

*The Blessings Which Come of Faithfulness*

Daniel 1:1–21

Dear Redeemed of the Lord,

Our Lord Jesus has not promised us that the Christian will have a prosperous life by the standards of men. Christians are made of all sorts of men, from the poorest of the poor, to the rich. Becoming a citizen of heaven does not change our lot in this world. The poor usually remain poor in the physical blessings. The crippled, the blind, men with every sort of disease or ailment, do not miraculously get better upon becoming Christians. There are exceptions, of course, for life is surely very different after the preaching of the Cross has converted a man. Some few who are sick do recover, but some who are healthy may thereafter get sick. Those who live at peace with men may find, upon conversion, that their friends are now their enemies. In this world, believing the Gospel could well mean the censure of the government, persecution, torture, or death. In faith, some are lifted up. In faith some are persecuted. In faith, some live much as they did before, only now they live out of love for Christ, who has redeemed them from their sins.

What then is the difference between the children of God who hear His Words and keep them, and the children of men who pay it no heed, who turn aside God's gracious invitation of life and salvation? Though there are "before and after" differences, they are nothing any man can predict, for the truth is that God Himself, and not men, will decide what is best for those who believe on His name. He may bless their lives with success or failure, acclaim or persecution, but in either case they are still His blessings.

One could well consider that the four Israelite children, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, were miserably oppressed. In the land of Babylon, they were taken from their parents, and forced to live in the king's household. He took over their education, and governed how they would eat. Their own wishes and desires were made subject to the wit and whim of mighty king Nebuchadnezzar. They were separated, first from their land, and then from their family. Would they now be separated from God? So it seemed.

God had given Israel special laws and signs to set them apart from the nations, things that identified them as a people of the Lord, sanctified to bring in the Lord's Christ and his Righteousness. Now the boys were on the verge of losing these things which distinguished them from the heathen. In Babylon, the Jews could not offer the temple sacrifices, but almost everything else they could retain. They could circumcise their eight day old children. They could keep the Passover. They could eat the clean meats and refuse the unclean. Not so for these boys. They were commanded to eat the food from King Nebuchadnezzar's table. They were ordered to disobey their Lord. If they chose instead to disobey the king, they could face death, for we know that King Nebuchadnezzar thought nothing of throwing men into fiery furnaces, as three of these four boys would discover later in life.

The boys were faced with a choice, the same choice, ultimately, which we all face. Should they follow the Word of the Lord and believe His promise, or should they compromise, and doubt that the Lord can sustain those who trust in Him. Without doubt, this is the choice that we all face. Do all things indeed work together for good to them that love God, or is this promise false, and we must always doubt whether it is for the good that we heed the Word of the Lord?

To us it may seem a trifling thing, this matter of what meats are eaten, but that is only because the Lord no longer requires that we separate ourselves from the world by such laws. Christ Jesus has now fulfilled them, and the old Law has passed away, but for the four children these laws were very real, and they were bound, as children of Israel, to obey them. Since Babylon was not governed by the laws of Israel, particularly the purity laws which governed clean and unclean meats, it was an absolute certainty that if they ate the food of the king, they would be breaking the word of the Lord. Daniel did not wish himself nor his three friends, to be defiled by eating what the Lord had forbidden. Compromise would be so easy. They even had a good excuse. Common sense, especially in those days, dictated that the children would become weak if they ate nothing but vegetables and water. Surely the Lord would not wish them to grow weak, but the only alternative was to eat what God had forbidden.

For Daniel, even as a child, there was no option at all. He would follow the Word of the Lord. Perhaps he would be slain. Perhaps not. Many who have refused to follow men rather than God have met the point of the sword. God has *not* delivered them all from death. Daniel and the other boys had *no* assurance that God would deliver them now. He asked, of faith, and lay himself at the mercy of God and the King.

Let no one trivialize the petition of Daniel. The moral of this story is most decidedly *not* that vegetables are healthier than meat. The healthy diet that God had prescribed for His people Israel always included meat as a matter of course. It was his regard for the Lord that moved Daniel, for this matter of unclean meats was no trifling matter. He did not want to be defiled by the unclean foods, and so both break God's Word, and chip away at what kept them apart from the pagan nations. God wanted Israel to be separate that they might be a blessing to the whole earth through the Lord's Christ. This was even more important when they were in a foreign land, surrounded by strange and pagan customs. More than ever they needed that constant reminder that they are not of this people, and could not in any way partake in their idolatry and other sins.

But what could they do? To refuse the food of the king could easily get these boys killed. Surely no one would fault them, especially such young boys, for giving up just this small part of the Lord's Word, and eating what He had forbidden. After all, it was all for the good purpose of preserving their lives. Today we might say the same thing regarding the constant pressure which is put upon Christians to conform to the norms of this world, their clothing, their music, their literature. Sadly many have given up that which marked them as separate from the world, and adopted new signs, music, and practices which are more comfortable for

the unbeliever. This, they think, is the way to blessing. And why not? Since we are no longer commanded by God to eat a certain way or worship with a certain liturgy or form, the temptation is greater still, to make ourselves more compatible with the world, to yield this or that “small” thing, give up the liturgy, or the hymns, the altar, the vestments, or at least change them to be more acceptable by modern standards. But as it is with the ordinances of God, so it is with our worship of Him. Though our specific forms of worship are not ordained by God, what we do through those forms *is* ordained by Him. We are still pilgrims and strangers in a foreign land, and we cling to the things which identify us as citizens of heaven. Therefore we preach the Gospel and administer the Sacraments by which we are converted and forgiven. By this we join with the Saints of every age in receiving the wondrous good things of forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation, which God freely gives us in His Son, Jesus Christ. Yield them so that the world can join the Church more comfortably, and you will soon find that you have neither the Church, nor Christ, but the world. It is not by conforming to this world that we win men to Christ, but by being transformed through the Holy Spirit, with renewed minds filled with His Word, a Word that is taught in those familiar hymns, the liturgy, the music, and all the various forms that identify us as a Christian Church. We will not abandon them, for by them God has done great things in His Church. We *know* that men have been blessed by such faithfulness, not to mere forms of men, but to the substance of Christ which they proclaim.

The blessings which come from faithfulness to God’s Word are not only for ourselves, but for others. So it was with Israel. God promised Abraham, “In thee and in thy Seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.” So it is that our faithfulness may give no immediate benefit at all, and yet still be used by God to feed and strengthen the faith of others. So it was for these four children. God had caused the chief of the eunuchs to love Daniel dearly. Therefore Daniel met with success when he made his request. Test them. Feed them only pulse, that is, vegetables for ten days, and then see whether they truly became impoverished, or whether in fact they did well.

The Babylonians were not ignorant barbarians. They had a highly advanced culture and science for their day. Melzar, the eunuch who had direct charge over the boys, had a legitimate concern, likely born of experience. He knew that if the boys ate only vegetables, they would be skinny. Their cheeks would not be fleshed out like the others children who ate meat. The king would take this as a sign that they were unhealthy and unfit to be his advisers. Melzar or his master would no doubt be punished. Nevertheless, he consented, and tested them for ten days. To his astonishment, the boys were far healthier, their faces more fleshed out, than all the others who ate from the king’s table. The Lord had blessed the boys for their faithfulness, not only with good health, but with wisdom and knowledge which excelled the other advisers of the king tenfold. Through their wise advice, their faithfulness came to be a blessing to the whole kingdom of Babylon.

Some would perhaps like to take this story and conclude that

the Lord will grant similar success to all who are faithful to His Word. There is no such promise here. Yet, the Lord does indeed promise to bless all those who believe on Him and to make them a blessing for the whole earth. So we are urged, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven. Thus we see that Daniel became a man through whom God revealed His power to this great and mighty nation of Babylon, and later of Persia. The other three, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, whom the Babylonians named Shadrach, Meeshak, and Abednego, God would showed His glory when He preserved them in a fiery furnace and demonstrated to even the pagan King Nebuchadnezzar that the Lord was a God who saves men through His Son. Through their faithfulness, God blessed these boys, and He blessed Babylon, the people of Judaea that they held captive, and generations yet unborn who would learn of Christ through the witness of these four. To this day, the blessings of God continue to come upon us through the witness of the prophet Daniel. To this day, many Jews are converted when they read in Daniel that God had so ordained that His Son, the Messiah, would not merely come and be King, but He would be cut off, and die, not for His own sins, but the sins of the world, that He might bring in everlasting righteousness for all (Dan. 3; 9:24f.).

What blessings can we now expect if we are faithful to the Word of God? That which the Lord has promised, that when we believe on His Son, Jesus Christ, we shall be saved. That we shall be glorified in heaven and see our God face to face. That until heaven and earth pass away, a feast of heavenly blessings will be freely given to us in the Word and Sacraments of Christ. These blessings are before the eyes of the whole world, and seem plain and trivial. Look at the parable of the Great Supper. What blessing did the many prominent men who were invited, finally have? The men who lived a good life, with property, cattle, a prosperous family, they did not heed the invitation to come to the Lord’s feast. Their success brought them failure. When all was said and done, the door would be shut to them. Who heard and came? The poor and the maimed, the halt and the blind. The ones who were despised, unproductive by human standards, burdens on society for their frailty and poverty. They are invited purely out of grace, and in grace the Lord receives them when they come and fill his house. Their failure brought them success. Even so, our true blessedness never comes in bodily success, even though God may grant it for a time as he did to the four children. Our blessings are more often in frailty. It was by the greatest lowliness and weakness that our Lord Jesus brought eternal blessings upon the whole world. Therefore, whether rich or poor, strong or weak, we all enter the kingdom of God in weakness and lowliness, for no one enters therein except by grace. May God therefore grant that whether we live or die, whether we prosper or suffer, that we may be faithful to His Word, be a blessing to others, and be blessed ourselves in heaven. Amen.