

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Thriving in Babylon

(Studies in the life and times of the prophet Daniel)

Wisdom for Your Stay in Babylon

(Daniel 1:8-21)

Study #2

Introduction: In need of a little help...

In October of 2013, Rick McFarland and Cathy Frye, a married couple from Arkansas, made a long drive to take in some outdoor adventure in the wilds of West Texas. They entered Big Bend Ranch State Park and made it to a parking area, intending to hike around for a few hours.

Rick and Cathy were quite experienced in the backcountry and planned on being back at the car by mid-afternoon. They took a wrong turn and ended up being gone six long days.¹

When, early on Day Three, Cathy was no longer able to walk due to exhaustion and dehydration, Rick left to go to look for help.

She was found on Day Six, delirious, under a mesquite tree by a search party consisting of forty Park Rangers, wilderness experts, and game wardens. With cuts all over and terribly sunburned, Cathy was at death's door due to exposure and dehydration.

¹ For a riveting description of this lost-and-found saga, go to <http://bigbend.arkansasonline.com/index.html>.

After she had recuperated in an El Paso hospital, both Rick and Cathy readily admitted to the two errors that had led to their misadventure.

For one thing, they had never been to this particular 300,000-acre (!) State Park, and they didn't have a decent map of the area. For another, they didn't take appropriate supplies on their day hike. Their wilderness nightmare was avoidable with better preparations.

Now I'm not making fun of Rick and Cathy. Their situation was no laughing matter. What's more, I'm not above getting lost. I've been turned around on a trail more than once. I've gotten turned around in suburban San Antonio lots of times.

But when you're looking to navigate challenging terrain, the right supplies and guides are indispensable. That's true for all kinds of journeys - including a journey through Babylon.

Review...

Last Sunday we began exploring the life and times of the Old Testament prophet, Daniel. Here's the back story.

Around 600 BC, King Nebuchadnezzar, ruler of the ferocious Babylonian Empire, besieged Jerusalem and destroyed it. His army looted the Jewish temple of its treasures and then looted the city of some of its most valuable human assets. Among those taken away into exile were Daniel and his three friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.

These four teenagers (probably taken captive at about aged 17)² were taken away from everything familiar (Jerusalem) to a land where everything was foreign (Babylon). When they arrived in Babylon, they found themselves in a place with different morals and customs and government and art. As well, Babylon could not have been more different when it came to religion.

In Jerusalem, the Jews worshiped the God who had revealed Himself to Israel and who had shepherded Israel for centuries. The

² So most scholars seem to think. (Among them Walvoord and Constable)

Babylonians followed many, many gods and goddesses who were not known for love and grace.

Israel's God called them to holiness. The worship system of Babylon involved gross immorality and violence.

This morning and in the weeks to come you and I will watch Daniel. We want to see how he navigated life in Babylon - a land that was far from God - so that we can likewise lovingly and wisely navigate life in our own culture.

Our Babylon...

You may even hear me refer today to our current cultural setting as "our Babylon."

When I say this, I'm not demeaning our setting. I love lots of things about San Antonio and I love much about our nation. But lots of people - people of faith and otherwise - have noticed that our culture has made very intentional and noticeable movements away from a biblical orientation to life.

Today, there are fewer references to Christianity in the public square. More people think negatively about Christianity than has ever been the case in our nation. Fewer people hold to the Bible's teachings and fewer think that the Bible is credible than in times past.

So, by referring to "our Babylon" I'm not being snarky. I'm just drawing a parallel between our story and the biblical story. I'm saying that we are facing what Daniel faced. And I believe that seeing how he lived in his 6th century Babylon will help us thrive for Jesus in ours.

We know that Daniel and his friends had been hand-picked by one of the king's chief officials, Ashpenaz, to serve in Nebuchadnezzar's court. To prepare for that service, though, these Hebrew youths had to undergo a three years long training regimen to learn the ways of the Babylonians.

There were inevitable conflicts for Daniel and his friends in Babylon. There will always be conflicts for people of faith who live in

Babylon. The first conflict Daniel records occurred during the training time, and it involved food.

Before we put this story under the microscope and drill down to explore the conflict in detail, let's get out the telescope and take in the big picture of this food fight.

The Story Viewed Through a Telescope (vv. 8-21)

Food Fight (vv. 8-13)

The king's plan was to give Daniel and his friends food from his own choice stock while they were in training. I'm sure the king believed that his trainees would be deeply impressed with the lavish feast they would eat every day.

However, for reasons that will soon become clear, Daniel balked at eating Nebuchadnezzar's food. He didn't want the king's food. He determined to NOT eat what was being placed in front of him and he set out to look for a workaround.

He approached one of his overseers with the idea of a special diet. This servant agreed to a ten-day trial run of vegetables and water.

And sure enough, at the end of those ten days Daniel and his friends were healthier than others in the program who had been eating the king's food. So, these four were allowed to keep on eating their odd, non-Babylonian diet for the rest of their time in training.

And as for the training, well, these Hebrew young men distinguished themselves as A+ students.

Superior Servants (vv. 17-20)

[17] As for these four youths, God gave them knowledge and intelligence in every branch of literature and wisdom; Daniel even understood all kinds of visions and dreams. [18] Then at the end of the days which the king had specified for presenting them, the commander of the officials presented them before Nebuchadnezzar. [19] The king talked with them, and out of them all not one was

found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king's personal service. [20] As for every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king consulted them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and conjurers who were in all his realm.

Obviously, these were four top quality young men. They were intelligent, high capacity learners.

In particular, Daniel, the only one of the four identified as a prophet of God, was singled out for his insight into visions and dreams.

Evidently, a sort of final exam for the trainees involved an extended audience with King Nebuchadnezzar himself, an oral exam where the king would ask them difficult questions. (v. 19)

In these conversations, Daniel and his three friends showed themselves to be ***“ten times better”*** than all the other trainees. And so, when the training time ended, all four of these Jewish exiles entered the king's personal service.

We don't know how long Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah hung around, but we do learn that Daniel was involved at the highest level of government service for a very long time.

Daniel's Staying Power (v. 21)

[21] And Daniel continued until the first year of Cyrus the king.

From historical records, we know that the Jewish nobles and their families were taken from Jerusalem to Babylon in 605 BC. So, that was when Daniel and his friends were marched away from Judah - 605 BC - meaning that the three-year training program would have ended around 602 BC, making this the first year of Daniel's government service.

With the first year of King Cyrus being 538 BC,³ that means that Daniel's career spanned nearly sixty-five years.

He served during the latter years of the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar, throughout the whole reign of Nebuchadnezzar's son, Belshazzar, during the reign of King Darius, the Mede, up until the reign of King Cyrus.

So, that's the story in broad brushstrokes. Now let's move from the telescopic view of Daniel's food fight to the microscope. Let's drill down to see what this story and Daniel's actions in it might say to us, who want to thrive for Jesus while living in our Babylon.

The Story Under the Microscope

Courage: A Line to NOT Cross (v. 8a)

[8a] But Daniel made up his mind that he would not defile himself with the king's choice food or with the wine which he drank

The king's food and drink

Jewish food laws

We don't know how much of what we call the Old Testament Daniel actually knew when he arrived in Babylon. Remember that at that time, Jerusalem was not a hotbed of spiritual passion and it's possible that his knowledge of Scripture was pretty limited.

However, we can be certain that he knew - just like every Jew knew - the Mosaic Law's dietary commands. He knew "kosher."

The Jewish laws of kosher said that certain kinds of food were off limits - especially certain meats like pork, some birds, some seafood - and that all food had to be prepared in a certain way.

³ Also the year that Cyrus gave the command that the Jerusalem temple be rebuilt, marking the end of the seventy years of the Babylonian captivity.

Without question, the food that the king of Babylon was planning to serve Daniel was NOT kosher.

The food and drink set before Daniel

The food would have been rich and lavish and there would have been lots of it. And certainly the wine was the best in the land.

But the Babylonians would have had no problem preparing and serving any kind of food they could find. Some of it would have been the wrong kind of food and all of it would have been prepared in the wrong kind of way. The king's food was not fit for Jewish consumption.

In addition, as was their custom, the wine very likely had been dedicated to Babylonian gods before it was served. So, for Daniel to have drunk it would have involved him in idolatrous ritual.

With that as background, we can understand why verse 8 begins with the word "***But...***"

Lavish food was prepared, but...

Delicious wine was served, but...

Daniel's taste buds were going to get a feast and his belly was going to get full, but...he rocks the cushy boat on which he's sailing.

Daniel's decision

And here's where we get our first glimpse of who this Daniel really is. Yes, he's a teenager and yes, he was raised in Jerusalem in a time of spiritual darkness.⁴ But Daniel never forgot his spiritual roots and he never forgot to Whom he belonged.

He was, first and foremost, God's. So, even in Babylon, he bound himself to Israel's Law.

Daniel's internal moral compass was informed by God's Word, and Scripture couldn't be more clear about what he should and should not eat. So Daniel "***made up his mind***" to not eat what God said he should not eat.

He came to a settled conviction about this thing. To eat the king's food would bring defilement. So, he took a stand.

When God's people find themselves in Babylon, remembering who they are and to whom they belong is very important and is a great protection

When in Babylon...

Babylon is the culture where God is not acknowledged. Babylon doesn't take God into consideration. So, in Babylon, it will sometimes be necessary for God's daughter or God's son to, like Daniel, go against the flow. Be counter-cultural.

Daniel swam against the current when it came to eating non-kosher food. However, notice where he did not go against the flow.

He didn't seem to have a problem answering to a Babylonian name. He was OK learning Babylonian literature and mythology. He agreed to learn everything that had to be learned to serve in Nebuchadnezzar's court.⁵

Daniel didn't turn everything into a fight. He accommodated himself to Babylonian culture when he could, compromised when he could - and then took his stand when he couldn't bend.

So, this is not about God's people gaining a reputation for the things that we are *against*. God does not call us to be cultural curmudgeons.

⁴ This spiritual rebellion and darkness was the reason God brought the Babylonians against Judah in the first place.

⁵ I have read that John Calvin suggested that Daniel and his friends were protected from having to study heathen stuff - but why would we think this? Studying such things would NOT have put them in direct disobedience to God's Law. Eating pork, though, would have.

But this one thing Daniel could not do. He could not eat the king's food - so he took a stand.

In our Babylon, there may very well come times when we will have to make decisions about what we will or won't do. It will be a good idea to pre-think this.

Regina Wilson, a mother of four children, is living in her own Babylon. Her home is in Nigeria and she had done some pre-thinking before her faith storm hit.

In Nigeria, the group *Boko Haram* has made life very dangerous for Christians. Regina had heard stories about the group's brutal attacks on Christian villages in northern Nigeria and she knew that her own village could very well be attacked.

Well, it was attacked on October 24, 2014. One of her sons was killed and a daughter was kidnapped. The other two children were badly injured.

In an interview for The Voice of the Martyrs ministry, Regina said, *"I had already decided, 'Even if I should be captured by Boko Haram, I will never deny my faith in Christ Jesus.' So, when we met them, my mind was made up beforehand since I know Who I serve."*

Sounds like Daniel. I can imagine Daniel having thoughts like these as the Babylonian army laid siege to Jerusalem. I can almost hear him, on the five-hundred-mile journey to Babylon - *"I know who I am. I know who I serve. I will draw the line when they tell me to DO what God PROHIBITS."*

When Daniel determined to not eat the king's food, he knew that he could have easily lost friends, advancement opportunities in the kingdom, even his life. By his estimation, that would be OK. What would not be OK would be for him to violate God's commands.

It will be a healthy exercise for you and for me to consider, *"What is the line we will not cross?"*

There won't be a lot of these lines. But there will be some. For the child of God, there will be those things for which we will go to the wall.

There is a question - *"What are you willing to go to the wall for, to die for?"* - that clarifies life. And Daniel has supplied us with a helpful guide here as to what that line should be. He refused to violate an explicit command of God.

Daniel determined that he would look for and find a way to not eat non-kosher food and to not drink wine that had been part of an idolatrous worship ceremony.

If we are going to thrive for Jesus in our Babylon, it will be important to pre-think with friends and family, *"Where is that line? What will I NOT do?"*

Let's notice, too, on Daniel's example, that when taking a stand, it's important to be as respectful toward Babylon as we possibly can be.

A Respectful Search for a Way Out (v. 8b)

[8b]...so he sought permission from the commander of the officials that he might not defile himself.

The king's provision of this great food was intended to be generous. It showed the king's favor. And so, having received grace from Babylon, Daniel communicated respect back by the way he approached the commander of the officials (i.e. - Ashpenaz; v. 3).

He didn't cop an attitude and he didn't make a demand. He didn't throw a fit and threaten a hunger strike (Although starving rather than eating non-kosher food might have been Plan B...). No.

He courteously requested permission to be excused from eating defiling food.⁶ He politely asked for an alternative diet.

⁶ Daniel may well have understood that his request was like to have been offensive to the official. He was referring to their choicest food as "defiling." All the more important that he make his request for special treatment with utmost respect.

When in Babylon...

Likewise, when you have to take a stand, when you come to a line you cannot cross, remember Daniel's respectful approach.

He was in Babylon for the long haul. There was nothing to be gained from being strident and offensive. Who knows how God might want to use him in the future? Never compromise, but better to protect relationships than to burn bridges. Better to be respectful and gracious.

Of course, the same holds true for us.

This culture in which we find ourselves is *our* culture for the long haul. We are likely going to be here in our Babylon for years. So, you and I must do everything we can to protect fragile relationships with people who may disagree with us.

Take stands when you must - but be as kind as you can. Draw a line in the sand and go against the flow to obey God. But while doing so love fervently and pursue peace.

Daniel's approach preserved relationship and made possible a long ministry in Babylon. When we are loving and kind and respectful toward those who oppose, we keep doors open to share our Jesus in our Babylon.

Daniel made a request for a work-around of the Babylonian non-kosher diet. Ashpenaz, who had the highest regard for Daniel (v. 9), gave him an answer. It was not the answer Daniel had hoped for.

"No" (v. 10)

The belief of Ashpenaz (v. 10)

[10]... "why should he (i.e. - the king) see your faces⁷ looking more haggard than the youths who are your own age?"

⁷ Here the friends are referenced for the first time in this passage.

Ashpenaz believed that if these four young men didn't eat the king's food, they would suffer. They would all look worse - frail, thin, pale, etc... - and would be worse off than the other young men serving the king, and all because of an inferior diet.

This would be displeasing to the king and THAT would be bad for Ashpenaz.

The fear of Ashpenaz (v. 10)

[10]... "I am afraid of my lord the king, who has appointed your food and your drink; for why should he see your faces looking more haggard than the youths who are your own age? Then you would make me forfeit my head to the king."

This response says a lot about the conditions in Babylon. Life was cheap in Babylon. Life and death were subject to the whims of King Nebuchadnezzar.

So, Daniel was refused by Ashpenaz, and for very good reasons. If there were any ill effects of a change in diet for these valuable Hebrew servants-in-training, the king would have him killed.

The answer is "No!" Conversation over. Case closed.

But that didn't mean the case was closed for Daniel. He wasn't going to drop the issue and go pig out on pork. Watch Daniel now.

Tenacity: The Grace to NOT Throw in the Towel (v. 11)

[11] But Daniel said to the overseer⁸ whom the commander of the officials had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah...

Daniel walked away from Ashpenaz and approached another servant.

⁸ King James identifies this understeward as "Melzar." The word "melzar" is probably not a proper name, but a title "chief attendant."

This servant was a subordinate to Ashpenaz. Daniel didn't go up the chain to appeal to a superior. He didn't walk on Ashpenaz' head. He went down the chain of command.

Now as I read this, I don't have the sense that Daniel had a guarantee from God that he would be given an alternative diet. He was committed, though, to keep on seeking one.

Remember. He had "**determined**" to not eat non-kosher food, so he didn't take Ashpenaz' "No" for his final answer. He kept pressing.

Once, when speaking about prayer, Jesus said to keep on knocking, keep on seeking, keep on asking. This is Daniel looking for a work-around.

One "No" didn't resolve the issue. We don't hear him approaching God in prayer and saying, "Sorry, Lord. Ashpenaz said 'No.' *Nothing more I can do.*" Daniel tenaciously continued to seek out a solution to his moral dilemma.

I suspect that moving into the future our pursuit of God's way in our Babylon will require more and more of Daniel's *tenacity*. But it always be *respectful tenacity*. *Loving tenacity*. And...*creative tenacity*.

Listen to the creative test Daniel proposed to this overseer.

Creativity: Depending on God to Find a Way Forward (vv. 12-13)

[12] "Please test your servants for ten days, and let us be given some vegetables⁹ to eat and water to drink. [13] Then let our appearance be observed in your presence and the appearance of the youths who are eating the king's choice food; and deal with your servants according to what you see."

Ten days was a reasonable time frame for a test: not long enough to do real damage if the new diet didn't work, but enough time to tell if he and his friends would do OK with the new diet.

What strikes me here is that Daniel refused to allow others to frame the argument. Ashpenaz said, "NO" as if there was no room for further discussion.

Daniel rejected that thought. He had **[8] made up his mind** to not eat the defiling food, so he took the position that there's always room for more discussion. Try a new wrinkle. Suggest an alternative. Look at the issue from a new perspective.

This creativity is part of what is in view when we speak of *wisdom*.

Biblical wisdom begins with the fear of God and becomes the nurtured ability to consider an issue from all angles. Wisdom is the skill to come up with solutions, compromises, and work-arounds that will honor God.

When in Babylon...

I began our look at Daniel last week with the thesis that our culture, generally speaking, has moved away from biblical moorings. There are fewer and fewer remnants of a biblical worldview evident in our society.

In short, we are living in Babylon. We can learn from Daniel the importance of creativity, a sanctified imagination, and wisdom when we face those who disagree with what we understand the Bible to teach.

Today, the broader culture is at a far different place than we who believe the Bible are when it comes to:

- sexual ethics, generally (including pre- and extra-marital sex and pornography);
- same-sex relationships and same-sex marriage;
- the practice of our faith in the public square;
- right to life issues (abortion, infanticide, and assisted suicide).

There are actually plenty of other examples I could list, but these will suffice as illustrations of some of the ways we who believe

⁹ Grain was probably included here, as the word means "things that are sown."

the Bible are out of step with our culture. They demonstrate that without having moved, we have moved to Babylon.

We are out of step. And our response to being out of step is NOT to change our beliefs so that we can better “fit” in our Babylon. (After all, we are marching to the beat of a different Drummer.)

Rather, our assignment is to do the hard work of asking, *“How do we most lovingly and most faithfully share the Gospel to our Babylon. How can we best present God and His ways to our Babylon?”*

For instance...

Because I believe that the Bible is God’s inspired Word, I believe what the Bible teaches: that marriage is a lifelong, loving covenant between a man and a woman. Not everybody in our broader society believes that. I need to be able to lovingly explain to anyone who asks, both what the Bible teaches AND how what the Bible teaches works best for human flourishing.

OR

Because I believe that the Bible teaches that all human life is made in God’s image, I therefore believe that the lives of unborn humans, disabled people, and the very infirm are sacred. I need to be able to engage respectfully and persuasively with those who disagree.

Over the past two or three years many Christian business owners in America have faced serious challenges when it comes to how they may and may not conduct business in light of their faith commitments.¹⁰

Not all of these have responded in the same way. All of them - and all who are put in these situations in the future - will need to respond with God-honoring wisdom and Daniel-like creativity.

¹⁰ Well-known examples include pizza shop owners in Indiana, pastry chefs in Colorado and Oregon, wedding venue operators in New York, and photographers in Arizona.

Parents who are raising children must navigate a world of schooling choices, online bullying, the Internet, sexting and so much more. Each family will need to come to their own convictions before God as to how to navigate these challenges in a way that honors the Lord.

In our Babylon, God has placed Christians in the work force and in schools. We serve in the military and in the government. We are scattered throughout every sector of our society like leaven.

Today, you are God’s witness, assigned to shine in dark places and to create thirst for Jesus by your saltiness. Becoming salt and light is your destiny. Daniel is your guide.

Conclusion:

The end of this story is almost anti-climactic.

Of course it is wonderful that at the end of the ten-day test, Daniel and his friends were found to be healthier (and fatter - don’t you love that!) than all the other trainees and were allowed to keep on eating their special diet.

Some people read this as God’s miraculous intervention,¹¹ to which I say, *“Maybe.”* I am personally more of a mind that the food Daniel and company were eating was actually better food, so they got healthier. (No, this is not intended to be a plug for vegetarianism!)

But IF they had not gotten healthier and the ten-day-long test had been a failure, we can be certain that Daniel would have tried something else. He would have gotten more creative.

He had “determined” that he wouldn’t eat the food God prohibited. And we can also be confident that his creative next attempt would have been carried out lovingly and respectfully, to the glory of God - because that’s what you do when you find yourself in Babylon.

¹¹ Larry Osborne identifies this ten-day period as when God showed up on behalf of Daniel and his friends.