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I must start by commending our Deacons. I have always valued their counsel; I also greatly value their suggestions of topics for Sunday worship.

Some time ago they suggested a character study and after prayerful thought and study, I was led to examine the life of Daniel.

We remind ourselves once again, the entire Bible is one complete story. It starts with God creating time. The first three words in the Bible are, *In the beginning...*

Why is this important?

God is eternal and lives in eternity, these three words signal the beginning of a time-bound history. **Eternity** does not have *time*, so God created a finite measurement called *time*, to inform all who live in it, that there is a beginning, and there will be an end. The Bible ends with Jesus' promise in the penultimate verse of Revelation 22, *Yes! I am coming soon!*¹

This period, between *the beginning* and *Jesus' coming soon*, is the history of **time**. We, God's most precious and loved creation, we who live in this time-bubble, are reminded *time-and-again* (excuse the pun) of the cycle of suffering, seeing visions and dreams of rescue and restoration (God's promise), and being elevated into a new and trusted relationship here and now. Abraham went through this cycle, as did Jacob (Israel), his son Joseph, Moses, David went through it in a different order, and several prophets.

History repeats itself because God is trying to give us the message of His plan, but we human beings tend not learn lessons from it, and this cycle, of suffering, being reminded of His promises through dreams and visions, and being used of God to influence the course history (we all do in our

¹ Revelation 22:20 - the penultimate verse of the Bible

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own way, in our families and our communities), this cycle keeps repeating itself, as God's reminder to us.

Leaders of countries (elected, appointed, and self-anointed) influence world history, and they too do not learn lessons from history, and world history and nation's histories repeat themselves. When leaders are in position, they think of themselves as Rulers, then as Kings and Emperors, then become tyrants, and at some stage of this journey deep into pride and hubris, they cannot stand Truth and oppose it. God's people, those who profess faith in Him, and latterly who profess faith in His Son's sacrificial death for the purpose of our salvation, suffer because we represent Truth.

The life of Daniel follows the same pattern.

Most of us would recall Daniel as a Sunday school hero, a young boy who survived a night in a den of hungry lions, because of his faith in God. But Daniel is much more than a fearless hero for young boys. Judging by the dates in this book, Daniel would have been 80+ years old when locked overnight in the lions den.²

Our story begins in 605 BC when the King of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem, and relocated a group of young men to Babylon. Rulers who seek to control their world, don't rely only on their own wisdom. They want advice and counsel of those who understand the lands and the people they have conquered, and want the likes of Daniel and his friends to be a part of their diplomatic corps, advising them how to integrate the people they have conquered.

The book of Proverbs teaches this principle in several places. Listen to two verses: *Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they*

² 605 BC when Nebuchadnezzar King of Babylon captured Jerusalem. If Daniel was 15 in 605 B.C. when taken to Babylon, then Daniel would have been 81 years old in 539 B.C., the year when Darius, King of Persia, succeeded by Nebuchadnezzar, also the year Daniel was locked in the lions den!

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*succeed*³, and *Without wise leadership, a nation falls; there is safety in having many advisers.*⁴

The criteria for selecting the group of Hebrew men from Jerusalem was the following:

1. Should be young.
2. From Royal families or Nobility to help them feel at home in a foreign court setting.
3. Without any physical impediment.
4. Handsome, good looking, well mannered
5. Showing intellectual aptitude, well-informed, and quick to understand.

Those who were chosen for what we equate with the upper house of Parliament, Nobility who hang around and support Royalty, will be taught *the literature and language of the Chaldeans*⁵, not an innocent little phrase as it might sound to be!

This past week, the BBC website carried news of the largest Muslim ethnic group (the *Uighurs*) in China's Xinjiang province, who when interviewed said, they'd been "*infected by extremism*" and volunteered to have their "*thoughts transformed*".⁶

Daniel and his very intelligent friends were taken to Babylon, not into an orientation programme for Lords and Noblemen into the upper house of Parliament, rather into a cultural re-orientation and re-programming course of study, to have their "*thoughts transformed*", from monotheistic

³ Proverbs 15:22

⁴ Proverbs 11:14

⁵ 1:4

⁶ Searching for Truth in China's Uighur 're-education' camps, by John Sudworth. BBC News, Xinjiang 21 June 2019

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worship of a living God to whom they gave their allegiance, to the polytheistic worship of idols! A proud and arrogant tyrant, Nebuchadnezzar, wanted the blessings of God's wisdom given to His chosen people, to become His blessings and for his people, and these young intelligent lads from Jerusalem should make that happen.

Acquiring and privatising faith is the struggle between **identity** and **image**, the struggle between who I really am (*identity*), who God has made me to be (*identity*), and who I want to be (*image*) and who I want the world to believe I am (*image*).

The book of Daniel speaks to many of our human predicaments. Today, confusion reigns in the dialogue on *human identity*, and everyone finds security in *image*; it is exactly the opposite of what should be!

The battle for *image* usually stems from a place of insecurity, attempts to makeover and airbrush that which we don't like about ourselves, to embellish our *image*, but it seems to provide security to those who seek its shelter.

Identity **should never be** fought for; it is naturally rooted in deep security, but is sadly struggling with confusion and insecurity.

When Daniel, his three close friends and several others arrive in Babylon, they were matriculated into what would have been "King's College, Babylon", to be trained in "*the language and literature of Babylon*".

We should not be naive to believe, this happens elsewhere in our world and not to us, in our world!

Our visual and social media, influences the way we think about everything, from the language and expressions used, to the details which are included and omitted; pictures and photos that are carefully chosen and air-brushed and those that aren't, all influenced how we think about issues, and the impression we have of people.

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Our education system, our conversations at work, at home, and among friends, at the local barbers or salon, the local pub, all contribute to influencing how we think and behave.

Back at King's College, Babylon, the *re-education / re-programming* for Daniel and his three friends, begins with a re-naming ceremony.

Names are very important, because they are the primary source of a person's identity. Hebrew culture followed two naming traditions: one was names ending with **-el**: Ab-**el**, Dani-**el**, Ezeki-**el**, Samu-**el**, Jerubabb-**el**, short for "Elohim," one of the two names for God, in Hebrew.

The other tradition is names ending with **-yah**, pronounced as in a release of air. Names ending with **-iah** and **-jah** such as Isai-**ah**, Elij-**ah**, Jeremi-**ah**, Nehemi-**ah**, Mic-**ah**, Zechari-**ah** is short for "Yahweh", the title God gives Himself when speaking with Moses⁷ - **I am**

Daniel and his three friends are identified with the living God (*Elohim* and *Yahweh*) who promised and promises always, to look after His people, *whom I have called by My Name, to be My people.*

So, the Chief of Staff (*Chancellor* or *Principal*) of King's College, Babylon renames these four young men as follows:

Daniel (which means, *God is my Judge*) becomes **Beltshazzar**, "Lady, protect the king" (*Belet* was the wife of Bel, a Babylonian god).

Hananiah (which means, *Yahweh has been gracious*) becomes **Shadrach**, "the command of Aku" (the Sumerian moon god)

Mishael (which means, *Who is, what God is?*) becomes **Meshach**, "I am of little account."

Azariah (which means, *Yahweh has helped*) became **Abednego**, "Servant of the shining one," a word play that includes the Babylonian god, Nabû

⁷ Exodus 3:13-15

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Their identity has been changed, from one belonging to the living God, to one in service of pagan idols! Daniel has a gender change, and Mishael's self-esteem has been undermined.

We may not think this has relevance to us today but it does! We have time for one example. The name **William** is the most popular name introduced to England by the Normans, derived from Old High German meaning "*resolute, determined protector*". A pop-rap artist/singer, who with Tom Jones, is a judge on the TV programme "The Voice", has changed his name to **Will.I.Am**. His new name has nothing to do with being a *resolute, determined protector* of anything or anyone. The wording strongly suggests a self-centred focus!

The book of Daniel is rich and has a powerful message, which challenges us to rethink our allegiances, our symbols of authority, and the dividing line of faith, which must not be compromised. The struggle between faith and compromise runs alongside the struggle between *identity* and *image*, more so now than ever before.

As we go through this book, I pray it strengthens your identity in Christ, and your allegiance to God. The deeper you focus on your identity with God, He will grant you His Wisdom to identify and resist all that tries to re-educate, re-train and re-focus your mind, and you will be able to navigate the treacherous waters of re-education and re-programming in the world around us!

AMEN.