

## The Vegetable Test Daniel 1

Friends, we just sang some lyrics – which if you stop to think about it for a moment... reach back into Israel’s history and they describe a part of Israel’s relationship with God.

*“Rock of ages – cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee”*

When I hear those words I’m reminded of Psalm 61:2 where David writes *“lead me to the rock that is higher than I”* and also Psalm 32:7 where he says *“You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance.”*

Songs of deliverance – friends, we sing Rock of Ages, or Mighty to Save, or God of Angel Armies.. and Israel had their songs of deliverance as well.

The Song of Moses and Miriam in Exodus 15 – about the horse and rider thrown into the sea as God saved Israel from Pharaoh. The Song of Deborah in Judges 5 recounting God’s

defeat of King Jabin and his commander Sisera and their Canaanite oppressors.

And there was a little song about the time God provided water for Israel while they were in the desert, which went like this *“Spring up o well – sing about it!”* (Numbers 21:17)

Songs of deliverance... because the nation of Israel had been chosen to be God’s covenant partners – He would be their God and they would be his people, and that meant he would deliver them in times of trouble – even if they brought the trouble on themselves by being unfaithful to Yahweh - which happened rather frequently.

Israel would worship false gods and idols, Yahweh would allow them to be oppressed by the nations around them, Israel would cry out to Yahweh – He would deliver them... and for a while they would stay faithful to Him but it didn’t take too long and they would turn away from Yahweh again and the cycle would repeat itself – all the way through the Judges and eventually through all their Kings as well.

And so, through their covenant unfaithfulness God's people finally brought the consequence of exile upon themselves.

First the Northern Kingdom of Israel was conquered and exiled by the Assyrian Empire in 740 B.C. and then later on in 597 B.C. the southern Kingdom of Judah was attacked by the Babylonian Empire and King Nebuchadnezzar conquered the city of Jerusalem and raided the Temple, and the Kingdom of Judah became a province of the Babylonian empire.

And, friends this consequence of exile – this conquest of King Nebuchadnezzar sets the stage for the story of Daniel, because – believe it or not - every empire succeeds or fails because of one thing... its administrators.

You can be the most impressive King, have a huge army, rack up military victories all across the Middle East, you can conquer and subjugate all your neighbors... but if you don't have loyal, competent, honest administrators it will all be for nothing – it will all fall apart in a short time.

Friends, Empires need administrators to run things and King Nebuchadnezzar was very aware of this, and as his Babylonian Empire expanded and grew – so did his need for good administrators.

So King Neb's practice was to look for the best and brightest young men from the royal families and nobility of the countries which he conquered, and he would take them into his service and they would become his administrators.

What's more – the training and service would effectively "Babylonian-ize" these bright young men and assimilate them into the culture.

And the comfortable lifestyle and prestige which they received as administrators of the empire would be visible to everyone around them and would encourage people to adopt the customs and culture and religion of Babylon - because that was the side the bread was buttered on.

Now in our day and age of cultural sensitivity and being Canadians who appreciate a multi-cultural society this “brain drain” and cultural assimilation of a conquered people sounds horrible, it is very offensive to our post-modern values...

But while it certainly wasn’t a walk in the park... we have to realize that for most peoples and nations when they experienced becoming part of an empire like Babylon, it was usually a case of “meet the new boss – same as the old boss”

We might compare it in many ways to a hostile corporate takeover. Imagine that your company was bought out by another much bigger larger corporation – true some people will lose their jobs, but the new ownership isn’t going to fire everyone...

They are buying to expand their business – not to annihilate and destroy your company. There certainly will be changes in personnel, procedure, product, and hopefully not your paycheck – but whatever changes in the end it’s still working 9 to 5 for the boss and getting paid.

And in fact those who quickly embrace the new ownership and the new corporate culture and leave behind the old company mindset will probably be the first ones to receive promotions and supervisor position. They may get opportunities they might not have had in the old company....

And so many of the smaller nations in the middle east – got used to switching bosses, first they were “Egyptian” and then Assyrian and now Babylonian and later on it would be Persian, then Greek, Roman and so on... meet the new boss – same as the old boss.

But now that you’ve got a sense for how people in the ancient world changed loyalties from empire to empire over the years, now I’m going to tell you that for God’s people it was very different.

God’s chosen people were not used to changing Empires. They were used to being oppressed and harassed - but not conquered and exiled... because they are God’s chosen people.

Yahweh had given them the Promised Land, He secured it for them and kept them safe there and when trouble came - he delivered them.

Daniel and his friends have grown up hearing and reading about all that Yahweh their God, the God above all gods is able to do and they believe it.

They have heard that the gods of the nations around them are in fact dumb idols, powerless, unable to help their people and unable to stand against Yahweh. 1 Chronicles 16:26 says *“For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the Lord made the heavens.”*

So, for God’s people to be conquered and exiled and moved out of the Promised Land wasn’t merely a political shake-up of meet the new boss – same as the old boss – it was a crisis of faith, it was evidence that something had gone terribly wrong in their relationship with Yahweh.

What’s more God’s temple had been ransacked, looted! King Neb with his Babylonian gods: Marduk, Aku and Nebo, had come into Yahweh’s house and looted it... and at first glance it seems that Yahweh is unable to stop this.

For as often as Israel had been unfaithful – being in the Promised Land and being known as Yahweh’s chosen people was part of their core identity - and now everything that contributed to that identity was being taken away from them, indeed it even looked like Yahweh was not the all-powerful “God above all gods” He claimed to be! Had he met his match with the gods of Babylon?

And I’m sure that Daniel and his friends were wondering about all this when they were selected to become part of Nebuchadnezzar’s administration and given all that luxuries that went along with it.

Was it time to switch allegiance as their new names suggested and go along with this empire and its gods which seemed to offer opportunity and prosperity? Or, was it possible that

Yahweh was even bigger than they had ever imagined in their little corner of world in Palestine.

The good news is that Daniel and his friends were about to discover just how mighty and powerful Yahweh actually was...

And friends even though Daniel's story happened so long ago it's amazing how it still speaks to God's people when the Empires of our world rise up and become powerful and by comparison it seems like God is absent or irrelevant.

I know that it's very easy for us to feel like this in our day and age too friends – out there in the world of big business, multi-national corporations, and big banks, in the bureaucracy of governments, educational and scientific institutions, in the tidal flow of popular culture and social media and the flood of information available online.

Is our God, the father of our Lord and savior Jesus Christ – is He at all relevant or necessary anymore? Or do the empires of our world call the shots and make the world go round?

Is it our Heavenly Father that blesses us and sets out our path before us or is it the new gods of technology, education and economics that determine what we must do to succeed?

Even Church leaders start to wonder if this is all “real....” when all it takes to get a decent sized church established is some insights from organizational psychology, a good slogan, a clear and concise vision and a good marketing campaign – and viola “a church!”

Perhaps we might wonder if it is time to throw in our allegiance and loyalty with economics, or science or a good marketing campaign.

Friends - it's not time to switch allegiance, its time to discover how big God actually is.

So as Daniel and his friends are making the long journey from Judah to Babylon perhaps parts of the Torah, especially the story of Job might have come to mind and reminded them of

how great Yahweh is, how in fact He rules over **all** nations – whether they recognize it or not...

Deuteronomy 32:8 *“When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when he divided all mankind, he set up boundaries for the peoples...”*

Job 12:23 *“He makes nations great, and destroys them; he enlarges nations, and disperses them.”*

Job 36:31 *“This is the way he governs the nations and provides food in abundance.”*

So with this knowledge and conviction that Yahweh is God over all nations - in spite of what he’s recently experienced with being conquered and exiled by Babylon - Daniel decides to take a step of faith and see if its true – and so he resolves not to defile himself by eating the royal food and wine.

Now at first glance this seems to be an attempt to resist being assimilated and educated for the King’s service, or perhaps

trying to stick to the Mosaic dietary laws, or avoid food sacrificed to idols..

But it’s really a test - to see if Yahweh is still with them – if Yahweh is still their covenant God, and they are his covenant people – in spite of their defeat and exile.

If Yahweh is the God over all the nations then they will be able to serve Yahweh even if they are not in their own nation – but how to prove it?

So Daniel and friends ask for permission not to eat the royal food and the first sign of Yahweh’s favor is that the Chief Official shows sympathy to Daniel’s request.

Such a request could come across rather badly – you don’t bite the hand that feeds you. It could have been seen as a means of resisting and being subversive – “I’d rather starve than serve the Babylonians...”

But the Chief Official doesn't receive it like this, instead he is sympathetic and just tells Daniel to eat up because it's his own head on the line here.

So – Daniel decided to push the test a bit further. He doesn't bother the Chief Official anymore but instead asks the guard who serves them food to just give them vegetables and water for ten days and see what their health is like compared to the other young men.

Nobody knows about this test – not the King, not the Chief official – only the guard who agrees to do this.

Daniel wants to see if Yahweh will prosper them in spite of their deficient diet, and He does! At the end of ten days they are in better shape than the rest of the men who have a normal diet – it's a miracle.

Sorry vegans, it's not the veggie diet at work, it's Yahweh - in spite of it.

And so Daniel and his friends continue with this secret test all the way through their training as a means of assurance that Yahweh was with them in the foreign land, and a means of assuring them that their success and blessings were really from Him – and not from the false gods of Babylon.

They knew that their knowledge and understanding and learning were from Yahweh – God's blessing could still come while they were in exile, through strange writings and foreign literature.

And this assured them that if they gave their best efforts, if they advised the King wisely, and helped ensure an empire which had destroyed their home ran smoothly and efficiently they were in fact still serving Yahweh – the God who *“makes nations great, and destroys them.”*

And as you will see in our upcoming stories friends – it is this conviction and assurance which gives Daniel, Hannaniah, Mishael, and Azariah the integrity, honesty, and courage for which they are most famously known.

Friends, if you have ever aspired or desired to be a person of integrity, honesty and courage like Daniel and his three friends – the first lesson we learn from the life of Daniel in order to become this way is that our view of God has to get bigger.

We need to realize that God’s Kingdom extends everywhere and that no matter where we find ourselves in life... (contrast how a Christian would be in court vs. recent terrorist suspects who refuse to acknowledge the Law, and say they only acknowledge “god’s law”)

We must realize that whatever prosperity, blessings or success we have great or small – it’s all from God and no matter who our boss is, or what government is in authority over us, or who our employees or constituents are... we are ultimately serving God.

Paul says as much in Colossians 3:23 *“Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters”*

If only more mayors and politicians paid heed to that...

Friends, the character and integrity that are so lacking in the public sphere and other areas come from that conviction, that belief, that assurance – that whatever we do is *“done for the Lord and not for your masters”*

And we have even more assurance than Daniel and his friends did that God is with us and that we serve Him no matter where we find ourselves.

They were in exile because Israel had broken the covenant, but we have a covenant in Christ that can never be broken – sealed in His body and blood.

Daniel determined God’s faithfulness through a diet of vegetables – God strengthens our faith and assures us - we are in Christ’s Covenant - by giving us the Lord’s Supper!

Daniel and his friends were deported, taken from their home to serve an ungodly empire – but Christ has commissioned us,



sent His Holy Spirit upon us, empowered us with grace gifts, to go and be his witnesses for the Kingdom of God to the ends of the earth!

“Go! Make disciples of all nations... and I am with you – Jesus assures us himself, He is with us - to the very end of the age.”

So friends if we learn anything from the story of Daniel’s vegetable test – it is that we have even more reason than he did to take a step of faith...

We have even more motivation to see what God can do through us - wherever we may find ourselves in life.

We have even more “assurance” that we are serving Christ - which will help us to be people of character, honesty and integrity!

And we ought to have even more passion to give our best... even in situations which seem to defy God’s relevance and existence and demean Christ’s Church – Amen!

Now, having laid this all out – I know you’re all wondering “do we still to give our best when the Empires of our world ask us in some way shape or form to worship them instead of Christ?”

Well... that’s a story for next week!

Would you join with me in prayer...