

DANIEL 1:3-21, Part 2 October 2, 2016

BIG D AND THE PIOUS THREE

Whether you believe in the divine origin of the Scriptures or not, you gotta love the stories of the Bible. They are just awesome and the book of Daniel gives us one of the most awesome stories of all. It is the story of Big D and the pious three. Daniel 1:1-7 *In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. ² The Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along 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 he brought the vessels into the treasury of his god. ³ Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, the chief of his officials, to bring in some of the sons of Israel, including some of the royal family and of the nobles, ⁴ youths in whom was no defect, who were good-looking, showing intelligence in every branch of wisdom, endowed with understanding and discerning knowledge, and who had ability for serving in the king's court; and he ordered him to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans. ⁵ The king appointed for them a daily ration from the king's choice food and from the wine which he drank, and appointed that they should be educated three years, at the end of which they were to enter the king's personal service. ⁶ Now among them from the sons of Judah were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. ⁷ Then the commander of the officials assigned new names to them; and to Daniel he assigned the name Belteshazzar, to Hananiah Shadrach, to Mishael Meshach and to Azariah Abed-nego.*

As we learned last time, the Lord gave over the nation of Judah to Nebuchadnezzar the Babylonian king. In the beginning of a process that would take eighteen years, Nebuchadnezzar came with his armies to Jerusalem and stole away to Babylon some of Judah's best things, the holy instruments of the temple, and some of Judah's best men, the choicest young men of royal and noble lineage whose destiny would be to serve in the court of Nebuchadnezzar. In Isaiah 39 God warned the people through his prophet that Isaiah 39:7 *Some of your sons who will issue from you, whom you will beget, will be taken away, and they will become officials in the palace of the king of Babylon.* Nebuchadnezzar and Ashpenaz had no clue they were fulfilling prophecy when they did this. They just wanted to take advantage of the talent pool there in Jerusalem so they sought out 4 *youths in whom was no defect, who were good-looking, showing intelligence in every branch of wisdom, endowed with understanding and discerning knowledge, and who had*

ability for serving in the king's court. Here we begin to learn something of our four heroes. They were first of all young men. Nearly twenty years ago our son and I read together a book by JC Ryle called *Thoughts For Young Men*. The first chapter is all about why young men stand in the greatest need of spiritual development. Our Andrew was 16 at that time, and young men become expensive at that age because to insure them as drivers costs a lot of money. Why? Insurance companies know that young men are the most foolish and reckless beings on the planet. Young men don't always demonstrate a sober maturity worthy of emulation, but the heroes of this book were probably between the ages of 13 and 18 when they are put to an enormous test which they pass with flying colors. Daniel was just a kid when he was ripped from his home and dragged off to a strange land. But how he handled his trials has landed him among the greatest men of God in all of history. You'll remember that later in the story Daniel's political enemies went looking for some character flaw in him by which to pull him down. And you know what they found? His only flaw as they saw it was that he was too devoted to his God. This is a great man we are going to study. And he had some great friends. We will say more on that later but having met our four heroes we move on to our first major point today which is the intention of Nebuchadnezzar.

The intention of Nebuchadnezzar. The king of Babylon, who was one of the greatest rulers of his age, has a plan for the Hebrew youngsters. He wants to turn them into loyal and capable servants of his throne. He figured he would start the process with the finest in raw ingredients. So, he took the cream of the crop from Jerusalem. Verse 4 says they were youths without defect or blemish. They had to be good-looking and intelligent and poised. These were the raw ingredients the king of Babylon would start with and his goal was to mold these young people into first-rate Babylonians and the key to his plan was a brainwashing Babylonian style. Let's see how he did it.

Method #1 was the way of education. The way of education. Verse 4 says that he ordered the Hebrew youths to be taught the literature and language of the Chaldeans. His brainwashing began with education. It always does. That is why we do well to give careful attention to the education of ourselves and our children. Parents, consider -- is your child's education preparing him or her to be a servant of God's kingdom or a servant of another kingdom?

Then too there was the way of enculturation. To make these youths into loyal subjects their names were changed. The Hebrew names they were given connected them to their native peoples and their God. The name *Daniel* meant: *God is judge*. *Hannaniah* meant: "*the Lord is gracious*." *Mishael* meant: "*who is like the Lord?*" *Azariah* meant: "*The Lord is my helper*."

Names do mean something don't they? Nebuchadnezzar was trying to uproot these youths from their heritage and an important part of that involved changing their names. The new names given to them: Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego all made reference to pagan deities. They were connecting the young men to Chaldean culture and separating them from Hebrew culture.

So, Nebuchadnezzar was melting them down via Chaldean education, Chaldean enculturation, and thirdly, now via Chaldean digestion. He wanted them to get used to the delicacies of Chaldean cooking. *5 The king appointed for them a daily ration from the king's choice food and from the wine which he drank.* Now why would Nebuchadnezzar choose to serve these guys the best of Chaldean cooking and wine? It was all part of his strategy to get his hooks into them. Not only did he want them to forget about the bagels back in Jerusalem he wanted them to develop a sense of obligation toward him and his administration. When we treat others lavishly they begin to feel they owe us something.

Now that was the plan of Nebuchadnezzar. But behind and before his plan someone else had a plan for the life of Daniel and the boys, someone else who had a wonderful plan for their lives, but who, like Nebuchadnezzar was seeking to make these young men loyal and capable servants in His kingdom. Let's look briefly at what God did to prepare Daniel for leadership in His kingdom.

First of all, there were given to him certain gifts and abilities. He was apparently good-looking, intelligent, and likeable. These were the natural abilities exhibited by Daniel. Lots of non-Christians have natural qualities that make their services desirable. They have a lot to offer because of the endowments of nature. When our founders said that all men are created equal, they were referring to their place before the law, not to native capacities. Clearly, we are not created equal. Some are given greater native gifts and Daniel appears to be among them. But if native ability was all Daniel had we would never have heard his name. Daniel became famous because of an ability that was not natural, but super-natural. What could he do? Daniel had that fantastic ability to understand dreams and then he went on to have many visions and dreams of his own that made their way into this book. Daniel 1:**17** *As for these four youths, God gave them knowledge and intelligence in every branch of literature and wisdom; Daniel even understood all kinds of visions and dreams.* Biblical characters come in many types. Some of them, like Paul and Daniel, were men of great natural ability. Others, like Amos, and Moses and Peter maybe were not. God can use both kinds. And we should be encouraged by that. If you are not the kind of

person who will impress kings, don't worry about that. God can still do great things through you. And, if you are an impressive person in worldly ways, if you, like Daniel are bright and good looking and personable then let God use those gifts too. But do not trust in those things. Trust in the Lord, seek His spiritual giftings while at the same time you put to use the natural abilities He has given you. Because whether your abilities are natural or supernatural they are still from God and are intended for His service and glory.

But listen, God's preparation of Daniel not only involved natural and supernatural giftings but also the development of those gifts. God put Daniel in places in his own land and then in Babylon where he could study and learn and grow, and especially it was God's plan that Daniel's gifts would grow under trial. When you read the pages of church history, as well as the pages of Scripture, you find that God commonly, normally, puts men through great pain and trial as part of their preparation for leadership. AW Tozer says that God seldom uses a man greatly until He has wounded him deeply. In His wonderful book on Spiritual Leadership, Oswald Sanders quotes this poem:

*When God wants to mold a man to play the noblest part;
When He yearns with all His heart to create so great and bold a man
That all the world should be amazed, watch his methods, watch His ways!
How He ruthlessly perfects whom He royally elects!
How He hammers him and hurts him, and with mighty blows converts him
Into trial shapes of clay which only God understands;
While his tortured heart is crying and he lifts beseeching hands!
How He bends but never breaks when his good He undertakes;
How He uses whom He chooses and with every purposes fuses him:
By every act induces him to try His splendor out --
God knows what He's about!*

God may know what He's about but it makes us wonder. Here is Daniel, the chosen of the Lord, one of His finest, choicest servants and he spend his life in exile? Because of the plans of Nebuchadnezzar? Yes. But especially because of the plans of God.

Okay, we are ready to move to our third point for today which is the convictions of Daniel. Now we need to read the rest of the chapter. Daniel 1:**8-21** *But Daniel made up his mind that he would not defile himself with the king's choice food or with the wine which he drank; so*

he sought permission from the commander of the officials that he might not defile himself. 9 Now God granted Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the commander of the officials, 10 and the commander of the officials said to Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king, who has appointed your food and your drink; for why should he see your faces looking more haggard than the youths who are your own age? Then you would make me forfeit my head to the king." 11 But Daniel said to the overseer whom the commander of the officials had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, 12 "Please test your servants for ten days, and let us be given some vegetables to eat and water to drink. 13 Then let our appearance be observed in your presence and the appearance of the youths who are eating the king's choice food; 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. 15 At the end of ten days their appearance seemed better and they were fatter than all the youths who had been eating the king's choice food. 16 So the overseer continued to withhold their choice food and the wine they were to drink, and kept giving them vegetables. 17 As for these four youths, God gave them knowledge and intelligence in every branch of literature and wisdom; Daniel even understood all kinds of visions and dreams. 18 Then at the end of the days which the king had specified for presenting them, the commander of the officials presented them before Nebuchadnezzar. 19 The king talked with them, and out of them all not one was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king's personal service. 20 As for every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king consulted them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and conjurers who were in all his realm.

We live in an age and among a church that is characterized in a big way by compromise. We seem to do whatever it takes to just get along in this world and not upset anybody. When our desires and our principles play chicken, it is usually our principles that blink and give way. Men of principle like Daniel are usually considered weird, radical or fanatical, especially when they take risks in areas that seem to the world to be so inconsequential – like what food they are going to eat. I mean, who really cares about that? But the men of this world have no capacity to see the spiritual issues that surround things like diet and music. Can you see that this story about Daniel and his dietary scruples is not about food but about his conviction that honoring God would be blessed by God? Our choice of food, like everything else we do, has a moral and spiritual dimension. I Corinthians 10:**31** *Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.* But understand, as much as some of us would love to teach nutrition from this text,

the lessons here are not about diet, but about the importance of obedience to your Lord. Romans 14:**17** *the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.* And this kingdom lesson is about righteousness.

How so? How is Daniel's refusal to eat the king's food an issue of righteousness? Most likely this is because eating the king's food would have violated Old Testament dietary laws. There are instructions in the law of Moses about what kinds of food the people of Israel, the worshippers of Yahweh, were allowed to eat and how these foods were to be prepared. There is no way that Daniel could expect the king's food to meet those regulations. The Chaldeans loved pork which was forbidden a Jew. They also ate horses and many others dishes that the Jew was forbidden to eat. And rather than say to himself, *Oh that was for another day and time. God doesn't intend for me to keep that rule now*, Daniel said, *No*. He actually did better than that. He said, *No, thank you*. He was polite about it. So often I fear we maintain our convictions with a certain snootiness about us. We say *Ugh, I would never eat your terrible food, you unwashed pagan*. But you read this, you read other portions of Daniel, and you are impressed with what a gentleman Daniel was, and his friends as well. Daniel made a respectful appeal that demonstrated sensitivity to the delicate position of the king's servants. May God help us to be both principled and nice.

It is interesting to note where and why Daniel drew the line where he did. Nebuchadnezzar's plan was to give the Hebrew youth three pagan things: pagan names, pagan learning, and pagan food. Big D and the pious three did not balk at the first two. They took the pagan names because that is no big deal. Then they took the pagan learning, because as young adults, well-taught in the ways of the Lord they would be able to filter out the lies they would read and hear without harm.

So, they didn't draw the line at pagan names or pagan learning. They drew the line at pagan food. Why the food? Why did that matter so much? For the same reason that apple in the garden did. God had said, "No." We don't need to understand His reasons – only His authority. God said not to eat certain foods and certain dishes, and so Daniel was simply drawing the line where God drew the line. Woah, there is a great idea. He was being a man of the book.

Now, if you are an advocate of healthy foods you may want to claim that our story argues for the benefits of veggies over fattier foods. You may have trouble with verse 15 where it says the four heroes were fatter than the others, but again to talk about food is to miss the point. The

reason Daniel and the three were healthier than the others after ten days is not due to the greatness of their vegetables but to the greatness of their God who honors those who honor him.

What I hope you get out of Daniel's story is the moral courage to obey God in every aspect of life, both big and small. The same man who would not compromise on the matter of diet would later not compromise on the matter of worship. You think there is any connection? You may say, "Oh, I would never worship an idol. I would never be scared out of praying." But when you are justifying lies and laziness and lusts where will it stop? The importance of our obedience is not determined by the magnitude of the subject but the majesty of the lawgiver. Is God worthy to be obeyed in all that He commands, or only in those things we regard as significant? How big a deal was that apple in the garden? May God give us some Daniels who will make up their mind not to be defiled by this world – its education, its culture, its foods and drinks, its lies and lusts – and who won't be so proud as to argue with God about what counts and what doesn't. Listen, if you are at a point in your attitudes about God and that you are able to say, "Well, God says to do A, but I'm going to do because doing A is a hassle and it's really not that important" Then you may have reason to question if you are a heaven-bound child of God. Jesus said, "If you love Me" you what? You keep the big commandments? If you love me you keep my commandments, big ones, little ones, tall ones, short ones, skinny ones, fat ones, just because they are mine. You obey not for the magnitude of the matter but the majesty of the lawgiver who is worthy to be praised and in the confidence that his way is the way of peace and joy.