Lessons About Kingdom of Heaven from Daniel

Evan Lature

Daniel 2: 14-23; Daniel 2: 8-21

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Description automatically generatedIntroduction**

How should Christians live out their faith in a secular world? This is a very practical topic that attracts Christian thinkers. Many books have been written on this topic. Many preachers and pastors talk about this from pulpits.

(I’m none of them -I’m just a person who loves stories). What follows is the Daniel’s story that I see from my vantage point in hopes of building up the church to understand Kingdom of Heaven on earth and encourage each of us to live out our faith as God’s people in the 21st century world aligned and congruent with the biblical narratives. Basically, there are 3 points I’m tackling.

1. God’s work in and through insignificance
2. The power of devotional self-discipline
3. Living out the faith as sojourners on earth

**1. God’s work in and through insignificance**

Chapter 1 is an introduction of Daniel’s life as an exile in Babylon, how he strives toward in a new world while preserving his old values as people of Yahweh. He entered the authority arena with similar patterns like Joseph had (Dan 2): a haunting dream of a king that couldn’t be explained by any wise man.

Bible informs us of how Daniel successfully won the king’s approval. After learning about no wise men could interpret Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, he went home and share the matter with his friends Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah (Dan 2:17) and asked them to pray for him so that he and his friends might not be executed with the rest of the wise men of Babylon. This is where our first lesson comes from: the fellowship of insignificant people.

Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah are **a small detail overlooked by grandeur.** They are nobody in the Babylonian emporium. They were losers taken out of their homeland in order to labor for their conqueror. Yet they bring significance to the rest of narratives. During the night the mystery of king’s dream was revealed to Daniel in a vision (Dan 2:19). He praised the Lord for revealing deep and hidden things (22) that could not be grasped by bigger pictures. After he solved the mystery of the king’s dream, he was placed in a high position where he rules over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of its wise men (Dan 2:48).

In Gospel, **Jesus equates the Kingdom of Heaven with small things: mustard seed, yeast, narrow gate**. He says,

“*What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is* ***the smallest of all seeds on earth****. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade (Mark4:30-32).”*

One time he says, *“The kingdom of heaven is like* ***yeast*** *that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough (Matthew 13:33)”.*

On the other occasion, he says, “*Enter through the* ***narrow gate.*** *For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it” (Matthew 6:13-14)”.*

God sees insignificance significant in the story He’s in charge. He chose the foolish things of the word to shame the wise and chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong (1 Cor 1:27). Look at our world today! Our world today worships grandeur, celebrity culture, and spotlight. We don’t like being small because it signifies insignificance and inferiority. We are drawn to domination and being big. Check out relationships among nations or multinational company platforms. All narratives are saturated by obsessions of domination. To the world, speaking against these values sound naïve and will result a frown upon, *“Which part of the world you live in?”*

We are a month away from one of significant celebrations in Christianity traditions. This celebration was pioneered by a small little insignificant baby born in a manger, helpless, and vulnerable. He was the Mighty God who made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant (Phil 2:7). To the world, this scenario doesn’t make any sense. But to us Christians, that’s priceless! If the Mighty God has emptied himself, how much more we -His followers- should follow His example.

**2. The power of devotional self- discipline**

In Daniel’s world, everything seems to appear in clear demarcation. Babylonian culture and Jewish culture; worshipping Babylonian gods and worshipping Yahweh; safety for those who obey the king and doom for disobedience. Because of this binary approach, Daniel had to submit himself under the dominant culture. Daniel had to change his name (Daniel means “God is my judge”) to a Babylonian name given to him Beltheshazzar which means Bel (the god of Babylon) protect the king. He also had to eat from king’s table. What the king eats, he eats too. This is a way to “own” someone psychologically. It might look like a simple thing. But the power of ritual things could change someone subconsciously and Daniel was aware of this latent danger. He might have no power to refuse a new given name to him, but not with his diet. Eating the king’s food and drinking his wine suggest an acceptance of the king’s fellowship and all that might entail (https://www.biblewise.com/bible\_study/questions/what-were-kings-food.php).

We are embodied creatures. Our bodily rituals shape our identity. In his book Desire for God, James K.A. Smith contends that embodied rituals and material practices are so effective in shaping our identities and forming our desires, because we are not primarily thinking things or believing animals but rather desiring agents. Daniel’s life in Babylon demonstrates how embodied rituals and material practices anchor him to worship Yahweh in a nation worshipping idols. He maintains self-discipline to devote himself to Yahweh. He doesn’t defile himself with the royal food and wine (1:8), and three times a day he would be on his knees, pray, and give thanks to God (6:10).

Daniel’s God-seeking posture stands out in the entire book. And it gives us a stark contrast to our modern Christianity which sadly to some degree reflects more of world rather than the Kingdom’s values. We consume, use, indulge unwittingly like the world does. We lack self-discipline that leads us lack self-discernment. As results, the world captured our desire and imagination and warp them in the opposite way of God’s purposes. How so? Look inside ourselves and be honest. What do we desire? Do we desire like the world does? These are things desire by the world: power, fame, significant status, self-glory, body-image, money, self-indulgence.

From Daniel, we learn the importance of devotional self-discipline in the world relentlessly conveying contradicting messages to Kingdom’s values. By the power of Holy Spirit, we should be able to guard ourselves: do our decisions enhance our love to God? Do our material practices stunt our desire to commune with God? What material practices can help us increase our desire for God?

**3. Sojourners on Earth**

Across the Bible, we found a constant message that God’s people are a channel that He chose to dispense His blessings to the world. He definitely does that in the story of Daniel. We saw that in the lives of Daniel and friends who acted like a yeast in Babylonian dough through their faithfulness and intents to witness counterculturally against the message of their contemporaries.

Daniel was very young when he had to be exiled to Babylon. He shared similar qualities with Joseph in terms of embarking on a journey outside home: young and coming from privileged family background, deprived of their youthfulness; now turned into labors and hardships. What used to be familiar to them now was foreign in every way, not only the customs, the land, the culture, but also their identity adjustments. Being an exile, Daniel seems to straddle in two worlds. On one hand he longs to preserve his old identity, on the other hand he has to adjust to his new context, so he can survive and thrive. By the hands of God, he made a high official in the Babylonian emporium. Nevertheless, he kept something that has been carved deeply in his heart. Three times a day, with his windows opened toward Jerusalem, he would pray to God (6:10). *I wonder what happened in the deepest of his soul during those lonely nights when he remembered his family and good old days in Israel. What was his thinking about his present and future? Was he longing for something?*

Bible pictures God’s people as sojourners in the world; people in between -foreigners and strangers on earth- who are longing for a better country – a heavenly one (Hebrews 11:13-15). Daniel was given an opportunity to exercise that longing as an exile in Babylon. Personally, I sometimes feel my experience living outside home has a spiritual dimension which connects me deeper with a profound biblical truth as a sojourner: in the world but not of the world.

One morning I woke up feeling lonely. It was even getting dramatic as I saw from my window the gloomy overcast and the autumn bald trees. I became melancholic. My soul was simply restless. I prayed, and grabbed my guitar, sang out loud to appease this restlessness. I sang this romantic song over and over in Bahasa Indonesia "I'm longing...Better to say what you feel if you really are longing. I'm longing. Time will not take side on a doubting feeling." The louder I sang it, the more I had no idea of what I was longing for. It frustrated me. But I just kept singing and got carried away. Magically, I thought of beautiful things in my life: the warmth of sunshine; my students that I disciple; my Mom's smile, and all people that I love. I'm always tempted to ask why loneliness exists. Every time I think of it, I always come back to the answer of maybe it has to be there, so we learn how to long for God properly and find the contentment in Him alone. That experience led me to a different level of understanding of Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane:

*“My prayer is not you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.” (John 17: 15-18)*

We Christians are sojourners on earth. We’ve been sent to the world to continue the mission of God’s people. While in mission, we’ll face hardships, persecution, loneliness, sufferings, and all kinds of enemy’s attacks. To be conformed to the world is not what we want. Nevertheless, we never walk alone. We walk together led by the Holy Spirit.

**Conclusion:** Let me recap what we have learned together from Daniel:

1. Kingdom of Heaven operates in opposite ways of the world. It counts small little things.
2. Self-discipline with a seeking-God posture guards our lives as God’s people in this hostile world.
3. God’s people are sojourner on earth called to witness to God’s glory to the world while desiring His kingdom to come.

In what ways God speaks His heart to you today?

Song: AUTUMN

By Evan Lature

I remember a story across the place

A country where you’re about to go

Your journey will unfurl with lavished joy

All your questions are answered

Perhaps the hardest part is a step to stop

And you forget where you belong

Then the leaves are falling in the yard

A squirrel’s running when you’re coming close

Oh…

The laughter that we share, the feast we delight

Colored up the sky

The pain, the tears we had

The beauty of the life

Like a night is turning dawn we’ll wait for the King

We’ll see the sun when morning comes

When the overcast envelopes the world

And you got nobody next to you

Then the sun comes up

Melting down the cold

Season comes, and season goes

You will never walk alone

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