

Sermon—November 13-14, 1999
Rich Nathan
Daniel: Thriving in a Hostile World
Daniel 1

Strangers in a Strange Land

Today I am going to begin a new series that will carry us through the New Year from the book of Daniel, which I have titled “Preparing for the Millennium.” Now, I know that for some of you, you might be thinking that I will be talking about building bomb shelters, or stocking up on guns and ammo, or news items from yesterday’s paper that tells us that Jesus is just around the corner.

When I announced last week that I was going to be teaching on the book of Daniel and the subject would be preparing for the millennium, I had a few people stop me in the hall and say, “Oh, Rich, I have heard all of that before. Please tell me that you aren’t going to be doing a series on this subject.” They said that in their last church all they did was one teaching after another on the end times with lots of speculative, wild-eyed theories regarding the future and the supposed government conspiracies. The overall effect of which was to frighten Christians and get people to become more defensive and more withdrawn. It caused people to pull up the draw bridges and isolate themselves even more from the surrounding culture.

What I heard from a couple of people last week essentially boiled down to “Say it ain’t so, Rich. Don’t tell me that you, too, have succumbed to millennial madness.”

Well, I haven’t succumbed to millennial madness and I won’t be suggesting that we all move to the country or that the world is going to end tomorrow or next year. But we

do have a helpful chronological marker, at least, with the end of this millennium and our entrance into a new millennium, to reflect on the current state of our lives and the church here in America. And also to anticipate what is likely going to be coming down the road for the church and for us as individual followers of Christ.

Now, if I might begin with a little bit of a historical lesson for you so that you can understand exactly where we find ourselves at this point in history, I have broken up church history for the purpose of simplification into four distinct periods—the period from the time of Jesus to the time of the Emperor Constantine in 311 AD; and then what we might call the Constantian world, which saw a merger of church and state, until 1650 with all of the religious wars in Europe between Protestants and Catholics and the general disgust that people had for all the religious wars. And then from 1650 to the end of the decade of the 1960's we have what we might call the Judeo-Christian world where Christianity wasn't officially linked the modern nation state, but it influenced its laws and shaped public education. It founded colleges and provided agendas for social reform. Finally, with the decade of the 60's we have the end of the Christian world and we have entered a time of post-Christianity where Christian influence has been increasingly marginalized.

Let me go through each of these four periods quickly. Again, this is a simplification of church history. I am not looking at church history through the lens of theology – certainly, I could be looking at the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation or the rise of the modern Pentecostal movement. I am simply at this moment concerned about the relationship between the church and the world. Between the church and the government.

What we find, first of all, in the early church up until the year 311, what I call the pre-Constantian church, before the Emperor Constantine in Rome, is that Christians lived, as you probably know, in a very difficult time, at least so far as official acceptance. There were at least ten rounds of persecution against Christians in the first 300 years following the death of Christ. The first major persecution broke out under Emperor Nero in which Christians were made the scapegoats for the burning of Rome. And under Nero, Christians were burned alive to light Nero's gardens. They were fed to lions. They were killed by the gladiators' swords.

And there were these ten rounds of heightened persecution of Christians in the first 300 years culminating in the persecutions under Diocletian in 303-311, which was the worst persecution of all. Right before Constantine's conversion, Christians experienced the worst time of all. Churches were destroyed, bibles were burned. All the civil rights of Christians were suspended. They had no legal rights at all. They couldn't own property. They could be executed without trial; sacrifice to pagan gods was required.

Not only were Christians persecuted in the early church, but Christianity was generally misunderstood. Christians were popularly accused of being cannibals and also guilty of incest. In the popular mind in the first couple of centuries, Christians were considered cannibals. This may be because they celebrated communion and each week as they were eating the bread and the cup, they would recite the words of Jesus, "This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me. This is my blood [as they picked up the cup of wine]..." But the word spread that Christians were eating the bodies of people. They were cannibals.

And Christians were also rumored to commit incest with each other. That may have arisen because in the early centuries, Christians believed that they were part of the family of God together and so Christian men would call their Christian wives, “Sister” and Christian women would call their Christian husbands, “Brother.” Now, people in the larger society thought they were literally brothers and sisters, so they thought they were guilty of incest.

And not only were Christians accused of incest and cannibalism, but in the intellectual circles, among the philosophers and the educated, identifying oneself as a Christian was the equivalent of identifying yourself as being ignorant. People basically thought that Christianity was another form of hocus-pocus magic. That the people attracted to Christianity were mainly illiterate and couldn’t deal with philosophy.

And certainly Christianity wasn’t the only religion in the market place. In the pre-Constantian world there were temples to dozens of gods – to Mithras, to Zeus, to Syrian gods, to Artemis, to Jupiter. There was competition from the East from Persian religions, from mystery religions, from Gnosticism. It was a challenging time, to say the least, to be a Christian with the persecution, the intellectual disdain the people held Christianity in, and the misunderstandings of Christianity in the popular mind, and with the competition in the religious marketplace.

And, frankly, it wasn’t only a difficult time to be a Christian, it was a difficult time to be alive in those centuries before Constantine, especially if you were a woman. It is estimated that there were a 131 men for everyone 100 women in Rome. And the disparity was even greater in other places and greater still among the elite. There was in Rome and in the Roman world the widespread practice of female infanticide. We have a

letter from a man in the Roman Empire that who said that if you deliver a child [he was writing to his wife who was pregnant] and it is a boy, keep it. If it is a girl, discard it. And that is what lots of fathers and mothers did. They took baby girls out and left them to die of exposure in the cold.

And the Romans practiced abortion widely through various dangerous means which would kill not only the child to be delivered, but also the mother. Christians were virtually the only ones in the society that practiced neither infanticide nor abortion.

And then something happened which changed the world – the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine. At the time of Constantine’s conversion in 311 AD, there were two Roman Emperors – one in the West in Rome and one in the East. And Constantine went to the West to Rome to claim the throne given him by his father, the former Roman Emperor. He came with an army to claim the throne in the West. He was opposed by a man named Maxentius, who was not only the Eastern Emperor, but also claimed to be the rightful heir to the Western throne.

Here is Constantine. He is with his army advancing on Rome, trying to claim his throne. He is nine miles north of Rome, right near the Tiber River. And in the afternoon Constantine and his army saw a vision in the sky. He saw a bright cross with the words underneath the sign in Latin saying, “By this sign, conquer.” And later Constantine also had a dream in which Christ himself came to Constantine in the dream and said that the cross should be Constantine’s standard.

Well, as a result of this vision and the dream, Constantine believed that he had received a word from God and he made all of his soldiers put on their shields the Greek letter “chi”, it is an “x” and a “roe” which look like a “p” – the first letters of the name for

Christ. He made all of his soldiers put the first letters of the name of Christ on their shields. They went into battle against Maxentius and won a great victory. Constantine became the Emperor of both East and West in Rome. His most famous accomplishment is that he ended the persecution of the Christians throughout the Roman Empire for all time. He declared Christianity to be a legal religion.

About 70 years later, Christianity was not only declared to be one of the legal religions, therefore free from persecution, but Christianity was declared to be the official religion of the Roman Empire. Pagan temples were burned. Sacrifices to the gods were ended. And Christianity got connected as the official religion of the state for the next 1300 years.

Then we went into a period of separation where Christianity lost its official role during what I call the Judeo-Christian period. It still carried great influence in shaping laws and public education, and in social reform movements.

And now here we are in the last 30 years on the eve of the millennium in what many have called the post-Christian period of church history. And by post-Christian we do not mean that the church no longer exists or that the Bible is no longer true. By post-Christian we mean that Christianity has lost its influence in the larger society. People no longer have to pretend that they are Christian or even that they are church goers to gain power in the culture. In our post-Christian society we see the declining influence of Christians in public education. The removal of Christian symbols from schools. Christians find themselves increasingly out of sync with the larger culture. Not only don't Christians exercise power as they did during the years of the Constantian takeover, but Christians no longer exercise much influence. Indeed, they find themselves out of

sync. So there is an increasing number of openly homosexual characters on popular TV shows. And there is increasing pressure on organizations like the Boy Scouts to allow for homosexual Scout leaders. In fact, homosexuality, as a general rule, is gaining wider and wider acceptance in our culture as a valid alternative to heterosexual relationships. And we are seeing a number of combinations of relationships, both heterosexual and homosexual, that are being offered as alternatives to traditional marriage.

Abortion on demand is the law of the land. And any attempt at restriction, including the most extreme kinds of abortion – the abortion of a 7-8-9 month old fetus that would be able to live on its own outside the womb, even what has become known as the partial birth abortion, is performed by the thousands across America. And the President recently vetoed another attempt to restrict even that kind of abortion.

There is a growing euthanasia movement in this country. There is the massive growth of the availability of pornography on the internet. There is a growing insensitivity to violence. A rising percentage of children being raised apart from their natural fathers and mothers.

And Christians do not only find themselves out of sync regarding values and practices with the larger culture, but Christians find themselves the brunt of intellectual disdain in most elite circles. It is simply not intellectually respectable in public discourse, public exchange, in universities, in major magazines or newspapers, to take a distinctively Christian perspective on the issues that shape our culture.

As we approach the millennium we find ourselves in a position that is increasing like the position of the Christians in the first few centuries of church history and increasingly

unlike the position of Christians in the last 17 centuries of church history. We find ourselves out of sync in an increasing way with the larger culture.

Now, here is the reason why I have chosen to preach the book of Daniel as we prepare for this new millennium in our post-Christian society. Because Daniel is a book about how to live as a follower of God when you are entirely out of sync with the world around you. Daniel is a book that tells the story of a man who found himself taken captive away from his homeland in Israel and forced to live in a society that was dominated by pagans. How do you live and live successfully when the things that you count most dear are not only not supported by the world around you, but actively opposed and ridiculed?

Well, I am going to try to answer that question over the next couple of months. In this introductory message, I have called my talk, “Strangers in a Strange Land.” Let’s pray.

We read in Daniel 1:1-2, “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.”

Now, vv. 1 and 2 give us two views of history. The one view in v. 1 we might call secular history. It says, “In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it.”

Secular history. Here is what happened beginning in 605 BC. The Babylonians in three successive invasions over the next 20 years progressively captured Judah and all of Jerusalem. They knocked the city walls down. They destroyed Solomon’s Temple.

They carried off all of the sacred items that were associated with the Temple. Secular history – here is what happened. Here is when it happened. Here is where it happened.

But v. 2 gives us a different view of history. “And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand...” See, secular history with its emphasis on economics, military power and philosophical movements, secular history can answer the questions: who, what, where and when. But it takes a different kind of history to answer the question: why? Why are the things happening the way they are happening? And that is what v. 2 is offering us – the meaning of history. What is going on behind Nebuchadnezzar and the rise of Babylon and the invasion of Jerusalem?

Now, you can interpret what is going on right now on the eve of this new millennium from the perspective of v. 1, secular history, or v. 2, sacred history. From the perspective of v.1, secular history here is what happened, here is when it happened, here is where it happened, here is who it happened with – just the facts, ma’am, just the facts. From the perspective of secular history you could say what is going on right now in this country is a political battle. It is a battle between conservatives and progressives. It is a cultural battle. It is a philosophical battle with all these little wars breaking out over the meaning of family and the meaning of marriage and sexuality and the redefinition of gender. You can look at life through the lens of politics or economics, or sociology or philosophy.

But in the alternative, you could pick up the lens of Daniel 1:2 and say, “I am going to look at life through the lens of sacred history. I am going to give, if you will, a prophetic interpretation to life on the eve of the millennium.” And a prophetic interpretation is an interpretation that pulls back the curtain. It is an interpretation that requires revelation from God. It is an interpretation that sees in this struggle between

Babylon and Jerusalem a type, a model, concerning the real struggle that has always gone on in the history of mankind – a conflict between God’s people and the people of this world.

The great Augustine wrote what he called “An Interpretation of History” in a book that he titled “The City of God.” Augustine lived at a time when the city of Rome fell as it was sacked by barbarian invaders. And many people, as a result of Constantine, believed that with the fall of Rome one would see the fall of Christianity. Christianity was so linked up with the Roman government that they said the fall of one would lead to the fall of the other. But Augustine said, “No, no, no. What is falling when we see the fall of Rome is simply the city of man. But what is rising in its place is the city of God.” Augustine said that these two things are always in conflict – the city of man and the city of God. There is this conflict.

And you know, in the first prophecy of the Bible, Gen. 3:15, God says to the serpent in the garden, “I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head and you will strike his heel.” God says to the serpent in the garden, “There is going to be ongoing conflict between your children, whom Augustine labeled the city of men, and the redeemed children, whom Augustine labeled the city of God.”

You see, history is all about this ongoing war, this ongoing conflict – Babylon and Jerusalem, the city of man and the city of God, the church and the world. There is always this conflict. Jesus said that there are two gates – a gate that is wide that leads to destruction and a narrow gate that leads to eternal life. He said that there are two ways – a way that is broad and easy, which the mass of mankind walks on, headed for hell, and a

hard way, a difficult way that leads to eternal life. Jesus said there are two masters – money and God. And people have to pick one or the other because they can't have both.

And as we move into this new millennium we are seeing in sharper relief, in a clear way, what the Bible has said is the meaning of history – the ongoing conflict between the city of man and the city of God, between Babylon and Jerusalem, between the world and the church. And folks are forced to choose sides, to say what they want to have ultimately rule their lives, what value system, what standard do you want to live by? What do you want to control your thinking, your marriage, your family, your dating relationship, sexuality, habits of spending? What do you want to control you? Babylon or Jerusalem? Man's standards or God's standards?

I also want you to note this one thing. In v. 2 it says that “the Lord delivered Jehoiakim, king of Judah, into Nebuchadnezzar's hands.” There is this ongoing conflict between Babylon and Jerusalem, between the city of man and the city of God, between the world and the church, but overruling all of it is the Lord. Any temporary defeats, any seeming setbacks, any ground that seems to be lost or gained is the result of the sovereignty of God, the control of God. God didn't wind up the universe and let it go and say, “Now I am going to watch this cosmic battle from the sidelines.” God is involved in the cosmic battle. He is holding the reins of history. He has the steering wheel. He has your life. He has your kids' lives. He has the government of your school, the government of this nation, in his hand. Never forget that.

Well, Daniel finds himself as a follower of God taken captive to Babylon where everyone around him lives by a different standard – the standard of the city of man. And so we read:

“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. Among these were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego.”

Now, if you were the ruler of the city of man, the ruler of Babylon, the ruler of the world, and you wanted to take over the city of God, Jerusalem, the church, Christian people, if you wanted to totally rule the entire culture how would you do it? If we were going to lay out a battle plan of attack and conquest, I don’t know if you could do a better job than what we see in Daniel 1.

Think about it. You want to dominate a culture. What would you do? The first thing you would do probably is identify the best and the brightest – the cream of the crop, the young people with the greatest potential for future leadership. You would take the best athletes, the brightest young minds, the most talented musicians, the future artists. You would take the writers, people who could control the media, the readers. You would take the ten talent people. And you would try to convert them from the city of God to the city of man.

And look what it says in v. 4 Nebuchadnezzar did: he took young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understanding, qualified to serve in the king's palace. He identified the best and the brightest because these are the future influencers, the people who will make a difference.

And what would you do with all of these future influencers, if you wanted to take over a culture? Well, the first thing you would do is isolate them from their families, their traditions, their backgrounds – you would cut them off from their roots. And that is what Nebuchadnezzar did in v. 3. It says, “Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring in some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility.” He separated the cream of the crop from their families. He cut them off from their culture. He separated them from their traditions, their roots, and transplanted them into the king's palace.

Let me bring this down to earth because I think there is an almost exact parallel between what is going on here in Daniel 1 and what happens when a young man or woman leaves home and their church and friends and traditions and the perspectives of their parents. They leave their youth groups and they go to another city where they go to live in a dormitory of a secular university with a roommate whose values may be completely antagonistic to a Christian way of life. I think what is going on in terms of this isolation is precisely what happens when a young man or woman who is raised in the church joins a fraternity or sorority that is completely moving in one direction. Everyone in the frat or the sorority or the dormitory is getting high. Everyone is partying and having casual sex. And here is this young person, isolated away from the encouragement

of their parents, isolated away from their church, their background and traditions. They are out in the spiritual desert.

I see parents ship their children off to universities, isolating them away, and I think to myself, “How many of you parents could survive that kind of isolation without being utterly taken over by Babylon?” Some of you parents have been Christians for decades, but I will bet you that if we isolate you for three months away from solid teaching and fellowship and your routines and your Christian connections, you would dry up and blow away in three months. And here you take your 18-year old with all of the needs and all the identity issues and all of the insecurities and all of the growth pains of being an 18-year old and you ship them off for four years. How is that we parents convince ourselves that our children will fare alright in a place of great isolation?

May I give you pastoral counsel? I have two teenagers. Marlene and I prayed long and hard about this as we considered the choice of universities for our son. But you must, parents and young adults, take significant account of what kind of spiritual provision you are going to make to deal with the issue of isolation when you pick what school you are going to go to. Who you are going to room with. Where you are going to live. To pick a university simply because of its excellent program in art or drama or engineering or education or anything else without a deep investigation of how you will thrive spiritually, parents and children, you might as well commit spiritual suicide. For truly, my wife and I would not send our children to schools away from us without a complete plan for their spiritual health anymore than I would send my kids into an infectious disease unit without significant protective gear.

Isolation. This is a fundamental spiritual warfare principle. The enemy's design is always to cut people off from encouragement, from fellowship, from church, from teaching, from their families. I would pay attention, friends, when the government plans to expand the school year to make public school year round. I would pay attention, friends, to the growing number of activities that fill your children's lives so that they spend an increasing amount of time away from your influence. I would pay attention to specific effects of having a job that takes you on the road a lot - lots of hotels, lots of distant cities. I would pay attention if you are getting away from fellowship, away from church, away from your routines. Because very quickly you will come under the rule and standard of the city of man.

And, of course, in this takeover, Nebuchadnezzar not only isolates, but he indoctrinates. V. 4, "Select 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."

What is going on in the lives of young adults? Day after day they are learning the language and literature of the Babylonians. On day one of the orientation process for my son at one of our best state universities here in Ohio, day one of orientation, a representative of the university stood up in front of the parents and said that she was so excited about having all of these new young students come to this particular state university because the purpose of college, in her opinion, was to challenge all of the student's formerly held opinions and beliefs and to open their minds to a totally new way of thinking.

Talk about Nebuchadnezzar's battle plan. We are here to change every one of your opinions and beliefs, everything that you learned from your parents and church, to get you to think in a totally different way. Day one of orientation, the very first thing that they had the students do before classes even began, the first thing – what would you want to introduce to young adults on day one of orientation at a university. What would you say? We want this to enter your minds. Hold onto this because it will carry you through in the next four years. Might it be a talk on the pursuit of excellence? Perhaps a talk on the pursuit of truth? Maybe a talk on hard work and study habits? The reason for universities? The history and tradition of the university? What would you talk about in your opening talk to students?

Do you know what this state university chose to do with my son? They did skits and role playing regarding tolerance for various homosexual practices. Numero uno – at the very top of the list of the priorities for this state university was to indoctrinate its entering students into a position of tolerance for various kinds of homosexual practices.

Friends, indoctrination into a language and the thought processes of the Babylonians is what goes on every day in our media-saturated culture. There is no escape by homeschooling children or sending them to Christian schools or getting yourself involved in church work. There is no escape from the language and the thought processes of the Babylonians. Every time you turn on TV or the radio or pick up a newspaper or surf the net or look at a billboard or enter a mall, you are being indoctrinated into the view that God is irrelevant here. You are being indoctrinated daily with the idea that people who have strong opinions about God are dangerous. That to announce strong opinions about

God makes you a fanatic, someone who can't be trusted with significant responsibility or management authority.

Every day our children and we ourselves as adults are under worldview assault in the workplace. Your value system is daily being shaped by the value your company puts on various measures of achievement, indoctrinating you regarding what is important in life. The people around you in your firm or company or office are regularly communicating to you that what is important is your position in the company, your income, the size of your home, the size of your office, your title.

Identification. Identify the best and the brightest.

Isolation. Isolate them out. Separate them from their roots.

Indoctrination. Indoctrinate them. Help them to come to a position of believing in their heart of hearts that God is irrelevant. That what really matters is a huge house, or an MD after your name, or a thin, fit body. Indoctrinate them through image after image.

And indulge them. V. 5, "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 then after that they were to enter the king's service."

Indulge them. Give people a taste of the good life. Help them to experience a taste of prosperity. Let them sit in a leather chair and feel the difference between a buttery kind of leather than envelopes them and plastic or vinyl. Bring them to some of the nicest restaurants. Wait on them hand and foot. You want to hollow out the people of God? Just put some serious dollar signs in front of their faces and wave it around for a while. Then say to the person after they have tasted some comfort and have enjoyed a little bit of the good life or a lot of the good life, "Now, what do you want? Do you want to live

in whole-hearted commitment to the standard of the city of God and return to crummy restaurants and public golf courses and cheap vacations and vinyl seats or do you want to still enjoy the good life—first rate hotel service, company cars, and buttery leather seating in your car? All it is going to take is just a little compromise of standard, a little more half-heartedness when it comes to your followership of God.

And finally, we see identity confusion in vv. 6-7. “Among these were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego.”

You say, “Well, what is the big deal about the name change?”

Well, Jews use names that incorporated in their name is a shortened form of the Hebrew word for God which was El or the Hebrew word for Lord which was Jah or Iah. So we see DaniEL or HananIAH, or MishaEL or AzarIAH. The contained in the ending of their names the Hebrew word for God or Lord. But instead they were given names that incorporated in them Babylonian God names.

See, in America right now, names are just tags. They don’t mean anything. We go through different periods of having popular names and then they drift away for a while for a few generations and then they rise up again. So the names of our grandparents – Matilda, Lily, Harry, Rose – all those names are coming back now. But they are just tags. They are fads that pass in and out.

But for most of the world and throughout most of religious history names had significance. It identified you with a God. You see that in India today. Someone’s name will contain in it the God Krishna or Rhama.

So the Babylonians are creating identity confusion. Day after day these young men are called by different names. They are being addressed by the name of a different God. And the pressure on these young men's lives to be able to say "Who am I fundamentally? Am I one of the guys in the frat house? Is that who I fundamentally am?" Is your fundamental identity your occupation? I AM a lawyer? I AM a teacher. Is your fundamental connection to the city of man or to the city of God?

Here are strangers in a strange land – God's people thrown into this highly conforming environment. Saturated as young people with a different world view. Isolated, indoctrinated, indulged.

Now, friends, here is the question. How do you maintain any kind of Christian distinctiveness in a post-Christian society? How do you keep a sharp edge? How do you keep from being entirely washed out, compromised out, watered down, faded like last week's newspaper? How does a person who wants to maintain the standard of the city of God live in the city of man? Let's read vv. 8-10.

"But 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. Now God had caused the official to show favor and sympathy to Daniel, but the official told Daniel, 'I am afraid of my lord the king, who as assigned your food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men you age? The king would then have my head because of you.'

"Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, 'Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then compare our appearance with that of the

young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see.’ So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days.”

“At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food. So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead. To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds.”

Here is what we see, first of all, in maintaining distinctiveness, we see a decision ahead of time. “But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine.” There was a resolution, a decision ahead of time, that godly people throughout the ages have found makes all of the difference in the world regarding handling temptation and pressure. One of the secrets to spiritual success is making a decision when you are spiritually strong about what you are going to do in a situation where you might find yourself spiritually weak. You do not wait until you are in the throes of temptation, when you are being eaten alive by the appetites of your flesh, to figure out the standard by which you will live your life.

The strategy of the enemy is always to get you to delay decision. Put it off. Every time you feel like you need to make a decision toward the kingdom of God, the enemy is dulling you. He is getting you to procrastinate. He is saying, “Don’t make the decision now. Turn the TV on. You can wait on that decision. Pick up a newspaper. The floor needs cleaning. A baby’s bottom needs wiping. Decide later. There is no urgency.”

One of the secrets of spiritual success is to decide things clearly when the kingdom of God presents itself to you. When things become spiritually clear in your mind regarding

right and wrong, regarding choosing Christ, when it is clear to you, when you have that window of opening, grab it. Decide then.

Daniel had one of these openings. Before he was asked to eat the king's food, he made a decision in his mind, "No, I am not going to do that."

What does that mean for me? What does it mean for you?

Well, before you go on a date decide what you will and won't allow. Before the date. Before the date you decide where you are going to go. Whether you will permit yourself to be alone in an apartment or not. How you are going to handle yourself. What you are going to eat. What you are going to drink. Before you make a certain income you resolve what you are going to do with your income when you make it. Before you get your next paycheck, you make a decision, "Here is where I am going to spend the money", not after it is in your pocket.

Those of you who struggle with giving financially to the work of the kingdom or you struggle with overspending, before you get your check, make the decision. That is the whole business of making out a budget.

With your roommates you can make a decision regarding the rules for your home. Where you will permit the opposite sex. How late they can stay over. Whether your door is open or closed. Before you get into situations, you make decisions. Whatever tempts you, whatever is your downfall, make a decision regarding that while you are strong, while you are under conviction. But if you put that off, if you fall under conviction by the Holy Spirit, and you say in that state, "I am not going to decide," you will be conformed.

Daniel not only made a decision ahead of time, he was also disciplined in his life and his lifestyle. Listen, if you want to maintain your distinctiveness in a hostile culture, there are two disciplines that will absolutely be invaluable to you in carrying you forward. The first discipline, you write this down, is the discipline of going public with your faith as early as you can. As quickly as you can at a new job or in a new class or when you enter a new relationship or when you move to a new neighborhood or are on an airplane sitting next to someone or in a hotel dining room in a strange city – as early as you can discipline yourself to confess Christ publicly.

Do you know what happens when you confess Christ early on? You are held accountable by the personal realization that you are now representing Jesus Christ. Something happens to your speech, to your behavior, to your attitudes, to your humor, to what you will let yourself do or not do when you are wearing a badge, “I am a Christian.”

The fact is, if you don’t confess Christ early in a public setting, in your office, early in the game, it becomes harder and harder. If the opportunity presents itself for you to publicly confess Christ and you don’t do it the first time, the second time is harder. The third time is even harder still. The more you hide your light under a bushel, the more difficult it is to come out of hiding.

Those of you who have been hiding, those of you who have not publicly confessed Christ where you are, haven’t you found it very difficult to come out of hiding? But do it, if you want to maintain the standard of the city of God. Come out of hiding. Let it be known that you are one of those people who does confess Christ. Your confession will hold you accountable.

You will have the inner strength to go on by a daily devotional life. Again, listen, we don't see it here in Daniel 1, but we see it continually in the rest of the book of Daniel in virtually every other chapter. Daniel is frequently before the Lord. Internal integrity is not something you just pump up. The internal integrity to keep from imploding under cultural pressure is something given to us out of our disciplined relationship with God. It is the fruit of spending time in God's presence in prayer and feeding on God's Word, meditating on scripture and putting it into your life.

Of course, there are times where we must draw the line. We have publicly confessed. We have made a decision. There is a time where you draw the line. And Daniel in v. 8 had to draw a line. He made a decision in v. 8 to not defile himself with the food and wine. He asked the chief official for permission to not defile himself this way.

You ask, "Why did he draw the line here? Why not on the name change or on the education? What is the big deal about a little food? Probably lots of other Jews were going along with it."

Well, the food laws were designed by God to keep the nation of Israel separate from the other nations. If you couldn't eat with your Gentile neighbors, you couldn't really intermingle with them. But giving ground on food laws meant that you were going to give ground on your distinctiveness and that could lead not only to close relationships, but possibly intermarriage.

There is a time, friend, where you wish to be a stranger in a strange land. Where you say, "I am going to hold onto the standard of the city of God and live according to that law, not the laws of the city of men." And there are points at which you will have to say to the officials over you, "no." It is quite easy to rationalize and believe that you will

never have to say “no”. No one of us is so isolated from the larger culture, no one of us is in such a lofty position, that at some places and in some ways we are just going to have to say, “I am sorry, no, I can’t go any further.”

There is no formula for when you need to draw the line. There is no clear rule book. Certainly you need to draw the line when someone is calling you to violate something in God’s word, but specific application of God’s word to life applications is a tricky business. A teenager just asked me the other day, “I am working at a large bookstore as a cashier. But they sell a lot of books that I, as a Christian, can’t go along with. And they sell pornographic magazines. Can I as a Christian work as a cashier and sell books to someone on witchcraft or pornographic magazines. Do I need to quit my job?”

There are no easy answers for living as a stranger in a strange land. We want to maintain our witness environment of being salt and light. But at the same time we find ourselves trapped and caught, pressured to do things that we aren’t sure are right.

Paul gives us a basic principle for decision making in Romans 14:23 when he says, “Everything that doesn’t come from faith is sin.” Of course, you draw a line when something clearly violates God’s word. But our indirect participation, Paul gives us a rule in Romans 14:23, “Whatever doesn’t proceed from faith is sin.”

You go before God with a particular issue and you seek his face. You say, “God, can I do this before you with a clear conscience? Can I believe that you are leading me here into the midst of this environment, into this less than sterile situation? Can I have your blessing?”

God's Spirit will internally lead you. You will feel a growing conviction, "No, it can't be that God wants me to do this." Or "Yes, I do believe that God wants me in here in the midst of all the yuk and junk." There are times when we have to draw a line.

Last thing – we have to depend on God to prosper us even when we draw a line. It says in Daniel 1:13 that Daniel said, Let our appearance be observed in your presence and the appearance of those who are eating the king's choice food. Deal with your servants according to what you see. At the end of the ten days, their appearance seemed better and they were fatter than all of the youths who had been eating the king's choice food. So the overseer continued to withhold the choice food and wine and kept giving them vegetables.

God prospered them. God can prosper you as a stranger in a strange land.

Sermon—November 13-14, 1999
Rich Nathan
Preparing for the Millennium Series
Daniel 1

Strangers in a Strange Land

I. Meaning of History

A. Secular History (Daniel 1:1)

1. Pre-Constantinian: Christ – 311 AD
2. Constantine Onward: 311-1650 AD
3. Judeo-Christian: 1659 – 1970
4. Post-Christianity: After 1970

B. Sacred History (Daniel 1:2)

II. Molding Culture

A. Identification (Daniel 1:4)

B. Isolation (Daniel 1:3)

C. Indoctrination (Daniel 1:4)

D. Indulgence (Daniel 1:5)

E. Identity Confusion (Daniel 1:6-7)

III. Maintaining Distinctiveness (Daniel 1:8-21)

A. Deciding

B. Disciplining

C. Drawing Lines

D. Depending