

THE JOY OF GENEROSITY
(2) DAINITIES AND DISCIPLESHIP

Daniel 1

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PROLOGUE

A church member angrily complained to the pastor that the church had wastefully purchased three new brooms, and he felt the expenditure to be unnecessary. The pastor mentioned it to the church treasurer. But the treasurer just smiled and said, "Oh, I can understand why he was upset. After all, how would you feel if you saw all the money you gave to the church in the past year tied up in three brooms?"

Now I realize this story presents a "sweeping generalization" about poor giving. Nevertheless, we all need to consider what the Bible says:

"Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a joyful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7).

SCRIPTURE

In the third year of the reign of King Jehoiakim of Judah, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it...{3} Then the king commanded his palace master Ashpenaz to bring some of the Israelites of the royal family and of the nobility, {4} young men without physical defect and handsome, versed in every branch of wisdom, endowed with knowledge and insight, and competent to serve in the king's palace; they were to be taught the literature and language of the Chaldeans. {5} The king assigned them a daily portion of the royal rations of food and wine. They were to be educated for three years, so that at the end of that time they could be stationed in the king's court. {6} Among them were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, from the tribe of Judah. {7} The palace master gave them other names: Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego. {8} But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the royal rations of food and wine; so he asked the palace master to allow him not to defile himself...{10} The palace master said to Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king; he has appointed your food and your drink. If he should see you in poorer condition than the other young men of your own age, you would endanger my head with the king." {11} Then Daniel asked..."Please test your servants for ten days. Let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. {13} You can then compare our appearance with the appearance of the young men who eat the royal rations, and deal with your

servants according to what you observe." {14} So he agreed to this proposal and tested them for ten days. {15} At the end of ten days it was observed that they appeared better and fatter than all the young men who had been eating the royal rations. {16} So the guard continued to withdraw their royal rations and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables. {17} To these four young men God gave knowledge and skill in every aspect of literature and wisdom; Daniel also had insight into all visions and dreams... {21} And Daniel continued there until the first year of King Cyrus (Daniel 1, selected verses, NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

Daniel is the hero of the Old Testament book which bears his name. The book covers the period of the exile from 605 BC, when Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, first took captives from Judah to Babylon (1:1, 2), to 537 BC, two years after Cyrus of Persia defeated Babylon (10:1). Among the captives was a young man of noble birth named Daniel. In spite of difficult circumstances, he became a high ranking official in the Babylonian and Persian kingdoms. But he did it without compromise. He demonstrated an unshakable allegiance to God by resisting the temptations and threats which confronted him repeatedly.

For God's people, the Babylonian Exile was a time of painful reflection. Did the loss of their land mean that God had abandoned them or was there some greater purpose at work? While in the new land were they supposed to hold on to their identity or completely assimilate into the prevailing culture?

The Book of Daniel was written to encourage God's people to remain committed to God's cause even and especially when the culture does not support such a commitment. We see this right away in the opening chapter. But Daniel's first test comes as a surprise. It is not about making tough moral choices. It is not about pressure to forsake religious rituals. It is about food from the king's table. Now how can "dainties" from the dinner table be a challenge to following God?

1. DAINITIES ARE SELF-SERVING. DISCIPLESHIP IS GOD-SERVING.

Daniel and his three friends were in a training program to prepare for government service. There was nothing wrong with this. After all, Jeremiah had told them that God wanted them to seek the welfare of the city where he was sending them (Jer 29:7). But their motivation for service was to please God rather than advance self interests.

Daniel and his friends realized that accepting the royal rations of food meant more than just feeding one's hunger but would be an expression of personal loyalty to the king. However, refusing the food would not have been an easy choice. Likely they felt intense social pressure from their classmates and teachers to do what everyone else was doing.

They may have even argued amongst themselves about the apparent foolishness of letting a little food destroy their chances of attaining high positions in the government. Why not accept the royal diet and avoid giving needless offense to their classmates or to the officials of the king himself? Besides, this was the only way to advance one's career, or so it was assumed. Their compliance would please everybody — everybody, that is, except God, to whom they were surrendered body and soul.

As God's people, we are to seek the welfare of the communities in which God has placed us. And while it is nice when people approve of what we do this cannot be our motivation. Our motivation needs to be to please God and God alone; if others disapprove of us when we know God approves of us, we must disregard their disapprovals or risk shipwrecking our souls.

2. DAINITIES BIND US TO THE WORLD. DISCIPLESHIP BINDS US TO GOD.

So Daniel and his friends requested vegetables and water in place of the food from the king's table. Because of this there are a number of people who think this story is an endorsement for vegetarianism. By the way, have you ever wondered, "If vegetarians eat vegetables, what do humanitarians eat?"

Now there is nothing wrong with being a vegetarian but that is not what this story is about. This is not a contest between meat and vegetables. The term that is translated as "royal rations" (pathbag) does not necessarily refer to meat. Four hundred years ago the translators of the King James Version thought it implied meat since it came from the royal cuisine. But we now know that this term referred to a kind of baked bread from barley and wheat.

Nor is this about Jewish dietary laws. We recognize that for Old Testament believers, dietary rules were very much an expression of their obedience to the Lord. But neither bread nor wine were prohibited by such laws.

Many think that food for the king would have come from the temples dedicated to the Babylonian gods. Therefore Daniel and his friends refused these meals because the food had been offered to idols. But any food, including vegetables, could have come by the same route.

So what is the problem? The real problem is the assimilation into Babylonian culture. Daniel and his friends struggled to find some way to maintain their identity as followers of the Lord in a society that wanted to change their identity.

The reason Daniel and his friends were in this predicament was because the Babylonians would typically select natural leaders from among those they captured and provide them with specialized education and treat them as though they were part of the royal family.

This had a three-fold effect: 1) It would eliminate capable future leaders from their enemies, reducing the chance of organized rebellion. 2) Newly trained leadership would strengthen Babylonian society. And 3) It would increase the chance of Babylonian religion spreading among the captives.

Re-education started with the giving of new names. Daniel means "God is my judge." The Babylonians changed it to Belteshazzar, which means something like "May the god Bel protect the king." Bel was another term for Marduk, the principal Babylonian deity.

The specialized education lasted three or more years. The training included language, literature, mathematics and music. Additional training was provided depending on the role they were expected to fill such as diplomat, advisor, physician, provincial governor and so on. It appears Daniel and his friends became advisors to the king and his chief officials.

But the point is, the Babylonian government was exercising control over every aspect of their lives. They had little means to resist the forces of assimilation that were controlling them. Concerning their education and their new names there was little they could be expected to do. So they seized on one of the few areas where they could still exercise choice as an opportunity to preserve their distinct identity - food! They would refuse the king's diet and the lifestyle it represented for a simple diet and a life that depended on God. Their careers would aid society but their lifestyles would show they belonged to the Lord.

God's people continually find themselves in cultures that offer the temptation to sell out their commitment to the Lord. Daniel reminds us that such pressure does not necessarily come in the form of a brute threat. Even the "dainties" of a dinner table can become a way to turn from discipleship.

The "dainties" of our culture are not so much the dishes on the dinner table. Rather they are the temptations of a consumer society that define us not by who we are but by what we have. Make no mistake, you are being pressured to completely assimilate into a society that has no room for a commitment to God. The choices you make about how you live and how you give will show whether you belong to the world or to the Lord.

3. DAINITIES ARE ABOUT SIGHT. DISCIPLESHP IS ABOUT FAITH.

Through their diet, Daniel and his friends flourished. But this was God's doing. The word that is translated as "vegetables" does not refer to any kind of vegetable dish for the dinner table. In fact, it usually refers to animal feed. But here it likely refers to a cereal grain that could be ground, mashed and cooked in water to produce a porridge.

This porridge by itself would not make anyone healthy. But this porridge eaten in faith resulted in God's blessings. Daniel and his friends were not only physically healthy, but they also

possessed a knowledge and insight that the culture could not give (vs 17). Human resources provide meals but God provides nourishment.

Money is also a human resource. Money by itself does nothing for the Kingdom of God. But money given in faith creates blessings that multiply beyond what a secular society can understand.

CONCLUSION

Here then is the difference between dainties and discipleship, between what the world says and what God's Word says.

Reader 1: The world says, "Buy and accumulate things."

Reader 2: God's Word says, "Life is not made up of how much a person has." (Luke 12:15)

Reader 1: The world says, "Wealth is our security."

Reader 2: God's Word says, "I will say about the Lord, 'He is my place of safety.'" (Ps. 91:2)

Reader 1: The world says, "We deserve the best."

Reader 2: God's Word says, "The Lord blesses us with favor and honor. He doesn't hold back anything good from those whose lives are without blame." (Ps. 84:11)

Reader 1: The world says, "Give so that you may obtain favors and praise from others."

Reader 2: God's Word says, "Lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then you will receive a lot in return." (Luke 6:35)

Reader 1: The world says, "Gratify yourself in every way."

Reader 2: God's Word says, "Let Christ's word live in you like a rich treasure. ... Do everything you say or do in the name of the Lord Jesus. Always give thanks to God the Father through Christ."¹

¹—Adapted from "Preparation for Giving" by Bryan Jeffery Leech, The Worshipping Church, © 1990 by Bryan Jeffery Leech, Walnut Creek, CA 94595. Used by permission. (Scripture passages from the New International Reader's Version)