

### ***Exiles in a Foreign Land***

In the name of him who left behind his heavenly glory to come among us and serve as if an exile in a foreign land; dear friends in Christ: This evening, as promised, we begin a series of Lenten meditations based on the book of the prophet Daniel. His was an unusual ministry, to say the least. Whereas most of the prophets of God performed their work and proclaimed his Word in the Holy Land among God's chosen people, Daniel's ministry was performed entirely in the court of pagan kings who were the enemies of God's people. But his unique situation allows us to discover in Daniel the answers to a lot of questions we often find ourselves having to face in our day that are not so easily found in other parts of the Bible; questions like "How do I live as a person of Christian faith when surrounded by unbelievers?" and "How do I live as a child of God in a place where others have no idea what that means and they think I'm foolish or backward for living the way I do?" and "How am I supposed to live *in* the world without being *of* the world?" and "When being pressured to compromise my faith and values, where must I draw the line?" These and others are the questions for which we will be discovering the answers as we take this Lenten journey together. And to begin this process and get our bearings, it's best to explain some of the historical background.

The year is 604 BC. The nation of Judah has the misfortune to be strategically situated smack dab between the two major superpowers of the day. They are, to the east and north, the Empire of Babylon centered in what is now Iraq; and to the south and west there is the Kingdom of Egypt. These two superpowers are involved in a decades-long struggle for supremacy with Judah the conquered vassal state of one or the other depending on which of them has the upper hand at any time. If it were a soccer match, you could think of Judah as playing the part of the ball. No matter who was winning, all they got was kicked. Now there was a reason for this. It was part of God's plan. You see, the nation of Judah was being notoriously unfaithful. The majority of them were worshipping other gods, thus offending the Lord; and they were placing their trust for national security in their political wheeling and dealing and their ability to make treaties with kingdoms around them. The Lord wanted them to worship him exclusively and to place their hope and trust for their security in him. And so he put them in this uncomfortable and unstable position to show them how wrong they were and how futile it was to pursue the courses they were following. He wanted them to repent and to return to him.

Unfortunately, despite their extreme difficulties and the call of the prophets to return to the Lord, they stubbornly refused to listen. And so it was that the Lord reluctantly decided to turn up the heat even more. He threatened to remove his people from the Promised Land entirely. But even then, he wanted to give them every opportunity to repent and prevent this disaster from coming upon them.

Still they failed to do what the Lord wanted. Jehoiakim, the king of Judah, thought he had a better plan. He allowed the worship of false gods to continue unchecked; and in what turned out to be a disastrous political move, he decided to break a long-standing treaty with Babylon and to place his trust in the might of Egypt instead. It seemed to him that Egypt was the superpower on the rise. And no doubt he had many advisors, false prophets, and probably a few fortunetellers telling him it was the right move to make. So he made a new treaty with the Egyptians and promised to pay them an exorbitant amount of tribute each year. He taxed his own nation almost to death to pay for it. But he thought he was being very clever – that he was a wise and shrewd leader for his people.

Well, to make a long story short, he backed the wrong horse. Displaying military genius, Prince Nebuchadnezzar, the son of Nabopolassar King of Babylon, crushed the Egyptian Army at the battle of Carchemish. He sent the few Egyptians who survived limping back to their homeland to lick their wounds. This left Judah unprotected and open for reoccupation by Babylon – which they did; and now there were penalties to be paid for their having switched sides.

First, of course, there was the matter of annual tribute, which would now be directed to back to Babylon with interest due. Second, as we heard, a number of sacred articles were taken from the Temple in Jerusalem. You see, in ancient times, the pagans believed that whenever there was a battle on the ground between two nations, there was a corresponding war in the heavens between their respective gods. So, if we won the battle, it meant that high above us our god beat yours. And to show this, we would take the idol of your god from your temple and place it the temple of our god – on a lower level, naturally, to show that your god was now the servant of ours. It was meant to humiliate you: your god is weak and ours is strong. You're a bunch of losers. Get it?

The trouble was that in the Temple of the Lord in Jerusalem, there was no idol. The Lord had forbidden it – it's basic first commandment stuff: no graven images and all. The pagans couldn't understand a people who had no visible god to worship. They thought it was really weird. But nevertheless, to convey the same idea – our god beat yours – the Babylonians satisfied themselves by taking a number of golden articles that were used in the worship of the Lord; like, for instance, the bowls that were used to collect the blood of the animal sacrifices. These were taken back to Babylon and placed in the temple of their god Bel or Marduk as he was sometimes called. And for the few who were faithful among God's people, this was indeed a great humiliation to see the holy items used in the worship of the one true God defiled in a pagan temple.

And there was one more penalty demanded by Nebuchadnezzar, who had now, upon the death of his father, become the king of Babylon. He insisted that a number of Judeans, mostly nobles and members of the royal family, be taken away in exile to Babylon. There were a number of reasons for this. First and most obviously, they were taken as hostages. If I'm the king of Babylon, you're less likely to cause problems for me in the future if you know I've got some of your loved ones within easy reach. Second by taking from you a lot of your leaders, the ones who are the best educated and that folks naturally look up to, it makes it less likely that you're going to be able to organize an effective rebellion. And then finally there's the implied threat. Knowing that I took some of your people away – primarily your leaders and nobles – you'd be dissuaded from rebelling against me again because the same fate might happen to you; because no one wanted to be taken away as a captive into exile.

Think what that would be like: to be uprooted, taken away from your homeland and the people you love, and placed in a relocation camp or colony, where, starting from scratch, you'd be forced to eke out an existence with pretty much nothing but your bare hands. Beyond the confines of your little colony, you'd be surrounded by strangers to whom you were at best a second or third class human. They don't speak your language, they don't eat your familiar foods, their customs and practices are different than yours. And to them everything about you appears backward and inferior. After all: you're the defeated. You have no rights to speak of. And you can't go home. You're stuck here.

And as bad as that would be, it was even worse from a Jewish perspective. If you were one of the faithful, you'd understand that you had been taken away from the one place on earth

where the Lord God made his dwelling among men. The Temple in Jerusalem was the center of the world for the Jews. It was the only place sacrifices could be offered to the Lord. It was the one place God forgave the sins of his people. So to be forcibly removed from that was like losing your connection to God. And you get a sense of this feeling of loss in the psalm we read together earlier. The mocking Babylonians come at them, “Yeah, you losers, ha! Sing us one of your songs of Zion now!” “Oh, how can we sing the Lord’s songs in a foreign land?” It was like rubbing salt in their wounds. No, life for the Jewish exiles was something no one would envy.

But it was even worse for Daniel and his three companions. They were set apart for yet further indignities. We read that Nebuchadnezzar ordered Ashpenaz, the chief of his eunuchs, to select a number of the more promising young men from among the exiles. These were to be thoroughly educated in the language, ways, and literature of the Babylonians and then, upon examination, impressed into the service of the king. On the surface, that might sound like a good thing; but I sincerely doubt that Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah would have thought so.

Let me explain: in the ancient world, it was often the custom of kings to surround themselves with advisors and personal servants who were both foreigners and eunuchs – that is, men who had been castrated. There are several reasons for this. You see, there were always plots and power struggles going on among the various noble families at the top levels of society. If you were the king, you had to be wary that people in these families were always scheming to have you assassinated and replaced with one of their own. Everyone dreams of kingly glory and starting their own dynasty. Therefore as the king you wanted those closest to you to be men who were total outsiders, who could not marry into one of these other families, and who could never dream of knocking you off and setting up a dynasty of their own because they couldn’t have any children. As an added benefit, these foreign eunuchs were completely expendable. If the king fired or removed a noble from a high position, or had him killed for some offense (real or imagined) it created bad blood between the families. He might have to pay for it later when someone came looking for revenge. But if one of these foreign eunuchs serving the king displeased him, it was “Off with his head” and nobody cared – at least nobody important or powerful enough to matter. As a result, these eunuchs tended to be fiercely loyal to the king. Their lives depended on keeping him safe and happy.

In St. Matthew’s Gospel, the Lord Jesus says, “There are those who are eunuchs from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made so ... for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.” I’m reasonably sure he had Daniel and his three friends in mind when he said it. I don’t imagine for a moment that this operation was performed with anesthetic or under conditions we might describe as sanitary. And not wishing to belabor the point, but if you were to ask any one of our male soldiers serving in Afghanistan today what possible injury he fears the most, he’ll tell you it isn’t the loss of an arm or a leg or an eye. No, what he fears most is losing his manhood – and with it a normal family life with a wife and children and all that entails. I expect that Daniel and his three companions at age fifteen or so felt exactly the same way.

And if this were not enough, there was one more indignity for these four young men to endure: they were renamed by their captors. This is important because all four of them had names that make reference to the Lord God. Daniel means “God is my Judge”. Hananiah is “The Lord gives graciously”. Mishael means “Who is what God is?” And Azariah is “The Lord is my help”. They might have taken some comfort in these names and the promises they imply; but now even these are denied them. And to them are given names that make reference to the false gods of Babylon. For example, Daniel’s new name, Belteshazzar, means “The Prince of

Bel". It's like they are being given new identities. And again, it's insulting to them – even blasphemous – that they should be named after the false gods of their captors. It's like the enemy saying, "You belong to us now. And from now on you will serve us and our gods."

So taken altogether, I hope you can begin to understand some of the anger, frustration, sorrow, and sense of loss Daniel and his three friends must have experienced. They've lost everything. They have every reason to be resentful and to want to get even with their captors. The question is how will they respond?

What we are going to discover as this Lenten series unfolds is that even in the midst of their sorrows and losses they continue to place their hope and trust in the Lord. Like the Patriarch Joseph before them, who when sold into bondage by his brothers faithfully served as a slave for Potiphar, and when falsely accused then served as a steward in the Pharaoh's prison, and then finally when he was raised up served as the prime minister of Egypt, they too will serve their Babylonian masters faithfully and well without compromising their faith in the Lord God. They will demonstrate that they understand that no matter where you are and what in circumstances you find yourself, we are still called to live out our vocations as the children of God, and by doing so we bear witness to his truth. In this way they will prove themselves to be like Christ, who for us and for our salvation voluntarily left behind his throne of glory to take on the role of a servant for us – we who by our sins are the enemies of God – and for us he suffered total humiliation, a shameful death on a cross, to save us from our sins.

As a final thought, it's worth mentioning that it is to a large degree most likely due to the kinds of hardships that Daniel and the three young men were made to face that caused them to turn to the Lord and cling to him with such steadfast faith. Had they not been taken into captivity, we would never have heard of them. It's more than likely that like so many of the Judeans who were not taken, they would have continued living lives filled with idolatry and misplaced trust in things other than the Lord. No, it's precisely that the Lord allowed these terrible things to happen to them that forced them to repent of their sins and place their trust so firmly in him. And the same is true of us. The Lord in his wisdom sometimes brings us afflictions, not to harm us, but to cause us to consider our sins and offenses, to repent of them, and to turn to him for his mercy and for relief. He understands that in this world, we as his children are exiles in a foreign land. His goal is to sustain us in this world, to cause us to be his faithful witnesses, and eventually to bring us to our homeland with him. And to do that, sometimes he has to remind us that this world is not our happy home, nor can it ever be.

So now you know where we're starting and to where we're heading. May the Lord bless us as we undertake this Lenten journey together. And may he bring us all safely out of this exile into his eternal Promised Land. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***