

Sermon: By the Rivers of Babylon, Daniel 1

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A while ago a local man told me of a shocking experience he had at a school prize giving. The principal welcomed everybody; there was a short Scripture reading, a prayer and choir item. The guest speaker was an official from the Education Department. He started by reprimanding the principal for reading from the Bible and praying to the Christian God. He lambasted the principal and the governing body for their narrow, unconstitutional approach. "It will not be tolerated," he insisted.

Last week we heard that the head boy of another local school is living with his girlfriend, a pupil of the same school, and their baby.

In last week's press I noted that the minister of tertiary education wants to introduce witchcraft as an academic course in South African varsities. Yes – he is serious.

According to the UN, our country is the most corrupt country in world. What a crazy, troubled, broken place is South Africa!

Our country is a fast changing society. Our traditional Christian props, privileges, benefits are going, going, gone. We live in a fallen, troubled, broken, idolatrous place.

It raises a number of questions:

- **Is** it possible to live for the Lord Jesus Christ in such a hostile place?
- **How** do we live for King Jesus in an environment where there is such hostility and opposition?

The book of Daniel is a piece of resistance literature. The central question of the book is Psalm 137:4, "How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?" It's so relevant – because we sometimes feel like strangers or aliens in the land of our birth.

Enter Daniel; commentators reckon that when we first meet him he is only fourteen or fifteen. What a teenager we meet in Daniel 1! He and his three Jewish buddies are at the University of Babylon. Consider:

- They attend a pagan university in a great, ungodly city.
- Daniel would eventually serve three pagan kings – the most influential men in the world.
- There are extraordinary miracles of mercy and protection in his life.
- They are given tremendous gifts of understanding, wisdom and interpretation.

Daniel tells us how to be a disciple of Jesus Christ in a hostile environment – it shows us how to live for God when things are against us. The book teaches us that it **IS** possible to live for the true and living God and make a huge impact for His kingdom – when it seems like there is nothing on your side. “Spirituality and integrity do not require ideal conditions in which to develop. They are not plants that thrive in the protection of the greenhouse, but grow best when exposed to snow, hail, drought and burning sun.” (Olyott)

What do we learn from Daniel 1?

1. God Is King, vv. 1-2

Yahweh reigns, God is sovereign over all things, circumstances, people all the time – bringing His purposes to fruition. There is an astounding statement about the sovereignty of God here – you see it?

It’s 605 BC. From Babylon comes Nebuchadnezzar. He is an expansionist – a mover and shaker – full of ambition. His plan is to take over the whole Middle Eastern world. Jerusalem was one of his first targets. His armies march around the holy city and take control of it. Babylonian soldiers desecrate the temple. The temple of the living God is trashed by pagans! Holy furnishings are taken to a pagan temple in Babylon. This is a taunt – the ultimate insult: “Our God is stronger than your God! Our God has captured yours.”

Listen up – you must appreciate this: the capture of Jerusalem and the desecration of the temple was the biggest disaster in Israel’s history. The holy city in the land of promise – pillaged by ungodly people – taken by enemy. It was the 9/11 of the ancient world – indeed it was worse. It was unthinkable. There seemed to be so much wrong with it – Israel would never be the same again.

Here is the extraordinary statement: v. 2 God did it! The conquered city, the trashed temple, the transported treasures, and the Jews carried off to exile was God’s doing and for the furtherance of His purposes. The experience of the people was ruin, shame, destruction. Yet God had done it.

You see the strange relationship between God’s sovereignty and human responsibility. Nebuchadnezzar boasts: “Look at **my** power, wisdom and

military strength!” God says: “No – you are merely an instrument in fulfilling the plans I have for my people and the world.”

There were several reasons why Jerusalem was trashed. The main one was the judgement of God – God had repeatedly warned – if you continue in sin, rebellion, idolatry – into exile you shall go. But there was another reason, so Nebuchadnezzar, a pagan king, would come to a point in his life when he would bow the knee before God, and declare the glorious rule of God – Daniel 4:34-35:

At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever. His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: “What have you done?”

We (like Daniel) live in a time of great international strife, uncertainty, conflict, terror, godless worldviews and clashing ideology. We are concerned about the Trumps, Zumas, Putins, Clintons and Mugabes. They are not sovereign – in a few years they will all be popping up daisies. We need to remind ourselves that God reigns – over unbelieving tyrants – and that His truth and kingdom will prevail.

2. Be Aware of the Strategies of Worldliness, vv. 3-7

Nebuchadnezzar was brilliant – this is borne out by the history textbooks. How do you govern a conquered people? It’s not simple. Great caution is required. The pharaohs of Egypt tried one approach – enslave, oppress, make them suffer. It backfired. Nebuchadnezzar was not going to fall into that trap – Babylon was conquering the world – there were too many people to keep subjugated.

His plan is brilliantly wicked. He takes the cream from every nation he has conquered. They are totally re-educated in things Babylonian. It’s called indoctrination or brainwashing. Then they are assimilated into the Babylonian civil service – some held key positions. Then if the conquered people rebelled, they would have to rebel against their own sons. Brilliant!

Enter Daniel and his buddies. These young teenagers start a comprehensive program of re-education in all things Babylonian. Commentators say they would have learned language, science, history, mathematics, geography, navigation, economics and administration. They were to study in a context

where everything was FOR them – everything was laid on. This is no Gulag – no concentration camp – it’s the extreme opposite. They all got fat scholarships. Everything is laid on – they got the best of everything. Your kids had to get part-time jobs – waitress, drive kids around, coach sport – not these guys. Imagine studying at Harvard, MIT, Oxford – while the President’s catering team is feeding you every day! They are allowed to walk the corridors of power – mingle with the big shots – what an ego trip! What teenager would not be turned?

Look at how Nebuchadnezzar does it:

- He isolates them – from their families, from Jerusalem, from public worship.
- He indoctrinates them – they become thoroughly marinated in the language and customs of Babylon.
- He makes them thoroughly comfortable – they get the best of everything. (There is great spiritual danger in comfort.)
- He gives them new names – their names are changed from Hebrew names to names that speak of pagan gods. For example, Daniel means “God has judged” becomes Belteshazzer – “keeper of the hidden treasures of Bel”.

You see the strategy here: blend in, forget who you are, forget whose you are. “When in Babylon do as the Babylonians do.”

It is very interesting that in Bible “Babylon” becomes a symbol of worldliness, a symbol of the world system that opposes God. Nebuchadnezzar’s strategy is really the same as worldliness. The enormous tug to blend in, to assimilate, to copy – to adopt a strategy – When in Babylon do as the Babylonians do! Babylon already has their bodies captive – but Babylon wants their souls, their affections, their wills. What is described in the rest of Daniel is a seventy-year campaign – a spiritual conflict between Jerusalem and Babylons – between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world.

Our battle is very similar: there is the enormous pull to conform to the world around us. Our heads get turned by the gross materialism, consumerism, self-absorption and sexual ethics by those we live amongst. The rationale is often: “But everyone is like that. Everyone is doing that.” But we are called to be godly non-conformists, to be counter-cultural, to be radically different. (Romans 12:1-2)

3. Resolve To Fight Worldliness - Say No! vv. 8-16

- What chance has Daniel got? A mere 14 year old – surely he is going to get swallowed up by the system, and become another statistic?
- He has witnessed the overthrow of Jerusalem and the trashing of the temple. How this must have played on his mind.
- He has been taken from his home, his family, and marched eight hundred kilometres east, across Syria to Babylon.

- He has been subjected to a powerful, yet subtle form of brainwashing.
- He is surrounded by evil on every side. Peer pressure is nothing new!

Can a follower of Jesus Christ stand firm when bombarded by an avalanche of worldliness? When the pressure to conform is enormous? Yes! He can and he must!

He does something very important. Daniel says NO! He has undergone a Babylonian education – no protest. He has had a name change – no protest. But he draws a line here, “He purposed in his heart.” We must know what to tolerate and when to say no.

This sounds strange to us – it’s just food and wine. Paul and Jesus tell us we can eat what we enjoy. This isn’t about being kosher. We must remember why the Jews were in captivity in first place. Their ongoing sin had been idolatry – running after other gods. The food from the king’s table had been offered to idols before it was served. Every meal in the royal palace began with an act of pagan worship. Every meal in Nebuchadnezzar’s palace was a holy meal – dedicated to his gods. Daniel would not eat – it would mean a compromise with idolatry – the cause of the exile.

Daniel requests permission to be excused from eating from the king’s table. Note how he does it – with humility and grace and respect. He is not obnoxious or pigheaded. There is a lesson here. Sometimes when Christians suffer in a hostile world they come out swinging, aggressive – with an incredible sense of entitlement. We demand better – we deserve better.

I think many believers are working from the wrong assumptions. Apart from suffering and dying for the Gospel we are not actually entitled to much! We are not in Jerusalem – we are in Babylon. But listen, don’t put a political spin on this – we were NOT exiled in 1994 – we have always been in exile. We live in a broken, sin sick, fallen world – which is not neutral – but which is opposed to Jesus Christ, His truth and His church. The New Testament calls us exiles, strangers, aliens and foreigners.

The official is very cagey. If these Hebrew boys lose condition while under his care, he could get the chop. Daniel respectfully proposes a test period: ten days of vegetables and water. Sounds terrible – Prof. Noakes would not be happy. After ten days these guys that had been eating celery and sauerkraut look better than those who had been on a five-star diet from the king’s table. This is the first miracle in Daniel.

Daniel said NO! We think of his great courage that took him to the lion’s den. But Daniel 1 comes before Daniel 6. If Daniel had not been firm and resolute at this point, he certainly would not have stood firm later when death was the sure outcome. The lesson: be faithful in the small things. We sometimes think in dramatic, gory terms: What would I do if terrorists forced me to renounce Christ? The more pressing issue is – am I denying Christ at home, in the office, at school, at golf, or in the bar? C.H. Spurgeon asks: “Why do you torment yourselves about the lion’s den when you are failing in

the dining-room today?”

Every year evangelical churches say goodbye to teens who go to university or college to study. They ALL go to the University of Babylon – some go to the Cape Town campus, some Port Elizabeth, some Johannesburg, some Bloemfontein, some stay local. We are concerned about them. Will they get turned? **Daniel shouts at us: It’s possible to be faithful in a terribly fallen world.**

4. Consider the Sustaining Grace of God, vv. 17-21

Grace is written all over Daniel’s life – grace is written all over the believer’s life. Our life is the story of the triumph of grace. We have already seen it in Daniel’s life (v.9). God honoured them and gave them more grace. A vital reality check here – the hero of the book of Daniel is not Daniel – it is the living God, who is King and gracious and good.

God gave these young Hebrew exiles gifts and abilities that they had never dreamed of. Their final exam is an oral. They were better than all the other students! That is grace. But there is more – they were better than the existing graduands who had finished their studies and were occupying leading positions – they were ten times better – abounding grace.

As a result they found themselves in strategic positions where they could use their influence enormously for good. Verse 21 is incredible! It looks innocuous (It’s like a PS at the end of a letter) – but how potent it is. What a plan. Seventy-five years later, Nebuchadnezzar is history, but Daniel (the foreigner) has held top, strategic positions under three pagan kings. Daniel tells us, no shouts at us, that because of the grace of God it is possible to live for Jesus in a totally ungodly environment.

The Old Testament points to a Saviour, a mighty Deliverer, the Messiah. During the time of the exile there was an increased expectation and longing for the Messiah. The people needed God to intervene decisively, they needed a great deliverer.

This morning we remind ourselves of Jesus Christ and His gospel. God intervened, He sent His beloved Son. His Son lived for us, suffered and died for us, was raised for us, and has given us His spirit and brought us into His church. We remember the wonder of the grace of God. Religion says DO. The Gospel says it’s all DONE. Our sin – all of it – is covered by Jesus Christ, who loved us and gave Himself for us. We remind ourselves that the cross is the focal point of our faith – we are disciples of the Cross. He has called us OUT of the world (to be holy) and sent us INTO the fallen world (like Daniel) to be instruments of grace.