

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.