

RESOLVE NOT TO DEFILE YOURSELF

After Dayo's introduction last week, we're going to start to delve into the Book of Daniel proper. But, I just want to remind you of the setting. The people of the kingdom of Judah (the two tribes of Benjamin and Judah, with the capital being Jerusalem) have gone astray from following the one true God. Led astray by their leaders, they have started worshipping all sorts of idols and the sun, moon and stars. There is little justice in the land. The previous three kings are described in the book of II Kings as "doing evil in the eyes of the Lord", and after great exercise of patience, including the sending of a number of prophets to warn of judgement and to call to repentance, God has finally decided that He will now act in judgment. And in 605 BC, the powerful king of Babylon, a man called Nebuchadnezzar, had come and besieged Jerusalem, carrying off its king, Jehoiakim and taking vessels and treasure from God's temple. He leaves Jehoiakim's son, Jehoiachin on the throne, but within three months, carries him off too and installs his uncle instead. He carries off all the items of value from the temple that are left and puts them in the temple of his god, Marduk. All this was done (in the earthly, political sense) because Jehoiakim had rebelled against him and tried to ally himself with the king of Egypt. And so, we come to our passage:-

"Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring in some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility – young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians. The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years and after that, were to enter the king's service.

Among these were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. The chief official gave them new names. To Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego.

But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself in this way. Now God caused the official to show favour and sympathy to Daniel, but the official told Daniel, "I am afraid of my Lord the king, who has assigned your food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men of your age? The king would then have my head because of you."

Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over them, "Please test your servants for ten days; give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see." So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days.

At the end of the ten days, they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food. So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead.

To those young men, God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds.

At the end of the time set by the king to bring them in, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. The king talked with them and he found none could equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king's service. In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanter in his whole kingdom.

And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.”

Daniel 1:3-21

So as well as stripping the temple of its treasure, Nebuchadnezzar decides to strip the nation of its brightest talent to serve in his empire. So Ashpenaz, his chief official, is directed to seek out royal or noble young men (i.e. of good family and background) who are physically perfect and also smart. Nebuchadnezzar is not interested in young men who would adorn his court, but who were dull or stupid. Nor is he interested in handsome, smart young men of humble circumstances. Among those carried off to what sounds like a cross between the University of Babylon and the Chaldean Civil Service staff college, are four teenagers who pass all the tests, from the tribe of Judah. These are Daniel and his three friends, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. And so they are carted off the 600 miles (not as the crow flies) to the city of Babylon. (The ruins of Babylon are a bit to the south of Baghdad – the capital of modern day Iraq.) Babylon would have stunned the exile/prisoner/students. Surrounded by huge walls that were wide enough to drive a chariot round; full of magnificent palaces and temples. Its 'hanging gardens' became famed as a 'Wonder of the World'. Up till then, Jerusalem would have been the largest place they'd seen, but that was 'tin pot' compared to this mighty city. Jerusalem had one temple, built by Solomon, but that would have looked very second division architecture compared to this opulence.

And this is what the king decreed for them – they were to learn the language and literature of the Babylonians. And to make sure there was no hindrance to this, they were assigned to eat a daily diet of food and wine from the king's table. Nothing was stinted. (Incidentally, the 18-year-old king, Jehoiachin, wasn't so lucky. He was in prison with an accompanying prison diet and was only released 37 years later at the age of 55. Archaeologists have actually found the ration docket for the food allocated to him and his sons.)

Nebuchadnezzar's purpose was to turn these young men into the best of Babylonian civil servants. The first thing after they've arrived is to change their Hebrew names to good Babylonian ones.

As Dayo mentioned last week, the names of these four friends all had meaning and, since I have no knowledge of Hebrew, I've had to look them up.

Daniel	= The Lord is judge/the Lord is my judge.
Hananiah	= Yahweh is/has been gracious.
Mishael	= Who is like the Lord?
Azariah	=Yahweh is my keeper/Yahweh has helped me.

Good names – all referring to Yahweh, the God of Israel, the one true God.

But these are changed by the chief official, Ashpenaz to:-

Belteshazzar = Bel (Marduk) protect his life.

Shadrach = Command of Aku (the moon god).
Meshach = Who is like Aku?
Abednego = Servant of Nego/Nebo (Nabu – the shining one).

And they just had to take these names, which seem to refer to Babylonian deities with the references to the true God removed. Daniel is called Belteshazzar for years until the Persian invasion in 539 BC.

And so, we come to the crunch of chapter 1 of the book of Daniel. In spite of being carried off hundreds of miles from home to a foreign capital of such magnificence; despite being given a new name with no reference to his god, Daniel makes a stand.

“But Daniel resolved not to defile himself... .” v8.

Daniel decided that if he took the rich food and wine decreed for him by the king himself, he would defile himself. The text is not quite clear as to why such food and wine would make him unclean, but could have been for one or more of the following reasons:

- a) the food had somehow been involved in an offering to the Babylonian gods;
- b) the blood had not been drained from the meat in God’s prescribed manner;
- c) the meat of unclean animals was included (the Babylonians were fond of pig meat and also ate horse meat);
- d) to eat the king’s meat/food was to show obligation to/dependence on the king and Daniel wanted to show loyalty to his God only.

[This last reason, if accurate, explains why Ashpenaz wouldn’t be too happy about such an arrangement, as he knew his head was also forfeit if Nebuchadnezzar got to hear of it.]

Nevertheless, the Lord had caused the official to show favour to Daniel and his friends and although he rejects Daniel’s proposal through fear, he doesn’t ‘shop’ him to Nebuchadnezzar. But Daniel hasn’t finished because he’s “resolved” to avoid being defiled. And he tries another tack. This time he approached the servant/guard appointed to look after the four friends (and others as we shall learn) and suggests an experiment – what we scientists would now call an empirical trial. He suggests a ten-day trial where he and his friends are given vegetables and water only and everyone else gets the king’s diet. And the guard/servant gives it a go. “At the end of ten days,” says Daniel, “treat your servants in accordance with what you see.”

And after ten days, the four friends are compared with their colleagues and found to be healthier and better nourished. Those of us of a vegetarian disposition may think that this is because of the superiority of their diet, whilst the meat eaters may suspect a miracle that they were healthier and better nourished on such a regime, but I would suggest that it wasn’t about the food/diet at all. It was about Daniel and his friends’ determination not to defile themselves. They wanted to follow the way prescribed by God’s laws and they were prepared to go out on a limb to make it happen. They had to stand up for the right way in this circumstance, take risks and exercise faith that God would support and help them in this endeavour and resolve.

And the story of Daniel 1 is how the Lord helped them to stand out for Him. Not only that, but He also arranged things so that others stopped defiling themselves because the results of Daniel's, Hananiah's, Mishael's and Azariah's faith were so visible. One minute they were feasting on the royal diet and then, ten days later, they're put on the crazy diet of the four friends. I bet they were "dischuffed" and not a little 'hacked off'!

(I find that quite amusing – God does have a sense of humour.)

And the Lord blessed these four young men in other ways – they are given knowledge and understanding in all kinds of literature and learning with Daniel having a special gift in the understanding of dreams and visions (as Chapter 2 will demonstrate next week!). On graduation day, when they are examined by Nebuchadnezzar, he actually finds them much better than anyone else, not just their fellow students. And they enter his service following the instructions that had been sent them from the prophet Jeremiah, who remained in Jerusalem.

“Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage; multiply there and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

Jeremiah 29:4-7

We may get placed in difficult situations, but what the Lord is looking for is acceptance of his purpose for us and a resolve to follow His ways. This will need the exercise of faith and the taking of risks; a determination not to compromise on God's standards. But He also expects us to be His ambassadors and He will do marvellous things through us.

When Nebuchadnezzar carried off Judah and the temple treasures, he thought his god, Marduk, was all powerful. What we find in the first four chapters is that God has allowed His people to be taken captive, firstly as judgment, but also as invaders of Babylon. And we will see Nebuchadnezzar himself acknowledging that the God of Israel was the Most High God. And it all started with these four lads' resolve not to defile themselves. Who knows what He might achieve through our resolve to follow His direction and ways?

Let's pray.