



SESSION 7

Living in the Land of Shadows



DO NOT BE CONFORMED TO THIS AGE, BUT BE TRANSFORMED BY THE RENEWING OF YOUR MIND, SO THAT YOU MAY DISCERN WHAT IS THE GOOD, PLEASING, AND PERFECT WILL OF GOD. Romans 12:2

We do not live in a Christian nation. Do you understand that? If not, read it again. We do not live in a Christian nation.

Perhaps the United States was founded as a Christian nation, or maybe even on Judeo-Christian principles. I will leave that up to historians to debate. Here's the point I want to make, and it's not debatable: You and I, as believers in 21st century North America, do not live in a Christian nation. Nothing in our nation's popular culture or our society's prevailing mind-set supports our faith. Our culture doesn't encourage the Christian faith (or any faith at all). We live in a nation that is, at best, neutral to faith. And in growing sectors of our society, there is a growing hostility to the Christian faith.

Have you seen hostility toward the Christian faith? If so, how?

Why do you think our culture, once heavily influenced by Christian faith and principles, has steadily shifted over time to become a culture of hostility toward Christians?

As you might imagine, there have been intense and varied reactions to the growing acceptance of this reality. Some Christian leaders have advocated the election of Christian politicians so our perceived Judeo-Christian heritage could be protected. Others have wanted to withdraw totally into Christian communities where Christian schools and Christian businesses allow us to only engage with other Christians. As other minorities have done, the thinking goes, Christians should cluster together and have a Christian sector in major cities across America. And cultures throughout history have responded this way with varying degrees of success.

Here's why I'm making such a big effort to try to understand this reality that we don't live in a Christian nation: Until this clicks—until we grab hold of this new way of thinking—we'll keep trying to live by the wrong map. See, most of us have a map of reality in our heads. This map is made up of the assumptions we have about how the world works and how we live in it. If our mental maps don't match the reality we live in, we're constantly frustrated.

Let me give you an example.

I grew up in Alabama, and as you would imagine, I have a very good map of Alabama in my car. The problem with having a very good map of Alabama is this: I live in Tennessee. A very good map of Alabama is worthless when I'm trying to drive through Tennessee. If I'm going to arrive at my desired destination, I need to change my map. In the same way, most of us need to change our map of reality if we're going to successfully live in post-Christian America. Until we do, we're going to be constantly frustrated and ultimately defeated.

To my brothers and sisters in Christ: relax. Take a deep breath. We've been here before. Remember, we're not the first believers to live in a situation where a government and/or ruler didn't support our relationship with God. We're not the first people to live in a time or place that's hostile to our faith. Not only have we been here before, but we've had pioneers of faith who've actually thrived in situations just like ours. There is much these people can teach us about how to respond to living faithfully in our 21st century, post-Christian American culture.

WHAT DANIEL TEACHES US

First, there's Daniel. Do you remember the story? Daniel and his friends are taken from Jerusalem to the capital of Babylon because they were chosen by the Babylonians as young men having desirable skills and abilities. They were brought to the capital to be trained to serve as counselors in the royal court. When Daniel and his friends arrive, they are taken to the king's palace and served food from the king's table. Now, this food was not kosher. That is, it wasn't prepared in keeping with Jewish law. From the way it was described, the food wasn't really healthy either. And Daniel recognized this wasn't good for him.

Daniel refuses to eat the food the king sent him. He explains this to the guard who is over them and says, "I can't eat this. Let me have a vegetarian diet." Now this guard would pay for any mistake with his life, so he was very reluctant to let Daniel try this experiment. But he was willing to do it within limits, so he gave Daniel a period of several days. At the end of those days, Daniel and his friends looked better and performed better than everybody else. So the guard in charge changed everybody's diet.

Because Daniel was faithful to the Lord's teaching about food, God granted him and his friends favor. They were found to be 10 times better in all areas of education and learning. They were better in Babylonian literature. They were better in finance and in accounting—everything! As the story develops you know that Daniel becomes one of the most trusted advisors to a series of kings.

How have you seen God's favor because of your obedience to Him?

Is God's favor contingent on whether or not we are obedient? Why or why not?

What, then, should we learn from Daniel's story?

The first lesson Daniel will teach Christians living in 21st century America is that we have to take control of what goes into our minds and into our bodies. Obviously, we need to learn to maintain better nutrition. We live in a culture that celebrates fast, fatty, high sugar, processed foods. These foods are now known for the damage they do to our health. Diabetes is climbing at unprecedented rates. Certain cancers are being traced to our dietary habits. Strokes are traced back to our high intake of salt and result in high blood pressure. The list goes on and on because we don't discipline ourselves to eat in a healthy manner.

Many believers have had trouble maintaining healthy habits. We either ignore it or we pay too much attention to it. But God gave us each a brain, a heart, and a body to get us there. Our bodies have to be in shape and prepared so that we can put our love in action for the people we need to love. We need healthy bodies to serve. We need to control what comes into our bodies and start living a healthier lifestyle.

We also have to control what comes into our minds. The messages of our culture aren't conducive to a Christ-follower's life. These come in all forms of media, not just what we see on television. Negative messages are in our

magazines, in the content of our video games, and in the movies we watch. By the time students leave high school, they'll have witnessed several thousand murders and many more thousand acts of violence on television. Seeing this kind of violence on television numbs the minds and hearts of all who watch it to the reality of death and suffering in the lives of the people around us.

What makes our image-driven culture so dangerous is what these images do in our minds.

We don't just watch television. Television imprints images on our minds. We don't just listen to the radio. These words get inside our heads and begin to form our worldview—that is, the way we see things around us, the way we see values and truth, the way we understand how we are to live in the world around us.

All of this comes to us through the culture. This means we, as responsible Christians, have to learn to control and take responsibility of what comes into our eyes, ears, and minds. I know. You might say to me, "Mike, I can't control what I think." Yes you can. It takes a little practice, but you can do it.

How do you practice this? First of all, stay in the Scripture. "Be transformed," Paul writes, "by the renewing of your mind" (Rom. 12:2). Stay part of an accountability group. Journal and keep your thoughts honest. This is what Daniel did.

What else helps you prepare your mind for pure and Christ-focused thoughts?

Read the following two verses and comment on how each addresses protecting your thoughts against the lure of culture.

John 15:19

2 Corinthians 5:17

Controlling our thoughts, however, doesn't mean withdrawing from culture. Daniel teaches us that as people of faith we should be the exact opposite of culture. Now that's a tough tightrope to walk, but it's the commandment we have. Daniel and his friends proved to be 10 times better at the things the Babylonian king needed them to do. God granted them wisdom so that they would be elevated to a platform where they could give witness and glory to God as they do on several occasions in the stories that follow.

In the same way, the post-modern church is meant to be 10 times better than the world at what the world does. We have to be 10 times better attorneys. We have to be 10 times better accountants. We have to be 10 times better CEOs. We have to be 10 times better computer programmers.

Are you driven like this? What area in life are you not giving God your absolute best—your “10 times better”?

How do you typically view your work? How do you decide how much effort you're going to put into your work? (School work, paid work, unpaid work, etc.)

In the fall we lost meaning in work. God told Adam,

The ground is cursed because of you. You will eat from it by means of painful labor all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field.

Genesis 3:17-18

So we go to work—we slave 8 hours, 10 hours, 12 hours a day. We come home. We're exhausted. We're brain dead. And yet we often don't know if we've done anything meaningful.

But Jesus restores meaning for us. Paul tells us, "Whatever you do, do it enthusiastically, as something done for the Lord and not for men" (Col. 3:23). Whatever your job, you do that job like you are doing it for Jesus. It may be a very important job or a menial job, but you do that job as if Jesus were your employer. You do that job to the very best of your ability, bringing excellence to everything you do, because your very work is an act of worship.

Have you ever thought of your work being a form of worship to God Himself? Do you agree with this? Why or why not?

When I was growing up, the maintenance supervisor of my little church was a man named Mr. Green. He worked part time at the church and also at the mill across the street from the church. I had never seen a church building this spotless. The floors were always shiny. There was never any dirt. It was an immaculate facility. And if you asked Mr. Green why he cleaned the church like he did, he would say, "Jesus will be here Sunday." He had taken the lowly job of cleaning the church—waxing floors, cleaning up after messy teenagers in a Sunday School room, and cleaning the bathrooms—and made his work a very act of worship. So when the Lord came to be with His people on Sunday the building would be ready for the presence of Jesus. Mr. Green understood that whatever his hands found to do, he was going to do it as to the Lord (see Eph. 6:7).

WHAT JOSEPH TEACHES US

Joseph is the second person I want to bring to your attention. You likely know his story. Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers. He had been wrongly accused of a crime. He had been falsely imprisoned and then forgotten. Later, when there was a crisis in the nation, Joseph was remembered and brought to Pharaoh. Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dream and proved to be an invaluable counselor to Pharaoh and his leadership. Joseph was honored not only in Egypt but in Israel as well.

Let's examine two interesting points from Joseph's story. The first is obedience. What if Joseph had given in to despair while he waited for God to remember him? Now, remember how many times Joseph had been betrayed and wronged. His brothers beat him up, threw him in a hole, and then sold him to slavers. He was bought as a slave, falsely accused of a crime, forgotten in prison. On any number of those occasions he could have given in to the despair and said it doesn't matter—even surrendering his relationship with God. But then when God had come for Joseph, he wouldn't have been ready to serve.

Have you ever been tempted to give in to despair because of surrounding circumstances? If yes, explain what happened.

Too many times we get into a situation and think it doesn't matter. We think it's too late. If God were going to do something He would have done it by now. So we give in to the despair and we sacrifice our righteousness. Then the moment comes and we're not ready. When the moment came for Joseph, he was ready. He stepped in front of Pharaoh and interpreted his dreams. God gave Joseph the interpretation because of his intimate relationship with God.

If we are going to survive in post-Christian America it will be because Christians—the church—take on a new understanding of holiness. It means being totally committed to, and always focusing on, our relationship with Jesus Christ—so we don't disqualify ourselves for those moments when Jesus wants to use us.

Are you ready to be used by God? List three things that need to change in your life so God can more effectively use you for His kingdom purposes.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

The second part of Joseph's story I find interesting is the theme of forgiveness. Before Joseph's life the response to being wronged was "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" (see Ex. 21:24). Joseph was the first one to choose not to seek revenge. Look at what he does in Genesis 50.

When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said to one another, "If Joseph is holding a grudge against us, he will certainly repay us for all the suffering we caused him." So they sent this message to Joseph, "Before he died your father gave a command: 'Say this to Joseph: Please forgive your brothers' transgression and their sin—the suffering they caused you.' Therefore, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when their message came to him. Then his brothers also came to him, bowed down before him, and said, "We are your slaves!" But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You planned evil against me; God planned it for good to bring about the present result—the survival of many people. Therefore don't be afraid. I will take care of you and your little ones." And he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

Genesis 50:15-21

Joseph's brothers had wronged him, but he forgave them, saying, "What you meant for evil, God meant for good."

How easy is it for you to forgive those who have wronged you? Is there someone who still hasn't seen your love through forgiveness?

The third part of Joseph's story I find interesting is that it was Joseph who interpreted Pharaoh's dreams. Our culture is filled with dreams—with people who want to see their lives differently, who want to see something significant happen. The reality is that no one gets up in the morning and says, "Today I'm going to wreck my life beyond all recognition." No one has decided, "This is the day I'm going to make stupid decision after stupid decision and totally destroy my life and my family."

One of the things Christians need to do is to be in the position to help our culture understand that yes, it's a good thing to want loving relationships, but here's how God says you can do it. Yes, it's a good thing to want to be successful, but here's how God defines success. This is one of the things Joseph teaches us.

How can we be engaged in the conversations of our culture so that we're in a position to help them define their dreams?

In Hebrews 12:4, there is a blunt reminder: "In struggling against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood." In other words, the writer of Hebrews tells the early church, and those of us since then, "Stop whining." The fact of the matter is, there are people around the world who are suffering much more than we are. So one of the things I want to say to the 21st century church in post-Christian America is stop whining.

I hear all the time where people say the Supreme Court threw God out of school. I want to see the man who is big enough to throw God anywhere! This is the same God who went into Egypt and pulled His people out of slavery into freedom. This is the same God who went into the fiery furnace and brought Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego through it. This is the same God who stayed all night with Daniel in the middle of the lion's den. This is the same God who went into that garden tomb on that first Easter morning and pulled His Son back from death.

And now you tell me the Supreme Court has a ruling and God can't go into a public school. If you're serving a God who can't get into a public school because the Supreme Court said He couldn't go there, you're serving the wrong God.

You may not know this, but while in Babylon, the people of Jerusalem faced a particular crisis. They believed God actually lived in the temple. It was His house and when they went to worship they would go to the temple. They had a sacred space where they would worship. In Babylon all that was destroyed, the temple was gone and they were in a new country. You hear this in Psalm 137: "How can we sing the LORD's song on foreign soil?" (v. 4).

The interesting thing that happened while they were in the Babylonian captivity was the development of the synagogue. The men of the community would gather around and study the Word. Historians believe a lot of the Bible we have now was written down and copied during the Babylonian captivity. Until then it had been mostly an oral tradition. But the Babylonian captivity forced people to write things down, and they became students of the Word.

Are you a student of the Word? Do you crave it? What practices can you establish for yourself so you can more consistently read and study God's Word?

SURVIVING IN A POST-CHRISTIAN 21ST CENTURY AMERICA

To survive in post-Christian 21st century America, the church is going to have to return to the centrality of the Word. It will require people understanding what Jesus is saying and how His Word is to be applied. It will be people reaffirming our identity again and again by studying and learning the Word.

We also need to be engaged in every area of culture. That is, we need to have Christian artists—people who are writing the great novels, writing the great songs, and performing the great music. We need leading thinkers in every area of conversation who are Christians. We cannot retreat. We cannot give up. No army yet has won any war by retreating.

When you're faithful to this, in due time the Lord will lift you up. He has promised that. He's not putting you in a place or a platform for self-gratification—but one where you can bless the name of Christ, bless the community, and give witness to His glory.

How are you currently engaging culture with the good news of Christ?

What's one truth you learned from this study that will guide you to engage culture differently than you ever have before?

There are four areas where the church has traditionally engaged the culture: Medicine, Poverty, Education, and Evangelism.

- With medicine, we were the first ones who took care of the victims of the plague in the Middle Ages.

- With poverty, we saw Mother Teresa gain credibility when she ministered to the lepers in India. One of the things the gospel does is restore dignity to the person. Poverty breaks dignity down. By working with a person, helping him understand essential life skills, and providing a job and job training, a person is restored to dignity. Traditionally, the church has done very well in dealing with issues of poverty.
- With education, we are reminded that most of the leading universities in this nation were founded by Christians. We need to return to the public forum of education.
- With evangelism, we have shared that the gospel is changing lives through the death of Jesus on the cross. But we live in a time now when the ministry comes before the message—when no one will listen to you until they understand you have something significant to bring to them. So they have to see it before they'll listen to what you say.

If you were to give the church a grade (1-10) based on how well they're engaging the culture through medicine, poverty, education, and evangelism, what grade would you give? Give a brief reason for your grade.

	Grade	Reasoning
Medicine		
Poverty		
Education		
Evangelism		

If you come into a community and provide a health clinic, people will want to know what you're doing. You'll have an opportunity to tell them, "This is what Jesus tells us to do." People will listen to you. The ministry comes before the message, and the strange thing is, we've been doing the very same thing on the mission field for years. Now, our own nation is the mission field. So what we have done in Rio de Janeiro, what we've done in countries in Africa, what we've done in Asia, we'll now have to do in the cities of our own nation.

Know this: It isn't a bad time to be alive. This is going to be an exciting time for the church and for our Lord. This isn't the first time we've been here, and God has given us grace to triumph through it all. Seize the moment in confidence. Victory is ours. Our Lord reigns.