

1/6/08 SERMON NOTES In the Meantime: Daniel 1

Introduction

One of the things I love about my wife is her determination never to waste a moment. The desire is most strongly manifest whenever we leave the home for the day. If there is the slightest possibility that there will be any down time, Jodie will be sure to bring a book, or two, or three, just in case. In fact, often she brings more books than she could read even if she were to forgo all other activity simply to read the entire day. It is almost like a disease. I call it “lackobookaphobia.” She likes to be certain that if there is a “meantime,” she’ll have something to do during it.

Life is filled with “meantimes.” The word refers to “middle:” times that are in the middle, between other important events. All of us are likely experiencing some sort of “meantime” even right now. Perhaps we’re waiting for a job change, marriage, having kids, spiritual renewal or change, healing from an illness or some other significant event. In fact, the Christian life, understood rightly, is itself a “meantime.” Jesus lived, died, rose, ascended to heaven and now we’re waiting for his return. It feels long but actually this meantime is quite short, at least when compared to the weight of eternity. But what do we DO in this “meantime” or in the smaller “meantimes” of our lives? How do we live? What matters most? This the question we’re going to be looking at through our study of the book of Daniel (p. 615). Daniel was a man living in the “meantime.” It all started with Daniel when he and his companions were carried off to Babylon. It would end when the Lord restored his people to the land of Israel. In between the two was a long “meantime” spanning nearly an entire life. What Daniel does in the meantime, and, more importantly, what God does, provide lessons for us as we face the “meantimes” of our lives.

Notes on Daniel 1

1:1 The time frame of Daniel is after all the great heroes of the Old Testament, Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, etc. Israel is not serving God and has been warned that their disobedience will result in ruination at the hands of foreigners and exile. Most of Israel has already suffered this fate; only the tribe of Judah remains. The book of Daniel begins with invasion of Judah and the subsequent exile of its leaders, including Daniel and company.

1:2 The removal of the King is almost a footnote in comparison to how much we learn about the articles from the temple. In fact, the removal of the articles should have been the most devastating blow. They were sacred and were connected directly to the God Israel worshipped. To have them placed in the temple of another god was an act normally signifying total defeat. But the text indicates that in this case, with this God, the normal interpretation might not entirely fit. The clue is the in the word “give,” “natan” in Hebrew (the same word from which we derive the name “Nathan,” meaning “gift”). Daniel writes, “and the Lord delivered (“natan”)” the King and the articles into the hands of the Babylonians. In fact, this word happens 5X in this text and it points us towards one of the key truths of the book: *despite what things look like, God is in control*. If we had to isolate one theme for the book, you couldn’t do much better than this. As is always the case, the book of Daniel is more about God than about Daniel, per se.

1:3-5 It was a very cunning tactic of the Babylonians. Instead of taking over a land they didn’t have the resources to manage, they just took out the leaders and the future leaders and left the rest intact. By this, they removed the threat and acquired some good leadership for themselves. Of course, the indoctrination of the young leaders back in Babylon was thorough. The language and literature would primarily entail learning the art of divination, a key craft of the Babylonians. Reference books told them how to interpret stars, dreams and things like sheep livers. Daniel and company were taken deep into these superstitions and it is remarkable that they kept their heads on. Their Jewish teachers, Jeremiah, Zephaniah and Habakkuk probably among them, most have done something right.

1:6-7 It was a day when names were even more significant to one’s identity than today. Each one receives a new name meant to break identification with the God of Israel and establish it with the Babylonian gods.

1:8-14 Why did they reject the meat? It probably wasn’t because it had been sacrificed to idols (the vegetables were too!) and it probably wasn’t because they wanted to obey the laws in Leviticus (those laws wouldn’t have required them to give up wine). Most likely they gave up the “royal foods” because to eat them would have been a sign of friendship with the Babylonian King, a friendship that would have included loyalty.

1:15-17 We might be tempted to be wowed by the looks and abilities of these young men but Daniel makes sure we keep things in proper perspective. These gifts were just on loan from God, given in a specific

circumstance for the purpose of bringing him glory. Again, while Daniel is important, the real hero of the story is God.

1:18-20 God's wisdom is far superior to the superstitions of the Babylonians (a point we could develop much further by comparing God's wisdom to all other forms of wisdom... if we had time).

1:21 This was 66 years. Daniel would be in his 80's. That was a long "meantime." Through it all Daniel thrived as the Lord sustained him. This is a hopeful message for us.

God is in Charge

Imagine what it would have looked like from the ancient's perspective. Judah was overrun by the biggest kid on the block. King Nebuchadnezzar was formidable. He's the one who had a 90 statue built of himself. He'd blown through Israel's powerful neighbor, Egypt, to get to them. He'd taken the temple articles (like ripping their hearts out); he'd taken their king and their future leadership. Is there any greater demonstration of superiority? And yet, it wasn't Nebuchadnezzar who did all this. God gave it to him for his own purposes (namely, he didn't want Israel to continue down the path away from him so he disciplined them). Ultimately, even a monster like Nebuchadnezzar only serves God's purposes. This ministers to us. Sometimes it is hard to see that God is on the throne. Sometimes the circumstances don't add up. If we were God, we'd do it differently. We are like the man who chastised his CEO. As they entered the conference room, he said to the CEO, "You're not supposed to sit here, you're supposed to be at the head of the table." The CEO replied, "Son, wherever I sit IS the head of the table." It may seem to us that God is in the wrong seat, that he's off the throne. He's not. Whatever seat God is in, that seat is the throne. Even if it seems like it is the wrong seat, like when his people are overrun and carried off to exile, or when his seat is a cross. Wherever God sits, that is his throne. Whatever unseemly circumstances he brings about, he is still in charge.

The great thing about Daniel is not that he is handsome, athletic, GQ, super fly, MVP, gifted, wise and an interpreter of dreams. It is tempting to make Daniel into a hero because he seems so amazing. And in our giftedness obsessed culture even more so it is the case. Our heroes are almost exclusively people who do a thing really well. Daniel was pretty amazing. But what is really noteworthy about Daniel is that he gets this core concept: wherever God sits, that is his throne. Whatever the circumstances, God is still in charge. This is the genius of Daniel. Not his giftedness, or his looks or his intelligence. This is why Daniel succeeds, why he doesn't cave under enormous pressures as we already begin to see here and will see more and more later. He gets this idea that whatever the circumstances, God is still in charge. *God is consistent, but he is also unpredictable. He is consistent in his nature. You always know where you are with God, but you seldom know what he is going to do next. You cannot find security in what God is doing. There is only security in who God is,* writes Graham Cook.

This is why Daniel sees "through streets" where most people see cul-de-sacs. Most people, when faced with the circumstances of Daniel, would tend to see a cul-de-sac. "It's all over," is the most basic response. But Daniel, knowing that God is still on the throne, sees a through way. It is the smallest expression, given all he has to accept, but it reveals his hope: "Give me nothing but vegetables."

The other night we were about to watch a movie with the family. To the adult eye, it looks like all the seats in the living room are equally good. But, adults don't get it. From a kid perspective, some seats are much better than others. The kids all know which ones these are. And as soon as we say, "we're going to watch a movie," the kids start to jockey for position. "I get the middle seat!" "No, I get the middle seat," etc, etc. The stress level goes up about 100 decibels as everyone envisions their seat being stolen by someone else. In the middle of it, my one daughter who likes to watch movies from my lap, said, "Well, you can't steal my seat, because my seat is daddy." That is a little like the security Daniel has. The Babylonians have stolen all the good seats. Everything is messed up. But Daniel knows there is one thing that can't be stolen from him: his trust in his God. "Give me vegetables," he says. "I'm not going to give my loyalty to Nebuchadnezzar. I know who's really in charge."