

War of the Gods

Messages from the Book of Daniel

Message 2

In the House of the Enemy

Daniel 1:1-21

In the House of the Enemy

Are you glad to be back at Lehigh? I know some of you think the Christmas break was too short, and others of you became bored toward the end. By the way, the sure-fire remedy for both ailments is the Ministry Team Retreat. Why not join the Ministry Team this semester?

I'll tell you a secret. I was glad to go off to college. I did not have a poor home life. My family were decent Christians, but I was eager for a change. I did not go far. I began college at Virginia Polytechnic Institute, about three and a half hours from home. I really enjoyed it! But when I was offered a chance to go home for a weekend in October, I took it. There's no place like home!

Our story tonight is about a boy who never went home. How would you handle it if you were trapped here at Lehigh for life? Suppose you never saw your family and friends again, and there was no phone or internet communication. Imagine arriving here and being forced to learn and function in a foreign language. Suppose no one practiced your own religion. What if President Farrington was a madman who killed any students who failed to measure up to his capricious idea of excellence? What would you do? Would you try your best to fit in and survive? Would you crack under the pressure? How many years would you mourn for the life that was robbed from you?

This is essentially the situation faced by Daniel and his friends. Last week we discussed the traumatic experience of Judah being overrun by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians. The Jews were completely convinced that they would never be conquered. God promised to give them the land of Canaan forever. He promised that one of David's sons would always sit on the throne of Judah. God sent prophets to predict a future era of perfect peace and prosperity when a great deliverer, the Messiah, would come to rule the whole earth. The Jews looked for that day, and trusted God to protect them from their enemies.

But those same prophets warned the Jews that God would not tolerate their wickedness. All through their history the Jews kept flirting with worshipping other gods. Periodically they got rid of the idols, but they never totally gave them up. And as the centuries unfolded the Jews became more and more corrupt. They oppressed the poor, were sexually immoral, and murdered those who stood in the way of their goals. Does this sound like the people of God? God said, "You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy," (Leviticus 11:45) yet His people were anything but holy. They were God's chosen people, but God was about to make another choice.

The prophet Habakkuk tells us that God chose the Babylonians to discipline Judah for her wickedness. It was a harsh discipline. Listen again as Habakkuk describes the people who would come to teach Judah a lesson.

For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation,
who march through the breadth of the earth, to seize dwellings not their own.

⁷ They are dreaded and fearsome; their justice and dignity go forth from themselves.

⁸ Their horses are swifter than leopards, more fierce than the evening wolves;
their horsemen press proudly on.

Their horsemen come from afar; they fly like an eagle swift to devour.

⁹ They all come for violence, all their faces forward.

They gather captives like sand.

¹⁰ At kings they scoff, and at rulers they laugh.

They laugh at every fortress, for they pile up earth and take it.

¹¹ Then they sweep by like the wind and go on,

guilty men, whose own might is their god! (Habakkuk 1:5-11)

Exactly as God had predicted, the Babylonians came and conquered Judah. They came three times. In 605 B.C. they replaced the king, imposed tribute, and took the best young men back to Babylon. In 587 B.C. they came and destroyed the city. The last time they came, in 582 B.C., they killed or exiled everyone but those who were too old or sick to revolt again.

This is the people who held Daniel and his friends in Babylon. It was no fun. Their families, their city, their temple, their whole life was gone forever. And as we shall see next week, Nebuchadnezzar the king, whom they served, was a murderous madman. What would you do in such a situation?

Conflict or Conformity?

People typically respond to captivity in one of three ways. Faced with a radical new regime and intense pressure to conform, many do. I suppose this is the most common response. The simple, obvious way to avoid the anger of Nebuchadnezzar was to do whatever he wanted. And it would be so easy to go along with the tide of their new culture. You would begin by rationalizing that some measure of cooperation is necessary in order to stay alive. Your decision would be so much easier because of the sumptuous food and luxurious accommodations in the king's quarters. Furthermore, if you do not cause trouble, you may be in line for a position in which you could influence the king. It would cause you a twinge of conscience, but you would begin to wonder if serving God really mattered in this new, strange place. After all, God did not protect you from the power of Babylon. Perhaps He is not as powerful as you thought. Perhaps He has reneged on His promises. Eventually you would forget that you ever worried about serving your former god. New gods for a new life would seem the right way to proceed.

Other people would respond in the opposite manner. They would vow never to budge an inch from their religion. You would insist on wearing the right clothes, eating the right food, celebrating all the religious festivals, and keeping every other law in the books. You would judge that any move toward conformity would compromise your faith. This whole disaster came because Judah failed to keep the law, and any hope of restoration must be based on faithful adherence to it. So you would dig in and make sure to keep every law in the scripture. And if you died, at least you were faithful to God.

There is no doubt that Nebuchadnezzar intended to make Babylonians of the Jewish boys he captured in Jerusalem. He implemented a whole program designed to scrub all Jewishness out of them. First, he taught them the Chaldean language. Every language is best suited to conveying the worldview of its culture, and the best way to begin transforming these boys into Babylonians was to teach them the language in which the ideas of that culture are best expressed. Then he taught them the literature of the Chaldeans. Of course this consisted of their own creation story, the exploits of their gods, the moral code and the laws of the new land. There would be a thorough immersion in a thought life that was opposed to the life of serving God. They were introduced to lavish food, but food which violated the laws which God had given the Jews. The boys could not eat this food without departing from the law of God. Finally, to demonstrate his complete mastery over them, Nebuchadnezzar gave the boys new names. The power to name is reserved to gods and fathers – and Nebuchadnezzar would be both. All the Hebrew names were compounds of the Hebrew word “El”, which means “God”. The replacement names were all compounds of names for pagan gods. All day, every day, every time someone spoke to them, these boys would be reminded that they were no longer serving the Hebrew God, but the Babylonian god.

At Home in Babylon

But in this situation Daniel and his friends chose neither extreme of conformity or conflict. Instead they opted for limited cooperation. Perhaps they remembered Jeremiah's instructions for living in exile:

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel,
to all who were carried away captive,
whom I have caused to be carried away from Jerusalem to Babylon:

⁵ Build houses and dwell in them; plant gardens and eat their fruit.

⁶ Take wives and beget sons and daughters;
and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands,
so that they may bear sons and daughters –
that you may be increased there, and not diminished.

⁷ And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive,
and pray to the LORD for it;
for in its peace you will have peace. (Jeremiah 29:4-7)

Notice carefully what Jeremiah says. This exile was not an accident. God was not overpowered by Nebuchadnezzar. The exile was in fact God's idea. Nebuchadnezzar was merely God's servant to do His will. So God said through Jeremiah, "whom *I* have caused to be carried away from Jerusalem to Babylon." Now God provided instructions on how the Jews were to conduct themselves in exile. Life was supposed to go on. They were going to be there for 70 years. They should settle down, marry, have children, and act like normal people. They must still pray. There is no excuse for abandoning God. But neither is there any cause to foment rebellion or resist in any way. God took them to Babylon, so to resist would be to resist God.

What we see here, in a sense, is that God has chosen a new people to accomplish His purpose in the earth. Judah had become so wicked, the righteous were in danger of their lives. God chose and called the Babylonians to be His people for destroying the wicked and protecting the righteous. Now the righteous were safe in Babylon. That is, as long as they would do what Jeremiah had said.

So we see Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah settling down to their studies, making a new life for themselves in this strange land. They were willing to learn a new language and study the literature of the Chaldeans. They needed to guard their hearts and minds lest they be lured away from God. But these things they could do without breaking the law of God. They even allowed their captors to call them by new names. But when it came to eating the king's food, they drew the line. Here *was* an issue which would compromise their faithfulness to God. At this point they resolved to stand firm.

The central verse in this chapter is verse eight, "But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's delicacies, nor with the wine which he drank..." Daniel did not wait until he was seated at the table and had an impossible choice to make. He did not experiment with eating or not eating the king's food. Daniel anticipated the problem, prayed about it, and made a firm decision. I think the intent of this verse is that Daniel made an irrevocable decision – rather like a vow. Daniel and his friends were willing to serve the king, and serve him with all their strength – but they would do that while remaining faithful to God. If the king would not have their service on those conditions, he could do without them.

But although Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were irrevocably determined to serve God, they did not act bratty about it. They did not storm into the chief's office, inform him that he was a wicked idolater, and announce that they would have nothing to do with his filthy food. That would have been foolish. After all, the chief had a job to do. If he failed to follow orders, he would be in serious trouble. He could lose his life if he were discovered. If it came to a showdown, there is no way anyone could expect the

chief to cooperate at all with the boys. Instead, Daniel and his friends showed the wisdom of understanding the position of their chief. In his approach to the chief of the eunuchs, and then in his follow-up appeal to the steward, Daniel acted with courtesy and sensitivity. The text tells us that God gave favor with the chief. Even so, the request was too much. It was way too dangerous to disobey an order of the king. But Daniel did not become mean, nor did he give up. He got another idea, and presented the request to a lower official. This time he proposed a test. The text is very brief, but it appears that Daniel may have offered his own royal food to this steward in return for permitting the test. However it worked out, the result was a clear vindication of Daniel's resolve.

Delivered by Grace

Now if we stopped right here this would be a message of salvation by human effort. Clearly Daniel is an admirable person – a man of strong character, a godly man. But character is no match for the power of the world, nor the power of Satan, nor the power of sin in our own lives. The story is told of Benjamin Franklin who once decided to rid himself of all his vices. Being an organized man, he made a list of his vices and tackled them one at a time. After some struggle he overcame the first item on the list. With some sense of satisfaction he moved on to the second vice. But as he worked to eliminate that one, he noticed the first creeping back. With great diligence he managed to kill the first and overcome the second. But when he attacked the third, the first two came storming back. Benjamin Franklin was a man of strong character, but he was no match for his own sins.

Surely Daniel was no match for Nebuchadnezzar – no matter how strong he was. You can just imagine the scene – stalwart Daniel standing before the throne and heroically saying, “Do what you want, O king, but I will never eat your food.” Then Nebuchadnezzar kills him. So much for strong character.

But God's people learn early to depend on God for their strength. Daniel placed himself in God's hands, and God saved him. In verse 17 we read, “God gave them knowledge and skill in all literature and wisdom; and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams.” This shows us that the food test was not merely a nutrition contest. God was present there giving the boys success in their effort to be faithful to Him. And having pledged themselves to serving God in the small matter of their food, God also granted them success in their studies. Three years later when their studies were completed they had the ultimate test – an oral exam before Nebuchadnezzar himself. This was it. Would God come through for them? Would their hard work pay off? Would their obedience to God be worth it? Verse 20 says, “In all matters of wisdom and understanding about which the king examined them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers who were in all his realm.”

The lesson here is that God gives grace to His people. Facing an impossible situation, God granted supernatural success to those men who wholeheartedly sought to follow Him. There were many Jews who kept the parts of the law that did not conflict with the policies of the kingdom. There were some who sought success by accommodating completely to their new situation. There were natives of Babylon who were ambitious for royal service. But the champions of the class by a huge margin were those Jews who loved God more than success.

Grace at Work Today

The simple, obvious application of this passage for us is to be faithful like Daniel. No doubt Daniel is an example of godliness for us. In a situation which might have broken many people, Daniel refused to give up. In an environment that was hostile to his faith, Daniel was resolute. He never wavered. He never lashed out. He made up his mind, he devised a wise plan, and he patiently implemented it. You should do likewise.

You are living and working in an environment which is often hostile to your faith. A few years ago

a student here took a course which required several papers. The professor rejected any papers which did not include a discussion of the homosexual elements of the work in question – whether homosexuality was evident or not. When Seamas took the Milton course the teacher kept insisting that Milton did not have a biblical view of Christ. Week after week Seamas kept objecting – politely, of course. Finally the professor asked him to lead a discussion of his viewpoint during one class period. Dr. Behe is ridiculed by his own department for questioning the current evolutionary dogma. Lehigh can be a nasty place if you are faithful to God.

Sex outside of marriage is the accepted norm here. Many of your friends fornicate regularly. Television shows, movies, literature, and all the arts show sex as recreation, not as an expression of the covenant of marriage. Even if you are still a virgin, do you think like one? It is hard in this culture. Suppose you avoid the typical college sins of drunkenness and sex, do you have a biblical attitude toward money? Jesus said that money is like a god. It has the power to control you. Are you lusting after a well-paying job so you can buy the American dream? Or is your career your idol? God has placed you here to study and learn, but the purpose is to serve Him. Our culture exalts careers to god-like status. We willingly sacrifice our children and elderly parents to maintain our career path. Is this not the way of the world around us? Even when you are not being attacked directly for your Christian faith, your environment is at war with you.

Are you like Daniel? Have you examined these pressures to conform? Have you resolved – irrevocably – to follow God, whatever the cost? Do you have a plan for living differently than those around you? You should.

The examples I have given so far are very important issues in Christian living. But I think there is one issue which, like food for Daniel, is a watershed issue. That is the fourth commandment – keeping the Lord's Day holy. God has appointed six days for us to work, but He has reserved the seventh for rest and worship. Sunday is the day when God's people cease their normal occupations and gather around His throne to worship Him. God's ministers proclaim the gospel, and everyone feasts on the body and blood of Jesus. It is the highlight of the week! When Nebuchadnezzar summoned Daniel and his friends to the throne, they never even considered refusing to come. When Jesus calls you on Sunday, you may not refuse to go. Whatever else you do, never miss worship in church on Sunday. Large group is wonderful, but this is not Sunday worship. Your highest priority as a Christian is worship in church on Sunday.

We live in a complex society. It is more challenging to rest on Sunday in an industrial society than in an agricultural society. Some people use this as an excuse for abusing the Lord's Day. I know that sometimes you might need to buy gas on Sunday, or do a load of laundry. But if you resolve to keep the Lord's Day holy, God will show you how to develop the habits necessary to doing so. Start where you are now and begin a process of obedience. One thing you can do now is to anticipate that this university may schedule one of your exams on the Lord's Day. You are blessed, because Lehigh allows you to take your exam on a different day if it occurs on Sunday. Resolve now to ask your professor for the exam on some different day if this happens to you.

You should resolve to serve God, whatever the cost. But if that is all you do, you will be a Pharisee. You will be attempting to do on your own strength what no one – not even Daniel – could do. You cannot serve God in your own power. Praise God, He has promised grace to those who fear Him! I can not promise you that if you serve God with all your heart you will get the highest grade in your class. But I can assure you that any attempt to obey God on your own power is doomed to failure. I can also assure you that when you rely upon God's power, He will not let you down.

If you play games with God, you have no guarantees. But if you commit yourself wholeheartedly to Him, if you seek wisdom to obey His law to the fullest, God will prosper you. If you are holding out on

God, do so no longer! God shows us in the gospel that Jesus is the source of the grace we need to serve Him. In John's gospel we read,

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. ¹⁶ And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. (John 1:14, 16-17)

If you have never believed in Jesus, tonight is a good time to do so. If you so believe in Jesus, continue. Step out in obedience, trusting Him to carry you through.

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January 24, 2006