

## ***Living in a Real Exile*** **Daniel 1:1-21**

In recent election years, talk often turns to the refugee situation – people leaving their own country and wanting to come to Australia. They have all sorts of reasons – some flee political or religious or racial persecution; others flee poverty and the struggle to make ends meet. They come to make a new life in this country. Some of you have done something similar – not as refugees perhaps, but as immigrants looking for a better future.

What are the expectations when you arrive? Should you expect to carry on your own culture in your new country? Or should you expect to assimilate to the culture of your newly adopted country? In Australia, the expectations have changed over time. The Greek neighbours I had as a child were expected to assimilate. Now, we boast of our great multicultural tolerance.

Daniel and his mates were in a significantly different situation. They weren't in Babylon as immigrants or refugees – they were there as exiles. They didn't voluntarily leave Jerusalem in search of fame and fortune – they were forcibly removed as captives when they lost the war. They were taken from their own culture and placed in a very different culture. Should they assimilate? Should they adopt the great world culture of the Babylonians? Should they stick to their backwater Jewish culture?

### **The Clash of Kingdoms**

But the question's actually stronger than that. The hint comes in the opening verses.

*In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of*

*Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia and put in the treasure house of his god.*

We have two kings, two temples and two gods. There's nothing strange about that – that was usually the case in war in those days. And the usual conclusion drawn was that the god of the victors was stronger than the god of the losers – at least, at that particular time.

But this created a problem for the Israelites. They had a different worldview. They believed their God was the one true God. He made the universe. He made all the nations on earth. He ruled His world. He chose Israel as His people and Jerusalem as the place for His temple. All other gods were fakes. They were tenth-rate substitutes with no chance of matching it with the real God. How can you talk of the real God being defeated?

- But Jerusalem didn't withstand the siege.
- God's magnificent temple was looted.
- The temple vessels were now in Babylon.

Was their theology wrong? Was God perhaps not as great as they thought?

The author lets us know at the outset that's not the case. In verse 2 we're told Israel's God did this. He delivered Israel's king into Babylon's hands. He delivered some of His temple's vessels into Babylon's hands. We're not told here why. That's not the point of this story. Elsewhere in the Bible we read it's because of Israel's sin – because Israel treated God with contempt and failed to honour her side of her covenant with God. This is God's wake-up

call to His people. That's an important lesson – but it's not the lesson of this chapter. This chapter simply wants to affirm the truth that God still rules.

- God isn't taken by surprise.
- God isn't defeated.
- God hasn't abdicated to the Babylonian gods.

He's behind this event. It's His will that Daniel and his mates be in Babylon.

Yet, given it's God's will they're there, how are they to act? How are they to view their situation? Verse 2 highlights the location of Shinar – the NIV uses *Babylonia* but lets you know about *Shinar* in the footnote. What's the significance of Shinar? It's the place where the tower of Babel was built in Genesis 11. What's the tower of Babel all about? Genesis 11:4

*Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth."*

Babel's the place where humans take their stand against God. They want to stand on their own two feet. They want to be masters of their own destiny. They want to make a name for themselves. They want to establish a great culture without reference to God. They want to define themselves apart from God. That's what Babylon comes to symbolise in the Bible. It's a physical place – but it's often more than just that. It represents a man-centred worldview. It's an approach to life in conflict with God's kingdom.

That's where Daniel and his mates are. How should a God-fearing Israelite live in this place? That's at the heart of this book.

And so, you may be tempted to ignore it. You're quite happy in Australia. You're not planning to emigrate any time soon. You don't have to worry about how to cope with another culture. So, why bother with Daniel?

We already live in Babylon. Secular Australia is built on a man-centred worldview. It has no place for God – not in the public arena. It's OK for people to have their religion – as long as they keep it private. Think of how we're treated in the media.

- Sometimes we're derided and belittled.
- More often we're mocked and made fun of – like the comment about Christians having an imaginary friend in response to our Prime Minister's admission to not believing in God.
- Most often we're simply ignored – we're pushed to the side-lines; we're irrelevant.

And if some expert puts forward their considered opinions on the basis of a Christian worldview, it'll come in for all manner of derogatory attack.

Our culture refuses God access to the public arena. He's not allowed into the political process. He's not permitted into the moral fabric. He's not allowed into the business world or financial markets. He's banished from technology. Our secular culture is man-centred and man-made and man-serving and totally independent from God. It claims to rule itself. It has no place for God's rule. And that's where God places us. How are we to live? Should we assimilate?

### **The Offer too Good to Refuse**

Nebuchadnezzar thought Daniel and his mates should

assimilate. Indeed, he skilfully designed a process to achieve that very end. Verse 3:

*Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring in some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility – young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians. The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service.*

Empires are difficult things to rule. You obtain them by military power and strategy: your army beats everyone else's army. But how do you keep them? All those nations you've conquered in war are upset with you. They didn't like losing in the first place. Neither do they like being told what to do. They don't like the taxes. They don't like their best stuff being carted off to the emperor. Can you keep your army loyal enough and big enough to squash all the potential rebellions?

Nebuchadnezzar dreamed up a better way. Get the next generation of leaders from all these nations and make them true Babylonian citizens. Convince them about the cultural magnificence of Babylonian civilisation and its vast superiority. Convert them to Babylonian ideology and then send them back home to rule. They won't want to rebel.

Look what he offers.

- Free access to an outstanding university education

at the world's leading educational institution.

- Free access to the gastronomical delights of the five-star service of the royal restaurant.
- Future job security in the top paying public service positions in the world superpower.

It's a great package. It's all aimed to stamp them with the core values of Babylonian culture.

It's a bit like America today. Sure, America has a significant military machine – and on occasion uses it. But that isn't the primary way American culture takes over.

- It's done by the elite young people of other nations going to American universities and experiencing the lifestyle firsthand.
- It's done by establishing their fast food chains and vending machines in the most unlikely places.
- It's done by offering executive local positions when multinational corporations open local operations.
- It's done by publicising the American way of life in all its glorious freedoms and luxuries in ads and magazines and TV shows and movies.

Every human system that sets itself up against the one true God demands allegiance. It goes for people's minds. It goes for people's hearts. Australian culture's no different. It doesn't have to be a persecution thing. Often, it's much more subtle than that.

- Our children are educated in secularism.
- Our teenagers are lured by technology and pleasure.
- Our young adults are offered the good life.

Sure, it's OK if you want to bring God along – just don't bring Him out in public. Don't think He's got anything to do with how our country runs. Don't mention him in polite conversation. Don't think He's got anything to say

about public morality. And whatever you do, never mention Him in academic circles.

### The Refusal

What do Daniel and his mates do with Nebuchadnezzar's offer? Verse 6:

*Among these were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego.*

*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.*

At this point, we've got two big unanswered questions. First, why does Daniel refuse the royal food and wine? All sorts of suggestions are made.

- Some think it's to do with the Jewish food laws about unclean food – but that doesn't explain why he refuses the wine.
- Some think it's to do with the royal food being offered to idols – but it's just as likely the vegetables would have been as well.
- Some think it's to do with meat and wine being festival food and Daniel's in mourning while in exile – but that doesn't explain the word defilement.
- Some think it's to do with meat and wine being upper class food and Daniel asks for peasant food – but that also doesn't explain the word defilement.
- Some think eating food from the king's table would indicate full alignment with the king's ideology and Daniel wanted to show some separation – but his food still came from the king's supplies.

And so it goes on.

The text doesn't explain it fully. What it does say is that Daniel saw this food and wine as in some way defiling and he resolved not to be defiled in this way. He drew the line and said: This is unacceptable.

God's people living in an anti-God culture will find points of tension. It's inevitable.

- The culture says: We don't want God. We don't pay attention to God. We live to please ourselves.
- God's people say: We want God. We pay attention to God. We live to please God.

We're moving in opposite directions. Our values conflict. Our standards conflict. Our very purpose in life conflicts.

There will come times when we feel pressure from our culture to think or do things that God says are wrong.

- Our culture pressures school students to whinge about their teachers.
- Our culture pressures university students to get drunk and sleep around.
- Our culture pressures young adults to pursue the great Australian dream.

We must draw the line and resolve not to defile ourselves.

It's unlikely our line will be about food – though it could be. While our culture may be changing in some aspects, there remains some pressure:

- to overindulge in calories;
- to overindulge in convenience;
- to participate in wastage;
- to develop gourmet tastes;
- to use food to show we're beyond the peasant class;

- to spend more than is necessary.

Our different values in relation to stewardship may mean we still draw lines about food – things where we believe God would have us differ in our approach to what's just accepted as the cultural norm.

But it's not just food. That's not the only area of potential defilement. The possibilities are endless.

- A boss who wants you to lie for him.
- A work colleague who wants you to discredit some other employee.
- Another employee wanting you to do something illegal or immoral for them.
- A contractor who wants you to pay cash.
- A group member who wants you to gossip.
- A friend who wants you to shoplift.
- A brother who wants you to cover for him.

Sometimes the lines are in areas where there's no direct word from God saying this particular thing is wrong. For example, I've heard of men who struggle with lust refusing to enter newsagents because of the magazine displays. There's no command in the Bible: Thou shalt not go into newsagents. There's no belief that all Christians should not enter newsagents. Rather, these men, because of their particular struggles, recognise it's unwise for them to put themselves in this area of temptation – and so they draw a line.

Where have you resolved to draw your lines? Are there other areas of your life where you need to take a stand? Maybe you need to take a stand on the big picture. In this whole process of drawing lines, there's one big danger it's easy to overlook. We can draw lots of lines – lines about

food and clothes and where to go and not to go and so on. We can pat ourselves on the back about how good we are at taking a stand. We may think about how impressed God is with us. And all the while, our heart may align itself with Babylon. Jesus said: You can't serve God and Money. Neither can you serve God and Pleasure – or God and Popularity – or God and Self-Fulfilment – or God and whatever other substitute our culture wants to throw up. Are you trying to be double-minded? Do you try to get God onside with all these little sacrifices around the edges, but deep down you're really committed to the Australian lifestyle and the Australian values? Do you need to find a deeper place to draw your line?

### **The Acceptance**

We come now to the second unanswered question. Why did Daniel draw the line at this point? Think of the places where he didn't draw the line.

- It seems he's happy to involve himself in the university education – even though that meant instruction in divination and spells and enchantments and magic and all the philosophies of Babylon.
- It seems he's happy to accept the change in names – even though it meant giving up names that included positive reference to the one true God and having names that included reference to Babylon's false gods.

Why? The text doesn't tell us specifically – other than to imply that these things didn't defile him.

When we're faced with living in an anti-God culture, the temptation is to head towards two wrong extremes.

- Some head towards complete assimilation. They go with the flow. They fit in with the culture. There's

no difference between them and the non-Christians. They must be challenged to make a stand – to draw the line. If they don't, perhaps it's because they're not in God's kingdom. That's the first extreme.

- Others head towards the ghetto. They retreat from the anti-God culture. They set up safe groups of God's people. In other words, they withdraw and hide. The anti-God culture's too hard, too scary, too threatening. It's much easier to sit in a corner and wait for God to bring it to an end.

That's not what Daniel does. He operates inside Babylonian culture. He goes to the university. He accepts the public service job. He advises the anti-God king. He engages with the culture and gets on with being God's person in the place God put him.

To put it in terms of that passage we read from 1 Peter:

As an alien in the Babylonian world, Daniel lived a good life among those pagans, so they could see his God-fearing deeds and glorify God.

Or, as Jesus prays in John 17: We are in the world, but not of the world. He specifically prays:

*My prayer is not that You take them out of the world but that You protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. ... As You sent Me into the world, I have sent them into the world.*

As I've read this chapter of Daniel in earlier years, I've focused on taking the stand – drawing the line. And that's a good and proper focus. But it's a focus that reflects my bias. I have the tendency to head to the ghetto. I need to hear the other focus as well. Get out into this anti-God Australian culture. Engage with people – people who

reject God. Be involved in their lives. Know who they are. Get alongside them. Live a God-fearing life where they can see it. Bring God's wisdom into their situations. Be salt and light.

## The God who Rules

Notice how the passage emphasises God's rule. There's the bit we've already touched on – about giving Israel into the hands of Babylon. But look at the other bits as well.

In relation to Daniel's decision not to defile himself with the food and wine, have a look at verse 9:

*Now God had caused the official to show favor and sympathy to Daniel ...*

And while the text doesn't specifically say it, it's also God's doing that they do so well in the ten-day trial. It's the same God who earlier told His people (Dt.8:3b):

*that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.*

In relation to their education at Babylon university, have a look at verse 17:

*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.*

And the result is that Nebuchadnezzar finds them ten times better than anyone else. It's not surprising. How can you have true knowledge and wisdom if you leave out the most basic fact – the one true God who made the universe and is the source of true wisdom?

In relation to the Babylonian Empire, look at verse 21:

*And Daniel remained there until the first year of King*

*Cyrus.*

It seems a strange way to finish the narrative. Why mention Cyrus all of a sudden? He's not part of the story. Cyrus has to do with the clash of kingdoms. Cyrus is the guy God brings along to overthrow the Babylonian Empire. Cyrus is the guy who says Israel can go back to her own land. Yes, Daniel's taken into a foreign land. He's subject to a pagan empire. But God brings him through all that. He outlasts the Babylonian Empire.

We run into problems when we forget God rules – or when we live as if He doesn't rule. Our modern anti-God Australian culture can look impressive.

- It looks powerful and successful and prosperous. It's such a magnificent-looking structure we humans have put together. It looks so secure.
- And it offers so much – money, comfort, pleasure, gadgets, entertainment – the ability to live life the way I want to live it; to please myself.

It wants our minds – our hearts – our allegiance.

It's tempting to buy the spin – to think this is where life's at. The pressure to conform comes. It's strong. It's all over the place. It's relentless. It says human wisdom's better than God's wisdom. It says the modern mind has improved on God's wisdom. It says things God says are wrong are OK. It asks us to trust it instead of God – to believe it instead of God – to follow its rule instead of God's rule. After all, it successfully relegated God to the sidelines. Remember that God rules. Sin matters. Trust Him. Take a stand. Draw the line.

At the other end of the spectrum, it's also tempting to think it's too hard for God – that God can't keep me safe

in such a powerful and impressive pagan environment. God can't match it with the might of humanity. It's all too overwhelming. I need the safety of the ghetto. It's too risky to get involved with our culture. There's too much danger I'll get contaminated. Yes, it's right we recognise that danger. It's right we recognise our own particular weaknesses – those areas we struggle. But we also need to trust God. God doesn't take us out of the world. He leaves us here to engage our world – and to be His people within this world. Remember that God rules. Don't withdraw. Live for Jesus in the world.