

Sermon- 6-8-2014

Text- Daniel 1

Title- Holy Determination

Father's day is next weekend, but I'm not speaking on that day, so I wonder if you'll indulge me a little time to express some fatherly sentiments toward my daughters? I have two little girls. Meira, who just turned 8, is my youngest and Aria, who is 9 for about another month, is my oldest. Now I'm proud of both my little girls, but today I want to tell you about something Aria recently shared with my wife and I. Aria has been keeping a journal. It's not an everyday thing for her, but when an idea or interesting thought comes to her, Aria likes to write it down. You might be interested to know the kind of sweet and simple thoughts my nine year old has occasion to commit to the page. Well, she gave me permission to show them to you. So with her full knowledge and consent I'd like to read you some of Aria's entries.

On March 16<sup>th</sup> she wrote: "Why do bands have funny names? Because of an inside joke? Because they couldn't come up with anything? Genuinely have bad taste?" This is how you clearly know she's her father's daughter. (Seriously, though, Toad the Wet Sprocket, Goo Goo Dolls, Hoobastank? She's got a real point!)

The same day, Aria wrote, "Why is it only men with their perspective when the heart of a woman is as important as man's? Sometimes men's opinions are valued more than women's. It's discrimination based on gender." And that's how you know that Aria's her mother's daughter!

Aria's next entry reads, "It matters not the beauty but the character. God has been misunderstood. Everyone thought Him only a king, He's also the Father of the UNIVERSE!"

The next entry, March 17<sup>th</sup>, Aria writes, "No one knows the cost of death until one has been in the face of it. But happiness can still be found, for a loved one who was sick and dying will run and jump in heaven. So rejoice, for they are not dead, they are safe in the hands of God."

So Aria's our little philosopher. She's nine years old and already thinking such big thoughts that I sit in disbelief. She and her sister represent the best of what my wife and I have contributed to this world. Now I want to you to consider for a moment how inconceivable it would be to us, and how utterly devastated we would be, if our girls were to be taken from us. Whisked away to another land where we would no longer be able to communicate with them. Can you imagine? And what if it weren't just my daughters, but all the young adults represented in this room. What if all our teenagers, the best and brightest, were taken away to a

foreign land to be raised by strangers. Consider the ramifications of that for a moment. There would be such anguish. Such despair.

These are the exact circumstances that befell the person we will be studying over the course of the next four weeks in a series of messages we've titled, "Stand Strong." Daniel was a young Israelite boy who lived in Jerusalem over 2,500 years ago, until the city was conquered by a foreign king who removed Daniel and his peers from their homeland and families.

As we study the life of Daniel we'll be asking some big questions, but they're extremely relevant to our lives today. How do we live out our faith in God in meaningful ways, even when it costs us deeply? How do we stand boldly and purposely for God in the face of opposition? Even when it could have cost him his life, Daniel remained steadfast in his faith, confident in God's goodness, and determined to live in such a way as to bring glory to God in every circumstance he faced.

Today, as we look at the early part of Daniel's story, it will show us how to live a believing life in an unbelieving world. We live in a society that presses against the very notion of a personal God who we can know and relate to. The existence of God has become a subject of debate. Truth has become relative, and the desire to be obedient to God has been replaced by an individualistic mindset that says, 'I will do what's good and right for me.' So looking at Daniel's life is extremely relevant for us because God calls us to live with a holy determination to know, trust, and follow Him in spite of the opposition we may face. That's Daniel's story, let's start in the first chapter of the book that bears his name.

*1During the third year of King Jehoiakim's reign in Judah, [Make a mental note, this is 605 BC] King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it.*

Now, in the ancient world, Jerusalem was a city approximately 3 miles in circumference. Nebuchadnezzar came from the east and besieged the city with his army. 10's of thousands of soldiers surrounded the city of Jerusalem and prevented any supplies from entering. After a period of time they had to surrender, of course, because the people were starving. So, Babylon under King Nebuchadnezzar won the war without losing a single soldier.

After the people of Israel have surrendered, in verse 3, we're told:

**3** Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, his chief of staff, to bring to the palace some of the young men of Judah's royal family and other noble families, who had been brought to Babylon as captives.

**4** "Select only strong, healthy, and good-looking young men," he said. "Make sure they are well versed in every branch of learning, are gifted with knowledge and good judgment, and are suited to serve in the royal palace. Train these young men in the language and literature of Babylon."

Now, what we see here is part of the brilliant kingdom expansion policy of the Babylonians. Whenever Babylon defeated a new region, they would take the most promising individuals from that region; the best and the brightest; and deport them to Babylon. Once there, they would assimilate them into Babylonian culture and give them a Babylonian worldview, then they would send these individuals back out to serve as diplomats or governors, often times in the very regions that they were taken from.

It was an ingenious strategy that allowed Babylon to expand their kingdom and govern their massive empire, but in order for it to work, Babylon had to be successful at taking people from all different walks of life and getting them to surrender their former identities so that they would become Babylonian through and through.

To accomplish this, Babylon concentrated on the young. The King ordered young people, still in their teens and impressionable to be the ones that underwent the process. These teenagers were given a thorough Babylonian education. The king ordered his chief official to instruct them in the language and the literature of the Babylonians. Then they changed their names.

In our story there are actually four young Israelite men. Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Those were the names they were given at birth, but if you look at verse 7 you see that the chief official gave them new names. To Daniel he gave the name Belteshazzar, to Hananiah he gave the name Shadrach, to Mishael he gave the name Meshach, and to Azariah he gave the name Abednego. Don't miss what's happening here. This was not inconsequential because none of these names are arbitrary. These names have deep meaning.

The name Daniel means "God is my judge," but Belteshazzar means, "May Baal protect the king." Baal is a Babylonian deity. Hananiah means, "Who is like God," but, Shadrach means, "Who is like Achu." Mishael means, "God is gracious," but Meshach means, "Achu is exalted." Achu was another Babylonian deity. Lastly,

Azariah's Hebrew name means, "God is my helper." He's given this new name, Abednego, which means, "Servant of Nego," another of the Babylonian gods.

From birth, the names of these men reminded them not just of their own identity but of the identity of the God they served and worshiped. Now those names are stripped away and they are given new names that speak to the identity of new gods. The Babylonians want these individuals to forget who they are and become like everyone else around them. This strategy of assimilation and indoctrination centered around starting young, giving a Babylonian education, giving new names, and lastly, changing their diets.

Look at verse 5, *"The king assigned them a daily ration of food and wine from his own kitchens. They were to be trained for three years, and then they would enter the royal service."*

At first this might not seem like a very big deal. It's just food, right? But actually it's a very big deal for at least two reasons. The first reason is that this diet, the food from the king's table, would not have been a part of a kosher Jewish diet. So in order to eat this food, they would have to disobey the command of God. More than that, the food that came from the king's table would have come from being offered to Babylonian idols, the false gods of that country. For multiple reasons, these guys know deep, deep down this is food that they're not supposed to eat.

So what did they do? It says in verse 8, *"But Daniel was determined not to defile himself by eating the food and wine given to them by the king. He asked the chief of staff for permission not to eat these unacceptable foods."*

That word, "determined" is a really important word. Other translations say that Daniel, "resolved," or "purposed in his heart," not to defile himself. Now, this is where it gets interesting and not just because we're curious as to how the Babylonian captors will respond. No, it's interesting because of the manner in which Daniel chooses to take a stand.

Here's something you need to know that was taking place behind the scenes during this time. Daniel and the entire contingent of Israelites that have been brought to Babylon in exile have been instructed by their leaders to resist the Babylonians, pray against their captors and the city to which they've been brought. This makes sense to us, right? You've been brought as captives to another land where they're trying to squeeze your very heritage out of you, well, you should buck against that at every opportunity, right?

Only that's not what God desired of his people. Jeremiah, one of God's true prophets who was living back in Jerusalem at that time, wrote the exiles a letter

expressing God's position on how they were to behave. This is what the letter said, and it's amazing because it became a blueprint for how Daniel chose to live his life while in Babylon. Jeremiah 29:4 says, *"4 This is what the Lord of Heaven's Armies, the God of Israel, says to all the captives he has exiled to Babylon from Jerusalem: 5 "Build homes, and plan to stay. Plant gardens, and eat the food they produce. 6 Marry and have children. Then find spouses for them so that you may have many grandchildren. Multiply! Do not dwindle away! 7 And work for the peace and prosperity of the city where I sent you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, for its welfare will determine your welfare."*

Now this must have been absolutely astounding to those who listened. This seems counterintuitive to what you think God would ever say. He says three things that must have just floored everyone. First He wants them to get a bigger picture of their circumstances. God tells them, "(This is) the city where I sent you into exile." He's telling them that their presence in a foreign land is a part of His plan. His plan was to change them and shape them and to change and shape their captors in the process. Their circumstances are not a mistake. God has them where they are for a reason.

Secondly, God does not want them to simply separate from the Babylonians at all costs. These young men have been told to pray against Babylon and her people, to separate themselves so as not to lose their identities. But God is telling them, through Jeremiah, that there's another option. On the one hand He wants them to retain their distinct identities. Verse 6 says that they were to increase in number and have kids. They weren't to just disappear into the Babylonian culture they were to multiply, which means keeping track of their numbers, which means remaining distinctive. They were to know who they were and not to lose their faith relationship with God. But on the other hand, God wanted the exiles to build houses, settle down, marry and have kids; they were to seek the prosperity of the city in which they were sent.

God wanted Daniel and his peers to hold on to their identity and faith, while simultaneously seeking the prosperity of Babylon and its people. That's a shocking position for God to ask these young men to take. He's asking them to be spiritually bi-cultural.

God tells them to move into the wicked city of Babylon but stay citizens of the city of God. He doesn't want them to love the city and begin to hate Him, nor does He want them to love Him and hate the city where they live. No, God asks them to love both.

Thirdly, in Jeremiah 29 God explains how they are to accomplish this task. You might be asking, "how can these young men retain their identity as people of God while simultaneously being asked to move in and seek the prosperity of the city of

Babylon?” How can that possibly take place? The answer is in verse 7, “pray for the city.” Seek the peace (or the shalom) of the city, “for its’ welfare will determine your welfare.” That’s the key, their *motivation*.

The word “shalom” does not just mean ‘peace.’ “Hi.” “Bye.” People use ‘shalom’ as a greeting, but the Hebrew word ‘shalom’ means, “complete well being, blessing and fulfillment.” It means spiritual and physical and economic wellbeing. So what God is saying is, “I don’t want you to just go and build your little churches in the culture and lob critiques at everything and everyone outside its’ walls. I want you to put your lives on the line to make the places in which you live prosperous and safe.” He wants us to love the city and pray for the city. Daniel and his peers had been instructed to pray against Babylon and resist, but God encouraged them to pray for the city and seek its prosperity. We’re to love the city of man for the sake of the city of God.

Now let’s hop back to Daniel’s decision in chapter 1. Daniel is faced with a situation that will test his ability to seek the prosperity of Babylon while retaining his identity of faith in God. He does not wish to eat the king’s food and defile himself, so he has determined in his heart not to do so. We pick up what happens next in verse 9, “**9** Now God had given the chief of staff both respect and affection for Daniel. **10** But he responded, “I am afraid of my lord the king, who has ordered that you eat this food and wine. If you become pale and thin compared to the other youths your age, I am afraid the king will have me beheaded.”

**11** Daniel spoke with the attendant who had been appointed by the chief of staff to look after Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. **12** “Please test us for ten days on a diet of vegetables and water,” Daniel said. **13** “At the end of the ten days, see how we look compared to the other young men who are eating the king’s food. Then make your decision in light of what you see.” **14** The attendant agreed to Daniel’s suggestion and tested them for ten days.

Daniel’s strategy here carries such wisdom. He tells them, “Let us try this for a short period of time, the results will speak for themselves.” It’s faith infused pragmatism. Daniel recognizes that nothing is more persuasive than positive results, so he allows those in power over him to retain their authority (he honors them and the process), while simultaneously trusting that God will bring about the desired growth in himself and his fellow Israelites.

Two quick points of application here: This required discipline & support. Daniel and his three friends would need to be disciplined in their eating habits to accomplish the desired goal, both in what they did and did not eat. They also

needed to be accountable to each other. If one of them faltered, they would all face the consequences. But if they worked collectively the cumulative effect of each accomplishing their goal would produce incontrovertible results. That's just a fancy way of saying they could not succeed without each other. I'm not going to belabor these points, but I think it's safe to say that people who are truly living fully, loving deeply, and giving freely are doing so through disciplined behavior and with the support of others who have the same goals.

So what were their results? Look at verse 15, "**15** *At the end of the ten days, Daniel and his three friends looked healthier and better nourished than the young men who had been eating the food assigned by the king.* **16** *So after that, the attendant fed them only vegetables instead of the food and wine provided for the others.*

**17** *God gave these four young men an unusual aptitude for understanding every aspect of literature and wisdom. And God gave Daniel the special ability to interpret the meanings of visions and dreams.*

**18** *When the training period ordered by the king was completed, the chief of staff brought all the young men to King Nebuchadnezzar. 19 The king talked with them, and no one impressed him as much as Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. So they entered the royal service. 20 Whenever the king consulted them in any matter requiring wisdom and balanced judgment, he found them ten times more capable than any of the magicians and enchanters in his entire kingdom.*

Here's the thing I'm struck by as I read this, Daniel made a decision to remain faithful to God in this one area. He didn't refuse his new name. He didn't withdraw from studying about Babylon's culture and language. In fact, Daniel allowed himself to be put in a position where he could work towards the prosperity of Babylon. But when it came to choosing between a command of king Nebuchadnezzar that was in direct opposition to a command of God, Daniel determined to remain true to his faith.

Is there a lesson somewhere in there for us? Is this, perhaps, what Paul was alluding to in his letter to the church in Corinth? You remember Paul? He hated Christians and persecuted them relentlessly, and yet had such a change of heart after an encounter with Jesus that he actually became a church planter. In his letter to the church he started in Corinth he wrote these words, **19** *Even though I am a free man with no master, I have become a slave to all people to bring many to Christ. 20 When I was with the Jews, I lived like a Jew to bring the Jews to Christ. When I was with those who follow the Jewish law, I too lived under that law. Even though I am not subject to the law, I did this so I could bring to Christ those who are under the law.*

**21** *When I am with the Gentiles who do not follow the Jewish law, I too live apart from that law so I can bring them to Christ. But I do not ignore the law of God; I obey the law of Christ.*

**22** *When I am with those who are weak, I share their weakness, for I want to bring the weak to Christ. Yes, I try to find common ground with everyone, doing everything I can to save some. 23 I do everything to spread the Good News and share in its blessings.*

Paul and Daniel both mastered a way of living that I hope we can learn to emulate. They determined to retain their identities as faithful followers of God while at the same time refusing to isolate themselves from the cultures in which they lived. They practiced distinctive living that honored God, without withdrawing from society. This is a delicate dance. It requires wisdom and spiritual dexterity. This is not an easy path to follow, but we need to become adept at it nonetheless. The stakes are far too high. The hope of our city lies in the balance, I truly believe that.

Closing- I can't imagine being Daniel's parents. Having to let my daughter go would cause immeasurable pain. I can't imagine how God allowed His son to go

Aria's journal entry for May 8<sup>th</sup> reads, "Not all stuff is good that happens in life, but if God will give His only son to die on a cross just to save us, then we should trust Him."