

Don't assimilate into the culture of Babylon

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[0 : 00] Since about October, some of the small groups I'm a part of, since about October, we've been looking at the book of Daniel. And it's so good that I thought we should spend a month in it as a church family.

We won't have time to look through all 12 chapters, but that's okay. We can easily pick up the big idea, looking at just a few. Because the theme that dominates Daniel is what a terrible time he and his friends are having.

In almost every chapter is something scary that Daniel and his friends have to face. And it begins right in verse 1. Have a look down, verse 1. In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem and besieged it.

The year is 605 BC and Jerusalem has been captured. Daniel and his friends are exiled to Babylon. And in the Bible, Babylon is synonymous as a place of 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 : 13] And long after Babylon has been and gone, it still gets mentioned in the Bible, in the New Testament, again and again, right to the very end of the Bible. Because the same pride and rebellion exists as long as this world continues.

And so how are God's people supposed to live as exiles in Babylon? The other scary thing for Daniel and his friends that they have to face are all the beasts.

So there's a lion with eagle's wings. There's a four-headed leopard who flies around the place. There's a bear whose favorite food is Jews. There is an iron beast.

He's got metal teeth. There is a ram. He's got two huge horns. There's an invincible goat who loves to smash 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 number one. It is Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon.

[2 : 15] You see, Nebuchadnezzar managed to do what no one else had done before. And that is, he laid siege to Jerusalem. In verse two, he takes on God. He carries the articles of God and puts them in the temple of another God.

That is like trying to take God and put him in his place. You see, even though Nebuchadnezzar is just a man, he's so gruesome and scary, he's begun to look like a beast.

In fact, in chapter four, he literally turns into a beast with long claws and feathers like an eagle. And so, 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 that is for us today. The Victorian government recently passed legislation that makes it a crime to get someone's LGBTQ identity wrong, where prayer in some situations is illegal.

A religious exemptions bill is needed to protect schools like Donvale Christian College and Ridley College from only employing Christians, as if that wasn't common sense already.

[3 : 32] Pastors who hold to the Bible's teaching on men and women, we are blacklisted from the plum jobs in the Anglican Diocese in Australia.

Shifts from just 20 years ago are now obvious for everyone to see. And it won't be long, I think, until things get worse and worse. And so, how are we as Christians to live in this place as exiles?

We're going to look to Daniel and his friends for the answer. And so, please keep Daniel 1 and that outline with you. What we're going to do is we're going to look at the tactics of Babylon against the believer.

And so, if you can, can you put yourself in the shoes of Nebuchadnezzar? I think they're little shoes, because I think Nebuchadnezzar's like, he's got little man syndrome, doesn't he?

Because he's all rage and no brains. And I think he's like a little man. So, put yourself in the little shoes of Nebuchadnezzar. How would you stop God's people? There are a number of tactics at your disposal.

[4 : 35] You can try violence, such as overthrowing their city and a fiery furnace next week. You can try outlawing them, making it illegal to pray to anyone but their golden images.

You can try social exclusion and moving God's people to the edge of society until they're all just but forgotten. But I reckon Nebuchadnezzar nails it in chapter 1.

Because his tactic is so charming and so subtle, you barely notice what he's doing. Have a look at verse 3. They were to enter the king's service.

In other words, come, join our Babylonian university. And for the three years of your undergraduate degree, we will give you royal food and wine from the royal cellar.

After that, you'll be fast-tracked to a great position in the power rankings of the Babylonian government. And you will forget all about Yahweh.

[6 : 06] Did you notice how privileged Daniel and his friends are? We are miles away from a fiery furnace. Can you see what Nebuchadnezzar is doing? Can you see how peaceful things are?

We're not going to fight you. Come and join us. Learn, work, rise through the ranks. And before long, you will forget who you are and where you came from.

And you will be Babylonian like the rest of us. The tactic of Babylon against the believer is assimilation.

It's assimilation. Can you see where this talk is going to go today? You see, if our culture wants to stop Christianity, they can try violence and outlawing us.

But that only grew the church in China, didn't it? Rather than stop us. But what they should really do is tempt our hearts. Tempt our hearts with peace and prosperity, with happiness and pleasure.

[7 : 07] That will work a treat. And before long, we will forget who we are. That Jesus is Lord. We will stop being holy as God is holy.

That was our New Testament reading. That is assimilation. And lots of Christians barely notice that it is happening today. So much so, it's quite hard to tell the difference between a Christian and a moral middle class atheist on the surface.

Because we're so assimilated into the culture around us, rather than being holy and sticking out, being distinct for Christ. But assimilation, it's in the universities, isn't it?

It's on the television shows we watch. Shows that make casual sex and casual relationships funny and entertaining. It's on the 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 ever notice the movies? They always make Christians look stupid. They make us look like bigots or that Christianity is just one way out of many to God.

[8 : 22] It's not always in your face, is it? Because my TV, it says Channel 7. It doesn't say Channel Babylon. It's in our schools where they are getting rid of Christian education, where they're pushing certain ideologies, where children are encouraged to celebrate Halloween and write letters to Santa.

Each one of these things in and of themselves is not much. But if you stack them together, you will see what's going on. It's on the news and in our newspapers. There is a controlling secular narrative.

I thought it was just reporting the news. Because it's not called... Well, it's called Sky News and the ABC. The newspapers 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 is actually 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 is all of Babylon. And that means it's all proud and rebellious against God. And if we're not careful, we will blend in with the culture around...

[9 : 42] We will go with the flow and we will forget who we are and that Jesus is Lord. The tactic of Babylon against the believer is assimilation.

And so what can faithful Christians do in Babylon? And the answer is our second point. Verse 8. 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 this way. And essentially, in a nutshell, what he does, he swaps meat and wine for vegetables and water.

There are lots of reasons why people become vegetarians. I don't know what they are. I don't know what you said. Maybe health reasons. Maybe ethical reasons. Maybe religious reasons.

Daniel is a Jew, after all. But the reason he chooses veggies is repeated throughout our passage. It's in verse 5. The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table.

[10:50] Verse 8. Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine. Verse 10. The king who has assigned your food and drink. Verse 13.

It's not called meat and wine, is it? It's called royal food. Same goes in verse 15. The author keeps reminding us how luxurious this food is. You see, if you want someone to assimilate, go after their heart.

And that's what Nebuchadnezzar is doing. Daniel and his friends, they are Israelite nobility. They are the best, the brightest, the most beautiful of Israel.

They are used to the finer, luxurious things in life. And Nebuchadnezzar was offering them that in Babylon. Look how good and rich our lifestyle can be here in Babylon.

Come, be one of us. The beast was going after their hearts. And meat and wine, meat and wine in and of itself is not a sin.

[11:52] But luxury like that captures our hearts. If we're not careful, it will replace God in our lives. And Daniel knows how susceptible his heart is.

And so he takes a stand. 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 this and tested them for 10 days. You see, these days it's very hard to tell who is a Christian and who is not. And equally, it's very hard to tell who's a vegetarian and who's not.

Which is why I'm not going to make any vegetarian jokes like insensitive Harry. Because there could be vegetarians amongst us. You see, our diets these days, is it the additives?

Is it the sugar? Whatever. Vegetarians look fuller in appearance than us meat eaters. But back then, only a miracle will make a vegetarian look as healthy as a meat eater.

[13:04] And so what Daniel is doing, he's making his survival dependent on God to provide and intervene in his little decision.

He steps out in faith. But it has to be private. Because if the king finds out, he'll be insulted. If the king finds out, the poor old chief official, it'll be off with his head.

It has to be private. Daniel is making his life dependent on God to intervene with something miraculous. Can you see that?

You see, the Jews believe that God is sovereign, even in Babylon. They believe that he's able to intervene, even in exile. And Daniel is testing whether he really believes that or not.

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

[14:06] So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead. And that is a miracle, actually. But in terms of everything else in the book, that is a pretty boring miracle, wouldn't you say?

It's not nearly as exciting as next week when God rescues them from a fiery furnace. And next week, we will be in awe of Daniel and his mates who stand up and refuse to give in.

And their courage that takes the furnace instead of denying God. And we will wonder whether we would be able to stand up when our faith is similarly tested.

But heroic faith like that begins in chapter one with boring steps of faith. Boring decisions to go with vegetables over meats.

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.

[15:12] Because when the fiery trial comes next week, they will stand, won't they, in their faith, rather than fold and assimilate with the culture around them.

And in Australia, in the last two years, lots of things have seemed out of control. The coronavirus has amplified the role of government in our lives.

And lots of Christians have been outraged by what they've seen at the state level, at the federal level and internationally. Lots of Christians are outraged by that.

Because in Australia, the ultimate power is the politicians. In Australia, the politicians are king. And so why don't you test yourself?

Test whether you really believe that God stands in the highest place. That way, you won't be bereft and consumed every day when you turn on the news and you get upset by the politicians' decisions.

[16 : 14] Why don't you test yourself by looking at this story? Did you notice in verse 2, God is the one who delivers Judah into the hands of Babylon?

Why don't you tell yourself that even these Australian kings have a king? That God is the sovereign one? Test whether you really believe that. Did you notice the very last verse of the story today? It says, Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus. That is a mark of stability because Cyrus is Persian. And that means Daniel stood in his faith long after God had dealt with the beastly Nebuchadnezzar.

Daniel was still standing right to the end of Cyrus. He came and saw empires come and go. Why don't you test whether you really believe God is sovereign?

That way, you won't be consumed by what Daniel Andrews is doing when you turn on the news or what Scott Morrison is doing when you turn on the news. The other issue in our story today is about provision, God providing food and wine.

[17 : 28] But in Australia, we trust in money, don't we? Our workplaces, our commerce, our universities, the TV shows, they all tell us that security is about how much you've got in the bank.

We champion wealth creation and your asset portfolio. And so why don't you test whether your security lies in God or in money by giving your money away?

Why not increase your financial giving to the church? Not so that you go into debt, but just so you feel the pinch each month and you have to sacrifice some earthly goals.

And Babylon will say to you, how reckless to trust in God over money. How reckless to be not just generous but sacrificial with your stuff.

Making your security dependent on God is a private way to refuse the assimilation of this country.

[18 : 33] This week, I was walking past, there's a couple of gentlemen who count the cash from the financial giving. And every week when I walk past them on Monday morning, I say g'day and we have a bit of a chat.

And this week they said that someone put \$1,000 cash in an envelope with no names and for no purpose. \$1,000, says Babylon.

Why not just make it \$100? \$100 is still generous. Why not put your name on it? At least so you get some public recognition. But not for that Christian.

You see, they have started a private way of testing where their security lies. They're trying to test whether they really believe that God can provide for them.

And they're beginning with \$1,000 increments. And maybe God will honor this person. You know, like some churches say, honor him tenfold. Tenfold, \$10,000 the way Daniel is given ten times the brains of everyone else.

[19 : 39] But even if God doesn't do anything, this Christian will be okay. Because they've begun developing the habit of a lifetime. Because one day they might lose their jobs.

One day they might lose all their money. A crisis which ordinarily would see them abandon their faith. But not this person. Because they will be standing firm. Because they began testing their trust in God with \$1,000 increments way back in 2022.

The other issue in our story today, the final one we'll do, is happiness. It's happiness. Because Daniel is taken away from his home. But in Australia, your happiness is everything, isn't it?

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

A way to refuse the assimilation of Australia and happiness is to derive your pleasure from Jesus. Get a bigger picture of what a sinner you are.

[20 : 50] How outrageous it is that someone like you or me could be in Jesus' family. The more you consider what it means to be in Christ, the less your joy will come from worldly things.

It's a private way to step out in faith. As we finish, I just want to talk about happiness in marriage. So, one place we feel the pressure of happiness is in our marriages.

Because lots of marriages experience seasons of sadness. And perhaps you're experiencing that right now. And that's really tough for Christians.

Because everything in our culture says that that is the point when it's okay to leave. But the purpose of marriage is security, isn't it? It's a lifelong binding commitment.

It's a safe place for sexual expression. It's a safe place to raise children. It's a partnership designed to make you serve Jesus better. And make you more like Christ.

[21 : 56] And it's not that Christians are against happiness. But searching for happiness in everything, including our marriages, it makes happiness an idol in your heart.

And Babylon wants your heart, remember? Babylon says, how reckless to stay trapped in an unhappy marriage. 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 or my situation when he designed this institution?

If you're unhappily married, we would love to help you. God's word is full of his Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit can reach even the most stubborn spouses, even the most unhappy of marriages.

Please don't pit your happiness in marriage against your relationship with God. Obviously, we're not talking about situations of abuse here. But when Christians get divorced for happiness reasons, in my opinion, I think that is either the first or the last straw for them, also abandoning God.

[23 : 16] And I wonder if you've seen something like that. And so, test yourself. Test yourself. Test where your happiness is coming from. Is it coming from your marriage or your spouse or your stuff or from Jesus?

Are you reserving your ultimate pleasure for the day when you will finally see him face to face in his new creation or for earthly things today?

That way, when a family crisis does happen, when your marriage does experience unhappiness, you won't need to leave and throw these things away because you have tested yourself with sometimes boring ways way ahead of time.

For Daniel and his friends, everything in the end of chapter 1, everything works out fine. But they're now in the public spotlight. They are closer to the king.

Everyone will see what Daniel and his friends will do. The pressure is on. But that is the story for next week. For now, there's enough for us to pray about.

[24 : 25] So do join me. Father God, please would we open our eyes. Please would we test ourselves.

Would we see the assimilation, the secular ideology of this place? Father God, please would we test ourselves.

Would we refuse to assimilate? Would we have our eyes on Jesus? And please, Father, help us in small private ways so that we will stand if we lose our money, if our marriages become unhappy, if governments overstep their boundary.

Help us to test ourselves that you are really in charge. Please would we test whether we really believe that in these small private ways. We ask it so that we will stand and not go with the flow like everyone else.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.