

the king's values. Even today sharing a meal with someone implies friendship and endorsement of the host. In the end Daniel could obey the king and even serve in his government, but he could not pretend to be his friend. To eat the king's food represented a moral compromise of everything Daniel believed. He made up his mind he would not do it.

Daniel risked everything by doing this. I don't imagine the king would appreciate hearing that some teenage kid from Israel didn't want to eat at his table. There's no way that could be made to sound good. In fact, it would probably sound rebellious and we know how ancient kings dealt with rebellion. So Daniel put his life on the line. He also spoiled his chances for advancement. If this decision backfired, he could kiss his future goodbye.

Verse 8 says that Daniel "purposed in his heart" (KJV). He made up his mind. He decided what he would and would not do; and that changed everything. The Babylonians could change everything — his diet, his location, his education, his language, even his name — but they couldn't change his heart. Why? Because his heart belonged to God. With his heart firmly for God, Daniel could go anywhere and face any situation with courage.

Verse 9 adds a crucial fact when it says, "Now God." God enters the picture and causes the palace master to look with favor upon Daniel and his three friends. Notice that this happened after Daniel's decision, not before. God blesses those who honor God, but generally that blessing comes after you stand up for what you believe. There is a blessing reserved for the bold that the timid never experience.

Daniel's proposal was very simple: he asked that he and his three friends be served only vegetables and water for ten days. At the end of that time the palace master could make his own comparison and draw his own conclusions. Verses 15-16 tell us that at the end of the ten days the four men looked better on their diet than the fellows who had been eating at the king's table, so good that the palace master let them continue with their unusual diet.

This story ends on a positive note: God honored Daniel and his friends. It reminds us that God honors those who honor God. In this case the reward came very quickly.. Sometimes, when we are faithful, our reward doesn't come until we get to heaven. Regardless of God's timing, our call is to be faithful, knowing that whether the reward comes on earth or in heaven, no one will ever regret standing up for Jesus.

Verse 17 informs us that God rewards these men with wisdom and understanding. God guaranteed that they would stand out above their Jewish contemporaries and far above the Babylonians. These four young men will soon find themselves in positions of enormous influence in a pagan government. The last part of the verse tells us that God gave Daniel the unique ability to interpret dreams, a useful skill that will later save his life.

Verse 18 skips to the end of the three years of education. King Nebuchadnezzar tests the young men himself, examining them on history, science, economics, the Babylonian language and the Babylonian religion. The result is astounding. The king found Daniel and his friends ten times smarter than the learned men of his own kingdom. Daniel and his colleagues immediately entered the king's service, and verse 21 adds the note that Daniel remained in the court of Babylon until the first year of King Cyrus (539 BC): that means Daniel served as an advisor to a succession of Babylonian kings for at least 60 years.

All this happened because Daniel said "No!" and stood his ground. Daniel stood for God, and God stood by Daniel. There are several important conclusions we can draw from this marvelous first chapter of Daniel.

The world continually tries to reprogram us into a different way of thinking. The world attempts to separate us from our spiritual heritage. The attacks come in subtle ways every day. We are promised promotions that will take us away from our families and from our church fellowship. We are offered educational opportunities that fill our minds with godless falsehood. We are told to keep quiet about our faith until we get to the top and then we can speak out. And all of us are bombarded with anti-God input from the media every day. Make no mistake. There is a battle for your heart and mind, a battle being fought every day. Some of us are losing the battle because we don't even know there is a battle going on. We just go with the flow and then wonder why we end up looking/sounding just like the Babylonians.

We must make up our minds in advance we will be loyal to God. The key phrase here is "in advance." Some decisions can't be made on the spur of the moment. You have to decide that you will not compromise in the things that matter. For Daniel, that meant not eating the king's food at the king's table. It doesn't matter that we don't fully understand his decision. What's important is that Daniel drew a line in the sand and said, "This far, and no farther." If you don't draw a line somewhere, sometime, you end up being just like the Babylonians all around you. So you've got to be smart. Think ahead. Decide what you will and won't do. Then stick to your plan!

Set your boundaries and don't do what you know to be wrong. When they enrolled him at Babylon State University, Daniel didn't object. When they taught him the Babylonian language, he learned it just like everyone else. When they taught him a new culture, he did not rebel. And even when they changed his name, he apparently did not speak out.

But when they said, "You have to eat the king's food at the king's table," he said, "I'm sorry. I can't do that." And he didn't. He was courteous in the way he said it and he was creative in the solution he proposed. By standing his ground, he was risking everything over an issue that made sense to no one but him. But Daniel saw past the food to the bigger issues underneath and he knew that for him to eat the king's food would be an act of disloyalty to God, and that was a line he would not cross.

This seemingly small matter had a huge impact on Daniel's life; this one act of courage had major consequences. It changed his whole life. In the end it wasn't small at all. If our God is the Lord of all, then every square inch of our life must be yielded to God.

This week I read about a 400-year-old redwood that suddenly and without warning toppled to the forest floor. A post-mortem examination revealed a startling cause. Tiny beetles had crawled under the bark and literally eaten the fibers away from the inside. Although it looked healthy on the outside, on the inside it was virtually hollow and one day finally collapsed. The same thing happens when we refuse to stand our ground for Christ. Every time we compromise something bad happens in our soul. Eventually the little decisions add up and we become hollow on the inside even though we may look great on the outside. Don't let that happen to you.

Godly convictions yield God-given rewards. Here is the final lesson. What starts with Daniel ends with God. What starts with courage, ends with a lifetime of blessing. Look what God did for this courageous man: God protected Daniel (when he proposed the test); God prospered Daniel (during the test and afterward); God promoted Daniel (in the eyes of the King).

Daniel's message still resonates today. For those who follow Christ, the world can be a hostile place, filled with temptations and trials. Daniel both forewarns us of the risks and also encourages us to stand up for Jesus, despite those dangers, because God honors those who honor God. The world still tries to seduce us, but the good news from Daniel 1 is that it is possible to live faithfully for God throughout your life. Daniel has shown us the way. I challenge you: dare to be a Daniel this week.

Dare to Be a Daniel

Sunday, January 4, 2015

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Daniel 1:8-21

The key to this passage is found in the very first verse: "But Daniel resolved ..." The King James Version says, "But Daniel purposed in his heart." Another translation says he "made up his mind." Whatever the translation, everything flows from Daniel's decision.

Daniel and his friends are in Babylon, having been torn away from their families in Jerusalem by King Nebuchadnezzar and the mighty Babylonian army. Because these young men come from noble backgrounds, the king orders them trained to enter his service. These are God-fearing Jewish teenagers, ripped out of everything they have known, now being trained to work for a pagan king.

Thus begins Operation Assimilation. The king makes sure they get the best education Babylon can offer. For three years they will be immersed in Babylonian knowledge, culture, history, language, and religion. Their Jewish names are changed in favor of new Babylonian names. At the end of that time they will enter the king's service and be assured of high-level government positions. It was a sophisticated form of indoctrination aimed at making them forget their past and form a new allegiance to the king and his pagan way of life. Everything appears to be going smoothly until one of the men decides he won't go along with the program: "But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine."

This is the crucial event of Daniel's life. Although it might not have appeared important at the time, what Daniel did shaped the next 60 years. We aren't Jews living in captivity in Babylon, so it's hard for us to understand why Daniel would object to eating the king's food. After all, as far as we can tell, Daniel accepted the bondage, he accepted the pagan education, and he evidently even accepted a new pagan name. If you're going to go along with all of that, why worry about the food? What's the big deal here?

There were at least three problems with the food served at the king's table. First, it certainly would not have been prepared according to the kosher laws of the Old Testament, meaning much of it would be ritually unclean. Second, the food and wine would have been previously offered to pagan gods; to eat that food in that situation would be to give tacit endorsement to paganism. Third, Daniel knew that sharing a meal at the king's table represented sharing