

Counselor's Toolbox

Using Exile as a Metaphor in Counseling



by LAUREN WHITMAN

Language is flexible. That's one of its charms. Language also develops over time as words morph and meanings expand. Take, for example, the phrase *batten down the hatches*. This phrase originated in the 18th century in the sailing world. When a storm was coming, sailors covered the hatches—the openings on the deck—with wood. The phrase endured—and developed to other uses. Hundreds of years later, I grew up in South Florida, a place where hurricanes are a regular threat. When one was headed our way, we would batten down the hatches. For us, this meant getting out custom-cut wooden boards and nailing them in to cover the windows. As we employed this phrase, there was a literal action attached to it, though we contextualized it for a different scenario than the original one. The phrase now worked in hurricane preparation for a house on land.

And the phrase can be flexible still! It can also be used figuratively. Imagine I said, “After I got into credit card debt, I battened down the hatches and learned to stick to a budget.” Here I am using the phrase

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metaphorically to express a commitment to ward off financial hardship by responsible spending. We can still draw a connection to the original context—that is, wise protective measures—but now there is no literal action of physically covering something.

This flexibility and broadening intrigues us as counselors when we consider how to use the Bible in counseling. Because the Bible is an ancient text, accessing it can be a challenge. Oftentimes, when we try, we encounter awkward phrasing, strange people, and unfamiliar scenarios. Sometimes it feels risky to turn to the Bible and try to make connections and draw parallels between the person you're helping and the people whom God spoke to so long ago. Yet we know it is important for all people to see themselves in the pages of Scripture and to know and trust that what they are facing is not outside Scripture's purview. Using metaphors is one way to bridge this gap. Metaphors can build a connection point between God's Word and counselees that can be life-giving amid trials and hardships. Metaphors can deepen our understanding of our situation, of ourselves, and of God.

The biblical metaphor I will explore is *exile*. Just as *batten down the hatches* can be used in different contexts and take on a metaphorical meaning, we will see how exile can similarly develop. Exile in the Bible had a literal meaning in specific contexts. It was an experienced reality. The reality it referred to can also become flexible and be used metaphorically. As we use exile metaphorically, remember that metaphors explore similarities—but important differences can also exist. Rather than expecting an exact, one-to-one correspondence, metaphors show connections by drawing comparisons in more symbolic, flexible ways. These connections can help enrich our understanding and lead to deeper insights. Keep these points in mind as we move forward.

This toolbox will prepare you to use exile as a metaphor in counseling conversations. We will explore three questions:

- What is the experience of exile like?
- Who is God amid an exilic experience?
- How does Christ fulfill and extend the exile metaphor?

Then I will end with an example of how to apply exile in a counseling situation.

Let's begin.

What Is the Experience of Exile Like?

Admittedly, the word *exile* isn't a part of our everyday vernacular. But most people know the word and are familiar with its general meaning, which is when someone has been forcibly removed from their home. Think of modern refugees fleeing from war and oppression. Given this meaning, exile resonates with the experience of various problems, namely the sense that "I am not where I am supposed to be." Exile is not a condition someone chooses; it is imposed on them and comes after a great loss.

It is important for all people to see themselves in the pages of Scripture.

To apply this metaphor in counseling, first identify where an actual exilic experience happens in the Bible. Adam and Eve might jump to mind as the first exiles. Because of their disobedience, God removed them from their home in Eden. But the most prominent narrative about exile comes after Babylon destroys Jerusalem and the temple in 587 BC. Earlier, God had made a covenant with Israel. He promised to bless them if they were faithful to him and the covenant. If they were not, he warned of exile:

The LORD will drive you and the king you set over you to a nation unknown to you or your ancestors. There you will worship other gods, gods of wood and stone. You will become a thing of horror, a byword and an object of ridicule among all the peoples where the LORD will drive you. (Deut 28:36–37)

God gave this stark warning—that they would become “a thing of horror”—but they did not heed it. The Israelites disobeyed God anyway. As a punishment for this, God raised up the Babylonians to conquer Jerusalem. When the city fell, the Babylonians took many Israelites to Babylon with them. They were in exile there for seventy years. Seventy years—that's a long suffering. Conquered and banished to a land that is not home. They became a *byword*, meaning their fate was a typification of horror. They were an object of ridicule among the surrounding nations. It was excruciatingly painful. This pain, this humiliation, this despair, this hopelessness, this uncertainty about the future—these are the connection points to a counselee's experience.

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