

DANIEL

Daniel 6

There is no doubt that life was markedly different for those who were forcibly taken from Africa, made slaves, and brought across the seas to America than other immigrants. Many others crossed the sea to come to America, but they did so voluntarily and went to places where at least some of their culture existed in the new world. We think of immigrants, like many who began our Lutheran Church in America, who settled in places where fellow Lutherans from Germany and Scandinavia lived. But the African slaves were completely torn from their homeland and ancestors. They lost their identity as Africans.

That is sort of like the difference between the people of Israel who were first taken into captivity by the Assyrians versus the ones who were taken by the Babylonians. The former, like the African slaves, were taken to places in the Assyrian empire where they lost their identity as Israelites. The ones taken by the Babylonians, however, held to their past identity and became known as “Jews,” from the word “Judah,” which was the name of the southern kingdom conquered by Babylon. Among those people was Daniel.

Why did they hold on to their identity? A lot of that had to do with their kingdom being centered in Jerusalem. The other Israelites in the north had temples supposedly to God in Dan and Bethel, but they soon became sites of pagan worship. They lost so much of their identity as God’s people even before they were captive. But in the south, the connection to Jerusalem and the true temple helped link the people more to the true God. So the captivity was more a visible part of their history as it remained a reminder of what they had lost, what they longed to return to. To get an idea of what Captivity meant to the people of Judah, let us read responsively Psalm 137:

P: By the waters of Babylon,

C: there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion.

P: On the willows there

C: we hung up our lyres.

P: For there our captors

C: required of us songs,

P: and our tormentors, mirth, saying,

C: “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

P: How shall we sing the LORD's song

C: in a foreign land?

P: If I forget you, O Jerusalem,

C: let my right hand forget its skill!

P: Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth,

C: if I do not remember you,

P: if I do not set Jerusalem

C: above my highest joy!

P: Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites

C: the day of Jerusalem,

P: how they said, “Lay it bare, lay it bare,

C: down to its foundations!”

P: O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed,

C: blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us!

P: Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones

C: and dashes them against the rock!

“Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!” Did I trick you into saying that? How could such evil be found in Scriptures? The Psalm is not trying to justify the killing of babies, like what was seen last October in Israel. It shows how the people of Judah felt. The captivity was a real shock to them. The problem was not just that their nation had been overrun by the Babylonians and they were taken into captivity. It was that the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed and they were taken away from the land promised to their father Abraham. To them that meant they were cut off from God. The temple contained the Ark of the Covenant, the real presence of God here on earth. In Judah they were taught that there was only one place for God’s temple and to offer sacrifices to Him—in Jerusalem! Now all that is gone.

That is where Daniel found himself. Yet, what do we see happening to Daniel? He never returned back to his homeland. He never saw the temple in Jerusalem rebuilt. But he learned to serve God in Babylon, far away from home.

First Daniel became a Babylonian official. Then when the Persians took over, he became an official for them. He did that, not by abandoning his relationship with God and “fitting in” with the pagans; but he did it by being good at what he did despite being persecuted for his faith in God.

We, too, are in captivity. We have been taken from our homeland by sin, cut off from the Garden of Eden by the angel with the flaming sword. We have been cut off from God, taken away from both our Creator and the one who loves us most. But until we fully return to Him on that last day He is with us to help us grow where we are planted.

Advice is often given to young people to “follow their dream.” We hear of famous athletes or actors or entrepreneurs who did that and became famous. But for everyone who seems to do that, the vast majority do not reach those dreams. Much better advice to those young people would be to follow where your gifts and talents are, to use what you have, not what you dream about.

Daniel found that out as he worked where he was in Babylon. As he and other young Jewish men were weaned by the Babylonians to become leaders in their government, they were encouraged to eat the rich foods given to those chosen young men. But the food was not kosher. Daniel asked that they be allowed to eat food that followed the Old Testament dietary

laws. The result is that those Jewish men were healthier. They became respected leaders in Babylon. Last week we heard about the three young Jewish men who refused to worship the idol. When God rescued them, they became even more respected. Daniel's faithfulness to God resulted in him being thrown into that lion's den. But when he survived, the Persian Emperor spoke the words we used in our opening responses:

P: Fear before the God of Israel,

C: For He is God almighty.

P: For He is the living God,

C: enduring forever;

P: His kingdom shall never be destroyed,

C: and His dominion shall be to the end.

P: He delivers and rescues;

C: He works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth,

P: He who has saved Daniel

C: from the power of the lions.

Daniel and other Jewish men became effective leaders in their society in Babylon. This also became true in other areas around the Middle East and spread so that historians estimate that by the time of Jesus 1/10 of the population of the Roman Empire was Jewish. And where the Jews were, there were the synagogues where they studied God's Word in the Old Testament. Where they were, far away from the temple and Jerusalem; Daniel and others served to advance the knowledge of God and His love throughout the world and paved the way for the message of Jesus.

It has been said, "Grow where you are planted." That is what we can do even though we live in a world held captive to sin. St. Paul wrote:

If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.

We are like Daniel in exile, away from our home with God. But God keeps us here to share His love with others, just as He did with Daniel. Daniel had no idea how he would be a blessing to others in the future, but we can see he was. We do not know how God can work through any of us as we use what God has given us right now and right here.