

Living Against the Current

A study in the book of Daniel

Have you ever gone swimming in a stream or river? I grew up in a canyon where frigid, springs poured out of the canyon walls and bubbled up out of the ground where those walls met the rocky canyon floor. In the summer, when temperatures climbed to the 100's, my dad often drove us kids through the sagebrush desert, down dirt and gravel roads to some of our favorite swimming holes. The best places had a large rock or bridge that we could climb, and then leap into the chilly water. We'd jump a few times, but could only endure maybe ten or fifteen minutes' exposure to the water, the temperature of which consistently measured 59 degrees Fahrenheit (a normal recreational swimming pool is kept around 80-85 degrees). The water flowed swiftly, especially in deep places, and we allowed the current to carry us from the entry point to the dock or sandy shallow where we'd climb out, lips blue and scrawny bones shivering. The real challenge, though, was to swim up stream. It was deceptive how quickly and effortlessly we floated downstream. But only in swimming against the current did I realize how fast the water really moved.

The book of Daniel is a story about a young man and his friends who live in a culture with a strong downstream current. The story begins with the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem, when Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, selects the most brilliant and handsome young men of Israel to serve in his palace. The first six chapters* of the book focus on the title character, Daniel, and his three friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. These young men worship and serve the one true God, YHWH, but must adapt to life in the polytheistic, pagan culture of Babylon. Throughout our six-week study, we'll see how Daniel and his friends learn to swim upstream as their faith is challenged by a series of difficult situations. We'll also examine what it looks like to live a life of faith in a culture that often pressures us to compromise our values and convictions. We'll also see God's sovereignty and miraculous power in the midst of circumstances that seem impossible or hopeless.

Contents:

Chapter 1: Living Against the Current

Chapter 2: In a Tight Spot

Chapter 3: Faith Under Fire

Chapter 4: Upset Alert

Chapter 5: Writing On the Wall

Chapter 6: Faith Under Trial

*Note: For this study, we focus on chapters one through six, the narratives of Daniel and his friends as they live for God's glory in the Babylonian culture. If you are interested in further study on the second half of Daniel, which contains a significant portion of the Bible's apocalyptic literature, see the NIV Application Commentary volume on the book of Daniel.

Living Against the Current

Daniel Chapter 1

Opening Questions:

1. Have you ever spent time in a foreign culture? What was it like adapting to that culture?
2. What are some ways that you've lived counter-culturally?

Important to Know:

The stage is set for us during the first chapter of the book of Daniel. After going astray and ignoring God, the Israelites are delivered into the hands of the Babylonians who drag them away into exile. Yet, though God's people begin to live in exile, God gives them opportunities to live faithfully. We see this play out through the story of Daniel and his three friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, who were Judean youths from royal or noble decent.

Immediately, we see the tension in the narrative as these young Israelites are handpicked to be trained in Babylonian culture, presumably to serve the interests of the Babylonian Empire. Do they give in to the pressure and forego their own religion, culture, and ethics?

At the core, it is a struggle of identity. As we find out later in the book, Daniel's name (which means "God is my judge" in Hebrew), is changed to "Belteshazzar," a namesake of the Babylonian idols. Daniel's physical appearance was also most likely altered or enhanced to fit the beauty standards of the Babylonians. Yet, Daniel perseveres in his faith, chooses to serve the one true God, and does not defile his heart with the customs of the Babylonians. This could be a result of Daniel's desire to observe the Jewish dietary laws, as well as his desire not to consume food that had been offered to Babylonian idols. The point is that the Judean youths sought to be dependent on their God for their success, while others were succumbing to the Babylonian customs. We see at the end of the chapter that God honors the sacrifices of these young men and blesses them with unparalleled understanding (v.17-20).

This first chapter illustrates how God calls us to be set apart in the face of insurmountable pressures. We are to set our dependence and trust in God, who is in control of kingdoms, kings, and servants. Let us persevere and not trade our faith for the perceived benefits of culture in opposition to our God.

Text Questions:

1. Have a group member retell the chapter in their own words.
2. Why did God “deliver” Jerusalem into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar?
3. How do you think the Jews felt in their exiled situation?
4. How long were Daniel and his friends expected to train in the Babylonian ways? What do you think the Babylonians were hoping to accomplish through their training? What would you expect to happen to a group of young people transplanted into another culture?
5. In what ways did Daniel and his friends resist the Babylonian inculcation?
6. Was this a private or public fast? Why? How might their lifestyle influence those around them?
7. What “gifts” did God bless Daniel and his friends with in order to succeed in their positions? What does this tell us about God? How could God be glorified with these gifts?

Application Questions:

1. How do you respond under pressure? What can you learn from Daniel when responding to your surroundings? How can God intervene to give you favor in difficult circumstances?
2. Is there an area in your life where you have given into pressure? Is there an area in your life where you are being tempted to give into pressure? What are some action steps you can take to depend on God during this situation?

Spiritual Exercise:

Consider doing a vegetable fast for a day or two (or a week). As you forgo “choice” foods and rely on God for your strength, draw near to Him for a deeper revelation of what it means to live in dependence of Him in all humility.

**Please be mindful of your health and only participate as you are able. Consider other forms of fasting, apart from abstaining from foods, such as a media or music fast.*

Memory Verse:

“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will,” Romans 12:2

In a Tight Spot

Daniel Chapter 2

Opening Questions:

1. Tell a story about a time someone told you surprising news (good or bad). How did you feel when you heard the news? How did it change your life?
2. Have you ever had to ask someone for help? What was the circumstance and how did it pan out?

Important to Know:

The second chapter of Daniel illuminates a particular aspect of God's character: His wisdom. With the event of a dream that deeply perturbs the king of Babylon, Daniel and his God-fearing friends, along with the other "magicians, enchanters, sorcerers, and astrologers," are in a precarious position.

In ancient Babylonian culture, a king would surround himself with many "advisors," who fulfilled a variety of roles that would be the modern day equivalent of psychologists, political consultants, and religious consultants. Babylonian advisors of Daniel's time often practiced cultic forms of divination. They believed that the gods would show them mysteries through their interpretation of strange omens (observed through stargazing, examining sheep livers, dropping oil in water, etc.) and dreams.

In our story, the advisors are given a real challenge: to discern the king's dream without being told what the dream was. The consequences for failure are dire. If they cannot both divine the dream without being told its contents and interpret the dream accurately, all the advisors (sometimes called "wise men") of the kingdom will be put to death (including Daniel). The response of the Babylonian advisors to this crisis contrasts sharply with Daniel's relationship with the true God. While the Babylonian advisors are confounded, Daniel immediately consults the God whom he knows to be the source of all wisdom and understanding.

The message of this chapter is one piece of the overarching narrative of Daniel: the sovereignty and centrality of God in the midst of adverse circumstances. As Longman states repeatedly in his commentary on the book of Daniel, "In spite of present circumstances, God is in control." Will we seek God first in our times of crisis and need or will we rely on our own worldly wisdom to provide the answers for our sometimes impossible problems?

Text Questions:

1. Have a group member retell chapter two in his/her own words.
2. What predicament is Daniel facing right now? Who is affected by the king's edict?
3. How do the magicians react when the king demanded they tell him what his dream was? What thoughts and emotions might they have been experiencing? What is often the result of solving problems in our own strength and wisdom?
4. How do you think Daniel felt when he heard the king's order to kill all the palace advisors? How did he respond to the news?
5. What role did Daniel's friends play in the story? What does this tell us about the value of community?
6. What was Daniel's attitude towards interpreting the king's dream? What was his response when God revealed to him the dream and its interpretation? What does this reveal to us about God's sovereignty and our dependence on Him?
7. Why do you think Daniel urgently relayed the message God had given him? What might have happened if he delayed? What does this tell us about God's compassion for all humans? (I.e. God saved not just Daniel and his God-fearing friends, but also the pagan advisors).
8. How was Nebuchadnezzar affected by God's intervention? What about Daniel and the other advisors?

Application Questions:

1. What is normally your first response in a crisis? What situation(s) are you facing now that seem difficult or impossible? How does God's presence change an otherwise unredeemable situation?
2. Is there an area of your life in which you have relied on your own wisdom more than God's wisdom? How can you commit that situation to God and rely on His power and insight?

Spiritual Exercise:

Brainstorm one or two people you know whom you consider to be wise (a parent, mentor, pastor, or friend you really look up to). Ask them to tell you a story about a time they needed God's wisdom or divine intervention and how God met them in their place or need.

Memory Verse:

"If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously and without finding fault, and it will be given to him." James 1:5

Faith Under Fire

Daniel Chapter 3

Opening Questions:

1. Have you ever felt pressured to do something you didn't want to do? How did you handle it?
2. What's the most impressive feature, man-made or natural, that you've ever seen? How did you feel when you stood next to it?

Important to Know:

Today's text is a standalone narrative about faith under pressure. While Daniel does not appear in this story, the protagonists are his three friends and fellow exiles, Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael, known by their Babylonian names, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. The statue you'll read about is of bizarrely exaggerated proportions and probably represents a Babylonian deity. There was a clear distinction between the idol and the god it represented; however, Babylonians believed it contained the essence or aura of the god, and therefore regarded it with great honor and reverence. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego know only one God to be sovereign and worthy of worship, yet their faith will be challenged once again by pressure to conform with societal norms.

Babylonian culture was very polytheistic, and a parallel might be drawn with our modern culture that trends towards pluralism. In our culture today it is popular to endorse many faiths as valuable in some way, while avoiding adherence to any one faith. This becomes problematic in that if it is marginally valuable to worship any god, yet not valuable to assert one as uniquely worthy of worship, the metaphorical ship of our lives has no anchor and finds no moorings. We will find ourselves tossed about by every whim of popular culture and political opinion.

Conversely, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego find great inner strength through their faithfulness to the one true God, and their security is not threatened even by the possibility of physical death. They know God's eternal reality to be of greatest importance and are unwavering in their choice to remain faithful.

Text Questions:

1. Describe Nebuchadnezzar's statue. Why did he build it?
2. What edict did Nebuchadnezzar deliver? How do you think most Babylonians reacted to the edict? How might the Jewish exiles have reacted to such a decree?
3. How did the king find out about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego's disobedience? What motive did the astrologers have for exposing them?
4. How did the astrologers manipulate Nebuchadnezzar in their accusation of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego? What does this reveal about Nebuchadnezzar's character?
5. What challenge did Nebuchadnezzar give in verse 15 against the one true God? How do Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego respond? What does this say about their character?
6. How did Nebuchadnezzar's attitude towards the three men change? What were the consequences of his extreme anger?
7. What effect did the miracle have on Nebuchadnezzar? What resulted from God's deliverance of his three faithful followers?
8. Think of one or two alternate endings for this story. Which scenarios glorify God? E.g., the three young men give into pressure and worship the idol; or the three young men perish in the fire. Leaders might guide the discussion to the topic of those who have suffered and died for their faith.

Application Questions:

1. What are "idols" that we face in our culture today? What is the cost of refusing to worship these idols? What happens to our hearts if we do worship or imbibe in them?
2. What situations are you facing now that tempt you to compromise your faith? How will you respond the next time you are tempted?

Spiritual Exercise:

Read the article "Lordship" on the Chi Alpha at UVA website:

<http://www.xaatuva.com/resources/discipleship/lordship1.pdf>

Share what you learn with a friend who can encourage you in your pursuit of God.

Memory Verse:

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart." Hebrews 12:1-3

Upset Alert

Daniel Chapter 4

Opening Questions:

1. Have you ever witnessed a dominant sports team lose a game they were supposed to win? What obvious factors contributed to their demise?
2. Why do you think that too much pride, or overconfidence, can debilitate a person?

Important to Know:

In chapter four we notice an interesting literary arrangement as Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, begins to narrate a story about a dream he had, the interpretation, fulfillment, and outcome of the dream. Although the Lord gives Daniel favor and wisdom to interpret the dream, Daniel is not the central figure in this story.

The king's dream exposes the prideful state of his heart. As we observe, the tree represents the way Nebuchadnezzar views himself, as a great and mighty ruler, not too much different from a god (he sees himself as the center, provider, protector, strength, etc., of his people). He refuses to be governed by authorities or rules outside his own and, therefore, refuses to humble himself before the Lord despite Daniels pleading. This decision leads to Nebuchadnezzar's demise.

The unfortunate outcome is that the king loses his mind and becomes unfit for royal duties for seven years (that's the meaning of the phrase "seven times will pass by . . ."). It is not until Nebuchadnezzar humbles himself and raises his eyes towards heaven in recognition of God that his sanity is restored. Longman states, "The dream and its consequences are a reminder that whatever he [Nebuchadnezzar] enjoys is at the pleasure of the true God, who, as the chapter is at pains to demonstrate, 'is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes' (v.25)."

This chapter shows us how gracious God is to expose the prideful natures of our hearts in order to turn us back towards Him. As Andrew Murray writes, "In trial and weakness and trouble He seeks to bring us low, until we so learn that His grace is all, as to take pleasure in the very thing that brings us and keeps us low." Ultimately, this is also a story of the redemptive heart of God. God uses this situation to change the heart of an oppressive, brute leader. The shame that Nebuchadnezzar experienced permits him to enter into the grace of God. It is a broken, humble man that is able to declare praises to God in the closing verses of the chapter.

Text Questions:

1. What things does Nebuchadnezzar praise God for? Why do you think he praises God for these characteristics?
2. How are the characteristics of the tree in the king's dream related to his pride? Why would these attributes cause someone in power to become prideful?
3. How does God use Daniel in this situation? How would you feel if you had to tell someone something as difficult as this?
4. How does the king respond to the exposure of his pride and "wickedness"? What would have been a more appropriate response?
5. How does God show his sovereignty to Nebuchadnezzar both before the dream and after? What redemptive qualities of God can you observe through God's actions in the text?

Application Questions:

1. How do you respond when humbled? Are there areas of your life that you are controlling too tightly? How could God use you if you operated in humility more often?
2. Why does God need humble leaders in His kingdom? How did Jesus model humility in His life and ministry? How can we apply that to our lives?

Spiritual Exercise:

Take some time throughout the week to humble yourself before the Lord and pray diligently for someone you normally wouldn't pray for. This could be a professor, an old friend, a family member, or maybe that neighbor you always wave to. As you pray, remember that Christ came for the "least of these," and neither you nor I are greater than anyone on this earth.

Memory Verse:

"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience." Colossians 3:12

Suggested Reading:

Humility, Andrew Murray

Writing On the Wall

Daniel Chapter 5

Opening Questions:

1. Have you ever done something you weren't supposed to while your parents weren't home? If they found out, how did they respond?
2. How would you define the word "sacred"? What are some things you consider sacred?

Important to Know:

Daniel chapter five provides an account of a king who, unlike Nebuchadnezzar, did not demonstrate any semblance of learning from his mistakes. Belshazzar was likely the son of and co-regent with Nabonidus, who was brought to power at the tail end of the Babylonian empire after the death of Nebuchadnezzar and a series of depositions of several kings. When Daniel refers to Nebuchadnezzar as Belshazzar's "father," he is speaking in the sense of "predecessor."

By now Daniel is probably around 80 years old. He is no longer in the forefront of the Babylonian political scene, and Belshazzar expresses very little regard for Daniel's reputation or the stories of God's supernatural work through him. Unlike his predecessors, Belshazzar also shows little regard for the holy vessels that Nebuchadnezzar captured from the temple in Jerusalem, but instead deeply profanes God's holiness by drinking from them and toasting to his idols.

Daniel's interactions with Belshazzar are abrupt and show little of the same regard and respect he previously demonstrated for Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel speaks prophetically to draw attention to the king's transgression, but Belshazzar does not respond well. Belshazzar's attitude is a precursor to the swift and heavy consequences of his idolatry and unrepentance. The fall of Babylon is imminent, and at the end of this chapter we learn of the Persian conquest. (Spoiler alert: Bel doesn't make it through the night.)

Text Questions:

1. Describe the scene in which this narrative takes place. What is the general tone of the gathering that is taking place?
2. What does Belshazzar do with the goblets that were taken from the temple in Jerusalem? What does this reveal about his attitude towards Israel and their God? In whom does Belshazzar place his trust and security?
3. How does the hand writing on the wall change the tone of the story? Why do you think Belshazzar was so afraid?
4. What is the tone of Daniel's address to Belshazzar? Of what does he accuse him? What does this tell you about his relationship with Belshazzar and how is it different from that of Nebuchadnezzar?
5. What sins are exposed in Belshazzar's heart? What were indicators of the condition of his heart before the divine hand wrote on the wall?
6. How does this situation resolve for Daniel? How does this contrast with the consequences that Belshazzar faces? What light does this shed on the ultimate fates of the godly and the wicked?
7. How does this ultimately fulfill God's purposes for Babylon and for His chosen people? (Cf. prophecies regarding the fall of Babylon, Jeremiah 50-51, etc)

Application Questions:

1. Where in our society do we see a mixture of the sacred and the profane? Are there indicators that your heart might be drifting towards pride in a particular area of your life? Take time to repent and place your worship and trust in God in those areas.
2. How does God work in every circumstance for His glory and the good of those who love him? Where do you see this principle at work in your own life?

Spiritual Exercise:

Meditate on the following scripture verse about how God cares for those who love Him. Write it on a piece of paper and put it on your wall as a reminder of his faithfulness.

Memory Verse:

"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." Romans 8:28

Faith Under Trial

Daniel Chapter 6

Opening Questions:

1. Have you ever been accused of something and had to defend yourself?
2. What are contemporary ways that we practice our faith publicly in a setting outside of “church?”

Important to Know:

We arrive at the final historical narrative contained in the book of Daniel, and, undoubtedly, Daniel’s claim to fame: the lion’s den.

It is now several years after the events that brought Daniel into a place of prominence. The Persians have taken over the Babylonians and have established a new form of rule over the conquered (and re-conquered) peoples. Daniel’s excellent work ethic has brought him favor in the eyes of the new authority figure, King Darius. Daniel is now a governing administrator who, along with two other administrators, oversees 120 governors of the different provinces of the Kingdom. Additionally, we learn that the king is so impressed with Daniel that he planned to increase Daniel’s power in the kingdom.

The conflict lies in the jealousy of the other officials in Daniel’s quick rise to power. It is as Longman describes, “a court narrative of conflict.” Since the jealous officials can not find a fault in Daniel, they conspire to use his religion against him. They manipulate the king to create a decree that will disfavor Daniel. Again, we observe the theme of holding steadfast to faith in the face of precarious situations. Daniel’s unfailing obedience is shown as he continues his daily prayers, without question, doubt, or worry. When the officials accuse Daniel of breaking the law, the king realizes his hands are tied and has no other option but to sentence Daniel to the lions’ den.

The outcome of this “trial” shows that God is the ultimate judge of men. Daniel is delivered, but his accusers receive their justice—death. We also observe how Daniel’s faith serves as a testimony to the King and, in the aftermath, to the peoples’ of the kingdom that God not only exists, but is also involved in the matters of the world.

The narrative of Daniel in the lions’ den also serves Christians today by showing us that we have to count the cost of our faith. Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah undergo a trial by fire. Daniel undergoes a trial by lions’ den. Yet, regardless of the price they might have to pay, life or death, they know where their loyalties lie.

Text Questions:

1. Which of Daniel's qualities (the ones we can observe from the text) might have assisted him in gaining favor with the new king? How might these qualities serve anyone working under an "authority" figure?
2. Why do you think some of the officials envied Daniel?
3. How shrewd were the officials in crafting a plan to bring down Daniel? How were they able to pull this one over the king's head without revealing their full intentions?
4. What can we conclude from Daniel's response to the decree? What do you think it would be like to live under a similar law in the U.S.?
5. What do you think it was like for Daniel to spend an entire night in the lions' den?
6. What impact does Daniel's deliverance have on King Darius? What do you think it meant for the rest of the king's life?
7. What does Daniel's deliverance tell us about God?

Application Questions:

1. What are some "costs" we have to pay in our current setting in order to pursue Christ?
2. How might suffering or trials draw us closer to the heart of God? What can we learn from our God during trials? How might we serve others in their faith as we give testimony to what God is doing (whether He's brought us out of the lions' den or is still protecting us while we're in it)?

Spiritual Exercise:

Consider Christian missionaries serving in "closed" countries—countries where Christianity is prohibited. Pray for these laborers and the people groups they are ministering to as specifically as possible. Consider using *The Live Dead Journal* as a source of information.

Memory Verse:

"Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see."
Hebrews 11:1

References

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