

**Daniel in the Lion's Den:
Living and Spending Faithfully in a Consumer Culture**

Scripture: Daniel (read the whole book of Daniel for personal study)

Daniel 1:8, But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's delicacies, nor with the wine which he drank; therefore he requested of the chief of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself.

A hint—Mammon is material wealth or possessions, especially those having a negative influence.

Sermon

The kingdom of Judah had fallen to the Babylonians. The city of Jerusalem lay destroyed. The Temple, the sacred place of worship, the site of those sacrifices made to celebrate the birth of a baby, in thanks for good times or as petition in days of sorrow, the Holy Temple lay in ruins. The Ark of the Covenant had been carried off to Babylon, God's sacred resting place, having made the long journey with the people through the Red Sea and the wilderness God's travel tent used during the forty, long years towards the Promise Land, the Holy Grail was gone never to be seen again (well, except maybe in Indiana Jones movies).

Most of the Jewish leadership was also carried off into the slavery and humiliation of Babylon. The victorious King Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, thought it wise to understand these new subjects so he ordered that some of the promising young leaders be brought to his court, there trained to serve him as advisors. Four handsome and smart young men were chosen to learn the Babylonian ways. At birth they had been named Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, but the Babylonians, like slave masters throughout time, renamed them in the new language and tried to reshape them in the new culture.

While the rest of the Hebrew people languished... "by the rivers of Babylon... where we sat down...and there we wept...as remembered Zion," these four chosen lived a high life in the royal court. For three years, the text tells us, they were to study their new language learning its poetry and prayers. For three years they would work out, learning new sports, testing their strength and endurance. For three years, the young men would eat like princes rich feasts from the King's table, royal portions of food and wine. The purpose of their studies and life in the royal court all designed to help King Nebuchadnezzar understand and control his Hebrew captives.

Wealth and possibility surrounded the young men, the latest thing in clothing, accessories, and experiences. The training beckoned them, offering all that money could buy. But the young men knew who they were and whom they served. Someone had trained them in the ways of their people and their Jewish faith. Someone had told them the stories of Abraham and Sarah, about Moses and the Promised Land; someone trained them in the Hebrew prayer and kosher food laws. Parents, teachers, neighbors, priests, all help raise them to love the Lord their God with all their heart, and mind and strength. And now, the young men, living with the temptations of foreign and forbidden foods, surrounded by enticements of an alien culture, the young men remembered who they were and to whom they belonged.

When faced with the food temptations, Daniel resolved, says Chapter 1 Verse 8, that he would not defile himself with the royal rations. That scared the palace master. It was his neck, if the Hebrew boys did not eat the good food and grow like the rest of the youth. Daniel insisting, requested a vegetarian diet, avoided the pork and shrimp, the cakes and wine, made a deal with the palace master. Give us a ten-day trial and if we the Hebrew students do not appear as healthy as the others, then they would eat with the rest. After ten days, the rations master let them be for the Hebrew boys appeared stronger than the others, maybe even ten times better than the others in spite of their three years of training.

Like many stories in the Bible, there was a dream. Not a promised land like Martin Luther King said, where all God's children were judged on the depth of their character, not the color of their skin, but a king's dream, like Pharaoh in Joseph's time, a dream that left the king's spirit troubled and sleepless.

The magicians, and enchanters, the sorcerers and the Chaldeans were summoned to help the king. Being powerful and grumpy, the king demanded that his court reveal his dream and interpret it. The court counsel complained bitterly at the task, since the king didn't reveal the dream to them. Even when faced with imminent death, not one of the royal advisors could reveal the dream or explain what it meant. Only, the faithful foreigner Daniel, called in at the last minute used the tools in his life of prayer and simplicity, could call on the power of God and reveal the dream and its meaning. Daniel, a man of prayer and principle, delivered the others from death. His reward like Joseph before him was a position of power and authority, where he was lavished with gifts.

Meanwhile, the king had an amazing golden statue made. And a decree went out that all should bow down and worship the gold. All races, colors, and creeds must turn toward the beautiful idol. All but Daniel's friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego followed the rules. Instead, they ignored the call of the marching band and the dedication ceremony. They ignored the trumpets and trombones, the cymbals and drums. They ignored the king's threat of death by fire if they didn't worship the gold idol the next time the drums rolled and music played.

Worshipping gold isn't just an ancient biblical story. We like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, are faced with the temptations of a consumer culture that encourages us to worship gold and all that it can buy, forgetting the promise made at our baptism, that we will follow Jesus as Lord and Savior. The lure and bait of modern consumer culture, the power of mammon is all around us and no less attractive than in Daniel's time. We, too, are trained in the court of foreign culture, a consumer culture and invited to bow down to the golden god of materialism.

Depressed about your marriage? Buy a diamond tennis bracelet or gold necklace. Flash that credit card and the world will respond. Worried about your job? Shop the Chrismahazkwanika MLK day sale and charge it all, all of it. Unhappy? Buy a designer purse. Just charge it and let the power of the plastic card carry your troubles away. Overweight and a bit of a couch potato? Buy a Nordic track, or better yet, a membership in a club with big windows, to bring back your youth.

The golden god promises healing for every human problem. This god is powerful. Just look at the line to find a space to park during holiday shopping season. Hoards of faithful worshipping, coming and going in all directions, bowing in reverence at every shopping mall and now on-line in the privacy of our homes.

Brothers and sisters, alien cultures aren't just out there and back then. Consumer culture, with its miracle stories—buy this and you will be popular, buy that and you will be beautiful, buy the other and you will be happy—all the miracle stories are designed to get you to worship the golden god, an alien culture whose value system tempts us to forget who we are and whose we are. Like the days of King Nebuchadnezzar, we are, must dare to be, Daniel, to live faithfully when tempted all around, rich food, electronic toys, even bigger homes and closets, one where we like the young men face enticing goodies, learn to live among the stuff, the mammon of our time, and resist. It's not easy. We too are tempted daily, captive to a set of values that keeps our eyes on a god of gold instead of the Holy One of Heaven and Earth.

Consumer culture is a modern King Nebuchadnezzar's court encouraging us to "buy, buy, buy" as a friend of mine from Mobile used to exclaim. Yet Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Luke 12:34)

Where and what is your treasure? What do you protect, lock up, cherish with your time and training? It can be difficult to live faithfully in a consumer culture. How many competing ads will you see today? How many closets and containers does it take? How many yard sales and driveway pick-ups from Good Will or Disabled Veterans, to store or carry off your battle lost?

And who can point fingers? Not I. I battle like you with the temptations daily. Even in the midst of reading and thinking about what the god of gold would have me worship, I received 4 magazines full of travel temptations and spring clothing sales.

So I look for faith heroes, like Daniel to guide my path. Daniel knew who he was and whose he was, so even living in an alien culture, even speaking its language he could resist its lure.

Daniel didn't get to be a hero without help. There was a community of faith family and others, who showed him from childhood on, how to love God, how to live life turned upside down as a result. Who do you serve? An ancient story points so close to home.

Dare to be Daniel, facing a culture and power that like back then, forgets that the resources of the world belong to God. They are not ours; they are simply entrusted to us for the care of the marginalized, and the creation.

Dare to be Daniel, knowing who you are, and whom you serve, a God that loves you enough to support you and encourage you as you face the temptations of consumer culture.

A story is told of a wealthy woman who belonged to a congregation like ours. When she worshipped, showing up in a fancy car and dressed well, she was proud of her offering as the plate passed by. When the congregation built a new building to minister to the youth in the community, she gave a gift, but nothing that pushed her even to notice. Then one day she found herself at the Pearly Gates. Walking toward a beautiful mansion, she expressed surprise as her guide walked her on by. Sputtering, she asked where they were headed and the heavenly host showed her a not yet completed shack. "Why" she asked? "Well you didn't send much up to work with since you kept most of your resources for yourself."

Daniel chose to worship the God of his ancestors. You too must choose whom you worship. On this day, God we know in Christ Jesus, offers abundant resources if we are willing to share them. The competing god of gold and consumer culture tempts us with the good life, but one to be hoarded. It's your choice, today and each day.

Dare to be Daniel!