

# TRANSFORMED TO BE A BLESSING

SERIES: ONE KINGDOM.  
INDIVISIBLE.



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Exile  
Third Message  
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## *Exile*

In the fall of 2002, my wife and I moved from Sunnyvale to Dallas, Texas, to begin a four-year program of seminary. We had recently become parents, so we moved right after our daughter turned six weeks old. Over the next four years, I learned a great deal about theology, biblical languages, church history, and pastoral ministry.

During that time, my wife and I had two more children and found that our marriage was deeply struggling. This led to several years of marriage counseling and some deep work on our relationship.

I often say that I learned the Bible in my classes, but I learned to be a pastor in marriage counseling. The work of learning how to listen well, open up my own heart, and love my wife transformed me.

This is our third week of a series on the unity of the kingdom of God called “One Kingdom. Indivisible.” We are joining with at least twenty other churches to preach the same series outlining how the unity we have as followers of Jesus is far deeper than any earthly alliance. Our approach has been to trace the theme of the kingdom of God broadly throughout Scripture.

This week we arrive at a painful part of the story of God’s people: the seventy years they spent in exile in Babylon. They were stolen from their land, resettled thousands of miles away, and separated from their heritage. God sent them into exile to learn a lesson. His goal was to transform his people through the difficult season of those seventy years.

The instruction God gave them while they were in exile was unexpected. While they were living among their oppressors, God asked them to bless the Babylonians. This season in the life of God’s people had a very clear purpose. God sent them into Babylon to transform their character so they could seek the good of the city. They are transformed to be a blessing.

As Christians, we can be quick to talk about how to change the world. We look around and see so many

things that are out of alignment with the kingdom of God: laws which allow unborn children to be killed; racial injustice throughout our country’s institutions; sexual confusion run rampant; poverty that can trap generations; drug use, gang violence, corruption, privacy concerns, income inequality. The list goes on and on.

There are so many areas of the world we’d like to change. In this part of the story of the kingdom of God, we see that God didn’t ask his people to change the world. He sent his people into the world to be changed by it. God subjected his people to oppression so that their character would be transformed.

This is not to say that all oppression is intended by God. The exile was a very unique time in the history of God’s people. However, God’s purposes there were clear. What we can take away from this part of the story is a clear understanding of the kind of people he wanted his people to be. We will see their calling to bless the world, but we will see that it starts with their character.

This morning we’ll begin with a brief explanation from Scripture of why God sent his people into exile. Then we’ll look at two individuals of the exile: Jeremiah and Daniel. Jeremiah gives some surprising instruction about how to live in Babylon, and Daniel finds himself in a surprising position within the Babylonian government.

Each of their stories will help us to think about how we need to be transformed so that we can be a blessing to the world.

## **Purpose of the exile**

Last week we saw the birth of the kingdom of God when God rescued his people from slavery in Egypt. After that, God built them into a nation. He gave them a land. He gave them prosperity. He gave them leaders. Despite all of that, God’s people kept turning away from him. And so, a thousand years after the exodus, God sent his people into exile.

Jeremiah explains the reason behind the exile when he records God telling his people how to return to him.

## Jeremiah 4:1-2:

**“If you return, O Israel, declares the LORD, to me you should return. If you remove your detestable things from my presence, and do not waver, 2 and if you swear, ‘As the LORD lives,’ in truth, in justice, and in righteousness, then nations shall bless themselves in him, and in him shall they glory.”**

If you listen carefully, you can identify the three things that caused God to send his people into exile. The first is idolatry. They failed in their worship of God and worshipped false gods. These are the “detestable things” that Jeremiah mentioned.

The second is righteousness. Their kings were selfish and hedonistic. The people had no leadership. They didn’t look any different from the nations around them. They had failed in the calling to be a “holy nation.”

The third is justice. Leaders were corrupt. The poor suffered while the rich prospered. Those in positions of authority took advantage of the vulnerable rather than protecting them. Justice was perverted for the sake of the powerful.

There are three reasons for the exile—three failures among God’s people: worship, righteousness, and justice. They failed in how they related to God, in their personal character, and how they related to others.

God had given his people their identity when he rescued them from Egypt. He gave them the Law. He told them who they were supposed to be: a treasured possession, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. But they failed. They didn’t live up to their identity, so he sent them into exile to be changed.

God saved them from oppression in Egypt to tell them who they were. He sent them into oppression in Babylon to shape them into who they were supposed to be.

Many of us are going through some hard times right now. I’m not suggesting that God caused any of it to change us. We don’t know God’s purposes. But he does use adversity to transform us. How might God be transforming you?

What’s been very interesting for me in this study is to see how different God’s purposes were in the exodus and the exile. We’ve been looking at the kingdom of God

and paying close attention to how the kingdom of God interacts with the kingdom of the world. The similarities and differences are fascinating.

In the exodus, God’s concern was for his people to be distinct. They were to be set apart from the world. Moses gave up a life in Pharaoh’s court, Moses stood up to Pharaoh, and God hardened Pharaoh’s heart.

In the exile, God wanted to transform his people. Daniel took a position in Nebuchadnezzar’s court. Daniel partnered with him, and God softened the heart of Nebuchadnezzar. God has different purposes for his people at different times.

My wife and I used to say this phrase to our kids a lot: “Different kids get different things at different times.” My kids all recently made a vow to never say that to their own kids. The same could be true of God. God is not a rulebook. He is not a system. God is a person with personal goals. His purposes adapt to the situation and what is needed.

There are times to stand in opposition to the world as Moses did with Egypt. There are times to partner with the world as Daniel did with Nebuchadnezzar. There is no formula for determining what to do. All of this requires wisdom. All of it requires the Holy Spirit working in our hearts and within our communities.

We’ve seen this tension come up in new ways lately. Our local government had issued restrictions around the kinds of activities churches can do. Some churches have seen this is a violation of their rights, and they are standing up and taking a posture in opposition to the government. Some churches have met in person in violation of shelter-in-place orders in a similar way to how Moses stood up to Pharaoh.

Other churches have chosen to partner with the government to fight this pandemic together. We’ve chosen this route too. We’re asking questions about how God is transforming us during this time. We see it as an opportunity to work alongside our leaders for the good of our community. We understand this more in line with what we’ll see in the story of Daniel helping Nebuchadnezzar.

This is why we need wisdom and the Holy Spirit to be leading us. Each church will make their own decisions as the Spirit guides them. We stand in unity, even if we sense God leading us differently.

How do we figure this out? How do we know when we're pushing back too hard or selling out too easily? Let's look at two individuals during the exile to grow in wisdom. We'll look a bit more closely at Jeremiah and Daniel.

## **Bless the city**

The book of Jeremiah is an incredible guide for how to live in exile. Most of the people in his day were hoping that things would get better quickly. Other prophets said the exile would end soon, but not Jeremiah. He had incredible instruction for God's people living in exile.

### **Jeremiah 29:7:**

**But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.**

You may have heard this verse before. We've talked about it. It's a popular verse for helping Christians understand how to promote the good of their local community. Don't let the familiarity take away from how radical this is.

Let's pick our worst political enemy right now. Maybe Russia or Iraq or North Korea. Let's say that North Korea invades the United States, and that most of us are kidnapped and relocated to live as exiles within the border of North Korea. We are given no rights. We are cut off from the outside world. Our homes and our schools and our parks and our churches have been leveled to the ground.

You're praying that God would rescue you from North Korea. You want to go home. It might be fair to say that you hate the people who kidnapped you. But you receive a letter from a prophet telling you that you're not going home anytime soon. What's more, they tell you to do whatever you can to help North Korea prosper. They ask you to pray for God to bless North Korea. They suggest that if North Korea flourishes as a communist totalitarian government, then that will be good for you, even though you're living as an exile with no rights.

That's crazy, right? What would you think about that? How could God possibly ask us to work for the welfare of a government that has no regard for human life? For a leader who twists the truth, obscures reality, and oppresses his people?

But this is the story of the kingdom of God. This is not only what they were asked to do. Their story is our story. This is what we were asked to do in that season. This is what we're asked to do in our season as well, to bless our city.

Centuries later, Jesus would echo the same idea when he said:

### **Matthew 5:44:**

**Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.**

Here's where it gets interesting from a political perspective. I suggest to you that our concern politically is not for ourselves, but for others. Let me say that again. Our political concern should not be for ourselves, but for others.

I find it troubling that so much of the political effort of many Christians is focused on self-preservation. We are worried that our rights are being violated. We are concerned that the government isn't treating Christians fairly. We lobby for legislation that protects our rights and favors our institutions.

But the nature of love is not to protect ourselves, but to care for others. So how do we focus our political efforts to care for others? How do we bless the city through politics?

The encouraging thing is that we have been doing this. For years, churches in Santa Clara County have been trying to bless our city. Our government officials notice. This morning we have a brief video from Santa Clara County Supervisor Joe Simitian in which he thanks churches for being involved and encourages us to keep it up.

We have a government official asking us as churches to help in the community. That doesn't always happen. But it does when you work toward building goodwill and loving without expecting anything in return.

Sometimes people say that we need to be calling the world to repentance, not blessing them. We need to help them see their sinfulness. I agree with that, but the method that God uses is kindness. Here's what Paul says in Romans:

## Romans 2:4:

**Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?**

God's kindness is meant to lead people to repentance. Jeremiah instructed people to seek the welfare of the barbaric godless nation, which was oppressing them.

God disciplines his people. He sent the nation of Israel into exile. But for those who don't know him, it's his grace and kindness which lead to repentance.

Our calling is not to protect our own rights or to change the people in our world. Our first goal is not to fix their lifestyle. If we start by blessing the world with the kindness of God, that's a great place to begin.

Of course, it's always complicated when you get real people talking about real issues. How do you bless the city? What about our biblical convictions? Who do we partner with? These are incredibly important questions, and because they require wisdom, different Christians are likely to come to different conclusions.

Which brings us back to unity. This is why it's important to start with a foundation of unity. We are in the family of God together, so we can disagree with the approach in a given situation. We can talk about the pros and cons, but all of that happens within the boundaries of our unity.

Balancing kindness and grace with biblical convictions is complicated. Let's look at one more story during the exile to see how Daniel did this.

## Partnering with leaders

One of the biggest surprises from the time God's people spend in exile is how God uses terrible leaders for his purposes, and how God's people work together with those leaders. Esther is sex-trafficked into the king's harem, and she ends up saving her people. Ezra and Nehemiah benefit from the sympathy of Persian leaders to allow returning from exile and rebuilding the temple.

Daniel works as a close associate with several Babylonian kings. These leaders were not nice people. Nebuchadnezzar was brutal and feared. But when you read the book of Daniel, you end up feeling fond of the guy. You can't help think but Daniel actually liked him.

After being kidnapped and transported to Babylon, Daniel and his friends were given high positions in Babylon's government.

## Daniel 2:48-49:

**Then the king gave Daniel high honors and many great gifts, and made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon and chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon. 49 Daniel made a request of the king, and he appointed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego over the affairs of the province of Babylon. But Daniel remained at the king's court.**

This is remarkable. Kidnapped Jewish slaves are given prominent positions in the court of Babylon. What's amazing is not just that they were offered these positions, but that they accepted. They were willing to serve in a government of a nation opposed to God and offer their best efforts to help that nation be successful. Granted, they were slaves and didn't have much of a choice, but all of them show a willingness in other stories to die for their principles.

I wonder how Daniel's role in Babylon affected the empire. We don't know what he actually did, but we have to assume that having his godly and wise counsel made a big difference. No wonder the Babylonian empire was so powerful.

This is a helpful image for us because it helps us to see that you can be faithful to God and serve in a political atmosphere which is opposed to God.

Daniel wasn't a sell-out. He didn't sacrifice his convictions. In fact, he was thrown into a lion's den precisely for not being willing to sell out. This is what's amazing about Daniel. He's able to maintain his own personal integrity. He has an incredible commitment to his own ethical convictions. He won't violate them for himself, but at the same, he partners with an evil pagan king.

Daniel manages to hold his convictions and partner for good. It's a great model for us.

In our collaborative preparation time with other pastors, one of them pointed out that Daniel was able to de-couple his faith from his political activism. At first, I was confused by that statement. Shouldn't our faith and political efforts go hand in hand? But as he clarified, it made sense to me.



Daniel was true to his convictions, but he worked with someone who violated a lot of those convictions. He didn't compromise. He focused on the good work he was doing. There are no perfect allies in our world. Nobody aligns with everything. But we can work with people and organizations whom we disagree with because we're working on things about which we agree.

If you're pro-life, can you vote for a pro-choice candidate because so many of their other positions line up with yours? Absolutely. If you believe in welfare programs, can you vote for someone who doesn't because their other values are compelling? Yes.

This picture of God's people in the exile helps to break up what James Mumford calls "package-deal ethics"<sup>1</sup>. Our world tends to view everything as a perfect alliance. They say we need to sign on completely to anything in order to work together. But in reality, nothing is like that. We hold true to our personal convictions and stay faithful to God. We partner with some people on particular issues, and we weigh everything in balance.

That's what the exile made clear. God's people could find a way to be true to themselves and their God while still seeking to radically bless a pagan nation. That's incredible. It requires a lot of wisdom, but that is how the Spirit leads.

## Conclusion

I'm so thankful for the years of transformation in marriage counseling that God gave me during seminary. In case you think that I figured it out during those few years and it's been smooth sailing ever since, that's not the case. I find God continually transforming me in deeper and deeper ways.

I'm convinced that all the ways God has and is transforming me is so that I can be a blessing to the world.

That's what happened in the exile. God transformed his people so they could bless the world. We can be tempted to get it backward. We think God wants to bless us so that we can transform the world—bless me and transform the world.

Of course, we want God to bless us. But when we're thinking about how the kingdom of God relates to the world, the process is clear. God doesn't bless us to transform the world. He transforms us so we can bless the world. How does that work for you? How is God transforming you so you can be a blessing to the world?

## Endnotes

1. James Mumford, *Vexed: Ethics Beyond Political Tribes* (Bloomsbury Continuum, 2020), quoted in John Harris, "Vexed by James Mumford review – provocative plea for political nuance," *The Guardian*, February 23, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/feb/23/vexed-ethics-beyond-political-tribes-james-mumford-review>.