

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Faithful in Doubtland

Faithful and Respectful, in Doubtland

(Daniel 1:8-21)

Study #2

Introduction: Pre-thinking...

There have been a few times when it would have been better if I had paid more attention to pre-thinking on camping trips.

Like the time when...

...I got to the campsite deep in the Colorado Rockies with my two sons (then twelve and fourteen years old) and realized I had left my coat in the car, fifteen miles back, with snow approaching.

...I got out of the car after an overnight drive to a trailhead in Wyoming and found that I had left my trekking poles back at the house.

...rather than relying on my map, I listened to the advice of a local know-it-all - who didn't know at all - who encouraged us to take a "shortcut" that added nearly ten miles to our trek.

I've learned - the hard way - that better planning results in better trips.

Valuable for journeys into the wilderness, pre-thinking is also valuable for a journey into Babylon or into Doubtland.¹

¹ For a more serious story about the danger of a lack of pre-thinking in a wilderness setting, read about the 2013 misadventure of Rick McFarland and Cathy Frye, a married couple from Arkansas on vacation who took a wrong turn, got lost, and almost lost their lives in the 300,000-acre Big Bend Ranch State Park, located about one hundred miles west of Big Bend National Park. (See <http://bigbend.arkansasonline.com/index.html>). Experienced in the out-of-doors, on

Review...

Last Sunday we began exploring the life and times of the Old Testament prophet, Daniel. Here's the essential back story.

Around 600 BC, Nebuchadnezzar, king of the (Neo) Babylonian Empire, besieged Jerusalem and destroyed it.

His army looted the Jewish temple of its treasures and then looted the city of some of its most valuable human assets. Among those taken away into exile were Daniel and his three friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.

These four teenagers (probably taken captive at about age 17²) were taken away from everything familiar (Jerusalem) to a land where everything was foreign (Babylon).

When they got to Babylon, they found themselves in a place with different morals and customs and government and art. And this new place was a polar opposite when it came to matters of faith.

The Jews worshiped the God who had redeemed and lovingly shepherded Israel for centuries. The Babylonians followed lots of gods and goddesses, none of whom were known for love and grace.

Israel's God called them to holiness. The worship system of Babylon involved gross immorality and violence.

Daniel experienced extreme culture shock in moving from Jerusalem to Babylon. Today and in the weeks to come you and I will watch Daniel.

We'll watch him navigate life in his new, different culture, so that we can lovingly and wisely navigate life in our broader culture. *Our Babylon...*

their day hike, which turned into a six-day nightmare, they didn't have a decent map of the area and didn't take appropriate supplies.

² So, most scholars seem to think. (Among them Walvoord and Constable)

As Jesus told us would be the case, and as has been the case for the last two thousand years, followers of Jesus march to the beat of a different drummer than do those in the broader culture.

Daniel didn't live in the Jewish-friendly culture he had known in Jerusalem, and we don't live in a culture that is immersed in the ways of Jesus.

You may hear me refer to our current cultural setting as "our Babylon."

When I say this, I'm not demeaning our culture. There were lots of positive things in ancient Babylon that Daniel learned to love. And I love lots of things about San Antonio culture and our national culture.

But the broad culture in which we live isn't uniformly friendly to Jesus or to His ways. And to the extent that it isn't, it's "Babylon-ish". Or, as Jeff and I are calling it, it is Doubtland. Doubtland is the culture where the people doubt that the Jesus we follow is the way, the truth, and the life.

To call our broader culture "Babylon" or "Doubtland" is to draw a parallel between our story and the biblical story of Daniel. I believe that seeing how he thrived for God in his 6th century BC culture will help us thrive for Jesus in ours. It will help us be a blessing to our culture.

Daniel and his friends had been hand-picked by one of Nebuchadnezzar's chief officials, Ashpenaz, to serve in the king's court.

To prepare for that service, they had to undergo three years of training to learn the ropes of Babylonian life.

It was inevitable that Daniel and his friends would face conflicts during their time of training concerning culture. Conflicts arising because of culture are common, and the first conflict occurred early in the training time. It involved food.

Before we put this story under the microscope and drill down to see the details of the conflict, let's get out the telescope and take in the big picture of Daniel's long years in his service to foreign states.

Daniel's Story - Viewed Through a Telescope (vv. 8-21)

Food Fight (vv. 8-13)

The king's plan was to give Daniel and his friends food from his own choice stock while they were in training. No doubt, the king was seeking to honor the trainees with these daily feasts.

But, for reasons that will soon become clear, Daniel balked at eating Nebuchadnezzar's food. The king told him to eat the food, but Daniel didn't want the king's food.

In a couple of minutes, we'll see how Daniel navigated this line drawn in the sand and how it all worked out for him and his friends.

(Spoiler alert!) It all worked out great, and these four young men continued with the training without eating the king's food. They all distinguished themselves as A+ students.

Superior Servants (vv. 17-20)

[17] And as for these four youths, God gave them knowledge and intelligence in every kind of literature and expertise.

They were all intelligent, diligent, high-capacity learners. In particular, Daniel, was singled out for his insight into visions and dreams. (v. 17b)

The final exam of this three-year training regimen involved an audience with King Nebuchadnezzar himself during which he gave them an oral exam, asking them difficult questions. (v. 19)

In these conversations, the four Jewish teenaged exiles showed themselves to be "***ten times better***" than all the other trainees. And so, when the training time ended, all four of them entered the king's personal service.

While we have the telescope out, here's just a word about the service of Daniel and its longevity.

Daniel's Staying Power (v. 21)

[21] And Daniel continued until the first year of Cyrus the king.

Historical records tell us that the Jewish nobles and their families were moved from Jerusalem to Babylon around 605 BC.

So, with time for travel to Babylon and settling into Babylon all figured in, let's say that their three-year training program would have ended around 600 BC, making that the first year of Daniel's government service.

The first year of the reign of King Cyrus was 538 BC,³ which means that Daniel's government career lasted over six decades.

He served during the latter years of King Nebuchadnezzar's reign, throughout the whole reign of his son, Belshazzar, during the reign of King Darius, the Mede, up until the start of the reign of King Cyrus of Persia.

We don't really know how long Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah hung around. But Daniel was involved at the highest level of government service for a very long time.

Think of what he saw.

Think of the world-changing events he lived through, the wickedness in high places, the overthrow of empires, heroism and treachery, luxurious living, power used well, and power abused.

And he lived through it all, with his faith intact, consistently shining as a bright light for his God. You and I can learn a lot from Daniel.

³ Also, the year that Cyrus gave the command that the Jerusalem temple be rebuilt, marking the end of the seventy years of the Babylonian captivity.

Now, having gotten a telescopic overview of Daniel's life, let's zoom in for a microscopic look at his dietary challenge. Let's see what this story and Daniel's actions in it say to us, who want to shine for Jesus in our 2021 Doubtland culture.

The Food Fight - Under a Microscope

CONVICTION (v. 8a)

[8a] 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...

The king's food and drink

Jewish food laws

Remember that at the time Daniel was sent to Babylon, Israel had not been a hotbed of spiritual health and vitality. Due to that fact, it's very possible that Daniel's knowledge of Scripture was limited.

But he definitely, obviously, knew all about the Mosaic Law's dietary commands. He knew "kosher."

The Jewish laws of kosher said that certain kinds of food were off limits - especially certain meats like pork, some birds, some seafood - and that all food had to be prepared in a certain way.

Without question, the food that the king of Babylon was planning to serve Daniel was NOT kosher.

The food and drink set before Daniel

The food would have been lavish and there would have been tons of it. The wine would have been the best Babylon had to offer. And the Babylonians had no scruples with eating or drinking any of it. They ate whatever kind of food they wanted to eat.

Some of the food prepared for Daniel and his friends would have been the wrong kind of food and all of it would have been

prepared in the wrong kind of way. The king's food was not fit for Jewish consumption. It wasn't kosher.

As for the wine, the custom of the Babylonians was to dedicate the wine to their gods before it was served. So, for Daniel to have drunk it would have involved him in idolatrous ritual.

With that as background, we can understand why verse 8 begins with the word "***But...***"

Lavish food was prepared, "***But...***"
Delicious wine was served, "***But...***"
Daniel's taste buds were going to get a feast and his belly was going to get full, "***But...***" he rocked the boat.

Daniel's decision

And this is where we get our first glimpse of what kind of a teenager Daniel was.

Yes, he was raised in Jerusalem in a time of spiritual mediocrity and lukewarmth,⁴ "***But...***" Daniel never forgot his roots. He never forgot to Whom he belonged.

He knew what God's Law said about what he should and should not eat. So, Daniel "***made up his mind***" to not eat the king's food.

People who follow Jesus today don't live under the Old, Mosaic Covenant. So, eating or not eating clean and unclean food won't ever be an issue for us like it was for Daniel.

But Jesus-followers do live under Jesus' New Covenant and in a broader culture where Jesus doesn't reign.

And there will be times when what the culture is doing or not doing will be different from what a Jesus-follower will do or not do. So, watching what Daniel does will be instructive for the times when we will go against the flow, go counter-cultural, today.

⁴ This spiritual rebellion and darkness were the reasons God brought the Babylonians against Judah in the first place.

When in Babylon...

Daniel swam against the current when it came to eating non-kosher food. But notice. He didn't always buck the culture.

- He didn't object to answering to a pagan, Babylonian name.
- He was OK learning Babylonian literature and mythology.
- He agreed to learn everything that had to be learned to serve in Nebuchadnezzar's court.⁵

Daniel didn't object to everything Babylonian. He accommodated himself to Babylonian culture when he could, compromised when he could, went along when he could.

So, today's message is not about Christians earning a reputation for the things that we are *against*. God does not call us to be cultural curmudgeons.

These four young men excelled in ALL their Babylonian training. But this one thing Daniel could not do. He could not eat the king's food.

I even wonder if, contrary to what I did on some of my camping trips, Daniel had done some pre-thinking about where he would and would not bend.

I have read that our brothers and sisters today, who live in places where it is dangerous to follow Jesus, pre-think how they will react when they are threatened with harm if they don't deny Jesus.⁶

⁵ I have read that John Calvin suggested that Daniel and his friends were protected from having to study heathen material - but why would we think this? Studying such things would NOT have put them in direct disobedience to God's Law. Eating pork, though, would have.

⁶ In Nigeria, the group *Boko Haram* has made life very dangerous for Christians. Regina Wilson, a mother of four, knew of the group's brutal attacks on Christian villages in northern Nigeria and she knew that her own village could very well be attacked, and it was, on October 24, 2014. One of her sons was killed and a daughter was kidnapped. The other two children were badly injured. In an interview for The Voice of the Martyrs ministry, Regina said, "*I had already*

I can imagine Daniel having thoughts like these as the Babylonian army laid siege to Jerusalem, or as he was trudging his way on the five-hundred-mile trek to Babylon: *“I know who I am. I know Who I serve. One of the lines I will not cross is this. I will not eat what God says I must not eat.”* Pre-thinking.

When Daniel **“made up his mind”** to not eat the king’s food, he knew that he was putting himself in harm’s way. He could have easily lost friends, career advancement opportunities, even his life.

By his calculation, that would be OK. What would not be OK would be for him to violate God’s commands.

I think it is a universally healthy exercise for people who follow Jesus to ask themselves, regularly, *“What am I living for?”* and, *“What am I willing to suffer loss for?”* and even, *“What am I willing to give my life away for?”* Those are questions that clarify.

Daniel was living for the pleasure of God, so his way forward was clear, just as it is for us, who want to hear, *“Well done!”* from Jesus.

Daniel **“made up his mind”** that he would search for a way to not eat non-kosher food and to not drink wine that had been part of an idolatrous worship ceremony. Let’s call this conviction.

As we move forward into this story about living by conviction, we discover that Daniel was also always respectful.

RESPECT (vv. 8b-9)

Searching for a way out

[8b]...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.

decided (note her pre-thinking), ‘Even if I should be captured by Boko Haram, I will never deny my faith in Christ Jesus.’ So, when we met them, my mind was made up beforehand since I know Who I serve.”

The king’s provision of this great food was intended to be generous and gracious. So, having received grace from Babylon, Daniel was gracious in his response.

He didn’t cop an attitude and he didn’t make a demand. He didn’t throw a fit and threaten a hunger strike. No.

He courteously requested permission to be excused from eating the king’s gracious provision of food.⁷ He politely asked for an alternative diet.

When in Babylon...

It is happening all over the world that followers of Jesus **“make up their minds”** that they cannot do something their culture requires or expects them to do OR they **“make up their minds”** that they must do something that their culture rejects or prohibits.

The young Daniel models for them that, when going counter-cultural, always be respectful. And a crucial part of pre-thinking for us, today, is that if and when we swim against our culture’s flow, we treat those who disagree with the utmost respect.

Daniel had nothing to gain from being strident and offensive. He was in Babylon to be a blessing. He was going to be there for a long time. Better to protect relationships than to burn bridges. Better to be respectful and gracious.

The same is true for us today, because this Doubtland culture is *our* culture for the long haul.

True, it’s not our eternal home, but it’s our home now. We are going to be here for a while. And we’ve been placed here to be God’s blessing to this place and to the people in this place.

⁷ Daniel likely understood that his request would have been offensive to the official. He was referring to their choicest food as “defiling.” All the more important that he make his request for special treatment with utmost respect.

The Apostle Paul writes, ***[Romans 12:18] If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all people.***

So, we are to do everything we can to protect the relationships with people who may disagree with us.

Take stands when you must - but be as kind as you can be. Draw a line in the sand and go against the flow to obey God. But while doing so love fervently and pursue peace. Look for ways to serve those who disagree with you. Love those who oppose you.

When we are loving and kind and respectful toward those who oppose, we keep doors open to share Jesus.

Daniel's approach preserved relationship and made possible a long ministry in Babylon. But he had a conviction about not eating the king's food. So, he respectfully asked for a work-around.

And Ashpenaz, a high-ranking official who had the utmost regard for Daniel, heard his request, and gave him the answer he didn't want to hear.

When the answer is "No" (v. 10)

What Ashpenaz believed (v. 10a)

[10a]... "I am afraid of my lord the king, who has allotted your food and your drink; for why should he (i.e. - the king) see your faces⁸ looking gaunt in comparison to the youths who are your own age?"

Ashpenaz believed that if these four young men didn't eat the king's food, they would suffer.

They would be frail, thin, pale, and would be worse off than the other young men serving the king because of their inferior diet.

This would be displeasing to the king and THAT would be bad for Ashpenaz.

What Ashpenaz feared (v. 10b)

[10b]... "Then you would make me forfeit my head to the king."

That comment says a lot about life in Babylon. Life was cheap there, and it was subject to the whims of King Nebuchadnezzar.

It only made sense for Ashpenaz to refuse Daniel. If there were any ill effects for these valuable Hebrew servants-in-training due to diet, the king would have him killed.

The answer is "No!" Conversation over. Case closed.

But that didn't mean the case was closed for Daniel. He wasn't going to drop the issue and go pig out on bacon. So he continued, ever respectful, he was tenacious in his commitment to his conviction.

Daniel walked away from Ashpenaz and approached another servant.

This servant was subordinate to Ashpenaz. Daniel didn't go up the chain to appeal to a superior. He didn't walk on Ashpenaz' head.

TENACITY (v. 11)

[11] But Daniel said to the overseer whom the commander of the officials had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, [12] "Please put your servants to the test for ten days."

From this move, it seems clear to me that Daniel had no guarantee from God that he would be given a way out. He was committed, though, to keep on seeking a way out.

Remember. He had "***made up his mind***" to not eat non-kosher food. So, he didn't take Ashpenaz' "No" for his final answer. He kept pressing.

⁸ Here the friends are referenced for the first time in this passage.

Once, when Jesus was teaching His followers about prayer, He said to keep on knocking, keep on seeking, keep on asking. This is Daniel, knocking, seeking, asking for a way to not eat non-kosher food.

One “No” didn’t resolve the issue. He didn’t tell God, “Sorry, Lord. Ashpenaz said ‘No.’ Nothing more I can do.”

No, he tenaciously continued to seek out a solution to his moral dilemma.

Sometimes, while looking for a way to follow a deeply held conviction, while always dealing with those who disagree respectfully, we’ll need to practice tenacity. Like Daniel did.

But it will always be *respectful* tenacity. *Loving* tenacity. And...*creative* tenacity.

Listen to the creative test Daniel proposed to this overseer.

CREATIVITY (vv. 12-13)

[12] “Please put your servants to the test for ten days, and let us be given some vegetables to eat and water to drink. [13] Then let our appearance be examined 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.”

Ten days. That was a reasonable time frame for a test: not long enough to do real damage if the new diet didn’t work, but long enough to tell if he and his friends would do OK with the new diet.

I’m struck here by Daniel’s refusal to let the Babylonians frame the argument. Ashpenaz’, “NO” didn’t mean there was no room for further discussion.

Daniel rejected that thought. He had **[8] *made up his mind*** to not eat the defiling food, so he took the position that there’s always room for more discussion.

His goal here is to keep the ball in play. Try a new wrinkle. Suggest an alternative. Look at the issue from a new perspective. In a word, Daniel got creative.

This creativity is part of what is in view when we speak of *wisdom*.

Biblical wisdom begins with a holy reverence of God. The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. (Proverbs 9:10) Then, wisdom turns into the nurtured ability to consider an issue from all angles.

It becomes a puzzle. It’s like a game for the truly mature. It’s like sport. Solomon wrote in Proverbs, ***[10:23] Doing wickedness is like sport to a fool, And so is wisdom to a person of understanding.***

A big part of the wisdom game, for us, is the capacity to come up with respectful work-arounds that honor God in a culture that isn’t as interested in following Jesus as we are.

God has placed every one of His followers - you, me, each of us - in strategic places here in Doubtland.

We all have access to lots of friends through phone calls and letter-writing and Zoom visits.

We are at workplaces and in school settings, in the military and in government service, in homes and in neighborhoods. We are all to permeate the dough of our society like leaven. We are all to season our culture like salt to a prime cut of beef.

And each one of us who is following Jesus is a Daniel, assigned to live creatively so as to create thirst by our love and compassion and care and mercy.

Becoming salty salt is our destiny, and Daniel serves as a great guide.

Conclusion:

The end of this story is almost anti-climactic.

[14] So he listened to them in this matter, and put them to the test for ten days. [15] And 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.

Of course, it is wonderful that at the end of the ten-day test, Daniel and his friends were found to be healthier (and fatter - don't you love that!) than all the other trainees and were allowed to keep on eating their special diet.

But IF they had not gotten healthier and the ten-day-long test had been a failure, you can bet that Daniel would have tried something else.

He would have gotten more creative and he would have remained tenacious to hold to his convictions, all the while respecting his Babylonian friends and authorities.

That is how we serve our Babylon, our Doubtland, today.