

A blurred, light blue-tinted photograph of a crowd of people walking, serving as the background for the top portion of the cover.

SUR VIV ING CULTURE

When Character and Your World Collide

BY EDWARD E. MOODY

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dedication

For Mackenzie and Mitchell:
May God use you to point our culture toward Him.

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Introduction

This is a tough time to be a teen. Maybe you feel like you are all alone as you try to follow the Lord. Perhaps your peers make fun of you and your lifestyle. You are not alone. I see a lot of teens. As a pastor, I see them during the week when they've been at school and on the weekends I see them as they interact with peers. Sometimes they feel very lonely. I also see a lot of college students in my work as a college professor. I watch them as they prepare to go into some difficult environments and try to help others. Many of them are Christians striving to remain firm in their faith. Can you stay true to your faith and succeed in a corrupt culture? Yes, you can, if you walk with the LORD.

In this book I hope you will see that if you are a believer, you never walk alone. You have a God who has made you to survive and thrive in this culture, and if you will follow Him He will bring you through. He will also use you in ways you never imagined to influence this culture.

I know. I've seen it. I've experienced it. Long ago I was a young person just like you, trying to serve God and do what I could to help others. Often it seemed like I was alone, and would have no impact upon the culture I was trying to help. I learned God was always at work and I simply needed to be prepared to serve and He would create the opportunities. For example, after I finished my training to be a professional counselor it was time for me to begin my clinical training. I chose a place where I thought I could make a difference. Just before

I began my internship, I met with the director of the facility. After a good meeting he noted, "I see you have a religious background, you know you can't talk about that here." I left feeling a little dejected, as if I might not be able to contribute. After all, it was my faith that energized me to try to help people. The next Monday when I arrived to begin my internship many of the staff members met me in the facility parking lot. They informed me that a staff member had been killed in an accident over the weekend and the whole facility was in turmoil. The director asked to see me. I went into his office and he recapped what had transpired over the weekend. Then he noted, "I see you have this religious background, I wonder if you could have some kind of meeting with all of the youth, kind of a chapel and help our folks deal with this death." I thought, yes, I can help with that. My faith was valuable to them after all. Throughout my life I've had many similar experiences. I've learned that it is important to be ready. I believe God made me to help with moments like this. I believe God made you to use you in His work. This book is for you, to help you see that God made you capable of surviving culture in the midst of corruption and that He will use you at some point to help those around you.

Chapter 1

Be Ready

You have probably heard all the negative statistics. Fewer than 18 percent of 18 to 29 year-olds attend church today. The number of atheists and agnostics are on the rise. One-third of the people under the age of 30 characterize themselves as believing nothing in particular.¹ It sounds like our situation is pretty bleak and that most people will be skeptical if not outright antagonistic toward Christianity in the future. If this data is correct, the only Christianity the world will see in the future will be from their classmate, co-worker, or neighbor. Some will succumb to the influence of the culture and fall away from Christianity. Others, though faithful, will be ineffective as they cocoon themselves away from the world. Rather than being discouraged, I hope you will see this as an opportunity. God is not surprised by any of this. In fact, He has been preparing you for just this kind of thing all of your life. By the way, He has dealt with all of this before.

Ecclesiastes 1:9 tells us, “What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun.” In many ways, the world you live in has changed and is unlike that of your parents and grandparents. In other ways, nothing has really changed. There is nothing new under the sun. That means you have an opportunity to learn from those from the past.

Brothers from Another Era

Some 2,600 years ago, God used four young men named Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah to impact their culture. Their situation was not unlike ours in many ways. There was a god on every corner, perhaps a temple on each block. Similarly, our pluralistic society seems to believe in any and everything. Yet, they went about their day without the grumbling and disputing that characterizes many of us. Instead of succumbing to negative influence, they held fast showing strong character. Instead of harming, they were helpful, providing light to those around them. Instead of becoming like the world in which they lived, God worked through them to point those they encountered to Him. If we wish to influence our culture, we will need to study their story.

Any time someone provides an example to follow, we have a tendency to say, "Yes, but." If someone gives you a model for living godly in your school or workplace, the tendency is to think, "Sure, but he didn't have to deal with my peers or my teachers." So, let us get some context for what these four endured.

In 605 B.C., terror descended upon Judah as an invading army poured into Jerusalem. The economy collapsed, the government was disbanded, and entire neighborhoods disappeared. These four found themselves in the middle of these horrific events. They were seized and taken to Babylon. (Check out 2 Kings 24 for the entire tale.)

The events these four endured were worse than the Great Depression, the attack upon Pearl Harbor, and the September 11, 2001 attacks combined. After all of this, they found themselves in the middle of a corrupt culture being bombarded with its messages.

So why do we need to study their story? Because they endured the worst, some of the most horrific scenarios our brains could conjure. How did they respond? How did they live in a culture so against the truth of God? Their example can encourage, instruct, and challenge us as difficult encounters arise in our lives. If they brought God's mes-

sage in the most hostile situations, then how can we present Christ to our friends, family, and those with whom we interact regularly?

Know God, Know Yourself

The Bible says in Ephesians 6:10-11, 13: “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.” I suspect Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah knew the Lord and had put on the whole armor of God before they were taken from Judah. To survive and thrive in your culture, you too need to place your faith in the Lord and derive your strength from Him by putting on the armor of God, using the tools only He can give you to prepare you to survive. It is tempting to rush into the corrupt culture and do what you can to have a positive influence upon it. However, this is not advisable. You must be properly prepared or such good intentions could lead to tragic consequences. Entering the culture unprepared is akin to a well-meaning firefighter entering a burning building without the proper equipment. If you are not prepared, you will become a victim of the corrupt culture.

Proper preparation means that you know God and you know yourself. What are your strengths? What are your weaknesses? What are your vulnerabilities? Ask yourself: Who am I? What am I? What is really important to me?

Who are you when you are Judean, and Judah lies in ruins? Who are you when you are Christian, and your culture cheapens Him? What are you to do when the kingdom you have spent your life preparing to serve has been conquered? What are you to do when the culture attacks what is important to you?

Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah found themselves serving in the kingdom that destroyed their homeland, and perhaps killed

many they loved. When they entered Babylon, they found themselves in a land unlike anything they had seen. The Babylonians were experts in magic devoted to other gods.

Daniel and his friends were immersed into this culture. They found themselves in classrooms studying polytheistic literature where magic, sorcery, charms, and astrology were valued.

They were unlike many of the young people who accompanied them and began taking on the ways of Babylon. Perhaps many of their peers left behind their “outdated and obsolete” faith.

Yet, these young men were secure enough in their relationship with God and their knowledge of God to be able to study this material without it undermining their faith. Their previous time with God and study of Scripture had prepared them to withstand this onslaught of false teaching. They knew God and therefore were undeterred. Similarly, you may find yourself bombarded with evolution, polytheism, and moral relativism where wrong is portrayed as right and right as wrong; so you too must be certain of your relationship with God, and what you believe.

When you are in the culture, be in the habit of asking yourself, “Who is influencing whom?” Am I influencing those around me toward God or are they drawing me away from God.

When you are in a situation where you are in over your head, you find yourself getting confused, or encountering severe temptation, get help and at times it may be necessary, at least temporarily, to get out of a situation. For example, if you find yourself getting confused when you are with a certain friend, you might need to withdraw from them until you are more certain of what you believe and better prepared to deal for a time with the challenges they present.

Names with a Purpose

Along with knowing the God they worshipped and how He crafted and designed their identity, these Hebrew men carried names with

a purpose. Daniel means, "God is my judge." When he heard his name, Daniel was reminded that God was watching over him no matter how unjust the world may have seemed.

Hananiah means, "God has been gracious." When he heard his name, Hananiah was reminded that God was good to him regardless of the circumstances he endured.

Mishael means, "Who is what God is?" When he heard his name, Mishael was reminded of the power of God as he faced a polytheistic environment. There may have been a god on every corner (or at every gate around the city), but there was no god like Jehovah.

Azariah means, "God is my help." He was reminded of the help that can come only from God as he encountered numerous crises. The naming of these four implies they had received strong spiritual preparation in their younger days. Yet, no matter if you have enjoyed a healthy upbringing with parents immersed in and following God's Word or experienced the complete opposite or anything in between, if you are God's, then He has His seal upon you. The names of these four indicate they belonged to Jehovah, the God of Judah just as you do. Ephesians 4:30 tells us "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption." You belong to God, but that does not mean the culture will not try to change you just as they tried to change Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah by changing their names as you will see shortly. You are His, and everything that comes with it. No culture, no pressure, no scientific data, can alter that distinction. With that basis, confidence, hope, and faith grow strong.

A Challenge Emerges

When you are part of a corrupt culture, the forces of that culture will try to change you. In the Bible, Babylon always refers to a corrupt culture. Interestingly, Daniel writes they were taken to the land of Shinar (Daniel 1:2), where there was an immediate assault upon their identity that came in the form of a name change.

Daniel's name was changed to Belteshazzar, which meant, "May a god protect his life" or "A goddess protect the king." Hananiah's name was changed to Shadrach that may invoke the name of the Babylonian god Marduk. Mishael's name was changed to Meshach and the meaning of this name is less certain. Azariah's name was changed to Abednego, which may mean "Servant of (the god) Nabu."² The king was probably immersing the youth in the customs of the Chaldeans so that Judah might become a distant memory.

An Attack on Your Name

Similarly, you will experience attacks on your identity like, "Jesus was just a man," and "The Bible is a manmade book." You may even see your faith described as something you do not recognize. Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were undeterred when the Babylonians changed their names. You too want to be undeterred by attacks upon your faith. For this to occur you must be immersed in the Word of God and have a deep relationship with God.

The Bible, Your New Best Friend

Daniel and his buddies did not become scholars of the Torah overnight. They most likely studied it from early childhood. When you become a follower of Christ, the Holy Spirit does not magically endow you with the ability to write a commentary on Revelation. God did not design spiritual growth that way.

We do not grow physically without a steady diet. The tendency is to eat at least three times a day. When we miss a meal, we deal with hunger pangs and lack of energy and have other ailments. In addition, eating a balanced diet is important. Though we might think a diet of chips and soda would be wonderful, we know that eventually it will have a negative impact upon us. If there is anything missing from our diet, we do not operate at our optimal level physically and we are more susceptible to disease.

Just like strong muscles or healthy bones are not developed by a hit-and-miss diet or a big binge on veggies, spiritual growth is derived from a steady diet in the Bible. Regular study of God's Word to us comes in a variety of ways: personal study, small group study, Christian education/Sunday School courses, and listening to sermons, just to name the most common. These types of activities create a healthy, balanced diet of time in the Scripture.

To benefit from the Bible, gather the tools you will need just as you gather utensils before a meal. Get a Bible in a translation you understand and a Bible dictionary or handbook that will help you get some context for what you are reading. I like the ESV study Bible. It is a good idea to compare passages in different translations at the Biblegateway.com website or with the Biblegateway or YouVersion apps. Use a journal or notebook to record your observations, what you learn about God, and what you need to apply to your life. This allows you to process the Word just as the body processes food.

Ask God to direct you as you study the Bible and to help you apply it to your life.

It helps if you are able to have routine times and places where you read the Bible and pray so that it becomes a habit in your life. Jesus often had His quiet time during the morning hours (Mark 1:35), but there are no strict guidelines about how. We are simply instructed to search the Scriptures daily (Deuteronomy 17:19; Acts 17:11). If you struggle with where to start, begin with the book of John. Read a chapter from Proverbs each day. (On the first of the month, read the first chapter and so forth.) Or read and pray a psalm each day. Or read a chapter from the Old Testament and another from the New Testament. Do not get too bogged down in the what, but make sure you have a daily time that you spend with God. Focus more on the Who and growing closer to Him!

When you read a portion of Scripture, consider these questions:

- What did this passage mean to the original hearers?
- What is the timeless principle?

- What does it teach me about God?
- Based on this passage, how can I apply it?

Why does this matter? People who are in top physical shape are more likely to survive an injury or sudden illness. Their bodies draw upon the strength they have developed when injured. Similarly, when faced with a spiritual crisis, you must draw upon the strength you have developed over time and your relationship with the Lord if you are to endure. Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah knew their God well long before the Babylonians tried to change their names. Similarly, you cannot wait until you find yourself in situations where you are the only Christian around and people are trying to change you to develop your relationship with God.

In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Ephesians 6:16-17

Application of the Word

You will see later that the faith of Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah as well as their application of the Word of God helped them deal with multiple attacks (or flaming darts of the evil one). Application of the Word of God is to spiritual growth as exercise is to physical growth. Unused biblical knowledge is similar to unused muscles. Without use deterioration results.

Constant reading and thinking about the Scripture will change you and how you deal with various problems.

For example, Dr. Dan Ariely conducted some research indicating that cheating is prevalent on college campuses. He found one situation where people were less likely to cheat. One group of students was

asked to recall the Ten Commandments before taking a test.³ Most of these students did not know the Ten Commandments and none could recall all of them. However, taking the time to recall them and consider some of them significantly reduced cheating. This demonstrates that taking the time to think about the Word of God can help you stay on track. Imagine the results that could be achieved for a person motivated to obey the Word.

With each step you take applying the Bible to your life, you are strengthening yourself for the challenges you will face in the future. You should also find that your relationship with the Lord grows deeper. Applying the Word, leads to the Word abiding in you and an intimate knowledge of it and the Lord. As an example, consider Psalm 46. If Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah knew this passage, how might they have applied it? How might you apply it in your own life?

The Worst Case Scenario Psalm

Psalm 46

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling. Selah (emphasis mine).

What did this passage mean to the original hearers? It meant that God was with them as they were encountering great difficulty and He would help them. The mountains falling into the middle of the sea would be the most traumatic event one could imagine (e.g., like the overthrow of your nation or the death of a parent). Instead of fear, the reader is instructed to concentrate upon God's ability to help them in any situation, even one as desperate as the mountains falling into the sea.

What is the timeless principle? God provides refuge and strength for us at the worst times of our lives.

What do I learn about God? He will be my refuge, my strength in the most difficult moments of my life.

What do I need to do based upon this passage? Ask yourself, “What are the worst events that could transpire in my life?” Think about how God would help you and give you strength during these. God will be with you when your world is turned upside down and when your life is calm. God is our refuge, our help, every day all the time. You do not know what the future holds, but you can know that God will help you, especially at the most difficult time of a crisis.

Have a period daily where you pause and reflect upon God. It is this kind of work that will help you as you encounter various difficulties in your life. As you look at Scripture like this, consider how the same God who helped Jacob, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah will help you.

I like reading *The Complete Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook*. There is an entry about how to escape from a giant octopus, and a charging rhino. Then there are more serious entries like surviving if your parachute does not open, and evading a stampede of shoppers. Some are pretty silly but others are fairly serious like surviving a rollover in a car, or how to perform a tracheotomy.

While we truly have no idea what the future holds in terms of personal triumphs and tragedies (giant octopi or not) or in terms of the evolution of our culture, God does know. He is preparing us today for what we will face tomorrow.

God knew what would happen to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Isaiah 39:7 says, “And some of your own sons, who will come from you, whom you will father, shall be taken away, and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.” This verse was written between 750 and 690 B.C., yet Isaiah prophesied about the events of 605 B.C. during Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah’s life.

God also knows what is coming your way. In addition to studying the Bible, it is important that you become capable of defending it.

Incidentally, the book of Daniel is one of the favorite targets of critics. Many deny that Daniel was a prophet because in Hebrew Bibles Daniel is located in the Writings section.

Some claim that someone other than Daniel wrote the book of Daniel, and that Daniel was not written until the second century B.C.

As an example of how to address these issues, consider a brief defense of the book of Daniel. The book of Daniel was likely located in the Writings section of the Hebrew Bible because Daniel's ministry was to the heathen court rather than the people of Israel.

By reading the New Testament, one will clearly see that Jesus viewed Daniel as a prophet, and his book as truth. Matthew 24:15 says, "So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand)."

Ezekiel, a contemporary of Daniel, wrote highly of him: "Even if these three men, Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in it, they would deliver but their own lives by their righteousness, declares the Lord GOD. Even if Noah, Daniel, and Job were in it, as I live, declares the Lord GOD, they would deliver neither son nor daughter. They would deliver but their own lives by their righteousness (Ezekiel 14:14, 20).

Some have claimed that Ezekiel was referring to a different Daniel but consider Ezekiel 28:3, "You are indeed wiser than Daniel; no secret is hidden from you." Ezekiel's Daniel sounds like the one in the book that bears his name.

Sometimes you will need to utilize other valuable resources to defend Scripture. For example, in *Daniel: Tyndale Old Testament Commentary* by J. G. Baldwin, you learn that the book of Daniel refers to people and events that would not otherwise be known from biblical events or history.⁴

Other commentators indicate there is nothing in the original Hebrew and Aramaic language of the book that precludes an authorship of the sixth century B.C.⁵