**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**DANIEL-001. YOUTHFUL CONFESSORS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"8. But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's meat, nor with the wine which he drank; therefore he requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself. 9. Now God had brought Daniel into favour and tender love with the prince of the eunuchs. 10. And the prince of the eunuchs said unto Daniel, I fear my lord the king, who hath appointed your meat and your drink; for why should he see your faces worse liking than the children which are of your sort? then shall ye make me endanger my head to the king. 11. Then said Daniel to Melzar, whom the prince of the eunuchs had set over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, 12. Prove thy servants, I beseech thee, ten days; and let them give us pulse to eat, and water to drink. 13. Then let our countenances be looked upon before thee, and the countenance of the children that eat of the portion of the king's meat; and as thou seest, deal with thy servants. 14. So he consented to them in this matter, and proved them ten days. 15. And at the end of ten days their countenances appeared fairer and fatter in flesh than all the children which did eat the portion of the king's meat. 16. Thus Melzar took away the portion of their meat, and the wine that they should drink; and gave them pulse. 17. As for these four children, God gave them knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom; and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams. 18. Now at the end of the days that the king had said he should bring them in, then the prince of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar. 19. And the king communed with them; and among them all was found none like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah; therefore stood they before the king. 20. And in all matters of wisdom and understanding, that the king enquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers that were in all his realm. 21. And Daniel continued even unto the first year of king Cyrus."*

*Daniel 1:8-21*

Daniel was but a boy at the date of the Captivity, and little more at the time of the attempt to make a Chaldean of him. The last verse says that he continued even unto the first year of king Cyrus, the date given elsewhere as the close of the Captivity (2 Chron. xxxvi. 22; Ezra i. 1; vi. 3). From Daniel x. 1 we learn that he lived on till Cyrus's third year, if not later; but the date in i. 21 is probably given in order to suggest that Daniel's career covered the whole period of the Captivity, and burned like a star of hope for the exiles. The incident in our passage is a noble example of religious principle applied to small details of daily life, and shows how God crowns such conscientious self-restraint with success. The lessons which it contains are best gathered by following the narrative.

**I.** The heroic determination of the boyish confessor is first set forth. The plan of taking leading young men from the newly captured nation and turning them into Babylonians was a stroke of policy as heartless and high-handed as might be expected from a great conqueror. In some measure, the same thing has been done by all nations who have built up a world-wide dominion. The new names given to the youths, the attaching of them to the court, their education in Babylonish fashion, all were meant for the same purpose,--to denationalise them, and strip them of their religion, and thus to make them tools for more easily governing their countrymen.

Most men would yield to the influences, and be so lapped in the comforts of their new position as to become pliable as wax in the conqueror's hands; but here and there he would come across a bit of stiffer stuff, which would break rather than bend. Such an obstinate piece of humanity was found in the Hebrew youth, of some fifteen years, whose Hebrew name (God is my judge) expressed a truth that ruled him, when the name was exchanged for one that invoked Bel. It took some firmness for a captive lad, without friends or influence, to take Daniel's stand; for the motive of his desire to be excused from taking the fare provided can only have been religious. He was determined, in his brave young heart, not to defile himself with the king's meat. The phrase points to the pollution incurred by eating things offered to idols, and does not imply scrupulousness like that of Pharisaic times, nor necessarily suggest a late date for the book. Probably there had been some kind of religious consecration of the food to Babylonian gods, and Daniel, in his solitary faithfulness, was carrying out the same principles which Paul afterwards laid down for Corinthian Christians as to partaking of things offered to idols. Similar difficulties are sure to emerge in analogous cases, and do so, on many mission fields.

The motive here, then, is distinctly religious. Common life was so woven in with idolatrous worship that every meal was in some sense a sacrifice. Therefore Touch not, taste not, handle not, was the inevitable dictate for a devout heart. Daniel seems to have been the moving spirit; but as is generally the case, he was able to infuse his own strong convictions into his companions, and the four of them held together in their protest. The great lesson from the incident is that religion should regulate the smallest details of life, and that it is not narrow over-scrupulousness, but fidelity to the highest duty, when a man sets his foot down about any small matter, and says, No, I dare not do it, little as it is, and pleasant as it might be to sense, because I should thereby be mixed up in a practical denial of my God. So did not I, because of the fear of God (Neh. v. 15), is a motto which will require from many a young man abstinence from many things which it would be much easier to accept.

**II.** This young confessor was as prudent as he was brave; and the story goes on to show how wisely he played his part, and how willing he was to accept all working compromises which might smooth his way. He did not at all want to pose as a martyr, and had no pleasure in making a noise. The favour which he had won with the high officer who looked after the lads before their formal examination (graduation we might call it), is set down in the narrative to the divine favour; but that favour worked by means, and no doubt the lad had done his part to win the important good opinion of his superior. The more firm is our determination to take no step beyond the line of duty, the more conciliatory we should be. But many people seem to think that heroism is shown by rudeness, and that if we are afraid that we shall some time have to say No very emphatically, we should prepare for it by a great many preliminary and unnecessary negatives. The very stern need for parting company, when conscience points one way and companions another, is a reason for keeping cordially together whenever we can.

The prince of the eunuchs made a very reasonable objection. He had been appointed to see after the health of the lads, and had ample means at his disposal; and if they lost their health in this chase after what he could only think a superstitious fad, the despot whom he served would think nothing of making him answer with his head. His fear gives a striking side-light as to the conditions of service in such a court, where no man's head was firm between his shoulders. Why should the prince of the eunuchs have supposed that the diet asked for would not nourish the lads? It was that of the bulk of men everywhere, and he had only to go out into the streets or the nearest barrack in Babylon to see what thews and muscles could be nurtured on vegetable diet and water. But whatever the want of ground in his objection, it was enough that he made it. Note that he puts it entirely on possible harmful results to himself, and that silences Daniel, who had no right to ask another to run his head into the noose, into which he was ready to put his own, if necessary. Martyrs by proxy, who have such strong convictions that they think it somebody else's duty to run risk for them, are by no means unknown.

This boy was made of other metal. So, apparently he gives up the prince of the eunuchs, and turns to another of the friends whom he had made in his short captivity--the person in whose more immediate charge he and his three friends were. He is named Melzar in the Authorised Version; but the Revised Version more accurately takes that to be a name of office, and translates it as steward. He did the catering for them, and was sufficiently friendly to listen to Daniel's reasonable proposal to try the vegetable diet for ten days--probably meaning an indefinite period, sufficiently long to test results, which a literal ten days would perhaps scarcely be. So the good-natured steward let the lads have their way, much wondering in his soul, no doubt, why they should take as much trouble to avoid good living as most youths would have taken to get it.

**III.** The success of the experiment comes next. We do not need to suppose a miracle as either wrought or suggested by the narrative. The issue might have taught the steward a wholesome lesson in dietetics, which he and a great many of us much need. A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth, and his bodily life consisteth not in the abundance and variety of the things that he eateth. The teaching of this lesson is, not that vegetarianism or total abstinence is obligatory, for diet is here regarded only as part of idolatrous worship; but certainly a secondary conclusion, fairly drawn from the story, is that vigorous health is best kept up on very simple fare. Many dinner-tables, over which God's blessing is formally asked, are spread in such a fashion as it is hard to suppose deserves His blessing. The simpler the fare, the fewer the wants: the fewer the wants, the greater the riches; the freer the life, the more leisure for higher pursuits, and the more sound the bodily health.

But the rosy faces and vigorous health of Daniel and his friends may illustrate, by a picturesque example, a large truth--that God suffers no man to be a loser by faithfulness, and more than makes up all that is surrendered for His sake. The blessing of God on small means makes them fountains of truer joy than large ones unblessed. No man hath left anything for Christ's sake but he receives a hundred-fold in this life, if not in the actual blessings surrendered, at all events in the peace and joy of heart of which they were supposed to be bearers. God fills places emptied by Himself, and those emptied by us for His sake.

**IV.** The conscientious abstinence of Daniel had limits. The learning of the Chaldeans was largely ritualistic, and magic, incantations, divination, and mythology constituted a most important part of it. Did not the conscience, which could not swallow idolatrous food, resent being forced to assimilate idolatrous learning? No; for all that learning could be acquired by a faithful monotheist, and could be used against the system which gave it birth. Like Moses, or like the young Pharisee Saul, these Jewish boys nurtured their faith by knowledge of their enemies' belief, and used their childhood's lessons as weapons in fighting for God's truth. It is not every man's duty to become familiar with error, or to master anti-Christian systems. But if it become ours, we are not to turn away from the task, nor to doubt that God will keep His own truth alight in our minds, if we realise the danger of the position, and seek to cling to Him.

**V.** So we have the last scene in the youths appearance before Nebuchadnezzar. A three years curriculum was considered necessary to turn a Jewish boy into a Chaldean expert, fit to be a traitor to his nation, an apostate from his God, and a tool of the tyrant. So far as knowledge of the priestly and astronomical science went, the four Hebrews came out at the top of the lists. The great king himself, with that personal interference in all departments which makes a despot's life so burdensome, put them through their paces, and was satisfied. His object had been to get instruments with which he could work on the Captivity, and, no doubt, also to secure servants who had no links with anybody in Babylon. Foreigners, kinless loons, are favourites with despots, for plain reasons. But Nebuchadnezzar could not fathom the hearts of the lads. An incarnation of unbridled will would find it difficult to understand a life guided by conscience, and religious scruples would have sounded as an unknown tongue to him. But yet, as he and they stood face to face, who was stronger, the conqueror or the youths who feared God, and none besides? They were in their right place at the head of the examination lists. They had not said, We do not believe in all this rubbish, and we are not going to trouble ourselves to master it, but they had set themselves determinedly to work, and been all the more persevering because of their objection to the diet. If a young man has to be singular by reason of his religion, let him be singularly diligent in his work, and seek to be first, not merely for his own glory, but for the sake of the religion which he professes.

Plain living and high thinking ought to go together. England and America have many names carved high on their annals, and written deep on their citizens hearts, who have nourished a sublime, studious youth in poverty, cultivating literature on a little oatmeal, and who all their lives have scorned delights and lived laborious days. It is the temper which is most likely to succeed, but which, whether it succeeds or not, brings the best blessings to those who cultivate it. Such a youth will generally be followed by an honoured manhood like Daniel's, but will, at all events, be its own reward, and have God's blessing.

Daniel continued unto the first year of king Cyrus. These simple words contain volumes. During all the troubles of the nation, from the king's insanity, and the murders of his successors, amidst whirling intrigues, envies, plots, and persecutions, this one man stood firm, like a pillar amid blowing sands. So God keeps the steadfast soul which is fixed on Him; and while the world passeth away, and the fashion thereof, he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.