

How to Reach the World Without Being Worldly

What can we learn from Daniel's example when we are tempted to cave in to societal pressures?

What would you consider to be the most thrilling book in Scripture? I'm not talking about a comforting or favorite book. I mean a book like a ride in a rocket-powered convertible, over the Grand Canyon, with the top down, barefoot. One that will yank you up, spin you around and leave you changed forever.

I think the book of Daniel qualifies for the short list as the most mind-blowingly fantastic book in Scripture. It speaks to the challenges you face every day and shows vividly how to confront the most extreme hardships you could possibly encounter.

Daniel's story begins with a teenager snatched from his home in Jerusalem to a city 900 miles away. I say a city, but she is more. Her name is Babylon, and she is an attitude, a lifestyle—a creed.

Make no mistake, she aims to seduce. Posing as the beautiful life, Babylon morphs into the current image of what every worldly man and woman wants to be—deserves to be.

She is popular, desirable, intoxicating and religious. She believes in so much of everything that one would be hard-pressed to tell if she believes in anything.

To worship self is to worship her. To worship her is to worship her king.

Few could resist Babylon's charms. Few had a firm enough hold on reality not to fall for her pretense. Daniel holds his

place in Scripture because he was one of the few.

Kidnapped from his boyhood home, Daniel spent at least seven decades of his life there. He victoriously faced down the temptations and threats of this kingdom of evil. Our goal must be to join him as individuals who can live in an extravagant, excessive culture without being poisoned by it. We need to develop alarms for Babylon's charms.

Sensory Overload

We live in a day more like the Babylon Daniel faced than we even imagine. The same forces that sought to seduce young Hebrews surround us moment by moment.

The illustrative head of Babylon was none other than Nebuchadnezzar, her most famous king. A powerful leader, his accomplishments during this period of history were legendary, and the empire passed down to him by his father expanded and prospered under his rule.

Handsome young Daniel encountered Babylon when the cup of her inviting intoxication was overflowing. She doesn't just offer him a sip. In time, she offered him the world.

Along with Daniel, three other Hebrew youths—Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah—were also taken captive from Judah. The king's special purpose in ordering their capture is explained in Daniel 1:3-5: "Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring in some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility—young men 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. The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service" (NIV).

Many scholars believe the young men were probably around 15

years old. Assuming this is a sound estimation, they were intensely indoctrinated in the Babylonian “language and literature” from then until they were 18 or so. We’ll grasp their undertaking more accurately by understanding the word “literature” in verse 4 to encompass anything in written form, including history religious beliefs and all manner of cultural propaganda.

Picture the culture that surrounded the Hebrew boys in Babylon. What kinds of things do you imagine boys that age would have found impressive in such a rich indulgent environment?

I was raised in a small Arkansas town with few entertainment amenities. The closest skating rink was a half hour away, and the closest bowling alley was too far to bother. Most of the time, I just stuck to riding my banana-seat bike.

Then we moved to Houston.

Neon lights. Billboards. Adult entertainment businesses I didn’t even know existed. On the lighter side, skating rinks and bowling alleys dotted every suburb, along with malls, superstores and multi-lane freeways.

Total culture shock. My senses were so overstimulated that I hardly knew where to begin.

Expand the balloon of sensory overload until it nearly pops, and you’ll have some idea of what Daniel and the others faced. Jerusalem was a thriving city, teeming with people, but even at its worst, comparatively speaking, the teens would have led a sheltered existence within its walls. Their transition would have been tantamount to moving from a stickball field into a video game convention only to be relentlessly indoctrinated by experts on exactly how to win.

Whether or not we are conscious of it, you and I are daily being indoctrinated and trained by our culture. Look back at

Daniel 1:4 and observe how closely these descriptions of the young Hebrews mirror the values of the culture surrounding us. The high premiums our culture places on age, appearance and intelligence are obvious.

Stolen Identity

Immersing the young Israelites in the exciting Babylonian culture began the process of indoctrination. In order to further it, each of the young men was given a Babylonian name by the chief of Nebuchadnezzar's court (see Dan. 1:6). Initially, each Hebrew boy's name contained a reference to God. But in stark contrast to their original names, each new name contained some reference to a false god.

Bible scholar John Goldingay explains: "The name Daniel means, 'God is my judge.' Hananiah means, 'Yah has been gracious.' Mishaël means, 'Who is what God is?' And, finally, Azariah means 'Yah has helped.'

"Daniel becomes Belteshazzar, ('Bel will protect'), Hananiah becomes Shadrach ('inspired of Aku'), Mishaël becomes Meshach ('belonging to Aku'), and Azariah becomes Abednego ('servant of Nego')" (Word Biblical Commentary, Nelson Reference).

Bel, Nego and Aku were false gods of the Babylonians. Renaming the young men accordingly was a deliberate attempt to echo constant contradictions of the truth regarding their God.

According to Goldingay, assigning new names was a common court practice in the ancient world. Its blatant intention was to change the entire identity of the bearer until the life matched the title. The new name marked new ownership and was meant to hail a new destiny.

Actually, God originated the concept. We see the practice of renaming in Scripture as early as Genesis when He changed Abram's name to Abraham. The world system with the enemy at its helm could not resist offering its own counterfeits to

serve its idols.

God and the world have opposite agendas represented in their name-giving. God's agenda is always based on truth while the world's agenda—captained by Satan—is replete with deception.

Recently I had the privilege of leading a three-day conference for college-age women. At one point, my fellow speakers and I wanted to spend a few minutes speaking the truth of God's Word over them concerning their identities in Christ.

In order to clear the way, I asked any of them who felt hindered by hurtful, destructive things said over them or names they'd been called to write those statements on a piece of paper and lay it on the altar. To our surprise, the aisles were congested until the altar that wrapped all the way around the platform was completely covered in stacks of paper.

Has the world (or worse yet, a loved one) ever tried to give you a bad name or a bad identity? Daniel, Hananiah, Mischael and Azariah prove to us by their example that the world can call us what it wants, but it cannot change who we are.

Resolve to Stand

You, Beloved, are God's. We resist the world's titanic pressure to compromise in the same way Daniel did. We resolve.

The Scriptures say that when he was assigned a daily portion from the king's table, "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" (1:8).

Daniel's resolve demanded something from him daily. Bone-deep resolve doesn't develop by going to church every Sunday morning or going to Bible study every Tuesday night.

Important opportunities like these encourage us in our resolve, but they aren't enough to create and sustain it. Daniel's brand of resolve involved something he was challenged

to practice every single day. In fact, you might say he ate it for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Don't think he wasn't tested and tempted by the sights and scents of succulent foods. Had his decision been easy, it wouldn't have demanded resolve.

I don't know any other way to say this, and goodness knows I learned it the hard way: Goodness is never accidental. Neither is victory coincidental. Both stem from upfront, daily resolve.

Counter Through Consistency

The lifeblood of integrity is becoming the same person no matter where we are—no matter who's around. When we become people of integrity, everything we are on the inside is obvious from the outside. The Latin word for "integrity" literally means "entire."

The essence of the term is wholeness and completeness. Webster's defines it as "the quality or state of being complete or undivided."

You can see, therefore, how much integrity depends on consistency. Integrity not only calls us to live inside out, it keeps the outside from coming in. Consistency in our walk and in our talk becomes a transportable cloak of protection around us, going anywhere we go. Life becomes so much simpler when there aren't so many costume changes.

We will not reach perfection in this lifetime on planet Earth, but we can certainly reach consistency. Indeed we must, or the enemy will nearly burn us alive. Never forget what a good shot he is.

Satan never wastes a fiery dart by aiming at a spot covered by armor. The bull's eye is located dead center in our inconsistency. That's where the enemy plans to bring us down.

Contend Through Conviction

In Daniel 3, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah would be challenged to stand, literally and alone, against the power of the Babylonian empire. And when the worship-crazy king ordered them to bow to his statue, they chose the furnace instead.

Their reply constitutes as fine a statement of devotion to God as any in history: "If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up" (Dan. 3:17-18).

We don't get the feeling from the text that the three young men stepped aside to prepare their statement prior to being dragged before the king. For people with true conviction, certain decisions have already been made. No amount of discussion would change one simple fact: They would not bow. No matter what.

Have you similarly decided you will remain faithful, no matter the cost? Could any circumstance make you renounce your faith in Christ?

The question is posed not only to invite our firm resolve in Christ, but also to consider that until we resolve certain things, Satan will threaten us unmercifully.

You and I, our children and our children's children can resist compromise no matter how stunningly carnal this world becomes. If we resolve.

Do you want to be a Daniel? Do you want to resist the tidal wave of temptation to blend in? Have you predetermined your loyalty to Christ? Do you want to live a life of integrity?

We will do it on purpose or we will not do it at all. The enticing voice of the world calls us from billboard to magazine stand, from television to Internet. God's warning to

Cain has never seemed more corporate: “‘sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you’” (Gen. 4:7).

While others compromised, Daniel and three friends remained obedient to the laws of God. Babylon did everything it could to indoctrinate their minds and steal their souls. But God granted the young men His own knowledge and understanding in every matter. In other words, whatever Babylon taught them, God interpreted to them.

They learned the language, literature and customs all right, but only so God could use them in the midst of it. They read the language of their culture with the lens of God. Thereby, they became culturally relevant without becoming spiritually irrelevant. Against all odds, they retained a God-centered worldview so that ultimately the world could view their God.

Tenacious obedience, Dear One! We will stand firm amid the current of our culture no other way. God will be glorified and blessing will come. Now or later. Here or there.

Enter the true King’s service. A lost world needs to view your God.

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