

Faith for Exiles

5 Ways for a New Generation
to Follow Jesus in Digital Babylon

David Kinnaman
and **Mark Matlock**
with Aly Hawkins



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To Jill and Jade,
whose resilient faith and love for Jesus
inspire us every day

Certainly there was an Eden on this very unhappy earth. We all long for it, and we are constantly glimpsing it: our whole nature at its best and least corrupted, its gentlest and most humane, is still soaked with the sense of “exile.”

J. R. R. TOLKIEN

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Start Here

Digital Babylon and Resilient Exiles

feel like there are a million things I'm forgetting to remind you," I tell my firstborn, Emily. We are three hours into a seven-hour trip to move her in for freshman year. The silver Kinnaman minivan is packed with crates of clothes and dorm room décor, and I am trying to cram in all the parenting wisdom that comes to mind. What to eat. How to manage her bank account. What to do in an emergency. How to remember what's on a guy's mind.

How much I love her.

How to stay committed to Jesus.

Most of our family attended Christian colleges. I did. My wife—Emily's mom—did too. Christian higher education shaped my parents, my siblings, and their spouses. But that option wasn't best for Emily. She graduated as valedictorian from an academically challenging high school and, as a great student with mountain-sized ambitions, had a specific science career in mind: genetic research. (She geeks out like her dad.) None of the Christian schools that felt safe and wholesome

enough to me seemed prestigious or rigorous enough to her. So Emily elected to attend a state school. And not just any state school: University of California, Berkeley.

My perception of that legendary Bay Area institution? Let's just say I was dead set against Berkeley when Emily put it on her list of possibilities. I tried to ignore the possibility that it *was* a possibility. Given a series of unexpected circumstances, however, attending became a real option—not just an unthinkable one. She visited and loved it. I realized just how elite the school is, especially for young scientists. Oh, and God changed my mind. (I'll tell you later how that happened.)

So now, alongside conviction that the Lord is leading my brilliant, talented, and driven eighteen-year-old daughter to Berkeley, I also feel trepidation. On campus, Emily beams with pride as she power walks the hillside, showing us highlights she remembers from previous tours. “These are reserved parking spots for Nobel Prize winners who teach at Cal!” As she leads us through Sproul Plaza, a landmark infamous for its rowdy political protests, the fading light of a Northern California evening hangs over imposing buildings. I know Emily possesses great reserves of physical and spiritual strength, yet I can't help but wonder, *Have we given her a resilient faith that will last?*



I am not just a worried father; I have professional reasons for my concern. In my work as a social researcher, I've interviewed tens of thousands of tweens, teenagers, and young adults. Using a variety of quantitative and qualitative research methods, my company, Barna Group, examines the spiritual journeys of young people.

A lot of what we hear is distressing.

It's a concern shared by my coauthor, Mark Matlock, who has spoken to nearly a million teenagers and parents, and written dozens of books about growing mature and lasting faith. And like me, he is a father to young adults and teens.

We have each been working with and for the sake of young people and the church for more than twenty years. So we've been thinking for a while about how to grow young disciples—and, at the same time, we've been parenting young disciples.

Here is a big data point that keeps us up at night.

The 2011 book *You Lost Me* argues that the church has a dropout problem. At the time we collected data for that project, 59 percent of young adults with a Christian background told us they had dropped out of church involvement—some for an extended period of time, some for good.

In less than a decade, the proportion of eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-old dropouts has increased. Today, nearly two-thirds of all young adults who were once regular churchgoers have dropped out at one time or another (64 percent).

Our contention is that today's society is especially and insidiously faith repellent. Certainly, God's people have weathered hostile seasons in the past; church history reminds us that living faithfully has never been easy. But our research shows that resilient faith is tougher to grow today using the cultivation methods we relied on throughout the twentieth century. This leads to our central claim in *Faith for Exiles*.

**Young non-Christians are avoiding Christianity,
and young Christians are abandoning church;
however, by cultivating five practices, we can
form and be formed into disciples of Jesus
who thrive as exiles in digital Babylon.**

Faith for Exiles is different from my previous books on faith and the next generation, which uncover how the Christian community sometimes fails to portray Christ's love so that young adults can perceive and receive it (*unChristian*, 2007) and, to young church dropouts, fails to make a case for itself (*You Lost Me*, 2011). Thanks to the research behind those projects, and dozens of other Barna studies among the next generation, we know a great deal about what is going wrong in the North American church's efforts to connect with young Christians and non-Christians.

But what, if anything, is going right?

More than a decade's worth of research with nearly one hundred thousand teens, young adults, parents, and church leaders reveals how young faith *can* mature and thrive in cultural exile. This book distills what we've learned thus far about passing on lasting faith in Jesus in a culture increasingly indifferent and sometimes hostile to Christianity.

Even now there are seeds of hope germinating in the cracks, breaking through in places such as England, Scotland, Ireland, Canada, and Australia—societies that are even more post-Christian than our own. Our research shows this is happening in North America too. And what we find confirms what Christianity's long history records: the roots of faithfulness often sink deeper in anxious, unsettled times. Faith can grow even—and sometimes especially—in the darkest of places.

Remember Jesus's parable of the sower, in which a farmer scatters seeds on various kinds of ground? It illustrates the spiritual receptivity or resistance of the human heart, reflecting a range of possible responses to the good news of God's kingdom. Through many centuries, this story has been used as a sort of growing guide to help Christians diagnose the

condition of the soil they are working with and then provide suitable light, proper pruning, and beneficial care.

As in that ancient story, today the soil of many hearts is rocky, dry, and dusty, or filled with thistles and weeds, stifling what really matters. The age-old questions of being human remain unasked, shriveling like neglected seedlings. Deep spiritual longings, which ought to be lovingly tended and skillfully cultivated, are choked to death by binge television, immersive gaming, and social media scrolling. As we will say many times in the coming pages, technology and the lighted rectangles we gaze at all the time aren't bad in and of themselves. But if we are not vigilant and intentional, digital Babylon glitzes and blitzes our days so completely that we never get around to pursuing the deeper things of life.

We believe this generation wants and needs more. And we believe the abundant way of Jesus, the family of God called the church, and the ancient call of Christian mission can answer the stifled longings of this anxious age.

Welcome to Digital Babylon

Maybe you remember that ad from a few years ago in which a young adolescent boy asks, “Google, what is ‘glossophobia?’” A warm female voice gently informs him, “Speech anxiety is the fear of public speaking.” He clicks “explore more” on his Nexus tablet and launches audio of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s first inaugural speech on the steps of the US Capitol, which soars over an inspiring video montage of Google coaching the young man’s preparations to give a speech in class.

We can tell the young man’s speech is a big success because his classmates burst into applause—and because an attractive

girl shyly smiles at him. Surprised and sheepish, he smiles back.

Jump cut to the ubiquitous Google search bar.

“How do I ask . . .” the boy types, “. . . a girl out,” the drop-down bar suggests, because his trusty Google device can see into the hopeful places of his tender heart and wants to be his ever-present, all-seeing, secret-keeping BFF.

Many of us today turn to our devices to help us make sense of the world. Young people, especially, use the screens in their pockets as counselors, entertainers, instructors, even sex educators. Why build up the courage to have what will likely be an awkward conversation with a parent, pastor, or teacher when you can just ask your phone and no one else will be the wiser?

When it comes to technology, the path of least resistance is not scorn-worthy because it's easy. It's praiseworthy because it's efficient.

Google searches are wonderful benefits, mostly, of life in the modern world. Who hasn't found their life improved by access to the right information at the right time? Watch a step-by-step tutorial on repairing your dishwasher. Listen to your favorite song. Discover a new recipe. Shop for your friend's birthday gift right now, before you forget. Confirm for the foolish person disagreeing with you that the villain in the first *Die Hard* movie is, in fact, Alan Rickman (not Jeremy Irons).

The virtual possibilities are virtually endless. Screens are portals to more rabbit holes than Alice could visit in many thousands of lifetimes—and a few even lead somewhere helpful.

Yes, there's the rub: instant access to information is not wisdom. In a 1965 sermon, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. could have been talking about our present moment when he asked,

“How much of our modern life can be summarized in that arresting dictum of the poet Thoreau, ‘Improved means to an unimproved end’? . . . We have allowed our technology to outdistance our theology and for this reason we find ourselves caught up with many problems.”¹

How do we find the rabbit hole that leads to real, worthwhile wisdom for living well and following Jesus in an accelerated, complex culture?

By *accelerated*, we mean everything moves faster: the news cycles, the speed of information, the pace of life, the rate of change. This is the screen age, after all. Digital tools, devices, and content drive our perceptions and experiences of reality. They offer an illusion of total control and a mirage of complete access to the world. As Andy Crouch writes in *The Tech-Wise Family*, technology makes things *easy everywhere*.²

By *complex*, we refer to the fact that everyday life feels increasingly complicated and uncertain. It is difficult to predict the relationship between cause and effect, to understand what outcomes (intended and unintended) will result from a given course of action, or even to get a complete picture of all the variables involved.

You Lost Me identifies three trends shaping young adults and our culture more broadly: *access* (which, thanks to “Wi-Fi everywhere,” is exponentially more amplified today), *alienation* (from institutions and traditions that give structure and meaning to our lives), and *authority* (which, like institutions and traditions, is increasingly viewed with suspicion).

In the years since that book came out, we at Barna have adopted a phrase to describe our accelerated, complex culture that is marked by phenomenal access, profound alienation, and a crisis of authority: *digital Babylon*.

FAITH FOR EXILES

Ancient Babylon was the pagan-but-spiritual, hyperstimulated, multicultural, imperial crossroads that became the unwilling home of Judean exiles, including the prophet Daniel, in the sixth century BCE. But *digital* Babylon is not a physical place. It is the pagan-but-spiritual, hyperstimulated, multicultural, imperial crossroads that is the virtual home of every person with Wi-Fi, a data plan, or—for most of us—both.

Christians whose understanding of the world is framed by the Bible can think about our experience as living in a shift from Jerusalem to digital Babylon. These are two of the ways human society is depicted in the Bible, and they endure today as helpful archetypes of civilization.

Jerusalem	Babylon
monoreligious	pluralistic
slower paced	accelerated, frenetic
homogeneous	diverse
central control	open source
sweet and simple	complex and bittersweet
idols: religious pride / false piety	idols: fitting in / not missing out

The pages of Scripture, and the annals of human history, suggest that there are times when faith is at the center and times when faith is pushed to the margins. In digital Babylon, where information (and any *thing* we could ever want or need) is instantly available at the godlike swipe of a finger, Almighty God has been squeezed to the margins. Those of us who long to keep him at the center of our lives constantly fight the centrifugal force of a world spinning us away from him.

This transition—from faith at the center to faith at the margins—is happening in North America and other societies in

the cultural West. Our data show widespread, top-to-bottom changes from a Christianized to a post-Christian society.

The tension of displacement felt by many (especially, but not only, white) Christians is this: At a formative time in their lives, they experienced a culture that was more Jerusalem-like. Monotheistic Judeo-Christian faith was at the center, and it dominated with fairly homogenized, white-middle-class values and morals that unashamedly claimed to rely on the Bible for authority. The pace of change was comparatively slow, so there was greater continuity between generational knowledge and experience. Most everyone seemed to agree on what life was about—and in that sense, things felt sweet, simple, and straightforward.

In digital Babylon, on the other hand, the Bible is one of many voices that interpret human experience; it is no longer viewed as the central authority over people and society.³ Today, if someone unironically drops “the Bible says” in a media interview, they sound as if they have just disembarked from a time machine.

Caught between Cultures

The idol in a Jerusalem-like culture is false piety; people want to appear devout, to look spiritual. Twenty-five years ago, US researchers like those of us at Barna were more likely than today to contend with religious “social desirability bias”—a desire on the part of survey respondents to be perceived as more spiritually engaged than they actually are. That’s because there was greater societal pressure to present oneself as a person of faith—even to an anonymous interviewer. That pressure has all but evaporated. It exists now only in pockets of Christian subculture. (From a researcher’s point of view, this is excellent news. From a Christian point of view, it’s a mixed bag.)

A few years ago, my daughter Annika Kinnaman, who was attending a K–8 Christian school, was on a school bus headed to an outdoor education event. As kids do on a bus with a bunch of other junior high kids, Anni and her friend Kali started up a rousing rendition of “99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall.”

One of the teachers, with a disapproving we-don’t-sing-about-booze-in-Christian-school scowl, said, “Anni! Beer?”

And sweet Anni said, with 100 percent sincerity, “Oh, I’m sorry. Is it supposed to be 99 bottles of *wine*?”

In Jerusalem, God’s people prize appropriate behavior, following rules, and moral purity. The culture of digital Babylon, however, resists the hegemony of a single “right” way of life. Anni got caught in the middle, to awkward and hilarious result.

We often consider our region or city or neighborhood (or Christian school) to be something like a backdrop, the setting against which our—and the other *minor* characters’—lives play out. However, what if we envisioned culture as a character in the story of a person’s faith formation?⁴ In a play or musical, the set is usually secondary to what the actors say and do, and we have a tendency to think the same about the “set” of our lives. Those who make claims like “There’s nothing new about the dropout problem” or “Young adults will return to church when they get married or have kids” perceive culture as a mere backdrop that makes no impact on the thoughts, feelings, relationships, and choices of the characters.

Yet the society we inhabit—the prevailing attitudes, the collective values, the assumptions about human purpose and flourishing, even the tools we use—is more like a character in than the setting of our lives.⁵ There is a big difference, for example, between growing up in certain regions of the country and growing up in others in terms of how that socializes us

toward or against faith. In other words, culture acts on our stories and on our perceptions of our stories.

Scripture is bursting with vivid characterizations of cities and societies. Jerusalem. Babylon. Sodom. Egypt. Canaan. Galilee. Rome. Laodicea. Nineveh. At the end of the brief book of the Bible named for Jonah, God asks the prophet a rhetorical question: “Shouldn’t I feel sorry for such a great city?” (4:11). Nineveh is not a painted canvas background or a cardboard veneer against which Jonah discerns, resists, and is reconciled to his prophetic calling; God cares for every single one of the 120,000-odd Ninevites *and* the Assyrian culture they give birth to. He wants to redeem whole neighborhoods, cities, and societies because they are filled with people made in his image who together create a unique way of being in God’s story: a culture.

The Babylon of the Bible is characterized as a culture set against the purposes of God—a human society that glories in pride, power, prestige, and pleasure. Babylon makes appearances throughout the Bible, most notably (and literally) in the story of Daniel. But Babylon is there in the pages of Scripture from beginning to end. From the Tower of Babel, the “first city of man,” in the book of Genesis to the final act of God’s justice and restoration in Revelation, Babylon is both a place and an archetype of collective human pursuits set in opposition to God.

At least two New Testament writers thought about imperial Rome through this Babylonian framework: Peter in his letters to Christians scattered throughout the empire and John in his apocalyptic vision recorded in the book of Revelation. Like them, exiles in digital Babylon sometimes have a love-hate relationship with the place, like the feeling you have when visiting a big, noisy city in another country; it is intoxicating but exhausting. The complexity can be both fascinating and repellant. Those who

love Jesus often feel this tension deeply; we truly appreciate what our society has to offer yet can't help but long for something more safe, more comfortable. A place that feels like home.

The Spirit of Babylon

Empires subjugate weaker nations of the earth using a variety of tactics, not all of which are military. Yes, empires use violence and power to achieve dominance. But military means often go hand in hand with colonial strategies deployed to transform the language, economics, and cultural imagination of conquered peoples. The Jewish elite were captured after Babylonia's military conquest of Judah, forcibly taken to the empire's capital, and subjected to a cultural conquest nearly as devastating as their martial defeat. (The book of Daniel is a vivid account of Babylon's culture-eradication campaign and how some exiles successfully resisted.)

If a literal Babylon were around today, the internet would certainly be in the imperial toolbox—and insofar as we thoughtlessly consume whatever content comes our way, we'd be cheerful participants in our own colonization. Even without a literal empire knocking on our door, many of us are willingly held captive. The infographic on page 26 is one way of envisioning the influence of digital Babylon, held in the balance against spiritual content a typical young person consumes in a given twelve-month period.

The idea of digital colonization may seem extreme, but here is the point: screens inform and connect, but they also distract and entertain. Through screens' ubiquitous presence, Babylon's pride, power, prestige, and pleasure colonize our hearts and minds. Pop culture is a reality filter. Websites, apps, movies, TV, video games, music, social media, YouTube channels, and so on

increasingly provide the grid against which we test what is true and what is real. The media and the messages blur the boundary between truth and falsehood. What is real is up for grabs. You've no doubt heard terms like *truthiness*, *fake news*, *post-truth*, and *alternative facts*. (Have you also come across the “research” that “proves” Millennials would rather give up their sense of smell than their smartphones? Not a real study.) All these contests to define reality are features of the current Babylonian landscape.

Screens demand our attention. Screens *disciple*.

The power of digital tools and the content they deliver are incredible, and we are the first generation of humans who cannot rely on the earned wisdom of previous generations to help us live with these rapid technological changes. Instead of older adults and traditions, many young people turn to friends and algorithms.

Digital Babylon moves at the pace of fiber optics, and the idol is fitting in and being up to speed. (A twentysomething neighbor recently scoffed that David didn't know a particular Kelly Clarkson song was, “like, really old. It came out earlier this year.”) Screens promise more connectedness, but, as researcher Jean Twenge has shown, loneliness, depression, and anxiety among teens have risen alongside widespread adoption of the smartphone.⁶ This is the iSelf era, and many young people are crippled by FOMO (the fear of missing out)—not to mention the fear of making the wrong choice, the fear of disappointing people close to them, and the fear of living a substandard life. Talk about anxiety! No wonder so many live depleted, shallow lives, huddled behind their screens consuming personalized content in a futile effort to fill the void.

In a recent study to examine the what, when, and how of faith-sharing in the age of screens, six out of ten Millennials

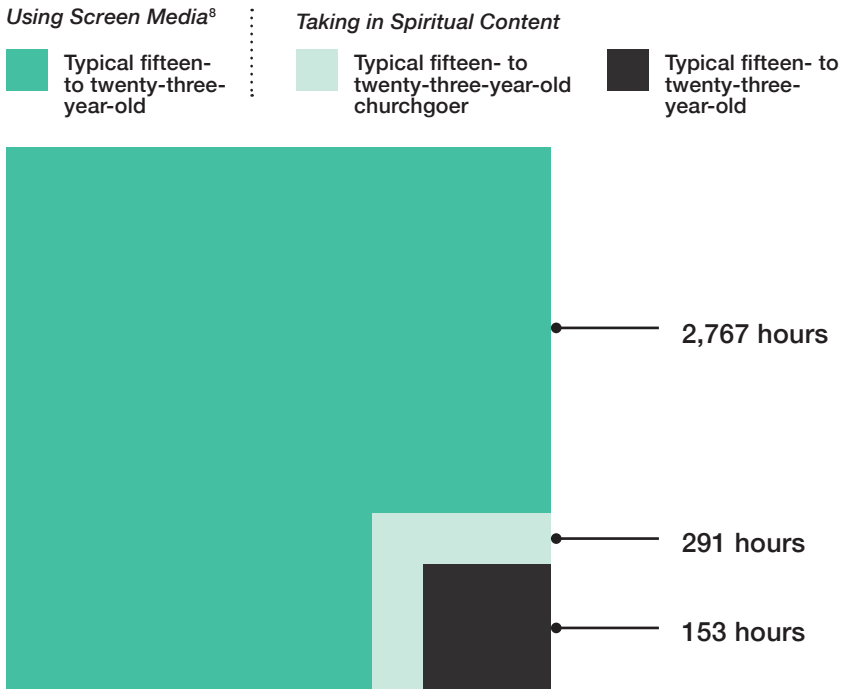
The Weight of Digital Babylon versus Spiritual Input

“Quietly, using screens and phones for entertainment has become *the* dominant activity of childhood,” writes Richard Freed.⁷ The power and the pull of screens in the lives of teens and young adults are unreal.

Even using conservative estimates, the typical young person spends nearly twenty times more hours per year using screen-driven media than taking in spiritual content. And for the typical young churchgoer, the ratio is still more than ten times as much cultural content as spiritual intake.

How can we hope to shape the hearts and minds of the next generation with the weight of information stacked against spiritual formation?

Among “typical” fifteen- to twenty-three-year-olds, the estimated number of hours per year are as follows.



*Our survey question asked, “How many hours in the last week did you spend focusing on your spirituality, including going to church, reading the Bible, praying, listening to or reading Christian content, or talking about faith?” We used this to estimate an annual total.

told us that “technology and digital interactions make me more careful about how and when I share my faith” (58 percent) and that “people are more likely now than in the past to see me as offensive if I share my faith” (61 percent). Two out of three said that people nowadays are so busy with their screens that they “are more likely to avoid real spiritual conversations” (64 percent).⁹ Of course, screens *can* make sharing faith easier—but those who use them in that way are an exception to the rule.

One reason is that we live in a time and a place characterized by rampant skepticism about Christianity and the Bible. Hyperrationalism and pop-culture atheism undercut belief. A majority of non-Christian youth and young adults are jaded to the appeal of following Jesus. They reject organized religion altogether, especially claims of an exclusive faith like Christianity. Many view the Bible as a book of oppression that is harmful to the minds of its devoted readers. In some influential places, young Christians encounter condescension or downright hostility from their peers, their instructors, and social elites.

In digital Babylon, it is difficult for earnest and sincere people to be taken, well, seriously. A constant drip of snarky YouTube videos and zippy Twitter replies, among other things, erodes any sense of trust in others. How do we persuade young nihilists to put their trust in Jesus—much less in the community of broken saints called the church?

Speaking of church—that’s different in digital Babylon too. Christians—even those who are very committed—are busier than ever, attend church less frequently, and have many options for socializing outside a faith community. It is not uncommon for people to attend events and services at multiple churches. Faith-based media is so easily accessible and portable that we’ve got a whole class of people whom the early

church would have found almost unrecognizable: Christian *consumers*. Youth group used to serve as a main social outlet for teens and kids, but it is being replaced by sports and social media. The number of hours connecting, learning, and being disciplined in a close-knit church community is now a drop of water in the ocean of content pouring out of their screens.

Much more could be said, but the point is this: we are on the front end of a digital revolution that is tinkering with what it means to be human. And we ain't seen nothin' yet.

We are all residents of digital Babylon.

We are all exiles now.

Resilient Exiles

You Lost Me concludes that the main reason young people drop out of church or fall away from faith is insufficient discipleship. The verdict of that research is that many families and churches have lost their way in terms of effectively discipling the next generation.

We believe many parents, educators, pastors, and other leaders are trying to prepare young Christians for Jerusalem, to keep them safe and well protected for a world they no longer live in. Cultivating faith for exiles means, by contrast, that we—young and old alike—trust that Jesus is Lord even in chaotic, pixelated, no-rules digital Babylon. A Christian identity and a rarely engaged church community are not enough to make someone resistant to the Babylon virus. They never have been.

Peter wrote to Christians in far-flung Roman provinces whom he called “temporary residents.”* Check out some of

*The NIV and ESV translations, for example, use the word *exiles* for Peter's depiction of these believers in 1 Peter 1:1 and 1 Peter 2:11.

the advice Peter conveyed to the exiles then and there, knowing full well they would be facing significant challenges in the culture he described as “Babylon” (see 1 Pet. 5:13).

So be truly glad. There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you must endure many trials for a little while. These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world. (1 Pet. 1:6–7)

So prepare your minds for action and exercise self-control. Put all your hope in the gracious salvation that will come to you when Jesus Christ is revealed to the world. So you must live as God’s obedient children. Don’t slip back into your old ways of living to satisfy your own desires. You didn’t know any better then. But now you must be holy in everything you do, just as God who chose you is holy. (1 Pet. 1:13–15)

You are coming to Christ, who is the living cornerstone of God’s temple. . . . What’s more, you are his holy priests. (1 Pet. 2:4–5)

This is faith for exiles.

We can’t go back to Jerusalem. Not yet, at least. So we should plan to stay and figure out how to grow disciples here and now in digital Babylon.

Making Disciples in Digital Babylon

In a previous era, we had some semblance of success with mass-producing disciples. We had big rallies and crusades and

whiz-bang events, and many young people came forward to pledge their lives to Christ. But as the growing dropout rate starkly reveals, that approach alone doesn't seem to work here and now as well as it did there and then.

In digital Babylon, faithful, resilient disciples are hand-crafted one life at a time.

Faith for Exiles is a sustained and up-close look at five hand-crafting, soul-shaping practices we've observed over the past ten years, five patterns of intentional behavior we can adopt to guide disciples in the making. But before we dive in, let's build some common ground by thinking together about common goals and suggesting some common language.

We propose that the goal of discipleship today is *to develop Jesus followers who are resiliently faithful in the face of cultural coercion and who live a vibrant life in the Spirit.*

Let's examine the component parts of this definition.

To develop Jesus followers. Our ultimate aim must be to make deep, lasting connections between young people and Jesus, "who initiates and perfects our faith" and endured the cross and its shame to joyfully redeem the world (Heb. 12:2). Those who follow him also undertake his joyful mission of redemption. As a community of faith, we sometimes miss opportunities to propel young people into the mission of Jesus. Millennials and Gen Z are often more willing to be challenged than we are willing to challenge them.*

Who are resiliently faithful in the face of cultural coercion. Resilience is a hot topic in business circles, and for good reason; it's what a person, team, or company needs in order to emerge from inevitable challenges not only intact but also with refined

*See the appendix for a breakdown of these generations.

skills and deeper wisdom. In the realm of faith, resilient disciples grow more like Jesus, not in spite of but because of their location in a society that exerts enormous coercive power, as in digital Babylon.

And who live a vibrant life in the Spirit. These Jesus-centered, culture-countering people adopt a way of life that is obviously different from the powerful norms of go-with-the-flow life in the screen age.

Here is the great news: some of these disciples already exist.

Because our main interest in *You Lost Me* was to understand church dropouts, we didn't look closely in that book at those who *stay engaged*. For the research that undergirds *Faith for Exiles*, we took a different approach. Our focus was not those who leave but those who stick around, who find cause as they come of age to make faith a high priority—and find the inner and outer resources to sustain resilient faith in the face of long odds. So this is what we did: using the survey parameters of the *You Lost Me* research—eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds with a churchgoing background—we interviewed young adults about their past and present experiences of Christian formation.

To zero in on the most committed young adults, we started by looking for the significant basics of Christian life. These Christians are regularly involved in a worshipping community and have made a personal commitment to Jesus, who they believe was crucified and raised to conquer sin and death. They also strongly affirm that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, which contains truth about the world. For this study, they also had to agree with one or more of the following “exile” statements:

- I want to find a way to follow Jesus that connects with the world I live in.

FAITH FOR EXILES

- God is more at work outside the church than inside, and I want to be a part of that.
- I want to be a Christian without separating myself from the world around me.

How many young Christians meet these criteria? There is a countercultural 10 percent of young Christians whose faith is vibrant and robust. Let's sit with the good news for a minute: from a numbers point of view, this percentage amounts to just under four million eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds in the US who follow Jesus and are resiliently faithful. Not only are the most engaged young Christians serious about personal faith and faithfulness, but they are also concerned for and thoughtful about how their faith in Christ intersects meaningfully and missionally with the world around them. In spite of the tensions they feel between church and everyday life, they keep showing up. Three-quarters of them declare a commitment to "help the church change its priorities to be what Jesus intended it to be" (76 percent).

That's resilience.

These are our "exemplars"—those who exemplify the kind of resilient discipleship we believe can flourish in digital Babylon. These sisters and brothers are young adults who model the outcomes hoped for by the community of faith. By getting to know these resilient disciples, we can find out what formation experiences and relationships are most effective for growing resilient faith in exile.

Throughout *Faith for Exiles*, we compare and contrast the practices, beliefs, perspectives, and attitudes of resilient disciples with those of *prodigals* (ex-Christians), *nomads* (church

Four Kinds of Exiles

Resilient faith is not easy to sustain in any context, but it's even harder for young people in digital Babylon. Among today's 18- to 29-year-olds, here is what's happening among those who grew up Christian.



Prodigals (Ex-Christians)

Individuals who do not currently identify as Christian despite having attended a Protestant or Catholic church or having considered themselves to be a Christian as a child or teen.



Nomads (Unchurched)

People who identify as Christian but have not attended church during the past month. The vast majority of nomads haven't been involved with a church for six months or more.



Habitual Churchgoers

Those who describe themselves as Christian and who have attended church at least once in the past month, yet do not meet foundational core beliefs or behaviors associated with being an intentional, engaged disciple.



Resilient Disciples

Christ followers who (1) attend church at least monthly and engage with their church more than just attending worship services; (2) trust firmly in the authority of the Bible; (3) are committed to Jesus personally and affirm he was crucified and raised from the dead to conquer sin and death; and (4) express desire to transform the broader society as an outcome of their faith.

dropouts), and *habitual churchgoers* (those who attend church but don't otherwise qualify under the resilient definition).

All four of these groups have some background in Christianity, and we track all of them throughout this book. The main thrust of our efforts, however, is to better understand resilient disciples. They represent the leading lights of young adult Christianity—not because they are perfect but because they exemplify a full-bodied experience of following Jesus that we should all hope to emulate. Most of their Christianized peers do not.

Five Practices of Resilient Faith

As part of our research with young resilient disciples, we kept probing the data to discern the story behind their resilience. If these are the kinds of Christians we hope to raise, support, and emulate, what can we learn from them? What makes them tick? What practices seem to distinguish these powerful examples of faith from the norm?

Our research shows that, in the face of a coercive, spirit-depleting, screen-obsessed society, cultivating the following five practices helps to form resilient faith. Again, these are not simple formulas; they are guidelines and guardrails for the formation of the soul. Think of these as the spiritual scaffolding around a young soul that enables the Holy Spirit to access the life inside, or the trellis that supports a growing disciple's branches as their roots sink deep enough to sustain them.

- Practice 1: To form a resilient identity, experience intimacy with Jesus.
- Practice 2: In a complex and anxious age, develop the muscles of cultural discernment.

- Practice 3: When isolation and mistrust are the norms, forge meaningful, intergenerational relationships.
- Practice 4: To ground and motivate an ambitious generation, train for vocational discipleship.
- Practice 5: Curb entitlement and self-centered tendencies by engaging in countercultural mission.

These five practices summarize a decade of work, research, thinking, and listening to discover hopeful ways forward. You can read the appendix for a detailed description of our methodology, but check out pages 36–37 for a big picture of these five practices and some of the components they include.



As I drove home from Berkeley, Mark called me from the other side of the country—New York City, to be exact. He and his wife, Jade, had just dropped off *their* daughter, Skye, for her first year of college in the fashion program at Parsons School of Design. “We’ve been having some great conversations with our daughter,” Mark said as we compared notes. We laughed at the symmetry of our experiences and our lame last-minute parenting.

Now Emily is in the San Francisco area aspiring to a life in science (unless she decides to pursue one of her other myriad interests), while Skye is a continent away in New York City preparing for a career in the arts. Like generations of students before them, they must make their way as Christians in unfamiliar territory. But unlike any previous group of young believers, they are also residents of someplace entirely new: digital Babylon.

What Resilience Looks Like

Experiencing Jesus

My relationship with Jesus brings me deep joy and satisfaction.

89%

Jesus speaks to me in a way that is relevant to my life.

83%

Worship is a lifestyle, not just an event.

91%

Cultural Discernment

The Bible teaching I receive in my church is relevant to my life.

86%

In my church, I regularly receive wisdom for how to live faithfully in a secular world.

70%

At church I get wisdom for how the Bible applies to my life.

86%

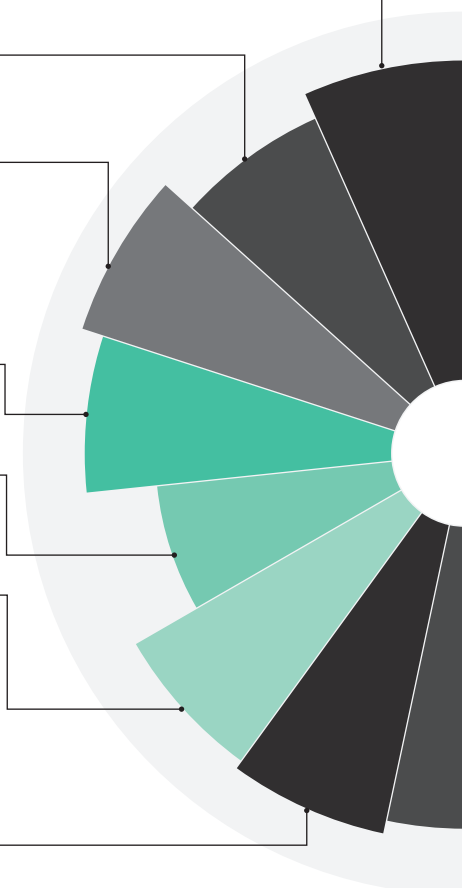
Meaningful Relationships

The church is a place where I feel I belong.

88%

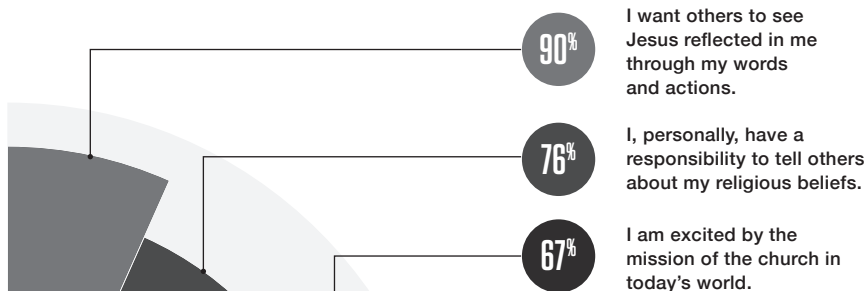
There is someone in my life who encourages me to grow spiritually.

85%

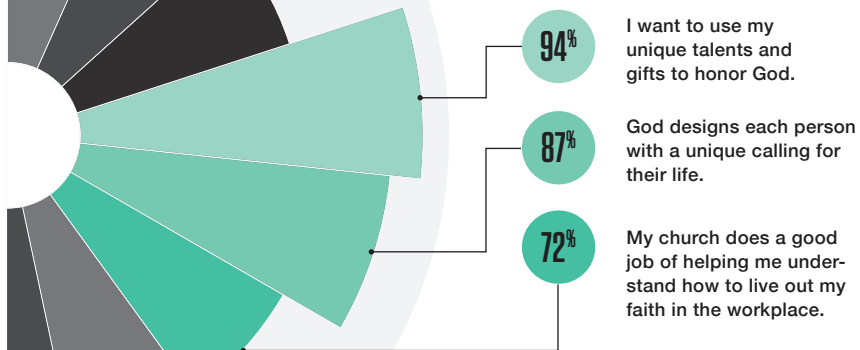


As we explored the profile of resilient disciples ages eighteen to twenty-nine, we discovered five sets of characteristics that distinguish them from other young churchgoers. The percentages below reflect the proportion of resilient disciples—the exemplars in our study—who responded affirmatively to each statement, far ahead of their Christian peers.

Countercultural Mission



Vocational Discipleship



Meaningful Relationships (Continued)

