



“Piety”

Daniel 1:1-21

Piety. I often hear the word but what does it really mean in practice?

This series is about saints, biblical and contemporary. The tricky part is that we think of a “saint” as being someone who is a super-duper Christian, not like the rest of us. But this is not the biblical understanding, in which a “saint” is a “holy one,” as in “Christian” or “believer.” All believers are saints, whether living now, in the past, or in the future. To speak of the “cloud of saints” is to refer to all God’s people whoever have or ever will exist. You may not think of yourself this way, but God does.

One characteristic of believers is that we are devoted to God and practice that devotion in all sorts of way. One word that is used to denote this devotion is “piety,” which is derived from the Latin word *pietas*, which is the noun form of the verb *pius*, meaning “devout” or “dutiful.”

Thus, we shouldn’t be surprised that the Bible is filled with stories of people who are devoted to God, i.e., are pious – not self-righteous or self-aware of their own piety – but are simply devoted to God, even under pressure and threat. There are few examples better than that of Daniel.

Life among the elite

Daniel had enjoyed his life of privilege. As part of Israel’s ruling class, Daniel was well-educated and quite comfortable. He was smart, organized, strong-willed, and confident. He had everything going for him. He was young and on top of the world. But when they came . . . they came for Daniel too.

As Jerusalem and the remaining Israelites slowly succumbed to the power of Babylon in the early 6th Century BC, demands were made of the king of Judah. Jerusalem’s best and brightest were to be sent to Babylon to serve their king, Nebuchadnezzar. So Daniel and others began the thousand-mile journey.

It begins

The journey had been hard. At times Daniel had feared he would never even reach Babylon. But he did. And he and his friends settled into their new lives, determined to make the best of it. What choice did they really have? There was no prospect of ever returning home; Babylon was one of the mightiest empires ever known. So, they would try to serve their new king well and stay true to their God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Daniel and his friends soon confronted the choices thrust upon them by this strange world called Babylon. It began with names, just names. Which seems like a small thing to us but would have been anything but small to these young Jews. Their proper Israelite names were taken from them. All four would now be known by Babylonian names: Daniel as Belteshazzar, his friends as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

Being now in service to Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel and his friends were expected to eat the king’s rations. This would be far better fare than the commoners of Babylon could ever contemplate eating. The goal was to make the four Jews strong and sharp and suitable for the king’s service.

But of course, the problem presented by the king’s food was clear. Such food, though delicious and nutritious, would often be conceived and prepared in violation of the Jewish food laws. Not only would pork be served, but also shrimp and other foods that were forbidden under the Law of Moses.

God had already softened the heart of the Babylonian official toward Daniel and his friends. So, when Daniel suggested they be allowed to live on vegetables and water for ten days and see how they did, the official agreed.

And, not surprisingly for those who know God, when the ten days were over Daniel and his friends were doing better than the young men who had been eating the King’s food!

So, Daniel and his friends were allowed to stay on their special “kosher” diet and a crisis was passed. Daniel would remain devoted to God and God’s ways, even when he was threatened with death by lions. Daniel’s piety was a signpost to the true God in the midst of a pagan world. He was what the Jews call a *Zaddiq*, a righteous person, a pious person. Here’s more on the Jewish understanding of piety, which may deepen our own understanding of what it means to live a pious life in all things:

The ultimate yardstick of piety is the *Zaddiq*, the righteous saint who we would call purely ethical, who flourishes as a proper human, and who achieves true virtue. The extent to which one adheres to all of the norms of piety marks how closely one approximates this standard of perfect righteousness.

Cognitive piety is a subset of the general category. Its highest form is the perpetual study of the Torah, the source and authoritative basis of all Judaic piety. The wellknown epigram that expressed this notion asserts that, "The study of Torah is as important as all other acts of piety combined."

Another dimension of piety may be referred to as "mind-piety," i.e., the desirability of maintaining perpetually pure thoughts, of harboring thoughts of Torah at all times. Along these lines, the rabbis emphasized the centrality in the daily life of the Jew of meditation, prayer, and contemplation.

Body-piety is another aspect of the larger concern. Physical actions endowed with piety include bowing and other specific bodily postures in prayer; washing for the purposes of ritual purity rather than simple hygiene; wearing proper clothing and appurtenances of pious living: *tzitzit* (fringes), *tefillin*, *yarmulke*, hat; other forms of dress; haircut, beard, or side locks. Naturally all aspects of sexuality can be included in this subset, as discussed above.

Synagogue piety is a third major area of the subject. Many acts associated with prayer in the synagogue define elements of this type of piety. Blowing and hearing the *shofar* on the New Year and shaking the *lulav* on the festival of Tabernacles constitute two examples of this area. All acts of prayer come under this rubric.

Some modern, secular, attitudes deny the value of the wide range of religious practices that define piety. Some even argue that constant piety and familiarity with the sacred in fact devalue the worshipper's relationship to the deity and render it rote and mechanical. Apologists for piety respond that such attitudes denigrate one important means of fulfilling a basic human need: acts of piety connect individuals to the past and future, to heaven and earth, to family and community. In this view, the modern, secular person, bereft of modes of enacting piety, lives a more lonely, detached life with less passion and devotion. Proponents of piety thus ask if the rise in secularization has in fact been accompanied by an increase in levels of individual or communal happiness or by a decline in economic oppression or psychological dysfunction?

The believer-practitioner of the pious life emphasizes a main advantage afforded by the intimacy of piety. In the Judaic notion, God wants constant contact with the believer, akin to an obsessive love affair, renewed frequently through expected daily affirmations. Constant devotion to the divine provides the perpetual training and conditioning for that relationship. Piety invigorates all the devotions of life, marriage, raising children, advancing one's vocation, and contributes to the well-being and wholeness of one's community.¹

A strange world

Many Christians increasingly feel like Daniel, that they are living in a stranger and stranger world. Vices embraced; virtues abandoned. The social fabric tearing further and further apart. To make matters worse, politicians and news outlets stoke anxieties and fears, filling the days with self-pronounced crises and breaking news.

What is a person to do? What is a Christian to do? How do we follow Jesus in a culture of fear? How can embracing true piety, genuine devotion to God, in all aspects of our lives?

Unlearning "self-reliance"

Piety begins with "unlearning" self-reliance. Daniel didn't develop his own nutritious diet in Babylon – he remained devoted to God's diet. I was taught to be self-reliant, always ready to "pull myself up by the bootstraps." Many of us are. Understood biblically, self-reliance is a good thing. Paul supported himself with his skills as a tentmaker rather than relying on others for financial support. He was committed to his ministry and knew that he couldn't stand by and leave it up to others. He knew that he was God's agent, not God's puppet. Paul did not just lay back and wait for life to run him over. Likewise, Daniel took the initiative to suggest a way out of the diet dilemma.

But as we are inclined to do in all things, too often we turn a healthy self-reliance into an unhealthy self-sufficiency. We forget that we actually need others. We forget that just as God is inherently relational, so are we. But how do we remember this in a culture driving us away from God? Piety – it deepens our on-going everyday relationship with God. You might read again the final paragraph from the Jewish encyclopedia entry on piety; it speaks to me.

¹ Jacob Neusner, Alan J. Avery-Peck, and William Scott Green, Eds., *The Encyclopedia of Judaism*, 2000, 3, 1069.