

# biblestudy: january 2018

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*Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series*

## January 7, 2018 Text: Daniel 1:8-21 “A Sincere Faith”

Excuse me. After reading this week’s study text about Daniel and the others eating vegetables (Daniel 1:12, 16), I remembered a very bad joke. (Skip the rest of this paragraph if you don’t want to be bothered.) *If two vegetarians had an argument, would you say that they had a beef with one another?*

Now, back to the business at hand. Some of the Hebrew young men (Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—Daniel 1:7)) who were brought to be trained by the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 1:3-5) chose not to eat the food the king was providing (Daniel 1:8). This may, in part, have been for health reasons, but the primary motivation was the fact that eating from the king’s table would imply (what Stephen Cook has called) “fellowship with the king and loyalty to him.” There was to be no competition for these men’s loyalty; they were loyal to Israel’s God. The story has a happy ending. Daniel and the others eat their vegetable diet instead of the rich meals from the royal table. They looked to be in better health than those who ate the king’s food (Daniel 1:15) and they were top flight in wisdom and understanding (Daniel 1:19-20).

From our faith perspective, we want to make Daniel the hero of the incident and, to some extent, he is. However, there is an unsung hero: the guard who allowed the Hebrew young men to conduct the experiment (Daniel 1:14).

God used him to do something good even though the guard did not realize he was an instrument of God. I don’t think God manipulated him, but God used the opening the guard gave. Sometimes, theologians refer to this as evidence of “prevenient grace,” a gift that God gives a person even before they know it is God’s presence.

Most of us do not think of ourselves as the key figures—heroes and heroines—in the ongoing journey of life. But each of us can be like the guard, willing to give others a chance to become all they can be for God. The guard did not know he was doing it; perhaps the same can be said of us. God is using our spirit of an open door to give others of God’s children a chance to become fully the persons God has called them to be. (Uh, it may be as simple as not having a beef with someone else.)

### What Someone Else Has Said:

In the Charles P. Frank novel *Digging for Answers*, one of the characters is noted as praying this way: “And indeed Moose said an unspoken prayer: Lord, open our hearts to hope; open our minds to truth; open our lives to one another. Amen.”

### Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin, “Thank You, grace-giving God, for those who open doors for me...”

## January 14, 2018 Text: Daniel 3:19-23, 26-28 “A Bold Faith”

Although most of our memories of this familiar story center on Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, the biggest change in the “before and after” is King Nebuchadnezzar. The three faithful Hebrews come into the story as men of full faith, willing to trust God even if things don’t go so well for them personally (Daniel 3:17-8). That doesn’t change.

But King Nebuchadnezzar! He goes from (a) absolute rage that his authority would be challenged by those who would honor Yahweh more than the king to (b) throwing that anger at anyone who would dare speak a bad word about the Hebrews’ God (Daniel 3:19, 29). Of course, God does not need anyone’s help in defending God’s honor, but Nebuchadnezzar does not know that.

It would be nice if everyone who comes to believe in God became instantly pure in every intent and action. The king has now stated a rich and profound belief in God (Daniel 3:28), but his way of expressing that faith looks a lot like the old king: “I now issue a decree to every people, nation, and language: whoever speaks disrespectfully about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego’s God will be torn limb from limb and their house made a trash heap, because there is no other god who can rescue like this” (Daniel 3:29). (If nothing else, we can surely see how a religious statement yanked from context can justify even the most heinous acts.)

Although John Wesley would never challenge God’s ability to do

things differently if God so chose, Wesley recognized that the journey to entire sanctification—full holiness of intent in love of God and of neighbor—was just that: a journey. A phrase that shows up in United Methodist liturgy and theology is “going on to perfection.” In today’s study text, King Nebuchadnezzar is in early stages of that journey, with doubts and missteps still ahead.

Let’s look in the mirror and at those around us. What we see in both places—in us and in others—is a work in progress. The good news is that God isn’t finished with us yet! And God is not through yet with those around us. Maybe that is why Paul enjoins us to a life of patience and forgiveness, both toward ourselves and toward others (Colossians 3:12-3).

### What Someone Else Has Said:

Maxie Dunnam (*Going on to Salvation*, Discipleship Resources) has written: “...sanctifying grace provides us an experience in which we can grow. Sanctification is not static....Sanctifying grace: ‘changed from glory into glory’ till we know singleness of motive and perfection in love.”

### Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Wash over me, Holy Spirit, that I might even now glimpse the holy tomorrow You want to give...”

## January 21, 2018 Text: Daniel 9:1-19 “A Prayer for Obedient Faith”

When I was in seminary, we had a guest lecturer one day who was himself then serving as pastor of a local church. Someone asked him a question about “having those real downers in every worship service.” “What do you mean by ‘real downer’?” “You know,” the questioner continued, “downers like the prayer of confession---every week, week after week.” The visiting pastor said, “Any week you leave out a prayer of confession, you have not taken seriously the week that you and your people have just been through.” Oops! (And, no, I was not the student who asked the question.)

Daniel is no stranger to confession. These verses (Daniel 9:1-19) unfold the many ways in which the people of Judah and Israel have sinned. The anguish that Daniel feels may be captured by another translation

of the word rendered as “confession.” *Yādāh* is sometimes translated “wringing the hands.”

But even confession carries with it a bit of joy and hope. These words about God show up in the prayer: great, awesome, keeps covenant, truly faithful, righteousness, compassion, deep forgiveness, strong hand, for example. Daniel dares to be forthright about the sins of the Hebrew people because of the fullness of new beginnings God is willing to give.

One of the pleas for forgiveness that Daniel makes is rooted in his understanding that Jerusalem was God’s city (Daniel 9:16, 19). In sort of a backhanded way, he is saying “Lord, everybody knows that Jerusalem is Yours, so if Jerusalem does not start looking better, You are

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not going to look so good.” Forgive us and give us a new start so Your city will give glory to Your name!

What is the implication of that for the Church in 2018? I am writing this during early baseball season, so I have no idea what breaks may come in the Church’s faithfulness by the time this is read. But I do know that the Church is the people of God and we too need forgiveness (*cálach*). The literal translation would be “We need to be spared.”

**What Someone Else Has Said:**

In *The Gospel According to Andy Capp* (John Knox Press), D. P. Mc-

Geachy III has written: “(Confession) isn’t wallowing in sin, or feeling sorry for oneself; rather, it is looking straight at self, and accepting God’s forgiveness. Confession is really the same as comedy; humility is humor. To be able to say ‘I’m sorry’ is to be able to laugh at myself. And there healing begins.”

**Prayer:**

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Make it so, Lord, that ‘this is a day of new beginnings, time to remember and move on...”

**January 28, 2018 Text: Daniel 10:1-19 “A Strong Faith”**

This week’s study verses (Daniel 10:1-19) are part of the apocalyptic literature of the Book of Daniel. The prophet has a vision, truth told in a highly imaginative and vivid story. (Why do we sometimes think that God is so limited that God can only inspire literal facts? God can surely stir God’s people with poetry, history, letters, symbolism, stories, visions, predictions, myths, and memories. It helps to hear God’s Word when we know in which form it is spoken!) These verses are even called a vision in the Bible: Daniel 10:1, 7. That doesn’t make them any less true; it is just truth in a different kind of package.

Have you ever felt washed out on your spiritual journey? Daniel felt that he had no strength at all (Daniel 10:8, 17). The one who spoke to him in the vision told him to be strong because he was greatly treasured (CEB), greatly beloved (KJV), God thinks highly of you (CEV), God loves you (TEV), beloved man (Collins). When Daniel heard this, his strength returned (Daniel 10:11, 18.)

To be sure, it makes a difference when we know we are loved. John 3:16 states that love in such a clarion way: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son...” (KJV). The word that we are loved is a strength-giving word (Daniel 10:19).

When Daniel went through his period of fasting and praying (Daniel 10:2-3), he did not realize that he was preparing for this vision from God. He was just making himself ready for whatever God would give. I wonder if our prayers sometimes are not open-ended enough to re-

ceive unexpected gifts from God. Most gifts from God are not received after we complete the order blank telling God what we want. The gifts come when our readiness opens the door to whatever God will give.

This week marks the anniversary of my wedding day in 1960. When Toni and I took those vows in Westside Methodist Church in Hopatcong, New Jersey, we did not know what the future would hold. Each knowing that we were loved was enough. The story of Daniel now moves ahead in that way, not knowing how the Hebrew children would be freed from exile, not knowing which foreign ruler would allow them to go back home, not knowing for sure what the next step should be...but, for Daniel, knowing that he was “greatly treasured” (Daniel 10:11) was enough. How about for you?

**What Someone Else Has Said:**

Paul W. Milhouse (*Philip William Otterbein*, Upper Room) wrote of Otterbein: “...he wrestled in prayer until he found peace and joy in the personal knowledge of forgiveness of his own sins and the witness of the Holy Spirit that he was a child of God.”

**Prayer:**

As you prepare this lesson, let our prayer begin: “Here’s my open heart, Lord...”

# Happy New Year 2018

He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” Revelation 21:5



Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” 2 Corinthians 5:17 (ESV)