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Consistent Faith in a Changing World (Daniel 1:1-21, ESV)

INTRO:

If you held a mirror up to Daniel's world in many ways you'd see a reflection of our own. Daniel's world was undergoing a process of rapid change—and not for the better.

We too live in a world that's changing.

- * Twenty-five years ago there were about 5.5 billion people on the planet; today 7.25 billion. An ever-growing population means ever-increasing complexity and constant change.
- * Twenty years ago 10% of the American population used computers on a regular basis, now it's over 80%. This has changed the way we communicate and form opinions, how we date and find a spouse, even who we consider our friends.

As a whole, these changes are neutral—you can find positives and negatives in each one. But other changes have made the world a difficult and scary place to live. Like Daniel, our world is changing and not always for the better.

TRANSITION:

Today I want to talk about having consistent faith in a changing world.

Daniel was a worshiper of God. As a teenager he moved to a nation called Babylon. This new country brought Daniel many opportunities, some of which he took full advantage of. But it also brought him challenges and temptations he had to overcome.

Daniel had to learn to live between the tension of the little king who ruled his country and the Big King who rules the Universe. And by looking at Daniel's life we gain some insight for how we can consistently live out our faith in a constantly changing world.

Here's how the book of Daniel begins.

TEXT:

1 In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. 2 And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God. And he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his god.

- * Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon, attacked the city of Jerusalem on three separate occasions or in three stages – first in 605 BC, then again in 597 BC, and then a third and final time in 587/86 BC, a devastating attack that ended up leveling the city. This passage is talking about the first occurrence.
- * On that first invasion of Jerusalem, Nebuchadnezzar took articles of worship from God's Temple (i.e. cups, plates, goblets, lampstands) and he brought them back to the temple of his own gods. Understand, Nebuchadnezzar didn't simply take a few items he wanted as souvenirs; the Old Testament book, 2 Chronicles, tells us that Nebuchadnezzar took well over 5,000 articles from God's temple. He's sending a message. To take the vessels of one deity and place them in the temple of your deity is to assert that your gods are stronger than the god you just pillaged. And yet notice v. 2 – *1 In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. 2 And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand.*
- ✓ Who does it say gave the people over to Nebuchadnezzar? The Lord. God did it. As Nebuchadnezzar puffs out his chest, posting pictures of all the booty on Instagram and expressing his dominance, the Bible lets us know ever so subtly who's really in control of these events. Not Nebuchadnezzar; it's the LORD. And so in the opening lines we're introduced to the theme of the book—**God is sovereign over the events of history.**¹
- ✓ As one author puts it, *"Nebuchadnezzar's might, though considerable, was not the reason why Jerusalem fell under his influence; it was the result of the will and action of God himself... A major concern of the book is to reinforce the belief that the sovereignty of God*

¹ Tremper Longman, 54, notes that three times in chapter 1 we read about God giving something to someone. In v. 2, God gave Jehoiakim to Nebuchadnezzar. In v. 9, God gave the chief official sympathy towards Daniel. And in v. 17, God gave Daniel and his friends knowledge and understanding. Longman notes, "The effect of the theme of 'God's giving' throughout the chapter is to press home who is really in control of the events of Daniel's life, not to speak of fate of the people of God in general."

far surpasses the power of the even the most mighty human rulers.”²

- This is good for us to remember as we begin gearing up for our own Presidential election, a little over a year from now. As followers of Jesus we recognize that God has a clear purpose for government. But we also stop short of putting our hope in any human authority. Deliverance is not found in the outcome of a political debate. Salvation will never come through a stump speech. Our eyes don't look to the little kings of this earth but to the Big King of the Universe.
- On the flipside, when we face ungodly leaders in our own day, as followers of Jesus, we don't lose heart. We don't disengage. We trust that God remains in control. That He is working behind the scenes. And that our time is best spent working alongside of Him in His mission. As we said last week, when facing a hostile culture, you have three options—follow the culture, condemn the culture, or seek to redeem the culture through the culture the way Jesus became human to redeem humanity. Daniel's life demonstrates that God would have us choose this third way.

3 Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility, 4 youths without blemish, of good appearance and skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king's palace, and to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans. 5 The king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate and of the wine that he drank. They were to be educated for 3 years and at the end of that time they were to stand before the king. 6 Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah of the tribe of Judah. 7 And the chief of the eunuchs gave them names: Daniel he called Beltshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego.

- * These young people were essentially abducted from their homes and taken to a strange country where they began a special education. Part of that education included receiving new names. Changing their names was one-way Babylon tried to separate these teenagers from their religious roots. Daniel, in Hebrew, means, "God is my judge." But they changed his name to celebrate the Babylonian gods. They were reorienting them to a new way of life and new system of religion. This had to be a confusing situation for these young people to find themselves in.

² Tremper Longman, 46.

8 But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself. 9 And God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs, 10 and the chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, "I fear my lord the king, who assigned your food and your drink; for why should he see that you were in worse condition than the youths who are of your own age? So you would endanger my head with the king." 11 Then Daniel said to the steward whom the chief of the eunuchs had assigned over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, 12 "Test your servants for ten days; let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. 13 Then let our appearance and the appearance of the youths who eat the king's food be observed by you, and deal with your servants according to what you see." 14 So he listened to them in this matter, and tested them for ten days. 15 At the end of ten days it was seen that they were better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youths who ate the king's food. 16 So the steward took away their food and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables. 17 As for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams. 18 At the end of the time, when the king had commanded that they should be brought in, the chief of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar. 19 And the king spoke with them, and among all of them none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Therefore they stood before the king. 20 And in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his kingdom. 21 And Daniel was there until the first year of King Cyrus.

APPLICATION:

We probably need a modern parallel to fully wrap our minds around what's happening with Daniel and his friends.

Imagine a world-renown corporation coming to you at 16-years-old. Some of you are 16, some of you wish you were 16, some of you can remember being 16, some of you wish you could remember being 16. This corporation comes to you and they say, "We're going to pay your way into the university of your choice. We're going to hook you up with outstanding internships all over the world. You'll be able to experience everything your heart desires, and when it's all done we'll give you a seven-figure salary in the city of your choice. All you have to is take what we serve you. Abandon a few of your values. Change your worldview."

This is the offer Daniel and his friends receive. Later in the book Daniel and his friends are going to experience physical persecution. But at the outset it's important for Daniel and for us that we don't underestimate the threat of seduction. That's what happens in Babylon—seduction. The world doesn't have to mistreat you to change you. Sin is at its worst when it is sneaky and subtle. It'll take different shapes throughout the book, but in chapter one Babylon's seduction involves food. Every culture has both spoken and unspoken rules about food.

- * Kevin Stuckey story—every culture has spoken and unspoken rules about food.
- * Even individuals have unspoken rules about food. If you go out to eat with friends do you pray before the meal, the appetizer, the entrée, or not at all? Or what if the meals come at different times? Do you wait for everyone to be served or do you get started before your food gets cold? Who eats pizza with their hands? Who uses a fork? Elbows on the table, okay, or elbows off? We all have different rules at the dinner table.
- * The Jewish people had way more rules than we do. Daniel might have refused the food in order to remain faithful to the Jewish dietary laws. Maybe the foods they served were used in the worship of idols and he wanted to avoid taking part in that. He could have felt bad that he had friends and family living outside the king's palace who weren't enjoying filet mignon—this may have been an act of solidarity.
- * Whatever the reasoning, here's what Daniel understands. He understands as he enters into this new world, in some way, eating the food the king offered him meant that he was acknowledging his safety, wellbeing, and life were now provided from the hands of a new king—the little king who rules his nation not the Big King who rules the Universe. Daniel understood that to indiscriminately take the king's food was to ever so subtly give the new king his allegiance.

Notice that when Babylon begins to educate Daniel he doesn't freak out and say, "I'm not going to read your secular books." When they rename him in a way that honors the gods of Babylon, he doesn't fight it ("I'll only answer to Daniel"); neither does he buy into the new identity. They can call him whatever they want. He knows who he belongs to. But when a test of allegiance comes he firmly but gently draws a line in the sand and says, "I will not cross this line."

- * When we find ourselves living in Babylon— and we’re talking now about Babylon as any culture or kingdom set against the Kingdom of God—we learn that Babylon will offer you success, power, and advancement. It will offer to open doors for you to pleasure and new opportunity, if you’ll just forget what God says and take in whatever they serve.
- * Daniel and his friends don’t take the bait. They are willing to serve the king where they now live but they are not going to blindly pledge their allegiance.

A TEACHING FROM JESUS:

To see this story clearly, it may help us to fast-forward about 600 years to something Jesus said in Matthew 10:16. In Matthew 10, Jesus is about to send his disciples out to do Kingdom work for the first time and as he sends them out he says, **16 “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16, ESV).**

Jesus gives us two word pictures here for how to interact with a world hostile to his ways. Perhaps in these word pictures we’ll understand how Daniel and his friends remained faithful. And we may learn how we can do the same.

- * First, Jesus says be as wise as snakes. I hate snakes. I wish Jesus had chosen another example. Why did he have to pick snakes? Well, let’s think about it. Snakes are crafty. They are shrewd. They don’t unwittingly expose themselves to danger (you rarely see a snake squashed on the side of the road unlike deer) and yet they are also very effective hunters. Being wise as a snake means being able to read a situation and determine the best course of action. It means avoiding danger while still being aggressive.
- ✓ When presented with food from the king’s table, Daniel comes up with a shrewd plan. Give me and my friends vegetables. Try this out and see if we don’t wind up healthier than the rest. Give us ten days, if it doesn’t work, we’ll eat like everyone else.
 - On one hand, this allows Daniel and his friends to know that God is the one sustaining them, not Nebuchadnezzar. It’s their way of trusting God. If this works, they’re going to know it was the Lord.

- On the other hand, this is a way for Daniel to make sure their secret stays safe. If you're the guy in charge of their food, it's a good deal for you—these guys get your vegetables, you get their steak, and everyone stays quiet.
- ✓ This in Daniel and his friends being wise as snakes.
- * But Jesus says we should be as innocent as doves. Innocent as doves means being faithful even when faithfulness means putting your self at considerable risk. Innocent as doves means being faithful even when faithfulness means not getting ahead. It means you won't compromise your integrity even for fame or power. **The question is why did Daniel and his friends choose to live this way?**
 - ✓ Ever see a young person make it big in Hollywood? They begin as a regular-looking kid, maybe even espousing ethical or religious values, and a few years later it seems their whole style and personality has changed? The musical artist **Pink (picture)**, in the song *Don't Let Me Get Me*, says, "L.A. told me / you'll be a pop star / all you have to change / is everything you are." This is the offer Daniel and his friends received. And people can be tempted to do about anything when the rewards seem big enough.
 - ✓ **So why did Daniel and his friends choose to remain faithful in their changing world?**

THE INFLUENCE OF GOOD KING JOSIAH:

The Bible doesn't tell us outright, but it does give us a hint.

In the days leading up to Daniel, a series of wicked kings had led the nation of Israel, God's people. This remained the case until a young man named Josiah was put on the throne. Josiah was a humble man who loved God. And during his reign as king, his leadership cabinet found an old copy of God's Law, probably Deuteronomy, buried in the Temple. When Josiah read the words his heart broke for how far the people had strayed from God so he began a series of reforms. God told Josiah that because of the people's wickedness the city of Jerusalem would eventually fall. But Josiah continued to issue reforms and continued to do all he could to turn the people back to God.

Josiah died in battle about four years prior to the events that take place in the book of Daniel. I imagine, in many ways, he felt like a failure. For all the good he had done there was still rampant wickedness among the people. God had already told him that one day the city of Jerusalem would be destroyed. As he drew his final breath on that battlefield, he had to wonder if all his effort to turn the people back to God had been worth it.

Little did he know that among the people there were four young boys watching his ways and listening to his words. Four young boys who in a few years would be taken from their homes and stand before the most powerful king in the world. And in that day they wouldn't even blink. As they saw their world change their faith grew even stronger. And eventually they would turn Babylon upside down.³

A WORD TO PARENTS, TEACHERS, AND ADULTS WHO WORK WITH YOUNG PEOPLE:

If you're a parent, teacher, or adult of any kind who works with young people and often feel like your words fall on deaf ears, take encouragement from the life and story of Josiah. You never know who is grabbing on to the words you're sharing and how God will use their life. So keep going even when it's difficult.

* **Prayers for teachers, coaches, administrators, and employees**

* **Prayers for parents**

A WORD TO YOUNG PEOPLE:

Most young people I meet want their life to count for something. You need to understand it's in your youth that the most significant and life-altering decisions are made. What you do at 13, 18, 21-years-old will in many ways determine what the rest of your life looks like. You'll find as we work through this book that because Daniel took a small stand in chapter 1, he has even greater opportunities to make a stand for his faith later. He not only becomes successful in his career he stays faithful to God. You can do both. You can be faithful to God and be a high achiever (school, sports, friends). *"In small matters great victories are won."*⁴

³ See 2 Kings 22-25; 2 Chronicles 34-36.

⁴ Boice, 22.

Being shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves means knowing how to be respectful to the little king who rules your country or the principal who rules your school or the boss who writes your paycheck while never letting that respect trump your commitment to the Big King who rules the Universe.

* **Prayer for Students**

CONCLUSION:

As we wrap up our time today and move further into this book in weeks to come, remember—God let all of this happen. Sometimes God will let you go into places you don't want to go because there you are the most useful. There He can teach you the most. It's in life's most difficult moments you learn to most rely upon Him.

How do you keep a consistent faith in a constantly changing world? By recognizing that whatever your circumstances, God is there. Look for His hand and His presence. And make a choice long before you face difficult circumstances that no matter what you will serve God and God alone.

Prayer → Response—Daniel found God in his moment of difficulty only because He knew God's presence prior to that in a moment of calm.

Resources

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