

Challenging insights from the **Book of Daniel**

Scriptures are taken from the New International Version, unless otherwise stated.

About 2600 years ago, Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem. These stressful weeks marked the beginning of a radical change in the life of at least four bright Jewish lads: Daniel, Hannaniah, Mishael and Azariah. In the years to come, the invading Babylonian Empire, even king Nebuchadnezzar himself, would be affected by the life and convictions of these young men. Your life, like theirs, can also influence others. As Daniel reached his older years, he was inspired by the Lord to set in writing a record of some extraordinary events, some which he lived himself, others happened later, and some of which have yet to happen. The first 6 chapters of his book are historic; the remaining 6 chapters are mainly prophetic.

Although the Lord Jesus refers to Daniel as a prophet (Matthew 24:15) he was never a “full time prophet” like Isaiah or Jeremiah. He remained all his life a statesman, a civil servant or government employee. A “full time” vocation to ministry is a response to a Divine call. The life of Daniel shows that men and women can be used of God effectively while in “secular” employment. It is a matter of calling, convictions and priorities. Although Daniel had many and varied administrative responsibilities, he was not absorbed by them. He was known as one who “served his God continually” (6:16, 20). Many generations have come and gone, but the lessons penned by Daniel still hold true today. Let’s look at five of them.

1. Victories and defeats begin in the heart **[Chapter 1: Daniel’s training in Babylon]**

We read that Daniel and his 3 friends belonged to the Jewish nobility, “without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand” (1:3,4). They had a bright future in small Judah. But their future was now even brighter in the large and prosperous Babylonian Empire. These young men were encouraged to integrate fully in this new culture. Even their names were changed (1:7). What kept these young lads from losing their real identity as “people of God”? Before they reached Babylon, they had made up their mind. “Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not pollute himself with the king’s delicate food” (1:8 DBY). Their victory began in their heart.

Some Christians think that they “accidentally fall” into a sin. Most sin, perhaps all sin, starts in the mind. Like Eve and Achan, we see, we covet, we act. Good things also start in the mind. We consider truth, we accept it, and then act on it. We see

someone else's need, we think about it, we feel it, we then act. If we are to speak and act rightly, we must think rightly. Our heart must be right. That is why the apostle Paul urged Christians not to "conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2). Life is made up of small choices. Choices are determined by our convictions. These convictions or purposes of heart must be developed consciously in the presence of God. Without them, we shall lose our identity as "people of God".

Making bold decisions that give direction to our life is not something only for the young. As we grow older, our religious and secular surroundings continue to exert pressure on us to conform. We may be tempted to think that we know it all or that we have always done things rightly. Every new situation provides us with an opportunity to humbly seek the Lord and to keep on learning. In his latter life, an angel approached Daniel and said: "Fear not, Daniel; for from the first day that thou didst set thy heart to understand, and to humble thyself before thy God, thy words were heard, and I am come because of thy words" (10:12 DBY). Still humble. Still setting his heart to understand. Is your heart right before the Lord? The battles are won or lost in our heart. Therefore, "above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life" (Proverbs 4:23).

2. Prayer releases God's mercies

[Chapters 2 & 9: Nebuchadnezzar's dream and Daniel's prayer]

Do you remember your dreams? Usually our dreams reflect what our minds are busy with during the day. But sometimes God uses dreams to communicate with humans. We find some examples of this in both the Old and New Testaments. Here God gives a pagan king a dream that troubles him. He woke up in a bad mood. He called his wise men together because he wanted to understand his dream: "This is what I have firmly decided" he said, "If you do not tell me what my dream was and interpret it, I will have you cut into pieces and your houses turned into piles of rubble" (2:5). Daniel only got to hear about this when Arioch, the commander of the king's guard, arrived to kill him. What would you do in this moment of personal crisis? The request was unreasonable. The procedure was unfair. The possible consequences were frightening. Daniel spoke with "wisdom and tact" and asked the king for some time. "Then Daniel returned to his house and explained the matter to his friends Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. He urged them to plead for mercy from the God of heaven concerning this mystery, so that he and his friends might not be executed with the rest of the wise men of Babylon" (2:14-18).

a. Personal crisis: Was God aware of the crisis lived by these Godly men? Of course! Could God have avoided this crisis? Yes! But God was behind the crisis. He gave the dream. It was God's way of bringing these Godly men closer to Himself, closer to each other and getting them into key positions in the Empire. Daniel's reaction was to call for a prayer meeting. Together they pleaded for mercy, not to the king but to the God of heaven. Their life was spared, the king recognized that Daniel's God was "the God of gods, and the Lord of kings" (2:47) and Daniel and his 3 friends were promoted within the administration of Babylon. Our God is still "able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us" (Ephesians 3:20). Are you living a difficult situation? Is someone being unreasonable? Is the situation unfair? Are the

possible consequences frightening? Seek your Christian friends and join in prayer. Prayer releases God's abundant mercies.

- b. National crisis:** While Daniel studied the writings of the prophet Jeremiah, he became aware and concerned about the spiritual state of the nation of Israel. What does Daniel do with this burden? He "turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes" (9:3). Daniel's response to a national crisis is the same as to a personal crisis: prayer. He seeks the mercies of a merciful God. "Give ear, O God, and hear; open your eyes and see... We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy. O Lord, listen! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, hear and act! For your sake, O my God, do not delay..." (9:18, 19). In the writings of Ezra and Nehemiah we read how God answered this prayer. His multiple mercies became evident as many Jews left Babylon and returned to Judah. Do you need God's mercies? Do you ask for them? "Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete" (John 16:24).

3. Pressure brings to light the quality of a conviction **[Chapters 3 & 6: The blazing furnace and the lions' den]**

Last month 10 elite antinarcotics police were killed together while on active duty. News of killings is fairly common here in Colombia. What made this event noteworthy was that they were surrounded and murdered by an elite army unit. Was this a communications mistake? Could this army unit be bribed to protect the large drug shipment? A thoughtful observer concluded: "Every conscience has a price, at some point it cracks". Does your conscience have a price? How deep do your Christian convictions go? Like the apostle Peter, we are prone to boast: "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death" (Luke 22:33). But this was untested confidence. How do we know Daniel and his friends had solid convictions? Because they passed the pressure test.

- a. Pressure to do what is wrong:** As is fairly common in politics, leaders try to use religion to control the masses. In those days this was very obvious. Nebuchadnezzar made an impressive golden image. Daniel must have been away on business. What his 3 friends heard was: "This is what you are commanded to do... As soon as you hear the sound of ... all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace" (3:4-6). Could they bow down externally but worship God internally? These 3 men chose not to bow down. The king was angry. They could become a catalyst for further rebellion. The king personally questioned these three men and again explained the simplicity of what was required. He gave them another chance. The fire was before them, but their conscience didn't crack. "If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it... But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up" (3:17,18). The Lord rewarded their steadfast conviction by standing with them in the fire. Are you under pressure to act incorrectly? Stand firm. Whatever the outcome, you will not be left alone.

b. Pressure to stop doing what is right: Perhaps a few years later, Daniel's 3 friends must have been away on business. This time Daniel was alone. For dubious political reasons, Darius signed a "decree that anyone who prays to any god or man during the next thirty days, except to you, O king, shall be thrown into the lions' den" (6:7). The pressure here was more subtle. Daniel was not required to renounce his faith. He should simply stop praying for a month. Sometimes Christians are tempted to take on well paid jobs that freeze their Christian service (of course, only for a few years). Some stop their God-given ministry afraid of receiving further criticism. We may be tempted to stop our family devotions because a non-Christian friend is visiting. What did Daniel do? "Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened towards Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before" (6:10). The Lord rewarded Daniel's steadfast conviction by sending an angel to accompany him and the lions in the den (6:22). Is one of your convictions currently being tested? Stand firm. Keep doing what is right and leave the consequences in God's hands. Steadfast obedience always leads to victory. But this victory is not always visibly obvious. Some men of faith "were stoned; they were sawn in two; they were put to death by the sword... the world was not worthy of them..." (Hebrews 11:37, 38). But heaven received them with open arms.

4. Pride provokes Divine displeasure **[Chapters 4 & 5: Nebuchadnezzar goes mad and Belshazzar is killed]**

The achievements of the Babylonian Empire were very impressive. It is quite natural that king Nebuchadnezzar should feel satisfied with his accomplishments. As he walked on the roof of the royal palace, "he said 'Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?' The words were still on his lips when a voice came from heaven, 'This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: Your royal authority has been taken from you... until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes'. Immediately what had been said about Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled. He... ate grass like cattle. His body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair grew like the feathers of an eagle and his nails like the claws of a bird" (4:30-33). He went mad!

a. Pride: We little humans are prone to boast great things. We seldom remember to give credit to the source of our intelligence, our health, our energy, life itself. This displeases the Lord. During earthquakes, tornados, volcanoes, tsunamis and other natural disasters, we realize the weakness and the limitations of our man-made infrastructure. But we soon forget, and soon feel safe and confident in the arms of our "human system". I have nothing against pensions and insurance policies, but when the banking system provides greater peace of mind than God's promises, something has gone sadly wrong within us. God reacts against independence, arrogance and pride. "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (1 Peter 5:5). Pride caused the fall of Lucifer, the confusion at Babel, the death of King Herod, and here, the madness of Nebuchadnezzar. Happily with this king, there was repentance: "At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar,

raised my eyes towards heaven, and my sanity was restored". Taking our eyes off ourselves and turning them upwards is the first step away from madness. "Then I praised the Most High; I honoured and glorified him who lives for ever. His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation" (4:34). Sanity comes as we acknowledge the sovereignty of God and choose to depend on Him.

- b. Irreverence:** In the following chapter, Belshazzar, Nebuchadnezzar's son, throws a massive party for his nobles. His father's pride, God's judgment and his father's conversion meant nothing to him. Daniel pointed this out to him: "But you his son, O Belshazzar, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this. Instead, you have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven. You had the goblets from his temple brought to you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines drank wine from them. You praised the gods of silver and gold... But you did not honour the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways" (5:22-23). A few hours later Belshazzar was killed by the invading army. Some treat God's things with irreverence out of ignorance. Others, accustomed to the Christian environment, can be irreverent out of familiarity or boredom. Are we still aware that Christ is present when 2 or 3 come together in His name? Does our behaviour reflect that? Are we conscious that we shall give account to God of every word we utter? Do our conversations and letters reflect that?

5. Our God still controls the future

[Chapters 7 to 12: Short and long range prophecies]

The importance of Daniel's prophecies is acknowledged by most Bible students. Some feel that the book of Daniel is to the Old Testament what the book of Revelation is to the New Testament. The accuracy of the predictions that became reality within the first 500 years has encouraged some critics to argue that the book of Daniel was written after some of these events. Daniel's prophecies also contain insights into things that are yet to come. Interestingly, God makes his plans for the future, and then works them out. The gospel writers were very conscious of this. They saw how prophecies were fulfilled in different events in the life of Jesus (Matthew 2:15, 17, 23; 13:14, 35; 26:54, 56; 27:9).

When we consider the future, we also make some plans. This is wise and prudent, yet we are encouraged to add "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that" (James 4:15). When the Lord looks at the future, he looks with certainty, "for what has been determined must take place" (11:36). The very existence of Biblical prophecies shows that God is in control of the future. He controls the future of the nations, of society, of the Christian church, of your family, of your life. Is this an unhealthy deterministic view of life? Does this mean that our current actions have no effect on destiny? No.

As we look at the nations and society in general, we cannot help but notice conflict, injustice and moral decadence. As we look at the state of world religions, we are impressed with the growing evidence of violence, the weird and the demonic. That which carries the name of Christianity thankfully has its bright spots. But in many areas it has become social, compromising, spiritually dead, and even morally evil. The authority of Christ and Scriptures is rapidly eroding. How can a Christian be

realistic and at the same time happy and optimistic? It is precisely this knowledge that our God still controls the future. Knowing that society is in His hands encourages me to be a good citizen. Knowing the Church is in His hands, and that Christ is still building it, encourages me to keep on evangelizing, discipling and encouraging the formation of new Christian assemblies. Knowing that the Lord will work out His plans for our four children, encourages us to educate, motivate and guide them in the Lord's ways. Knowing that "The LORD will fulfill *his purpose* for me" (Psalm 138:8) makes me look at the future with confidence. Knowing that "he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion" (Philippians 1:6) encourages me to get up and press on after I make mistakes and sadly fail. Knowing that God still controls the future, makes it possible for Christians to be realistic and also optimistic.

Conclusion

The prophecies of Daniel, his exemplary life and the experiences of his contemporaries have challenged and inspired believers for more than two and a half millennia. They have encouraged many to maintain their identity as "people of God", to take a stand on moral issues, to intercede for others, to be willing to pay a price in order to uphold Biblical convictions. This tenacity is still necessary today. When we Christians look at the future, there is no room for fear, neither for passive complaisance. Our confidence is in knowing Him who holds the future in His hands. In looking back at the future, Daniel prophesied: "... the people that know their God shall be strong, and shall act" (11:32 DBY). Do we know our God well enough?

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June 2006

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