

**For Goodness Sake**  
Sermon Text: Daniel 1:3-17  
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**I. Receiving goodness from God**

“O Lord, it’s hard to be humble, when you’re perfect in every way. I can’t wait to look in the mirror, ‘cause I get better lookin’ each day. To know me is to love me. I must be one heck of a man. O Lord, it’s hard to be humble, but I’m doin’ the best that I can.” I remember growing up that I got a laugh out of that country and western song by Mac Davis, “O Lord, It’s Hard to Be Humble.” But, you know, that song could easily have been the theme song for Daniel. I mean, look at how he is described in the first chapter of the Old Testament book bearing his name.

Daniel was young man, “without physical defect and handsome, versed in every branch of wisdom, endowed with knowledge and insight, and competent to serve in the king’s palace.” In other words, Daniel had a whole lot going for him. He was the recipient of a great deal of goodness from God. However, not everything was “peachy” in Daniel’s life. He and quite a few other young nobles from Jerusalem were taken away to captivity in Babylon. But even there, Daniel and his friends were kept in the king’s palace. And if you have to be a captive, you might as well be a captive in the palace.

But before we get too far ahead of ourselves in the story, it is helpful to know a little about the setting for the book of Daniel. The time was 606 B.C. and the place was the southern kingdom of Judah. The northern kingdom of Israel had been conquered over one hundred years earlier by the Assyrians. Since that time, the Babylonian empire had become the dominant power in that part of the world from their location in what is now Iraq. Egypt was the rival power to Judah’s south.

If you look at the first verses of Daniel 1, you’ll see that Jehoiakim had been king of Judah for three years. What the text doesn’t say is that Judah was a vassal state to Egypt. But as the Babylonian empire expanded, King Nebuchadnezzar asserted more and more control over the land of Judah. The incident in which Daniel and his friends were taken captive was the first of three deportations that occurred as Nebuchadnezzar took progressively stronger actions against Judah, culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 586 B.C.

In this first wave of captives, Nebuchadnezzar was looking for “cream of the crop” young men, probably teenagers, who would be trained to serve as pages in the palace. He wanted to put Judah’s most outstanding young noblemen through a three year leadership training course. Look again at the characteristics the Babylonian king desired. He wanted young men who were good-looking and also had outstanding mental capabilities. Besides that the young men needed to have the polish and personality to fit in with the power elite of the empire.

In other words, Nebuchadnezzar looked for young men who were almost too good to be true. Kind of like a lot of soccer fans feel about Cristiano Ronaldo – young, good-looking, successful... Or movie star Channing Tatum – he seems to have it all. That is the type of person Nebuchadnezzar got with Daniel and the other young men from Judah who were taken captive. Truly, Daniel received many good gifts from the Lord.

How about you and me? How do we respond to the goodness of God in our lives? When I have the opportunity to travel in another country, I am reminded that there are so many good things in my life that I can easily take for granted. I often live as if I deserve those blessings from the Lord. But the attitude I want to cultivate as a follower of Christ is one of gratitude and humility. All of the goodness I enjoy in life is a gift from God. Let's be sure humbly to thank the Lord for his goodness.

## **II. Choosing goodness for ourselves**

Returning to Daniel's story, our passage for this morning tells us that although the young captives were already well educated, they received additional training in the language and literature of the Babylonians. They were put through a kind of finishing school in which they were given the final touches to prepare them for life as part of the elite in Babylon. Daniel and his friends lived in the palace and were given the "royal treatment" in every way. When it came to their diet, the young men were offered the same royal food and drink as Nebuchadnezzar himself. It was good food, rich food, and fine wine – the best that the empire had to offer. The king's intent was to provide the best of the best for these promising young men. He wanted Daniel and the others to reach their maximum potential.

So Daniel was faced with a difficult decision. He was aware that the king was trying to provide the very best, but in his heart Daniel knew that a faithful Jew would not eat the food from Nebuchadnezzar's table. In the first place, some of the food would have been unclean according to the dietary laws God had given the Jews. And in the second place, the food intended for the king's table was offered to the Babylonian gods for a blessing before it was served.

Faced with this difficult decision, this potentially life and death decision, Daniel chose goodness. He asked those who were in charge of his care to give him only veggies to eat and only water to drink. However, the caretakers were concerned that the diet might make Daniel less healthy than the other pages in training, and that would lead to the caretakers' being punished by the Nebuchadnezzar himself. So Daniel proposed a trial period. He asked them to give him only veggies and water for ten days. Then the caretakers could assess whether or not Daniel was healthier than the others who were eating the king's food. And, of course, the low fat diet with lots of green leafy veggies agreed with Daniel – after ten days he looked healthier than the other young men.

Daniel was faced with a difficult decision between the good offered by the king and the best offered by the Lord. He chose God's goodness. Daniel's example is one we can learn from as we face decisions between a choice that seems to be acceptable and what we know is God's best for us.

I was reminded of this truth a couple of months ago when I received an email from a guy I knew in college and hadn't heard from in thirty years. I'd like to share it with you, not because it makes me look good – because Lord knows there have been many instances in which I've done the wrong thing, but I'd like to share it with you because it's an example of what can happen when we choose God's best.

Here's the email from a guy we'll call 'Alex': "Long ago there was a kid you played basketball with the summer before his freshman year at Stetson..." As background information, I was a junior when 'Alex' was a freshman. I was an active member of the fraternity that he wanted to join and he pledged the fraternity I was in.

'Alex' continues: "Anyway, after I quit (blackballed) from your fraternity, I never forgot that you were the only one that continued to talk to me afterwards. I never forgot that... Thanks for being you..." In that instance, I thank God that I chose goodness. I hope and pray the same for you – choose goodness it pleases the Lord and is a blessing to others.

### **III. Affirming goodness in others**

My next point is not explicitly found in our text, but I believe it is in line with God's good plan for you and me. I want to encourage each of us to be intentional about affirming the goodness we see in others. Life can be filled with so much negativity and criticism that being affirmed by a brother or sister in Christ is like a breath of fresh air.

You may remember Pastor Steve's teaching during Lent in which he drew upon the insights of Christian psychologist, Gary Chapman, about the five "love languages" – the main ways we are wired to give and receive love. Chapman says that each one of us has a preferred "love language." Some of us experience love best through physical touch, others through the giving or receiving of gifts, still others through acts of service, quality time, or words of affirmation. That's right – words of affirmation are a primary way we give and receive love. For some of us words of affirmation is our main love language, but for all of us words of affirmation are valuable.

So let us, as a family of faith, be on the lookout for God's goodness shining through others. And when we see that goodness, let's be intentional about affirming it in one another, because words of affirmation can be so important. I know they have been for me, even before I received that affirming email from my college friend 'Alex.'

A number of years ago the couples small group that Cindy and I were in did an affirmation exercise after we'd been meeting together as a group for a while. On 3x5 cards, each person wrote down one outstanding quality for every other person in the group. We spent one whole evening sharing our affirmations of one another, and then we got to keep the cards with the affirming words others in the group wrote about us. For years after that I saved those cards and when I was having a no good, very bad kind of day, and I felt like nobody in world except my mother loved me, I would take out those cards and read through them just to get my batteries charged up again. Words of affirmation can be so important.

Who in your sphere of relationships reflects God's goodness? Perhaps it's a family member, maybe it's a friend, it could be someone here at church in whom you see the goodness of the Lord shining through. Why not let that person know? Heart-felt words of affirmation of the goodness we see in others can be so important. May each of us appreciate God's goodness in our lives, choose the Lord's best in what we do and say and think, and affirm the goodness we see in one another. Amen.