

Daniel: Living Godly in Godless Times

How effective are you at responding to difficult times? When found in a tight spot, inundated with problems, anxiety rising, and not nearly enough resources to meet the needs, how do you respond? Are you able to look beyond the circumstances to the answer in God? Or are you apt to give up in discouragement and defeat? Some time ago I can across a parable that pictures the choice we often face. It goes like this:

*Two frogs fell into a can of cream, or so I've heard it told.
The sides of the can were shiny and steep; the cream was deep and cold.
"Oh, what's the use?" croaked number one. "Tis fate, no help's around!"
"Goodbye, my friends. Goodbye, sad world!" And weeping still he drowned.
But number two, of sterner stuff, dogpaddled in surprise.
The while he wiped his creamy face, and dried his creamy eyes.
"I'll swim awhile at least," he said, or so I've heard it said.
"It really wouldn't help the world, if one more frog were dead."
An hour or two he kicked and swam, not once he stopped to mutter.
But kicked and swam and swam and kicked, then hopped out via butter.*

Cute story, but as I'm sure you're aware, it really isn't about frogs. It's about you and me and the difficulties we face as followers of Jesus Christ. The pail of cream is the world and the problems it poses for us, and we're the frogs faced with a decision. Do we give up in doubt and despair? Or do we press on in faith believing in the grace of God? The truth is: Life is hard and it isn't about to get any easier. The government we live under is drowning in debt and in shutdown mode the last two weeks. Health insurance is also skyrocketing. The plan we've had is no longer offered. So now we're looking at a 50% increase in January for a worse plan with a deductible of \$10,000 a year. So what do you do? Stay healthy. Add to that the godlessness of the culture we live in which is becoming increasingly unfriendly toward Bible-believing Christians, and you wonder—what kind of dilemmas are we going to face in 5 to 10 years?

All of that to offer this word of hope. We aren't the first believers to face times like these. This evening I want to take us back in time 2600 years to one of my favorite passages of Scripture where God Himself shows us how to live godly in godless times. The passage is Daniel chapter 1 where Daniel and his friends face a crisis of mammoth proportions. But what we're going to find is that God meant it and sent it not for their undoing, but to bless them, empower them, and turn them into overcomers for their good and His glory. In particular, there are 3 lessons I want to highlight tonight.

1. Trials are designed to showcase our distinctiveness.

Let me say that again. Trials are meant and sent by God not to discourage or destroy us, but to bring out the best in us and showcase our distinctiveness as His children before a watching world. Daniel begins like this if you'll open your Bible there now.

“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.”

So here we have a great crisis. Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon and world ruler at this time lays siege to Jerusalem, starving the people into submission. It was a siege that lasted 30 months at the end of which time the armies of Babylon invaded the city, plundered the Temple, and carried off hundreds of Jews, including Daniel and his friends, as hostages to Babylon—the most terrifying experience these Jews would ever face. And yet, notice what Daniel says about it. Instead of being an oversight on God's part, which is how we feel when things go haywire, he says it happened according to the pre-determined plan of God. Verse 2 says it was the Lord who delivered Jehoiakim into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. That's something I can't say passionately enough and something Daniel emphasizes from the very outset of this study—no matter how impressive and intimidating the rulers of this world appear to be, God is still on His throne ruling and overruling everything that comes to pass. “This is my Father's world. O, let me ne'er forget, that though the wrong seem oft so strong, God is the ruler yet!”

And friends, the same thing is true of the dilemmas we face today. Do you remember the words of Benjamin Franklin as he and our other founding fathers battled over the writing of our Constitution? He said, “Gentlemen, I have lived a long time and I'm convinced that God governs in the affairs of men. If a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid?” And so he advised, “I move that prayer imploring the assistance of Heaven be held every morning before we proceed to business.” To which they all agreed, the outcome of which was the greatest legislative document the world has ever seen.

But you say, “Why would God let such a terrible thing happen to His chosen people?” The answer is: Because they weren't acting like God's people anymore! You see, what was God's reason for delivering these people out of Egypt and making them a great nation? Was it for their own pleasure and enjoyment? No! He saved them for one purpose and one purpose only—to be a bright and shining city on a hill making it

clear to all the world around them that God was living among them! And yet, contrary to His calling, they erected idols on every high hill in Israel including the holy hill that down on the Temple, called the Mount of Olives. They also broke every other law He gave them, including the commandment to let the land lie fallow every 7 years. Not once in the 490 years since they came out of Egypt did they do that. So, as Jeremiah the prophet warned them, they were evicted from the Land of Promise and made to live in Babylon for 70 years, until the land received its Sabbath rests.

All of which is a sharp reminder to us that God expects us to be different from the world. That isn't just an Old Testament principle. That's a principle that stretches all the way from Genesis to Revelation. For example, in 2 Corinthians 6, Paul asks the question, "What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: 'I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people. Therefore come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.'" The point is: God loves you so much that He's willing to accept you just the way you are. But He also loves you too much to leave you that way. So He sends trials into our lives to bring out the best in us, so we shine for Jesus in the midst of this very dark and broken world. And as in the case of Israel, sometimes those trials can be very severe.

"OK," you say. "I can understand that. I can understand why God expelled His people from the Land of Promise. But what about Daniel and his friends! They hadn't done anything worthy of judgment, had they?" You're right! They hadn't. But have you ever noticed that when it rains, it rains on both the righteous and unrighteous, and that even though we're innocent of wrongdoing, we often suffer because of someone else's sin? That's how Daniel and his friends wound up in Babylon.

And right away the trouble began. Let me pick up the action in verse 3. It says, "Then the king instructed Ashpenaz, the master of his eunuchs, to bring some of the children of Israel and some of the king's descendants and some of the nobles, young men in whom there was no blemish, but good-looking, gifted in all wisdom, possessing knowledge and quick to understand, who had ability to serve in the king's palace, and whom they might teach the language and literature of the Chaldeans." These boys were the cream of the crop, set apart for special training as servants in the king's court.

And notice, according to Isaiah 39:7, what did Ashpenaz, the chief eunuch, do to help them concentrate on their studies? He made them eunuchs like himself. That's why you never read of Daniel or his friends as having wives. And I admit, there were times

during my high school and college years when young women did distract me from my studies. But help like that, I don't think any of us would want. What say you, men?

Furthermore, verse 5 says, "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." So now they have to make a decision. They couldn't prevent the destruction of their homes, their country, or the loss of their virility, but we do have control over what we eat! In fact, that's one of the first ways a child exerts his free will. He refuses to eat what's put on his plate. Why would the boys do that in this case? Because the king's food wouldn't have been kosher in keeping with the dietary laws of God like abstaining from pork and shellfish. What's more, it would have been offered in worship to the king's gods before it made it to the king's table.

This was more than a new health regimen for those who wanted to serve in the king's court. It was an overt attempt to brainwash these boys into accepting the pagan way of doing things. Phillips warns us about this in Romans 12:1. "Do not let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold, but let God re-mold your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good." You can this brainwashing effort very clearly in verse 7 where the king changes their names from Daniel meaning "God is my Judge" to Belteshazzar meaning "May Bel (the pagan god) protect your life." So they weren't going along with it. After all, what got them sent to Babylon in the first place? Their fellow countrymen bowing down to idols on every high hill in Israel! So there's no way they're going back to that. In fact, it may interest you to know that following the Babylonian captivity, the Jews never worshiped idols again. Before the captivity, all they did was worship idols. But never again after that down to this very day! God knows how to discipline His children.

That too is a principle for life. 1 Peter 4:1 puts it like this: "Therefore, since Christ suffered in His body, arm yourselves with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in the body is done with sin. As a result they do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God." What is Peter saying? Is he saying those who suffer no longer have a capacity to sin? No! He's saying that once we go through great suffering in life, the world which has hurt you so badly begins to lose its appeal for you. In the case of Daniel and his friends, that meant the loss of family, homeland, virility and now the pressure of conforming to the world's way of doing things. But they wouldn't give in. They knew this was God's way of bringing out the best in them and showcasing their distinctiveness as believers. So they held firm. And I encourage you to hold firm as well, no matter what temptation you're facing today, for there's a second, even greater principle that follows in verse 8, and it's this—

2. Trials turn to triumphs when we exercise our faith.

Verse 8 continues: “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.” Wasn’t that a gracious way to respond to the king’s servant? Did you know that righteous people are also very humble and gracious? And because of his humility and respect, the king’s servant complied with Daniel’s request, and at the end of the ten days, Daniel and his friends looked healthier and better nourished than all the other boys who ate the royal food.

But that begs the question: Where did Daniel and his friends suddenly get the courage to risk their lives by refusing to eat the king’s food? The answer is: They didn’t suddenly get it. The fact is God had been preparing these boys for this moment all their lives up until now. For one thing, these were royal teenagers who grew up in the king’s palace in Jerusalem and were well versed in courtly etiquette. And may I remind you that the same is true of you. The Bible says that we too are a royal priesthood “that we may declare the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light.” Let’s be honest for a moment. Haven’t you met Christians whose attitude is, “As long as I’m speaking the truth, it doesn’t matter how I say it. And if others don’t like that, that’s their problem. Not mine!” But I don’t buy that for a moment. The truth is: Jesus Christ was the most winsome person who ever walked the face of the earth, and if we would be His servants, then we ought to be the most winsome people in the world today.

Those of you who’ve read the biography of David Livingstone know that this was the secret of his success as a missionary to Africa. A friend from his youth said of him: “There was truly an indescribable charm about him which, with all his rather ungainly ways and by no means winning face, attracted almost everyone to him and helped him so much during his wanderings throughout Africa. He won those who came near him by a kind of spell. He then went on to explain that Livingstone always treated everyone—

rich or poor, black or white, educated, or uneducated—with the same Christian courtesy and respect. For example, when he found that his treatment method was in conflict with that of the native doctors, he made it his policy never to disagree with them in front of a patient lest he embarrass them. He quietly took them aside and explained in private what he prescribed, and normally he said they were ready and thankful to try his methods. He wrote in his diary, “We have found that we gave the most satisfaction in our answers when we tried to fancy ourselves in the other person’s position and see him as a poor uneducated fellow-countryman in England. The polite, respectful way of speaking and behavior of what we call ‘a thorough gentleman’ almost always secures the friendship and goodwill of the Africans.” No wonder he was such a great servant of the King!

But even more important is what happened in Jerusalem just before these boys were exiled to Babylon. You see, even though there was many evil kings in Jerusalem, including Jehoiakim who was king just before the exile, there was also one very good king in Judah named Josiah who faithfully ruled the kingdom for 31 years until just two years prior to Nebuchadnezzar invasion. The reason the Bible says he was a good king is because of how he tore down the pagan idols, paid for the repair of God’s Temple, and commanded the priests to teach the Scriptures to the people again, leading to one of the greatest revivals in history! And guess who happened to be growing up in the king’s court at this time! Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. In other words, the reason these boys were ready to obey God’s call when it came to them in Babylon is because they had already committed their lives to His service years before the trouble began.

Now the application for us: How many of you would like to serve the Lord in a significant way? My guess is that almost every one of us would like to do that. But the truth is: To serve God in great ways, you have to serve Him in little ways first. Jesus said in Luke 16:10, “He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much.” So I encourage you. Stop looking for great and dramatic ways to serve the Lord and start by being faithful in the little things only God sees like giving, praying, resisting temptation, and treating others with courtesy and respect. That’s the only way to prepare for the greater tasks and temptations to come. Trials showcase our distinctiveness as believers and turn into triumphs when we exercise our faith. And finally, lesson #3—

3. Trials are God’s opportunities to prove His faithfulness.

The Bible says, “Where sin abounded, grace much more did abound.” My point is this: Though God wanted to discipline His people in Babylon, He didn’t want to destroy them. In fact, 2600 years later, despite their rejection of Jesus their Messiah, He’s still watching over His chosen people. In this case, notice what His gracious plan of salvation was. Just

as he raised up Joseph to protect and provide for His people in Egypt 850 years before, now He raises up Daniel and his friends to protect and provide for them in Babylon.

Verse 18 says, “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. And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.” God was faithful to these boys, wasn’t He? In fact, if I were to create a trailer for this story, you know the tagline I’d give it? When we’re faithful to God’s call and commandments, He rewards us beyond anything we can ask or even think. Amen!

In fact, let’s take a final moment to zero in on that last sentence before we finish. Do you see it in verse 20? It says, “Daniel remained (remained in power) until the first year of King Cyrus.” That is to say, he remained in a position of influence protecting and providing for God’s people throughout the entire Babylonian captivity! For who was Cyrus the Great? The king who conquered Babylon and decreed, exactly 70 years after their captivity began, that the Jews could return home and rebuild Jerusalem!

Why did he do that according to Josephus the historian? Because he read it in Isaiah, written 200 years before he came to power! Isaiah 44:28, “(I say) of Cyrus, ‘He is My shepherd and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, ‘Let it be rebuilt,’ and of the Temple, ‘Let its foundations be laid.’”” Question: How do you suppose Cyrus knew to read about himself in the book of Isaiah? Daniel showed it to him to convince him it was time to let his people go home? Isn’t that an amazing testimony to the goodness and greatness of God? No matter who the ruler is or how unnerving the circumstances may be, God is always faithfully at work behind the scenes orchestrating all things together for His children’s good—for your good. Do you believe that? I have to believe it. My life is committed to it.

Behind me you see the Mandarin symbol for “crisis.” Mandarin Chinese is not only the most frequently spoken language on earth; it’s also one of the oldest. I don’t speak it but I do know this. Their word for “crisis” is made up of two symbols meaning danger and opportunity because, that’s what every crisis presents. It presents God with an opportunity to prove His faithfulness to us and it gives us the opportunity to trust Him. But to do that well, we need to resolve like Daniel and his friends to do that before the crisis comes. So that’s what I invite you to do as we close our time in prayer. Tell Him that you trust Him and that you’re going to keep trusting Him until the blessing comes.