was one of the best, one of the finest young men Judah had to offer²⁵.

The book of Daniel begins in 605 BCE with the first of three waves of exile from Jerusalem. At the very least, Daniel lived until the first year of Cyrus the Great's rule over Babylon, which would have been 540 BCE. This year was significant, because it was the year that Cyrus decreed for Judah to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple (Ezra 1:1).

This means that Daniel's life spanned the entire exile, and the book that bears his name is a mixture of narrative and prophecy that has confounded and perplexed people for millennia. During his exile, Daniel became one of the leaders of Babylon. He was persecuted for his faith. He outlasts endless kings.

We are looking at the way a righteous man endures exile. We can see the entire process of exile unfold around Daniel. He lives through the pain we've seen in Psalm 137, and he lives to see at least the beginning of the jubilation of the return to Jerusalem that is recorded in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

While the meditations are somewhat in sync with the Sunday messages, there may be some overlap of content. Sometimes, it might seem like the meditations move ahead or stay behind the messages. This is because the meditations are on the book as a whole rather than broken down by incident or topic.

Monday :: March 28

READING

Daniel 1:1-7

MEDITATION:

Daniel's name means "God is judge." When he came to Babylon, he was renamed *Beltshazzar*. While we're not entirely sure that the new name means, it includes the name *Bel* – the name of a Babylonian god. His three friends²⁶ also receive

Babylonian names. Interestingly, most church kids know who *Shadrach, Meschach and Abednego* are but still refer to Belteshazzar as *Daniel*.

Daniel's place in exile was to be out of place. He was a living anachronism²⁷ – someone who *should have* embraced an exile identity. But he refused to. He remained Daniel and was a living witness of the one true God's presence, even in the midst of Babylon.

TODAY'S PRAYER

*O God, help us to be out of place in our exile.
Though we are ourselves sinners, make us uncomfortable with sin.
Do not allow us to become judgmental,
But teach us to be true to who you have made us.*

Tuesday :: March 29

READING

Daniel 1:8-21

MEDITATION

As one of the privileged of Judah, Daniel would have been no stranger to the finer things of life. But in exile, he calls for simple foods. His exile could have been very comfortable – possibly even more comfortable than his place in Jerusalem. But he chose the way of simplicity as a way to demonstrate God's sufficiency²⁸.

Often our pursuit of God's glory can be confused with the pursuit of the good things. We equate a good God with good *things* and full bellies. This is a mistake. The majesty of God and the richness of things are often at odds. Goodness is not gauged by the same standards we use to measure good meat or rich wine²⁹.

TODAY'S PRAYER

*Your goodness, Father, is not confined to our definitions
What goodness have you placed in my life?
What simple in my life is overflowing with your grace?*

Wednesday :: March 30

READING

Daniel 1:8-21

MEDITATION:

After ten days (v 12), Daniel and his friends were ten times as wise as the other counselors (v 21). That's quite a difference indeed, and there's no way to chalk it up to just a better diet. Even in exile, God demonstrates his magnificence and power. Even in exile, God is present.

What is particularly amazing is that God gave them understanding in arts that were not part of His own worship (v 17). To demonstrate his presence, God gave Daniel knowledge of both the written and oral traditions of the Chaldeans³⁰.

TODAY'S PRAYER

*Make me first holy, Lord,
And grant me the skills necessary to demonstrate your power even in exile.*

Thursday :: March 31

READING:

Daniel 2:1-16

MEDITATION:

Dreams are dangerous things³¹. This goes doubly for dreams that sit on the edge of the memory, and triply so when the dreamer is the most powerful man on earth. Nebuchadnezzar was a *ruthless* man. He demanded complete obedience, and his word was law. To deny him anything, even if it was impossible, was to ask for swift and brutal retribution.

Daniel was not even called into this assembly before the king – probably because of his age – but when he heard about it, he rushed to the king and boldly asked for more time. Why?

Daniel could have let them come and kill him. At the very least, every counselor in the kingdom would have been dead, and Babylon would have been paralyzed. His life was a small price to pay for crippling the people who had destroyed his own.

Exile lets us see even our enemies as God's creatures. We are after all just sinners – whether we are kings or wise men or exiles. It was within his power to at least *try* to save these men³², and so Daniel was willing to take the risk.

TODAY'S PRAYER

*God, will you help me love my enemies?
Please make me a blessing – a compassionate spirit
And help me to never forget that Your gifts are not for me but for others.*