Wisdom to Navigate Life’s Challenges

Purpose
To learn how God’s people receive God’s wisdom.

Hearing the Word
The background scripture for this lesson is Daniel 1:1-17.

Daniel 1:8-17 (NIV)
8 But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way.
9 Now God had caused the official to show favor and compassion to Daniel,
10 but the official told Daniel, “I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you.”
11 Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah,
12 “Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink.
13 Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see.”
14 So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days.
15 At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food.
16 So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead.
17 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.

Daniel 1:8-17 (KJV)
8 But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king’s meat, nor with the wine which he drank: therefore he requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself.
9 Now God had brought Daniel into favour and tender love with the prince of the eunuchs.
10 And the prince of the eunuchs said unto Daniel, I fear my lord the king, who hath appointed your meat and your drink: for why should he see your faces worse liking than the children which are of your sort? then shall ye make me endanger my head to the king.
11 Then said Daniel to Melzar, whom the prince of the eunuchs had set over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah,
12 Prove thy servants, I beseech thee, ten days: and let them give us pulse to eat, and water to drink.
13 Then let our countenances be looked upon before thee, and the countenance of the children that eat of the portion of the king’s meat: and as thou seest, deal with thy servants.
14 So he consented to them in this matter, and proved them ten days.
15 And at the end of ten days their countenances appeared fairer and fatter in flesh than all the children which did eat the portion of the king’s meat.
16 Thus Melzar took away the portion of their meat, and the wine that they should drink; and
gave them pulse.

17 As for these four children, God gave them knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom:

and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams.

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**DAILY BIBLE STUDY**

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**Seeing the Need**

Success stories have always impressed me. Some people refer to these stories as “Horatio Alger stories,” named after the great American author Horatio Alger. Alger primarily wrote novels about young boys living in poverty who rose to wealth and fame through determination and hard work. These stories were particularly attractive to me as a young pastor freshly starting my ministry. I never had an urgent and overwhelming desire to become rich and famous; however, I did enjoy reading and gaining insight into how to make the best out of a bad situation. These “rags to riches” stories and their illustrations set a mindset within me that often enabled me to see the bright side in the worst of situations. Later, and probably as can be expected, my library grew to have its share of positive-thinking books mixed in with books on theology and other pastoral concerns.

Corrie ten Boom was a great success story for me. Although hers was not a “rags to riches success story,” we nevertheless see her success in how she made the best out of a bad situation. Born in 1892 into a devout Christian family in the Netherlands, Corrie’s faith moved her to reach out to help others. When Nazi soldiers invaded her country, she and her family provided a safe haven for many Jews who needed food and shelter. Later she and her family would be caught by the Nazi regime and put into a concentration camp. The trauma of mental and physical abuse along with witnessing the deaths of several of her family members left a permanent scar on her life. Corrie ten Boom’s success, however, was her faith and her commitment to Christ that empowered her to forgive her attackers and rise above the horrors of a devastating ordeal.

Daniel’s captivity story helps us to see that faith in God can empower us to receive wisdom and guidance to endure and rise above life’s negative situations.
Daniel’s Decision

Daniel’s story begins in the harsh realities of war. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had attacked and invaded Jerusalem. This ruthless king spared nothing and no one from his wrath. Holy and sacred items were taken from the Lord’s Temple and placed into Nebuchadnezzar’s pagan god shrine in Babylon. This act would have been especially heartbreaking and discouraging to the Jews of that community. Furthermore, destroying the Temple and capturing its sacred artifacts would show dominance of a pagan god over Israel’s God. When the Philistines defeated Israel and captured the Ark of the Covenant, Eli’s daughter-in-law gave birth to a son, Ichabod, whose name declared that “The glory [of the LORD] has left Israel” (1 Samuel 4:21). Such an attitude would likewise have characterized the people’s feelings when the Temple at Jerusalem was ransacked.

Lastly, Nebuchadnezzar would make use of slave labor from the captives. This would have been a slow and methodical process of cultural assimilation, or in layman’s terms, brainwashing. Daniel 1:4 lists Nebuchadnezzar’s standards and qualifications for workers. These persons were expected to be “good looking young men without defects, skilled in all wisdom, possessing knowledge, conversant with learning, and capable of serving in the king’s palace.” The fact that Nebuchadnezzar ordered his chief official to draw this pool from the “ruling class” (verse 3) of Israelites suggests that Daniel was already a person of high social and moral character.

War can be a prosperous adventure. A major benefit of the conquering army in battle is that it captures the goods and supplies of its captives. When Jehoshaphat defeated the Moabite and Ammonite armies, it took three days to collect the spoils (2 Chronicles 20:25). These collected spears, armor, chariots, food, and other supplies in addition to horses would easily add to the economy of any nation. Most likely many of the men captured during a battle would be used as chariot and cavalry drivers, and women would become cooks and bakers (1 Samuel 8:11-13). Nebuchadnezzar saw his conquest over Jerusalem as an opportunity to use everything and everyone to help build up and sustain the nation of Babylon.

Daniel’s training would last for three years. The first steps for these new captives in becoming culturally assimilated into Babylonian society involved learning the language of the nation, undergoing name changes, and receiving a daily allotment of the king’s food and drink. It was at the dinner table, so to speak, that Daniel drew the line. Daniel 1:8 says that Daniel would not “pollute” himself with the king’s food or wine. This open and public refusal was a bold act to say the least. Such overt and public resistance could very easily have resulted in negative consequences for Daniel. Common sense, along with being a captive in a for-
eign land and subject to mistreatment and possible death, would suggest that offending the king was not in Daniel’s best interest. However, Daniel’s decision and resolve stood firm and without apology. He would not do anything that would compromise his faith.

When we understand the Jewish concepts of clean and unclean, we see the why of Daniel’s actions. The dietary laws found in the Book of Leviticus declare that certain foods are clean while others are unclean (Leviticus 11). These laws applied to domestic and wild animals, fish, birds, and other flying and crawling creatures. The spiritual reason for these laws was to establish and set Israel apart as a sanctified and holy people. Anyone who ate (or touched) anything that was unclean lost fellowship with the covenant community. In some cases, one who was considered unclean would be forced to go outside the camp (Numbers 5:1-4). Therefore, for Daniel it was not so much a matter of cultural taste in refusing to eat a foreign dish as it was a faithful expression of commitment and loyalty to the community of faith. Daniel refused to sacrifice his relationship with God and the covenant community because of physical appetite.

What things or experiences might “pollute” your faith?

A Challenging Test

Daniel’s commitment and determination to live for God in a hostile environment strangely gained him favor in the eyes of palace officials. His approach might be seen as consistent diplomacy. His decision and determination were fixed; however, Daniel prayerfully and over time slowly negotiated his way into the good graces of his captors. Daniel seemed to understand that even in enemy territory, communication and understanding can be powerful weapons in reaching your goal. Daniel 1:9 says that “God had established faithful loyalty between Daniel and the chief official.” God can always touch the hearts of others on behalf of the faithful. Fear of the king’s reprimand toward him, however, made this official refuse Daniel’s request.

Nonetheless, this refusal did not diminish Daniel’s resolve and commitment to stay faithful to God and the covenant community.

We learn and grow in our faith commitment to God in our local covenant communities. Other places can provide this experience; however, for most people, it is our relationship with the local church where we learn and grow in discipleship. Daniel’s great and uncompromising faith grew out of his connection to and participation in the covenant community. There is something life-changing about being a part of something bigger than ourselves. I often feel this way when I attend annual conference gatherings. The local church is the primary means through which the body of believers gathers for worship and fellowship and people are brought into saving relationship with God. It is where
the word of God is preached, sacraments are administered, and salvation is freely offered to a hurting world. Part of a church’s baptismal ceremony reads, “The church is of God, and will be preserved to the end of time, All, of every age and station, stand in need of the means of grace which it alone supplies.”

Daniel’s proposed test offered a challenge to himself and the palace officials. He was not reluctant or cowardly in his request. After being rejected by the chief official of the palace, Daniel then went with a proposal to the guard this official had appointed over Daniel and his friends. His persistence not to pollute or defile himself with the king’s food is seen in his actions. Again, he was polite and conversational in his approach: “Why not test your servants for ten days? You could give us a diet of vegetables to eat and water to drink” (verse 12). His attitude was not to insult the king and his royal delicacies, but to offer an option and perhaps even a challenge to the quality of palace food. Furthermore, it might be an opportunity in the minds of some palace officials to show the health superiority of Babylonian food (verse 10). The challenge was that after the ten-day period had ended, the appearance of Daniel and his friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, would be compared to that of those who ate the king’s food. The results would determine the consequences and how he and his friends would conduct themselves. It was cordial diplomacy. For some it was a risky challenge; for Daniel it was matter of faith and trust in God.

Life is often filled with tests. That is, it seems that we are regularly confronted with negative predicaments and unwanted circumstances. These problems and unsolicited difficulties challenge our faith and spiritual integrity. As someone once said, “If it’s not one thing, it’s another.” Unwanted troubles just seem to pop up. Over the years I believe I have mastered the art of how to calmly handle life when bad things happen. The secret for me is realizing that while bad things do happen to good people, God is in control and this too shall past. It works for me! Jesus told the worried disciples, “In the world you have distress. But be encouraged! I have conquered the world” (John 16:33). Keeping our eyes on God in uncertain times keeps us calm in the midst of the storm. This was Daniel’s secret and how he was able despite his uncertainties to sing a new song in a strange land.

Daniel’s commitment and determination to remain faithful to God speaks a positive word to us today. Commitment and dedication in doing the right thing does not have to be loud and animated. Daniel exemplified quiet strength in the midst of a challenging time. It would have been so easy (and common sense for some) to simply “fit in” until reaching a point of safety. However, Daniel’s persistence in not defiling himself was anchored in a knowing that God was fully able to handle the crisis of the moment. He chose to respect and even be sensitive to the fear of the palace officials while at
the same time holding firm to his faith. It was a precarious and risky situation to be in, yet Daniel’s faith in God balanced the scales.

**What troubles and difficulties have you experienced that have tested your faith in God?**

**Remarkable Results**

At the end of the ten-day period, the results were clear. Daniel and his friends “looked better and healthier than all the young men who were eating the king’s food” (verse 15). It is important to understand that while better appearance and health were a good result, this was not Daniel’s intent. It was never so much about food for Daniel but about faith and obedience to God. Eating the king’s food was an act of disobedience that would pollute the spiritual integrity of Daniel and prove him unfaithful to the covenant community. Health and better appearance were simply the by-products or side effects of trusting God. Special diets do not gauge or determine our level of spirituality. On the other hand, respecting our bodies with proper eating (and exercise for me) honors God. The final score of this challenging test was that Daniel was able to remain faithful to covenant law and the God of Israel was glorified.

Verse 17 says that “God gave knowledge, mastery of all literature, and wisdom” to Daniel and his three friends. In addition, Daniel received the gifts of vision and dream interpretation. “Knowledge” in Hebrew context generally refers to the ability to understand and perceive through one’s sight, touch, and hearing. It is the ability to discern truth in life’s puzzling moments. “Wisdom” in similar fashion makes reference to the act of skillfully and wisely living in our surroundings. These anointed and special gifts gave Daniel and his three friends an edge above the other captives and established them as persons of high potential in the king’s eyes. It is a beautiful picture of how God can raise up the faithful in a hostile and uncertain environment.

God gave Daniel wisdom. God gives us wisdom. This wisdom as the holy endowment of God is our free gift. It is God’s promise for all who trust and obey. This wisdom is not worldly but heavenly. True wisdom is found in Christ who is God’s wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:24). James tells his readers that if any desire wisdom, he or she should simply ask God, who liberally gives to all who ask (James 1:5). He continues by saying that this wisdom which comes from above is first “pure, and then peaceful, gentle, obedient, filled with mercy and good actions, fair, and genuine” (James 3:17). The point here is that God is actively involved in directing the paths of the faithful. Claim the wisdom of God this coming week through observing the beauty of life and the handiwork of creation. When Daniel tapped into God through his faithfulness, he tapped into heaven’s wisdom and guidance. Trusting God enables us to access heaven’s best in knowing how to successfully navigate life.
Lesson 6

What helps you to discern truth in any given situation?

God of Grace and God of glory, on thy people pour thy power. Grant us wisdom and grant us courage for the living of these days; in Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.