

Faith Evangelical Free Church

Daniel 1:1-21; Committed to Faith and Faithful to God

Sunday, July 17, 2016

Introduction:

Back in the 1980s a man named George Shultz served under President Ronald Reagan as Secretary of State. As Secretary of State, one of Shultz's responsibilities was to meet with newly appointed ambassadors before they were sent out on their first posts.

At the end of each of these meetings Shultz had a test for the rookie ambassadors. In his office was a large globe—one of those big ones that sit in a frame with four legs. Shultz would say to the ambassador, "Before you leave, you have to go over to that globe and prove to me you can identify your country."

A simple test, one that every ambassador disposed of with the same relative ease. They would walk over, spin the globe, and always put their finger on the country to which they were being sent.

Then, one day, Shultz's friend Mike Mansfield was appointed as the U.S. ambassador to Japan. Mansfield's friendship with Shultz did not get him out of being tested, so as they walked out of the office, Shultz brought Mansfield to the globe and asked him to identify his country.

Without hesitation Mansfield spun the globe and placed his hand on the United States. "That's my country," he said, and walked out the door.

Mansfield's response made an impression on Shultz, so much so that from that day forward, as ambassador after ambassador chose their country the place they were being sent, Shultz reminded them to never forget that although they were at times going to live and serve in a different country it was important for them to remember the place that was truly their home.

Today we're going to look at the story of a man who wasn't sent from his home willingly as an ambassador, but rather forcefully as a captive. Those who became his leaders didn't want to encourage him to remember his home, but were instead bent on doing everything they could to try and make him and his friends forget their former life, and embrace a new life devoid of everything they once new – family, faith, and foundations.

See, the challenge facing this man -- a man by the name of Daniel -- was, as a believer in exile, to **remain committed to his faith, and faithful to the one true God.**

If you've got a Bible, turn with me to Daniel 1, and we'll see how this whole thing got started.

In the opening verses of Daniel, we read: (1:1-5)

[1] In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. [2] And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God. 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. [3] Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility, [4] youths without blemish, of good appearance and skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king's palace, and to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans. [5] The king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate, and of the wine that he drank. They were to be educated for three years, and at the end of that time they were to stand before the king.

The book of Daniel opens with the beginning of the end for the Kingdom of Judah.

In 605 BC, after a lengthy history of repeated disobedience, God finally enacted the covenantal punishments prescribed in Leviticus 26 and fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy to King Hezekiah – that Judah -- the southern kingdom of the Jewish people -- would fall, its treasures be taken away, and its best and brightest people stolen and made to serve a foreign power.

The instrument of God's judgment was Babylon – the fiercest military power of the day, and Nebuchadnezzar – the most feared ruler.

Any hopes that Jehoiakim (the king of Judah) or the people may have been holding onto that God might save them at the last moment (as he done so many times before) were dashed when the city fell, the temple was overtaken, and the treasures within were looted and given over to the gods of the Babylonians. In the worldview of the Ancient Near East, the God of Israel had just lost. There would be no parting of the seas, no invisible angelic army, and no spirit-filled leader to rise up and drive the enemy army back to where they came from.

No, this time, Judah would simply fall and become just another vassal state in the service of the Babylonian Empire. The Jewish people, who had come to think of themselves as invincible as God's chosen people, were marched away from their homes defeated, lost, and likely wondering whether or not this time their sins had caused God to abandon them altogether.

Now, the Babylonians were expert conquerors, and over time they had developed a pretty smart method of keeping the people and places they defeated dependent on the Empire.

When they were done invading a city or kingdom, they left some of its citizens alive and allowed them to rebuild and pay taxes to the Babylonian Empire. Then they took the best, most capable leaders of the places and people they defeated and turned them into servants of the king. They'd return to the capital and provide their captives with safety, provisions, education, and opportunity. In return, the captives would feel obligated to honor the king for his mercy and be

too far away from their homes to try and organize an uprising or rebellion. Overall, it was an extremely ingenious and effective strategy.

That Babylonians did one other thing in an effort to reeducate – or perhaps indoctrinate – their prized captives into their new life, culture, and religion. They gave them new names, a few of which were recorded for us.

Continuing in Daniel 1:6, we read:

[6] Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishaël, and Azariah of the tribe of Judah. [7] And the chief of the eunuchs gave them names: Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishaël he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego.

The captive Judeans Daniel, Hanniniah, Mishaël, and Azariah were all renamed.

Their true names were all related to Yahweh, the God of Israel

Daniel – “God is my Judge”

Hananiah – “The Lord is gracious”

Mishaël – “Who is what God is?”

Azariah – “The Lord is my helper” (Side note: “Azariah” is the name I chose for myself in my Hebrew classes in seminary...I thought it fitting since I needed lots and lots of God’s help.)

We’re not entirely sure of the exact translation of their new Babylonians names, but we can be sure that instead of being linked to the power, provision, and praise of Yahweh, their Babylonian names Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abendego (or Rack, Shack, and Benny if you’re familiar with the veggie tales version) were honoring the Babylonian gods Marduk, Bel, and Nebo.

Take a moment to put yourself in the situation of these captives.

You’ve been taken away from your home after having witnessed the conquering of your people.

You find yourself living in a foreign land, 100s of miles away from everything you ever knew and held dear -- family and friends gone, and your faith very likely shaken if not shattered.

You are completely at the mercy of the Babylonians. And, perhaps to your surprise...you find their mercy pretty comfortable. You’re given a place to live, great food to eat, wine to drink, and opportunities not only to learn, but also earn a safe and secure position as an advisor to the king.

And all of this comes at one cost: That over time, once your new education and training has had a chance to take root, when you’re asked where your country is, where your gods are from, and who your king is and where he reigns, and you spin the globe...you’re finger always points to Babylon.

I'm sure for many of these Israelite captives the chance to live, and not only live but thrive, felt too good to be true after all the loss and tragedy of having been conquered and taken from their homes. They were faced with such an unbelievable deal, I bet most of them felt this qualified as a "don't bite the hand that feeds you" type of situation, and thus were quite willing to adapt to their new surroundings, new king, and new gods.

Most of them, that is...except Daniel.

This new life full of Babylonian languages, learning, and libations wasn't sitting well with Daniel.

Starting in 1:8, we read

[8] But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself.

As I was reading this story and trying to understand the challenges Daniel faced, his taking issue with the food he was given came as bit of a surprise.

He accepts the challenges of taking on a new name, learning a new language, and even studying in a new culture and learning about other gods...yet for some reason, Daniel sees accepting food from the king's table as an act that will prohibit him from ***remaining committed to his faith, and faithful to the one true God.***

If you walked into work Monday morning and discovered that over the weekend your offices had been moved, the nature of your work completely changed, that you had all new bosses, and that those new bosses had left bagels and donuts in the new break room as a way to welcome everyone to their new reality...I'm just guessing here but I bet very few of you would reject the bagels and donuts. You might be pretty angry at all the sudden and overwhelming changes, but you know what helps everyone cope with sudden and overwhelming changes? Stressing eating 3 donuts and a couple bagels, that's what.

So maybe Nebuchadnezzar felt like telling Daniel and his friends, "hey, sorry about that whole conquering and captivity business...lunch is on me." Certainly sharing food with the king shouldn't be that big of a deal, right?

But in 1:8, we learn it's the only aspect of Daniel's new life he asks to be excused from. The question for us becomes, "what is Daniel worried about?" What danger did he see that we must also be able to identify and understand when considering how to remain committed to our faith and faithful to the one true God in our own lives?

In the Ancient Near East -- in the time and place in which this story takes place -- sharing a meal with someone as important as a king or as common as your neighbor taken as a sign of committing to a relationship.

In this case, it was clear that the food and wine coming directly from the king's table were meant to communicate to the new captives that Nebuchadnezzar was now their provider. As long as they accepted his benevolence, and the obligation of loyalty attached to his gracious provision, all would be well.

In short, Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians were carefully, subtly, and strategically chipping away at Daniel and his friend's dependence on God. They wanted to see Daniel abandon his faith and commit to his new home, his new king, and a new way of life that would lead him further and further away from the one true God.

Daniel did not want to start going down that road. He did not want to give Nebuchadnezzar that much authority over his life. Maybe Daniel knew that even what seems like a small, harmless breach in his dependence on God could in a very short period of time cause Daniel to compromise his faith and lead him to depending not on God, but on his new king.

It can be hard for us today to imagine what giving into the authority of a king might be like, because there's really no contextual similarity for us to place ourselves in. We don't have kings, and we certainly don't have any problem disagreeing with or even cutting loose of our political leaders.

So let me suggest a slight twist, for the sake of understanding, and swap king for culture. There are, within our culture, many ways in which seemingly benevolent things are offered to us in exchange for getting a little closer to a bad situation -- things that daily challenge our faith and tempt us to consider habits and activities that are less about being faithful to God and more about pursuing the false promises of pleasure and happiness that our culture assures us can only be found apart from God.

What sort of things are brought to us from culture's table in an attempt to challenge where our loyalties lie and shift our dependence away from God? The list is likely very long, and no doubt every person in this room struggles against a variety of tantalizing offerings. But to provide a few as an example...

Culturally, there's very little problem with extreme amounts of bodily exposure. Internet ads capitalize on the allure of barely dressed men and women. They catch our eyes, excite our imaginations, and lead us from looking to perhaps clicking. Clicking leads to searching, searching leads to outright pursuing...and suddenly a snowball has taken on great size and dangerous speeds, crashing down on us and dragging us into the struggle against pornographic addiction.

In this town, year in and year out, we see one of the culture's strongest and most dangerous narratives captivate the hearts of far too many young adults: that college is a time of personal exploration -- which to some degree is true -- but the opportunity gets twisted into a narrative of acceptable moral ambiguity. The culture at large would have you believe that the consequences

and responsibilities of things like drinking and sexual relationships are okay to ignore...right up until they either destroy lives or create new ones that you weren't ready to have be a part of your own.

Or what about one of culture's oldest promises: happy and successful people make and spend lots of money. Again, there's a small degree of truth here -- wealth accumulation is not objectively bad or sinful. God can and certainly does bless people with money. But if you accept our culture's encouragement on what to do with that money and spend it selfishly you may be happy for a time, but as many of us know it's a fleeting and shallow happiness.

Daniel understood that accepting food from the king's table was committing to a relationship that would compromise his dependence and faith in God.

We may not have kings, but our culture rules over our society and certainly invites to abandon our faith in favor of a less than godly or righteous life.

We, like Daniel, must strive to remain committed to our faith and faithful to the one true God. The rest of our passage this morning will show us that doing so will not be easy, but it will be absolutely worth the fight.

So let's return to the text and try to understand some of the challenges Daniel faced.

Beginning again in 1:8, we read: (1:8-14)

[8] But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself. [9] And God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs, [10] and the chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, "I fear my lord the king, who assigned your food and your drink; for why should he see that you were in worse condition than the youths who are of your own age? So you would endanger my head with the king." [11] Then Daniel said to the steward whom the chief of the eunuchs had assigned over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, [12] "Test your servants for ten days; let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. [13] Then let our appearance and the appearance of the youths who eat the king's food be observed by you, and deal with your servants according to what you see." [14] So he listened to them in this matter, and tested them for ten days. (1:8-14)

Daniel, after determining that accepting the king's food and drinking the king's wine is one step too far toward dependence on entities other and lesser than God, starts looking for ways he can remain faithful and continue living the way he believes God has called him to live.

And everywhere he looked he found opposition, trial, and difficulty.

He first asks the guy in charge, the chief of eunuchs, to be excused from the king's food and wine. The chief is compassionate...but ultimately not interested in helping Daniel. He feared that if Daniel didn't eat what was provided that Daniel would become weak, causing the king to get angry at the chief of eunuchs...and when King Nebuchadnezzar got angry, apparently there was an increased risk of losing one's head.

Daniel, undeterred, didn't stop with the chief of eunuchs. Instead, he pulled the classic 6-year-old-switcharoo: if someone says no...just go ask someone else and see if they say yes.

That "someone else" turns out to be a steward who had been given the responsibility of watching over and attending to Daniel and his friends. This time Daniel tried another plan: he asked that he and his friends would only be made to eat vegetables and drink water. While all the other captives and members of the king's court enjoyed the choicest meats and finest wines, Daniel and his friends snacked on greenleaf salads.

Who in here likes Taco Lucha down in Aggville (next to So Long Saloon). I LOVE Taco Lucha, if you haven't tried it yet, you absolutely need to. Imagine for the next 10 days I offer everyone in this room free Taco Lucha (or whatever your food is) for lunch. Delicious tacos, cheese-smothered burritos, and of course all you can eat Raspberry Bean Dip.

Everyone in here gets to have as much as they want...except this side of the room. This side of the room is going to get vegetables -- carrots, celery, and broccoli for 10 days.

Doesn't sound like much fun, does it? Only really, you four have it easy compared to Daniel and his buddies. For Daniel, not only was he eating veggies instead of the best food straight from the king's table, but he was also doing so while trying not to get caught (I can't imagine the Chief of Eunuchs would have been too happy to find Daniel doing exactly what he was told not to do), possibly endangering his life and the lives of others by doing this, and likely had some not-too-happy fellow Judean captives who had decided to give up on their commitment to God, because clearly the gods of the Babylonians clearly had better perks.

But Daniel (and his friends) understood that sometimes being committed to their faith and faithful to the one true God was going to require living a harder life. A life of faith will make demands on what you do and what you do not do, and those demands can be difficult to follow and obey because our sin makes the ways of the world -- the ways of our culture -- seem so much more rewarding and so much easier. (At least in the moment)

It's going to be hard to turn off and walk away from your computer when you're tempted to search for pornography, or harder still when you commit to confessing your struggle to another believer and work intentionally on repentance and accountability.

It's going to be hard when your friends accuse you of being judgmental and boring when you turn down shots as an underage collegiate.

It's going to be hard as the truth claims of our culture and our faith continue to clash and as a result you find yourself being called bigoted, intolerant, narrow-minded, and ignorant...all while you continue to do the most loving thing you can do in this life -- care for others and tell them about the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the love, freedom and forgiveness found within.

All of these things, and many more that I'm sure you could list of in the dozens, are going to be hard and difficult. Living for God in a world that so determined to live in opposition to God is never going to be easy.

But we, like Daniel, should not expect ourselves to be exempt from the hard parts of life and faith. We've got to be committed to our faith and faithful to our God, even and especially when it's tough.

And now we come to the big question....why? What happens when we persevere and we stay true to our faith and faithful to our God?

Scripture's overwhelming answer and promise is this: God comes through. Whether your faithfulness is strong enough to refuse a king or just barely able to cling to the hope of the Gospel, all that you can do, whatever you can do, will be upheld, empowered, and rewarded by our good, good God.

Take a look at what happens to Daniel and his friends. In 1:15-21

[15] At the end of ten days it was seen that they were better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youths who ate the king's food. [16] So the steward took away their food and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables. [17] As for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams. [18] At the end of the time, when the king had commanded that they should be brought in, the chief of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar. [19] And the king spoke with them, and among all of them none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Therefore they stood before the king. [20] And in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his kingdom. [21] And Daniel was there until the first year of King Cyrus.

Daniel and his friends were indeed rewarded for their faithfulness -- or rather were blessed recipients of God's faithfulness. They understood that although remaining committed to their faith and faithful to God will at many points in life be met with difficulty and hardship, it will absolutely, always, and ultimately result in the overwhelming and undeserved blessings of our Father in Heaven.

Jesus Christ taught and promised much the same during his ministry on earth.

"You will be hated by all for my namesake," he said in Matthew 10:22, "but the one who endures to the end will be saved."

"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it," Jesus said in Matthew 16:14-26,, "but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?"

In the Gospel of John 11:25-26 Jesus declared, ***"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"***

(Can you remain faithful to this Can you depend on this?)

I have no doubt that in this room there are plenty of people who have passionate and trial-tested faith, who know exactly what I mean when I say the Christian life is not free of hardship or difficulty.

There are also probably people who have struggled to keep their faith in hard times, maybe even feeling guilty for having sought someone or something other than God to depend on.

At different points in my life I have found myself in both of these circumstances.

Feeling tested and proven and strong in my faith.

Feeling broken and just barely holding fast to what I believe.

Whichever place or circumstance you're in this morning, my hope is that the story of Daniel and the promises of Christ will be an encouragement to you to remain committed to your faith and faithful to God, because God will absolutely and unfailingly remain faithful to you -- to the ends of the earth, to the end of this age, and forevermore.