

In a Foreign Land

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[0 : 00] I wonder if you've ever had the experience of being a foreigner in a foreign country. And if so, whether you stood out as quite different.

Whether it was because of your language and customs that were different, or whether it was because your appearance in clothes were different, or whether it was because your behaviours and values were different.

I mentioned before that when I was doing training at Teachers College or University, I went on a teaching prac to Fiji, of all places.

And then I was a small, blonde-haired boy with trousers on, standing next to this big, muscly Fijian man in his skirt called a Sulu.

And it was abundantly clear that I was a foreigner. There's a complete contrast in our appearances. But we also had different customs as well. So I was teaching in one class, and the teacher of that class invited me to her house for dinner to meet her family.

[1 : 00] My custom says you accept the invitation because that's polite. When I got there, we ate curry and rice with our fingers, which was a bit different to the way I ate. That was okay. I could cope with that.

But then they started asking me what I thought about their daughter in front of her. And then they asked me whether my parents would be happy to come to Fiji for the wedding.

And I suddenly realised that I was actually on a date about to be married off. I kid you not. The daughter even said to me, You are my blonde Superman. Well, I tell you what, I have never left a dinner so quickly in all my life.

Politely, of course. And at that moment, I'd never felt like such a foreigner in a foreign land as I did then. And today we begin a new series in the book of Daniel, which was originally written to Jews who found themselves living in a foreign land.

And not tourists in Fiji, but as exiles in Babylon. And the book of Daniel begins by setting this scene for us. So we're going to spend a bit of time setting the scene and how it relates to us before we get into most of the passage today.

[2 : 12] So the scene begins in verses 1 and 2 or even 3. So have a look there in your Bibles. It's the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim, king of Judah. And Nebuchadnezzar becomes the power and he's the king of Babylon.

And he comes to Jerusalem and besieges it. And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim, king of Judah, into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God.

These he carried off to the temple of his God in Babylonia and put in the treasure house of his God. And then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of the court officials, to bring into the king's service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility, presumably, who had also been taken. Here, in verse 1, Judah is invaded by Babylon. And over the next 19 years, King Nebuchadnezzar destroys God's kingdom, it seems.

Defeats God's kings, plunders God's temple again and again, and carries off God's people. Three lots of deportation, actually. Now, to help you put this history together, on the back of your outline is a very basic timeline.

[3 : 27] And so verse 1 and 2, most scholars think, takes place in about late 605 BC. Nebuchadnezzar is newly crowned.

He has just defeated Egypt at the Battle of Carchemish earlier that year. And so now he begins to take over the lands that were once under Egypt's control, including Judah.

But unlike Egypt, Nebuchadnezzar also carries off treasures from God's temple. And verse 3, it seems, some of the young men from the royal family and the nobility. This included Daniel and his

three friends.

The rest of the Jews stayed in Judah and Jehoiakim stayed as king. That was deportation number one. And the next day, 601 BC, Jehoiakim, king of Judah, he rebels against Nebuchadnezzar, largely because Egypt rises again and defeats Nebuchadnezzar.

So Jehoiakim gets a bit of courage up and he rebels as well. And so the next few years, Nebuchadnezzar, it seems, deals with Egypt and the other countries that rebelled against him.

[4 : 33] He kind of puts them down one by one. And he gets to Judah in about late 598 BC. And after besieging it, he then carries off lots of Jews this time early the next year, in spring of 597 BC.

And he makes Zedekiah king of Judah. And so on the next slide, from 2 Kings 24, we read this. As the Lord had declared, Nebuchadnezzar carried all Jerusalem into exile, all the officers and fighting men and all the skilled workers and artisans, a total of 10,000.

Only the poorest people of the land were left. That was the second deportation. Nine years later, in about 588 BC, Zedekiah also rebels against Nebuchadnezzar.

And so again, Nebuchadnezzar comes for a third time to Jerusalem. This time he surrounds the city, and for two years he starves the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

Until in 586 BC, he enters and destroys it completely. And this time he takes almost all the Jewish population left to Babylon. And so on the next slide, in 2 Kings 25, at this time we read, in the 19th year of Nebuchadnezzar, so from 605 BC to 586 BC, Nebuchadnezzar, the commander of the imperial guard, set fire to the temple of the Lord and the royal palace, all the houses of Jerusalem.

[5 : 57] Every important building he burned down. And he carried into exile the people who remained in the city, along with the rest of the populace. But the commander left behind some of the poorest people of the land to work the vineyards and fields.

And that was the third deportation. Why did all this happen? Well, because the Jews continued to sin against God, despite God patiently warning them for more than 300 years.

I mean, that's pretty patient, isn't it? 300 years? Sometimes I'm so impatient with my kids, they don't even get one warning. But these received loads of warnings.

Even this current generation who was carried off, were being warned at that time by Jeremiah, the prophet. But they persisted in sin. And it was really bad sin.

Last year we looked at the book of Habakkuk, you might remember. And that was basically his complaint to God. God, when are you going to deal with this sin in Judah? And so on the next slide, from Habakkuk 1, he says, How long, God, will I cry out to you and see all this violence in Judah?

[7 : 02] When are you going to do something about it? Well, here God does. He sends Babylon, which wasn't quite what Habakkuk had in mind. But that's what God does.

That's why back in verse 2 of Daniel chapter 1, it says, The Lord was the one who delivered Judah into Nebuchadnezzar's hands. This was God's just judgment, you see, on Judah for their persistent sin.

And there they remained in Babylon until about 539 BC, when Cyrus, king of Persia, conquers Babylon. And he allowed the Jews to return the following year in 538 BC.

And so these opening verses of Daniel really show us the beginning of God's people in a foreign land. And the beginning of Babylon destroying God's kingdom. You know, defeating its king, God's human kings, time and time again.

Plundering God's temple time and time again. And carrying off God's people time and time again. And as the Jews sat in this foreign land of Babylon, the big question they would have been wondering and asking themselves is, Does God still rule?

[8 : 12] Because against the might of Babylon, it really looks like he doesn't. It looks like God's been defeated. After all, verse 2 makes it quite clear, repeats it twice, that the treasure of God's temple is now in the temple of a foreign God.

It's like the foreign God has won, you see. And his people sit in a foreign land. And now the Jews are now facing pressure to conform to the culture of their foreign land.

And so this book of Daniel was written to show them that God does still rule. That his king and kingdom will triumph. And so they are to remain loyal to him.

That's the big message of the book of Daniel. And this makes the book of Daniel, and the context also makes it very relevant for us today. You see, as Christians, we too live in a foreign land.

Did you realize that? We heard this in our second reading. It's on the next slide where Peter calls us to live as exiles and foreigners in this world.

[9 : 21] Or Paul says that our citizenship is in heavens from Philippians 3. You see, if we trust in Christ, then heaven and the world to come is our true home. And that means that this world is not our true home.

It's more like a foreign country that we are just passing through, you see. And what's more, our values, behavior and beliefs make us different to this world. They make us stand out like foreigners in this world.

I mean, have you ever felt like you've stood out because you're a Christian, whether it's at school or the workplace? Or perhaps amongst extended family because you have different Christian beliefs to them?

If you've never felt that, then perhaps next time you're discussing something at work or with friends or non-Christian family members, why don't you just say, well, look, I think we should do what the Bible says and follow Jesus' example and see how they respond.

Now, I bet they'll look at you like, what? You're weird. You're not from around here, are you? You're like a foreigner. That's the point, isn't it? Because Christians, this world is like our foreign land.

[10 : 33] And like the Jews back then, we too can look around and wonder whether God still rules in our foreign land, this world. After all, we see ungodly prime ministers and presidents ruling and God's rule being ignored.

And we see God's people being persecuted and suffering disease and disaster. And we can wonder, does God still rule our foreign land, this world?

And like the Jews back then, we too face pressure to fit in and conform to our world's culture and its values. And so the message of Daniel, you see, is very relevant for us today. For the message of the book is, remain loyal like Daniel.

For God's king and kingdom will triumph. For God still rules. And we begin to see this message unpacked for us in chapter one, as Daniel is pressured to fit in to his culture.

So we're now at point one in your outlines and verse three in your Bibles. And we'll start to move a bit quicker now. Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king's service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility.

[11 : 44] Young men without physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand and qualified to serve in the king's palace.

He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians. And the king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years.

And after that, they were to enter the king's service. Among those who were chosen were some from Judah. Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, Azariah. And the chief official gave them new names.

To Daniel, he named Belshazzar. To Hananiah, Shadrach. And to Mishael, Meshach. And to Azariah, Abednego. Here we see Nebuchadnezzar's rather clever program of assimilation.

He would take the cream of the crop from the foreign nations, the nobility, those men who had good bodies, good minds, even good looks. And he would take them, verse 4, when they were young, impressionable.

[12 : 50] In fact, the word for young men here can also refer to a child. So perhaps 13 or 14, 15 years old, a young teenager. And then Nebuchadnezzar would put his stamp on them.

So verse 4, he would re-educate them in the Babylonian ways. It's language and literature. Second, verse 5, he would give them incentives like the best food and the best jobs.

In fact, he gave them his very own food and wine from his own table. And he would give them a job working for himself, which meant great status in the kingdom, working in the king's palace.

These incentives were like, you know, an employer giving his employees a high salary and job perks, like a company car and so on. That they might dangle them in front of their employee to buy their devotion.

And third, Nebuchadnezzar in verse 6 and 7 had them renamed with Babylonian names, you see. And so on the next slide, Daniel has part of the name for God in it.

[13 : 53] So the Hebrew word for God is Elohim, El. So Dan-El, if you like, means Elohim is my judge. But Belshazzar has the name of a Babylonian goddess in it, Bel.

And it means Bel protect the king. And do you see what's happening? Their Hebrew names connected them to their God. And so they're given new names which connect them to the Babylonian gods.

Trying to change their identity, you see. Nebuchadnezzar was effectively making them Babylonians. Making them conform to his culture. Making them fit into his kingdom.

And as I said, it was a very clever way of dealing with conquered nations. After all, these were the leaders of tomorrow. And one day they might rise up and lead a revolt against you.

And so what do you do? Well, you take them when they're young. You re-educate them, rename them, dangle incentives in front of them to buy their loyalty. And then they won't fight against you.

[14:54] In fact, they might even fight for you. It was a rather clever way to assimilate foreigners and make them conform to your culture. And is this not what our world tries to do to us as Christians today?

Does it not incentivize and re-educate and rename to try and get us to conform to its culture, its way? Take example, for example, the current Safe Schools program.

Is that not a form of re-education? Does it not seek to conform our values and beliefs about gender and sexuality to the world's? And is it not an unbalanced presentation of the ideas in the media and even on TV in shows like Q&A;?

Is that not a way of re-educating Australia, including us? A guy from the 1030 congregation almost made it onto the audience at Q&A; one time. There was a Christian issue being discussed.

And he said to me that the producers of the show deliberately stack the audience against the Christian view. So that whenever the non-Christian view is expressed, all the audience cheers.

[16:04] And when the Christian view is expressed, they boo. And that kind of subtly educates, re-educates Australia, re-educates us, you see. Promotes the non-Christian view.

And what about renaming? Well, those who promote abortion rename themselves. What do they name themselves? Pro-choice. Good thing. Those who support gay marriage name themselves marriage equality.

Surely that's a good thing. And we Christians who might disagree, what are we renamed? Bigots. The irony, of course, is that a bigot by definition is someone who is intolerant.

We Christians tolerate other people's rights to choose. It's there, right? We just disagree. It's actually the world who does not tolerate the Christian view and crucifies Christians in the public square like Margaret Court.

Yet we are renamed that. Why is this renaming happening? Well, so that we might conform to the world's culture, you see. It's the same as Babylon. Or take incentives.

[17:10] Young workers have incentives of pay rises, job security, career advancement, all dangled in front of them so that they might make work their God. It's been happening for years. I remember when I was a teenager working at McDonald's, flipping hamburgers.

And every year I would go at the Christmas time, I would go away and do what was called beach mission, where you go to a caravan park and you run activities and share the gospel with kids. And I remember the store manager, the top manager said to me one year that if I didn't go on beach mission this year and stayed and worked, that she would promote me to be a manager.

Dangle in front of you. Conform to the work culture. Ignore God's culture. This is what it's like to live in a foreign land. It pressures us to conform to its culture and its values.

This is what Nebuchadnezzar was doing to Daniel. So how will this young teenager respond? Well, point to verse 8. But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine.

And he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself in this way. Now, God had caused the official to show favor and compassion to Daniel. But the official told Daniel, I'm afraid of my lord, the king, who has assigned your food and drink.

[18:24] Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you. Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, Please test your servants for 10 days.

Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food and treat your servants in accordance with what you see. So he agreed to this and tested them for 10 days.

What does Daniel do? Verse 8. He resolves not to defile himself with the king's food. Now, the question is here, why choose that particular issue?

Why not take a stand against being renamed, for example? Though interestingly, in the book of Daniel, he does keep using his Hebrew name, and they keep using the Hebrew names of all the friends in this chapter, at least.

But why does Daniel here take a stand on the king's food and wine? Some say it's because it involved eating unclean animals that the Old Testament said, you know, Jews were not allowed to eat.

[19 : 31] For example, pork. After all, the word defile would suggest that. But there was no Old Testament law against wine. What's more, there would have been food from the king's table that was clean, like beef and lamb.

And so why does Daniel still reject wine and all the meat? Others suggest it was because both food and wine were offered to the Babylonian gods.

And yet so too were the vegetables. And Daniel was happy to eat those. Which is extraordinary, by the way. A teenage boy who wants to eat only vegetables.

We have some teenage boys here. I have one at home. Anyway. Why does Daniel reject the king's food from the king's table? I think it's because to eat from the king's table was a sign that you are now part of the king's men.

That you owed him your loyalty. This is how the idea seems to be used later on in Daniel chapter 11. In other words, the king's food came with strings.

[20 : 34] And those strings included your loyalty and devotion to him above all others. And in the book of Daniel, this is constantly where he and his friends draw the line.

And they are happy to obey foreign authorities, learn a new language, even get a new name. But they will not compromise their loyalty to God. We see it in chapter 3 where they would prefer to be thrown into a fiery furnace than compromise their loyalty.

Or chapter 6 where Daniel was thrown into the lion's den rather than compromise his loyalty. And this is how we know where to draw the line for ourselves in our world.

You see, there are many things that we might disagree with as Christians in our world, in our foreign land. And it's right for us to sign petitions and vote against them when we're able. But if our society ever tried to force us to disown God, then we must resolve to take our stand no matter what. Even if it costs us. And while we're not at this stage here in Australia, it has happened in the last couple of years to many Christians in the Middle East, has it not? Who've refused to renounce God for Islam and lost their lives.

[21 : 45] Of course, for Daniel, he doesn't. Instead, after his 10-day diet of veggies and water, we read in verse 15 that at the end of the 10 days, they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food.

And so the guard took away their choice food and the wine, and they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead. Daniel and his friends, you see, passed the test.

Unless we think this is just common sense, you know, after all, vegetables and water are a healthier option than rich food and wine, the narrator now makes it abundantly clear that this is actually God. God working. God ruling in the background. So point three, verse 17. He goes on to say, So they entered the king's service.

In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them 10 times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom.

[23 : 13] And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus. In verse 17, the narrator says, God gives Daniel and his friends knowledge and wisdom.

And notice how the narrator emphasizes how great it is. Verse 20, the narrator tells us that when the king questioned Daniel, he finds him in every subject 10 times better than all the other magicians in the whole of his kingdom.

Why does he emphasize how great their wisdom is? Well, to show that God is still working and ruling. Even in this foreign land. God is the one giving this to them.

In fact, the narrator has been showing this to us all through the whole chapter. Back in verse 2, we read, The Lord delivered Judah into the hands of Babylon. Verse 9, we read, God caused the official to show favor to Daniel.

Here in verse 17, God gave knowledge. Even verse 21, Daniel remained until King Cyrus arrived. Remember King Cyrus? He was the Persian who rose up and conquered Babylon and allowed the Jews to go back home to their land.

[24 : 25] And so not only has God enabled Daniel to outlive the whole Babylonian empire and all its kings, the very mention of Cyrus reminds us that God did raise up Cyrus to set his people free.

You see, more than 100 years earlier, on the next slide in Isaiah 45, God said this, I will raise up Cyrus in my righteousness. I will make all his ways straight. He will rebuild my city and set my exiles free.

And in the end of chapter 1, the narrator mentions Cyrus to show that God has kept that promise. You see, God still rules, even in this foreign land.

And so like Daniel, the Jews were to remain loyal to him. And this is the same message for us here today. See, as I said, if we trust in Christ, then we are made part of God's people.

We have mercy and forgiveness. We have the certainty of life eternal, enjoying God's physical kingdom in the world to come. If we trust in Christ, that is. And so do you?

[25 : 33] That's the first thing I need to ask. And if we do, it means that this world, therefore, is no longer our true home. As I said before, we're just passing through this world.

We are like foreigners in a foreign country. If heaven is our home, then this world is not, you see. What's more, we have different values and customs, different beliefs and behaviors to this world, which make us stand out like foreigners in a foreign land.

And yet, the first question I need to ask us who trust in Christ is, do we actually live like that? Do we live as foreigners? Or do we live as though we belong to this world?

In other words, do we actually stand out in this world as different? I remember some friends of ours telling us how they got together. And the guy said that he used a really corny line to get this girl to go out with him.

He actually grabbed his sleeve off his shirt like this. And he says, oh, what's this material? And the girl's going, what? And he said, this is boyfriend material. It's pretty lame.

[26 : 41] But it worked. We're now married. But this is another corny line I heard a guy say. This is even worse. He said to a girl, why are you trying so hard to fit in when you're born to stand out?

Very bad. But the point is, and there is a point, we as Christians are born to stand out as different. That's what it means to be a Christian.

We had to be different in this world. We were like foreigners and exiles, as Peter said. And yet, sometimes we can work so hard to fit in, can't we? We can cling to the things of this world.

We can have the same priorities as this world, the same behavior as this world. But as Christians, we're to stand out as different. We're born to stand out as foreigners.

As Peter said, I urge you as foreigners and exiles to abstain from sinful desires, to live different and good lives. Are we living as foreigners? That's the first question for us.

[27 : 40] And the second one, though, is if we do live like foreigners in this world, then from time to time, we will feel pressure to fit in, to conform. But the message of Daniel is, don't.

Instead, remain loyal like Daniel, because God still rules, even in our foreign land. Let me finish with a simple example of this.

I remember some friends of ours who were visiting us in a caravan park. There was an indoor pool, which was heated. It's great for the kids. And we weren't sure, though, how the use of the pool worked with guests who weren't staying in the park.

So we asked another person, staying in the park, and they said, oh, look, guests are supposed to pay for the pool, but, you know, our friends don't. We just swipe our tag, and when the door opens to the pools, our friends just go in.

So just do that. But when we got to the pool, our friend went looking for the staff member at the office, rang the bell, and waited for them to appear, and then asked how much was the pool, paid their money, and went in.

[28 : 52] You see, even in this very little way, he was not going to conform to the culture around him. But he was going to remain loyal to God.

Why? Because God still rules, including over his life. So, remain loyal like Daniel. God's king and kingdom will triumph, for God still rules.

Let's pray. Our gracious Father, we do thank you for this introductory chapter to Daniel, which reminds us that you still rule, and so we are to remain loyal to you.

that, like the Jews of the past, we live in a foreign land. Like the Jews of the past, we will feel pressure to fit in. But Father, we pray that you'd help us to follow Daniel's example, remembering that you still rule.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.