

Uncommon Faith of Uncompromising Lives

Daniel 1:3-8

*"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the **renewal of your mind...**"*

Introduction: There is a battle raging all around us, but it is not being fought with bombs, swords, or drones. It is a type of guerilla warfare, however, since the battle lines are not easily seen nor are the enemies readily identified. It is a war that leaves casualties miserable and without hope, often with wounds they could not see coming nor even find an entry or exit wound. This war, of course, is one for the hearts and minds of humanity, one that has its roots in the Garden of Eden and will continue on until Christ returns and makes all things new. It is insidious, duplicitous, and dangerous, but we often ignore or forget that it's even a thing. But Scripture is extremely clear about the importance of our engagement:

*"For though we walk in the flesh, we are not **waging war** according to the flesh. For the **weapons of our warfare** are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ."*

2 Corinthians 10:3-5

Our enemy does not present himself as a red horned monster (except in commercials or satire), since that would be easy to identify. The weapons and combatants are much more subtle than that. Our young people going to universities do not enter into neutral ground but rather the bombardment of philosophy and thinking born out of humanism with the desire to kill the idea of God and the family since these both oppress our individual desires. However, you do not have to read Nietzsche or Freud to hear a godless philosophy, you simply have to listen to your 12 year old daughters music, be it Ariana Grande or Miley Cyrus, or watch basic television shows that promote self fulfillment over glorifying an all sufficient Creator. Very few have read the writings of Darwin yet generations have been influenced by his conclusions, which focuses on *natural selections and processes* and cut out the Divine, leaving meaning and morality up to individuals. Take God and prayer out of schools, pump university students full of humanistic drivel that appeals to their flesh, and in a matter of decades you have the average person believing *"Be whoever you want to be, and do whatever works for you, or makes you happy."* God becomes someone we have to get rid of since He is the roadblock to happiness, since doing what I want IS my identity, it IS what makes me what I am, and if someone stops me from that end, they are an oppressor and oppressive, rather than glorious and loving.

This type of reprogramming and indoctrination is exactly where Daniel and his friends found themselves in 605 B.C as they were carted off from their home, never to return, to a foreign land and leaders who were bent on a **total makeover**. Here we get a vivid picture of our own culture, the war raging for our minds, and how to actually combat it.

THE INDIVIDUALS TAKEN (1:3-4)

"Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility, youths without blemish, of good appearance and skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding, learning, and competent to stand in the king's palace, and to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans."

Different philosophies would drive different conquerors. The goal was always how to keep a conquered people under thumb and quell rebellion. When Israel was overrun by the Assyrians in 722 B.C, the king

brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim, and placed them in key cities rather than the people of Israel (2 Kings 17:24). This left the people of Israel unorganized, weak, and inevitably led to intermarriage (creating the new group called "Samaritans"), which meant no unified force to rise up. Nebuchadnezzar went a different direction. He'd set up a puppet king and make the new area a vassal, having to pay taxes regularly to Babylon. When a 'king' refused, the king would send his army and deal with them (which is exactly what happened in Jerusalem in 597 and 586 B.C). But he also went one step further: instead of carting off ALL the people and trying to find space for a new slave class, he took the cream of the crop of a conquered kingdom. It's not difficult to see the wisdom of this move:

- 1) It **weakened** the leadership of the area, pilfering the best and brightest minds, leaving a void of leadership for the next generation.
- 2) It **slowed the desire to rebel**, since rebellion could cost their sons and brothers their lives
- 3) **Reprogramming** people from an area, who understood the people, culture, language, and traditions gave Babylon managers who could keep vassals in line.

It's also clear that Nebuchadnezzar had a type. He commanded one of his chief advisors, Ashpenaz (described as a eunuch - which either meant one created surgically, often to oversee the king's harem, or simply it meant an officer or official, like Potiphar in Genesis 39:1, who was obviously married). His job was to assess and pick out a few, choice young men that would be brought back to be trained up for the king's service. It's important for us to get a picture of who these young men were:

- 1) They were **young** - The other night I went over to the Simmons house to drop Morgan off to hang out with friends, and there were some 8th and 9th grade boys: Tae, Ethan, Noah, Will, and Justice are all boys that come to this church or attend our youth group. They are fun, funny, come from good families, and this dad trusts my daughter to be around them (mostly). I thought about Daniel and his 3 friends as they were captured out of their homes, carried away from family and friends, and carted into the unknown as I watched these young men interact. They are our future, but they are so young! It's hard to visualize this happening to one of our own, but that is exactly what it would have been like in Judah as their kids were taken away.
- 2) They were from **nobility and royalty** - These would have been around the palace and Temple in Jerusalem, would have known and perhaps interacted with king Josiah, and came from privilege.
- 3) They were **easy on the eyes** - The idea was that they were without physical defect and were a model of the standard of beauty for that age. When Israel looked for a king centuries earlier, they wanted Saul because he fit the mold of being tall and handsome (1 Sam. 9:2), which is still a barometer of success (short-sighted) today.
- 4) Had already shown **mental aptitude** - They would have already excelled in their studies and shown a propensity to think and learn
- 5) Personality to hold up in the king's court - They would have had the makeup to think on their feet, speak in public, read a room, and form cogent thought quickly. They most likely had shown leadership aptitude as well.

6) There were not an overwhelming amount - We obviously know of these 4 who were taken, but estimates range from 50-75 as to the total number who would have gone. We know Babylon did this with other vassal kingdoms, so these boys would have also mixed in with others from other backgrounds and religions. It also means that MOST were simply absorbed into the culture and did not stand firm nor stand out like these four.

THE INDOCTRINATION PROGRAM (1:5-7)

"The king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate, and of the wine that he drank.

*They were to be **educated** for **three years**, and at the end of that time they were to stand before the king. Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah of the tribe of Judah. And the chief of the eunuchs gave them names: Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego.*

There are two things we should consider at this point. First, again imagine yourself a 14-15 year old that's been forcibly taken away from your home with no hope of returning. Your people lost the war, you have been defeated, and the victorious are imposing their will on you. Second, if you were trying to re-program someone and teach them about your culture, family, or tradition, how would you do it? The tried and true is to get someone to **forget their past and upbringing** and offer a **better alternative for the future**. This happens through **indoctrination and inundation** into a culture, which is the same method used against our kids today.

1) **New Food** - A king would not eat like a commoner, but would have a lavish feast each day. The finest meat, wine, and culinary cuisine from around the world would be served. These captives would be given access to the SAME dining opportunities as the king himself! Perhaps they were used to this growing up in nobility, but I'm sure it's not what they expected upon arrival of their weeks long journey to Babylon. One way to gain loyalty and a following is to offer fine things in front of people which gives a sense of care and hope for things to come.

2) **New Worldview** - For three years they would be absorbed in learning of a Babylonian worldview, or the lens by which they viewed all things. *"Babylon was the learning center of the day and had acquired the remarkable library left by the Assyrian ruler Ashurbanipal (669-626 B.C.)¹* They would have learned the Akkadian language and learned to write in cuneiform (thousands of these texts have been unearthed by archaeologists). Babylon believed in a "systematized superstition", a mixture of astrology, mathematics, economic, historical documentation, religious omens and studying of dreams. This was the highest science and literature of the day, including the eventual laws of the Medes and Persians.

What was the end goal and purpose of this training: **to get the Israelite young men to THINK like Babylonians, to buy into their eclectic system, and to forget about their God and His teaching**. The goal was not even to get them to *believe* everything, but to be so inundated with new data that the truth would be lost through a cacophony of information. This is the idea of **brain-washing**, a complete re-programming of thought. This is EXACTLY what happens in our world today. People believe they are learning to think and engaging in **progressive thought** as they throw off the oppressive shackles of family, the church (or formalized 'religion'), and God Himself. The goal of our enemy is have generations buy into cultural norms (sexual freedom, choice of gender identity, abortion and divorce on demand, etc), and see anyone who would believe differently as oppressors, backward, or the enemy.

Indoctrination today happens in our schools, homes, on television, movies, on ball fields, and

¹ Stephen R. Miller, "Daniel: The New American Commentary." p. 62.

sometimes even in churches where the focus is on SELF as the highest goal, and if God is not going to help, then we'll get rid of Him too.

3) **New Names** - Perhaps a subtle but obvious exertion of power was the changing of names given to these young men. Naming something or someone is an expression of authority over them, much like Adam naming the animals in the Garden. Each had a Hebrew name with specific meaning that pointed to YHWH and a godly tradition. **Daniel**, which means "God is my judge", was changed to **Beltshazzar**, which was calling for the god Bel to "protect his life." **Hananiah** (YHWH is gracious) changed to **Shadrach** ("command of Aku" the moon god). **Mishael** (Who is what God is") changed to **Meshach** ('who is what Aku is"), and **Azariah** (YHWH has helped) to **Abednego** (Servant of Nebo). This is more than getting a nickname in college ("Coop!", "Mighty Mite", "British Bulldog"), but an attempt to have them see their **identity** as Babylonian, not as Israelites. It's interesting that Daniel and these 3 accepted their names, still referred to themselves by their Hebrew names throughout this book (see 4:8, 9, and 19 as an example). The king and people of Babylon would have called him Beltshazzar, he still called himself **Daniel**. He knew who he was and no amount of indoctrination or name changing could change that. A question to consider is this: **how did these young, bright, but captive and captivated young men stand firm in an uncommon way amid all the rest?**

THE INTUITIVE DECISION (1:8)

*"But Daniel **resolved** that he would not defile himself with the kings food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself."*

Remarkable. It's an appropriate word to describe this choice by a young man. In fact, if any of our young people would make this kind of choice in their time of high school or college in the midst of all kinds of peer pressure, we would rise up and call them blessed (3 John 4) and thank the grace of God. We will call this an **intuitive decision** because it was not made in a vacuum or come out of nowhere. In fact, exactly what Babylon hoped to do to these young boys **HAD ALREADY HAPPENED in their upbringing**. These boys were not just taught to think, but were taught to think through a Biblical lens so that whatever situation they were put into, they could thrive and glorify God. Here are **three observations about this choice**:

1) It was made in the midst of the hardest circumstances - If there was anyone who you could empathize with in terms of compromise, Daniel was in that place. Where was God? Everything has changed and the normal that I knew would never be back. I'll never see my parents again, God and they have failed me, and now I'm on my own to make the most of this that I can. In fact, I can be whoever I want to be since they will never know. I might as well enjoy the opportunities, gain power and advancement, and get mine! But Daniel was a young man of **uncommon faith**. It's unfortunate that it is so **uncommon, however, since it simply IS FAITH that he exercised**. He made a decision that was **counter-cultural, foolish in terms of worldly wisdom, possibly hindering to his advancement, and easily could have cost his life**. This was not a decision made on a whim or without prior thought and commitment. It was not **status quo**. It was not about self-promotion or feeling better, or simply a raising of a hand. It was a deep seated commitment to his God.

2) It was born out of conviction and awareness of compromise - Why was Daniel ok with taking literature and astrology classes, learning a new language, studying the law of the land, taking on a new name, but NOT eating the kings food and drinking the kings wine? There are a couple of possibilities:

- It was food that violated the OT Law, eating Babylonian delicacies such as pork and horseflesh (mmmmm, horse burgers!) which was against commands such as Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. Daniel possibly wanted to stay pure morally and ceremonially as best that he could given the fare presented to him. Wine was NOT ceremonially unclean, which is a bit of a problem with this view.
- It could have been food sacrificed to idols, which would have again been a violation of the Law in worshipping of graven images. The problem with this is the vegetables he ate could have easily have been sacrificed to idols as well, making them unclean.
- A third possibility, and one that actually has the same principle at its core from the first two, is Daniel's desire to remain true to his God. The king was clearly manipulating these young men by his food and cushy positions to meet his own ends. He was engendering loyalty, indebtedness, and pseudo kindness. Daniel saw through this. He was committed to his God, not the king. He could serve, respect, and even help the king, but the KING WAS NOT HIS LORD.

Can I take a few minutes to talk to our young people? There will come a point, soon, in your life where you will have to make a choice (actually a hundred different choices), and they will seem innocuous at first, but will lead you down a path away from God. "Don't tell your parents", "everyone is doing it", "how can you expect to get ahead if you don't" will be decisions you'll have to navigate. The place where convictional realities are almost most important are NOT between blatant sin and not (in this case, DON'T choose sin), but between those things that may be acceptable but will lead your mind and heart away from God. I'm sure Daniel eating a steak would not have been a sin, but it would have been an incremental step into cultural inundation. This will mean you have to have clear reasons for what you say "yes" to and "no" to, and most will not understand your reasoning. **Standards in dating, commitment to a local church family, and continual disciplines in pursuing God** through His Word and prayer will all be decisions that will be made and cultivated NOW, so that when you are faced with a decision to compromise, you'll know intuitively what the best choice is.

3) It was prepared by a specific upbringing - We stated that Daniel and the boys would have been trained well in their 14 years of life. The way his history lines up, these would have grown up in Jerusalem under the leadership of **King Josiah**. You'll remember that Josiah took the throne 2 years after his grandpa Manassah died, at the ripe old age of **8**. Under his leadership, Judah saw revival and return to obedience to God. There are **4 principles of life that Josiah instilled that would help Daniel live with uncommon faith in Babylon** (and are still in play for us today):

- At 16, Josiah began to **seek the God of David** (2 Chron. 34:3) and he did so with all of his heart, soul, and might (2 Kings 23:25) - The first way to help our kids live with conviction when it comes to following the LORD is to have it modeled by parents who demonstrate that conviction. Seeking the Lord set the tone for everything else Josiah did, and kept it out of formulaic religion or legalism.

Our kids may not follow our convictions, since they have to make their own choices, but if they DID follow our convictions, would they be distinctive in their pursuit of God in Christ?

- Josiah consistently, constantly, and fastidiously got rid of **idols in the land** (2 Chron. 34:4-7; 2 Kings 23:1-20) - Idolatry is one of the plaguing sins of all mankind for all time. We make the gifts God gives us to enjoy into replacements for Him, where we begin to center our life around our idols rather than God. One of the tell tale signs something is an idol? What is our reaction

when it is taken away?! Judah had adopted the practices of the nations around them because it was easy: all the nations have Asherah poles, they seem to have good lives, we should have Asherah poles! Slowly and surely, even though they would NOT say YHWH did not exist, but their lives were filled with the gods of the land (Molech, Baal, moon gods, etc). If we are going to live by conviction and teach our kids to do the same, we must identify and get rid of the idols in our lives. BTW, if you make the argument "everyone has this, or does this, or buys this", you can almost guarantee it will be an idol in your life.

- **He recommitted ALL the people to the WORD OF GOD** - In restoring the Temple, Shaphan found one of the remaining scrolls of Scripture that was not destroyed by Manassah. When Josiah understood what they had been missing, he brought nobility and commoner together (2 Kings 23:2-3) to **humble themselves, confess and repent with penitent hearts, and commit to obey from then on out**. C.S. Lewis captured what had happened to Judah before this: "It is funny how mortals always picture us (demons) as putting things into their minds; in reality our best work is done by keeping things out."² Parents and other disciplers here, if you know MORE about your sports team, or are more disciplined in working out than you are to knowing God in His Word and having your family commit to that as well, you are being disobedient and following the examples of the evil Kings of Israel, not the faithful ones.
- Finally, **Josiah committed to the keeping of the Passover feast** - 2 Chron. 35:16-18 says that he did so in a way that hadn't been done since the day of Samuel, centuries before. This meant that for a week they would keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread, they would confess their sins, and keep what God said was HIS PASSOVER (Lev. 23:5). This was the ultimate practice of doing things God's way and conforming one's life to His commands, rather than trying to get God's commands to conform around our desires. Parents, your kids will learn the importance of a commitment to a local church, the Word, purposeful relationships, taking communion, evangelism and the like by watching your commitment to these things. Each time you exchange preferential or pragmatic reasons for neglecting these commands, you teach your kids that these are nominally important.

Josiah established a new culture of God centeredness in Judah, and that translated to Daniel and his friends living by **uncommon faith through uncompromising commitment**. To them, that is what they observed, so it was intuitive to them. But clearly Josiah's own sons did not follow their dad's lead. Conviction cannot be absolutely transferred, but it can be caught. It's important that we do not see Daniel as merely a story of "be more like Daniel". It is a story of recognizing we cannot. We want to respond like Josiah, who when he heard the Word, tore his clothes (2 Kings 22:11), had a tender heart, humbled himself, and committed himself. We fail. But we have a Savior who did not. He frees us to commit to Him wholly, forgives when we don't, and transforms us in the renewing of our minds.

² C.S. Lewis, "The Screwtape Letters"