

August 4, 2024

The Book of Daniel
I. A Jerusalem Life in a Babylon World
Daniel 1:1-21, Psalm 137:4

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In 586 B.C., King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon conquered Judah and its capital city of Jerusalem. In addition to looting the Temple and tearing down the city walls, he also selected a number of the Israelite elite and took them as captives back to his capital city of Babylon. And there the Israelite captives would stay, until King Cyrus of Persia rose up against Babylon and set the Israelites free around 521 B.C.

This time of captivity in Babylon is known as the Exile. And this time of exile was a time of great soul-searching among those Israelite captives in Babylon. How had this happened, they asked – for they had been laboring under the assumption that nothing bad could ever happen to Jerusalem, since God’s Temple was located there. The prophets, particularly Isaiah and Jeremiah, stepped in to answer that question. What God spoke to the exiles through his prophets was that this had come upon them because they had turned away from the Lord God – worshipping false idols imported from other nations, mistreating the poor and helpless in their midst, practicing injustice in the service of their greed. The Exile had come upon them, the prophets said, so that God could get their attention and turn them back to Himself and to His commandments. And, by and large, that message got through – and there was repentance.

But having turned back to the Lord while in exile in Babylon, the exiles began asking a second question – the question voiced in Psalm 137: *“How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?”* In other words, cut off from the Temple, cut off from the Promised Land, cut off from everything that had supported and nurtured their faith back home; and instead, living in a land hostile to their belief and filled with different gods and different values and different ways of going about life – how then can we be the people God wants us to be? *“How shall we sing the Lord’s song in this foreign land?”* And that is the question which the Book of Daniel seeks to answer.

But before we turn to that answer, it is important for us to understand something else the Bible says about exile, something else the Bible tells us about the importance of this question of how we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land. Namely that this question belongs not just to those Israelite exiles in that particular time and place, but rather is a question to be raised in every age and in every place by the people of God. Even in our own age, even in this land in which we live. A question that must be asked because, as the Bible says, all of God’s people on this earth are in exile. For while the Babylonian exile was a physical exile – the people of God literally moved from one place, one culture to another – the Bible states that God’s people ever and always are in

some form of spiritual exile. Spiritual exile, meaning that as we make our way through this fallen world, in whatever land and speaking whatever tongue, we are not at home – never truly at home. Because our true home is not here in this fallen world, but is with God, in God’s Kingdom.

I Peter tells us that we are “*sojourners and exiles*” as we live our lives here on this earth.¹ And he cautions us never to make the mistake of thinking this world in which we live is our true home. Not to live by the ways of this world around us, but by the ways of that Kingdom which is our true home. Paul, writing to the Philippians, states that “*our citizenship is in heaven.*”² And so not in any nation of this world, despite what our passport might say. And further that we are, of first priority, to serve our true King and our true homeland, His Kingdom, in whatever earthly kingdom governed by whichever earthly king in which we find ourselves. And it is Jesus Himself who stated that those who belong to Him are “*not of this world,*” even as He prays to the Father that we should be sanctified and protected while we are in this world.³ And I am just scratching the surface of Scripture on this theme – this theme of God’s people on earth living as exiles from their true home in heaven.

So the question of Psalm 137, the question raised by the exiles in Babylon, is ours as well: “*How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?*” How shall we live a Jerusalem life in the midst of this Babylonian world? How shall we live a God-honoring life in a God-forgetting, God-indifferent, God-hostile world? How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land? And perhaps – it could be argued – perhaps that question is finding a new urgency for American Christians – who find ourselves living in a nation that we love, but which is also day by day becoming less friendly to faith, less supportive of those seeking to live by faith.

“*How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?*” As I said, the Book of Daniel goes a long way toward answering that question – and this morning is just the first of the lessons Daniel has to teach us. Our story begins by focusing on just four of those exiles now in Babylon, a group of young friends named Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah – or, as we will soon come to know them, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These four young men, older boys perhaps, were part of a special project of King Nebuchadnezzar – to take the best and brightest of the Jerusalem youth, educate them, train them, and in general raise them up to join his personal wise men and advisors. But, as we shall see, even as Nebuchadnezzar was doing so, God was using these four young men for a very different purpose: to show His people in exile – then, now, and always – how to be faithful in a world not welcoming to their faith. To show His people, including us, how to live a Jerusalem life even in the midst of a Babylon world. To live a Kingdom life even in the midst of this fallen world.

And the first thing we see these four friends do is draw a line between what they are permitted to offer up to the Babylonian king and what they can offer up only to the King of kings. The first thing they show us is that fidelity to God is not something that just happens without our trying, it is not something we can just take for granted if we wish to remain faithful in our exile. But rather fidelity to our God is something which must be chosen deliberately and daily – resolved upon, asserted even in the face of disapproval or outright hostility.

What happens is this. First the king decides to give the boys Babylonian names – Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Daniel and his friends have no objection to this – nothing critical to their

fidelity to God is at stake in this. After all, to quote a rather famous poet, *“What’s in a name? that which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet.”*⁴ The king also decides to give these Israelite boys the full benefit of the very best Babylonian education. And again, the boys have no problem with this. I remember my pastor, just before I went off to college, calling me into his study and reading to me a passage from John Calvin which said that we should never be afraid of any truth just because it comes from a non-Christian source – for all truth, if it is truth, is ultimately from God.⁵

But then Nebuchadnezzar decides that these young men should eat of the king’s table, dine on the king’s own rich food. And here is where Daniel and his friends draw the line. This they will not do, they tell their keepers: *“But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king’s food, or with the wine that he drank.”* There’s that word again: resolved – faithfulness is not something that happens without our effort, our strong resolve. But why this, why resolve not to be defiled by the king’s food? Nothing is said here about concern for the Jewish dietary laws – so that can’t be it. And no concern is expressed that maybe the king’s rich food might not be healthy for growing young boys – so that can’t be it. Why is the line drawn at the king’s food?

The answer is found in a somewhat offhand way from a verse we read in Daniel 11 – that to eat the king’s food meant more, symbolically more, than just to eat the king’s food.⁶ To eat the king’s food, to share his table, in that culture and time, was in effect to become the king’s men. To eat the king’s food was essentially to enter into a covenant with the king in which one committed oneself to the king above all other loyalties. To eat the king’s food was to make the king lord over one’s life. And this Daniel and his friends will not do. *“You shall have no other gods before me,”* God had said⁷ – and Daniel and his friends will not compromise on their obedience to that command, will not compromise on their ultimate commitment to God as the One to whom they belong. Though they may live in Babylon, where Nebuchadnezzar is king; and though they may be living in the king’s house according to the king’s pleasure – still they will not for one moment let this Babylonian king take the place of the King of kings in their hearts and minds, in their ultimate loyalty and devotion.

So that’s lesson number one for how to sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land – it is to keep our loyalty to Jesus Christ primary. Not to let anything or anyone else in Babylon take the place of Jesus in our devotion. It is to resolve to Jesus first, last, and always. To know where to draw the lines in order to maintain that priority – and to do so faithfully, courageously, and no matter the cost. To resolve to live for Jesus, not Nebuchadnezzar in whatever shape or form he might take in our own day.

One small illustration, closer to our own day. Methodist Bishop Will Willimon tells of his days at Army boot camp. The first night, after the first gruelingly awful day, Willimon and his fellow inductees were surprised to see and hear one member of their new platoon down on his knees praying after lights out. They all hooted at him, made fun of him, called him a “mama’s boy.” But each successive night, this young soldier, whose name was Sweat, still got down on his knees and prayed in the barracks, in the face of their scorn and derision. He might be in the army, proudly serving his country – but his heart, his highest loyalty, still belonged to Jesus. Willimon writes: *“When boot camp was over at the end of August, our platoon voted Sweat the best cadet. He really wasn’t so good a soldier. But he was what we might have liked to be as people.”*⁸

So how do we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? The first lesson Daniel teaches us is that we do so by drawing the line, with strong resolve, regarding where our ultimate loyalty lies. Never forgetting to whom we ultimately belong, to whom we ultimately owe the priority and direction and manner of our living. Drawing the line between what we can give to Babylon without compromising our faith, and what we can never give to Babylon because of our faith. Where in this present time and place do we need to draw that line, stand up and stand out with strong resolve?

But there is a second thing in this story about singing the Lord's song in exile which we should not overlook, though it is easy to overlook – the manner with which Daniel takes his stand. Daniel makes his resolution, takes his uncompromising stand – we won't eat the king's food – but he does so graciously and with concern for those who might face consequences because of his stand. When he approaches the chief eunuch and his steward – those charged with his well-being by the king – he doesn't do so with arrogance, self-righteousness. In other words, he doesn't act like a jerk. He acts like someone who belongs to the God of grace. He understands that the chief eunuch and his steward will be held responsible, possibly with their lives, should he and his friends' rejection of the king's food not go well. So he graciously offers a ten day trial period, after which they can evaluate how well the boys are doing. Though he has resolved not to eat the king's food, he is gracious and considerate toward the Babylonians who bear responsibility for him.

And so we draw the lines and resolve to stay loyal to Christ, but we also do so not in a spirit of judgment toward our Babylonians, not with a self-righteous spirit which elevates “us” over “them,” and certainly not with utter indifference to the well-being of the Babylonians around us. To put it simply, just because we belong to Jesus does not mean we have the right to treat others with disdain. In fact, quite the opposite. Because we belong to Jesus we are to treat others outside the faith in a way that reflects His goodness and kindness and graciousness towards us. Christians must draw the line in Babylon, but we are not singing the Lord's song when we act like pompous religious jerks. We show our loyalty to Christ not just in the stands we take, but every bit as much in the way we take those stands. Remember the story of Pachomius from last Sunday, in which the Christians of his day were described as those “*who are merciful to everyone, strangers*”?

Paul knew this. Paul has a wonderful verse in II Corinthians in which he states that we who belong to Christ are to be “*the aroma of Christ*” to the world around us.⁹ The aroma of Christ – what do you think that might smell like? Philip Yancey, in his wonderful book, What's So Amazing About Grace?, says that Paul's image of Christians as the dispersers of the fragrance of grace to the world calls to his mind those old-fashioned atomizers that were used to apply perfume. You would squeeze the rubber bulb, and a fine mist of perfume would come shooting out of the fine holes at the end of the nozzle. A few drops, he says, would suffice for one's whole body; a few pumps on that rubber bulb could change the atmosphere of an entire room.

Yancey then says he loves that image of how Christians dispense the aroma of God's grace to the world – but then adds that he is nonetheless very worried that the world actually has cause to perceive Christians to be a very different type of spray apparatus altogether, and dispensing a very different type of aroma. Not an atomizer of pleasing perfume, but rather the sort of spray

device used by exterminators. Christians, instead of being the aroma of Christ, running around Babylon crying out:

“There’s a roach!” Pump, spray, pump, spray. “There’s a spot of evil!” Pump, spray, pump, spray. Some Christians I know have taken on the task of “moral exterminator” for the evil-infested society around them.¹⁰

But that sort of self-righteous, self-appointed judge approach to Babylon does not work at all – and brings no glory to Christ. To sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land, we cannot use that tune. We do draw the line, uncompromising and with strong resolve, between our loyalty to Christ and the world’s loyalties to that which is not Christ – but we do so in a way that conveys, not judgment and condemnation, but rather Christ’s love and kindness and compassion and invitation. In a way which invites rather than repels. In a manner consistent with the love by which Christ has first loved us.¹¹ As well as consistent with the way Christ loves even the Babylonians and wants them to be redeemed along with us. Draw the line, but do so with the love and grace we have first received from our Lord and Savior.

Well, that’s enough for one morning. I mean, Daniel does have much more to teach us about living a Jerusalem life in a Babylon world. But we’ll hear more next Sunday.

¹ I Peter 2:11.

² Philippians 3:20.

³ John 17:16-17.

⁴ From Act II, Scene II of Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet.

⁵ If you are interested, the passage is from Calvin’s Institutes of the Christian Religion, II.ii.15.

⁶ Daniel 11:26, by way of some serious scholarship involving the word for “food” used in both this passage and in Daniel 1.

⁷ Exodus 20:3.

⁸ William H. Willimon, “Advice,” in Pulpit Resource, Vol. 27, No. 3 (July, August, September, 1999), p. 38.

⁹ II Corinthians 2:15.

¹⁰ Philip Yancey, What’s So Amazing About Grace? (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), p. 158.

¹¹ I John 4:19.