

# **The Encouraging Story of Daniel**

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Romans 15.4-6 ESV*

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Imagine what it must have been like to be born into a noble family, thousands of years ago, back in a time when nobility meant a life of privilege. And then as a teenager, to watch as one of the cruelest armies on the face of the earth invade, ravage, and conquer your homeland. If that was not bad enough, you are taken captive as a prisoner of war, deported, and forced to live in the capital city of nation that conquered you. Your captors change your name and force you to serve the very king that slaughtered many of your friends and relatives.

Who do you think you would become after such an experience? What would become of your faith? Would you be a person of conviction and courage, or would you fall into despair and hopelessness?

### **The Encouragement of the Scriptures**

The apostle Paul wrote the following words to the church in Rome,

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Speaking particularly of the Old Testament, Paul described the Scriptures as a source of encouragement. Literally, the Scriptures are “called alongside” us so that we might have hope.

When the Bible speaks of hope, it does not speak of wishful thinking. Biblical hope is “confident expectation.” The things written in former days, specifically the stories of God’s people walking in faith, were written to be our companions on our journey to give us the confident expectation that the same God who walked with them will walk with us.

By reading the stories of people who walked with God, by seeing how God worked in and around them, by seeing how godly people endured and persevered, we can see what we can confidently expect God to do the same in our lives. Over the course of the next few weeks, we will be reading these stories of hope and encouragement so that our hope in Christ will grow.

Today we begin that journey by reading the story of Daniel.

### **The Story of Daniel**

For hundreds of years, the prophets of God warned of this dreadful day. Prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Amos prophesied that if the people of God continued to forsake the covenant they made with God and continued to worship other gods and disobey His commandments, judgment would fall. Just like God divinely brought them into the land of promise, His wrath would divinely remove them, too. Less we dismiss this as some minor plot line in the story of God’s relationship with His people, this was the dominate theme of the Old Testament beginning with the ministry of Moses and lasting for well over a thousand years.

In 605 BC, the hammer of God’s wrath finally fell. We don’t know exactly how old Daniel was when the armies of

Nebuchadnezzar invaded Jerusalem, only that he was a youth.

Daniel was one of many young men identified by the King who were

“...youths without blemish, of good appearance and skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king’s palace, and to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans. (Daniel 1.4 ESV)

Nebuchadnezzar’s officials thought that Daniel, and many others, were capable of learning the Babylonian language and might be of useful service to the king, so he was deported, a prisoner of war.

### **Undefined**

From the very beginning, Daniel was a remarkable young man. After traveling the hundreds of miles to his new home, a trip that had to be less than comfortable and full of fear, he was quickly faced with the challenges of life in the palace. His new king, Nebuchadnezzar, wanted the young men to live the noble life of Babylon, complete with new clothes, new languages, new education, new food, and a new name. Daniel’s name was officially changed to Belteshazzar. The young man once named “My judge is Yahwah” was given a Babylonian name. And a Babylonian diet.

Daniel displayed his true character very quickly. What seems like an insignificant matter to us, Daniel took a moral stand against his captors by refusing to eat the diet of the kings. They set before him the king’s food and wine, but Daniel asked to be given

vegetables and water instead. Daniel was not a health food nut.

This was a religious stand.

But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself. (Daniel 1.8 ESV)

The king's food was more than just fine dining. In Daniel's mind, it would defile him. This means that the food being served was either in violation of the Mosaic law or that the meat had been sacrificed in a pagan temple to a false god. Either way, Daniel saw it set his face to not be defiled.

I am writing about Daniel today because he was a great man of God, used by God to do great and mighty things. But great men and women of God don't just fall out of the trees. The usability is the result of many small decisions just like Daniel, the decision to not be defiled. So many want to be used by God to do great things, but we forget that great men and women are forged in the simple moment of choosing to not be defiled. Daniel guarded his heart and soul from the encroaching effects of compromise with evil.

Compromise starts early, slowly, and builds momentum. Like a snowball rolling downhill, compromise picks up speed, grows in size, and gets harder to stop. The small decisions of obedience and holiness matter. They add up, and define us over time.

Daniel stepped out in courage quickly, and he established a pattern for his life that he would live into over and over again:

believe, act, trust, and watch. Believe in God's way, act obediently and courageously in faith, trust the Lord to take care of the consequences, and stand back and watch God work.

And work God did. I wonder how many times Daniel set on the edge of his bed and wondered at how God was using him. He must have woke up each morning and said to himself, "I wonder what incredible, creative, and totally off the wall thing God is going to do today?"

God gave Daniel and his friends great wisdom, but He gave Daniel a special gift.

As for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams. (Daniel 1.17 ESV)

Oh, the wonderful places that gift would take Daniel.

What did Daniel do to deserve that incredible gift? On some level, absolutely nothing. That is what makes grace so incredible. Grace is God doing in us, through us, and around us what only He can do. Grace is God at work by His choice, by His plan, and by His power. The Bible tells us that the Spirit gives gifts as He wills (see 1 Corinthians 12.11).

But, we should not miss the connection that God gave Daniel this grace gift after Daniel made the decision to not be defiled by the king's food. What if Daniel had decided to be like everyone else and eat the king's food? Surely, after all that he and his friends had been through, surely the matter of his diet was the least of his concerns. If Daniel had allowed himself to be defiled, would God have entrusted him with that incredible gift? Jesus said

it like this, “One who is faithful in very little is also faithful in much” (see Luke 16.10). Daniel was given a mighty gift after he demonstrated his faithfulness.

The decisions we make in our youth to be undefiled yield a lifetime of ministry.

### **Faith in Action**

Daniel hadn't been there long when King Nebuchadnezzar had a dream, and it wasn't a dream to bring everyone together in harmony. The dream disturbed the king so much that he demanded his advisors and wise men to give him the interpretation. But to know that the wise men weren't just making stuff up, the king decreed that the wise men had to tell him both the dream and the interpretation. Of course, no one could do this, so the king ordered his soldiers to execute the wise men for the frauds they were.

On the execution list? Daniel and his friends.

When Daniel heard of the order, he requested to see the king so that he could show the interpretation to the king.

And Daniel went in and requested the king to appoint him a time, that he might show the interpretation to the king. Then Daniel went to his house and made the matter known to Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, his companions, and told them to seek mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery, so that Daniel and his companions might not be destroyed with the rest of the wise men of Babylon. Then the mystery was revealed to Daniel in a vision of the night. (Daniel 2.16-19 ESV)

Did you notice that Daniel made the appointment with the king to let him know the interpretation of the dream before God had given the interpretation to him? Now that's faith. It is one thing for

Daniel to approach the king after God had given him the interpretation, but in faith, Daniel He makes an appointment with the king before he had the interpretation.

Daniel knew that God had given him a gift, and he saw an opportunity to use that gift, and he stepped. The New Testament says it like this,

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2.10 ESV)

Daniel was God's workmanship, created and gifted to carry out the goods works that God had designed him to do. And when he saw an opportunity to step into those good works, he stepped. He stepped before God acted, believing and trusting that God would not let him down.

Many times in Scripture, God calls people to step first and then God will act. For instance, when Israel entered the land of promise, God parted the waters of the Jordan river so they could walk across on dry land. But God did not part the waters first. He said to them,

And when the soles of the feet of the priests bearing the ark of the LORD, the Lord of all the earth, shall rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan shall be cut off from flowing, and the waters coming down from above shall stand in one heap." (Joshua 3.13 ESV)

The priests put their feet in the waters first, and then God cut off the waters.

Daniel stepped, and then God acted. Daniel did not wait for the interpretation to come, but he stepped out on faith believing

that God would give the interpretation to him. That is an encouraging word.

### **Forgotten**

Daniel continued to serve as an advisor to Nebuchadnezzar for nearly 40 years. During that time, he interpreted two dreams and guided the king through a humiliating mental illness sent by God Himself to humble the arrogant ruler. Like Joseph in Egypt, Daniel was promoted to an office almost second to the king himself.

When the great king died in 563 BC, chaos took his place. Nebuchadnezzar was a great and powerful ruler, but his sons, not so much. They fought each other for power, killed each other off, and brought ruin to the great nation of Babylon. By the time Belshazzar took the throne almost thirty years later, Daniel was little more than a memory to the royal family.

After living in his captive city for almost 66 years, Daniel had to be pushing 80. Though endowed with an incredible ability to interpret dreams, the kings that followed Nebuchadnezzar forgot all about Daniel.

We are not given much insight into the forgotten years, whether Daniel stewed in anger or self-pity, whether he languished in silence or tried to offer his services to the new king. What we do know is that when it was time for God to use Daniel again, he was ready. His gift of understanding dreams and visions had not diminished through the forgotten years. Through the silent years, Daniel was still preparing to be used by God.

When we examine the lives of great men and women in the Bible, almost all of them had a “desert period” of their lives, a time when they were in intense preparation to be used by God. Moses was in the wilderness for forty years before the burning bush. David hid in caves from Saul for years even after he was anointed by Samuel. Joseph was left to rot in a prison cell in Egypt. The apostle Paul spent three years in the desert after his Damascus call. And Daniel was forgotten for almost thirty years.

But great men and women of faith know that while the world might forget them, their Creator never does. They are always in a state of preparation, and what happens during the desert years is life shaping.

Once in a lifetime moments are often the result of thirty years of preparation.

King Belshazzar didn't have a dream like his forefather, but he did have a life changing experience.

Immediately the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace, opposite the lampstand. And the king saw the hand as it wrote. (Daniel 5.5 ESV)

The king immediately called all the wise men to interpret the meaning, but no one could. But one man was suspiciously absent. Why wasn't Daniel called? Despite all the great things Daniel had done for the nation of Babylon, he was forgotten and ignored.

Thankfully for the king, the queen mother remembered the great wisdom of Daniel, but it seems that no one in the royal court

of Belshazzar had a clue who Daniel was. Godly men are often forgotten by their peers, but never by their Creator.

### **Spiritually Disciplined**

Not only did Daniel witness the collapse of his native country, but he witness the implosion of his captive country, Babylon. Cyrus, King of Persia, conquered Babylon in 539 BC. And though we would expect that all of the advisors to the conquered king would have been dismissed or imprisoned, God still used Daniel in yet a third kingdom. Daniel, the same wise man full of integrity, proved himself to be useful and effective even to the new King of Persia, Darius.

But the advisors of Darius were not so impressed with Daniel. Jealous of his power and of the king's favor, they pulled a fast one on the king. They coerced him into signing a law that even he could not reverse. This law forbade anyone from praying to any other god beside the king himself for 30 days. It must have struck an egotistical chord, for the king signed it. But Daniel would not obey it.

When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem. He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously. (Daniel 6.10 ESV)

Daniel's practice, long before Darius was King of Persia, was to pray three times a day to Yahweh. And Daniel was not about to stop that practice just because some king told him to. He was arrested, and tossed in the lion's den.

Godliness sometimes get you in trouble. But Daniel's philosophy had always been to believe, act, trust, and watch. He believed God had commanded him to pray to the one true God. He acted, despite the law. He trusted God to take care of the circumstances. And he stood back and watched the show. I wonder who was more surprised? The lions who didn't want to eat Daniel or Daniel who didn't want to be eaten. What a life changing moment that must have been for King Darius, to arrive at the lion's den the next day to see Daniel alive and well. Godliness can get you into trouble, and God can get you out.

While we usually focus on the lion's den part of the story, we should not miss the fact that Daniel was a spiritually disciplined man. One of the reasons that God was able to do great and mighty things through Daniel was that he faithfully prayed to God three times a day for over 80 years. Everyone wants to do something great for God, but how many exercise the basic spiritual discipline of prayer?

### **Conclusion**

Daniel's story is truly amazing. And the apostle Paul was right, the things written down for us encourage us to endure and give us hope. I find encouragement through the story of Daniel in several ways.

Through Daniel's story, I am reminded of the importance of personal holiness. If I want to be used greatly by God, I must take great care to not be defiled by the sinfulness of the world in which I live. There are so many different ways to be defiled. Some

are more obvious, like drugs or sexual immorality. But the Devil's schemes are much more crafty. He is scheming against me to defile me with anger, bitterness, jealousy, fear, greed, covetousness, pride, and selfishness. If I want to be used by God to do great and mighty things, then I must resolve to not be defiled.

Through Daniel's story, I am also encouraged to boldly step into the good works God has prepared in advance for me to do. God gives us all gifts to be used, but they are grace gifts exercised by faith. Sometimes God calls us to step first and then He will act. Daniel's story challenges me to think about how God may call me to step boldly into the good works He has prepared for me to do, even stepping before He has acted. Those who always wait for God to act first miss a life of wonder, and I don't want to miss that.

Through Daniel's story, I am encouraged to be faithful during the lean times. Godly men and women in the Bible often went through long periods of preparation, where it seemed that the world around them had forgotten all about them. Daniel's story challenges me to develop faith eyes that see a preparation period when everyone else only sees a desert. I don't want to waste the periods of preparation by whining. God might use the decades of preparation to prepare me for a one in a lifetime opportunities.

Through Daniels' story, I can confidently expect God to be sovereignly orchestrating the events around me and to be in total control. The same God who was orchestrating the events of Daniel's day is still on the throne today. It does not mean that we

will never see the inside of a lion's den, but it does mean that God is bigger than any other force in my life. God can make a way when there seems to be no way.

May the Lord encourage your heart today and give you hope through the story of Daniel. May the Scriptures come along side you on your journey of endurance, and may they give you hope.

To the glory of God. Amen.