

Resisting Babylon

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[0 : 00] Let's pray. Let's ask God to illuminate us. Sovereign Lord, you hold all things and places in your hand, Amen.

Now imagine yourself in this situation. You've volunteered for what seems like a simple eye test. You're sitting in a room with a few other people and you're shown a line on the screen. And then they show you three other lines and they ask you, which of the other three lines is the same length? Simple, right? And one by one, the people around you give their answers out loud. Well, most of the time, everyone picks the obvious correct one. No problem. But after a few rounds, something weird happens. Everyone before you confidently picks a line that you know is clearly wrong.

Now it's your turn. Do you stick with what your eyes tell you? Or do you go along with the crowd just to avoid standing out? What I've just described to you is a famous psychological experiment that was performed a few decades ago.

[1 : 35] And here's what the experiment found. 75% of people went along with the wrong answer at least once, sometimes more, just because everyone else said it.

Many of them gave the wrong answer, not because they thought it was right, but because they didn't want to stand out or seem awkward.

Indeed, the whole experiment showed just how powerful peer pressure can be, even when what we are seeing is obviously wrong. Human beings by nature are inclined to conform.

And Christians are not exempt. We all know this, don't we? Whether it's the classroom, the office, or the hangout place, all of us are part of larger groups, and they all have a certain culture.

So at work, perhaps, there is a particular way of getting things done, and sometimes some of the practices are clearly dodgy. But your workplace culture says to you, don't be awkward.

[2 : 50] Conform. Just fit in. Don't risk your chances of promotion. Just go with the flow. Or it could be the after-work socializing time.

It's called socializing, but really it seems like an excuse for excessive gossip, flirting, or drinking. Again, stuff we all know is not honoring to God.

But once again, the culture says, join us if you want to be really happy. This is the way to go. Conform. Or go home.

Or in the classroom, your friends are all huddled together talking about how to use chat GPT to cheat on your homework. or to edit certain photos of your classmates and put them in an unflattering light.

And again, the whole culture is screaming at you, fit in or be left out. And we all feel the pull to do just that. Conform.

[3 : 55] That's exactly what Daniel and his friends had to deal with. You see, what has happened? Just look at verse 1 of today's passage with me and we discover Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, has come to Jerusalem and besieged it.

And that, my friends, is no joke. This is the guy who took down Egypt not long before the events of verse 1 and rose to lead the world's top superpower.

This is the guy who would go on to ransack Jerusalem, tearing down its walls, burning its temple, and dragging many of its people to a foreign land.

This guy means business. And if you are one of those Jews brought to Babylon, you'll be asking questions.

questions like, God, where are you? Have you disappeared? Are you relevant to our new location? Or should we just forget you?

[5 : 07] Should we just fit in? Conform to Babylon? And that's what we ask to, isn't it? As we live in places where God doesn't really seem to show up, and we feel the pull of the world, we'll be asking, what now?

Should we just fit in and conform? And Daniel was written basically to answer that question. You see, Daniel is written to believers who are living in godless environments.

And the main message of the whole book is this. Stand firm, God. Because even when it doesn't look like it, God is always in charge.

He controls all of history. Other kingdoms come and go, but his kingdom never fails. There might be scary beasts.

We'll see that in particular in the second half of this book. But don't worry, there are nothing compared to the living God. So keep being the people of God.

[6 : 22] Don't conform, but resist Babylon. But here is our big question for today. How can we resist Babylon?

Given how alluring and indestructible Babylon appears, how can we resist Babylon? Which in the Bible stands for the world in opposition to God.

Well, today Daniel 1 will show us the key is to understand that God is present even in Babylon. In fact, he is not just present, but reigning.

And we'll see how that is the case in three ways. First of all, we'll see that even when the world seems to be winning, God is still writing the story. And then second of all, we'll see that even when the world looks captivating, God is honoring distinctive faith.

And more briefly, third of all, we'll see that even when the world appears to prevail, God is establishing his lasting rule. And understanding this will help us resist.

[7 : 40] Babylon. So let's dig deeper now into Daniel 1 and let's look at the first way. First of all, even when the world seems to be winning, God is still writing the story.

Look at verses 1 and 2. Did you notice how Daniel's story begins right where Judah's story seems to end? Jerusalem has been attacked, conquered, and even worse, verse 2, the sacred things from God's temple are being carried off and placed in a Babylonian idol-worshipping temple.

Indeed, as we'll see later on in this passage, Nebuchadnezzar doesn't just take the temple treasures, he takes Jerusalem's finest people as well.

Everything about this looks like the end of the road for God's people. And certainly, that is how this event would have been universally interpreted.

Back then, people believed that whenever nations go to war, their gods were fighting too. So, if you won, that man, your god, was stronger.

[9 : 01] But, if you lost and got plundered, your god must be pretty weak. And so, if Judah's temple vessels and people could be taken just like that, that must mean the Lord is unable to protect them.

He's weak. In fact, he must be a total loser. Indeed, did you notice how Nebuchadnezzar seems to be the one calling all the shots throughout verses 1 and 2?

Look at all the verbs, he came to Jerusalem, he besieged it, he carried off the temple articles, he put it in the treasure house of his god.

Everything seems to revolve around what Nebuchadnezzar is doing. It looks like Nebuchadnezzar is running the show at this point. By contrast, Jehoiakim, the other named king in this section, is a completely passive figure.

He has no say in anything. So Babylon looks unstoppable while Judah looks finished. And doesn't it feel like that today too?

[10 : 23] Doesn't it sometimes feel like being God's people means being on the losing side?

Perhaps we sense it on a more national scale, like with the abduction of Pastor Raymond Corr, a case that remains unresolved today, or when Orang Asli churches are abruptly demolished without warning, with authorities closing one eye as to what's happening.

Perhaps we sense it more personally, like when we realise that almost all our friends have no issue with sleeping around before marriage, or how they are fully leaning into the rat race to chase success, and we seem to be the only person who thinks differently.

Perhaps we sense it in the TV shows we watch, when we realise that nearly every one of them tends to portray Christians as stupid, out of touch, hypocritical, people.

It's almost as if every part of our surrounding culture is designed to remind us that to be on God's side is to be a loser.

And then they whisper to us, come, stop resisting, join us. But here's what the first two verses of Daniel 1 wants to show us.

[11:56] even when the world seems to be winning, God is still writing the story. Our first clue comes at the beginning of verse 2.

Did you notice that Nebuchadnezzar and Jehoiakim are not the only characters? The Lord is around too. And he is not just passively watching.

In fact, verse 2 says, the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his, that is Nebuchadnezzar's, hand.

In other words, Babylon's victory isn't a glitch in the plan. It is the plan. It's God's doing. You see, the prophet Jeremiah has been warning God's people for decades that if they didn't repent, God will bring this disaster upon your hands.

After all, they were in a covenant relationship, one which came with certain obligations. If they obeyed God's law, they would enjoy his blessings, but if not, they would come under his curse, including the curse of exile.

[13:16] But God's people kept ignoring God. And now, as Jeremiah also makes clear, God is using Nebuchadnezzar to judge Judah.

And so, in the larger context of the Old Testament, this isn't defeat. This is judgment. That's why verses 1 and 2, rather than showing God has lost control or been defeated, actually shows the opposite.

God is still very much the one writing the story. As one commentator puts it, the human king of Judah has been handed over, but the real king of Judah, who is really the king of the world, remains on the throne.

Beneath the surface of world events, God is at work fulfilling his purposes. And I think there is another clue in verse 2.

The NIV says, Nebuchadnezzar took the temple items to the temple of his God in Babylonia. But if you check the footnote, the original word is actually China.

[14:39] Now, why does the NIV use Babylonia instead? Because it is the more familiar name for the region, much like how people will say Singapore today, instead of Damascus.

But Daniel deliberately uses China, and that is worth noticing. Why? Because China only appears a handful of times in the Old Testament, and so if Daniel is using it, it's because he wants to jog our memories.

You see, where else does that word appear? Any idea? Well, let me tell you. China is where the Tower of Babel was built.

If you look at Genesis 11, it says that the tower was set up on the plains of China, that is Babylon. And do you remember what Babel is all about?

It's about people trying to set up a kingdom for themselves because they think they're like God. But do you remember how that story ended? With God putting a stop to their empire building.

[16:03] And now, here we are in China again, this time with Nebuchadnezzar doing the empire building. And he seems to be winning.

But that mention of China is a big clue things are not as they seem. Just as the builders of the tower of Babel ultimately failed, Daniel's deliberate use of this name foreshadows the same end for Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom.

It is God's way of hinting he is writing a bigger story, one that won't end with his defeat. So how can we resist Babylon?

God? When we understand that God is actually still writing the story and he loves to work through apparent weakness.

Think of the gospel. Isn't it the same? At the cross, it looks like God has lost. Jesus is crucified, his story has ended, the Lord is defeated.

[17:18] And yet in God's hand, defeat is victory, weakness is glory, death brings eternity. And those who are willing to cling to the cross and take the path of the cross will find themselves vindicated in the end.

So don't feel like to be a Christian is to be a total loser. that's what the world tells us, isn't it? That's how it pulls us in.

But if we conform to God's story, rather than the story the world tells us, we know who wins in the end. So finish your story in the way God intended it.

Resist Babylon. That's the first way. Here's the second. second of all, even when the world looks captivating, God is honoring distinctive faith.

Now, Nebuchadnezzar didn't rise to power by being a fool. To secure his empire's future, he knows he must win over the best and brightest so that their loyalty lies with him.

[18 : 38] So what better way than to enroll Judah's best young man in king's college, Babylon. That's what verses 3 and 4 are all about. Then the king ordered Eshpenas, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king's service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility.

Young man 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. So, Nebuchadnezzar wants nothing less than the cream of the crop, the most handsome, the most physically fit, the shopper's minds, and he spares no expense to make them an irresistible offer.

I mean, look at verse 5. These young men, they are getting udang gala and the finest chardonnay from the king's own table, and that is a serious step up from your typical university student's diet, right?

And this deal comes with long-term job security. Verse 5 says they will enter the king's service, and verse 4 tells us where? Right in the king's palace.

[20 : 06] That's pretty sweet. The only requirement? Three years of full immersion in Babylonian culture and literature.

Learning about astrology, sorcery, mythology, Babylonian gods, rituals, and incantations. That's the deal. So, where is Nebuchadnezzar going?

With all this? The answer becomes clearer in verses 6 and 7. We are introduced to four young men, and no surprise, the first thing we learn about them is their names.

Why is that significant? Well, their names put on display their identity as God's people. For example, the name Daniel contains L, E-L, meaning God.

So, his name means God is my judge. Similarly, Yah, a shortened form of Yahweh, is part of Hananiah's name, meaning Yahweh is gracious.

[21 : 21] Yahweh. But now, the chief official renames them one by one so that their new names praise Babylonian gods instead.

And I hope Nebuchadnezzar's scheme is now becoming obvious. What is his end goal? He wants nothing less than to dismantle their allegiance to their God and replace it with loyalty to him and his gods.

He's saying to them, come, join us, learn, work, and eat like a Babylonian, just like the rest of us, identify as one, and soon you will forget who you are and where you came from.

That's the game plan. He is after nothing less than the total assimilation of these Israelites into Babylon.

He wants them to become totally Babylonian in their outlook and conduct. You see, Babylon's strategy isn't always violence.

[22 : 35] Violence can work, but sometimes that backfires. As we know from history, sometimes persecution only makes the church grow. So sometimes Babylon's strategy is simply quiet assimilation.

Babylon's strategy is simply to tempt our hearts with peace, prosperity, comfort, and pleasure. I mean, Daniel and his friends are showered with luxury, aren't they?

And as they are, you can bet the people around them are saying, see, join us and you will get good stuff. So just forget your God.

I mean, this is where the luxury is, this is where success is, this is where power is, forget your God, forget who you belong to.

After all, has he done anything good for you? But here in Babylon, which remember simply stands for the world at large, hey, you will get what you want.

[23 : 45] So let's pause briefly and consider, is Babylon's strategy working on us? You see, assimilation is often subtle, isn't it?

It happens without us even noticing it. So let us ask some diagnostic questions. Consider your definition of success and freedom, for example.

Do they line up more with the world's or with Jesus? Do you take the world's definition of success and freedom at face value?

You know, something like whoever earns the most money is the most successful, something like that? Or do you challenge it? consider where you seek wisdom for the struggles you face. Do you tend to draw from the wells of pop psychology found on Facebook pages? Or do you prayerfully draw from the well of the scriptures?

[24 : 50] Or when was the last time you felt some discomfort in a social setting simply because you were a Christian? or has it been a very long time since that has happened?

That might indicate a comfort level with the world that should raise at least a yellow flag. That might indicate Babylon's scheme to make you thoroughly Babylonian in outlook and conduct is succeeding.

thing. Now in all this I am not saying that there is nothing we can learn from the world. In fact you'll notice that on quite a number of things Daniel and his friends did not resist Babylon.

For one thing they said yes to a Babylonian education. The curriculum they were taught could hardly be said to be Christian or God centered in any way and yet they clearly work hard at their studies.

And that is pretty amazing because much of what they studied went against what they believe about God. They didn't agree with it but they had to understand it.

[26 : 05] And that is a powerful reminder for us as well. As Christians living in the world we need to understand the culture around us even if we don't share its beliefs.

How can we share the gospel in a way that really connects with people around us unless we actually understand the world they live in? Their questions, their struggles, their ways of thinking. And notice also Daniel and his friends said yes to a career in a pagan government. Certainly they were not the first of God's people to do so.

Remember Joseph? he to serve a foreign ruler faithfully. Or consider the lesser known Obadiah who worked under King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, two of the worst rulers in Israel's history and yet still served God.

The point is Daniel and his friends were not the first godly believers to work under a government that had no regard for the living God. Resisting Babylon doesn't necessarily mean you can't serve in government or public administration or the courts, but you only serve them in as far as you serve God.

[27 : 34] You only serve them in as far as you can retain your distinctive identity in the Lord. You can say yes only when you know where you must say no.

And that's what the next part of our story shows. Look at verse 8. 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.

Now this is radical. Daniel after all is basically putting himself against the great Nebuchadnezzar. But it's also a little strange, don't you think?

I mean, it's just food and drink, right? Why draw the line here? Now there has been much discussion around this.

Some people have suggested that maybe it's because he wants to keep the Old Testament food laws, no unclean animals. But that doesn't explain why he rejects the wine as well, which the Old Testament does not reject.

[28 : 45] Some others suggest that maybe it's been sacrificed to idols. But the problem with that is that there is no reason why the vegetables he eventually opts for isn't offered to idols as well.

So why draw the line here? I think the best answer is twofold. one. In this book, the only other place where the rich food is described is in Daniel 11 verse 26.

And this verse makes clear in a negative way that those who shared the king's table also entered into a covenant relationship with him.

So to eat the food is to make explicit your ultimate loyalty lies with the king. And two, if Daniel eats the king's food and prospers, clearly Babylon will get all the credit.

But he and his friends want such honor to go to God instead. So Daniel draws the line. Covenant loyalty is for God alone.

[29 : 59] Yes, he can serve Babylon under God, but he will not serve Babylon God or its king as if it were God. And the way he and his friends make that clear is by not accepting the king's food and wine.

They are going to show distinctive faith, no matter what. But here is the key verse of this section, verse 9. Notice once again, who is acting?

It is God. God had caused the official to show favor and compassion to Daniel. And actually, in Hebrew, it is exactly the same word as in verse 2.

God gave them favor and compassion. God is in control. He acts by causing the official to show favor and sympathy to Daniel.

He is honoring their distinctive! faith. Now, of course, it requires a little bit more negotiation because the official is afraid, verse 10, but Daniel suggests a 10-day trial in verses 11-14, which the official agrees to.

[31 : 14] And in verse 15, we see the results. God makes sure his people outshine everyone else. He honors their distinctive!

faith. So, how can we resist Babylon when we know that God is honoring a distinctive faith, even when the world looks captivating?

Yes, the world can offer so many things, and sure, God can redeem many aspects of culture in the here and now, and yet, we must beware assimilation.

We must know where to draw the line. Now, that takes wisdom. What do you do, for example, if your non-Christian family wants you to take part in certain funeral rites as an act of filial piety?

Well, you do all you can to show appropriate respect for your loved ones, but you cannot do anything that shows your covenant loyalty is to someone other than God.

[32 : 23] You draw the line. Or what if Unifor invites us to participate in an interfaith prayer service where it is not clear who exactly the prayers are being offered up to?

Well, we do our best to convey our respect for the religious beliefs of others, but we do not participate in anything that confuses the gospel. We draw the line.

And isn't it interesting that Daniel draws the line as something that we regard as a small thing here? And yet I think that is significant.

Many of us, I think, will know that he draws the line again later when the stakes are much higher when it comes to choosing between prayer and the lions.

But how could he draw the line there as such a big thing? because he first drew the line here at a seemingly small thing.

[33 : 29] So my brothers and sisters, where's your line? But don't miss the big point. God is the one who enables this to happen.

He is present in Babylon. He is the reason why we can draw the line and be vindicated. Now, as the whole book of Daniel will make clear, that doesn't mean God's people will never suffer for the choices they make.

But this event shows why we can resist Babylon, because even though it might not be obvious, God is quietly sovereign behind the scenes. Do you realize that even though Nebuchadnezzar is king, he has no idea any of this is happening?

he's not in control. God is. That's the main point. Contrary to what some popular writers might suggest, this section is not about adopting a new diet so that we all look like Korean opas.

It is all about who our God is. He reigns. God is God.

[34 : 44] And we see that again when we look at our third way. Third of all, even when the world appears to prevail, God is establishing his lasting rule.

Look at verse 17. For the third time in this chapter, we read God acts. Just as in verses 2 and 9, the same Hebrew word is used to show that God gives something.

And what he gives is knowledge and understanding to Daniel and his friends, a gift that verse 20 tells us is ten times better than anything Babylon has to offer.

As a result, these four young men are chosen to serve the king. So what we have is a picture of God prevailing. As one commentator puts it on the screen, the chapter which begins with the humiliation of Judah and its royal house ends with some of that house in a leadership role in Babylon.

This has not happened by force or intrigue, but by the overruling hand of God. And they did all this without compromising their identity.

[36 : 03] did you also notice in verse 19 that their original Hebrew names are used instead of their Babylonian ones. This is Daniel one's way of showing us where their loyalty still lies.

They may work for the king, but they don't ultimately belong to Babylon. And the Lord has put Daniel exactly where he wants him to be.

You see, did you notice that Daniel himself gets a rather unique gift? He is given special insight into visions and dreams. As we will see in later chapters, God is going to use Daniel and his special gift to reveal how even the greatest earthly kingdom in the world is no match for his.

But here Daniel wants to make a simple point. The source of his gift is not his own intellect or some Babylonian magic. It is because God gave.

And just look at how this chapter ends. Verse 21. And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus. And you might be thinking, okay, so what?

[37 : 23] Well, here is why that matters. Cyrus is a Persian king. And if you know your history, you know that around 539 B.C., around 65 years after the events of verse 1, the Persians came and conquered the Babylonians.

Now, think about that. Daniel, who started off as a teenager, taken into exile, would be around 80 years old by then?

And yet, verse 21 says, Daniel was there. He lived through all of it. And that is the point. Daniel was still standing at the end.

He outlasted Babylon. He outlasted Nebuchadnezzar. He outlasted the empire that conquered him. The Babylonians were on their way out, soon to be more at home in the British Museum than in any throne room.

But Daniel was around because he aligned himself with God's kingdom. And God's kingdom never fails.

[38 : 38] Even when the world appears to prevail, God is establishing his lasting rule. You know those old-school inflatable punching bags or dummies that you sometimes find in boxing gyms?

You hit them hard and then they flop over but somehow they always spring back up. And no matter how many times you knock them down, they're upright again in seconds. You just can't keep them down.

That's what God's kingdom is like. You can't keep it down. It's made to last. God's kingdom.

So my friends, do you sometimes feel like the world always has the upper hand? Like resistance is futile and you will be assimilated to borrow that famous line from Star Trek.

Well, here is what Daniel 1 wants us to see. Even in Babylon, God is still in control. He still reigns. Even in Babylon, nothing can separate His people from His presence, His provision, or His power.

[39 : 51] And doesn't Paul say a similar thing in Romans 8? Can trouble or hardship or persecution or danger separate us from Christ's love?

His answer, never. In all these things, even in the thick of them, we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.

So yes, we can trust God, He stays faithful, He gives His people all they need, for as Romans 8 also reminds us, He has already given us the one we most need, Jesus Christ.

He is writing the story, and His story is the one with the happy ending. And that is all the encouragement we need to keep resisting Babylon.

So my brothers and sisters, stay in the fight, remain part of the resistance, it is the right side to be on. Let's pray.

[41 : 01] Father, we thank you that you are always on your throne, not once, not even for a single second have you ever lost control, and you are present with us in every situation, in every place we're in.

So help us to be aware of that, help us to be aware that you are reigning and over ruling over every circumstance, and help us to be on your side, to live for you, to stay distinctive, to find our identity in you, to place all our hope in you.

We pray all this in the name of Christ. Amen.