

## SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

June 27, 2021

### Keep The Faith – A Series on the Book of Daniel “In But Not of the World”

**Daniel 1:1-16**

Rev. Mike Fordham

In his book, *All the Places to Go*, John Ortberg writes, Columbia researcher Sheena Iyengar has found that the average person makes about 70 decisions every day. That's 25,500 decisions a year. Over 70 years, that's 1,788,500 decisions. [The 20th century philosopher] Albert Camus said, “Life is a sum of all your choices.” You put all of those 1,788,500 choices together, and that's who you are. There is one overarching decision that we as Christians make that affects all these decisions and in so doing our entire lives and that is whether to follow Jesus or not. That decision affects all our daily decisions in how we live our lives in this world as faithful followers of Jesus. We begin a summer sermon series this morning that will walk us through some of the highlights of the life of Daniel where we will learn about how to keep the faith while living in the real world as followers of Jesus Christ. Let us begin by reading **Daniel 1:1-16**:

*During the third year of King Jehoiakim's reign in Judah, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. <sup>2</sup> The Lord gave him victory over King Jehoiakim of Judah and permitted him to take some of the sacred objects from the Temple of God. So Nebuchadnezzar took them back to the land of Babylon and placed them in the treasure-house of his god.*

*<sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> “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.<sup>[c]</sup>” <sup>5</sup> 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.*

*<sup>6</sup> Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were four of the young men chosen, all from the tribe of Judah. <sup>7</sup> The chief of staff renamed them with these Babylonian names:*

*Daniel was called Beltshazzar.  
Hananiah was called Shadrach.  
Mishael was called Meshach.  
Azariah was called Abednego.*

*<sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> Now God had given the chief of staff both respect and affection for Daniel. <sup>10</sup> 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.”*

*<sup>11</sup> Daniel spoke with the attendant who had been appointed by the chief of staff to look after Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. <sup>12</sup> “Please test us for ten days on a diet of vegetables*

and water,” Daniel said. <sup>13</sup> “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.” <sup>14</sup> The attendant agreed to Daniel’s suggestion and tested them for ten days.

<sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> So after that, the attendant fed them only vegetables instead of the food and wine provided for the others.

## ***INFLUENCES IN THE WORLD***

In our world today, we have all kinds of voices trying to influence how we think, how we perceive our world, what we are to value, how to feel, what to believe, and how we live our lives. The same was true thousands of years ago for Daniel and his companions. Daniel was a young man of Judah’s royal family when the Babylonian army, under the direction of King Nebuchadnezzar first attacked Jerusalem in 605 BC. Daniel was then deported to Babylon with his friends Azariah, Hananiah, and Mishael. Imagine what that must have been like to be taken from your home country against your will and exiled to another country to basically serve as their slave. Then King Nebuchadnezzar ordered that the best of these exiled young men from Judah’s royal family and other royal families were to be handpicked to be trained to work for the King at his palace. As a result, Daniel, and his 3 friends along with others were chosen and then embarked on a special 3-year training. In those 3 years they experienced all kinds of educational, social, and religious pressure to conform to a new identity as Babylonians. They were given the finest education from the vast literature and knowledge of the great Babylon kingdom, taught the Babylonian language, given the king’s finest food and drink to enjoy, and were even given new Babylonian names that were meant to enculturate the Hebrews into the pagan Babylonian society. **Daniel** (“God is my Judge” or “God has judged”) became **Belteshazzar** (“Bel [a Babylonian god] protects his life”). **Hananiah** (“the LORD is grace”) became **Shadrach** (possibly meaning “command of Aku,” another Babylonian god). **Mishael** (“who is God?”) became **Meshach** (“who is Aku?”). **Azariah** (“the LORD helps”) became **Abednego** (“servant of Nego/Nebo,” another Babylonian god). The goal of their training was to transform these young men from Jewish royalty to Babylonians serving in the palace.

While the influences these young men experienced were very obvious, the influences in our world today may not always be so obvious but they are working 24/7 to mold and shape our lives as well. In January of 2011, *Sports Illustrated Magazine* made an interesting observation that sports fans around the world can rely on one fact about their sport: the home team wins more often than the visiting team. The article said, “Home field advantage is no myth. Indisputably, it exists .... Across all sports and at all levels, from Japanese baseball to Brazilian soccer to the NFL, the team hosting a game wins more often than not.” What explains this fact? A wealth of evidence disputes the most common theories behind home team advantage. For instance, thousands of cheering or jeering fans didn’t change a team’s performance. On a number of statistics—such as pitch velocity in baseball or free throw percentage in basketball (which over two decades was 75.9 percent for home and visiting teams)—home field advantage didn’t

make a difference. Their research also eliminated other likely theories based on the rigors of travel for the visiting team or the home team's familiarity with their field, rink, or court. So what drives home field advantage? According to the authors of the article, "Officials' bias is the most significant contribution to home field advantage." In short, the refs don't like to get booed. So when the game gets close, they call fewer fouls or penalties against the home team; or they call more strikes against visiting batters. Larger and louder fans really do influence the calls from the officials. The refs naturally (and often unconsciously) respond to the pressure from the crowd. Then they try to please the angry fans and make the calls that will lessen the pain of crowd disapproval. In the end, the refs' people-pleasing response can have an impact on the final result of the game. As Christians, if we are not careful, we can be unduly influenced by those things in this world that are contrary to what God wants for us. Instead of this training changing Daniel and his friends' identities, God uses the boys to bring change to the world around them. Daniel and his friends did exactly what *Romans 12:2* reminds us to do as it says, "*Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.*"

### **WHOLEHEARTED DEVOTION TO GOD**

How then did Daniel and friends hold onto their faith in God in the real world? The 1<sup>st</sup> thing we see is that they had **1) WHOLEHEARTED DEVOTION TO GOD**. We get a hint of this wholehearted devotion to God when we read in *verse 8* where it said that Daniel was determined not to defile himself. Daniel had already made up his mind that he would not compromise by living his life in a manner that was inconsistent with what God expected. Daniel committed in his heart to follow God, to be wholeheartedly committed to God. We will see numerous stories in this sermon series where Daniel and his friends maintained their wholehearted commitment to God no matter what it cost them, their health, careers, livelihood, reputation, and even their lives. It wasn't easy for them to follow God in a culture that did not, but they did not give up following God even if they were the only ones who were doing it. It reminds me of another Old Testament character, Joshua, the man of God who, when leading the Israelites into the Promised Land, challenged the Israelites by saying to them, *Joshua 24:14-15*, "*14 'So fear the LORD and serve him wholeheartedly. Put away forever the idols your ancestors worshiped when they lived beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt. Serve the LORD alone. 15 But if you refuse to serve the LORD, then choose today whom you will serve. Would you prefer the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates? Or will it be the gods of the Amorites in whose land you now live? But as for me and my family, we will serve the LORD.'*"

It is important for us to choose in our hearts who we will serve with our lives. Who is it that we are going to give our hearts to, our wholehearted dedication to? Are we all-in with God or are we only half-hearted? At the time when Lou Holtz was the football coach of Notre Dame, he challenged his players to give their best as he said, "The kamikaze pilot who flew 50 missions was involved—but never committed." As you already know, all truly wholeheartedly committed kamikaze pilots only flew one mission

which, if they were successful, they used their plane as a weapon to fly into enemy ships thus taking their lives. As Christians, God expects us to give our all to following Him with wholehearted devotion just as Jesus did for us. That means that we live our lives in this world today according to *1 Corinthians 10:31*, “<sup>31</sup> So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.”

### **OBEDIENT WHOLEHEARTED DEVOTION TO GOD**

The 2<sup>nd</sup> essential way that Daniel and his friends were able to maintain their faith in God in the midst of a world is through **2) OBEDIENT WHOLEHEARTED DEVOTION TO GOD**. The 4 men did not only have wholehearted devotion in God, but they also acted on that devotion. They lived out their devotion to God in the real world. Their devotion to God was tested in what seemed to be an insignificant, nitpicky way, but yet really was an important one. We know that the Jewish people were instructed by God as to God's expectations for how to live their lives as God's children. One rule that God gave the Israelites was as to what they were allowed to and not allowed to eat. For example, the Jews knew that God did not allow them to eat pork. Aren't you glad that you are a New Testament Christian who can not only eat BBQ beef but also pork? Missy and I have already planned to enjoy some wonderful BBQ ribs that I will cook on my Pit Boss Pellet Grill. I know, that makes your mouth water. Even though King Nebuchadnezzar was giving the boys the best food and drink, they knew that God would not be pleased if they ate the pork. How did they handle it? Daniel, politely and humbly, approached his supervisor and asked for permission not to eat the unacceptable foods. Daniel did not come preaching on the evils of eating these foods with a holier-than-thou attitude. Daniel also did not organize a sit-in protest and demand his rights as a Jewish citizen in a foreign world. Instead, Daniel quietly and humbly requested they not be required to eat and drink of anything that was contrary to their faith. Their supervisor was afraid that he might be beheaded by the king if he did not follow the king's orders. Through the wisdom that God gave Daniel, Daniel devised a plan where they would only eat vegetables and water for 10 days and if they were not healthy after that they would revisit the food issue. What happened at the end of those 10 days? Daniel and the boys were healthier than everyone else and consequently, everyone else was put on the same diet. When they lived a humble, quiet, loving life of no compromise in the world God gave them an abundant, healthy life in the world and they became an example to the rest of the world because of the quality of life they experienced in following God.

Daniel and his friends didn't just give lip service to their commitment to God, they obeyed God, they lived for God, wanting to please God in everything they did in their lives. They didn't just go to church on Sunday and then do whatever they wanted with their lives the other 6 days of the week. Daniel and his friends could have said that since they are not living in Jerusalem anymore what would it hurt to enjoy the king's food and drinks. Instead, they understood that how they lived their lives every day in the real world for God was how they worshiped God. Daniel and his friends' lives of wholehearted devotion to God reminds me of the words of *Psalms 1:1-3*, “<sup>1</sup> Oh, the joys of those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or stand around with sinners, or join in with mockers. <sup>2</sup> But they delight in the law of the LORD, meditating on it day and night.

<sup>3</sup> *They are like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit each season. Their leaves never wither, and they prosper in all they do.*” This way of life is not easy and not always popular in our world and can possibly change who our friends are, maybe limit how much power we have in our world, or even affect how much prestige and money we make in some instances, yet we will follow God with all the decisions that we make in our lives and leave the results up to God. It is our goal above all else as Christians living a real faith in the real world to do as *1 Peter 1:14-16* says, <sup>14</sup> *“So you must live as God’s obedient children. Don’t slip back into your old ways of living to satisfy your own desires. You didn’t know any better then. <sup>15</sup> But now you must be holy in everything you do, just as God who chose you is holy. <sup>16</sup> For the Scriptures say, ‘You must be holy because I am holy.’”*

God expects us to show our wholehearted devotion for Him by obediently following God’s every direction for our lives, thus making decisions that please God and wholeheartedly living our lives for God. It reminds me of teaching my kids how to drive after they got their learner’s permit. I remember the first time my first-born daughter, Amanda, got behind the wheel of the car with me sitting in the passenger’s seat. I gave her what I thought was one very important principle that would guide her driving with me in the passenger’s seat and that was that she would follow every single instruction I gave her when she was driving, and she was to do so immediately and without question. Why did I give her that instruction? #1, I wanted her and myself to survive her driving. Secondly, she had never been behind the wheel of a car, and I had decades of experience and she had a lot to learn. Thirdly, Amanda is one of the most strong-willed persons you will ever meet and while she is driving, having to make safe decisions, there is not time to debate with me about the wisdom of my instruction. In essence, I was saying if you are in that driver’s seat and want to do as good a job as possible, it is essential for you to listen to and follow my every instruction. I wasn’t on a power trip, just wanting her to be as safe and successful as possible and her listening and obeying me would make all the difference. I think that is the way that God works with us as well. If we have wholehearted devotion and commitment to God, we will follow God’s every direction for our lives and as we do so God will use our lives to make an eternal difference in this world and not the world shape our lives.

Daniel and the boys were a great example of this, but the greatest example of all who lived like this was Jesus. Jesus was obedient to God even to the point of selflessly giving up His life to God on the cross for our salvation.

Icebreaker I – Do you know the meaning of your name? If you have children, did you research the meanings of the names you chose for them?

Icebreaker II – Do you have a favorite sports team for whom you root? Have you been known to cheer or boo loudly at the calls referees make?

1. Why did Daniel ask the chief official for different food?
2. What impresses you the most about Daniel?
3. If Daniel lived in your world, how would he be viewed by your peers?
4. What message does this story have for today?
5. How would you describe your physical health?
6. What do you need most in relation to the physical area of your life?
7. Which of Daniel's attributes would help you most in your quest for healthy habits?
8. What have you found best to do when confronted with something you know you should refuse?
9. How can this group pray for you this week?