

The Lions, The Fire, and the Faithfulness of God

Sermon 1 - Daniel 1 – Onward Christian Strangers

We are launching into a new series of sermons this morning where we will be looking at the life of an Old Testament figure named Daniel. The reason we are going into Daniel is because this book is going to show us the story of a small group of young friends who grew up in the community of Israel. They were God's people, they learned God's ways and were thriving as a part of that community. But as young adults they find themselves now living as exiles in a foreign land where no one else holds and operates by the same faith system they do. And the book of Daniel follows Daniel and his friends as they try to figure out how to navigate this new reality of being a fringe minority when they were once a part of the cultural & spiritual majority.

Right now we are living in a new cultural moment. Over the last two to three hundred years, ever since the enlightenment really, but certainly in the past three decades in the U.S., the ground beneath our feet has begun to shift. For quite some time the U.S. had a Christianized culture where Christian values and principles carried over into public life. It was normative to be a Christian, to attend church, and to operate by biblical values. This reality was most dense here in the south in what became known as the bible belt. Large protestant churches were built and certainly in our city you can see streets lined with some of the biggest church buildings you've ever seen.

But then the ground shifted. American culture became a mix of Christian and pagan values with the rise of the sexual revolution in the 60s and 70s. There was an anthem of that time called the Age of Aquarius. And the song indicated all the old structures were being torn down and we are now in a new age. And they were. And over the past 30 years or so culture has shifted again to where we are operating in what social critics call a "Post-Christian" culture.

Where you no longer need to ascribe to Christian values to be accepted in the public sphere. And it's not that Christianity is going anywhere. It's that the nominal, cultural Christianity that sees Christianity only as a set of values to govern society instead of seeing Jesus as a crucified and resurrected King.¹ The moral majority of the 80s is gone.

"The Bible Belt is collapsing. The world of nominal, cultural Christianity that took the American dream and added Jesus to it in order to say "You can have everything you've ever wanted and heaven too" is soon to be gone. Good riddance."²

So as Christians we now find ourselves as strangers and aliens in a foreign land. The culture at large sees us and our way of life as strange. Think of our belief, for example, that God made sex as a gift for a husband and a wife and to separate sex from marriage is damaging to human

¹ Russell Moore – Q ideas talk. "The Prophetic Minority" 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q15jPKStjbU>

² Russell Moore. *The Inaugural Address of Russell D. Moore as President of The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention*. September 10, 2013.

flourishing and rebellion against God. Culture looks at that and says how strange. To the point it finds a virgin in his 20s and puts him as the lead of this season's "Bachelor." I don't know the guy's beliefs but the idea that someone would be in their mid 20s and be a virgin...it's now so bizarre its worthy of a T.V. show.

AND we are in Daniel because Daniel is going to be really helpful in teaching us how to respond to this new cultural moment. There have been a couple of over-reactions by Christians.

1. **Separate from culture** – You can do that physically by moving deep into the appalachain mountains like Eustace Conway. – Mountain Men. OR you can separate by only going to Christian stores, only drinking Christian coffee, eating only Christian chicken, listening only to Christian music, go to Christian school, reading only Christian books. Another way to get away from it all. The problem of course is that moment where Jesus prays for his followers in John 17 and says father "don't take them out of the world." Don't remove them. Protect them, but keep them in the world. And there's the rest of Jesus' story that has Jesus sending his followers out into the world.

2. **Assimilate into culture** – We adapt Christianity to conform with the prevailing values of the culture so that it fits in without causing controversy. Assimilation in millennial America looks like "Go with the flow and update the teachings of Jesus to fit with the western secular worldview and ethic of relativism and anti-authoritarianism." The problem of course is Jesus made it clear his true followers would always, somehow or another, be at odds with culture. He says his followers will be hated by the world. That to follow him is to take up a cross, an execution device. So assimilation can't be what we are called to.

What if instead of separation, or assimilation, we found a calling in being **spiritual exiles** living on the fringe of culture together while we work for the good and healing of our city BY remaining faithful to the one true God. We don't panic or ring our hands when culture doesn't line up with Jesus, we engage & we pray.

This is **Jeremiah 29.7 – Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.**

The book of Daniel is going to show us what it looks like to live as spiritual strangers in a foreign land. And its wild! There are going to be times where Daniel & friends takes stands because they are **FIRST** God's people. And they seem bound for certain death at least 3 times. That's the lions & the fire. Yet they will also be people of great wisdom & influence in the kingdom. And right in the thick all of it...you will see that God is actually the main character. His faithfulness to his people and to his mission is the real story of the book of Daniel.

And I **HOPE** and **PRAY** this empowers you Christians to a fresh vision for your life & vocation. I hope you non-Christians get a clearer sense of what we really believe.

Today We are going to walk through Chapter 1. Going to see the first of what will be several tense situations Daniel & his friends get into.

***Explain how this connects to us. Are we in Babylon?

Daniel 1

1 In the third year of the reign of King Jehoiakim of Judah, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came to Jerusalem and laid siege to it. 2 The Lord handed King Jehoiakim of Judah over to him, along with some of the vessels from the house of God. Nebuchadnezzar carried them to the land of Babylon, to the house of his god, and put the vessels in the treasury of his god.

First two verses you get the historical context and the theological explanation. The historical context is a really awful king of Judah, king Jehoiakim, has led his people into an extended period of decline. In about 605 B.C. King Nebuchadnezzar lays siege to it & carries off some of the most prized possessions. Theological explanation is at the beginning of verse 2. **The Lord handed him over.**

So this is a pretty tough opening right. God's people & God's city is sieged. This is an all out low point. And God...orchestrated it? Somehow God was complicit in this? What is really happening here is God making good on a promise from long ago where he said if his people didn't obey him they would be defeated by their enemies. And now, God is allowing it to happen. And it even gets worse.

3 The king ordered Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the Israelites from the royal family and from the nobility — 4 young men without any physical defect, good-looking, suitable for instruction in all wisdom, knowledgeable, perceptive, and capable of serving in the king's palace.

The king abducts the best and brightest in the land. The intent by ole King Neb is to strip God's people of their best and brightest and add them to his ranks. This will help, he thinks, ensure that Israel is subordinate to Babylon for generations to come. He will indoctrinate them and assimilate them into Babylon. Look:

He was to teach them the Chaldean language and literature. 5 The king assigned them daily provisions from the royal food and from the wine that he drank. They were to be trained for three years, and at the end of that time they were to attend the king. 6 Among them, from the Judahites, were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. 7 The chief eunuch gave them names; he gave the name Belteshazzar to Daniel, Shadrach to Hananiah, Meshach to Mishael, and Abednego to Azariah.

The assimilation was to go so far that their names would be changed. And that's how we get introduced to Daniel. This is Daniel's situation: An abduction of 4 teenage young men by a hostile enemy power.

**Separate abduction & "similar challenges."

And I want you to see what happens to them because Christian you will face similar challenges today. I see this all the time, particularly with high school students that grow up in Christian

homes and then go off to college. But also with people who were thriving as Christians in college and then move here to Charlotte on their own. Look at what's happening to these 4. Their captors hit them hard with two things:

1. **Isolation** – They were taken away from everything they know and thrust into this foreign place! That makes them more vulnerable to accepting the ideas of their new host culture.

2. **Indoctrination** – They go to Babylon University for 3 years. They are charged with learning language and literature, and were trained in divination. This is systemic brainwashing trying to get them to remove their previous beliefs in other Gods & embrace the Babylonian worldview. New foods, new lifestyles, even new names. New names is a big deal because their names were at the core of their identity. When I got to UNC I changed my name from Spencer to Spence. This is not that. Way bigger. This is “Out with that old religion of your parents.” Get with the times!

This combination of Isolation and Indoctrination was a military strategy to erase their ties to their former way of life. And as a pastor I see people *voluntarily* enter into this very same combo all the time.

- College
- Young Pro
- Black & Hispanic minorities –
- Cubans – sent to other side of island. 6yrs old.

Move to college and you have a prof or series of profs who try to show you that your parent's religion was just ignorance. That it's IMPOSSIBLE that there is only one God and one way to that God. HOW IGNORANT IS THAT? HOW HATEFUL IS THAT? How can you tell me my religion is the wrong one and yours is right? How do you know? And you've never been trained to spot the small minded hypocrisy of your professor's argument. Your with other 18 year olds who also haven't been trained to see it. And in isolation & indoctrination you start to say “I don't know, I believe in God but it's got to be a God who accepts everyone as they are.”

****If I'm black, I'm hearing the story of slavery. What do I do with this?*****

**** Maybe the idea of being a minority & how foreign it is?*****

Not everybody goes to college of course but the same challenge is faced by all of us at some point or another. AND in the 3 years I've been your pastor I have people my heart breaks over because they were once a part of our family and now they are GONE. Not to another church, that'd be fine with me. They are gone from Jesus, gone from true life. So today might have a bit of a tone of warning in it and that's because eternity is at stake!

Now look at how Daniel and his friends respond to this moment.

8 Daniel determined that he would not defile himself with the king's food or with the wine he drank. So he asked permission from the chief eunuch not to defile himself.

Daniel's stand on food might be an odd one to you. But there is a high likelihood that the Babylonian food was unclean by Hebrew law standards. So to eat the food would be to disobey a direct order from God. Even if it wasn't that, there is this sense that Babylon is everywhere around him and if he ingested Babylon, maybe he felt he'd be gone for good. What we know is that Daniel determined to take a stand against the king and that DEFINITELY would have consequences right? There is a cost.

9 God had granted Daniel kindness and compassion from the chief eunuch, 10 yet he said to Daniel, "I fear my lord the king, who assigned your food and drink. What if he sees your faces looking thinner than the other young men your age? You would endanger my life with the king."

I want you to underline verse 9. That's the second time we see Daniel making progress because God had granted...God is the one working on Daniel's behalf. The Eunuch is looking out for #1. So Daniel comes up with a pretty shrewd plan. He says give us vegetables & water for 10 days. It's a new diet called Whole 10. Give us this for 10 days and see what happens. So he does & at the end of 10 days they look even healthier than the rest of their peers. So the guard agrees to continue the Daniel Plan for the rest of their days under his command.

Daniel refused to compromise & defile himself, but he did so thoughtfully. And the Lord gave him the favor to make the conversation even possible. Sometimes we wait on the Lord to show us what to do and fail to realize he's the one that has brought us this far. This book is allowing us to see that the God who put you where you are was faithful in doing that. It's no accident. And if you'll trust him you'll see him remain faithful to you again. More on that in a minute. Look what happens.

17 God gave these four young men knowledge and understanding in every kind of literature and wisdom. Daniel also understood visions and dreams of every kind...

Again look and see who the main player is here. Chapter 1 is CLEARLY trying to emphasize God's role in this story. God gave them what they needed to carry out his purposes in Babylon.

19 The king interviewed them, and among all of them, no one was found equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. So they began to attend the king. 20 In every matter of wisdom and understanding that the king consulted them about, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and mediums in his entire kingdom. 21 Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus

All of these guys get important posts in the kingdom. And Daniel...Daniel held his position for 70 years!! 70 years! He outlived multiple kings of Babylon and even was around when the Jews were released back to Jerusalem! Most historians believe there is a good chance it was Daniel's influence on king Cyrus, his wisdom and uncompromising character, that led Cyrus to release the Jews. 70 years in such a prominent position had the kind of impact we'll never fully know.

For his whole life Daniel was a stranger in a foreign land. And writing to the Church the Apostle Peter says we, the church, are now those strangers in whatever land we live in.

****Connection to Babylon**

Look:

11 Dear friends, I urge you as strangers and exiles to abstain from sinful desires that wage war against the soul. 12 Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that when they slander you as evildoers, they will observe your good works and will glorify God on the day he visits. -- 1 Peter 2:11-12 (CSB)

Strangers & Exiles. We abstain from that which will defile us, yet we do so in a way that will lead those we are around to see the glory of God in us. Augustine reference.

I want you to notice a couple of things from Chapter 1 that show us what obedience to God looks like in the foreign land we live in.

1. Trust, and look for, the faithfulness of God.

- Verses 2, 9, 17. God accomplished his plan
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2. God works by scattering his people

- *Sometimes God may allow hardships to reach us because he wants his mercy to reach beyond us.³
- This is a story about a missionary who didn't realize he was a missionary.
- God moved that person in across from you so you could share the gospel. He brought this person so you could show the kindness they've needed. ASK GOD: HOW DO YOU WANT TO USE ME IN THIS PERSON'S LIFE!?
 - When you meet someone new, you should have a "well at some point you and I are gonna talk about Jesus" mindset.

3. Resolve to live with uncompromising obedience to God

- False dichotomy: Don't have to compromise in order to love people.
- Abstain from the passions of the flesh.
 - Abstain from foolish & corrupting talk
 - Gossip – I'm not gonna pile on but I'll laugh. I'll be a bystander.
 - Better to abstain & have the favor of the Lord than to participate and have the favor of man.
- Example of believers in our church who've done this
- TRUST GOD "FOR 10 Days". Choose to abstain and see what God does.
- DANIEL HERE is prepping for DANIEL THEN.

³ Dale Ralph Davis. *The Message of Daniel* (____) 36.

4. Rest in the finished work of Christ, the greater Daniel

- A lot of times people only read themselves into the main character. And what I've shown you up to this point is certainly a model for life now. I believe it is. I believe we can learn from
- Be glad you aren't Daniel in this story, you are a Babylonian.

Sermon ends in Repentance / Communion

- Corporate Repentance
 - Confession of corporate sin
 - Groups of 2-3