

MESSAGE TRANSCRIPT //

AMONG LIONS | WHEN CULTURE SHIFTS

AARON BROCKETT | AUGUST 7, 2022

Man, so good—so, so good to be back with all of you. I want to welcome everybody joining us across all of our other locations, online, maybe you are joining us from another state. It is really, really good to be back with you.

We just had a great summer. We had some good time away with family. I had some time where... I've shared this with you all in the past. I never, ever want to serve this church or to preach and teach from an empty tank but always out of the overflow of my heart.

And when you're running on fumes, that's when you make really, really unwise decisions. So I just want to thank you guys for being the most encouraging church on the planet. I got so many text messages, DMs, and emails from you all while I was away.

Just an incredible time with family. And I was able to get away outside of the pressure of weekly teaching and do some prayer and planning and just seeking after God, "God, where do You want us to go through the course of the next year?"

And I've never been more excited about the future and the direction of our church than I am right now. So glad that you are here to be a part of it.

Before we get going, can we just express our appreciation to everybody who taught this summer? They did such a great job. It's not necessarily an easy platform to teach on. In fact, one of them came to me and said, "Man, I don't know how you do that every week. It's like preaching on a roller coaster. Right? Up on this big stage." They did an amazing job. We just have one of the best teams on the planet. And I'm so, so grateful for them.

If you are here for the very first time, or you are back to church after a long time, you came on a good day because today we are kicking off a brand-new teaching series called *Among Lions* and we're going to be walking our way through the story of the life of this guy by the name of Daniel. His story is found in the Old Testament. So if you have a Bible, go ahead and find chapter one.

I just want to encourage you every week to bring a Bible with you. And maybe something just to jot a few notes down on. Like, obviously you're not going to be tested on this at the end of it. But I just want you to jot down a few things and maybe you can go back through and review.

I'm under no illusion that the entire message will be for you, but there might be one thing that God is trying to say, and I don't want you to miss it. So bring something to write with every week.

And as you are finding Daniel, chapter 1, I just have a question that I want to present to you today. Has there ever been a time in your life when you felt you were in a situation or an environment where you were out of place? Maybe it was a new job, a new school, a new gym, a new community, a new environment.

Maybe somebody gave you tickets to a Colts game, and you found yourself in the section surrounded by drunk Bears fans, because you have to be drunk to be a Bears fan. And you just kind of felt like out of place, and awkward, and a little bit on edge.

I think all of us have been there at some point in our lives. I know I have in a lot of different scenarios. But maybe the most recent was this last spring. I took my 15-year-old daughter to a concert in Chicago.

And I'm not going to tell you the artist that we saw because I don't want you to think I am recommending or endorsing. But this was an artist that a lot of teenaged girls really, really like. And now, one 46-year-old man, alright?

So I take my daughter to this concert, and I've got to tell you, we showed up and it was like standing room only. And as soon as I got there, it was like me and four or five thousand teenaged girls. And I just felt so out of place.

They knew every single lyric to all of the songs. And I had no idea. I was sitting there kind of bebopping around. And I felt so old and uncool. I just felt out of place. And because of that, I felt a little bit defensive, kind of keeping people at arms-length.

That's usually what happens when you find yourself in an environment where you feel a little bit like an outsider, out of place, you don't know that you have anything in common with the people around you. It can bring about all sorts of emotions that are very understandable.

You could be a little bit nervous or fearful, maybe a little bit anxious or angry, maybe defensive or divisive. All of those things are perfectly normal when you are in that type of an environment.

Now, I say all of that to simply say this. This series is going to be primarily for two groups of people—to invite those of you who are not following after God to surrender your life to Him and for those of us who are following after God to have the courage to live for Him.

Here's what I want you to understand. Over the last couple of years, all of us have found ourselves in a situation within culture in which, in some scenario, we've felt out of place. Culture has always and is always shifting under our feet like the tectonic plates underneath the surface of the earth. And when they shift abruptly, that's when you get an earthquake.

Over the last couple of years that's what we've seen happen in society and in culture on all of the fun issues, all the really tense issues like: politics, sexuality, gender identity, abortion, climate change, issues of justice, and gun control. You know, all the ones that we see eye to eye on.

We have all of these issues that are shifting under our feet. Here's the question for every Christ follower. How can I be formed more and more into the image and likeness of Jesus within a culture that wants to shape me into its image?

Here's a little bit simpler and cleaner way of putting it. How do I follow God in a godless culture? Romans, chapter 12, verse 2 says it so well. It says:

"Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you"—one translation says, "Don't be conformed but be transformed"—"... into a new person by changing the way you," what? "... you think." (NLT)

So what that shows us is that it all begins up here [in your head]. If you want to affect the direction of your heart then you've got to pay attention to what you are thinking. And what you are thinking is usually what you are exposed to.

So this is the perspective by which we see things, these are the thoughts that we have, the worldview that we end up developing.

Now, when culture shifts, and it always has and it always will, there are three common responses that a lot of Christ followers can have. And the first is that we freak out. We just freak out. We say things like, "Things can't get much worse." "The world is going to hell in a handbasket." "I don't have much hope for the future." "I don't know what kind of world my kids and grandkids are going to grow up in."

Now, please understand—I want to say this very gently but very directly—Jesus promised that would happen. Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble." But then what does He say right after that? He says, "Hey, but I want you to take heart," that's another way of saying have some courage, "because I have gone before you and I have overcome the world."

Jesus went to a cross to achieve victory for us on our behalf. So what that means is that we can feel all kinds of things, but we don't necessarily stay camped out on them. There should be no such thing as a pessimistic Christian.

Thoughtful, you bet. Concerned about the world, absolutely. Heavy hearted, yes. But hopeless, defeated, and cynical, man, no way because Jesus is.... There should be a joy that is within us regardless of our circumstances.

So one of the things we do is freak out. The second is that we can just blend in. And this is happening more and more as we face pressure from society around us. And

oftentimes what happens is professing Christians just don't know how to respond to the questions or the statements that culture is shouting at us.

And we don't want to appear like we've kind of got it all figured out. So we end up conforming and we end up just blending in and there is really nothing distinct about the way that we live our lives.

But there is a third way. We don't have to freak out. We don't have to blend in. The third way is that we can actually hold onto a faith that is anchored to the truth of God, characterized by the grace of God.

What that means is, "I'm going to live my life in a way that is different and distinct from the culture in which I live." Now it's different and distinct, not weird and obnoxious. We don't need any more weird and obnoxious Christians. We don't need people looking down their noses on others.

We need Christians who will say, "You know what? Man, I am unashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Man, I don't need to water anything down. I don't need to lower the bar. But I'm going to live my life in a real, vulnerable, humble, authentic way knowing that that is the only way to earn a hearing in the lives of others."

This is exactly the way that Jesus lived His life. Jesus lived His life in such a way that people who were nothing like Him at all, really liked being around Him. And Jesus didn't just blend in. Jesus called them to a different kind of life. And they were compelled to do it because they could tell that there was something dramatically different about the way that He lived.

So how do we do this? How do we keep from freaking out, blending in, and how do we live our lives in a distinct way? Well, nobody models this better than Daniel. So we're going to spend the next several weeks together looking at his story.

When I was in college, I did an internship out on the west coast. This was in the summer of 1997. So I got into my 1991 Pontiac Grand Am, may that car rest in peace, and I drove cross country to California by myself as a 21-year-old.

This was a time when I didn't have a cell phone. I didn't have internet access. I didn't have a credit card. I didn't have a GPS device in my car. There was no way for anybody to check in with me or to see how I was doing.

Once I got there I found a pay phone somewhere and would tell Mom and Dad that I got there safely. I can't even imagine my 20-year-old son in a car without any way to connect with him driving across country. That was just the kind of world that we lived in, you know?

Here's the thing. I didn't have a GPS device. The way that I navigated out to the west coast was through one of those big, giant road atlases the size of Texas. Remember those?

And you thought texting and driving was dangerous. Try pulling out one of those big, old road atlases that actually could double as one of those things you can stick in your windshield to protect your car from the sun. And you're trying to navigate your way across country.

Now, here's why I say that. If you're taking notes, understand that:

The Book of Daniel is a roadmap for how godly people can thrive in a godless culture.

Now, let me kind of set the table before we jump into the text. A couple of things that I want you to know about the context of this book. This book covers 70 years of Daniel's life. And unfortunately, we have lots and lots of examples of people both in the Bible and in the world today who didn't finish well.

In fact, only 20 percent of people in the Bible would be what we would say finished well. They didn't have some big scandal. They didn't blow up their lives. They didn't end up in a ditch somewhere at some point.

You know, we read in the Bible to see individuals like Moses and David and Peter and Paul, they all made these really big mistakes like many of us.

Now, I say that to say that God is in the redemption business and there isn't anybody that His grace can't reach. So if you are here today and you've messed up your life, you are in good company with the rest of us because God's grace can reach you.

But understand that Daniel, he stays faithful his entire life. That's pretty rare. The guy never had a scandal. He never has an accusation made against him. He never had an ethical or moral failure in the midst of a culture that was doing everything that it could to cut his faith out at his knees.

He lived for God in a way that was different and distinct, but it was winsome and influential within a very godless and hostile culture.

One of the things that I really love about Daniel, and I think that you're going to identify with, is that Daniel was not a pastor or a prophet or a priest. He was not in full-time vocational ministry.

And understand that if you are called to Christ, you are called to ministry even though you may have a different occupation. But very, very few of you listening to this will be in full-time vocational ministry. And Daniel is your model.

Daniel shows us how to be faithful to God within the marketplace. In fact, Daniel wasn't just in the marketplace, Daniel was in a very, very corrupt political world and his boss was a very corrupt politician by the name of Nebuchadnezzar.

And Daniel knew that the goal wasn't to be right. Daniel wasn't trying to argue people into faith. If you can argue someone into faith, then they can be argued right back out of it. Daniel knew that the goal for him was to have the Spirit of God alive and well within in him and unapologetically live for God in a way that people would be curious about the gospel of grace.

It says it so well in Daniel, chapter 12, verse 3. It says:

"Those who are wise will shine," man, if you are wise, that will stand out. That is counter-cultural today. To just grow in wisdom and you will shine *"as bright as the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness will shine like the stars forever."* (NLT)

I love how pastor Chris Hodges summarizes the story of Daniel. He says Daniel was:

"An ordinary dude thrown into extraordinary circumstances and events that forced him to maintain his faith in God's truth characterized by God's grace."

So, with that setup, let's dive into the text. We're going to look at verses 1 through 21. You guys ready? Sweet, four of you are ready. Verse 1:

"During the third year of King Jehoiakim's reign," now this is a little tid-bit for you when you're reading difficult Old Testament names. Some of you are like, "Man, how in the world do you know how to pronounce that Old Testament name?" Here's how you do it. You just say it real fast and with confidence. Just real fast and confident—Jehoiakim. You're so smart.

"King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it." (NLT)

So what I want you to know is that Jehoiakim was Judah's 19th king after King David in the land of Israel. And he was a terrible king. He just continued to lead the people of God farther and farther away from God.

It's a lesson for us. Throughout history one of the things that we see is that disobedient people will often vote false prophets into power who will tell them what they want to hear.

And we see that Jehoiakim was a really, really bad king in Israel. But then there was this other guy named King Nebuchadnezzar who was a really, really bad king in Babylon. And Babylon is the key place in this narrative. It was the most dominant superpower in the ancient Near East at the time.

And what would happen is that Babylon would go into these surrounding nations, and it would besiege them, which is different from obliterate. Besiege means that they would

go in and they were basically wanting to declare, “Hey, our gods are more superior than your god.”

“So we are going to take the best of your resources, the best of your economy, the best of the arts, the best of your ideas, the best of your people, and we are going to absorb them into our culture so that way we can be even more dominant.”

Essentially they were Thanos before Thanos was a thing, right? Not very many Marvel fans. So, got it. Verse 2:

“The Lord gave him victory over King Jehoiakim of Judah and permitted him to take some of the sacred objects from the Temple of God. So Nebuchadnezzar took them back to the land of Babylonia and placed them in the treasure-house of his god.” (NLT)

So, key words here if you are taking notes *gave* and *permitted*. It is so important for us to understand that Nebuchadnezzar did not take anything from God. God was not some helpless bystander here; God allowed him to take it. And there is a difference. God was still in control.

It's kind of like whenever my kids have the remote control in my house. They didn't take it from me. I permitted them to have it. At least I'd like to think so in my mind.

So God gave Nebuchadnezzar permission to do this. Now, here's the question. Why? Why would God allow Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon to overtake His people in Israel? What was going on?

Well, understand that the Israelites were a lot like you and me today. They meant well, they kept making these commitments to God, and then they kept breaking them due to their own pride, sin, and rebellion. And God kept warning them over and over and over again that if they continued to walk that path, then He would send them into exile.

So, in 605 BC He kept His promise. And because of the disobedience of Israel, which, by the way, that's where Daniel grew up, God allowed them to be defeated by a godless, pagan empire called Babylon. Look at verse 3:

“Then the king ordered Ashpenaz,” fast and confident, “his chief of staff, to bring to the palace some of the young men of Judah’s royal family and other noble families, who had been brought to Babylon as captives. ‘Select only strong, healthy, and good-looking young men’....”

So doesn't it do you good to know that your pastor would have been included in this group. Right? Really glad you guys laughed at that.

“Make sure they are well versed in every branch of learning, are gifted with knowledge and good judgment, and are suited to serve in the royal palace. Train these young men in the language and literature,” of what? *“of Babylon.” The king assigned them a daily ration of*

food and wine from his own kitchens. They were to be trained for three years, and then they would enter the royal service.” Daniel 1:3-5 (NLT)

So I want you to understand here, they have been kidnapped. And the idea was to take the best of the best in Jerusalem, in Israel, and then indoctrinate them into Babylonian culture.

Now, most Bible scholars believe that Daniel was around 13 to 15 years old at the time. What were you doing as a 13 or 15-year-old? Daniel is in this really impressionable time in his life. A time when he needed a family unit. A time when he needed godly influence in his life.

And just overnight his nation, his home, is attacked and ransacked by an enemy—sort of like *Red Dawn* style and they are pulled out of their family, and they are forced to walk 700 miles to Babylon, which is modern day Iraq. And so he goes from a godly upbringing to a godless culture and his world is turned upside down over night.

Now, one of the things we need to understand about Babylon is that Babylon was a literal city, the largest city in the known world at the time. About 150,000 or 200,000 people lived in Babylon.

But it was also a metaphor. Throughout our study, and I’ll keep referencing this, Babylon was a city, but it was also a metaphor. And we first hear about Babylon in Genesis, chapter 11, when the people of God get together and they are very, very, very rebellious and they think, “You know what? We think we can be like God,” which is really at the root of all of our issues, “I want to be my own god.”

So they get together and they build this tower up to the heavens thinking, “We’ll build our way up to God and sort of overtake Him.” And God scattered the people, confused the languages and the cultures. And that tower was called Babel. That’s the first time we hear of this concept.

Then we hear it again in the book of Revelation. So it bookends the Bible. There are three chapters in Revelation that talk about Jesus returning and conquering some entity called Babylon.

Now there is some really, really crazy stuff that happens in the book of Revelation. You’ve got seven-headed dragons eating babies and stuff. It’s just like you’re reading it and are like, “Man, this is so weird. What are we reading here?”

Well understand that Revelation is not all about a revelation about the future, but it is primarily a revealing, a pulling back of the curtain and revealing what has been going on behind the scenes throughout human history even until today.

And in chapter 14, verse 8 it says this:

“Then another angel followed him through the sky, shouting, ‘Babylon is fallen—that great city is fallen—because she made all the nations of the world drink the wine of her passionate immorality.’” (NLT)

So understand the literal city of Babylon was conquered somewhere around 500 to 600 BC, roughly 3,000 years ago. But it was repeatedly mentioned throughout the New Testament. They keep talking about it even though the empire was gone. Why?

Well because the spirit of Babylon lived on. It is a metaphor for a rebellious, pluralistic, antagonistic culture—anything that is anti-God. It is the kingdom that is built in opposition to God, independent of God where the kingdom of men is in charge and at the center.

And Satan always uses secular governments, media, businesses, and economics to wage war against the kingdom of God.

See, the Bible is not an old book that tells us what happened, the Bible is a timeless book that tells us what always happens. And the reason why it is so important that I share that with you is that, in order for us to know how to live for God in the times in which we live, we’ve got to understand our environment.

You and I are exiles. We are just like Daniel. We are exiles in this place where the spirit of Babylon is at work.

Now, please understand that I absolutely love our country. Alright? #America. I love our country. But understand, this is not home. We’re not trying to take back our nation for God, we’re trying to live for God in a very godless place and time.

We are exiles and we are waiting for Jesus to return one day to restore the new heaven and the new earth. We are ambassadors. So we’ve got to understand our identity in place and time to know how to live.

So what happens is that Babylon takes these four guys and they put them into this Babylonian school. And the purpose of the school was not to educate Daniel and his friends about Babylon, it was to make them Babylonians.

It was a social engineering project. It was reverse evangelism. They were trying to remove and erase anything about them that was distinct as young men of God and instill and download their values, perspectives, beliefs, and systems into their lives. It was a three-year school.

Four strategies the spirit of Babylon uses to dilute or neutralize the image of Christ within us.

There were four strategies the spirit used then and continues to use today to dilute and neutralize the image of Christ within us. So as I briefly walk through these, I just simply

want to ask you to do a little bit of self-reflection, "Which one of these is at work in my life right now? Which one of these am I most susceptible to?"

The first one, Babylonian strategy number one is:

Separation

Separation. They get Daniel and his friends 700 miles away from the godly culture that they grew up in. And the reason why is that you walk like who you walk with.

This is why it is so important that you choose your friends wisely. It is so important that you find yourself in the right kind of community with other godly men and women who will provide wisdom and insight and accountability into your life. Because if I want to program you to live in a new way, then all I've got to do is get you away from the environment and the relationships that brought you to God in the first place. You walk like who you walk with.

This is why we do very dumb things when we are with other dumb people. I speak from experience. When I was in college there was a creek that ran outside of campus, and we were hiking one day. There was this train trestle about 20 or 30 feet above the creek and we were all standing up on top, me and my dumb friends.

And one of them challenged me to jump without checking the depth of the water. And I did. And luckily it was deep enough that I didn't hit the bottom, but it was deep enough that I'm okay. It didn't cause any permanent damage.

And I look back on that and I'm like, "That was so stupid." And it was because I was with other stupid people. And I was stupid. We just did stupid things.

This is why we say things like, "What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas." News flash. Venereal disease always follows you home. [pause] I'm back! Some of you are here for the first time and you're like, "What kind of church is this?"

So the Spirit of God is always working for the unification of God's people. Now I didn't say uniformity. I said unification. There is unity in diversity. The Spirit of God works toward that. The spirit of Babylon is always looking for ways to separate and isolate God's people. Can you say the last two years?

This is the whole idea of he knows in order to pick you and me off, just get us alone or get us with the wrong group of people.

So maybe some of you, maybe you grew up in a really, really good church and you went off to college and you drifted away from the family of God. You got isolated from that environment.

Maybe some of you... I run into people every week who are like, "Oh man, I haven't been back to church since COVID but I'm planning to one day." And I understand that there are a lot of good reasons to stay away from crowds for all kinds of personal reasons.

But it's a totally different thing if you're just like, "Oh we just got out of the rhythm. We just kind of enjoy watching from home." And there is nothing wrong with watching it at home, just don't stay there. It's this idea that if Satan wants to pick you off, he's going to isolate you.

And I do want to encourage you to sign up for *Rooted*. I do want to encourage you to get involved in community. And by the way, this is not a plug for our church. It doesn't have to be this one. If this isn't your jam, find another church where the Bible is preached, and Jesus is the hero and go there.

Get around other people who keep their faith, alright? People always drift from people who are saved before they drift from their faith. That always happens.

Here's Babylonian strategy number two:

Deconstruction of the Family

They took Daniel and his friends away from their families. And if I want to deconstruct your faith, then I need to dismantle the family who fostered that thing in you.

Spirit of Babylon always attacks two things:

The spirit of Babylon is always attacking two things throughout history:

healthy human sexuality

and the idea that:

God made them 'male and female'

Understand that Daniel was put under the chief eunuch. The eunuch. What do eunuchs do? Daniel was likely pressured to have a surgery that he didn't want to have to remove the distinctiveness of his gender.

The spirit of Babylon says gender isn't binary, it's not X and Y chromosomes. It's more like a spectrum. But understand that behind the spectrum there is a spirit. The spirit of Babylon.

The spirit of Babylon always seeks to kill children. In the Old Testament there was this god named Molech and whenever you had a baby you sacrificed him to Molech.

Fast forward to the Egyptian Empire when Moses was born. The unholy spirit moved Pharaoh to send out an edict to slaughter all of the male children of God.

Fast forward to the gospel of Matthew. Jesus is born. The same spirit worked in this guy named Herod to send out an edict to slaughter all male children under a certain age in a particular region.

Fast forward to Revelation, and the spirit of Babylon makes war against the offspring of the people of God. It is no coincidence. It is the same spirit.

Right now we live in a very broken, divided, hurting society in which we have a lot of absent dads and a lot of overwhelmed moms. And we look to government to do for us what healthy moms and dads should be doing: provide, care for, nurture, and protect. What kids need right now is less government and more dads, more dads.

And, guys, I just want to challenge you to put this on your calendar right now. October the 28th, it's a Friday night, we're going to have our men's event night, we're bringing that back. You're not going to want to miss it. We've got some amazing things planned for that.

So sign up the men in your life. Tell them they are coming to this. They are not going to regret it. Ladies, we're not leaving you out. In the spring we're doing a lady's event night for you as well.

That leads us to strategy number three:

Indoctrination

This was a three-year Babylonian school. The Spirit of God teaches doctrine from the Word. That's why we go line by line every week from God's Word. The spirit of Babylon indoctrinates with the world. What's that? Social media, media, all of our entertainment choices, books, and magazines.

Romans 12:2 says, "Don't be conformed into the pattern...." That Greek word *pattern* is a mold. It's the image of mold in which everything is trying to press you into it.

So here's what this practically looks like. Here's a tool that is often used in the world. It's called:

Choice architecture

And choice architecture, what is that? It:

manipulates the way options are presented to force a desired outcome.

So what that practically looks like is this: Are you pro-choice or do you oppose women's rights? Which one? Are you affirming of alternative lifestyles, or are you intolerant and hateful? Because you can't be both. Are you a socialist or a racist? Check a box. Are you empowering of women, or do you uphold toxic masculinity and patriarchy?

And the spirit of Babylon is shaping the narrative. These are false categories designed to manipulate you to a desired choice.

You can be for women's rights and against abortion. You can oppose socialism and racism. You can be for women and uphold godly masculinity. We have to. If you accept the world's categories you will always come to the world's conclusions. If you think that way, you'll live that way.

Here's the last Babylonian strategy that I will mention:

Repetition through reinforcement

Repetition through reinforcement. Joseph Goebbels, the chief minister of propaganda in the Nazi regime during World War II had this axiom. He said this, "Repeat a lie often enough, and it will become the truth."

And today culture doesn't drop propaganda in paper pamphlets from bombers on cities like they did in the 1940s. We just do it with hashtags and causes. Hashtag you do you. Love is love. Follow your heart. Do what makes you happy. Stand on the right side of history.

And all of those phrases, you listen to them and initially you're like, "Yeah, that sounds good. I think I want to do that." Sounds good initially, but each of those phrases comes with a hidden worldview loaded into the hashtag. And eventually you start living by hashtags instead of Bible verses.

Please understand:

Truth without grace is mean.

It's just mean. None of us can possibly live up to the righteous requirements that God requires. We need His grace. However:

Grace without truth is meaningless.

The tension is between grace and truth, truth and grace.

The Good News of the gospel is that we don't have to become paralyzed by extremes. We can be calm in the midst of the cultural storm. Daniel was.

They take Daniel and his friends, and they say, "Listen. You're going to go to this three-year school and we're going to indoctrinate you into this Babylonian lifestyle. And at the end of it you're going to be assigned a new role and a new job within the empire. And as part of this program, you're going to get a new name."

We read about this in verse 7. It says:

“The chief of staff renamed them with these Babylonian names: Daniel was called Belteshazzar. Hananiah was called Shadrach. Mishael was called Meshach. Azariah was called Abednego.” Daniel 1:7-8 (NLT)

Now, what’s going on here? They weren’t just given these kinds of cool, fancy names. Their Hebrew names located their identity in relationship to the one true God. Their Babylonian names repositioned their identity in relation to Babylonian gods. Or at least that was the idea.

So for example Daniel’s name in Hebrew meant: God is my judge. It located his identity in his relationship to God. His name was changed to Belteshazzar which meant: treasure of Baal or Marduk (Babylonian god).

Hananiah’s name meant: God shows grace. His name was changed to Shadrach which meant: Under the command of Aku, a moon god of Babylon.

Mishael, his name meant: there is no one like God. It was changed to Meshach: there is none like Aku (moon god).

Azariah, his name meant: God is my helper. His name was changed to Abednego which meant: servant of Nebo, Babylonian god of wisdom.

Now I say all of that to share this with you. I discovered this in my study, and I thought, “Man, this is so amazing.” Throughout the entire book, Daniel never refers to himself by his Babylonian name. Not one time.

In fact, throughout the book, the writer of Daniel consistently spells the Hebrew names correctly and consistently misspells the Babylonian names. A little subtle misspelling all through the book.

For years Bible scholars thought there was probably some kind of scribal error. So somebody, when they were copying the original manuscript they got it wrong, and it just got copied on down through the generations.

Then a few years ago we discovered the Dead Sea Scrolls, which were the original copies, and in the original copy all the Babylonian names were misspelled, which meant that it was done on purpose. That is so punk rock. I love that so much.

This is like a very subtle way that Daniel is being like, “Man,” I’d say something stronger but I’m preaching, “forget those Babylonian names. Forget those Babylonian names.”

Understand this. This cultural engineering project failed miserably. It didn’t take. Daniel and his friends held onto their distinctiveness and did not compromise their faith. And the reason why is because Daniel recognized what they were trying to do. He was aware of the strategy.

The question is, are you and I? When among lions how do we not just survive this but how do we thrive in it and actually be a compelling influence on others for God?

We'll look at what it says in verse 8 and 9. It says:

"But Daniel was determined not to defile himself by eating the food and wine given to them by the king. He asked the chief of staff for permission...." So understand. He is being kind of subtly defiant, it's the main thing. But he is still being respectful.

He goes and he asks for permission, *"not to eat these unacceptable foods."* Verse 9, *"Now God had given the chief of staff both respect and affection for Daniel."* (NLT)

All of that. The way that Daniel had been living his life, the chief of staff respected him, and he had affection for him. And God granted that as well. So God is highly, highly involved as Daniel lives his life.

Now, Daniel asked if he and his friends could order from a different menu because they resolved not to defile themselves. He was living a gluten-free, soy-free, dairy-free, joy-free kind of life, right? That was him. And any of you who have ever had to prepare a meal for a group of people, it's always such a wonderful thing when they all ask to order off a different menu.

But Daniel comes in and he says, "Hey, listen. I've got a request." And I love that about him. He didn't resort to social media and blast his boss. He didn't start gossiping about him. He didn't yell at him. He went to him directly and he went to him privately. And he said, "Hey, could I have permission to order off a different menu?"

In other words, for our context today, we could say, "Hey, man. I'll go to your school. I'll work your job. I'll take that salary. But I will not compromise my devotion to God. I will work unto the Lord, not unto men. Because the Lord is Maker of heaven and earth, and His words will never pass away."

So what about you?

So the chief of staff, what he does is he expresses his concern back to Daniel. He says, "I'm afraid."

"I am afraid of my lord the king," he's talking about Nebuchadnezzar, *"who has ordered that you eat this food and wine. If you become pale and thin compared to the other youths your age, I am afraid the king will have me beheaded."* Daniel 1:10 (NLT)

Now this says something about me. If I'm Daniel, I'm thinking, "Thanks for the idea. I'm just going to starve myself; I'm going to punch myself in the face, not shower, look really, really awful, that way you lose your head."

But thankfully, your pastor is not in the Bible and Daniel is. Here's how Daniel handles it. Verse 12. He says, "Hey, I understand that. Please test us."

"Please test us for ten days on a diet of vegetables and water," Daniel said. 'At the end of the ten days, see how we look compared to the other young men who are eating the king's food. Then make your decision in light of what you see.'" Daniel 1:12-13 NLT

A couple of things I just want you to know. This is not some sort of Holy Spirit filled keto diet. This was the idea that Daniel is like, "Hey, we can't eat anything defiled."

The other thing I love about this is that Daniel is basically making his decision, but it's really up to God to come through to actually.... Supernaturally, these guys are going to look healthier than the other guys in the Babylonian program.

Look at what it says in verse 14:

"The attendant agreed," he agreed, "to Daniel's suggestion and tested them for ten days. At the end of the ten days, Daniel and his three friends looked healthier and better nourished than the young men who had been eating the food assigned by the king. So after that, the attendant fed them only vegetables instead of the food and wine provided for the others."

"God gave these four young men an unusual aptitude for understanding every aspect of literature and wisdom. And God gave Daniel the special ability to interpret the meanings of visions and dreams."

We'll actually see more of that in weeks to come. Verse 18:

"When the training period ordered by the king was completed, the chief of staff brought all the young men to King Nebuchadnezzar."

"The king talked with them," I love this, "and no one impressed him as much as Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. So they entered the royal service. Whenever the king consulted them in any matter requiring wisdom and balanced judgment, he found them ten times more capable than any of the magicians and enchanters in his entire kingdom."
Daniel 1:14-20 (NLT)

Here's what I want you to see. The minute that Daniel decided who he was going to be, the minute Daniel drew that line in the sand is when God went to work.

You've got this guy, the king, named Nebuchadnezzar, who does not believe the same things that Daniel and his friends believed. He does not submit his life to the same God that they've submitted to. He does not share their same values or their political convictions. He does not see society through the same lens that they do.

And yet he was so impressed with them. He saw their wisdom and balanced judgement. And he invites them in to have a platform to have an influence not only in the Babylonian culture, but even his own life.

And I just want to share with you two real quick things and then I'm going to be done. Here's what we learn from Daniel and his friends. Number one, we need to remember that right now, no matter how crazy this world is:

God is in control of who is in control.

We've got to remember that. God is in control of who is in control. The Biblical word for that is *sovereign*. And every time I see that word *sovereign* in the Scriptures, that is just shorthand for this: God's got this. God's got this.

I know that things seem crazy right now in Ukraine and Russia—God's got this. I know right now our political world seems to continue to be divided and divisive and there are all of these issues: the economy, gas prices, and I've got this issue in my marriage, this thing going on at work, and I've got this health thing I can't quite fully figure out. Man, God has got this.

Now, I want to say this with one caveat. I don't mean that as a cop out. I don't mean to say that as, "Well, I don't really need to work hard on my marriage." Or, "I really don't need to go to counselling." "I don't really need to show up fully, because God's got this." That's just lazy.

No. We show up. We take full responsibility. We work hard for the things we have control of. The things we do not have control of, that's when the sovereignty of God kicks in.

We're like, "Man, I just don't have control over that. I'm not going to let that erode my joy. I'm not going to become cynical or bitter. I'm just going to recognize that God is ultimately in control." And when we gather weekly like this, it is just an exercise of resubmitting that control back to Him.

Here's the second thing, alright?

God still loves 'Babylon' even though 'Babylon' does not acknowledge God.

We've got to remember who the real enemy is. The enemy is not culture. The enemy is not talking heads on TV. The enemy is not somebody who has a different system of beliefs than you do. The enemy is the principality and powers behind this dark world, the spirit of Babylon.

Any time I'm sort of tempted to be divisive or defensive or angry or hostile or mean-spirited, I've just got to remember this: Jesus went to a cross for them too.

And, man, but by the grace of God, I don't stand a chance. I have no hope. And ultimately my sin and my pride and my rebellion have offended but God didn't give up on me.

And maybe, maybe right now.... Hey, if you're going to clap, just commit.

Maybe right now you find yourself in a very hostile work environment. Maybe you feel like you're the only Christian on your dorm floor, or in your school. Maybe you're in a marriage and maybe your spouse isn't a believer. Maybe you find yourself... you've got friends and family who are pressuring you, shouting questions at you that you don't know how to answer.

I just simply want to ask you to take a deep breath and say, "You know what? I see that I find myself as an exile in a foreign land." And that's not a pity party. That is an opportunity to be a representative of God.

"So I'm not going to freak out and I'm not going to blend in. I'm not going to play by their rule. I'm not going to be defined by their categories. I'm going to be defined by my identity as a child of Jesus. And I'm not going to allow that to erode my joy and my peace."

God still has us here on this planet, in this nation for a reason. Not to hunker in a bunker. Not to lob holy grenades into the other camp. But to simply be salt and light, to simply stand firm when we are among lions, and recognize that it is His Spirit that is at work within us.

So today, I just want to simply invite two groups of people.... Maybe you're here today and you're realizing, "Man, I've drifted from this. I've kind of bought into all four of those strategies of Babylon. I've gotten separated from the kingdom of God, I've kind of bought into some of the hashtags and categories and I realize that I've drifted away."

I just want you to come back to the foot of the cross once again. Listen, God is ready and willing to receive you no matter how far you've drifted. It's one of the greatest things to recognize His grace continues to reach you right where you are.

You've got three categories of people in the book of Daniel. You've got the people of God. You've got the people of Babylon. And you've got the people of God who end up living Babylonian. And those are the confusing people. Maybe you're in that third category. And you say, "You know what? I've lost my distinctiveness. I've lost my saltiness. I need to come back to the King."

Here's the second invitation. Maybe you're here today and you are like, "Man, I had no idea this is how it was. I just thought this was some sort of religion where I just had to clean up my act and do a whole bunch of good things and God would receive me and love me."

It's the exact opposite. God receives you and loves you by His grace and the sacrifice that Jesus made for you on the cross. Because He walked out of that grave, you can have hope beyond yours. And right now you can become a brand-new person today. You simply recognize your sinfulness and give it to God and ask Him to make you a new person by His Spirit.

And if you're willing to do that, we would love to come along side of you and help you know what your next steps are because we are all in this together, as exiles, living for the one true God in a world that doesn't know Him. So we need to represent who He really is.

Father, we come to You right now, and I just pray that in the course of our study of Daniel in the coming weeks that You would just do a transformational work in each one of our lives and in the life of our church. We need this now more than ever.

So help us to be unashamed of the gospel. Help us to really show up fully, be present, asking You to start with our minds and the way that we think and fill our lives with Your Word so that way we can discern the culture around us and that we would ultimately recognize that our goal isn't to be right, our goal is to lead people into a relationship with a God who will change them forever.

So, God, I just ask that You would meet us right where we are at today. Do what only You can do. We ask this in Jesus' name. And everybody says: Amen.