

# THE COURAGE TO BE DIFFERENT

*SERIES: FORTIFIED FOR FAITHFULNESS*

By Steve Zeisler

*Dare to Be a Daniel* is a revivalist hymn written in the mid-nineteenth century. These are the lyrics of the chorus:

“Dare to be a Daniel,  
Dare to stand alone!  
Dare to have a purpose firm!  
Dare to make it known!” (1)

This chorus is a good start for this series of studies in the book of Daniel. It takes some boldness to enter the places we are going to go. Some texts of Scripture speak with subtlety, and in some God whispers words of tenderness and encouragement. But not in the book of Daniel! There is nothing subtle or tender about the accounts and visions that are recorded here. This book consists of big considerations: emperors, war, fires, beasts, angelic visits, the end of the age.

A study of the book of Daniel is timely. Popular interest in the themes of Biblical prophecy waxes and wanes over time, and clearly we are in a season when the subject is in focus. The best-selling *Left Behind* series of books by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins has probably stimulated this interest. The recently released movie *Left Behind*, which is based on the first book, is also receiving some attention.

The framework upon which almost all prophetic discussion is built is formed by two books of the Bible: Daniel and the Revelation of John. The last half of the book of Daniel is filled with visions and announcements of things to come.

The first half of the book is Daniel's own history and that of his three friends. The accounts in the first six chapters are among the most famous stories in the Bible. You probably encountered them at an early age in Sunday School lessons and Bible story books. But I hope we will hear them anew and with the conviction of the Holy Spirit to stir us to faith.

The book of Daniel has been subjected to fairly extensive criticism by scholars and is in fact among the most criticized books of the Bible. Critics have been not so much interested in hearing God speak as in treating the book as a work of historic literature. Generally, there are two types of criticism of the book: One type says that the historicity of the book is not reliable. But over time, as has been the case with so many statements of that type, new archeological discoveries have actually been establishing the historicity of the book, and those arguments are being persuasively countered. The other type of criticism essentially reflects a bias that some scholars begin with, which is that there is no such thing as a miracle, divine revelation of the future, self-disclosure by God, and so on. Therefore if a text seems predictive of the future, they assume it was written after the events it predicts took place. But if we start with the possibility that God might indeed tell us what is to come, that he might disclose himself in words and visions, that he might do miracles, then we find the book speaking prophetically, as it clearly appears to, about future events before they happen.

Let's "dare to be a Daniel," then, and begin our study of the book of Daniel. Chapter 1 opens with these words:

**In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it.**

The last verse of chapter 1 reads:

**And Daniel remained there [in Babylon] until the first year of King Cyrus.**

## **Captured!**

These two verses of the first chapter give us a time frame for the events Daniel records in this book: from the earliest days of the Babylonian empire through seventy years of Jewish exile to the beginning of Persian hegemony under Cyrus. Verse 1 places us near in time to Babylon's victory over Egypt in the battle of Charchemish. It was one of the important ancient battles between the great world empires of the day, and it is well attested historically. The battle of Charchemish took place in 605 BC. It was evidently immediately after this victory, as Nebuchadnezzar proceeded back toward Babylon, that he stopped on the outskirts of Jerusalem, the capital city of the kingdom of Judah. Judah had thrown its lot in with Egypt in the great war, and of course was now on the losing side. Nebuchadnezzar threatened Jerusalem with a siege, and King Jehoiakim capitulated, in two particular ways. Verses 2-7:

**And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia and put in the treasure house of his god.**

**Then the king [Nebuchadnezzar] ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring in some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility—young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians. The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service.**

**Among these were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego.**

Judah bared its neck in subservience to the new world ruler, Nebuchadnezzar, by allowing him to take articles from the temple of Yahweh and a handful of the finest young men in the kingdom back to Babylonia to become servants in his house, to make his empire greater using their abilities to his own ends. This was the first of three stages in which the might of Babylon overwhelmed God's people in Judah. The second stage was in 597 BC, when Nebuchadnezzar came back and took the rest of the nobility, the intelligentsia and the highborn of the nation including the king, and carted them off to exile as well. In the third stage, in 587 BC, he destroyed the entire city of Jerusalem, burned the temple, and essentially displaced the entire remaining population to captivity in Babylon.

In the first stage (referenced in Daniel 1), when Nebuchadnezzar took the articles from the temple he effectively declared, "Your god is worthless and contemptible. He cannot protect his people. It is the gods of Babylon that rule the world!" In plundering the temple of God, he was affronting the God of heaven. In taking the young men into captivity, he was saying, "Your future is mine, too. I will take some of the finest of your young men because their generation and every generation afterward will serve me. I own the people of this land, I despise the god of this land, and you have no recourse."

Those are the historic circumstances. I want to ask you now to enter imaginatively into the story, especially to step into the sandals of Daniel, to "dare to be a Daniel."

## The question of significance

Daniel was probably thirteen or fourteen when this capture took place. Overnight, Egypt, the empire with which the Jews were allied, had been routed, and now unexpectedly Judah found itself under the thumb of Nebuchadnezzar. He forcefully grabbed a handful of boys and marched them, in tears and terrified, we must certainly assume, off to Babylon. There were no parents, no chaperones, no older brothers, no mentors. Boys roughly the age of eighth- or ninth-graders in our culture were taken precisely because they had aptitude and because they could still be shaped. They would remember their people and their God, but they would be denied every opportunity to learn more, to be cared for, to be supported. They would be changed.

When I was fourteen, during the summer between my eighth- and ninth-grade years, our family moved from Chicago, Illinois to Phoenix, Arizona. I was about to enter high school, and I was a bundle of conflicting emotions even before we moved, filled with angst and uncertainty going through puberty, wondering who I was and what would ever become of me. Entering high school would have been challenging even in the town I knew, with the people I knew. Now I was going to a new, unfamiliar place. I remember thinking how odd-looking the school buildings in Phoenix were. And I didn't know if I would ever figure out what clothes were cool.

But consider how much more difficult it would have been for Daniel, with all those same vulnerabilities, to be taken perhaps at night, stolen from his parents' house, and marched away to a foreign place with only a few of his peers, and with no one to guide or help him or answer his questions. And it was much worse than that. These boys were probably castrated when they were taken to Babylon. The word "official" in the second paragraph is actually the Hebrew word for eunuch. Isaiah prophesied to Hezekiah in 2 Kings 20:18, using the same word, "Some of your descendants, your own flesh and blood, that will be born to you, will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon." It was common for those serving in a king's court, those who kept the king's harem and so on, to be emasculated. In 2 Kings the word certainly refers to castration. And of course, throughout the rest of this book, there is never any mention of Daniel's having any sort of family.

At an extremely vulnerable age when the world made no sense to them anyway, these boys were taken to serve a violent and terrifying king for the rest of their lives, without families, wives, or children. One of the things that stands out to me most in this book is the loneliness of Daniel. We have met his three friends who clearly are a support for one another in chapter 1, and they will pray for him in chapter 2. But already in chapter 1 Daniel seems somewhat separate from the other three, and shortly we will find that he is regularly by himself. When the other three face a test they face it together (chapter 3). But the tests that Daniel faces, he almost always undergoes alone. The book is a record, in some sense, of his loneliness. Ezekiel was another prophet during the exile, but at least Ezekiel lived and prophesied among his own people. Daniel never got to live with his people. He was taken eight years before the majority of others in the nobility were exiled, and by then he was well ensconced

in the palace of the king. He would trust God for seventy years of ministry, largely in situations where he was called to be alone. His loneliness is one of the poignancies of this book.

Questions would come up for any exile, and for these boys in particular: "How can I believe the old stories? How can I claim that my God is the Lord of heaven and earth, that he controls its future, when we see his people, ourselves in particular, carted off to exile?" The issue of significance is behind these questions, isn't it? Either God was not strong enough to protect his temple and his people, and all the stories of the greatness of God—the making of the world, the deliverance from Egypt—were a lie—or these boys were discards. Isn't that the other option? Perhaps God would in fact protect the nation eventually, but he had thrown away a handful of boys he didn't care enough about to protect. How could they believe they were worth anything if the God they believed in was weak or had discarded them? The issue of significance was absolutely at the heart of the experience of these boys.

When they looked back, all they saw was loss and sorrow. Let's imagine now what their gaze toward the future held.

## **Resolving to identify with God**

Look carefully at what these youths were being offered. The highest court official personally chose them. They were assigned special rations of food from the king's table. They were to be given an elite education in the best university under the best circumstances. They were given the privilege of having new names honoring the gods of Babylon. They were offered a chance to serve in the presence of the greatest emperor who had ever ruled to that time (described as the "head of gold" in chapter 2). They would be his familiars, serve in his court, speak to him daily, and minister to his needs. What an opportunity it was! Behind them was the failed religion of their own people, and now here was an opportunity, if they were strong enough to take it, to advance to a high place and grand success, serving the powers of the world—yet all this testing at the age of fourteen, with no one there to help them, to answer questions, or to speak a word of balance.

Verses 8-16:

**But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he 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, but the official told Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you."**

**Daniel then said to the guard, whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, "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.**

Under the circumstances there were few things that these boys could do or say to question this new world, to control what would happen to them, to shape their own future, to speak of their hope that God would be present with them and for them. But what they ate was one thing they had some control over.

The concern here would not have been so much about keeping the dietary laws of the Jews. Meeting all the food requirements of the law was well beyond their reach. Rather, the issue was this: eating from the king's table was a way of honoring the king by accepting his hospitality, receiving the offer of familiar relationship. Offering it was a statement by the king of his greatness and sovereign authority, and receiving it was an acceptance of their standing in his presence.

The sentence that begins verse 8 is strategic: "Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine..." He resolved to behave differently because he was different. Daniel knew who owned him. He knew that the table he was meant to eat at was the table of the Lord. He knew that the identity that was meant to sustain him through life was the identity of being a child of God.

How the Lord got Daniel to a place where he could act on his resolve is a wonderful story. The chief official, presumably Ashpenaz, liked these young men. And if you know some fourteen-year-olds, you know they can be good kids—filled with life, curious, energetic, bright, talented. But Ashpenaz couldn't bring himself to threaten his future by giving in to their request. At least he was sympathetic to it, however, and he created an environment of sympathy to their situation. Now, there was a guard or warden who worked for him, and the guard made a deal with them. Verse 16: "So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead." We can probably assume the guard was not allowed to eat from the king's table, so it was to his advantage to give the boys the vegetables and water, and take the king's food for himself! The combination of the sympathetic senior official, the greedy guard, and their negotiations gave them the opportunity to be different. They would not be the king's property. If they couldn't change all their circumstances, they could at least retain their identity separate from the familiarity of his hospitality and from his claim on them.

The issues here are important for us. As Daniel resolved not to defile himself, we will each face choices in which the question of who we are is absolutely central. Who lays claims to us? At whose table are we nourished? Who is the one with whom we share life itself? The question will present itself in different ways for different people, and we each have to answer it.

Perhaps you work in an environment where the expectation is that you will lie or cheat. Perhaps the expectation is that you will worship money as if it were God. Perhaps it is that you will trash your family, whether because of the party environment in which the work takes place or because of the hours you are required to work. Will you say, "No, I can't eat at the king's table, I am nourished from a different place"? You may be able to negotiate a way to do what is reasonable without having to lose everything, or you may not. But the question is one of discipleship.

Our particular community is more rabid about turning out Harvard undergraduates than almost any other place in the world. Every child raised in this community has to compete at maximum performance in order for parents to be given credit for parenting correctly. If we don't turn out stellar, accomplished, driven children, there is something wrong with us. But some would say, "I won't eat at the king's table. I'm not going to do that to my kids. I'm going to value different things. I want them to know love, to know God, to grow up creative, with a sense of freedom that the world doesn't control them absolutely." They may find a way to be who they need to be without having to move somewhere else. These are critical choices at the point of discipleship.

There are children in our community the age of Daniel and his friends who are saying, "I'm going to spend spring break building houses for the poor in Mexico, even though the expectation of my peer group is to go to the beach, drink, party, and whatever. I have other things I'm living for. Other realities own me. I'm going to claim allegiance to my God." The issue of resolve is critical.

Remember what Jesus said to his friends as he sat by a well in Samaria after they had returned from buying food. Jesus had been speaking with a Samaritan woman there. They wanted to give him something to eat, and his response was very interesting. He said, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about. . . . My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work" (John 4:32,34). What the Daniels of the world are saying when they resolve not to eat at the king's table is, "I am nourished in ways that the world does not understand. I receive blessing, strength, and real approval from God that make me who he intended me to be, and who I long to be. The world offers pleasure—I'd rather have joy. Joy is opaque to the world, but I know what it's like and where it comes from." Daniel was, with the small means he had, insisting that what seemed to be true was not true: He was not insignificant. God had not forgotten him. His destiny was in the hands of Yahweh, the living God, not the gods of Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar was not his Lord.

## The fruit of faithfulness

Verses 17-21:

**To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds.**

**At the end of the time set by the king to bring them in, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king's service. In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanterers in his whole kingdom.**

**And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.**

There are three words of application we can take from this story. The first is this: Be sure about the issue of significance raised here. When we are in extremity and suffering, when our health has failed, when the folks we love have died or are gone, when we lose our job, when there are sorrows and heartbreak in family life, when it feels as if we are in exile and abandoned, we must be certain that we have not lost our significance. We need to speak to our own hearts about what *is* true, not what *feels* true. God is strong, not weak. His temple has not been plundered because he couldn't save the articles that were in it. He is allowing things to happen for reasons of his own. And we matter to him. We have not been discarded. It is not true, as it seems in exile, that he cares for others and not for us. We must fight to believe in our value when it seems as if we have no value.

The second word of application is this: make a resolution. Where is the point of discipleship right now for you? You are either going to eat at the king's table or you aren't. You are either going to give in or you are going to be owned by the Lord God. You are going to accept an allegiance that's harmful or you are going to refuse. Resolve not to be defiled. Make the choice that may have hard implications, but is the one you must make in order to be who Jesus died for you to be.

The third word of application is hinted at here, and we will see more of it as the book unfolds: expect to be influential. Often when we say, "I will stand for the Lord," we assume that we will be marginalized, shunted off to some backwater and forgotten, and the world will go on glorifying the people it always glorifies. But the interesting thing about this book is that exactly the opposite was true for Daniel. His commitment to be a servant of God made him an effective witness in his world. Nebuchadnezzar, the great "head of gold," fell on his face before Daniel. Later Nebuchadnezzar lost his mind for a number of years, and it was Daniel who was there beside him, who helped him make sense of things, and who essentially led this proud man to humble faith. Daniel prophesied the death of Belshazzar and the fall of the city of Babylon. Daniel was similarly elevated when the Persians came to power. It may well have been Daniel, in service to Cyrus, who wrote the decree to send the Jews back to the Promised Land. Daniel survived every one of these kings except Cyrus. He served for many decades. This book we are studying is not Nebuchadnezzar's book, nor Belshazzar's. It's not even Cyrus' book. It's Daniel's book! God established him and made him an influence in his time and in every time since.

Choosing to honor God may very well make you hundreds of times more influential in people's lives than going along with them, being just like them in order to be close to them. We should expect that God is going to honor the choices he calls on his people to make.

So insist that you are significant. Don't let exile ever take away your sense of worth. Resolve at the point of discipleship not to "eat the king's food." And expect to be influential. God will make something of all that happens to you.

## Notes

1. Philip P. Bliss, *Dare to Be a Daniel*.

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Daniel 1

First Message

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