

Living In a Strange Land

Daniel 1:1-21, 1 Peter 2:9-12, Philippians 2:14-16

Slide 1

Because we reside in a pagan world, we need to know how to live in it without compromising our Christian integrity, but we're not the first ones to face that challenge as we see in today's message.

Let's begin by reviewing some Biblical history. Beginning in Genesis we see God bringing His chosen His people, the descendants of Abraham, out of Egypt under Moses, and settling them in the Promised Land, creating the kingdom of Israel.

The kingdom of Israel reached its peak under David and Solomon, but in 937 B.C., the 12 tribes separated into two separate kingdoms, Israel and Judah.

These kingdoms had their ups and downs, often falling into sin, causing the 10 northern tribes to be taken into exile in 722 B.C.

Being dispersed throughout the Assyrian empire, they lost their identity as God's people causing them to be today known as "*the ten lost tribes of Israel.*"

The kingdom of Judah remained. King Josiah attempted revival, but he faced strong opposition and idol worship and immorality took over after his death.

Finally, about 600 B.C., the Babylonians attacked Judah, leveled Jerusalem and the temple, and took most of Jews to Babylon where they found themselves in a strange and foreign culture.

Now, Babylon was a prosperous country. Its Hanging Gardens were among the 7 wonders of the ancient world as well as being a center of learning and a hub of technology.

Babylon was the center of a religion with temple-towers, called ziggurats, where astrologers and sorcerers searched for wisdom and direction. They had even developed their own creation myths.

The Jews, who were exiled there, faced a crucial question: How do we live as God's people in a pagan culture? Some decided to go with the flow, as many people do today.

Others, feeling lost, became angry at God and Babylon and withdraw into Jewish enclaves, separated from the world.

This is like some believers today. Deeply committed Christians who avoid all media and only engage with people at their church.

Then there were other exiles chose to become a redemptive force in the pagan Babylonian culture in which they found themselves.

The prophet Jeremiah told the exiles in Jeremiah 29:7, *“Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”*

That's good advice for us today, but how do we engage our culture without being swallowed up by its ungodly and evil influences?

1 Peter 2:9-12 tells us, *“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your*

soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.”

Jesus said that we are the light of the world. We live in the world, shining in the darkness. We are IN the world, but not OF the world. It all sounds good, but it’s not easy to put into practice!

So, what can we learn from Daniel about living in a pagan world? How can our light shine in an environment which is often ungodly and full of darkness?

Slide 2

First, we must stand up for who we are.

Daniel 1:7, “The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego.”

Why were their names changed? Well, the Babylonians wanted Daniel and his friends to forget their identity as Jews and take on an identity tied to Babylonian gods.

For example, Daniel includes the Hebrew word for God, El, while Beltashazzar includes the name of the Babylonian god, Bel.

Now, I don’t believe that names change who you are or what you believe, but actions do. That’s why Daniel reacted so strongly about the food.

Daniel 1:8, “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.”

Why was food and drink such a big deal for Daniel? Was it a health thing? Was Daniel just trying to impress the king, or the interns from other nations.

No, he wasn't but the food the chief official tried to get Daniel and his friends to eat wasn't kosher. In fact, it probably had been sacrificed to idols before being prepared.

Daniel wasn't trying to impress anyone; he was just trying to keep his identity.

Since Jewish food laws were part of Daniel's identity as a servant of the God of Israel, He wanted to remember that he was not like the rest of the world.

He wanted to remember that he was one of the God's chosen people. That's why, when we take a stand as a Christian, we shouldn't try to impose our moral standards on pagans!

If ungodly people are immoral or have different values, they're living in a way that's consistent with who they are.

We need to be concerned when Christians act like pagans! Ezekiel, a contemporary of Daniel, identified the problem that caused the Jews to be taken into exile.

Ezekiel 22:6-12, "See how each of the princes of Israel who are in you uses his power to shed blood. In you they have treated father and mother with contempt; in you they have oppressed the foreigner and mistreated the fatherless and the widow. You have despised my holy things and desecrated my Sabbaths. In you are slanderers who are bent on shedding blood; in you are those who eat at the mountain shrines and commit lewd acts. In you are those who dishonor their father's bed; in you are those who violate women during their period, when they are ceremonially

unclean. In you one man commits a detestable offense with his neighbor's wife, another shamefully defiles his daughter-in-law, and another violates his sister, his own father's daughter. In you are people who accept bribes to shed blood; you take interest and make a profit from the poor. You extort unjust gain from your neighbors. And you have forgotten me, declares the Sovereign LORD."

Daniel wasn't trying to change the eating habits of Babylonians. He was reminding himself and his three Jewish friends who they were: God's chosen people.

In the words of Peter, which we read earlier, we are "*chosen... holy... God's special possession.*" We're reminded of that when we stand up for who we are and how God wants us to live.

Can we take charge of our schedule and stay close to God and serve others? Can we go against the flow at work, to stand for ethical principles?

Can we choose, not only what we put into our mouths, but what we allow into our minds and our hearts?

When we take a stand, we need to be wise about how we do it, so we don't come across as self-righteous or arrogant.

1 Peter 3:15-16 tells us, "*But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.*"

Daniel was a wise man, sensitive to the situation of the man in charge.

Daniel 1:11-16, *“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.”*

Daniel won that battle, and he maintained his integrity from the start of his time in Babylon. This is why we need to remind ourselves and others of who we are.

Slide 3

Then, we need to excel in the environment in which we live.

Daniel 1:17-20, *“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.”*

This is significant because the literature and knowledge of the Babylonians included sacred writings, creation myths, astrology, and magic arts.

Daniel and his friends learned more about Babylonian religion and culture than most Babylonians.

Daniel could interpret dreams and visions better than the king's magicians and enchanters. Daniel beat them at their own game!

Some Christian schools today refuse to discuss evolution, or study objections to Christianity, or even study other religions.

Parents and churches avoid talking about sexuality, or secular music or media. Some Christian adults even refuse to read news and opinions from secular sources.

They prefer to live in a bubble of information they find more supportive which is a different approach from Daniel and his friends.

In fact, God helped Daniel and his friends excel in the pagan culture of Babylon!

And, like Daniel and his friends, the environment in which we live in may not be entirely friendly, or even wholesome, but Christians should excel in all areas of their lives.

We should take care of ourselves, to be as healthy, physically and emotionally, as possible.

We should excel in learning; incorporating well-rounded information and opinions that are not based on lies.

Christians should aim to excel in areas like science, technology, the arts, music, and writing.

If we're not able to excel, we should at least be focused on our work, committed to excellence, and be effective team members.

In work or business, Christians should shine light on shady dealings and dark atmospheres.

Employers and bosses should shine by how they treat people, and even the most menial tasks should be done “as to the Lord.”

Christians should be known for their service in and to the community. Churches should be known for the impact they make and for what they add to the community.

We should bring a ray of light into the atmosphere of ball games, family gatherings, office chatter, and online conversation.

Paul puts it this way in Philippians 2:14-16, *“Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, “children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.” Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor in vain.”*

Slide 4

Conclusion

Of course, light also encounters darkness, and we shouldn't be naïve about the dangers in our culture.

As we pursue money or success, engage in politics, or try to exert influence, we need to be wise.

Jesus said to his disciples in Matthew 10:16, *“I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.”*

In a world that's ungodly and full of darkness, we're to shine by:

- Standing up for who we are, and

- Excelling in the environment in which we live.

Matthew 5:16, *“In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”*