

Faith in a Hostile World

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Date: 17 January 2021

Preacher: Jonathan de Groot

[0 : 00] Well, each year, Open Doors, the Christian charity that supports the persecuted church throughout the world, produces its World Watch list. And last week, it released its 2021 list, highlighting the top 50 countries that are most hostile towards Christianity.

And it was picked up by the Guardian newspaper, who wanted to report on Christian persecution throughout the world. And there are apparently more than 340 million Christians, that's one in eight, who face high levels of persecution and discrimination because of their faith in Jesus Christ.

And so the top 10 countries most hostile towards Christianity are North Korea, Afghanistan, Somalia, Libya, Pakistan, Eritrea, Yemen, Iran, Nigeria, and India.

And it's clear from their list that there are more Christians around the world who are suffering for their faith and because of their faith. And the persecution is getting even more severe.

And in our own society, in recent years, it's obvious that it is becoming a society that is increasingly hostile towards Christians and Christianity. And there are plenty examples, such as the negative stereotyping in the media, legal action against Christian-owned businesses, Christian employees being subject to bullying, harassment, and unfair dismissal, Christian student groups having meeting venues cancelled by university authorities, violence towards Christians, vandalism towards churches, and then the latest, hate crime bills threatening to criminalise certain forms of Christian speech.

[1 : 55] And so it goes on. So if you profess to being a Christian, then you'll be able to relate to the pressure of trying to live out your faith in this world.

Because our culture is no longer remotely Christian. Possibly not even post-Christian. And more likely to be pre-Christian. But it isn't just that you shouldn't practice your faith in public life.

You're not even supposed to hold certain beliefs in private. You must conform to the zeitgeist of today. The values of the culture around us.

And that's why the book of Daniel is ever relevant. And so as we begin a new series today, we get a record of Daniel and his friends seeking to remain faithful to God in a hostile world.

And so it is a practical book because it speaks right into the world in which we live. And so by way of introduction, let's think about the context of Daniel. It's there in verse 1 and verse 2.

[3 : 01] Let me read them again. So Daniel is set in the worst of times for God's people.

The third year of the reign of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, is 605 BC. And so Nebuchadnezzar, the pagan king, ransacked the temple in Jerusalem and God's people were taken into exile in Babylon. But did you notice that the defeat of God's people was actually God's doing? And so while Babylon may have seemed like a God-forsaken place, we're told that it was actually a God-appointed place. It was the fulfillment of God's covenant promises. Blessings for obedience and punishment for disobedience. And so God's people were taken into exile because of their sinful behavior.

It was God's judgment on them. And God had already foretold through the prophet Isaiah that this would take place in Isaiah 39. And so it was God's purpose not just to punish them, but to purify them so that he might restore them again.

[4 : 32] And it was part of God's greater plan to establish an everlasting kingdom. And we'll discover that as the message of Daniel unfolds. And so we're being told at the very beginning of the book that God rules.

And that is the main message of the book of Daniel. God rules. And so just a bit more by way of introduction before we get into this passage. Daniel is a book of two halves.

In chapters 1 to 6, the focus is on Daniel and his friends in Babylon. And it's told in the third person. And we see God's rule over nations and over kings.

And then in chapters 7 to 12, the focus is on Daniel's visions. Told in the first person by Daniel. And we see there God's rule in establishing an everlasting kingdom.

And so there's a shift from historical narrative in the first half to apocalyptic visions in the second. But Daniel isn't just divided into two halves.

[5 : 32] It's also written in two languages. And this isn't obvious in the English. But Daniel begins in Hebrew, chapter 1. Then shifts to Aramaic, chapters 2 to 7.

And then returns to Hebrew in chapters 8 to 12. And so this middle section is in Aramaic. Which was the lingua franca of the day. The international language that everybody spoke.

And so the message of Daniel wasn't just intended, first of all, to encourage God's people how to live in a hostile world. But it was also meant to challenge all people.

To help all people see that there's one true God. And that he rules over all. And so if you're tuning in today and you wouldn't call yourself a Christian.

Then don't think Daniel's got nothing to say to you. Because we all need to know that God rules. He rules over our individual lives. But God rules over this world.

[6 : 33] And so God is exercising his rule to establish his kingdom. To advance it until the day that his son, Jesus Christ, returns. And so the message of Daniel, the message of God's rule, is supposed to cause us to submit to this God.

And so Daniel, chapter 1, shows God's rule as Daniel and his friends were able to relate to the culture in Babylon without compromising their faith in God.

So let's see how we should, three things, see how we should relate to the culture, verse 3 to 7.

Secondly, how we should resolve not to compromise, verse 8 to 16.

And then thirdly, how we should remember that God rules, verse 17 to 21. So relate, resolve, and remember. First of all, relate to the culture, verse 3 to 7.

Daniel and his friends were able to relate to the culture without compromise. So King Nebuchadnezzar wanted the very best, the creme de la creme of Israel's youth, a bit like Alan Sugar and his search for the apprentice.

[7 : 44] And so Nebuchadnezzar got the aristocratic, the best-looking, the most intelligent young men. And they were probably just teenagers at the time. And so his foreign policy was domination by assimilation.

Because if he captured the brightest and the best while they were still young and impressionable and somehow managed to schmooze them, then they would be a tremendous political asset for him.

He could turn them from foreigners and make them allies to strengthen Babylon's rule in future generations. And that's why he develops this training program to deconstruct their faith in God and then assimilate them socially, culturally, spiritually with the pagan ways of Babylon.

And so his plan had four elements. It began with first a new education to change their thinking. Verse 4. They were to be taught the language and literature of the Babylonians.

So this was state-sponsored indoctrination. They were to spend three years studying at the great University of Babylon. Fees were paid in full. No student grants to pay back.

[8 : 56] And their education was really meant to undermine their faith in God by introducing them to a new pagan worldview as if it were a more enlightened way of thinking.

That's the first thing. A new education to change their thinking. The second part of the king's plan was a new diet to change their living. Verse 5. So they were to be fed the king's food from the king's table every day.

Best food. Best wine. Because he didn't want them complaining about the quality of food in the halls of residence. Or even to have them resort to beans on toast or pasta.

So they got their specialized nutrition plan. And it was perhaps to get them used to a certain kind of lifestyle. Because the privileges were a way of getting these young lads to feel a sense of indebtedness to the king.

After all, there's no such thing as a free lunch. And so thirdly, the plan also involved a new career to change their future. Again, in verse 5, they were being groomed for government service.

[10 : 03] So after graduation, the aim was to give them a career in the king's service. And then fourthly, the plan was to give them new names to change their identity.

Verse 6 and 7. So their names were significant. Daniel means God is my judge. But their new names were meant to wipe out their spiritual heritage and give them a new identity.

So each of the new names included names of Babylonian gods. And it was a way of saying, forget about your God. Forget about your upbringing. Forget about your past. When in Babylon, do as the Babylonians do. And so they were under immense pressure to conform by being told how to think, what to eat, what to do, and what to be called. And it's really no different in our secular world today, where the expectation is that you will simply just fit in and you must conform.

[11 : 07] So forget about God. Believe this. Think this way. Adopt these views. Live like this.

Choose your own identity. And it is preached and proclaimed to us 24-7 by big tech, who rule our thinking and our living.

And if you don't conform the way these powerful gods want you to, then you'll be cancelled. So the message for Daniel and his friends was forget about God.

And that's the message today. Yes, you're free to choose however you want to think and however you want to live, but as long as it is within the parameters that our culture sets for you.

And yet the problem is that they change so quickly, as quickly as the culture changes. And so the question is, if you profess to have faith in God, is how do you practice your faith in this hostile world?

[12 : 07] Well, Daniel and his friends had worked through what they could accept and what they must reject. And it's interesting because you notice that they accepted a pagan education.

They accepted careers in a pagan work environment. And they accepted pagan names. Yet they rejected a new diet. And so we'll come to the food in a moment.

But we shouldn't miss the lesson from Daniel and his friends. Because it seems that if we're under pressure to compromise, then there are three ways that we can relate to the culture.

We can withdraw. We can accommodate. Or we can engage. So first of all, withdraw. That's one response God's people can make to a hostile world.

By withdrawing from anyone and anything that isn't Christian. By having a life that only revolves around Christian people or church activities.

[13 : 09] And it might be a safe retreat into some kind of holy huddle. But it's really the life of a dropout. And yet it's so easy to separate from anyone who doesn't share our faith in God.

Whether at work or school, university, sport, socially, wherever. But it's clear that Daniel and his friends didn't withdraw by saying no to absolutely everything.

And so neither should we if we have faith in the same God as Daniel's God. So that's withdraw. Another response to the culture is to accommodate.

God's people can accommodate the values and the behaviours of the culture around us. A bit like a chameleon that just blends into the background.

And again, it's safe. And yet we lose any distinctiveness if we merely ape the culture around us.

And it's dangerous because culture, rather than God, begins to shape our thinking and our living.

[14 : 15] And this is the kind of cultural assimilation the king attempted with Daniel. But it didn't work. And so it's something we need to be conscious of if we have faith in God.

But then there's a third response. And it's neither to withdraw nor to accommodate, but it is to engage. And that best sums up what Daniel and his friends did.

Because as teenagers here in chapter 1, they were able to engage with the culture around them.

But also, for the rest of their lives in Babylon, they were able to engage in this pagan, hostile environment.

So they engaged not by rejecting everything, clearly, nor by accepting everything, but by engaging in a distinctive way.

And so it's the best way for a Christian to relate to the culture. Through being able to connect with the culture, as well as challenge the culture, as we'll see with the food.

[15 : 18] So Daniel was able to live distinctively for God, despite being part of a society that was definitely anti-God. And so the temptation is always going to be to withdraw from or to accommodate the culture.

Withdrawal does give distinctiveness, and yet it gives no audience to listen to us. Whereas accommodation does give an audience, but there's no distinct message to share.

But if we seek to engage with real people in the real world, then we'll have an audience to hear our message. And that's the story of Daniel and his friends. It's how they didn't just survive in a hostile world, but they were able to thrive.

And so that's the first point, relate to the culture. Secondly, we see how to resolve not to compromise. In verse 8 to 16. So while Daniel accepted a pagan education, a career in the king's service, and a name change, he rejected the king's food.

Look at verse 8. Why?

[16:31] Why? It might seem such a trivial issue to make a fuss about. Why draw the line on this particular issue? Well, the answer is, we don't know, because the text doesn't tell us.

And we're told that Daniel, all we're told is that Daniel resolved not to defile himself. But there are a few possibilities. First of all, perhaps it was because the food didn't conform to Jewish food laws. In other words, the food was unclean. And yet, they didn't just refuse the food, they refused the wine as well. Secondly, perhaps it was because the food had been sacrificed to pagan gods. But presumably, the vegetables were also offered to idols. Possibly, it was because eating the king's food implied a relationship with the king.

Because covenants were always accompanied by a meal. And these are all possibilities, but we don't really know. It is a bit of a mystery why Daniel drew the line where he did.

[17:42] But we need to see that he did draw a line. He was aware that he would defile himself if he ate the king's food. It would compromise his faith in God.

And so it doesn't really matter why he resolved not to eat the food. What matters is that he had to draw a line. And he did draw a line.

The king's food was just one step further. And he was prepared to go to engage with his new culture. And so this was where he had to take a stand.

And just notice how he took his stand. He was winsome and wise as well as courageous, if not a little shrewd as well. So first of all, he asked for permission to the chief official.

But he was knocked back. And so then he approached the guard, requesting that they be tested with nothing but vegetables and water. And then the guard agreed. So Daniel and his friends at the end of the test looked healthier and better nourished than everybody else.

[18:45] So God honoured their resolve not to compromise. And so if we have faith in God, how does this apply?

Well, it should be clear that we must not resolve to defile ourselves if we want to live distinctively for God. But how do we know where to draw the line and what to reject?

Well, if God's word is clear on the issue, it's a no-brainer. If something leads to sin and defilement, it's obvious that we need to draw the line.

But what if it isn't so clear-cut? Well, what matters is not so much where to draw the line, but that we do actually draw the line.

So Daniel couldn't just carry on. Doing nothing wasn't an option for him. Because if we fail to take a stand when we can, then compromise just becomes easier as we start the slide towards sin.

[19:50] I've heard it described as a mountain climber on an icy slope. So the mountain climber begins to slip down and there's a dangerous drop below. And so it doesn't really matter where they stick their ice axe in the ice, but it does matter that they stick it in somewhere.

Or they'll keep sliding towards disaster. And so there will be times when we will need to do something to avoid sin. I just remembered Daniel was only a teenager when he saw the need to draw the line.

And yet it stood him in good stead for his future. Taking a stand when they were young enabled Daniel and his friends to do it later.

Like when Daniel's friends refused to bow down and worship a statue at risk of being thrown into a fiery furnace in Daniel chapter 3. Or when Daniel continued to pray at risk of being thrown into a lion's den in chapter 6.

Because if you don't have the courage of your convictions on the small, seemingly insignificant, trivial issues, then what hope is there of surviving when faced with far bigger issues or bigger tests?

[21:09] And for each of us the issues will be different. But we'll need to be resolved not to compromise knowing where or when to stop. So it might be where to draw the line with drinking alcohol.

Or it might be where to draw the line in relationships. Or perhaps where to draw the line with the use of the internet or watching TV. It is wise to draw the line, isn't it?

If we are serious about resolving not to defile ourselves. It's not always easy to draw the line. It is always hard to take a stand.

And I guess that's why it's so good to do it at the earliest opportunity we get. Just like Daniel. By letting others know ASAP why there are certain things that we just won't do.

And so the first step is to let people know that you're a Christian. Because it's far harder to live distinctively if those around us have no idea that we have faith and trust in God.

[22 : 15] But if people do know, then it's less surprising when we draw the line or take the stand on certain issues. Or perhaps if you're a new believer or you're a Christian who's going into a new context.

Maybe a new job or a new city or a new sports club or a new social group. Then aim to take the earliest opportunity to say that you're a Christian. And it might be awkward.

But missing the first opportunity just makes it harder the further down the line that we get. And so how can we do this? Well this takes us to our third point.

First point, relate to the culture. Second point, resolve not to compromise. But the third point is remember that God rules. Verse 17 to 21.

We'll never relate to the culture effectively and resolve not to compromise if we aren't certain that God rules. And Daniel chapter 1 continually emphasizes this.

[23 : 20] Three times in the original, the phrase God gave is used. So see verse 2. The Lord gave Jehoiakim, king of Judah, into Nebuchadnezzar's hand.

And so we're being told that the Lord controls the events of history. He rules over world leaders and military powers. And then see verse 9.

God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the official. And so God rules over the hearts of individual people. Even if they don't know him.

And then see verse 17. God gave them knowledge and understanding. And so God rules over the lives of individual people like you and me. He gives us what we need.

And he works in all the circumstances of our lives. Because God is sovereign. Sovereign over this world. And over individual lives.

[24 : 22] And so as we jump into the book of Daniel. At this terrible time for God's people. They were exiles. Carried off into exile in a strange land.

And yet, despite appearances, God was in control. And God was doing his work. And so God is always accomplishing his purposes in this world and in our lives.

And that's really the emphasis at the end of the chapter. Because Daniel and his friends weren't just preserved. They were promoted. Did you see that? The king was impressed with them.

Their wisdom and knowledge was ten times better than anyone else in the kingdom. And so as the top students, they entered the king's grad scheme. They didn't just survive in Babylon.

They were able to thrive in Babylon. Because God was with them. So verse 21 closes out the chapter. And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.

[25 : 29] We're being told that Daniel outlived all the pagan kings of Babylon. And so this is talking about the end of the exile some 70 years later. When King Cyrus issued the decree that enabled the Jews to return home.

And so Daniel was an old man. Probably in his 80s. And yet the verse at the end of the chapter is telling us that this is fulfilling what God had promised. And so while the book of Daniel tells us the story of Daniel.

The message of Daniel is that God rules. And that's what Daniel and his friends needed to remember. And it's what you and I need to remember today.

So are we daunted by the future? Perhaps near or far? Are we worried about our job? Are we anxious about our health or that of a loved one?

Are we concerned about our church? Are we afraid about what will happen in our nation or in our world? Well, Daniel reminds us that despite appearances, God rules.

[26 : 37] And that's what we must remember if we are going to live for this God in a hostile world. We don't need to withdraw or accommodate ourselves to the culture.

But we must engage with the culture whilst resolving not to compromise. And yet while we might resolve not to defile ourselves, we are well aware that we continue to fail and sin.

And that's why we shouldn't just look at Daniel and try to be like him. But we should look to the one that Daniel foreshadows.

Jesus Christ. Because Jesus, Daniel's son of man, as he refers to him in chapter 7, is king. Jesus is king of God's everlasting kingdom.

And yet Jesus willingly came from heaven into this hostile world. Jesus was fully man. He was engaged with this world.

[27 : 38] And he resolved not to defile himself with sin. And he's the only one who has ever managed to be successful in that.

Jesus endured far greater temptation than we ever will. And yet he remained pure and undefiled until the end. Even under extreme pressure in the Garden of Gethsemane, the night before Jesus died, Jesus resolved to be faithful to God by becoming obedient.

To death. Why? Well, because all humanity is in exile from God. And we have been since the fall, way back at the very beginning.

And so the inability of God's people in Daniel to stay faithful to him is due to the sinful nature that we all share. And so their exile from their homeland and their captivity in Babylon points to the deeper problem of our captivity to sin and death.

And that's why God sent Jesus Christ. To deliver us from sin and to conquer death. And so on the cross, Jesus was exiled from God so that we need never be.

[28 : 55] He took the punishment that we deserve for our sin so that we can be set free. And so again, the cross, despite appearances, was victory.

It wasn't defeat. Because Jesus returned from exile by rising from death. And he is now seated at God's right hand in heaven.

And one day, Jesus will return to gather all his exiled people and take them home to his everlasting kingdom. And so the good news of Jesus Christ assures us that God rules.

And that's why we must accept Jesus as our savior and live for Jesus as our king. And only as secure citizens of this everlasting kingdom will we be able to live as we ought in a hostile world.