

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we talk about the heroes of the faith, Daniel and his 3 friends are right there at the top of the list. We mention Daniel's name in the same breath as heroes like Samson, Deborah, and David. God used those people in great and powerful ways to advance his Kingdom, to bring glory to his name, to point the way to Jesus.

When we think about the heroic trials and tests of Daniel and his 3 friends, two episodes usually come to mind. One is when Daniel is cast into the den of lion's. The second, is when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are thrown into the fiery furnace.

Those are certainly great tests of faith, and wonderful victories for Christ and His church. Yet, when we consider the great battles that Daniel and his 3 friends faced, we tend to overlook their very first battle which took place in Babylon. The battle that is waged here in our text.

Granted it wasn't much of a battle by today's standards--there were no man eating lions, no fiery furnace, no mysterious dreams, no terrifying hand of God writing on the wall. No. The very first battle that Daniel and his friends faced in Babylon was over mere food and drink. Yet, this seemingly insignificant little battle was arguably their most important battle of all.

So much was at stake. Everything was on the line for the church. That's hard for us to believe, isn't it? That such a tiny battle, over such trivial things 区区小事 such a food and drink, could mean so much. Well, this battle is going to teach us something this evening. It's going to teach us that very often the battle for the Kingdom of God (the battle to be faithful) is a battle over the subtle things in life, it's often a battle waged over the little details that we so easily overlook.

That's what we see in Daniel 1. The Church Battles to be Faithful in a Pagan Land.

- 1) The Subtle Strategy against the Church (1-7)
- 2) The Faithful Resistance of the Church (8-14)
- 3) The Great Victory for the Church (15-21)

1. The Subtle Strategy against the Church

In II Kings 24, we read the historical account of Babylon's war with Judah. Now, keep in mind, the Babylonians didn't defeat Judah in one fell swoop. No, they systematically destroyed Judah. In a twenty year period, in three separate military campaigns, the Babylonians literally took Judah apart piece by piece. Each time they came up against Judah, Babylon carried away more captives and they did a little more damage.

Daniel 1:1 records the very first military strike that Nebuchadnezzar made against Judah. The Babylonians came against Jerusalem, surrounded it, besieged it until the Lord delivered Jerusalem into Nebuchadnezzar's hands. (Which means that even in defeat, God is sovereign)!

The end of verse 2, we read that the Babylonians began deporting all the valuables from the city.

Nebuchadnezzar took some of the articles from the temple of God, and placed them in the temple of his god (Marduk). Now that should alert us to something right there. That war, in Bible times, was never just a power struggle between men, between enemy nations.

No, it always involved their gods--the deities of the nations as well. It was a question of whose God was more powerful! Remember what the Philistines did when they captured the ark? What did they do with it? They put it in their temple of Dagon, along with all the other trophies they had collected from other nations. They considered that to be a great victory for their god.

Here, too, Nebuchadnezzar is making the same statement. He not only considers this to be a military victory over the land of Judah, but he also considers this to a a spiritual victory over the God of Judah. And, as we shall see, he's determined to make this victory complete. When you look at vs. 3, we see that Nebuchadnezzar took back more than just valuable possessions--he also took back some of Judah's valuable resources, some of the young men of Judah.

These young men are described as being w/out any physical defect, they are handsome, willing and able to learn--skillful and cunning in areas of wisdom, science, and knowledge. They were well trained in the ways of the king's court. Simply put, these are the brightest and best of Judah's youth--the cream of the crop. These are the sons of nobility, artisans, princes, the scholars. They are Judah's future, their parent's pride and joy, a teacher's dream.

Daniel and his 3 friends are numbered among this group, and it is believed that they were about 14 years old at

that time. That sounds like a rather young age by our standards, but in Israel's day, 14 was a mature and responsible age (13 was the age of discretion for the Jews).

I hope you can appreciate the seriousness of this situation. I trust you can see how scary this scenario is. Nebuchadnezzar has his eyes on the church's youth, on the church's children, her future--the church's most valuable resource. He wants to turn them into his own children. He wants to tap their potential. (Imagine parents, a pagan ruler stealing our children away).

It's not like the parents could stop them. They were taken by force to Babylon. I guess the only thing to do at that point, would be to pray--to pray and hope; hope that you have trained your children well; hope that your children are prepared to fight their own battle against Babylon (the world).

You wonder, how hard will it be to turn the sons of Israel, into sons of Babylon? That's what we're about to see. Now, what do you think these Babylonians do to them? How will they attempt to turn these young people? Do you think they'll torture these young men, force them to change their ways? Will they threaten to scar their handsome faces? Disfigure their bodies? Will Babylon take these pampered youths, and make them perform back-breaking work? Is that how they'll get them to forsake their God? Is that how Satan subdues Christ church, the youth?

Not in this case. Here in Babylon, the enemy has a much more clever strategy--a more modern, subtle, humane way to win them over. They are going to make every effort to take care of these young men, to treat them like nobility, to keep on pampering them--just like they were accustomed to! They are going to kill them with kindness.

The King ordered Ashpenaz to educate them! So, their education continued. Granted, they were learning about Babylonian history, and the Babylonian language, and no doubt Babylonian religion--but what's the harm, these young men loved to learn. Here was a perfect opportunity to broaden their horizons--add a real multi-cultural flavor to Israel's education! That was not torture--some for these young men. (The way you think, determines the way you live!).

What's more (in vs. 5!), these young men would be treated like royalty when it came to their food as well! They ate from the King's table--they enjoyed the same menu as the King. So, these young Judeans who were taken away into captivity, find themselves getting the royal treatment. What a relief! What a comfort this would be to their parents to see them treated well!

It hardly seemed like they were prisoners, it was almost like home for them. That is exactly how the Babylonians planned it. "Just get comfortable in your new surroundings. Enjoy your stay. See, we aren't so bad after all, are we? We're not so wicked and treacherous as everyone makes us out to be".

Yet their motives are crystal clear. They are trying to brain wash the church's youth. They're trying to slowly-but-surely win them over to Babylon's side. In fact, this becomes more evident in vs 6-7. There, the chief official is given the task of assigning new names for the captives. And this renaming process was far from a formality.

Realize, Daniel and his 3 friends had Hebrew names which proclaimed something great about Israel's God. Daniel's name meant God is judge: Hananiah meant God is gracious: Mishael meant Who is like God is? Azariah meant God is my help.

Whereas their new names are all references to the god of Babylon--the god Marduk. By doing this, the Babylonians intend to stamp out every last reference to Israel's God. They are on a mission to remove every last memory of Israel's God from their mind--for then and only then will Nebuchadnezzar's victory be complete. This is the same strategy that Satan uses against the church today--at least in our part of the world. The church in the western world isn't attacked in a straight-forward manner. Here in America, it's not like the church is not fighting a pitched battle where the enemy is out there in the open, where the enemy is physically persecuting us.

No, the Devil's strategy is more humane, more covert, more subtle. Satan attacks the church (especially her YP) with catchy lyrics and humanistic philosophies in popular music; with humorous movies and sitcoms that make light of the decadence and immorality. We face a daily barrage of advertisements which calls into question our contentment. Especially even in the classrooms of our nation's universities, our YP are attacked with teachings of humanism, where man is the measure of all things, and God is just a by-product of man's imagination. Beloved, Satan wants our children. Make no mistake about it. The great advantage Satan has, is that we are already living in his territory--in enemy territory. Satan has access to our children almost all the time. But the one advantage we have, is that God is on our side, and He is forever faithful.

When we take His Word seriously, when we take our covenant responsibilities seriously, to pray for our children everyday (as did Job), and to teach our children, give them a Christian education, to teach them or cause them to be instructed in the fear and knowledge of our Lord, then we must trust that God will protect them, that God will keep them safe from the snares of the Devil. Because we can't keep our children out of Babylon. But we can keep Babylon out of our children!

Getting back to our text, we wonder 'How will Israel's young men stand up under this subtle attack? Will they pick up on the enemy's strategy, or will they gradually be led astray? In vv. 8-14, Daniel and his friends are not fooled by all this "royal treatment". They know what's at stake, that they are engaged in a battle right there in the king's court. This is where we see.

2. The Faithful Resistance of the Church

Verse 8 says, Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine. Daniel, in a very respectful, but no less determined fashion, refuses to go along with the king's program. This isn't because Daniel is bull-headed, that he'd rather die than go along with the king's wishes. No. Daniel refuses to eat the king's food and drink his wine is because the Babylonians made every meal a religious ritual. A portion of the meat and a portion of the wine from the king's table were offered up in a sacrifice to Babylon's gods. And, for a Jew to take part in that meal was to defile himself-it was to participate in the worship of another god.

But how do you think the other young Jewish men reacted to Daniel's resolve? I'm sure they were not very pleased at all. After all, no one likes a 'Goody-two-shoes'. If someone fails to go along with the program, it causes real trouble. They probably tried to justify their actions to Daniel-"Come on Daniel, you're in Babylon now! Consider the circumstances. No one is going to condemn you for eating meat to stay alive--it's all their giving us--we're in captivity"!

Yet Daniel stood firm. He refused to eat and drink that which came from the king's table. So His resistance wasn't a matter of pride, or personal honor. It was all a matter of love and dedication and devotion to God. Daniel proved by his actions that he was a true child of God.

Daniel and his friends stood their ground against the enemy attack. But I want you to notice how they did that. We don't read that they protested vehemently. I'm sure they didn't throw the food back at the servants. Neither did they get in the guard's faces yelling and screaming out foolish ultimatums. You'll never get us to eat this food!

Daniel, in a very patient, gentle, wise, manner asked the official for permission to be excused from eating the royal food (there's a word to us here about winning over the world-we don't attract many to Christ, if all we do is shake our fist in their face and tell others how wrong they are, how right we are, and how our God is going to punish them. Daniel was able to do what he did because he was loving, because he was polite and friendly-he related well to them).

When one request was denied, he very politely went to that official's servant (didn't go over his head) and begged him, he beseeched him that for the next 10 days they would be permitted to go without the king's food--and then they could see, they could judge for themselves. They could weigh the results of this test (vs. 12-13). Daniel's deal was agreed to. He was allowed to eat only vegetables and drink only water for the next 10 days. Now, that was a great example of Daniel standing up for his faith. It would have been so easy for Daniel to compromise. To just go along with the program.

It would have been so easy to, just to make peace, to give in and eat the King's food. After all, it seemed like such a little thing-such a small issue. It was just a matter of food and drink. It seemed far from serious-unlike Joseph's situation, where Potiphar's wife tempted him and chased him all over the house. Certainly this wasn't a major battle like that.

But it was, beloved. It was. Think of how important it was for Jesus Christ to remain faithful, when he faced a similar temptation in the wilderness-to turn rocks into bread. How did Christ respond to that? Did He downplay that importance of His obedience? Did Christ consider his own hunger more important than His Father's honor? Did he compromise? No!

And Daniel's faith and his firm resolve here, foreshadow Christ and his faithfulness-who was willing to go all the way to the cross, instead of making a deal with the Devil. You know congregation, we Christians are so good at rationalizing away our orthodoxy. We are so good at determining what is and what isn't a real issue in terms of our salvation.

We are experts at justifying the "little compromises" we make in life. Whether it's cheating a toll booth now and then or hiding a little cash from the IRS, or occasionally going places we don't belong, or hanging with people we know we shouldn't be around. Now and then looking at or watching something we know we shouldn't be seeing. But it's only now and then.

It's nothing serious. But that is exactly how we compromise our faith. We do it, just a little bit at a time. Very few Christians fall away all at once. Usually Christians fall away from the faith by increments.

It's because in our everyday life, we start to surrender our orthodoxy inch by inch. Whether it's compromising our ethics at work, or our morality on a date, or our conduct among friends, or we start to dabble in pornography or other addictions. We lose the battle a little bit at a time. We forget what we've been taught, we turn from God's Word, and we head down the slippery slope.

So we do well to learn from Daniel's example, but especially to see through Him, to Jesus Christ. For Daniel had Christ-like faith, Daniel had that Christ-like resolve to serve God and make no compromise with the world! Hebrews call us to look to Daniel as a type of Christ, but primarily to keep our eyes on Christ, because only in and through His power can we win.

3. The Great Victory for the Church

That's what we consider next. The Great Victory for the Church which Daniel wins. Daniel's strong faith and firm resolve are rewarded by God. His willingness to stand his ground and fight life's little battles resulted in a great honor and praise unto God-even in Babylon.

For after ten days of eating nothing but vegetables and drinking only water, these young men looked even healthier than the other young men. So the guards took away the royal food and gave them only the vegetables and water. And the results were truly incredible.

To these 4 young men, God gave wisdom, knowledge and understanding far beyond any others in the entire Kingdom (vs. 19). Quite obviously, this passage is not recommending to us a new diet, that we all stop eating meat and become vegetarians. No. What we're seeing though, is a display of God's great power, of His faithfulness to His church.

God sustains His faithful children. God sustains His church despite their hardships. God grants His church a great victory even when it looks as if things are bleakest for the church. We see another allusion to the cross, where at Christ's darkest hour, His bleakest moment, His own death, God brings victory!

Here to, Israel is captive. They are miles away from Jerusalem, children removed from parents. There's seemingly no hope, no light for Israel. Yet, in this land of Babylon, God is with His people, and He gives them the triumph over Nebuchadnezzar's subtle scheme.

Look at the last verse of chapter 1.(vs.21): And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.

Congregation, that's not just an interesting little historical side-note to throw in at the end of the chapter. That verse is nothing less than a shout of victory--shouting loudly and clearly that Israel's God won the battle!

Daniel lived long enough to see Babylon's destruction. Daniel outlasted Nebuchadnezzar's own kingdom.

Christ's church survived (and prospered) in Babylon, despite all of Satan's efforts to destroy her. We know that is true for us today as well, because God, through Jesus Christ, has won the complete Victory for us over Satan.

And even though Satan has his little season--even though Satan and this world tries ever trick and deception possible to destroy Christ's church--we must never forget that the Church will outlast this wicked world. When all the dust settles, when all the great nations and all the powerful rulers have come and gone, when the final battles are fought and won, it is Christ's Church that will be left standing.

Beloved, there never really was any question as to who was going to win the battle was there? The battle that was fought in Nebuchadnezzar's court was won decisively by God--by Israel's God! The soldiers in the battle were people of flesh and blood, members of Christ's church, just like you and me. Just like you young people. Our calling in the world today is no different than Daniel's calling was in Babylon. We are called to fight against Satan, against the influences of this world in our lives. Mathew's profession of faith is not an indication that "he has arrived", spiritually speaking, that now Satan is just content to give up on him now. No.

His profession means that perhaps now more than ever, Satan sees him as an enemy, and is sworn to trip him up, and cause him to stumble. So all you who profess your faith or desire to do so, be aware of the battle you're engaging in. Be aware of the enemy you face, and where the battle lines are drawn in your life. And, realize that little compromises can bring great harm.

We have to recognize that Satan is a brilliant strategists who knows that the ways to a person heart and mind, he knows which buttons to push within us. But most of all, be confident. Be confident in the Lord Christ Jesus. As Hebrews says, because He was tempted in every way yet remained without sin, so too we are given strength to resist temptation.

We are empowered to stand strong in the Lord. And we fight, knowing the outcome of the battle. We know that because of Christ, God has already won the Complete victory for us. Our struggle, our fight is merely to honor and uphold and exalt His Name and His work in our lives. Israel's God has destroyed the god of this world. And we, as Christ's church will celebrate that victory for all eternity. Amen.