

Exiled

I would like for you to use your imaginations for a moment. I want to see yourself as a teenager. Your country has been at war with several nations for some time. One country after the other has ruled your country. Finally one overpowers them all. As a condition of peace, you are taken to the palace of the conquering king, and possibly made into a eunuch.

You are fortunate enough to have 3 of your best friends with you. Imagine this and you are seeing the situation that Daniel was experiencing.

When Daniel was taken by Nebuchadnezzar he was probably in his teens. He first served Nebuchadnezzar, then seems to have become less popular with the succeeding kings, is called back into service of Belshazzar for one evening, then serves the rulers of the Medo-Persian empire.

After being taken to Babylon, Daniel lived the rest of his long life faithfully serving in a number of administrations. Daniel lived most of his life in Babylon, though we know that he did visit other cities. As far as we know he died in or around Babylon at about the age of 90, after receiving the last prophecy. He never got to return to his beloved Jerusalem, though many Israelites ultimately did.

There are several factors at play in the Book of Daniel. As we alluded to earlier, the tiny kingdom of Judah was often caught in the crossfire between Egypt and those who would conquer her. The wars that raged back and forth around Judea are used by the Bible as a metaphor for the great struggle between good and evil that constantly goes on in the world around us. So the literal struggles around Judea are amplified into the struggle between the New Jerusalem and Babylon, the source of all apostasy. This is most evident in Revelation but it is not only there.

In the last part of the 7th century B.C., we have the Assyrians, the Egyptians, and the Babylonians each in turn ruling over Judah. This is where another symbol enters the picture.

Those powers who warred with Judah from the north became designated at the king of the north. The phrase applied to any power that came at Jerusalem from the north.

There was only one power that came against Judea from the south and that was Egypt, but that too became to be applied symbolically. More on that later.

One of the cuneiform documents recovered from Babylon says this: "At that time Nebuchadnezzar conquered the whole area of Hatti-country." That was the designation of all the area that had been held by the Hittites when they ruled Syria and Palestine from their capitol in Hattisa. And from time to time that included Judea.

Why would God allow his people to be conquered like this? He had saved the nation powerfully before.

The prophet Jeremiah gives us the answer. Israel had turned against God. In spite of the pleadings of the prophets that he sent, they continued on their path.

Even after they were conquered by Babylon, Jeremiah told them that if they would submit to Babylon, they could survive as a nation. But they could not even do this, and after a couple of attempts at subduing the rebellions, Nebuchadnezzar razed Jerusalem and took most of Judah captive.

Which brings us to Daniel as an individual. In spite of the general apostasy in Judah, Daniel and his 3 friends were outstanding for their moral characters. Though this did not keep them from being taken hostage, it did make them powerful witnesses to their God through the years.

What must he have felt? A young man, from the royal family, being taken to Babylon with a very definite purpose in mind.

And upon arriving there deciding how to live his life.

Would he be faithful to his God, since no one knew him here, or would he just do whatever the crowd was doing and get by?

I am sure that many of the captives just decided to go with the flow and make the most of things. After all, this was a luxurious life that was being offered. It would have been a very seductive lifestyle.

Taking hostages from the conquered country, or even exchanging people in the case of treaties was a normal part of the times.

In Nebuchadnezzar's case it was foresight, as he would be able to train the brightest of the young men into his service, and as they were in his court, Babylonian ways would influence them. They would also be able to help the king understand the conquered peoples if the need arose.

When the young men came to Babylon they began an intensive course of study. Cuneiform writing, astronomy, language, court manners, and mathematics would have been taught.

The purpose of Nebuchadnezzar was not to just conquer Israel physically through battle, but to conquer it culturally. The goal was to make Hebrews good Babylonians.

The king wanted to introduce the "less civilized" Hebrews to the cosmopolitan, therefore better, lifestyle. This included language, manners, pastimes, food, and yes. Gods.

It was not that Nebuchadnezzar did not believe in Jehovah: It was that he believed in all the gods, and Jehovah was just another among many.

That explains a lot that we will see as we go through Daniel.

First thing, obviously would be to learn the language. Nebuchadnezzar's native language would have been Aramaic, and Daniel would have had to be familiar with it. Several chapters are written in that language in the original text.

Then there would have been instruction in astrology. This was a study that pervaded the Babylonian, and much of the Near Eastern, cultures. This was in direct conflict with the Bible.

Astrology, while based on the stars, took it a lot further than astronomy. Astrologists, like today, believed that the stars controlled the affairs of men, in opposition to the Biblical view what God is in charge.

We will see the conflict between this paradigm and that of God's way played out over and over in the book of Daniel.

It is an interesting situation that we find as we go through the book, that Daniel, who was no doubt trained in astrology in the court, but did not believe in it or practice it. And furthermore, he eventually became the leader of the astrologers, leading people who believed in that practice.

Perhaps that gives us just a glimpse of how God would have his servants work.

But throughout Daniel, Jehovah God prevailed over the astrologers, confounding them, and eventually overcoming them.

We will be back to Daniel's story, but here is a good place to interject some things that we see in this chapter that give us a clue to the direction of the whole book.

Daniel 1:1-2 (KJV)

¹ In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah came Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon unto Jerusalem, and besieged it.

² And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with part of the vessels of the house of God: which he carried into the land of Shinar to the house of his god; and he brought the vessels into the treasure house of his god.

Here in verse 1, we have a statement that is reflected down through prophecy until the end of time: the great battle between Jerusalem and Babylon.

In Revelation it becomes the New Jerusalem against the spiritual Babylon, Where Jerusalem is the symbol for God's faithful, and Babylon, the repository of every evil and nastiness.

Some have referred to this as the great controversy, and we see it played out in time. In fact we can see it playing out now. And it seems as if prophetic Babylon will conquer prophetic Jerusalem. But it does not, and Babylon is eventually forced to reap the results of their own wickedness.

The word that could be used for that is defiled. And that word plays a key throughout the book of Daniel.

There is another key thought that is introduced here. That is the concept of judgment. While it is not expressed specifically, when the text says that God gave Judah into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, that is judgment.

A third concept throughout the book is deliverance. God delivers his individual followers. God also delivers his "nation" or church in the end. That rescue is brought about by the executive (execution) judgment of the wicked.

The Christian can understand this as being defiled by sin, being judged in Jesus Christ who takes our sin, and being delivered from that sin and it's presence.

So here is the first thing that gives us a clue to the book of Daniel, as well as the book of Revelation, and other New Testament references.

Daniel 1:2 (KJV)

² And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with part of the vessels of the house of God: which he carried into the land of Shinar to the house of his god; and he brought the vessels into the treasure house of his god.

Perhaps the most astounding part of this verse as you look at it is the first phrase: The Lord gave Judah up.

There is no reason for Judah to be given up, except that, by their choices they left God no choice. As mentioned before, they were given warnings about their wicked ways, they had been encouraged to submit to Babylon. Following either of those commands from God would have spared them. In essence, they gave themselves up by their choices.

We also need to take note that Judah was suffering the consequences of her behavior. Here we see the concept of judgment. Choices have consequences. And interestingly enough, Babylon, which was used by God to judge his people, itself came under judgment from God, which we will see as also true with the prophetic Babylon.

And the big universal choice is this: "Who am I going to worship?" Because that determines how we will be judged. Will we be judged as righteous by the blood of the Lamb, or will we accept the judgment we receive without the benefits of the atonement. Sobering.

And any nation or person that resists God will come to the point where God let's them have their way. The picture is never pretty.

The word that comes to mind for this, again, is Judgment.

The next part of this verse takes this even further. In those days, it was believed the gods were gods of their respective nations. That was connected with the concept of god-kings, which came down through the ages until not too long ago. Babylon had their gods, with one major god. Assyria had their gods. Egypt had their gods. And of course Judah claimed to have their God, though in practice they disobeyed him.

So when Babylon conquered Judah, in the mind of King Nebuchadnezzar, his god had conquered the God of Judah, Jehovah. But not wanting to offend the gods, Nebuchadnezzar did not melt down the vessels from the Temple in Jerusalem, but brought them into the temple of his god. It was a form of taking Jehovah captive. But he respected the fact that Jehovah was worshipped.

We find later, in the story of Belshazzar, that in his drunkenness disrespected not only Jehovah, but also the sensibilities of his gods. But that is for later.

Again, we see the prototype of the two great powers that struggle for mankind. Good and evil. The Bible says that good eventually wins.

We need to be constantly aware that the Babylon of this world is working continually to influence each one of us to move us towards the false gods of this world.

Daniel 1:3-5 (KJV)

³ And the king spake unto Ashpenaz the master of his eunuchs, that he should bring *certain* of the children of Israel, and of the king's seed, and of the princes;

⁴ Children in whom *was* no blemish, but well favoured, and skilful in all wisdom, and cunning in knowledge, and understanding science, and such as *had* ability in them to stand in the king's palace, and whom they might teach the learning and the tongue of the Chaldeans.

⁵ And the king appointed them a daily provision of the king's meat, and of the wine which he drank: so nourishing them three years, that at the end thereof they might stand before the king.

Nebuchadnezzar wanted good looking, smart, trained youth from the nobility to serve him.

He was going to train them for 3 years, then they would enter the service of the court.

In his generosity, he was going to do what he thought best for them. Let them eat and drink like he did.

Daniel 1:6-7 (KJV)

⁶ Now among these were of the children of Judah, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah:

⁷ Unto whom the prince of the eunuchs gave names: for he gave unto Daniel *the name* of Belteshazzar; and to Hananiah, of Shadrach; and to Mishael, of Meshach; and to Azariah, of Abednego.

Here we find the Babylonization of the four young men starting.

The first thing that they did was to change the names of the four.

Daniel's name meant, "God is Judge". The "El" in his name was one of the names for God. They renamed Daniel Belteshazzar "protect the king's life" Also "Bel" was the name of one of their gods. See Daniel 4

Hananiah meant, "Jehovah is gracious." They renamed him Shadrach, which meant "Circuit of the sun".

Mishael meant, "Who is What God is?" They renamed Meshach, which may have meant, "Who is what Aku is?"

Azariah meant, "Jehovah has helped." He was renamed, Abednego, probably meaning "Servant of Nego."

Now whether this was brainwashing or just something to make it easier for them to remember the names is not clear, but it is obvious that what people call you can influence how you feel about yourself.

The Babylonizing of the young men had started.

The next thing was more subtle. And the king did this as a positive gesture. Remember, the king was hoping to enlighten the Hebrews (let's call them forced exchange students). He wanted them to become good Babylonians.

It came time to eat, and they are ushered into this huge banquet room with tables loaded with every kind of kingly food. Nebuchadnezzar wanted these guys to be smart and happy. He wanted each of them to be the best person that he could be. Nebuchadnezzar was, in his mind, doing them a great favor.

It was very common for the food in the palaces, and other places, to be offered to idols first. The pagans were pragmatic worshippers. They knew that idols did not eat food. And it would be a pity to waste it. So as part of the worship of the idols the food was put on the king's tables. Then there were the further issues of clean and unclean foods, and non-kosher foods. And Daniel and his friends were supposed to eat from those tables.

This was not to mention the alcoholic beverages that would have been served at the king's table. No doubt the warnings of the book of Proverbs against wine were clear in their minds as they looked over the tables.

Now how many of you know teenage boys that did *not* want to eat? Here they are, surrounded by enticing food, and plenty of alcoholic drink. They live in luxurious surroundings. They are not home in Judah. Their parents are not there. Some of their acquaintances are probably partying. Maybe the gods of Nebuchadnezzar are really stronger than Jehovah.

Daniel and his friends had determined to worship only Jehovah. Therefore they needed a diet that did not include foods offered to idols, and had been prepared properly.

The easiest way for this to be was to have a simple, plain, diet. Pulse is what they asked for: Grains, beans, vegetables, and water were what they asked for.

Now most of us here can relate to what a simple diet without alcohol can do for us. How do you feel after stuffing yourself with stuffing at Thanksgiving? Is your mind clear and alert? Are you full of energy and pep?

And I am not even going to ask you about alcohol. We all know the answer to that.

At first, after they made their request, their supervisor was reluctant to allow this to happen, for fear that the young men would shrivel up and look unhealthy. He was concerned for his head, for he was responsible for the health of the king's captives. But finally he agreed to a test for a period of 10 days.

When those 10 days were up, the king himself interviewed them, and they were ten times healthier, and fatter, and smarter than all the others.

They were tested about worship. They made decisions that let them honor God. God honored them. And the king honored them. His purpose in elevating the brightest and best of Israel's youth was fulfilled. And God's agenda to have his men in high places in government was fulfilled.

And they refused to be made into good Babylonians. They recognize that the path to leaving God is not one great leap, but a series of small decisions that have the cumulative effect of making them Babylonian. The truth is that you cannot be half Hebrew and half Babylonian in your spiritual life. It is either or.

And real underlying issue worship.

Who or what do you worship?

Worship is something that we do not think of too often. We just usually do it. We worship so many things. We worship God so little in reality. But the book of Daniel tells us that God is coming to take those who worship Him above everything else, to live with Him.

The struggle for God's people is to keep Babylon out of their lives.

In a way worship was the issue in the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve chose to believe the enemy over God.

Worship was the issue when Able was murdered by Cain.

Worship was the issue when God made a covenant with Abraham.

Worship was the issue when the Israelites made the Golden Calf.

Worship was the issue when God came down on Mt. Sinai and gave the 10 commandments.

Worship was the issue on Mt. Carmel, when at Elijah's prayerful request; God sent down fire from heaven and burned up the sacrifice, the altar, and the water.

Worship is the issue that divides God's people from followers of the beast in Revelation. Worship of God keeps from receiving the mark of the beast, or prophetic Babylon.

Worship matters to God. And worship matters to God's enemy. Virtually every issue that is decided in this world has this background. When we honor God with our lives, we are worshipping him. When we do not honor God with our lives, we are worshipping some other being.

So in Daniel 1, the stage is set. God allows his people to suffer the consequences of their choices. We can worship who we wish, and how we wish, but the choices we make about worship can affect us now, and will affect us for eternity.

And it starts with the little, simple, seemingly innocuous things.

Our gospel text for this session is this:

Luke 16:10 (KJV)

¹⁰ He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much: and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much.

Remember, God is calling you to faithfulness.