

How Do We Measure Success?

Part I

By Lois Mitchell, July 29, 2004

I've always been intrigued by the account of the four young Hebrew men - Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah - who were brought as captives from Judah to serve in the palace of the King of Babylon. These four Hebrew boys were from the royal family and nobility (Dan. 1:3) and are described as "young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand..." (Dan. 1:4). When it comes to public witness, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah are my heroes.

Their story in a nutshell is this: they bargained with Ashpenaz, chief of the court officials, to be excused from eating the rich royal food and wine and to be served only vegetables and water instead. When Ashpenaz worried that such a diet would leave the Hebrew young men weak, Daniel suggested a ten day trial period after which Ashpenaz could decide for himself whether they should continue to eat their own diet.

The first lesson for us to learn is that God is in control, even of secular powers and authorities. We read (in Dan. 1:9) that "God had caused the official to show favor and sympathy to Daniel" and so Ashpenaz agreed to Daniel's suggestion. At the end of the ten day trial, Daniel and his cohorts "looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food" (Dan. 1:15).

The second lesson is that God rewards those who remain faithful. Not only were they healthy, but we read (in Dan. 1:17) that "to these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds" (Dan. 1:17).

Skipping ahead in the book of Daniel we come to the testing of Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. When they refuse to worship the gods of King Nebuchadnezzar or the image of gold he had made, they are thrown into a furnace heated seven times hotter than usual. Upon hearing the consequences of their quiet defiance of the royal decree, the three young men say to the angry king:

"O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up" (Dan. 3:16-18).

I think they really understood and believed the words of God in Exodus 20:1-4, especially the part that says:

"You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God."

They understood God's power – “he will rescue us from your hand” – but they also recognized his sovereignty – “but even if he does not”. They understood that their lives were in God's hands. It reminds me of Jesus' final interview with Pilate when the governor, frustrated by Jesus' apparent lack of cooperation refused to defend himself and Pilate said to him (John 19:10): "Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?" Jesus replied with a simple declaration of the truth (John 19:11): "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above." God is in control!

In this instance, God did spare Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. God sent a messenger (Jesus? The Holy Spirit? an angel?) into the fire with them and they came out of the furnace unscathed. They didn't even smell of smoke! King Nebuchadnezzar is impressed:

Then Nebuchadnezzar said, "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God. Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way."

He even promoted them to positions of greater authority in the province of Babylonia.

Now for my favorite part. Daniel is busy being an administrator and interpreter of dreams in the royal court. King Nebuchadnezzar dies as does his son, Belshazzar, who succeeds him. Next to the throne is King Darius. His advisers have him issue a decree forbidding prayers to any God or man except the King himself. The consequence of violating this decree is that the perpetrator shall be thrown into a den of lions. It's a setup, designed to trap Daniel and to finally get rid of him. Daniel knows it.

Others might have prayed silently or even given up praying to God for the thirty day period of the decree, but Daniel carried on as usual, praying three times a day in an open window to his God. You know the story – he is brought before King Darius who, with regret, carries out the punishment. However, so impressed is King Darius with Daniel and his allegiance to his God that after a long sleepless night, he hurries to the lion's den to see if Daniel's God has delivered him from the lions. King Darius is delighted to discover that Daniel is completely unscathed and he immediately acknowledges the power of Daniel's God. He wastes no time in issuing a new decree commanding that:

“in every part of my kingdom people must fear and reverence the God of Daniel. "For he is the living God and he endures forever; his kingdom will not be destroyed, his dominion will never end” (Dan. 6:26).

In the next issue we will consider the implications of this decree for Babylon and the further lessons we can learn from Daniel and his friends in terms of measuring our success in the area of public witness. In the meantime, think about these questions: As we see public policy stray further and further from the truth of Scripture, what can we learn from Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah about remaining faithful? How do we measure our success? How does God measure success?