

Faithful Living in a Faithless World: Whose Am I?

Daniel 1:1-21

Every Christian carries at least two passports: one temporary and one permanent. The temporary one is our secondary citizenship; the permanent one is primary.

Until you grasp this, you won't really know how to live well in this world as a follower of the Lord Jesus. The point is this: When you place your faith in Jesus, you belong to God. You are given a different citizenship that eclipses any other - with a different king, the King over all kings. What happens is that you begin to view all of your life in this world as a part of a process preparing you for another place that will last forever. In fact, you really cannot appreciate your life fully in this world until it sinks in that this world is not the primary place God has made you for.

When you find yourself living for anything in this world - making any allegiance in this world your primary allegiance - then you will always be disappointed. Why? Because you were made for another king and another kingdom. All this is to say that, when you and I give our lives to Jesus, we live in this world but with our ultimate allegiance being to the kingdom of God. How do we live like that?

The story of Daniel is a marvelous example of how we do that. Oh, I know -- he lived over 2,500 years ago. But, I am quite sure you will be able to identify personally with him and his story. Let's start with chapter 1.

Setting the Stage

Daniel grew up in a prestigious home in Jerusalem. In Daniel's youth, Judah's leaders were walking away from God and the nation was deteriorating. The great military super power of the day was Babylon.

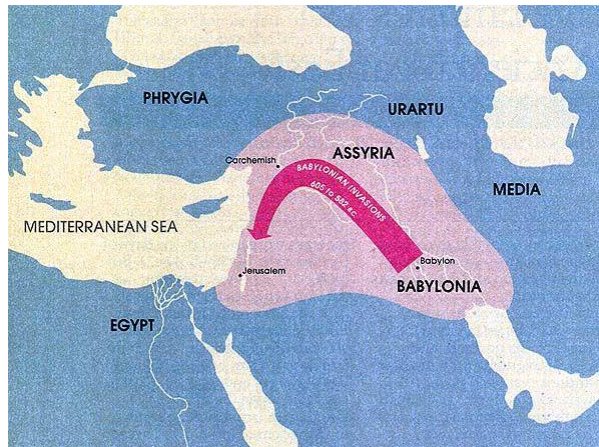


Babylon's king, Nebuchadnezzar II, was a man driven by his desire for world domination. Jeremiah called him, "The Destroyer of Nations" (Jer 4:7) because he took over one nation after another with his powerful army - including Judah.

In fact, Nebuchadnezzar besieged Daniel's nation of Judah three times:

1. 605 BC --He took a few of Judah's smartest, best looking and capable young men (as v. 4 describes them) away from their homes back to Babylon.
2. 597 BC - He took a second group of about 10,000 people, including the prophet Ezekiel.
3. 586 BC - He destroyed the entire city of Jerusalem.

Daniel was taken in the first group. When he was taken captive, he probably was 14-16 years old. So, he was among the brightest and the best of all the young men in Judah. He and three others were taken to Babylon, almost 1,700



miles away. So, when you read Daniel's story, you have to think of a high school aged student having this happen. Imagine it: A pagan band of soldiers breaks into your home and carries you away. You have to be thinking, "What are they going to do to me?" "Will I be killed?" "Will I be a slave?" And, especially - "Where is God?" Let's see what the Bible says.

#1: Where Is God, My King? He is Always Present and Always in Control. *And God gave...* (1:2, 9, 17).

Let's face it: It certainly wouldn't have felt God was in control to Daniel, his Jewish friends and their extended families. It certainly looked like Nebuchadnezzar was in control. But, when you read Dan 1 in Daniel's own language, you'll see he used one phrase three times - each time showing that God was involved in all aspects of Daniel's life. Even this difficult reality was a part of God's plan. The phrase? "And God gave."

- **V. 2** - *And God gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into Nebuchadnezzar's hand...*

It seemed like Nebuchadnezzar was in control - but no, this is all a part of God's plan. In the coming weeks, we'll begin to see parts of why God was doing what he was doing. Right now, let me only say that, when we read the story of the three Magi who came to the east because they knew of a King who

was to be born of the Jews, you must ask, “Where did they hear a prophecy like that?” Perhaps, it started with Daniel. These Magi were Persians, like Nebuchadnezzar, and Daniel’s witness would have almost certainly had a lasting impact.

- **V. 9** - *And God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the Babylonian official...*

It would have seemed like there was no way these young men could stay pure and devoted to God in this foreign land -- but the Lord was there. God worked in the heart of one man who made a decision that enabled them to stay holy unto God.

- **V. 17** - *And God gave them knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning...*

God gave these four boys what they needed to remain connected to this new world and productive in it. They had to study, of course! But, God was with them and was at work in their minds and their endeavors.

I think this has so much to say to all of us. For all of you headed off to college or into a new vocation or location, this has a direct application to you. There is no God-forsaken place in God’s universe. There is no place that he is not. So, when you find yourself in any kind of situation, choose to interpret it as, “God put me here!” And, know that God will be there - and that has put you wherever you are for a reason, i.e., to bless those he brings around you; to give witness to him through your life and words.

#2: What Will the Kingdoms of This World Try to Do? Always to Mold You in Their Image. *They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king’s service (1:5).*

The main point of this first chapter is that these young men were supposed to be people set apart to live for God instead of for anything in this world - but every influence around them tried to make them to have their first allegiance be to Babylon’s king and to become like every other Babylonian citizen. Vv. 4-7 describe the kinds of pressures they underwent to wipe out their distinctiveness as God’s people:

- **Separation** - *They were ripped out of their homes and sent into a new place.*

So, they no longer would have to please their parents or priests or youth group. Let me tell you this: When you have freedom to do what you want to do without the constraints of family or church, you then have the freedom to do what is consistent with who you truly are inside. When you are dislocated from your comfort zones, you will find out who you truly are. No, you will

find out **whose** you truly are! You will discover whether Jesus is truly the Lord of your life or whether this faith you professed to be yours was merely a cultural religion? Is Jesus truly the Lord of your life? Daniel discovered that Jehovah God was his God.

- **Indoctrination** - *They were forced to go through three years of intense Babylonian education.*

Much of what they would have been taught would have clashed with the Scriptures they had been taught at home. I can imagine the way the professors at the King's University in Babylon viewed them: "How can these provincial Jewish boys really believe that their God is the God of the world. Their God can't even stand up against our king and our army. We're living in the 6th C BC! How can anyone believe those old Jewish stories in their Bibles!"

The boys would have to think deeply about whether the faith they had believed was true and whether the God they said they had met was real. Have you gone through times like that? I have. It's tough when everything you are taught seems like it undermines everything you believe.

- **Assimilation** - *They were put through a way of life totally immersed in Babylonian culture.*

They were provided a luxurious lifestyle, including the best accommodations, the best food and best wine. Remember that they had been taken from a country that had been devastated by war. Life would have been hard. Could they give up all this to remain true to God? Once you've tasted the best, it's hard to go back to crumbs.

- **Identification** - *They were assigned different names.*

From our last series in the life of Jacob, we learned that a name in the Bible stood for who you are and what you are like. We know these four boys had come from godly homes because of their names: **Daniel** - *God is my judge*; **Hananiah** - *Approved by Jehovah*; **Misrael** - *No one like my God*; **Azariah** - *Jehovah is my help*.

These bright and gifted young men were destined for leadership in Babylon so, of course, they could no longer be known by those names. So, look at how the rulers in Babylon wanted them to be known (v.7):

- Daniel, *God is my judge*, they called Belteshazzar, *Bel's* (their patron god) *Prince*.

- Hananiah, *Approved by Jehovah*, they called Shadrach, *Led by Aku* (the sun god).

- Mishael, *No One like My God*, they called Meshach, *Who Is like Shak*, another of their gods.

- Azariah, *Jehovah is My Help*, they called Abednego, *Servant of the Shining Fire*.

Is the point clear to you? In doing all this, the Babylonians' goal was to erase all distinctions - to make everyone in the world Babylonians in thought and worldview. You see, the Babylonians wanted to rule the world. Their strategy was very different from many other nations who desired that. They did not conquer a nation and make them all slaves. No, they conquered a nation and made them all Babylonians.

Do you remember our series earlier this year entitled, *God's Biggest Story*? In it, we saw that God chose one people, beginning with Abraham, who would need to stay distinct as God's people from all the peoples of the world - through whom all the peoples of the world eventually would be blessed. That plan of God was at stake in what we read in this chapter. How would these boys remain faithful to God in a world committed to molding them into the image of their culture?

#3: What Can We Do to Live for our King While in another Kingdom? Find a way to identify "Whose you are" ; then, serve others in his name.

We will discover that Daniel both lived for God and he made positive contributions to the people in this foreign country. He lived well in the world while never becoming conformed to it. Do you want to learn how to do that? Let me boil down what I see that Daniel did in ch. 1 into a couple of points:

Be aware (v.5) -- *of the pressure to conform to the world.*

Although he was only 15, Daniel was able to discern what was at stake in responding to what the Babylonians were trying to do. This challenge in ch.1 was not going to be a sensational battle in a fiery furnace like ch.3 or in a lion's den like ch.6. This one was much more subtle - but, probably, much more dangerous. Daniel was in a battle for his mind and soul. It was going to be hard to resist all the allures of the wealthiest and most powerful nation in the world.

I think victory in these kinds of struggles always starts with awareness. It's hard to take a stand against something when you're not even aware of how dangerous it is. So, do you see any place in your life in which you feel you are being shaped to be more and more like a world that rejects God? It can happen in any setting in this world - not just the king's palace or the university. Be aware.

Be resolute (v. 8a) -- *about maintaining your identity as a child of the King who is your king.*

“But Daniel resolved…”. What a strong phrase. What a powerful commitment! Day after day, I’m sure he found that resolved being tested. That’s always the case. He would have to show this King in vv. 19–20 that he wasn’t a mindless religious nut - but that he was the best student he possibly could be.

Notice this: Daniel’s main question was not just, “Can I do this or that now that I’m in Babylon?” I’m quite sure he could have found good reasons for eating the food and drinking the king’s wine that was there. His question was, “How can I be a person who consistently lives for God? How can I be set apart for the Lord in this new setting he has placed me in?”

So, never be naïve about the erosive and molding power of culture. You need a deep inner resolve to live in a way that you are known by those who watch you as a child of the King over kings. Have you ever resolved to do anything - or not to do something - simply as a clear mark that you belong to God? I ask you today to make a commitment like Daniel made: Resolve in your mind, will and heart that you will not merely become like everyone else. Daniel “resolved in his heart…” . I call you to do the same.

Be wise - *about identifying some specific thing that will set you apart.*

In a situation like this, you could choose to be different about everything, i. e., not to allow anything in your life to be like the Babylonians. That choice would have made Daniel different for sure -- but without any influence to bring about good. Or, you could choose to be completely like those around you - then you might have some influence but you would not be distinctive as a child of God.

Please notice that Daniel did not reject going to school and learning what the professors were teaching. He may not have believed it all - but he mastered it all. And, he did not say, “I refuse to serve a megalomaniac king.” No, he learned to serve that king - and to become a blessing to that king. And, Daniel did not refuse to let them call him Belteshazzar. No, he answered to that name. But, at the same time, he found something that would declare to everyone that he belonged to God.

It’s important to notice that, when Daniel chose the way he would set himself apart from the world, he still dealt with those in authority with respect. He asked the official to grant his request. When the official said no, Daniel stood his ground but did so with graciousness. My point is that he was not obnoxious or proud. He found a way to move forward in his life

for God in his new setting - and still dealt with people respectfully.

What did Daniel choose to do? The thing Daniel chose to set him apart was food and drink. Why? Lots of people speculate about this. Had the king's food been offered to idols? Was it merely that he didn't want to break Jewish food laws? Was it that being a vegan is the only way to live for God? I see something else.

I think the main thing was that Daniel knew that, if he could find the freedom to eat differently, he would not become like everyone else around him. Everybody else would surely have wanted to have the best food and drink in the world. But, he knew that, every day, three times a day, he would be reminding himself and all who watched him that he was different. Every mealtime, they would know whose he was. And, just as much, he would know whose he was. He would be a great citizen in Babylon - but his main allegiance was to his other passport. He belonged to the King over all kings.

I want you now to begin praying about one thing that is a regular part of your life that could help you identify yourself as a follower of Jesus - while still enabling you to be a good student, a good worker, a good boss, etc. Can you think of anything? I'll give you a few ideas:

- In the movie, *Chariots of Fire*, we saw the true story of Eric Liddell who chose not to run on Sundays because that was the day he set apart to the Lord. But, he still trained every other day and became the best runner God had made him able to be. Do you think that, maybe, going to church each Sunday - even when others are taking SAT courses or others are playing baseball - might be something you and your family should consider?

- Years ago, some high school students from LAC attending Marshall Fundamental School here in Pasadena looked for a way to identify themselves as Christians. They chose to start a student club that met each week to pray and to hear something from God's Word. They simply called it, *The Christian Club*. By doing so, they thought they would be able to remind themselves and all who saw them going to the club that they were Christians. I think the group still meets.

I want you to let the Spirit of God lead you in finding a way to make known that you are devoted to Jesus - just as, it seems, he led Daniel. We, like Daniel, are people with two passports. Daniel would live in Babylon but his ultimate allegiance would not be to Babylon. He would live there but, while he did, he would ultimately live for his true King. He somehow knew that, in doing so, he would also be a more positive part of Babylon.

V. 21 is such a powerful conclusion to this first chapter. It lays out where this 15-year-old's life, now identified with God, would be heading: *Daniel remained in Babylon until the first year of King Cyrus.*

Do you see it? Daniel was living for God in 605 BC as a 15-year-old under the reign of the seemingly invincible earthly king, Nebuchadnezzar. And, Daniel would be doing so as an 82-year-old in 538 BC under another seemingly invincible king name Cyrus. And, he was a blessing to his world all the time because, ultimately, he was serving with the one who was his real King.

So, as you leave church today, see the place to which you go as a place God has sent you. Identify something that it will be clear to you and to others that you belong to God. Make it evident both to yourself and to the world around -- whose you are! Then seek to bless those around you through the way you serve - the way you speak - the way you live... to God's glory alone.