

FAITHFUL RESOLVE IN FOREIGN PLACES

INTRODUCTION

It is no secret that we are living in a truly unprecedented and extraordinary time. What's more, it seems that our situation continues to change at a rate that makes it really tough just to keep up! Despite our ever-changing circumstances, we gather this morning to proclaim an unchanging message: that Jesus Christ is Lord of all.

And this morning we have the unique privilege of proclaiming the greatness of Christ through celebrating the academic achievement of those who are graduating from various institutions of learning.

The Scriptures teach that everything that can be known is first known by God for He, himself, *knows everything* (1 John 3:20). The Lord knows the end from the beginning (Is. 46:10), the heart of every man (Lk. 16:14), our rising up and lying down (Ps. 139), what we need before we ask him (Matt. 6:8), even how many hairs are on your head (Matt. 10:30) – is there anything He does not know?

Moreover, it's the fear of the LORD, according to Proverbs, which is our starting point on the path to all true knowledge and wisdom (Prov. 2). Graduates, if you've acquired any knowledge over the course of your studies, it's only because God has known it first; and it is only because God has given you the necessary grace to acquire it. Thanks be to God. *For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory for ever and ever, Amen* (Rom. 11:36).

Though learning is first and foremost about God, it is nonetheless fitting that we mark off this moment as special, not only for the graduates, but for the families, friends, educators, and support networks that made today possible. And so, to all of you in this room: parents, friends, family, teachers - thank you. And well done.

I will also individually commend each of our Trinity graduates, but before I do so, I'd like to issue a charge from the first chapter of Daniel. And that charge is this:

Because the LORD reigns in every season and over every place, resolve today to keep yourself undefiled from the world

BODY: This charge is built on three principles we encounter in the narrative of Daniel 1

1. PRINCIPLE #1: In extraordinary times, God often sets us in unusual places [Read Dan. 1:1-2]

From our text last week in 2 Chron. 20 to this week in Daniel 1, over 200 years had passed. During these two centuries, Israel and Judah's moral, spiritual, social, and political prominence diminished. With each passing year, and with each successive king, the people of promise forsook Yahweh and His covenant and worshiped the gods of the nations around them.

After generations and generations of unfaithfulness, the Lord's patience finally wore out. Daniel 1 describes the beginning of the Babylonian Exile which culminated in the destruction

of the temple in 586 BC. These were extraordinary times for the people of Judah; and it was entirely the result of their extraordinary disobedience.

But not all of Israel turned from the Lord. The OT prophets were clear: yes, God would be faithful to judge Israel for her rebellion (2 Kings 20; Isaiah 39), but God would also be faithful to preserve a remnant who would stay true to Yahweh through Israel's captivity.

And so the book of Daniel (along with Esther) are windows into the lives of this remnant few who need to sort out how they will stay faithful while living in a hostile culture. And it's this dynamic that makes Daniel an 'evergreen' text for Christians today – especially for you graduates.

Like Daniel and his comrades, God is setting you in a culture that is increasingly hostile to the most core tenants of the Christian Scriptures. And yet, despite this hostility, God is reigning still. He reigns over every season and in every place.

Babylon may have been hundreds of miles from the land of Israel, but no Babylon lies beyond the jurisdiction of Israel's God

In our extraordinary time, it is imperative that God's people recognize that He, not any virus, not any governor or world leader, is ultimately responsible for putting us in this unusual place.

In extraordinary times, God often sets us in unusual places

2. PRINCIPLE #2: God uses unusual places to test and prove our faith [Read Dan. 1:3-7]

After the king of Babylon has taken the spoils of Jerusalem's temple and now he takes the spoils of Jerusalem's elite: the youthful, good-looking nobility, and make them Babylonians.

Nebuchadnezzar was not politically correct. He didn't care about diversity. Diversity was not Babylon's strength. "Assume our culture or else." And, in fairness, this wasn't such a bad gig. You get a good education, a good job – you're even fed well! It's like a full-ride scholarship (room and board included!). Sounds like a sweet deal to me. Oh, there's just one catch: you have to fudge just a little on your faith.

For Daniel and his friends, acclimating to their new context meant a near complete change of identity. They needed to assume new names (v. 7), learn a new language and customs. But they would also need a new diet. There's some discussion among commentators why Daniel objected at this point. It could be because Babylonian meat was mostly considered unclean according to OT law. But this doesn't explain the abstinence from wine drinking.

What's most likely is that their diet was the one area in which they could remain culturally distinct. They saw their diet as a way to trust God and entrust themselves to God thereby avoiding some of the pagan entrapments of Babylonian culture. Whatever the exact reason, the narrative is clear that partaking in the palace violated their personal conscience – something Daniel and his friends were unwilling to do.

And so the tension in the story builds and we begin to glimpse God's purposes behind this unusual place. God is at work – not just at the highest level, but at the heart level. God is using this unusual place to test and prove Daniel's faith.

Could it be that God is using our highly unusual circumstance to test and prove your faith?
Could it be that God is at work in this crisis to expose where our loyalties truly lie?

God may be at work in every trial, but so is the Enemy. “It’s just a piece of fruit from a tree,” he whispers. “It’s just some luxurious palace food”. “It’ll be easier this way.” “It’s for your health and well-being.”

Graduates: you too will find yourselves in unusual places. Unfamiliar environments are easy places to lose our way and stray into unbelief. We must be diligent!

God uses unusual places to test and prove our faith

3. PRINCIPLE #3: God has grace for every unusual place [Read 1:8-21]

When the moment of testing comes, Daniel stays steadfast. I love verse 8: “But Daniel made up his mind (resolved/set his heart) that he would not defile himself.” Whatever it took, he would do the right thing. He would not forsake the Lord – no matter what.

It’s also interesting to note that his resolve did not absolve him from his responsibility to the authority God had placed over him. It says that Daniel “sought permission” from the commander of the officials. I don’t think this means that Danile would have given up on the diet had his boss disapproved. I do think that his doing so came from a righteous heart posture of submission and humility, one which God blessed.

“God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the commander of the officials.”

The commander eventually agrees to test their dietary request, not because it didn’t matter (his life was at stake) or because it was a good idea (it was a remarkably bad one), but because God gave Daniel favor.

Sure enough, after ten days: “their appearance seemed better and they were fatter than all the youths who had been eating the king’s food” (v. 15) – please don’t be mistaken: this text is not some secret health-diet. I may offend some vegans out there, but a diet of only veggies and water is probably a bad idea and certainly doesn’t make you fat. And that’s the point! It wasn’t supposed to work. It only worked because of God’s sustaining grace and favor.

[Read vv. 17-21]

Daniel and his friends were faithful to resist the cultural ensnarements of Babylon and God honored their resolve. Their protest was counter-cultural, but it was also respectful and God provided for them in abundance.

Graduates: you will likely need to engage in counter-cultural protest in the season ahead of you. It may not involve food, but it should keep you from the defilements of this world; and it should always be with a respectful and humble heart.

Church: we too must be ready to engage in respectful, counter-cultural protest, trusting in the sufficiency of God’s grace in this unusual moment. Do not succumb to conspiratorial

speculation or irrational fear. These are the tools of the Enemy designed to divide and embitter.

Instead, with grace and humility make every effort to build up the church, to stand and act on biblical principle (irrespective of the legal or medical consequence), and to set our hope, not for the return to normalcy, but the return of Christ in glory.

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Pray with me.

And now I have the privilege of commending four of our graduates this morning: Joe Callahan, Erin Peterson, Rachel Spent, and Ben Callahan.

Joe: I have loved answering all your questions these last few years. I loved seeing the wheels turn as I've taught and as you've had the opportunity to lead, serve, and love others. You are a natural leader with a heart for people. May God give you grace to lead and love as Christ Jesus lead and loved.

Erin: I have loved seeing you serve, the majority of the time without any prompting or asking. I have loved seeing you love on other kids. It has been a joy to have had you in ONEighty these six years. May God give you grace to persevere in faithful service to our servant-king, Jesus

Rachel: I have loved seeing you lead. It may not be the first thing that strikes you about Rachel because she's quiet, but leadership isn't about being loud and visible, it's about exemplary living. You have truly been a role model for so many, myself included. May God give you grace to walk in the unshakable hope and security of the manifold promises that are yours in Christ.

Ben: I have loved becoming your colleague. Three years ago you were a student in my youth group. Today you are a fellow minister of the gospel of Christ. It has been a tremendous privilege to have seen God grow and shape you in this season. May God give you grace to steward well the many gifts to which He has entrusted you in this new season.

To you all: well done. This has been an exceptionally trying season for all of you. Both the big and the countless small moments which typically make for lasting, treasured memories have been full of sorrow and longing. This has not been the senior year any of you would have chosen, but like Daniel and his friends, you have the opportunity to rise above the disappointment and receive God's favor as you resolve today to honor Him as Lord in your heart.