

Good morning everyone, my name is Mark and I'm one of the pastors here at North Shore Alliance Church. We've just finished 4 weeks of focus on mission—local and global—many thanks to Dave, our Mission Outreach team, and to our missionaries for leading us. This morning marks the beginning of a 7 week teaching series on the first 6 chapters from the Book of Daniel.

As I begin, I offer a brief warning. I expect that many of us will not like what God does—and doesn't do—in the Daniel story. I expect that Daniel's experience in a foreign land will resonate with your own experience—he lived in a culture that was hostile to his faith; so do we. And I expect that many of us will be uncomfortable with what God asked of Daniel and his friends—the way they lived has implications for our lives today.

Throughout this series, there are two words that I plan to return to over and over again—**consecration** and **courage**. Consecration means to be set apart for God, to be “other,” to be holy. Consecration is a word that has to do with **allegiance**—*who do I belong to, who am I living for?* Courage is a word that has to do with **faith**—*will I trust God no matter the results?* Daniel and his three friends faced the same question that each of us face every day—*will I blend in to the surrounding culture or will I stand out?* What will you do? How will you live?

Let me encourage you to open your Bible, paper or electronic, to Daniel 1; I will be reading verses 1-8. But before I do, I want to set the historical stage for what we are about to hear.

In the year 605 B.C., Babylon was the new superpower of the ancient world. Egypt attempted to fill the power vacuum but Babylon handed them a couple of crushing defeats. Judah's King, Jehoiakim, sensed the changing political climate and he abandoned his alliance with Egypt in order to align with Babylon.¹

His allegiance was short-lived; in 601 B.C., Jehoiakim rebelled. In response, the Babylonian army surrounded Jerusalem, and the city surrendered in 597. Nebuchadnezzar deported Jerusalem's leading citizens and it is likely that this is the time when Daniel and Ezekiel became exiles in Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar placed a puppet-king on the throne in Jerusalem, but when Zedekiah rebelled, Babylon's army returned, leading to the destruction of the city and the temple in 587 B.C.

Daniel 1:1-8, *“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 delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia and put in the treasure house of his god.*

Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king's service 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.

¹ c.f. 2 Kings 23:31-35; 24:1-17.

They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service.

Among those who were chosen were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. 7 The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego. But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine”.

Daniel 1:1-7 is a summary account of what happened to Jerusalem and how its people ended up in Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar came, he saw, he conquered. But he didn't just conquer—he took whatever pleased him: sacred articles from the Temple, and the best and brightest from the nobility. While this written account is devoid of emotion, I can assure you that the event was not. Tens of thousands of people were killed, those who weren't killed were left in poverty, and who weren't left behind dragged off in chains to Babylon—the life they knew was gone.

And unless you were listening carefully, it might appear that something else is missing from this account, namely, God. Every account in the scriptures serves to reveal God's being and activity. We can rightly ask with Daniel and his fellow exiles—*where was God and why didn't He do something?*

Vs. 2 tells us that God was present, in fact, God delivered the city, the king, the temple, and the nobility into Babylonian. I wonder, why did the author include this piece of information? It wasn't God's absence that led to Judah's exile—it was His presence; God allowed this to happen. And while no rationale is offered here, the prophets foretold this day—when a nation turns its back on God, when it

refuses to look to Him, to listen to Him, to follow Him, exile is the eventual result.

Let me offer a brief explanation of verses 3-7. Babylon utilized an assimilation strategy that was well-established in the Ancient Near East.

Step 1: Deport National Leadership. Deportation was utilized to enforce imperial control—it increased the labour base for the conquering nation, and it also reduced the likelihood of reorganizing a resistance. If you have ever lived, even briefly, in a country with a foreign language and culture, you know how disorienting it can be—it takes all of one's wits just to manage daily activities.

illus: a number of years ago, I went on a two week tour of Israel with a group from Colorado. Many of my companions had never been in a non-western country before and the unfamiliarities led to increasing frustration. Unfamiliar currency. Unfamiliar food. Unfamiliar weather—during one of our days in the desert, the heat topped out at 49 degrees Celsius.

One day we were driving down the highway in our tour bus and one of the guys cracked. We were on our way to another location and he got his map out; he was trying to figure out where we were and how long to our next destination. The highway was well-marked with signs, but since he couldn't read Hebrew, he wasn't having any luck. In his exasperation, he exclaimed rather loudly, “*Why aren't any of these signs in American?*”

I immediately thought to myself, “ (A) We're in Israel, and their language is Hebrew, and (B) American isn't a language.” I was wise

enough to keep my thoughts to myself but I sympathized with his sentiment—we were a long way from the comfort and familiarity of home.

Step 2: Re-education. Daniel was thrust into a three year training program, after which time he would serve Babylon and its king. We're told that the exiles were taught the language and literature of Babylon—this would have included a steady diet of religion, philosophy, politics, and culture.

It was more than a re-education; it was a systematic reprogramming. These exiles were being stripped of everything that made them Jewish—the hope was that they would become good Babylonians.

Step 3: Develop Dependency. Daniel and his fellow exiles were given daily rations from the king's table—they indulged in his pleasures, and, the hope was that they would become dependent on his pleasures. The best food and wine were theirs to have and enjoy. You may be asking, how does this engender dependency? Let me answer with another question: *do you really want to bite the hand that feeds you?* It's a lot harder to say “no” to someone when you've come to enjoy something they supply.

The final step in the process can be seen in vs. 6; Daniel and his friends were given new names.

Step 4: Rename. They were given three years of training for a new way of seeing, thinking, and living. A new city, new language, new gods, new clothes, new food, new values, and the piece de resistance—a new name; one final reminder that their old life was gone.

Daniel was given the name “Belteshazzar” which means, “*May a god protect his life*”—it's a name that speaks of new ownership, new allegiance, new identity. Ironically, the name “Daniel” means, “*God is my Judge*.” What we find is that in spite of Babylon's attempts to reprogram Daniel, he never forgot who he belonged to—*God is my Judge*. **Consecration**—above king, culture, or country, Daniel answered to the God of heaven and earth.

I want to offer one final word about verse 8 before I move into the second half of my sermon. Daniel was about to embark upon a three years program, designed to reprogram him—the goal was to transform him into a Babylonian. This was the moment to make the most of his opportunity—many of his friends and family were already dead or ruined—this was the time to keep his mouth shut and blend in, but Daniel drew a line in the sand and stood out from the crowd. Vs. 8 tells us that Daniel *resolved* not defile himself with royal food and wine.

Consecration—*above king and culture, I belong to God; I will not dishonour God—I will not defile myself.* **Courage**—at a time when nearly every decision was being made for him, Daniel went public, said “no,” and entrusted the results to God.

As I move into the second half of my sermon, I want to shift from 6'th century Babylon to West Coast living in 2015—the question I want to pose is this: *what does the Book of Daniel have to do with our lives today?*

I want to suggest that we're all living in exile but the Canadian church has been slow to recognize it. Webster defines exile as the “forced absence from one's country or home,” but geographical

displacement is only one form of exile. If you have ever felt pressure to adopt values that are at odds with your faith, then you have experienced exile firsthand.² What you are experiencing is the clash between kingdoms—the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world.

I have lived all of my life in Canada, I am familiar with its history, values, and culture, and yet I do not feel fully “at home.” The reason I feel estranged—the reason many of you feel estranged—is because our West Coast culture is largely estranged from God.³

illus: Last year, a parent from our church was driving a group of children home. At some point in the conversation, the “Bible” was mentioned, and one of the children piped up and asked, “*what is a Bible?*” No one answered right away and so the child asked again, this time more insistently, “*what is a Bible?*”

As a sociopolitical reality, Christianity’s influence in the West has been in decline for the last 250 years—the Christian story no longer defines Western Culture. Students no longer pray the Lord’s Prayer in school. Christmas and Easter are just two more stat holidays on the calendar. And the while the Bible may still be the most printed book in the world, most Canadians have no idea what it says.

There was a time when the church enjoyed a position of power and influence over Western culture, but those days are long gone. While Vancouver culture preaches tolerance, ironically, there is no room for

the Christian message in the public sphere. The church has been pushed to the margins as outdated and irrelevant.

illus: If you were to eavesdrop on a conversation between Dave Sattler and I, it wouldn’t be long before you would hear the two of us talking about soccer. And if you listened long enough, you would hear us talk about the glory days, when we were young, fit, dynamic players. You might hear Dave talk about winning the championship, you might hear us talk about the “goal”—a gorgeous right foot cross from Sattler, delivered to the 6 yard box, and a brilliant finish, a diving header by Peters to put the game away. What a moment! What a game! Those were the glory days.

There are some who long for the days of old, when the church, the Christian story, was at the centre of influence. They remember when the culture at large had a sense of what was right and what was wrong. They remember a different Canada than the one we live in today.

But here’s the thing, the church doesn’t have to be in a position of power or influence in order to represent God. God hasn’t abandoned us or our city—God is with us on the margins and He can win no matter where He stands.

I want to draw your attention back to Daniel 1:2 for a moment; specifically, I want to draw your attention to the footnote contained within. The author tells us that King Jehoiakim and some articles

² Lee Beach, *The Hopefulness And Helpfulness Of An Exilic Paradigm*, 1.

³ Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith*, 89.

from the temple were carried off to Babylon, but the original Hebrew text contains the word “*Shinar*.”

In Genesis 11:1-9, “*Shinar*” is used to describe the place where the Tower of Babel was built—the tower was a symbol of opposition, of humanity setting its face against God. In Zechariah 5:11, “*Shinar*” is described as the place where wickedness is at home. In the Scriptures, “*Shinar*” is a loaded term. Daniel and his friends have not come to just any place, they have been transplanted in a land that is hostile to God—a decision to live faithfully will come with a cost. At the same time, vs. 2 reminds us that Daniel and his three friends have not come to *Shinar* by accident—the Lord led them there. *Shinar* is not void of God’s presence, nor is it beyond His control. This is good news for all who live in exile—this my dear people, is good news for us.

We don’t have to occupy a position of power and influence to live faithfully. If God’s plans and purposes can unfold in a place like Babylon, if they can unfold in a place like China, they can unfold on the North Shore too. If God can sustain Daniel and his friends in *Shinar*, He can sustain us—He can sustain our sisters and brothers in hostile places all over the world. God hasn’t grown weak; He hasn’t lost a step.

How are the people of God to live in exile? The Book of Daniel tells us how, and his answer is twofold.

(a) First, exiles are invited to live **faithfully**. I have no doubt there were many situations in which Daniel and his friends were able to

live faithfully and go along with culture. But Daniel 1, 3, and 6, tell of situations where the *resolve* to remain faithful to God meant standing out rather than blending in.

These stories remind us that the God who calls us to faithful living will be faithful to us—faithful to love, faithful to strengthen, faithful to lead, faithful to save. And these stories remind us that there is a cost to following Jesus—sometimes Christ and Culture collide. Following Jesus may cost you the respect of certain family members, friends, or colleagues. Following Jesus may keep you from advancing at work—you may be unwilling to do what others are quite happy to do to get ahead. Following Jesus will keep you from everyday “freedoms” that others consider normal.

The Book of Daniel calls us to **Consecration**. I said earlier that consecration is a word that has to do with allegiance—I asked the question: *who do you belong to, who are you living for?* The one who has been consecrated, is the one who has already planted their flag, they’ve already declared their allegiance. To consecrate is to set someone apart, to be God’s very own possession—to be holy.

Mind you, I’m not talking about being stuck up, stuffy, and holier-than-thou. Jesus lived a life consecrated to God and He wasn’t any of these things. In fact, Jesus was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard; He was labelled as a “friend of sinners.”⁴ So when we think about what it means to consecrate ourselves, we’re going to have to take our cues from Jesus. He didn’t compartmentalize faith in certain regions of His life—His faith in God affected every activity, conversation, and relationship.

⁴ One of the few labels Jesus wore gladly!

Perhaps you're wondering why Jesus would allow His followers to remain in hostile territory; why not keep them from difficulty and harm? It's for the sake of the world that Jesus' disciples must remain in the world.

Listen to Jesus' words, captured in Matthew 5:13-16.

Let me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness?

Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on...a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.⁵

The Book of Daniel invites exiles to live faithfully, and

(b) Second, exiles are invited to live with **expectancy** and **courage**. If Daniel 1, 3, and 6 tell stories of standing out, Daniel 2, 4, and 5 tell the story of God's sovereign control.

⁵ The Message Translation.

⁶ John 16:33.

In Daniel 2:44 we hear God's word to Nebuchadnezzar, "*the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever.*"

Before Babylon there was Assyria, and before Assyria there was Egypt. After Babylon there was Persia, after Persia there was Greece, and after Greece there was Rome. Have we learned nothing from history? All human empires are destined to fall, but God's kingdom will stand firm forever.

God has not left us on our own. He sees everything, He knows what's going on, and is therefore able to reveal his plans to his people. Nothing and no one exists apart from God's sovereign rule—His plans and purposes will come to pass; He cannot be thwarted.

We live with expectancy and courage because we've read God's story and we know how it ends—the conclusion has already been written. One day every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. One day everything that has gone wrong with the world will be put back to rights. Jesus once said, "*In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.*"⁶

Courage is a word that has to do with **faith**—we trust God in the now, no matter the results, because we know that God is with us, He is building His kingdom here and now, and one day His kingdom will

rule without rival. The apostle Paul writes, “*our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.*”⁷

Now, more than ever, is the time for **consecration**—the question is: *will you live for God or for self?* Now, more than ever, is the time for **courage**—the question is: *will you entrust your life to God and His purposes?*

Prayer

⁷ Romans 8:18.