

In the World, Not of the World

Believers might wonder: With the world being such a sinful place, and seeming to grow worse daily, how can we actively live in today's society and still maintain a good conscience as a believer? The narrative of Daniel and his friends in the Old Testament helps us to consider this question.

All in God's Plan

The first chapter of Daniel relates how King Nebuchadnezzar, of Babylon, led his army of conquest into Jerusalem and sacked the city. Daniel was a young boy in Judah when this happened, and God's Word explains that Nebuchadnezzar took Daniel and the other boys, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, away to serve him in Babylon. These youth were selected, as the Bible explains, because they were "children in whom was no blemish, but well favoured, and skilful in all wisdom, and cunning 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" (Dan. 1:4).

These boys were chosen because they had demonstrated their ability to learn. We could say, perhaps, that they were "straight-A" students. King Nebuchadnezzar wanted boys who could learn the language of his people and serve in his government, so his country would flourish. Thus, he selected the best and the brightest youth and taught them how to be successful in his land. They were taken against their will as spoils of war; but this was God's plan for them. With this special trial of being taken from home, they were also given a great opportunity to succeed in the world.

Today we have great opportunities for schooling. Access to education is, in North America, better than ever, with public schools, student loans, grants, Internet-based instruction, veteran's educational benefits, and more. Many believers have been able to take advantage of these opportunities, learning to be productive members of society. Believers graduate from vocational schools, universities, medical schools, law schools, and others. Many choose to use their gifts to serve fellow citizens as police, firefighters, and other public positions in government. Others work in the private sector. Like the boys in the Old Testament, we are given opportunities to use our gifts in our temporal endeavors, and it is clearly not wrong to do so. Indeed, it is good and proper to do so.

They Faced Challenges, Too

But the boys were confronted with challenges. The king prescribed a certain diet for them. He wanted them fed with the best food, the same food that he ate, with his wine and meat. The king thought this was best for the boys, and that it would support them in their studies and work. But the food and wine offered by the king upset Daniel's conscience. Old Testament dietary laws forbade many of the foods offered by the king, and Daniel did not want to drink the king's wine. He did not want to disobey God's Word, but he also did not want to disobey the king. Daniel explained the matter to his superior and confessed his faith openly, and worked to find an alternative that satisfied both the king and his conscience. The text continues:

"But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's meat, nor with the wine which he drank: therefore he requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself.

"Now God had brought Daniel into favour and tender love with the prince of the eunuchs. And the prince of the eunuchs said unto Daniel, I fear my lord the king, who hath appointed your meat and your drink: for why should he see your faces worse liking than the children which are of your sort? then shall ye make me endanger my head to the king.

"Then said Daniel to Melzar, whom the prince of the eunuchs had set over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, Prove thy servants, I beseech thee, ten days; and let them give us pulse to eat, and water to drink. Then let our countenances be looked upon before thee, and the countenance of the children that eat of the portion of the king's meat: and as thou seest, deal with thy servants.

"So he consented to them in this matter, and proved them ten days. And at the end of ten days their countenances appeared fairer and fatter in flesh than all the children which did eat the portion of the king's meat. Thus Melzar took away the portion of their meat, and the wine that they should drink; and gave them pulse. As for these four children, God gave them knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom" (Dan. 1:8-17).

Obedience and Blessing, Then and Now

Daniel's diet confounded his superiors. To them it made no sense. So it is for believers today. A believer's life choices often make no sense to the unbelieving world and to the rationale of man. The king's diet could be seen as the extra-curricular activities often associated with the educational and workplace environments: the sports teams, athletic games, dances, dinner parties, and other social activities the world deems as important as the classroom learning or job performance, but believers choose not to participate in.

In Daniel's time, as well as in today's sinful society, people often respect the decisions of a believer when faith is freely confessed. God blessed the believing boys. They were able to complete their studies. They prospered in their work for the king, and were so successful that the Bible relates, "in all matters of wisdom and understanding, that the king enquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers that were in all his realm" (Dan. 1:20).

Jesus prays for His own in this way, “I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil” (John 17:14). He does not ask God to remove them from the world. He does not pray that His own should be isolated from the greater society. Rather, He prays that God should keep His children from evil. We can freely participate in our earthly calling at school, at work, or in our hobbies. We can fully strive to do our best in all that we do. We can trust that God will still protect us from evil today. Daniel simply confessed his faith, and humbly desired to fulfill his duties. God provided Daniel a way to accomplish these things while maintaining faith and a good conscience. So we trust that God through His Word provides a way to actively participate in the world without accepting the ways of the world.

Dan Wuollet

Discussion questions:

- Apostle Paul offered consolation to the believers in 1 Corinthians 10:13. How would this knowledge benefit these boys in Babylon?
- How does the interaction between Jesus and the Pharisees recorded in Matthew 22:15–22 relate to “In the World, Not of the World?”
- It is worth noting that Daniel respectfully declined the king’s alcohol in favor of water. How does this example of Daniel relate to us today where so much of the social activity in this world revolves around alcohol?
- Consider song of Zion #541, “Now as the World Is Turbulent and Restless.” In what way does the message from this song relate to this writing of Daniel and other believers of old? How does the message relate to our lives today?

September 2012 *Voice of Zion*