The Dangers of Digital Babylon

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Let's turn again to the book of Daniel 1 and we'll read together verse 8. Daniel 1:8.

> 8 But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's meat, nor with the wine which he drank: therefore he requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself.

Two thousand five hundred years ago, God sent his people into Babylon, into Babylonian exile as a punishment for their sins. It was a culture that was extremely hostile to the faith of God's people, and yet God called them to build houses, to open businesses, to have children, and to parent them for his glory because he knew that in a few decades' times, he would call Israel back out of Babylon and back to the Promised Land and he wanted a people who would be separated from that culture; who would be willing to leave it, eager to leave it and get back to being God's people in God's land. We do not live, of course, in physical Babylon in a geographical place called Babylon, but we are living in a digital Babylon, a digital culture that is extremely hostile to spirituality in general, and to Christianity in particular, and yet God also calls us to live here, to work here, to have children here, and to raise them for his glory.

Now, you might think, you know, compare the two, historical, physical Babylon, digital Babylon, "Hey, we're in a much easier situation than they were." I hope I can show you today that that is far from the truth. In some ways, we are in even more danger because it's not so obvious that we are in a digital Babylon, that we are living in a digital culture that is so damaging and destructive to Christian faith and spirituality. Digital Babylon is at least as dangerous as historical Babylon. Historical Babylon killed thousands, digital Babylon is killing hundreds of thousands.

Do you know when Judah was taken into Babylon, hundreds of thousands of them were taken. When called them to return, only several thousands did so. The rest had been thoroughly Babylonized and that's the danger that we are all in as well. We are in great danger of being Babylonized, of just merging, of just becoming Babylon itself, no different, no different to the rest of the culture, and if we want to avoid that, the first thing we must do is be alert to the seriousness of the dangers that we face. We are not going to take any steps, as Daniel did to remain separate, unless we realize how dangerous a

situation we are in. I'm sure many people said to Daniel, "Daniel, it's just food. What's the big deal? You know, everyone else is doing it." "No," Daniel said, "in this area I'm going to be different, I'm going to be separate," and it says, "he purposed in his heart." He saw the dangers that others didn't and resolved with God's help to be separate, to be different, and to be undefiled.

Getting digital technology under control is, I believe, the key to excelling in every area of life today. Do you want your children, parents, to excel relationally, vocationally, educationally, emotionally? Then you must help them get digital technology under control. It is going to give them a competitive advantage in the marketplace and in their marriages that others just don't have. We'll see that tonight, especially as we look at how Daniel and his friends thrived more than all the others in Babylon.

This, though, is also going to be the area that will determine our spiritual health. It's not just vocationally, educationally, emotionally, relationally. No, obviously above all we are interested in our children and ourselves excelling spiritually. And again, I 100% believe that this is the key determinant of spiritual health in the days and years ahead. If we want to grow in grace and in the knowledge of Jesus Christ, we have to grow in digital self-control. I'm 100% convinced there is nothing more important for us as individuals, as families, as a church, than this. This is going to make or break you as an individual. This is going to make or break our families. This is going to make or break the Christian church, and it's not just a problem for our kids, it's a problem for many of us adults as well.

This is not to deny that technology has enhanced our lives and many of us maybe wouldn't even be here if it wasn't for technology. Yes, it has enhanced our lives but it's also slowly killing our lives. Of course, you can think of the physical deaths that have resulted from abusive technology. There are nine deaths every day in the USA as a result of texting and driving. Three hundred and fifty thousand accidents a year in motor vehicles are the result of cellphone use while driving. So yes, it's killing physically and that's obvious, surely. I want to look this morning with you at some of the less obvious ways in which technology is killing us and this is a concern because we are told in one of our commandments, "You shall not kill," which requires us to take all lawful means to maintain and preserve our own lives and the lives of others, and that's not just living physically but it's every area of life that we must have a concern to preserve from all attacks, from all attempts to murder us.

The first area I want you to think about this morning is the way that digital technology is killing our brains. I'm going to be reading quite a number of statistics to you this morning. The average person checks in, in other words, opens up their phone and does something with it, the average person checks in 70 times a day, and the range at the lower end is about 50 and at the upper end is about 150. So the average is 70 times a day. The average person touches, clicks or swipes their phone 2,500 times a day and again, the upper range of this as just an average is 5,500. You think of all the times your brain is being engaged in this activity, interrupted with this activity.

It's been shown that toddlers who watch screens beyond the recommended minimal amount, which is very low, those who watch it for an hour above that suffer in the following ways: a 7% decrease in classroom engagement every year of their lives; and a 13% decrease in physical activity. That's just one hour of screens a day above the recommended average.

Those who play violent video games are actually changing the shape of their brains. For example, the area of the brain that is concerned with inhibition, in other words, self-control and concentration, is reduced in size by exposure to violent video games, and the part of the brain that's concerned with emotional arousal like anger, is actually increased by the use of violent video games.

Multi-device use, in other words, people who sit there watching the television while they're scrolling on their iPad and listening and texting people on their phone, is reducing brain density in these areas that control empathy and self-control. Multi-device use is actually reducing brain density.

Those who engage in multi-tasking, switching from one activity to another thinking that they're doing three or four things at once, scientists have found that they are reducing their IQ by 15 points. Adults are coming down to the level of an average eight year old through continued multi-tasking.

It's also killing our creativity and our problem solving ability. Who is going to create anything when there are so many distractions and when there is so little boredom? Kids don't create, they don't imagine, unless they are without distraction and unless they're left to be bored, and as a result, long term creativity, problem solving ability is being diminished.

We could go on and on but I hope that shows you we are actually killing our brains and the problem is we don't see it. You think about it, a spade is a piece of technology just like an iPhone. A spade and an iPhone, we can use them for work and for tasks, but you overuse a spade, you get blisters on your hands that prevent you from doing more work; that give you a warning that says, "Whoa. You need to take a break." Technology is, using our iPhones in the ways that most of us are doing, basically putting blisters on our brains but we don't see it. If we could see it, we would change. We are destroying our mental abilities. We are damaging, we are killing this vital organ with digital technology.

The second area is we're killing our sleep. We're killing our sleep. God is the one who gives his beloved sleep, says the psalmist. It's a gift of God and we're just throwing it in the trash. It's been shown that the way we're using our devices is having three effects upon sleep: it's shortening it; it's shallowing it; and it's interrupting it. It's reduced the length of time that teens sleep from an average of nine hours a night to seven hours a night. And it's not just a short time, it's been shown that using devices, especially late in the evening, results in much shallower sleep patterns. We're not getting into the deep restorative sleep that is so vital to our health. And it's also interrupting sleep. Again, you're not conscious of it maybe, but it's been shown that those who are using devices,

again so much through the day and especially in the evening, they are waking up repeatedly through the night, not realizing it. And all of these things are damaging and destroying our sleep. Sleep deprivation is a serious health problem. It's been linked to increased blood pressure, to heart disease. It's been linked to psychological problems such as depression and anxiety. Killing sleep has many knock-on effects in many areas of our lives. It's killing our sleep.

Thirdly, it's killing our identity. It's killing our identity, our sense of who we are. If you think of the multiple personas that people project onto social media, you'll look at people you know and you see the changes, every week there's a different image, a different persona, a different person being presented and you wonder, "Is this the person I actually know in real life? Do they know themselves who they are?" The opportunity to shape and form one's public persona and presentation via social media is resulting in people forgetting who they really are.

Psychologists and counselors tells us that they are inundated with teens who have no idea who they are, what God has made them, what their personality is, what their gifts are, what their character is, who they should be in this world. And it's not just people who are doing this to themselves, obviously they're also lighting a pipeline of other people's lives and personas into their lives via social media, watching carefully curated and cultured images of other people and their lives come into their lives resulting in feelings of inadequacy, of low self-esteem, of negative comparisons with others. It's become a societal addiction. Instagram has been found just recently to be the worst app for emotional and mental health.

Now it brings me onto our fourth point: it's killing our emotional health. There is a book recently out by a sociologist who has surveyed "I Gen," that's the new word that's been used to describe the current up and coming young generation. You had Generation X, then you had Millennials, now they are called "I Gen." And she's done research over a number of years into this new generation and she presents graphs in this book, dozens of graphs that show from about year 2000 up to 2016, and she's measuring different things, and the graphs are uniform. The graph is just going along up and down, up and down a little bit, come 2007, the graphs for things like depression and anxiety begin to increase. Shallow, but there's a definite increase. By 2010, 2011, it's like a cliff face and it's stayed up there. And they have searched for all the causes and factors of this and the conclusion that has been drawn is 2007 was the year the iPhone was released and 2010 was the year when the iPhone really permeated into the whole of society. The majority of Americans got a smartphone. There was a mass adoption of that technology. There is nothing else that can explain the soaring rates of depression and anxiety.

Why is that? Well, because social media, connection to the internet, is bringing three things into teens' lives: more pressure; more stimulus, especially that; and more trickle down stress. Six million American teens struggle with an anxiety disorder. In 2011, 50% of undergraduates said they felt overwhelming anxiety, 50%. By 2016, it's up to 65%. Anxiety is affecting not just adolescents but adults as well. Thirty percent of the adult population said they too are feeling overwhelming anxiety. And it's really not hard, is it,

to see at least one of the major causes of this in many cases is the constant beeps and buzzes and vibrations and notifications and banners that are just continually stimulating the brain, leaving no time for rest, for quiet, for peace, for undisturbed time.

This scientist who spoke of this said, "Our teens are in a cauldron of stimulus that they can't get away from or don't want to get away from or don't know how to get away from." If you look at these graphs again, for loneliness and for unhappiness, again, it's trundling along up and down, up and down, until 2007 it starts increasing, 2010, 2011, it goes through the roof. It's frightening when you see one after another after another like this. A lot of this is related to things like Instagram and Snapchat which are very image focused, producing feelings of inadequacy and anxiety. People who would in the past have been comparing themselves to maybe a few people in their close circles, a couple of hundred maybe in their school, are now comparing themselves to thousands, if not tens of thousands of people.

Fifthly, it's killing our modeling. By that I mean parental modeling. Our children look to us to be positive role-models in every area of life, especially this one, and they're not getting it. It's not just our children that have this problem. More than a third of teens when surveyed said they'd asked their parents to stop checking their devices. Of those who asked, 46% said their parents took no notice; 44% felt upset and ignored. They found that 82% of teens themselves felt meals should be device-free but needed their parents' help to enforce it. This scientist concluded, "Children are aware of some of the risks of tech overuse but they need adults to set clear boundaries and be good role-models." It's killing our modeling. What image as our children are growing up, what will be their memory of us consciously and subconsciously?

Sixthly, it is killing our relationships. This flows, really, from the previous one. It's killing our family relationships, our relationships with friends, our marriages. It's killing our listening skills and our speaking abilities. It's killing face-to-face communication and inter-family relationships. It's been found that 2+ hours of social media a day doubles the chances of a person experiencing social isolation.

Again, if you go to these graphs, this scientist, she measured the number of teens who hang out with their friends at least once a week, the number of teens who are driving by 12th grade, and the number of teens who are going out without their parents, and it found that when as the graphs for things like loneliness and unhappiness are soaring, these graphs are dropping off the cliff in the same years. In other words, since this technology has come in, our young people are being less social. They are not going out. They are not hanging out with friends. They are not even learning how to drive.

This scientist when she conducted interviews with teens found that they did the vast majority of their socializing on their beds with their phones, some of them spending whole summers, 80-90% of their time in their rooms with their phones. Friendships even amongst men have dropped to epic lows. Counselors involved in helping troubled marriages have found that instead of there being a third person in the marriage, as was

often the case, there is now a third party in the marriage and it's the phone of one of the partners, the wife or the husband. It's killing our relationships.

Seventhly, it's killing our time, the amount of time that's being wasted. The typical under 20 year old will have spent more than 30,000 hours on the internet or playing video games by the time they're 20. Thirty thousands hours, that's three and a half years. You think of all that time. And it's interesting, it splits into two categories here. For boys, the vast majority of their time is spent on video games, and for girls, the vast majority of their time is spent on more visual media such as Instagram and Snapchat, but the hours are the same.

Children now spend more time with the media than they do sleeping or in school or with their families. When a survey was done of teen leisure time, it was found that the average teen is spending 2 ¼ hours a day texting, 2 hours on the internet, 1 ½ hours gaming, and 30 minutes video-chatting. That's 6 hours a day with new media in leisure time alone. When total screen time is added up, it comes to about 11 hours every single day. You think of the hit that that is taking on productivity; how much time it's consuming; how much attention it's consuming; how much energy it's consuming. The time is just disappearing, productive time, and with time, money as well. How much time has been wasted in everybody's daily life that could have been much more productive and even financially rewarding.

Eighthly, it's killing our self-control. Dr. Peter Whybrow, the Director of Neuroscience at UCLA, calls screens electronic cocaine. Chinese researchers call it digital heroin. That's because they're seeing that digital technology is having the same impact as these drugs. It's a similar stimulant like caffeine, like amphetamines, and cocaine. Its usage puts the body into a state of high arousal followed by a crash. Like these drugs, it's producing chemical, hormonal and sleep disturbances. And just as drugs affect users long after their apparent effects wear off, so digital technology is affecting the central nervous system long after the immediate effect of this drug wears off.

Brain imaging research shows that digital technology is stimulating the same area of the brain as cocaine does and to the same degree after a certain amount of hours. Fifty percent of teens say, this was just in the past week researchers published, 50% of teens say they feel addicted to the smartphone. Thirty percent of adults say the same. It's actually been found by counselors to be more addictive than cigarettes and alcohol. One researcher said it's easier to treat heroin and crystal meth addicts than lost in the matrix video gamers or Facebook dependent social media addicts. He says it's worse than alcohol or drug abuse because it's so much more engaging and there's no stigma behind it.

It's killing our purity, ninthly, and I hardly need to expound upon this, do I? I mean, it's so obvious, obvious in two areas. Pornography is the first. There is a fatal combination here of accessibility, affordability, and anonymity. These three things have never come together in this way in the history of the world regarding porn. And it's not just Christians that are concerned about this. I read a report recently that didn't cover the soul or the spirit but covered so many areas of life. There must have been about 40 chapters in this

report on the 40 different areas of human life that are damaged by porn. And it's not just the consuming of porn, it's the creating of porn that our children are doing. Sixty percent of teens have received a sext and 40% of teens have made them themselves. And lest you think, "Well, that's just the world," I'm sorry, sadly that's proving not to be the case. It's in Christian schools and it's in Christian churches as well and, parents, you're ostriches if you're not aware of this. You need to get your head out of the sand and get ahead of this. Our children are becoming pornographers themselves.

And above all, tenthly, it's killing our spirituality. Yes, it's serious and it's killing our brains, it's killing our sleep, it's killing our identity, it's killing our time, it's killing our emotional life, it's killing our modeling, it's killing our relationships, it's killing our self-control, it's killing our purity, but above all it's killing our spirituality. It's killing it. You can't have all these things going wrong in every other part of our lives and think we're going to have a healthy spirituality. We just can't. We are holistic beings. Every single part of us feeds into an relates to the other.

But think of even these statistics: 50% of people in a survey of 8,000 Christians admitted to checking their phone within minutes of waking; and 73% of them said that they did that before they did their spiritual devotions. What's happening there? What's happening at the most impressionable time of the day, the time when our brains have been refreshed by sleep and are now like a blank sheet of paper ready for the deepest, longest lasting impressions and we're pouring the world in? We're impressing all sorts of nonsense on our brains first thing instead of pouring God in and his word in, and leaving that as our most abiding impression of the day.

You think of the way it's killing our ability even to read the Bible. What do we do as we read our devices? We're scanning. We've developed this ability to just go straight down a 2,000 word article in about two minutes, and then we come to the Bible and surprise, surprise, we can't slow ourselves down to think and meditate. We can't stop the scanning. Our brain associates reading with fast-paced scanning and it's so hard. We come to the Bible and that's the last thing that will help us there. Think of meditation. We are now consuming three times more information a day than 50 years ago and thinking about it far less.

You think even of how we use the little gaps in our lives. We used to sit at a traffic stop or stand in line or even go to the bathroom, and it would be a moment or two, 30 seconds, a minute, where nothing was happening and our brains had time to rest, to be refreshed, or to pray, to think of the Lord, to bring a concern before him, and now these 30 second, one minute moments are gone. We fill it with our phones and we end up going from one end of the day to the other without a thought heavenwards.

Do you see the dangers of digital Babylon? Do you see how hostile this culture is to us in every area of our humanity, but especially our spirituality? How would you react to this headline of a recent report: you are your phone. You are your phone. That's how defining our devices have become of us. Marketers know we are our phones, that's why they want so much of the data. That's why they mine everything we do, because they know this is

what reveals the passions, the desires, the ambitions and the interests of every individual. Whatever image we put on it there, this is what truly counts. This is infallible in terms of determining what kind of person we are.

You think of that, if you are your phone, that means that God is also judging us by our phones. We're going to be judged for every idle click as well as every idle word. How would you feel turning up at the Judgment Seat with your phone and presenting it to the Lord and saying, "Judge me"? He has all the data already. He won't need to ask us for our phones.

You are your phone and you are dying. You're dying. Your device is destroying you. Maybe there are some here, older folks, this is totally alien to you. You haven't got a clue maybe what I'm talking about. Well, just talk to your children and your grandchildren or just observe them. Surely you've seen it. Surely you're also alarmed. You may not have kind of figured out all of the dangers but you desperately need to pray for your grandchildren and your children, if not for yourself. But for many of us, it's a personal problem, it's not just our children. Do we really believe that we are being defiled? That we are being destroyed slowly but surely?

If so, if as I hope these dangers have alarmed you, listen to what Daniel did in physical Babylon: "purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's meat, nor with the wine which he drank: and he requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself." Now, Daniel stayed in Babylon and Daniel continued to eat and drink but he had discernment. He knew what he had to avoid. He knew what he had to separate from. He knew the diet that would help him flourish in physical Babylon, not just survive it but thrive in it, and that's what I want to look at this evening with you. Okay, if these are the dangers, if this is what's happening to us, this is what we are doing to ourselves, we are committing maybe not suicide but techicide, what is the digital diet that will help us to thrive in digital Babylon?

Notice later on in this chapter after Daniel said, "Look, just test me for 10 days." Ten days, and his supervisor said, "Okay." What happened? It wasn't just that they kept up barely with everyone else. As we'll see this evening, they were 10 times wiser than everyone else. That's possible still but only, only if we eat the divine diet in digital Babylon and it starts with this: purposing in the heart, resolving, determining by God's grace and by the help of the Holy Spirit, "I will not defile myself with digital Babylon." Amen.

Let's pray.