

Against the Tide: Lessons from Daniel 1-6

Cultured but Uncompromised (Daniel 1)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on September 10, 2017

Introduction

- ❖ We've started a new sermon series in the book of Daniel focusing on chapters 1 to 6. We're calling it *Against the Tide* because that's a good description of how Daniel and his friends lived. They were exiles from Israel who were dropped into a Babylonian culture that was very pagan and very hostile to their faith. And they weren't your average captives. They were handpicked young men who were to be reeducated and raised in a particular way so as to become thoroughly Babylonian.
 - **A vast current of cultural pressure to conform was pushing against them all the time, and yet we see, in these chapters, Daniel and his friends making difficult choices to swim upstream against the tide.** They refuse to bow to a cultural idol that's being worshipped by everyone else – so they're cast into a furnace. They ignore unjust laws that violate their religious freedom to pray to their own God – so they're thrown into a lion's den.
 - There's a road set before them that's wide and easy, safe and comfortable – but they reject it. Because they know their God is found on the road that's hard and narrow, at times risky and mostly uncomfortable.

- ❖ Now the reason we chose to study this book is because of its relevance to the challenges we face today – **as we try to live as faithful followers of Christ within a prevailing culture that prevails upon us to conform, to go with the flow, to adopt its values and norms.**
 - In our society today, there is a tidal wave of culture pressure pushing against Christians. Against those whose allegiance is ultimately to Christ as Lord. Against those who desire to live their lives, privately and publicly, in accordance with God's Word.

- ❖ **Christians today are under pressure to adjust and adapt our gospel (our beliefs) to fit the current consensus of the culture.** The things we believe about heaven and hell and final judgment; about Jesus being the only way of salvation; about the moral and sexual ethics taught in Scripture; about the sanctity of marriage as a union between a man and a woman; about the goodness of the human body and how it informs our identity as a man or woman.

- ❖ These convictions, along with a host of others, make Christianity seem so backwards, so out-of-touch, so insensitive and unloving. Our views are viewed as ignorant and bigoted. **Let's be honest, it would be so much easier to just go with the flow, abandon these beliefs, and join the moral revolution. To ride the wave with everyone else.**
 - Unless you're contrarian by nature, it never feels good to swim against the tide. It's hard. It's tiring. It's costly. It could cost you opportunities to advance in your career. It could cost you social capital and cherished relationships.
 - That's why what we need to hear are compelling testimonies of people who love God, who submit to his lordship, and who seek to faithfully live our lives according to his Word – while being immersed in a highly secular culture.

- ❖ And that's why we're going to study the book of Daniel. This morning we're covering chapter one. I know it's not as exciting as the later chapters. It's quite tame really. There are no heroic life-or-death decisions. Just a request to eat vegan. Not very earth-shattering. So it's tempting to gloss over a chapter this and move on to the good stuff.
 - But we need to pause at chapter one because there's a very important lesson here. You have to realize that your faithfulness over the minor things *now* is what prepares you later for the major issues. **It was the quiet faithfulness of Daniel and his friends – taking a private stand over matters of seemingly minor importance – that prepared them and made possible their later acts of public courage when faced with matters of life and death.**
 - Don't despise the day of small things (Zech. 4:10). Learn from it. That's what we intend to do today. I see three important lessons for God's people that will help us navigate the rough waters of our prevailing culture.

Swim in the ocean of culture but don't drink it

- ❖ The first lesson is this: **God's people have to swim in the ocean of culture but they don't have to drink it.** Unless you plan to live in a cave or on top of a mountain – off the grid, all by yourself – you can't escape culture. You're swimming in it. It's the water all around you.
 - Now the word 'culture' could mean many things. So to be clear, when I speak of 'culture', I'm using it much like the Bible would speak of the 'world' – with more of a negative connotation attached. So Jesus's disciples live in the world, but as he said in John 17, his disciples are not "*of the world*" (17:14). So in the same way we can say, Christians are *in* but not *of* the culture. **You have to live in the culture, but you don't have to imbibe its values and norms.**
- ❖ Daniel and his friends embodies this principle faithfully and courageously. But first we need to understand the context in which they operated. The very first verse of the book grounds us historically in the year 605 B.C. **That was the year that Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon led the first campaign against the kingdom of Judah, besieging the capital of Jerusalem.**
 - By this time in Israel's history, the kingdom was long divided. The northern kingdom had already been defeated and destroyed by the Assyrians. That left the southern kingdom of Judah. Its king, mentioned in v1, was Jehoiakim. At this point, Judah was just a pawn on a world stage full of super powers including Assyria, Egypt, and Babylon. The latter being the fastest rising and greatest threat to Judah.
- ❖ In 605 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem and they eventually surrendered. And many members of the royal family and the nobility were deported to Babylon. Daniel and his friends were part of that deportation.
 - Now in this first campaign, Nebuchadnezzar didn't destroy the city (that didn't happen until 586 B.C.), but he did ransack the temple. In v2, it says Nebuchadnezzar took vessels from the house of God and he placed it in "*the treasury of his god*". That was quite an insult.

- ❖ **Then we're told in v3 that the chief eunuch took young men from the royal family and nobility and put them through an intensive re-education process.** They took the cream of the crop – *“youths without blemish, of good appearance and skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king's palace, and to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans.”*
 - **This was a shrewd move that was part of a larger strategy for subjugating a conquered people.** After you defeat a nation, you could set up a new government filled with your own officers, but they would be resented by your conquered subjects and viewed as foreign occupiers. The people will continue to resist and rebel. You'll have to constantly deal with insurrections and uprisings.

- ❖ So you play the long game. You take the educated elite from among the conquered people. You take the young who are still impressionable. And you don't throw them in prison. No, you set them up in the palace. You lavish them with the best. **You impress their socks off until they come to see your culture, your civilization, as better than their own.**
 - You educate (or more like re-educate) them with your own literature and language until they come to appreciate it. And you feed them the best foods found within your culture. Because if you can get a foreigner to fall in love with your food, they'll easily fall in love with your culture.

- ❖ So their goal was to take the next generation of Israelites and thoroughly acculturate them. **To assimilate them into Babylonian culture to such a degree that they lose their identity as Israelites.** And then down the road, you send them back to Israel to serve as governors and magistrates that you can trust to be loyal and partial to all things Babylonian.
 - If we keep reading in vv6-7, we learn that the Babylonians even changed the names of these four boys. Their Hebrew names contained the name of Yahweh God. But their new names had references to one of the many Babylonian gods. **Now for us, a name change may not seem like a big deal, but in ancient cultures, your name was integrally connected with your identity.** And your faith would've been core to your identity, which is why their names usually contained the name of their god.
 - All this to say, the Babylonians were doing all they could to reshape and redefine these young men into the image of their culture – into the image of their gods. **But, as we'll see, Daniel and his friends refused to let their newly given names shape or influence their true identity.**

- ❖ They were fully immersed in the culture in which God had placed them. They were neck deep in it. But they didn't let the culture overwhelm them. Instead they just kept swimming in the direction God pointed – and they flourished! **They rose to positions of prominence and contributed greatly to society. But all the while refusing to let the prevailing culture define them. They maintain their distinctly Jewish identity.** Daniel and his friends proved that you can faithfully (and fruitfully) swim in the ocean of culture without drinking it.

- ❖ Church, this is what we need to teach our young people. This is how we ought to train our children. **The enemy is still using the same old strategy. How does he conquer a society? By targeting its young.** Not by *oppressing* them but by *impressing* them. By enticing them with the best this world has to offer.
 - **The devil wants to acculturate young professing Christians into the larger, secular culture around them to the point that they begin to lose their Christian identity and become altogether worldly.** Where their lives bear no distinguishing marks; where they end up looking no different than a non-Christian.

- ❖ That's why we need more of you – who, like Daniel, have been swimming for years in the ocean of culture without drinking it – we need you to get involved in our children's ministry or youth or college. We need your help discipling these young people. Showing them, by your own example, that it's possible – **it's possible to be fully immersed in the culture and yet at the same time live distinctly Christian lives and maintain a distinctly Christian identity.** You can be cultured and yet remain uncompromised.
 - To those of you believers who *are* feeling this tension – this pressure to follow the current of culture – I want to encourage you. It's hard to be a committed Christian on a highly secular campus or in a competitive work environment. **The one thing that'll help you swim against the tide – to maintain your biblical convictions and Christian identity – is a deep-rooted trust in the sovereignty of God.**

- ❖ That's what Daniel and his friends leaned upon. The prophets of old told them to look at their circumstances through a theological lens. **To interpret this defeat – not as God's failure to preserve his people – but as a deliberate act in accordance with his sovereign will.**
 - In the entire chapter, God is barely mentioned. But when he is, he's not passively observing. He is actively doing. In the three times he's mentioned, it says 'he gave'. V9 says God *gave* Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief eunuch. In v17, God *gave* the four youth learning and skill. God's the one in charge.
 - But the mention of God in v2 is what stands out the most. *“And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his (Nebuchadnezzar's) hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God.”* **Apparently to be in the hands of Nebuchadnezzar doesn't mean you've fallen out of God's.** God is in complete control, and he has his people exactly where he wants them.

- ❖ **Church, we have to trust that our sovereign Lord has us where he wants us – immersed neck deep in a culture that's opposed and hostile to our faith.** Yes, the temptations are there but they're not too great. Yes, the pressure is real but it's not too much. God is faithful and he won't let you be tempted beyond your ability to bear it.
 - So go on reading your Bible as the very words of God. Trust that Jesus is risen from the grave. That he's the only way to the Father. That the scriptures and all they teach are all true no matter how unpopular. Keep on believing. **The world is going to make you worry about being on the wrong side of history. But what's far more disconcerting is being on the wrong side of the sovereign Lord of history.**

Plant your feet and go against the tide

- ❖ So the first lesson is that God’s people have to swim in the ocean of culture, but they don’t have to drink it. The second lesson goes like this: **God’s people sometimes have to plant their feet and go against the tide.**
 - As you navigate the waters of culture, you’ll be faced with countless decisions as you try to remain cultured by uncompromised. Should I attend this university? Should I join this club or fraternity? Should I send my kids to public school or private? Or should I homeschool them? Should I watch these movies/shows; read these books; or listen to this kind of music? Should I be active on social media or abstain altogether?

- ❖ **For the most part, I think these decisions should be left to individual Christian consciences – *mature* Christian consciences.** That’s because the Bible does not speak directly to these issues. Obviously if the particular decision leads to you violate or ignore a direct teaching of Scripture, then what you should do is pretty black and white.
 - But usually – when it comes to engaging the culture – we’re dealing with issues in which two sincerely committed Christians could disagree. So let’s be charitable. But whatever you do – however you decide – the Bible says it needs to proceed from a heart of faith. *“For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.”* (Rom. 14:3) That means your heart and your heart motives got to be right and righteous.

- ❖ **But as you swim in the waters of culture, there are going to be times when you have to plant your feet and take a stand.** If you’re always swimming with the tide, that’s a problem. As a Christian – as a citizen of another kingdom – you will inevitably encounter circumstances and face decisions where you’ll have to make a clear countercultural stand.
 - We see Daniel taking his stand in v8. Look with me there, *“But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king’s food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself.”*

- ❖ So Daniel and friends were willing to receive new names and receive a Babylonian education – learning the *“literature and language of the Chaldeans”* – but they drew the line at the king’s food and wine. They ask instead to be fed vegetables and water only.
 - But the chief eunuch is hesitant because he knows if their health declines, then it’s his neck on the line. But they work out a deal where they test Daniel and his friends for ten days feeding them only vegetables and water, and after ten days they were *“better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youths who ate the king’s food.”* (v15) So from then on, they were allowed this exemption.

- ❖ **Now the question is, why did Daniel choose royal food as his battle to fight?** Why did he draw a line here? Since he didn’t seem to have any qualms about living in a royal palace, receiving a royal education, or being pampered by royal servants. Why food?
 - The obvious thought is that it must have something to do with kosher laws. He doesn’t want to be ‘defiled’ by unclean foods. But keeping kosher is likely not a direct concern since he also rejected wine. There’s no kosher law forbidding wine.

- ❖ Some would argue that the defilement that concerned him had less to do with kosher and more to do with the fact that the royal provisions would've been first offered to Babylonian gods. It was a safe assumption that the king's food and wine would've been served in the context of idol worship. So Daniel doesn't want to eat food sacrificed to idols. But then again, he was willing to eat the vegetables, which would've been included in idol worship.
 - So we don't know his exact motivation. **But regardless a line must be drawn somewhere.** Perhaps believers living in another context or culture, might draw the line elsewhere. But at some point, you just have to plant your feet and say this is who I am. I am a Christian. My identity is not defined by the prevailing winds of culture. My convictions are not formed by popular opinion. You've got to draw a line.

- ❖ For Daniel it came down to food, to what he ate. It makes sense. Food is often connected to one's identity. You are what you eat. **No matter how acculturated second-generation Asians can be in American culture, one aspect of our ethnic identity that we tend to hold onto is the food.** I can barely speak Chinese. I don't think like a Chinese person. I don't communicate like one either. But I still love the food! Much of my Chinese identity is wrapped up with that. If not for my affinity for the food, then besides my face, there's not much about my identity that's Chinese. That's because I've been Americanized.
 - I think that's the reason why Daniel drew the line at food. He was already being Babylonian-ized in many other ways. **So by abstaining from royal food and wine, that was Daniel's way of setting himself apart from the prevailing culture and preserving his distinct identity as a Jew.**

- ❖ And I think it's important to note that when Daniel took this stand, he didn't make a big stink about it. He didn't try to shame his fellow Jews who chose differently and ate the food. He wasn't casting judgment on them.
 - **So whenever you do draw a line and plant your feet somewhere, you don't have to be obnoxious about it.** Yes the goal is to go against the tide – to make counter-cultural lifestyle decisions for the sake of your witness to Christ – but you don't need to scream it on a mountaintop or all over Facebook. Be like Daniel, in that his counter-cultural stance was done primarily for the Lord and for his own conscience.

- ❖ So what about you? **Christian, where is God calling you to draw a line?** We live in a highly secular culture where the pressure to assimilate and join the moral revolution is growing ever stronger. If you don't decide now, it's likely that you'll just be carried along by the currents of culture. So make a stand. **On what issues, in which decisions, will you plant your feet on the firm foundation and start walking against the tide?**
 - Maybe it'll be related to your entertainment choices – the quality or quantity of media you're ingesting. Maybe it'll be your speech – avoiding the use of foul language or toning down the coarseness of your humor. Maybe the line you draw will be related to how you educate your children or how you actively disciple them versus outsourcing it to church staff. Or maybe you'll go against the tide of unbridled consumerism and resist keeping up with the Joneses and live a life of simplicity within your means.

- ❖ It's not going to be easy. Walking or swimming against the tide never is. But it is rewarding. As we saw in v15, the four youth pass the ten-day test and maintain great health despite a vegetarian diet. And of course the lesson is not that it's healthier to be a vegetarian. The lesson is that God is faithful to intervene to prove that man does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from his mouth. (Mt. 4:4)
 - **The point is that you will not come to harm if you abstain from certain aspects of the culture.** There is no harm in not knowing anything about that show your colleagues are chatting about around the water cooler. There is no harm in being inactive on social media or not even owning a smart phone. I know some of you teens feel like you'll be an outcast (a leper) among your peers if you don't own an iPhone.
 - Have courage and draw a line, and trust that God will crown your faithfulness. He sees your quiet obedience and humble courage to go against the tide. He honors your effort to preserve your distinctive identity as one of his own.

Make an impression and outlast the prevailing (passing) culture

- ❖ This leads to our third lesson which goes like this: **God's people can make quite an impression and outlast the prevailing (passing) culture.** The dominant culture today – that wield so much influence and pressure – is like the grass. Here today; gone tomorrow. It flourishes in the morning but by evening it fades and withers (Ps. 90:5-6).
 - **This highly secular modern culture that we live in today is going to pass one day, but God's kingdom and his kingdom citizens will remain.** We will outlast. But by that I don't mean bunkering down and waiting out the culture to pass. **Like Daniel, God's people – as we await a kingdom come – can make quite an impression on the culture now in the present.** That's the hope and promise I want to leave you with because that's the hope and promise we're left with at the end of chapter 1.
- ❖ If we read on in v17, we're told that these four youth were given, by God, "*learning and skill in all literature and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams.*" That'll be relevant in subsequent chapters. And then they're brought before Nebuchadnezzar, and it says in v19 that, "*the king spoke with them, and among all of them none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Therefore they stood before the king. ²⁰And in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanterers that were in all his kingdom.*"
 - It's no wonder why their wisdom and understanding were ten times better than all the court magicians – when we're told the source of wisdom and understanding for Daniel and his friends was God himself!
- ❖ It says in v17 that God *gave* them learning and skill and wisdom. But we're talking about Babylonian skill and wisdom. **That means even pagan, Babylonian learning comes ultimately from God. He's the source of all true wisdom and understanding.**
 - All truth is God's truth. That means if anything is true, then it's also good and beautiful and of God – even if it comes from the lips of a godless teacher. Even if it's taught on a secular campus or promoted in a secular company.

- ❖ **I don't want to give the impression that faithfulness to Christ requires a withdrawal from the culture – an avoidance of secular influences and education.** I am *not* saying the only solution is to cut off contact by avoiding popular culture, by only working for a Christian employer, by only homeschooling your children, or only sending them to Christian colleges. Now I commend those who make those decisions, and I think more of us can learn from them and the reasons for their choices.
 - But if you decide, as an individual or family, to remain deeply engaged in secular school or work environments – then be encouraged by Daniel's example. **He proves that a faithful follower of God can still flourish in a godless environment and make quite an impression on others.** No question it's going to be hard. It's going to require lots of discernment.

- ❖ But Christians *can* flourish in a highly secular culture. **Of course by 'flourish' I'm not referring to 'being successful' by worldly standards.** You might be ridiculed or ostracized for your faith. Bypassed for a promotion. Pressured to compromise your convictions.
 - But if you continue to seek God as the source for all wisdom and understanding – as you faithfully swim in the ocean of culture without drinking it – you'll flourish and be fruitful according to God's standards. The standards that matter in the end.

- ❖ And you'll outlast your oppressors. Notice how v21 suggests that Daniel outlasted all his captors. He remained in his royal post until the first year of King Cyrus, the Medo-Persian king who, seventy-years later, allowed the Jewish exiles to return home. So this chapter ends by forecasting the very end of exile.
 - **I think the message for the Church is to remember that, in a more profound sense, our exile from our true home will come to an end.** In our case, our true King will return for us. He came once before. He bore our sins and took them to the cross. And on that rugged cross he was separated from God the Father. He was exiled.
 - **The gospel says that Jesus was exiled so that you don't have to be.** By his wounds you are healed. By his rejection you are welcomed into the kingdom. Take courage Church, knowing that this world (this culture) is not your home. Your home is coming. Your exile will soon end. Your King guarantees it.