

THE STORY - Unit 5 - Chapter 18 - Out Of The Ashes

Daniel In Exile

February 1, 2015

(Loud Emergency Warning Message)

Isn't that scary? I remember watching my cartoons as a little kid and would hear that sound: "AAaaaaaaa!! AAAAAAAAAaaa!" And I'd get both freaked out and mad at the same time. Freaked, because I loved the movie Red Dawn and was convinced that Russians were trying to invade at that moment. Mad, because the more likely scenario is that the Emergency Broadcast System decided that 10:21 AM during a particularly riveting episode of Scooby-Doo, they would issue a test, causing me to miss the big reveal of who the bad guy was, thereby upsetting my whole day.

A lot of people get freaked about what the end of the world will look like. I was around for Y2K and the idiocy that surrounded that. Mayan calendar issues were upsetting folks at the end of 2012. There's a lot of conjecture over how it will all go down. There are concerns about a nuclear war started by Korea or an outbreak of the Ebola virus. If I were to guess, it would probably be zombies that wipe us all out. I watch the Walking Dead like it's a CNN report. I'm glued to the TV I want to know who, what, where, when and why. Then I watch the discussion show right afterward to see what other people say about it. I have long discussions about who I would want on my "apocalypse" team. My officemate, Tater, has begun working on his emergency "bug out bag." My kids do regular drills when leaving the van to see how quickly they can get into the house. Last one in gets eaten by zombies. There are "reality" shows like Doomsday Preppers where individuals and families are featured who are getting ready for their version of the coming apocalypse.

So much of what we dwell on focuses on what WE'D do if and when the trouble starts. Will we be prepared? What will we do? Where will we go? We just completed a series last week called "When Life Falls Apart." I'd venture to say every person in here has felt that way at some point or another: Maybe even right now. In your mind, you are saying, "My life is in shambles. What am I going to do?" And if you haven't... oh boy, you better get ready. And with that in mind, what will you do to prepare for tragedy in your life?

If you've been following along with us in the Story, you probably read chapter 18, entitled "Daniel in Exile." If you missed that, we played a video earlier to give you a quick synopsis. Now if you missed the video, you really need to focus a little better.

The book of Daniel is chock full of entertaining stories. You have 90 foot statues, a vegan diet outline, lions, dudes thrown in a fire, angels battling. An emperor who acted like a cow. Lots of fun. But in the middle of it all was a man that we need to imitate. He was the ultimate "Doomsday Prepper." When calamity hit him, it didn't seem to faze him in the least. Today, I want to explore the way Daniel prepared himself for devastating circumstances.

If you brought your Bibles, go ahead and open up to the book of Daniel in the Old Testament, chapter one. It's important to get a sense of when these people lived, especially as we move chronologically through the Bible. Last week we learned how the divided kingdom of Israel and Judah came to an end. They went into exile. We also learned of prophets who spoke on God's behalf. Daniel was one of these men, but most of his life was spent among people that were not his own.

The great king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, raided Jerusalem, the capital of Judah in 605 BC. So, Daniel's time that we read about in this book went from 605 BC to about 537 BC. Daniel 10 tells us he was prophesying three years into the reign of Cyrus, the Persian king who had succeeded in conquering the Babylonian empire. So let's put that into perspective: King David was about 1000 BC. And the birth of Jesus was somewhere between 7-4 BC. This is the time that Daniel lived.

If you would, start with me in the first verse. "In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem and besieged it." Again, that's 605 BC. "And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia and put in the treasure house of his god. Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king's service some of the Israelites from the royal families and the nobility-young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well-informed, quick to understand and qualified to serve in the king's palace."

There's a diabolical plan in place here. You may not see it, yet, but it is here. These were the folks that the Babylonians wanted to change. They were leaders, sons of leaders. The ones everyone looked up to. If you can change them, then you're going to influence the rest of the tribes of the people of God. Think about that. If you can cut off the head, you kill the body. That is the strategy.

"He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians. The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years and after that they were to enter the king's service." So the plan was to take these incoming freshmen, and train them for three years to convert them from the values of the Hebrew culture, the Hebrew God, to the values of the Babylonians and Babylonian gods.

"Among those who were chosen were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Beltshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego."

Culture has an incredible power to shape our character. If we are unprepared, it will change us from who we need to be. We get to see in Daniel an amazing attribute. He was prepared for the inevitable trials in his life because he was willing to fight cultural conformity. The entire goal of the Babylonian captivity was to redefine the Hebrews' identity and reshape their character by making Babylonian culture their new norm. They were to adopt Babylonian way of thinking, Babylonian way of acting, Babylonian way of speaking, Babylonian nationalistic pride and worship Babylonian gods. So the goal of culture (conformity) is to get you to forget who you are, where you come from and the allegiance to your god. This pull of culture is extremely strong.

A few years ago a psychologist named Ruth W. Berenda and her associates carried out an interesting experiment with teenagers designed to show how a person handled group pressure. The plan was simple. They brought groups of ten adolescents into a room for a test. Subsequently, each group of ten was instructed to raise their hands when the teacher pointed to the longest line on three separate charts. What one person in the group did not know was that nine of the others in the room had been instructed ahead of time to vote for the second-longest line.

Regardless of the instructions they heard, once they were all together in the group, the nine were not to vote for the longest line, but rather vote for the next to the longest line. The experiment began with nine teenagers voting for the wrong line. The unsuspecting kid would typically glance around, frown in confusion, and slip his hand up with the group. The instructions were repeated and the next card was raised. Time after time, the self-conscious stooge would sit there saying a short line is longer than a long line, simply because he lacked the courage to challenge the group. This remarkable conformity occurred in about 75% of the cases, and was true of small children and high-school students

as well. The conclusion we can draw is simple: some folks would rather go along with the crowd than be right.

Culture will seek to compromise our promises we made to God. Promises to ourselves. Now what we see here, the question we need to ask as we look at Daniel is: Which king are you serving? Which king are you serving? Your answer here is important, because it will change how you plan. How you prepare for life, and how you will prepare for devastation in your life. You see, the king of Babylon ordered that these young men enter into a three year period of preparation so that they can serve him. This strategy had proven to work time and time again with other young men that were brought into captivity. They were assimilated and changed for the king's benefit. But why would it be different for these men? Daniel and his friends were prepared for what happened because they were willing to fight against cultural conformity. It's what we need to learn in order to survive when tragedy strikes us, as well.

What does Jesus remind us? Matthew 6:24 tells us, "No one can serve two masters." It is not possible to serve God and a Babylonian king. It is not possible to serve God or an American king. Jesus said, "Either you will hate the one and love the other or you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money." You will either spend time and energy preparing to serve and act for God or for something else.

So, ask yourself the question: what king are you willing to bet your soul on? What King will you bet your eternity on?

The process of cultural conformity is very subtle. The text lays out the three step plan. The first thing that they were to do is to learn a new language. They were to learn the language of the Babylonians. This makes sense to me, that if you live in Babylon you need to speak the language of Babylon. If I'm going to live learn long term in a place like Sudan, I better learn Arabic. Admittedly, it is important to engage the culture, but not conform to it.

As Christians we must engage our culture. We want to do that for Jesus Christ, to reach those who do not know him. I admit that I'm a student of culture. We want to engage the culture without being con-formed to the culture. I grew up in a culture where Michael Jackson was the king of pop. Nowadays, I find it odd that people actually spend hard earned money on One Direction music. But I have to understand that music shifts. It's not about what I like all the time. As I try to engage with the culture for my job and so that I can talk music with my teenage daughters, I realize I have to make a bit of a shift. I'm sad to find myself watching or listening to something my kids enjoy, shake my head and say, "Kids today." I am close to calling them whippersnappers. It just feels right. But we

have to engage the culture. We want to reach the one who is not yet here. Jesus talks about leaving the 99 in the house to reach the one outside. As we seek to imitate Christ, we need to pursue that one. It's not about us. So I want to be able to engage the culture without being conformed to the culture.

Here's the second thing, the one that seems innocent enough. First in the process of cultural conformity was to learn the new language. Next these young men are given the king's menu. They were to eat food and wine from the king's table. What does that mean? The Bible talks about food offered to idols. What do we do as Christians before we eat? We bless the food. We dedicate the food. "Lord bless this to the nourishment of our body. For service to you." The food is blessed to nourish us to give us energy and fuel to serve God. Well, it's the same as what happens in the Babylonian culture. The food is blessed for the purpose of giving honor to the pagan deities. What you ingest you become. What you ingest in your body, what you ingest into your mind, you become.

But there's even something more than this. When you're talking about food from the king's table, you're talking about a materialistic culture given to indulgence and opulence. We contrast this with the simplicity and disciplined living of the Hebrew culture. I won't go into it because of time, but Daniel presented a plan to shove the king a better way to live through eating and drinking within this chapter that flew in the face of that indulgence.

This Babylonian influence can represent materialism in our own lives. Did you know that Jesus was tempted by Satan himself? The Holy Spirit led Jesus out into the wilderness to be tempted. Satan takes Jesus to a high mountain. He showed him all the kingdoms of the world. He said, "All these are mine." This is true. Whether it is a Babylonian kingdom, or a Roman kingdom or an American kingdom. Don't care who you vote for president. They will not bring in the kingdom of God. I will never advocate any politician because of this. I will only advocate God to you. Would that we would learn this and not become so obsessed with politics. We are confusing the king of the Babylonian culture with the king of the kingdom of God.

He said, "All these are mine. All these kingdoms are mine. And I'll give them to you." That's influence. Health and wealth. You will get it all. All you have to do is fall down and worship me. Serve my kingdom. Serve my purpose. What did Jesus say, what was his response? The Word says we are to worship the Lord our God and serve Him only. You cannot serve two masters.

Notice the third step in the process. First they had to learn a new language. Then they were given the king's food. Now they are given new names. Did you

notice that? They were given new names. Names have meaning. Last week we talked about Jacob's new name (Israel) when his life was changed. If I can get you to forget your name, who you are, where you come from, whose you are, I can get you to forget your identity. If I call you a loser, or lazy, or worthless often enough, you will begin to feel that there may be truth to it, especially if I can get everyone else in your life to say the same.

Daniel, the Hebrew name, however, means "God alone is judge." Solid Hebrew name right there. When I die, I'm not standing before our senior minister for final judgment. I won't stand before our elders. I won't be standing before any of you. I will stand before God alone. This is why I will always convey truth up here, whether you or I like it or not. The new name the Babylonians wanted to give Daniel, Belteshazaar, means "Bel's prince." Bel was one of the primary deities of the Babylonian culture. So if we can get Daniel to believe he's Bel's prince, the favorite of Bel, rather than "God alone is judge," then we can make Daniel forget who he is and whose he is. But Daniel would not conform.

Daniel fought against this cultural conformity. He was prepared well before he went into exile. Throughout his time in Babylon he made it clear that he would not equivocate. He would not back down. This fight was possible because of a secret weapon. Daniel had a courageous character.

In verse B it says, "But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine of the king." Love that word: Resolve. Means to take a stand. It means to stand up. With heart abandoned. To make a commitment. There is no quit (even in the midst of calamity, trouble or devastation). There's no going back. There are no do avers. Daniel's resolve. He refused to let the culture define his character. His resolution was a tactical declaration that the young Hebrew men would retain spiritual and moral independence from the elements of Babylonian culture that would defile them.

This resolve is a commitment that we make when we stand up and say that Jesus Christ is our savior and Lord. We commit all of our life to him. It is a resolve. The Apostle Paul put it this way (Galatians 2:20): "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live but Christ lives in me." That means I am no longer given to my own thinking. I submit to the mind of Christ. I don't act on my own appetites or passions. I act based on every word that comes from the mouth of God. Paul goes on to say, "the life I now live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me."

So Daniel is saying: You can change my name, but not my identity. And he lets this be known to his superiors. He speaks it out loud as well as to his

companions. It's important everywhere we go that we let people know who owns us. Who we belong to.

Daniel's resolve was so strong. His integrity was so heroic that even the Babylonians slipped several times and actually called him by his Hebrew name! What a testimony. They would slip and call him by the name "God alone is judge."

Courageous character is always forged inside the will of God. His will doesn't include our own agenda. It often doesn't include our agenda. This Story we read about it not our story. It is HIS Story. When we try to make it about us, we make a mess. We fall apart. But His will is what we should be pursuing.

Jesus prayed the night before his death. Do you know what he prayed? (Luke 22:42) "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." He was in a garden, knew all about what was going to happen. About to be arrested, tried, betrayed by one of his own disciples, Judas. He was held overnight in the jail below on a Thursday. If there's any other way, help me out of this mess. But I will follow your will. Daniel's buddies, when defying the king's command later in Daniel and were about to be thrown into a furnace, said something similar. Character is formed inside the will of God. Winning the battle of integrity and faithfulness means commitment to zero compromise.

And you don't need to compromise to get ahead. You don't need to compromise to get a promotion. I've been on a stage for a number of years. I could have a lot more friends and supporters if I would just do what everyone told me to do. Now that is difficult. I would have to have around 22 consecutive services every Sunday to accommodate all the requests! My commitment to God means listening to what He says, diligently seeking out his will each and every week.

When we maintain integrity in the little things, God will entrust us with great responsibility. I have a warning, though. Character will be tested. Repeatedly. Let's go over to the sixth chapter of Daniel. I want you to see what happened when Daniel's character was tested.

Here comes Daniel. He's been promoted multiple times while in captivity. All while fighting cultural conformity. He's a Hebrew. In a pagan land, God has shown him favor and he's succeeded. Just like Joseph, he's ascended to an unprecedented position as a foreigner.

All the other Babylonian politicians are a little ticked off about that. How does this Hebrew come in here and get ahead of all of us? He doesn't even worship

our gods! So they tried to find that chink in his armor. They couldn't find one thing that he was doing that was illegal. They couldn't find one wrinkle in his integrity. So they had to manufacture a plan. Hit him square in his faith. Here's a great idea we have. We will go to the king and say, "May King Darius live forever! The royal administrators, prefects, satraps, advisers and governors have all agreed that the king should issue an edict and enforce the decree that anyone who prays to any god or human being during the next thirty days, except to you, Your Majesty, shall be thrown into the lions' den." Let's go to verse 10. "flow when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem." I might have closed a window. But Daniel wasn't hiding anything. "Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before." The Hebrew says, literally, just as it was his habit. So what happened to Daniel? They ran to the king, "We caught Daniel breaking the law!" They threw him in the lion's den. He knew he could die, but God shut the mouths of the lions. Testing builds character.

Think about your situation. You are not unique, I promise you. Your situation is not a hindrance for success. Say it. Now say it again. It is not an excuse for failure. With God ALL things are possible. Do you feel like your life has fallen apart?

How many of you are old enough to remember David Brinkley? How many of you are young enough that you immediately heard me say that and said, "Boy, that dude is old!" Great quote. I love really great quotes as reminders. I especially like putting them up to pictures of kittens and such. This is what he said "The successful person is one who can lay a firm foundation with the bricks others have thrown at them." Isn't that great?

Let's go back to that first chapter of Daniel. I love this picture of a man. I pray, Lord give me a courageous character like him. Give me an uncompromising integrity. Uncompromising character. What is the key to courageous character? The twentieth verse shows us what I'm calling the 10X factor. What is that? "In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them he found (these four Hebrew young men) 10X better than all the magicians and enchanters in the whole kingdom."

Few people want to do the work to be 10X better. Character cannot be separated from personal discipline. It is the key to preparation. I hear people, hear it in the church, as a pastor and as a music teacher: I just don't have the discipline to do that. Discipline in diet. In physical activity. Notice Daniel had discipline in everything. In diet. Discipline in study habits. Discipline at his work.

All of his spiritual disciplines. He sounds like somebody I wouldn't want to work with. Make me look bad. He prayed three times a day. Bible says it was a habit.

If you are struggling with discipline, know this. Discipline is a character issue. We need to understand that in any area of our lives, especially spiritual disciplines.

Rick Warren, pastor of a huge church in California had a son who struggled all his life with major depression. His son was a Christian. At 27 years old, Rick Warren's son committed suicide. It obviously shocked Rick to his core. His child was dead. His life was falling apart. In the midst of his mourning, he made a point to tell his congregation and other folks in his life: "Don't wait until you're in a tough situation to learn the discipline of prayer." I'm begging you: become a person of prayer. Prepare yourself for devastating circumstances. Be a person who is willing to meditate on God's word on a daily basis. Form character and integrity today. This cannot wait.

There's one other discipline I see here: Daniel was committed to hanging out with those who were sold out. We've talked about them much today. The four friends maintained integrity because they were connected to each other. You need a Shadrach, Meshach and an Abednego in your life. You can't do faith as a solitary Christian. You may think you can. And I've heard many who legitimately claim that's what they prefer. But it is imperative that you commit to a serious connection to those people who are inspiring you forward in your faith. Pushing you to discover God's greater purpose in your life. I encourage you to prepare for that now. Don't say, "I'll do it later." Today is the day of salvation. Your doomsday prepping begins now. To do anything less is disobedience. Fight against the culture. Don't be like everyone else. Develop a courageous character today. Start here and now. Let's do this together.