

Dr. David A. deSilva, Cultural World of the New Testament, Session 5, Family and Household

6-min. Video Overview

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Alright, let's just jump right in. You know, when we think of ancient religious texts, our minds usually go to long lists of rules or these epic, sprawling histories. But today, we're going to look at a fascinating collection of ancient Jewish writings, the Apocrypha, through a totally different lens.

Think of it as a powerful toolkit, really an ancient survival guide. And really, this whole explainer, it's all built around trying to answer this one huge, incredibly relevant question. Because you have to understand, for the people who actually wrote these texts, being an outsider, that wasn't just a phase they were going through; it was their entire reality, day in and day out.

So to really get this survival guide, we first have to get the crisis it was built for. We're diving deep into a period known as the Diaspora. And what that means is, this was a time when the Jewish people were scattered all across these massive, powerful empires.

Think Assyria, Persia. I mean, these were the superpowers of their day. There were a minority everywhere they went, and they were facing this immense, constant pressure to just blend in, to assimilate, and ultimately, to forget who they were.

All right, so how do you even begin to fight that kind of pressure? Well, our first strategy, which is all about faithfulness right there at home, it doesn't kick off with some big public protest or a massive rebellion. No, it starts much more quietly. It starts within the walls of a single family's house, with the story of a man named Tobit.

So we meet this guy, Tobit. And he is, I mean, the absolute picture of devotion, even in exile. Deep in the enemy capital of Nineveh, he's doing everything right.

He's secretly burying the executed, he's feeding the poor, he's following the law to the letter. And what does he get for all his trouble? A bizarre, almost comical tragedy. He gets blinded by bird droppings.

Seriously. It's totally absurd, and it leaves him completely disgraced and dependent on others. And right as Tobit hits rock bottom, the story just cuts away to his relative, a young woman named Sarah.

And if you think his situation is bad, hers is somehow even more dire. Get this. She's been married seven times.

And a jealous demon, this entity called Asmodeus, has murdered every single one of her husbands on their wedding night. So just like Tobit, she is in total despair and literally prays for death. Now, this is where the whole story shifts.

The prayers of these two suffering people are actually heard. And God sends a powerful angel, Raphael, one of the seven who stand in God's presence, no less. But here's the twist.

He shows up disguised as a regular guy, a traveling companion for Tobit's son, Tobias. And what's so fascinating is the solution Raphael provides. He tells Tobias to catch this specific fish and to harvest its organs.

The heart and liver, when you burn them, act like a kind of spiritual fumigation. It drives the demon away from Sarah for good. And the gallbladder? That becomes an ointment that miraculously cures Tobit's blindness.

It's strange, it's very specific, and it absolutely works. So what's the big takeaway here? Why did God even intervene? Well, the angel Raphael eventually reveals the secret. It was Tobit's relentless acts of charity, his almsgiving, that got God's attention in the first place.

His faithfulness at home, even when it seemed totally pointless and only led to more suffering, was actually building up this valuable treasure that ended up saving his entire family. Okay, let's move on to our next strategy: justice from within. Because threats don't always come from foreign kings or supernatural demons, right? Sometimes the most dangerous threat is the corruption that's already inside your own community.

The story of Susanna introduces us to two community elders. I mean, these are respected judges, guys who hold the people's trust. But, as the text puts it so well, they turn their eyes away from the fear of heaven.

They become obsessed with a virtuous married woman, Susanna, and they plot to corner her alone in her garden. So they give her this horrible ultimatum: sleep with us, or we will ruin you. When she refuses, they go through with their threat.

They publicly accuse her of adultery with some young man who, conveniently, escaped. Now, since the law required two witnesses, and these were two of the most respected men in town, their word is just taken as fact. Susanna is immediately sentenced to death.

But just as she's being led away to be executed, a voice cries out from the crowd, I will have no part in the shedding of innocent blood. And it's a young man named Daniel. He interrupts the whole proceeding and insists on doing the one thing the other judges totally failed to do: conduct a thorough inquiry.

And this is where it all comes together, the brilliant climax of the story. Daniel separates the two accusers. He asks the first one, okay, you saw them, under which tree? The guy confidently replies, under a yew tree.

Simple enough. Then he brings in the second judge and asks him the exact same question. And his answer? Oh, it was under a pine tree.

Boom, the lie is completely exposed. The whole conspiracy just unravels in that one single fatal contradiction. It's genius.

So we've talked about personal piety, and we've talked about community justice. Our final strategy is all about resisting a foreign world. And this moves us into the realm of really intellectual warfare, giving people the mental and spiritual tools they need to resist the powerful allure of a dominant foreign culture.

So the Book of Baruch makes this really powerful argument. It completely reframes the Jewish law, the Torah. It says this isn't some heavy burden of rules you have to follow.

No, it's the ultimate privilege. The argument is that the Torah is literally divine wisdom itself made physical here on earth. So to have it is to be happy because you know exactly what pleases God while the rest of the world is just trying to guess.

Now, the letter of Jeremiah takes a completely different tactic. It's much more aggressive. This isn't a philosophical argument so much as it is a satirical rant.

Its whole goal is to look at these impressive awe-inspiring temples and statues of the Babylonians and just completely dismantle their power through sheer mockery. I mean, the author just rattles off one absurdity after another. These so-called gods have to be carried around everywhere because they can't move.

If they get knocked over, someone has to pick them up. If there's a fire in the temple, the priests run for their lives while the idols just burn up like firewood. They can't even stop a common thief from peeling off their gold plating.

The message is just relentless and crystal clear. These things are just objects. Why in the world would you ever fear them? And that brings us to our second little detective story.

And guess who's back? It's Daniel. So the Persian king shows Daniel the magnificent temple of his god Bel. And the proof that Bel is a living god? Every single night, a huge feast is laid out for him.

And every morning, poof, the food has vanished. The king challenges Daniel, see, you can't possibly deny this is a living god. But Daniel, he just laughs.

He tells the king, don't be deceived. And then he sets this simple but absolutely ingenious trap. After the priests lay out all the offerings, he has fine ash secretly scattered all over the temple floor.

Then the doors are sealed with the king's own royal seal, guaranteeing that nobody can get in or out. And here comes the brilliant reveal. The next morning, they unseal the doors.

And yep, the food is gone, just like the king expected. But the ash on the floor tells the real story. It's completely covered in footprints, not of a god, but of men, women, and even little children, all leading from the altar to a hidden door.

The priests and their families had been sneaking in every single night to chow down on the offerings. Okay, so let's pull all of these different threads together. These ancient texts give us some incredibly powerful answers, which we're going to summarize right now.

And then we'll turn to the modern questions they leave us with. So what we've really seen here are three distinct but totally interconnected layers of defense. First, it starts at home, building resilience through personal and family piety.

That's the Tobit story. Then it expands outward, making sure the community itself is strong and just from the inside. That's the story of Susanna.

And finally, the whole thing is fortified by this powerful intellectual and cultural self-defense, the kind that actively resists outside pressure. And that's exactly what we saw with Baruch and Daniel. You see, when you put it all together, what this shows us is that these are not just simple morality tales or fables.

Together, they form a really complex, sophisticated toolkit for survival. They address the personal, the communal, and the cultural challenges you face when you're trying to maintain your identity as an outsider. And that leaves us with one final thought, a question that brings this ancient guide directly into our world today.

In an age of social media, global brands, and just a constant flood of information, where overwhelming cultural influences are the norm for pretty much everyone, how do we figure out what it even means to stay true to ourselves?