

Series: Trading the Individualism of Babylon for the Communion of God's family.
Sermon Text: Daniel 1: Daniel in Two Worlds

Good morning! We'll be in ***Daniel chapter 1*** if you would like to follow along. And while you're going there, I'd like to ask a question: *How many of you have heard the term SPIRITUAL FORMATION being used lately, and what do you suppose it means?*" It's a process of personal transformation, guided by spiritual practices like prayer, meditation, scripture study, serving others, and living in community which helps cultivate a deeper relationship with God. Essentially, it's DISCIPLESHIP. Today, we're going to talk about Daniel's spiritual formation in a godly environment and his re-formation by an ungodly empire. Whether we see this or not, we are all being molded and shaped by the environments and influences that are around us. The concept of spiritual formation is illustrated in the biblical account of Daniel, a young man whose identity was significantly impacted by 2 very different environments: ***First***, the godly environment in Jerusalem, and ***second***, the unholy environment of Babylon.

Let's begin by reading ***Daniel 1:1-7*** which I've asked Brian Hansen to come up and read for us. ***In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God. And he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his god. Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility, 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. The king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate, and of the wine that he drank. They were to be educated for three years, and at the end of that time they were to stand before the king. Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah of the tribe of Judah. And the chief of the eunuchs gave them names: Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego.***

Daniel's early life in Jerusalem was characterized by a spiritual formation, rooted in the worship of the one true God. He grew up in a God-honoring culture where names had meaning. The meaning of Daniel's name was "*God is my judge*", and the name reflects the values instilled in him by his parents, his community, and by the word of God. He also would have had a strong emphasis on worship and prayer. As a devout Jew, Daniel would have participated in the regular worship services at the temple in Jerusalem, which included sacrifices, prayers, and praise. He would also have been taught to pray regularly, both publicly and privately, seeking God's guidance and intervention in his life.

Here are some of the tactics that we will see which were used by king Nebuchadnezzar to erase the formal identity of Daniel and his friends: Indoctrination, Renaming, Obligation, Isolation. These are some of the same things Gary talked about last week with his personal experience of time spent in the military, but let's look more closely at Babylon's tactics used against God's people.

1. **Physical removal from their homeland.** By forcefully removing Daniel and his peers from their homeland, King Nebuchadnezzar physically isolated them from their culture, religion, and familiar roots. Jerusalem was the center of Jewish worship with the temple as a physical point of their connection to God. Relocating them to Babylon, a foreign land with a vastly different culture, aimed to sever their ties to the Jewish community and its practices, weakening their devotion to God.
2. **Separation from family and community.** Isolating from their family and community was a deliberate tactic to disrupt the social structure that reinforced Jewish identity without the guidance of parents, priests, and elders. Daniel and the others were more vulnerable to Babylonian influence. This isolation aimed to replace their Jewish identity with loyalty to Babylon.
3. **Dietary changes.** Nebuchadnezzar used food as a tool of assimilation, isolating the captives from the Jewish dietary laws which were central to their covenant with God. The King's food likely included items forbidden by the Torah (unclean meats, food offered idols) and consuming it would have violated religious purity. Nebuchadnezzar aimed to erode their spiritual

discipline and loyalty to God, replacing it with dependence on the king's provision.

4. **Education and language.** Nebuchadnezzar isolated the young men from Jewish teaching by immersing them in Babylonian education. Learning the Chaldean language and literature, which included Babylonian myths, laws, and possibly religious practices was intended to reorient their world views away from the Torah and Jewish traditions. This intellectual isolation from their sacred text aimed to reshape their thinking and beliefs to align with Babylonian theology.
5. **Prolonged isolation through training.** The extended duration of their training served as a form of temporal isolation, allowing prolonged exposure to Babylonian culture without interference from Jewish influence. This immersion period was designated to gradually erode their commitment to their faith and replace it with Babylonian values.
6. **Integration into the Babylonian court.** By grooming the captives for high positions in the Babylonian Court, Nebuchadnezzar isolated them from their former status as Jewish Nobles and integrated them into the Babylonian elite. This social realignment aimed to shift their allegiance from God and Judea to the king and his empire. The promise of status and privilege was meant to make them feel invested in Babylon.
7. **Renaming to erase Jewish identity.** Names in Jewish culture often reflect their faith and connection to God. As I already mentioned, Daniel's name means "*God is my judge.*" By assigning Babylonian names, they tried to strip them of their Jewish identity and align them with Babylonian gods. This renaming was a form of psychological isolation, distancing them from their heritage and signaling their integration into the new culture identity.

Now, let's read ***Daniel 1:17-19*** which says: ***As for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams. At the end of the time, when the king had commanded that they should be brought in, the chief of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar. And the king spoke with them, and among all of them***

none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishaal, and Azariah. Therefore, they stood before the king. Their faithfulness in education and God-given success was a testament to God's favor by allowing them to retain their identity while serving in a foreign court.

Today's Christians often find themselves in a world that in many ways mirrors the ungodly empire of Babylon. Although we are not in a physical exile, today's culture with its values is often in direct opposition to Christian teaching. This presents a constant pressure to conform and to be spiritually reformed. The concept that we're all being informed by something remains profoundly irrelevant in today's modern Babylon. That's why the Apostle Paul tells us in Romans 12:2, *"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."*

In closing, I'd like to reflect on my testimony in Christian community and contrast Daniel's formation with ours. I had the opportunity a few months back to give you a testimony about why your presence matters here. In this community, where I was able to hear the word of God and learn about God, I was able to see the word of God being lived out. I learned by watching you. I had a good man to look up to and imitate--they were godly examples. I got to see people pray with each other, serve one another, comfort those that were hurting, help those in need, encourage others, and learn how to worship. You see, I didn't have an upbringing like Daniel. Most of us born in this country weren't raised like Daniel and have no concept of it. Being a devout Jew in a noble family, every aspect of Daniel's upbringing was rooted in spiritual education. In our group study someone mentioned how in the story of Daniel, God takes Daniel out of the community in Jerusalem and places him in the evil empire of Babylon and with us he does just the opposite--God saves us out of an evil empire and into a community of believers for our spiritual formation. When I look around this morning and see all these young people here, along with younger believers and people who have not yet trusted Jesus, I think about the opportunities we have to be a part of their spiritual formation and how that could impact their future.

Daniels' early grounding in Jerusalem sustained him in Babylon. Our consistent engagement with scripture, prayer, and Christian community is vital for maintaining our identity in a world that resists God's ways. We need to be discerning about the influences we allow into our lives, choosing to nourish our spirits with what aligns with God's truth. Like Daniel, we may find ourselves in positions of influence within this modern Babylon. Our challenge is to remain faithful to God, demonstrating integrity, courage, and wisdom in our interactions with the surrounding culture by anchoring ourselves in the unchanging faith of God's word and relying on His strength. Daniel and his friends didn't just survive Babylon they thrived by becoming living testimonies of God's power and faithfulness they stand in. The question is, "How will you stand firm in your faith when the world demands compromise?" Let Daniel's story inspire you to live with courage, conviction, and unwavering trust in God. Faith in a foreign land isn't easy, but it's worth it; and as Daniel's story shows us, it's not just about surviving the culture, it's about transforming it with the power of unwavering faith. Ponder all this with your people, and remember, we never need to take our next step alone--spiritual growth is a communal, family project.

Considerations for discussion leaders:

1. Keep circling back to the big idea and main points of the passage to stay on track.
2. Keep the group small for deeper sharing.
3. Keep the discussion around 30 mins. Once you hit the "sweet spot", spend your time there.
4. Keep these simple questions in your back pocket: What is God teaching you? What are you going to do about it? How will it help you love & serve others?

Sunday to Monday Connection: We need to be discerning about the influences we allow into our lives, choosing to nourish our spirits with what aligns with God's truth.

- **Question:** Who, here at landmark or in the larger body of Christ, has been a good role model in your life, one that has healthy and godly habits that nourish their souls?
- **Next Step:** You are invited to reach out and talk with this person, first to appreciate what you see in them, and second to ask them to help you develop the habit(s) you want to have.

- **Note:** If you are not a Christ follower and would like to investigate further what all this might mean for you, please come talk with any of our leaders, or the person who brought you.

Alternative takeaways to discuss with your people:

- We talked about how, in many cultures, names have meanings. What does your name mean, and did your parents give it to you with some sort of intention? If you don't know, maybe ask them.
- Review the list of 7 tactics used by Babylon against God's people. Which of these is Satan using today, and how is he doing so? As you identify ancient tactics in modern methods, discuss ways that we can carefully counteract and resist their effects.
- Have you ever experienced anything like Daniel and his friends or perhaps like Pastor Gary did during his military service mentioned 2 weeks ago? Discuss this with your group, especially how it has shaped you and what you've learned from Scripture about it.
- Romans 12:2 says, "*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*" Meditate on this concept in the context of Romans 12 and this lesson, then discuss your successes and challenges with it.
- Discuss how our exile is similar and different from that of Daniel and his friends. Specifically, talk about how many of us did not grow up in a healthy Christian culture, and how this impacts us as we attempt to resist cultural pressures as people who came to faith as a teen or even as an adult.
- Should Christians avoid culture or engage it, and why? Answer this question, not from personal experience, but from the example of Daniel and his friends.

Additional considerations:

- Ways that modern Babylon seeks to change us. **Indoctrination through media:** We are constantly bombarded with messages through entertainment, social media, and news outlets that promote a secular worldview. **Subtle renaming of values:** While our names may not be changed, the meaning and importance of traditional Christian values are often redefined or dismissed by the dominant culture. Concepts like marriage, family, and even truth itself are being reinterpreted in ways that contradict biblical understanding. **Temptations of worldly comfort:** The allure of material wealth, success, and social acceptance can tempt Christians to compromise their faith. Just as the king's food was meant to entice Daniel, the pursuit of worldly comfort can lead to a gradual drifting away from God's principles. For instance, prioritizing career advancement over Sabbath observant or engaging in unethical practices for financial gain are modern parallels.
- **Jewish culture:** Daniel and his friends grew up in a devout Jewish heritage, where spiritual education was a way of life. These influences molded and shaped him in every aspect of their upbringing. Learning from the Scriptures

would've been central to Jewish spiritual education, providing them with a deep understanding of God 's character and covenant with Israel. They also would've been engaging in acts of service and charity as a part of their faith, teaching the importance of caring for the poor, the widows, the orphans, and helping others in need. They would've been deeply rooted in the community, family worship, traditions, and festivals of the Jewish people, especially temple rituals, and observing the Sabbath. They would've been encouraged to recognize God 's presence in nature and history and in the livelihood of His people. They likely learned about God's intervention in the lives of the Israelites, the struggles, the triumphs, the ongoing relationship between God and these people, and with one another in a godly community. They likely attended temple ceremonies and witnessed the leadership of prophets, like Jeremiah and Zephaniah. This environment fostered in them a strong foundation of faith, obedience to God commands, and an understanding of their identity as a member of God 's chosen people. This early formation was crucial and would shape their character and personality that would form their identity.

- **Exercising faith in Babylonian exile.** This wasn't just a physical displacement, it was a spiritual battleground. Daniel and his friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, were not just captives. They were young men faced with the monumental challenge of remaining faithful to God in the land that demanded re-formation to pagan practices. Imagine being a teenager torn from your homeland, watching the temple of your God filled with foreign soldiers. Daniel and his friends were taken from Jerusalem and thrust into the glittering but godless empire of Babylon. Their courage wasn't just in their refusal, but it was also in trusting God to honor their obedience. Daniel 1 isn't just a story of a dietary test; it's also a testament to the power of faith in the face of reformation. They chose faith over fear, conviction over convenience, and God did not fail. He gave them exceptional wisdom, understanding, and knowledge. King Nebuchadnezzar found none like these--they were 10 times better than all who followed Babylonian ways. Daniel was particularly blessed with the ability to interpret dreams. The pressure to conform is just as real in our world today. It may not come in the form of royal food and wine, but it's there in social media, workplace environments, and cultural norms that often contradict God's word.
- **Daniel's story challenges us.** How can we stand firm in our faith when the world demands re-formation? It starts with resolve and decisions made in advance, like Daniel did, to honor God no matter the cost. It requires humility and wisdom, knowing when to speak, when to act, and when to trust God with the outcome. It demands deep belief in God 's faithfulness, trusting that He will provide strength, protection and favor when we choose to follow him. Take a moment to reflect on your own life: “Are there areas where the world is asking you to compromise your faith?” Perhaps it's in the workplace where integrity is tested. Maybe it's in relationships, where standing firm in your values feels isolating. Maybe it's in the quiet moments with the temptation to prioritize convenience over conviction. Daniel and his friends remind us that

we don't stand alone. The same God who gave them strength in Babylon stands with us today. He honors those who trust him, providing not only the courage to stand, but also the blessings that follow obedience.

- **Name changes:** The Jewish names of Daniel and his three friends were Hananiah, Mishael, Azariah. In Babylon, their names were changed to Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.