

Faith and Protest in A Strange World Daniel 1:1-9

Last week we saw how Nebuchadnezzar raided the temple at Jerusalem and took its treasures back to the temple of his own god in Babylon. But that's not all he took. Arguably, he took something far more valuable. As Nelson Mandela said 'Our children are our greatest treasure. They are our future.' And Nebuchadnezzar's army hauled Israel's future off into exile, to use them to build the world he wanted.

So this morning we're going to look at the pressure to conform, drawing a line in the sand, and where we can get the courage to do that.

The Pressure of Culture

So, in v6 we meet the four young men, 'Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah of the tribe of Judah' who are going to become the leading players in the first half of the book. They're a reminder, especially this weekend, that in all the big picture stuff with which this book is concerned, in the rise and fall of presidents and empires, that God has his hand on the lives of those who trust him.

Verses 3-4: 'Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility, youths without blemish, of good appearance and skilful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king's palace.'

Now, how would you describe these young people Nebuchadnezzar selects? And what does that tell us about what this Babylonian society valued? It's fascinating isn't it: Firstly they went for youth. Then they choose the ablest students. But they also had to be without blemish and of good appearance.

I've told you this before, but when Su and I were at university, there was a group of students who were called the Beautiful People: privately educated, wealthy, intelligent and good looking. I was not in that group! But Daniel was, and it's that group – the Beautiful People - that gets selected for Babylon. Even then image and appearance were critical, weren't they. It's a forerunner of our western cult of youth and image and charisma over character.

Now, in the Cold War, the Russian KGB recruited spies from the West's top universities. But Nebuchadnezzar, rather than recruit them and leave them where they are as his agents, takes the cream of the nation off into exile. He siphons off the elite – 'the intellectual capital' of the Jewish people¹, and teaches them.

And look what they were to be taught, v4-5: 'The literature and language of the Chaldeans... They were to be educated for three years, and at the end of that time they were to stand before the king.' So, just ask yourself, what's Nebuchadnezzar's education policy? He enrolls them in an intensive three-year university program, during which they had to learn the language and literature of the Babylonians. He wants them to learn to think and speak and live like the surrounding culture. And the aim is assimilation and homogenisation, isn't it? He wants these young people integrated into the Babylonian system, so that, when they come out the other end, everyone is thinking the same. He wants to take

¹ Helm, 20.

them and make them Babylonians. And by the time they graduate they'll be insiders, not outsiders, thinking, feeling, responding like Babylonians. Because if they can be made to think like Babylonians, they will live as Babylonians.

In other words, Nebuchadnezzar believed you could change people, and mold them to your culture, and he does that in four ways. He **isolates** them, and cuts them off from everything they had known and that had shaped them. Secondly, he **immerses** them in his culture. Thirdly, he **invites** them into his circle with his food, so they don't need to think of themselves as defeated enemies anymore, they can make it here, they can be the king's friend. And fourthly, he removes their **identity**, by renaming them.

And the parallels with today are clear, aren't they? If we can just get them when they're young; if we can influence the education system; if we can change the way you think, then you'll agree with us and live like us. And today that plays out in multiple areas of our own societies, from advertising, to scientific materialism, to the tolerance agenda, or same-sex marriage.

But of course it's not just the young who are susceptible to this. We all are. When you're exposed over a prolonged period of time to the rhythms of a secular culture – to what the American philosopher, James KA Smith, calls its *liturgies*, you too can begin to imbibe the thinking and living of Babylon. And that can be happening to you without you even being aware of it.

In his commencement address at Kenyon College, the writer, David Foster Wallace, told a parable: "There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, 'Morning, boys. How's the water?' And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, 'What the hell is water?'" You see, you can be immersed in a culture, it can be shaping your mind and profoundly influencing your life and your loves, and you don't even realise it. You're swimming in water and you don't even know what water is.

I had a friend who went away to university, and in his hall of residence there was a culture of stealing from the canteen and shop, something he would never have done at home. But away from home, he too began to steal, because that was what you did, everyone stole. And at first his conscience bugged him, but not for long. And it was only when he came home and we would meet up in the holidays and speak about it in a different culture, that he realised – that's the water I've been swimming in. And here are Israel's young elite being plunged into Babylon's waters. And if that's the water they get used to, then God's people will be one generation away from becoming Babylonian.

And Daniel gives us one telling example of how things worked, and it's the changing of their names.

Now on the surface this might seem like an innocent bit of cultural adaptation; but in reality it was an attempt to further uproot them. You see, like all Hebrew names, their original names testified to the God they worshipped. Daniel means, *God is Judge*. Hananiah means, *the Lord shows grace*. Mishael means, *Who is like*

God? – which, if you’re wondering, expects a negative answer: there is no one like our God! And Azariah means, *The Lord helps*.

But compare those to the new Babylonian names they’re given. Daniel was called Belteshazzar. Which means, May Bel – the Babylonian god - protect his life. Hananiah was called Shadrach, which means Command of Aku – the moon god. Azariah was called Abednego, which means, Servant of Nabu - the Babylonian god of wisdom and agriculture. And Mishael was called Meshach, which means, Who is like Aku, the moon god?

The message was clear: From now on you’re not in the service of Judah’s king or God, you’re in the service of Nebuchadnezzar and his gods. And their new names express that new allegiance. It’s like a restaurant that puts up a sign: under new management, under new ownership.

Plus, this was an attempt to eradicate any distinctions between them and their fellow Babylonian students: You’re all Babylonians now. And the God of Israel is erased and replaced by their idols, and now these gods must define you. And think of the parallels to today: in our own societies we see attempts to level everything by stifling any dissent about morality, and have everyone on board. And the God of the Bible is squeezed out and replaced by other gods; gods of personal freedom and money and sex.

And yet, as we’ll see next week, the answer of these young men to the challenge they faced was not to retreat to the ghetto, or withdraw or disengage at work or on campus. Rather, they engaged with the Babylonian literature and languages, they studied hard, they worked, and God blessed them, and they end up graduating top of their class. And their approach has something to teach us about our own approach to work or study in an increasingly non-Christian environment.

But the time for resistance did come, and for Daniel and friends, collaboration with the state had its limits.

A Line in the Sand

Look at v5: ‘The king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate, and of the wine that he drank.’

Now, given that Babylonian culture placed such a high value on physical appearance, it’s no surprise these students were given the best food. I don’t know about you, but that was not my experience! I remember a cartoon appearing in our college magazine, where the head chef and his underling were peering over a pan boiling the usual broccoli on the stove – it was always broccoli - and the junior chef says, ‘o I think I can see a vitamin’; to which the head chef replied, ‘then boil it for another hour!’

But students are students, aren’t they. Put on a free lunch and they’ll come! So imagine a university course where food was provided free for any student enrolled on the course! ‘Underwater basket weaving anyone?’ ‘Please, I’m a guy!’ ‘It comes with free food.’ ‘Ok, sign me up!’

And Daniel and his friends have lived through the siege of Jerusalem. So this food would have been unlike anything they had ever imagined. Plus, to receive the king's food was a huge honour. So it wasn't just their bodies it would feed but their egos too.

And yet, they refuse it. Verse 8, 'But Daniel resolved...' Now, up until now, Nebuchadnezzar and his people have been calling the shots, and everyone else has just been swept along by events. But with Daniel's resolve that changes. As Daniel decides to take a stand *he* begins to shape the story.

Now sure students love to complain about university food, don't they? But this was different. This was the best food the greatest world super power could offer. So why refuse it? Was it because it had been offered to idols? Maybe, but that would have been true of the vegetables he does agree to eat as well as the meat he doesn't. Was he concerned about ritual uncleanness – and obeying the Old Testament food laws? Maybe, but there were no laws against wine, and he refuses that. Or maybe, as Daniel would have known, in the Ancient Near East eating a meal with someone was the last step in making a covenant with them. It was to commit yourself to friendship with them, and whilst Daniel was willing to loyally serve the king, there was a step of acceptance and friendship he would not take.

Well, most likely, it was a combination of things. You see the reason Daniel gives is in v8, 'Daniel resolved that he would not *defile* himself with the king's food.' And he would have known from Moses and the prophets about the dangers of being defiled by neighbouring pagan practices. He would have known that the OT food laws served as a demarcator, to teach the people of Israel about the holiness of God; and about loyalty to God; of the difference between the holy and the unholy, and of being different from the surrounding peoples. And given that the food laws would have made fellowship with the surrounding peoples almost impossible, they served as a barrier against negative, external, pagan influence.

So maybe Daniel's resolve, not to eat the king's food, was a means, a reminder, to not allow themselves to become ensnared by the temptations of Babylonian culture. It was a way of maintaining their identity as separate from the system.

You see Proverbs 23:3 says, 'do not desire [a ruler's] delicacies, for they are deceptive food.' In other words, the danger of mixing with those in power is that over time you're drawn into their circle. You're deceived by the culture you are swimming in.

In 1944, CS Lewis gave the memorial Lecture at Kings College London, and he titled it *The Inner Ring*. In it he describes the phenomenon of the Inner Ring. This desire to be in among those who are really in, and once in, to keep out those who are not yet in. To be among the select few who know, because this is what sets you apart. And Lewis concludes by saying, 'The quest for the inner ring will break your hearts, unless you break it.' And Daniel and his friends were being offered access to the Inner Ring. But they would not defile themselves to get it, they would not compromise their loyalty to God, to gain that kind of access.

But the question is, have we? Have you, or are you compromising to get access to the Inner Ring? The inner ring of some wrong relationship, or group of friends, or upper echelons of management, or the in-crowd at work. Is the king's food working its deception on you?

You see, Daniel had decided what his priority would be, and it wasn't going to be his own protection, he was prepared to say 'no' to the king. And it wasn't going to be his personal pleasure, but neither was it going to be promotion or success. Daniel's priority was purity.² It was holiness.

But to take that path, and refuse to be ultimately shaped by your culture, and be willing to say 'no', whilst lovingly serving your society, carries risk doesn't it? For Daniel, there's the risk of how the other young Jewish guys who did take the king's food will think and speak of him. But there's also the risk to his future. I mean, think about it. Daniel's future in Jerusalem is over. To succeed in Babylon is his only hope. So should he throw all that away, his one chance? All he needs is keep his head down and play along. He just needs to eat the food. And yet he doesn't. He's prepared to face those risks.

So right at the beginning of his career, Daniel drew a line. This was where he would dig his toes in. And it was here, in the seemingly insignificant issue of food that these guys' courage later on to risk death by fire, or the lion's mouth, was forged. You see, when we hear the chink of the king's plates and the clink of his glasses, we don't think there's a spiritual battle going on, do we? – it's just a meal. But it here's that spiritual metal is fashioned. It's here, in the small decisions, and often in private, that the battles of faith are won and lost – long before we stand before the mouths of ravenous lions.

And notice Daniel doesn't wait until he's promoted, he doesn't wait until he's in a position of strength, or until he has the social capital to have his voice heard – he does it from a position of weakness, when he's starting out. You see, the longer you leave it to honour God and confess Christ, the harder it becomes. We think it will get easier, but it only ever gets harder the higher you go.

But where does Daniel's resolve come from? You see, if this issue of food was less about food and more about Daniel's heart, then this must have been something he decided ahead of time, mustn't it? The food is just the crisis of the moment. But his inner resolve as to who he would serve must have been decided already – or else this simply wouldn't have bothered him. So where was that resolve born?

Well, as one commentator has pointed out, Daniel and his friends were raised, not in King Jehoiakim's court – he's only been on the throne for 3 years - but in his father's – King Josiah. And King Josiah led this renaissance of biblical thinking, and restored the centrality of the word of God. And that's the culture these young men's parents raised them in. That's the foundation they laid in their lives – a commitment to the word of God and the centrality of living for the glory of God. That was their defining culture that meant they could stand in this culture. And whether it's us as parents, or in Sunday school, we need to raise kids like this don't we?

² Helm, 26.

But not just kids – we all need to be like this. Because at some time, we will all face this, when something wrong needs to be protested against, when truth and justice need to be defended, when in conscience we cannot go along with something and must say so, regardless of the implications; when we too must decide we will not eat the king's food.

So how can we have the inner resolve, when the crunch comes, to choose God's glory and our purity over our protection, pleasure or promotion? How can we choose to live as exiles, as citizens of another city, whose lives are defined by heaven, not the culture?

Set Apart Christ as Lord

Look at 1 Peter 3:13-15: 'Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.'

So, Peter says that when you're facing potential conflict, or suffering for the sake of righteousness, or have to give an account for why you believe and act as you do, you need, v15, to 'honour Christ the Lord as holy' in your heart, or as other translations put it, to set apart Christ as Lord in your heart.

In other words, when you face that moment of testing, you need to decide who you're going to serve, who it is who's going to be king; who it is who is going to call the shots in your life; whose word of applause or criticism is going to mean more to you. And Peter says, it's got to be Christ.

You see, the phrase 'Jesus is Lord', just trips off our tongues doesn't it, it's easy to say; but for the first Christians it was radically revolutionary and counter-cultural. Because 'Caesar is Lord' was stamped on coins and declared in public – it was the motto of the state. So to say 'Jesus is Lord' is to say, 'yes, and Caesar isn't.' And increasingly, in our day, to say Jesus is Lord is just as revolutionary.

But when Caesar or Nebuchadnezzar, or whoever else, wants your heart and life, you have to decide up ahead of time who your Lord is going to be. And Daniel and friends could face down fear and take a stand, because they had set God apart as Lord, as holy, ahead of time. And so must we.

When Jesus was asked whether it was right to pay taxes to Caesar or not, how did he respond? He asked for a denarius, and asked whose image was on it. And the answer? Caesar's. So give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. Give to Caesar what has Caesar's image on it and to God what has God's image on it. But what has God's image on it? You! It's your life Jesus is talking about. You're God's image bearer. So sure honour the state and its laws, Jesus says, but God is after far more than that, he's after you.

So let me ask you, in what situations do you find it most difficult to stay faithful to God - at home, on campus, or at work? Where are those situations where you feel most squeezed by the surrounding culture and the pressure to conform? The

pressure to sign something off you know is wrong. The pressure to massage results. The pressure to join in on gossip. The pressure to keep your head down and protect yourself, or prioritise your pleasure, or your promotion.

And where can you get the resolve and the courage to set apart Christ as Lord in those situations?

Well look at v9: 'And God gave Daniel favour and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs.' It's the second of the three 'And God gave...' in chapter 1. And this one is to steel our hearts for commitment: that you and I can live in the middle of Babylon without being a Babylonian. You can live out a life of personal holiness, because God will give you the strength to do it, because it's the favour of God you need, not the king's.

You see, daring to be a Daniel is not so much about daring to be different, as daring to be a disciple of Christ. And here are four young men from the royal family, from the tribe of Judah, whom God allows to be taken into exile. But 600 years later God will allow another young man, another descendant of David, of the royal line, of the tribe of Judah, to be sent into our sinful world. And here Daniel prioritises holiness and the glory of God – and the Lord Jesus does the same – except he's the only one to do so perfectly. And whilst Daniel's moment of trial comes in a hall of residence in Babylon, Jesus' moment comes in a garden outside Jerusalem. And whilst Daniel decides he cannot take the king's food and cup, for Jesus the trial is different, isn't it? For him the trial was to *take* the cup, *the* King's cup, the cup of God's wrath that was ours to drink. And he made his own resolution: not my will but yours be done, and drank it to its dregs.

And so just as with Daniel, Jesus' resolve meant risk, the risk of the cross. But it's there, at the cross, as you see Christ risking everything for you, that you and I can find the resolve to risk and do the right thing, and choose holiness, and seek God's glory, and not our own. And just as with Daniel, the risk and the cross was not the end. And just as Daniel was vindicated, so in his resurrection from the dead, Christ was vindicated and now reigns as the king to whom we can give our ultimate allegiance, and allow his Spirit to fill our hearts with his resolve for God's glory and God's will, whatever the risk.

And like Daniel, you too will know the favour of God, not because of your heroism, but because of Christ's, which has won you the endless favour of God.