

Diet programs in our country are a multi-billion dollar industry in spite of the fact that diet advice continually changes. When I was young, doctors routinely gave out amphetamines to help control appetite, and many people became addicted to them. No-meat diets have been popular, but recently paleo diets permit lots of meat, trying to mimic the diets of our ancestors! And various celebrities make lots of money by lending their names to a variety of dieting programs. Maybe you've tried some of them.

This morning's Bible story centers on a diet! The setting is important. Around 600 B.C., Israel, having flaunted God's commandments and the calls of the prophets, fell under Babylonian power. They never thought this would happen, because they believed they were protected by God himself! And yet it did happen. Daniel chapter 1 begins, *In the third year of the reign of King Jehoiakim of Judah, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. ²The Lord let King Jehoiakim of Judah fall into his power, as well as some of the vessels of the house of God. These he brought to the land of Shinar, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his gods. ³Then the king commanded his palace master Ashpenaz to bring some of the Israelites of the royal family and of the nobility, ⁴young men without physical defect and handsome, versed in every branch of wisdom, endowed with knowledge and insight, and competent to serve in the king's*

palace; they were to be taught the literature and language of the Chaldeans. ⁵The king assigned them a daily portion of the royal rations of food and wine. They were to be educated for three years, so that at the end of that time they could be stationed in the king's court. ⁶Among them were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, from the tribe of Judah. ⁷The palace master gave them other names: Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego. (Dan. 1:1-7)

The Babylonian empire was the most powerful empire on the planet, having just defeated the Egyptians! Then they took Jerusalem, looting the temple treasures. As was their custom, they also took some of the young Hebrew men to Babylon- the cream of the crop- so they could be trained for service to King Nebuchadnezzar. They were to be thoroughly inculcated in the ways of Babylon for three years so they could be useful. They were to learn a new language, new values, and a new culture- a culture which was thoroughly polytheistic. They were given new names, which suggested a new identity. While Daniel's Hebrew name contains the word "El," the Hebrew word for God, his new name, "Belteshazzar," contains a reference to the Babylonian god, "Bel." The stories of Daniel and his friends revolve around the tension of trying to remain faithful to God while living in a world

which is hostile to their faith and values- a world in which they have no power!

Listen to what happens next. ⁸*But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the royal rations of food and wine; so he asked the palace master to allow him not to defile himself.* ⁹*Now God allowed Daniel to receive favor and compassion from the palace master.* ¹⁰*The palace master said to Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king; he has appointed your food and your drink. If he should see you in poorer condition than the other young men of your own age, you would endanger my head with the king."* ¹¹*Then Daniel asked the guard whom the palace master had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah:* ¹²*"Please test your servants for ten days. Let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink.* ¹³*You can then compare our appearance with the appearance of the young men who eat the royal rations, and deal with your servants according to what you observe."* ¹⁴*So he agreed to this proposal and tested them for ten days. (Dan. 1:8-14)*

One of the challenges for anyone seeking to be faithful in a hostile culture is deciding where to draw the line. In this case, Daniel was willing to accept his new name, to serve a Gentile king and his empire, and to be educated in ways that were completely at odds with his Hebrew upbringing. But he drew the line at eating the fine meals provided by the king! Why?

We're not sure. It's certainly possible that the food would not have been Kosher, which would have been a reason to reject it, but why then reject the wine, which was perfectly acceptable? Perhaps, Daniel didn't want to be dependent on the king in a way that conveyed his ultimate allegiance to him; We're just not sure. But this is where he drew the line.

In their book, Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony, Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas argue that we are facing the same kind of challenges today as we seek to live faithfully in a culture and society which operates under very different values than those espoused by Jesus. For example, Materialism, the belief that an abundance of stuff is necessary to have a happy and fulfilling life, dominates our society. And it's very easy to get swept up into a way of life in which shopping and Amazon and the values of our stock portfolios dominate our imaginations and our lives. Jesus, on the other hand, says that real life is found in giving, not in having lots of stuff!

Or, how about the sexual norms of our culture, which seem to say that anything goes as long as everyone is willing. That's very different from the biblical norm which says that sexual relations were created for a marriage relationship. Or, what about the call of Jesus and the biblical writers to compassion? That seems to go out the window when it comes to having compassion for people of color who often have not gotten a fair

shake or immigrants seeking a better way of life. So, where can we compromise on social issues and personal issues, and where do we need to make a stand? That's the issue raised by this morning's story.

Daniel and his friends draw the line on eating the king's food. The palace master refuses their request to give them a different diet, fearing the consequences if the young men don't flourish. So, they approach a lower-level official, who agrees to give it a try. They are given only vegetables and water to eat for ten days. But where did their ration of food-fit-for-a-king go? Presumably, it was consumed by the lesser official and his family! Everyone wins! Daniel and his friends demonstrate a great deal of faith here. If the experiment fails, the king will likely be very angry that his hospitality has been refused. They are trusting God to come through for them as they seek to be faithful to God.

Here's how the story ends. ¹⁵*At the end of ten days it was observed that they appeared better and fatter than all the young men who had been eating the royal rations.* ¹⁶*So the guard continued to withdraw their royal rations and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables.*

¹⁷*To these four young men God gave knowledge and skill in every aspect of literature and wisdom; Daniel also had insight into all visions and dreams.* ¹⁸*At the end of the time that the king had set for them to be*

brought in, the palace master brought them into the presence of Nebuchadnezzar, ¹⁹and the king spoke with them. And among them all, no one was found to compare with Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah; therefore they were stationed in the king's court. ²⁰In every matter of wisdom and understanding concerning which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom. (Dan. 1:15-20)

God honors their faithfulness and they prosper! The king finds that they are “ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom!” And that sets up the other stories about Daniel and his friends, which we’ll look at in the coming weeks. But for this morning, let’s focus on this issue of remaining faithful in a spiritually hostile environment. This has always been an issue for God’s people. In New Testament times, Paul says, *“I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Rom. 12:1,2)*

“Do not be conformed to this world.” Sometimes that means saying “no” to certain things- materialism, hedonism, and callousness toward

others. But, as Paul reminds us, it also involves allowing God to renew our minds and our hearts. That happens as we hear and ponder God's Word, alone and in groups and even in sermons! That happens when we pray for those around us, and for our world. That happens as we serve those who are poor and in need. Through these spiritual disciplines, God begins to renew or change our hearts so that our values stop reflecting the values of our world and begin to reflect the values of God's kingdom. And, as we take courageous stands based on those values, we learn to trust that God has our back, as he did with Daniel and his friends. Can you trust God to take care of you when you do the right thing? I hope so!