

THRIVING in BABYLON

A STUDY OF DANIEL

SERMON TITLE: In the Lion's Den
SCRIPTURE: Daniel 6

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Sometimes life feels like it's all about survival. Sometimes it feels like all we can do is keep our head above water. This is true for everyone, but especially for followers of Jesus. As Christians, we are exiles, and that means that survival is doubly difficult. But God has not called us to survive; he has called us to thrive. And the place that God called us to thrive is in Babylon - the place of our exile. With this in view, the book of Daniel is a perfect picture for us of what it looks like to be faithful in a foreign land that isn't our home. Daniel doesn't merely survive in Babylon. Rather, with God's help, he thrives there. What would it look like for us to do the same here in Greenville?

PART 1 — Now before we start reading I want to give you a little bit of background. Daniel is about 80 years old and he's lived in Babylon for over 60 years. Daniel is a Jew. 60 years earlier, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had crushed Jerusalem—and Jerusalem was like the epicenter of God's activity in the world at that time in redemptive history.

The Temple was there and God's presence was there in a special way. God's purpose for Israel was that they would be a light to the nations to, showing them the One True and Living God. But over and over again, God's people refused to be what God has called them to be and they don't do what God has called them to do. So God allows Nebuchadnezzar, this powerful, megalomaniac ruler to destroy Jerusalem, and take Jerusalem's best stuff and best people back to Babylon. So, he takes the stuff from the Temple and puts it in the temple of his god saying, "See there. My god beat up your god. My god is more powerful than your god." And he took the best and brightest of Jerusalem's people, and *in that little sub-narrative is where we get the book of Daniel.*

So, Daniel and his three friends—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—get taken from their homes as teenagers and they're put into a Babylonian cultural immersion program, with the purpose of making them Babylonian. The idea was to completely erase all traces of their Jewish heritage, assimilate them into Babylonian culture, and give them government jobs. And that's what happened.

But here's the *tension* in the book of Daniel and this is why we're reading it even today in our Bibles, and this is why we're doing this series we've called—*Thriving in Babylon*. The *tension* in the book of Daniel is that Daniel and his friends didn't become Babylonians—*well, they did and they didn't.*

They remained Jewish; their Jewish identity remained intact. They remained very much devoted to God, devoted to the vision of what it meant to be the people of God. However, they were Babylonian in the sense that they worked for the Babylonian government. They dressed Babylonian; they talked Babylonian; they were educated Babylonian; they had "secular," civil servant jobs where they achieved great success. But, they were still faithful to God as Jews.

So, what Daniel has taught the people of God for centuries—and *what I hope what this book is teaching us*—is how to live as the people of God in a culture that has very different beliefs and values than ours. It's a culture that works overtime to deconstruct our beliefs and values so that we eventually assimilate into the dominant culture.

How did Daniel not just survive, but actually thrive in a culture like that? Well, he and his three friends put into practice what Jeremiah the prophet told Israel when God sent them into exile in Babylon. We've looked at this before, but we need to keep going back to it because this is the whole ballgame right here. Jeremiah tells God's people to settle down and sink their roots in Babylon. He tells them God sent them there and they're to live there, raise their families there, and start businesses there. And here's the 'Jeremiah 29:7' big idea that shaped Daniel's life: "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" (Jeremiah 29:7).

The question is: *How do we do that? If we deeply engage with our culture, how do we guard against being assimilated into the culture?* Part of the answer has to do with being shaped by a vision of God's kingdom—by a vision of how God's people thrive in exile.

Duane Friesen put it like this in a great book *Artists, Citizens, and Philosophers: Seeking the Peace of the City*. He writes: "The Church is shaped by a vision of God's kingdom; the ordering of human life by an alternative vision. Christians belong to the Church, the body of Christ, a community that confesses loyalty to Jesus Christ who calls it to live in a way that places Christians in *profound tension* with many of the fundamental values of a larger culture. So, as exiles living in modern-day Babylon, the question is: *How do we live in the tension of being IN Babylon, but not OF Babylon? How do we live in the tension of the competing vision of the larger culture and remain loyal to God? How do we engage the culture without being assimilated into the culture? Like Daniel, how do we put Jeremiah 29 into practice today?*"

PART 2 —Daniel 6 helps us answer those questions. (For this next section, follow along as Charlie walks us through the text, making comments along the way.)

PART 3 — **Application:** *Our engagement in Babylon is rooted in disengagement.* Quoting Friesen again: "Intentional disengagement from the dominant culture is the necessary precondition for a meaningful engagement of that same dominant culture." This means the only way to "redemptively participate" in a culture with a vision for life directly opposed to God's vision for life, is to know where you will have to draw the line and how you draw the line in love and truth.

Notice, there is more time spent, more "weight" placed on engagement, than disengagement. Think of Daniel working day after day, excelling at his job inside the Babylonian culture. Think of all the relationships he must have had; think of all the conversations he must have had; think of all the different jobs he had to do.

And then we have a few snapshots of disengagement—a few times when he and his friends had to draw the line. But still, they had to know where to draw that line. You cannot redemptively participate in this world unless you have been rooted in non-participation. (It's my hope that we can flesh this out more in a future message.)

One final thing. The "moral" of most Sunday Schools lessons I heard on the book of Daniel went something like: "Be good. Do good. And God will rescue from the lions in your life." But that's not what Christianity teaches. Yes, Daniel was delivered, but throughout church history, other faithful believers were not. Even more, I know someone who was more innocent than Daniel, and he died at the hands of those who plotted against him. He too had a stone rolled over him. His body was filled with wounds and scratches. Yes, Jesus came *into* this world, but he was not *of* this world, and the world hated him for it. He prayed, but he died a horrible death on the cross. However, three days later he rose from the dead and now is enthroned at God's right hand. The Good News is: You don't have to be good and do good to be saved. When you put your faith in Jesus to save you from your sin, God pours his love out on you and he gives you the goodness of Jesus. Our salvation doesn't rest on our ability to "Dare to be a Daniel." It rests solely on Christ's perfect obedience in our place. That really is Good News.

Discussion Starters

Take time to read all the way through Daniel 6. You may want to ask different people to read five or six verses at a time.

1. If you grew up in a church or you've heard the story of Daniel in The Lion's den somewhere along the way, what do you remember as the main lesson of this story?
2. What is the "profound tension" in the book of Daniel that Charlie discussed in this message?
3. How did Jeremiah 29:7 shape Daniel's understanding of how to live in exile? In what ways did he seek the peace and prosperity of Babylon as someone who worked in the government?
4. What are some of the tensions you feel living in our country today?
5. As you've reflected on this message, are there areas where you think you may be more influenced by the culture than you realize? Think about sex, marriage, gender; think about how you view your money; think about how you view politics and power and who is ultimately in control.
6. After Darius made the decree that "no one can pray to anyone but me for 30 days," why didn't Daniel just change the way he had been praying so that it was more private than public?
7. What does this idea—"Our engagement in Babylon is rooted in disengagement"—actually mean? Where do we see this in Daniel chapters 1 through 6?
8. How do we disengage from the dominant cultural god of "American Individualism" today? What does "engaging disengagement" look like for you...at work, school, in your neighborhood, etc? Think of specific interactions that you have with people who don't know God in all these places. How do you engage them?
9. What does Jesus teach us about "engaging disengagement" and "redemptive participation" with people who don't know God?

