

“Living In Babylon”

Daniel 1:1-21

Take your Bible and find your place with me in the book of Daniel, where in just a minute we will read from the first chapter. We are just three weeks away from Election Day in our country as tens of millions of our nation’s citizens will head to the ballot box and exercise their right to vote. And as those who believe God’s Word, you and I cannot afford to sit this one out. We Christians have a responsibility to be salt and light, which means we must be engaged in the political process. I don’t have to convince you this morning that the our nation is in a very dangerous place. And this is not so much from enemies which are abroad as much as it is from the division within. Our nation is fractured perhaps more than it has been since the Civil War.

Os Guinness — *“In the end, the ultimate threat to the American republic will be Americans. The problem is not wolves at the door but termites in the floor.”*

In the absence of a Christian moral vision, the philosophy of demons will fill the void. I am not under any impression that winning an election will save us from that which is destroying us. Before our nation has a political problem, it has a deeply spiritual problem. Our faith is not in a political savior, but is firmly anchored in the Lord Jesus Christ who is the hope of nations. Aside from Jesus alone, there is no government, there is no president who will ever usher in a perfect world. That won’t happen until Jesus returns to set up His kingdom. But until then, you and I are to influence our world for His sake. And that means we must take our faith into the ballot box so that the political is influenced by the spiritual and the biblical. Now, what does that mean for us practically? In a culture where civil discourse seems to be non-existent, how can the followers of Jesus make an impact? Especially as society is bent on rejecting Judeo-

Christian values and ethics. What is the balance between our Christianity and our politics? How do Christians take their faith into the ballot box? Well, this is the subject that I want to consider for the next few weeks.

One of the questions that is being asked by believers and unbelievers alike right now is this—“What is going on in our world?” Civility in society seems to have disappeared over the last decade. Instability plagues our world in ways that we have not witnessed before in our lifetimes, and has led to a massive wave of anxiety and insecurity. In crazy times such as these, we wonder where our world is headed. We find our hearts troubled by the news and divisive rhetoric that seems to have infiltrated every level of our society. It feels as if our world is spinning out of control like a kite in a hurricane. We wonder where it all is headed.

If you have your Bible, I'd like to invite you to turn with me to the book of Daniel. When you find yourself struggling to live out your faith amid the pressures of a secular age, the first six chapters of Daniel are a 'must read' for you. One of the greatest and most wonderful truths we are taught in Daniel is that the kingdoms of this world are passing away and the kingdom of heaven is coming to pass. The time is coming when all the kingdoms of this world will belong to the Lord Jesus Christ, and this is an unshakeable promise given to us in God's Word. And there is nothing that will prevent that from happening. I like what one person says:

David Jeremiah—*“Christians should be the calmest people on earth. We have no right to run around this world in frenzied activity, staying up and walking the floor at night, wondering what is going to happen. God in heaven rules the kingdoms of men.”*

Daniel stood like an iron pillar in a hurricane because the sovereign God of the universe was also the sovereign God of his life. He's one of the most important characters in the Old Testament, a man of courage under fire, a man who swam upstream against a heavy current of cultural chaos and opposition. His story has far reaching significance for us, especially against the backdrop of today's spiritual and political climate. Daniel's example of how to live and even thrive in the most godless of environments is a lesson that we don't want to miss. This is why it is relevant to where we find ourselves today.

Larry Osborne — *“We live in a world gone haywire. Our moral fabric seems to be decaying at breakneck speed. Things that were once shamefully hidden are now publicly celebrated. The previously unimaginable has become commonplace. In a few short decades our culture's response to Bible-believing Christians has gone from grudging respect, to a patronizing pat on the head, to a marginalizing indifference, to outright hostility. It's mind-boggling—and a bit scary.”*

The world has always been in opposition to Christ and His followers, and as societies go the way of Romans 1, their hostility becomes more apparent. Christianity is counter-cultural, but it is not culturally absent. Jesus intended for His followers to not retreat from society, but to influence it as those on mission for Him. We are **in** the world, though we are not **of** the world. We've been set apart as salt and light in a dark and polluted world. You ought to think about the properties of light and salt. Light shines, it illuminates, while salt preserves, agitates. That's why the message of Daniel is so important:

- it provides us a prophetic framework for understanding the course of world history (forms our faith)

- it presents Jesus Christ as the coming King who reigns over an everlasting kingdom (fosters our hope)
- it paints a picture of what it truly looks like to walk with God in a counter-cultural way (fuels our love)

The theme of the book of Daniel is the sovereignty of God over the lives of individuals, nations, and kings. As those who trust in such a God, we fully recognize that the earth belongs to Him. He is the Lord of heaven and earth. All of earth's citizens are subject to Him, whether they recognize it or not. In fact, Jesus told His disciples:

Matthew 28:18-19—“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...”

Instead of retreating from society, we engage it as Christ's disciples. The book of Daniel presents us with a picture of what this looks like. Daniel was a committed worshiper of God in the midst of a godless society. And rather than retreating from that society, Daniel stood firm as a faithful witness and a made a difference for the glory of God.

Daniel's faith not only survived the culture of Babylon, but even *thrived* in the midst of it. Of course, in no way does that mean his life was easy, for his faith made him stand out. There were cultural consequences. His three friends found themselves in a literal furnace of fire. Daniel himself would be thrown into a den of lions. Yet in spite of it all, he was blessed and he even prospered as his life gave great witness to God's truth. From chapter 1, I want us to see what living in Babylon involved.

1—Living in a PLACE of exile (1:1-2)

“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 gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God. And he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his god.”

The first couple of verses of the book provide us with the historical setting. The Babylonian Empire had become the world power. Judah was a mere shadow of what it had been. After the reigns of David and Solomon, the throne went to Solomon's son Rehoboam under whom the kingdom was divided. The ten northern tribes formed the northern kingdom of Israel, while two tribes formed the southern kingdom of Judah. This all happened more than four centuries before the time of Daniel. In 722 BC, the northern kingdom fell to the Assyrians. The Assyrian Empire fell to the Babylonians or 'Chaldeans' roughly 110 years later. And it would be the Babylonians who would eventually bring the city of Jerusalem and all of Judah to ruin.

For a brief time, the kingdom of Judah seemed to be on a path toward revival under the reign of King Josiah. He repaired the temple of the Lord that had been forsaken. It was under Josiah that the Book of the Law was found in the house of the Lord, which led to a series of reforms that he introduced throughout the land. Things seemed to be going well under Josiah, that is until the bottom fell out. In 610 BC, Josiah was suddenly killed in battle by Pharaoh Neco of Egypt. So his son Jehoahaz became king in his father's place, and only reigned for three months. He was wicked and did evil in the sight of the Lord. Pharaoh Neco took control of Judah and deposed Jehoahaz and put his brother Eliakim on the throne instead and changed his name to Jehoiakim.

In the third year of his reign, because of their idolatry, God delivered Judah into Nebuchadnezzar's hands as an act of judgment. According to 2 Kings 24 and its parallel account in 2 Chronicles 36, Jerusalem fell to King Nebuchadnezzar in 605 BC, and carried away the Jews into captivity in three stages. The first group which was taken away immediately included only those from the nobility. There were two more deportations occurred in 597 and 587 BC, leaving the city in ruins and the temple destroyed.

But notice in verse 2 how the Scripture shows God was in control of the circumstances. The Bible says, "***And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand.***" To be sure, it was not King Nebuchadnezzar's strength or military might that brought about the downfall of Jerusalem. It was God's sovereign hand. God had been patient, but their sin had reached its limits. Now, the judgment of God fell in the form of the Babylonians, something that the prophets had warned them about for decades.

So Nebuchadnezzar carries off Judah's nobility, which included Daniel and his three companions whose names are mentioned in verse 7. He also took for himself certain vessels used for worship in the house of God. Verse 2 says he brought them to 'the land of Shinar' and placed them in the house of his god. (Gen. 11)

J.G. Baldwin — *"[This] is a deliberate archaism...Shinar, site of the tower of Babel, was synonymous with opposition to God; it was the place where wickedness was at home and uprightness could expect opposition."*

By placing the utensils from the temple into the house of his own god, Nebuchadnezzar was foolishly proclaiming his gods were superior to the God of Israel. However, he would soon come to learn the truth. The Lord God rules!

What we need to understand is that the sin and rebellion of Jehoiakim and the people of Judah eventually exhausted the patience of God. He then used the Babylonians—the most wicked and idolatrous nation on earth at the time—as His instrument of judgment. Beloved, the point is one that we cannot miss. Sin leads to a place of exile. It results in death and separation. God is not to be trifled with.

J.R.R. Tolkien — “...our whole nature at its best and least corrupted, its gentlest and most humane, is still soaked with the sense of ‘exile.’”

The world of lost humanity is in exile from the fall. And no matter how hard we try, no matter what ideas and pretend solutions we come up with, nothing less than a perfect Savior can redeem us from such a condition. The wages of sin is death and always will be death and nothing more.

Though the deportation to Babylon is God’s judgment on the sins of Judah, the Lord uses it to advance His purpose. By allowing Daniel and his companions to be taken to such a hostile place, He is extending His presence among the nations. Unknown to the Babylonians is the fact that it is really a divine invasion of enemy territory. God was at work behind the scenes on the world’s political stage, just as He always is even today.

2—Facing the PRESSURE to conform (1:3-7)

“Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the real family and of the nobility, youths without blemish, of good appearance and skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king’s palace, and to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans. The king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate, and of the wine that he drank.”

They were to be educated for three years, and at the end of that time they were to stand before the king. Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah of the tribe of Judah. And the chief of the eunuchs gave them names: Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Meshael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego.”

The first chapter of Daniel illustrates the fact that there have always been various pressures on God’s people to compromise their faith. The world exerts its pressure on us every day in many subtle and not so subtle ways. Daniel and his friends were among the first of those in Jerusalem who were carried away into captivity by the Babylonians. The custom of the Babylonians involved humiliating the cities they conquered by taking the best and brightest of those cities to Babylon. Daniel had been among the nobility of Jerusalem, a son of some of its leading citizens. Years before, the prophet Isaiah foretold:

Isaiah 39:6—“Behold, the days are coming, when all that is in your house, and that which your fathers have stored up till this day, shall be carried to Babylon. Nothing shall be left, says the Lord. And some of your own sons, who will come from you, whom you will father, shall be taken away, and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.”

Most scholars believe that Daniel was somewhere between the ages of 13 and 16 when he was taken captive. So you can well imagine the pressure he faced as a teenager in a foreign place among a pagan people. He was taken away from all that he had ever known and placed among people who did not eat what he ate, who did not believe what he believed, and did not live like he lived. As soon as he and his friends are in Babylon, they’re enrolled in a program intended to indoctrinate them with a Babylonian worldview. They are immediately

pressured to conform to Babylonian ideals and philosophies. Notice how they are:

Pressured to conform in their thinking (v. 4)

Notice how in verse 4 that Ashpenaz was commanded “to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans.” The Hebrew youths were enrolled in a rigorous three year system of cultural brainwashing. They’re introduced to the culture of Babylon and no doubt urged to embrace its ideas and beliefs. All the while, keep in mind that ‘Babylon’ in the Bible is always symbolic of an anti-God, anti-Christ society. It has at its roots an attitude of rebellion against God. It is the ‘city of man’ in opposition to the ‘city of God.’

Danny Akin — *“Babylon would given them a first-class secular education in Babylonian language, philosophy, literature, science, history, and astrology. Religion would have been a part of the curriculum as well as the mythologies of Babylon, the greatness of Marduk, and the importance of the pantheon of polytheistic deities that dominated the ancient Near Eastern world.”*

Now, the city of Babylon fell centuries ago...yet the ‘spirit’ of Babylon lives on. It is man’s attempt to build a society without God in rejection of His truth. Whether it is rooted in wicked materialism, godless Marxism, secular humanism, no matter the form it takes or the name given, the spirit of Babylon is rooted in pride and unbelief.

Daniel and his friends face the pressure to conform to the spirit of the age, the spirit of Babylon. That same wicked spirit is at work in our world even now. The world around us is constantly trying to shape us in its mold.

Pressured to conform in their lifestyle (v. 5)

In addition to enrolling in class, they are also put on the meal plan of Babylon U. It wasn't enough for them to simply think like a Babylonian. Full indoctrination meant that they also had to eat and drink like a Babylonian. Verse 5 says they are assigned a daily portion of the food that the king himself ate. Before meat was placed on the king's table, it was offered up to the Babylonian gods. It meant it was unclean and forbidden to a Jew. To eat food that had been sacrificed to idols was a sin against God, and to do so would be compromise.

Pressured to conform in their worship (v. 6-7)

Daniel and his friends are enrolled in class, put on the meal plan, and notice that they are even given Babylonian names. This may seem like a minor detail in the story, but it is really a big deal. In the ancient world, a person's name went to the very core of who that person was, because a name involved an identity. In Hebrew, their names held great significance and give us clues about their faith.

For instance:

- Daniel means 'God is my Judge'; his name is changed to Belteshazzar which means 'Bel protect my life'
- Hananiah means 'The Lord is Gracious'; his name is changed to Shadrach which means 'Aku is Exalted'
- Mishael means 'Who is What God Is'; his name is changed to Meshach which means 'Who is What Aku Is'
- Azariah means 'The Lord is My Helper'; his name is changed to Abednego which means 'Servant of Nebo'

Babylon had a name and an identity that it wanted to attach to Daniel and his friends. The fact that their names were changed reveals an attempt to make

them forget the God of Israel and embrace the false gods of the culture. You and I face the same kind of pressure from society today. This present world system and the satanic influence behind it puts pressure on Christians to conform. It constantly tries to press us into its mold. In our thinking, the world wants us to conform to its ideas. In our lifestyle, the world wants us to conform to its behaviors. In our worship, the world wants us to conform to its idols.

Romans 12:2—“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

The NLT says, “Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think.” Don’t let the world press you into its mold. The Message paraphrases it this way, “Don’t become so well adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out.” So Daniel faced pressure while in the midst of a Babylonian culture, and so will we. Yet Daniel did not buckle while under the weight of that pressure. He maintained a bold, yet winsome witness. We must do the same in our own present cultural moment.

3—Obeying the PRINCIPLES of faith (1:8-16)

“But Daniel resolved...”

Isn’t that a great statement? The world of Babylon around him said to think, believe, and act one way. But instead of letting the culture dictate what he should believe and how he should live, Daniel resolved to remain true to God. Or, he ‘purposed in his heart’ to obey the Lord.

“Resolved” — *word means to determine or fix; NASB says that Daniel ‘made up his mind’*

I guarantee that his mind was made up before he found himself in the situation. Somewhere along the way in his young life, someone influential had taught him what was true. He was prepared and well versed in God’s truth long before he got to Babylon.

The resolution of his heart (v. 8)

“But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king’s food, or with the wine that he drank.”

Even though he was under intense pressure, Daniel made the resolution to keep himself pure. If most scholars are correct, Daniel was a teenager when he was carried off to Babylon. If that happened in 606 B.C. when he was 16, that means he was born in 622 B.C. It was 622 B.C. that King Josiah rediscovered the Law of God in the temple and instituted a series of reforms. That means that as a child and teenager, it is highly likely Daniel was surrounded by a group of people who took God’s Word seriously. This no doubt had a tremendous impact on his young life.

Our kids ought to grow up in a living, vibrant church that is devoted to the Word of God. This means that the church must be more than a social club or a weekly event. There is nothing more important than laying down the foundation of God’s Word in the lives of our kids. We have a mission and a purpose to carry out. We must determine that we will be a family of faith that will not compromise in our preaching and teaching, but will live out what we believe before their watching eyes and impressionable minds. My friends, Babylon would love to indoctrinate

our kids, but we must be resolved to shape their worldview and beliefs long before the world has a chance.

The courage of his actions (v. 9-16)

Since his name means, “God is My Judge,” we are not off base to assume that Daniel had a mom and dad who loved God and taught their young son that he was accountable to God. It is evident in the book that all throughout his years in Babylon, he lived with this sense of divine accountability.

We don’t have much time to disciple our children. We have them for a few years, and they are gone. That is why you must make the most of the time while you have it. The Bible says in:

Psalm 127:3-4—“Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one’s youth.”

We only have less than two decades to shape and sharpen our kids like a warrior would shape and sharpen his arrows. Why does he do this? The purpose of the arrow is to be released by the bow. An archer sends his arrows out. This is the same way that we should think about what we do with our children—we lead them to Jesus and send them out to serve God and live obedient lives.

Verse 9 says, “God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs.” The hand of God is on Daniel’s life. In the midst of a foreign land, God is the source of Daniel’s strength and confidence. Daniel was determined to not defile himself. His reliance upon God is demonstrated in a courageous way here in the text. He asks the chief eunuch if he and his friends can be exempt from having to eat the food that came from the king’s table.

Rather than compromising their convictions and going along with the crowd, Daniel and his friends were willing to be different. Obviously, this may not have won them many friends. But regardless of that fact, they were spiritually prepared for what Babylon had to throw at them. Are we?

The influence of his life (v. 17-21)

“As for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams.”

Even though he was culturally pressured, Daniel could thrive in a culture like Babylon because he was spiritually prepared. Notice also that he was providentially placed. The Lord God had sovereignly and purposefully placed him there as a witness to the truth. He’s there as an influencer, and he could do so because:

- He had proper instruction

Notice that verse 17 says God gave Daniel and his friends both learning and skill in all literature and wisdom. Babylon wanted to instruct them, yet God is the One who ended up being their Teacher.

- He showed personal integrity

Even when pressured to compromise his faith for the sake of blending in, Daniel held fast to his integrity. He was willing to stand out and be different. His influence was more than what he knew—it flowed from who he was as a person.

- He received prophetic insight

The last part of verse 17 says, “Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams.” This could very well be a summary of the whole book that bears his

name. Seven of the twelve chapters in the book are nothing but prophetic visions that God gave Daniel about the future. In this way, Daniel spoke of Christ!

- He was given political influence

Notice what we are told in verses 18-21:

“At the end of of the time, when the king had commanded that they should be brought in, the chief of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar. And the king spoke with them, and among all of them none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Therefore they stood before the king. And in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his kingdom. And Daniel was there until the first year of King Cyrus.”

There is a powerful application of this text for our lives today as Christian men and women. Instead of retreating and isolating ourselves from the world, Christ fully intends for His disciples to represent Him in a society much like ancient Babylon. Rather than viewing culture as a barrier to the gospel, what if we began looking at it as a bridge?

- music and the arts
- athletics
- corporate world

For those of you who are students on a college campus, you are living right where Daniel and his three friends were. You are in the belly of the beast. You are bombarded with ideas and philosophical systems that are easily described as

being Babylonian. Do you retreat? Do you quit and come back home? Do you just go along with what your professor and peers want you to believe and embrace? Or, will you prepare yourself to stand for Christ even if it means standing alone? In all honesty, you are not alone, for He is right there with you. I can guarantee there are some other Christians there, too.

How can we thrive in a Babylonian culture today? As we live in a world that is becoming increasingly hostile to our faith, how now shall we live? Here are several ways that I've found:

- We must build one another up in the gospel
- We must reject conformity to the world around us
- We must be salt and light
- We must engage our world and not retreat from it

After all, that is what Jesus came to do. He stepped out of the comfort of eternity past with God the Father and into the world of man. He was heaven's Missionary —sent to our sinful, fallen, even 'Babylonian' world. He didn't come for the righteous but came to save sinners. As He was sent, so are we as His followers.

Now, I want to ask you this question as I close. Has the world been taking you to school of late? Have you bought into the ideals and philosophies that Babylon would like to spoon feed you? We'll never make a difference for Christ in our world if cultural imitation is our goal. If we cower in fear, what type of witness is that? You and I will make a difference, however, when we march to heaven's drumbeat and live counter cultural lives that bring glory to God.

Daniel lived a radically different life to the glory of God in a place of exile. And in that way, his life points us to Jesus, the One who left the glory of heaven and

stepped into a world of lost sinners who were exiled from the presence of God. Daniel, in the face of cultural temptation, committed himself to obey God. Jesus was tempted in every way like as we are, yet He was without sin. He suffered and died for our sins, rose again from the grave, and has ascended in to a place of exaltation far above any earthly ruler. And one of these days, He is going to come again for His own.

Luke 12:32—“Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”

The time is soon approaching when the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He will reign forever and ever! And that is a promise in which you can place all your confidence.