DANIEL’S RESOLUTION

Daniel 1:1-21
Key Verse 1:8

“But 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.”

The book of Daniel is the fourth major book of prophecy in the Old Testament. Like Ezekiel, Daniel was a prophet during the Babylonian exile. In contrast to Ezekiel, Daniel was taken out of the Jewish culture at a very early age, and trained in the royal courts of Babylon. More important than his intellectual training, however, was Daniel's spiritual training through his struggle to maintain his identity as a child of God even as his Jewish cultural identity was stripped away. At times, this struggle exhausted Daniel so much that he couldn't get up for several days at a time! Nevertheless, God was with Daniel and enabled him to serve as the salt and light to the Babylonian and Medean kings throughout the period of Jewish exile. As a result, Daniel was raised as a prophet who could see God's sovereign purpose for the whole world. And God chose Daniel as the prophet who would reveal the time of Jesus' coming to this world, and God’s will for the Son of Man to be the King of kings and Lord of lords. In today’s passage, we will study about Daniel's physical and spiritual training that prepared him for his long service to kings and to God. The most important training that Daniel received was training in holiness. Training in holiness has value for all things. May God bless us to know that holiness comes only when we make a clear decision to live before God!

I. God's hope for Judah

First, Daniel was exiled from Judah (1-3). When Daniel was still a very young man, tragedy befell the people of Judah. Judah was the remaining southern kingdom of what had once been the united kingdom of Israel under David and Solomon. After Solomon's death, the northern tribes rebelled under Jereboam against Solomon's son,
Rehoboam. Jereboam, however, led the people of northern Israel astray by building altars and golden calves in Bethel, so that they would no longer go to the temple in Jerusalem. Politically, his idea was brilliant, but spiritually, he signed the death warrant for his nation. Finally, in 722 BC, northern Israel was conquered by Assyria, and its people were exiled. Judah, under the leadership of Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah, survived Assyria’s assault and so remained the sole bearer of God’s name among the peoples of the earth. But Judah was led astray under Manasseh, Hezekiah’s son, so that she followed the same path of idolatry that northern Israel had laid out. Prophets spoke in God’s name of the judgment that would be sure to come because of the things that Manasseh and the people of Judah did at that time. But the people did not repent. Finally, God’s judgment came on the people of Judah during the reign of Jehoiakim. Jeremiah the prophet declared in Jeremiah 25:8-11, “Therefore the Lord Almighty says this: ‘Because you have not listened to my words, I will summon all the peoples of the north and my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon,’ declares the Lord, ‘and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants and against all the surrounding nations. I will completely destroy them and make them an object of horror and scorn, and an everlasting ruin. I will banish from them the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of bride and bridegroom, the sound of millstones and the light of the lamp. This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon for seventy years.’” Daniel 1:1-2 reads, “In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim, 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 he put them in the treasure house of his god.”

Jehoiakim’s defeat and Jerusalem’s fall was God’s judgment on his rebellious and unbelieving people. But we should not think that God’s judgment is punishment. God’s judgment is always for the sake of cleansing and restoring his people. God’s judgment is always the expression of God’s hope that his people might repent and believe. The leadership of Judah was corrupt and its priests were unbelieving. But among the young people of Judah and Israel, there were many hopeful
young men who needed training for the sake of God’s mission and purpose in their lives. Their shepherds had failed to raise them up as future leaders of their nation. So God took the opportunity of Nebuchadnezzar’s rise to power and gave these young men new shepherds and better training, in hope that they could become the leaders of his people after the seventy years of Babylonian captivity was over. Look at verse 3. “Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring in some of the Israelites from the royal family and nobility.” The kingdom of Judah was on its last legs. But God found a hope for Judah in a few young men, and God himself would train them and raise them up as shepherds for his people, as well as prayer servants for the world.

Second, Trained to serve the king of Babylon (3-5). Look at verses 3-5. “Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of the court officials, to bring in some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility – young men 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 were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service.” King Nebuchadnezzar had become king the very year he subjected Judah and Jerusalem to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar was a very ambitious man. For example, Egypt was the reigning superpower nation in the region of Canaan and Syria. But Nebuchadnezzar determined to challenge Egypt’s power for the sake of making a name for himself and his nation the greatest nation on earth. For the sake of building up his nation’s strength and wisdom, Nebuchadnezzar drafted the very best and most promising young men of every nation that he conquered. And he determined to train them and to build them up so as to concentrate all human knowledge, wisdom and creativity within his kingdom. Indeed, he spared no expense to serve those he brought in to train, sacrificing food and wine from his own table to help these young men grow in body, mind and spirit.

Verse 4 says that the young men were to be trained in the language and literature of the Babylonians. These days, the study of language
and literature are generally despised as being of no practical value. One might say that we are living in the age of the number, in which the businessmen and engineers hold the greatest influence. But it is a mistake to discount the importance of language and literature in the training of young men and women. Language is the tool that reveals the very structure of our minds and thoughts. Literature is the expression of our humanity. Those who ignore language and literature study cannot understand how it is that we think, and they are blind to human nature. Nebuchadnezzar was not interested in merely building up a war machine that could crush all the nations of the earth. He wanted to build up a kingdom that could rule wisely over every nation on earth. So he trained the young men in thought and humanity through language and literature study. Whoever desires to be a shepherd in his or her generation must receive training in language and literature as a matter of first importance.

Third, Belteshazzar (6-7). Among all the men chosen by Ashpenaz, four young men were from Judah. They were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. Perhaps they were in their early teens. They had a hope to be one of the leading men of Judah. But one day, all of their dreams and their human joy was taken from them. They lost their parents. They lost their inheritance in the Promised Land. They lost their country. They lost their prospects as free men, and became slaves in Babylon. In Judah, they could look up to the priests and listen to the Bible being taught every Sabbath and they could understand that they were the chosen people of God. But now, they were ripped from their comfortable homes and their identity as God’s chosen people was being questioned. If they were chosen, why had they been exiled to Babylon? If they were so special, why had they been taken captive and made slaves along with many other able young men from the Babylonian empire? Now, they were being trained to serve the Babylonian empire, not their own nation. They even lost their Hebrew names, and were given new, Babylonian names: Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. For these young men, this was a time of great turmoil and uncertainty. They had been recognized for their potential and given the opportunity to serve the greatest nation on earth. But the human blessing of being chosen for service to the king of Babylon threatened their identity as a people chosen by God.
Hitler had Jewish blood. But he forgot his identity as one of God’s chosen people for the sake of the human opportunity leadership in Germany gave him. He ended up being one of the greatest disasters for the Jewish nation ever. Stalin was from Georgia, and a seminary student. But when he was chosen by the communists for leadership in the revolution, he forgot everything he ever learned in seminary and his own nationality in order to gain the top position in communist Russia. He was a disaster for the people of Georgia and the church in Russia. Human choosing and training is a blessing. But those who forget God’s choosing and training for the sake of human blessings become very wicked and evil people, indeed. Daniel and his friends were at a crossroads. They had to find the way to keep their identity in God, even as they lost their identity as Jewish citizens.

II. Daniel’s testing

First, Daniel asked for permission not to defile himself (8). Look at verse 8. “But 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.” In all likelihood, the food that Daniel and his companions were being served from the king’s table included meat sacrificed to idols. What is more, the meat was probably not prepared in the way prescribed by the Bible, but still contained the blood of the animal that was killed. However, there was no such prescription in the Bible against wine, except for the Nazirites, who had made vows to devote themselves to God. Nevertheless, Daniel resolved not to defile himself by eating any of the meat or drinking any of the wine from the king’s table. The point is, Daniel was not acting simply out of tradition or in an effort to hold on to Jewish customs. When faced with the dilemma of whether to follow God’s choosing or human choosing, Daniel made a conscious decision to devote himself to God by denying the choice food and wine being offered him from the king’s table. It was an expression of devotion of his body and mind to God. Daniel was free to act as he saw fit. No one among men could judge him for going along with his situation and eating the food that was given him. But Daniel did not think that he was free from God’s choosing of him, just because the Babylonians had also chosen him. Daniel considered God’s choosing of him precious, and he determined not to forget God’s
choosing, ever. He resolved to keep his identity as a chosen people, even as he was being trained to serve the Gentile king of Babylon.

Daniel’s resolution, however, seemed very impractical. In reality, he had no right to decide for himself what to eat or wear. He was now a servant to the king of Babylon, and he was subject to his commands and laws. But where there is a will, there is a way. Daniel went to the chief official, Ashpenaz, and asked him for permission not to defile himself by eating the royal food (8b). Daniel's request is remarkable for several reasons. First of all, Daniel did not use his circumstances as an excuse not to do what was right. Daniel prayed about it and sought God earnestly, until God gave him wisdom how to find the way to keep himself pure before God. We can contrast Daniel's humble decision to ask permission from the chief official with Peter's emotional outburst when he cut off the right ear of the servant Malchus during Jesus’ arrest. Peter tried very hard to keep his identity as Jesus’ disciple. But he depended on his emotional feelings. However, his emotional feelings led him into a spirit of rebellion, so that he became a violent man, and eventually a defeated man. Daniel did not give in to the spirit of rebellion. Daniel accepted God’s sovereignty which had made him, a Jew, subject to the Babylonians. But Daniel did not think that there was no way for him. Daniel believed that even though he was subject to the Babylonians, God was not. Daniel depended on God, who is God of both the Babylonians and the Jews, for strength and wisdom to do what was right.

Second of all, Daniel asked for permission not to defile himself. Daniel’s request is contrary to human nature. Human beings in our sinful selves are always in rebellion against God’s truth. In our sinful nature, we are always looking for ways to get permission to defile ourselves, if only for a short time. We are all descendants of Adam, who traded paradise for a tasty piece of fruit, and Esau, who traded his birthright for a bowl of soup. Our desires are so low. But when Daniel overcame his rebellious spirit to God and to the Babylonians, he was no longer under the control of his sinful nature. Instead, he was controlled by the mind of the Spirit, and he desired the things of the Spirit (Ro. 8:6-9). He yearned for the holiness of God, and earnestly sought a way to keep himself from being defiled so that he might grow
in God’s holiness throughout his lifetime. Jesus taught his disciples, “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.” (Mat. 7:7). Jesus is not encouraging his disciples to find a better job. Jesus is encouraging his disciples to seek the holiness of God (Luke 11:13). Everyone who seeks the holiness of God will find it. But how can our desires be changed so that we earnestly seek God’s holiness? We must humble ourselves and submit to God and his Christ as Lord in our hearts. And we must submit to God’s sovereign will for our lives here on this earth. John 14:23 says, “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.” The Holy Spirit comes and dwells in those who submit and obey. If anyone wants to subdue the darkness of sinful desires that torments your soul, please, submit to Jesus Christ as Lord, and accept his sovereign will for your life. Then you will come under the control of the Holy Spirit, and you will grow in desire for the holiness of God. Test him, and you will see!

Second, Daniel’s faith experiment (9-14). Daniel’s request was very unusual and frightening to the chief official, Ashpenaz. He knew of Nebuchadnezzar’s decisive and drastic spirit, and he did not want to tempt his anger by giving in to the special requests of his charges. He was not willing to risk Daniel and his friends becoming any less healthy than the other young men. But Daniel was not perturbed. Daniel proposed a test. Look at verses 12-13. “Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then compare our appearance with the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see.” Daniel’s experiment made no sense. Of course, the young men who ate the best food would be the healthiest and strongest! Why even bother making the experiment? But God blessed Daniel by making the chief official show favor to Daniel, and he granted Daniel’s request. He and his friends were given only vegetables for ten days. And to his surprise, Daniel and his friends didn’t look emaciated at all! Look at verse 15. “At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food.” The chief official and the guard saw with their own eyes that Daniel and his friends on vegetables, had outperformed the others on the royal
food. They didn’t have to “just believe”. They saw with their own eyes that God had blessed Daniel and his friends’ decision of faith to keep themselves pure. Look at verse 16. “So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables, instead.”

Here we learn that we must come to have faith that moves mountains. St. Paul is an example of one who had faith to move mountains. St. Paul was imprisoned because of the jealousy of the Jews. After more than two years in jail, he had the opportunity to plead his case before Festus, the new governor, and Agrippa, the king. He was in chains. His life was in danger. But Paul did not think that he was to be pitied or despised. Paul put his faith in Jesus on the line when he said, “Short time or long – I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.” (Acts 26:29). It was an audacious claim. Why should anyone want to be like him in his suffering and trials? But he had the faith in God to back up his claim. As a result, even as a prisoner in Rome he could convert the guards and members of Caesar’s household, until finally all of Rome could be conquered for the gospel. We must not be content to say, “Well, I have my faith, and you have yours.” Our faith must be evident in our lives. Our faith must be active and powerful in advancing the kingdom of God. Daniel and his friends put their faith in God to the test, and as a result, God provided a way for them to testify to God’s power, and advertise the holy life in God. May God bless us to advertise the holy life in God when we put our faith on the line with what we do.

Third, God commissions Daniel (17-21). Look at verse 17. “To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of every kind of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds.” When Daniel and his friends passed the faith test, and held on to their identity in the holy God, God abundantly blessed them. He equipped them with understanding and wisdom an order of magnitude greater than anyone else in the king’s service. He also gave Daniel special insight to understand men’s hearts and dreams. In short, when these young men devoted themselves to living a holy life, keeping their identity in God even as they lost their human identity as
Jews, then God gave them success in everything they did. The king recognized them as second to none, and they were exalted as leading members in his service. 1 Timothy 4:8 says, “For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.” Those who seek God, his righteousness and holiness, will find all things as well. And we are qualified to enter his service as shepherds and Bible teachers.

There is not much value in being a cultural Christian. But there is great value in knowing and growing in the holiness of God, both for ourselves and for our nation. May God bless you with a decision of faith to submit to Christ Jesus as Lord, and seek his holiness in your life like Daniel with all your heart, mind and soul!