

Life in a Hostile World: foreign territory

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[0 : 0 0] As I said, it is good to be here. It feels like it's been a little while. A few people have already let me know that I'm a new person, which is only a half-truth. I have been here a few times before.

But I'm particularly excited to be back and among the family that we have here, and particularly because we're going to start a new series today that I think is quite significant.

All the Bible is significant, but this book in particular, I think, is at a really significant point in history. So I'm excited for us to unpack it and help us understand God's plan in what is a difficult situation, I think, in history.

So how about I pray, and then we're going to get stuck into the book of Daniel. Father God, I thank you so much for the chance to be here this morning. I thank you for your word. Lord, I ask that you give us open hearts and minds this morning. I ask that you give me your words, that you'll enable me to speak your truth clearly and faithfully.

And Lord, I pray that the result of us meeting together around your word will be that we're changed. I ask that your spirit would be shaping us as a result of this time, that we might be more like Jesus. Amen.

[1 : 1 1] Amen. Just before we do start, I want to encourage you, if it's not your habit yet, to make it your habit. We're going to work through Daniel for the next, I'm not sure, I think it's about five or six weeks.

At some point in that time, actually have a read of the whole book for yourself. It's only 12 chapters, so it's a manageable amount. But reading it for yourself at home will mean that when you come here on Sunday, you'll actually have a really helpful framework for the stuff that we're going to look at in each sermon.

Because we're about to drop in on what I think is one of the most significant points in history, we can't just kind of drop in there and then try and find our bearings. So we're going to do a bit of work really quickly to make sure we know where we are and what we're looking at.

So this might be old news to some of you, and if so, that's great. But if not, this will help us as we go forward. So I'm going to give you a quick, very quick history of Israel up to the point that we're looking at in Daniel.

So for those of you who remember, basically in Genesis 12, we've got God chooses Abraham as a unique person, and he makes some promises to him. He says he's going to make Abraham into a great nation.

[2 : 1 7] He's going to give him land, and he's going to bless him. From that point, we kind of see God looking after Abraham's kids and Abraham's grandkids and Abraham's great-grandkids. And progressively, this nation starts to build momentum in terms of people.

We go through the whole Egypt incident, and then finally, after Moses dies, this growing nation of Israel steps into the land of Canaan, which is the land that God had promised to them.

They've got to fight and kick everyone else out, but then eventually we get to King David, and King David is the point where they've beaten their enemies, or God's beaten their enemies. They're in the land that God promised.

They're a great nation. They're blessed. They've got the temple. God's with them. Everything's going fantastic. And they're all feeling pretty great, like, you know, this is the good team to be on.

But along the way, the whole time from the very beginning, God has warned them that if they don't remain faithful to him, if they turn away to any other gods, there's going to be consequences.

[3 : 19] And after David, which is kind of the high point in Israel's history, there's this progressive slip where they start to ignore God more and more.

They get just kind of comfortable because they've got everything. They've got the land. They are a nation. They feel blessed. They've got the temple. They've beaten everyone. And they start to take for granted God.

They start to ignore the warnings that he's given them. And they start to think God would never take this stuff away. You know, we're his people. We're special. And with the book of Daniel, they are about to get a rude awakening.

They're about to get a reminder of who God is and how God works. And so are we. So look with me at Daniel chapter 1, 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.

[4 : 23] So I've been watching the news over the last couple of weeks, and I'm sure that you've caught at least glimpses of this. It's the biggest story in the world on Channel 9. The Melbourne Storm saga.

What a fall from grace. I mean, I've taken a secret pleasure in this because I'm an AFL fan. So anything that damages rugby league is good for AFL, I figure. But I wonder what it would be like to be a Melbourne Storm supporter at the moment.

I mean, this team that you love and that you support and that you're just so excited about, probably even a little bit cocky about, has just lost all credibility.

Everything they'd achieved, everything they'd worked hard for, everything they'd sacrificed for is gone. The victories are gone. The premierships are gone. The popularity is gone.

I wonder if some of the Melbourne Storm supporters are looking for a new team to support. I noticed on the news there was at least one supporter who walked up to the players' entrance at the Melbourne Storm's home ground, took off his supporter jersey, threw it on the ground and walked away.

[5 : 34] His unbeatable heroes are beaten, are fallen. And I wonder if that's kind of how it would have felt for Daniel and Israel when this was happening.

They're watching the youngest and brightest men being carted off to another country. They're watching the articles from the temple, the things they used to worship their God, being shifted off to be used for some other pagan God in another country.

Their victorious land has been taken over. Their great nation is now some pathetic little province of the superpower Babylon. Their unbeatable God looks like he's been beaten.

Looks kind of powerless. This Babylonian God and this Babylonian army seem to have overpowered what used to be an impressive God. And I wonder how many people in Israel at that time were ready to take off their God jersey and throw it on the ground.

Were ready to find someone new to follow. I mean, they signed up to be a great nation. They signed up to get a land of their own. They signed up for blessing. And now it looks like that's all gone.

[6 : 59] Now they're going to be servants of some foreign king. Half the people are being sent away into exile. And you have to wonder, if God can do something, why doesn't he?

And maybe you know what that feels like in your own life as well. I mean, when you signed up to follow Jesus, it was great. He was offering you forgiveness and a new life.

And there was people around you and it was exciting. And, you know, you wanted to go to church. You wanted to read the Bible and everything was fantastic. But it didn't stay fantastic. You started to realize that over time, being a Christian doesn't change how many painful circumstances you face in life.

It doesn't change how hard life can get sometimes. You still have to deal with people close to you, dying. Maybe you've lost a job.

Maybe someone you care about a lot has given up on following Jesus. And maybe you're asking the question, if God can do something, why doesn't he?

[8 : 04] You look around at the world, even beyond your circumstances, you see suffering, you see poverty, you see famine. And you start to wonder, start to wonder, has God been beaten?

I mean, we'd never say that out loud. We're Christians. We believe that God's, you know, sovereign and in control. But deep down, where no one else knows, do you ever ask the question, is God still in control?

It'd be really easy to read this story of Daniel and this book that we're looking at over the next few weeks and kind of just skim through it and think, oh, you know, oh darn, things have gone slightly amiss.

I mean, we've heard the Lion's Den story. We've heard some of the stories of Daniel. They're great Sunday school things. But we need to understand how significant this situation is. Israel is surrounded by a foreign army in a land that they thought God had given them for good.

People would be fearing for their lives. Some of the soldiers might have even died. And now young men, as young as 12 or 15, are being taken from their families to probably never see them again.

[9 : 20] God's people, God's nation of Israel is effectively coming to an end. And so you can understand why they would be asking the question, has God lost?

Is God beaten? Is God still in control? Plus, it gets even worse. Have a look with me at verse 3. It says, Then the king, once they'd taken away some of the young men, it says, Then the king ordered Ashfenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring in 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. 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 these were some from Judah.

Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. The chief official gave them new names. To Daniel, the name Belshazzar. To Hananiah, Shadrach. To Mishael, Meshach.

[10 : 32] And to Azariah, Abednego. See, not only have they been removed from God's country, not only has God's people been broken up and separated, not only have articles from God's temple used for God's worship been taken somewhere else to worship other gods, these men are now going to be assimilated.

Nebuchadnezzar is going to make them Babylonian. They've got to learn the language. They've got to read the history books. They've got to know everything there is to know about Babylon and its culture and its religion and its spirituality. King Nebuchadnezzar is on a mission to remove anything that makes these men distinctively Israelite.

Anything that makes them stand out from somewhere else, anything that makes them stand out as belonging to God, King Nebuchadnezzar is going to break it away and make them Babylonian.

And the hard part is that there's something appealing about what Nebuchadnezzar is doing. I mean, sure, these young men would have been devastated by what was happening to them, but it's a pretty good offer they're getting when you think about it.

They're being offered education. They're being offered positions of prestige and respect in the new Babylonian kingdom. They'll be serving the king. That's not lowly public service.

[11 : 55] That's a place of significance in society. They'll be receiving the king's food, working in the king's palace. We're talking quality meat, wine, fruit and veg, and all they have to do is give up on the God who it looks like has already abandoned them anyway.

In a foreign country, it kind of feels to them like the rules have changed. Success and blessing apparently doesn't come from God anymore. It comes from doing things the Babylonian way.

And you know what's funny? I think our world's not that dissimilar to Babylon. I mean, we would be forgiven for thinking our world's not as hostile.

I mean, we live in a country where, you know, it's fine to be a Christian. It's pretty religiously tolerant around here. As long as you don't annoy other people with the fact that you believe in God, it's fine for you to believe it. In Sydney, and in Anglican Sydney, we're, you know, pretty proud of the fact that we teach the Bible well and that, you know, we're really passionate about finding biblical truth.

Here at St. Paul's, we're one of six congregations that are going to meet here today and every Sunday. There's a couple of other great Bible-believing churches within five or ten minutes from here. And you could be forgiven for, you know, starting to feel like this is home.

[13 : 15] This is where we belong. But it's not. The Bible makes it clear from start to finish, front to back, all humanity is at war with its creator.

We are enemies of God. By nature, we're objects of wrath. We deserve God's punishment. And if you're following Jesus, you need to recognise that the world that you live in is hostile.

Hostile to the one you follow and hostile to you. Whether you realise it or not, you're in a process of being slowly assimilated into the culture of the world.

Every day you live in this culture, you spend time engaging with people who worship gods of self, gods of money, gods of success, gods of nature, and the world is trying to make you like them.

Trying to remove anything that makes you distinctively Christian, anything that makes you stand out, is now weird and unacceptable. One of the most popular books over the last few years at least is The Da Vinci Code.

[14 : 27] Now, it's popular probably for a couple of reasons. It's pretty well written. That's probably part of the reason that it's popular. But I think it's also popular because the whole point of the book is it's built around the premise that Christianity is a big sham.

It's a big conspiracy trying to trick people. And so people love to kind of just debunk those ideas and kind of see Christianity as the weird sideline thing. So our society likes to make the norm not believing in Jesus.

As we sit here, there's a growing argument in politics at the moment as to whether or not young kids should learn the Bible at scripture in school. Every day you watch TV, read magazines, drive past billboards that make an effort to display men and women in a way that degrades them compared to the way the Bible shows them.

There is a relentless pursuit for self-satisfaction in this world. And before you realise it, you start to become just like the world around you.

Before you realise it, you start being less offended by sexually explicit material. Think about what it's okay for you to watch on TV compared to what was okay to watch on TV five years ago, ten years ago.

[15 : 45] Before you realise it, you find yourself rationalising the little lies because that's a good way to get ahead in life. You're not lying on a resume, you're just padding it out so that you can get the job.

That's what everyone else does. Unless you make a decision to consciously fight, to remain distinctive, to stand out as a follower of Jesus, there's a good chance that slowly but surely you're going to move in the other direction.

If you don't realise that everything in this world is working to make you less like Jesus, then it's going to succeed. We are slowly being assimilated by the culture we live in and we're being convinced to worship a whole bunch of things that aren't God.

And there's no denying that the power of what this world is doing is that it's kind of appealing. Just like these young men in Babylon had the chance to be in positions of status, had a chance to be in the king's palace, in our world, it's the people who ignore God who seem to do okay.

It's the people who lie who get rich quicker. It's the people who are dishonest and self-absorbed that seem to be, you know, have the stuff, have the things that are supposed to make you happy and at the same time it's the good faithful Christians that often seem to go from hardship to hardship or never get out of a cycle of constant suffering.

[17 : 17] Yet God calls us to remain distinctive. He doesn't call us to leave a hostile world. He calls us to remain here but remain distinctive as Christians.

In 1 Peter chapter 2, just after the passage that was read for us in verse 11, Peter writes these words. He says, Dear friends, I urge you as aliens and strangers in the world to abstain from sinful desires which war against your soul, live such good lives among the pagans that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

God is calling us to stand out for him in a world that doesn't want to know him. And Daniel is going to show us how. Look with me at verse 8. 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 sympathy 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 then have my head because of you. Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah please test your servants for 10 days.

[18 : 40] 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.

So in spite of the appeal of what Babylon has to offer Daniel still makes a point of saying no. But he doesn't say no to what you might expect him to say no to.

He's already accepted a name change. He's already accepted the training they've offered him. He's already moved to a new city. But at this point Daniel stands up and says no.

Even with everything changing, everything against him, there's still a point where Daniel says I will not compromise. But why is it this? Why refuse meat and wine?

Why refuse a good feed that's going to keep you healthy? I mean, he's accepted a new name which is designed to make him feel like he belongs to Babylon.

[19 : 44] He's studied Babylonian literature. He's probably even studied Babylonian religion and spirituality. Yet food is the thing that he will not defile himself with.

Why? Well, there's no such thing as a free lunch. Have you ever been out to lunch with someone and, you know, they offer to pay, it's no strings attached, it's fine, they're just feeling generous and you think, great, fantastic, I'll take it, I'm going to go back and order seconds.

But then, half a week later you get a phone call and that same friend needs a favour. And suddenly it's harder to say no than it would have been if you paid for your own lunch. Or every time you see them after that they just kind of remind you that they paid last time and you owe them.

There's no such thing as a free lunch and it was the same for Daniel. Daniel knew that it wasn't just food that the king was offering him. In the ancient world receiving food and receiving provision from someone like a king was a way of saying I'm your servant.

It was a way of declaring your allegiance to someone. And so Daniel accepted these other things. He accepted a name that supposedly transferred him away from God because he knew who he was he knew who he belonged to but he refused to do anything that was a willing and intentional step away from his commitment to God.

[21 : 09] He refused to do anything that would say to God I'm now following this person. Daniel remains distinctive as God in a culture that is doing everything it can to transform him and there's two things that we need to grab from Daniel's example if we hope to remain distinctive in the hostile world that we live in.

Two really simple things simple to say but maybe a little bit harder to live out. First thing Daniel knows when to say no.

Daniel knows when to say no. It's really interesting that Daniel puts up with all that stuff. he puts up with a new country he puts up with a new name he puts up with training he puts up with living in this new culture completely in fact he even uses the training that they give him to serve the Babylonian kingdom he becomes a significant man in the king's palace but there is a point where he says no.

So I think sometimes the temptation for us as Christians is to kind of hide away from the evil world that's around us you know we kind of look around and we don't want to get contaminated by the pagan people and their pagan hobbies and their pagan TV shows and their pagan movies and whatever else we kind of turn up our nose at the people around us and think they're bad and we're not and we just keep saying no and keep saying no and rejecting all these things and I think you know as Christians we're almost too good at saying no but I wonder if we get so preoccupied with saying no but everything in the world that we're choosing that we're missing the things that actually matter see what we need to learn from Daniel is when to say no Daniel immerses himself in this Babylonian culture he doesn't hide in a tent or hide under his bed and stay away from anything that might be remotely bad he was happy to study so long as it didn't compromise his commitment to God he was happy for a new name because that didn't change that he still loved God he was happy for a new city because that didn't change that he still loved God but he wasn't willing to eat a meal that would be his way of saying now Nebuchadnezzar comes first

God is calling us to be in this world so that we can be a light in it but not of it the challenge for us is when do we say no I mean in church we're pretty good at rejecting culture throughout the decades church has worked really hard to keep certain things from the world outside you know some people fought tooth and nail to make sure that the world's music never made it in here and drums finally got in the door a few years ago some people are still fighting tooth and nail to make sure that the church remains a pointy building with a cross on the top because you know we don't want to engage with the world's kind of fancy technological air conditioned comfy chairs you know the church is supposed to have a pointy roof and uncomfortable chairs apparently and we fight for these things and we say no to these things of the world but at the same time we're embracing other aspects that are pulling us away from Jesus we're fighting for things like pews and music but we're progressively becoming more self-obsessed less servant-hearted more sexually immoral dishonest we're doing less and less about injustice and suffering in the world but hey at least we don't have the world's music we need to let go of what doesn't matter we need to let go of the parts of culture that have no impact on how much we love Jesus in fact sometimes we can even use it and that way we'll be ready to recognise the things that we must say no to to recognise the things that will lead us away from Jesus the things that compromise the most important person the first thing we need to learn from Daniel is when to say no the second thing

[25 : 46] God is always in control trust God it sounds so simple trust God we always say it to each other things are tough trust God trust him because he's in control but you'd forgive Daniel for asking the question has God lost control wouldn't you all these promises land great nation blessing seem like they're disappearing it seems like everything's going wrong Daniel's in a foreign country and it looks like God's lost control but look at the story with me again verse 2 the Lord delivered verse 9 God caused the official verse 17 God gave knowledge and understanding the single most devastating event in Israel's history was not the point where God lost grip on the wheel but it was an essential part of God's plan for this world this is God keeping his promise to punish Israel for being unfaithful and even though

Daniel couldn't see what God was doing or how God was doing it even though he didn't know the details or the specifics he trusted him because he knew that God was always in control someone once told me that my life was kind of like a puzzle piece you know it's kind of funny shaped edges doesn't make a lot of sense by itself but when you put it in the puzzle when you surround it with all the other pieces the picture becomes clear and my perspective in life and your perspective in life is just our little puzzle piece it doesn't always make sense why it's that way it doesn't always make sense what's happening or what God's doing or how he's doing it but God can see the whole picture and God has designed every specific circumstance that you face every event of your life every person you interact with exactly the way he needed to so that your piece would fit perfectly within his plan for creation

God doesn't make mistakes your life is the detailed work of a master craftsman who is achieving his unstoppable plan in his world you won't always know what God's doing you won't always know how he's doing it or why he's doing it but you can be sure that whatever's happening he's doing it he's still in control over the next couple of weeks in Daniel we're going to get to see a little bit more about how God uses an event like this exile to achieve his purposes we're going to see how this monumental fall from grace from the heights of King David to exile in Babylon was part was an essential part of God's plan to bring salvation to the world and even though he didn't know what God was doing

Daniel knew God was doing something and so he trusted him God has left you in this world hostile as it is God has left you here the question is will you trust him will you trust his way even though you don't know how it pans out God our passage today finishes with a little glimmer of hope well actually it's more than a glimmer it's kind of like a fog horn for anyone who hasn't got it yet look with me at verse 15 it says at the end of the ten days they looked healthier this is after the test of just eating vegetables and water at the end of the ten 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 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 in 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 enchanterers in his whole kingdom and Daniel remained there until the first year of king Cyrus the chapter starts with us asking the question is God beaten are these Babylonian gods suddenly more powerful and it ends with God reminding us that he is the one and only creator God this is his world and there is none that compares to him the wisdom he gives Daniel and his friends is ten times better than anything the

[31 : 07] Babylonians can muster and that little verse at the end Daniel remained there until the first year of king Cyrus what would have felt like a devastating life ending circumstance we just get reminded here Daniel lasts longer than Babylon does this new superpower Daniel's there when it falls Daniel gets beyond this disaster by trusting God God's plan never ends in disaster but sometimes it's the path by which he leads us to the purpose he has for us God is at work in this world he has a plan and an unstoppable plan which culminates in rescuing his people with Jesus God is still in control whether you can see how or not so trust him know when to say no and resolve that you will not defile yourself that you will not assimilate that you will not become like the world you live in

God is in control so trust him