

A Series Of Three Talks On Daniel - 1. Daniel takes care of his diet.

Some time ago I was asked if I would give a series of talks, on one of the very best known Bible characters, Daniel. We all know the story of Daniel in the lions' den. Because it so vividly catches the imagination, stirred us when we were children, has been popularized, dramatized and even sung about, it is as well known to most people as such stories as Noah's Ark and the Flood, David and Goliath, and Jonah and the Whale. But the Book of Daniel consists, in fact, of twelve chapters in all. It is an unusual, even at times complex book, and Daniel himself figures in it much more prominently than a reference to the lions den sometimes suggests.

Some say, in fact it is fairly generally agreed now, that the Book of Daniel was written somewhere in the second century before Christ although it seems to be treating of events at the time of the Fall of Jerusalem in the year 587 B.C. and the carrying away of exiles from Jerusalem and Judah into Babylon at that time. At a period of considerable difficulty and persecution of Jews in that second century before Christ when, under threat of punishment and loss of life, people were sorely tempted to abandon their worship of Jehovah. The book of Daniel, it is thought, was written and circulated to help stiffen resistance and to encourage people to hold out against all inducements to abandon their religion. The known heroism of Daniel is cited as an example to be followed. It is as if the writer of the book was saying 'Here is a man who held fast to his religion and continued to worship Jehovah even when it meant loss of position, ostracism, and even the prospect of a frightful death by being thrown into a den of lions. Now that you find yourselves in a similar position try to be like him. Aim to emulate his behaviour and loyalty and steadfastness'.

We are not questioning, you will notice, that Daniel was an actual historical character and that what is written about him is essentially factual and accurate. There is no need to question this. His story, however, and as all the evidence of language, style, and dates seems to suggest, has been taken and written up in another context and for a particular purpose.

If you know the story you will, perhaps, have noted a similarity between Daniel and another famous Bible character, Joseph. Though the circumstances confronting them were quite different, both men were involved in situations where they could so easily have abandoned their beliefs and ideals and must have been sorely tempted to do so.

In Daniel's case all the trappings of power and prestige were dangled in front of him if only he would give up his loyalty to Jehovah and stop being so high principled about things. Where Joseph was concerned he could so easily have become the pampered lover of the scheming and unscrupulous wife of Potiphar, captain of Pharaoh's guard. In a worldly sense both could have so much. The tantalizing delights of power and pleasure were being urged upon them. If only they would stifle conscience and sacrifice their ideals they could have it all!

Both men, then, have left us examples which we in our day and age do well to heed and follow. What is essentially the same kind of situation arises in our own lives time and time again. There is so much we could seem to have if only we would abandon principles and ideals. It can arise in a family. A parent, wanting to be popular with his children, can be tempted to abandon a difficult stand which he believes principle demands. There would be hugs and approval and promises of everlasting thankfulness, if only he would do so. And, in the world outside the family, there are continual opportunities for personal gain, flattery, even promotion, if we are prepared to let go of principles and ideals. Sometimes we can be made to feel fools that we even stop and think about it! Conscience is ridiculed. Everybody does it, they say. How can we be so prepared to forfeit so much?

Daniel was uncaring about the consequences of his stand, and awesome, those consequences threatened to be. In fact, and in the end, things turned out so differently from what he or anyone else expected.

The consequences can seem awesome at times, can't they?

We may be called upon to own up to bad workmanship, for example, and the consequences could easily be the loss of our job. We may have to own up to a broken promise, and the consequences in this case may be an embarrassing loss of face. But even if these are the consequences, does it matter? Does it matter more than being true to one's conscience? Could we live with a lie if, for example, and because of our failure to own up, we had caused another to lose his or her job? The thing we have got to do is to hold on to what we know to be true and right and to go ahead and act accordingly, whatever the consequences threaten to be.

In Joseph's case it led to his imprisonment. Because he would not accommodate her desires, Potiphar's wife had him jailed, and there is no doubt that this involved privation and a certain suffering for him. But even there the Lord was able to be with him and to work with him in a way that He would never have been able to do otherwise. And so it is with us. When we hold fast to what is right, though this may threaten the most unwanted consequences, the Lord is able to be with us, to work with us, and to accomplish His divine purposes. As for the consequences, He will see us through them. He will lead us through them. And, as with Joseph and as with Daniel, the outcome can be so different from what was anticipated. The Lord can only ever be present with us in life in our struggles to obey the dictates of conscience and in our effort to speak and think and act according to what we know to be true. Why worry about the consequences - loss of face, loss of friends, loss of a chance to make easy money, or whatever? The Lord will see us through these consequences and lead us to a good outcome.

The Book of Daniel commences by telling the story of the way in which the conqueror of Judah, the king of Babylon, gave instructions that a number of the young princes of Judah were to be specially set apart and trained in the way of the Babylonians.

Four in particular are mentioned - Daniel, and his three companions, Hannaniah, Mishael, and Azariah. All four were given Babylonian names, and they were to be fed with food from the king's own table. Daniel and his friends resolved, however, not to eat the food or drink the king's wine. They insisted upon, and were granted, a simple diet of wholesome food on which they thrived. Right from the beginning Daniel was determined to be his own man. He was not going to be taken in by the pleasant things of Babylon.

Swedenborg shows us many times that where Babylon is mentioned in the Bible it is a symbol of self-love. Babylon is always an enemy, always a conqueror; just as the love of self is. It strives to take over our lives. It wants to dominate and rule. It has caused real anguish to people that in the Psalms - Psalm 137 - it is said that those people will be happy who take the little ones of Babylon, the children, and dash them against the stones. But when it is realised that Babylon stands for, or represents, the love of self striving for control over our lives, the difficulty vanishes. All that comes forth from such a love - which is what is meant by the "children" of Babylon - is indeed to be destroyed.

The choice then which is depicted in the story we are referring to is a choice between the mental and spiritual food which appeals to and exploits the love of self in us, and the mental and spiritual food, simple and uninteresting by comparison though it may seem to be, which is of a high-minded nature and has its origins in the Lord. "I am" He said, "the Bread of life". But there are so many other ideas, attitudes, philosophies about life and about how to go about things which are pressed upon us. Daniel and his friends had to make a decision. We also are called upon to make a decision. Are we going to feed upon and try to nourish ourselves on the man-made ideas, on human ingenuity and pragmatism? Or are we going to hold out, instead, for the nourishment, the principles, the ideals and the inspiration of what comes from, and is based on, He who alone can truly satisfy the hungry soul?

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