

REMEMBER YOUR NAME

Maintaining Your Integrity & Identity

I

Family membership can mean an awful lot, can't it? The right name can be an automatic ticket to prominence or influence. The right name can also symbolize a whole raft of values and traditions to be carried on or lived up to. I think in that connection of the eight-year-old daughter of William Howard Taft III who once remarked with chest swelled out: "My great-grandfather was President of the United States, my grandfather was Senator of Ohio, my father is Ambassador to Ireland, and I am a Brownie." There can be great pride and power in a family name.

That's why I want to introduce you to one from your family this morning -- someone you can be proud to be related to. I'm going to reprise one of the first sermon series I have preached here and have you meet "Daniel." I don't mean the preacher, but rather the biblical character after whom the preacher was named -- a spiritual forebearer of each of us -- whose life has much to teach you and me about what it means to live with clarity and courage -- with a LIONHEART, as it were -- in an often wayward world.

How many of you have ever seen a sandcastle obliterated by an ocean wave? Well, in figurative terms, that's what you would have witnessed had you been in Israel in September of 605 B.C. It was then that the armies of Babylon swept southward through Syria, into Palestine, obliterating the Jewish nation, and adding the remnants to its collection of tributary states. The Bible puts the event in these terms: **"In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. The Lord DELIVERED Jehoiakim king of Judah into [Nebuchadnezzar's] hand.** Did you get that? The text says that God purposely "delivered" his chosen people into the hands of their enemies. Why?

To get at an answer, you've got to understand that for nearly 500 years, the chosen people had been the "dozin' people" in all the ways that really matter to God. While maintaining a superficial piety, they had violated God's law in just about every manner conceivable. They had ignored God's instructions about allowing the land to lie fallow every seventh year and, in their greed, had depleted the good earth God had given them. Environmental destruction displeases God. The LORD had also commanded that every 50 years a "jubilee" year was to be observed in which the debts of the poor were to be forgiven. God does not like inescapable debt and despair. But God's people had discarded the Jubilee tradition, and the result was now a gigantic gulf between the rich and the poor. God had commanded care for widows and orphans, but Israel had given little more than nominal attention to that. He'd said, don't have other gods or graven images, but Israel adopted other religious traditions and even the worship of idols.

For nearly 500 years, God was extraordinarily patient with Israel. After all, as the Apostle Paul reminds us, **Love is patient and kind (1 Cor 13:4)**. God sent prophets and minor calamities to his people in repeated attempts to call them back to integrity and identity with Him. But even God doesn't turn his cheek forever. For the northern kingdom of Israel, God's patience ran out in 722 B.C. He allowed Assyria to be the "rod of his judgment," utterly destroying Israel's capital, Samaria, and carrying its leading citizens into slavery. It was like that Amazon Prime show, *MAN IN THE HIGH CASTLE*, that imagines the Nazis getting the atom bomb first, destroying Washington with it, and enslaving America. Only this alternative history actually happened.

Now you'd think that would have woken up the folks down south, and for a moment it did. Urged on by the rediscovery of the Book of Deuteronomy, a king named Josiah launches a period of national reform and, for a season, things get better. When Josiah suddenly dies in battle, however, the nation drifts again. Prophets like Jeremiah warn that judgment is imminent unless repentance is immediate. But the majority of folks effectively say: *"Oh, God wouldn't let what happened over there to happen to us. We're his chosen peeps. We've got his holy temple. We're a city on a hill, a light to the nations. We put his name on our money. Nothing that awful can happen to us."*

But here's the first practical lesson I'd like to lift out of the Bible today: You can't disobey God without ultimately losing. The consequences may not come today. They may not be clearly visible on the horizon of tomorrow. We may even enjoy an illusory season of prosperity in worldly terms. But, eventually, those who disobey God -- whether an individual or a nation -- wind up as losers. It's a law of the Universe.

II

The just arm of that Law stretched out and exacted judgment on the southern kingdom beginning in 605 B.C. Over the next 20 years, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon systematically stripped Judah of its best resources. He took its wealth, its sacred worship vessels, and eventually (in 586) even the stones of Jerusalem's great temple. But worst of all, he stole Judah's heart and brain. In a succession of three deportations, Neb surgically removed their top talent and added it to his own administration.

Daniel chapter 1 tells us exactly how Nebuchadnezzar did it. He had his VP for Human Resources, a fellow named Ashpenaz, select the physically best and the intellectually brightest of Judah's young leadership and put them through a three-step recruitment program. *Step One* involved giving them a full scholarship to Chaldean University -- Babylon's top college. There, in that heady environment, they'd be steeped in the Babylonian language and literature. *Step Two* was to offer them a free meal ticket to the rich menu served at the King's table. Even back then Nebuchadnezzar knew that one of the best ways to a young person's heart is through their stomach. And *Step Three* was to give these young people new names.

For the vast majority of young Jews, the program was enormously effective. I mean just put yourself in the place of one of those deportees. You're thinking, "I'm going to spend the rest of my life pounding rocks into pebbles for the King's roadworks." Then someone comes to you as you're slaving over a hot sledgehammer and says: *"Whoa! You're too talented to be doing something like this. How'd you like to join our executive training program instead?"* Are you going to worry that much that this special "education" you're getting just might replace your biblical worldview?

If you'd been marched hundreds of miles in a slave train, like Daniel and his friends certainly were all the way from Jerusalem to Babylon, and someone pointed to you while you stood in the bread and water line and said: *"Hold on a minute here, that one belongs at the King's training table. That one should be on a diet of filet mignon and cabernet instead!"* Would you quibble that much just because the food had been offered first to some idols in a pagan worship rite?

And if you, like Daniel and the other guys, had been separated from your home and kinfolk, and brought to a land where you knew nary a soul; and then someone comes up, puts an arm around your shoulder and says: *"You know, we've been watching you and we really like your style. We'd like you to be part of our family. It's just that Jewish name of yours is awfully hard for us to pronounce. How about if we just give you a Babylonian nickname instead."* Well, if that's the price of belonging, are you really going to get all that worked up, just because your new name (which in Daniel's case was "Beltshazzar") means *"he whom the [pagan god] Bel favors"*? Probably not.

III

I know that because I know the story of Daniel. This time I don't mean the ancient Daniel; I mean ME. In ways that will become increasingly obvious in weeks ahead, I feel like I'm in Babylon today and I'm subtly adapting myself to the prevailing culture for the sake of the benefits I believe I'm getting. I tell myself I can maintain a strong biblical worldview, while spending all these hours reading literature that implies there are no moral absolutes and no problems that education or technology can't solve. I think I can remain spiritually healthy, while I munch daily on a media-provided diet of junkfood that has me unconsciously bowing to the idol of possessions, power, or fame. I tell myself and others that my identity is "Christian," while accepting with satisfaction names like "mega-church pastor" or "Ivy-Leaguer," as if every identity other than being a Jesus-Follower doesn't compete with the first. I make these little compromises, accept these big little lies -- and maybe you do too -- as if they had no cost.

But don't they? Before there was the game show JEOPARDY, Americans tuned in by the millions to a quiz show called TWENTY ONE, whose repeated winner (the Ken Jennings or James Holzhauer of his day) was a man named Charles Van Doren, Jr. In the Hollywood film that tells his story, we meet Van Doren as he discovers something crucial about the nature of integrity and identity. Charlie tries to explain to his dad how

he became a rich, national celebrity, and lined the pockets of the network and sponsors, by participating in an answer-rigging scheme. It began so innocently.

"They gave me the answers... well, no, no, at first they just asked me questions they knew that I already had the answers to... I still didn't want them to actually give me the answers, so I just had them give me the questions, and then I'd go look up the answers -- as if that were any different.... Well, we ran through those in a couple of weeks, and then I just didn't have the time, and finally it just seemed silly, so..."

Father: "They gave you all that money to answer questions they knew you knew, now that's inflation." **Son:** "You're not being very helpful." **Father:** "I'm sorry Charlie, I'm an old man, and this is all a little difficult for me to comprehend." **Son:** "It's just television dad, it's just television!" **Father:** "You make it sound like you didn't have a choice." **Son:** "What was I supposed to do -- disillusion the whole country?!" **Father:** "But you took the money?" **Son:** "Yes, I know, I took the money." **Father:** "Is that what this was about?" **Son:** "I don't know..." **Father:** "It was a quiz show, Charlie."

At that point, the son rolls his eyes in exasperation and raises his voice: "Look, dad, it was my own name at stake, O.K. -- my own name." With that the father gazes at him with a look of pained love and righteous anger, and says in tones that shake the empty lecture hall in which they're meeting: "What you seem to have forgotten, son, is that your name is my name!"

It's easy to forget it, isn't it? We can forget sometimes that *our* actions reflect on Someone larger than ourselves too -- that we are part of a family, connected to a Father, whose good name is affected by our behavior. But Daniel couldn't forget that. Even in the midst of Babylon, this teenager couldn't forget that he shared his Father's name. You see, Daniel *literally* did. The name "Daniel" contains the word "El" -- an abbreviated form of "Elohim" -- the name of God.

Because the word "el" is so small, I can understand why Daniel *might* have taken it a little less seriously. After all, it would have been such a small concession to eat food that had been offered to idols, just like it is really a very small aberration from truth to tell a little lie or fudge on our taxes. It's only a small variance from love to speak ill of a neighbor or look with lust upon another's spouse. It's only a tiny sidestep from grace to hold a grudge against an obnoxious individual; only a miniscule shift from integrity to live by the ethics of the marketplace instead of the kingdom; only a seemingly wee diversion to go from getting the *questions* ahead of time to getting the *answers*.

Like Charlie in the movie, we want to excuse these diversions. We want to say to God: "Look, Dad, it's not that big a deal. Can we not focus on all the things I've done right." But here's a second important principle from the life of Daniel. That Hebrew kid knew that all obedience and victory in the big tasks of life begins with total obedience in the small tasks. Partial obedience to a perfectly holy God is still disobedience. God asks for

total obedience, because even a slight variation from integrity, or loyalty, or kindness reflects not just upon you and me but upon our Father's name.

IV

That's why Daniel turned the surf and turf down. He did it knowing that such an act had to put his place at Babylon U., if not the place of his head upon his neck, in severe jeopardy. What gave him the courage to do that? I suspect that it was because Daniel knew that as powerful as Nebuchadnezzar was; and as prevalent as the values of Babylon were; and as persuasive as the Chaldean culture was; in the end there was and is only one true judge of the success and worth of a life – the heavenly Father. In fact Daniel's name was a reminder of that truth. Did you know that it literally means "God is my judge"? The Psalmist had put it this way: **"For not from the east, nor from the west, nor from the desert comes exaltation; but God is the Judge; he puts down one, and exalts another" (Psalm 75:6-7).**

That's a third principle from Daniel's life that it may be helpful to ponder. Just as there is no way to disobey God and not wind up a loser, there is no way that you can obey God and not, in the end, wind up a winner. Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying it will all be roses, no thorns. As we'll see as we follow Daniel's story in coming weeks, obeying God can lead you into some very tight and tough places. It was too for One who **"for the joy set before him endured the cross."** But let us remember that because of Christ's obedience, **"God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:9-11).** Let me say it again: There is no way to obey God and not, in the end, wind up a winner.

As we go this morning, let me ask you: Is there some area of your life where you need to hear, believe, and act on that promise? Maybe God is calling you to manage your time differently -- to set aside some Babylonian literature and immerse yourself a bit more fully in His Word? Perhaps God is commanding you to give your marriage a second chance, or to make one more heartfelt effort to try and patch up that broken relationship you have with a child, a parent, an estranged colleague or friend? Perhaps God is calling you to give more time to your family, or to clean up your business dealings, or to share your faith with someone near. I don't know.

What I do know is that no matter how risky obedience looks, no matter how big the sacrifice required to do what God is calling you to do, if you will REMEMBER YOUR NAME, if you will resolve to be totally obedient in even the little things, in the end, you will not lose.