

University of Babylon

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[0 : 00] There are a lot of reasons to be excited about this book. I think the main reason I'm excited to do it here with us is that I hope you will see over the next couple of months that this book is extremely relevant, particularly for this time and place.

Now, God's Word is always relevant across the ages, but I think for a lot of reasons this book is particularly relevant for people like us living in a place like Washington, D.C.

If you ask what the book's about, you can answer it a couple of ways. In the most general sense, the book is about this. Don't be fooled by the title. Even though we call it the book of Daniel, it's actually a story of God and God's faithfulness.

And it's a book that makes clear again and again and again that God is able to be in control of history and thus to work His purposes to completion. And so in some ways it's a book that points forward, ahead of itself, to the coming of Jesus Christ and the ultimate fulfilling of God's redemptive purposes in the world.

As we zoom in, however, we see that, as I said a moment ago, this book is a story and trying to answer this question.

[1 : 18] And here's really the question of the book. Is it possible to be faithful to God and to thrive in a culture that is hostile to your beliefs?

Is it possible to follow God faithfully and to thrive in a culture that is largely hostile to your beliefs? That's the question of this book.

And it's the question that we're going to follow like a thread over the next few weeks. For those of us who are Christians, I think this is a question that we have to answer every single day of our lives in a place like Washington, D.C.

For those of us who are not Christians who are here, I would imagine that this is part of the reason you hesitate as you think about Christianity. Because it would seem that the answer is unequivocally no.

And yet, as we look at this book, as we'll begin to see in chapter 1, we begin to see that, in fact, the answer to this question is, yes, it is possible to be faithful and to thrive in a culture that's hostile to your beliefs.

[2 : 30] And we're going to begin to see how. So what I'd like to do tonight is to begin to walk us through the events just of chapter 1. We're not going to get past chapter 1. And so we're going to begin to walk through the beginning of this story, and then I'm going to draw out a couple of implications to help us understand the connection between this 6th century story, 6th century B.C. story, and our lives today.

Let's pray. Our Father, we thank you for many things, but chiefly this moment we thank you for your word. We thank you that it's not merely ink on paper, nor is it merely the wisdom of human beings being echoed, but rather, Lord, we have an opportunity through your word to hear your voice.

We pray that your written word would reveal to us your living word, that we would see him face to face. We pray this in his name, by your grace, Lord.

Amen. So Daniel chapter 1, it begins with a bang. The unthinkable happens right at the start. King Nebuchadnezzar is the king of a massive nation state centered at Babylon.

And he has moved against Judah, God's people. And Judah falls. And their king, the king of God's people, the Jews, Jehoiakim, is delivered into Nebuchadnezzar's hand.

[4 : 00] So at this point, any reasonable person would expect that the next step would be widespread slaughter. The Babylonians are going to sweep in and wipe out the Israelites.

But in fact, Nebuchadnezzar has a brilliant plan in mind. So he goes to his officials. And he says, I want you to go into and among the people of Israel.

And I want you to bring back with you the best and the brightest. In Babylon, looking good was very important. So I want you to find attractive people. I want you to find nobility, people of royal blood or noble blood.

I want you to find people who are wise, who are highly intelligent. People who are well educated. People who are successful. People who are popular. People who are influential and have wide circles of influence.

People who other people respect. The best and the brightest. And I want you to bring them to Babylon. And I'm going to enroll them in Babylon University. And they're going to spend three years in an intensive study program in all things Babylonian.

[5 : 01] They're going to read all of our literature. They're going to learn all of our music. They're going to learn our science. They're going to learn our religion. They're going to learn our history, our mythology. Everything for three years. And at the end of that time, they're all going to stand before me.

Now, what's the idea behind this? It's quite brilliant. It's a lot of money and a lot of bloodshed to wipe out a nation.

Much, much easier and much more beneficial to you and your culture if you can assimilate them.

How do you do that? Get the best and the brightest. Thoroughly acculturate them.

And then put them up front as role models for everyone else to see. If all goes well, in a generation or two, there will be no more Israel. There will only be Babylon. So this is the plan.

It's quite brilliant. And it is enacted. And at this point, we meet Daniel and his friends. They are among those who are chosen and brought into Babylon. And you have to imagine, from Daniel's point of view, walking into Babylon for the first time, looking around.

[6 : 03] This, at the time, is the biggest city in the known world. It's bigger than anything he's ever seen before. It's the most technologically and scientifically advanced city in the world.

Beyond that, it was absolutely full of idols. Roughly a thousand temples at this point in history. And everywhere you looked, everywhere, the walls, the ceilings, the doorposts, the beams, everything was covered in idols and references to Babylonian gods.

And yet, even under that, under the widespread polytheism, there was a core ethic that summarizes the Babylonian way of life, the Babylonian mentality.

And we read that in Genesis chapter 11. As people set out to build this great city of Babylon, they say, Let us build a great city and let us make a name for ourselves.

That's the core of the Babylonian ethic. It's a city built to point to the glory of human beings. And Nebuchadnezzar not only enrolls Daniel and his friends in the University of Babylon, he takes a further step.

[7 : 20] He actually renames them. Now, we think about that, and renaming doesn't seem like a big deal to us. Not so in the ancient Near East. In the ancient Near East, your name was very closely tied to your identity.

And if you know anything about their names, Daniel and his friends all have names that point to and make reference to their God, the God of the Bible, Yahweh, Elohim. Nebuchadnezzar renames them and gives them Babylonian names that all make reference to the Babylonian gods.

And thus, the process of acculturation begins. And what we see is, he's actually exerting a tremendous pressure on Daniel and his friends to conform.

So this is the first point I want to draw out as we're considering this story and what it has to say to us. And that is to take a moment to consider the pressure of conformity.

The immense pressure of conformity that exists. It's a sociological reality that when you live in any kind of culture or people group, in every people group, in every society, there's a powerful pressure to conform to the norms of the group, whatever those norms may be.

[8 : 36] One of the best examples of this comes from the study conducted by Solomon Ash in 1951, the Ash Line Study. So in 1951, Solomon Ash sets out to measure the pressure of conformity.

And he selects some subjects and he brings them in and he shows them a picture of some lines. So can we bring that up? So he shows them an image much like this. And he has people sit across the front row in a classroom.

He puts this up on the screen. And he says, okay, see the line on the left? Now I want you, each of you, to look at the three lines on the right, pick which one of these lines is the same length as the

line on the left, and then I want you to tell me your answer.

What's the answer? You sure about that? I told somebody else I hope they get it right, because that's going to really ruin the illustration if they don't. It's definitely most obviously C. You're all correct. So he brings in a bunch of participants. He sits them down in the first few rounds. He lets everybody answer for themselves. Everybody looks. Everybody says, see, 99% of participants get it right.

[9 : 48] I don't know what's going on with that 1%, but 99% of the people get it right, okay? Then he changes it up. Then he brings in a whole new slate of participants. But this time, there's only one real participant who doesn't know what's going on.

Everybody else in the room is a confederate. They're in on it, and they're working with the researchers. And so what happens? This time, they begin down here. Here's the solitary participant who doesn't know what's going on.

They start at this end, and what happens? A, A, A, A, A, A, A, all the way down. What happens? 75% of the time, the participant changes their answer. They knowingly give the wrong answer. 75, three out of four people. Ash is mystified. How does this happen? So he and the researchers, they go, and they interview all these kind of hapless participants who weren't in on the joke. Why did you change your answer?

[10 : 47] You knew it was C. Why did you say A? The answers fell into two primary groups. The first group of people said, well, I guess I just assumed that everybody else knew something I didn't.

So even though it looked like C, I just assumed they knew something I didn't. The other group, a little more prevalent, maybe a little more honest, said, I just really, really, really wanted to fit in. I didn't want to look stupid. So you have three out of four people knowingly giving the wrong answer. Why? And here's the point. Because they would rather give the wrong answer and fit in than give the right answer and risk social rejection.

That is the power of social conformity. So when you live in a culture surrounded by people who disagree with or even oppose your beliefs, your values, your assumptions about the nature of reality, your priorities, the pressure to conform can be a very, very hard thing to resist. And so this is what Daniel and his friends are facing at Babylon U. And it exists just as powerfully today. And in fact, if you want to look around for examples of where this kind of thing exists, you need not look any further than academia.

[12 : 00] I mean, for those of you who are in academia, you teach or you work or you're administrators, you know that the pressure is immense. Nicholas Kristof, who is by no means a Christian, he's written many articles that are disparaging against Christians, nevertheless, earlier this year, wrote two pieces in the New York Times, at least two, maybe more, where he essentially calls out progressive liberals, what he considers to be his kind of group.

He wrote a couple of articles basically calling them out and criticizing them for promoting all kinds of diversity on campuses except ideological. And he warns that universities are becoming echo chambers and hostile environments for anyone who disagrees, especially for Christians.

And here's what he says. He says, So Christians in academia face enormous pressure to conform. You may be familiar with John Lennox, who's a brilliant mathematician and philosopher of science. He's at Oxford, top of his field. He relates a story about when he was a young student and he found himself seated next to a Nobel laureate.

And he engages this man in a conversation about God. And he's later invited to come back to this man's quarters with some other distinguished professors to have coffee and continue the conversation.

[13 : 22] And when everybody's settled and Lennox is looking around and realizing he's the only student in the room, the laureate fixes him with his eyes and asks him this, Do you intend to make a serious career of science?

Lennox says, Yes, I do. The man responds, If you want to make a serious career in science, you must give up these childish ideas of God. They will only disadvantage you intellectually among your peers.

See, this is the prevailing assumption that in order to be a person of faith, you must be intellectually disadvantaged. Right? There's a growing bias in our society that being an intelligent, sophisticated, culturally savvy person means being post-religious.

Right? You can be spiritual, but to be religious, a member of any kind of organized religion rooted in any kind of tradition, that that is for the weak, it is for the backward, it is for the ignorant, but it is not for sophisticated intellectuals.

It is not for truly open-minded progressives. It is only for the dregs of society. There's no basis, of course, in reality for this bias.

[14:35] I mean, many of the most brilliant minds today and throughout history are or have been people of faith, many of them Christians, but the bias exists nonetheless. The point is this, when you live as a person of faith in such a culture, with such biases, it can seem as though your entire life is lived as a never-ending ash line experiment.

It can feel like your entire life is lived sitting in that chair. And you know, the power of social media, there's many great things about it, but it enhances this effect because you know instantaneously what tens of thousands of people around you think about everything.

And so it's not just eight people saying, eh, eh, eh, it's ten times, ten times, ten thousand people saying, eh, eh, eh, eh, eh. And it gets to you, and what do you say?

The pressure is tremendous. You buckle under it. So in a culture like ours, we have to ask, to what extent are our convictions, our morals, our assumptions, our ethics, to what extent are those driven by deeply held principles, and to what extent are they driven by peer pressure?

Right, do we hold beliefs, values, assumptions based on careful, prayerful discernment, or have we simply adopted the ideas of people around us so that we will fit in, or because we assume they must know something we don't?

[16:07] So this is the first point to see. It's the pressure of conformity. Daniel and his friends are facing massive pressure to conform to Babylonian culture, so the question is, what do they do?

How can they possibly sustain it? And the answer comes through this. We see that they begin to adopt the practice of a faithful presence. They adopt a posture toward their circumstances of faithful presence.

This is a theme that we will continue to look at, but we begin to see it right away in chapter one. So among the Jews who find themselves in this situation, they're in exile, they've been taken into Babylon, they don't know when it's going to be over.

Among the Jews, there were several groups of people and grouped by how they responded to their situation. The first group of people said, well, we don't know how long we're going to be here, but surely any day God's going to rescue us.

But the pressure to assimilate, the pressure to conform is so great that the only way we can resist it is by completely separating ourselves.

[17:17] So it was a fortification mentality. We can't have any contact with the Babylonians. We can't have any intermingling with the Babylonians. We have to keep ourselves entirely separate. We have to build walls. We have to do everything we can to keep our culture pure and wait for God to rescue us.

That was the first group. The second group, the second group of people were sort of in the opposite mentality. They said, well, we don't know how long we're going to be here, but if we want to have any chance at having friends, any chance at having a career, any chance at thriving on any level, any chance at surviving this, we have to make accommodations.

We have to compromise. We have to make this work. And over time, they made more, more, more accommodations again and again and again to the point where they became utterly indistinct and they lost their cultural identity and became Babylonian.

Nebuchadnezzar's plan worked. And of course, we see there are many churches that fall into these two groups. We have the churches that fortify themselves against culture, that say secular culture is evil.

We need to create our own society within a society and make as little intermingling possible as we possibly can, especially for the good of our children. They insulate themselves.

[18:32] Then you have the other churches who respond to their situation and the current cultural moment by doing all that they can to become relevant, to become like the culture that they live in and they make accommodations in their beliefs and in their values and in their priorities and in their ways of life.

And ultimately, what happens? They become more and more and more and more and more indistinguishable until ironically, in their striving to be relevant, they become utterly irrelevant. Well,

Daniel was a part of neither group.

Daniel was part of a third group. The group that Daniel was a part of had most likely read the prophet Jeremiah. See, Jeremiah wrote about this particular time of exile.

And the prophet Jeremiah was the one God used to teach God's people how they should relate to and think about their predicament in Babylon. It's possible, Daniel being royalty, that he even had a scroll of Jeremiah's writings in his bag in Babylon.

And it's very likely that he would have been familiar with Jeremiah chapter 29, which says an amazing thing. Jeremiah chapter 29, which calls the Israelites to build houses, to plant gardens, to get jobs, to allow their kids to marry, to make a life for themselves.

[19 : 59] You're going to be here for a while, he says. Settle in, intermingle, get to know your neighbors. And yet at the same time, the purpose is revealed for this in verse 7 of chapter 29.

He says, I've sent you here and I've put you here so that you can seek the welfare of this city where I've sent you. And then he says something amazing. For in its welfare, you will find your welfare.

The city that destroyed you, the city that wiped your people out, the city that has brought you into exile, I've put you here to seek their welfare and in their welfare, you will find your welfare. So immerse yourself in the culture, immerse yourself, but do it in a way where you remain faithful to me because your reason for being there is so that I can bless and reach them.

It's an amazing balance to strike. It's the balance of faithful presence. So on the one hand, you see Daniel and his friends become fully present, fully immersed in the Babylonian culture.

They read and they study everything they can get their hands on. Now you have to understand, the curriculum at Babylon U was not quite like the curricula of most of our universities today.

[21 : 13] Here's some of the subjects they would have studied. Astrology. Not astronomy. Astrology. The study of animal entrails. That's a whole study, I guess.

Rites of purification, sacrificial incantations, exorcism, forms of divination, enchantments, magic. Sounds a lot like Harry Potter at Hogwarts.

And we think that, and you know, well, it can't be that bad, but you have to understand for devout Jews, this would have been utterly scandalous. It would have been much more challenging for them than most of the content Christians are confronted with in today's universities.

This would have been scandalous. And yet, they plunge into this three-year degree and they graduate summa cum laude. You can see that because Nebuchadnezzar actually says in verse 20 that Daniel and his friends are ten times better than anyone else in his court.

top of their class. And the very last verse tells us that he's so good that Daniel is secured as a top advisor in Nebuchadnezzar's court for the remainder of his time on the throne.

[22 : 24] That's amazing. So his career is what? Giving advice to the king who wiped out his people. Advising the enemy. You can't get more immersed than that.

So they immerse themselves in the culture and yet here's the thing. They don't totally assimilate. There's a line that they will not cross.

A line that they will not cross. As part of the acculturation program, Nebuchadnezzar decrees that all students will eat from the king's table. Now you've got to understand, food from the king's table, that is the best food in the land.

This is Michelin quality dining. But it says in verse 8, Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food or the wine that he drank.

Now you've got to understand, huge risk. Huge risk. He's taking a massive risk here so we have to ask, why? Why would he take such a stand?

[23 : 25] I mean, Daniel has allowed himself to be renamed with a pagan name. He's allowed himself to be forced into a PhD program in occult sciences. Moreover, there's no direct prohibition against eating meat or drinking wine in scripture unless you're a Nazirite.

So why did he draw the line here? What is it about the food? And some people say, well, Daniel 1, this is a diet and weight loss plan and this is what we should take from this.

That's not what it's about. Some people say, see, this is why we should all be vegetarian. That's not what it's about. He draws the line at the meal because the meal is more than a meal.

It's more than a meal. It's not the food itself. It's the significance of this meal. It's a religious act. It's an act of worship.

Eating the king's food was a kind of sacrament. It meant worshiping the king and his provision. Food from the king's table. Christians, we have a king's table.

[24 : 31] But it's a very different king. The idea was, over time, those who ate from the king's table would be presented to the public and their healthy appearance would be admired by all and it would be seen as evidence of the good king and the blessing of the gods of that king, his father and the pantheon and evidence of his goodness and his provision.

And Daniel knew that he could not do that. He's willing to learn the language. He's willing to learn the literature. He's willing to learn and master the sciences. But he draws the line at worship. He will not worship or glorify the king or the pagan idols of Babylon. And one thing I want to note here, he doesn't make a huge fuss.

What's interesting is, this isn't a major hunger strike. You know, he doesn't protest. He doesn't make it an issue, a public issue. He doesn't issue an outcry. He doesn't start a petition.

In fact, Nebuchadnezzar never even knows that he does this. It's private. He goes to the officials and very discreetly and quietly arranges to be fed only vegetables.

[25 : 46] What does this tell us? What does this tell us? His primary concern wasn't making a public stand.

It was personal. In other words, he's concerned about the effect of eating this meal on his own heart. That's his primary concern. And here's the thing that we need to see here.

The habits and the patterns of our lives. In particular, the habits and the patterns and the rituals and the liturgies that are imbued with significance, that have a kind of religious weight to them.

Over time, the more we do those things, they actually shape our hearts. They shape what we imagine. They shape what we think about. They shape what we fantasize about. They shape how we hope and where we hope.

And ultimately, they shape what we love. And Daniel instinctively knows this. What's he worried about? The first time he eats the food, not a big deal. The second time, not a big deal.

[26 : 46] But over time, as he continues to engage in this sacrament, what will happen to his heart? More and more and more as he's eating the food and enjoying the goodness of it and reflecting on his gratitude to King Nebuchadnezzar, what's going to happen?

He's going to grow to love and ultimately to worship a pagan king. He realizes that's how hearts are wooed away. Not a grand act of rebellion, small acts of compromise over time that pave the way for larger compromises down the road.

Faithfulness is the same way. Small acts of faithfulness paved the way for larger acts of faithfulness down the road. So the only way Daniel can hope to have a successful career utterly immersed in Babylonian idolatry and remain faithful is to cultivate daily habits that lead his heart to worship God rather than the Babylonian idols.

And this is what it means to practice a faithful presence. So on the one hand this tells us very clearly God's people, Christians, are called to immerse ourselves in culture.

Read the literature. Know the science. Master all the fields of study. Seek excellence. Do your utmost to rise to the top of your chosen profession. Daniel is more Babylonian than the Babylonians.

[28 : 11] He's better at being a Babylonian than they are in many ways except for religious. Right? I hope that Christians rise to the top of their field.

I love the idea that people might say you know I don't agree with anything that they believe. I think that they're I can't believe that they believe those things. But they make amazing employees.

They're the most honest, reliable, thorough, effective employees and I can think of nothing better than to fill my I don't agree with what they believe.

but I want a company full of them. Can you imagine if people said that? Immerse ourselves. But on the other hand like Babylon our culture is frankly full of idols and it's ultimately devoted not to the glory of any pantheons of gods and goddesses but rather the glory of humanity.

DC is devoted to the glory of human achievement. That is our idol here. And there are times when we have to draw lines.

There are places where we have to draw moral and ethical lines. But even below that unless we cultivate habits and patterns and rituals and liturgies of faithfulness in the small things we can never hope to remain faithful over the long haul.

[29 : 30] Right? This is why we gather weekly and do what we're doing. This is a counter-formational liturgy. It's a liturgy that turns our hearts away from achievement away from being convinced of our own amazingness away from the hopes that we place here or there and it

wrenches our hearts back and reorients them toward the God who gave his son for us.

But yet it's not enough to do this once a week. That's why we encourage people to meet in small groups to pray and to read scripture together. Why? Because we need those habits and rituals and it's really not enough to do it on Sunday and then on Wednesday.

You need to do it even more than that. So we encourage families and groups of friends and roommates to do this regularly in their homes together because we need these habits and rituals. But it's not even enough to do that.

We actually encourage people to do it individually to pray and to read scripture. Why? Because this is the only way that we can hope to be fully immersed in such a culture and yet remain faithful.

This is what you might think of and what has been called a rule of life. It's a way of structuring your life building your life around rituals habits patterns and liturgies that ultimately cultivate a heart that is shaped by the gospel rather than the pantheon.

[30 : 54] This is why we encourage these kinds of practices in our church and over the course of the next few months including our parish retreat we'll be talking more and more about what it means to live by a rule of life what that actually looks like.

But for now we want to come back to our original question as we close. Is it possible to follow God faithfully and to thrive in a culture that is largely hostile to your beliefs?

In other words how do we deal with the immense pressure of conformity? And the answer begins this way by committing ourselves to the practice of faithful presence. Living lives fully immersed in culture but shaped by a rule of life.

Habits of faithfulness. But of course if we ended here we would be missing the larger point of the chapter and the book. I could say dare to be a Daniel.

Amen. But as I said at the beginning that's not the point of the book. What we see here is that Daniel's faithful presence is only made possible because of God's faithful presence.

[32 : 02] And you see it like a drumbeat again and again and again. Verse 2 God gave Jehoiakim into Nebuchadnezzar's hand. Verse 9 God gave Daniel favor with the officials in Babylon.

Verse 17 God gave Daniel and his friends learning and skill beyond anyone else in Babylon. God is in control he's the hero of the story. God gave.

God gave. God gave. And ultimately what does this point us toward? God gave us his son. The one who had an ultimate and perfect faithful presence.

The one who fully entered in became in every way thoroughly like all of us and yet remained perfectly faithful to his father even though it led him straight to the cross to die for us to reconcile us to himself.

So the point we leave with is this it is only possible for us to have a faithful presence in this world because God in Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit has a faithful presence with us.

[33 : 10] Let's pray. Our Father as we said before we thank you for your word. We thank you that even as we consider these things you are present you are here.

not only with us but in us. We ask now that your Holy Spirit would surgically apply your word to our hearts in exactly the ways we need.

We pray this for our good but chiefly for your glory in your son's name. Amen.