

• PARENT EDITION •

SUR VIV ING CULTURE

When Character and Your World Collide

BY EDWARD E. MOODY



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randallhouse.com

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dedication

To my parents, Ed and Donna Moody,
who taught me how to survive the culture.

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Introduction

It is a tough time to be a parent. The culture around us is deteriorating. Perhaps you've read or heard the headline, "Brad Pitt and More Stars Go Back on Christian Beliefs."¹ As you look closer you learn that Brad Pitt says he viewed Christianity as stifling, and Katy Perry laments the only book her parents read to her as a child was the Bible. Though they and others like them grew up in Christian environments, they seem to turn away from Christianity. Today, fewer than 18 percent of 18 to 29 year-olds attend church, and the number of atheists and agnostics are on the rise. In fact, one-third of the people under the age of 30 characterize themselves as believing nothing in particular.² It is enough to frighten the most confident parent and make one wonder, "How can I prepare my child for this culture?"

I write this book as a parent who has tried to train two children to follow the Lord, as a pastor who has worked with youth and their parents, and a professor who has watched young people for more than 20 years as they've tried to navigate this culture. Rather than being frightened or discouraged, I hope you will see this situation as an opportunity. You need to actively engage the young people in your life rather than being frightened into inaction. Remember the numerous times God has told us to fear not in the Scripture? In fact, as we face this challenge and try to empower our youth let us take Deuteronomy 31:6 to heart, "Be strong and courageous." As we face an increasingly hostile culture, remember what the Lord told Israel as she faced seemingly insurmountable forces, "Do not fear or be in

dread of them, for it is the LORD your God who goes with you. He will not leave you nor forsake you." So remember God is not surprised by what is happening in our culture, and He will help you.

Chapter 1

Are They Ready?

In many ways, the culture today is unlike the one you and I experienced as youth. The challenges our youth face is like none before. In other ways, nothing has really changed, as Ecclesiastes 1:9 says, "There is nothing new under the sun."

Some 2,600 years ago, there were parents just like you. They watched as the culture around them deteriorated. They must have feared for their youth. Yet they helped four young men named Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah as they developed into godly adults. These four young men found themselves living in Babylon where there was a god on every corner, and a temple on each block. Yet, instead of succumbing, they held fast. Instead of harming, they were helpful, providing light to those around them. Instead of becoming like the world in which they lived, they pointed those who encountered them to God. Do you want your children to be like that? They can be if you follow the Daniel development plan.

Parents from Another Period

I suspect if you could talk to the parents of Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, and the others who helped them, they would say to you, "If we could prepare our youth to survive and thrive in Babylon, so can you." How do we know they prepared their children?

How do we know that they were not passive or even lucky parents? After all, we don't really know anything about these parents, or do we? The first significant role any parent has in the life of their child is in the naming of that child. Often after much consternation a child is named. Sometimes it is a family name that is given or the child is named after a friend. But the name matters. Why did these parents name their children Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah?

Names with a Purpose

Judge me, O LORD; for I have walked in mine integrity: I have trusted also in the LORD; therefore I shall not slide.

Psalm 26:1 KJV

Along with knowing the God they worshiped and how He crafted and designed their identity, these Hebrew men carried names with purpose. Daniel means "God is my judge." Did Daniel's parents have Psalm 26 in mind when they named him? When he heard his name, Daniel was reminded that God was watching over him no matter how unjust the world may have seemed. Realizing God is my judge would help him stay on track as he endured various temptations throughout his life. Perhaps as Daniel's parents viewed the injustice around them they chose the name to remind Daniel that God was just and he needed to walk with integrity.

The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

Psalm 103:8

Hananiah means "God has been gracious." Did Hananiah's parents have Psalm 103 in mind when they named him? When he heard his name, Hananiah was reminded that God was good to him regardless of the circumstances he endured. Realizing God is gracious would help him stay on track as he endured difficult times.

*Who is like the LORD our God,
who is seated on high.
Psalm 113:5*

Mishael means "Who is what God is?" Did Mishael's parents have Psalm 113 in mind when they named him? Perhaps as they viewed the people of Judah worshiping other God's and offering children as sacrifices to Molech they chose the name. When he heard his name, Mishael was reminded of the power of God as he faced a polytheistic environment. When there was a god on every corner (or at every gate around the city), realizing there was no god like Jehovah helped Mishael stay on track.

*Behold, God is my helper;
the Lord is the upholder of my life.
Psalm 54:4*

Azariah means "God is my help." Did Azariah's parents have Psalm 54 in mind when they named him? When he heard his name, Azariah was reminded of the help that can come only from God as he encountered numerous crises. Realizing God would help him allowed him to endure unimaginable stress and trials.

The naming of these four implies they received strong spiritual preparation in their younger days. Later you will see this was the first place the Chaldeans attacked them.

The names of these four indicate they belonged to Jehovah, the God of Judah just as our children who place their faith in Christ 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.” Christian youth belong to God, but that doesn’t mean the culture will not try to change them just as they tried to change Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah by changing their names. The Christian youth are God’s, and everything that comes with it. No culture, no pressure, no scientific data, can alter that distinction. With that basis, confidence, hope, and faith, they can grow strong.

Model, Teach, Create

Fortunately, the development of Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah went well beyond the names they were given. Since the days of Moses, faithful Jews have practiced the Shema which is found in Deuteronomy 6:4, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, The LORD is one.” I suspect the parents and many of the adults in the lives of Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah recited the Shema as they arose in the morning and just before bedtime. I believe they also served as a model of this passage. Deuteronomy 6:5 says, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” As the rest of Judah seemed to chase after other gods, these people followed the one true God. This was a model for the young men that helped them until the end of their lives.

The parents also diligently taught their children as Deuteronomy 6:6-7 instructed, “And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.” I believe these parents faithfully taught the Scriptures to these four young men.

Finally, they created an environment where God was honored, and excellence was celebrated. Deuteronomy 6:8-9 says, “You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house

and on your gates." Everyone that looked in the home of these four, would find what pointed them to God and encouraged them to serve Him.

What would the parents and youth leaders of Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah say to you? I think they would say, get busy preparing your children for a corrupt culture. In a moment you could be taken away from them. That is what happened to these parents from Judah. 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 young men found themselves in the middle of 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, these youth found themselves in the middle of a corrupt culture being bombarded with its messages. Nothing like this could happen to you, right? Recently, one of my graduate students succumbed after a four-year battle with cancer. He was just 34 years old. He had a wife and four children. His biggest concern was had he prepared his children for the future. He knew he had a limited amount of time before he would be separated from them. Who knows how much time we have with the young people in our lives. Let us use it wisely. Let's study their story to see what we can glean so we can prepare our children to stand.

Identity Development

A major function you have as a parent is the development of identity for your children. Devote a significant effort to identity development knowing that your greatest opportunity to influence them is early in life.

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 believe Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah knew the Lord and put on the whole armor of God before they were taken from Judah. To survive and thrive in their culture, our children also need to place their faith in the Lord and derive their strength from Him by putting on the whole armor of God.

Young people will fail if they are not prepared. Entering the corrupt culture unprepared is akin to a well-meaning firefighter entering a burning building without the proper equipment. A lack of preparation sets your children up to become a victim of the corrupt culture. Preparation begins with instilling a sense of certainty.

If Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah had not been certain about who they were, their lives would have been very different. When their world turned upside down they were stable enough to stand upright. Who are you when you are Judean, and Judah lies in ruins? Who are you when you are a Christian and the culture cheapens Christ? What are you to do when the kingdom you've spent your life preparing to serve has been conquered? How do you react when the culture attacks what is important to you?

Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah's situation would be like dreaming of working in the United States government, only to see the nation collapse and find yourself working in the capitol of the invading country. 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 that was 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. Yet, 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 as they entered the largest city the world had known to that point in history.

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, therefore, they were undeterred. Similarly, our children may find themselves bombarded with evolution, polytheism, and moral relativism where wrong is portrayed as right and right as wrong; so they too must be certain of their identity, relationship with God, and what they believe.

A Challenge Emerges

Babylon in the Bible

... And he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his god.

Daniel 1:2

The land of Shinar is where the tower of Babel was built.

And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there.

Genesis 11:2

Shinar and Babylon are used in the Bible to describe corruption and immorality. Consider the reference to Babylon in the book of Revelation.

And on her forehead was written a name of mystery: "Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations."

Revelation 17:5

Babylon is anywhere you find a crooked and perverse culture.

As our children enter the culture, the forces of that culture will try to change them. In the Bible, Babylon always refers to a place of corruption. 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 that 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."³ The king was probably immersing the youth in the customs of the Chaldeans so that Judah might become a distant memory. Similarly, our youth will be attacked when they enter their Babylon. Perhaps it will be an assault on their identity like, "Jesus was just a man," and "The Bible is just a manmade book." They may even see their faith described as something they do not recognize. Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were undeterred when the Babylonians changed their names. We too want our youth to be undeterred by attacks on their faith. For this to occur they must be immersed in the Word of God and have a deep relationship with God.

The Bible, Their Best Friend

*Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth,
and having put on the breastplate of righteousness,
and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the
readiness given by the gospel of peace.*

Ephesians 6:14-15

Daniel and his friends didn't become scholars of the Torah overnight. They most likely studied it from childhood. How was this accomplished? Deuteronomy 6:7 says, "You shall teach them diligently

to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise." This means that we must talk a lot about what the Scripture says and actively teach it to the youth in our lives.

When a person becomes a follower of Christ, the Holy Spirit doesn't magically endow them with the ability to write a commentary on Revelation. God didn't design spiritual growth that way.

Children do not grow physically without a steady diet. The tendency is to eat at least three times a day. When they miss a meal they aren't up to their peak performance level. In addition, eating a balanced diet is important. Though our children might think a diet of chips and soda would be wonderful, we know eventually it will have a negative impact upon them. If there is anything missing from a person's diet, they don't operate at their optimal level physically and are more susceptible to disease.

Just like muscles or healthy bones are not developed by a hit and miss diet or a binge on veggies, spiritual growth is derived from a steady diet in the Bible. Our children can grow in the Word through small group study, Sunday School classes, Christian Education courses, and listening to sermons. But encourage them to have a time of personal Bible reading as Deuteronomy 17:19 teaches us, "And it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them."

To benefit from the Bible, encourage them to gather the tools they will need just as one gathers utensils before a meal. Get them a readable Bible in a translation they understand, a Bible dictionary or handbook that will help them get some context for what they are read-

Helpful Resources:

Bible

Notebook for recording

Unger's Bible Handbook

M. E. Unger, & G. Larson (2005).

The New Unger's Bible Handbook.

Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers.

ing. Also get a journal or notebook for them to record what they are learning and what they need to apply to their life. This allows them to process the Word just as the body processes food.

Encourage them to ask God to direct them as they study the Bible and to help them apply it to their life. 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.

It helps to ask key questions about a text as one reads it like:

- 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?

After answering these questions they can use a journal or notebook to record their observations, what they learn about God, and what they need to apply to their life. Regularly ask your child about what parts of the Scripture they are studying and what they are learning. It helps if they are able to have times and places where they read the Bible and pray so that it becomes a habit in their life.

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 they must draw upon the strength they've developed over time and their relationship with the Lord if they are to endure.

Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah knew their God well, long before the Babylonians tried to change their name. Similarly, our teens can't wait to develop a relationship with God until they find themselves in situations when they are the only Christian around and people are trying to change them.

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.

By keeping the Bible before them as instructed in Deuteronomy 6:7-8 our teens can be equipped to 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.⁴ 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 them stay on track. Imagine the results that could be achieved for a person motivated to obey the Word.

With each step our youth take applying the Bible to their life, they are strengthening themselves for the challenges they will face in the future. They should also find that their relationship with the Lord grows deeper. Applying the Word leads to the Word abiding in them and an intimate knowledge of it and the Lord. When they face a problem, we want them to ask, "What does the Bible say about this? We can model this by taking the Bible and applying it to the problems that arise. As an example, consider Psalm 46. If Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and

Azariah knew this passage, how might they have applied it? How might our youth apply it in their own lives?

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 so 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 don't know what the future holds, but you can know that God will help you, especially at the most difficult time of a crisis.

Encourage youth to have a period daily where they pause and reflect upon God. It is this kind of work that will help them as they encounter various difficulties in their life. As they look at Scripture like this, ask them to consider how the same God who helped Jacob and Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah will help them.

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 doesn't 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 for our youth 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 them today for what they 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 will happen in the future to our children.

Since our culture so actively attacks the Bible it is important to equip our youth to explain 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 bares his name. Sometimes our youth will need to utilize other valuable resources to defend Scripture. For example, in *Daniel: Tyndale Old Testament Commentary* by J. G. Baldwin, they can learn that the book of Daniel refers to people and events that would not otherwise be known from biblical events or history.⁵

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.⁶

When they find they need to learn more about a particular book of the Bible, they can utilize commentaries. Many of these can be found in libraries, however, not all will be helpful. Teach them to look for commentaries by those who believe the Bible is the inspired Word of God. There are two books that rank commentaries according to reliability: *Old Testament Commentary Survey* by T. Longman and *New Testament Commentary Survey* by D. A. Carson.

Critics like to attack the biblical account of creation and the historical accuracy of the Bible so it helps to be familiar with work that addresses these attacks. You can inoculate your youth by getting them to read some of the great works on these subjects. Here is a list of resources where you can find podcasts that will help prepare you for these issues.