

Being a "Daniel" After *Obergefell*

Living
faithfully and
fruitfully in exile

By Scott J. Ward and Stephen H. King

GOD'S PEOPLE HAD JUST SUFFERED A CRUSHING DEFEAT. Disoriented and disillusioned, they found themselves surrounded by a culture that felt deeply alien. They were coming under increasing pressure from society and state alike to compromise their unique identity and life as followers of the one true God and to embrace the relativistic and morally diverse surrounding culture.

Of course, this describes Judah following its conquest by the Chaldean emperor Nebuchadnezzar at the beginning of the Babylonian captivity. But these words come uncomfortably close to describing the church in North America today. The Supreme Court's 5-4 decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* in 2015 seems to many a modern moral analogue to the fall of besieged Jerusalem, heralding a sea change in legal and cultural understandings of marriage and human sexuality. As attorneys who have represented ministries for decades, we view *Obergefell* as one (but only one) significant milestone of declining respect and protection for the free exercise of religion.

But in the midst of the disorientation, disillusionment and even despair that can accompany such changes, it is easy to lose perspective. Among biblical examples, the prophet Daniel,

literally dislocated from Jerusalem to Babylon early in the captivity, provides powerful insights into how to live faithfully and fruitfully in cultural exile.

For some, *Obergefell* has been profoundly unsettling, and the response has been uncertainty, fear, even lamentation. Yet Daniel begins not with lament, but rather a sober assessment of the situation and a strong certainty of God's sovereignty: "*And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into [Nebuchadnezzar's] hand....*" (Dan. 1:2, KJV). God was sovereignly at work even in a devastating defeat. Like Daniel, we must remind ourselves that God is not surprised by these changes, but remains sovereignly at work for good.

FROM JERUSALEM TO BABYLON

Like Daniel, we are now living through cultural transition, dislocation and disorientation. We have moved "from Jerusalem to Babylon" — from a culture that to a degree reflected Christian values to one in which those values are often disregarded and even denounced. *Obergefell*, like Daniel's relocation to Babylon, is a defining moment in that transition.

In Daniel 1, God's people had suffered a massive military defeat — the dominant world power had conquered Jerusalem.



There followed a major dislocation — the Babylonians forcibly relocated leading youth from Judah to Babylon to the emperor’s house. Their names, which reflected their God, were replaced with names evoking Babylonian deities. This was a brilliant strategy to co-opt and inculcate each conquered nation’s young leaders in Babylonian values.

In the thousand-year-old capital city, Daniel encountered monumental displays of the empire’s power — military and economic — and multi-cultural diversity from the nations Nebuchadnezzar had conquered. Daniel also encountered multiple deities and mounting decadence. Babylon’s diverse people brought their local gods with them, supplementing the dominant Chaldeans’ many deities. This multiplicity of deities (many connected to fertility rites) brought substantial sexual promiscuity and moral confusion.

The Babylonian regimes sought to assert their earthly power over all other sovereigns, including Daniel’s God. Three episodes display this attempt at mirror-image deification, the replacement of God by the state as ultimate sovereign. In Daniel Chapter 3, the state declares that all must worship only the emperor or be cast into the furnace. In Daniel Chapter 6, the state declares that all must pray only to the emperor or be sent

into the lions’ den. In Daniel Chapter 5, the emperor profanes holy vessels captured from the Jerusalem Temple at his dissolute celebration of his own power. In each episode, the state asserts that it replaces God and reigns over God’s people. In each, Daniel and his friends remain faithful to God, whatever the cost. In each, God has the final word.

There are two meta-dynamics at play here. The first is the relativizing of objective transcendent values. The second is the absolutizing of the state, as it attempts to fill this vacuum and serve the ordering role in society previously filled by displaced transcendent values. We can see similar dynamics at play today.

LIVING FAITHFULLY AND FRUITFULLY IN EXILE

Daniel provides wisdom for living in such a time as this. Daniel did not attempt to escape from his culture, but rather strove to be equipped with God’s truth to engage his culture. These are four ways in which Daniel lived faithfully and fruitfully in exile:

1. SOVEREIGN STABILITY

Daniel faced sobering realities — devastating defeat and exile — with calm certainty that God remained sovereignly

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at work for good. Throughout the book, Daniel expounds God's sovereign authority, boldly proclaiming that God alone controls the rise and fall of regimes and rulers, reveals mysteries and is the source of all authority, greatness and even breath.

2. IDENTITY INTEGRITY

Daniel focused on maintaining his identity in the midst of a culture and state aggressively seeking to co-opt it. Although he could not refuse his new Babylonian name, Daniel never forgot his true identity. The book (written in part by Daniel) consistently uses his Hebrew name. Belshazzar may have been his legal name, but Daniel — “God is my Judge” — was his identity.

3. PRINCIPLED PRUDENCE

Daniel also demonstrates profound prudential wisdom in knowing when and how to effectively engage an unfriendly regime. That principled prudence was reflected in Daniel's:

- **Creativity:** Faced with an apparently irreconcilable conflict between his faith and the regime's requirements, Daniel's response was neither capitulation nor complaint, but creativity. Daniel prayerfully proposed a creative solution that better accomplished the state's legitimate purposes, while fully honoring God (Dan. 1).
- **Carefulness:** Daniel was careful, wise as a serpent yet innocent as a dove. He engaged those in authority respectfully. He prudently foresaw trouble, such as Belshazzar's dissolute feast and avoided it until expressly summoned (Dan. 5:13–17).
- **Consistency:** Daniel's consistent faithfulness was legendary, as even his enemies could find no fault apart from his consistent obedience to God (Dan. 6:4–5). When they tricked Darius into forbidding prayer to any god but the state, Daniel's response was not protest, but simply to continue to pray “*just as he had always done*” (Dan. 6:10 MSG/NIRV).
- **Community:** It is not coincidental that the first three chapters focus not only on Daniel but also his three young Hebrew friends, who helped preserve their shared faith by remaining devoted to each other. Together, they committed not to defile themselves, sought God's mercy to interpret dreams, resisted the command to worship the state and were delivered by God from the fiery furnace.
- **Courage:** Sometimes, obedience to God means being willing to be thrown into fiery furnaces and lion's dens.

Hebrews 11 reminds us that such faithfulness can result in two primary outcomes — amazing deliverance or agonizing death. Hebrews and Daniel alike remind us that true victory is not coming out of such places, but going in.

- **Civility:** Daniel was a man of unwavering conviction, yet expressed his convictions respectfully, contending for truth without being contentious. He did not pursue civil disobedience but never shrank from divine obedience. Whenever possible, he pursued creative, civil resolutions of conflicts with the state's requirements.
- **Clarity:** The Babylonians likely thought that Daniel was a quaint relic of a dying culture; that he was “on the wrong side of history.” But Daniel was unconfused about what is permanent and what is passing. A central theme in the book is that today's dominant regime or ideology quickly becomes but a memory. Only God endures, eternally. This is seen repeatedly in the dreams Daniel interprets and the visions he receives, which predicted, with stunning accuracy, the rise and fall of empires. Daniel survived and served at least four different rulers and regimes. In the most dramatic example, regime change happened literally overnight (Dan. 5:30). By morning, Belshazzar's regime was history, but Daniel remained.

4. PERSISTENT POWERFUL PRAYER

Above all, Daniel was a man of prayer. The second half of the book is all about Daniel's prayers — and, even more, God's amazing responses.

The book does not record Daniel excoriating Judah or Babylon. But it repeatedly shows Daniel on his knees praying for both. Daniel humbled himself, fasted and prayed for his people, repenting not only of his own sins but of theirs. Daniel prayed boldly, with a vision shaped not by the power of empire(s) but by a deep awareness of the sovereign power of God. Daniel prayed on a vast scale, for the destinies of nations. But as God responded, Daniel came to see that God was painting on an infinitely vaster canvas. God's responses were about the redemption of humanity across all time through the promise of his Messiah, Jesus Christ.

It is Daniel's promised Messiah whom we seek to follow faithfully today. When we contend for religious liberty in this season of cultural confusion, like Daniel, we are contending for the immediate and the ultimate good of those who contend against us. We seek that they and we alike may enjoy the same freedom of religious exercise to choose to follow (or not follow) God without coercion. ●

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