

**The Vegetable Test
Daniel 1**

Brothers and sisters – as we move through our Breakfast Theatre presentation of Lessons from the Life of Daniel, you will notice that things like people’s abilities and skills, their job positions, their titles and their rankings in the hierarchy of the empire are very important in this story.

And as I was studying up on the hierarchy of the Babylonian Empire, I came across some material that was very insightful and helpful in explaining the hierarchy of a local church, and I thought I should share it with you this morning.

It starts – naturally – with the Sr. Pastor and they are described as being able to leap tall buildings in a single bound, more powerful than a locomotive, are faster than a speeding bullet, they can walk on water, and they advise God.

Then comes the Associate Pastor – if you have one. He is able to leap short buildings in a single bound, is almost as powerful as a locomotive, just as fast as a speeding bullet

and is able to walk on the water if its calm, and can speak with God.

Next you have the Children’s Pastor and she can leap short buildings with a running start, prefers toy trains to locomotives, is faster than a speeding B-B, looks like they are walking on water because they know where the rocks are, and they talk with God on special occasions.

Then comes – no not the youth pastor – the Worship Leader. They are able to climb over a small building, have a tendency to fall off the locomotive, are able to fire a speeding bullet... they swim very well and God occasionally speaks to them.

Now we get to the Youth Pastor, who runs into small buildings, recognizes a locomotive two out of three times, owns a squirt gun, knows how to use the water fountain and tends to mumbles to himself.

Now you might think this wraps it up – but there’s one position left. The mysterious and elusive Church

Administrator! Now you might think this is lowest position – but appearances can be deceiving...

According to the material I came across Church Administrators just lift up tall building with one hand and walk underneath them. They knock speeding locomotives right off the tracks! They can catch a speeding bullet in their teeth – and are known to freeze water with a single glance. And when God speaks – they say “May I ask who is calling!?”

But seriously brothers and sisters – only a fool underestimates the power and the necessity of having good administrators, and King Nebuchadnezzar was no fool in this regard.

King Neb was the most impressive King of his time, He had a huge army, he was victorious and unstoppable in battle, so he conquered and subjugated all the surrounding nations and had them pay tribute to Him.

But King Neb knew that if His empire didn't have loyal, competent, honest administrators to run things, all of his

impressive accomplishment would be for nothing – and his empire would all fall apart in a short time. Believe it or not – brothers and sisters – empires rise and fall because of their administrators.

So, as King Neb attacked and conquered the southern Kingdom of Judah in 597 B.C. - capturing Jerusalem and raiding the Temple, taking the people captive – his empire was growing again and so was his need for good administrators.

And this is what sets the stage for the story of Daniel to take place.

It was 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 of the Empire.

And the comfortable lifestyle and prestige which they received as administrators of the empire would be visible to everyone around them and would encourage their 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...

And while it certainly wasn't a walk in the park... we have to realize that for most peoples and nations of that time - when they were conquered by an empire like Babylon, it was usually just 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 small 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 positions. 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 as world empires rose and fell. 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 were 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.

They had finally reaped the ultimate consequences of their Covenant unfaithfulness to Yahweh – they were disobeying God's law, worshiping other gods, acting just like the other nations around them – and so they were losing the land and being sent to live in those other nations.

And what's more is that God's temple had been ransacked and 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.

This has never happened before – they've been warned about it, but Yahweh has always relented and they repented but this time they are reaping the covenant consequences.

And it was also a crisis of identity for them, because even though Israel was often unfaithful – they still had their identity of being in the Promised Land and being known as Yahweh’s chosen people – even in their disobedience it was a core part of their identity.

But 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! His temple had been ransacked and burned! 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, it’s 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 politicians and gov’ts paid heed to this and operated from this motive.

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 and that comes from how this scripture leads us to Christ.

And the way that happens is that Christ takes everything in this story and flips it around.

Daniel and his friends 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 – but 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 and how this story points us towards Christ, it is that we have even more reason to discover just how big God is and take a step of faith... because of Christ.

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

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

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 – because that kind of suffering and serving is exactly how Christ achieved our salvation and was victorious - Amen!

Brothers and sisters – the lesson we learn from this first chapter in the story of Daniel is that God is God of all, Jesus Christ is Lord of the nations, and far bigger than what we can imagine.

May I humbly suggest brothers and sisters that our problems are not too big – but our view of Jesus is too small.

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? And if Jesus is so big – will He make all my problems go away?

Well... that's a story for next week! Let's pray...