

DANIEL: Profiles in Courage

I. "Against the Stream"

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Daniel 1

TEXT: *Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold.*
– Rom. 12:2a (Phillips)

INTRODUCTION

We all need stories of faith and courage to help us stand for what is right and for the cause of Christ. Among the Biblical stories my mother made sure we knew, there were also interspersed some from our own family history. One I grew up with was that of my brother, Eugene, who was 12 years older than me.

In high school in Montana, Eugene played in the band. The band had traveled 120 miles to Missoula to play for some event. As a special treat, the band director decided to take all the members to the movie theater. Well this produced a serious conflict with Eugene about how to handle this, because the church we were reared in had a rule about not attending movies. Such a rule may sound strange to you, especially considering this was in 1951. How damaging was the content in that day? But such a rule was part of trying to maintain a separation from harmful worldly influences. Eugene was confronted with choice. Here they were in a strange city and everyone was going to the movie. And of course peer pressure is probably at its strongest for us when we're in those teen years in high school.

Eugene refused to enter the movie theater with all the rest. The band teacher pressured him, told him not to be silly— no harm would come from the movie they were going to. But Eugene remained adamant, refusing to enter. Finally, after further urging and some ridicule from among 100 band members, the teacher agreed to let Eugene wait outside. My mother was always very dramatic in her story telling. The picture I have in mind is of this being in the cold of winter with winds howling down the deserted streets of Missoula and Eugene alone fighting to keep warm out on the street in front of the theater— but remaining true to what he believed no matter the cost.

It was a story of courage and faithfulness that gave me a bit more backbone to stand up for what I believed. When I felt peer pressure to compromise or feared making waves by my stand, I would recall Eugene standing strong, alone, but faithful in front of that theater.

The book of Daniel provides a series of stories that for 25 centuries have shot adrenaline into the veins of God's people seeking courage and strength in standing up for God. This morning we are beginning a series of six sermons from the book of Daniel. We live in a world that is increasingly unfriendly to Christianity. Christian views of morality are routinely ridiculed on TV, in movies, and in society in general. To walk in step with Jesus definitely means we'll be out of step with our culture today. The six soul-survival stories in Daniel will give us guidance and courage in what it means to be faithful in our world today.

Let me set the background for our Scripture this morning. The story occurred 2,600 years ago in the Middle East. Referring to the map on the overhead projector, there were two superpowers: Egypt and Babylon. You'll notice the nation of Israel is caught right in the middle. In the summer of 605 B.C., a decisive battle was fought at Carchemish with Nebuchadnezzar and the armies of Babylon defeating the Egyptians, sending them hightailing it back to Egypt. It can be difficult maintaining control of an occupied country 1,000 miles away, so one of the precautions Nebuchadnezzar had was to take back to Babylon the cream-of-the-crop leadership and youth. Not only would it decimate any leadership that might lead a rebellion, but they could make use of their brains and abilities in Babylon. Remember how after WW II, some of the top German scientists were brought to our country to now help us?

The book of Daniel opens with a focus upon four of these young men, probably in their mid to late teens. They are 1,000 miles from home in a foreign land with an unfamiliar language and customs and worst of all an idolatrous religion. Uprooted from family and friends, they belong to a conquered humiliated people. They are faithful Jews thrust into the service of a pagan king.

Let's read the first chapter of Daniel together. (page 855 in your pew Bibles).

AWAY FROM HOME

We all know "away from home" stories. Young people off to college, away from the sheltered environment of home going wild with the party scene. Business men and women away on a trip, having a quick affair or secretly indulging in pornography in the motel room— behavior they would never do if there was a chance of being seen by family or friends. Anonymity and secrecy have a way of throwing off restraint and morals. The pressure of going along with the crowd can be formidable.

That helps us begin to imagine the tremendous pressure Daniel and his friends were under. Who would condemn them if they buckled under such pressure? After all, they were prisoners of war being forced to live in a way they had little choice in. In one sense, they had it pretty good for being a prisoner of war. After all, being assigned to the palace and having to eat the king's food isn't too shabby. But at the same time, it also provides its own pressure. You don't want to mess-up your good fortune. They were undoubtedly subjected to enormous efforts to change their mind-set from Jews loyal to Jehovah God to Babylonians loyal to Babylonian gods. Remember, in that day, names were to reflect the essence and character of the person. So, as part of this indoctrination, Daniel tells us even their names were changed.

Daniel meaning "God is my judge," is changed to "Belteshazzar" which means, "Bel protect his life." Bel was the chief Babylonian god.

Haniah meaning "Jehovah is gracious" is changed to "Shadrach" which means, "Command of Aku." Aku was their moon-god.

Mishael meaning "Who is what God is?" is changed to "Meshach" which means, "Who is what Aku is?"

Azariah meaning “The Lord helps” is changed to “Abednego” which means, “Servant of Nebo”— another Babylonian god.

Furthermore, they were placed under the teaching of the elite, ungodly teachers of Babylon. Remember, Babylon was one of the most advanced cultures of the day. So this is like the Harvard or Yale of the day. Science and literature were all integrated into the mythology of their gods and astrology. To these Jewish lads, it was all a violation of the first three of the Ten Commandments— belief and practices the one true God, Jehovah had expressly forbidden.

Inducted into this course of study, they are promised that if they do well, they will get some of the best government posts. To keep them strong and healthy, their food would come from the king’s table— the same meals he had!

In such a situation, where do you cooperate and where do you draw the line?

Throughout Daniel we’ll be seeing an interesting, courteous respect for authority and a lack of trying to impose their faith upon others. At the same time, these Hebrews seem to know where to take a stand in order to remain faithful to God. They make their stand in an inoffensive way that demonstrates clear trust in God.

Israelites considered the royal food and wine as forbidden fare since the first portion of it was always offered to the Babylonian idols. Likewise a portion of the wine was poured out on a pagan altar. To eat that food was considered participation in the worship of those gods. And of course the meat would not only include forbidden, unclean animals, but they were not slaughtered or prepared as Jewish law prescribed. Thus, for a Jew to eat from the king’s table, he would appear to have forsaken Jehovah the true God for Babylonian gods.

Here, Daniel and his friends decide to make a stand regarding the food. But notice the kindness and grace with which it is done. They could have made demands for special treatment, for Kosher food. They could have gone on a hunger strike. How do they handle the problem? Daniel

“...asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way. Now God had caused the official to show favor and sympathy to Daniel” (8-9). There is humility, submission, softness in his approach. And, would the official have been so favorably disposed to Daniel if Daniel and his friends hadn’t showed a spirit of cooperation, love, and forgiveness toward their captives? If they were angry, nasty, and rebellious, would this have been the case? God of course had a hand in it (as the text says), but I believe He worked through Daniel and his friends’ attitude and acceptance.

When the official expresses his fears that they will appear malnourished eating only vegetables, Daniel makes an offer that affirms his absolute trust in God’s ability to care for him and also ease the fears of the official.

“Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you

see." So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days.

At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food. So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead. (Dan 1:12-16)

There is no whining or complaining from Daniel. There are no lectures on how wrong the Babylonians are in their worship of idols or their dietary practices. There is no condemnation here, but what seems to be a gracious acceptance of where the Babylonians are in their religion. After all, they haven't been exposed to the one true God, so why wouldn't they follow myths? At the same time, Daniel is fully aware that the God of Israel is alive and involved in the affairs of humanity in objective, verifiable ways these Babylonians never dreamed of. He is indeed able to prove Himself. So, Daniel simply asks the official in charge to give God a chance to prove himself. And, there is this nonchalance about it— compare us to the others, *and treat your servants in accordance with what you see.*

Wow! What a way to give a witness! Nothing to argue. Just a demonstration of the power of God in their robust health.

I'm also impressed by their commitment and faith. Certainly it would be easy to justify breaking dietary laws while in captivity and there is nothing else to eat. This would not be willful disobedience but born of necessity. Yet, Daniel is fully trusting God to provide a way of obedience in what may seem a minor point to us. This is preparation for some even more major situations that will come.

As an aside I might add, food is extremely important to me. Just ask my wife, Polly. I think willingness to give up the gourmet royal food is awesome! And my father was a butcher, owning a meat market— so I have a hard time conceiving of a real meal without meat.

EXCELLENCE

At the end of their three years of study, these four Hebrews were brought before the king for oral exams. The results were,

In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom. (Dan 1:20)

That involved a lot of hard study on the part of Daniel and his friends. Remember, many of these subjects would have been repulsive to them and contrary to their faith. The practice of astrology was forbidden to Israelites. Yet the principles were woven throughout their study of science as well as the mythologies of all their gods and religious practice. They learned it all well, knowing that serving God faithfully in this culture meant understanding and knowing it intimately.

We honor God and provide opportunities for influence in being the best that we can at whatever we do. We earn respect at our work places by the excellence of our work. Christians should be the most trustworthy and among the hardest working employees. Not giving our best at our place of employment is a form of stealing from our employers.

In the New Testament, even slaves were encouraged to show excellence in their work for their masters. Col. 3:22-24 puts it this way:

Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.

Laziness, slipshod work, being unprepared, failing to be up-to-speed on what we should know all dishonor Christ. This is a call to be our best at school, in sports, in our chosen professions. We admire Christian athletes who use their excellence as a means to promote the cause of Christ. Doing well at whatever you do earns respect and opens doors for being a blessing to others and sharing our faith.

CONCLUSION

I want to close by reading something Eric Reed wrote about an experience he had. Eric is one of the associate editors of *Leadership Journal*, published by *Christianity Today*. In this, he is modeling for us a number of principles in making an effective stand for Christ.

“I held a notice from my 13-year-old daughter’s school announcing a meeting to preview the new course in sexuality. Parents could examine the curriculum and take part in a lesson presented exactly as it would be given to the students.

“When I arrived at the school, I was surprised to discover only about a dozen parents present. As we waited for the presentation, I thumbed through page after page of instructions on the prevention of pregnancy or disease. I found abstinence mentioned only in passing.

“When the teacher arrived with the school nurse, she asked if there were any questions. I asked why abstinence did not play a noticeable part in the material. I was shocked by what happened next. There was a great deal of laughter, and someone suggested that is I thought abstinence has any merit, I should go back to burying my head in the sand. The teacher and nurse said nothing as I drowned in a sea of embarrassment. My mind went blank, and I could think of nothing to say. The teacher explained that the job of the school was to ‘teach facts,’ and the home was responsible for moral training.

“I sat in silence the next 20 minutes as the course was explained. The other

parents seemed to give their unqualified support to the materials. 'Donuts at the back,' announced the teacher during the break. 'I'd like you to put on the name tags we have prepared and mingle with the other parents.' Everyone moved to the back of the room. As I watched them affix their name tags and shake hands, I sat deep in thought. I was ashamed I had not been able to convince them to include a serious discussion of abstinence in the materials. I uttered a silent prayer for guidance.

"My thoughts were interrupted by the nurse's hand on my shoulder. 'Won't you join the others?' The nurse smiled sweetly at me. 'The donuts are good.'

"Thank you, no.' I replied.

"Well, then, how about a name tag? I'm sure the others would like to meet you.'

"Somehow I doubt that,' I replied.

"Won't you please join them?' she coaxed. Then I heard a still, small voice whisper, *Don't go*. The instruction was unmistakable: *Don't go!*

"I'll just wait here,' I said.

"When the class was called back to order, the teacher looked around the long table and thanked everyone for putting on name tags. She ignored me. Then she said, 'Now we're going to give you the same lesson we'll be giving your children. Everyone please peel off your name tags. Now, then, on the back of one of the tags I drew a tiny flower. Who has it?'

"The gentleman across from me held it up. 'All right,' she said. 'The flower represents disease.' Then she asked the man, 'Do you recall with whom you shook hands?' He pointed to a couple of people. 'Very good,' she replied. 'The handshake in this case represents intimacy. The two people you had contact with now have the disease.'

"There was laughter and joking among the parents. The teacher continued, 'And whom did the two of you shake hands with?' The point was well taken, and she explained how this lesson would show students how quickly disease spreads. 'Since we all shook hands, we all have the disease.'

"It was then that I heard the still, small voice again. *Speak now, but be humble*. I rose from my chair. I apologized for any upset I might have caused earlier, congratulated the teacher on an excellent lesson that would impress the youth, and concluded by saying I had only one small point I wished to make. Not all of us were infected. One of us abstained."

Prayer for guidance, humility and obedience all are crucial components in standing for what we believe in.