

Third Rock From The Sun

1. Warm-up: One of the main points in Sunday's sermon was that our core identity should be grounded in the fact that we are children of God and followers of Jesus. Beyond that, though, there are many other aspects of our identity. Besides being a child of God, what's something else that's important to your sense of identity?
2. About 600 years before the time of Christ, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon invaded the southern half of Israel (called Judah), stormed the capital city Jerusalem, and turned Judah into a vassal state. In an attempt to pacify Judah, Nebuchadnezzar deported many Israelites of the ruling class 900 miles to Babylon and inducted a number of their sons into a reeducation program to prepare them to serve in the Babylonian government. Daniel and three of his close friends were inducted into the program. All of this was aimed at successfully assimilating the Jews and minimizing the risk of revolt. Read Daniel 1:1-21, as printed on p. 3.
 - a. Daniel found himself a stranger in a strange land immersed in a totally foreign culture, yet also simultaneously offered the opportunity to become a prosperous courtier in the government of King Nebuchadnezzar. If he cooperated, it would go well for him. If you were Daniel, what would you be thinking and feeling?
 - b. Most of us, at one time or another, have been thrust into an unfamiliar culture, perhaps when traveling, moving, changing jobs, marrying into a family, etc. Tell us about one of those times. How did you feel, and how did it go?
3. Although the Babylonians were determined to make Daniel one of them, Daniel had a strong sense of who he was – a child of Abraham, a follower of Yahweh, the God of Israel. No matter what happened in Babylon, he was determined to be true to his core identity. As children of God and followers of Jesus, we too are called to see ourselves as being on a journey similar to Daniel's.
 - a. When testifying before Pilate, Jesus said, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over. . . . But as it is, my kingdom is not from here. . . ." John 19:36. When praying for us, Jesus said, "Father, I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world." Elsewhere the Bible refers to us as strangers, exiles, and aliens here on planet earth. What does it mean to say that we "do not belong to the world?" Does that way of seeing things resonate with you? Why or why not?
 - b. Daniel embraced certain aspects of Babylonian culture, but rejected others. We face the same challenge. Clearly there are many wonderful things in this world and our American culture. But there are also many terrible things. What are some of the good things about modern American culture? What are some of the bad things? How are we supposed to discern what to embrace and what to reject?

4. Daniel and his friends were chosen for their special assignment in Babylon because “[they] were endowed with knowledge and insight, and competent to serve in the king’s palace.” Daniel 1:4. In other words, they had gifts to share that were very much needed in Babylon, and God could use them as positive change agents there. It’s the same with us. Jeff said, “Like Daniel, we too have gifts to share. We’re not here on earth as tourists on vacation; we’re not here to be entertained. Each one of us is here on special assignment, sent here to be positive change agents.”
 - a. At the funeral of Tyré Nichols, his mother said, “The only thing that keeps me going is the belief that my son was here on an assignment. And I guess his assignment was completed and he was called home.” What do you think of her perspective? Do you buy it? Why or why not?
 - b. Life is full of unexpected twists and turns, but as best you can understand at present, how would you describe the assignment God has given you here on earth? What’s your assigned mission?
5. Nebuchadnezzar attempted to rename Daniel. Instead of Daniel (which refers to a Hebrew name for God, “El”), he called him Belteshazzar (which refers to the Babylonian god “Bel”). Nebuchadnezzar also “assigned them a daily portion of rations of food and wine” from the king’s table. The food was not kosher and also was routinely ritually dedicated to the Babylonian gods before being consumed. Daniel faced a critical choice: Do I let my culture change me or do I change my culture? As followers of Jesus, and citizens of heaven, we face similar choices.
 - a. Romans 12:2 says, “Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” What do you think that means?
 - b. How does our culture teach us to deal with our enemies/opponents? How does Jesus teach us to deal with our enemies/opponents?
 - c. Tell us about a time recently you’ve had to deal with an enemy/opponent. Looking back, do you feel you approached the situation as a citizen of heaven or a citizen of the world?
 - d. How does our culture teach us to deal with frustration in life? How does Jesus teach us to deal with frustration?
 - e. Tell us about a time recently you experienced frustration. Looking back, do you feel you approached the situation as a citizen of heaven or a citizen of the world?
 - f. It’s really easy to get sucked in and simply copy the prevalent patterns of our culture. What are some practical ways we can strengthen ourselves to be more true to the countercultural values of Jesus and our heavenly home?
 - g. On balance, do you feel you’re living more like a citizen of heaven or earth?

Daniel 1:1-21, selected verses

¹In the third year of the reign of King Jehoiakim [Juh-HOY-uh-kim] of Judah, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. ²The Lord let the King of Judah fall into his power. ³Then the king commanded his palace master 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 [Han-uh-NIGH-uh], Mishael [ME-shell], and Azariah [Az-uh-RYE-uh]. ⁷The palace master gave them other names: Daniel he called Belteshazzar [BEL-shaz-ar], Hananiah he called Shadrach [SHAD-rack], Mishael he called Meshach [ME-shack], and Azariah he called Abednego [Uh-bed-NAY-go].

⁸But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the royal rations of food and wine; ¹¹so he asked the guard whom the palace master had appointed over them: ¹²"Please test your servants for ten days. Let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. ¹³You can then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal rations, and deal with your servants according to what you observe." ¹⁴He agreed to this proposal. ¹⁵At 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. ¹⁶So the guard continued to withdraw their royal rations.

¹⁸At the end of the [three years], the palace master brought all the young men into the presence of Nebuchadnezzar. ¹⁹And among them all, no one was found to compare with Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.