

In a Foreign Land

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 16 July 2017

Preacher: Andrew Price

[0 : 00] Well, I wonder if you've ever had the experience of being a foreigner in a foreign land, you know, where you've perhaps stood out as different.

Jeff was just over in Japan for two weeks, and as you can imagine, Jeff up here, it actually stands out everywhere, so maybe not just Japan.

But, you know, perhaps our language and customs are different and make us stand out, perhaps our appearance or clothes, or perhaps it's our behaviour or values that are different and make us stand out.

I've mentioned before that when I was training to be a teacher at university, I went to Fiji for a teaching prac. And there I was, with my blonde hair and trousers, standing next to a big, muscly Fijian man in his skirt, called a Sulu.

We were looking very different. I stood out. It was clear I was a foreigner. But we also had different customs as well. So I was teaching in one class, and the teacher invited me to her house for dinner to meet her family.

[1 : 04] And my custom says, you accept out of politeness and go along. So I went. When I got there, we had curry and rice, which we ate with our fingers. That was a bit different, but I could cope with that different custom.

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

And suddenly I realised that I was actually on a date about to be married off. I kid you not. I'm serious. And the daughter even said to me, you are my blonde Superman.

I had never left a dinner so quickly in all my life. Politely, of course, because that's my custom. And I had never felt so much like a foreigner in a foreign land as I did then.

Today we begin a new series, as I said, in the book of Daniel. And it was originally written to Jews who found themselves living in a foreign land. Not as tourists in Fiji, but as exiles in Babylon.

[2 : 07] And the book begins by setting this scene for us in verses 1 to 3. And we're going to spend a bit of time on this context. Because it introduces us not just to chapter 1, but to the whole book.

So have a look there in your Bibles. Verse 1. In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem and besieged it.

And the Lord 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.

The king also 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, and on it goes.

Here Judah is invaded by Babylon. And over the next 19 years, Nebuchadnezzar destroys God's kingdom, it seems.

[3 : 08] By defeating God's human kings, like Jehoiakim, plundering God's temple again and again, and carrying off God's people three times, actually.

Three deportations. Now, to help you put the history of it together, there's a timeline on the back of your outline. So you might like to turn to that just very quickly.

So verse 1 and 2 of Daniel take place in late 605 BC. Nebuchadnezzar is newly crowned as king. He's just defeated Egypt at the Battle of Carchemish earlier that year.

And so he's now taking over the lands that were under Egypt's control, including Judah. But unlike Egypt, Nebuchadnezzar also carries off treasures from God's temple, and verse 3, some of the young men from the royal family and the nobility.

And we saw that very well demonstrated for us in the kids' talk, carrying off Daniel to exile. So this is where Daniel and his three friends went to Babylon, 605 BC, at the end of the year.

[4 : 10] This is the first deportation. The rest of the Jews stayed in Judah, and Jehoiakim stayed as king. And then if you come down to 601 BC, Jehoiakim rebels against Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar, along with a number of other nations.

And so over the next few years, Nebuchadnezzar deals with each rebellion, starting with Egypt, and he puts them down one at a time. So he takes a bit of time to get to Judah in late 598 BC.

After besieging it, he then carries off lots more Jews this time to Babylon in 597 BC. 10,000 Jews, in fact. So on the next slide, we read this from 2 Kings 24.

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. This is the second deportation. Nine years later, after he made Zedekiah king, well, Zedekiah rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar.

[5 : 14] So we're at 588 BC on your outline, or your timeline. And so Nebuchadnezzar came back a third time, and this time he surrounded Jerusalem, starved it for two years.

It was horrific what happened inside the city. I won't go into it because of the kids here today. And then two years later, at 586 BC, he completely destroyed it. And this time, almost all the populace went to Babylon.

So on the next slide from 2 Kings 25, we read in the 19th year of Nebuchadnezzar, so he became king 605, 605 down to 586. King of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, the commander of the imperial guard, set fire to the temple of the Lord, the royal palace, and all the houses of Jerusalem.

Every important building he burned down. He carried into exile the people who remained in the city, along with the rest of the populace, by the commander left behind some of the poorest people of the land to work the vineyards and fields.

And that was the third deportation. And this happened over 19 years. Why did it happen though? Well, because the Jews continued to sin against God, despite God patiently warning them for more than 300 years.

[6 : 29] I mean, that's pretty patient, isn't it? Sometimes I'm so impatient with my kids, they don't even get one warning. But here the Jews receive loads of warnings.

Even this current generation of Jews were warned by the prophet Jeremiah, but they would not listen. And what's more, the sin of Judah was particularly bad. Last year we looked at the book of Habakkuk, and this was his complaint to God about when, God, are you going to do something about the sin in Judah?

So on the next slide, we have Habakkuk chapter one, and he's saying, how long, O Lord, until you basically deal with this violence and sin in Judah? Well, here God does.

He sends Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, which wasn't quite what Habakkuk had in mind, to judge Judah. That's why in verse two of our passage today, it says, the Lord delivered Judah into Nebuchadnezzar's hand.

This was God's doing. This was God's just judgment on Judah for their persistent sin. And there they remained in Babylon until 539 BC, where Cyrus, who was Persian, rose up to power, took over Babylon, and then allowed the Jews to return back home the next year in 538 BC.

[7 : 49] And so the opening verses of Daniel show us God's people who are beginning to live as exiles in a foreign land and Babylon beginning to destroy God's kingdom by defeating God's human kings, 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, the big question they were asking themselves is, does our God still rule? Because against the might of Babylon, it looked like he was defeated.

After all, verse 2 says that his treasure from his temple now sat where? In the temple of the foreign God. Twice we're told that. It's as though the foreign God has defeated Yahweh, Israel's God.

And God's people are now sitting in a foreign land themselves, and they are facing pressure to conform to the culture of their foreign land. And so the book of Daniel was written to show them that actually God does still rule.

His king and kingdom will triumph. So as we heard from the kids talk, they are to remain loyal to God. And this makes the book of Daniel very relevant for us today.

[9 : 06] You see, as Christians, we too live in a foreign land. Did you realize that? We heard this in our second reading. That's on the next slide where Peter calls us to live as exiles and foreigners.

Or as Paul says, our citizenship, our true home is heaven. And if our true home is heaven and the world to come, then that means this world is not our true home.

It's like a foreign land. We're just passing through. What's more, our values, behavior, and beliefs make us different to this world. They make us like a foreigner in this world.

I mean, have you ever felt like a foreigner in your workplace because of your Christian values or amongst parents at school or amongst the kids at school? Or perhaps extended family because they don't believe and, you know, you just feel on the outer.

If you don't, if you've never felt that, then next time you're discussing something with some non-Christian work friends or family members, just say, look, well, the Bible says that we should do this. So let's follow Jesus' example, shall we?

[10 : 14] And see what happens. See how they respond. I bet you get a look like, what? You're a bit weird. You're not from around here. You're like a foreigner. But that's the point. As Christians, this world is like our foreign land.

And like the Jews back then, we too can look around and wonder, does God still rule in our world, our foreign land? After all, we see ungodly leaders ruling while God's rule is rejected.

We see God's people being persecuted and suffering from disease and disaster while non-Christians prosper. And so we can wonder whether God still rules in our foreign land.

And like the Jews back then, we too face pressure to fit into our world and conform to its culture and values. And so the message of Daniel is very much relevant for us today.

For the message of the whole book is this. Remain loyal like Daniel. God's king and kingdom will triumph because God still rules.

[11 : 20] That's the three-part message for the whole book. Remain loyal like Daniel. God's king and kingdom will triumph because God still rules. And we begin to see two of those parts in chapter one as Daniel is pressured to fit in.

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

A young man 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. He was to teach them the language and 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 they were to enter the king's service. Among those who were chosen were some from Judah, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah.

The chief official gave them new names. To Daniel, the name Belteshazzar. To Hananiah, Shadrach and to Mishael, Meshach and to Azariah Abednego. Here we see Nebuchadnezzar's rather clever program of assimilation.

[12 : 34] He would take the cream of the crop, those of nobility, those who had good bodies, good minds, even good looks and he would take them when they were young. The phrase young men there can also be used for a child.

So we're talking 13, 14, 15 years old. In other words, at an age where they are impressionable. And Nebuchadnezzar would then put his stamp on them. Make them into Babylonians as we heard from the kids talk.

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

In fact, he gave them his very own food from his own table. And he would give them a job working for himself in the palace. I mean, that's huge status in the kingdom.

These incentives are like an employer kind of, you know, offering an employee a higher salary at a car parking spot, their own work car so that the employee might give the employer their undivided devotion.

[13 : 43] And third, in verse 6 and 7, Nebuchadnezzar had them renamed with Babylonian names. You see, the name Daniel has part of the name for God in it.

So on the next slide, the Hebrew word for God is El-Ohim. And so, Dan-El, it's got the El part. And his name, therefore, means Elohim is my judge.

Elohim is the Hebrew God, God of the Bible. But Belteshazzar, says, has the name of a Babylonian goddess, Bel, in it. And it means Bel protect the king. And so, as we rightly heard before, their Hebrew names connected them to their god, but now what's happening is they're getting new names that would connect them to the Babylonian gods.

See, Nebuchadnezzar was effectively making them Babylonian, changing their identity, making them conform to his culture, making them fit into his kingdom. And it is a clever way of dealing with conquered nations.

After all, these were the leaders of tomorrow who might one day rise up and lead a revolt against you. So what do you do? Well, you take them when they're young, re-educate, rename, incentivize them, buy their loyalty, and then they won't fight against you, they'll fight for you, as well as making your kingdom even greater in the process.

[15 : 05] It was a rather clever way to assimilate foreigners, to conform them to your culture. And yet, is this not what our world does to us and others today? Does it not try to incentivize, re-educate, and rename us so that we might become people of the world rather than people of God?

That we might conform to the world's culture rather than God's culture? I mean, is not the current Safe Schools program here in Victoria a form of re-education? Does it not seek to conform our values and beliefs about gender and sexuality to the world's values and beliefs?

And is not the unbalanced presentation of ideas in our media or shows like Q&A; a way of re-educating us to conform to the world's culture? Someone from our service at 10.30 nearly made it onto Q&A; one time, the ABC show, I think they weren't the next or the second next to go on, and they said the producers deliberately stack the audience against the Christian views.

And so when a non-Christian points their view, the audience would cheer easily, because there's more of them of that opinion, but when the Christian view puts forward, there's less to cheer and more would boo.

And as that happens, what's happening? It's sending out a message to the rest of Australia, it's re-education so that we conform to the world's values.

[16 : 32] I could go on and give more examples, but just take renaming instead. Those who promote abortion name themselves what? Pro-choice. It's positive, you know?

Or those who support gay marriage name themselves marriage equality. And we Christians who disagree with that, we are renamed what? Bigots.

Yeah. The irony, of course, is that a bigot by definition is someone who is intolerant. We Christians tolerate other people's rights to choose, we just disagree. It's actually the world who does not tolerate the Christian view and crucify Christians in the public square like Margaret Court.

They are the biggest, yet we are renamed that. Why? So that we might conform to the world's culture. Even incentives, young workers given the incentive of pay rise, job security, status, career advancement, all dangled in front of them so that they might make work their God rather than Jesus their God.

God. I remember working at McDonald's as a teenager and every year at Christmas time I go away and do what's called beach mission. We go to caravan parks and run activities for kids and talk about Jesus and so on.

[17 : 42] And I remember the store manager one year saying to me, look, if you don't go on beach mission this year and stay and work over the new year period, we will promote you to a manager. Now, I realise a manager of McDonald's is not all that attractive to us here today, but for a teenager, that was pretty attractive.

It was a good incentive. It was an incentive to conform to the work culture rather than God's culture. For the record, I never became a manager. But you see, this is what it's like to live in a foreign world where there is pressure on us to conform to its culture, to fit in to its values.

This is what Nebuchadnezzar was doing to Daniel. So how will this young teenager, Daniel, 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 this way. Now, God had caused the official to show favour and compassion to Daniel, but the official told Daniel, I'm afraid of my lord, the king, who has assigned your food and drink.

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

[19 : 01] 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 ten days. What does Daniel do? How does he respond? Verse 8, he resolved not to defile himself with the king's food.

Now it's an odd choice when I first read this. Why choose to make you stand on this particular thing? Why not stand against being renamed for example after a Babylonian god?

Although interestingly the book of Daniel does keep using his Hebrew name and in chapter one it keeps using the friends Hebrew names as well at least. But why does Daniel take his stand here on the king's food and wine?

Some commentators suggest it is because both the food and wine were offered to Babylonian gods. Yet so too were the vegetables and Daniel is happy to eat them. Which is extraordinary by the way a young teenage boy choosing only vegetables.

[20 : 04] It's a lesson out there for my teenage anyway. Other commentators and this has got legs. Other commentators would say he refused it because it involved eating unclean animals that the Old Testament law said you could not eat like pork for example or pepper pig.

After all the word defile would suggest that. And yet there is no Old Testament law against wine. And what's more there would have been food from the king's table that was clean like beef or lamb.

So it's a good suggestion and many commentators suggest it but it doesn't fully explain why he rejects all the meat and the wine as well. So why does he 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 were now part of the king's men. You now owed your loyalty to him. This is how the idea is used later on in Daniel chapter 11.

In other words the king's food came with strings 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.

[21 : 12] They are happy to obey their foreign authorities learn new languages and literature even be renamed but they will not compromise their loyalty to God even if it sees them thrown into the fiery furnace in chapter 3 even if it sees them thrown into the lion's den in chapter 6 you see this is constantly where they draw the line.

And it's helpful for us too to know where to draw the line for ourselves in our world. You see there are many things that we might disagree with and petitions to sign things to vote against and we should take those opportunities but if our society ever tried to force us to disown God or be disloyal to God then we just then we got no choice we must resolve to stand firm against that even if it costs us.

While we're not at that stage here in Australia it has happened in the last couple of years to many Christians in the Middle East who have refused to renounce God for Islam and lost their lives.

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

So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead. Daniel and his friends passed the test.

[22 : 41] Unless we think this outcome is just common sense I mean after all vegetables and water are a kind of healthy option than wine and rich food fatty food that kind of thing. Unless we think it's just common sense the narrator now makes it clear that it's actually God working behind the scenes ruling to make all this happen.

So point three verse 17 to these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning and Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds.

At the end of the time set by the king to bring them into his service the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. The king talked with them and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah so they entered the king's service.

In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom and Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.

Notice verse 17 the narrator says God gives Daniel and his friends knowledge and notice how the narrator then emphasizes how great this knowledge is.

[23 : 55] So verse 20 the king questions Daniel and his friends and he finds them in every subject ten times better than all the other wise men in the whole land.

Notice how he emphasizes it. He wants us to see how great this wisdom is so that we might know that God is still working the one who gave them this wisdom.

He is still ruling even in this foreign land. In fact the narrator has been showing us this throughout 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 favour to Daniel and here in verse 17 God gave knowledge. Even in verse 21 where Daniel remained until King Cyrus arrived is a hint that God still rules.

Remember King Cyrus? He is the Persian who rose up to go to Babylon and then let the people, the Jews, go back home. So God not only enabled Daniel to outlive the whole Babylonian empire, the whole empire Daniel outlived, but the very mention of Cyrus reminds us that God did raise up Cyrus to free his people, that he is still ruling, just as he promised he would.

[25 : 17] You see a hundred years earlier on the next slide in Isaiah 45, God promised this, I will raise up Cyrus in my righteousness, I will make all his ways straight, he will rebuild my city and notice set my exiles free a hundred years earlier through Isaiah and here at the end of Daniel chapter 1 the narrator mentions Cyrus to show that God has kept that very promise.

You see God still rules even in this foreign land and so like Daniel the Jews are to remain loyal to God and this is the message for us today.

You see if we trust in Christ then we have been made part of God's precious people, we have mercy and forgiveness and we have the certainty of life eternal enjoying God's physical kingdom in the world to come if we trust in Christ that is.

So I should ask do you, do you trust in Christ? But if we do that's what we have but it also means therefore that this world is no longer our true home.

As I said before we're just passing through this world, we are like foreigners in a foreign land. And what's more we have different values and customs, beliefs and behaviours to this world which make us stand out as foreigners in a foreign land or at least should make us stand out.

[26 : 39] So the first question for us who trust in Jesus is do we actually live like foreigners in this world? Or do we live as though we belong to this world? In other words, do we actually stand out in this world like a foreigner stands out in a foreign country?

I remember some friends telling us how they got together and the guy said he used this really corny line to get this girl to go out with him. He grabbed his sleeve of his shirt and he says, what's this material?

And the girl's going, what? This is boyfriend material. It was bad, but it worked. They're married. But there's another corny line I heard a guy say to a girl, he said, why are you trying so, this is worse, why are you trying so hard to fit in when you were born to stand out?

But the point is, and there is a point, we as Christians are born into God's family and we are born, therefore, to stand out as different, like foreigners stand out in a foreign land.

But we can sometimes work so hard to fit into this world, to cling to the things of this world. We can have the same priorities as this world, the same behaviour as this world. But as Christians, we are born to stand out as different, as foreigners in this world.

[27 : 59] And secondly, if we do live like foreigners in this world, then from time to time, we will feel pressure to fit in and conform, won't we? But the message of Daniel is, don't.

Remain loyal like Daniel, because God still rules, even in our foreign land. Let me finish with a little story, a small example of this in practice.

I remember some friends of ours visiting us. This was two or three years ago. We were staying up in New South Wales in a caravan park, and at the park there was an indoor pool which was heated, which was nice because it was winter time.

And they were visiting us, and we weren't sure how the pool worked with guests who weren't staying at the park. So we asked another person staying at the caravan park, and they said, oh, look, guests are supposed to pay for the pool, but whenever our friends come, we just swipe our tag, and when the door opens, our friends just go on in.

So why don't you just go and do that? But when we get to the pool, and in front was an office area, my friend went to the counter, rung the little bell, ding, waited for the staff person to come, asked how much the pool was, paid the money, and then went in.

[29 : 12] You see, in this very little way, he was not going to conform to the culture around him. He was going to remain loyal to God. Why?

Because God still rules, even over his life. And so he was going to stick with God and not conform to the culture. The message of Daniel, as we'll see chapter after chapter, is that we are to remain loyal like Daniel, for God's king and kingdom will triumph since God still rules.

Let's pray. Gracious Father, we do thank you for this book of Daniel, which has a similar context to the context we find ourselves here in Melbourne in 2017, where we as your people live as foreigners in a foreign land, where we are faced and pressured to conform to our culture.

But Father, we pray that you would help us to remain loyal to you, for you still rule even in our world and so over our lives.

So help us in this, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.