

## Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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### Happy Father's Day!

Sermon manuscript

### Sermon Series: Character Forged in Crisis

(Character sketches from Scripture)

#### **A Mind Made Up...to Shine for God**

(A look at the life of Daniel)

Study #1

#### Introduction: Tell me a story...

Images will come to mind if you hear me say, "911" or "covid-19" or "The Spurs!" Those words may bring to mind a story.

If you are familiar with the Bible, I could say "the Garden of Eden" and you may think of the story of Adam and Eve. I might say, "Cain" and you would think of Abel, the brother Cain killed.

Or I could say "Noah" or "Abraham" or "Tower of Babel" and your thoughts would turn to a story about a flood, a man of faith, or the confusion of languages.

Just like a fragrance brings to mind a memory, a word brings to mind a story: Goliath. Bathsheba. John the Baptist. The Apostle Paul.

Well, over the next few Sundays, we're going to explore the stories of a few Bible characters from both the Old and New Testaments to see what we can learn from them about the life of faith.

We'll hear the stories of Nehemiah and Esther, Stephen and John Mark, Barnabas and Lydia.

We start out today with our first character sketch of the Old Testament prophet, Daniel.

When I say "Daniel," you may think of visions and dreams, wild prophecies, giant statues, and hungry lions. The mention of Daniel might also drive you to thoughts of integrity, courage, and faith.

I'm eager for us to see what we can learn from Daniel this morning. So, let's jump right into his story by listening to the first couple of verses in the book.

#### **Background: Description of a disaster (Daniel 1:1-2)**

*[1] In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it.<sup>1</sup> [2] And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah over to him, along with some of the vessels of the house of God; and he brought them to the land of Shinar<sup>2</sup>, to the house of his god, and he brought the vessels into the treasury of his god.*

Those words recount for us a time of great disruption for the Jews. They describe the beginning of the fall of Jerusalem, and that was an earthquake for the people of God.

Here's a bit of the background to what led up to this disaster:

*\*\*\*The "Why?" of Babylon's attack*

When Israel was established as a nation in the Promised Land, she was one unified nation that stretched from the Sea of Galilee in the north to the Dead Sea in the South, from the Mediterranean to the west and past the Jordan River to the east.

However, the people of God soon slid into deep rebellion against God. That rebellion led to severe discipline from God.

<sup>1</sup> Parallel accounts are given in 2 Kings 24:1-2 and 2 Chron. 36:5-7.

<sup>2</sup> Shinar is another name for Babylon, with the nuance of a place hostile to faith in the one true God. Shinar is associated with Nimrod (Genesis 11:2), an early rebel against God and His ways.

The northern kingdom, Israel, was destroyed by the Assyrian Empire in 722 BC.

Shortly after that, the southern kingdom, Judah, caught up to its northern counterpart in sin and fell victim to the judgment of God that Daniel records.<sup>3</sup>

God sent judgment against Judah in the form of conquest by the Babylonian Empire.

\*\*\**The "What?" of Babylon*

Babylon was enormous and spread out over much of the Middle East, taking in present-day Jordan, Syria, Iraq, and Iran.

The empire's capitol city - Babylon - was wealthy beyond measure, and beautiful.<sup>4</sup>

And the Babylonians were very advanced in matters of astronomy, math,<sup>5</sup> education, law,<sup>6</sup> and literature.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For quite some time, there were enough good kings (Jehoshaphat, Uzziah, Hezekiah, and others) to balance out the damage done by bad kings (Rehoboam, Queen Athaliah, Ahaz, and others). The tipping point came with King Manasseh, whose fifty-year reign plunged Judah deep into absolute rebellion.

<sup>4</sup> There were eight magnificent gates that led into the walled city. The walls were forty feet high, decorated with painted lions with red or yellow manes on a blue ceramic background. Within the city was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world: the famed Hanging Gardens of Babylon that Nebuchadnezzar had built for one of his wives. Also, see the Ishtar Gate (Wikipedia), which, like all of Babylon's gates, was impressive, as it was covered with blue enameled bricks and pictured red-and-white dragons and bulls (symbolic of two Babylonian gods).

<sup>5</sup> Art was highly developed in 6<sup>th</sup> century BC Babylon. Babylon's scholars took mathematics to new heights. Archaeologists have found multiplication and division tables that students used to practice their math assignments. Algebraic achievement by the early Babylonians has led some to compare this period with the European Renaissance. Her scholars also used a sexagesimal system of counting (in addition to the decimal system, based on multiples of 10), that has formed the basis for our 360-degree circle and 60-minute hour. They were masters of astronomy, in part due to an interest in astrology, but also for what appear to be scientific purposes.

<sup>6</sup> Babylon had a mature system of laws, recorded in the Law Code of Hammurabi.

Babylon had its own creation story,<sup>8</sup> a record of a worldwide flood,<sup>9</sup> and a book very similar to the Bible's Job and to Proverbs.<sup>10</sup>

Babylon was the epitome of advanced culture around 600 BC. But there were terrible downsides to Babylonian culture, too.

"Babylon" is the term the Bible often uses to describe the anti-God state. Babylon was arrogant and proud. Violence was the national pass time. Babylon was materialistic.

The worship of her gods and goddesses was immoral. Demonic, occult practices dominated society.

And the king of Babylon - Nebuchadnezzar - was a godless, arrogant and prideful, violent, impetuous king.

\*\*\**Babylon's defeat of the Jews, in stages*

So...Nebuchadnezzar was the king and Babylon was the nation that God allowed to destroy Judah, depose King Jehoiakim, lay waste the city of Jerusalem, tear down and loot the temple, and deport many of the leading people of the Jews into captivity in Babylon.

It was to Babylon that Daniel and a lot of other Jews were taken into captivity.

**Meet Daniel**

**Life in Jerusalem vs Life in Babylon**

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<sup>7</sup> They had developed an elaborate system of writing, called cuneiform (*nuneus* "wedge" and *forma* "form" from the Latin), which made words from wedge-shaped figures impressed into clay.

<sup>8</sup> Babylon's creation story - a very involved, mythical tale of how the gods created the world - titled "The Enuma Elish" - was masterfully written.

<sup>9</sup> Many ancient peoples have a flood story. The Babylonians' is called "The Gilgamesh Epic" and has similarities to Noah's record (The Bible's story is a thousand years older than Babylon's.)

<sup>10</sup> Among writings discovered by archaeologists is wisdom literature, much like the book of Proverbs, and poetry, including "*The Poem of the Righteous Sufferer*" which is remarkably similar to Job.

We should never forget that Daniel spent his formative years in the Holy Land. He knew Jerusalem. Jerusalem was familiar. He knew Judah's land and climate and seasons. He knew her culture.

Daniel knew and loved Jerusalem's food, language, art, clothing, daily routines, government, architecture. All of that is what culture is, and that culture was Daniel's culture.

The Babylon to which he was taken was flashier, wealthier, and more intellectually stimulating. It was exotic and erotic and violent. It wasn't Daniel's culture.

Everything was familiar in Jerusalem. Nothing was familiar in Babylon. Daniel fit in Jerusalem. He didn't fit in Babylon.

Even though Judah was not spiritually healthy in Daniel's day, it was acceptable to be a Jew in Jerusalem. If you were a Jew, you fit.

In Jerusalem, there was the temple where God was worshiped. There was the Levitical priesthood. There were the annual Jewish feasts. Then Daniel went to Babylon where none of that was in place.

### **What We Know About Daniel**

Most scholars estimate that Daniel was somewhere close to seventeen years of age when he was taken away to Babylon.<sup>11</sup>

It was nothing he had done wrong that landed him in Babylon.

He was simply a pawn caught up in the larger story of God's judgment on the nation for the sins of others. (In our own day, too, the innocent are frequently collateral damage for the sins of others.)

### **Daniel's Reputation Outside of His Book (Ezekiel; Hebrews)**

But - and this is amazing - for many decades, Daniel lived in Babylon. And he didn't just live. He thrived. He flourished.

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<sup>11</sup> He and his friends are referred to as "children," a broad term that can refer to a small child and to a near adult.

Daniel is one of the true heroes of the Bible. There is not one negative comment about him in all of Scripture.

The prophet Ezekiel, who was a contemporary of Daniel and evidently knew (or at least knew of) Daniel, put Daniel in a group that included Noah and Job to attest to Daniel's integrity.<sup>12</sup>

And Daniel is mentioned, but not by name, in the New Testament book of Hebrews. There, the author tells us that among the heroes of faith are those who **[11:33] conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions.**

### **A Long Life of Faithfulness to God**

#### *In the lion's den (Daniel 6)*

That last phrase - "**shut the mouths of lions**" - is from Daniel's life, when God kept him safe in a lion's den.

Daniel had refused a command to stop his practice of publicly, daily, worshiping God. He was threatened with being thrown into the lion's den as punishment if he didn't stop.

Well, Daniel didn't stop - but God protected Daniel. He shut the lions' mouths.

#### *In the court of Belshazzar (Daniel 5)*

Before that (Daniel, chapter 5), when Daniel was called into the court of Belshazzar, a Babylonian king, he was commanded to interpret strange words that had been written on a wall by a disembodied hand.

Those words contained a message of terrible judgment on King Belshazzar, but Daniel fearlessly interpreted the words for the king. The king could have had Daniel killed for delivering that message, but he faithfully did what he had been called to do.

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<sup>12</sup> Ezekiel 14:14, 20

### *Interpreting Nebuchadnezzar's vision of the great tree (Daniel 4)*

And before that, Daniel courageously interpreted a vision that the great king, Nebuchadnezzar had about a great tree.

It took courage for Daniel to give the interpretation of this vision, because the vision was all about the king's pride and his soon-to-come downfall. Daniel gave it, nonetheless.

In all three of these episodes, Daniel was God's man. And he lived as God's man well into his 80's. He faithfully served God in the highest positions in Babylonian / Persian governmental service while never compromising his primary allegiance to God.

That's fascinating. Compelling. Because the administrations in which Daniel served were not benevolent nonprofits.

No, he spent a lifetime in a working environment where brutality and callous indifference to the welfare of people was the order of the day.<sup>13</sup>

Slavery was condoned. Human life was forfeited at the whim of the king. Power was enforced at the end of a spear.

How was it possible, in such an un-Jewish, un-Godly, setting as Babylon, that Daniel flourished and shone bright for his God?

For an answer, we turn to a scene that set the course of Daniel's life, early in his life.

This incident describes the season when he decided to be the man who would never waver from shining for his God.

### **In Training, in Babylon (1:3-7)**

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<sup>13</sup> Daniel was certainly God's prophet, but he was, professionally, a governmental servant and a faithful historian of God's dealings with him. He lived during the exile, but not, as was the case with Ezekiel and Jeremiah, in the midst of his own people. He lived in the court of the ruler of the world and in the service of the state.

***[3] Then the king told 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<sup>14</sup>, [4] youths in whom there was no impairment, who were good-looking, suitable for instruction in every kind of expertise, endowed with understanding and discerning knowledge, and who had ability to serve in the king's court; and he ordered Ashpenaz to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans.***

The Jewish exiles in view here had been forced to travel five hundred miles from Jerusalem to Babylon. They were the cream of the Jewish crop.<sup>15</sup>

They were royalty, and Babylon believed that they could be assets to the king's administration.

They were chosen for their physical, personal, and intellectual capacities and potential. And among these young people were Daniel and three of Daniel's close friends.

### **Education and Culture (vv. 3-4)**

Over the course of a three year-long training regimen they would take a crash course in all the ways of Babylon / Chaldea.

They would learn the Babylonian language and its literature. They would study Babylonian architecture, agriculture, law, and math.

They would learn all about astronomy...and astrology. By the time they graduated, they would have been certified experts in the occult practices of the Babylonians.

So, don't miss that their education would have exposed them to things that were directly contrary to their faith.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> We don't know from Scripture, nor does secular history tell us, how many were taken.

<sup>15</sup> The names of these four young men indicate that they came from godly stock, the endings of their names "el" (the name for God) and "iah" ("Ya" being shorthand for "Yahweh") being dead giveaways.

Their training included more.

### Food and drink (v. 5a)

**[5a] The king also allotted for them a daily ration from the king's choice food and from the wine which he drank...**

There will be more to see about this in a minute.

In addition to the three years of training and the food and drink regimen, Daniel and his three friends were also renamed.

### New Names (vv. 6-7)

**[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 ("God is my Judge") he assigned the name *Beltshazzar* ("Bel's prince"), to *Hananiah* (Yahweh has been gracious) *Shadrach* (meaning unknown), to *Mishael* ("Who is what God is?") *Meshach* (meaning unknown), and to *Azariah* ("Yahweh has helped") *Abed-nego* (name of a Babylonian god).**

The whole point of the training and the food and the drink and the renaming was to make Daniel, his three friends, and all the other Jewish youths who were being pressed into Babylonian service, completely Babylonian-ish.

Babylon did everything it could to force them to adopt new identities, new gods, and a new way of looking at the world.

And it almost worked. That it didn't work becomes clear in the next words.

### Food Fight (1:8-16)

#### A Line in the Sand (v. 8)

*Daniel's mind made up (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...**

This was the first fight Daniel had in Babylon, and it was a food fight.

The king's plan was to give to these Jews food from his own stores of food while they were in training.

I'm sure the king believed that his trainees would be grateful and impressed with the daily feasts.

Daniel wasn't impressed. This was food he didn't know, food he likely didn't like, and food he definitely didn't want.

From a Babylonian perspective, it was great food. But it wasn't to Daniel's taste. More to the point, it wasn't *kosher*. And that was a problem.

The Mosaic laws of *kosher* said that certain kinds of food were off limits to the Jews - meats like pork, some birds, some seafood.

*Kosher* also required that all food had to be prepared in a certain way.

So, some of the food served by Babylon was the wrong kind of food, while all of it was prepared in the wrong kind of way.

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<sup>16</sup> As well, as servants in the king's court, there is almost no doubt that Daniel and his friends would have been made eunuchs. No, the Bible doesn't say this, but there is no mention of Daniel's legacy in children (which we might have expected to read about) AND it was common practice to make eunuchs out of those from foreign lands who served in the king's court AND the man in charge of Daniel's training was the chief of the eunuchs.

On top of all that, the food may have been used in idolatrous sacrifices. The wine very likely had been dedicated to Babylonian gods before it was served.

So, for Daniel to have eaten and drunk would have involved him in idolatry.

The king's food was not fit for Jewish consumption.

With all of that as background, we understand why Daniel refused the king's generous gift of food.

Lavish food was prepared, and delicious wine was served, and Daniel's belly was going to get full, but he rocked the cushy boat on which he was sailing.

And here's where we get our first glimpse of who Daniel is determined to be. Yes, he's a teenager. Yes, he was raised in Jerusalem in a time of spiritual darkness.<sup>17</sup>

But Daniel never forgot his spiritual roots and he never forgot to Whom he belonged. He was, first and foremost, God's.

So, even in Babylon, away from home and away from every Jewish influence, he bound himself to God's Law.

Daniel's internal moral compass always pointed to the true north set by God's Word, and that Word was crystal clear about what he should and shouldn't eat.

So, Daniel came to a settled conviction about this thing. He took a stand. Daniel **"made up his mind"** to not eat what God said he should not eat.

He sought a work-around, he looked for a Plan B, in discussion with the commander who was over his training. (Ashpenaz)

*Seeking permission to not defile himself (v. 8b)*

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<sup>17</sup> This spiritual rebellion was the reason God brought the Babylonians against Judah in the first place.

***[8c]...so he sought permission from the commander of the officials that he might not defile himself.***

He didn't cop an attitude. He didn't make a demand. He didn't throw a fit and threaten a hunger strike.<sup>18</sup> No.

He politely asked for an alternative diet. He asked to be excused from eating the king's food.<sup>19</sup>

The answer he got was not the answer he had hoped for.

### **The Concern of Commander Ashpenaz (v. 10)**

***[10] The commander of the officials said, "I am afraid of my lord the king, who has appointed your food and your drink; for why should he see your faces<sup>20</sup> looking gaunt in comparison to the youths who are your own age? Then you would make me forfeit my head to the king."***

Ashpenaz believed that if Daniel and his friends didn't eat the king's food, they would suffer from an inferior diet. And if these youth suffered, he, Ashpenaz, would also suffer.

So, Daniel was refused by Ashpenaz. The answer is *"No!"* Conversation over. Case closed.

But it was like Daniel didn't get the memo. For him, the case wasn't closed at all. He wasn't going to drop the issue and go pig out on pork. He simply directed his request for a Plan B elsewhere.

### **Daniel Has a Plan (vv. 11-13)**

*Daniel's redirect (v. 11)*

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<sup>18</sup> Although starving rather than eating non-kosher food might have been Plan B...

<sup>19</sup> Daniel may well have understood that his request was like to 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.

<sup>20</sup> Here the friends are referenced for the first time in this passage.

***[11] But Daniel said to the overseer<sup>21</sup> whom the commander of the officials had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah...***

This *overseer* worked for Ashpenaz. Daniel didn't go up the chain to appeal to a superior. He didn't walk on Ashpenaz' head. He went down the chain.

It is not my impression that Daniel had a guarantee from God that he would be given an alternative diet. I don't think that the solution was certain. But Daniel was committed to seeking a solution.

Remember. He had ***"made up his mind"*** to not eat non-kosher food, so he didn't take Ashpenaz' *"No"* for a final answer. He kept pressing.<sup>22</sup>

Daniel didn't immediately pray to God, *"Sorry, Lord. Ashpenaz said 'No.' Nothing more I can do."*

No. He was tenacious in seeking a God-honoring solution to his moral dilemma. While seeking this work-around, Daniel continued, tenacious and respectful.

*With all due respect (vv. 12-13)*

***[12] "Please put your servants to the test for ten days, and let us be given some vegetables<sup>23</sup> 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."***

This was a reasonable time frame for a test. Ten days wasn't long enough to do any real damage if the new diet didn't work. But it

<sup>21</sup> The King James version identifies this understeward as "Melzar." The word "melzar" is probably not a proper name, but a title "chief attendant."

<sup>22</sup> Once, when speaking about prayer, Jesus said to keep on knocking, keep on seeking, keep on asking. One "No" didn't resolve the issue.

<sup>23</sup> Grain was probably included here, as the word means "things that are sown."

was enough time to tell if he and his friends would do OK with the new diet.

This overseer considered Daniel's proposal - and put Daniel's Plan B into action. (v. 14)

### **Daniel and Friends Passed the Test with Flying Colors (vv. 14-16)**

***[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 and a clear provision from God that the overseer agreed to the test AND that at the end of the 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, having come to know Daniel as we have, I'm certain that IF they had not gotten healthier and the ten-day-long test had been a bust, Daniel would have tried something else.

He would have gotten more creative, because, as we saw, he had ***"made up his mind"*** that he was not going to eat what God said to not eat.

And here is the wonderful, happy ending to this story.

### **A Good End To The Story (vv. 18-20)**

***[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] And 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 expertise and understanding about which the king consulted them, he found them ten times better than all the soothsayer priests and conjurers who were in all his realm.***

## **Conclusion:**

We're looking at Daniel today to see what we can learn from him about the life of faith, and we've zeroed in on an incident that occurred early in his time in Babylon.

This incident revolved around food.

At *issue* was whether Daniel would allow himself to be shaped by the culture around him or conform to God's commands while living in an un-Jewish, un-Godly land.

The *stakes* were high. For taking this stand, Daniel could have lost a privileged position in Nebuchadnezzar's government. He could have even lost his life.

But he was highly *motivated* to take a stand because he had seen the devastating consequences of disobedience to God in his own country.

Daniel faced the *obstacles* of being a teenager far from home and getting pushback from a royal official. In addition, evidently none of the other Jewish youth - except for his three friends - stood with him in eating only *kosher* food.

The crisis moment that resulted in Daniel's lifetime of faithfulness to God was when he **[8] made up his mind.**

Daniel took a stand. He swam against the current when it came to eating non-kosher food...while not swimming against all the currents of Babylonian culture.

He didn't have a problem answering to a Babylonian name. He was OK learning Babylonian mythology. He agreed to learn everything that had to be learned to serve in the king's court.<sup>24</sup>

He drew the line at food - and notice what that did.

By God's gifting, Daniel had great wisdom and insight into dreams and visions. For this he was sought out by kings.

By his own lifestyle choices, He was a man of unimpeachable integrity. Uncompromisable. He told the truth. He had an unassailable reputation.

A man like that is essential in a king's court. Daniel's presence was invaluable to the people around him. They wanted him around.

But every time a meal was served, Daniel had to have his special food. Daniel was Jewish. Daniel's God required that he eat different food. This difference was apparent at every meal, at every snack, at every dessert fellowship.

Integrity and wisdom invited him in. Food set him apart. Character identified him as a valuable man. Food identified him as God's man.

At a certain point in his life (some time prior to his training to be on the king's staff), Daniel had made a conscious decision to be fully vested in Babylonian life while committing to always shine for God.

This is the harder course, and it is the one to which we are called, today. Neither withdrawal or isolation from our culture nor wholesale assimilation with our culture.

No. Like Daniel, we are called to serve in our culture in all the ways we can while remaining distinctively followers of Jesus.

We are to be people of integrity, people whose word is our bond, people who serve and love and give to meet needs, people who never retaliate when wronged.

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<sup>24</sup> I have read that John Calvin suggested that Daniel and his friends were protected from having to study heathen stuff - but why would we think this? Studying such

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things would NOT have put them in direct disobedience to God's Law. Eating pork, though, would have.



And we are to be those people who stand out like sore thumbs because we serve the unborn, the physically and mentally challenged, the elderly, the sick, and the dying.

We love without partiality or distinction people from every ethnicity, every demographic, every station of life.

We hold ourselves to the New Testament's standards of sexual purity and edifying speech.

Like Daniel, we "*make up our minds*" to shine bright for God and for our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.