

SINNERS & SAINTS
Daniel
Daniel 1:1-21 & 6:1-23
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Hello, McBIC. I'm preaching via recorded video today, because my sermon on Sunday was rained out at about the 10-minute mark. So, if you're watching this, you're probably in the middle of reading my weekly communique or tuning in via Facebook. Thanks for watching!

I'm enjoying preaching this series on the lives of Bible characters, because there's so much we can learn from them. Most of the personalities we're exploring in this series weren't ministry professionals. They were simply men and women who loved God and lived for Him. Too often in the American church, we embrace the misconception that true ministry is best left to the professionals, and those who aren't pastors or missionaries are relegated to showing up for worship services to fill seats, volunteer their time to staff ministries, and give financially to support those who do the "real work" of ministry. That's a warped picture of church. You all are the backbone of Jesus' Church, and every follower of Jesus is called to do ministry for Him wherever they're placed to whomever is in their circle of influence. In Matthew 5:13-14, Jesus calls us to be salt and light. The Message paraphrase of those verses says that as salt, we bring out the God flavors in our world, and as light, we draw out the God colors.

During our "Sinners & Saints" series, I've been emphasizing that the men and women God used to accomplish his purposes in the Bible weren't perfect. They had warts and flaws, and they messed up just like you and I do.

Today we're focused on Daniel, and while I know Daniel wasn't perfect because he was human, the Bible doesn't reveal any of Daniel's shortcomings to us. As Cody pointed out last week when he preached on Moses, it's difficult to decide what aspect of Daniel's life to preach on, because his life is filled with greatest hits. When I asked the kids in our worship service on Sunday to tell me what they knew about Daniel, they quickly mentioned the fiery furnace and the lions' den, and not surprisingly, our McBIC artists highlighted the fiery furnace and the lions' den in their artwork, along with the mysterious handwriting on the wall that Daniel interpreted. To help us jump into Daniel's story, I'll read Daniel 1:1-20 as an introduction.

In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. 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 ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king's service 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 those who were chosen 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.

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 compassion 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.

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 into his service, 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 enchanters in his whole kingdom. – Daniel 1:1-20

After the Babylonians, under King Nebuchadnezzar's leadership, sacked and plundered Jerusalem, they deported some of the best and brightest of the Judean young men to be trained for three years in all the ways of the Babylonians. After being fully indoctrinated, these young men would serve in leadership roles in Babylon or in the conquered nation from which they originally came. Daniel and his friends Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were among this group of young men who were taken from Jerusalem to Babylon.

A dilemma Daniel and all the deported young men from Jerusalem faced was that their Babylonian indoctrination and training was in direct conflict with how devout Jews were to dress, eat and worship. Most of the young Israelites accepted their situation, but Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine. He asked the official overseeing him for permission not to defile himself with the royal Babylonian food and wine, and God gave Daniel **favor** with the official. Remember that word **favor**, because the **favor** God gave Daniel with government officials was a recurring theme throughout his life. Daniel had **favor** with the official, but the official was afraid if he gave Daniel permission to eat different food and drink than everyone else, his health would be compromised and the official would be punished. Instead of passively accepting what was expected, Daniel exercised courage. He placed his faith in God to provide for him and his friends, and God blessed them not only with health but also with superior knowledge and understanding, and Daniel was given the gift of interpreting dreams. What takes place in Daniel 1 is important, but my primary focus today is on what comes much later in Daniel's life.

Before we go there, I want you to pay special attention to verse 21: “And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.” Don’t let the shortness of that verse cause you to overlook it. What’s said there is highly significant. Daniel was deported to Babylon under King Nebuchadnezzar around 605 B.C. Approximately 65 years later in 539 B.C., King Cyrus of the Persian Empire came to the throne. Cyrus ruled for several years and was succeeded by a man named Darius. The names of those rulers aren’t that important, but it does provide us with a timeline for Daniel’s life.

I want to highlight two things about that time span. First, 65 years is a long time for anyone to be in a significant leadership, let alone in a political position. If Daniel was 13–17 years of age when he went to Babylon, he was approximately 80 years of age when Darius became king. Secondly, not only was Daniel in a significant position of leadership for a long time, but also his tenure began with the Babylonians and ended with the Persians. Did you catch that? That’s equivalent to a British citizen being in a government leadership role in Russia for over six decades and then remaining in power when Russia is taken over by China. That would be unheard of, but that was Daniel’s story. More accurately, that was the result of God’s favor resting on Daniel. Let’s skip ahead to Daniel 6:1, another well-known account from Daniel’s life.

It pleased Darius to appoint 120 satraps to rule throughout the kingdom, with three administrators over them, one of whom was Daniel. The satraps were made accountable to them so that the king might not suffer loss. ³ Now Daniel so distinguished himself among the administrators and the satraps by his exceptional qualities that the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom. At this, the administrators and the satraps tried to find grounds for charges against Daniel in his conduct of government affairs, but they were unable to do so. They could find no corruption in him, because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent. ⁵ Finally these men said, “We will never find any basis for charges against this man Daniel unless it has something to do with the law of his God.” – Daniel 6:1-5

Eugene Peterson, a pastor and prolific author who died several years ago, wrote a book about longevity in ministry titled “A Long Obedience in the Same Direction.” Daniel’s life was the epitome of a “long obedience in the same direction.” After 65–70 years in significant government leadership roles in the Babylonian and then in the Persian empire, he reached such a high position—something like Prime Minister in our modern context—that his colleagues grew jealous of his success. They tried to find something against Daniel to bring him down, and all they could find was “We’ll never find any basis for charges against Daniel unless it has something to do with how he worships and serves his God.” Wow! There’s nothing there. After 6–7 decades of high-level service in a foreign government, there were no scandals, misappropriated funds, abuse of power, or sexually inappropriate behavior. There was no evidence of him mistreating anyone. The only thing his enemies had was how devout Daniel is in following and worshipping his God. Follow along as I read verses 6–16 of Daniel chapter 6...

So these administrators and satraps went as a group to the king and said: “May King Darius live forever! The royal administrators, prefects, satraps, advisers and governors have all agreed that the king should issue an edict and enforce the decree that anyone who prays to any god or human being during the next thirty days, except to you, Your Majesty, shall be thrown into the lions’ den. Now, Your Majesty, issue the decree and put it in writing so that it cannot be altered—in accordance with the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed.” So King Darius put the decree in writing.

Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before. Then these men went as a group and found Daniel praying and asking God for help. So they went to the king and spoke to him about his royal decree: “Did you not publish a decree that during the next thirty days anyone who prays to any god or human being except to you, Your Majesty, would be thrown into the lions’ den?” The king answered, “The decree stands—in accordance with the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed.”

Then they said to the king, “Daniel, who is one of the exiles from Judah, pays no attention to you, Your Majesty, or to the decree you put in writing. He still prays three times a day.” When the king heard this, he was greatly distressed; he was determined to rescue Daniel and made every effort until sundown to save him. Then the men went as a group to King Darius and said to him, “Remember, Your Majesty, that according to the law of the Medes and Persians no decree or edict that the king issues can be changed.” So the king gave the order, and they brought Daniel and threw him into the lions’ den. The king said to Daniel, “May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!”

– Daniel 6:6-16

Most of us are familiar with this part of the story, so I’m not going to comment much on what I’ve just read or on God’s deliverance of Daniel from the lions. If you’re not familiar with the ending, you can read it at the end of Daniel chapter 6. Suffice it to say that the king, who loved and admired Daniel, was horrified when he realized he’d been duped into making a law that indicted Daniel, but his hands were tied. King Darius couldn’t save Daniel from the lions’ den, but God did. We’re told that God shut the lions’ mouths, and Daniel’s life was preserved.

I want to highlight three things from Daniel’s life that have significant implications for us. When we examine Daniel’s life his courage, his devotion to God, his integrity as he interacted with people, and his humility jump out at us. **Daniel lived faithfully for the duration of his life**—a long obedience in the same direction. In a time when so many people start their lives well, attain early success, and then crash and burn due to pride, moral failures, or the abuse of power, Daniel provides a great example for us to emulate. I want to be like Daniel, and my hope for you is that you’ll be like Daniel as well.

A second thing we see when we study Daniel’s life is the impact a person can have even in difficult and unlikely circumstances. **Daniel’s influence went far beyond what he could have imagined.** In Ephesians 3:20, the Apostle Paul writes, “And now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we can ask or imagine according to his power that is at work within us.” Many of us have had an experience where someone told us how much we meant to them, and we were completely caught off guard and surprised. We tend to downplay or overlook the

influence and impact our lives have on others. It's so easy for us to go through life on cruise control, taking life as it comes to us, but when we do that, we're in danger of missing out on what God wants to do in and through us. God can and wants to do more in your life and in my life than we can even imagine.

Finally, **God's favor rested on Daniel, and he was granted astounding success.** God's grace and mercy is undeserved, but often God's favor rests on us as we obey God and commit ourselves to faithfully following Him. A prayer I frequently pray is this: "God, let your favor rest on me in a way that people are attracted to you through my life." God's favor rested on Daniel in a unique way, and God was able to accomplish his purposes through him, even in a pagan country that knew nothing about God. When I think about Daniel's life and my desire for people to see Jesus in me, I'm reminded of what Luke wrote about the apostles in Acts 4:13: "Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus." The Jewish religious leaders, who weeks earlier had seen to it that Jesus was crucified, were able to look at Peter and John and observe that they had been with Jesus. May the fact that we've been with Jesus be evident to people as they observe our lives. My hope for myself and for each of you is that our lives will be characterized by a "long obedience in the same direction," that God's favor will rest on us, and that people who don't know Jesus will be attracted to our lives through Him.