

“The Power to Make a Difference” // Daniel 1 // *Shining in Babylon* #1

Report from weekend and heads-up about today

We are starting a new series today called *Shining in Babylon*. It's a study of the book of Daniel, and I wanted to explain where the title, *Shining in Babylon*, comes from. It comes from a verse in the last chapter of the book, one of my favorite verses in the Old Testament: **Daniel 12:3** Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.

The book is written in the context of Babylon, where God's people have been taken captive because of their sin. Here's how the book opens: **1** In the third year of the reign of King Jehoiakim of Judah, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came to Jerusalem and laid siege to it. **2** The Lord handed King Jehoiakim of Judah over to him, along with treasures from the house of God. Nebuchadnezzar carried them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and put the vessels in the treasury of his god.... King Jehoiakim, who was Judah's 20th king after God established the Kingdom under King Saul, continued to lead Israel in a downward spiral of unbelief, compromise and disobedience. God had warned Israel that if they continued to walk in disobedience, he would send them into exile. And so, in 605 B.C., he kept his promise.¹

And might I say, before we go any farther, I think God might want to warn some of you right now. We're 3 minutes into this message and God is right now speaking to some of you through his Word with a dire warning. He is saying to you, “You think I'm kidding? You think you can continue on in your sin? You think I'm bluffing? That I won't deliver you over to some kind of “exile,” some kind of suffering? I've seen God destroy many a “believer” who wouldn't listen. Do not be deceived; God will not be mocked. Do not mistake his patience in your life for his apathy. He is not kidding. God. Is. Not. Kidding. You need to wake up and repent. Don't mistake his patience for his apathy. God comes to a point where he says, “OK, if you won't pay attention, I'll do what I said.” He's telling some of you today: WAKE. UP.

And **3** The king ordered Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the Israelites from the royal family and from the nobility— **4** young men without any physical defect, good-looking, suitable for instruction in all wisdom, knowledgeable, perceptive, and capable of serving in the king's palace. The best of the best, of course! **He was to teach them the Chaldean language and literature.** Chaldean being the culture of Babylon.

Let's talk for a minute about Babylon, because there is some deeply important symbolism at work here. Babylon, of course, refers to a particular City-State in a particular time and place, but in the Bible, Babylon also represents a spiritual power at work in every secular kingdom in every age.

¹ You can read the full story of that exile in 2 Kings 24.

Did you notice, vs. 2, where it said the city of Babylon was? **"...to the land of Shinar" (Daniel 1:2)**. The land of Shinar is also mentioned in Genesis 11:2, where all mankind gathered together in order to build a great tower and to make a name for themselves. And do you remember the name of that tower? The Tower of... Babel. Babel; Babylon. Ah, I see what you did there, God. Nicely played.

In the New Testament, the early Christians use "Babylon" as a code name for Rome, even though it was miles away from the ancient city of Babylon and had no political connection to Babylon in any way, and that's because Rome played the same role in the early church as this Babylon did for the Jews. Furthermore, in the book of Revelation, Babylon becomes John's name for all world powers controlled by Satan at war with the people of God.²

The point is, in the Bible "Babylon" is the term for the spiritual kingdom at work in the secular world since the tower of Babel. It's the kingdom built in opposition to God, independent of God, with man in charge and man at the center. Scripture says that Satan is the ruler of this world, and Satan has always used secular governments, secular power, secular media and secular economics and business structures to wage war against the people of the gospel. You have to choose one of the two kingdoms to belong to.

Now here's the thing: Most of you, like Daniel, are called to serve in the structures of Babylon, and the book of Daniel is a manual for how to survive, thrive and shine as God's people in Babylon in any age.

The book of Daniel is written in a very interesting, albeit confusing, way. Chapters 1–7 are all about the events of Daniel's life in Babylon. You'll find a lot of famous stories in there--Daniel in the Lion's Den; S, M, and A and the fiery furnace, and many others. But then, chapters 8–12 are Daniel's prophecy about the restoration of Israel, the coming of Christ and the end of the world.

- Chapter 1 is written in Hebrew, because it starts in the land of Israel.
- Chapters 2–7 are written in Aramaic, which was the language of Babylon, because then events take place in Babylon.
- Then, chapters 8–12, which are the prophecies about the future, shift back to Hebrew again, because we're back in the realm of God's people.
- The question the book of Daniel presents is: You've learned how to act in the Hebrew chapters; when you're on home turf; in the church; in a place where all the rulers are Christian. But have you learned how to thrive and shine in the Aramaic chapters? Can you translate your witness, your faithfulness, from the church realm to the secular realm?

What does faithfulness to God look like in a 'secular' realm controlled by secular powers at war with the gospel?

This is where most of you are. I work in the church. I am in the realm of God's people. I operate in Hebrew, so to speak. You work in the world. You work in Aramaic. Like I always say, "I get paid to be good. You are good for nothing." Just kidding.

² See Rev 17–18.

Let's get back to the story: Daniel is 1 of 4 young men--good looking, smart, healthy, athletic--conscripted into Nebuchadnezzar's service. But don't think of this like an episode of the Bachelor: Hebrew edition. Daniel says they were put under the chief eunuch, which means they would have been made eunuchs--which means their capacity to have kids was removed. Not only were they stolen from their homeland, their parents would have been murdered and any siblings they had would have been divided up and distributed as slaves. Plato said that people enrolled in these training programs were usually 14–17 years old so we can assume all this happened when Daniel was about 15.

Nebuchadnezzar then has their names changed. They had good, Hebrew names which pointed to the glory of God. Nebuchadnezzar changed their names to speak praise to his gods.

- **Daniel:** "God is my judge" → **Belteshazzar:** "Baal protects the king"
- **Hananiah:** "God is gracious" → **Shadrach:** "Under the Command of Aku (the moon god)"
- **Mishael:** "There is none like God?" → **Meshach:** "There is none like Aku (the moon god)"
- **Azariah:** "God has helped me" → **Abed-Nego:** "Servant of Nebo (Babylonian god of wisdom)" So, he was in charge of finding Nebo or whatever

So, pause for a minute to think about what happened to the world of these 15 year olds. Keep in mind, these are real people, not fairy tale characters. These high-school aged boys watched their land invaded and ravaged, their families killed, their Temple desecrated, their futures as husbands and fathers destroyed, and their names changed to give worship to a foreign deity. Some of you feel like you've been put into a difficult environment to be a Christian is. I daresay Daniel and his friends have you beat.

So, again: What does faithfulness in this kind of environment look like?

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. The foods of Babylon were forbidden to Israelites to eat in the Torah. So, here's their first test of faith: Will they obey the Scriptures or will they conform to Babylon? Daniel asks that he and his friends not have to eat.

9 Now God had caused the official to show favor and compassion to Daniel, 10 but the official told Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you." 11 Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, 12 "Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink.

Now, please, don't be shortsighted and think that Daniel just gave you some secret, superior diet. Some of you are like, "I knew it. Vegetables and water. Only whole grains. Non-GMO stuff." That's not the point. These were evidently the only things he could eat that would guarantee he wasn't ritually defiled. You're free to follow this Daniel diet if you want, but that's not the point of this chapter. And so help me if you use this chapter to find justification for an essential oil our relationship is over.

Daniel said, "Let us eat these things, **13 Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see."** **14 So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days.**

15 At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food. 19 The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king's service. 20 In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom.

God blessed them! When you commit to do things God's way and honor him, he honors you. This is not a magic formula. Sometimes, as we'll see in Daniel, you do the right thing and suffer for it. But I'm telling you, a consistent biblical testimony is that those who honor God, he honors. Often he brings glory to his name by prospering you beyond your abilities so that people will see how God has honored you and glorify him.

Key phrase: **You can't make a difference unless you are different**

So what does that look like today? How do we keep from 'defiling ourselves with the royal food and wine' today?

1. **We are different because... we live by different values**

- Particularly, in relation to the big 3. St. Augustine said that followers of Jesus are most distinguishable from the world in their attitudes toward 3 things. The big 3: **money, sex, and power**.
- **Money:** Babylon approaches money from the standpoint of acquisition. Get all you can. Keep all you can. Maybe give away a little, we should be responsible with it, but money is lifeblood. Get it. Keep it. Save it. For the believer, money is a tool to prosper the Kingdom of God. Yes, we live off of it, but as God prospers me I don't think so much in terms of how to advance my standard of living, but advance my standard of giving. Let me ask. Is money for you primarily something to acquire and enjoy, and give a little bit away on the side; or a tool to bless, empower, and prosper the Kingdom of God, and enjoy a little bit of on the side? Which is true of you? "**sufficiently, _____ extravagantly.**" **Live/Give; Give/Live**
- For the follower of Jesus, their work serves a dual purpose. Not only are you actualizing your potential and getting paid, you are blessing others. Think of like the honeybee. Around this time of year, as the yellow plague of pollen descend on us, we see honeybees going to work. They go from flower to flower. They are gathering pollen, their primary source of protein. They need it to survive and feed their young. But there is another benefit to their work. When these bees go out flower-hopping they end up taking pollen from flower to flower. Many flowers that cannot self-pollinate, and so this is survival. For the bee, their work is not about themselves. That's how you should approach work, and that will be shown by the spirit you carry into the career and what you do with the profits from it.
- **Sex:** Babylon approaches sex from the standpoint of, "It's all about me. If it feels good, it can't be wrong. What I desire, if it feels good and I don't feel like I'm hurting anybody, is what I am entitled to." The

Christian sees sex as a gift of God to be used for God's purposes. It's powerful, and it should be used only to facilitate intimacy between a man and a woman in the safety of a covenant marriage and to propagate the species. It was said of the early Christians that they stood in stark contrast to other Roman citizens, because Christians were "promiscuous with their money and guarded with their beds," while other Romans "were guarded with their money and promiscuous with their beds."

- **Power**, the third of the big 3: For Babylon, whatever power you have, use it to your advantage. If it's your looks, use that. If it's your money, use that. If it's your talent, use that. If it's your majority culture status, use that. If it's your minority status, use that. The Christian sees any position of power and privilege like Jesus did--a place from which to serve. How can I use this position of power or privilege to lift up those around me?
 - **Question: Is the trajectory of your life going toward suffering or away from it?** For the world, it is away from it. Use whatever power you have to take you and those you love away from suffering. For the follower of Jesus, it is the opposite. The trajectory of your life is moving toward suffering. And that means the more power you have, the more you are freed up to bless others. Here's a good test case: How are you thinking of using your retirement? Are you thinking, "Finally, I'll have enough money where I can just get up and do what I want to do all day with no obligations?" Or will you be thinking, "This will be great. I won't have to work to support myself. Think of all the time and opportunity I'll have to bless others."

The Christian is perhaps most distinct from the world in how he or she approaches these 3 things. That will make you strange (drummer) and it will show up everywhere!

- **It will show up in how you approach your career.** For you college students and young professionals rather than asking simply, "Which career will make me most fulfilled or get me the most money," you'll ask, "Which career can best serve the Great Commission?"
 - Go2
- **It will show up in how you approach your retirement**
 - Most of us live in subconscious pursuit of the American Dream. What is that? Make all you can. Become self-reliant, an island of self-sufficiency. Retire early and enjoy the fruit of your labor.
 - The Gospel Mission is different from the American Dream. The Gospel Mission says that we have one shot on earth to let people know about Jesus. To quote the late Keith Green, this generation of Christians is responsible for this generation of souls, all over the world. And so we never stop. We never give up. If we are prospered, we have more to share and sacrifice. If we retire early, there is still more we can do. We never really retire because there are always people who need Jesus. When you approach retirement, you're not focused on a life of leisure but how you can use the best years of your life to serve.
- **It will show up in how you manage your business**
 - I know of a business that commits to invest 10% and prospered. This is not a requirement for all, nor is it a formula that God guarantees will make you successful. You need to prayerfully discern what God is calling you to do. The point is that God often glorifies himself by prospering you when you distinguish yourself from the world around you and do things his way.
- **It will show up in how you manage your budget**

- I've told you this before, but if you are committed to follow Jesus with your money, you'll be at least **3 steps behind** everyone else who makes the same amount of money as you. Follow me here. One thing that is true of human nature--you know who is about the same income level as you and you are always comparing: "How do they afford that? They must be house poor. Well, clearly they spend all their money on clothes. They must have an inheritance or trust they are drawing from." The Bible teaches 3 things about our money that differ from the world. 1. Don't go into debt. They say the average Raleigh citizen lives about 5% above their means and is somewhere in the neighborhood of 15K in credit card debt. 2. Save. Proverbs tells us that the wise man saves! 3. Be generous (and 10% is the starting point for that.) If you are being wise with your money, you'll be at least 3 steps behind everybody else that makes the same amount of money as you and that is noticeable!

Do you look different in these areas?

2. We are different because... We refuse to compromise integrity

- For the Christian, convictions, and our integrity, is not something we do because it pays off practically ("Well, I don't want to get a bad reputation") or because we don't want to get caught ("I don't want to get in trouble"). We pursue integrity because we answer to God.
- Pastor Bryan told me about a hotel owner at his previous church that chose not to offer porn at his hotel, even though that is one of the most lucrative things a hotel owner can do--it brings in about 100K profit per year for even a small hotel!
- Eric Liddell

3. We are different because... We conform to Scripture, not culture

- The way of Jesus is counter-cultural in every society. Just in different ways. In some cultures, it's the Christian's teaching on the sanctity of marriage that offends. In others, it's the gospel's emphasis on grace and generosity and giving away power. In some cultures, it's Jesus' emphasis on the equality of all people that threatens to overturn the system. In others, it's Jesus' emphasis on the responsibilities and roles we play in relation to others and the requirement to adopt a posture of servanthood toward each other.
- When we live according to the ways of Jesus, two things happen. We become very offensive to the culture around us. We threaten them. But we also become incredibly attractive. There is something about us that speaks life and beauty and wholeness.
- One of the great tragedies of the church in the West is how often we have conformed to Babylon d
 - In my library I have a 3-volume history of slavery in the world written by an AA scholar, and one thing he points out is that slavery has been present in almost every powerful culture in history. One of the effects of the Fall is that we tend to use whatever power we have, whether as individuals or groups, to exploit other people who are less powerful. And he shows that when you go back through history, you see that in almost every culture with power, slavery existed. It happened in Asian cultures, African cultures, European cultures. Numerically, the largest slave trade took place in Arab cultures. The particularly tragedy, he said, is that it happened in Western cultures, which believed a gospel that undermined the very nature of slavery. Our gospel taught a) that all people were equal because they

were made in the image of God; b) it taught that all people had a common problem--sin, and a common solution--Jesus and c) our gospel taught that it was the responsibility of the strong to lift up the weak; the responsibility of the insider to bring in the outsider; because that's what Jesus did for us. We were the weak and the outsider when Jesus brought us in. And yet, we find the church in the West not only complicit in, but a defender and proponent of slavery. They conformed to the world! Our SBC was formed because... What a terrible thing to have to overcome. We were more shaped by our culture than the Word of God and that left such a lasting legacy of damage we deal with to this day. Now, eventually, the gospel started to win out--this AA scholar pointed out that it was only in Christianized cultures that we see reforms for slavery come from within. In no other world culture do you find all the guilt literature that went along with the slave trade or all the internal pressure to change. That's the good news. The church conformed to Babylon rather than letting the Scriptures shape them, to devastating consequence.

- The question for us today: Where else do we see this happening? I'll give you a few. Christians are more and more shaped by the world when it comes to how we look at sex and gender.
 - Stats
 - PD story: no one believes that anymore. You'll lose your job. What will you do?
 - Don't congratulate yourself because you get the slavery question right or because you're so bold on the wrongness of racism. No one I know really debates that anymore. There's a famous line attributed to the Reformer Martin Luther: "The courage of the soldier is tested in how well he stands where the battle is the hottest, not in how brave he postures himself where the battle is no longer being fought."
 - BTW, next week...
- And please don't think these are just right or left issues I'm talking about, as if I'm trying to push you from one political leaning to the other. Being shaped by Scripture will put us out of fashion with both the political left and the political right. I'm not saying that both these platforms are morally equivalent or there's no wiser choice between them, just that neither for us captures the essence of the Kingdom of God because both are political parties of Babylon.
 - Just that there are many things associated with the political left we must profoundly and thoroughly reject: The left tends to reject the value of life in the womb. They treat human life like a commodity for the convenience of the powerful. They reject Christian understandings of morality and gender and our responsibility before God. Not only does the left tend to subscribe to this morality, they leave less and less room for any disagreement with it. If you don't conform, they will shut you down.
 - There are many things associated with the political right that we must reject. Some Christians on the right go beyond a healthy patriotism and appreciation for American freedoms to an unhealthy embrace of Christian nationalism where our hope for the future is American power and might. Some on the right speak as if our only responsibility is to protect our own rights and pursue our own interests and we don't have responsibility for any less privileged around us.
- A follower of Jesus will look different from all things Babylon.

Let's return to our main idea: **You won't make a difference unless you are different.** Or let me adjust it just slightly: **The power to make a difference is only found in the commitment to be different.**

While, as I explained, this is not a magic formula, God does intend to use his people like Daniel, Shadrach, Meshack and Abednego to challenge the world system, so we should not be surprised when he exalts his people as they pursue what is right just like he did Daniel and his friends.

The power to make a difference is only found in the commitment to be different.

In the NT, Jesus compared it to being salt. Salt preserves the food that it is in and it brings out the beauties of flavor in the food. If the salt lost its saltiness, Jesus said, it was worthless. To be thrown out. The same thing is true of the Christian that conforms to the world, he says. They neither help preserve the culture they are in nor do they demonstrate the distinctive beauty of Christ in the culture. And, such, they are useless to God and the world and will be thrown out. If you study the history of Christianity in our country, you'll see that a lot of churches, particularly in the so-called mainstream denominations, around the mid 20th century, as our culture began to change its opinion on orthodox Christian teaching and Christian morality, changed right along with them. They said things like, "If we don't change our old-fashioned, outdated views on these things, we'll be so offensive to our culture we'll lose all influence." And yet, those very denominations that did that--and changed their views on morality and doctrine--they were the ones that shrunk the fastest. Today, their numbers are incredibly small and they've become altogether irrelevant.

If you want to make a difference, you have to be different! In some ways, the more different you are, the more clearly you point people to Jesus. Now, one caveat: don't be weird. There's no excuse for Christian weirdness. BTW, some of you have met some weird Christians and that turned you off. What I've learned, these people would have been weird whether or not they were Christians.

That caveat aside, **If you want to make a difference, you have to be different!** The best example of this is Jesus.

Jesus' ministry was a paradox because never was there anyone who so exalted God's standards of righteousness. He said that he came not to abolish any part of the law; that sooner would heaven and earth pass away than one jot or tittle of God's law pass away, and that except our righteousness exceeded that of the Pharisees we would never see the kingdom of God. Yet, at the same time, never was there one so effectively gathered outcast--be they the prostitutes, the tax collectors--both the oppressed and the oppressors sat at his feet; the thieves and the victims.

I believe the Apostle John captured the heart of Jesus' ministry in John 1:14 when he described Jesus as "full of grace and truth." Grace and truth. Truth without grace is fundamentalism; grace without truth is sentimentality. Neither is attractive without the other; and one without the other is not Jesus. When we are full of grace and truth, like Jesus, we can expect to provoke the same reaction. To attract the broken and repel the proud. To gather the outcast and be maligned by secular and religious power.

And that's who Daniel is really all about. It's not that Daniel and his friends could be righteous enough to bring the world back to God, or that we could be. Daniel is a prophecy of a Savior who would come--Jesus. He would perfectly display the Kingdom of God--he would not defile himself with any of Babylon's delicacies. And then

he would most put on display the beauty of God when we rejected and crucified him and he came back from the dead offering salvation and grace to all who would receive him. It wasn't just that God made him look "better and fatter" after 10 days; God raised him from the dead. And now, because he has done that and demonstrated the victory for us, as we follow his pattern we can demonstrate the beauty of God just like he did.

Next week, we'll see how God uses miraculous answers to prayer (Dan 2)