

Apart from the World

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- [0 : 00] I'll please turn back to Daniel if you can, page 881. That's the series we're starting today. Hope you like my graphic. Spent a lot of time doing that. Not. I'm sure we've all had the experience, haven't we, of being a stranger turning up in a foreign land for the first time. And I don't mean being a tourist, for example, going to, I don't know, Japan, say, which I think half the congregation have or are going to, tucking into yummy sushi and posing with anime characters. No, I'm thinking more of being a migrant or refugee landing in a foreign land, perhaps even against your will. And then faced with learning a strange language or coming to terms with new food and things. I remember feeling this way, reluctantly coming to Australia some 30 plus years ago. And to be honest, I wasn't too impressed, I have to say, when I got here.
- [1 : 17] First, they told me that everyone spoke English. But no, it was Australian instead. G'day, mate. Like, come again? Now, back in Singapore as well, even though that was considered a developing country then, lunches at school was a real treat. Now, most schools had canteens that actually served hot, cooked-to-order lunches. And we had a great selection to choose from. So there was fried chicken wings with fried rice, Malaysian nasi lemak, a lot of nods around, Indian roti with curry, all washed down with a soft, cold soft drink. Ten cents a glass. And less than a dollar for lunch. Now, that was more than 30 years ago. And so imagine arriving here to be confronted by the fact of having a cold, packed sandwich each day.
- [2 : 28] Squished and flattened at the bottom of my school bag by the time I got to it. Raw lettuce. And cold ham. And then, sitting out in the cold winter to eat it. I mean, is this First World Australia? Or a Siberian concentration camp? It's a culture shock for me. Now, I think Daniel would have experienced, here in this first chapter of Daniel, something quite similar. Taken from his home in Judah, and then shipped far away to Babylon. Verse 1 of chapter 1 sets the scene, actually, for the entire prophecy. So look with me. In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim, and king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim, king of Judah, into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his God in Babylonia, and put in the treasure house of his God.
- [3 : 34] And so we see the people of Judah were therefore prisoners of war. Nebuchadnezzar, this mighty superpower from Babylon, had carried away Jehoiakim and his subjects into exile.

And as a mark of victory, he had also raided God's temple to take some of the articles away, put them in his own treasure house of his God. All this by way of saying, my God is more powerful than your God.

But if you look closely, things are not as they seem, are they? Because who is the one that actually has allowed this? It's the Lord, who delivered Judah into Nebuchadnezzar's hands.

Now, no disrespect to him, but I think I'm going to keep calling him Nebi from now on, because that's just too many syllables otherwise. So behind Nebi's conquest, stands the Lord, who is allowing this to occur, because Judah was under his judgment.

And so contrary to Nebi's belief, the God of Israel was not being overpowered by his God, but rather God was allowing these things to serve his own purpose. But of course, for the exiles, this felt like a big blow.

[4 : 50] It was still humiliating to be carried away from their home and then now subjected to servitude in Babylon. And for those who wanted to be faithful to God, it also meant that their means of worship was being taken away.

They could no longer go to the temple to offer their sacrifices. In fact, the articles of worship are now being locked away in Nebi's treasure house. And if they are living, and what is a consequence as well, is now they are living under the authority of this godless king, who has no regard for their God or their ways.

And so for young exiles like Daniel, this would have been bewildering. You know, his entire worldview was being turned upside down. Is this God that I've grown up with really who he says it is?

What about this other god in Babylon? Could he be real instead? Because, you know, look at the power of that kingdom. Now, Nebi didn't just have designs on the temple, artifacts.

He also wanted to subjugate the people of Judah and put them to good use. So verse 3, the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility.

[6 : 05] Young man without any physical defect. Handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning. Well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians.

The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They too were to be trained for three years, and after that, they were to enter the king's service. So this is a tried and true method of empire building, and I'm pretty sure Nebi has probably used it before with other nations.

What you do is take the very best of your concrete subjects, train them in your ways, indoctrinate them, inculcate the ways of Babylonia in them.

And by the way, did you notice it was a three-year MBA? A Masters of Babylonian Administration. And after which, when they graduate, these up-and-coming leaders of Judah, they will be influential on the rest of the exiles, wouldn't they?

And then to sweeten the deal, they get food from the king's own table. That must be pretty good quality stuff, I think. You know, caviar, wagubi, washed down with shiraz each night.

[7 : 24] Now, who wouldn't be loyal after this? I mean, you'd be downright ungrateful, wouldn't you, if you still were disloyal to Nebi after all that. And to complete the process of assimilation, Nebi also assigned them new names.

Verse 6. Among those who were chosen were some from Judah, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. And the chief official gave them new names. To Daniel, the name, Belteshazzar.

To Hananiah, Shadrach. To Mishael, Mishak. And to Azariah, Abednego. And if your name is your identity, which it is, then the aim really then is to strip them of their Jewish identity, wasn't it?

And if their identity can be taken away, well, there's a high chance there are legions to their God will as well. Now, of course, it's not all carrot and no stick.

There were consequences for not playing by Nebi's rules. And so this is where Daniel and his three friends stand out. You see, they may be young, but they were actually wise beyond their years.

[8 : 26] And they realized, Daniel in particular, what was truly at stake. You see, if this was just a simple choice between swearing allegiance to, on the one hand, this human king, Jehoiakim, or to the other, Nebuchadnezzar, or whether, you know, it was a choice between handing in their passport at birth and getting a Babylonian passport, you know, a superpower passport, then, you know, in one sense, it's no big deal.

Is it? But no, Daniel could see that at the heart of this was a choice that would require him and his friends to forsake the God of their forefathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and to then start serving a very different God.

And so for Daniel, the line that he drew came in the food that was served at the king's table. Verse 8, Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way.

And so we read, it's clear, isn't it, this is an issue of worship and idolatry, isn't it? Not just allegiance to a foreign king, because Daniel refused on the grounds of defilement by eating it.

Now, we're not sure exactly why the food would defile him. I suspect that this food may have been offered in worship to the gods of Babylon beforehand. That's probably why vegetables were okay, because, you know, you don't really want to offer cabbages and carrots to your king, you know, like offering rabbits, you know, food, not the thing to do.

[10 : 05] But by refusing, Daniel was not just saying, I don't want to worship your god, he was also defying the king's orders, wasn't he? And risking that the king's plans be upset, because if he's malnourished, he wouldn't be able to be put to work, and there will be consequences for that.

Now, thankfully, verse 9, God had caused the official to show favor and compassion to Daniel. But there was still a problem, wasn't it? The official told Daniel, I'm afraid of my lord, the king, who has signed your food and drink.

Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? Then the king would have my head because of you. Now, so this official, although he had sympathy for Daniel's conscience, didn't want to put his life at risk, did he?

And so Daniel proposed a deal with him. He said, please, test your servants for 10 days. Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then compare appearance with that of the young men who ate the royal food.

Treat your servants in accordance with what you see. And so they agreed, and he tested them for 10 days. Daniel, you see, was able to walk this careful line, isn't it, between standing on his convictions and what is right to honor God on the one hand, while still submitting to authority on the other.

[11 : 30] And he wisely gave the guard an option he could take so that his life was not at risk. But at the same time, Daniel had to trust the outcome of his decision to God.

And that took faith, didn't it? Because when he offered this as a solution, did he have any guarantee that the vegetables would work? No. But as the hymn goes, Daniel trusted and obeyed.

And that's how a life of faith is, isn't it? we trust God to do what he thinks is best. And we obey, even when we don't know sometimes, and perhaps all the time, what the precise outcome will be when we trust in him.

That's what trust means, isn't it? To have faith in God. Well, in the third and final section of the passage, we actually see the outcome ten days later.

God's hand was clearly seen in Daniel's choice. And as I read it, see if you can pick out the ways in which God acted for Daniel. So at the end of the ten days, they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food.

[12 : 50] So the God took away their choice food and the wine and gave them vegetables instead. 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. At the end of the time set by the king to bring them into service, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. The king talked with them and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishaël, and Ezariah.

So they entered the king's service. 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.

And so it's pretty clear, isn't it? First, God nourished them physically so they looked healthier than all those who ate the royal food. I hazard a guess, I think it was lentils and baked beans.

That's, you know, really nourishing vegetables. But secondly, God gave them ten times the wisdom and understanding. Not just with the other young men, but with the magicians and enchanters of the land.

[13 : 59] ten times smarter than your lecturer rather than the top student in your class.

That's pretty good, isn't it? And of course, for Daniel, God also gave him the ability to understand dreams and visions of all kinds, which we will see becomes very useful later in the book.

Now, the whole point of this story, I think, is not to say that God promises exactly what he did for Daniel to us. That's not the point. Because as I said, we're to trust God even when the outcome isn't favorable.

Rather, those who serve faithfully can be assured that God watches over them, even when everyone else around them might be, around us, might be doing different things.

things. That, I think, is the point of this story. You see, there were a lot of other young men of Judah, weren't there? Not just Daniel and his friends.

[15 : 09] There were probably a few hundred others as well. And all of them were faced with the same choice, weren't they? But it's only Daniel and his friends that stood firm in their faith and chose not to defile themselves with the king's food.

food. So yes, they were all in exile, Daniel included, all under God's judgment. But that was because of Judah's sin, and in particular the sin and rebellion of their kings.

And so, despite the fact that they were still under God's judgment, God was still watching over them, wasn't he? Verse 9, God had caused the official to show favor to Daniel.

Verse 15, he sustained them so that they looked healthier than all the other young men. And then, verse 17, God gave them knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning.

And for David and his friends, they remained faithful even when they were weak and powerless. They had no connections, no advantage, no networking.

[16 : 14] They were right at the bottom of the food chain, weren't they? And yet, they stood up for their faith. Just have a look at how far down the chain they were. Because on the next slide, immediately above them was the God.

Verse 11, wasn't it? And then, above him was Ashpenes, the chief official. Above him was Nebuchadnezzar, the king himself. And then the king, of course, was worshipping his own God.

So Daniel and his friends really are nobodies in Babylon, are they? Minnows. God. But if you look at that slide, in reality, think who sits right at the top of that.

The God of Israel, right? The sovereign creator over all the kingdoms of this world. And so Daniel and his friends may be at the bottom of the food chain, right at the bottom, but they have a God who is over all and watches over them.

They are his people, the sheep of his pasture. And so that makes them the most secure of all people in the kingdom of Babylon, isn't it?

[17 : 29] And friends, that's how we are too in Christ Jesus. In our second reading, Peter was writing to the church scattered in his first letter and he said, you are a chosen people.

That's us, we. A royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession. that we may declare the praises of God who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light.

And then he goes on to address us as foreigners and exiles, just like these young men of Judah. And he urges, Peter says, as foreigners and exiles to abstain from sinful desires which war against your soul.

You see, as foreigners and exiles, we don't really belong in this world, do we? Our eternal home is somewhere else. And yet, great is the temptation, isn't it, to conform to this world, to get comfortable, to blend in with the world.

And the messages we constantly hear play to our sinful desire for comfort, acceptance, and pride. And whether it's the mess advertising or the figures of authority that are in our lives, be it the politicians, our bosses, we are constantly urged to just join in or we get left behind.

[18 : 47] But what they're doing, whether they realize or not, is pandering to those desires to want to get ahead and get comfortable in this life. And we, as we look at ourselves and we think we're just nobodies in this big world, we feel like we've got no choice, do we, but to just go along.

But although that may be true in worldly terms, that is, we are nobodies, just a lowly employee in a big corporation or a hospital, you're that one lone student, one lone Christian in the entire year level of your school, that's not who we are in God's sight.

When we are in Christ, we are God's children, chosen, precious, loved by him, and his powerful and gracious hand is guiding us all the time.

And you know, even if you're somebody in this world, that is, if you've got some standing community or some seniority at work, that's still nothing compared to being the least in God's kingdom, is it? And Daniel, despite his youth, could see that clearly and therefore chose not to defile himself so as not to forfeit his place in God's kingdom, even at risk of offending the king.

God's kingdom. So, brothers and sisters, if we choose to follow Jesus, that will be our challenge in life. We may not know exactly when, but because we're set apart from the world, it will likely cost us in some way.

[20 : 22] I suspect some of you already have experienced this, if you've been a Christian for a while, and been standing firm. But we know, don't we, when the time comes, because the Lord will prompt us by his spirit, our conscience will tell us that this decision, particular decision, is one which we need to stand up for because it involves us remaining faithful to Jesus by deciding to do so.

And, you know, if you think about this, what Daniel and his friends did in this very first chapter was significant, but if you think about it, it's not that risky to begin with, is it? Compared to the trials by fire later on, and then the lion's den, this is chicken feet in one sense, isn't it?

Which they couldn't eat, perhaps. But this small step of courage is preparing them, weren't they, for that bigger challenge later on. You know, often we think when we're faced with this, oh, you know, that's just a small decision.

Doesn't really matter. I'll let it pass. I'll just go along with it. But that's not how it works, is it? Because if we don't stand for the small things, I don't know about you, but I'm not going to stand for the big things when the time comes, will it?

If I can't be tested and found faithful in the small things, I'm not sure whether I can actually stand and be faithful with the big things. And so I think God in his graciousness has allowed them this small little test as a way to train them up so that when we get on later in Daniel, we see them able to take those bigger steps of faith and courage.

[22 : 08] Well, let me end with the last verse, which you thought maybe I forgot, but I didn't. But the narrator points out in verse 21, Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.

Now, if you think about it, I'm not sure this adds a lot to the story. So what is it doing here? Well, this, I think. That Daniel, the mineral of the Babylonian empire, has outlasted Nebuchadnezzar and his empire.

Because Cyrus is the king of the Persian empire that eventually comes and conquers and puts an end to the Babylonian empire. And what the narrator is saying is that God preserved Daniel even after King Nebi was gone.

Friends, we may be nobodies in this world, but as children of the living God, as with Christ, we will outlast every single superpower in this world.

We will. Every president, good or bad. every prime minister, the CEO that you have in your company, the boss that is giving you a hard time.

[23 : 23] When they are all done and gone, we will still be enjoying the riches of God's kingdom. We will still be standing as children of the living God.

So just think about that and hold on to that. And then resolve when the time comes not to devour yourself, but abstain from the sinful desires of this world that wage against our souls.

Let's pray. Father, help us to see your sovereign hand over all things. As people set apart from this world in Christ Jesus, help us to live holy and pure lives for your glory.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.