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Last Sunday we started a study of the character of Daniel. We might remember the Sunday School hero, the fearless young man who survived a night in a dungeon, surrounded by hungry lions; last Sunday we noted, by the best estimates, Daniel would have been around 80 years old when he was lowered into the "den".

As we delve deeper into the life of Daniel, it is my prayer, we would discover one of **the** greatest witnesses of the compassionate love of God, how God works together with those who love Him.

Chapter 1 falls into two parts. Last Sunday we looked at the first part (verses 1-7), which helped us appreciate the tension between **image**, that which I desire to show others, who I want them to believe I am (which keeps image consultants very busy!), and **identity**, who I really am; first, the person God made me to be, then the person I am, when God leads my life. People indulge in image management from a point of insecurity in their lives, whereas identity **should** be reinforced from a point of security in our lives, but identity can also be manipulated.

Almost immediately after they settle into King's College, Babylon, Daniel and his three friends face a challenge. Their identity in **Elohim**, (*Supreme One, or Mighty One* - Genesis 1:1) and **Yahweh** (*I am, Who I am*) is changed to reflect their new service to the plethora of Sumerian and Babylonian gods, and in Daniel's case, we understand a gender reassignment took place.

The narrative seems to be interrupted by a naming ceremony. Verse 5 reads, *The king assigned them the best of food and wine from his own kitchen during their three-year training period, planning to make them **his** counsellors and **his** advisors when they graduated*, and verse 10 reads, *But Daniel was determined not to tarnish himself by eating the food and wine given them by the king.*

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On the face of it, we might think young Daniel was throwing a strop, being difficult, even challenging the King's order! *You cannot force me to eat or drink your royal food - My royal food is different!* As a 15-16 year old, such behaviour would be understandable, though not tolerated.

To appreciate the struggle in Daniel's spirit, imagine yourself being offered the opportunity to travel to a foreign land with the promise that you would be well treated and looked after. In recent years, this promise has been given to many young men and women. A "recruiter" informs their family, they would earn good income in respectable jobs ("*trust me*"), to help support their family back home. Many are enticed to "invest" their savings to make this journey, and end up as part of the modern "slave trade", sold off to red-light districts, or as domestic helpers living under inhumane conditions.

The parents and elders of these young lads from Royal and Noble homes in Jerusalem, might have resisted their young boys being taken away; some would have been heirs to family fortunes, others being groomed to take over the family business. The "recruiter" (Ashpenaz) from the court of the King (Nebuchadnezzar) might have promised the family that these young lads would be well looked after, well taken care of, but no mention would have been made of inculcating a new and different culture, of cultural and religious indoctrination, and definitely, no mention made that their names and identities would be changed!

The re-naming ceremony is very important. Once their roots and origins are changed, it would be difficult to trace and find them at a later date.

The same thing happens now: when young men and women join a radical group, their identity is changed; tracing them later, becomes difficult.

In Jewish culture, by the age of 18 or so, young lads would be well steeped in their history and in their identity as a special people in the sight of God,

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ready to participate in the work of God on earth. They don't need an image makeover, because their identity in **Elohim**, the Sovereign and Supreme One, and in **Yahweh**, the ageless *I am, who I am*, is iron-clad secure.

As we shall see, God works with a person who consciously chooses to identify with His Name, who, despite the difficulties, lives by God's law, for the sole purpose of honouring Him.

To Abraham God said, *I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and your offspring after you, throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.*¹

Just before the exodus from Egypt, God said to Moses, *I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God.*²

To the prophet Ezekiel, God said, *You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be My people, and I will be your God.*³

When the people of Israel deviated from obeying God, and suffered as a result, God told Jeremiah to remind them, *When I delivered your ancestors out of Egypt, I never said anything to them about wanting burnt offerings and sacrifices as such. But I did require this of them: "Obey me. Do what I say and I will be your God and you will be my people."*⁴

Again through Jeremiah God reminds His people, *This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel ... I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*⁵

¹ Genesis 17:7

² Exodus 6:7

³ Ezekiel 36:28

⁴ Jeremiah 7:23

⁵ Jeremiah 31:33

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As the pages of history turn, Matthew records Jesus saying, *If anyone publicly acknowledges Me as his friend, I will openly acknowledge him as My friend before my Father in Heaven.*⁶

May of us would have heard this from our young children who made friends in school, and were proud to come home and tell Daddy about this new friend!

Throughout human history, God has regularly told His people, those who carry His Name (we are included because we carry God's Name through His Son Jesus the Christ), *I have made a covenant with you (a promise which only I can keep, because I am able to do so!) - you shall be My people, and I will be your God!*

This identity, as a secure child of God, is so deeply entrenched in Daniel and his friends, that they *determined not to defile themselves* with food from the King's kitchen, foods outlawed in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14:3-21. Daniel requested the main person, *Do not allow me to defile myself by eating foods forbidden, not by my culture, but foods forbidden by my God!*

The story of Daniel's character starts with him taking a stand to defend the sanctity of God, to Whom he has surrendered his life. *You can change my name if you wish, but that will not change who I am! I will not defile, corrupt my body eating foods God has forbidden, and food offered to idols.* You can change my name, but cannot change my allegiance and whom I worship.

Daniel refused what many would gladly welcome: delicacies from the top table. In response, God steps in to strengthen Daniel's testimony, preparing him for greater things.

⁶ Matthew 10:32

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God softened the heart of the Chief Steward who secretly agreed to Daniel's plan, they be given a vegetarian diet.

At the end of the three-year course of study, the King interviewed the graduating class and was pleased to note, his investment in them had paid off: they excelled in everything, beating all local competition. What the king did not know was, Daniel and his friends were not nourished with food from his kitchen, but fed a vegetarian diet of their choice!

Too often, we want our relationship with God to start, with Him showing His power and His might, to convince us of what He can do. Then either impressed by His marvellous power, or frightened by His awesome destructive power, we surrender to God.

But that's not the relationship God wants with us. He wants us to first, get to know Him through His revealed Word, to accept His proposition that He cares for us and loves us more than anything else in His creation, the reason why He sent His Son to defeat death and open the door leading to eternity with God.

John makes this so clear, To those who received God's Son and accepted Him, He gave them the power to become children of God. Those who truly believed in Him, whose birth depended not on the course of nature, nor on any impulse, or human plan, but who are born of God.

The first challenge the character of Daniel places before us, is the challenge of faith: *Do you know Me (God) well enough to trust me? Do you know Me well enough, to trust my Word? Do you know me well enough to stand up for Me?*

Because if you do know me, and are not ashamed to stand up for I have said is right, then you will be known as My people, and I will be your God! I will look after you and take care your every need.

AMEN.