



SERVING
IN BABYLON
DANIEL'S
STORY

PETER SAUNDERS

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This booklet is based on the biblical overview used for a series of regional conferences, on the theme 'Serving in Babylon', run by the Christian Medical Fellowship in conjunction with the Lawyers' Christian Fellowship.

Britain has had a glorious Christian history that has had a profound influence in shaping our language, culture, laws and institutions – not least our medical schools and hospitals.

Christian involvement in healthcare has a long pedigree in the UK and elsewhere, stretching back to the monastic hospitals of the medieval period.

Many of the major hospitals which provided the foundations for the NHS were originally set up by Christians. St Bartholomew’s, St Thomas’, St Mary’s and St George’s are examples just in London. Similarly many of the country’s leading medical schools began with Christian initiatives. But anyone observing political events in Britain today would be clear that we are now living in a post-Christian society and working in a post-Christian health service.

The mountains of our culture – those institutions which shape its cultural trajectory – parliament, the judiciary, the universities, schools, the worlds of media and entertainment – are now increasingly occupied by people who hold to an atheistic worldview and the values of secular humanism.

‘God doesn’t exist. Man is a clever monkey. Death is the end. Morality is discovered, not revealed.’ The sacred triad of autonomy – ‘I want it’ – technology – ‘we can do it’ – and moral relativism – ‘why not?’ – are increasingly determining our nation’s direction. Same-sex marriage, abortion on demand, the relentless push for legalised euthanasia, materialism, crippling debt and self-absorption are merely symptoms of a collective loss of Christian faith. The cultural decline – atheism leading to idolatry and immorality, especially sexual immorality – spelt out clearly by Paul in Romans 1 – is also soberly mapped by the prophet Ezekiel in describing the terminal moral decline of the Jewish people:

‘Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. They were haughty and did detestable things before me. Therefore I did away with them as you have seen.’

(Ezekiel 16:49-50)

Elsewhere the prophets outline the four markers of a culture experiencing its death throes – flagrant idolatry, sexual immorality, the shedding of innocent blood and an arrogant self-righteousness.

One of the most reliable barometers of this cultural shift is in the changing composition and character of parliament itself – and especially the House of Lords, which over the last seven years has become a rubber stamp to any measures resonating with this new atheist and secular humanist zeitgeist.

Rather than a chamber offering careful scrutiny of new laws this unelected and unaccountable body is now taking the lead in introducing and rubber-stamping so-called progressive legislation.

It voted in 2014 to legalise three parent embryo techniques involving both germline genetic manipulation and cell nuclear replacement (aka cloning technology) by an incredible 280 to 48.

In the same year the House of Commons – led by the Prime Minister and the vice leader of the Labour Party – astoundingly rejected a move by Fiona Bruce MP to clarify that sex selection abortion is illegal under the Abortion Act by an incredible 292 votes to 201. What parliament would balk at criminalising female gendercide? Ours would and has.

Lord Falconer's Assisted Dying Bill thankfully fell before the general election in 2015 through lack of parliamentary time at committee stage but there is little doubt that it would have passed through the Lords had the time been granted.

So how are we to live in a society that has lost its cultural foundations and is now increasingly inimical to both Christian faith and values? How are we to live when we find ourselves increasingly as 'aliens and strangers' in our own country? It's precisely for this kind of situation that the story of Daniel is so instructive. When Paul instructed Timothy (2 Timothy 3:16-17) that 'all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work' he was talking about the Old Testament – as the New Testament at that stage had not been compiled.

The apostle also said to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 10:11), 'These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come.'

A JOURNEY IN HISTORY

So let me take you back 2,600 years in history. When Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 587 BC, the nation of Judah was taken to Babylon in an exile that would last 70 years. As God's people in a foreign land that was hostile to their faith and values, they faced the challenge of living and serving as 'aliens and strangers'. There was great pressure to close ranks or to forget who they were. There was also great hand-wringing and lament. In King James English:

*'By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept,
when we remembered Zion.'*

(Psalm 137:1)

The Psalm goes on to describe in graphic detail how they were tormented by their captors, unable to sing the songs of their homeland, pining for Jerusalem and longing for vengeance against those who had mistreated them.

They were forcibly displaced people – not even asylum seekers or refugees, let alone economic migrants – but rather captives, prisoners of war in a country utterly different from their own in language, culture, values, religion and worldview. God's people – but made to serve in an idolatrous empire, Babylon.

In the New Testament the symbolism of 'Babylon' is used by the apostles to describe a Christian's position in the world.

The apostle Peter talks of 'living in Babylon' and describes God's elect (Christians) as 'strangers in the world' (1 Peter 1:1), and 'aliens' (1 Peter 2:11). We are called to 'be holy' – to be set apart – because we are 'a chosen people, a royal priesthood' and 'a holy nation' (1 Peter 2:9).

One of the key themes of the book of Daniel is that God is sovereign over all physical, spiritual, social and political processes (Daniel 2:21, 4:17, 5:21). In other words, fire can't burn, lions can't bite and kings can't rule unless God allows them to.

God's rescue of Daniel from the lion's den in Daniel 6 and of his friends Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego from the fiery furnace in Daniel 3 are familiar to anyone who has attended Sunday school. But less appreciated and believed in – even in the church – is God's control over political events and his sovereign rule over the rise and fall of nations.

'He changes times and seasons; he deposes kings and raises up others.'

(Daniel 2:21)

'The Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes.'

(Daniel 4:32, repeated 4:17, 25, 5:21, 35)

Daniel's two great dreams – in chapters two and seven of this book – illustrate this. First there is the great statue in chapter two with its head of gold, chest of silver, loins of bronze and legs of iron – representing the empire of Babylon and three more empires – usually identified by commentators as Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome – that followed it. Then there are the four great beasts of chapter seven – representing probably the same four kingdoms – each falling to be replaced by the next. Each dream ends in a similar way with these temporary earthly kingdoms being destroyed to be replaced by a Heavenly Kingdom that will never end. The statue made from four metals is smashed by a rock which grows to fill the whole world – a direct reference to Christ's Kingdom. The four beasts are superseded by one, we are told, like a 'Son of Man' (Daniel 7:13) coming with the clouds of heaven. He approaches the Ancient of Days (God the Father) and is led into his presence. Then this Son of Man 'is given authority, glory

and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worship(ed) him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.' 'Son of Man' was of course Jesus' favourite term for himself in the gospels. It is Jesus who through his death and resurrection rules over all the kingdoms of men.

I live in St Albans – named after Britain's first Christian martyr, a Roman nobleman called Alban – who was converted through the ministry of a priest fleeing persecution in the early third century. When he refused to recant, the Roman officials chopped his head off. But centuries later, when the Roman town of Verulamium where Alban lived lay in ruins, they took the bricks and used them to build a cathedral on the very spot where he had given his life.

It's a beautiful picture of what has, and is, happening in history. Through the shedding of Jesus' own blood at the hands of Roman Empire God is building a living temple of his own people – the church.

'The sovereignty, power and greatness of all the kingdoms under heaven will be handed over to the holy people of the Most High. His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship and obey him.'
(Daniel 7:27)

Of course what is true of the ancient world empires is equally true of the empires of today – the American, British and Soviet Empires – and equally the empires of post-war western capitalism and Islam.

God has raised them all up and he will bring them all down. God is not only sovereign over his own people. Yes, he brought the nation of Israel out of captivity in Egypt and planted them in the Promised Land. But, as the prophet Amos tells us (Amos 9:7), he also brought up the Philistines from Caphtor (Crete) and the Arameans from Kir. Every migration is ultimately God's doing. As the apostle Paul reminds us:

'From one man (God) made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.'
(Acts 17:26)

God is sovereign over all political events just as he is sovereign over all events of any kind – even over the NHS! In like manner the Jews did not end up in Babylon by some mistake or historical accident – and certainly not by the design of Babylon itself. God himself put them there:

'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.'
(Daniel 1:1-2)

That's how Daniel and his friends got to Babylon in the first place. By 605 BC, when the book of Daniel starts, Babylon was the most powerful city in the world. It was the capital city of the Babylonian empire stretching from modern day Egypt to Armenia, Turkey to Iran. Babylon ruled all the nations rather like Moscow ruled the USSR; 100,000 people, 1,197 temples, home of the hanging gardens of Babylon and the famous Ishtar gate with its beautiful blue mosaics reconstructed in Berlin's Pergamon Museum. A world leader in science, art, astronomy, literature, engineering – and pre-eminent in political and military strength. Judah was just one of many nations crushed.

DANIEL

Daniel is a character eminently worthy of study:

- he rises from nothing to be Prime Minister in a country whose language and culture were at first completely unfamiliar to him

- he serves seven kings as a leading official though two great empires, not just Babylon but Media too
- he is visited by angels and receives more dreams and visions from God than any other Old Testament character
- he remains faithful to God through great tests of faith

It is said that all power corrupts and that absolute power corrupts absolutely. But we see no trace of it here – Daniel had almost absolute power and yet, despite all the corruption and power-seeking and idolatry in Babylon, he remains untainted. And yet this remarkable character was also a humble man with a simple approach – he simply read his Bible, prayed and obeyed.

His situation also has many similarities with ours as Christian doctors and health professionals. We read in Daniel 1:3-7 that Daniel and his friends were:

- selected for a period of rigorous training
- taken away from home and family
- had to acquire new language and skills – language and literature of Babylonians
- employed by the state in a privileged position
- faced pressures to conform to the society in which they had been placed

They were in many ways model citizens who had a huge respect for the authorities and hierarchical structures they had been asked to serve. But they were actually citizens of another Kingdom, the Kingdom of God.

In Babylon they were aliens, exiles, sojourners, strangers – awaiting the coming of their real Kingdom when they would return to Jerusalem – just as we are waiting for our New Jerusalem with Christ.

So as God’s people they had to live in a time of tension between the ‘now’ and the ‘not yet’. Just as we do as God’s people today. God’s Kingdom has been inaugurated but will not fully come until Christ returns in

judgment. Christians are therefore called both to be ‘in the world’ whilst not being ‘of the world’ (John 17:11, 15-16). We do not ‘belong to the world’ but have been ‘chosen... out of the world’ (John 15:18-19).

This world is not our real home – we are citizens of a different Kingdom serving a different King.

TWO TEMPTATIONS

In this situation of tension Daniel and his friends faced two key temptations.

The first temptation was to retreat into an escapist spiritual ghetto – to seek solace with like-minded believers and to leave the world to its own devices. The second temptation was simply to compromise and become no different from those around them. We face exactly the same temptations today – to withdraw into our Christian communities or simply to blend in with those around us. But like Daniel we are called instead to be fully engaged with the society into which we have been placed – to be both ‘salt and light’ – penetrating and flavouring (Matthew 5:13-16) and to ‘shine like stars’ (Philippians 2:15) – to stand out as morally different.

This involves conformity to a degree. Daniel and his friends learnt a trade, adopted clothing and culture, learnt a new language and served in a secular state.

But it also involved daring to be different.

1. DARE TO BE DIFFERENT – DISTINCTIVENESS

The first challenge they faced in chapter one was to eat the king’s rich food – something they felt that as believers they could not do – they felt for some reason it would be dishonouring to God.

Was it because the food was not kosher, or had been sacrificed to idols, or was simply bad for them? We are not told specifically but nevertheless they had concluded that, for whatever reason, it would be wrong for them to eat it.

This first challenge was one in which they risked embarrassment – but not much else. But it was also the first of many steps that would take them eventually to the fiery furnace (chapter three) and the lions’ den (chapter six).

In the same way there are steps of faithfulness to God for us that might make us unpopular with others or risk embarrassment – where we need to take a different path from those round us in terms of lifestyle: the misuse of alcohol or drugs, sexual boundaries, gambling, the way we use our money, honesty, language... refusing to join in with gossip, capitulate to cynicism, running others down, complaining. It’s noteworthy that Paul’s exhortation to ‘shine like stars’ in Philippians 2:14-15 is in the context of doing ‘everything without grumbling or arguing’ so that ‘you may become blameless and pure, “children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.”’

And then there are steps of faithfulness where the stakes are considerably raised – where not just reputation or friendship is at stake – but something much more – our jobs, our comfort, our property, our freedom, even our lives.

It’s interesting that the situations Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego faced in chapter three with the fiery furnace and Daniel faced in chapter six with the lions’ den both involved changes in the law. In chapter three the law changed in a way that forced these believers to do something that they believed was wrong – in this case to bow down to an idolatrous image.

In Britain today there are changes in the law threatening to do just that, to force us to act against our consciences – especially with regard to areas of life ethics. Abortion is an obvious example. Christians risk being effectively marginalised from some specialities in medicine. If the law were to change to allow euthanasia or assisted suicide – making it part of ‘the full range of services’ we are obliged to provide in, say, intensive care, anaesthetics, rehab medicine, paediatrics or care of the elderly – there would be pressure to conform of a very different kind.

In chapter six the law changed in a way that threatened to stop these men participating in what was really quite normal behaviour for believers – for Daniel it was to pray with his window open. In the same way for us it

might be praying in public or for patients, sharing our faith, expressing an opinion about an ethical issue or perhaps even wearing a cross.

The apostle Paul is quite unambiguous in telling the Romans to 'submit...to the governing authorities' (Romans 13:1). The context of a Roman empire at that time hostile to Christians makes his argument that governments have been established by God even more compelling. But this is not a call for unquestioning obedience.

The Bible is very clear about 'red lines': that we should not submit to obeying governing authorities when they force us to do things which are wrong, or try to prevent us from living and speaking in obedience to Jesus Christ. The Israelite midwives refused to kill Israelite babies when the king of Egypt ordered them to do so (Exodus 1:15-21). Daniel disobeyed King Darius when he was ordered to desist from public prayer and his friends Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego did not bow down to Nebuchadnezzar's golden image. Peter said 'We must obey God rather than men!' (Acts 5:29) to the high priest and Sanhedrin when he was ordered not to preach the gospel. The response of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego is particularly striking.

'King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.'
(Daniel 3:16-18)

'But even if he does not' – the KJV puts it even more starkly – 'But if not'. In the summer of 1940, more than 350,000 soldiers – most of them British – were trapped at Dunkirk. The German forces were on their way, and they had the capacity to wipe out the British Expeditionary Force. When it seemed certain that the allied forces at Dunkirk were about to be massacred, a British naval officer cabled just three words back to London: 'But if not'.

'But if not'. These words were instantly recognisable to the people who were accustomed to hearing the scriptures read in church. They knew the story told in the book of Daniel. The message in those three little words was clear: the situation was desperate. The allied forces were trapped. It would take a miracle to save them, but they were determined not to give in. One simple three word phrase communicated all that.

For some reason – people are still not sure why – the Axis powers hesitated. They backed off, briefly, and what's known as the 'Miracle of Dunkirk' took place. British families and fishermen heard about the cry for help, and they answered with merchant marine boats, with pleasure cruisers, and even with small fishing boats. By a miracle, they evacuated more than 338,000 soldiers and took them to safety.

Now of course Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego did not know whether or not God would intervene with a miracle – as he actually did – but regardless they were not going to bow down to the image. In the same way we too need to count the cost of obedience and be prepared to pay it.

2. SEEK THE COMMON GOOD – ENGAGEMENT

Daring to be different is a key element of Christian discipleship but there was another component of Daniel's faithfulness to God.

The prophet Jeremiah urged the exiles, including Daniel and his friends, to become fully engaged with their new society, whilst maintaining their distinctiveness as believers faithful to God – to be truly in the world but not of the world.

'Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper... "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

(Jeremiah 29:7-11)

And so Daniel worked hard and effectively within the alien Babylonian system and was rewarded with great responsibility for his integrity and commitment.

'Daniel so distinguished himself among the administrators and satraps by his exceptional qualities that the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom. They tried to find grounds for charges against him in his conduct of government affairs but they were unable to do so. They could find no corruption in him because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent.'
(Daniel 6:3-4)

In fact this was true of his friends as well and the Bible makes it very clear where these qualities came from.

'To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning... The king talked with them, and he found none equal to [them] so they entered the king's service. In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom.'
(Daniel 1:17-20)

And the result?

'Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the province of Babylon.'
(Daniel 3:30)

There is nothing wrong with Christians holding influential positions of authority. In fact it enables us to do great good. But the key thing is to make

sure that it is God and not selfish ambition that puts us there. If we have to compromise to get there we will have to compromise to stay there. On the other hand, if it is God who puts us there then he can do great things through us.

For much of biblical history God's people have lived as exiles and have worked in state systems. Joseph, Esther, Mordecai and Nehemiah also served in state systems in the great empires of Egypt, Media and Persia. The early Christians lived at the time when the Roman Empire was dominant and throughout the last 20 centuries Christians have served in state systems and empires all over the world.

We should work to the best of our abilities within the system in which we're placed, and value the good of the organisation in which we work. In doing this we not only obey the principles in Jeremiah 29, but also uphold the high view of work given to us in Genesis 1.

As God's 'stewards' we are entrusted with gifts, training, resources and held responsible to care for his world as he himself cares for it (Genesis 1:28). We should make an effort to help with particular priorities in our organisation, striving to improve the quality of its work. This might include providing leadership, balancing the finances, learning management processes and promoting what our organisation does.

One way to engage is to become involved in management structures and work on improving the system. The latest NHS reforms have given more opportunities to GPs particularly. Indeed every doctor is a manager to a greater or lesser extent; principles around integrity and seeking the good of our workplace are no different when applied to management tasks than when applied to patient care.

Part of seeking that prosperity is praying. If there are other Christians, are we praying together in our workplace? If so, we may well pray for our patients and ourselves, but how often do we pray for the health of the organisation, or the managers?

Christians are urged not only to pray for 'all those in authority' (1 Timothy 2:1-2) but also to be subject to them: 'to be obedient, to be ready

to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and to show humility to all men' (Titus 3:1-2). We are also to serve them 'with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord... as working for the Lord and not for men' (Colossians 3:22-25): loving as Christ loved and treating others as if they were Christ himself. As we have noted, Christian involvement in healthcare has a long pedigree in the UK. Many Christians will quite rightly choose to continue to work in the state healthcare institutions of the NHS, but with the global financial crisis and burgeoning national debt there are also going to be more opportunities for Christians – to fulfil the 'any qualified provider' criterion to provide healthcare and health education in innovative ways – through churches, communities, charities and corporate bodies alongside.

The Chinese character for 'crisis' is made up of two other characters – 'threat' and 'opportunity'. If the health system is in crisis then of course it poses a threat to us, but it will also give more opportunities for Christians and for explicitly Christian organisations to provide healthcare and health education.

The astronomical growth of charitable Christian initiatives – foodbanks, street-pastoring, debt counselling, crisis pregnancy counselling, drug and alcohol rehabilitation – represent Christians beginning to rise to that challenge. But there is unlimited potential by God's grace for much greater initiatives by Christians, churches, communities, charities and corporate bodies.

THE FALL OF BABYLON

We live in the period between Jesus' first coming, in which he achieved our salvation through his death and resurrection, and his second coming leading to the final judgment and the establishment of a new heaven and new earth.

We know that the final days before Christ's return will be days of great turmoil and torment.

In the book of Revelation, John describes the final death of human culture, which he calls 'Babylon the Great' epitomising a state in full rebellion against God.

"Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great," which made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries.'
(Revelation 14:8)

'God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath.'
(Revelation 16:9)

'Babylon the great the mother of prostitutes and of the abominations of the earth.'
(Revelation 17:5)

'With a mighty voice he shouted: "Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!" She has become a dwelling for demons and a haunt for every impure spirit, a haunt for every unclean bird, a haunt for every unclean and detestable animal.'
(Revelation 18:2)

'When the kings of the earth who committed adultery with her and shared her luxury see the smoke of her burning, they will weep and mourn over her.'
(Revelation 18:9)

'Terrified at her torment, they will stand far off and cry: "Woe! Woe to you, great city, you mighty city of Babylon! In one hour your doom has come!"'
(Revelation 18:10)

'Then a mighty angel picked up a boulder the size of a large millstone and threw it into the sea, and said: "With such violence the great city of Babylon will be thrown down, never to be found again.'"
(Revelation 18:21)

And then finally: 'After this I heard what sounded like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting: "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God.'"
(Revelation 19:10)

'Then I heard another voice from heaven say: "Come out of her, my people," so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues.'
(Revelation 18:4)

We don't know the future holds for our nation – and we don't know if we are living in the last generation.

But we do know that this is the last chance for this generation to hear and respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ, so we must live as if it is the last.

We don't know whether as Christians we will live out our days as a small remnant on these islands or whether by God's grace we will see another great revival, like that of the 18th century, which transforms our whole history and culture. It is in God's hands. But, regardless, as his people we are called both to be distinctive and to be engaged – both salt and light, in the world but not of the world – daring to be different whilst seeking the good of the city in which God has placed us.

It will require grace, compassion, courage and discernment. But it is our calling by God's grace and by his Spirit. ■

When Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 587 BC, the nation of Judah was taken to Babylon in an exile that would last 70 years. As God's people in a foreign land that was hostile to their faith and values, they faced the challenge of living and serving as 'aliens and strangers'. There was great pressure to close ranks or to forget who they were.

The temptation was either to retreat into an escapist spiritual ghetto or simply to compromise and become no different from those around them.

But the prophet Jeremiah instead urged the exiles, who included Daniel and his friends, to become fully engaged with their new society, whilst maintaining their distinctiveness as believers faithful to God – to be truly in the world but not of the world.

Christians living in 21st century Britain and serving in the NHS face similar challenges to those of Daniel. In this booklet, Peter Saunders, CMF Chief Executive, encourages Christian healthcare professionals to be fruitful yet distinctive as they serve God in today's NHS.

