

Don't assimilate into the culture of Babylon

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[0 : 00] Since about October, some of the small groups I lead have been studying the book of Daniel. And it's so terrific, I thought we could do it as a whole church. We won't have time to do all 12 chapters, but we'll easily pick up the big idea with just a few in January.

Because the theme that dominates Daniel is what a terrible time he and his friends are having. Almost every chapter is something scary for Daniel and his friends to deal with.

And it begins right in verse 1. In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem and besieged it.

You see, the year is 605 BC. Jerusalem is captured and Daniel and his friends are carried off in exile to Babylon. And in the Bible, Babylon is synonymous with pride and rebellion to God.

It's the same place as Babel from Genesis 11. Where in their pride, humanity thought they could build their own way to heaven with their tower.

[1 : 07] And long after Babylon has been and gone, long after it's finished, it keeps getting mentioned right throughout the New Testament. Even the very end of the Bible. The reason why is the same pride and rebellion of Babylon is found in this world as long as it continues.

And so, how are God's people supposed to live in exile in Babylon? The other scary thing for Daniel and his friends to deal with is all the beasts they face in that country.

So, there's a lion with eagle's wings. There's a four-headed flying leopard. There is a bear whose favorite food is Jews. There is an iron beast.

He's got metal teeth. There's a ram with two huge horns. There's an invincible goat who loves nothing more than smashing up temples. And, of course, there is the lion's den.

But I reckon we've already met the biggest beast in the book in verse 1 already. Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon.

[2 : 15] You see, Nebuchadnezzar managed to do what no one else had done before. He besieged Jerusalem, verse 1. In verse 2, he carries off the articles of God and puts them in the temple of another god.

You see, he's trying to take on God, put him in his place, in his own temple. You see, even though Nebuchadnezzar is just a man, he's so scary and gruesome that he's begun to look like a beast. In fact, in chapter 4, he literally turns into a beast with long claws and feathers like an eagle. But, hey, that's what you get from the king of Babylon.

How are God's people supposed to live in beastly Babylon? And so that's what we've called this series, Living with Beasts. And it's not hard to see how relevant this is to us today.

So, the Victorian government recently passed laws that made it a crime to get someone's LGBTQI identity wrong.

[3 : 24] Where prayer, in some circumstances, is illegal in Australia. A religious exemptions bill, I think is currently before Parliament, to protect schools like Donvale Christian College and Ridley College, to protect them so that they are allowed to hire only Christians on staff, as if that wasn't common sense already.

Pastors who hold to the Bible's teaching on men and women, we are blacklisted and don't get the plum jobs in the Anglican Church in Australia. Shifts from just 20 years ago are obvious for all to see today.

And it won't be surprising if things get much harder for Christians in the next generation. How are we to live as exiles in this place? We're going to look to Daniel and his friends for the answer.

And so please keep that passage open, chapter 1, and that handout, and we'll have a look. We're going to begin by looking at the tactic of Babylon against the believer.

So if you can, imagine you're in the shoes of Nebuchadnezzar. I imagine they're small shoes, because I always picture Nebuchadnezzar as a small little guy who's all heart and no brains. [4 : 39] That's just me. I don't know what you picture when you think of Nebuchadnezzar. Like a little angry man, you know, so little shoes. Put yourself in his little shoes and think to yourself, what would you do to stop God's people in your country?

What would you do? There are many tactics at your disposal. So you can try violence, so overthrowing a city, which he's already done. A fiery furnace comes next week. You can try social exclusion and pushing them out of the centre until they're forgotten by everyone else.

You can try outlawing them, so legislating things like it's illegal to pray to anyone else, which he does in chapter 6. These are some of the tactics you can use.

But history shows, doesn't it, that those things only grow the church rather than ruin it. But I reckon Nebuchadnezzar's tactic in chapter 1, I reckon he's nailed it in chapter 1, because his tactic is so subtle and charming, you barely notice that it's happening.

Look at verse 3. 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. Young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well-informed, quick to understand and qualified to serve in the king's palace.

[6 : 01] He was to teach them the language and the literature of the Babylonians. 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 were to enter the king's service.

In other words, come, join our Babylonian university, and for the three years of your undergraduate degree, you'll be assigned food from the king's table and wine from the royal cellar.

After that, you'll be fast-tracked through the hierarchy of the Babylonian government. Did you notice how privileged Daniel and his friends are?

We're miles away from a fiery furnace or a lion's den. Can you see what Nebuchadnezzar is doing? Do you notice how peaceful everything is?

We don't want to fight you. Come, be one of us. Learn, rise through our ranks. Work in our governments. And before long, you'll forget about Yahweh and the fact that you are Jews, and you will be Babylonian like the rest of us.

[7 : 09] The tactic of Babylon against the believer is assimilation. It's assimilation. Can you see where this is going to go today?

You see, if our culture wants to stop Christianity, they shouldn't try violence or legislating us away because China shows us that that only grows the church rather than ruins it.

The tactic they should try is tempting our hearts. Tempt our hearts with pleasure and prosperity, with peace and happiness.

That will work a treat. And before long, we'll forget that we're Christians, that Jesus is our Lord. That is assimilation.

And lots of Christians barely notice that that is what's happening today. So much so that it's quite hard to tell the difference between a Christian and a moral middle class Australian on the outside.

[8 : 11] You see, we're so assimilated into the culture around us rather than, as Barry read to us, being holy as God is holy.

But assimilation, it's there in the universities. It's on the television shows we watch. Shows that make sex and casual relationships funny and entertaining.

Shows that tempt us with a grand design house or an escape to the country lifestyle. It's in the movies we watch.

Do you notice the movies? They always make Christians look stupid. They always make us look bigoted. Or that Christianity is just one way out of many. One equal way to God.

It's not in your face, is it? Because my TV says Channel 7. It doesn't say Channel Babylon. It's in our schools where they are getting rid of religious instruction, where there's a certain ideological agenda, where they encourage children to celebrate Halloween and write letters to Santa.

[9 : 20] In and of themselves, none of these things on their own will do it. But when you add them up, something is going on. It's on the news. In the newspapers, there is a controlling secular narrative.

I thought it was just reporting the news. But it's not easy to tell, is it? Because it's called Sky News. Or it's called the ABC. The papers we read, it's called the Herald Sun.

Not the Babylonian Times. The danger is that Christians don't have their eyes open to what's really going on. See, we think society is so neutral, that journalism is so objective, that movies and TV are just entertainment, that left or right wing politics is the answer.

But it's all secular. It's all of Babylon, which means it's all rebellious and proud against God. And if we're not careful, we will just blend in and assimilate with the culture around us, rather than being holy.

Standing out as healthy thumbs. Being holy as God is holy. The tactic of Babylon against the believer is assimilation. And so what can faithful Christians do?

[10:36] The tactic of the believer is point number two. Verse eight. 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 this way. And essentially what he does is he swaps meat and wine with vegetables and water.

Why someone would do that, I have no idea. There are lots of reasons people choose to become vegetarians. Let's say health, ethical reasons, maybe religious devotion.

Daniel is a Jew after all. But the reason he becomes a vegetarian, it's repeated throughout our passage. It's there in verse five. The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table.

Verse eight. But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with royal food and wine. Verse 10. The king who has assigned your food and drink.

[11:38] Verse 13. Verse 15. It says, not just meat and wine. It's called royal food. You see, the author keeps reminding us about how special this food is.

If you want someone to assimilate, tempt their hearts. And that's what Nebuchadnezzar is doing.

You see, Daniel and his friends, they are Israelite royalty. They are the best and brightest.

They're the most beautiful of Israel. They're used to the finer things of life. And Nebuchadnezzar is offering them that in Babylon. Look, look how good and rich life can be for you here in Babylon.

Come, be one of us. The beast is going after their hearts. And meat and wine in and of themselves. Meat and wine is not a sin, is it?

But a luxurious lifestyle can tempt us away from God. It makes us forget who we are. It might replace God in our hearts.

[12:38] And Daniel knows how susceptible he is. And so he acts now not to eat that food. Verse 12. 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 do this and tested them for 10 days.

You see, just as it's hard to tell who is a Christian and who's not on the outside, so today it's really hard, isn't it, to tell who's a vegetarian and who's not, which is why I'm not going to make any vegetarian jokes, because there could be some amongst us.

You see, our diets these days, is it the additives? Maybe it's the sugar. But a vegetarian can look just as full, healthy in appearance as a meat eater.

But back then, everyone knew that a vegetarian diet was worse. Verse 10 says, why should you look worse than other men your age?

[13:44] And so what Daniel is doing, he's making his survival dependent on the provision and the intervention of God. He steps out in faith, but it has to be a private step, because if the king finds out, he'll be insulted that you rejected his food.

He'll have the chief official's head on a platter. And even though a vegetarian diet is worse, Daniel is making his survival contingent on the provision and the intervention of God.

And he's going to test whether he really believes God is sovereign. You see, as a Jew, he believes that God is sovereign, even in Babylon. As a Jew, he knows that God is able to intervene, even in exile.

But he needs to test whether he really believes that. And so he goes for vegetables, not meat. Something which is ordinarily impossible back in their time.

And intervene, God does, with our third point. Verse 15. At the end of ten days, they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food.

[15:02] So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead. And while that is a miracle, it isn't very exciting, is it?

It's pretty boring as far as all the things God is able to do. In fact, next week, a fiery furnace, that is so much more impressive compared to vegetables over meat.

But next week at the fiery furnace, we will sort of stand in awe at Daniel's courage. We will wonder where he gets that courage. We will question whether we would be able to stand up in similar tests. But heroic faith like that begins in chapter one. It begins with the seemingly boring leaps of faith. The boring decisions to go with vegetables over meat. It's a private way to depend on God to look after you. And in that way, Daniel and his friends are developing the habit of a lifetime.

[16:08] So next week when the fiery trials come, they will stand firm because they've been testing themselves since chapter one. They will stand firm rather than abandon God in despair.

And in Australia, even though we're 20 years away from violence and persecution like that, chapter one asks us whether we are testing ourselves today.

Are we sure that God is sovereign? Are you sure that he's able to intervene in your lives? We need to begin testing whether we really believe that.

That way, when there really is a family crisis or government agents really do knock on the door, we will be ready to stand firm like Daniel and his friends do. And so in the story today, the issue was about God providing.

But in Australia, we say that money provides, don't we? In our workplaces, on commerce, in the universities, on the TV shows, the films we watch, everything says that money is your security.

[17:18] It depends on how much you've got in the bank. Everything around us champions wealth creation and your asset portfolio. And so to test whether your security lies in God or money, why not begin giving some of your money away?

Why not increase your financial giving to the church? Not because we love cash, but so you can test where your confidence lies.

Don't keep giving till you're in debt. Just so you feel the pinch. So you feel the sacrifice of some of your worldly things.

It's a private way for you to depend on God and not money. And Babylon will say, how reckless. How reckless to trust in God and not money.

How reckless to be sacrificial and not just generous. Making your security dependent on God and not money.

[18:20] That is a private way for you to refuse the assimilation of this country. This week on Monday or Tuesday, maybe even Wednesday, Barry and Roger were counting the cash.

Barry and Roger count the cash every week. And I was walking past and I said g'day to them, as I sometimes do. And they said that someone put \$1,000 cash in an envelope with no name for no reason in the church.

\$1,000, says Babylon. Why not just make it \$100? \$100 is still generous. Why not put your name on the envelope? So at least you get some public recognition.

But not for this Christian. You see, they have begun testing where their security lies. They're testing whether they believe that God can provide for them despite the fact they've created a \$1,000 hole in their family budget.

Maybe God will honor this Christian. Maybe he'll do, as the charismatic say, give them tenfold, as he's given Daniel ten times the intelligence of everyone else.

[19:34] But even if he doesn't do that, and that person just goes without \$1,000, they have begun developing the habit of a lifetime. Because in five years, ten years, that person may lose their job.

They may lose all their money, family crises which would cause them to abandon God and their faith. But now they will be standing firm. Because back in 2022, they began testing themselves, their sense of security, with \$1,000 increments.

The other issue in our story today is one of happiness. Because Daniel and his friends are exiled away from their home. But in Australia, your happiness is everything.

We look to relationships, appetites, our stuff to make us happy. Happiness is the measuring stick for everything. If something doesn't make me happy or bring me pleasure, we get rid of it.

A way to refuse assimilation is to derive your happiness from Jesus. Get a bigger picture of your own sin and the fact that you, of all people and me, could be members of Jesus' family.

[20:51] The more you consider being in Christ, the less your joy will come from earthly stuff. It's a private way to step out in faith.

A private way to test where your happiness lies. One place we feel the pressure of happiness is in our marriages.

Because lots of marriages experience seasons of unhappiness. Perhaps you're experiencing that now. And it's really tough, isn't it?

Because in Australia, everyone says, well, that's okay to leave at that point. But the purpose of marriage is security, isn't it? It's a lifelong binding commitment that creates a safe place for sexual expression.

A safe place for your children to be raised. It's a partnership that better enables you to serve Jesus and grow and be like him. It's not that Christians are against happiness.

[21 : 53] But searching for happiness in everything, including your marriage, turns happiness into an idol in your heart. And the beast wants to get to your heart, remember? The beast says, how reckless to stay trapped in an unhappy marriage.

It's okay to leave and get divorced. Your emotional well-being is everything. But aren't they essentially saying that God's design for marriage is not good?

Or that he didn't really consider your situation when he invented it? Here at the church, we would love to help you if unhappiness in marriage is your situation.

God's word is chock-a-block full of his spirit. His spirit can do anything. It can break into the worst and most stubborn of spouses. Please don't pit your happiness against your relationship with God when it comes to your marriage.

Obviously, we're not talking about abuse situations here. But I wonder when Christians get divorced for happiness reasons, whether that is the first or last straw for them abandoning their faith.

[23 : 09] And so test yourself. Test yourself where your happiness is coming from. Is your happiness dependent on Jesus? Preserve your joy for that day when you finally see him face to face rather than earthly things.

Because one day a family crisis will happen. One day there will be seasons of unhappiness in your marriage. And that will end your faith as it ends your marriage.

Test whether the source of your happiness is something eternal or worldly. Like your marriage, like another person, like your stuff. For Daniel and his friends, everything by the end of the story works out well.

They're promoted. They're made smarter than anyone else in the kingdom of Babylon. But now they are closer to the center. They're right within eyeshot of the king.

And so more in the public firing line. And that is next week. For now, we've said enough to pray about. So do join me. Father God, please would we not assimilate into the culture of this place.

[24 : 23] Please would we stand out and be holy just as you are holy. Please open our eyes to what's really going on. Help us realize that everything in our culture is secular and rebellious to you.

And please, Father, please guard our hearts. Please help us test whether we really trust in you or in worldly things. Please help us to make small private steps so we begin developing the habit of a lifetime.

Please help us, Father, so that when the big crisis comes or the persecution comes, we will stand firm like Daniel and his friends. And we ask these things in Jesus' name.

Amen.