

Thriving in Digital Babylon

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In the book of Daniel 1 and we can read verse 20.

20 And in all matters of wisdom and understanding, that the king enquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers that were in all his realm.

In the past week, two articles appeared, the first one had this headline, "Inventor of the iPhone worries that his children will remember him as the man that destroyed a generation." That's the inventor of the iPhone. The inventor of the Facebook "like" button has recently started a new group, an association within Silicon Valley trying to bring law to bear on digital companies to limit the amount of stimulation, buzzes, beeps and interruptions that are coming to people through their devices. These are men who have made millions, millions and millions of dollars from technology and who clearly see, even as unbelievers, the dreadful dangers that they have created. They see it maybe clearer than even some of us. And if they see it, then surely its incumbent on us, it's necessary for us, to also ponder the dangers, especially the spiritual dangers.

That's why we spent time on that this morning. We looked at the way that digital technology is killing us: killing our brains, our sleep, our identity, our emotional health, our relationships, our modeling for our children, our time, our finances, our self-control, our purity and our spirituality. It's a devastating battlefield, isn't it? And you might have heard that sermon or in just hearing that list this evening or just you know from your own life how hard and difficult this is, and you might say, "It's pointless. Who can survive in digital Babylon?" Well, I want to encourage you this evening from this same chapter, that it's possible not just to survive but to thrive in digital Babylon, and the key is diet just as it was for Daniel.

You know this story well. Daniel refused the royal diet because it had been offered to idols and instead chose common, poor, basic foods that wasn't considered worthy of being offered to idols. He chose this pure diet and resolved that he would continue down that path with the Lord's help. And what happened? Well, his bosses were afraid that they would suffer so much, Daniel and his friends, that they would lose their heads; that the king would come and say, "We gave you the cream of the crop of Judah and look at what

you've done to them. Off with their heads!" And Daniel said, "No, test us for 10 days and see what difference you'll find and it will be the opposite of what you expect." And in four ways at the end of this chapter, the thriving of Daniel and his friends is emphasized. You see it, for example, in verse 15, "at the end of ten days their countenances appeared fairer and fatter in flesh than all the children which did eat the portion of the king's meat." Then in verse 17, "As for these four children, God gave them knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom: and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams." The emphasis on "all" there. Every area of life, they excelled in. And the reason for it is made explicit: God gave them. It was a blessing of God.

Then when they are brought in before the king, we read in verse 19, "the king communed with them; and among them all was found none like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah: therefore stood they before the king." Their superiority by the blessing of God stood out in ways that the king had to acknowledge and acted on and promoted them because of it.

Then in verse 20, "And in all matters of wisdom and understanding, that the king enquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers that were in all his realm." A changed diet with the blessing of God caused Daniel and his believing friends not just to survive but to thrive and flourish even in the midst of the most terrible dangers and in the most hostile of cultures and this is the pattern for us as well. Not so much our food diet, but our media diet. Not so much what we put in our mouths, but what we put in our eyes and in our ears, which ultimately end up in our hearts.

What then is the diet? What is the Daniel diet in digital Babylon? What do we need to make up our diet in this world so that we too, and our children, can thrive like Daniel and his friends? That's a question I want to answer this evening. I want to give some theological answers, I want to give some spiritual answers, I also want to give just some very practical answers as well that hopefully will help you as individuals and as families, because as I said this morning and as I believe with all my heart, this is the area that for the vast majority of us will be make or break, that will determine heaven or hell. It's as stark and as simple and as profound as that.

The first part of a digital diet is more theology. You might think that's a strange answer. Surely we see the problems of technology and we go for more technology is the answer, and that may be part of it. It may be. Thankfully, God in his mercy has provided things like accountability software, Covenant Eyes, website blockers, various kinds of filters. You can find many sources on the internet to help you as individuals and as families with that. Surely that's just the basics. It's just common sense. You spend a few dollars a month to protect you and your family in this way. Yes, that's part of the answer but it's a small part, relatively speaking. The biggest part, the most important part is not more technology but more theology. The deepest spiritual truths are the answer to the deepest spiritual problems that technology is throwing out. The oldest truths are the best rebuttal to the newest challenges.

Why does this work? You see, well, let me just briefly mention a few things. You think of this truth: God is all-knowing. God knows everything. If we really believed that truth, what a difference it would make as we pick up our devices, as we sit in front of our computers. "No, mom and dad don't know. My wife doesn't know. My husband doesn't know. My friends don't know. My church doesn't know." But God knows. He knows everything that we do in every place, at every time of the day or of the night. God knows everything. If you're tempted to abuse digital technology, go to Psalm 139 and bring God's omnipresence in front of you, that God is all-knowing and God is in all places at all times.

And it's not just that, in a negative sense, like being a preventative, but the fact that God's all-knowing can also motivate us to use technology in a way that pleases him. Yes, that's possible. Just as the believer in every area of their life lives to please the Lord, knowing that he sees their life, therefore works hard at their work, works hard in the home, in their various callings, so with technology. We can use this in a way that God sees, God knows, and God smiles upon. That should encourage us as well.

God is all-knowing but also God is Judge and he will judge the secrets of men by Christ Jesus, the Apostle Paul says. He's going to judge us not just for every idle word but for every idle click as well. He's going to bring all our works into judgment. Every second of every day, we will give an account. We will have to answer charges. Remember, he is the Judge of all the earth and of all people. There is a Great White Throne that we're going to stand in front of and it doesn't matter how many "likes" and hearts we get in this world from other people if we don't get God's "like" and God's heart on the day of judgment.

Think of God as Savior as a truth to help you in living faithfully in digital Babylon. How can God as Savior help? Well, think of it this way: when we fall and fail, when we use technology in a way that is sinful and maybe we do again and again and again, we despair. Guilt leaves us feeling hopeless and helpless. We think, "But what's the point? I've done it again. There is no point in even trying. God is already angry with me. Well, I might as well keep going." But if instead of that logic, you bring the logic of grace and you bring the logic of forgiveness and you come to see, "I've done it again. God, forgive me! Wipe my slate clean! Wipe my report clean! Make me snow white again by your forgiveness through the blood of Christ! Clean me from every sin!" And we start afresh as if we have never sinned in our whole lives, that's motivating. You watch a child who goes out to play in their new soccer uniform. It's spotless. You watch how careful they are not to get a spot on that pristine clean uniform. Then you compare that with somebody who goes out with a stained dirty uniform, they don't care. They don't care what they do. It's dirty already. Similarly, the more that believers can embrace the forgiveness of God, the whiteness that he gives through forgiveness, the more we will be motivated to stay clean and pure in this world. The more we can appreciate the salvation that God gives, the more we will flee from sin. That's the logic that Paul uses in various places. It's the logic of the psalmist. There is forgiveness with you that you may be feared.

Embrace God as Savior. Embrace God as powerful is a truth, as well. Yes, you're weak. Yes, you're frail. Yes, you can't do this on your own. Yes, it's impossible, you might say, but God loves to use our impossibility as a stage for his possibility. All things are possible with God. Our impotence is the stage that he loves to show his omnipotence on. None are so weak that he cannot come and by his Spirit show his power.

These are just a few truths. You could scour the Scriptures and bring together multiple truths and you should. You want to beat this. If you want to live like Daniel in this Babylonian culture, you must start with more theology. Daniel was a theologian. You don't have to read his prophecy to see that. He was a man that was consumed by God. As he said, "Those who do know God will be strong and do exploits." Those who know God. But that's not enough, more theology, we need more relationship with God. It's possible to have all the theology in the world, to have all the confessional statements and catechetical Q&A's, have them all off-pat, known them perfectly, and have no relationship with God.

You think of the truth that God is three-in-one. He in his very essence is a relationship between three persons. That's who he is and what the Gospel says is, "Come and enter into. Come. We invite you into this existing relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Come and relate. Come and commune. Come and talk. Come and listen. Come and love and be loved." And the more, the more relationship with God is at the center of our lives, the more the trivial will be pushed out. The more time we spend in God's presence relating to him, interacting with him, the more we will see technology for what it really is, the more it will shrink, the more we will see it in the divine perspective.

And just very practically, that means meet with God first thing in the morning. Sure have a coffee, but before you meet anyone else, before you turn on a device, meet with God first. Not with your phone first. Not with email first. Not with the news first. But with God first. Meet him first. If you want a good, healthy, strong, lively relationship with God, that's where it begins.

And meet with God without distraction. Make sure your devices are way out of arm's reach, even out of sight. It's been shown that even the sight of a device draws attention away and reduces our cognitive capacities. Get in a place where you're not going to be distracted; where you're not going to hear a beep or a buzz.

And resolve also, even for a time, not to share anything from your private devotions. It's very tempting, "Oh, I've got a great verse. I've got a great thought. I'm going to share that." But what that does is it changes the whole nature of your devotions because then the next day you go in thinking, "Oh, what can I get to share?" And it moves away from, "What can I get for myself?" And that changes the whole nature of a relationship when the priority is, "What can I get to give," rather than just, "What do I need?" More relationship with God.

Thirdly, more relationship with your children. I'm addressing parents and grandparents here. Again, we go to the Trinity. We start with God. What do we find there? We find a

relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit that's characterized by openness, a transparency, honesty, communication, and enjoyment and delight in one another, and that's to be the pattern for our relationships with our children. It's to be like that. That is the epic, the climactic, the prototypical relationship and therefore our relationships with our children have to be characterized by openness, transparency, honesty, love, enjoyment of one another, accountability. The healthier the relationships we have with our children are, the healthier their relationships with technology will be, and in many many cases, our children's problematic relationship with technology is caused by a problematic relationship with parents, or just a lack of one, therefore that has to be a priority. Deeper relationships are more effective than detailed rules.

And one of the key areas here is modeling, being a role-model in our use of technology. We're not just telling our children but showing our children how to use technology wisely and well and building into them with conversation, communication, discernment. That's the great aim, isn't it? Our children are going to leave our homes one day and our task is to prepare them for that leaving so that when they leave, they don't encounter a world they've never heard of before, never seen before, they know nothing about and they go off the cliff and they disappear and they are overwhelmed. No, it's to gradually get them prepared and used to what lies ahead and this will vary child by child but graduated exposure, conversation, discussion, Q&A's, trying to build that relationship of trust and openness so that when they go and our rules have disappeared and our eyes have gone, they have something inside them, they have a discernment, an ability to tell the difference between right and wrong, good and bad, wise and foolish, helpful and worthless. That's got to be one of our great aims in parenting, that they just don't need us anymore, at least in the same way as they used to.

Fourthly, more boundaries. More boundaries, and this applies in a number of different areas. Boundaries regarding how much time is spent in the digital world. Boundaries regarding which websites and apps are acceptable. Boundaries regarding what's appropriate to share on social media. Boundaries regarding what role digital technology plays in education and in work. Boundaries regarding places that digital devices are acceptable. There is one book I would really recommend to you. It's quite recently published by Andy Crouch and it's called "The Tech-Wise Family," and in that book, very readable, very well researched, very practical, he outlines 10 commitments. Not 10 Commandments, 10 commitments regarding how a family becomes wise in its use of technology. And one of the areas that he talks about is which places in the home are to be digital-free, device-free. Which times in a family's life are to be tech-free. And for him it's the meal table. The car. He says cars are for conversation, not surfing. The bedroom. And vacations. I'll go into that in a wee bit more detail in a moment. But again, he's not making this rules for everybody, these are commitments his family have made after discussion, after conversation, mutually agreed mostly. Then he says when you've got your boundaries, when you've made your borders, when you've decided what times, what websites, what social media behavior, what places are acceptable, then you need clarity, you need consistency, you need enforcement, you need accountability, you need sanctions and you need rewards as well. I think that's a very helpful emphasis in that book that it's not just all about finding what's wrong and punishing it, but finding what's

good and praising it and encouraging it, and even rewarding it. Again, this is going to vary for different families, different children, even. Some children have a much more obsessive, addictive personality. They need different boundaries to someone who is maybe more bookish, and really is not interested in the digital world. But more boundaries are needed.

Then more amputation. More amputation. We've been talking about trying to get digital technology in the right place, in the right proportion, and managing it. It's not an evil in and of itself but it can become an evil through misuse, and yet there are times for certain people that nothing short of amputation is the answer. You think of Jesus' words, "If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out and cast it from thee, for it's profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off and cast it from thee, for it's profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell."

You've got to recognize that for some it's going to mean gouging out an eye or cutting off a hand spiritually speaking, and what that means with technology, it might mean that you just have to do without or do with a very minimalist device that just doesn't let you be tempted. You can get to heaven without a smartphone. Some of us are not smart enough for a smartphone. We're not strong enough. You can get to heaven without an iPhone but you can't get to heaven without holiness. More amputation.

More fasting is required as part of that digital diet. Yes, for some it may mean totally cutting off but for others, it may mean choosing times to be cut off to regain perspective, to get a fresh take in life, to separate one's self from the madness of social media and the internet just to reset and refresh one's life. Again, Andy Crouch in his book, "The Tech-Wise Family," recommends a minimum, a minimum of one hour a day tech free. Isn't it ridiculous that that's an achievement? One day in the week tech-free. That is a digital Sabbath and the Lord's Day is the best day to do that, to just cut out or totally minimize device use, digital technology on the Lord's Day. Do you need to check email? Do you need to check Facebook? Do you need to check Instagram? Do you need to Snapchat? Can you not block some of these apps for a day? Do all these texts need to be returned today? One hour a day, one day a week, one week a year. For him it's his vacation week. They all agree for one week the devices are gone. If they go a second week, then they agree that a couple of times in that second week they'll have a little window where everyone can check and then the devices are gone again.

It's fasting. It's modern-day fasting. It's the equivalent of the biblical fasting from food because what that did was it gave people time for better and higher things. And for us to fast from food, there is some merit in it but it doesn't save us a lot of time because, I mean, we can just buy a microwave meal, in the microwave, eat it, throw the rest in the trash and we're gone, 15 minutes. But to fast from technology, there you can gain hours and hours for higher things.

Dr. Victoria Dunckley, she's a psychologist who has discovered the damaging effects of digital technology on many children and she says sometimes something even more

radical than fasting is required. She says the everyday use of interactive screen devices can easily overstimulate a child's nervous system. Strict electronic fasts single-handedly improves mood, focus, sleep and behavior. She noted that, again, about 2007-2010, the rate of diagnosis for many childhood disorders like ADD, autism, Asperger's, it was going through the roof and once they ruled out all other possibilities, they came to see nothing else can explain this but the overstimulation of young brains by digital technology. It wasn't to deny there were real cases but they found that in many of these new cases, that if you took the children away from all technology, that within four weeks they were back to normal.

Radical measures. Sixty-five percent of Americans agree that periodically unplugging or taking a digital detox is important for mental health but only 5% actually do it. Silence has actually been found to grow brain cells. Do you want a better brain? Get some silence in your life. Get some quiet. Fasting.

Then more physicality. This, again, has been proven scientifically. It's not enough to take devices away, you've got to replace them with something better, things like physical exercise, sport, hobbies for our children, taking them on days out, making sure that they're getting together with their friends, music, art, creative exercises. All of these things tend to wean children away from digital technology and actually give them more pleasure in the long run once they get used to it. Face-to-face relationships. Discovery. Exploring. Cooking. There are so many activities out there to do that are much more physical, much more hands-on, much more creative, much more healthy for developing our children in every aspect of their personalities. Andy Crouch said the more you entertain children, the more bored they will get. More physicality is required.

Also, more positivity. I know I've been very negative today about technology, but really one of the things we've also got to introduce to our children is the idea of this is a good gift of God. Technology is God's gift to humanity. It's been used to bless us. You start thinking about all the technology that you have in your daily life and all the blessings and benefits it brings to us, and yet how often do we actually trace that to God and say to our children, "You know, God is so good, he gave us GPS. God is so good, he gave us SermonAudio. God is so good that he gave us Facetime and Skype to connect with family that are in far parts of the world that we would never see for years otherwise." And one of our tasks is to show our children the goodness of technology, the benefits and blessings of it, tracing it to God because the more we see technology as a good gift of God, the more we will use it in a good way. It's like you get a gift from somebody that maybe you're not that keen on, you're not that fond of, well, you'll be grateful but you won't take much care over it. You get a gift from someone that you really love, that you really respect, you want to use that gift in a way that will honor them and that will please them. And again, the more positive an approach we can take to this aspect of technology, the much more likely we and our children will be to use it in God-honoring ways. If God in his goodness gave me this, how dare I use it as a weapon to destroy myself and others and turn it even against God? Spend time in the week gathering good articles, good videos to share and to show to your children, to show them the good, the beauty, the true, the lovely, as Paul says in Philippians 4.

We need more education. If you follow my blog in the next few weeks, I'll be posting some reviews of some of the books I've been reading. Get some of them. Educate yourself. Educate your children about technology, its dangers and its blessings. How to abuse it and how to use it. More education about male/female relationships, if I could use a euphemism, and God's good gift of that as well. Let the first imprint on our children's minds regarding God's design for marriage come from good and true and beautiful sources. Don't let your children's first hearing of God's good design for men and women come from filthy minds and filthy mouths. Get in there first. Put it in front of them in a way that will leave a lasting impression of God's wisdom and beauty and goodness and grace to his people and to the human race in general.

Lastly, more prayer, and it's not lastly, is it? I put it last for emphasis. We begin with theology, I want to end with prayer. In this chapter of Daniel, we have a great prospect laid out for us of thriving and flourishing, excelling, surpassing our generation even in worldly things, even in business and education. But of course, especially spiritually, but we need prayer. Yes, we can use all these other elements of a digital diet but without prayer, we won't have the blessing of God. We need this word of God in Daniel 1, God gave and God gives in response to prayer.

Remember, we read this morning Daniel resolved in his heart to separate himself from all that was idolatrous. How could he do that successfully? He could only do that successfully because he had a new heart. His heart had been born again and ultimately that's our only hope for us and our children. We and our children are born into this world dead in trespasses and in sins, we are born into this world with a love of darkness rather than light. Every child that comes forward for baptism is a fallen, sinful, hell-bound child and needs to be born again. And we can bring all our rules and all our strategies to bear and all our education, but unless they are born again from above, they're going down. They're going down in this world and they're going down in the world to come. Yes, we want our children to resolve in their hearts but they haven't a hope of succeeding unless God puts new life in their hearts.

That's what our prayer has to be, "God, give them new hearts. Give them a love for what is light, not a love for the darkness." Without that, they're going to be drawn irresistibly to the dark side of the internet and the dark side of digital technology and no amount of our supervision, no amount of our technology, no amount of our strategies, are going to save them. Only God can. Even a Christian upbringing won't do that. It needs to be a heavenly down-giving that does it.

And if you this evening, professing Christian, have not resolved in your heart or have resolved and nothing has happened, you have to seriously examine yourself: do I have a new heart? Am I truly born again? There is perhaps no clearer indicator in our modern world of where our true heart desires lie than in whether we take this device and we bow down to it or whether by God's grace, we're able to get it under control. If this has dominion over you, you are not a believer. If this has dominion over you, you need to be born again. If this has dominion over you, you are going to hell because the Apostle Paul

said, "Sin shall not reign in the believer's life." Yes, there are falls from time to time, but not dominion. Resolve all you like but make this your first resolution, "God, give me a new heart so that I can handle and get under control new technology."

Remember this, one last thing: Daniel and his friends were tested sorely here and they pursued a divine diet in physical Babylon, but remember this was small fry compared to what was ahead. What was ahead for Daniel and his friends were a lions' den and a fiery furnace. They wouldn't have had a hope of standing firm and uncompromising in these far greater trials if they had failed here. Use this as a testing ground, as a spiritual university, as a place to learn and grow strong for God so that when the greater trials come, and they shall, you will be able to stand alone like Daniel and face the lions, or like his friends and face the fire, because those who do know their God shall be strong and do exploits. Pursue a divine diet in digital Babylon and you will excel in every way in life but especially spiritually. Amen.

Let's pray.