

Not Alone: God's Relentless Pursuit Exile

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One of my favorite theologians in church history is a man named Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, who lived in the fourth century. You'd think his life was idyllic, but it was not. Athanasius had his battles, specifically with heresy. As a result, he was exiled five times for over seventeen years! This is why he has famously been called "Athanasius *contra Mundum*" or "Athanasius Against the World."

Could you imagine—exile? During his exile, he (1) had to live in a cistern; (2) had to evade assassination attempts; (3) had to live in the Egyptian desert away from society. Could you imagine? Exile? No ball with your kids, no Fourth of July fireworks, no coming home to your wife, no Chick-fil-A, no Cape Verde almost beating Argentina, and no Travis and Taylor weddings! Actually, exile me! Just kidding—it would be terrible!

Here's my question: What was it that allowed Athanasius to be faithful? To truly be "Athanasius Against the World?"

We're in a series called **Not Alone**, going through the Old Testament. Today, we're not looking at an individual book, but a time period: the period of exile. As we've talked about, Israel, once one, had been split into two. For the northern kingdom (Israel), exile occurred in 722 to the Assyrians. Then, around 586 BC, the southern kingdom (Judah) was taken into exile by the Babylonians.

Today, I want us to think about the question we asked of Athanasius (what was it that allowed him to be faithful?) and I want to apply it to two people from two time periods who themselves endured exile, Daniel and Esther. To do this, we're going to use our **LIFE** acrostic.

L → Literal—What is the original meaning/message of the book?

I → Incarnational—How is Jesus reflected in the book?

F → Formational—How does the book apply to our lives?

E → Eternal—How does the book point us to heaven and eternity?

LITERAL

Let's look at what's literal from these characters.

1. *Consider Daniel.* Daniel was taken into captivity by the Babylonians. While in exile, he underwent attempts at re-education to form and shape him into a more Babylonian kind of man. "Then the king ordered Ashpenaz...to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians...They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service" (Daniel 1:3-5). So, here's Daniel, being "re-educated," and trying to figure out how to remain faithful despite it all.
2. *Consider Esther.* Esther was a beautiful woman, who, chronologically after Daniel, was summoned by the King of Persia (the Persians had overtaken the Babylonians) to be his queen. "Esther also was taken to the king's palace..." (Esther 2:8). So, here's Esther, in exile, in the harem of a Persian king, walking on eggshells, trying to figure out how to be faithful through it all.

My friends, I wish I could say that it was easy, but it was not!

1. *Consider Daniel.* Daniel was known for being faithful to God alone and not bowing down to the Babylonian idols nor praying to their gods. The Babylonian officials hated this, so they conspired against Daniel. They knew he would keep praying to his God, so they went to the Babylonian king (Darius) and said,

“May King Darius live forever! The royal administrators, prefects, satraps, advisers and governors have all agreed that the king should issue an edict and enforce the decree that anyone who prays to any god or human being during the next thirty days, except to you, Your Majesty, shall be thrown into the lions’ den.” (Daniel 6:6-7)

2. *Consider Esther.* Soon after Esther became queen, an evil man named Haman, who hated the Jews, began planning a genocidal plot to destroy all of God’s people. Haman proposed a plan to the Persian King Xerxes.

“There is a certain people dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom who keep themselves separate. Their customs are different from those of all other people, and they do not obey the king’s laws... If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them...” (Esther 3:8-9)

So, what do we have here? We have Daniel facing being thrown to lions if he worships the one, true God, and we have Esther facing the extermination of her whole people. Two different people, two different times of exile, two different kings, two examples of faithfulness on the line.

If we were here [points to high point of stock market performance image on screen], now we’re here [points to a spot below the image]. What happened?

1. *Consider Daniel.* “Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before” (Daniel 6:10). Do you know what happened? Daniel went into the lions’ den. One hour passed, two hours passed, then the whole night. In the morning, everyone rushed to see what happened. “Daniel, are you in there?” Daniel walked out, completely unscathed. God saved him. The king’s jaw hit the floor. Because of Daniel’s faithfulness, King Darius said, “I issue a decree that in every part of my kingdom people must fear and reverence the God of Daniel...He has rescued Daniel from the power of the lions” (Daniel 6:26-27).
2. *Consider Esther.* Upon learning that Haman had plotted to destroy God’s people, Esther resolved to advocate for them. The problem was that going to the king uninvited could cost her her life! But she went anyway. “I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish” (Esther 4:16). So Esther went before the king, and he accepted her even though she was uninvited. But here’s the kicker: she still had to advocate for her people! Finally, she mustered up the courage. “If I have found favor with you, Your Majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request” (Esther 7:3). By the grace of God, Xerxes took her side. He was angry that anyone would threaten Esther or her people. The king favored her! “Who is the man responsible?!” he asked. Esther response, “An adversary and enemy! This vile Haman!” (Esther 7:6). Haman was impaled and God’s people were saved through Esther’s faithfulness!

To recap: We have two different people, two different times of exile, two different kings, two examples of total faithfulness. That’s the literal.

INCARNATIONAL

Now let's think about the incarnational. How do these figures point us to Jesus?

Ash and I first met in June. To commemorate the moment we became boyfriend and girlfriend a month later, we got a plant and named it June. Our plan was to pass June back and forth each month and keep it alive as a token of our love. Unfortunately, June died. Why? We were unfaithful in watering June!

Contrast that with this story I recently came across about Jadav Payeng, nicknamed "Forest Man." He is an example of one man who makes a difference. The island he lives on, Majuli, in northeast India, is threatened with extinction through erosion. His response has been to try to counteract this by planting 1300 acres of forest, one tree at a time, since 1979. He has singlehandedly prevented the total decay of his island through his faithfulness.

Now, here's why I share this: before I get to the formational and try to inspire you to make a difference where you're at through faithfulness, I need you to know that without the faithfulness of Christ, we'd be like June: dead. We'd be like Payeng's island, destined for extinction by erosion.

But here's the thing: we have a Jadav Payeng, someone faithful. A better Daniel. A better Esther!

1. *Consider Daniel.* Think about his life. Daniel (1) left his home, becoming a foreigner. Daniel was (2) tested and tempted yet never relented. Daniel (3) trusted God. As a result of his faithfulness, Daniel (4) went down into the den of lions. The result? Daniel (5) came out the other side and transformed everything.

Does that sound anything like what you know of Christ? Didn't Jesus leave his home, becoming a foreigner? Wasn't Jesus tested and tempted yet never relented? Didn't Jesus trust God and obey His will? As a result of faithfulness, didn't Jesus get handed over to some lions, taken into a den-like grave? Didn't Jesus, like Daniel, come out the other side, bringing transformation with him? Do you see how Daniel points to Jesus? Amazing!

2. *Consider Esther.* Think about her life. Esther (1) left the safety of where she was in Xerxes palace. She left there to go to Xerxes (2) at great risk and threat to her very own life. She (3) identified with her people, and she went to Xerxes to (4) advocate for them despite the plans of Haman, the "adversary and enemy." What happened? By *her* faithfulness, God's people were (5) saved!

Does that sound anything like what you know of Christ? Didn't Jesus leave his heavenly palace? Didn't he come to Earth at the risk of his own life? Didn't he identify with all humanity by assuming a human nature? Didn't Jesus become our advocate? Didn't he thwart the plans of our adversary and enemy the devil? Didn't Jesus bring us salvation? Of course he did!

Friends, if we have eyes to see, even in one of Israel's hardest moments, exile, God was orchestrating all things to point us to his Son!

FORMATIONAL

But now, let's get this on the ground. Let's get practical. We covered the literal and the incarnational. Now, let's talk about the formational.

Not too long ago I learned the story of Ernest Gordon, a soldier who survived three and a half years as a Japanese prisoner during World War II. He was an exile. As an exile, he was forced into brutal manual labor and had to endure starvation and a bunch of diseases! And get this: he went into the camp as an agnostic, yet came out a Christian. How?

Gordon saw stuff: (1) He saw one prisoner accidentally starve himself to death to provide rations to a dying friend. (2) He saw another man accept the death penalty imposed by the guards for the alleged theft of a shovel (a shovel that was only misplaced, not stolen). And finally (3), there came a moment, at Gordon's lowest point, after he suffered from malaria, appendicitis, diphtheria, parasites, and more. Ernest lay crippled at one end of the camp, written off as beyond hope by the doctors. But some Christians built a small shelter for him, and two Christians in particular alternated shifts bathing Gordon, caring for his wounds, and massaging his legs to help him gain the strength to walk again. Eventually, he got better.

As a result of their service, his heart changed. He began to see something that he didn't know before. The effect wasn't had on only him. The whole camp was affected. Unbelievably, in the midst of darkness, a Christian culture emerged even during exile. As Gordon puts it:

The wind of the spirit had blown upon us; we could not prove how or whence it had come. But our experience pointed to a source beyond ourselves. We knew personal fulfillment, love, joy, peace, wholeness, as we committed ourselves to the One who called us. Only as we responded to this Word did we receive the power to progress towards true humanity. Our life on the horizontal plane was made meaningful at the point where it was met by the vertical. At the point marked by the Cross we found ourselves.

The Bible tells us that we, like Esther, Daniel, Athanasius, and Ernest, are “exiles scattered” (1 Peter 1:1) and “foreigners and exiles” (1 Peter 2:11). So, how can we be faithful like Esther? Faithful like Daniel? Faithful like Athanasius? How do we create the kind of culture Ernest experienced in a POW camp of all places?

Let me give you three considerations. You've got to have...

1. **A different story.** In other words you need a vision that God is writing a story that won't end with death and exile, but ultimately with resurrection.
2. **A different authority.** In Daniel's day it seemed like the authority was King Darius. In Esther's, King Xerxes. In Athanasius', Rome. In our post-truth world, it feels like the true and sole authority is our own personal narrative. But here's the reality: Jesus didn't come only to be our Savior. He also came to be our Lord. He's on the throne!
3. **A different ethic.** As Christians, we are not only called to believe certain things; we are called to live out a way of life that is different—a life shaped by God's story and God's gospel. Daniel was a man of prayer. Esther fasted. Both had integrity. Both worshipped God. What about us?

A different story, a different authority, and a different ethic. It's what Athanasius had, Daniel had, Esther had. It's what Ernest found. And it's what we can have too.

ETERNAL

So, that's the literal, the incarnational, and the formational. Now we get to the eternal.

Here's all I'll say to this: You and I, though exiles now, will not be exiles forever.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.” (John 14:1-4)

Friends, we may be exiles, but we're headed home. And Jesus is leading the way.