

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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Keep The Faith – A Series on the Book of Daniel “Equipped to Serve”

Daniel 1:17-21

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Have you ever experienced that awkward moment when you seal up a package and drop it in the mail and you weren't aware that your cat was inside the box you just mailed? Sound far-fetched? It is not as far-fetched as you think. Back in March of 2016 Huffington Post reported that Julie Baggott was placing DVDs in a package and didn't realize her Siamese cat, Cupcake had fallen asleep inside the box. She shipped the box, and Cupcake went on an unexpected 8 day, 260-mile trip. But there's a happy ending: the resilient cat survived the journey and has been reunited with her owner. Bagott said, "It was a miracle because she was alive." Life can kind of be like that at times as it can take unexpected twists and turns along the way and yet no matter how bleak it might get, we learn that at all times God is with us and is in control. God equips us with whatever we need for what we might face on our journey and however He wants to use us in accomplishing His great, master plan. Consider Daniel 1:17-21:

¹⁷ To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds.

¹⁸ At the end of the time set by the king to bring them into his service, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. ¹⁹ The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king's service. ²⁰ In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom.

²¹ And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.

GOD'S MASTER PLAN

What I find that helps me bring to life what I am reading in the Bible is to put myself in the story. Imagine being one of the 4 young boys who were enjoying life back home in Jerusalem as members of the royal family of Judah. You have your entire life ahead of you with all its possibilities and then out of nowhere all your hopes and dreams of your future life comes crashing down. Out of nowhere the nation of Babylon attacks your nation and in the first of several battles, the army comes into your home and captures you and takes you away as a slave to Babylon. You have gone from having everything as royalty to nothing as a slave of a foreign nation. Then you are told you are going to be serving the king and as such you will enter 3 years of training to do so where they will do all they can to change your entire identity, even changing your names. How

would you have felt? Powerless, hopeless, afraid, frustrated, angry, violated, depressed, anxious, worried, stressful, homesick, bitter, resentful, uncertain, insecure, and wondering, where is God in all of this? Have you ever been there before when out of nowhere you lose a job, have a huge financial setback, out of nowhere you are facing a significant health issue, or are struggling with a significant relationship issue with someone you love, or maybe you are grieving the loss of a loved one? Have you ever wondered where is God in the midst of these unsettling times of great uncertainty?

As we read this story in the book of Daniel we can look back and see exactly where God was in this story and we know what God was up to, but Daniel and his friends couldn't have had a clue. They were in pretty thick weeds wondering what in the world was happening to them in this nightmare and where was God as they had no idea of where this would lead their lives. When we are going through tough times, we often don't have a grasp of the big picture of what is going on and can feel powerless in uncertainty and consequently we can be overwhelmed. Yet, what we learn in the Bible is that no matter what we face in life God is with us every step of the way and God is working out His master plan. God is never caught off guard or by surprise but is with us in the midst of our circumstances taking care of the details behind the scenes. God was working behind the scenes of 4 boys the entire time orchestrating circumstances, watching over them, providing for them, protecting them, and leading these young men to fulfill His great plan. We can see over and over again how God used these young men to introduce the one true God, Yahweh, to the Gentiles. God put them in a place of great influence in the palace of the king of this foreign nation.

When we are facing uncertain times and wondering what in the world that God is doing God says to us the words of *Isaiah 55:8-9*, "*My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts, says the LORD. And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. ⁹ For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.*" *Proverbs 16:9*, "*We can make our plans, but the LORD determines our steps.*" *Proverbs 19:21*, "*You can make many plans, but the LORD's purpose will prevail.*" Even in the darkest times of life, God has not abandoned us as God is still in control. A very helpful example for me that you may have heard of before is that life is like that of a tapestry. If you look at the back of a tapestry it looks like a nasty, chaotic, messy maze of tangled up, different colored, random threads. Yet, when you turn over the tapestry you discover that all the threads are actually put in exactly the right place to make a beautiful tapestry. Or as someone once said, when you turn the tapestry over and look at the other side the exact same threads clearly spell out the words, "God loves you." I have discovered what I am sure Daniel and the boys discovered is that the only path to peace in times of uncertainty is not God clearing up the uncertainty but to trust that God is in control working His great master plan.

OUR CALLING IN GOD'S MASTER PLAN

We also learn from Daniel and the boys that not only is God in control working His master plan, but that God has a role for each one of us in His master plan. When the 4 boys completed their 3-year training they joined all the young men who entered this

training and took an oral exam administered by King Nebuchadnezzar himself. These 4 young men were the top of their class so much so that the King didn't just make them servants but appointed them to serve as high-ranking officials in the Babylonian government. Who would have thought that would have happened when they had been captured 3 years earlier? All along God had a plan for these 4 young men's' lives. God arranged for the young men to be his witnesses among the nations, and they were greatly honored by being appointed to positions of power, responsibility, and opportunity. Using the analogy of the tapestry someone else said, "Though we can only make out the individual threads, we are all part of his great tapestry."

Later on, Jeremiah came to the Israelites who were exiled in Babylon, and he gave them this message of hope from God in *Jeremiah 29:11*, "*For I know the plans I have for you,*" says the LORD. "*They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.*" God has a plan for each one of our lives and longs to bless us by using us to bring about His great, redemptive master plan. You might be wondering what that calling is that God has for you. I have the answer for every single one of us. Christian musician Phil Keaggy wisely helps us to understand what that calling is as he says, "If you're honest, you know your calling--to serve God--before the lights are turned on and after they've burned out." As children of God, we are all given the high calling of being servants of God. Daniel and the boys' role and ours as well, was for them to submit their lives into God's hands and follow God wherever He might lead them. As they walked through the uncertain times, they were to stay close to God and allow God to lead the way and take care of the results. In so doing they would fulfill God's plan for their lives.

I like to think of our lives as being like that of a sailboat. In order to sail on the water, the first step is to untie the boat from the dock and push off and then we are to open our sails to allow the winds of the Holy Spirit to take us where God would have us go. In so doing, we are making ourselves available to God to make us who He wants us to be, and to us our lives and take us wherever He wants us to go. God then will take care of the results of our lives. I love the words of *Ephesians 2:10* that says about God's calling for us lives, "*For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.*" Do you believe that God is making you into being His beautiful masterpiece and He is using you to do the good things he planned for you long ago? Our role in God's master plan is simply then to do what Corrie ten Boom one said, "Don't bother to give God instructions; just report for duty."

GOD EQUIPS US TO FULFILL OUR CALLING

One last truth we learn from Daniel and the boys is that not only does God have a place for all of us in His master plan but also that ***GOD EQUIPS US TO FULFILL OUR CALLING***. Not only does God have a plan and lead us in that plan but God also gives us all the resources we need to do our part in God's plan. In their training, Daniel and his friends remained faithful to God as they mastered language, literature, and science, they pursued excellence and honored God, who added many gifts to their skills and learning.

God equipped these 4 young men with an unusually high aptitude for learning and wisdom and in addition gave Daniel the ability to interpret dreams and visions. Also, not only did God equip them with these special gifts through the Holy Spirit God gave them the ability and power to use those gifts to glorify God. I love how *verse 20* brings this out saying, *"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."* God was doing a great work through these boys in ways that exceeded their expectation. I wonder how many times these boys looked back over their lives and marveled at where God led them and how God used them. Incidentally, did you know that Daniel served God in this role for well over 60 years until he retired?

For us today, we have the Holy Spirit living in us through whom God equips us with spiritual gifts to accomplish the calling he has for us at home, with our families, with our neighbors, in the workplace, in the church, and everywhere we go in life. The Bible tells us in *1 Corinthians 12:4-7*, *"4 There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit is the source of them all. 5 There are different kinds of service, but we serve the same Lord. 6 God works in different ways, but it is the same God who does the work in all of us. 7 A spiritual gift is given to each of us so we can help each other."* What spiritual gift(s) has the Holy Spirit given to you to build up the church and to glorify God out in the world? If you don't know, call the church office and Sheri Dodge, our Director of Discipleship, will be thrilled to help you discover God's spiritual gifts He has given you.

Please remember that it is by God's grace that these 4 young men had these spiritual gifts and abilities and that they prospered as used them. So also, God's grace can and does work in the lives of ordinary, imperfect, broken people like us to fulfill God's extraordinary plan for our lives and His kingdom. As *2 Peter 1:3*, *"By his divine power, God has given us everything we need for living a godly life. We have received all of this by coming to know him, the one who called us to himself by means of his marvelous glory and excellence."* As someone once said, "God does not call the equipped, He equips the called." God can take the worst, most broken life, heal it, equip it, and then use it according to His plan. Listen to these examples from the Bible of this great truth, "Noah was a drunk, Abraham was too old, Isaac was a daydreamer, Jacob was a liar, Leah was very unattractive, Joseph was abused, Moses had a stuttering problem, Gideon was afraid, Samson had long hair and was a womanizer, Rahab was a prostitute, Jeremiah and Timothy were too young, David was an adulterer and a murderer, Elijah was suicidal, Isaiah preached naked, Jonah ran from God, Naomi was a widow, Job went bankrupt, John the Baptist ate bugs, Peter denied Christ, The disciples fell asleep while praying, Martha worried about everything, The Samaritan woman was had been through many husbands (more than once), Zaccheus was too small, Paul was too religious, Timothy had an ulcer, and Lazarus was dead!" God delights in taken ordinary, broken, unqualified people and transforming their lives and doing extraordinary things through them. A great example of God's grace working in our lives is Jesus and the disciples and what took place in the upper room . . . Communion .

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Icebreaker I – What is the oddest thing you’ve ever received in the mail? What is the oddest thing you’ve ever sent in the mail?

Icebreaker II – Have you been able to identify your Spiritual Gifts? Are you serving within your area of giftedness?

1. Why was the king more pleased with Daniel and his friends than with his magicians and enchanters?
2. How did the captives survive in a foreign culture?
3. What kind of “alien culture” do you find yourself living in right now?
4. How can we adapt to our new surroundings without abandoning God?
5. How has God’s mercy favored you this year (for example, in your efforts toward excellence or in your service to others)?
6. How can this group pray for you?