



How to Stay Faithful in Exile

THEOLOGICAL THEME: As Christians, we can trust in God's guidance even while we are in exile here on earth.

When we find our feet forcibly planted in the soil of an anti-God, anti-Christian culture, it is vitally important for our hearts to be drawn to God and our minds immersed in His Word. The apostle Paul told the early Christians, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind" (Rom. 12:2). One of the best examples of such non-conformity comes from the Book of Daniel, from the story of four Hebrew teenagers who were plucked from their country and taken captive to the evil empire of Babylon.

 What are some Christian beliefs or practices that cause us to stand out from the world today?

 Why is it important for us not to conform to the world in these areas?

In this session, we are inspired by the courage and faithfulness of Daniel and his friends. Because they remained true to their identity as God's chosen people and because they were willing to demonstrate their trust in God through their actions, they provided a testimony to God's power and goodness while in exile. As believers, we are sojourners and exiles in this world, redeemed by the blood of Jesus and called to be a testimony to His grace by remaining true to our identity in Christ.

1. Remember your true identity (Dan. 1:1-7).

How do we live in exile? To begin, we must recognize the hand of God in our circumstances. God may send us to a difficult place to spread His name among the nations. God often brings suffering into the lives of His people to demonstrate His sovereignty, strengthen their faith, show Himself wise and strong, and put His glory on display among the nations that they might be drawn to Him, as He did in this story.

Voices from the Church

“Sometimes God may allow hardship to reach us because he wants his mercy to reach beyond us.”¹

—Dale Ralph Davis

¹ In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. ² And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God. And he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his god. ³ Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility, ⁴ youths without blemish, of good appearance and skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king's palace, and to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans. ⁵ The king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate, and of the wine that he drank. They were to be educated for three years, and at the end of that time they were to stand before the king. ⁶ Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah of the tribe of Judah. ⁷ And the chief of the eunuchs gave them names: Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego.

On the surface, God's people were invaded and taken captive. But from a different perspective, we see that God's people were now free to bring God's light into enemy territory. Babylon—also known as Shinar, the land of ziggurats (remember the tower of Babel in Genesis 11?)—this place teeming with idols was now being infiltrated by the Lord's "army." Israel would be oppressed and her people scattered, but the nations would now have a witness among them to the one true and living God.



How is our missionary identity as God's people strengthened by remembering that our present circumstances are no accident?

<p>In order for God's people to be salt and light in Babylon, they would need to be prepared for the cultural challenges designed to lead them away from God.</p>	<p>In what ways would it be easy for Christians to fall prey to these strategies of making us like the world?</p>
<p>Isolation. The Babylonian strategy was to seize upon the Hebrews' vulnerability once they were separated from all that was familiar—homeland, family, and friends (v. 3). Over time, they would be more likely to abandon their faith and become like the Babylonians.</p>	
<p>Indoctrination. The young men were enrolled in an educational school for three years to become experts in the Babylonian language, philosophy, literature, science, history, and astrology, including their pagan, polytheistic religion (vv. 4-5).</p>	
<p>Assimilation. The Hebrews were expected to change their minds and their lifestyle, to eat and drink like the Babylonians, enticing them with the delicacies and privileges of their new life (v. 5). This would wear them down and win them over to the dark side.</p>	
<p>Confusion. Finally, the young men were given new names (v. 7). In the ancient world, a name went to the core of a person's identity, so this was a way of reorienting their lives away from their past and toward the pagan gods of Babylonian culture (ex. Bel, Aku, Nebo).</p>	



How can we strengthen our identity in Christ when facing the pressures of the culture?

2. Embrace the risk of holiness (Dan. 1:8-16).

⁸ But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself. ⁹ And God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs, ¹⁰ and the chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, "I fear my lord the king, who assigned your food and your drink; for why should he see that you were in worse condition than the youths who are of your own age? So you would endanger my head with the king." ¹¹ Then Daniel said to the steward whom the chief of the eunuchs had assigned over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, ¹² "Test your servants for ten days; let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. ¹³ Then let our appearance and the appearance of the youths who eat the king's food be observed by you, and deal with your servants according to what you see." ¹⁴ So he listened to them in this matter, and tested them for ten days. ¹⁵ At the end of ten days it was seen that they were better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youths who ate the king's food. ¹⁶ So the steward took away their food and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables.

99 Essential Christian Doctrines

82. New Identity of the Believer

When a person places faith in Christ, that person undergoes a fundamental change of identity. He or she goes from being an enemy under God's wrath (Eph. 2:1-3) to being welcomed into God's family as a beloved child (Eph. 2:19). The believer in Christ is declared righteous on account of Christ's perfect life and substitutionary death and resurrection. No longer is the person a slave to sin, defined by past failures or present struggles. The person has been delivered from the realm of darkness and now belongs to the kingdom of light (Col. 1:13). Anyone who is in Christ is a "new creation" in whom the old, sinful self is passed away and the new, redeemed self is alive and progressing, becoming more and more like Christ (2 Cor. 5:17).

Notice how Daniel resisted the temptation to defile himself (v. 8). The immersion into the world of pagan Babylon had not won over his heart or mind. Babylon was where he lived, but Babylon would never be his home. Like his forefather Abraham, Daniel was “looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God” (Heb. 11:10).



What do you think prepared Daniel and his friends to resist this moment of compromise?

Daniel not only had conviction, but he also had wisdom. He walked in holiness *and* humility. He shared his faith and convictions with Ashpenaz, and God “gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs” (Dan. 1:9). Daniel stood his ground, but he did so with grace and humility. He was not arrogant or rude. He was not obnoxious or stubborn. He kindly and winsomely won over his superior (vv. 10-16). Daniel believed and trusted God to honor his commitment to obedience.

Charles Swindoll summarizes the lesson we learn in Daniel’s risky holiness: “In a world filled with people who rebel against the divine King, it is inevitable that believers of all ages will face situations in which their convictions will be challenged. We who are parents need to prepare our children for those occasions by both teaching them God’s truth and modeling integrity. And all of us who are Christians need to personally commit ourselves to living God’s way regardless of the temptations to live otherwise.”² This is what Daniel and his friends had been taught. This is how they would live or die.



Voices from Church History

“Unless there is the element of extreme risk in our exploits for God, there is no need for faith.”³

—Hudson Taylor (1832-1905)



What did Daniel believe about God that made possible this kind of courage?



In what ways does our commitment to holiness demonstrate our trust in God's goodness and power?

3. Look for ways to testify to God's grace (Dan. 1:17-21).

¹⁷ As for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams. ¹⁸ At the end of the time, when the king had commanded that they should be brought in, the chief of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar. ¹⁹ And the king spoke with them, and among all of them none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Therefore they stood before the king. ²⁰ And in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his kingdom. ²¹ And Daniel was there until the first year of King Cyrus.

Here, for the third time in one chapter, God gives something (see also vv. 2,9). In this case, He gave the four youths “learning and skill in all literature and wisdom.” These were “Proverbs men” with the ability to see the things of life and this world from God’s perspective and to act accordingly.

God blessed Daniel spiritually by giving him “understanding in all visions and dreams” (v. 17). This gift from God would prove extremely valuable in chapter 2 and beyond (cf. 4:4-27; 5:11-31; 7:1–8:27; 9:20-27; 10:1–12:13).



Wisdom is often in short supply in our world. In what ways does a Christian's wisdom and understanding give glory to God?



In what ways does such wisdom improve things in our world?

After their three years of education, the four Hebrew teens were brought by the chief official to stand before King Nebuchadnezzar (1:18). They were head and shoulders above all the rest. “None was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah”; therefore, “they stood before the king” (v. 19). They were brought right into the palace and into the king’s court—they were that impressive!

Nebuchadnezzar gave the four Hebrews key administrative posts. He was confident they would serve and represent him well. Already in this Old Testament narrative, we see the living out of that cardinal principle in Colossians 3:23-24: “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.” Yes, “whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). And Daniel 1:21 is not so much a footnote as it is a summary of the long life and ministry of Daniel on account of his faithfulness to God.



How has your walk with God been impacted by the testimony of grace from people in previous generations?



How might your walk with God impact future generations?

Conclusion

Daniel and his three companions remained faithful to their true identity, obeyed God, and became a shining testimony and witness both to God's providence and His grace. He sent them on a missionary journey, leaving behind all that was familiar, that they might bear a faithful and true witness to kings and nations in foreign lands.

Daniel and his friends point forward to another Hebrew who would arrive six hundred years later. He also was sent to a foreign land to bear witness to the one true God. Like Daniel and his friends, the Son of God would leave His home and willingly embrace a sinful world without defiling Himself even once (2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; 1 Pet. 2:21-25). Like these Hebrew boys, He would grow "in favor with God and man" (Luke 2:40,52). When He was still a child, His teachers "were amazed at his understanding and his answers" (Luke 2:47).⁴ Jesus is the embodiment of the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:30; cf. Col. 2:3).

There is divine irony in this story. Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah gave a faithful witness before Ashpenaz and Nebuchadnezzar and were brought to live in the king's palace. Jesus, in contrast, gave a faithful witness before Herod and Pilate and was nailed to a cross. And yet, it is by His death that all who trust Him will live forever with the King of kings and Lord of lords in His eternal palace. So be strong and exercise good courage in whatever it is God calls you to do. He is with you and He is accomplishing so much more than meets the eye!

CHRIST CONNECTION: Daniel stayed true to his identity, obeyed God, and was a testimony to God's grace. He points forward to the Son of God, who willingly embraced a sinful world without ever defiling Himself and through His death and resurrection became the greatest picture of God's grace the world has ever known.



Voices from Church History

"Therefore, their faith is not mistaken. God does not desert those who firmly cling to the word of God. From this it is apparent that humankind does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord."⁵

—Heinrich Bullinger
(1504-1575)

HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: God calls us to be a shining testament to His grace by remaining true to our identity in Christ and living in holiness.

1. In what ways can we encourage one another regularly to live as missionaries “sent” to the people around us?

2. How can we fortify our faith and the faith of the next generation to resist temptation?

3. With whom can you share about the grace of God available through Jesus Christ? Write a prayer asking God to help you testify of Christ with this person.
