

‘Welcome to Exile. It’s Going to Be OK.’

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When I was a child, I was taught this chorus:

This world is not my home,
I’m just a-passing through.
My treasures are laid up
Somewhere beyond the blue.

Honestly, until recently I had no idea what I was singing. For us in the English-speaking West, this world has tended to feel very much like home, and our treasures have been right before our eyes.

Perhaps it is only in the last few years in the United States that we have finally faced that what the Bible says is true: in this world we really are sojourners and exiles ([1 Pet. 2:11](#)). That reality has been clouded and obscured by the size and legal protection of the church in most of the Western world. But this world is not actually our home. We’re not supposed to settle down here. We’re not supposed to expect the church to be large, influential, and respected.

Christians are increasingly going to be seen as different, and not in a good way. We are increasingly going to have to choose between obedience and comfort. The next decades will not bring apathy to the gospel, but antagonism. And that’s OK. After all, that has been the reality for most of God’s people through most of history.

In this sense, as we move ahead in time, we’re going back - back to the world of the first-century church, and back even further to the Babylon of the exiles. And so we have many lessons from early Christians, and from men like Daniel and his friends.

Statue vs. Rock

When we think of drawing inspiration for a post-Christian world from the book of Daniel, our minds perhaps instinctively turn to the fiery furnace or the writing on the wall or the lions' den. But even before any of those events, there's rich truth for our times in the dream that God gives the pagan king Nebuchadnezzar, and enables his godly servant Daniel to interpret -- for here is a lesson about what the church is, and what the great empires and nations of the world are.

Here is, as Daniel explains it to the king, the content of the dream:

You saw, O king, and behold, a great image. This image, mighty and of exceeding brightness, stood before you, and its appearance was frightening. The head of this image was of fine gold, its chest and arms of silver, its middle and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay. As you looked, a stone was cut out by no human hand, and it struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold, all together were broken in pieces, and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away, so that not a trace of them could be found. But the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth. ([Dan. 2:31-35](#))

The statue represents the great empires of the ancient world, with Nebuchadnezzar's as the head. And all -- all -- are superseded by, and brought to nothing by, a small rock. The meaning? "The God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people" ([Dan. 2:44](#)).

Here is the main and the plain thing: human history is under the control of God, and he has a purpose that will be achieved. The message of the dream was for the young exile as much as for the apparently all-powerful king. God would replace every kingdom and bring into being his everlasting kingdom. And that is what he did when he sent his Son, who announced that “the kingdom of God is at hand” ([Mark 1:15](#)). Jesus was (and still is) the rock that God fashioned out of nothing. Here was the everlasting kingdom of God. And it appeared that the Roman statue had smashed the rock by nailing him to a cross, and yet it was not possible even for death to keep hold of this king ([Acts 2:24](#)).

Even then, at the turn of the first century it must have seemed impossible that the Roman Empire would ever fade and perish -- yet fade and perish it did, even as the kingdom of King Jesus grew throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. The rock smashed the statue, and the rock became a mountain that filled the entire earth.

What a comforting message for the young, exiled Daniel. What a confidence-building truth for us, too: God is God, he is in control, and his kingdom has no rivals.

His Kingdom Knows No Rivals

We have seen more than Daniel could. We know the name of the rock; we can look back in history and around in our world and see how the rock became a mountain. Yet we find ourselves complaining about everything, looking back to the good old days and worrying that the church cannot survive the empire of an aggressively secular post-Christendom. Too much of the public face of evangelicalism is characterized by angry venting or panicking -- rather than prayerful, humble, calm, and confident belief in a sovereign God who is in control of things.

How will we handle the onset of persecution? How will we handle the loss of our jobs on account of our Christian faith? How will we handle the closing of public worship? Will we give up, or grow defeatist or angry? Not if we remember that God is God, that he is in control, and that his kingdom ultimately knows no rivals.

In the 1920s, Lord Reith helped to establish the British Broadcasting Corporation and served as its first director-general. He was a somewhat severe man from the highlands of Scotland. As the BBC began to be carried along by the tide of secularism that swept through Britain in the 1960s, a young producer stood up in a meeting and said to Lord Reith that the world was changing, and that the BBC did not need to continue with its religious programming. People were no longer interested in religion, he said, and the church was becoming increasingly obsolete.

Lord Reith, who was 6'6", told this young man to take his seat. Then he stood up and said: "The church will stand at the grave of the BBC."

And you know what? It will. It will still stand when the BBC - and [CNN and Fox as well](#) -- dwindle and die. God's kingdom will stand when every organization and institution and empire meets its end.

Give Yourself to the Church

Your church may seem small. As you drive to meet with the household of God on a Sunday, you may pass hundreds of houses whose inhabitants give no thought to what you are doing, except politely (or not so politely) to deride it. It may feel little. But God's kingdom is unsmashable, and it has an embassy in your neighborhood that we call the church. Don't be discouraged as you meet; don't be distraught over dwindling numbers or a more and more hostile media. Instead, commit to it.

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Serve your church family. Give yourself to it. Because when the Lord builds his church (either in number or in maturity) through our labors, gifts, and giving, we are being used to build the only kingdom that will last forever. There is nothing coming next. So, give your best to this kingdom. It may feel small, but it is never in vain, for this kingdom is eternal, and it is God's. So we do not panic and we do not vent, and we enjoy a deep confidence even as the tides seem to run against our faith. God is God, he is in control, and his kingdom -- his church -- ultimately knows no rivals.

Editor's note:

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