

Article of the Month – January 2009

Missions Training in Babylonia

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From Daniel's life we learn many missionary principles. We see that the Lord can turn adverse circumstances into a missionary vocation. Often He calls missionaries without them realizing it at first. Godly upbringing can be the privilege that leads to a missionary career. Daniel shows that missionary functionality starts with living a holy life, that Christian character and attitude are indispensable on the field and that good cross-cultural training best takes place in the host country.

Ashpenaz explained to the young Hebrews (some of royal descent), what program would be followed to turn them into good Babylonians. They were to be fed the best food from the royal table and language studies were to be started immediately; literature studies were added later. They had to understand what life in Babylonia was all about.

Four of these youngsters asked permission to eat a diet of vegetables and fruit. Daniel & friends resolved to not defile themselves with the royal food and drink. They spoke to Ashpenaz privately and explained their requests. Daniel proposed a ten-day probation period. Ashpenaz gave the boys the benefit of the doubt, which he did not have to regret.¹

Before the deportation to Babylon they grew up in God-fearing families, in contrast to the surrounding idolatry. They learned to read the scrolls of Moses and the Prophets, which their fathers and rabbis had explained to them. When they were thirteen they had passed through the Bar-Mitzvah ritual, and were considered adults thereafter. Each had vowed to serve God for the rest of their lives. They had heard Jeremiah preach, warning about an exile to Babylonia. Now they knew what that meant....

Language learning was heavy. They had to learn another alphabet, but young minds and determination helped them over the hassles. They understood that learning the local language well would benefit them, and that it might enable them to tell the Babylonians the stories of their people, e.g. how God delivered them from Egypt. Little did they realize that later God had to save *them* from the idolatrous ordeals of *Babylon*.

Ashpenaz took the integration process seriously: he gave them Babylonian names. Daniel became Belteshazzar, and his friends Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.² Some would have seen this as an insult to their national identity. But Daniel & friends understood that it should rather be seen as an honor, because Ashpenaz now thought of them as real

¹ Dan. 1:3,4,6,8,12,14,15

² Dan. 1:5,7

Babylonians. The friends had enough of the idolatry they saw and prayed that God would manifest Himself, confronting the King. They wanted God to show Himself as King of kings and Lord of lords, because Nebuchadnezzar had taken that title for himself.

We read nowhere that the four friends heard God's voice, calling them into missions. They were normal believers, seeking to serve God wherever they went. Had they known the challenges God would place on their way, they might have shrunk away. Wouldn't you, if you knew you would be thrown into a fiery furnace or a lion's den?

In the life of Daniel & friends we see a beautiful example of missionary training. Had they not been raised with God-fearing principles in Judah, they would never have maintained these in a pagan court. Their decision to not defile themselves was one of the most important components of a successful missionary career. From a missionary training point of view we might say that this 'home training' could be compared with a Bible school education. This is an invaluable part of the shaping of workers in God's Kingdom.

Then, they were not sent to the field alone, but *in a team*. They could support each other, pray for one another, discuss decisions to be taken, etc. Yet, this is not enough when we look at the demands of missionary ministry. Daniel & friends learned the language, literature and culture *at their mission field*. Although there is nothing against linguistic- and cultural training at home, nothing can replace continued learning on the field.

The friends were trained *for three years*, with only secular employment in mind. Missionaries cannot do with less. Before one functions in another culture, speaks another language, understands the religious beliefs, and knows the indigenous value system, a new missionary may well be three years underway.

The moment in which the men were no longer perceived as foreigners, came when Ashpenaz gave them a new name. They had now earned the right to speak as Babylonians to Babylonians. That was the time that their cross-cultural ministry could safely start.

The significance of Daniel's missionary training model is, that if we want to present God in a way that people understand, He must be presented within *their* cultural context, *not in ours*. As long as we present God in our way – which is foreign to our hosts – *He Himself will be perceived as a Foreigner*, and nobody entrusts his life to a foreigner. The best example is Jesus, Who became a man, a Hebrew among Hebrews, to serve Hebrews. Becoming Man, He was no longer a 'God from afar', a foreigner.³ Paul followed this example by 'becoming all things to all men, to save at least a few'.⁴

It is obvious that contextualization is not a 20th century given, nor even a New Testament one; God designed it already in His missionary training of Daniel and his friends 2,600 years ago, not to mention Joseph and Moses!

³ Phil. 2:5-7

⁴ 1 Cor. 9:19-22