

DANIEL- SECOND CHOICE

Welcome to Babylon

I think I would be right in saying that we are living in a world, right now, that none of us would choose. We are living in a world fighting a pandemic. That's the stuff of films, isn't it? That's a world that's not supposed to be real, isn't it? And yet, here we are! This is a world of second choice! Yet it is the world we have to live in. And, for this time, however long it lasts, we find ourselves having to live in the world as it is and not how we would like it to be.

There may too, be a deeper truth at work here. This virus, Covid-19, will pass because of the brilliance of human ability, skill and determination. This extraordinary time will pass. This particular second-choice world will pass. There are, though, second-choice worlds that may not pass. You may, right now, be living in other second-choice worlds.

A second-choice world is, most simply, having to live in a place we do not want to be. It is a world we never expected to live in. Maybe we're stuck in a place, to be honest, we don't like but we can't move. Maybe that's particularly true at this time. Maybe that relationship that seemed so good at one time, doesn't seem so good now. Perhaps you are in a job you don't want, or the job you really want, you can't get. Or you lost your job. Maybe it's to do with other things: money, debt, loss, deep hurt you have experienced, deep hurt you have caused. Maybe it is to do with the future – what you have planned has been ripped away. Perhaps the past haunts you as you live with the consequences of something that happened.

Second-choice worlds are worlds we do not choose or desire and over which we have no control. As many of you will know, I would say I have lived most of my life in a second-choice world, following the death of my dad, when I was just six years old. That is not a world I would have chosen but it is a world I have had to live in.

My best guess is that all of us, are in some part of our life, living in a second-choice world. Our stories will all be different, but we all know the experience of a second-choice world. But there is a challenge here. Living in a second-choice world does not mean everything is bad – that's not true. I have lots of

things in my life that are good: my family, my job, my health. The challenge becomes, how do I live well in a second-choice world?

There is a magnificent example of how to live well in a second-choice world in the life of a man called Daniel. So, as we live in the second-choice world of Covid-19, and all our other second-choice worlds, we're going to explore his story over the next couple of months.

1 In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. ²And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia and put in the treasure house of his god.

³Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king's service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility— ⁴young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians. ⁵The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service.

⁶Among those who were chosen were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. ⁷The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego.

⁸But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way. ⁹Now God had caused the official to show favour and compassion to Daniel, ¹⁰but the official told Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you."

¹¹Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, ¹²"Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to

eat and water to drink. ¹³Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see.” ¹⁴So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days.

¹⁵At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food. ¹⁶So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead.

¹⁷To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds.

¹⁸At the end of the time set by the king to bring them into his service, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. ¹⁹The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so, they entered the king’s service. ²⁰In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom.

²¹And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.

(Daniel 1 v 21)

Daniel never expected to end up in Babylon. As far as we know, Daniel lived the whole of his adult life in Babylon. Everything we will read about Daniel in this series, happened in Babylon. Here’s the thing, Daniel’s future had been fairly predictable up until now. In fact, Daniel had a great future ahead of him, but right at the beginning of what we read in the story of Daniel is a whole lot of heartbreak. Actually, what we read about is shattered dreams. Verses 1 & 2 set the scene.

Centuries ago, God had made a promise to Abraham that he would be the father of the nation. That nation was Israel whom God chose and loved. Israel’s journey with God had its ups and downs and now, as Jeremiah and others had prophesied, Israel was exiled by the Babylonians.

The temple had become the meeting place of God with his people and something that marked Israel’s relationship with God. Knowing exactly what he was doing, Nebuchadnezzar carried off the articles from the temple to Babylon. Daniel, a Jewish boy, knew this history of his people

and knew what this act meant, his understanding of his people and God's promise to them shattered. Daniel himself, along with his friends, is taken captive to Babylon. Interestingly Jeremiah is left in Jerusalem.

Daniel is probably around 14/15 years old at this point. Daniel and his friends are to serve in the king's court. They are to serve a foreign king, in a foreign country, in a foreign culture. My best guess is that Daniel would have dreams about what he would do in life. We are told he was gifted, intelligent, good looking and quick to learn. He could probably have done anything he wanted in Jerusalem.

I wonder what he dreamed of doing or being? Well, one thing's for sure: it did not involve Babylon. He never expected to end up in Babylon.

We all have dreams in life, don't we? Nothing wrong with that – actually it can be a God given thing.

“Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.” (Psalm 37 v 4)

When we follow God, he places in our hearts the dreams that we then can pursue! Daniel's dream did not involve Babylon. Daniel knew what it was like to have his dreams shattered. And maybe you do to.

Author Viv Thomas says it this way:

Most of us like to have our first choice. In the real world things do not work out that smoothly. Even if we have the opportunity to employ our power of choice, the first choice tends to go wrong. Somehow our first choice gets contaminated or corrupted; it changes and in the process we are changed along with it. What looked like an outstanding selection at first, turns into something less than we anticipated or much different. The attractive partner you married loses their appeal; the job with huge potential becomes tedious within a few weeks; the house where you felt so safe is burgled; and the friends to whom you once felt so close are now distant.¹

Maybe you know what shattered dreams are like. Daniel has to live his life in a place he does not want to be. That's true for all of us, right now, and we all have to live in the world as it is, not as we would like it to be.

¹ Thomas, V., “*Second Choice*,” Paternoster Press 2000 page 3

In Babylon, Daniel had his name changed, as did his friends. Daniel is a Hebrew name containing the name of God. Daniel means 'the Lord will judge.' In Babylon he's given a new name, a Babylonian name – Belteshazzar, containing the name of a Babylonian god – Bel. Belteshazzar means: Bel protect his life. Nebuchadnezzar is saying: 'I'm in charge!'

Sometimes, the world as it is gives us no choice! In Babylon, Daniel is cut off from the life that he planned. In Babylon, Daniel might feel cut off from God, and yet, as we read this story of this remarkable young man, we see the story of a man who thrived. Daniel, it seems, was able to live well in a second-choice world. We may observe some things from him that may be helpful to us, as we try to live well and thrive in our second-choice worlds.

M Scott Peck wrote the best-selling popular psychology book "The Road Less Travelled." It begins with these three words: "Life is difficult". People, he says, respond in one of two ways: either, they face the truth that life is difficult and learn to live with it. Or, they try to avoid difficulties and pretend things are other than they really are. He asks the question as to which one leads to the more fulfilling life.

The study of social science has revealed that some people thrive in challenging circumstance while others don't. A key factor in people being able to thrive in challenging circumstances, researchers say, is resilience. The truth is that, in very challenging circumstances, in second-choice worlds, we can become spiritually resilient and we can thrive. That's what Daniel did.

In Babylon Daniel was faced with a whole range of choices that had not been open to him before, and he had to figure out which ones to engage with and which ones to leave alone. Verse 8 tells us he made a choice not to defile himself with royal food and wine. Actually, it says he 'resolved' not to.

There is no evidence that Daniel (or his friends) objected to learning Babylonian culture. In fact, at the end of their training, we are told he and his friend were 10 times better than anyone else, they excelled. But there is a point at which he draws the line: he will not defile himself with the royal food and wine. We are not told why. That that's not the point. The point is, there is a line he will not cross. He resolved in his heart to

honour God in this way. It was, in fact, a tough choice. He could have lost his head – literally.

Resilient people refuse to become passive victims of things beyond their control. Spiritually resilient people will not betray their deepest convictions. Spiritually resilient people will not betray their deepest values. Spiritually resilient people will not betray what they know of God.

Up until verse 8, Babylon has been in charge. When Daniel resolves in his heart to honour God, he is now in charge!

How are you living now in this second-choice world of Covid-19? Perhaps, in your heart, you know you need to make a choice to honour God, a relationship, an attitude, an unhelpful pattern of behaviour.

Maybe, as you look beyond the present, you know in your heart there is a line you need to draw. It may be a second-choice world, but there is a line beyond which you will not go. When life gets hard, and when the life of faith gets hard, its easy to drift, to get caught up in what's around us.

Daniel's wisdom was to know where to draw the line and where to compromise and negotiate within his second-choice world. Resolving in your heart to honour God is what sets you up for the future.

Resilient people have friends. It seems to me that Daniel's three friends were God's gift to him in Babylon, and my guess is that he needed his friends in Babylon, like he'd never needed them in Jerusalem.

An interesting, thing that has emerged during the lock down we are experiencing, is just how much we need community. We have found so many creative ways to find and maintain community. From pop stars, to sports stars, from TV personalities to people on the radio, from companies to small business, from social groups to individuals, we have found ways to create community.

I'm phoning my mum every day, she is delighted! It's lovely to have you all watching this live stream, which is all about maintaining community. And it turns out that some of you watching this would not normally come to CBC, or any church, but you are watching this!! I'm wondering if that's something to do with seeking community at a difficult time. Community and friends are very important when life is tough.

Friends and community that can hold us accountable is a very powerful thing, and if we are to live well, if we are to be resilient, we need to cultivate community.

Here's a thought, maybe you could be the difference for someone struggling in a second-choice world.

Who keeps appearing all the way through this chapter? (v 2,9,17) The answer is God. The point? God is with Daniel even in his second-choice world.

Here's a fantasy some Christians believe: "If I walk closely with God, he will give me my first choice (perfect) world." No, that is simply not true. It was not true for Daniel. Behind this fantasy is the notion that spiritual people always 'get it right.' Spiritual people don't have problems because they always hear clearly from God and always do what he says. But Daniel, whose prayer we sometimes hold up as a model prayer, lived his whole life in a second-choice world. And yet, God is with him.

Here's another fantasy some Christians believe: "In my first-choice world, I will be able to walk close to God." This fantasy promises that when I am where I want to be, I can enjoy a wonderful relationship with God. Daniel walked closely with God in his second-choice world. To live in this fantasy is to live an 'if only' life.

The deep and profound truth revealed in the story of Daniel, is that God is as close to you in your second-choice world as he ever could be in your first-choice world. And your first-choice world may never come. So, in a second-choice world, how will you live?

Prepared by Rev. Ian Phillips, lived streamed on Sunday 3rd May 2020, for Crawley Baptist Church.

