



IN THE WORLD. NOT OF IT

Over the next few months, we're going to be looking at a book that was written for a people in exile. A people living 1000 miles from their homeland; a people who had to practice their faith in a culture diametrically opposed to it.

Some of us know what that feels like: to be far from home. But as Christians, that should be true of all of us! We're all singing the Lord's song in a 'strange land' (Psalm 137:4). So, how do we keep the faith in such a land? Endure, overcome, 'stand in the place where you live' (to quote a classic R.E.M. track)?

That's what this book, the book of Daniel, is all about.

Let's take a look at the opening chapter:

Daniel 1

The book begins in 605 BC, and on a pretty depressing note: Nebuchadnezzar II, King of Babylon, invades the land of Judah, raids the temple in Jerusalem, and takes a whole bunch of children, members of Judah's nobility, into exile. It's a way of saying, "I'm greater than you, greater than your God, and I own you." And he enrolls them into the 'School of the Chaldeans' - Babylon's very own 'School of Witchcraft & Wizardry.'

Among these kids are Daniel and his 3 friends, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah.

Immediately, they're given new names – names reflecting the gods of Babylon (like being called 'Satan is Lord.'). They're taught the language and occult literature of the Babylonians. They're given a medical procedure (eunuch or *saris* means more than just 'official!'). And they're given the food of the king: meat sacrificed to idols.

I.e. they are being culturally and ideologically brainwashed.

But notice vs2: "The Lord gave (*yiten*) Jehoiakim into his hand ..." And vs9: "God gave (*yiten*) them favour ..." And vs17: "To these 4 young men God gave (*yiten*) knowledge ..." I.e. God had put His people in this land for a reason: to make a difference to it. And the same is true of us.

So, how do we do that? Picture it like a river. There are 3, mutually exclusive, approaches:

1) Sit on the riverbank. I.e. adopt a ghetto mentality: watch only Christian movies; read only Christian books; listen to only Christian music; hang out with only Christian friends. The Christian bubble approach to life.

Now creating distance can be necessary, sometimes (hence all that advice in Proverbs). But if that's your stance towards *everything*, that could affect the spiritual impact you have the potential to make. Because if your faith can't cope with the world around you, can't hear and handle the counter-messages, can't distinguish between the good and the not-so-good, then your faith is weak – and so is your witness. If you want to speak the Gospel to people, you need to understand this (the Bible), but you also need to understand *them* – otherwise they won't understand you.

You need to be able to speak the language of Babylon.

So, being a part of this world matters – as Daniel and his friends realised. Because not everything about our culture is dangerous, only elements of it. However, it is possible to go too far with this.

Which brings us to option #2:

2) Go with the flow. No-one wants to be ostracised or persecuted, right? And besides, the world can look very appealing, sometimes. So, the temptation is to turn our backs on what God says; even on God Himself.

And it can happen in subtle ways.

E.g. there's a trend amongst Christians today to look at Scripture through the lens of the world rather than the other way around. Now again, don't get me wrong: we can't read the Bible in a vacuum, without reference to history or geography or culture. Nor should we approach the Bible with an anti-scientific bent, as if physics or chemistry or biology have nothing to teach us (the Bible is *not* a science text book!). What I mean is: we tend to read the Bible through the lens of our own likes and dislikes, i.e. we make *our* desires the authority in this equation. And today, that idea is pervasive, among non-Christians and Christians alike.

If we want to be used by God, we need to do what Daniel and his friends do: make sure *He* is the final authority, not us or the world around us.

Which brings us to option #3:

3) Swim against the current. Daniel and his friends are immersed into this new culture, but there's one thing they refuse: the king's meat. Why? Because 1) that meat had been sacrificed to one of Israel's biggest weaknesses: idols / false gods; and 2) in this 1 thing they get a say, the chance to declare who their God is and what He's like.

And here's why it works: they do it from within. Because yes, what we choose to do and not do can speak volumes to the world around us – but only if they can *see* it. And that means we need to be there, living amongst them, working amongst them, caring about them (Jeremiah 29:4-7).

And the greatest example of that is? Jesus Himself.

On the night before His crucifixion, Jesus sent His disciples into the world, just as He had been sent (John 17:18). And He sends us, too. Is it hard work? Yes. Would it be easier to go with one of the other options? Yes. Would God be able to use you there? Probably not.

God calls us to be fruitful, where He has put us. And that means we need to be faithful. To Him. And to others.

The Long Game

So, Daniel and his friends opt to eat veggies, for 10 days (the horror!). And at the end of this experiment, they look healthier than the others. And not only do they graduate, but by the end of the chapter, we're told that Daniel remained in Babylon to the first year of Cyrus, King of Persia. That's 70 years later! 7 decades of quiet, patient, unbroken loyalty, where God has placed him. What a lesson in staying power! And we need to have the same attitude if God is going to use us. Where *we* are.

The exile would have been viewed as a negative – as the most terrible situation Israel had ever faced. And in many ways, it was. But the exile was bigger than just Israel. It was tied to God's heart for the whole world. God had given (*yiten*) Israel to Babylon so that people would come to know Him (i.e. they were literally God's gift!).

All of which means that the exile was a positive thing. Uncomfortable, yes. Challenging, yes. But also, positive.

And so is yours.

This week, as you navigate your way through the world and all its brokenness, may you refuse to either sit on the riverbank or go with the flow. May you dive into that part of the world where God has placed you, swim against that current, and make a difference for Him.

May you be in the world. Not of it.