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Daniel 2:17–18, NIV.

¹⁷ Then Daniel returned to his house and explained the matter to his friends Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. ¹⁸ He urged them to plead for mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery, so that he and his friends might not be executed with the rest of the wise men of Babylon.

Praying in the Hospital Parking Lot.

When working as a hospital chaplain, the intensity of one's workday can vary a lot. There are days when it seems like all you do is help people fill out medical power of attorney forms, tell family members about next steps after a very elderly patient passes away, and talk to a few patients who have been in the hospital longer than expected and are feeling anxious. Then there are days when a young person is brought into the emergency department with horrific injuries and the mother must be called, a middle-aged patient with teenaged kids gets a terminal diagnosis, or a patient violently attacks a staff member. After one of the more intense days I had had in the hospital, I was leaving. I had stayed late. As I was walking to my car, someone yelled after me, "Chaplain Buzz!" I stopped and after he got close to me, I recognized the father of a twenty-something patient whom I had spent a lot of time with that day. I'll get back to this.

I'd like to look at the Book of Daniel again. We did so recently. You might remember that the Book of Daniel purports to be written around 530 B.C., after the capture of Babylon by Cyrus, the Persian king. It was then that the Israelite exiles were released from Babylon and allowed to return to Israel – but Daniel was too old to return. The captives had been held in Babylon for 70 years. The prophet Daniel was one of those who had been captured and forcibly taken to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar in about 608 B.C. According to the biblical account, Daniel would have been around 18 when taken prisoner and about 100 when he finished the Book of Daniel in exile.

There is a problem with this timeline, however. There is Hebrew and Aramaic grammar and vocabulary in the book that appears to date to a much later period. There are also some Persian and Greek words in the book that appear to be anachronistic. There are some historical inaccuracies in the book, suggesting that the author was not personally familiar with the exilic period. The nature of the writing itself is considered “apocalyptic”, that is, symbolic writing having to do with the crushing of evil empires by God, something that was popular hundreds of years after the story of the Book of Daniel was supposed to have taken place. In sum, although the book is nominally the prophecies of Daniel concerning a period before 500 B.C., most scholars think a large part or all of it was written hundreds of years

later, around 165 B.C. This was during the “Maccabean” period when Greek speaking Seleucids occupied the Holy Land. The Seleucids were a Greek dynasty that descended from one of Alexander the Great’s generals, Seleucus Nicator.

But the Book of Daniel is still very inspiring and teaches us a lot about our relationship with God. There are twelve chapters; the first six tell us about Daniel in the court of the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, and then in the court of the Persian king, Cyrus after the Persians conquer the Babylonians. Although the Babylonians have held the Israelite elite prisoner in Babylon to keep them from fomenting an uprising 700 miles west, back in Israel, the Persians decide that it is better to send the Israelites back so that they can rebuild their farmland, buildings, and Temple, thus making Israel a more profitable land to control. But 70 years have passed, and the people who return are descendants of those who had been exiled. During the exile, because of his intelligence and ingenuity – and most importantly because of his trust in God – Daniel rises to a position of high authority in both the Babylonian and Persian courts. A key reason for his success is his ability to interpret the dreams of these kings. Some of the stories of Daniel include three special friends of his who are tossed into a furnace but are not burned. In Chapters 7 to 12, we read about the visions and dreams of Daniel. They teach us about God’s authority over all people, even the most powerful, the

reward we receive from God when we put all our trust in God, and the promise that God will ultimately deal with all evil, especially evil human empires.

At the beginning of Chapter 2, King Nebuchadnezzar is troubled and can't sleep because of frightening dreams. The king summons his magicians, enchanters, sorcerers, and astrologers, not only to interpret one specific dream, but to recall a dream for him. The king seems to be testing them. He tells them that if they cannot tell him what he dreamed, he will have them all cut into pieces and killed. But if they succeed, he will give them great rewards and honors. The magicians, enchanters, sorcerers, and astrologers stall, knowing that they cannot do this. The king gets antsy with them. The astrologers tell him this:

"There is no one on earth who can do what the king asks! No king, however great and mighty, has ever asked such a thing of any magician or enchanter or astrologer. ¹¹ What the king asks is too difficult. No one can reveal it to the king except the gods, and they do not live among humans."

The king then gets angry, and he orders all wise men in the kingdom to be executed. This ends up including Daniel and his young friends, who by this time have become highly regarded members of the court. We then read this:

¹⁷ Then Daniel returned to his house and explained the matter to his friends Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. ¹⁸ He urged them to plead for mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery, so that he and his friends might not be executed with the rest of the wise men of Babylon. ¹⁹ During the night the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision. Then Daniel praised the God of heaven ²⁰ and said:

"Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever;

wisdom and power are his.

²¹ *He changes times and seasons;
he deposes kings and raises up others.*

*He gives wisdom to the wise
and knowledge to the discerning.*

²² *He reveals deep and hidden things;
he knows what lies in darkness,
and light dwells with him.*

²³ *I thank and praise you, God of my ancestors:
You have given me wisdom and power,
you have made known to me what we asked of you,
you have made known to us the dream of the king.”*

As a result of the four of them praying together, God blesses Daniel, and he is able to tell the king what he dreamt and what it means. The dream has to do with what will happen at the end of time, and Daniel makes it clear to the king that it is the one true God, not Daniel and his young friends, who is responsible for informing the king that one day all human kingdoms will be replaced with God’s kingdom. As a reward, Daniel becomes a very high ranking official.

Notice that Daniel prays with his three friends, young men who came to Babylon as fellow prisoners. Earlier, in Chapter 1, King Nebuchadnezzar selected all four of these young men, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, to receive far better food than the other Israelites who have been brought to Babylon. They are chosen because they are “*youths without blemish, of good appearance and skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning*”. The goal is to educate them in the literature and language of the Babylonians so that

they can serve in important ways. The four are offered wine and rich food that is not kosher, perhaps pork and shellfish. But they refuse this food, with Daniel saying that it would “defile” them. This is a very bold thing to do. They are offered privilege and advanced education – and they tell the king no. They are allowed to eat a very modest diet, mostly vegetables, for ten days, and at the end of this period, they are leaner and healthier in appearance than the young people who choose to eat the king’s food. They are then allowed to eat in a way that follows the laws of their faith, and they are educated, gaining great wisdom.

Their names are then changed by the king’s chief eunuch. We are told this:

Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego.

The problem with this is that in the Israelite culture, their names are a blessing from their parents. Daniel means “God is my judge”, Hananiah means “I am under God’s grace”, Mishael means “Who is like God?”, and Azariah means “Servant of God”. These names were meant as promises and prophecies by their parents. Their new names proclaim them to be servants of the pagan Gods, Marduk, Aku and Nego. The four stick to their faith however, and as a result, in Chapter 3, we are told that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are tossed into a furnace, but God sends an angel to protect them, and they rise even higher in

status in Babylonian society. The point is that when Daniel chooses three friends to pray with at a critical time, he draws on the spiritual support and power of very faithful and courageous believers.

Consider parts of this prayer that the four offer together:

*“Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever;
wisdom and power are his.
He gives wisdom to the wise
and knowledge to the discerning.
²³ I thank and praise you, God of my ancestors:
You have given me wisdom and power.”*

They acknowledge that all wisdom and power begin with God, and that whatever skills they are given come from God. They then thank God for blessing them with what they need to fulfill the demands of the king. Despite being gifted and apparently handsome, and despite being from families that are most likely powerful, and despite being selected by King Nebuchadnezzar for special treatment, they remain faithful, humble, and thankful to God.

In the fifth and last chapter of James, a book written by the brother of Jesus and a leader of the church in Jerusalem, he writes this to the recipients of his letter, Jewish Christians who are living outside of Israel in the Roman Empire:

¹⁶ Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.

Notice that James is telling people that they should be honest with each other about their limitations, that is, the ways in which they have struggled with their faith, and to pray together that they will heal spiritually. We see that when we pray together, we draw on each other's confidence in their faith in God. We need to be able to trust each other with what bothers us spiritually. We need to reinforce each other's humility and thankfulness. When we pray together, we can build each other up, give each other strength. Sharing our faith through mutual prayer reinforces the naturalness of being a follower of Christ. It makes it easier to live by those two great commandments to love God and to love our neighbors. Praying with other people is a radiant, joyful, empowering experience.

Jesus is often portrayed as praying in the Gospels. One of the most powerful scenes in the life of Jesus happens in the Garden of Gethsemane, just before Jesus is betrayed, arrested and killed. Jesus is greatly hurt when he discovers that three of his Apostles, Peter, and the brothers James and John, whom he had chosen to pray with him, have fallen asleep. This is from Matthew, Chapter 26:

⁴⁰ Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and he said to Peter, "So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? ⁴¹ Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."

Jesus has counted on them to pray with him while he asks God to please not make him suffer the way that he knows he is going to suffer. Even for Jesus, praying with others is an empowering thing to do. Even he has a desperate need to share his faith and his communication with God.

I want to broaden this a bit. As followers of Christ, we come together for more reasons than to pray. We come together to share our faith in multiple contexts. We sing together. We come to church to honor God together. We also work in groups to keep a church running, and sometimes that involves making tough decisions with the support of each other. In Matthew, Chapter 18, Jesus is offering advice to his disciples, sometimes in the form of parables. At one point, he says the following:

¹⁹ Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."

This passage is often used out of context to argue that where two or three believers are present, God will grant whatever they ask for, or that with a congregation as small as two or three people, God will make an appearance. In truth, the context of this passage is quite different. Jesus is talking about a potential situation where a supposed follower of his commits a wrong against another follower. The person who has been harmed goes and talks this over with

this person, but he or she will not admit their guilt. Jesus says that the way to resolve this issue is to bring two others with you. Now that you are a group, you can approach this person with confidence, knowing that God will approve of your decision. In other words, major decisions in the life of a person of faith are best made with the advice of other believers. We live better lives as Christians, and we stay on the right path if we walk through the Kingdom of God together.

So, there I was in the growing dark, when the father of a young trauma patient jogged up to me. Alongside him was his other child, his daughter. The father apologized for bothering me when clearly, I was trying to go home. He said that he and his daughter had been praying for his son, and they were trying to decide on next steps. His son had been badly hurt in a motorcycle accident, but he had only a minor brain injury. Mostly, he had severe orthopedic injuries. They knew he would need extensive help, and neither the parents nor the sister lived in the area; they had flown in to be with the patient. He asked me if I could please take a minute to pray with them, that he felt they would make better decisions, that their prayers for healing would be more powerful if they prayed with someone else. I told them I would be honored. We stood in the parking lot, next to my car, and asked God to bring this young man back to full mobility, to get him through his extended therapy, and to give him a long life as a follower of Christ.