

Daniel 1

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[0 : 0 0] Now, the story is so very familiar to us, this story of Daniel, and it's a great story. It's an exciting story. It's a thrilling story and a memorable story, hence we remember it so well.

This morning, I want to focus on one particular aspect, indeed one word that we find here concerning Daniel, there in verse 8, but Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine. Daniel, at the beginning of this new chapter in his life, made a resolution. He took a definite and settled decision about a course of action that he proposed to take, and that is what resolutions are. But in any case, that is what resolutions should be, carefully taken decisions concerning actions to be taken, which includes, as with Daniel on this occasion, avoiding action, what we resolve not to do, as well as what we resolve positively to do. Daniel resolved.

And so, he can serve as an example, and some of the features of his resolution can help us and can challenge us, as we would also resolve with Daniel. And as we consider his resolution, I hope to demonstrate that really what he resolves to do is precisely what we too can and must resolve to do.

Circumstances very different. But at heart, what he resolves to do is precisely what we are required to resolve to do also. So, there are instructive characteristics of Daniel's resolution, which we will notice in a moment. But before we do so, just very briefly to comment on the circumstances that Daniel finds himself in. We're told, and we've read the passage that gives us a very helpful insight or background into the circumstances of his resolution. Nebuchadnezzar takes power in Babylon, and at the very beginning of his reign, he is involved in this siege of Jerusalem, a siege that has as its outcome the conquering of the city. Now, this siege was a devastating experience for the Israelites.

It wasn't and isn't to be confused with the much more disastrous destruction of Jerusalem that occurred also at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C. This is in 605 B.C. But though it wasn't on the same scale, if you wish, in terms of the destruction that it involved, it was nonetheless devastating for the city and for those who lived in it. We're told here of two particular actions that Nebuchadnezzar took following his conquest of the city. In the first place, we're told that he removed some of the vessels from the temple and carried them and placed them in the temple of his God. We read that there in verse 2.

[3 : 3 3] Now, that at face value may not seem particularly a significant act or significant in its consequences, or so it would seem. But we'll notice, not now but in a moment, some of the significance of that.

That was the first thing he did. But the second thing that he did was that he chose, or he had chosen, the finest young men of the nobility of Jerusalem, and he took them captive to Babylon. And this, of course, is where Daniel and his friends come in to the story. I wonder how Daniel felt as he arrived in Babylon. A young man coming into this hostile environment, far from family and friends, uncertain as to what lay before him. I imagine, as a human being of flesh and blood like you and me, there must have been a great measure of fear as he approached and entered the city, confusion as to why this fate had befallen him.

He was evidently a pious, a godly young man, as we discover. And yet here he is in such desperate circumstances. Where was his God? A measure of trepidation as he wonders what the plans are for him.

Perhaps on the journey, he had discovered something of what awaited him. We don't know. But I'm sure some of these emotions would have been very much present as he and others entered the city as slaves.

Slaves perhaps not treated in the manner in which we sometimes imagine, but slaves nonetheless, captives, having been removed the freedom that they had previously enjoyed. What would come of him?

[5 : 27] What would he be required to do? Well, he soon discovers some of what awaits him. He discovers that he's to be given a new name. And though we're not told what he thought about that, it would appear that he can handle that. He wouldn't have been happy, I imagine, but he can handle being given a new name.

He is also told, he discovers, that he is to be instructed in the language and literature of the Chaldeans. And again, it would seem that Daniel can handle that. He's prepared to go along with that, to participate in that, and no doubt to excel in this particular course of study.

But then finally, or thirdly, he is told that he is to eat from the king's table. Or any case, he is to eat that which is provided for him from the king's table. And it's here that he is faced with a challenge that results in the resolution that we are focusing on. Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine. And we want to think about this resolution in the following ways. The what of the resolution, the why, the who, the when, and finally the result.

So, we'll think of the resolution, as I say, from these different angles. The what, the why, the who, the when, and finally the result. First of all, then the what. The what of the resolution. What was the resolution? Well, the facts are clear enough. We've already read the verse three or four times.

The question really is, why was this an issue? Why would Daniel draw the line here? He can handle the new name. He can handle being matriculated, as it were, into this course of study of Chaldean language, and no doubt religion and traditions and customs that were alien to him and that he had no sympathy with. And yet he was willing to be involved in that. He didn't see this as something that went against his principles or his convictions. And yet, on this matter, he says, no, this is something I am not prepared to do. Why was this? Why was eating from the king's table a concern for Daniel? Well, as I'm sure you can imagine, many possible explanations have been proposed, have been suggested in answer to that question. One of the common ones that we often find in those who have studied this passage and perhaps written commentaries on it, is the suggestion that the reason why Daniel was not prepared to eat the food from the king's table is that this is food that would have been dedicated or offered to the

[8 : 27] Babylonian idols, food offered to idols. And so he, as a follower of Yahweh, could not participate in eating this food. Now, that controversy is familiar to us, but of course in a different context. In the New Testament, that was a big issue, a significant controversy in the New Testament church. And perhaps there's a danger that, as we are aware of that, we import from a different historical context an issue that possibly wouldn't have been the major concern for Daniel. And I would suggest that this wasn't the primary concern for Daniel. And one reason for suggesting that it wouldn't have been is that if that was his concern, that the food in question had been dedicated to idols, then who's to say that the vegetables that he was to eat wouldn't have been also so dedicated. Perfectly reasonable to imagine that all the food that was consumed in the palace and by those connected with the palace would have, in some way or another, been offered to or dedicated to the Babylonian idols. And so it seems unlikely that this would have been his primary concern. Another suggestion that is made as to why he draws the line on this particular issue and resolves not to eat of this food is that to eat from the food from the king's table would have involved eating food that contravened the food laws of the Mosaic law.

To take just one example, it may well have been that at the table of Nebuchadnezzar, pork would have been consumed. And so Daniel said, well, I can't eat of that food, for I am a follower of Yahweh, and the law that is the law of my God forbids me from eating this or some other food that might have proceeded from the king's table. Well, that again is a possibility, but it doesn't deal with the matter there in verse 5 where we read, the king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. And then in verse 8, he resolves not to defile himself with the royal food and wine.

And very explicitly it mentions not only the food, but the wine. Now, there was no prohibition for a faithful Israelite to consume wine. And so why would this be the issue at stake? If this was the issue at stake, it seems strange that it would be expressed in this way. It seems, again, I would suggest unlikely that this was the reason why Daniel draws the line and resolves not to eat from the food and wine from the king's table. There are two further reasons or suggestions. I would describe them as complementary reasons that I think capture what was at stake and explain Daniel's course of action.

Now, we're still considering this matter of the what of the resolution. What is it that he resolves to do? Two further reasons. The first is that to eat from the king's table, it would seem, was an expression of loyalty and commitment to the king. It wasn't just about somebody who was hungry being fed. It wasn't just the physical act of consuming food or drinking wine. To eat from the king's table was a declaration of loyalty to the king. It was a declaration of commitment to the king.

It was throwing in your lot with the king. It was the king's table. And to eat from his table was to declare publicly, I am with the king. I serve this king. I am loyal to this king.

[12 : 18] It was an expression, so we are told, of unquestioning submission to the king. But Daniel had another king. Daniel's king was Yahweh. And so, out of loyalty to Yahweh, he would not eat or act in a way that would give the impression or indeed declare that he was shifting his loyalties from Yahweh to Nebuchadnezzar or, in any case, the gods of Babylon. Now, a second reason, or really a complementary reason that goes or that follows on from what we've just said, is that to eat from the king's table was not only an expression of undivided loyalty to the king, it was also to enjoy the privileges and comforts of such a commitment. You see, if you declared your loyalty to the king, you were rewarded for that loyalty. Eating from the king's table itself was part of that reward.

You see, it wasn't just that you were saying, I'm committed to the king. I'm committed to Nebuchadnezzar, but Nebuchadnezzar would reward you for that. And that commitment would carry luxuries and rewards for those who so expressed such a commitment. The food that he was to eat was rich food.

It was tempting food. It was alluring fear that was set before these young men. And today, as thousands of years ago, and indeed throughout the history of humankind, most men and women have a price.

Most men and women have a price. And Nebuchadnezzar was willing to pay that price to secure the loyalty of those who represented his vassal states. But Daniel was not prepared to be seduced by the glitter of Babylon. Though his feet were on Babylonian soil, his heart remained firmly anchored in Jerusalem.

Well, we can and we could continue to consider and to debate the relative weight that could be given to different reasons or different explanations as to why Daniel drew the line at eating the royal food and wine.

[14 : 48] I've suggested the reasons that seem to me the most cogent and coherent ones. But I recognize that arguments can be made one way or another for other possible explanations. But even as we, for the moment, lead to one side, these different reasons or possible theories, there is one thing that we can say very clearly concerning the what of Daniel's resolution. Essentially, what Daniel is resolving to do is that he is resolving not to sin. He resolves not to defile himself. To defile himself would have been sinful for Daniel. Sin defiles. It makes us unclean and dirty and defiled. And this is what Daniel resolved would not happen to him. He resolved, in essence, at heart, he resolved not to sin. And as I say, we don't need to have total clarity as to why it would have been sinful for him to eat of this food and wine. I think there are reasons. Evidently, there are reasons. But even if we're not altogether clear what the reasons are, it is clear that for him at this time, in these circumstances, it would have been sinful for him to do that which he refuses to do. And so, as one loyal to Yahweh, as one who was committed to his God, he resolves not to defile himself. He resolves not to sin.

Very particularly, he resolved not to be lured into sin by those around him. And the hostile environment that he now unwillingly found himself a part of. And of course, as we understand it in these terms, we can see how Daniel's resolution is of practical and immediate and contemporary application to all of us. And I ask you, on this, the second day of January, 2011, I ask you, Christian friend, disciple of Jesus Christ, one who bows the knee to Yahweh, will you at the beginning of this year resolve not to sin? Will you at the beginning of this year examine yourself? And as you examine yourself, and as you honestly do so, discover indwelling sin, will you resolve that in this year you will leave that aside? You will no longer defile yourself with sin. I'm not going to give examples because it's unnecessary, but I hope it's unnecessary. Each of us can and must examine our own hearts.

We are all sinners. There are all sins that we have fallen into the habit of committing, that we have foolishly considered to be of little consequence, trivial matters. And it is incumbent upon us to examine ourselves, to discover, to highlight, to identify those sins, and with Daniel, to resolve to no longer defile ourselves, to no longer sin in this careless way that we are accustomed to.

Will you resolve to no longer defile yourself, to no longer go with the flow, to no longer behave as others behave, to no longer be molded into a lifestyle of those who surround you, who know nothing of God, who know nothing of His law, who have no concern for loyalty to Him? Will you, with Daniel, resolve to no longer sin? We are children of God. This is the passage that we read in the letter of John.

We are children of God, and as such we cannot go on sinning. It goes against our very identity of who we are. It cannot be. It's one of these enigmas of the Christian life. It cannot be, and yet it is.

[19 : 22] It cannot be, and yet it is. Well, let us resolve at the beginning of this year that we will not defile ourselves. We will not sin before a God. The what of the resolution, but moving on to the why of the resolution, why not defile himself? Now, we've hinted at the reasons for that already. But when I ask the question, or when I pose the matter in this way, the why of the resolution, I'm concerned with the question of motivation. Why not sin? Why be different to those around us? And here it is perhaps sometimes suggested that Daniel was motivated by the desire to stand out as different before the worldly Babylonians. To use our churchy language, he wanted to be a good witness to the unbelievers who surrounded him. We think of the chorus that perhaps we've sung as children, dare to be a Daniel, dare to stand alone, dare to have a purpose clear, and dare to make it known, to make known, I'm different,

I'm a follower of Yahweh, I don't do the sinful, nasty, dirty things you do. And maybe we think that this is the motivation that drives Daniel. Well, Daniel certainly was different. He was very different.

But his motivation wasn't to be different. His only concern was loyalty to God. He was, I suspect, mildly indifferent concerning the opinion the Babylonians held about him. But he was acutely concerned about God's opinion. You see, he loved God. He was committed to God. His loyalty was to God.

And his only concern was to please God. Hence, his concern not to defile himself, not to sin. He's actually very discreet in making his intentions known. He doesn't shout it from the rooftops that all would hear. There are some that need to know, and on a need-to-know basis, he declares his intention.

But his intention was not to impress others or to be openly different to others. His concern, his motivation was to please God. At heart, it was loyalty to God that drives Daniel.

[21 : 57] Now, of course, as I think we've already suggested or even explicitly stated, it is true that in seeking single-mindedly to be loyal to God, he was inevitably very different to those around him.

And if they were looking carefully, they would notice and they would be struck, some bemused, and some, no doubt, impressed. And so with us, we are to bear testimony to those who surround us.

We are indeed to be a good witness. We are to be different as Christians. But if we are driven by the motivation simply to be different, simply to stand out, simply perhaps to keep a healthy distance from the world and its sin and its pollution, then we will fail miserably. If that is our driving motivation just to be different. No, our motivation must be rooted in our loyalty to God, in our desire to please God, in our deep gratitude to God for what He has done for us in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. This must be our motivation. This was the why of Daniel's resolution, his loyalty and his commitment to God. The what, the why, the who, much more briefly. Now, this may seem an unnecessary question to ask. The who. Obviously, it's Daniel. But there's just one detail I want to highlight that

I think perhaps could be helpful for us as we would so resolve with Daniel. And it is this, that this was a personal resolution of Daniel independently of what others might decide to do. Verse 8 begins, But Daniel. But Daniel. Now, in time, we discover that his three friends chose the same path, but I think the language is clear. Daniel's decision, as he makes this decision, was his alone. He was not looking around to see what others would do. He was not even at this point primarily concerned with what other Israelites would do. He knew what he had to do. He resolved. Now, what of his friends? It may be that they, like Daniel, also made that selfsame resolution independently of others. But I suspect it's not too far-fetched to suggest that they were encouraged in that decision by the courageous stand and resolve of Daniel.

But what is certainly clear is that Daniel personally takes this decision, regardless of what others may or may not decide to do. Now, I think that is very relevant and instructive for us, because we as Christians can fall into the trap of being content with mediocrity in our Christian lives because, to put it bluntly, we are surrounded by mediocrity. Other Christians are materialistic. Well, why shouldn't I be? Other Christians fritter away their God-given time on trivia. Well, why can't I?

[25 : 08] Other Christians seem unconcerned with twisting and massaging the truth. Well, why should I be any different? Why should I care? Other Christians seem to give little importance to sacrificially giving of their time and of their money to the Lord's cause. Well, why should I? And so, the bar by which we seek to establish our lives or discipleship isn't the bar of Scripture, but the bar of those who surround us. And I would say to you this morning, it's not that you should be unconcerned as to what others do, but never you mind what others do as you resolve not to defile yourself. You resolve for yourself before God. You resolve to no longer sin. You resolve to give your life as a living sacrifice to God. That is your decision and your responsibility. The fourth angle that we want to consider this is the when. Again, this is something that perhaps we've covered, and it's not necessary to dwell on in any great detail. But the point is this, as we think of the when of the resolution. The point is this, that these were tough times for giving yourself the luxury of being loyal to Yahweh. For Daniel, this was a difficult time. These were difficult circumstances for him to make and to take such a stand, to make such a resolution. Remember what we mentioned at the beginning concerning the temple utensils. And the significance of this is that, though it may not seem of great significance, is that this was a powerful act of ritual humiliation. It was an act that shouted to the world that Yahweh had been defeated, and that the Babylonian gods reigned supreme. To be able to go into the very temple and remove the vessels from the very temple of Yahweh and to take them and place them in the temple of the Babylonian gods was, as I say, a declaration, a powerful, eloquent declaration. Yahweh is powerless.

Yahweh is impotent. Yahweh doesn't work. But the Babylonian gods, they reign supreme. Yahweh was not worth serving. Yahweh couldn't even defend his own temple in his own holy city. And yet, it is at such a time, and to such a God, that Daniel declares his loyalty. Now, to some, this must have seemed just ridiculous.

Why do you suffer? Why do you commit yourself to a God who has proven himself to be incapable of defending you, who has shown himself to be weak and poor? And yet, it is to such a God that Daniel declares his loyalty. And again, today is not so different. Who is Jesus? Who is Jesus? He's a spent force, a peripheral figure, quaint and curious, perhaps, but certainly not king of kings and lord of lords.

We have, as a nation, as a society, moved on from such childish, superstitious nonsense concerning God becoming man and rising from the dead and all such things. And it's not easy to declare our loyalty to Jesus in such a day as this. And so, we can learn from Daniel. He, in days that were hostile to his God, resolved, we too can do the same. Finally, the how. How did Daniel resolve? The how of his resolution. No doubt there is much that could be said here, but I just want to highlight two things that are, I hope, of practical help as we would follow his example. The how of Daniel's resolution. The first thing is this, is that Daniel acts on his resolution. We know very well that resolutions can so often be no more than good intentions. You know, I resolve to do more exercise this year. I resolve to lose weight. I resolve to spend more time with my children. I resolve, we can have all these good intentions, but we don't actually do anything. We don't act on them.

We don't say, well, how am I going to make this happen? And so, consequently, nothing does happen. But Daniel resolves and acts. We read there in 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 in this way. Not only does he act on his resolution by approaching the official and presenting to him, or seeking the permission that he requires, but he has a plan that is ready and waiting for when the official presents the official presents the obstacles to giving the permission. So, this is something that he has carefully considered and thought out, and he resolves, yes, alone before God as a very private act, but then that resolution is acted upon so that it happens, so that it doesn't remain as simply as a good intention. Now, I don't want to labor the application of that. I think it's evident how we too can seek to apply that in our own circumstances. But the second thing, and again, just briefly to note in this matter of the how of the resolution, is that he carries it out humbly and respectfully. Daniel is no hothead glorying in his loyalty to God and inviting persecution. No,

[30 : 52] Daniel quietly and discreetly asks permission and courteously suggests how his resolve could be made effective to those whose permission he required if this was to proceed. He did so in a manner that was acceptable to the Babylonian officials responsible. And so, he resolves firmly, decisively, out of a firm commitment to his God. And yet, he is able to do so in a winsome and humble and respectful way. And in this, he serves as an example for us. The what, the why, the who, the when, the how. And what was the outcome of it all? What was the outcome of it all? Well, the outcome is that God honored his resolve.

God honored his resolve. He honored his resolve in two ways. He honored his resolve in helping make the plan work. Yes, Daniel was careful to be respectful, to be polite, to be winsome. And yet, it required that God intervene. And we are told explicitly that God does intervene. In verse 9, now God had caused the official to show favor and sympathy to Daniel. Such was his request that there was this need for divine intervention to predispose this man to look favorably upon Daniel. Daniel certainly did all that he could do, but God honors his resolve in ensuring that this resolve can indeed be made effective. He honors his resolve in helping the plan work. But finally, he honors his resolve in vindicating Daniel's plan not to defile himself. And here, the account is so familiar to us. But he ate the vegetables that were provided. He ate the food that he asked permission to eat. And of course, at the end of the time of trial, he was healthier and smarter than all the others. His resolve was vindicated by God.

Well, it's only the 2nd of January, and so I think still that it's time to make a resolution. And so I ask you the question that I asked a few moments ago, will you resolve not to defile yourself in this year that has begun?

Will you resolve not to sin? Will you resolve in so doing to please God in this year that has begun? Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your Word, and we thank you for those who are presented to us in your Word, who serve as a challenge and as an encouragement to us. We thank you for the life of Daniel. We pray that familiarity with his story might not dull the lessons that can be wrought from it. We pray that you would help us by your Spirit, that as we begin this year, there would be in us a resolve not to defile ourselves, a resolve not to carry on sinning carelessly, a resolve to live lives whose concern is to please you, and that our motivation would indeed be rooted in our loyalty to you and love for you.

[34 : 29] And these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.