

Private Faith

Throughout history, kingdoms and empires have conquered and ruled over weaker nations. The Bible records many examples; Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, and the Roman, just to name some of the more significant ones. Those who ruled went by different titles; sometimes they were called Kings, in Egypt they were called Pharaohs, and under the Roman Empire they were known as Caesars. One way that a king expands his kingdom is to conquer and assimilate other people groups. Kings are historically greedy and want to rule over more and more people, so it doesn't do them any good to wipe out entire nations, but rather, defeat the opposing army and then assimilate the remaining people to become subjects/civilians under his reign. Assimilation is the process of adapting in order to fit in or belong to another group. A person assimilates by changing his identity in order to reflect allegiance to a new set of values. When a king conquered and assimilated other people groups, sometimes that king would allow people to keep their faith identity, other kings might not, making it illegal to worship other deities beside who the king worshipped.

The purpose of this essay is to expose how culture encourages Christians to keep their faith private. This is ultimately the plot of our adversary, Satan, who wants all believers to be muted in society. Satan would like nothing more than for Christians to assimilate and become like the world, and to become less and less like Jesus.

The Babylonians Assimilated the Hebrews

In the book of Daniel, chapter one, we see that the kingdom of Babylon conquered the kingdom of Judah. The Hebrew people of Judah, later more prominently known as the Jews, were some of God's chosen people, except that the Hebrews had not been faithful to the Lord and as such they had forfeited God's protection against enemy nations. The king of Babylon went by the name Nebuchadnezzar, which means, "*may Nebo protect the crown.*" Nebo/Nabu was a name of a prominent false god that Babylonians worshipped. Nebuchadnezzar assimilated the Hebrews and in doing so, he ran a series of tests in order to find out who the best and the brightest were among them. Four special young men were identified as sharp and promising potential leaders. They were brought into the king's palace to be groomed to become officials. These four would undergo a three-year assimilation process which included learning to speak and write in Chaldean, which was the language of the Babylonian kingdom. Eventually they'd work as part of the king's royal counsel. See Daniel chapter one for greater detail.

Aside from learning the language, these four men were to be assimilated in dress, culture, and even eating habits. So much emphasis was put on breaking them from their old ways, that their names were even changed to reflect Babylonian allegiance. This degree of assimilation was meant to express complete conquering. However, the four men in view wouldn't abandon their faith in the Lord. The four men in view are Daniel, whose Hebrew name means, "*God is my judge.*" His name was changed to Belteshazzar, which means "*The prince of Bel*" - Beltis was a Chaldean deity. Hananiah, whose name in Hebrew means, "*God is gracious,*" had his name changed to Shadrach, which means "*At Aku's command*" - Aku was a Babylonian moon god. Mishael, whose name in Hebrew means, "*No one is like God,*" had his name changed to Meshach, which means, "*There is no one like Aku.*" And, Azariah, whose name in Hebrew means, "*God helps me,*" had his name changed to Abednego, which means "*Servant of Nego*" - Nego was another Chaldean deity. Despite their assimilation into the Babylonian culture, they held firm to their faith. God honored them and gave the four men wisdom well beyond their age. Nebuchadnezzar recognized their giftings as well.

To summarize the events that followed, Nebuchadnezzar had a dream that was given to him from the Lord. This dream haunted Nebuchadnezzar, and he called to his wise-men and sorcerers to give him understanding. Nebuchadnezzar had said that they must give him both the dream and its interpretation, or else they'd be killed. None of the king's advisors could do what was asked. Daniel prayed to the Lord for help. God gave Daniel the dream and its interpretation, and Daniel presented these things to the king. Daniel 2:27-28 says that Daniel stood before the king and proclaimed, "**As for**

the mystery about which the king has inquired, neither wise men, conjurers, magicians nor diviners are able to declare it to the king. However, there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and He has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will take place in the latter days.” After Daniel gave Nebuchadnezzar his dream and its meaning, Nebuchadnezzar fell on the floor and proclaimed (2:47), ***“Surely your God is a God of gods and a Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, since you have been able to reveal this mystery.”***

The king doesn’t bow down to anyone, but here he’s on the floor paying homage to Daniel’s God, and declaring Daniel’s God to be the God of gods! You’d think this revelation would be cause for Nebuchadnezzar to turn in his faith and worship Daniel’s God. However, despite this public profession of worship, the king didn’t turn in his faith. He did however honor Daniel and his three friends. Daniel was made second in command over all of Babylon, and his three friends were promoted to being chief deputies under Daniel’s leadership.

What’s next is key. The dream that was given to Nebuchadnezzar revealed the limitations of his power, and that his kingdom would come to an end, and that only God’s kingdom would stand forever. This dream was revealed by the image of a large statue, whose head of gold represented the kingdom of Nebuchadnezzar. The rest of the body of the statue, from the head on down, represented the weaker subsequent kingdoms that would follow after Babylon; each body part of the statue was made of a lesser material (silver, bronze, iron, iron/clay). Instead of Nebuchadnezzar acknowledging his limitations and turning in faith, he went ahead and built for himself a huge statue made entirely out of gold; symbolizing that his kingdom would never come to an end. In fact, Nebuchadnezzar build this enormous statue in the center of town and daily had musicians publicly call people to worship it. The king even established a decree that said that whenever the musicians play, anyone who doesn’t stop and bow down and worship the statue will be killed; being thrown into a furnace of fire.

Here's the point. Nebuchadnezzar had worshipped Daniel’s God, and declared that Daniel’s God was superior to all other gods. Daniel and his three friends were certainly allowed to keep their faith, and were promoted in view of what God could do in and through them for the benefit of Babylon. However, the culture of Babylon mandated that they keep their faith private. Once in public, they must worship the king’s idol. In short, when you’re out and about in society, just go with the flow, regardless of who you worship in your home. A classic example of privatized faith and an attempt to keep believers looking, acting, talking, and honoring whatever the world honors. However, this decree didn’t sit well with Daniel’s three friends.

Fast-forward to Daniel 3:12, where Nebuchadnezzar learns that Daniels friends won’t bow to the Babylonian false god, ***“There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the administration of the province of Babylon, namely Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego. These men, O king, have disregarded you; they do not serve your gods or worship the golden image which you have set up.”*** The three men are brought before the king, and in 3:16-18, they declare to the king, ***“O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.”*** Their allegiance to the One true God enraged Nebuchadnezzar, and into the fire the three went. However, the Lord protected them and not one hair on their head was singed. In fact, someone appeared in the fire with the three believers to accompany and protect them. Whether it was an angel deployed by God, or the Lord Himself who had many times appeared in human form, the Bible doesn’t make clear. Ultimately, Daniel 3:26 records, ***“Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the door of the furnace of blazing fire; he responded and said, “Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, come out, you servants of the Most High God, and come here!” Then Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego came out of the midst of the fire.”*** Despite being ordered to worship false gods, the faith of Daniel and his friends wouldn’t be kept to themselves.

Roman's Assimilated Jews

Centuries later, during the Roman Empire, the Israelites were among many nations that were conquered by the Romans. Rome, in an effort to keep peace, allowed subject nations to keep their forms of worship, and even their lesser forms of government. This meant that the Israelites could continue to worship in their synagogues and in their temple, and even conduct their governing court, the Sanhedrin, so long as their Jewish laws didn't impede on any Roman law. However, being slaves, the Jews still had to pay taxes to Rome and follow Roman laws, which included publicly declaring "Caesar is king", if a Roman official commanded you to do so. Not doing so resulted in punishment. Keep in mind, for a Jew to declare that Caesar, a Gentile, was their king, was an act of blasphemy. Even though the Jews had no earthly king at that time, they believed that only God could rightly govern over them.

Roman coins depicted Caesar on one side as well as an inscription that read, "*Caesar is God.*" The Jews would buy and sell with these Roman coins in the public markets, but wouldn't put these blasphemous coins in their temple. In fact, when a Jew came to the temple to pay an offering or a temple tax, he would have to exchange his Roman coinage with the money-exchangers for Jewish coins before the money could be placed in the temple treasury. Blasphemy of the Lord was very serious to the Jews and they worked hard to appear to be righteous. However, sometimes this righteousness was only skin deep. On one occasion, Jesus was on trial and stood next to the Roman Procurator over Jerusalem, named Pilate. Pilate shouted to a crowd of the Jewish civilians that he found Jesus to be innocent, but asked the mob what they wanted done with Jesus. John 19:15 records, "***So they cried out, 'Away with Him, away with Him, crucify Him!' Pilate said to them, 'Shall I crucify your King?' The chief priests answered, 'We have no king but Caesar.'***" Notice who the ones were that shouted, "*We have no king but Caesar!*" It was the chief priests, the religious leaders who caved in to the government when there was something to be gained! Do you think the chief priests would ever dare shout this blasphemy in the synagogues, or the temple? Of course not! They'd have been stoned. But, when in public, they kept their faith beliefs private and willingly shouted what Pilate wanted to hear.

Jesus had previously called out the hypocrisy of these religious leaders, demonstrating that their faith really was only skin deep. In Matthew 15:7-8, "***You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you: 'THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME.'***"

The bottom line is this, the world will always try to keep Christians as controlled and quiet as possible. Fortunately, we have the examples of bold Christians who would not keep their faith quiet, such as the men in the book of Daniel. And, we have the result of cowards, who act religious, but are willing to compromise their standards, and thus expose their lack of faith, whenever it's convenient out in public, as demonstrated by the chief priests in the book of John.

If you're a Christian, will you live with bold faith? 2 Timothy 1:7 says, "***For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline.***"

Decide to not let the culture of our time assimilate you into becoming a private Christian. Don't be conformed to this world, as Romans 12:2 says, "***And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.***"