

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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21st Century challenges from Daniel: Faithfulness to God - Daniel 1

Today we begin a series of six talks under the general title of "21st century challenges from Daniel" Although the book of Daniel was written about 2,600 years ago we will see that it still has a lot to teach us today. In today's talk we will look at Daniel's faithfulness to God.

I wonder how many of you as children sang the hymn:

*Standing by a purpose true,
Heeding God's command,
Honour them, the faithful few!
All hail to Daniel's band!*

*Dare to be a Daniel,
Dare to stand alone!
Dare to have a purpose firm!
Dare to make it known.*

This old hymn was written by Philip Bliss who was born in America in 1838. It conjures up a picture of a real hero! It was a hymn that I really enjoyed singing as a child. It conveys the bravery and faithfulness of this young man, Daniel. As a young child you can't help but be thrilled to read the story of Daniel in the lion's den!

As is so often the case, however, what Daniel is best remembered for was just a very small part of a remarkable story, and many years of instruction and preparation had led up to this event, and made it possible. God's heroes are not often made overnight! Most are prepared by God for a particular service over many, many years.

Daniel's story is told in the book in the Bible that bears his name and in thinking today about Daniel and his faithfulness to God, I want to consider three things that Daniel did.

1. In 1:8 we read that Daniel purposed in his heart;
2. In the same chapter and verse 21 we read that Daniel continued; and
3. In 6:10 we learn that Daniel prayed. I think we will see that these three things are what made Daniel a real hero of faith.

They are things that you and I can do today.

Daniel purposed in his heart

Daniel's story of faithfulness to God in extremely difficult circumstances has much to say to us today, particularly for younger Christians. Think about the background to this story. Daniel and his friends had grown up in the land of Israel; they were all from noble families and quite possibly lived fairly comfortable lives. Israel as a nation had, however, not been faithful and obedient to God and were about to face an invasion from the huge Babylonian army. God considers His chosen people to be His children and like a good father will not allow bad behaviour to continue. The invasion of Israel by King Nebuchadnezzar is the discipline allowed by God to correct and chastise His people. The vast Babylonian army easily defeats the Israelites. The conquering army seize many treasures from the Temple at Jerusalem and, along with other princes, Daniel and his friends are taken captive back to Babylon.

Nebuchadnezzar was the most formidable and powerful Gentile monarch ever. A man of remarkable intelligence and energy, he was also a great warrior. Under his leadership, he had forged the nation of Babylon into the leading power of that day. Babylon was a strong nation, rich and powerful, but also with a well-deserved reputation for learning and scholarship. It was to this country and to serve this great king that Daniel and his companions had been brought.

Nebuchadnezzar had a policy of placing around himself the wisest and handsomest of people. To this end, Daniel and all the other princes who had been brought captive to Babylon would be schooled in all the learning of the Babylonians

which was considerable. Those who excelled would stand before the king to give advice, and would be in positions of relative comfort and power. The pupils in this school would be provided with the best food, drink and clothing but in return would have to study extremely hard each day to learn two new languages and all about the science and culture of Babylon. Their final exam at the end of three years would be conducted by king Nebuchadnezzar himself! King Nebuchadnezzar had a reputation for killing those who displeased him!

What would you do? What would I do? The easiest course of action, and many would argue the most sensible, would be to knuckle down, do as you were told and fit in as best you can with the new arrangements! They were, after all, effectively slaves, hundreds of miles from home with no prospect of return. They could argue that God had allowed this to happen to them, so now they must serve their new master and forget about their old ways and teachings.

What did Daniel do? Let's read from the book in the Bible that bears his name. "But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's delicacies, nor with the wine which he drank; therefore he requested of the chief of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself. Now God had brought Daniel into the favour and goodwill of the chief of the eunuchs. And the chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, 'I fear my lord the king, who has appointed your food and drink. For why should he see your faces looking worse than the young men who are your age? Then you would endanger my head before the king. So Daniel said to the steward whom the chief of the eunuchs had set over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, 'Please test your servants for ten days, and let them give us vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then let our appearance be examined before you, and the appearance of the young men who eat the portion of the king's delicacies; and as you see fit, so deal with your servants.' So he consented with them in this matter, and tested them ten days. And at the end of ten days their features appeared better and fatter in flesh than all the young men who ate the portion of the king's delicacies. Thus the steward took away their portion of delicacies and the wine that they were to drink, and gave them vegetables." Daniel 1:8-16.

"Daniel purposed in his heart." This is the great decision that Daniel made! He had already thought about the problem; he might be lonely and a long way from home and away from God's Temple where he had been used to worship. There were many things that Daniel had no control over at all but he would do all in his power to remain faithful to God whom he loved. Up and down this country there are young Christians in schools and colleges who are learning about science, languages and the culture of this country. Much is good, but just like the education that Daniel received, some of the things taught are plain and simply wrong! The Babylonians were great scholars; their understanding of mathematics was remarkable, their building and architecture was some of the finest in the world and their knowledge of the stars and planets was very advanced. But mixed in with these things, they were also involved in the occult and a false belief that their destinies were written in the stars.

Daniel and his friends couldn't change that and indeed were not required by God to do so! Young Christians today are taught many good and helpful things at school, but again mixed in with the subjects they learn are many teachings that are contrary to God's Word. Daniel and his friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, would make a stand! They knew that the food provided by King Nebuchadnezzar had been dedicated to idols. It might be the finest food in the land but in the eyes of these young men it was polluted. There was only one God and they would remain true to Him!

These four young men had reached a decision that might cost them their lives! Clearly other young men had also been brought up from Israel with them, but only these four are concerned to remain faithful to what they had been taught from the Word of God. Remarkably the other princes are not named and are long forgotten. The names of these faithful young men will never be forgotten!

The way Daniel approached this problem is exemplary! He had "purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the king's meat." His decision, wrongly handled, would endanger not only his life and the lives of his friends, but would also endanger the life of Ashpenaz the chief steward who had been put in charge of their welfare and education. So Daniel approaches the chief steward; he requests that the four of them are excused eating the king's provision. He is polite but firm. Ashpenaz explains his fear that if Daniel and his companions eat a poor diet they will appear unwell and this will reflect badly on his care of them and endanger his own life. Nebuchadnezzar might think that he, Ashpenaz, had been using their portion of food for himself or his family!

Daniel is prepared for this answer and also prepared to trust God to help him. Instead of giving them the finest food, he suggests that they be fed with the food of slaves and peasants, simple vegetables and plain water! Then after ten days on this meagre diet see who looked the fittest! It was a reasonable suggestion and Daniel had every confidence that God would look after them. And indeed He did! Not only did they not look ill and under nourished, but on the contrary they looked in better health than the others of their age! This is the first demonstration of Daniel's faithfulness to God. Clearly he had learnt a lot from the Bible! He had possibly been taught God's precepts at home as a young boy but this is the first public record of his faithfulness. In a very simple thing Daniel knew what was right and what was wrong and he determined to do what was right.

I find this a huge challenge to me personally. So often it would seem easier to go along with the crowd and compromise my principles, but Daniel in far more difficult and dangerous circumstances stood firm. "He would not defile himself." It is often very easy to argue that as our circumstances are allowed by God we should just accept the situation and make the best of it. Fit in as best we can and then maybe at some point in the future, when things have settled down, we can try again to witness to God's love and faithfulness. Clearly this is what some of Daniel's compatriots decided to do, but not Daniel! He purposed in his heart! Daniel and his friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, are still remembered and admired today; those other princes who lived at the same time but who didn't dare to stand up and be counted have long since been forgotten.

Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself. Today we might not be offered food sacrificed to idols but no thinking person would argue that there is not every opportunity to be defiled. All around us, on advertising hoardings, in newspapers, on the television and on the internet are images and articles that will defile us. Pornography has never before been so blatant or available. We can be defiled by it by accident but there is also the real risk that we will knowingly watch or read things that are impure.

The apostle Paul, writing to his young friend Timothy says "Keep yourself pure" 1 Timothy 5:22. In a later letter that Paul also wrote to Timothy, he speaks about the need to be clean and then he will be "a vessel for honour, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work" 2 Timothy 2:21. A holy and pure God obviously cannot use dirty tools to do His work!

Daniel continued

There was also a continuing cost to Daniel and his friends in this decision. Most of us could manage for just ten days on vegetables and water, but having taken a stand, Daniel and his friends continued happily and without complaint on this diet for years!

This is another important lesson for us from the life of Daniel. He continued! Having made a stand, he didn't give up or get discouraged, he continued! This is the second thing that I want to think about from the story of Daniel. At the end of Daniel 1 it is written, "And Daniel continued even unto the first year of King Cyrus." Daniel 1:21.

I know that this is an historical comment on the length of Daniel's life and service, but it is also a very important statement regarding Daniel's witness and character. He continued! This is a very under-rated virtue! Some of us are sprinters, a lot of effort for a very short period of time! I need to be more like a marathon runner, I need to continue! The person who wrote the letter to the Hebrews said in Hebrews 12:1, "Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of faith" Hebrews 12:1-2.

This is both a challenge and an encouragement to you and me. There are so many Christians who week after week turn up at the prayer meeting or Bible study, who quietly do a work that is largely unnoticed by others. They continue! Having been won by the amazing love of the Lord Jesus, they respond to that love in faithful service to Him year after year. They continue.

If you are one of these, God bless you! He notices and values faithfulness! In Isaiah 42, Jehovah draws attention to His Beloved servant and says, "He shall not cry, nor lift up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street. A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench: he shall bring forth judgment unto truth. He shall not fail nor be discouraged." I have always enjoyed listening to Vance Hafner, a Southern Baptist Minister. He put it very memorably when he said that we need to serve faithfully, not fitfully. We need to continue!

This is exactly what Daniel did. He continued! His remarkable role as Prime Minister to some of the most powerful rulers this world has ever seen spanned some 70 years. The various kings learned to value his wisdom and advice. Daniel could be relied upon because first and foremost he was faithful to God. He didn't compromise the principles he had learned from the Bible.

Daniel had his enemies of course; others didn't like the role he had and the prominence he had achieved. Some of the other rulers would use every opportunity to enrich themselves but not Daniel. They tried to find fault with Daniel but Daniel 6:4 tells us, "they could find no charge or fault, because he was faithful; nor was there any error or fault found in him." If my life was to be examined so closely, would it also be true that I was found to be faithful and without fault?

Daniel prayed

The third lesson that I want to think about from the life of Daniel is that he prayed. Daniel's life was marked by self-discipline; he had established good habits and he carried on with them. It is clear from 6:10 and from 10:12, that Daniel made it a habit to study God's Word and pray each and every day. This is so very, very important! When you read the stories of the lives of great Christian heroes like Billy Graham and Hudson Taylor, the missionary to China,

the thing that comes through loud and clear is that they were self disciplined men who always made time for prayer and the study of the Bible. It has to be the basic foundation to a strong Christian testimony. Again I have to ask myself if I place the same value on prayer as Daniel did. Do I value God's Word and seek to understand it in the way Daniel did?

When Daniel first arrived as a captive in Babylon he faced his first test. Would he be faithful to God or not? As we have seen, Daniel passed this test with flying colours. Many years have now passed. There is a new ruler of Babylon and Daniel is now a very respected and powerful man. But he will still be tested. Our enemy will never give up and nor did Daniel's enemies! We have already seen that those who envied Daniel could not find any fault with him so they trick the proud and gullible King Darius into passing a law that they know Daniel will break.

Let's read Daniel 6:6-10: "Then these presidents and princes assembled together to the king, and said thus unto him, 'King Darius, live for ever. All the presidents of the kingdom, the governors, and the princes, the counsellors, and the captains, have consulted together to establish a royal statute, and to make a firm decree, that whosoever shall ask a petition of any God or man for thirty days, save of thee, O king, he shall be cast into the den of lions. Now, O king, establish the decree, and sign the writing, that it be not changed, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which alters not.' Wherefore king Darius signed the writing and the decree. Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house; and his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as was his custom."

What would Daniel do now? Would he change his established habits? Would he be discreet and find some secret place to pray? No! He changed nothing. He continued to do as he had always done. Daniel went home to his house, opened his window which faced towards Jerusalem and three times a day he prayed. This wasn't bravado. Daniel was relying on God's faithfulness. Years earlier in much brighter days, when Solomon dedicated the temple at Jerusalem, he envisaged a day when following serious sin and disobedience the people of Israel might be taken away captive from their land. This was the very thing that had happened and Daniel, although not necessarily guilty himself, was caught up in the nation's punishment.

In his prayer Solomon called on God to hear and answer those who, although a long way from home, repented and turned towards Jerusalem to pray. This is what Daniel had made his custom over many years. He had not forgotten Jerusalem, God or His temple, and Daniel was familiar with the promise contained in Solomon's prayer. Just as years earlier as a young man Daniel had counted on God's faithfulness regarding the matter of the food sacrificed to idols, so now as a prominent and respected statesman he would rely on God's faithfulness and promises. In returning to his house to pray Daniel wasn't being provocative or heroic. He was doing what he had done from an early age; he prayed!

The story of what happened next is well known. King Darius realised the folly of what he, in his pride had allowed to happen. He couldn't risk losing face with his officials and so commanded that his trusted advisor, Daniel, be thrown into the lion's den. As Darius speaks to Daniel, he seems to sense that Daniel's God could deliver him from the lions. King Darius spent an anxious and restless night and early in the morning goes to the lion's den to see what had happened to Daniel. He calls out, "Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to deliver you from the lions?" Daniel 6:20. Even Darius the king had to acknowledge Daniel's continued and faithful service to God. But what a question! Daniel, is your God able? Of course He is!

Like Daniel we too have a God who is able. Take a moment to think about the times in the Bible when we are told our God is able. "He is able to save to the uttermost" Hebrews 7:25. He is "able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy" Jude 24. He is "able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think" Ephesians 3:20. We have a great God!

This is the part of Daniel's story that is the best known; Daniel in the lion's den. But I think we have seen that there was a long history with God before this point is arrived at. Daniel was a faithful servant of God, first of all in a matter that seems small and not very important but then in a more heroic way. Daniel was faithful first of all in the little things. This is exactly what the Lord Jesus said in the parable of the Talents in Matthew 25. There the master says to his faithful servant "Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things."

You and I can be this. We can be faithful in the small things. Obedience to the Word of God is lightly esteemed today or even made fun of. God's Word, the Bible, makes very clear what His standards are on sex, marriage and morality. They haven't changed over the years in spite of what society and some religious leaders would try and tell us. God's values and principles are timeless as are His promises. Let us value them and seek to be faithful to God.

Just before I finish I want to draw your attention to a wonderful phrase in Daniel 11:32: "the people who know their God shall be strong, and carry out great exploits." This is wonderful! "The people who know their God shall be strong, and carry out great exploits." It is not knowing about God, it's knowing God!

Having had personal experience of God, the Apostle Paul standing on the deck of a wrecked ship sinking in a fierce storm could say "Take heart, men, for I believe God," in the calm certainty that all aboard would get to land safely. As indeed they did! Elsewhere he could say, "My God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus" Philippians 4:19. Paul said "My God shall supply all your need." Paul had a personal living relationship with God and knew from experience He could be relied upon. It is people like Daniel and Paul who really knew their God in a meaningful way who will do great exploits.

These three things then marked Daniel. He purposed in his heart not to defile himself, he continued, carried on faithfully; and he prayed. These three simple things are certainly not beyond the reach of any of us. Do you, do I have a determination to keep ourselves pure so that we are available for the Lord Jesus to use if He so chooses. Do we continue to do faithfully whatever God has put in our hands to do and do we pray regularly and earnestly?

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