

## Daniel 1:5-21 The Courage to be Different

### Introduction

In life we have some key times of decision-making that significantly impact the rest of our lives here on earth. At these special moments the choices we propose determine far more than we may ever imagine at the time. The most prominent one that comes to mind is when a Christian young person leaves home for the first time. It may be to go to university to take an undergraduate degree course as nearly half of all young adults do at the current time. For others it may be a work-related move to another part of the country. However, whatever the reason for the first time that individual has to make their choices about how they will live their lives and in a secular society there will be intense pressure not to put God first and not to prioritise getting established in a local Christian Church. What happens in the first few weeks in a new setting often forms a pattern for the next few years and beyond. For others it may be a decision over a potential marriage partner. When a Christian marries a fellow believer they can encourage one another to go on with the Lord. Or if it is a mixed marriage there may be contrasting pressures to be less involved in church life and to live in a way that falls short of how the Lord would want us to live. Another key stage of life is as parents when we have that solemn responsibility for the guidance and direction of our children. How do we model the values we profess and how as a family do we communicate the principles we proclaim? There are of course times of crises in life to which our responses will either bring us closer to the Lord or the opposite. Times of major ill-health, or bereavements; family breakdowns or long-term unemployment; these and other challenges in some form or other will cross each of our paths. For all of us there will be disappointments in life- for some relationships long sought that never materialise; for others careers that seemed so possible remain frustratingly out of reach; each of us could add to the mix a variety of other things that can shake people's faith or raise doubts or fears about the future. In such times do we go along with the crowd around us or do we have the courage to be different? Are we willing to give the Lord His rightful place in our lives even if we cannot see how the future will turn out? Daniel 1:5-21 is both a well-known and highly significant passage in the Bible for addressing this topic. Here out of several hundred teenagers are four young men who had the courage to be different. We must not automatically make negative assumptions about all the others, but the text of the book of Daniel is silent concerning their welfare. Instead it highlights a handful of incidents in the lives of Jewish believers who were determined to witness to their faith in a credible manner in a foreign land. The wisdom they showed, in addition to their courage, was an example to each of us whatever our age today.

### 1. The Resolve in His Heart (Daniel 1:5-8a)

<sup>6</sup>Among those who were chosen were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. <sup>7</sup>The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego. <sup>8</sup>But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine... (a) **The experience of separation (Daniel 1:5)** 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. What these young men and countless thousand others had experienced over the years this Empire existed was almost overwhelming. If they did as their imperial masters requested then they were set up for life. Jobs, accommodation, salary, food and drink, together with other perks were a given. It would be no surprise that many young men from different cultures and religious backgrounds were seduced into adopting all the values and ways of Babylon and becoming servants loyal

to the regime. One has to assume from the success of this scheme that this was the case with the majority of those inducted into the Babylonian civil service. The loss of family ties would be exceedingly painful to begin with, but the pain would become less severe as time passed. The hope might remain that a future reunion would be possible but it was relegated to a future year and certainly not in the years immediately following their capture and effective enslavement. This three year course conducted in the Babylonian language was incredibly intense. There would be little time left besides the cramming of endless reams of information about the country, culture and practices of Babylon. The brightest young people from each subjugated country were now expected to serve a new master and offer loyalty to a different cause. The pressure to conform would have been greater than anything else they had previously experienced. We have to remember that until this current generation only a tiny proportion of young adults would have had a higher education. There was a self-perpetuating elite that took the majority of these places in each country. To kidnap the young people set apart as the future leaders of their societies was a major blow to their future prosperity and by contrast a major enhancement of the capabilities of the occupying power. How would these young Jewish boys fare when denied access to their Scriptures and public worship services in the community of faith? How do you and I cope in new work, social or educational environments?

(b) **The experience of indoctrination** (Daniel 1:6-7) <sup>6</sup>*Among those who were chosen were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah.* <sup>7</sup>*The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego.* It was not out of good will to these individuals that they were given the best education available in Babylon. It was not for their personal advantage that they were probably provided with a good diet and above average accommodation. There was something much more significant going on here. At one level there was the ‘carrot and the stick’ approach being used. If you do what we want you will be rewarded with an excellent career with the best prospects for the future. If you don’t go along with our strategy then you will lose out, or in the worst case scenario risk your life. It is certain that both economically and professionally your chances of success in this-worldly terms will only come about through you doing what you are told. This line of reasoning connects so well today in our materialistic culture. An accountant, for example, may be offered more money to fiddle the company books; or a border official may be offered inducements to look the other way when a person or goods comes to their station. In every type of employment there are moral and legal boundaries we know we must not cross, even though some people have gained financially by breaking the rules. The actual challenges for most people are not a temptation to commit serious crimes, rather engaging in things that may actually be legal but morally questionable. In many forms of sales employment staff can be encouraged to present their products in ways that may be quite legal but convey a false impression to customers. The significance of this may be unclear, but in practice when you have worked in this type of employment it is not too difficult to work out how to behave to make it much more likely that the customer will be interested in purchasing your product than not. As a follower of Jesus it is our duty to ascertain where the appropriate boundaries lie as we do our work. Life is more than our work. Sometimes employers forget that! It appears that this is a particular problem at the present time as departing colleagues are not replaced in many workplaces during an economic downturn and the remaining staff members are required to cover the additional duties that now require attention. Would Daniel and his friends just go along with the crowd in conforming to everything they were asked to carry out? Or would there be boundaries they would not cross? These were valid questions to ask then and now. Many requests are

perfectly legal, reasonable and appropriate in a place of employment. It requires much thought, wisdom and courage to give a negative, but contextually appropriate answer.

(c) **The exposure to potential compromise** (Daniel 1:8a) <sup>8</sup> *But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine...* Scholars have used much ink and expended great efforts in seeking to determine the criteria behind Daniel's decision. They have chosen not to eat certain foodstuffs including meat. It is most probable that because the boundaries for meat-eating set out for Jews in Leviticus chapter eleven were not followed that these four friends asked to be excused from eating meat in their diet. It was not a modern conscience choice as may be made in our country this century over whether to be a carnivore, vegetarian or vegan in dietary preferences! Daniel and his friends also declined to accept alcoholic beverages. Now there were no suggestions in the Old Testament that this course of action might be appropriate, unlike in the New Testament. By contrast Paul in Romans 14 spends a considerable amount of time advising the Christians in Rome about how they ought to be sensitive in the lifestyle choices they made so as to avoid hindering the Christian witness of other believers. In summary, Paul declared in Romans 14:19-21: *Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.* <sup>20</sup> *Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a person to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble.* <sup>21</sup> *It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall.* There is in both the Old and New Testament context the real possibility that prayers have been said over the food to a pagan god. But Daniel could not know for certain that the restricted diet he and his friends would choose had not been the recipient of pagan prayers. However, it could be said that they were doing the best they could under the circumstances. In any case, over the vast majority of things that were happening in their lives there was no option of alternative choices. It may be that these young men were endeavouring to do the best they could as devout Jews to preserve as much as they could of their faith and practice in a foreign culture and land. We too live in an imperfect world. The choices we too make are limited. At times because of our faith we may need to decline opportunities presented to us. In a sister church at a particular time of growth in that fellowship three of the most prominent deacons were offered significant promotions in their companies. All three could legally and as Christians morally too accept these offers as their work efforts had merited this opportunity. However, as they prayed about it, all three came to a conclusion that this was not best for their families; they were convinced that a move to another part of the country was not what they wanted either as they wished to remain in that church as well. The respective company managers were very surprised that they had all turned down significant salary increases and other associated benefits that would have been given had the promotions been accepted. It was a real opportunity for these believers to explain that their primary motivation was not material. Finance was important but it was not the decisive factor in this choice. All of us will have times when we face decisions that are far from easy, but as followers of Jesus our reasoning and priorities might be quite different to others around us. These kinds of decisions are personal no-one can make them for us. We need to take the necessary time with prayer to seek to determine how God would have us choose from the permissible options available.

## 2. **The Request from His Lips** (Daniel 1:8b-13)

(a) **Daniel's first attempt to negotiate** (Daniel 1:8b-10) *...and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself in this way.* <sup>9</sup> *Now God had caused the official to show favour and compassion to Daniel,* <sup>10</sup> *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 of your age? The king would then have my head because of you.'* Daniel's approach was planned ahead of

time and raised with a state official with whom he had cultivated a good working relationship. Ashpenaz the chief official was sympathetic to Daniel's request but deeply worried about his own position if anything went wrong. He was obliged to answer to the boss if something did not turn out as expected. It was not the sack he feared but his execution. The concept of unemployment and getting your 'P45' from the Babylonian civil service did not exist. You were either in work or potentially eliminated by another branch of the government. It was a most effective system and kept the overwhelming majority of employees eager to fulfil their employer's every wish! Ashpenaz was convinced that Daniel's plan could not succeed. Therefore, he declined to get involved. It is impossible to know for certain but it is possible that the first version of Daniel's plan was more restrictive than the one raised with the lesser official. It was certainly going to be for a much shorter time duration when it was aired with the steward of Ashpenaz who appears to have been in charge of the food being served to what was probably a large number of young men. The first time round Ashpenaz declined to accept Daniel's proposition. It was, though, not the end of the story. Daniel and his friends did not give up because they were unsuccessful the first time round. Perseverance is a faith quality that we all need if we are to live fruitful lives as followers of Jesus. Paul in I Corinthians 15:58 wrote: *Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.*

**(b) Daniel's second attempt to negotiate** (Daniel 1:11-13) <sup>11</sup> *Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah,* <sup>12</sup> *'Please test your servants for ten days: give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink.'* <sup>13</sup> *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.* It is not impossible that Ashpenaz had spoken to his junior official Melzar about what the young men were proposing to do. Maybe he had indicated that he had no scope for accepting the proposal, but possibly could have given his subordinate the freedom to make such a choice on a more restricted basis. It may be more likely that Melzar heard it first directly from Daniel. This time round it is clear that there is more detail in the proposal and the timescale is quite short –only for ten days. The risk to their long term health would be minimal even if they had fasted for the entire period of time! Therefore, the chances of the Emperor or any senior official noticing anything amiss in the staff canteen was minimal. What is most important here was not that the friends would succeed in gaining a hearing but the fact that they continued to attempt to do something that appeared to be impossible. Around 1940 German Evangelical Christian Helmut Thielicke had been dismissed from his teaching post at Munich University probably due to maintaining a Christian stance on some issue that conflicted with Nazi Party policy. An unknown colleague encouraged him not simply to accept the decision but instead to make an appeal and seek to be reinstated. Thielicke went to the Brown House, the Nazi central office in Munich, to present his case. The first official he made his presentation to was less than sympathetic and the appeal rebuffed. However, on the same occasion he tried another route making a request to a young civil servant who appeared much more sympathetic to his case. This young official arranged an appointment with the senior bureaucrat who could have overturned Thielicke's dismissal. Unfortunately, after due process the sacking was upheld (D.R. Davis, *The Message of Daniel*, p. 34). However, the fact that his appeal was taken so seriously was an encouragement in itself that not all 'Nazis' were as zealous for the cause as appearances would have suggested. You and I will also raise questions and challenge things that morally are out of line with our Christian convictions. Sometimes we will be successful in getting some of all of the concessions we have sought. On other occasions it will be rejected out of

hand. However, it is far better to attempt and to fail than not to make the effort in the first place.

### 3. The Result in His Appearance (Daniel 1:14-16)

(a) **The decision** (Daniel 1:14) <sup>14</sup> *So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days.* What an encouragement to them when Melzar agreed to their enquiry. However, unless they had gone out of their way to ask it would not have happened. Do we have a sense of expectancy of God speaking to us when we come to church, for example? Do we have a hope that this Sunday someone might profess faith in Jesus for the first time? If we expect nothing to happen we will not be praying for anything to happen and we can thus be certain that God will not exceed our expectations! William Carey's most famous missionary sermon had two headings 'Expect Great Things from God' and 'Attempt Great things for God'. Both are required for God's people to be experiencing the blessing of God in His service. In James 4:4b the author reminded his fellow believers that sometimes '*You do not have, because you do not ask God*'. Could you or I miss out on some blessing that God wants to bestow on us this year because we are neglecting to ask for it? How often do God's people pray without really expecting anything to happen? Far too often I expect! It happened in the Early Church in Jerusalem too. In Acts 12 Luke records the story of an all-night prayer meeting pleading with God for Peter's release from prison. Herod the barbaric ruler had already executed one apostle and thought it would be amusing to dispatch another the same week. God miraculously sent an angel to get Peter out of prison. What happened next is quite sobering. Acts 12:12-17 records: *When this had dawned on him [his release], he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying.* <sup>13</sup> *Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant named Rhoda came to answer the door.* <sup>14</sup> *When she recognised Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, 'Peter is at the door!'* <sup>15</sup> *'You're out of your mind,' they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, 'It must be his angel.'* <sup>16</sup> *But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished.* <sup>17</sup> *Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. 'Tell James and the other brothers and sisters about this,' he said, and then he left for another place.* I actually find this story encouraging that God can use the most ordinary Christians with limited faith at times to accomplish His work. He doesn't require extraordinary people to do His work. He can use you and me to be His person in a given social context. May God give us a sense of expectancy and holy boldness for Him.

(b) **The initial outcome** (Daniel 1:15-16) <sup>15</sup> *At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food.* <sup>16</sup> *So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead.* What was the diet they were on? The Hebrew word translated in most versions as *vegetables* in verses 12 and 16 refers to produce grown from seed and encompasses both fruit and vegetables and grains which would have included those used for bread or today also for cereal (D.R. Davis, *The Message of Daniel*, p. 31). It does appear quite remarkable that there was such a significant difference in their appearance compared with their fellow students in a mere ten days. What is significant is that the reason they sought to be different was in order to live out their faith as best they could as powerless individuals in a foreign land. God honours those that seek to honour Him (I Samuel 2:30c). Will you and I seek to honour Him in our lives this year? There were many things over which they were powerless such as the decision to change their names. They were wise not to protest over things where there was no possibility of success. Daniel ('God is my Judge') had his name changed to Belteshazzar ('May Bel [= Marduk] protect his life'); Hananiah ('Yahweh is gracious') was renamed Shadrach ('the command of Aku' the moon god); Mishael ('Who is what God is') became Meshach ('Who is what Aku

is?) and Azariah ('Yahweh has helped') became Abednego ('servant of Nebo' –god of wisdom). In worldly terms it looked impossible for their faith to survive in that furnace of pressure to conform to Babylonian religious and cultural convictions. What they had accomplished in those first weeks or months seemed so insignificant. It certainly wasn't! Without that first little step of faith the major ones in later years would never have happened. It is exactly the same for you and me. May we be faithful in our youth and in the little things of life and God will enable us to stand when much bigger challenges come across our pathway.

#### 4. **The Reward for His Dedication** (Daniel 1:17-21)

(a) **The medium term outcome** (Daniel 1:17)<sup>17</sup> *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.* It could be said that these four teenagers were outstandingly gifted young men whose potential was realised as they gave their best attention to their studies and were rewarded for it. This may have been true we do all have natural gifts and abilities given by God which if used wisely and effectively can lead to the accomplishment of significant goals. However, I think more than this is being narrated by the author of these verses. This is especially because of his decision to include the last sentence of this verse. *And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds.* We know from having read this story many times that this supernatural gift would set Daniel apart from all the magicians and diviners of the Babylonian religions in the years that followed. At the time he didn't know that this would be a vital aspect of his ministry in this strange land. God has gifted you to do everything He wants you to do in your life. He has gifted each person similarly so that we may be the man or woman He has planned us to be. Be encouraged in what you are facing just now. Paul's words in Philippians 4:13 are so appropriate: *I can do everything through Him who strengthens me.* This means everything God has planned for you and I to do.

(b) **The blessings that flowed from obedience** (Daniel 1:18-21)<sup>18</sup> *At the end of the time set by the king to bring them into his service, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar.*<sup>19</sup> *The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king's service.*<sup>20</sup> *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.*<sup>21</sup> *And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.* What a testimony to their exemplary service. How long did Daniel remain in his senior government position to which he would rise? Up to and beyond 539BC when the Babylonian Empire had fallen and replaced by the Persian one –when he was probably into his 80s! It is impossible for these young lads to imagine what they would accomplish for God in future decades. It is impossible for us to know what God has in store for us personally, for our family members and for our church family in the next decade and beyond. Eighteenth century American Philosopher, Theologian and Pastor Jonathan Edwards, in his late teens, wrote a series of seventy resolutions about how he would live his life they included:

Resolved, never to do any manner of thing, whether in soul or body, less or more, but what tends to the glory of God...

Resolved, that I will live just so as I can think I shall wish I had done, supposing I live to old age.

Resolved, never to give over, nor in the least to slacken, my fight with corruptions, however unsuccessful I may be.

Resolved, never to do anything which I should be afraid to do, if I expected it would not be above an hour before I should hear the last trump [Jesus' return] (Sinclair Ferguson, *Daniel*, p. 40)

May we too be blessed as we honour the Lord in the choice we make, for His name's sake, Amen.