

Personal Holiness in a Secular World – Daniel 1

In the 1300s there was a man named John Wycliffe, you may have heard of him. He studied theology at Oxford and became a famous instructor of theology and philosophy. Wycliffe challenged the Church leaders in many respects but is best known for translating the Latin Vulgate into English. Interestingly enough, although translating the Bible into the native tongue was revolutionary at the time, Wycliffe argued that the Bible had already been translated into French. About 34 years after Wycliffe died, the Church clerics dug up his dead body and burned it. Then they threw the ashes into a river, supposedly for heresy. Yet, Wycliffe is called, “the morning star of the Reformation”.

Because of Wycliffe and many others the Bible was translated into English and is now available to everyone. Wycliffe believed that any believer should be able to read or listen to God’s word and interpret it for themselves. Now, when we look at what the Church did after Wycliffe’s death we might think, well, I guess this is the end of all his work. We might even think God did not honor his work. But of course, we know that is not true. It is evident God was moving to place the Bible in everyone’s hand, not just the clergy. Sometimes because of the opposition we face, it may seem like God is not around. That he is allowing darkness and persecution with no answer. And often we, as Christians, appear to be on the losing end. Yet, all the while God is sovereign and in control. God’s timetable never looks the way we think it should. His mission and goals are bigger than anything we might think or image. That is why we must always put our faith and trust in him. He will divinely achieve the right purpose at the right time with the most success.

The story we are discussing today appears to reveal a time when God’s people are at a low point with no hope in sight. Yet, God was still in control and would reveal it was not the end, but a new beginning.

Let’s read Daniel chapter 1.

In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. ²And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, 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 placed the vessels in the treasury of his god. ³Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility, ⁴youths without blemish, of good appearance and skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king’s palace, and to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans. ⁵The king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate, and of the wine that he

drank. They were to be educated for three years, and at the end of that time they were to stand before the king. ⁶ Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah of the tribe of Judah. ⁷ And the chief of the eunuchs gave them names: Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego.

⁸ But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself. ⁹ And God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs, ¹⁰ and the chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, "I fear my lord the king, who assigned your food and your drink; for why should he see that you were in worse condition than the youths who are of your own age? So you would endanger my head with the king." ¹¹ Then Daniel said to the steward whom the chief of the eunuchs had assigned over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, ¹² "Test your servants for ten days; let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. ¹³ Then let our appearance and the appearance of the youths who eat the king's food be observed by you, 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 it was seen that they were better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youths who ate the king's food. ¹⁶ So the steward took away their food and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables.

¹⁷ As for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams. ¹⁸ At the end of the time, when the king had commanded that they should be brought in, the chief of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar. ¹⁹ And the king spoke with them, and among all of them none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Therefore they stood before the king. ²⁰ And in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his kingdom. ²¹ And Daniel was there until the first year of King Cyrus.

Daniel was written during the time of the Babylonian exile, and the first two verses tell us the major theme of the book, God's sovereignty. God's people had rebelled and because of this God allowed them to go into exile and for Jerusalem to be destroyed by king Nebuchadnezzar. The first two verses seem to tell a story of defeat. And not just of Judah, but of God himself. Yet the text reveals that the Lord gave the king of Judah into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar. God was in control, not defeated, but orchestrating divine justice on his people. But mark this, God is much deeper than that, he is also going to restore his people and reveal himself to the Babylonians.

In this chapter there seems to be a battle between the secular and the sacred. The vessels of the Lord's house are removed and taken to the house of the Babylonian god, Marduk. It is interesting that the Lord seems to be willing to suffer shame and defeat in order to waken his people. We find a similar story in I Samuel 5 when the Philistines defeated Israel and brought the ark to the house of their god, Dagon. In that story, Dagon falls on his face and loses his head and limbs. Even when it seems defeat is imminent, God is sovereign and always the victor. In Philippians it states this of Christ, "though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (2:5-11)

Moving back to Daniel, we have what appears to be a devastating loss. Nebuchadnezzar and his god appear to be supreme and superior to Judah and Yahweh. Yet, in reality, while God is punishing his people for rebellion, it is also a new beginning. Often when God moves us into a new stage of life it is not pretty. It seems like all is lost and we are at an end. Yet, God is behind the scenes orchestrating his perfect plan to restore his people.

Now, if we were to break down this chapter in Daniel, it really has four parts.

- 1) King Nebuchadnezzar captures Jerusalem and loots the temple.
- 2) Daniel and his friends are chosen to be educated in Babylon for 3 years.
- 3) The test of Daniel's faith and personal holiness.
- 4) Reward for Daniel and his friends for their faith in God.

One of the main ideas of the chapter is that faithfulness and passion for God can lead to rewards. But we must be careful to understand what the purpose is for those rewards in God's kingdom.

Now, let's move to verse 3. The text tells us that the king commanded his chief officer to select some of the royalty and nobility of Judah to serve in the king's palace. Just a little food for thought – the word here in Daniel for this officer is eunuch in some English translations. The Hebrew word here is sariys. This word can mean court official, palace officer, or eunuch. This word is also used for Potiphar in Genesis, who had a wife. It might be better to think of the officer as a chief of staff or something similar. The term does not necessarily mean the person is a eunuch. The Lexham English Bible does not use this word, it states, "commander of the court officials." Either way, this chief of the court

officials was to choose some of the royals for the king, which included Daniel and his friends.

So, we might ask, what is the king of Babylon doing? Well, he was taking the cream of Judah and re-educating them in the ways, language and literature of the Babylonians. Daniel and his friends would then take up positions in the government of Babylon. The king also gave Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah Babylonian names. This way, theoretically, they would lose their Jewish identity. Each of their Hebrew names is a form of the name of God. Daniel whose name means, “God is my judge” in Hebrew, received the Babylonian name Belteshazzar, which means “Bel, protect my life.” Hananiah means, “Jehovah is gracious”. His name was changed to Shadrach, which meant “I am fearful of god”. Mishael in Hebrew means, “Who is he that is God”. The king changed his name to Meshach, which means, “I am despised before my god” or “I am of little account”. And lastly, Azariah in Hebrew means, “The Lord is help” or “Yahweh has helped”. And his new Babylonian name was Abednego, which meant “servant of Nebo”. And you can see what is going on here. The whole purpose of the re-education program for the Jewish boys was to change their thinking from Jewish to Babylonian. It was also to secure Judah as a vassal. In some ways you could think of Daniel and his royal friends as political prisoners. And it is very likely that all four of them are part of the royal family of Zedekiah.

Now, let’s talk about languages. Obviously Aramaic would have been one of the Babylonian languages. But the boys learning would also have included Sumerian and Akkadian. Akkadian being their sacred tongue. The re-education program would also have included religious and mythological texts, history, astronomy, mathematics, medicine, and astrology. These young men were educated for 3 years in the pagan language, literature, and religion of Babylon. This might make you think of a CIA brain washing experiment, where the re-education and renaming process of these young Judean boys would change the way they think and act, essentially changing who they are. But does it? It is a battle between the secular and the sacred.

In verse 5 we see the beginning of the test and conflict for Daniel. The king assigns the Jewish boys food and wine from the king’s table. And this is where Daniel chooses to take a stand. It is possible this resistance by Daniel had to do with maintaining his Jewish identity. It is also possible Daniel’s request was dietary, and had to do with eating unclean meat. But it is more likely it was due to the fact that the food was offered in sacrifice to the Babylonian idols. In the Jewish mind this would be equivalent to idol worship. Note the determination of Daniel – he resolved not to defile himself. His passion for God superseded his circumstance. He was determined not to defile himself. Daniel first asks the chief of staff, and even though God had given him favor the chief essentially told Daniel no, fearing for his

life. So, here is my question. Did Daniel, who was resolved not to defile himself take “no” for an answer. No, he didn’t. He asked the next person in line. Daniel asked a subordinate to the chief, who was directly over Daniel and his friends. But this time Daniel offers a test of eating vegetables and drinking water for ten days. This steward who was over Daniel and his friends listened. He tested them for ten days, and you know what happens don’t you. After the ten days the Jewish boys appearance was far better than those who ate the king’s food. Now, I want to be clear here. Daniel does not stomp around and demand his way. He is very gracious, wise and persistent. He asks one way, then he asks in a different way. Daniel is determined, yet wise. His passion for God does not push him to lose his head, but to persist until a solution is found.

In the 1600s there was a famous French theologian named Moise Amyraut. He studied law and then went to the Huguenot theology academy at Saumur. After he finished his studies he became a pastor and also lectured at the academy. In 1631 Amyraut was selected to report to the king. However, because Catholic clergy remained standing in the presence of the king, Amyraut refused to kneel before him. King Louis was very offended and refused to see the pastor for many days. Finally, the king sent his chief minister, Cardinal Richelieu to convince Amyraut to kneel before the king. However, Amyraut responded with such grace and resolve that Richelieu could not convince him. In fact, Amyraut was allowed to remain standing in the presence of King Louis. Now, this story does not compare with the Biblical text, but we can see the character and resolve just like in the case of Daniel. We should consider if we are people of passion or compromise. Daniel could have easily accepted the king’s food, but he didn’t. He persisted in what was right and won over those over him in Babylon.

We might think of the many ways we can and do compromise today in our culture. We are bombarded with food of all kinds, food that defiles. And I am not talking about what you put in your mouth to eat, but what you put into your mind. Have you considered your online presence? What about your movie, TV or screen time? And what about how you spend your money? What exactly defiles us? What we eat, read, watch, and do. Take an inventory of what does not honor God. What defiles you as a follower of Jesus? Daniel was taken to a different culture and given orders to learn and experience the secular and pagan Babylonia. Their religion and worship alone would have likely defiled him.

Now, we are not done with the text, but I want to stop here and make a challenge. We, as Christians, need to say no to our culture where it is defiling us. Where can we eat vegetables instead of the king’s food. And let’s get real. What do we really need? We need Jesus, we need his word, we need to pray. I want you to think of one area where you need to

say no, where you need to stop the advance of the culture in your life. Just like Daniel, there is a danger that Christians will lose their identity if we do not learn to say no.

Now, I am going to get real with you. I recently watched a couple of episodes of a show. I am not going to name the show, but the story is supposed to be based on the Bible. This particular show included some dark elements. And I am going to be honest with you, I am not going to continue watching that, I rarely watch shows anyway. But it is was very clear to me after that experience that watching shows like that do not honor God and I should not be doing that. And this is what I mean. We have to learn to say no to the culture, and sometimes this includes the Christian culture. We need to be pure and holy like God. That should always be our goal. But I am not telling you what to read or watch, that is between you and the Holy Spirit, but as Christians living in a secular world, we need to learn to be more discerning. The food we take in that enters our mouths, ears, eyes and mind should be good for us – like vegetables. I know this is hard for some of us in our culture, but we are either Christians called by the name of Christ or we aren't. Defy the culture, but do it in wisdom. Do it with resolve and grace. Say no to the culture where it is wrong and persist in the right way until God opens a door and provides a solution.

The book of Daniel is filled with how to deal with a secular culture and maintain a pure faith. It is not easy. But it is possible with the Holy Spirit as our guide. Say no to the culture and yes to God. And guess what – this story in Daniel tells us how things turn out when our passion for God, our resolve to do what is right supersedes our circumstances.

Now, when we get to verse 17, I think it is critically important we read and even re-read this verse. Why? Because this part of the chapter reveals the reward the boys receive for their study and faithfulness. And before the passage ever gets to the king, the text says, “God gave”. And this is clear in the text so we are not confused about where the success comes from. Was it the boys work ethic, their study habits, their diet? Well, the text says God gave them learning and skill – and Daniel received understanding in visions and dreams. Please be aware that God had a purpose in these gifts he gave Daniel and his friends. And if we step back a moment, I think we can see that if we as God's kids honor him, resolve to be holy and righteous, then Yahweh in turn will honor us giving us gifts as he sees fit. Daniel resolved to not defile himself and honor God. Then God decides to give Daniel understanding with mysteries. And he was going to need this gift in the Babylonian kingdom. God gives liberally when we choose to follow him. When the Jewish boys were brought before the king, Nebuchadnezzar did not find anyone like them. They were ten times better than anyone else!

Now, I think if we consider how chapter starts off, this is significant. The chapter starts with the siege of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. It was lights out for the Jews, they were

defeated, taken into exile. The vessels in the temple were taken. This was a total defeat of Yahweh and his people. Yet, it isn't the end. It is certainly God's correction, but it isn't the end. It is a new beginning in a strange land. And ironically as we come to the end of chapter one, this great defeat ends with the rise of Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Even in defeat these Judean royals rise. Now, don't let that go to your head with any speeches about God's people always win or anything like that. God's people were under his judgment. But God still allowed these Jewish boys to rise to a place of prominence in the Babylonian government. Not to show who they were, but to reveal Yahweh to the Babylonians. God was going to reveal himself to king Nebuchadnezzar.

And as we seek application to this story we should consider our purpose in a secular culture. There are three main points to the story in Daniel 1.

- 1) Daniel and his friends were chosen. They were chosen to be educated and serve in the Babylonian court. And by the way, Daniel did not have a choice, the Jews were taken from their homeland. So, here is the question for us. What have we been chosen for? What has God clearly chosen for us to do and accomplish? Now, do not get in a hurry, take a moment and think about it. In Daniel's case, this was a three year commitment to learn and study. So, what has God chosen for you? It may take a while to get there. Let me give you an example. God chose me to preach and teach his Word. Now, I have had to do a lot of other things, but I know he chose me to do that. And to do that, you have to know the Bible, spend time studying and most importantly you have to spend time praying and getting to know God. This may take several years, but it is worth it because God chose me for that task. So again, what has God chosen for you? Are you working on it? It may take years, but it will be worth it. Ask yourself some very practical questions. What do I need to do next? How can I prepare? But most of all, pray about it and ask God what you need to accomplish the mission he has given you.
- 2) There is going to be a test of your faith in the area you are called to. Daniel's faith was tested. I promise you if God chooses you for a specific task, there will be a test. Daniel passed with flying colors and so can you! You need to be ready and prepared. Our passion for God will help get us there, but we must remember to hold fast to our beliefs and not compromise. Daniel resolved not to defile himself. We must also resolve to stay holy in such a corrupt world. Why was Daniel a success – that answer I think is found in later chapters and well as in chapter 1. We see in the book of Daniel that he is a man of wisdom but also of prayer. You need a strong prayer life to pass the test of your faith. The way you pass the test is faithfulness to God, prayer and refusal to compromise with a secular world.

- 3) Reward of faith and personal holiness – God rewards faithfulness and purity. When we act according to God’s standards, he will reward us, but we should realize those rewards, whatever they are, will have a greater purpose. This means the gifts or abilities or whatever God gives will be to help others. You will shine your light brighter or in a different place. For Daniel, he ended up having great influence in a secular culture. We should realize the rewards of the Lord are purposeful and for blessing others. It has a multiplication effect. God gives liberally, and expects us to use what he gives for his glory and kingdom.

My challenge for you is personal holiness. What has God chosen for you to do? What is your mission directly from the throne of God? And what must you change to pursue that mission? Daniel had to refuse the king’s food and offer an alternative. What do you need to do? Take a moment and ask God what is the one thing he wants you to do, and what is the one thing you need to change in your life?

Pursue holiness – the process works like this: pursue uncompromising holiness, then God shows up and gives gifts, and then we wisely use those gifts to change our secular culture. Do not wait – ask God today how to pursue his holiness and take action.