

Daniel and his friends become vegetarian: Daniel 1

Leader's reflection

In the first lines of this reading one of the most cataclysmic events to befall the nation of Israel is described; the invasion and exile of the people from Jerusalem to Babylon. This had far reaching and long lasting consequences for the Jews. They had to come to an understanding of what it was to be Jewish without access to the Temple and without being citizens of the promised land. The word Babylon had become shorthand for evil, chaos, and abuse of power, and the people had to come to terms with whether their exile meant that God had abandoned them, whether he was ineffective, or whether they were being punished for their sins. All of this is explored in depth in books such as Jeremiah.

This then forms the backdrop to Daniel, which wrestles with questions of existing as aliens in a foreign land, trusting in God, and standing against the abuse of power. Unlike many heroes of the Old Testament, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah are not described as being from powerless families, but instead their nobility, physical health, and mental prowess are highlighted. As part of the exile, the four are taken with other nobles to the household of the king to be trained in ruling and to be inculturated into Babylonian culture. This may seem strange, but if you take the rulers of a land, indoctrinate them into your way of being, and then send them to rule over their own land, you will quickly have an obedient vassal state.

As part of this they were given a place to live and fed from the king's own food and wine. However this is where Daniel has his first confrontation with his captors. He decides that he will not defile himself with the king's food or wine, and asks for permission not to eat the food. He comes to an agreement that Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah will go through a trial of eating vegetables and drinking water rather than the meat and wine from the king, and see how they fare.



With the emphasis on kosher food in the Law, it is easy to assume that this was due to some Law concerning the food, however it seems that this is not the case. Their concern was less to do with what the food was, but rather what had been done to it; had it been offered to a Babylonian god in worship? Had it been dedicated to a pagan shrine? Or, would accepting the food and wine from the king show they were beholden to him and therefore submitting to his authority? It isn't clear which of these reasons are key, what is important is that as teenagers these young men are choosing already to oppose, albeit incredibly politely, the rule of Babylon.

At the end of their trial period they are looking fit and well, and so their teetotal vegetarianism continues, and their reward for their faithfulness is wisdom. Strangely, this wisdom means that they are consulted regularly by the king holding them captive, and their wisdom allows them to serve their captors well.

This story sets up the central conflict at the heart of the book of Daniel; Daniel and his friends standing against the excesses of the Babylonian kings, while also serving them with wisdom and insight.

Aim

To show that when we stand for God in the little things, it prepares us for the big things.

Main points to cover

1. Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah stand up for their faith, while also taking care of those around them.
2. Their love for God is clear to those around them.
3. Their love for God led them to serve those around them with love, care, and integrity, despite the challenges.

Focus On

Daniel, Hananiah, Michael and Azariah's age at the time of this story and their faith in God despite their situation.



Activity ideas

Give the young people a large piece of paper and ask them to draw a line down the middle, with one side labelled 'Good', and the other as 'Bad'. Have a list of things that are seen as desirable in our world today, such as a large house, a well-paid job, family, lots of friends, a nice car. Try and be specific as possible in the items, particularly with things like the house and car. As the last item on the list have lots of food. As you go down the list give the young people 10 seconds to decide whether wanting the thing is good or bad, and put it on the side of the paper they think. Once you have gone down the list, ask them for reasons why they have placed the items where they have. When you get to the last item, look at Daniel 1:5-9. Give the young people a minute or so to think why Daniel and his friends wouldn't want to eat the king's food, what is wrong with being given a good diet? After feedback, explain that there is nothing wrong in the good diet in itself, but it's the way that Daniel and his friends receive it that is the problem for them. This food may have been offered as part of worship to Babylonian gods, and the four friends didn't want to be associated with that, so chose to ask for something else. It also needs to be made clear that there is nothing wrong with the list of things that you read out to the young people, but what matters is how it is achieved. Is it achieved at the expense of others? Do we ignore the needs of others to get those things? That is when it becomes a problem, because we are not living in line with what God asks of us.

A lot of the time in our everyday life we go about not thinking about the things we do or the impact they have on either the people around us or the world we live in. On slips of card have an everyday activity that the young people might do such as buying clothes, getting fast food, getting a lift somewhere close. Try and find things that we all do without thinking about the knock on effects of those things. Split the young people into pairs and give each pair a card with an activity on it. Get them to think through two things for each one; what impact does this have on me, and what impact does this have on others. Have them think quite widely about this, for example when we buy clothes, do we choose clothes that are cheap for us, but which are made overseas with poor working conditions? Or when we get a lift somewhere close, what impact are we having on the environment? It is important to make clear that the aim of this activity is not to make the young people feel guilty for the things that they do, but to help them think through the impact they have on the world around them, so we can try and make wise decisions about the things that we do, and ask if they are making the world a better or a worse place.



Trying to live an ethical life in the world can be like walking in a minefield. We could drive ourselves to distraction thinking about the ethical implications of everything we do, and it is important that we find a middle ground where we are able to function in the world, but do so in a way that doesn't have negative impacts on others. To do this, we need to ask for God's help. Have the young people think back over their week, and pick one or two things that they want to make a change to. It may be choosing not to shop at large, cheap clothes shops, or making more of an effort to recycle, or having a day or two a week when they choose not to eat meat. Allow each young person the space to think of their own practical thing, and then find a quiet reflective piece of music to put on in the background. As the music plays, have the young people spend some time asking for God's help with the decision they have made.

To make sure this doesn't become a one off, say that you will feedback with the young people the next time you see them about how they found trying to do these things, and close in prayer.

The Statue and the Fiery Furnace: Daniel 3

Leader's reflection

This reading brings to the fore the difficult situation that the exiles in Babylon found themselves in, as well as showing us the excesses of the rulers of Babylon.

King Nebuchadnezzar (hereby known as N for obvious reasons), has a gold, 90 foot statue made and placed prominently on the plain of Dura. It is never stated what this statue depicts; it may have been Nebuchadnezzar, or it may have been one of the many Babylonian gods. Either way, it is an impressive feat of engineering, as well as a significant use of resources. Remember that at the time most people would have been living subsistence lives, and so this use of wealth was both wasteful and excessive, and whatever the statue depicted, the message to the people was, 'look how great king N is, he can build this.'

Not only is the statue built, but King N then declares that when people hear music, presumably some sort of specific call to worship rather than just any music, they must bow down before the statue and worship it. Not only that, but anyone who does not, will be burned to death.

Sometimes these stories take on a mythical, fairy-story air, and the real import of those words can pass us by. But for the people living there, in that time, their continued existence was reliant on the whims of a tyrant, who could have whoever he wanted killed whenever he wanted. This is the reality for those living in exile, and it makes what happens next more incredible.

Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, who have been renamed Shadrach, Meshach, and Adebnego, have been appointed to govern the province of Babylon, and some locals come to the king with news that they will not bow down to the statue. They are brought before the king, and ordered to bow down when the music plays.

But before they are given a chance to, they answer the king, confirming that they will



not bow down to the statue. One line stands out from their answer, 'If the God we serve exists He can rescue us from the furnace...*But even if He does not rescue us, we want you as king to know we will not serve your gods.*' That middle part is powerful. They are declaring that death for their God is better than life serving the false gods and excesses of Babylon. They are declaring that there is a better way to live, and they are choosing to die in that better way, than to live in a way that rejects God and His work in the world.

And so they are thrown into the furnace, after it has been heated so hot that standing near it will kill you. But the fire doesn't even touch the three, and N calls them out of the fire. They emerge not even smelling of smoke, a detail that reminds us that God didn't just save them a little bit, but completely from harm.

The impact of this on N is immediate, he declares his praise of God for what He has done. Although N shows that he doesn't really know God, by declaring that he will tear to pieces anyone who insults Him, a contrast to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego's peaceful rebellion against the Kings decree.

It can sometimes be difficult to see how stories like this can have an impact on our everyday lives as Christians, as they are from a different world and about extraordinary events. But through their rejection of the worship of the statue, S, M, and A are doing more than choosing a religion; they are choosing a way of life, a purpose to live for, and they see that that way is one that brings beauty, joy, and life into the world. The fruits of N's view of the world are pain and suffering.

Which of those do we want to live for? We need to actively choose that each day, otherwise we become swept up in the way of the world.



Aim

To show how as Christians we may be called to follow a different way of life than those around us, and that God will be with us if it is a tough choice.

Main points to cover

1. The three men were working hard to help the society that had kept them prisoner
2. They were well known as followers of the Living God.
3. Their early lives had prepared them to stand up for what was right.

Focus On

The three men's certainty that God's way was better.

Activity ideas

Have Bibles ready for each of the young people and ask them read through the story in small groups and see if they can pick out why Shad, Mesh, and Abed choose to act in the way that they do. Surface answers are absolutely fine at this point, as the next activities will dig into what is really going on here.

In this activity we want to make it clear that worship is far more than singing certain songs and praying in certain ways. It is about living lives that point towards God. This is difficult for us to get our heads around, because we have been shaped by an idea of faith that is based around thinking the correct ideas. A good illustration is an electrical circuit with two switches. If one or other switch is on, then the light will be on. If one or the other is off, the light will be off. In the same way, if our heads and hearts are in alignment with God, then we will worship with our whole lives. If one or the other is out of alignment, we will struggle to worship with our whole lives. If you have the resources, then having an electrical circuit as outline above would be a fantastic teaching tool to explain this to the young people. However for many of us that will not be possible. The aim of the illustration is to show that when our heads and hearts are aligned in the same way, we worship the things we work for.

Ask the young people if it is just God that we worship in this way? Explore the idea with them that we worship each day, but not necessarily God. By the things we think, do, and say, we show what we worship. It may be that we worship our own ego, by doing and thinking things that show how great we are. It may be that we worship popularity, by doing and thinking things that will make others like us even if we think those things are wrong. We may worship academic achievement, or wealth, or power, or any of a multitude of things. Explore what happens when we worship some of those things instead of God. What are the results of that worship? Does it lead us closer to God? Does it help us become more like Jesus? Does it bring joy, happiness, and goodness into the world, or does it bring sadness, pain, and darkness?

If possible it would be great to do some burning as part of the response to this story. Give each young person a piece of paper and a pen or pencil, and have them write a letter to God asking for His help in worshipping Him with their heads and hearts. As part of their prayers, offer them the chance to put their letter into a metal bin, outside, and set them on fire as a way of handing them over to God.

Daniel and the Lions' Den: Daniel 6

Leader's reflection

This reading places Daniel in a similar position to his three friends, in which he must choose between his loyalty to God and his submission to the Babylonian king. It is worth reminding ourselves at this point that quite a while has passed since the incident with the golden statue, and Daniel is now serving his third Babylonian king. That by itself is impressive, as it seems the most dangerous place to be in the kingdom is under the notice of the king, and yet Daniel has managed to survive serving three, and will go on to serve the Persian king Cyrus who takes over the rule of Babylon after Darius.

King Darius seems to have an ego to match his predecessors, as his administrators at various different levels of government have him sign a law that for one month, no one can worship or pray to anyone except the king. All this is a move to get rid of Daniel; his integrity is such that they can find no other way to remove him from power than to use his faithful worship of God as their weapon against him.

Daniel, upon hearing of this law, returns to his home and, with his window open facing towards Jerusalem, kneels down to pray to God. This may seem like a strange thing to do, surely it is just asking for trouble? But maybe that is Daniel's aim; by acting in this way he is defying the king and showing his faithfulness, and by doing so in such a public and predictable way, is declaring to those trying to remove him that he is unafraid of them because God is with him,

The officials know they have trapped Daniel, and so return to the king with news of Daniel's defiance. The king is upset, as he loves Daniel, and tries hard to get him out of trouble. If we are not careful, this activity on the part of the king can make us think he is not so bad. But we need to remember that this is a king who has a lions' den in his palace grounds, and was perfectly willing to have anyone thrown to them.



Despite his efforts, Darius cannot rescind the law without undermining his rule, and so Daniel is placed in the lions' den with a stone rolled across the entrance and sealed with the king's seal. Darius is distraught that Daniel is in the den, and spends his night in turmoil at what has happened.

In the morning Darius rushes to the den and calls out to Daniel. Daniel is referred to as a faithful follower of the 'living God'. Presumably there are memories in the court of the fiery furnace and the miracle that occurred there, and Darius is hoping for a similar act to have saved one of his favoured governors.

Daniel is, of course, saved from the lions by an act of God, and Darius is overjoyed. However we get a stark reminder that once again, while the king understands the power of God, he doesn't understand what it is to be a follower of God, as his next act is one of unutterable cruelty and ruthlessness. All those who had accused Daniel, and their families, are thrown into the lions' den and torn apart. This does make for uncomfortable reading, however we need to remember that while this is included in the story, it is not condoned. Darius may recognise the power of God, but he doesn't recognise his character, and grace and forgiveness are far from his mind when dealing with the aftermath of this situation.

This reading again gives us pause, as it is an extraordinary event from a different world. How do we take lessons from this reading when it is so alien to us? Again, like the fiery furnace, we are reminded of the faith of those who live for God, their trust in Him, and the way that those who are faithful to Him live extraordinary lives at odds with the culture they find themselves in. Daniel does not meet scheming with scheming, but with faithful integrity to God. In the same way we must not get caught up in the ways of the world, but live faithful lives following the principles of peace, love, and grace, and in doing so show the world God's love for the people around us.



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| Aim | To show that Daniel trusted in God and believed that God was King, not Darius. |
| Main points to cover | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Daniel's faithfulness meant that it was used as a tool against him. 2. Despite knowing this, he remained faithful. 3. God was faithful to Daniel and brought him through his time of trouble. |
| Focus On | Being faithful can be hard but we can do it with God's strength |

Activity ideas

Ask the young people to create a mind-map of what they think a king should be like. Feedback from this and create a shared list of all the things that your group think would make a great king. Now have them read Daniel 6: 6-9, 16. What characteristics do they see in King Darius? Contrast that list with the one you have made. If it hasn't been highlighted already, draw the young people's attention to the fact that Darius has, in his palace, a lions' den. This tells us a lot about the King, and we can assume that Daniel was not the first person to be thrown into the lions' den during King Darius's reign.

It would have been incredibly easy for Daniel to avoid what happened in this story. He could have hidden himself away and prayed in private, but he chose to pray, as he usually did, with his windows open despite just finding out about the law that the King had put in place. Ask the young people why they think Daniel did this? What do we already know about Daniel that make this make sense? Daniel had shown from his teenage years that he was faithful to God and trusted God. By continuing to pray as he did, Daniel was showing that he didn't serve Darius, but God, and that just because Darius had made a new law, it didn't change Daniel's relationship with God.

An important thing to remember when we are talking about following God is that we do it not out of duty, or because we have to, but because God showed us His incredible love first. We try to be faithful to God because of what He has already done for us, not to earn His love. Daniel understood what God had done for him, and was faithful to Him because of that. Remind the young people about this, and give them each a piece of paper with John 3:16 written on it. Highlight to them that God loves the world, and loves each of them, and wants them to live in the best way they can because of His love. Have them each think about ways they are faithful to God, and ways they are not and need His help. Lead them in a short time of confession, praying using modelling clay. Ask them to think of things they need to ask God's help with, and make something out of the clay to represent that. Once you have led them in a prayer asking for God's forgiveness, get them to remodel their clay into a cross as a way to remind them of how God showed His love to the world.