

Away From Home

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A FEW years ago I walked along a row of shops in Sofia, Bulgaria with a friend who had made this former communist country his home. As we approached a small grocery he shared that he found some of their store policies a bit odd. The shelves normally carried a highly sought after product that he frequently purchased. He noted in time that the popular item was no longer stocked. When he asked why, the explanation was that the item was much too popular and therefore took a great deal of time and effort to supply. The store owner preferred to stock those things which did not sell as well. That explanation made no sense to me.

The grocer's logic is confusing to anyone who has lived in a free society. Any item that sells well is what normally is stocked. It is good that you must frequently restock the product. The Sofia grocer illustrates the impact of a nation that has followed the policies of Marxism. Such policies caused a serious distortion.

I lived for a time in South Africa, before the end of the apartheid era. For many years that land was under the rule of the Dutch descendants, Afrikaners. They claimed for decades that their policies were consistent with the views of Scripture. To them apartheid was in concert with their Reformed understanding of the Old and New Testament. The world knows that such policies caused a great deal of suffering.

In each case the nation was influenced by those who believed they had a mandate to impact the lives of millions. Yet, their influence was not in harmony with Scripture.

There are, however, examples of those who influenced their country in a manner that was in agreement with the values of Bible.

Garth Lean's book "God's Politician" is an account of an 18th century English politician by the name of William Wilberforce. He is best known for being influential in moving his nation to abolish the slave trade. In the introduction, Charles Colson, writes,

"In a day when the relationship between religion and politics is so hotly debated, Garth Lean's book might arouse skepticism: to many, "God's Politician" seems a contradiction in terms. The life of William Wilberforce shows why it is not. Wilberforce did not confuse or merge the church with the state; but he did bring transcendent moral values to bear on the political processes - and thus the society - of his day. Those who today complain that "you can't legislate morality!" could, however, only salute Wilberforce's fight to legislate his moral viewpoint that England's slave trade of the late 18th century was wrong."

Wilberforce was one who knew that this earth was not his real home. He lived his life in such a way that altered the world in which God had placed him. In some ways Wilberforce reminds me of a man spoken of in the Old Testament by the name of Daniel.

“ In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. 2 And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia ^[a] and put in the treasure house of his god.

3 Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring in some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility- 4 young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians. ^[b]
5 The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service.

6 Among these were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. 7 The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego.

8 But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way. 9 Now God had caused the official to show favor and sympathy to Daniel, 10 but the official told Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your ^[c] food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you."

11 Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, 12 "Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. 13 Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see." 14 So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days.

15 At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food. 16 So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead.

17 To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds.

18 At the end of the time set by the king to bring them in, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. 19 The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king's service. 20 In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom.

21 And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.

- Daniel 1:1-21

1 Peter 2:11 reminds us that a Christian is an alien, a stranger in the world. I am certain that the Old Testament Daniel and his friends understood 1 Peter well, long before the epistle was written. The question for us is not, "Are we strangers?", but how do we live in this world as a stranger? **Do we become hermits or do we interact and influence the world in which we have been placed?**

Daniel is a well known Biblical character. Perhaps he is best known for his visit in the lions' den. There is a great deal more to learn of Daniel. This prophet, as Jesus refers to him (Matt. 24:15), provides for us today, some 2,600 years later, important truths in understanding and implementing what it means to be a Christian in a strange place, a place away from home.

Context of Daniel

In Isaiah 39 we are informed that an envoy from Babylon was gladly received by Hezekiah. He showed the envoy all the riches that were kept in the storehouses. When the prophet Isaiah heard what had taken place he spoke these words to King Hezekiah.

"The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your fathers

have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the LORD.

And some of your descendants, your own flesh and blood who will be born to you, will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.”

"The word of the LORD you have spoken is good," Hezekiah replied. For he thought, "There will be peace and security in my lifetime."

-- Isaiah 39:6-8

The word of the Lord did come true. The Book of Daniel takes place during that period of Jewish history known as the Exile. The Judean Jews were displaced over the course of time beginning around 605 BC when Nebuchadnezzar brought Jehoiakim to his knees.

“Jehoiakim was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem eleven years. His mother's name was Zebidah daughter of Pedaiah; she was from Rumah.

37 And he did evil in the eyes of the LORD, just as his fathers had done.

24:1 During Jehoiakim's reign, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon invaded the land, and Jehoiakim became his vassal for three years. But then he changed his mind and rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar.”

– II Kings 23:36- 24:1

After certain rebellious acts in 597 BC, Nebuchadnezzar carried off 10,000 Jewish captives to Babylon, as mentioned in Ezk. 1:1-3. Again in 587 BC, after a long siege Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem and its temple, and broke up the Jewish community. We obtain some insights into what it was like for the Jews to be placed in Babylon when reading the Psalms.

“By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.

There on the poplars we hung our harps,

For there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said,

"Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?

If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill.

May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy.”

--Ps. 137:1-6

It is in this context that Daniel finds himself in a place that is not his home, serving a king that is not his king. What do we learn from this man and the way he lived out his faith in a such a place?

Convictions and Principles

Daniel, along with others, has been chosen to serve the King. They would undergo three years of training, be tested, and then if all went well, serve. The four were informed that they must eat the food from the King's table. Who in his right mind would complain? Yet, the invitation created a great predicament for Daniel. Why? Was it an issue of violating the Levitical Law? Was the meat from unclean animals? Keil in his commentary addressed the question as such:

“The partaking of the food brought to them from the king's table was to them contaminating, because forbidden by law; not so much because the food was not prepared according to the Lev. ordinance, or perhaps consisted of the flesh of animals which to the Israelites were unclean, for in this case the youths were not under the necessity of refraining from the wine, but the reason of their rejection of it was, that the heathen at their feast offered up in sacrificed to their gods a part of the food and the drink, and thus consecrated their meals by a religious rite,"

The Mesopotamian pantheon consisted of some 2,500 deities. Marduk, was chief god of the Babylonians (Jeremiah 50:2). This deity gained supremacy as a creator god and chief of the pantheon, some time after Hammurabi. According to the Babylonians the primary purpose of man was to serve the gods. This was done by the priest dressing divine images and providing daily gifts of food at the temples. The temple

personnel consisted of different types of priests, singers, prostitutes, prophets, and diviners. Some of the activity was designed to ward off evil spirits.

You are participating in the worship of the Babylonian gods when you eat the meat and drink the wine. Daniel would not partake. Yet, if you are under the rule of another what option do you have unless you are willing to lose your life?

How well do we discern God's will? What governs our thoughts and actions? What is the nature of our influence? Daniel knew God and His Word and was not going to ignore it. This caused a great dilemma for these Jews. No one will have a Godly influence upon his world unless he has Biblical convictions.

He Is Not Rude

Perhaps another way of putting this is to say that Daniel was diplomatic. Knowing what was right, he addresses the issue of having to consume both food and drink. Given the right circumstances, I might have responded in more straightforward manner:

"You want me to do what?! When are you people going to wake up? You force us to leave our home and come to this god- forsaken place to live among a bunch of heathens who are all going to be doomed by the wrath of God. And you expect me to join with you and your king in offending the one and only true God? Not a chance! You will never see me touch your food, even if it means that I must die."

No, that is not Daniel's approach. He is not arrogant or rude. He assesses the circumstances and looks for a way to work the issue without causing a revolt or the loss of a head or heads. Consider again the passage:

"But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way.

Now God had caused the official to show favor and sympathy to Daniel,

but the official told Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than

the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you."

Daniel then said to the guard, whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah,

"Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink.

Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see."

So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days.

At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food." --Daniel 1:8-15

I like how E.J. Young puts it. (p44)

"To accomplish this end, Daniel displays no fanaticism or rudeness, but candidly states his purpose to the chief chamberlain and asks his help. At this point, as throughout his life, Daniel exhibits himself as a true gentleman. He never yields in devotion to principle, but he does not permit devotion to principle to serve as a cloak for rudeness or fanaticism. He was a true hero of the Faith."

It takes a great deal of patience and wisdom to respond as Daniel did. It is so easy to be rude. Daniel understood that Ashpenaz lived in a sensual world. Therefore Daniel must communicate with that understanding. Life is only pragmatic to this king's servant. If you do not follow the king's order, you are dead. . He does not say, "This is the Word of God...." That has no meaning to Ashpenaz. Daniel speaks to him in the language he knows

God's Presence

What does it mean to live in the presence of God? Our lives are to be lived knowing that nothing takes place outside of God's control and purpose.

It is not uncommon for Christians to live as though their faith is based more on the past as opposed to the present. It is important that we do not forget all that God has done for us in Christ. The Savior is alive. He is not too busy or asleep. He is always a present help:

7 Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?

8 If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, ^[a] you are there.

9 If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,

10 even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.

--Psalm 139:7-10

Daniel and friends experienced God's presence in amazing ways as indicated in the passage. Perhaps Daniel could have lived out his life in bitterness to God for being placed in a foreign country, but he clearly did not. We are informed that the Lord was with Daniel and had blessed him and his friends in many ways – physically and mentally. It was God who caused the official to show favor and sympathy to Daniel. It was God who gave the four men knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. To live life in God's presence is not only to be changed by God, but to change the world around you.

You become a redemptive agent. It is for this reason that Christ tells his disciples that they are the salt and light of the earth. It may not be home, but it should be left in a redeemed form.

-Reflection-

1. What does it mean for you to live as a person of faith in the world today?
2. In what ways does your faith and world conflict?
3. Do you ever feel defeated as a Christian?
4. Are your convictions in harmony with Scripture?
5. What does it mean for you personally to live in the presence of God?