

The experience of the exile exists in a manner that seems alien and foreign and maybe at times hostile to the world around us. The work we do in exile is the work of becoming a group of transformed nonconformists. We find a way in which we never adjust to the world in such a way that is contrary to the way of Jesus, but we resist the formative pull toward a way counter to the way of Jesus.

Last week, we started the study on the life of Daniel by focusing on the first two verses that detail the context in which Daniel's story takes place. From that, we saw the emphasis of two primary biblical motifs or metaphors rise to the surface, which are the best metaphors for us to understand what it means to follow Jesus in the modern age—the metaphor of Babylon and exile.

As we look at the life of Daniel, the question we ask in this series is how do we remain faithful to the way of Jesus while in exile? This message will pull out of the first story of Daniel, an example of how we resist the seeming natural pull toward conformity to the empire around us. For Daniel and his group of friends, this was the driving question that they were forced to figure out, and somehow they did find a way to remain faithful against all odds.

**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. Daniel 1:1-2**

If you didn't get the chance, I encourage you to go back and listen to the teaching last week, where we detailed the context for the life of Daniel. It is especially important for us to understand the context in which the life of Daniel is taking place. In brief, Daniel and a small group of Israelites were taken as prisoners of war to the Babylonians. They were cultural elites—wealthy, smart, strong, powerful young men who were ripped from their homeland and taken into exile. In this context, we pick up the story.

**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. vv. 3-5**

Did you catch anything odd in this section? What an odd detail to include, "*young men without any physical defect...*" What is going on here? All throughout the Old Testament, and particularly the sacrificial laws, the people were to bring sacrifices that were without defect. It is language you can see all over the place. There is a sort of theological warfare going on here. Nebuchadnezzar is bringing these boys and, in some way, offering them as a sacrifice to the gods of Babylon. You will see more of this later.

The assigning of food and wine from the King's table meant more than just that they were allowed into the King's inner circle—although it probably didn't mean nightly soirees with the king—it meant that they were dependent on the state for their sustenance. It was a means of control that the king could exert over the boys.

The training they were going to be subjected to is a cultural immersion program of sorts that the group would have been placed in to strip them of their identity as an Israelite and immerse them into the Babylonian way of life. The goal wasn't just to educate them in Babylon; the goal at the end of the three years was to make them Babylonian. This practice was common in the ancient world. It was a means to take the best and brightest of your enemies and immerse them into your own culture so that their talents would be used for you and not your enemies.

**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. vv. 6-7**

As we mentioned last week, the book of Daniel tells the story of just four Israelites in exile as a cross-section of what life was like in exile for the whole of Israel. These four, and particularly Daniel, are emblematic of the entire exile. So when we read about these four guys, we can map their experience onto the whole of Israel in exile and can even glean the principles in which they experienced and thrived in exile into our own experience.

The act of changing their names was a power move. It was a way in which Babylon could exert a form of power over the guys. Names in the ancient world held much more significance than they typically would today. They were a way for the Babylonian powers to subvert their old identity and give nod to their new identity, giving shape to their immediate future. Assimilation was a key goal of the Babylonians for these prisoners of war, and new names would have made that assimilation easier.

At this point, they've been renamed, given access to the king's inner circle, and immersed in a program to reshape their identity. But now, here comes a key line in the text, circle, underline, highlight, whatever it is you do, here's the line to do it.

*"But 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" (v. 8).* We'll circle back to the importance of Daniel resolving not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, but notice that Daniel came to the place where he "resolved;" he made a conscious decision to not defile himself. For Daniel and his friends, this was a moment of questioning allegiance. It was a question of which god they worship, and they weren't willing to give in

Notice also the posture of Daniel's rebellion. He didn't rage against the machine. He didn't start a hashtag. He didn't take up arms and demand change. He simply quietly resisted. And throughout the story, you will see this same posture from Daniel and the boys. You will see their quiet refusal and resistance and their willful acceptance of the consequences that this brings upon them.

**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." vv. 9-10**

The concern from the official is valid. "I've been placed in charge over you, so if you don't look as strong and well off as the others, then that will reflect badly on me, and I'll be killed. Not going to happen! Eat up!"

**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. vv. 11-16**

Okay, what is going on here? Just to be crystal clear, this is not some sort of biblically inspired weight-loss plan. Sure, all veggies and no alcohol are probably a decent way to lose weight, but it's not exactly the intention or purpose of the story. It is not a method of cutting a few holiday pounds.

Now, there is some confusion among scholars around the particular reason for this section. But what I believe to be the most likely answer is that the meat would have been considered un-kosher according to the dietary laws of the Jews. Most likely because it would have come to the palace through the Babylonian temple system in which it was offered as a sacrifice, making their consumption of the food a compromise to their

allegiance and identity as followers of the one true God, Yahweh. This is where Daniel decides to draw the line. But as God normally does, he shows up, and it works out.

*"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" (v. 17).* Isn't this fascinating. The text says that God meets them in their exile within the pagan culture and doesn't just meet them there but actually provides knowledge and understanding of "all kinds of literature and learning." Yes, Daniel and his friends were brilliant and hard-working, but God actually meets them in their learning and enables them to understand the culture, to engage intellectually with the culture they find themselves in.

There can be and has been a stream of anti-intellectualism in the big "C" church. All week as I've been prepping, I've been fascinated with how Daniel and his friends actually say yes to parts of this immersion program, and education is one of them. Daniel and his friends were so immersed in the story of their faith that they were not afraid of outside influences. Rather, they were able to engage with them in a way where they could critically assess others' opinions in light of their own discernment. With the wisdom and guidance of the Holy Spirit, they were able to contrast where their culture veered from the way of God.

**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. vv. 18-21**

As we mentioned last week, this is a narrative note that is referencing a period of time of nearly 70 years. From verse 1, "the reign of Jehoiakim" to this line, "the first year of King Cyrus" was 70 years and the entirety of the exile.

What a fascinating story, right? What an interesting look into the immersion process of Babylon. So let's stop for one second and close our time considering what this means for us as followers of Jesus in the Bay Area because I believe that we are not all that removed from the method of cultural immersion than we would like to think. So the plan this week is to explore how Babylon seeks to influence us and ways we can resist that. And next week, Dan will discuss the ways that we faithfully seek to influence Babylon.

What are the strategies employed by Babylon that seek to shape and squeeze us into its image? Because what Daniel and his friends figured out, and what we too have to figure out, is how do we retain our faithfulness while still existing within our world around us? How do we retain faithfulness while avoiding the postures of separatism and syncretism?

I think one of the ways we start to figure this out is by questioning Babylon's strategy for changing and influencing us. And what we see

in the text is two primary ways Babylon sought to influence Daniel and his friends.

### **Alienation from Community**

First, alienation from community. This was the entire point of the exile. Nebuchadnezzar sees that if he wants to convert these deeply Jewish boys to Babylonian, he has to remove them from their community. So he isolates them and immerses them into a new community.

The ploy was to remove the social setting that thickened Daniel's beliefs. When you are surrounded by people who affirm, encourage, and remind you of your identity, it has a deep formative effect on your convictions. This is why friends, family, community, geographic locations, etc., have such a powerful influence on who we become. Because simply by existing within community, your identity and beliefs are reified over and over.

### **Commitment to Faith Community**

For Daniel, he counters this strategy with a deep commitment to his faith community. Throughout the book, you will see the ways he held to his community of faith, whether it was his commitment to a fixed hour prayer that we'll see later in chapter 6. Or the way he bonded together with his friends here in Daniel 1 to continue to lean into their support.

This is one of the unique pressures we experience as Americans. We are steeped in American individualism; it is nearly impossible to overstate the manner in which our world operates at an individualistic level, myself included. Our default internal "common sense" level of thinking is formed as individuals. We think, process, imagine, strategize, and plan everything fundamentally from the posture of individualism. But as followers of Jesus, we resist. When we become isolated, we are more easily detoured from our normal manner of life.

Church, this is why our gatherings are so important. This is why the discipline of showing up either online or in-person week after week is so essential. Because we need to be reminded constantly of who we are. I often come into this room discouraged, beat up, and I need to hear the voices of others affirming the goodness of God and reminding me of what I am about.

### **Allure of "the Good life"**

Second, Babylon offers a deeply powerful vision of the "good life." In some way, all of us live from a vision of the good life that we are pursuing. What that vision is and pertains to is a different question. But we all, Christian or not, live from a vision of the good life. It is what motivates us, propels us, and animates us in our daily life. The question for us as followers of Jesus is, is this vision saturated in the Kingdom of God or alternative visions constructed by the idols of our day?

Notice that for Daniel, this was the appeal to both his physical appetites and his career prospects. The offer was for him to dine at the king's table, to have anything he would like, food, wine, and indulgence. Fill your appetite on all that the empire had to offer. Not only that but there was the allure of career ambition. Nebuchadnezzar was grooming them for powerful positions. What we will see is that Daniel has the wisdom

and resolve to say yes to this but does so in a way where he doesn't compromise his faithfulness and allegiance to God.

What is the allure for us? Is it attaining a particular position? Receiving that internship? That salary? What is the allure that we must place in its proper context in order for us to resist compromising our faithfulness?

### **Immersion in an Alternative Story**

Daniel had his mind saturated in the story of the Torah. He would have been steeped in this story from a young age. It was a story that permeated his entire understanding of the world. And so, when he bumped into alternative stories, he was able to recognize and operate out of a different story. This highlights the importance of the inter-generational church. We all need to see examples of people who are faithfully following in the way of Jesus in the midst of all this challenge. For those of you in the younger generations, of which I would still consider myself, it is a gift to have so many people here at CPC who have been following Jesus for decades. We need their example. We need to see what is possible within a life committed to following Jesus.

What a gift it is to be a part of a community where we can look to those who have followed Jesus longer than we have been alive and see a picture of what is possible when you humbly organize your life around the way of Jesus.

## **Hard power and soft power of influence**

### **Hard Power**

This form of power is coercive by its nature. It is power employed through force. This isn't always wrong. Hard power is the use of the law or police officer. Think of a stop sign; you can ignore it, but if you do, you will have to pay the consequences of that action. That is a form of hard power. And that is one way to coerce behavior.

### **Soft Power**

This form of power isn't coercive; it's persuasive. It is power derived from attraction and emulation. Soft power lures you away by projecting a vision of the good life and then offering you the means to become like that image. It is the subtle voice that seeks to soothe the tension you feel when you drift from the way of Jesus. The Bay Area is a soft power machine; it deals in persuasion and attraction. Have another drink. It's okay; everyone is drinking. Cut another corner; you deserve it.

If you've lived here for any duration of time, you've seen the influence of soft power to transform people in this area. I remember when Lindsey and I first moved to the area seven years ago. We did, maybe the most Bay Area thing we've ever done. We came from Napa, which is a rural, more agricultural sleepy town. A beautiful place. And when we lived there, I had a Chevy Silverado, a great truck! But after probably less than a year, we did the most Bay Area thing we could do; unintentionally, mind you, we sold the truck and bought a Prius. I had never ever considered a Prius before in my life. It's a great car, by the way; it saves us a ton on gas every month. But they are everywhere out here, and it eventually swayed us. That is an example of how the Bay Area changes you. Now, of

course, that is a silly example, but what if I were to talk more about how the Bay Area has sought to change the way I understand other things.

Like money, how money in the Bay is not just a means to sustenance but a symbol of success. It has heightened the tension and anxiety I feel around having enough or being enough. Or ambition or work/life—ambition and success are the air we breathe. It has caused more concern about how we live. It has increased my pace of life and increased the amount of commitments I take on, because of course, we have to “get on that grind.” Don’t you have a side hustle? If you are not working 70-80 hours a week, how will you make it? You can sleep when you’re dead.

Or how about sexuality—the general view on sexuality in the Bay area is that it is meant to be expressed with little to no regard for how. Our sexuality is meant to be experienced with flippant disregard; it is merely an appetite to be satisfied. Whereas the way of Jesus would understand sexuality with incredibly high regard, a sacred part of who we are that is meant to be cultivated carefully under the way of Jesus.

Now, map whatever that particular area of compromise is for you onto the story of Daniel. Daniel found a way to resist this compromise. In what manner can you resist? What is it for you? What are the small incremental decisions that you have made that are slowly eroding away at your discipleship? Because sin has a numbing effect that dulls our senses to what God is calling us to.

You see, the formative power of our Babylon isn’t through hard coercive power, but through the invitation to a thousand small compromises to the way of Jesus that slowly erode our distinct identity until we lose our distinction and subtly are merged into the image of the Bay rather than Jesus. It is a slow slide as faithfulness to Jesus wanes under the guise of “relax and just enjoy yourself. Don’t be so strict.”

I mean, let’s be honest. This place is utterly beautiful. It is a stunning place to live—the food, wine, coffee, entertainment, sports, weather, and opportunity. I love this place. But all of that also makes the allure that much stronger. It is incredibly hard to exist here and say no to this place when we need to say no.

And so what happens is compromise after compromise, sacrifice after sacrifice. You begin to slowly drift from your convictions, and ten years down the road, you’ve been transformed into the image of Babylon. Soft power is deadly because it isn’t a sudden force, but it finds its power in the cumulative effect of a thousand different things. It is slow and unassuming; it comes in through the side door.

As a pastor, I can’t tell you how many times I’ve watched this happen in people’s lives. They begin to drift in one or two areas, and they begin to compromise slowly and subtly, and over time they leave their faith entirely. It’s heartbreaking. *“But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine...” (Daniel 1:8)*

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

There’s a story of the great follower of Jesus in the past century, the German Pastor and Scholar Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He came to prominence during the rise of Nazi Germany. As he witnessed this rise, he grew disappointed in the German church’s resistance. He was witnessing the church succumb to the very temptations that we listed above. He witnessed countless of his peers get swept away by the powerful formative sway of the culture around him.

As an effort to stem the tide, he began a community at a place called Finkenwalde, where he would intentionally and seriously disciple pastors and followers of Jesus to take on the task of resisting the coming failure of Germany. In our language, Finkenwalde became a place where he could intentionally transform people in order to transform Germany.

At one point, his family and friends began to read and hear the reports of how serious he was taking his work as a pastor and tried to discourage him from continuing on in this work. His family was swaying him to give up his efforts, return to the university and continue his more serious work in the academy. But he was not to be dissuaded. A friend became suspicious of the intensity of the situation. When the friend arrived at Finkenwalde, Bonhoeffer took him out on a lake and up a hill where off in the distance one could see a Nazi training camp.

When there, Bonhoeffer spoke about a generation of Germans being disciplined into a kingdom of “hardness and cruelty.” He then looked at his friend and said, “You have to be stronger than these tormentors that you find everywhere today...this [pointing back toward Finkenwald] must be stronger than that [pointing at the Nazi camp].”

Now, I am not in any way equating our moment to the rise of Nazi Germany, but we face challenging times to remain distinct. And as we seek to grow more and more into the Ekklesia of God in a time of exile that we now face, what happens here in this community, must be stronger than what will shape us out there.

“Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine...” What came to mind as I was talking about small compromises into the way of Babylon? Is it an addiction to shopping and consuming? Or have we bought the myth of sexuality that the world is peddling? Is it the incessant pursuit of power for your own gain? Is it a show you watch that continues to drag you down? Is it a porn addiction you can’t seem to kick that is distorting your vision of sexuality? Is it simply a commitment to leisure and apathy when God has called you to more?

The soft power of Babylon is a powerful force. If we do not take the sway of Babylon seriously, we will not be able to resist.

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Catalog No. 1465 2FC