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SINGING  
*in*  
BABYLON

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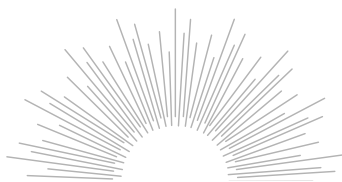
FINDING PURPOSE  
IN LIFE'S  
SECOND CHOICES



JEFF LUCAS

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# Prelude

It was a poignant moment, and the room hushed as if to mark it.

Huddled around a lengthy conference table for our weekly pastors meeting, we chattered back and forth, considering themes for an upcoming sermon series. Someone posed a question.

“What are we hearing from people in our congregation?”

There was a thoughtful pause, then Pastor Brent spoke up:

“There’s one comment I hear repeatedly, expressed in a variety of ways. People often say that life just hasn’t turned out the way they thought it would.”

A senior member of our team, sage-like Dick Foth, smiled ruefully and nodded. He’s navigated quite a few twists in the road during his seventy-something trips around the sun.

“Life is what happens when you expected something else,” he mused.

Through a window across the room, beams of sunshine cascaded through the glass, the cloudless sky a shimmering blue.

We were in Fort Collins, Colorado. Boasting around three hundred days of sunshine annually, our city often scores top marks in those “Best places to live” charts. Fort Collins is seen as an ideal location for raising a family, with quality schools and the

prestigious Colorado State University nestled in the historic downtown area, which also hosts a thriving arts scene and more than fifteen microbreweries.

This northern Colorado city is viewed as a great place to retire, affordable, with a multitude of restaurants that appeal to every taste. There are well-stocked libraries and lush parks and great health care.

The population is broadly affluent. As in any city, some face economic hardship, but the median family income tops \$90,000.

The Front Range of the majestic Rocky Mountains dominates the horizon to the west. People hike, camp, hunt, jog, and ski, in an outdoorsy, healthy culture.

It's not perfect, but it is very pleasant.

Yet it was here people were reporting that life just hadn't turned out the way they thought it would. And the comment was coming, not from those who had yet to discover the power and purpose that Jesus offers, disappointed because life without God seemed hollow. This was a view from Christians who were wrestling with "second choice" life.

As we'll see (and I'll emphasize this repeatedly), life for every one of us, Christians included, involves episodes or seasons that would not be our first choice. We all live on a fractured planet, created good but now marred by the Fall, where everything is not as it should be. Thus in the trivial and the tragic, life can be good, but it's rarely perfect, if ever.

So how can we find purpose when the sun disappears from view and all seems barren, wintry?

That's what this book is about. We will spend time with a man who was suddenly wrenched from a life of privilege and roughly

shoved into an existence of servility and danger. His was not a brief visit; we will see that he would spend his whole life in that second choice world, but he did not merely survive in that place: he flourished. Many miles from family and home, he surely experienced great heartache, but he also discovered that God had trekked to Babylon with him. I will not visit every detail that Scripture gives us about Daniel. The first six chapters of the book that bears his name focus on stories about Daniel and his friends, and the second six chapters focus on prophetic material about the future. We will focus more on the stories than the prophecies. I want to highlight enough of his journey to illustrate this truth:

In the midst of bewildering dislocation, Daniel found that his God helped, delivered, spoke, directed.

The result?

In short, in Babylon, Daniel sang.

Perhaps, where you live, life just hasn't turned out the way you thought it would.

My prayer is that, in these pages, you and I might find grace, hope, and purpose as we follow Daniel's footsteps and, more specifically, consider Daniel's God.

I have a request. Please don't be tempted to gloss over or ignore the portions of Scripture that will follow: they come from God's Word and provide vital context for all I have written.

Thank you for allowing me to journey with you in this book. Together, may we learn how to hum a tune when life happens, and we expected something else.

In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia and put in the treasure house of his god.

**Daniel 1:1–2**

How can we sing the songs of the  
LORD while in a foreign land?

**Psalms 137:4**

To God's elect, exiles scattered ...

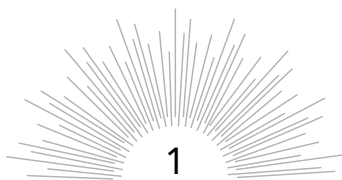
**1 Peter 1:1**

Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching.  
My Father will love them, and we will come  
to them and make our home with them.

**John 14:23**

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for ... who through faith ... shut the mouths of lions [and] quenched the fury of the flames.

**Hebrews 11:1–2, 33–34**



# You've Been Relocated

I'm dreaming.

I'm a contestant in one of those so-called reality TV shows. My fellow cast members and I have been dropped into a hostile jungle location, where an alarmingly hungry number of creepy-crawlies vie for the epicurean opportunity to snack on humans.

It's a competition, and there's a handsome prize for the most enduring soul in the group.

It's my dream and I'll win if I want to.

I do.

I brave the slithery horrors of the snake pit. I wolf down a surprisingly crunchy maggot tart, and I am now declared winner.

My prize? My wife, Kay, and I can now relocate to anywhere we want to live in the world, the first year there all expenses paid. Our choice.

My first choice would be Hawaii, one the most remote groups of islands in the world, around 2,500 miles from the nearest continental landmass.

Thanks to frequent flier miles, I've been there a few times, and I love it.

Warm, soft, white sand underfoot, crystal clear blue water lapping at your toes as you stroll down the beach for your morning cappuccino.

Glorious sunsets where, like a laughing, slightly crazy artist, God lobs buckets filled with hundreds of shades of orange and red all over the fading blue canvas of sky, and the distant sun seems to settle, sizzling, into the sea.

The fresh after-rain aroma of the flora-perfumed air.

A gentle evening breeze that refreshes and never chills.

First choice. It doesn't get any better than this.

But stop right there. It seems that paradise is flawed.

There have been issues with rumbling volcanic activity, and not just the "vog" that can shroud the sun and stain the air with the rotten egg stench of sulphur dioxide, a toxic gas. Running from a fast-moving stream of bubbling molten lava (1,200 degrees hot) would not be my first choice.

Last time I was in Hawaii, I viewed a surfboard, structurally revised by a passing peckish shark that took a huge bite out of it. No harm was done to the surfer, but the beaches were closed for two days. Suddenly I can hear that menacing theme music from the movie *Jaws*.

Okay, perhaps it's unlikely that I'd bump into a hungry shark or suffer cremation courtesy of an angry volcano.

But there are other challenges. Living in such a remote place sounds idyllic, but being far from the madding crowd also means living distant from family and friends. One could easily be lonely in paradise.

Then there are those pesky tourists, lots of them. I've been one of them, but as a newly settled resident, I'd bristle when they crowd and litter the beach, grab the last table at the cafe, and purloin "my" parking space.



I know, these are very much first-world problems, the minor pains of the privileged few. For significant second choice challenges, I could have pointed to the millions who don't have enough food to feed their children today.

My point is this: even when life looks close to perfect, it's not. Real life is a combination of first and second choices. Every day includes some of both.

And, to emphasize the point, that is true for all who live on this beautiful yet broken planet, including those who follow the King whose rule is breaking in, but is not fully here yet. That Second Coming day will dawn, but in the meantime, we all have to live through mean and menial times.

We'd do well to face the truth, that in the trivial and the tragic, the irritating and the devastating, second choices—circumstances that we would not choose, given the chance—are part of living. But that reality check is often hindered by the way some portray the life of faith.



The preacher was working up a sweat now, dark patches appearing in the armpits of his otherwise immaculate suit. Arms flailing, he paced back and forth across the platform, barking into the microphone. His sky-blue eyes were wide open, his smile broad, revealing perfect white teeth.

What he offered sounded very good indeed. Bible open in hand, he proffered what everyone with a pulse wants: a wonderful life.

Briskly weaving contemporary examples of victory and breakthrough with a practiced delivery of memorized Scriptures, he told us that God wanted us—each and every one of us—to be winners, not losers.

We were to be the head, not the tail.

Triumphant over the circumstances, not cowed down by them.

Strong and healthy, not withered by sickness.

Financially prosperous, never short of cash.

*Yes, please, I thought.*

For a few moments, I believed it and tried to ignore the fact he had wrenched some of those Scriptures completely out of context. His rapid-fire, staccato delivery made it hard to keep up.

But my discomfort increased as I looked around the congregation. Like hungry baby sparrows, beaks wide open for a tasty tidbit, many of them were swallowing this whole.

*Yes, please!*

But then I glanced over at wheelchair-bound Sue, and before I could look away, she caught my eye. She just looked back at me, a fixed stare, yet not harsh. And then I realized what was behind her expression: quiet despair.

Her look seemed to probe me for some kind of silent response to the performance on the platform. Would I shrug, roll my eyes, shake my head? It felt as though she was alone, marooned, and now some gesture from me might lessen her stricken isolation.

Sue's condition has gone downhill fast in recent years. She has received prayer for her multiple sclerosis many times, but without noticeable effect. Once, another enthusiastic visiting evangelist loudly declared her healed and attempted, without success, to persuade her

to vacate her wheelchair. She tried so hard to oblige, but couldn't even stand up straight, never mind take a step. She slumped back down heavily into the chair, a picture of defeat. The evangelist had no problem with his walking, darting to the next person in the queue for prayer.

Unwilling to commit to a gesture of response to Sue, I wondered if I was being wise or cowardly. I looked away, and my eyes fell upon Bill, who has been unemployed for a very long time. After decades of working for the same company (and refusing lucrative offers along the way because he is loyal), now he's been rudely banished in the company reshuffle, with the news he's now overqualified. He's too old, it seems; younger blood is needed. He lives daily with the harsh knowledge he has passed his sell-by date. His loyalty wasn't reciprocated.

Sitting next to him is his best friend, John, who is currently at the head of the proverbial tale, at least in career terms. Handsome and brilliant, he is racing through promotions at meteoric speed. With no money problems, he and his wife, Christine, enjoy the comforts of a beautiful home.

At first glance, they're living the dream. But John and Christine are currently navigating heartbreak because their oldest son has marched away from Jesus and is playing fast and loose with hard drugs. They pray for him each night before they vainly pursue sleep, terrified at the thought of a phone call in the small hours from the hospital or police.

Then I look across at the gaggle of smiling teenagers sitting cross-legged close to the platform; minutes ago they were bopping away as the worship band strutted their stuff. They recently completed high school, and the guest speaker at their graduating ceremony told them they could do anything they dreamed; if they believed it, it could

be done. Now they were getting the “Christian” version of the same speech from our guest speaker.

It was then that I wondered: Were we setting these young people up with the expectation they would always experience a first choice world?

Where, if they put God first, they would get a life of comfort and abundance?

Where opportunity would knock but tragedy not stop by?

Where the sun would warm their backs but never burn their skin?

Bluntly, to do so is to indoctrinate them with a lie. Little wonder some struggle—and tragically, some even opt out of life—when it doesn’t work out that way.

Nobody gets a life of endless first choices, be they billionaires or barely scraping by, be they anonymous faces in the crowd or feted celebrities.

Nobody.

Including Jesus.

If in doubt, eavesdrop on His prayers in Gethsemane. His first choice was for the cup of suffering to be taken away. He got second choice, which involved a cross.

Second choice living: we all experience it.

If in doubt, ask Sue.

Ask Bill.

Ask John and Christine.

Ask Jesus.

But here is some good news. When life offers us second choice, not only can we survive, we can thrive. We can flourish when the weather turns wintry.

I know those last couple of sentences sound like fodder churned out by one of those motivational speakers that I mentioned earlier, slogan-like rather than substantial. But as one who views the Bible as the core foundation for life, I'm convinced there's good reason for that claim.

Can we learn to blossom in the wilderness or, to switch back to our familiar metaphor, could we sing a joyful song in Babylon?

Perhaps there's a way.

*Yes, please.*



Here's another dream, more a nightmare.

You are living happily in the location of your choice. Life is good, comfortable, happily predictable.

War suddenly breaks out, and a totally unexpected defeat comes at the hands of a foreign power. Ground troops invade the country that you thought was yours, swooping across the land like ravenous locusts. Terror grips you as you watch the doom-laden newsflashes, because the headlines are apocalyptic. Rumors abound about the brutality of the advancing soldiers, who are rapidly approaching your area.

The dreaded day dawns. Enemy soldiers arrive, and pound on the door. They order you to pack your things: your home no longer belongs to you. Not that you will be homeless. It looks worse than that, because you are being deported, shipped off to that foreign country, together with some other leaders and influencers from the community. All your plans, hopes, dreams—your whole life—all has been snatched from your grasp.

Choices? You have none right now, and the horizon looks bleak.

At last you arrive in the place where you will be forced to settle and make your home, but it is an alien place, where everything is unfamiliar. Again, you have no choice. Nobody is asking what you think, if you like it here. You're a commodity. You've been trafficked.

You wonder: Where is God in all of this? Is He there? Worse still, if He is there, does He care?



As we turn to the story of Daniel, which unfolded 2,600 years ago, around 600 years before Christ, we see he faced an unexpected development that he would never have chosen: and one he would live with for the rest of his days. Deported, probably as a hostage, with a few friends to the strange land of Babylon, he was now in a location and situation where absolutely everything about the culture—music, food, customs, religion, philosophy, education, values—was all utterly foreign to him. Daniel, a contemporary of the fiery prophet Ezekiel, was a young man whose name means “God is my judge.” Now he was suddenly caught up in the maelstrom in what was an extended period of exile, the judgment of God upon His wayward people.

Countless Sunday school teachers have portrayed Daniel as the suave hero in a real-life thriller story, but that depiction is wrong. Daniel's story is one of long-term captivity and conflict. As Larry Osbourne writes:

It's such a huge mistake to turn Daniel into an adventure story. It not only obscures the main

point, but it also sends a blatantly false message: if we do the right thing, God won't let anything bad happen to us. He'll rescue us from the furnace and the lions. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. God's best have often suffered the worst this world has to offer. Ever since the fall of Adam and Eve, evil and injustice have had a field day. Bad things happen to good and godly people all the time.<sup>3</sup>

In Babylon, Daniel and his friends were a long way from the comforts and familiarity of home. They were young, described in the story as *yeladim*, a Hebrew word that was frequently used for “lads.” Some commentators say they may have been between twelve and, at the most, eighteen. Historians believe that Babylonian children began serious education at the age of fourteen, and that Nebuchadnezzar would have demanded impressionable youngsters who could be shaped by a rigorous training program. The Hebrew boys were certainly inexperienced with life and therefore pliable.

Or so it was thought.

They had also lost particular privileges that were theirs back in Jerusalem. Scripture tells us those chosen for service in the foreign palace were from “the royal family and the nobility” (Dan. 1:3). Rabbinic tradition says that Daniel was a descendant from King Hezekiah—but now he was placed in someone else's service.

Ironically, if Daniel was indeed from the line of Hezekiah, then his personal captivity and exile had been predicted by Isaiah around 150 years earlier:

“And some of your descendants, your own flesh and blood who will be born to you, will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the King of Babylon” (Isa. 39:7).

The mention of eunuchs brings us to another uncomfortable truth not usually mentioned in those Sunday school lessons.

Commentators are divided, but it’s possible that hope for a normal marriage and family life was taken from the exiles shortly after they arrived at their new address: these young men were castrated. Hardly anyone’s first choice, and devastating because in the ancient world the ability to have a family was especially vital. They were the ones who would not only inherit your wealth, but take care of you in your dotage. If you had no sons, you would lose your land to others. You would be forgotten.

There’s no mention of any family in the story of Daniel and his friends, which is telling. And then he was “qualified” to work in the king’s palace, which included a harem full of beautiful women. We know from the biblical record that Daniel was good-looking: a first choice. But that may have been the reason for an awful second choice: castration to appease the despot on the throne and protect his interests.

Daniel’s “tutor” in the palace had already experienced the unkindest cut: according to the ESV translation of the text, he was the “chief of the eunuchs.” Perhaps Daniel was part of an emasculated team, one that nobody would choose to join.





In the story of Daniel, Babylon is not just a location, but it represents a whole system of opposing beliefs and values: the city of this world against the city of God, a conflict traced in Scripture from Genesis to Revelation. Daniel's story poses the question: Who is the biggest loser? Daniel, beaten hands down by the power of Babylon, or God, vanquished by Babylon's gods? In those days, when a nation was defeated, people considered that the nation's God was defeated too.

Gerard Kelly comments:

The taking of the secured articles from the temple in Jerusalem indicates that this is a spiritual as well as a political victory. There is a conflict between Babylon and Israel in which Israel is the loser. But behind this there is an implied conflict between the gods of Babylon and Israel's God, Yahweh. One of the primary questions the book of Daniel wrestles with is this: "Is it that Israel has lost power, or the God of Israel?" On the surface, we wonder if Daniel can survive the experience of exile, but far more deeply the book is asking us if Yahweh can survive it. Is God's "turf" limited to the promised land or will He still be God when all appears lost?<sup>4</sup>

Babylon personified evil.

The king whom they were forced to serve, Nebuchadnezzar, was impulsive, murderous, and vicious beyond belief, and his

plundering of the temple was a deliberate act of mockery and blasphemy. This was a man who built a ninety-foot statue of himself and insisted that everyone bow before it.

Exile was devastating, separating these young men from all that they held precious.

They left behind the Promised Land—the place of God’s bountiful provision, and the temple—viewed by the Jewish people as the place where God dwelled on the earth.

They were separated now from the holy and beloved city of Jerusalem, so cherished in the history of God’s people, together with the comforting and strengthening cycles of sacrifice, celebration, feast, and festival, where God’s people gathered to celebrate their unity and identity, and to renew their covenant with the Lord.

The city of Babylon itself would have been intimidating. The Babylonians were enjoying stunning economic and military success, having decisively triumphed over the armies of Assyria and Egypt in the battle of Carchemish.

Babylon was a boomtown.

Archeologists and Greek historians describe a fabulous and opulent designer city, built on both sides of the river Euphrates: the greatest and largest city on earth at that time. Two hundred miles square, it was surrounded by a double fortified wall, with 250 towers placed at strategic intervals. The walls, fifty-six miles of them, were eighty feet thick and 320 feet high.

The city was dominated by the Etemenanki: the temple of “the foundation of heaven and earth,” a seven-story ziggurat dedicated to Marduk. At around 299 feet high, it was a skyscraper of its day, a staggering feat of engineering.

Parks, fields, and gardens took over 90 percent of the city, with the remainder filled with private houses, public buildings, and temples: over a thousand of them. Idolatry was everywhere. There was a huge double gate created to honor the god Ishtar, which led to a processional street especially designed for pomp and ceremony, decorated with enamel figures of dragons and bulls.

The hanging gardens, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, were situated in Nebuchadnezzar's palace.

The Babylonians had the wealth, the power, the architectural brilliance. The Hebrew Four had been taught that the idols of other nations were nothing, dead, powerless. But if that was true, how come they had all this "blessing"?

Even though the king was the most powerful man on earth, the belief was that the gods were the real power brokers. In Babylon, the temple priests wielded enormous power.

John Lennox says of them, "They controlled a great deal of the land and therefore were in receipt of immense revenues. Even the emperor had to publicly acknowledge that reality. At the climax of the spring festival Nebuchadnezzar had to submit to a public ritual humiliation by the priests, during which the custom was to slap him hard until his tears flowed. This was to remind everyone that the priests were the power behind the throne, and it was only after this ceremony had been performed that the great banquet to herald the advent of spring could begin."<sup>5</sup>

The land around the city was flat and fertile, in marked contrast to the land back in Judah. The plenty of Babylon mocked the lack of their homeland. Historians say that even the geography of Babylon daily reminded the exiles of what they'd lost. Babylon was

quite literally a strange land, so unlike the mountains of Judah. The Judeans were hill-dwellers; historians say that being forcibly transported to a land of unending plains would have been bewildering. It was coupled with the sense that they'd been betrayed by their leaders and abandoned by God, intensifying their sense of emotional and spiritual crisis.

The plains offered nowhere to hide, no way to escape.

While they knew this had happened as a result of God's judgment, they must have wondered: *Why now? Why us?*

*Why me? What did I do?*



Not everything has a cause and effect. When things go wrong in life, it's not correct to suggest this is always the result of something bad we've done. But in Israel's case, exile came because she had consistently defied the Lord.

God had warned His people that persistence in evil would lead to captivity:

“You will be uprooted from the land you are entering to possess. Then the LORD will scatter you among all nations, from one end of the earth to the other” (Deut. 28:63–64).

So for hundreds of years warnings had been sounded. Gerard Kelly points out:

The people of Israel should not have been surprised by the exile—there are plenty of hints in their earlier

history that such a thing could happen, and that disobedience could trigger it. But for the most part they did not read these signs and it was the trauma of exile that finally convinced them that God was serious in both the promises and sanctions of covenant. The prophets had spoken of it already but it took the harsh reality of Babylon to bring the message home.<sup>6</sup>

Exile came because Israel refused to learn her lesson; judgment came to bring her to her senses, calling her to repent from her idolatry and its twin sister, injustice. And Daniel and his friends were caught up in the maelstrom that resulted.



Mother sobbing, wailing. Begging  
the soldiers to have mercy.

Take whatever you want, she screams, but please!

Leave my son!

One of them punches her hard in the face.

She falls heavily, and then a sword  
is held at her throat.

Get in line, the man with the sword yells  
at me, his filthy, yellow teeth gritted.

Do as you're told, or she dies.

Hands at her face, blood running through her  
fingers, her sobs quieten now, but her body heaves.

I get in line, and there is one of them at my side,  
 almost willing me to make a wrong move.  
 I dare not look back.  
 What will become of us?  
 Will they march us out of the city,  
 and then put us to the sword?  
 Will there be torture first, with me  
 begging like my mother, not to be spared  
 but allowed the mercy of death?  
 The word is these invaders like to put out the  
 eyes of their enemies before they kill them.  
 A fool asks one of them: What will you do with us?  
 The others are coming with us to the  
 great city, Babylon, one of them says.  
 There's a long march ahead. Four  
 months. A dangerous route.  
 Babylon? A city of darkness.  
 What is there for us?  
 Prison?  
 A public execution, after a parade for the  
 victorious, with us as the trophies of war?  
 The fool pushes his luck.  
 What do you mean, the others  
 are going to Babylon?  
 It is the last thing he says.



So what's all this got to do with us, thousands of years later?

We've been relocated. We too live in exile.

It's always true of Christians that we live as foreigners, exiles, resident aliens. Exile is the place where we are not fully at home yet, and where God is not fully in charge—yet.

And that is where we live.

One day every knee will bow, but for now, the world remains broken. We are establishing a kingdom colony as we live as the people of God, and one bright day the new Jerusalem will come down, and the good King will fully take charge. In the meantime, we are resident aliens, living here but with a passport from another kingdom. As Gerard Kelly says,

The New Testament points us to the truth that we Christians are “aliens and strangers” (Heb. 11:13; 1 Pet. 1:1; 2:11) living freely in the world and yet not at home within it. The Greek words used in these texts present a local church as a colony of resident aliens in a given place and time. We are called to be both resident and alien, at home but not at home in every place to which the spirit of God scatters us.<sup>7</sup>

And surely we feel that sense of alienation increasingly as the days go by.

Without developing an over-rosy view of a past where Christianity and churchgoing were more central in life, we must face the fact that culture has increasingly shifted away from

Christian values. Those who hold those values are often viewed as being out of touch and dismissed as intolerant, judgmental, even dangerous.

We are in exile, which is where the church began. In fact, they were an exilic people among an exiled people. Birthed in a nation that was governed by the occupying Roman forces (and therefore, in a sense, exiled within their own nation), they were initially a tiny minority, viewed as a strange sect within Judaism.



Again we must abandon the myth that following Jesus always give us a “first choice” life, and expose the fantasies associated with that myth.

As Viv Thomas suggests, there are four main fantasies:

Fantasy one: “If I walk closely with God he will give me my first choice.” The idea behind this fantasy is simple; it is the notion that spiritual people always “get it right.” They listen to God and God always delivers to them the things they think they need. Really spiritual people are like high-class machinery—low maintenance and almost problem-free. If they do have problems they know how to solve them quickly.

Fantasy two: “In my first choice world I will be happy.” In this fantasy my peace and joy are dependent on getting my first choice. If I get what



I want I will be truly happy and content. Anything which appears to me to be second best will not do, for it will not give me the joy I think I need, and will thus make it impossible for me to live my life as I think I should be able to live it.

Fantasy three: “In my first choice world I will be secure.” If I get what I want I will be able to build my life involving minimal risk. The underlying idea is that I do really know what is best for me so that I can actually make sure that I live a life which is long, safe, satisfied and under my control. In this fantasy second choice worlds are perceived as risky, difficult, undesirable and unstable.

Fantasy four: “In my first choice world I will be able to walk closely with God.” This fantasy promises that when I am where I want to be then I will be able to have a wonderful relationship with God. When I get my first choice world it will help me understand his beauty, wonder and glory.<sup>8</sup>

A poignant example of “second choice living” comes from the experience of getting older and frailer, from writer Donald McCullough:

Every other week I visit a friend who lives in a convalescent home. I have a vague discomfort ... I think I know what causes it: the fear of losing

control. Examples of how this could happen abound in a convalescent home. Some residents are unable to leave the premises without assistance from relatives or friends; some are confined to wheelchairs; some need others to translate their incoherent mutterings; I don't like being reminded of the possibility of these things. Each loss, no matter how apparently small, is a blow to our freedom.<sup>9</sup>



Exile was not all bad news. In Daniel's case, it was God who "handed Israel over" to bring them to repentance and a greater revelation of His character. Exile was not just about judgment, but a tool to bring Israel clarity that might lead to a better day. Babylon was a place of revelation for Daniel.

God wanted His people to learn some lessons: walking away from Him had consequences. Ultimately, He is sovereign and in control. The place of suffering can be the place of refinement and growth. The darkest place can be the valley where we find light, and become the light to others. The hottest furnace can produce the purest gold.

Exile gave Daniel an unparalleled opportunity to speak into the dark realm of Babylonian politics.

Anyone who says that Christians should not be engaged in politics has never read or understood the book of Daniel. He speaks the truth of God to kings, and remember, he does this as a foreigner in exile. Up until now prophets of Israel have spoken to the kings of Israel, but

this was a new situation. Exile has made Daniel and his friends aware that the God of Israel is the God of all creation, of all history, and of all peoples, everywhere.

Although these truths about God being the Lord of the planet and not just Israel were embedded in the call of Abraham and the commissioning of Moses, they come fully to the forefront in Daniel's exile.

And the book of Daniel has much more to show us about God too. In fact, that's the main purpose of the book. Although the story of Daniel is about ethics, it's not really a call to copy Daniel: to choose vegetarianism or open our windows to pray three times a day. It is not just a call to heroism. Like the book of Jonah, where too much focus has been given to the big fish, but which is primarily about God and His nature, the book of Daniel is really about Daniel's God.

As Tremper Longman points out, from its very first verses, the book of Daniel is not about Daniel but about God, who "does not reveal Himself to us in the abstract but rather in relationship to His people and through His actions in history."<sup>10</sup>

The revelation of God in the book of Daniel challenges many modern notions we have about God.

Daniel's God is mighty, and towers above the self-promotion yet undeniable power of King Nebuchadnezzar. God is totally self-sufficient, omniscient, and omnipotent. He is willing to share secrets about current and future events. He is far above anything humanity is or could ever hope to be; he is King of Kings, Lord of Lords, who does that which is humanly impossible. God acts, Nebuchadnezzar's jaw drops, and on one occasion, he falls prostrate because of what God does.

Daniel's God stands astride history, using it, never dominated or surprised by it. In spite of present appearances, He is in control. We don't live in a world where God's will is always done—that's why we pray, "Your kingdom come, Your will be done," but like the book of Revelation, the book of Daniel shows us that, ultimately, He is in charge, and finally, when Christ comes, He will rule and reign absolutely.

Even in chaos, God has a plan and a purpose. He works with the found and seeks the lost.

Perhaps most of all, Daniel's God was with him, wherever they found themselves, regardless of their circumstances.



Jesus knows about exile. In a sense, the incarnation of Jesus—His coming to this earth—was an experience of *total* exile, as He laid aside His majesty and the glories of heaven, exchanging them for the challenges and difficulties of life on this planet. As a baby, He was taken to a foreign land, Egypt, to escape Herod's program of infanticide. He experienced rejection from His own village, Nazareth, and had to relocate His base to Capernaum. As I mentioned earlier, in Gethsemane, He asked the Father if there was any other way to complete His work other than taking the pathway to the cross, a request that was denied, and so He experienced the ultimate "second choice"—a death sentence from Pilate. Jesus knows all about exile, and is able to fully empathize with us in our experience of exile and second choice living.

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Heb. 4:15–16).

We live in Babylon.

But just as Daniel and his friends discovered that God lived where they lived too, so we affirm that God has taken up residence with us, in us, and will work through us, even as we live in a strange land. Jesus promised His followers pressure and presence. While we are never assured that we will not go through the fire, we are always assured that, in the agony of the fire, we are not and will never be abandoned. Wherever we find ourselves, and whatever circumstances are ours, we share our address with Him.



## FOR REFLECTION

1. “Poor choices sometimes lead to second choice lives.” What are some examples of this, and are there any from your own experience?
2. As Christians living in the Western Hemisphere, do you agree that we are now in exile? Why, or why not?
3. Can you give any example where you learned something valuable in a “second choice” circumstance—what was it?