



Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for April 6, 2008
Released on April 2, 2008

"Holding to Your Convictions"

Printed Text: Daniel 1:8-20

Background Scripture: Daniel 1:1-21

Devotional Reading: Psalm 141:1-4

Daniel 1:8-20

8 But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's meat, nor with the wine which he drank: therefore he requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself.

9 Now God had brought Daniel into favor and tender love with the prince of the eunuchs.

10 And the prince of the eunuchs said unto Daniel, I fear my lord the king, who hath appointed your meat and your drink: for why should he see your faces worse liking than the children which are of your sort? then shall ye make me endanger my head to the king.

11 Then said Daniel to Melzar, whom the prince of the eunuchs had set over Daniel, Hananiah, Misha-el, and Azariah,

12 Prove thy servants, I beseech thee, ten days; and let them give us pulse to eat, and water to drink.

13 Then let our countenances be looked upon before thee, and the countenance of the children that eat of the portion of the king's meat: and as thou seest, deal with thy servants.

14 So he consented to them in this matter, and proved them ten days.

15 And at the end of ten days their countenances appeared fairer and fatter in flesh than all the children which did eat the portion of the king's meat.

16 Thus Melzar took away the portion of their meat, and the wine that they should drink; and gave them pulse.

17 As for these four children, God gave them knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom: and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams.

18 Now at the end of the days that the king had said he should bring them in, then the prince of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar.

19 And the king communed with them; and among them all was found none like Daniel, Hananiah, Misha-el, and Azariah: therefore stood they before the king.

20 And in all matters of wisdom and understanding, that the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers that were in all his realm.

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each student will be able to:

1. Describe how and why Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah avoided self-defilement.
2. Explain how the example of Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah is helpful to Christians as they face challenges from an ungodly culture.
3. Make a plan to resist one unholy cultural trend.
4. Reference and quote at least one verse in the Bible about how Christians can be optimistic and dependent on God when faced with difficult circumstances.

Introduction - Maintaining Identity

The book of Daniel may contain more fulfilled prophecies than any other book in the Bible. It is named after its human author, who wrote from exile in Babylon. The northern nation of Israel had been taken captive by Assyria in 722 B.C. The southern nation of Judah was taken by Babylon in three separate incursions that occurred in 605 B.C., 597 B.C., and 586 B.C. Daniel was taken into captivity during the first of these incursions, while Ezekiel was taken in the second. Both wrote from exile and captivity.

While the book of Daniel contains such historical information, its primary purpose is to present prophecy. Jesus referred to “the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet” (Mark 13:14), showing us that He considered Daniel to be one of the prophets of the Old Testament. If we were to assign a central theme to this book, we would have to think seriously about calling it a book about the sovereignty of God.

There is also some important moral content in this book. Of particular interest is the determination of Daniel and his friends to live according to God’s will.

Lesson Background

Working through Kings David and Solomon, God built Israel into a mighty nation. Israelites occupied an impressive stretch of land, they were ruled by their own kings, and smaller nations paid tribute to them. By the end of Solomon’s reign (about 930 B.C.), the Israelites had come a long way since the Egyptian bondage of some 500 years previous.

But prosperity went to their heads. The Israelites began worshiping the gods of other nations, mistreating the poor, and trusting human power rather than God. The Israelites, whom God called to be distinct from other nations, became like the nations they dispossessed. Through prophets, God warned His people that He would punish them if they refused to reform their ways. The Israelites did not repent permanently, so God used the Assyrians and the Babylonians to conquer His people.

Jerusalem was quite a distance from Babylon—some 900 miles. For the Babylonians to maintain control of the territory of Judah was a challenge. The Babylonians could establish a large military presence in Judah, but the costs would be high and soldiers undoubtedly were needed elsewhere in the empire.

So King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon chose a different strategy: he crippled Judah’s ability to revolt by relocating the most educated and skilled Jews. This way the king of Babylon could benefit from their abilities while the Jews who were left behind would lack the leadership to rebuild. The word we normally use for such forced relocation is exile.

In Daniel 1:1–7, we learn that Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were among those gifted Jews who were taken into exile (about 605 B.C.). Being of royal blood, they were selected to serve in Nebuchadnezzar’s royal court in Babylon (v. 3). Such service required preparation. So for three years these men were given the finest education Babylon could offer.

Yet such an education raised questions for exiled Jews. How much could they immerse themselves in Babylonian culture before they ceased being Jews? How could they survive among the pagans without becoming just like them? As recent events have taught us, these questions apply not only to ancient Jews, but also to modern Christians. Let us therefore pay careful attention to the answers of Scripture.

Faithfulness to God (Daniel 1:8-13)

1. What did King Nebuchadnezzar do to prepare young men from Judah to serve in his administration?

The young men were given the abundant provisions of finest foods and drink. They lived in a life of luxury in preparation for their new assignments in King Nebuchadnezzar's court. The young men were to receive the greatest education, and they were to learn the Babylonian language so that they could be indoctrinated about the Babylonian culture.

Another thing that King Nebuchadnezzar did for the young men was to change their names. The significance of a name change is to have the young men forget their Jewish heritage and identify with the Babylonians. This would reduce the likelihood that the young men would help their fellow Jews to revolt against Babylon. As we see in today's text, Daniel maintained his Jewish identity.

2. What led Daniel to make a special request of Ashpenaz? (Daniel 1:8)

Daniel had a problem with conforming to the Babylonian culture. His convictions were too great for him to just accept the status quo. His convictions led him to be concerned about the king's food and drink. At this time, Daniel was a teenager. Nebuchadnezzar probably chose teenagers because they were much easier to influence than adults.

Teenagers often succumb to peer pressure, resulting in them doing things that they know are wrong. Most teenagers do not have a solid foundation to stand on concerning their beliefs, and most are easily persuaded by what is trendy.

Daniel was different from the other teenagers. He would not allow peer pressure to turn him away from his God. Daniel will not violate his convictions. As a result of his convictions, Daniel asked Ashpenaz, the chief eunuch if he could be exempt from the King's diet?

Daniel knows that even in exile the Jews need to maintain a distinct identity. They cannot simply blend in with the surrounding cultures. To adopt every and all foreign practices is to defile themselves and forsake their Jewishness. Daniel knows, however, that one can learn about the ways of other people without accepting those ways. That's probably why he doesn't object to learning the Babylonian language and literature (v. 4).

Food, however, is different in light of God-given dietary laws for Old Testament Jews. The Jews had been set apart by diet. Daniel has to make choices regarding what will compromise his Jewish identity and what won't. To compromise on the food issue will mean that he and his friends are becoming full-fledged Babylonians rather than Jews that happen to live in Babylon.

Regardless of the specific reason for his decision, Daniel is not content to keep his conviction to himself. He sticks his neck out and tells the king's official that he wishes to avoid being defiled by the king's food. What a bold statement! Daniel publicly declares that the king's chosen food is unacceptable.

3. What was the servant's concern? (v. 10)

Ashpenaz had a job to do. His mission was to make sure that his young men were ready for service at the designated time. He needed his young men to be as healthy as possible. If Ashpenaz failed his mission, it could cost him his life.

Verse 9 states that God brought Daniel in favor with the chief eunuch. As a result, the chief eunuch did not punish Daniel for making that request, which could have resulted in Daniel's death. Another possibility could be that Daniel could have been forced to join lower-level servants who would eat the food that Daniel proposed. God's grace prevented both of those scenarios from happening.

Ashpenaz was not free to decide the young men's diet. That was decided by the king. Ashpenaz could not change the young men's diet without the king's permission; otherwise he could be executed. Ashpenaz was not convinced that Daniel's proposed diet would benefit Daniel and the three Hebrew boys. Ashpenaz does not want to risk giving in to Daniel's request and he and the three Hebrew boys look worse when they appear before King Nebuchadnezzar. The official does not immediately grant Daniel's request.

Daniel's Insistence

4. What did Daniel propose as a trial compromise? (vs. 11-13)

Daniel did not choose to be vindictive or rebellious in this matter, but he could not compromise on his convictions, either. Daniel does not give up. He then asks Melzar for ten days to prove his point. The word "Melzar" was probably not a personal name but rather a reference to an official position (such as a guard or steward). Ashpenaz had appointed this steward over the young men in training (v.11).

Daniel requests *water* instead of wine and seed-bearing plants (*pulse*) instead of meat. If Daniel looks worse after ten days, then Daniel would follow the eunuch's instructions.

Faithfulness from God (Daniel 1:14-20)

5. What was done for Daniel and his friends, and what was the outcome? (vs. 14-15)

Here we see God's hand at work yet again. As stated in verse 9, the chief eunuch continues to have a favorable view of Daniel. So when Daniel boldly yet respectfully counters the chief eunuch's reservations, the chief eunuch does not receive it as an affront to his authority, but as an idea worth trying. So he gave Daniel permission to "test" this new diet (v. 14).

Daniel's and his friend's had very strong faith; they did not doubt that God would honor their desire to remain pure. The results were exactly what they had expected: they were perfectly healthy after ten days.

We must not miss the fact that not only did Daniel and his friends appear healthy after the ten-day test; they appeared healthier than those who ate the other diet.

Experience teaches us that under normal circumstances those who drink water and eat vegetables lose weight, whereas those who eat meat and drink wine tend to gain. Here, God blesses these four so they will gain more weight than their peers.

The king's official is now comfortable enough to remove their portions of *wine* and *meat* altogether (v. 16). Perhaps for a while he has set these items alongside their vegetables just for show. If so, this procedure is no longer necessary, since the superior appearance of the Hebrew boys now testifies to the validity of their diet. Thus is removed any threat to the official's life.

6. How can partnerships be of value when making spiritual commitments today?

Daniel and his friends entered into their agreement as a group. Doing so enabled them to draw strength from one another during the 10 days of proving themselves.

One person seeking to do this alone could easily fail. But “a threefold cord is not quickly broken” (Ecclesiastes 4:12).

There is spiritual strength in numbers. Perhaps that’s why the author of Hebrews says, “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching” (Hebrews 10:25). Growing in faith and remaining faithful is enhanced when others hold us accountable, encourage us, and even rebuke us when we stray from the way of truth.

7. What things did God do for Daniel and his friends during their time of training? (v. 17)

God’s blessings do not end with the favor and health of *these four*. God does not bless them for mere survival. He wants to bless them with abundant life. Such blessing is central to God’s promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:1–3) and covenant with Israel (Deuteronomy 28:1–14).

Verse 17 tells us that God gave Daniel and his friends “knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom.” God also gave Daniel the ability to interpret visions and dreams. Nebuchadnezzar thought he was preparing young men to serve in his administration, but God had other plans for these four young men.

The knowledge that the young men received was God-given. We can understand it to be knowledge that was way beyond the norm. God gave the young men an unusual ability to learn, described as “skill in learning.” They were able to master the literature and science presented to them by the Babylonian scholars more readily than the others. They were outstanding students in every area of academic learning.

There are many smart people in the world who do not have the insight that comes only from knowing God and how He views the world and what takes place here. A worldwide view apart from God is an incomplete understanding of truth and reality.

8. What are some ways that God has blessed you beyond what you have asked or imagined?

In Ephesians 3:20, the apostle Paul states that God can bless us beyond what we can ask or think is possible. God did this for Daniel and his friends. He continues to do so today in the lives of His people as individuals and in the church as a whole. God is an abundant giver. Jesus says that He came to give abundant life (John 10:10). But it is important to see in this story of Daniel and his friends that the blessing came after faith was exercised, not before. Often we want to see God give the blessing before we move forward. We often prefer to walk by sight, not by faith.

9. Who conducted the interviews, and what does this tell us about him? (vs. 18-19)

The time period in view with the phrase *at the end of the days* is not the 10-day test we saw earlier, but the three years of training introduced in verse 5. All the trainees are brought before King *Nebuchadnezzar*, not just the four Jews we have been talking about.

Nebuchadnezzar himself was going to make the choices and appointments. He therefore would conduct the interviews personally. Based on the questions that he asked, we know that the king was extremely intelligent (see v. 20).

The king spends time with his new recruits, interviewing them and selecting them for various administrative posts. Like his official, Nebuchadnezzar is impressed with *Daniel, Hananiah, Misha-el, and Azariah*. Verse 19 states that “among them all was found none like” these four boys.

10. What else did the king discover as the result of the interviews? (vs. 19-20)

After the king interviewed all of the young men, he finds that Daniel and his three friends were found to be even “ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers that were in all his realm.” “By this is meant that they had high intelligence and keen discernment in the matters which they had studied.

The statement that they were “ten times better...signifies that they were outstandingly different...Their straightforward character and honesty, as well as the deep insight of these young men into the real meaning of their studies, must have stood in sharp contrast to the wise men of the king’s court, who often were more sly and cunning than wise.” (Wallword, Daniel: The Key to Prophetic Revelation, Moody).

11. What important lesson should we learn from the examples seen here?

The most important lesson we should learn from today’s lesson is that God will allow us to serve him no matter the circumstances. God will create situations in which we can serve Him. It is not always easy to serve God in the natural world. As a public school teacher, I understand the risks of sharing the Word of God with the students.

The news is full of stories in which teachers have lost their jobs for bringing Christianity into schools. I am very fortunate to work in a school system in which Christian values are not challenged. I have had students who threatened to tell their parents about some of the things I say, but God has blessed me to not get into situations where my job is on the line, yet.

In fact, our school has two Christian clubs, which is led by Christian students. Many school districts would not tolerate having Christian clubs to begin with. We have Christian students who are willing to pray on Friday morning and each day during lunch. God can strengthen us to serve Him, even in the secular world.

Conclusion - Learning from Daniel and Friends

In adopting an alternative diet, Daniel and his friends reminded themselves daily that they were different from the Babylonians. Remaining God’s people meant remaining visibly distinct from the nations.

Christ said that His followers are not of the world, but are sent into it as ones who are set apart (John 17:14-19). We live in the world (1 Corinthians 5:10); yet the apostle Paul cautions us not to be yoked with unbelievers, but to come out and be separate from them (2 Corinthians 6:14-18). The separation is not one of physical isolation, but of maintaining a pure spiritual identity. According to James, pure religion entails, in part, keeping oneself unstained by the world; those who befriend the world become God’s enemies (James 1:27; 4:4).

Peter ties these themes together with Israel’s Old Testament witness by referring to Christians as strangers in this world (1 Peter 1:1, 17; 2:11) and calling us to be holy as God is holy (1:14-17). So while the cross of Christ has removed barriers between believers—whether of race, gender, age, ability, or social status—our distinctively holy way of life continues to set us apart from those who do not believe. We must never forget, however, that this difference is not for difference’s sake. We are different for the sake of witness, so that others may be drawn to God (1 Peter 2:9).

The nonbelievers we know at work, at school, and in our neighborhoods should notice that we are different. If this is not clear to them, then perhaps we, like Daniel and his friends, need a symbolic reminder of our unique identity. They chose diet as their reminder, but that won’t work today (see Mark 7:17-19). So we choose other ways to remember and announce our set-apart status. Some wear certain rings to remind themselves of the need for sexual purity. Some wear WWJD bracelets. Others

wear necklaces with crosses. Some remove the TV from being the focal point of the living room.

Christians do such things because they believe that symbolic practices can be meaningful if used properly. When Jesus washed His followers' feet, He did not significantly improve hygiene in Palestine. Nor did He change the way kings and governors rule. Rather, He created a symbol for His disciples so they would not forget that leadership in His kingdom is not about worldly power, but about service. How will you remember your unique identity in Christ this week?

Prayer

We thank You, God, for setting us apart. We thank You for calling us to the adventure of following You. This adventure is never dull and always entails making tough yet life-giving choices. Empower us the way You empowered Daniel and his friends to make the right decisions. Forgive us when we have preferred simply to blend in. Give us the courage to stand out so that You may use our witness to draw others unto You. In Jesus' name, amen.

Thought to Remember

Make your unique identity in Christ known.

Anticipating Next Week's Lesson

If Daniel's problem regarding what to eat and drink seemed difficult, the experience of the three young men Jewish men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, in enduring punishment for not bowing to Nebuchadnezzar's image was far greater. Have your students ponder the identity of the fourth person seen with them in the fiery furnace. Study Daniel 3 in preparation of April 13, 2008's lesson "Holding to Your Faith."

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The Pulpit Commentary, Spence-Jones, H. D. M. (Hrsg.), Bellingham, WA : Logos Research Systems, Inc.

The KJV Parallel Bible Commentary, by Nelson Books.