

**The Man Who Missed Thanksgiving
Presented to Trinity Church of Teaneck, NJ
on Sunday, November 19, 2020**

Introduction

This coming Thursday, people all over America will celebrate Thanksgiving. It's a great holiday. There's oftentimes a big meal, featuring the bird in our picture. From there, people enjoy all kinds of different activities. For some, it's football. For others it's playing games with family and friends.

Here's one thing people sometimes do: They read special Thanksgiving stories to children.



There's a website called "Mom Junction". They recently featured an article entitled, "15 Most Wonderful Thanksgiving Story Books For Kids". Here are some of their selections:

- Over The River: A Turkey's Tale
- Gobble Gobble
- Ankle Soup (I'm trying not to picture this – I'm sure it makes sense if you read the book)
- Twas the Night Before Thanksgiving
- Pete The Cat: The First Thanksgiving

It looks like stories about Thanksgiving are popular. So today, I'm going to try my hand at a Thanksgiving tale. And it's not just for kids.

Here's the Title: "The Man Who Missed Thanksgiving". It's a story about a well-known man in the Bible. His name is: Daniel. When we talk about Daniel, we usually hear about the time he sent into the lion's den. We don't normally hear about the time he missed Thanksgiving. Let's read about it.

1 In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. 2 And 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. (Daniel 1:1-2)

The year is 606 B.C. The land of Judah came under attack from the most powerful king in the world at that time - King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. If you know the history of Israel, you

know God blessed this land in a multitude of ways. But he warned them that if they fell into sin, they would see judgement.

To make a long story short, the people of Israel had sinned to badly, so many times, and for so long, that God allowed a powerful king to attack them. There were two groups of people in Israel at that time: There were people who wanted to follow God, and there were people who rebelled against God.

All of them were warned of this by the prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 38). Here's what Jeremiah said: Jerusalem would fall because this was a judgment of God.

Here's what obedient people were to do: They were to surrender. Anyone who surrendered would be captured and taken to Babylon. There they would not be hurt. Life would be rough, but it would be better than the alternative.

Here's what would happen to anyone who rejected God's warning: Anyone who stayed and fought against Babylon would see Jerusalem burned. Their lives would be destroyed in a number of different ways.

One group, the ones who followed God, did as they were told. They surrendered, and they allowed themselves to be taken away. They became known as the exiles.

The others stayed and fought. And things turned out exactly as God had warned. The city was captured and much of it burned. Even the great temple of Jerusalem didn't escape. The attackers came and emptied most of its treasures and took them away. Many people died in that attack. Others survived, but they lived in poverty. They spent their lives wondering where their next meal would come from. You can read about those people in the book of Lamentations. The people who were taken to Babylon fared better, but life was still harsh.

Have you ever had a time in your life where everything went wrong? Have you ever had a time when you would do just about anything to escape? There was one group among the exiles who were offered a chance to escape the harsh life of their fellow Israelites. Let's read about them.

3 Then 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— 4 young 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. 5 The 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. (Daniel 1:3-5)

Ah! Listen to this: Certain young men from the royal family and the nobility were to be chosen for special positions. Most Hebrews in Babylon lived as second-class citizens. Not these men!

They were to be brought into the king's service.

Here were the requirements:

- Young: The king wanted youth and energy.
- Without any physical defect: No handicaps permitted.
- Handsome: No ugly people allowed. In modern terms, this was the "Hollywood" crowd.
- Intelligent.
- Members of royalty and nobility: The king wanted people who were accustomed to be in charge, and who would be respected by their people.

Anyone who fit these requirements would get things the rest of their people didn't get: Prestige, comfort, and food. And not just any food - The best food. Food from the King's table.

During the Thanksgiving holiday, people in America think about all kinds of things. Food tops the list. For many, Thanksgiving is a feast. This group of young Hebrew men were being offered a feast grander than anything we could dream of at Thanksgiving. And this wasn't just one day - It was to be a life-long feast.

The people of Israel who lived in exile might have heard how bad things were back home. People back there were starving. It would be very tempting to say, "Thank you Lord! - Where's the silverware?" This would be the first "Thanksgiving" holiday for those people.

However, there was a catch. You've all heard the saying, "There's no such thing as a free lunch." That saying was true here. There was a price for all this. You had to be discerning to see it at first. Later, it would become obvious.

Notice that these men were to learn "the language and literature of the Babylonians." (vs 4). Why would the Babylonians want this? If you look at the ancient world, you'll see that many of the empires that existed had surprisingly similar ways of thinking. Each of them believed that they were special. Whether you look at the Romans, the Greeks, or the Babylonians, it's all the same.

Here's what made them believe this: They were winners. They were able to conquer surrounding nations and make all those nations bow before them. This made them believe that their way of doing things was best. Their thinking was the best. Their religion, their gods, were the best. Because everything about them was the best, they, in their minds, were the best.

They got it into their heads that everyone else needed to be like them. Because of this, they decided to do the world a favor: They would make everyone in the world become like them. They would first conquer surrounding nations. Then they would "share" their belief system.

Here's how this worked with the Hebrew people: This meant that the Babylonians brought a large group of conquered Hebrews close by. A small group of those Hebrews were to be taught the culture and ways of the Babylonians. That small group of Hebrews would then teach all

their people everything the Babylonians wanted. In this way, the Hebrew people would be changed to be like the people of Babylon.

However, there was a problem with this plan - A big problem. Here it is: The Hebrew people were not like any other group of people on the planet. They were different. Here's how: God had chosen the Hebrew people. They were his.

Here's what God said to the ancient Hebrew people through Moses:

You are to be holy to me because I, the Lord, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own. (Leviticus 20:26)

God gave the Hebrew people a mission. Through Moses and the prophets, he taught them how he wanted people to live. They would then teach others. The Hebrew people were to be used by God to change the world. The world was to become like the Hebrews - not the other way around.

Here's why God gave the Hebrews this mission. We've been saying this for a long time. Humans are created in the image of God. That means we are given the awesome privilege of being like him. God is holy. To be holy means to be totally separated from the evil of this world.

When humans sinned, they became corrupted. The image that God created in us became tarnished. We are no longer holy. God offers humans redemption. We can with his help begin to achieve the things that he created us to be. God is holy, so he calls his people to be holy, too. That's why he commanded the Hebrew people to be holy. That was part of their mission.

This young group of Hebrew men didn't know it, but they were being tempted. They were being tempted to draw their people, the Hebrews, away from their mission.

Let me ask you a question: Do you have a mission? Do you have a purpose in life? Do you have something that is bigger than you- Something to live for?

The Hebrew people had a mission. They were to be used of God to change the world. That mission was in danger.

Let's read some more.

Among those who were chosen were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. (Daniel 1:6)

Enter a young man named Daniel and some of his friends. They've been chosen. They met all the criteria. So far, all they know is that they've won a kind of lottery. Things are looking good so far. Then they get their first hint of what's going on.

The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego. (Daniel 1:7)

The four young men are given new names. Daniel is changed to “Belteshazzar”. - That name has a meaning: It’s “Protect the Life of the King”. That doesn’t refer to the Hebrew king. That refers to the Babylonian king. Hananiah became “Shadrach”. That name also has a meaning: “Command of Aku”. Aku was a Babylonian god.

Mishael became Meshach. No one knows with certainty what that name means, but the best guess is that it’s a Babylonian god. Azariah was changed to “Abed-Nego”. That means “servant of Nego”. “Nego” was another Babylonian deity.

These four young men get their first hint of what’s happening. They are going to be asked to give up their Hebrew heritage. It would start with their names, and get worse from there. They will be asked to give up their mission. Then they will be asked to make their people follow along.



While this is sinking in, they’re given a tour of the palace and the food that they will be eating. Perhaps they saw something like this: They see the master chef carrying a pig’s head on a tray.

Imagine this: Hananiah turns to Daniel and asks, “Is that a pig’s head?” Daniel answers, “Yeah, that would be a pig’s head.”

This is a problem. Here’s why: Earlier, I read to you what God said about the Hebrew people. They were to be holy and separate, because God is holy and separate.

I didn’t read the whole quote. Here it is in its context:

I am the Lord your God, who has set you apart from the nations. You must therefore make a distinction between clean and unclean animals and between unclean and clean birds. Do not defile yourselves by any animal or bird or anything that moves along the ground—those that I have set apart as unclean for you. (Leviticus 20:24b-25)

After that, it says:

You are to be holy to me because I, the Lord, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own. (v 26)

The path to holiness was slightly complex. Part of the path involved learning the laws of God. It involved obeying those laws. Part of the path involved symbols. The Hebrew people were not just to be different in attitude and belief. They were to include symbols of what God wanted for them. One of those symbols was food. The Hebrew people were to eat clean, or Kosher, food. They were to avoid all unclean food.

The list of clean and unclean foods is a little long, so we won't read it here. Some quick examples: Chicken and Beef are Kosher. Pork is not. Even with those quick examples though, there are further restrictions. Beef and chicken are kosher, but the animals must be slaughtered in a special way - A humane way.

So, If Daniel and his friends ate food from the King's table, they would surely be eating unclean foods - foods that would defile them. This was more than breaking a law. ***This was abandoning the mission that God gave to the Hebrew people.***

Think about all this. Daniel and his friends look around them. People back home live in burned-out ruins. They're starving. The people who came to Babylon are safe, but they're second class citizens eating leftovers. Daniel and his friends just won a kind of lottery. They could live the high life. They could live in comfort and prestige. They could enjoy a life-long Thanksgiving feast.

All they have to do to receive all of this is compromise their mission in life. A mission that involved following the commands of their God. A mission that involved holiness. A mission that involved being used by God to change the world.

What would they do? Let's read and find out.

But 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. (Daniel 1:8)

Daniel understood what he needed to do. He needed to draw a line. This meant possibly giving up all the wonderful things he was being offered. More than this, his actions at least meant returning to a second-class life. But, things could get worse. What if the Babylonians became displeased? What if they decided to make an example of Daniel? The result could be imprisonment, slavery, or even death.

But Daniel stood firm. He chose to pass on a lifelong Thanksgiving feast. On that day, Daniel became the man who missed Thanksgiving. He chose his mission over privilege. He chose sacrifice over indulgence. He chose obedience over an easy way out.

Notice, the text says that Daniel made this decision. It doesn't mention his three friends. They eventually came along, but there's a chance that Daniel started out alone on this. He went from there to convince his friends to stand with him.

What was the result of Daniel's decision?

Now God had caused the official to show favor and compassion to Daniel...
(Daniel 1:9)

Daniel chose obedience. God rewarded him. The reward came in the form of supernatural protection.

We don't have time to read the whole story, so I'll summarize: Daniel and the official who was involved worked out a compromise. Daniel proposed a test. He suggested that he and his friends would eat only vegetables for 10 days. If they looked sick or malnourished, the official could decide what to do at that time. Ten days came and went, and Daniel and his friends looked better than any of the other young men. So, they were permitted to continue eating only vegetables. This allowed them to live a life of obedience. They were able to continue their mission.

What was the result of these men choosing to be true to their mission? Here's what happened only a few years later in Daniel chapter 2. King Nebuchadnezzar had a mysterious vision that no one could interpret. No one that is, but Daniel. God gave him a supernatural ability to do this. This task was so amazing that this is what followed:

46 Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell prostrate before Daniel and paid him honor and ordered that an offering and incense be presented to him. 47 The king said to Daniel, "Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery." (Daniel 2:46-47)

Guess what? Nebuchadnezzar intended to change Daniel. Instead, God used Daniel to change Nebuchadnezzar. Prior to meeting Daniel, the king thought his gods were the best. Now, he acknowledged that the God of Israel was supreme.

It didn't end there.

48 Then the king placed Daniel in a high position and lavished many gifts on him. He made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men. 49 Moreover, at Daniel's request the king appointed Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego administrators over the province of Babylon, while Daniel himself remained at the royal court. (Daniel 2:48-49)

So, The Babylonians meant to change Daniel and his friends, and then use them to change the Hebrew people. Instead, God used Daniel and his friends to change Babylon. Daniel and his friends were so influential in Babylon that eventually, the Hebrew people were permitted to go home and rebuild their country. The Hebrew people were allowed to continue their mission. Eventually, this led to the Messiah being born in Bethlehem. Through Jesus Christ, the world has been changed. Jesus brought salvation. His followers completed the written revelation of God, the Holy Scriptures, the Bible, so that the rest of us can be shown the way.

Let's pull this all together.

Conclusion

Today, we met the man who missed Thanksgiving. Daniel started out with a life of despair. He was a refugee from a conquered nation. He was hungry. He was looked down upon. Then, he was offered the opportunity to escape. But the escape had a cost. Daniel and his friends were tempted to give up their mission. Had they given in, they would have been used to tempt the Hebrew people away from their mission, too.

Daniel chose to remain true to his mission. He chose to pass on a lifelong feast - A lifelong Thanksgiving meal. Because of that, instead of being used to tempt others away, Daniel was used by God to help his people continue their mission. Because of Daniel, we have the hope of the Scriptures. We have the message of the Gospel.

We asked earlier, do you have a mission? Do you have something in your life that's bigger than you - Something to live for? God calls us to such a mission - An eternal mission. God wants to use you to change the world. Will you say "yes" to that call? You can start at any time.

For some, it starts by admitting that we have led a life of disobedience to God. For those people, there is grace. God is willing to forgive through the cross. You don't need to do any good works. You only need to believe. Let us tell you how you can accept the free gift of salvation from God. There are some places to go at the end of this article.

Others have accepted this forgiveness. They benefitted from people like Daniel who heard God's call and followed. God now calls to you. Following that call may mean saying "no" to some things - Maybe a lot of things. I don't want to mislead you. Daniel is an example of the best case when people follow God. Others have followed at greater cost. Some have suffered and even died. But there is eternal reward for those who say "yes" when God calls.

Let us tell you how you can determine the call that God has for you. Again check out the links at the end. Let us help you to know how to let God use you to change the world.

This Thanksgiving, I hope you enjoy every bite of your meal. But if you have a moment, remember that there was a man who said “no” to the offer of a lifelong feast so that he could follow his mission. There was a man named Daniel who lived a long time ago who missed Thanksgiving.

All of us benefit because he did.

Want to learn more?

Visit our web site: TrinityTeaneck.org

Or you can visit Phil’s site: PhilBrainerd.com

Finally, you get help from the Billy Graham association by visiting their site: PeaceWithGod.net.

May the Lord richly bless you.

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