

You Are What You Eat

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ: Last week as we began this series of Lenten meditations, we learned about the unfaithfulness of God's people living in the land of Judah, and how it was part of a divine judgment that a number of them – mostly nobles and members of the royal family – were taken into captivity to the land of Babylon. It's hard for us to imagine the kinds of sorrows and humiliations these captives suffered as a result. But we also discovered that for Daniel and his three companions, who renamed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, things were even worse. Because of their youth, their upbringing and education, and their demonstrated aptitudes for learning they were selected from among the exiles to be prepared for service as eunuchs in the court of King Nebuchadnezzar – the very man most responsible for their exile, their humiliation, and their emasculation.

Considering what they'd suffered, we might expect them to be less than enthusiastic about being made to serve the king who had conquered their nation, insulted the Lord God, and caused them so much personal loss and affliction. We would rather anticipate that they'd be angry and sullen, resentful and seeking opportunities for revenge. But that is precisely what we do not see in them. Instead, like Joseph who was sold by his brothers as a slave into Egypt, and the unnamed Israelite girl who was made to serve as a slave to the wife of Naaman, the Syrian army commander, these four young men assume a more mature, faithful, and godly attitude concerning their circumstances. Each one of them comes to the correct conclusion that "This is where God has placed me. I may not like the way things are, but these are the circumstances in which he has called me to serve him according to his good and perfect plan. Therefore I will seek to live as his faithful child. I will seek the good of all people – including my neighbors in this foreign land. And I will humbly submit to the authorities that the Lord in his wisdom has seen fit to place over me."

And what I'd have you see is that this is a very Christ-like attitude. It mirrors the mind of Christ who left behind his heavenly glory and authority to come to this earth to serve sinners who were as yet the enemies of God. He humbled himself and suffered all to serve and to save us. The main difference is that Christ, in love, chose to do that for us; whereas I'm pretty sure Daniel and his friends would have not chosen their lot in life if the option had been given to them. Nevertheless, they display what it means to live as faithful children of God in a hostile and pagan land – and that's their first lesson for us: that we too would adopt the mind of Christ and seek the good of our neighbors, and yes, even our enemies in whatever circumstances the Lord places us. We are called to grow fruit for the Lord precisely where he plants us.

But living as we do in a largely unbelieving and completely sinful world, we need to be careful that we don't fall under its influence and be subverted and led away from our Christian faith. Daniel and his three companions understood this. Babylon was land filled with wonders. Its armies had conquered the entire near eastern world. The wealth of the nations was pouring into the capital, which city was filled with spectacular monuments, glorious temples and palaces, and other displays of architectural genius. It was also the center of learning and culture, of science and technology. Going as they did from backwater Judea to Babylon would have been like taking four peasants from a remote village in Central America today and setting them down in the midst of one of our modern cities. The "wow factor" would have been overwhelming. And here they are chosen to be right in the middle of it. Despite the obvious setbacks, Daniel and

the others were to be trained to serve the king as his personal advisors. It would be like being selected to serve on the White House staff. They were going to be part of making the most important decisions that governed the world.

And one of the perks of all this was to be able to enjoy dining every day in the royal mess hall. And you'd better believe that a king like Nebuchadnezzar had the best kitchen staff imaginable. Countless gourmet chefs, wine stewards, bakers and pastry makers turning out sumptuous delicacies morning, noon, and night; all made with the finest ingredients. Only the best found its way to the king's table. And especially in the ancient world, when simply being able to eat regularly was a standard of living 95% of the population never achieved, this bonus that went with their positions would have been huge.

But Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego resolved not to defile themselves with the king's food. And that might strike as odd. I mean, considering what they'd suffered, why not take advantage of the benefits to at least soften the blow a little? Why not make the most of their situation? Bible scholars have suggested several reasons. The first is that it's likely that much of the meat that came out of the king's kitchen had been first ritually sacrificed to idols, to the false gods of Babylon. It would have been offensive to faithful Jews to eat such meat. The trouble with this view is that it's likely that most of the fruits and vegetables that made their way to the king's table were also first offered to idols. So if their hang up was with the idolatry connected to the food, they wouldn't have been able to eat anything at all. Another suggestion is that as Jews, Daniel and his friends would have been subject to all the Old Testament dietary restrictions. They were prohibited from eating meat that the Lord declared unclean like pork, shellfish, and any meat that still had blood in it. The trouble with this idea is that it certainly would have been possible for them to eat around such menu items and only eat things that God permitted. It also doesn't explain why they refused the king's wine. There's no such thing as unclean wine in the Bible.

Now, it may be that the reasons thus far suggested played a part in their decision to eat only vegetables and drink only water, but I'm convinced the biggest reason they resolved to do this was to avoid being seduced by the opulence and luxury set before them. There's an old saying that goes "you are what you eat". And this is true, of course. Your body is continually regenerating itself, replacing the complex chemicals that form the cells in your body with new ones that come to you through the food you eat. I read recently that every seven years or so you are an entirely new person; that in that amount of time everything you were once made up of has been completely replaced – which means, by the way, since I've been married almost thirty years now, I've actually had four completely different wives, and I'm well on my way to getting a fifth. And did I mention? Each one is sweeter and more lovely than the last. (Oh, nicely handled! And you thought I was going to get in trouble with that remark.)

Anyway, while this is true in a physical sense – that you are what you eat – let me suggest it's also true in a moral and spiritual sense. What you allow to go into you becomes part of you. Therefore, living in a pagan land and immersed in its seductive culture, it's necessary to put up certain filters. What Daniel and his friends want to avoid more than anything is becoming Babylonian. If they eat the king's food, they fear they will eventually become the king's men. They don't want to be assimilated by their surroundings. They don't want to lose their identity as believers and worshippers of the One True God. So they are very careful about what they allow themselves to ingest that will become a part of them.

You see, it's more than just the food. In the positions for which they are being groomed there will be all kinds of other perks and advantages. They'll have influence and power, fine

clothes, nice possessions, fancy rooms and furniture, the best of entertainments, lives of comparative ease and excess. What they want to prevent is having the things of this Babylonian world filling their hearts and minds and crowding out the things and truths that matter most and that make them who they are: the chosen children of God.

It's necessary too that we see it's not just the food from the king's table that will be going into them. As we heard, they were also to be trained in the language and literature of the Babylonians. They were going to receive what would have been considered in that day the best education in the world. And some of it would have been very good. The Babylonians were on the cutting edge of math, natural science, poetry, music, and the fine arts. Sure, it would have been crude by modern standards; but it was the most advanced back then. Some of their education, however, would not have been so good. The literature of the Babylonians would have consisted mostly of the myths and legends of their gods – the basis of their pagan religion. And as advisors for the king, Daniel and his friends would have been trained to do things like read omens and forecast the future according to the stars. The Babylonians were really into astrology. So these four young men would have had to study what it supposedly meant when Jupiter was in Pisces and the moon was half full – stuff like that. Another way the ancients augured the future was to read the entrails of animal sacrifices. They'd cut them open and examine the guts. So they would have been trained to know what it meant if a pig's bladder was smaller than normal and covered with spots or if a goat's kidney was slightly out of place. It's nonsense, of course; but it was considered first class science back then.

And overlaying it all would have been the constant theme of Babylonian supremacy. We are the best. We conquered the civilized world because our army is the strongest, our generals the brightest, our king the mightiest, our laws the most just, our government the most efficient, our accumulated wisdom without match, and our gods the most powerful and therefore our religion the most correct. And how easy it would have been to be seduced by all that because if you looked around, that's the way things appeared.

Daniel and his friends had no control over what they had to learn. They couldn't change what their teachers taught. But they could control what they allowed to become part of them. What we see them doing with respect to the food from the king's table – something they could control – was what they were doing all the time with respect to everything they were experiencing and that was being shoved down their throats in that pagan culture. They were keeping what was good and filtering out what wasn't. And the result of their efforts was apparent even to their captors: in the end, their bodies were healthier and their wisdom was found to far exceed that of their peers.

And this is the second lesson for us, for we too are immersed in a largely pagan culture which imagines itself to be the best, the most glorious, and the most enlightened that has ever existed on the face of the earth. Like Babylon in its heyday, it's also the wealthiest and most powerful in terms of military might. This country of ours doesn't exactly dominate the world; but it does have tremendous power and influence over it. And it's so easy for us to be seduced by the culture, by the wealth, and by the worldview that we are swimming in. Consider how we tend to measure success in terms of temporal wealth and property like our culture does, rather than in spiritual riches that the Lord tells us will last forever. Consider too how we all seek what's called financial security; that is, accumulating enough money so that we won't have to worry about the future – which in fact is a form of idolatry: trusting in riches rather than in the Lord to take care of us.

Consider also how the films we watch and the programs that stream into our homes on the television are constantly bombarding us with ideas and values that stand directly at odds with our Christian faith and biblical values. The Bible is ridiculed. God's institution of marriage is openly mocked and degraded. The sanctity of human life is considered a threat to personal freedom. Aberrant lifestyles are endorsed and celebrated. Sex is what sells. And now we're in an election year, which means that you can't turn on the radio or watch the news without hearing someone violating the 8th commandment as they denounce this politician or that; and rather than being offended, we join in with them. Here we are commanded to honor and pray for those whom the Lord places in authority above us; but adopting the way of the culture we think, "Hey, it's politics. That's the way the game is played."

And think about what our students are subjected to in our schools and universities. There they must study among other things called science the theory of evolution and, what's even more destructive, the naturalistic philosophy that undergirds it – the one that says there is no God, that all things came about on their own purely by accident, and that therefore life has no meaning or purpose. So there's no such thing as good or evil. There's merely what is – so you might as well enjoy it while you can because there isn't anything else.

My friends, you are what you eat. You become what you allow yourself to ingest – both physically and spiritually. And we can't change this world in which we are immersed nor can we leave it. We've been called to be faithful right here in our time and in these circumstances. And this is why, like Daniel and his three young companions, we need to be careful. It's imperative that like them we erect screens and filters that allow in what is good and useful, and keep out what's unclean and harmful to the soul. And to assist in this, we need the gift of discernment to be able to tell the difference. What we need is more of the mind of Christ.

That's what these four young men had, and I'll tell you where they got it. They had been thoroughly trained in God's Holy Word even before they went into exile. They knew the Scriptures where the mind of Christ is revealed. And I'm sure that once they were in Babylon, they continued to encourage one another and build themselves up by speaking God's Word to one another. That's what they consumed; that's what fed and nourished them. And that's why they were filled with the wisdom and virtue of Christ. And the same will be true of us as we continue to feed upon God's Word which is the Bread of Life from heaven, and we refrain from taking into ourselves the empty offerings of this world no matter how tasty and eye appealing they appear to be. As we do this, our wisdom and understanding will also be found to be ten times better than the supposedly enlightened philosophers and secular pundits and prognosticators of our age. People will see the light of Christ in us – and by God's mercy, some will be drawn to the light. Therefore let us bear in mind at all times what's at stake, and watch very carefully what we eat. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!