

# DANIEL IN EXILE: “Swimming against the Tide”

A sermon by  
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## TEXTS: Daniel 6:1-18

*It pleased Darius to set over the kingdom one hundred and twenty satraps, stationed throughout the whole kingdom, and over them three presidents, including Daniel; to these the satraps gave account, so that the king might suffer no loss. Soon Daniel distinguished himself above all the other presidents and satraps because an excellent spirit was in him, and the king planned to appoint him over the whole kingdom. So the presidents and the satraps tried to find grounds for complaint against Daniel in connection with the kingdom. But they could find no grounds for complaint or any corruption, because he was faithful, and no negligence or corruption could be found in him. The men said, ‘We shall not find any ground for complaint against this Daniel unless we find it in connection with the law of his God.’*

*So the presidents and satraps conspired and came to the king and said to him, ‘O King Darius, live forever! All the presidents of the kingdom, the prefects and the satraps, the counsellors and the governors, are agreed that the king should establish an ordinance and enforce an interdict, that whoever prays to anyone, divine or human, for thirty days, except to you, O king, shall be thrown into a den of lions. Now, O king, establish the interdict and sign the document, so that it cannot be changed, according to the law of the Medes and the Persians, which cannot be revoked.’ Therefore King Darius signed the document and interdict.*

*Although Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he continued to go to his house, which had windows in its upper room open towards Jerusalem, and to get down on his knees three times a day to pray to his God and praise him, just as he had done previously. The conspirators came and found Daniel praying and seeking mercy before his God. Then they approached the king and said concerning the interdict, ‘O king! Did you not sign an interdict, that anyone who prays to anyone, divine or human, within thirty days except to you, O king, shall be thrown into a den of lions?’ The king answered, ‘The thing stands fast, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be revoked.’ Then they responded to the king, ‘Daniel, one of the exiles from Judah, pays no attention to you, O king, or to the interdict you have signed, but he is saying his prayers three times a day.’*

*When the king heard the charge, he was very much distressed. He was determined to save Daniel, and until the sun went down he made every effort to rescue him. Then the conspirators came to the king and said to him, ‘Know, O king, that it is a law of the Medes and Persians that no interdict or ordinance that the king establishes can be changed.’*

*Then the king gave the command, and Daniel was brought and thrown into the den of lions. The king said to Daniel, ‘May your God, whom you faithfully serve, deliver you!’ A stone was brought and laid on the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet and with the signet of his lords, so that nothing might be changed concerning Daniel. Then the king went to his palace and spent the night fasting; no food was brought to him, and sleep fled from him.*

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Do you remember sixteen? No matter the decade in which you discover sixteen candles on your birthday cake, you face the challenges of growing independence from your parents. Social life becomes more important. You begin thinking of what you might do after high school. You consider a trade or a career. You discover who you are, what makes you tick, and how you will live into the future.

For the prophet Daniel, turning sixteen is a nightmare. He finds himself a stranger in a strange land. He is an exile. A long march has brought him to Babylon. The buildings are immense. The clothing is strange. The language rolls off the tongue awkwardly. The gods the people worship have odd-sounding names and there are many. The Temple is gone. The many things which gave a sense of security are part of the past.

Daniel, along with three of his friends, is chosen for service in the king's court. They receive new names . . . Babylonian names. Daniel's name in Hebrew means "God is my judge." His new name, Belteshazzar, means "Baal protect the king" in the Babylonian tongue. The conquerors are insistent. He and all the other exiles must leave their old ways behind.

Daniel and his friends are the best and the brightest. They are groomed, prepped, and trained for service to Nebuchadnezzar. The process will take three years. This regimen includes eating Babylonian food and drinking Babylonian wine. Daniel refuses. His friends refuse, as well.

Early in Daniel's life we see the faith and determination that will serve him throughout his life. It is a principle I wish I had learned at such an early age. **WHO YOU ARE SHOULD NEVER BE SHAPED BY WHERE YOU ARE OR THE COMPANY YOU KEEP.**

We have a saying, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." Daniel and his friends would have said, "If what the Romans do is wrong, we don't do it!"

There are two kinds of people. Some are thermometers. They take the temperature of the room and then reflect that temperature. Some people, though, are thermostats. By their very presence, they set the temperature of the room.

Daniel and his friends were thermostats. Daniel and the three Hebrew friends refused to eat from the king's table. Why? Were they committed vegetarians? No! They did not know the source or origin of the meat. Likely, it had been sacrificed to one of the Babylonian gods. The wine was likely offered as a drink offering to the Babylonian gods. By eating and drinking, Daniel and his friends knew they were violating the first commandment to have no other gods before Jehovah.

Idolatry got the nation of Israel to Babylon. Their exile, according to prophecy, would be for seventy years. Faithfulness might get them home again. So, Daniel and his friends are faithful. They set themselves apart. They continue to worship the God of Israel. They maintain the Hebrew diet.

They are young men of integrity and character. Who they are is not shaped by where they are. Who they are is not shaped by the crowd around them.

A few years ago, psychologist Ruth W. Berenda and her associates carried out an interesting experiment with teenagers designed to show how a person handled group pressure. The plan was simple. They brought groups of ten adolescents into a room for a test. Subsequently, each group of ten was instructed to raise their hands when the teacher pointed to the longest line on three separate charts. What one person in the group did not know was that nine of the others in the room had been instructed ahead of time to vote for the second-longest line. Regardless of the instructions they heard, once they were all together in the group, the nine were not to vote for the longest line, but rather vote for the next-to-the-longest line.

The desire of the psychologists was to determine how one person reacted when surrounded by numerous people who obviously stood against what was true.

The experiment began with nine teen-agers voting for the wrong line. The stooge would typically glance around, frown in confusion, and slip his hand up with the group. The instructions were repeated. The next card was raised. Time after time, the self-conscious stooge would sit there saying a short line is longer than a long line, simply because he lacked the courage to challenge the group. This remarkable conformity occurred in about seventy-five percent of the cases. It was true of small children and high-school students as well. (The Tale Of The Tardy Oxcart, Charles R. Swindoll, Word, p. 434.)

It is hard to stand alone. It is a struggle to swim against the tide. In the end, it is the only way to live with yourself. Pastor Matt Chandler of the Village Church, writes: "When we heed God's Word, we are rejecting how the world tries to disciple us."

That is what Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did. They heeded God's word. They stood their ground.

Because Daniel stands out, he gets noticed. Like Joseph in Egypt, Daniel is gifted with the interpretation of dreams. Nebuchadnezzar gives his wise men an impossible task. He has a disturbing dream. He demands his seers and advisors interpret his dream. They respond, "Tell us your dream and we will interpret." Nebuchadnezzar essentially says, "If you wise men were as

smart as you say you are, you could not only interpret the dream, you could tell me the dream!"

They cannot. Only Daniel is given understanding by his God. This is another principle taught by this story. YOU CAN BE A WITNESS WHEREVER YOU ARE, BY YOUR ACTIONS AND BY YOUR WORDS.

Daniel gives the dream and the interpretation. Before he does, though, he assures King Nebby, "*No wise men, enchanters, magicians, or diviners can show to the king the mystery that the king is asking, but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and he has disclosed to King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen at the end of days.*" (Daniel 2:27-28)

No man can do this. No magician can do this. No wise man, enchanter or diviner can do this. Only God can reveal the hidden things.

How does Nebuchadnezzar respond when Daniel tells him his dream and interprets the dream? "*Truly, your God is God of gods and Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you have been able to reveal this mystery.*" (Daniel 2:47)

Here is another principle from the Book of Daniel. SOMETIMES DOING RIGHT COMES AT GREAT PERSONAL COST.

Witness does not come without cost. It is hardest to stand up when you are the only one standing. It is costly to speak up when you are the only one speaking. The Book of Daniel repeatedly highlights the conflict between Jews who try to honor God and live faithfully, and a foreign culture bent on shaping and forming them to its own liking. The next part of this story illustrates the cost of obedience to God.

The field of battle has not changed over the centuries. As Christians, we are still trying to discern our way. How do we live for God, speak for God, serve God, and live by Godly principles in a culture that is anti-God, anti-morality, anti-truth, and anti-life? How do we stand up? How do we swim against the tide?

Does it matter? Of course, it matters! Is there a cost? Indeed, there is a cost! Look again at the Book of Daniel.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego endure the fiery furnace. What have they done? They have refused to bow the knee to falsehood and idolatry. They are willing to bear the cost of doing what is right. That is what integrity does. They are willing to trust that their lives and their times are in the hands of the God who is faithful.

Sometimes we fool ourselves into thinking that if we just blend in, keep our heads down, and keep our mouths shut, we can buy a little more time, a little more life. Wednesday morning, I shared with the Men's Prayer Breakfast group one of my favorite quotes by Rev. Martin Niemoller, German Lutheran pastor, who spent time in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II. The quote is this: "First they came for the Jews, but I did nothing because I'm not a Jew. Then they came for the socialists, but I did nothing because I'm not a socialist. Then they came for the Catholics, but I did nothing because I'm not a Catholic. Finally, they came for me, but by then there was no one left to help me."

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were willing to bet the house on God. Their security is in God. They trusted that God would preserve them. Hear was their testimony, "*O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defense to you in this matter. If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of*

*blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up.” (Daniel 3:16-18)*

This is the next principle that we can glean from the Book of Daniel. GOD KEEPS WATCH OVER HIS OWN. The only reason we know the names of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego is because God preserved their lives. They trusted God. God came through.

They possessed the daring faith of those who believe that their times are in the hands of God. It is the faith and assurance expressed in the answer to the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism: “What is your only comfort in life and death?” The answer? “That I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from all the power of the devil. He also preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, all things must work together for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit he also assures me of eternal life and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for him.”

I love those words. I am not my own.

The last verse of one of my favorite hymns also expresses this well. The words were penned by James Russell Lowell, the son of a Congregationalist minister as a protest during the Mexican War. The words are these:

Though the cause of evil prospers, yet 'tis truth alone is strong;  
Though her portion be the scaffold, and upon the throne be wrong.  
Yet that scaffold sways the future, and, behind the dim unknown,  
Standeth God within the shadow keeping watch above His own.

God is standing in the shadows keeping watch above His own. What a comfort!

I know it took a long time getting here, but now we come to Daniel and the lion's den. Some of you are worried that I just wrapped up the introduction to the sermon. Yes, I did, but I'll try to keep it under an hour!

Daniel started in Babylon as a teenager. Many decades have passed. He is now an old man of 81-83. He has served four pagan kings in two different kingdoms. The Medes/Persians are now in control. He maintains an excellent spirit, even in old age. Now King Darius plans, as with Joseph under Pharaoh, to put Daniel in charge of his whole kingdom. Daniel's life has been, in the words of the Rev. Eugene Peterson, “a long obedience in the same direction.”

Daniel's character stood the test of time. Even his enemies say of him, “*We shall not find any ground for complaint against this Daniel unless we find it in connection with the law of his God.*” (Daniel 6:5) That is where his enemies try to spring a trap to ensnare Daniel. They seek to put Daniel in a moral bind. They convince Darius to publish a decree that only prayers to the king may be made. Notice how Daniel handles it. He doesn't pray to the king in public. Neither does he pray to his God in public. I can imagine that the counselors, prefects, satraps, and governors, like the Pharisee in Jesus's parable of the Pharisee and the Publican, make a great show of praying publicly, loudly, and demonstratively, to King Darius.

Daniel is not insubordinate. He is not rebellious.

Here is what verse 10 says, “*Although Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he continued to go to his house, which had windows in its upper room open toward Jerusalem, and to get down on his knees three times a day to pray to his God and praise him, just as he had done previously.*”

Daniel continues to be who Daniel has always been. When he prays, he prays toward Jerusalem. He has not forgotten the Temple. He has not forgotten his home. He has not forgotten God.

The Prophet Isaiah speaks of the restoration of Jerusalem in the time to come. It is a promise distant and intangible right now. How could it be true? Yet, God is a God of promises. God is a God of miracles. God is the God who keeps covenant, even when those with whom God makes covenant are belligerent, hostile, and faithless. Hear what Isaiah says of Zion, “*But Zion said, ‘The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me.’ Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me.*” (Isaiah 49:14-16)

Daniel has not forgotten God. More importantly, God has not forgotten Daniel. Daniel is ratted out by his enemies. Charges are brought. King Darius is caught. Violating his own decree would force him to play the fool. He doesn't want to harm Daniel, yet his word as king must stand. His final charge to Daniel is curious. "May your God, whom you faithfully serve, deliver you!"

Daniel spends the night in the lion's den.

It has been said that if you lie down with dogs, you will wake up with fleas. What about cats? Not just *felis catus*, but *panthera leo*? If you lie down with lions, you probably aren't getting up at all . . . unless the God who made the lions is in control. Lions normally circle their prey with one occupying the prey's attention so that others may attack from the side or rear.

Do you think Daniel was prayed up before he entered the lion's den? That was his practice, three times a day. Do you think he might have been praying from the moment they sealed the lion's den? What was Daniel's confidence? He had already seen miracles. He had watched as God gave him favor with four different kings allowing him to advance as a stranger in a strange land.

What happened in that lion's den? I don't know for sure. Neither do you. We only know the end of the story. I can imagine that Daniel exhibited no fear. He quietly dropped to his knees. He prayed fervently and silently. The lionesses, the ones who do the hunting, sniff Daniel. They smell Daniel. He doesn't smell like dinner. Perhaps Daniel remembered and claimed the promise from Psalm 4:8, "*I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety.*"

By the end of the night, I see Daniel curled in a ball, surrounded by lions with the head of one lion in his lap. No, he's not singing "Soft Kitty"! However, the God who made Daniel, and the God who made the lion, determines that Daniel will walk out of the lion's den in one piece. King Darius determines that Daniel's enemies will not. They suffer the fate they prepared for Daniel.

The king makes a decree that everyone in his kingdom should tremble and fear before the God of Daniel, "*For he is the living God, enduring forever. His kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion has no end. He delivers and rescues, he works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth; for he has saved Daniel from the power of the lions.*" (Daniel 6:26-27)

If you are a teenager, you can serve God in a hostile environment. As a stranger in a strange land, you can stand up for righteousness. You can do the right thing. You can be a man of integrity and faith, a woman of purity and backbone. You can witness to the power, love, and reality of God. You do not have to go along to get along, succumb to peer pressure, give in to your friends, compromise, or sell out your principles. You can swim against the tide, go against the grain, stand up for God, and be God's man or God's woman in a culture that stands in opposition to faith, to God, and to righteousness. Daniel shows us the way.

And at the end of your life? Like Daniel, you can know that God isn't finished with you yet. God is never finished with us. Until He calls us home, there is a witness we bear, a task for us to do, a place for us to be, and stand for us to take.

Where has God placed you?

Soli Deo Gloria. To God alone be the glory. Amen.