**Pursuing Spiritual Excellence**

Well, welcome back from the summer holidays. It is great to be back and I hope you had a relaxing summer break like we did. Well, perhaps the last few days have not been so relaxing for us. Many of you know that Kathy was in the hospital Thursday and Friday this week to treat a heart condition. And thank you for your prayers and warm wishes and we thank God for answering those prayers as everything went as we had hoped. But, it is during times like this that you quickly realize that what matters most to us in life are the things that we control the least.

And today, we are starting a new series about the life of a man named Daniel who is going to be caught up in something that is totally out of his control and which changes not only his entire life, but also the life of the southern kingdom of Judah. **<Arrow>**

*In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah* **(605 BC)***, 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 put in the treasure house of his god.*

Daniel was a young man at this time, probably a teenager like some of you. Now what do you do when the most powerful man in the world shows up with his whole army outside your city gates? This guy just doesn’t lose a battle and everyone knows it. In fact, the prophet Isaiah had actually prophesied about 100 years earlier that this exact thing would happen. You can check it out for yourself in the end of the 39th chapter of Isaiah.

Now a siege in those days meant no one comes or goes. No one brings in food, so you do with what is inside the city walls and slowly you starve to death. This is bad news and Daniel knows that his life will forever be changed. It doesn’t say how long the siege lasted, but it doesn’t seem like they put up a big fight. Perhaps everyone knew of Isaiah’s prophecy and they surrendered quickly.

Now, for sure this was significant for Daniel. But was this just some ancient battle that occurred a long time ago. This happened hundreds of times in the past, why was this defeat so special?

Well, you have to go way back to the book of Genesis in chapter 11 & 12. It’s after the flood of the earth that God caused in order to end all the suffering that people endured due to the constant wicked and evil behavior in the world. And eventually, the descendents of Noah build a great city and a great tower to honor themselves and people begin to sin against God more and more. So, God decides to give them different languages which stops all the construction and causes them to scatter to different parts of the world. That was the story about the tower of Babel. And many scholars believe that it was the beginning of the city of Babylon.

Later, God decides to focus in on a relationship with one man named Abraham, who lived near Babylon. This was around 2000 BC and it would be through Abraham that God would try to reach the rest of the world. He promised Abraham, “*I’ll be your God, and your people will be my people. And I will give you a promised land, and I will make you a new community that will bless the world*.”

That community had a lot of ups and downs through the years. They were in slavery in Egypt for many centuries. They were delivered under Moses. They wandered in the wilderness for forty years and, finally, they entered the promised land of Canaan. And after a period of time they reached their peak under King David and Solomon. And Solomon built this glorious temple. Then there was a long, slow decline and the kings that followed did evil in the sight of the Lord. Eventually, the kingdom was split into a Northern kingdom, Israel, which was destroyed around 722 BC by the Assyrians. And all that was left was the Southern kingdom called Judah.

So, when Judah fell to the Babylonians it was an end to God’s dream of a nation on earth led by Him that would be a model community of beauty and goodness and truth that would be a blessing to all nations. God’s dream was dead and now, some of his people, the Israelites were in captivity in Babylon; the very area where Abraham had come from in the beginning.

So, not only was this a big deal for Daniel as a person, it was a big deal for the nation. They must have felt like the world had ended. They had failed miserably and God had abandoned them or so they thought. Do you ever feel like that? Have you been through a time when all you can do is look to heaven and say, “Why God? Why me? Why now?” Nothing makes sense any longer and we learn that we are not in control.

But God has not abandoned them at all. It is all part of his master plan for their good. It’s not a punishment in the sense that God is angry and wants them to suffer in order to get even with them. That’s not it at all. It’s the sense of a loving Father who sees his child making wrong choices that he knows will only end up harming his child and He desperately loves his child too much to ignore the problem. He reasons with his child and explains and tries to get him to choose to change his ways on his own, but if words and reason don’t work, then He will do whatever it takes to help his child. That’s what is called Tough Love.

Let me give a simple example of this. What if you have a child that refuses to brush their teeth? And you explain that if you don’t brush your teeth, then you will get cavities and other diseases and eventually you can lose all your teeth. But your child doesn’t care and for now, it doesn’t seem like it’s a problem, so they still won’t brush their teeth. Now, what do you do as a parent? Do you simply give up and say, well, I did my best and they didn’t listen. And the child goes on to get many cavities and have lots of surgeries that will be terribly painful. Will that outcome make any parent happy? Does any loving parent wish that on your child? No, you never give up trying to make your child brush their teeth. No matter how much of a struggle it is, you always fight to make sure they brush their teeth because you love them that much.

Now, it may seem like a silly example, but we humans do really stupid things that in the end cause us so much pain. There are spiritual laws just like the law of not brushing your teeth. And if you don’t obey these spiritual laws you will have problems in life and God loves us too much to just let us go and do whatever we want. He will fight and keep on fighting to help us do the right thing. And sometimes he uses traumatic events to wake us up and get our attention.

But you have to believe that you have a loving Father; otherwise, it seems like cruelty. Now, what if I could prove to you that you have a loving Father in heaven who is working out everything for your good?

Do you remember that I mentioned Isaiah prophesied in chapter 39 of his book that Babylon would overthrow Judah? Well, God spends the next 26 chapters giving comfort to his people. Here in Isaiah we learn that there captivity is only for a certain period of time and then God will restore them. He even gives the King’s name, Cyrus, who will do it. He names this guy about 150 years before he is even born. God has planned this all out. And here’s what he has to say to his people. Listen to God’s heart here. **<ARROW>**

*“Comfort, comfort my people,” says your God. “Speak tenderly to Jerusalem. Tell her that her sad days are gone and her sins are pardoned.”* **<ARROW>**

*He will feed his flock like a shepherd. He will carry the lambs in his arms, holding them close to his heart. He will gently lead the mother sheep with their young.* **<ARROW>**

*But those who trust in the Lord will find new strength. They will soar high on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not faint.*

Now, does that sound like a vengeful God or a loving Father? But it keeps going. **<ARROW>**

*But as for you, Israel my servant, Jacob my chosen one, descended from Abraham my friend, I have called you back from the ends of the earth, saying, ‘You are my servant.’ For I have chosen you and will not throw you away. Don’t be afraid, for I am with you. Don’t be discouraged, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will hold you up with my victorious right hand*.

**<ARROW>**

And it keeps coming.

*Sing for joy, O heavens! Rejoice, O earth! Burst into song, O mountains! For the Lord has comforted his people & will have compassion on them in their suffering. Yet Jerusalem says, “The Lord has deserted us; the Lord has forgotten us.”*

*“Never! Can a mother forget her nursing child? Can she feel no love for the child she has borne? But even if that were possible, I would not forget you! See, I have written your name on the palms of my hands. Always in my mind is a picture of Jerusalem’s walls in ruins. Soon your descendants will come back, and all who are trying to destroy you will go away. Look around you and see, for all your children will come back to you. As surely as I live,” says the Lord, they will be like jewels or bridal ornaments for you to display.*

And this type of loving, comforting words goes on for the next 26 chapters. For sure there are many words of warning to obey, but you can see God’s heart. He is the loving Father who is looking out for our best interest and in the end, everything will be made right. Not convinced. One last verse from Isaiah 53 **<ARROW>**

*Who has believed our message? To whom has the Lord revealed his powerful arm? My servant grew up in the Lord’s presence like a tender green shoot, like a root in dry ground. There was nothing beautiful or majestic about his appearance, nothing to attract us to him. He was despised and rejected - a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief. We turned our backs on him and looked the other way. He was despised, and we did not care. Yet it was our weaknesses he carried; it was our sorrows that weighed him down. And we thought his troubles were a punishment from God, a punishment for his own sins! But he was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed. All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God’s paths to follow our own. Yet the Lord laid on him the sins of us all.*

God not only promises to restore Israel, He tells us his new game plan for the human race. It did not work to heal the world through one man, Abraham. So, God would come down in the flesh and He would heal the world himself through Jesus Christ. Jesus is the ultimate answer to the question, “Is God good and loving?” In Jesus, we see the loving Father who would do anything to protect his children. He would go so far as to even die for them. And that is what he did on the cross for you and me. Words cannot express how much love He feels for you. I hope you believe that.

Now, you understand the background to this story of exile. It’s a sad day for Israel and it’s a sad day for Daniel. **<ARROW>**

In verse 3, we learn that Daniel and many other important people were taken back to Babylon as captives. This was the typical pattern for the Babylonians after they conquered a land. They would take most talented and useful people back to Babylon to ensure a steady supply of people to serve the king. And they would leave others behind to live peacefully and pay tribute. Usually the people left behind got a promotion, so it gained their loyalty and the ‘cream of the crop’ got taken back to Babylon.

And we learn in verse 4 that Daniel fit in that category. He was strong, healthy, good-looking, and intelligent. And you have to imagine that if Nebuchadnezzar had never showed up that Daniel would have had a great life back in Judah. He probably could have had his pick of beautiful brides and had an important position in his home country, but that’s not going to happen for Daniel. That dream is dead. He’s going to spend the rest of his life living in a foreign country, speaking a foreign language, and serving a series of kings who were not very nice guys.

He would be immersed in a foreign culture. I sure he was given new clothes to wear like the rest of the Babylonians and he was given new food to eat from the king’s table. He was then trained for 3 years to learn everything there was to learn in Babylon. They would even change his name and this is important because his name, Daniel, meant “God is my judge”, but his new name Belteshazzar means “Bel, protect his life”. Bel was the chief Babylonian god. So, in everyway, Daniel was stripped of his identity and given a new life.

The problem is, some of this new life in Babylon was not good or pleasing to God. And Daniel had to make some tough choices between fitting into the culture that he lived in or doing what he thought was right to do. Have you ever had that problem in your life?

I want to share a story from my own life when I had to make a choice whether to fit in or to stand out. And I made the wrong choice.

It was the summer of 1987. I was 21 years old. I had been a committed Christian for about 9 months and now I was getting ready to be married to my beautiful bride. But as is the tradition in the USA and here in Sweden, when you get married, you have a Bachelor party. That one last night of freedom, or so they say. Well, I was a little nervous about this, since it is usually a surprise type of thing. And I told Kathy that if anyone of my friends contacted her, that she should tell them not to plan anything crazy. Well, they did call and she did tell them, but they weren’t Christians and they only knew the old me, since my conversion happened at school only 9 months ago. They thought Kathy was saying that for herself and that it wasn’t coming from me.

Anyway, we go out to a Comedy Club first and it’s fun and there’s many of my friends from High School. And there’s even 1 guy from my church. And after a while, they ask me to go to another bar with them and I’m beginning to have my doubts that I should go. They are talking about drinking more, but I haven’t seen some of these guys in a while and I want to spend time with them, so I agree. The 1 guy from my church tells me that he’s not going and he even offers to help me explain to my friends that drinking isn’t what I live for. I tell him no and he leaves.

We go to a bar and I have a beer and it’s OK. Then one of the guys says, “We should go to this Strip Club.” And I knew what that was all about because I had actually been there about a year and half earlier with this same guy before I had become a Christian. And I knew I should say no, but I was afraid what they would think. And I also knew that one of my best friends, Mike, was 1 year younger than me and he was not of legal drinking age and he couldn’t get in. And so I told them that I wouldn’t go in if Mike couldn’t get in. Well, guess what happened. They slipped the doorman 20 dollars and before I knew it, we were all inside. Now, what do I do?

I should have said, “No” a dozen times, but I never did and I felt awful. I hated every single minute, but I never said anything. Eventually, a few of them could see that I really wasn’t enjoying myself, so they suggested to call it an evening. And I went home and I wept for what seemed like hours because I knew what I should have done and I didn’t have the courage to do it. I needed to stand up for my convictions and to say that I don’t think God wants me to go to the strip club. And I wonder now which one of my friends probably needed to hear that from me that night.

I could see that God was putting me to the test and I had failed. But I learned a hard lesson that night. I could not just ‘fit-in’ any longer and I had to make a choice once and for all whom I would serve. I couldn’t ‘sit on the fence’ any longer. And I made another commitment to God that night that I would never give in to peer pressure like that again and that I would stand up for my beliefs when needed. **<ARROW>**

And that is what we see Daniel doing in verse 8. It says he resolved or made up his mind not to defile himself by eating this food. It doesn’t say why it was bad, it could have been that they ate pork or it could have been meat sacrificed to idols, which were both commanded by God in the Old Testament not to eat from. In any case, he has decided once and for all that he won’t do it and he knows his boundary from the start.

I also like the way Daniel handled the situation. He could have easily turned it into a nasty argument and he would have likely been killed. But he tried to reason with the attendant over them and gave a reasonable request to make a test. The attendant had good reason to be nervous, so Daniel respected him and tried to find a way forward that would be good for everyone. He acted responsibly and with wisdom. I think sometimes we Christians have a martyr complex and we are looking for a fight when there is no need for one. But Daniel and his friends don’t fight or condemn the culture.

Instead, they act responsibly and through good behavior and 3 years of hard work and God’s blessing, they end up putting themselves in a position to lead the culture. **Arrow**

*The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king’s service. 20 In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom*

Wouldn’t it be much better if Christians were known for excellence and wisdom instead of always railing against the ungodly parts of the culture? We are not in control of our secular, post-Christian society, but we can influence it by good deeds and hard work and by asking for God’s blessing. He is ultimately in control and we can trust in that.

To summarize, I see a couple of places where Daniel got help in his situation. 3 things that he could trust in. **<ARROW>** Firstly, it’s obvious that just like me, he knew in his heart that it wasn’t right. His conscience told him there was a problem with eating this food. **<ARROW>** Secondly, if he didn’t trust himself, which sometimes can happen, he had his 3 close friends to get help from. They could give him good advice and help him to make a wise decision. Just like my Christian friend who tried to help me, but I didn’t listen to. And maybe you are a part of a small group where you can get good advice from other mature Christians. **<ARROW>** Proverbs 11:14 says, “*there is safety in having many advisers*.” It’s another reason to get involved in a small group.

**<ARROW>** Lastly, you can always trust God for help to know what is right and wrong. **<ARROW>** James 1:5 says, “*If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him*.” I remember praying that prayer later that summer as I came to realize how immature and unwise I really was. And I think God has started to answer that prayer in me over time.

Now, if you still have some doubts about something in your life and you’re still not getting clear answers. And sometimes life is like that. Everything is not black or white. Here’s 3 tests you can use to help guide you. **<ARROW>**

The first is the test of secrecy. Would you be embarrassed if others knew what you are involved in? Would you welcome Jesus to sit by your side and view all your activities all day and all night long? That will help to sharpen your convictions won’t it?

**<ARROW>** The second is the test of universality. Would you encourage everyone to do what you are doing? What kind of community and world would we have if everyone were involved in your activity?

**<ARROW>** Lastly, is the test of prayer. Can you pray and ask God’s blessing on your activity? If you fail any one of these tests in some area of your life, then I would strongly recommend that you trust your conscience, your friends, and your God and make a change in your life. If may not be easy and perhaps you will suffer for your convictions, but perhaps not.

I like the story of a young man who was hired to be the assistant to the president of a growing department store. On the first day of his job, the phone rang and the person asked to speak to the president. He told the president who was on the phone for him and the president told him to say that he wasn’t there. The assistant handed the president the phone and said, “You tell him.”

After he hung up, the president came over to the assistant and started cursing and yelling at him for not doing what he was told. After the president stopped yelling, the assistant said, “If I can lie for you, then I can lie to you.” And the assistant could have been fired, but instead he became the president’s most trusted employee and eventually his 2nd in command. And we’ll see times in Daniel’s life over the coming weeks where it can go either way, but Daniel and his friends stayed true to their faith and they put their trust in a loving Heavenly Father. How about you? Are there areas of your life where you don’t let Christ walk with you? Are you riding the fence of your faith?

**<Arrow>**I like the way William Barclay put it in his book The Apostles Creed for Everyman where he said, "*Jesus did not say discuss me; he said follow me." We do not make terms with Christ; we surrender to Christ. We do not compromise with Christ; we submit to Christ. Christianity does not mean being interested in Jesus Christ; it means taking the same oath as princes take to a king or queen in a coronation ceremony and saying, I am your liege man of life and limb, and faith and truth will I bear to you against all manner of folk. So help me God."*

**Closing Prayer**

**Closing Benediction <Arrow>**

*Now may the God of peace make you holy in every way, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ comes again.*

**Daniel 1:1-21**

*1 In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. 2 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 put in the treasure house of his god.*

*3 Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king’s service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility— 4 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. 5 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.*

*6 Among those who were chosen were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. 7 The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego.*

*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. 9 Now God had caused the official to show favor and compassion to Daniel, 10 but the official told Daniel, “I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you.”*

*11 Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, 12 “Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. 13 Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see.” 14 So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days.*

*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. 16 So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead.*

*17 To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds.*

*18 At the end of the time set by the king to bring them into his service, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. 19 The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king’s service. 20 In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom.*

*21 And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.*