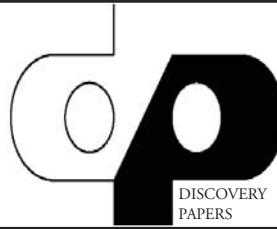


WHEN ALLEGIANCE IS EXPECTED

SERIES: WHEN KINGDOMS COLLIDE



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Daniel 1:3-21
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“I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

This pledge was written at the close of the 19th century. It was first published in a children’s magazine called *The Youth’s Companion*. The purpose of the pledge was to instill nationalism in the youth of this country—a love for our country and a desire to see its principles carried forward.

What does it mean to pledge allegiance? What are you really saying? Webster defines allegiance as “devotion or loyalty to a person, group, or cause.” What does it mean to pledge devotion to our country?

Most of us are asked to pledge allegiance to all sorts of things. Do you ever feel like everybody in your life wants more from you? Your job wants more time. Your spouse and children want more energy. Your extended family wants more attention. Charities want more money. Volunteer organizations want more effort.

Behind all of these requests is someone asking for allegiance. Someone or some organization wants you to pledge devotion or loyalty to them above someone else. We are constantly bombarded with requests for our allegiance.

How should we respond? We can’t say yes to all of them. How do we decide? How do we know when people are asking for too much devotion? What do we do when we promise more than we really want to deliver?

Last week we introduced the book of Daniel by talking about two kingdoms. The kingdom of man is what we live in day to day. We have jobs, we drive cars, we make and spend money. We go to the grocery store and movies and soccer games and vacations. This is the kingdom of man.

But Jesus came to bring the kingdom of God to earth. The holy and just rule of the creator, a community of people trying to live in accordance with his character and see his will done on earth—this is the kingdom of God.

For now, these two kingdoms exist side by side, but they are not at peace. They regularly come into conflict and

collide, sometimes in small ways, sometimes in dramatic clashes. The first part of the book of Daniel contains six stories that describe moments when that collision occurs in a dramatic way. We’ll be considering these stories over the next six weeks.

This morning we’re going to look at the first one. It’s a story where Daniel faces a choice about loyalty. Daniel faces someone demanding allegiance and expecting it. But it isn’t really even being asked, it’s being expected. Daniel has to make a choice about what to do when allegiance is just automatically expected of him. What do we do when allegiance is expected?

The story has multiple surprises. At first, we don’t know what to make of Daniel. But in the end, he handles these demands in a remarkable way. Daniel shows us where his ultimate allegiance lies. His example will help us as we face similar moments in our life.

We might think about this story as if it were a reality TV show. There’s a group of people who all start off in the same category. Then slowly that groups narrows down to a smaller and smaller group. Selections are made. Difficult choices. And eventually one individual ends up standing out above the rest. Someone has distinguished themselves. They have won.

That’s the basic situation that Daniel faces. He is selected as part of a group of people. Eventually, some smaller number of them will be chosen for a prestigious purpose. We get to follow his story as he makes decisions. Let’s follow Daniel as he stars in Babylon’s version of *The Apprentice*.

The Contestants

As with any good reality TV show, you have to start by meeting the contestants. Who are we going to root for? Who is playing this game? That’s where Daniel’s story starts. Unlike most reality TV shows, our contestants were violently kidnapped from their home cities and transported to a foreign city in order to participate in this contest.

Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility, youths without blemish, of good appearance and skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king's palace, and to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans. ⁵The king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate, and of the wine that he drank. They were to be educated for three years, and at the end of that time they were to stand before the king. ⁶Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah of the tribe of Judah. ⁷And the chief of the eunuchs gave them names: Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego.

The rules of recruiting are always the same. You start with good people. You train them well. And you put them in positions that match their skills. Babylon was a well-run government. They were literally conquering the world. Daniel and his friends were being recruited to help run this incredibly powerful and successful enterprise.

The problem here is that Daniel and his friends were being trained to be executives of evil.

Babylon was the enemy. In verse 2, this place was described as “the land of Shinar.” The land of Shinar is first mentioned in Genesis 10 and 11 where it was the place that a whole community of people gathered. They collected themselves into a community and they built a huge tower to identify themselves. This was, of course, the tower of Babel. It was the first major effort by a group of people to rebel against God. It became the iconic example of going against what God wanted for his people.

It is mentioned again in the book of Joshua when the nation of Israel loses a huge battle. The reason is discovered to be because one of its soldiers had stolen a “beautiful cloak from Shinar.” At the end of the Bible in the book of Revelation where Babylon represents the assembled evil of the entire world. Evil is personified by this place. In Revelation 17:5, it is called “*Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations.*”

Biblically, Babylon is a synonym for evil.

As we start reading the story of Daniel and his friends it looks like they might have gone into business with the

devil. It looks like they have given up on God and aligned themselves with evil.

The first surprising thing that Daniel does is not to refuse something from Babylon but to accept it. He is willing to be put into the service of the king of Babylon. He learns the language of the Chaldeans. What is most surprising of all is that he accepts a new name. This is what really blows my mind.

The name Daniel is powerful. It means “God is my judge.” Daniel's name proclaims the reality of the kingdom of God. But he is given the new name: Belteshazzar. That's also a powerful name. It probably comes from the phrase “to protect the life of the prince” and has to do with the role that Daniel will play in service to the king. His new name proclaims his role to serve the kingdom of man.

What's the first thing that happens when you start to work at a new company? If it's a company of reasonable size, you get a badge. That badge gets you in to the building and means you're OK to be there. But it also says something about you. It says that you are a part of something. You are aligned with the interests of the organization. You're one of them.

As this story opens, it looks like Daniel has become one of them, and his friends, too. And we can't believe it. You might say that they had no choice—that they would be killed if they protested any of these things. But this book is all about people refusing things that should have gotten them killed. So why do they let this happen?

It was because he knew that what we talked about last week: that we have to live in the kingdom of man. We have to be faithful to our companies and our countries. We can root for our sports teams. We are loyal to our friends and even our brands. We live in two kingdoms. Living in the kingdom of man means doing what Daniel did: supporting the world, doing our best within the earthly realm.

Support the World

That seems like a strange thing to say. Most of the time in church you hear about how we need to protect ourselves from the world. Or not to be tempted by the things of the world. Or how to fix the world. But all of us support the things of this world in some ways. And we ought to.

Jeremiah gives the exiles living in Babylon the same instruction. In Jeremiah 29:7, he tells them, “*seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.*” This is what Daniel was doing.

He was doing his best to make the kingdom of man successful. Even if that kingdom was Babylon. Why?

Because he knew that even the worst evil has the hope of being redeemed. Even that which represents everything that is against God has the possibility of being used by God. He knew that his life was fully steeped in the kingdom of God, so he expended his efforts for the sake of Babylon.

Yesterday, there was a group of 200 – 300 leaders gathered here at PBC: from churches, businesses and non-profits. You may have heard me reference this group before. We've been meeting together for over a year now. The movement is called Transforming the Bay with Christ. The whole goal is to see what can happen in the Bay Area if leaders collaborate to make an impact in our communities. We're interested in relationships between leaders, service in our communities, and church planting all across this area.

During our time together, John Ortberg gave a message and it sounded as if he had been reading the Book of Daniel. He talked about the kingdom of the world and the kingdom of God. And he reminded us that Jesus came not to take us out of the kingdom of the world, but to bring the kingdom of God into it.

Jesus taught us to pray, *Your kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven*. Not "This kingdom die, so I can be happy in heaven." I think Daniel knew this, even before Jesus made it explicit. I think he surprised people by the extent to which he aligned himself with Babylon. But I think he did it to see the kingdom of God brought to earth through him in some small way.

So Daniel served Babylon. This would have been a surprise. But then something changed. He was comfortable with some amount of alignment with the kingdom of man. But then he drew a line in the sand. This is the second surprise.

The Choice

This is where the reality TV show really gets interesting. Here is where the favored contestant does something that makes the crowd stunned. It seems like he makes a decision that ruins his chances.

Daniel 1:8–14—

But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of

the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself. ⁹And God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs, ¹⁰and the chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, I fear my lord the king, who assigned your food and your drink; for why should he see that you were in worse condition than the youths who are of your own age? So you would endanger my head with the king. ¹¹Then Daniel said to the steward whom the chief of the eunuchs had assigned over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, ¹²Test your servants for ten days; let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. ¹³Then let our appearance and the appearance of the youths who eat the king's food be observed by you, and deal with your servants according to what you see. ¹⁴So he listened to them in this matter, and tested them for ten days.

This part of the passage begins *But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food or wine*. Up until now, Daniel has adapted well to life in Babylon. He has accepted everything that was a part of life there. But now he has drawn a line.

The obvious question to ask is "why?" Why has Daniel drawn a line here? Some people think that the food the king was offering wasn't kosher. That he would be violating Jewish law by eating this food. That's possible, but it doesn't seem likely.

First, there's no mention of the food violating Israel's food laws. Second, there are no food laws against wine unless you had taken a vow of some sort, which Daniel doesn't seem to have done. Finally, and most conclusively, later in the book Daniel does eat meat and wine in Babylon. Daniel 10:3 refers to a period of three weeks where he refrains from meat and wine, with the implication that it was his normal practice to eat them.

So why now, at this point, does Daniel refuse the meat and the wine from the king's table?

When the pledge of allegiance for America was first introduced, it included a certain kind of salute. You started with your arm outstretched and the palm facing upward toward the flag and you ended with your palm turned downward. But then around 1942, people realized that this motion was way too similar to the Nazi salute Hitler had started. So it was quickly changed to putting your hand over your heart.

Nobody wanted any confusion about who you were pledging allegiance to. Daniel felt the same way.

I think Daniel understood that sometimes alignment can become allegiance. That sometimes the kingdom of man asks more from you than you ought to be willing to give. Sometimes you need to limit how much you accept from the kingdom of man in order to show the limits of how much you're willing to give.

I heard a story from decades ago about a prominent San Francisco law firm. In that era, most employees would leave the campus to go out for lunch. Most lawyers are particularly good at two things: extensive research and finding ways to make more money. This firm did both. They researched the productivity of their employees and discovered that by adding one extra hour to each workday, they could nearly double their profits.

So they built a company cafeteria where their employees could conveniently get lunch in the comfort of their own building. This is the trend that has increased and developed until the point where Google and other companies in our area have perfected it. Make your professional campus as convenient and as comfortable as possible so that your employees work harder and stay longer.

I think this is what Daniel was afraid of. He was OK with being a part of the Babylonian system. But he didn't want to be owned by them. He didn't want his alliance to turn into blind allegiance. He wasn't obligated to refuse the meat and the wine they offered him, but he chose to refuse it in order to maintain some distance for his own personal sake.

Maybe he knew that if he allowed himself to be wined and dined by Babylon, the kingdom of man would become brighter and brighter and the kingdom of God would fade away into the background of his life. To avoid that, Daniel drew a line in the sand.

Listen to this definition for "drawing a line in the sand": *to declare an artificial boundary and imply that crossing it will cause trouble.* That describes perfectly what Daniel was doing. He was declaring an artificial boundary because he knew himself well enough to know that crossing it would cause trouble.

One of our favorite restaurants when we lived in Texas was Chick-Fil-A. It's now finally made it to the Bay Area so we can all enjoy the goodness of a chicken sandwich with plenty of pickles. The great irony of Chick-Fil-A is that it's owned by a Christian family so everyone wants to

go there after church on Sunday. Except of course, they are closed on Sunday because it's owned by a Christian family.

I don't think they have to be closed on Sundays. They wouldn't be sinning to operate seven days a week. Other companies with Christian leaders aren't wrong for not closing their doors on Sunday. But Chick-Fil-A has drawn a line in the sand. An artificial boundary that they won't cross. But they do it to acknowledge that they owe their allegiance to a kingdom other than the one of profit and economics.

This is what Daniel does by refusing the king's meat and wine. He supports the world, but he demonstrates allegiance to God. This is our call as well. Our ultimate allegiance is to God.

What could this look like for you?

Realize that the world doesn't ask for allegiance. Allegiance is rarely given. It is bought.

I have a vivid memory of my seventh grade social studies teacher telling us that she was going to teach us a fundamental lesson of economics. She slowly wrote on the board, "There ... is ... no ... such ... thing ... as ... a ... free ... lunch." I was so proud of myself for bringing my lunch that day instead of having to buy it because I thought I had beaten a fundamental lesson of economics.

But this is what she was saying. The world doesn't give stuff away. It trades. This is what Babylon was doing. It was trading gourmet food and the honor of eating from the king's table for the allegiance of these young men. That's why Daniel refused the meat and the wine. He didn't want Babylon to buy his loyalty.

If the world is trying to buy our allegiance, that means that pledging allegiance to God will cost us something. We will miss out on something that the world seems to offer. Or it will at least seem like we are missing out.

Sabbath is a great example of this. That's the principle that Chick-Fil-A put into practice. The theology behind Sabbath is not a period of time to rest and recharge so that you can work more efficiently. We heard about that this summer when we looked at the Ten Commandments. The purpose of the Sabbath is to recognize our dependence on God. To admit that what we have comes from him, not from our diligent effort.

Sabbath is a kind of pledging allegiance.

It might be necessary for some of us to draw lines in the sand with the people that employ us. Or with the consumer culture that we live in. Or with our extended families. Or with our friends.

The great thing about what Daniel did is that he didn't draw a line in the sand alone. He did it as part of a community of people. Daniel and his three friends all refused the meat and wine of the king's table.

Living counter-culturally is much easier if it's done as part of a group. That's what we're meant to do as the church. We figure out that our ultimate allegiance is to God. And we agree to live that way together. To support each other in it. To remind each other in gentle and grace-filled ways when we might have forgotten. That's part of why we come together each Sunday. To remember this kingdom of God and acknowledge our ultimate allegiance to it.

Worship is like saying the pledge of allegiance. I pledge allegiance above all forces of this world to God, the creator and redeemer of the earth. That's why we are here this morning.

Daniel and his friends declared their allegiance to God. If you were following this reality TV show, you would think that all hope is lost for them. Babylon is asking for complete devotion and they have placed a limit on how far they are willing to go. They have just completely removed themselves from the running. But that's not how the story ends. There's one more surprise left.

The Result

Daniel 1:15–21—

At the end of ten days it was seen that they were better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youths who ate the king's food. ¹⁶So the steward took away their food and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables.

¹⁷As for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams. ¹⁸At the end of the time, when the king had commanded that they should be brought in, the chief of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar. ¹⁹And the king spoke with them, and among all of them none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Therefore they stood before the

king. ²⁰And in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanterers that were in all his kingdom. ²¹And Daniel was there until the first year of King Cyrus.

This is the kind of story we like to hear. Our hero makes a brave decision, risks everything for the sake of his principles and then comes out on top. He didn't just match all the other contestants. He was stronger and healthier. At the end of the training program, it turned out that Daniel and his friends were the top of the class and they got promoted to the best position.

The judges have decided and Daniel wins. What a great story. This is exactly what we want. Daniel was faithful to the kingdom of God and fabulously successful in the kingdom of man at the same time. A double victory. Two things need to be said about this outcome. It is helpful, but it can be dangerous.

It's helpful because it's good to see that it's possible to be faithful to God and successful in this world at the same time. Those two are not mutually exclusive. Sometimes we assume that if people are successful in business or politics then they must have cut some corners. We can think that success in the kingdom of man can't come without sacrificing our principles in the kingdom of God. Daniel demonstrates that this isn't true. He is successful and faithful. You can be both.

However, this story can be dangerous because we could assume that if we are faithful to the kingdom of God, then we will automatically be successful in the kingdom of man. After all, Daniel trusted God and ended up winning. So if we trust God too, then we will win too. We could be led to believe that.

A closer look at the text will help us to see that this isn't the case. Daniel didn't come out on top because he was faithful to God. Daniel won the reality show because God wanted him to.

Verse 9 reads *God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs*. Verse 17 reads *As for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom*. God gave Daniel favor and God gave the four of them learning and skill. The reason they ended up at the top of their class was because God put them there.

The kingdom of God is not a vending machine where you put in faithfulness and you get success spat out at you.

Being faithful to God does not guarantee you any kind of success in the short term. Your faithfulness means that you are living true to the kingdom of God and trusting its king for the result.

Faithfulness means that you are trusting God for the result. We support the world. Then we pledge allegiance to God. And we trust him for the results. Trust God for the results.

God gave Daniel success and intelligence and a powerful position. But that doesn't mean that is what he wants for you or me or anyone else. He might. When we are faithful, we are trusting him for the result.

That's why it is so hard. The mantra of the kingdom of man is that you are in control. Act this way and your life will improve. Go to this school and you will get a good job. Follow the rules and you'll come out on top. The kingdom of man promises us that if we make the right decisions, things will go the way we want them to.

This, of course, is a blatant lie. It's amazing that we keep believing it. Everywhere we look there are examples that disprove it. People with incredible background and experience that can't find a good job. People who happened to be in the right place at the right time and got lucky because of it. We see sudden illnesses, sudden injustice, and sudden tragedy. We're told that we're in control and we believe it despite all the overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

Being faithful to God and living in his kingdom is an acknowledgment of what we should already know to be true. We are not in control. God is. We are in the best place when we stop trying to take control for ourselves and admit that everything is up to God.

That's what Daniel does. I don't think he knew what exactly would happen if he only ate vegetables. He just knew that he needed to clarify which kingdom was primary in his life. And when he did that, God would decide how things would turn out.

If you stop working to honor a Sabbath, I can't promise you that you'll succeed. If you draw boundaries with your extended family, they might be upset with you. The results aren't guaranteed. They are up to God.

Conclusion

American schoolchildren are asked to pledge allegiance to a flag. It's an allegiance to a principle, to a set of values that define a nation. I believe our nation is worth pledging allegiance to.

But there is something even more worthy. I've invited us to pledge allegiance first and foremost to God. Not to a principle or a set of values or an abstract idea, but to God himself. Not something, someone. The creator God who made us, loves us, and redeems us at great cost to himself.

This is who Daniel pledged allegiance to, even when it might have cost him dearly. He is a great model of what it looks like when refusing to be owned by the world and trusting God for the results.

Have you let the kingdom of man own you? Are you consumed by the desire to control the outcome of everything in your life? How can you protect yourself from getting too wrapped up in the kingdom of man?

Take some time this week and consider whether there is a line in the sand that you can draw. Remember that we aren't talking about black and white issues here. Your line will probably be very different from someone else's line.

Maybe it's not doing something like eating meat or drinking wine or spending money in a certain way or spending time doing certain things. Or maybe it's doing something, like attending a small group or having a regular rhythm of prayer or reading the Bible or serving regularly in the church or in the world.

It's not about the decision or the specifics. And it's not going to be the same for anyone else. It's about you and your heart. When allegiance is expected, how can you protect your heart and live faithfully in the kingdom of God?