

# THRIVING in BABYLON

A STUDY OF DANIEL

SERMON TITLE: Thriving in Babylon (Part 2)  
SCRIPTURE: Daniel 1:8-21

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PASTOR: Matt Densky

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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 merely 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?

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A number of years ago I found myself arguing with my wife about plates - wedding china to be exact. We were standing in a retail store in front of a large display of different kinds of china and stoneware and I was baffled as to why we needed more surfaces to eat from, mainly ones that cost more but would be used less.

Being the very non-stubborn and understanding man that I am, I decided I would help her understand the logic through a series of explanations, hurtful tones, short comments and so on—definitely, not the most loving approach to my sweetheart.

I wish I could say by now that I've mastered communication and the ways of patient and gentle understanding. I still have a lot to learn. But one thing I have learned over the years of being married to this saint of a woman is that while there might be times to have a firm stance on opinions, more often than not my approach ought to be open-handed and be willing to let go rather than allowing an obtuse posture to lead to pain for the both of us.

I have found this not only to be a healthier approach to marriage but really to all relationships, including our faith. As followers of Jesus, we maintain a unique position in this world. We are called to be separate from the ways *of* the world, but not separated *from* the world.

This requires a delicate balancing act where we find harmony in the midst of tension. When should we take a stand for this? When should we let go of that? When is it ok to assimilate into culture in this way? When should we draw a line in the sand over that issue? Most of these are gray areas overall. Few concerns that present themselves in our culture are black and white and therefore we find ourselves being tugged. Yet, our vertical and moral alignment with Jesus will often times put us in a contradiction with the horizontal cultural norms around us. So what are we to do?

I am suggesting that the healthiest approach is to avoid the extremes. Those are easy. And certainly, both of these camps can be observed in our culture.

On one hand, there's the camp of full assimilation. These are the ones who claim to love and follow Jesus but assimilate into culture seamlessly and without hesitation. Before long they are indistinguishable as followers of the way of Jesus and they have *lost all sense of identity as children of God*. On the other hand, there are those who—out of a righteous zeal—decide assimilation of any kind is immoral and therefore the only option is separation, taking up no parts of the world around them and removing themselves entirely. Before long they are indistinguishable as people who can be approached and they have *lost all sense of influence in the culture around them*.

So what's the solution? How do we retain our identity as children of God, marked to be holy and set apart, while at the same time growing in influence with the world around us? I believe Daniel can offer us wisdom into how to maintain the closed-hand / open-hand approach to thriving as an exile.

Think back to last week's message or read Daniel 1:1-7 to gain some context. Babylon has conquered Israel and begins the process of bringing waves of Jewish people back to Babylon. Among these were Daniel and his three friends, who are the focal point of the first six chapters of the book. The King's goal is not just to erase their heritage and past but prevent their future as well. He does this through a cultural cleansing and immersion into Babylonian ways.

He requires them to learn the language, receive Babylonian education, embrace the Babylonian culture, receive new names, and eat in the same manner as the King.

Daniel doesn't seem to have a problem with any of this until the mention of the diet (verse 8). Why? What was it about the diet that made Daniel draw the line in the sand and be willing to die in defiance of this rule? As you survey this list, it seems surprising. How could he maintain an open hand towards the initial things, but stand firm against the diet? How did he discern this was the thing to take a stand for, risking his own life as well as the lives of others?

- Remember, Daniel was of royalty and a young Jewish man. He would have been well versed in the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament) in which God clearly lays out dietary restrictions and expectations. So for Daniel, while the other expectations of the King were undesirable, this one was a clear violation of Daniel's conscience and obedience to God's laws. In addition, the food they were serving to Daniel and his friends *may* have been offered to idols beforehand, and Daniel did not want to take in food which would have already been spoiled spiritually.
- Verse 5 may offer insight as well. The King wanted to provide their *daily portion* of food. Not only did he desire to demolish their cultural ties to Judaism, but he was attempting to make them wholly dependent on him as provider and nourisher on a daily basis. In other words, "we can't survive without the King and must depend on him." This would be in clear contrast to God's desire to be the provider for his people as with the manna example while the Jews wandered in the wilderness.

So for Daniel, at least in chapter 1, he moves from open hand to closed fist when what's expected of Him in the assimilation process is in clear contradiction with the word of God. And when someone is trying to replace God's role in Daniels life.

So we know the *what* that made Daniel take a stand, and what's equally amazing is the *how*. How did Daniel refuse the assimilation process of the cultural norm?

- Respectfully (verses 9-11) - Daniel doesn't lead a revolt, usurp power, or even boycott. What does he do? He asks respectfully if he and his friends can choose to refuse the King's diet.
- Humbly (verse 12) - Daniel refers to himself and his friends as servants. Remember they are royalty. He could have allowed his ego to swell up. He didn't. Daniel approaches the matter meekly.
- Faithfully (verses 13-16) Daniel has so much faith in God that he's willing to risk his own life for this outcome. "Test our appearance after 10 days" is an invitation to see what God can do when those who love him are faithful.

How does God respond?

- He blesses Daniel and his friends with influence among the Babylonians while they were maintaining their identity as followers of God. (verses 17-21)

This is the manifestation of the open-hand / closed-hand balance that Daniel models. Assimilation as exiles without forfeiting our beliefs, but standing for our beliefs in a way that is respectable, humble, and willing to put the outcome in God's hands.

This practice of discerning when to let things go and when to take a stand is not only modeled by Daniel, but many others including Jesus and is expected of us today.

How do you thrive as an exile? You avoid the extremes of full assimilation or full separation and you maintain your beliefs while expanding your influence. Remember, you can never change the culture around you if you are not connected to it on some level. The culture will never know Jesus if those who do only remove themselves. Find the balance.

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### Discussion Starters

Have someone read Daniel 1:8-21.

1. What's your biggest takeaway from today's teaching?
2. At first glance does Daniel's stance on the diet strike you as surprising? (especially when compared to the other things he and his friends were expected to do?) Why or why not?
3. What are some current day examples of the extremes? Where do you see people removing themselves from culture fully? Where do you see people assimilating fully?
4. What do we lose if we assimilate into culture fully? What do we lose if we separate from culture fully?
5. Do you find it challenging to find the balance Daniel modeled? (open hand / closed hand) Why or why not?
6. Give some examples of ways you're practicing this balance in your life right now amidst our culture.
7. Have you ever experienced God expanding your influence to impact the culture around you as you remain faithful to him? Where and when?