

Daniel 1:3-21 - When In Babylon...

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Date: 17 April 2016

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Amen. Last week we began a journey through the book of Daniel. We began that journey by reading about the defeat of God's people.

His people suffering defeat against Babylon and King Nebuchadnezzar. So God's people are going to be taken into Babylon where the rest of the book occurs.

Today Daniel and his friends are taken into exile in Babylon. They're moved there and we begin to deal then with the question of when in Babylon?

How should we live? What does it look like for God's people living in Babylon? Here's this pluralistic culture much like the one we live in and God's people called to a singular devotion to Him.

[1 : 07] How? How can that happen? In some ways it's the age-old challenge of being in the world but not of the world. And there are at least four ways that Christians have approached this idea through the years.

The first is to isolate, right? You're faced with this dilemma living in Babylon and one option is to isolate, to avoid all possible interaction with this culture.

To avoid contact with the world whenever possible. Create a separate culture of your own that protects from the ills of the world and is entirely Christian. This approach values safety and assumes, incorrectly I would say, that all evil is out there.

And we can, with some degree of success, avoid being defiled by avoiding being near the world. A second option is to fight.

Even in an angry or belligerent way. Always being angry about everything and always seeking to push back. At every turn, the way I'm engaging the culture is by defeating it to gain control or power.

[2 : 25] This approach values control. It would seek to see Christians in the majority and would fight politically or socially to see Christian influence in the culture increase by being in charge.

It's the we're going to win approach. We're going to be stronger than they are. Now, if you're among the older generations in this room this morning and you've lived most of your life in America and particularly in the southern Bible belt, some version of this approach is pretty much the air you breathe, right?

That you may have grown up and not actually felt at all like you were living in Babylon. You may have felt very much like Christian principles ruled the day in many areas of society and in the way that you engaged.

Christians have even used terms like moral majority to talk about the way we engage with the culture, that that's what we're going to have and that's how we'll live. But if you're among the younger generations in the room today, you've never experienced a world quite like that, even in Huntsville, Alabama.

Even growing up here, you're much more accustomed to a culture that disagrees with or actively discourages your values and beliefs.

[3 : 45] Younger Christians, you may have noticed, are in general not particularly interested in striving to be in control of cultural institutions. But rather, they're working to remain credible and relevant as a minority in an increasingly dismissive and sometimes hostile culture that they're growing up in.

And as they do that, the temptation for them is actually towards a third approach, which is to assimilate. To determine to be a part of the world in every way.

To take a passive, go-with-the-flow stance on most issues and just hope to blend in and get along, right? Not to attract too much negative attention or too much criticism.

This approach values acceptance. In the end, perhaps, as other generations may notice, may sometimes find themselves left with little distinctively Christian.

No distinctively Christian message at all, perhaps. We all have personal tendencies as we think about how to engage, don't we? Some of us to isolate, some of us to fight, some of us to assimilate.

[5 : 02] But while there are moments where each of these approaches may be helpful, in general, none of them is fully biblical. Is there a fourth approach? Is there another way to engage in a culture like Babylon?

Like ours? Daniel will show us one as we read chapter 1. And we will learn this, that because God is supremely valuable, we must maintain our distinctive identity in the world.

Because God is supremely valuable, we must stay distinctive, maintain that distinctive identity while engaging in the world.

Let's give attention to God's word and see what this looks like for his people here in Babylon. It's a lengthy section in Daniel 1, but we'll start at verse 3, after Nebuchadnezzar has conquered Israel. This is God's word. The wine that the king drank.

[6 : 32] They were to be educated for three years, and at the end of that time, they were to stand before the king. Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah of the tribe of Judah.

And the chief of the eunuchs gave them names. Daniel he called Belteshazzar. Hananiah he called Shadrach. Mishael he called Meshach. And Azariah he called Abednego.

But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself.

And God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs. And the chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, I fear my lord the king who assigned your food and your drink, for why should he see that you were in worse condition than the youths who are of your own age?

So you would endanger my head with the king. Then Daniel said to the steward whom the chief of the eunuchs had assigned over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, Test your servants for ten days.

[7 : 36] Let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then let our appearance and the appearance of the youths who eat the king's food be observed by you and deal with your servants according to what you see.

So he listened to them in this matter and tested them for ten days. At the end of ten days it was seen that they were better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youths who ate the king's food.

So the steward took away their food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables. As for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill and all literature and wisdom.

And Daniel had understanding and all visions and dreams. At the end of the time when the king had commanded that they should be brought in, the chief of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar. And the king spoke with them and among all of them none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.

Therefore they stood before the king. And in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanterers that were in all his kingdom.

[8 : 41] And Daniel was there until the first year of King Cyrus. Pray with me. Father, this is a familiar story for some of us.

But it seems distant. It happened a long time ago. 600 B.C. Not a world we're familiar with. Would you teach us about yourself from your word this morning?

Would you show us what you would have for us? This is your word and so we ask your spirit to teach us. Would you make our hearts open to what you would show us this morning?

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. As the story opens here, what brings Daniel and his friends to Babylon is the king's plan of complete assimilation.

It's in verses 3-7 that we just read. The king has a plan for complete assimilation. Nebuchadnezzar wants to do what? He wants to cement his power over these newly conquered peoples, doesn't he?

[9 : 51] He wants to make sure that he's in power and that he stays in power by taking the best and the brightest of Israel and making them Babylonian in every way.

Daniel and his friends are probably teenagers, by the way, when they are taken from their homes and dragged to Babylon. enrolled in Babylon Prep. The Babylonian public schools are well known for their excellence in academics.

They're also well known for their excellence at inculcating the Babylonian worldview and way of life. So classes on literature and math and medicine, but also classes on omens, astrology, pagan religion, and others most likely.

Don't miss that God, who is at work here, who we saw last week, is in control, has placed some of his beloved people right there.

Right there in the world. The program of assimilation that they're to undergo includes new names, a new diet, new education, the best of everything that Babylon has to offer with the intent of communicating one message, one thing that the king wants these men who would serve before the king to know, the path to the things that are really valuable is to be like one of us.

[11 : 25] All those things you heard growing up in Israel, they're inferior. We've conquered them. That's not worthy of following. The path to the really valuable things is to be like us.

You hear that message all the time, don't you? The path to what's really valuable is to be like us. Maybe you've been a part of a friend group, a workplace clique, a sorority that you've been engaged with and the reality is that backbiting and gossip and demeaning criticism of others is really the language of the land in this group.

If you're going to be a part of it, if you're going to be in there getting or staying in requires compromising your commitment to Christ to get what's really valuable, to get in, to be a part of that. Caring for the marginalized will just get you marginalized. You can tell that. And then what good will you be, you ask yourself? Young people, some of you are going off to school and you're hearing a message there that if you're going to get what's really valuable, that if you're going to find love and what's really important in life, you will have to have a sexual morality like everyone else.

It's just normal and expected these days, isn't it? The commitments that your parents have taught you as you've grown up are mocked as ridiculous. Nobody really lives that way anymore.

[13 : 16] That's silly, that's old-fashioned, that's out of date. And the relationships, the guy or the girl that you really need, this is the only way you can get it is to do what everyone else is doing.

We all know how valuable it is to provide for our families, don't we? To have a good job and to keep it and to be able to provide, that's valuable, isn't it?

It's very valuable. And many of us realize if we don't fudge the numbers like the rest of the people in the office, we'll lose the promotion or the bonus or the job.

And then if we don't make the money, we won't be able to live in the right place or get the valuable things to protect our kids and that would be terrible and after all, it's just a very small compromise for such a big payoff to be able to provide for my family, right?

We live in these places, don't we? Where does your heart receive that clear message? The path to the things that are really valuable is to be like everyone else.

[14 : 29] You know, there's a reason my parents always used to say to me, if everybody else jumps off a bridge, are you gonna jump off a bridge too? Anybody else's parents ever say that to them? Why did we say that a lot?

I mean, it sounds silly, but honestly, you know, I was a smart and sarcastic little kid sometimes. Sometimes I thought to myself but didn't have the guts to say it, yeah, maybe I would.

I mean, because yeah, if everybody else is doing it, maybe they've found what's really valuable. Maybe they're in the right place and they've figured something out and I wanna, at least I'd be, I won't be alone.

At least I'll be a part of the group even if they're wrong. You've felt that way. There's safety in numbers, right? Daniel determines not necessarily.

Starting at verse eight, we see Daniel's commitment to his distinctive identity. His commitment to his distinctive identity. Look at verse eight.

[15 : 29] What does Daniel do? But Daniel, faced with this plan of assimilation, resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food or with the wine that he drank.

Daniel makes a decision. I'm not going to defile myself in that way. He doesn't isolate himself, does he? He doesn't try to just avoid Babylon altogether and to escape from Babylonian education or politics.

No, he spends the rest of his life in it. He doesn't fight. He doesn't angrily attack those in charge of the program and seek to take over and be in charge.

But he doesn't assimilate either. He doesn't just go along with this complete indoctrination into Babylonian culture, full loyalty to the king and forgetting his Jewish heritage.

He doesn't do that. Instead, he resolves not to defile himself. He commits to maintaining his distinctive identity in some way even in the midst of that.

[16:33] And so it's a fair question to say, why here with the food and wine? Why is it there that Daniel draws the line? You may think perhaps that it's because of Jewish dietary laws that Daniel, these things would be unclean and so Daniel decides he won't eat them.

That's actually not true in this case. It wouldn't make sense of why the wine would be included as not part of that. And later in Daniel, we actually see him probably eating some of this very food. So it seems like it wasn't black and white like that. You may think very reasonably that the food was offered to idols. And so it was important for Daniel not to partake of food offered to idols.

Except that that really is not the context we're in here. Plus, the veggies probably would have been the same. And he's happy to partake of those. The Bible doesn't tell us why specifically Daniel drew the line here except that he determined not to defile himself in this way.

So the particular reason why must not be the issue but rather that Daniel determined to maintain his identity as a follower of Yahweh in some way and not give himself wholly over to dependence on and commitment to the king.

[17:53] Just taking it all in and just being loyal to the king. It's a foothold in that sense for Daniel in the midst of the program of complete assimilation.

A way not to forget who he is. Notice just a few things about the way that Daniel engages the ungodly culture at this point. He's not fearful, is he?

But he's bold. Determining that he would take a stand here and going straight to the chief of the eunuchs with his request. He's willing to risk, isn't he?

It's risky. Perhaps even risking his life to suggest this idea. Verse 10 tells us that it could cost the chief of the eunuchs his head. So it certainly was risky for Daniel.

In asking this though, he's humble, isn't he? Not pridefully insisting that he knows better but asking permission. And he's respectful.

[18:51] Personally and patiently engaging two different officials to ask for their help rather than taking to Facebook as you would probably expect him to have done to rant about the ridiculous new program and the fools in charge of it.

But he doesn't do that. Finally, he's dependent. Verse 9 says, and God gave.

You hear an echo from verse 2 last week? And God gave. It actually happens again in this chapter. Three times in the first chapter. It'll happen in verse 17. We'll see in a minute. And God gave.

Who's still in charge? God is in charge. God is the one who gives Daniel favor in the eyes of these foreign officials who would really have had no reason to listen to Daniel.

He's engaging in a foreign culture in a distinctive way. In a way that's consistent with his identity as a follower of Yahweh. And in a way that is not forcing his own agenda to become reality but is rather completely dependent on God to grant him success.

[20:02] It won't happen if God doesn't give him favor. And these may seem like small things here that we're talking about. In a decision not to eat the food and drink the wine.

But in the small things, if you know the story of the rest of Daniel, you know God's offering here, Daniel and his friends, a training ground for idols and fiery furnaces and lion's dens.

A training ground that allows them to be distinctive now in preparation for even more difficult days that lie ahead. Friends, as followers of Jesus Christ, we have a distinctive identity.

We are in Christ. And that is to be what primarily defines us in every facet of life. That means, for example, that we find value in that we are loved by God and adopted into His family.

So we are distinctively not looking for our value in the approval of others. In worldly success and accumulating the things of the world. In the comfort and the fame that we might otherwise chase after.

[21:15] We rest in the grace of God for ourselves and extend that grace to others even at great cost to ourselves. And that is to be distinctive. In fact, it is distinctive if you live and love others like that.

The point of Daniel 1 is not to tell you that it's okay to change your name but it's not okay to change what you eat. That's not the point of this chapter. It's not a detailed list of do's and don'ts for living in Babylon.

Do these particular things but make sure you avoid the others. It's a reminder here of the primacy of our identity in Christ. That we sacrifice that distinctive identity and blend in with our loyalties and priorities looking just like the world's at our own peril.

We really can't go any further without stopping to admit how easy that is. Right? How easy would it have been for Daniel just to go along with one more thing. Right? Everybody else is a part of the program.

It would have been very easy. It wasn't even best we can tell individually more evil than any other part of the program. It didn't stick out as the one thing to avoid.

[22 : 34] How easy is it just to give in in one more area? Just to say I'll buy what you buy and pursue what you pursue and I'll watch what you watch and I'll say what you say and eventually over time just forget that my life is to be shaped distinctively by who I am in Christ not by just receiving the air that I breathe around me every day.

It's so easy isn't it just to go with the flow. Some days I feel like that's all I've got the energy for. Not to determine to do anything at all just kind of whatever the culture seems to do.

It's like going through Atlanta at the flow of traffic and you can look up and not even realize you were going 80 in a 55 right? It's natural it's easy it feels right.

It's so hard to resolve not to defile yourself to be committed to your distinctive identity to be driven in everything you do by who you are in Christ.

That's hard. You can't do it without trusting God's provision of lasting blessing. That's what we see here at the end of the chapter.

[23 : 47] We see again in verse 17 that God gave this time blessing them with learning and skill and their training and Daniel particularly with expertise and vision and dreams so they far surpass all the other youths in the king's training right?

Now that seems like a triumph doesn't it? There it is they've conquered they've won everything's good stories over and there is blessing there is a temporal blessing from God God's people are honored but things are not all good for Daniel and his friends are they?

And they experience some of that temporal protection blessing from God yes they do but also quite a bit of suffering they spend the rest of their lives in exile away from the promised land facing persecution at the hands of jealous colleagues and ungodly kings listen the lasting blessing is not a few good days in Nebuchadnezzar's court it can't be can it?

But the thing that's really worth it for Daniel enough to risk his life in this case can't just be a few good days of being smarter than the guys around him the lasting blessing is God himself we see that relationship they have with God is highlighted there in verse 17 as God gives them learning and understanding particularly Daniel with the dreams and visions where does that come from?

Whenever it comes up the interpretation of the dream comes from God doesn't it? It shows that Daniel understands God's heart that he's a man of God that he's in relationship with God you see the gift with lasting value is knowing God a relationship with God is lasting and is strengthened by the commitment to that primary and distinctive identity as his child in the midst of temptation to compromise or assimilate it strengthens the relationship and the truly valuable thing is being his and eternally being his look at verse 21 again didn't probably catch your attention Daniel was there until the first year of King Cyrus until the first year of King Cyrus we know at that point in time Daniel would have to be in his 80s or older that's his entire life right?

[26 : 25] A note here about King Cyrus to wrap up the first chapter that we said is about two kingdoms in conflict the kingdom of Israel and the kingdom of Babylon Yahweh and Nebuchadnezzar they're in conflict who's greater it appears at the beginning that Babylon is greater and that Yahweh is defeated right?

That's what we saw last week but Cyrus is not just another king who steps in after Nebuchadnezzar is gone Cyrus is a Persian king his nation has conquered Babylon even in Daniel's lifetime Daniel is still there still standing still serving the king kings pass kingdoms pass but God remains in control knowing him therefore is of much greater value than getting in with Nebuchadnezzar do you see that?

if you just got in with Nebuchadnezzar he's gonna be gone it's gonna pass but knowing God is much greater value being connected to his son is of much greater value than being connected to

the power players of society that's the eternal perspective that God truly lasts even kings pass people people who seem to be powerful and valuable and will really get us somewhere and they're gone but God remains kids that's something that's hard to wrap your minds around God being eternal God lasting forever that's that's hard to picture sometimes isn't it?

but that's what's so important in this passage to remember God is so valuable that knowing him is a greater treasure than having all the treasures of the world kids that's our thing to write down about God this morning it's it's what Daniel learns about God and what enables Daniel to take the stand that he does here in chapter one God is so valuable that knowing him is a greater treasure than having all the treasures of the world the most valuable thing is being his eternally remember y'all in Christ in that distinctive identity what do we have we forgotten we have every spiritual blessing the ones that really last we're children of the king the everlasting king we have an eternal inheritance that can never fade away listen

I know all the things that we long for seem so valuable and the way to get them seems so simple just blend in and get ahead just blend in and get love just blend in and get what you really want and need but when you weigh things in eternal scales there's no comparison with the relationship you have with God and the distinctive identity that you have in Christ it's that grace that gift that he gives us that enables us to remain committed to the one who has committed himself to us I want to close by talking from my heart to the younger generation in the room this morning that's those of us I don't know maybe south of our 40s something like that you can be a part of the group if you want if you know you're not you can listen in anyway all of us who

[30 : 22] Lord willing are going to be around when a few kings pass you know I wasn't a teenager too long ago sometimes I think it was just yesterday but even now in my 30s I remember and still say to myself some of the same things I used to say as a teenager one of those that I find saying to myself is you know what I'll follow Christ later in that area of my life I'll be committed to Christ later because to be quite honest with you there's so much going on there are so many areas of life and I am so busy just one thing at a time you know what I'll deal with that another time I'll follow Christ later you know what I've realized after telling myself that for a lot of years it only costs more later to have that distinctive identity the cost keeps going up not down the cost of following

Christ isn't going down in our culture if you won't pay it now you won't pay it later if you won't sacrifice for Christ now you won't sacrifice later that's what God has taught me don't say to yourself after college after I get to go really enjoy my life then I'll follow God's model for morality after I get to have my fun don't say to yourself you know after I get the job that I really need once I've got that job then I'll start working honestly and treating others respectfully that's when I'll do it don't say to yourself you know what after after we finally get through this season and really get settled then I'll start making my family the priority that they should be and loving them the way that God tells me to love them don't say to yourself after I get my kids out of the house take good care of them protect them and get them out of the house then I'll have a zeal for the lost like you've never seen then I'm really going to care about that y'all I want to stop saying those things

I need you to help me stop saying those things to myself it's not going to cost less and in these early small decisions we begin to set the pattern for our lives for future decisions here's how it works if getting what's really valuable in life requires setting God aside now why in the world would that change later if getting what's really valuable requires setting God aside I'm not going to change that later and bring him back in in other words if God's not worth it now he won't be then either but if you decide to be distinctive now if you find following Jesus to be worth it now even at great cost he will be worth it it will be worth it again later because when we say the cost of following Jesus of being distinctive in that identity is not going down that means something else has to change doesn't it if that's true you know what has to happen God has to become more valuable to us doesn't he if that cost is going to go up he's got to become more valuable faster and more consistently remember what said of Moses in Hebrews 11 by faith Moses when he was grown up refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin he considered the reproach of

Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt for he was looking to the reward because he had an eternal perspective he considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt y'all that's the choice we're going to be making next generation the choice will be the reproach of Christ over the treasures of Egypt it will cost and Moses said even reproach with Christ is greater value than the treasures of Egypt it reminds me of Jesus when he's tempted by Satan

what's he tempted to do to find control to find comfort Satan's way rather than God's way and Jesus says God is so valuable he is so worth it that I'll choose the path that I know at the end of it is what waiting for me a cross torment and pain and rejection by my father is worth it Jesus says it's going to cost something and it's worth it to choose that path he says

God is the treasure he is the one of lasting value knowing God himself is the treasure that is most precious solid joys and lasting treasure none but Zion's children know so that's in front of us if we're going to be anything like what God intends for us as his church here at Southwood in the years to come if we're going to be God's agent of changing the world don't you want to be a part of that don't you want to be a part of God's agency to change the world to fill every person in every corner of creation with his glory that's what he's doing and he wants us to be a part of it if we're going to get to do that we will have to learn together and we will have to help each other remember in the hard times that God is supremely and eternally valuable pray with me

[36 : 50] God we need your help for that there's so many other things in our hearts that seem more valuable and that we want we want to be a community of people we want to be your body that truly believes that you're worth whatever cost you might ask us to pay that truly believes that the people who have yet to meet you are worth whatever cost we would pay to show your love to them we just confess that many days it's not true many days our choices are for ourselves and our own comfort and father I pray that you would by your grace make yourself so precious in our hearts so valuable in our eyes that everything else would pale in comparison I pray that you would make the song we're about to sing increasingly true of us would you make

Jesus more valuable to us than anything else that we would be forever different that the world would be changed because Jesus was indeed the pearl of great price and we did anything to have him and to share him with others do that work we ask in his name amen for more information visit us online at southwood.org k you you you you