

Character. Webster defines character as "moral strength, reputation." It's hard to find character these days. In politics. In the work force. In professional athletics. In the teachers' lounge at school. Oh, we can find characters easily enough, but to find character, now that's a different story.

My aim this morning is not to bemoan the lack of character in this world. There's little fruit in that kind of conversation. No, my objective is to address a specific question that pertains to each of us. How can you be a person of character in a world of compromise? We find the answer in the Old Testament book of Daniel.

This morning we are beginning a study in what is a life-changing book. Daniel is packed with relevance for us. It shows us how to live for God in a "secular" world. You see, the events of Daniel take place, not in the Promised Land, but in a nation much like ours. God's people, like Daniel, found themselves immersed in a pagan culture. They had no temple and no sacrificial system. Yet they learned how to live as the covenant people of God in a context of paganism.

Daniel shows us how God's program works in a secular world. In that sense, it provides an important transition from the Old Testament theocracy to New Testament sojourning. Daniel shows us how to live for God when you are the minority, when you're outnumbered by pagan critics.

My friend, more and more that is the situation confronting the American Church as we face the 21st century. We do not live in a Christian nation. We are a minority (don't be surprised--the broad road has always held more people than the narrow road). How can we fit in without being swallowed? How can we be people of character in a world of compromise? Daniel can show us.

Proposition: Through two events in Daniel 1, God gives us a vivid picture of character in a world of compromise.

I. Event #1: An ungodly nation faced a Tragedy (1-2).

- A. Jerusalem was attacked.
- B. The Jews were taken captive.
 - 1. The first stage: 605 B.C.
 - 2. The second stage: 597 B.C.
 - 3. The third stage: 586 B.C.
- C. The temple was desecrated.

II. Event #2: A godly remnant faced a Test (3-8).

- A. They confronted the unfamiliar (3-5).
 - 1. A new country
 - 2. A new leader
 - 3. A new language
 - 4. A new culture
- B. They confronted the ungodly (6-7).

***Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

1. They were tempted to lose their identity.
 2. They were tempted to lose their allegiance.
- C. Daniel chose the unpopular (8).
1. He was a man of principle.
 2. He was a man of purity.

Application: How can I be a person of character in a world of compromise?

1. I must live by principle.
2. I must live by principles.

I. Event #1: An ungodly nation faced a Tragedy (1-2).

Notice the setting in v 1, "In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, came Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, unto Jerusalem, and besieged it." The tragedy had been coming for decades. The prophets had warned the people of God time after time, to no avail.

Isaiah had pleaded in behalf of God in Isa 1:18-20, "Come now, let us reason together, saith the LORD; though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow...If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land. But if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured with the sword." Sadly, God's people chose the latter. They didn't listen to Isaiah, nor to Amos, nor Joel, nor the others.

So the inevitable occurred. The ungodly people of Yahweh felt the heavy hand of God's judgment. God raised up the mighty nation of Babylon to chastise His defiant children. The tragedy came in three forms, as described by Daniel in verses 1-2.

A. Jerusalem was attacked.

The text says it happened in the third year while Jehoiakim was king. The northern kingdom of Israel was already gone, having been deported in 722 B.C. by the cruel Assyrians. But the southern kingdom, known as Judah, coasted along for another century plus, teeter-tottering with sin, until the wrath of God would be assuaged no longer.

Then, Nebuchadnezzar attacked the city of David, the city of peace, Jerusalem, and when the dust settled, the place was in shambles. Another tragedy took place.

B. The Jews were taken captive.

Notice v 2, "And the Lord gave Jehoiakim, king of Judah, into his hand." Stop there. Lest you think the fall of Jerusalem was an indication that God went on vacation, or that He was outmaneuvered by the devil, v 2 informs us that God was sovereign even in the tragedy of the captivity of His people. The Lord gave. The Lord gave Jehoiakim into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. The Lord gave the people of Judah into the same hands. The hand of God is sovereign over the affairs of men.

Just think of the timeless truth behind that statement. Who really is in control of world events in our day? Is the United Nations? Is President Clinton? Never forget this. The God Who is, the God Who acted in the 7th century B.C., is the One Who raises up nations, and takes them down. He raises up leaders, and brings them down. Think of that when you watch the news coverage of the presidential primaries.

History tells us that the Jews were not taken captive during one Babylonian campaign, but three. There were three stages in the fall of Judah.

1. *The first stage: 605 B.C.*
2. *The second stage: 597 B.C.*

3. *The third stage: 586 B.C.*

Daniel mentions only the first stage, and as far as he was concerned, the 70-year captivity period started in 605 B.C., the date on which the shackles were placed on his wrists. It's that date which will be important for figuring the end of the captivity, which God predicted would occur 70 years later (Jer 29:10). For now, notice a third tragedy.

C. The temple was desecrated.

V 2 tells us, "And the Lord gave Jehoiakim into his hand, with part of the vessels of the house of his god; and he brought the vessels into the treasure house of his god." When it was all said and done, the Babylonians destroyed the temple of God. They demolished the machinery of the sacrificial system. But to pour salt in the stinging wounds of the Jews, they plundered the temple articles and placed them in the house of their gods. It was a symbolic gesture that said, "Our gods are stronger than yours."

What a low blow! Was God unable to prevent this? Was Yaweh less powerful than Bel and Marduk, the gods of the Babylon? If not, how could He allow His temple to be desecrated by pagans?

And then we notice v 2 again, "The Lord gave." The tragedy was no accident, no quirk of fate, no sign of weakness. You see, the real issue is not how could God allow pagans to desecrate His temple. The real problem was that God's own people had been desecrating God's reputation for year after year after year. Until God took action.

Several years ago (story told by Tim Kenoyer), Moshe Diane, Israel's great military genius traveled to New Dehli, India. Moseh Diane was the man who led Israel to the miracle victory in the Six-Day war. The press in New Dehli asked Moshe about the incredible win, and he responded with these words, "The God Who was, is. The God Who did, does."

If you are a God-fearing person, you are probably concerned about the moral direction of our nation. You may even wonder, "What's going to happen to the Church if so-and-so gets elected?" I believe as good Christian citizens, we ought to be involved in the political process, but never forget this. God's program is not dependent on a political party or platform. God's not a democrat. He's not a republican either. In fact, He used a dictator like Nebuchadnezzar to accomplish His plan. God is sovereign, my friend.

We see His sovereignty in the first event of Daniel 1: An ungodly nation faced a tragedy. We likewise see His sovereignty in event #2.

II. Event #2: A godly remnant faced a Test (3-8).

Don't misunderstand something. The fact that God judged the nation of Judah did not mean there were no godly people in Judah. There was a remnant--God always has His remnant--and through that remnant, God fulfilled His plan. The same tragedy that God used to discipline the wayward nation He used to strengthen the character of His faithful remnant.

Let's take a look at the test in verses 3-8. It was a test in character development taken by four pupils which most of us first met years ago in Sunday School. Their names: Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. What kind of test did these men face? The test involved three steps (we'll see the outcome next week).

A. They confronted the unfamiliar (3-5).

The scene in v 3 is in Babylon, "And the king spoke unto Ashpenaz, the master of his eunuchs, that he should bring certain of the children of Israel, and of the king's seed, and of the princes." Nebuchadnezzar passed down an executive decision to his aid, Ashpenaz. He wanted him to recruit top-notch young people for his service, and then put them through a vigorous training program.

There was a political motivation behind this decision. How do you break the backbone of a nation, particularly a nation you just conquered? The answer is you enroll their most promising youth, their future leaders, in your service. You make them dependent upon you by showering them with privileges which would ensure their loyalty to you. That's what Nebuchadnezzar did. He utilized the same kind of de-nationalization and brain-washing that has been carried on by communists in our day.

What kind of youth did Nebuchadnezzar seek? V 4 tells us, "Youths in whom was no blemish, but well favored, and skillful in all wisdom, and gifted in knowledge, and understanding science, and such as had ability in them to stand in the king's palace, and whom they might teach the learning and the tongue of the Chaldeans."

What did the Babylonians do with these recruits? Notice v 5, "And the king appointed them a daily provision of the king's food, and of the wine which he drank, so nourishing them three years that, at the end of them, they might stand before the king."

The training program would last three years. Don't forget the goal of the king. He wanted to completely convert the Hebrew youth to the Babylonian way of life. He wanted to make them think like Babylonians, look like Babylonians, behave like Babylonians, and even worship like Babylonians.

That created a real dilemma for four young Jews. V 6 gives us their Hebrew names, "Now among these were of the children of Judah, Daniel, Hannaniah, Mishael, and Azariah." Speculation suggests that these four fellows were teenagers, between the ages of fourteen and nineteen (Strauss, 37).

Just think about all the unfamiliar things that confronted Daniel and his peers. They confronted at least four unfamiliar challenges.

1. *A new country* -- They were in Babylon, more than 800 miles from their familiar homeland, in what today is modern Iraq. These young men weren't religious professionals, but laymen.

2. *A new leader* -- A pagan leader at that!

3. *A new language* -- It's interesting that parts of the book of Daniel are written in Hebrew and parts in Aramaic, which presupposes that its readers were bilingual.

4. *A new culture* -- By the way, remember something. Christianity works in any culture. Do you know why? It's because Christianity is fundamentally not a religious system, but a relationship with a person, Jesus Christ.

So there's step #1 in the test. Four Hebrew teens confronted the unfamiliar.

B. They confronted the ungodly (6-7).

What would you do if you were in a strange place, with no family members and no other church members, and you had the opportunity to sin without getting caught? Those of you who travel frequently for business know what I mean. Joe Stowell shares about a leader of a major ministry (in Perilous Pursuits, p. 30) who noticed a lady across the lobby as he checked into a hotel. He reached his room and was unloosening his tie

when he heard a knock and opened the door. It was her, wanting to come in. For a flash of a moment he paused...then closed the door and walked back into the room alone.

Daniel and his friends faced temptation on two fronts.

1. They were tempted to lose their identity.

We see this in the name changes in v 7. When the teens arrived in Babylon, they were given new names, Babylonians names, to replace their Hebrew names. It was a threat to their identity as God's people. Though we can't be dogmatic on the meaning of the names, Gaebelien suggests the following (in Strauss, 38):

Daniel (God is my judge) to Belteshazzar (Bel's prince). Hananiah (Beloved of the LORD) to Shadrach (Illumined by the sun). Mishael (Who is as God) to Meshach (Who is like Venus). Azariah (no meaning given; possibly Yahweh has helped) to Abednego (The servant of Nego).

The young men were tempted to lose their identity as the people of God. Did they? We'll see in a moment, but before we do, never forget this. Character is linked to identity. How I see myself affects how I live. Let's examine a second temptation.

2. They were tempted to lose their allegiance.

We see this in v 8, regarding eating the king's food. It's interesting that Daniel accepted a new name, a new language, a new leader, but he protested when they tried to give him new food. To eat the food was to cross the line (see v 8). But why?

It's hard to be certain, but several suggestions have been made. One is that Daniel wouldn't eat the meat because it had been previously offered to false gods. Another possibility is because to eat the king's meat would have been to break the Jewish Law (Lev 3:17; 11:1-47), since pork was highly prized in Babylon, and horse was also eaten freely.

There's a more likely reason, though. In the eastern culture, to share a meal together is to commit oneself to friendship. Commentator John Goldingay makes this observation (19), "Pagan food and drink may simply epitomize the pagan uncleanness associated with exile. This reflects the fact that what we eat and drink, like what we wear and how we speak, generally constitutes an outward expression of our self-identity and commitments."

The issue in v 8 is covenant allegiance. For Daniel to eat the king's food would be to say, "My new friend and master is Nebuchadnezzar. I give my allegiance to him."

But Daniel had already given his allegiance to Another. His heart belonged to the Living God, and he would not compromise that devotion. He wasn't exempt from temptation but he refused to yield to temptation.

So guess what he did? After they faced the unfamiliar and the ungodly, Daniel choose the unpopular.

C. Daniel chose the unpopular (8).

Apparently, Daniel was the leader of the four Hebrews for v 8 says "But Daniel purposed in his heart," and v 14 indicates that the other three agreed with him. One thing's for sure. Daniel's priorities were firm. He chose to live a life separated from sin.

How we need more Christians like Daniel! A. W. Tozer once observed, "A whole new generation of Christians has come up believing that it is possible to 'accept' Christ without forsaking the world." Yet such an attitude smacks in the face passages like 1

John 2:15, "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him." (also 2 Cor 6:14)

How did Daniel ever make it? How could such a young person stand for God, resist the peer-pressure, and choose the unpopular? He could for two reasons.

1. *He was a man of principle.* Where did he get that principle? From the Word of God. Evidently the work of prophets like Jeremiah, Zephaniah, and Habakkuk had not been in vain. These prophets had prepared the god-fearing minority in Jerusalem for the inevitable exile that was coming. We can assume that the teens' parents had also taught them the Word of God. And it stuck.

Parents, we need to teach our children how to function in the world, not retreat from it. It's not enough to teach them WHAT to think, but HOW to think, how to apply God's truth to real life situations. You see, they could change Daniel's name, but they couldn't change his nature. They could change his culture, but not his character.

How could Daniel chose the unpopular? Because he was a man of principle, and

2. *He was a man of purity.* Daniel purposes in his heart that he would not "defile" himself. The word means "to contaminate." Purity was a priority for him. He was cooperative, but not compromising. He wasn't afraid to say no to what God forbids.

Patrick Morley tells the story about a man named Steve (Man in the Mirror, p. 40). Steve and his wife sold their businesses, enrolled in a graduate school out of state, and purchased a home near the university. When they went to close the mortgage on the new house, the mortgage company wanted him to falsify some financial information.

Steve told them, "I can't do that." They replied, "It's no big deal. Everybody does it." To which Steve responded, "I don't think you understand, I can't do that."

The banker fidgeted as he spoke, "It just goes in the file; nobody will ever even look at it. Besides, if you don't then we can't give you the loan."

Steve and his wife were Christians. They really believed God had led them to the decision to return to school. It would have been so easy to justify their actions. But they didn't. Steve decided to return to school locally instead of moving out of state on a lie. He lost the house, but kept something much more valuable, something many have forfeited time and time again--his integrity.

Daniel was a man of principle and purity. What about you? Perhaps you have some embarrassing blots on your character from past blunders. Is there hope? Yes, if you'll do two things. First, confess your sin to God and experience His forgiveness through His Son. Second, as did Zacchaeus in Luke 19, resolve to make restitution. Go to those to whom you've lied or cheated. Go to those who have seen your unethical actions. Ask for their forgiveness. Tell them, "I belong to Christ. What I did in the past was wrong. I wish I could change it, but I can't. I've asked God to forgive me, and He has because of Christ. Now I want to ask for your forgiveness."

Application: How can I be a person of character in a world of compromise?

I must make two resolutions today which will affect how I will live every day.

1. *I must live by principle.* The driving question in my mind must be, not, "Will it hurt me?" nor, "Can I get away with it?" but "Is it right?" And realize this. You cannot DO right until you ARE right with God. To be right with God requires a personal, relationship with Jesus Christ.

2. *I must live by principles.* You see, the fact is there are lots of life-situations the Bible does not address specifically (there were no CD's, no internet, etc when the Bible was written). So what do you do? Do your own thing? No. Daniel teaches us to apply the principles of God's Word to the situation. A person of character lives by the principles of God's Word. We'll see how in future weeks in Daniel.