



The Barna Group recently published their latest research on the most post-Christian cities in America. A post-Christian city is one in which Christianity is no longer the dominant religion. They write, "The level of irreligion in America depends on how you measure it. And the vitality of faith in America is much more than simply how people label themselves." Barna Group tracked 15 metrics related to faith, which speak to the lack of Christian identity, belief and practice. The first five metrics where:

1. do not believe in God
2. identify as atheist or agnostic
3. disagree that faith is important in their lives
4. have not prayed to God (in the last year)
5. have never made a commitment to Jesus

Out of 96 cities in America, where do you think the San Francisco Bay Area ranked? Number 6. The Northeast is top of the list but the West Coast, San Francisco, which includes Oakland and San Jose, is the most post-Christian area on the West Coast. Anyone surprised? No.

There are 117 cities in the entire Bay Area (Sonoma County down to Santa Cruz County). 112 different languages are spoken here. It's one of the most influential and wealthiest places in the entire world. One third of all venture capital is invested right here. It's also one of the least philanthropic communities in America, aka, people don't give much of their income to charity. And it's one of the least church areas in North America. One Christian CEO summed up the Bay Area in four words—"Rich, Influential, Miserly, Pagans."

Those statistics and data either excite you about the mission field God has placed you to serve or it really freaks you out making you think about moving to a secluded ranch in Texas. Or maybe you're somewhere in between! While those statistics seem gloomy, I'm convinced that God is on the move in the Bay Area in a very real and significant way. Even though the Bay Area has never experienced a genuine revival, I believe we will see one in my lifetime. Churches are working together more now. Christian organizations, like Third Box, are rallying followers of Jesus to pray and serve the community. New churches are being planted. And Christians are taking seriously the call to be salt and light at their workplaces, schools, and communities.

Today we are going to look at the life of a young teenage boy named Daniel, who lived in a world much like ours. Daniel, along with three other young Jewish men, were among countless others taken in exile to Babylon in 605 BC after the first fall of Jerusalem. Daniel and his three friends successfully bear witness to their faith in a hostile environment.

How do we, like Daniel, live in a world that doesn't honor God? As believers, we are all in exile. Like the people of God exiled in Babylon, we're on our way to a new Jerusalem, where God will make this world new again. When the Lord returns there will be justice. Until then, it's just us! So, let's look to the example of Daniel for encouragement and hope for living among "rich, influential, miserly, pagans." The first thing we are going to see, if we are going to live as exiles in a foreign land, is we must make hard choices.

### **We Must Make Hard Choices**

**Then the king 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— 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 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; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego. But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine... (1:3–8a).**

King Nebuchadnezzar was a wicked man but a smart one. He started a royal academy, a university in Babylon for the elite young men of his new empire. He wanted to pool together the best young brains from all the nations he conquered and employ them in service of his regime. Led by the chief of his court officials, Ashpenaz oversaw a rigorous three-year training program which steeped these men deeply into Babylonian culture. They would learn the Babylonian language, read their literature, study art, and even eat the best food and wine Babylon had to offer.

Their names were even changed to Babylonian ones. After three years, the men of this academy would be more Babylonian than the native folks.

While everyone else in exile went to work in the fields or around the city, Daniel and his three friends entered the academy. These teenagers were the cream of the crop of Israel's youth. They were sons of Jewish nobility and had to go through an intense screening process before being admitted to the school. They had to look like Adam Levine from Maroon 5 and think like Bill Gates. And that was just to get into the school!

Can you imagine what it must have been like to be Daniel? He would spend the rest of his life, far from home, out of touch with his family, living in the most powerful city of his day. The city of Babylon was impressive. Its walls were 300 feet high, 80 feet thick, and sunk 35 feet below the ground to prevent tunneling. Babylon was no doubt a marvel of the ancient world. It was also the capital city of pagan worship. The great temple of Marduk connected with the tower of Babylon. All that to say, Daniel and his friends were no longer in Kansas anymore. This was a brave new world and the easiest way to make it in exile would have been to just go with the flow. But, that is not what they did.

Right at the very beginning of their training, Daniel and his buddies were faced with a clearcut issue of faith and obedience. It would all happen at the dinner table. Now, there was nothing wrong learning another culture and being respectful of it, but the Jewish Law, the Torah (Lev. 11 and Deut. 14), had a series of dietary laws that forbid Jewish people to eat unclean food. Can you imagine a half rack of juicy baby back ribs being placed in front of you and you've never ate them in your life? In fact, you believed if you ate them, you would defile your body and dishonor your God. Not to mention that most of the meat served at the academy was likely taken from animals sacrificed to the gods of Babylon. No doubt the other kids in the academy placed incredible pressure on these four to eat and drink the food. "Come on man, it's just meat! What's the big deal?" I wonder if Daniel struggled with self doubt, wondering if his not eating the food would hurt his chances of rising to a high position in the government. Maybe he thought, "If I just eat the food, I won't offend my classmates or the king and be saved from probable death."

Hopefully, none of us today will get the death penalty for passing on the pork. So, what is the principle we can learn from this? If we are going to live in Babylon, in exile, we too must draw the line somewhere. Over the years, Christians have gone to two extremes. Some completely withdraw from the culture, fight against it, and want nothing to do with anything that stinks of modern day culture. On the other hand, some Christians completely adapt to the culture. Their motto is, "When in Babylon, do as the Babylonians do." They completely assimilate themselves deeply within the culture. There is no critique of culture. No deep

thought as how to be "in the world but not of the world." Daniel and his friends did neither. They adopted a policy we might call "cooperation without compromise." They said yes to some things and no to other things. They went to class, read the books, answered to their Babylonian names, and even dressed like them. On the other hand they didn't completely absorb themselves in Babylonian culture. Daniel, for several reasons, chose to draw the line with the food. For him, it was an important external symbol of his internal loyalty for God.

As a teenager, Daniel was faced with an incredibly hard choice, one we face every day. Do I please people or please God? Do I make the hard choice or do I compromise my beliefs? Daniel made the hard choice and chose to obey God. And we will see the blessing that comes from his obedience. Before we do that, look with me at verse 8. It says that Daniel, "resolved" not to defile himself. That means, before the food was placed in front of him, he had already made up his mind to honor God. As we face hard choices every day, we can learn something here. Have you resolved, have you made up your mind beforehand, how you will handle the pressures and temptations you face every day?

One of the keys to making hard choices and trusting the Lord is deciding in advance how you will handle the temptation. What will you do when that internet site pops up on your computer? How will you handle a client that wants you to massage the numbers a little? Are you prepared to deal with the flirtatious advance from a co-worker? Daniel made up his mind in advance, he resolved to make the hard choice. If you are going to live in exile, you will need to determine what you will say no to and what you will say yes to. You will need to be a student of God's word and determine what your convictions are from there. What does your "cooperation without compromise" plan look like? If you don't have one, Daniel will help us there too. Let's read 1:8b-16.

### **We Must Courageously and Creatively Step Out with a View to God's Involvement**

**...and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way. Now God had caused the official to show favor and compassion to Daniel, but the official told Daniel, "I am 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 ten days: 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.**

**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.**

The second principle we learn from the life of Daniel is this—we must courageously and creatively step out with a view to God's involvement. Daniel's resolve not to eat the food did not sit well with the guy who brought him the meals. Really, who could blame the guard for trying to get Daniel to change his mind. First, **no one** refused anything from the king, let alone some teenage Jewish slave who was being educated on the king's dime. Daniel had it made in the king's academy. But, what upsets the meal server the most is what will happen to Daniel and his friends if they only eat veggies and drink water. These young men were entrusted to the official's care and if they shriveled up and died, he would be killed for not doing his job. The king will blame him! So, like any of us, he begs Daniel to change his mind and just eat the food and drink the wine. This official didn't have to put up with Daniel's request. He could have him reported, killed, or at least kicked out of the program.

Daniel, led by the Spirit of God, offers his "cooperation without compromise" plan. He says, "Ok. How about you allow us to try this for ten days and then compare us with all the others who have been eating prime rib and drinking merlot." The official allows them to do it and ten days later he is amazed to see them healthier and stronger than those who ate from the king's table. Daniel courageously takes a stand and creatively offers a plan that will both respect the king and honor his God.

I believe God wants us to have the same courageous faith and devotion to him as Daniel, to be willing to make a stand even if it comes with a big price tag. Have you ever had to make a decision that you knew could be a costly one? You might lose your job. You might give up that friendship. You might get labeled.

Not only do I see courage in Daniel's life, I see creativity. He uses his head and works within the system. He has an idea, a plan. He acts respectfully to his superiors. He's not demanding but asks for permission. We can be right and we can know God but that doesn't give us the right to be a jerk! We need to learn how to hold on to our convictions with grace and respect and compassion to others who live very different from us.

One more thing I see here—Daniel's faith. Daniel was sticking his neck out here and if God doesn't come through, it will get chopped off! But, at the very outset of this situation we can see God's involvement. God was at work in the heart of the official and in verse 9 it says, **"God had caused the official to show favor and compassion to Daniel."** Daniel made the hard choice and stepped out in faith and guess what? God was at work in the hearts of those around him. And God made sure Daniel and his friends were plump and healthy with only vegetables. How do

we live in exile? We learn to make hard choices and live by our convictions rather than compromise. We learn how to step out with courage, creativity and faith. We believe God will come through for us. But our man Daniel is still in school and the time is coming for him to come before the king.

### **God Honors Those Who Honor Him**

**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 (verses 17–21).**

God had already given Daniel and his three friends favor with the king's official; they were able to be healthy on a diet of vegetables, and now God gave them knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. He also gave Daniel the special gift of interpreting dreams. How did they get all this? It wasn't their special diet or their rigorous academic school that gave them success; it all came from the Lord. They ended up graduating at the top of their class, *summa cum laude*, and they were brought to the king who himself is uber impressed with them. He says, "These Jewish kids are ten times better than my own people!"

When I was a young kid and in high school, like some of my friends, I excelled in stealing. We'd go to the mall and steal a few things, nothing ever too big because I was too much of a chicken to do that. But then, I became a Christian towards the end of my junior year. And by the time I went away to college at USF, I was a new believer with a new set of beliefs and convictions. One of the jobs I had during college was at Abercrombie and Fitch in downtown San Francisco. I hated that job but I needed the money. Folding clothes all day and smelling like their cologne all the time was not my idea of a wonderful job!

So, one day, I came in to work and noticed that we had several new employees and most of the people I worked with were gone. When I asked my boss what happened, she told me that a majority of our team had been working together and stealing clothes from the store. That didn't surprise me because I knew it was easy to do. She told me that I was one of the few who didn't get fired because I didn't steal. I learned a great lesson in my young faith that day—God honors those who honor him. After that incident, I was able to work any time slot I wanted

because they trusted me. Sometime he chooses to honor us in ways that include earthly success. Like Daniel, he places us in a strategic position to make an impact for him. Sometimes we experience that honor in other ways. We end up losing that job or house or the relationship. There have been Christians all over the world who have lost their lives for honoring God. Sometimes our choices to honor God will cost us. But God still honors those who honor him. There is an honor that comes on earth and an honor that comes in heaven.

The book of Daniel was written to God's people trying to figure out how to be holy people in an unholy culture. The book reminds us that God is sovereign. He's in control of nations, rulers, the heat of a furnace and the mouths of lions. He overrules and eventually will overcome human evil. The book of Daniel looks forward to an even greater man who would come from the Father. He would make hard choices and honor God perfectly. Jesus too would battle evil during his earthly ministry and

ultimately defeat the powers of evil on the cross. Daniel's message comforted the people of Israel and it also comforts us who live in an imperfect, and at times, horrifying world. Daniel 1 ends with an incredible statement, "*Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.*" Daniel lived and served in his role for 66 years. He outlived the Babylonian empire and several kings who came after Nebuchadnezzar.

How do you live in exile? How do you live holy lives in an unholy place? We learn to make hard choices to be in the world but not of the world; to cooperate without compromise. We step out in courage and creativity and faith, trusting God will intervene. We trust that God will honor those who honor him. We look forward to Jesus' return. And one way or another, he will give us a strategic place in his kingdom. It may be here on earth or it may be in the new heavens and the new earth.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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