

## Lessons From the Flannelgraph

### Daniel and the Lion's Den (For Grown Ups)

Daniel and the Lion's Den may be one of the best known Old Testament stories. Most everyone that attended Sunday School as a child heard this bible story. What courage and faith he had in the midst of a den of hungry lions. The truth is, this wasn't the only time Daniel was facing death in this Old Testament book. But we find this theme running through the twelve chapters of Daniel, that regardless of the circumstances, God is Sovereign, God is in control and God is with Daniel and with his people. We see it in the first six chapters as Daniel and his friends face death and we find the same to be true in the final six chapters as Daniel is given prophetic dreams and visions of the end times. God is in control. He rules and when necessary, he over-rules! God is with us and the story of Daniel proves it again and again.

The book of Daniel opens with bad news. The prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah had come to pass. The Southern kingdom of Judah has been conquered by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, Jerusalem has been destroyed and the articles of the temple of God have fallen into the hands of the Babylonians. In addition, the citizens of Jerusalem have been carried off into exile. The cream of the crop, part of Judah's royal class which includes Daniel and three of his friends, are selected to be trained to serve in the king's court. Nebuchadnezzar understood that as his kingdom and dominion grew, he would have to have knowledgeable people familiar with the nations and cultures he conquered to advise him. He selected young people from these conquered nations that he could indoctrinate and train in Babylonian or Chaldean culture. He told his chief of staff to find, **“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.”** The plan was to teach them the language and the literature and the religion of Babylon. They would be trained and indoctrinated into the culture for three years and then they would enter the king's service.

Scholars estimate that Daniel and his three friends were perhaps 17 or 18 when they were brought to Babylon as captives. Imagine what a frightening situation. The Babylonians had laid siege to Jerusalem for some time. Daniel and friends had watched as everything they held precious and dear was destroyed. Taken by force to Babylon, everything – the culture, the gods, the city, the climate, the language, the dress, the values – everything was different. And

everything familiar to them – their homes, their families, their own language, their religion, the temple, even their names – all of that had been cut off and left behind. Here they were, young teenagers, in a foreign, pagan culture, Jerusalem is no more. What are they to do?

**Daniel had to learn quickly that God is still with you when everything suggests he isn't!** Have you ever been in that situation? Everything seems foreign to you. It feels like you are alone in the world and everything is against you, maybe even God? Understand, Judah and the Israelites had sinned against God and that's why God allowed them to be carried into exile in Babylon to begin with. Warren Weirsbe wrote, **“God would rather have His people living in shameful captivity in a pagan land than living like pagans in the Holy Land and disgracing His name.”** ... Warren Weirsbe It was judgement that brought them to Babylon, but Daniel and Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah I'm sure felt like this was undeserved on their part. They hadn't sinned against the Lord. They were honoring God, keeping kosher, honoring the Sabbath, praying three times a day when suddenly they are guilty by association, enslaved and carried off into exile. They are part of a sinful nation and now their lives have been turned upside down. What did we do to deserve this?

And consider this, no matter how you try to look at this, from the standpoint of the people in the story, it looked like a pagan king and his pagan gods had triumphed over the God of Israel and his people. That's certainly the way the Babylonians viewed it. They had carried off the articles of the temple and Belshazzar would even use some of those holy vessels to honor his pagan gods at a feast in chapter 5. It sure didn't look like victory or triumph for Daniel and his friends. In fact, it looked like nothing would ever be the same for them with the exception of this one thing: **God was still with them!** He had been with them in Judah and he was with them now, even though they couldn't see it or sense it. God was with them and God was still in control. Keep reading and you'll see it for Daniel. Keep believing and you'll see it for yourself in your circumstances.

It may feel like you're in a similar situation to Daniel and his friends - alone, cut off, feeling like God has forgotten you, exiled from everyone and everything that is precious to you, but God is still with you. He is in control, even in these adverse circumstances.

It wasn't pleasant, but in numerous ways God was at work in Daniel's behalf causing all these things to work together for good. Don't assume that because things are difficult that God is

no longer with you or helping you. Notice Daniel 1:2 (the Lord was behind the whole thing); 1:9 (God caused the official to show favor to Daniel); 1:17 (God gave Daniel and his friends knowledge and understanding 10 times beyond everyone in Babylon). Even if it doesn't seem like it, if you are a child of God, God is with you. God is still in control. Trust him and rely upon him.

**God is still with you when the world pressures you to conform.** Notice the systematic dismantling of Daniel's Jewish identity. **"He [Ashpenaz, chief of the court officials] 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...The king's official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego."**

You talk about pressure to change, to adapt, these young Jewish men were under pressure. The plan was they were to forget all about Israel, forget about Jerusalem, forget about the temple, forget about the law, forget about their God. They were given new names, new identities. They were to become Babylonian.

I know that names don't mean as much to us today, but in the Eastern culture, the person's name was closely tied to their identity and it often included the name of your God. Daniel means "God is my judge" but it was changed to Belteshazzar which means "Bel protect his life" bel being the name of a god or goddess. The same for the others: Hananiah ("The Lord has been gracious") to Shadrach ("command of Aku" the moon god); Mishael ("who is like God") to Meshach ("who is as Aku is") and Azariah ("the Lord is my help") to Abednego ("Servant of Nebo (Nego). The point is that the name of the Lord was replaced by the names of Babylonian gods. The idea was that these young men would form a new identity and a new allegiance but the Babylonians didn't understand how deep the faith of Daniel and his friends was.

The pressure is there for all of us to conform to a culture and embrace values that are contrary to God and his word – contrary to biblical values. How are we going to live in an adversarial and openly hostile cultural environment?

Daniel chose to pursue excellence, to study Babylonian language and literature and

science, but to maintain a godly and biblical worldview. You can study science and still believe in God and believe that God created the heavens and the earth. (Ask Dr. John Nelson or Dr. Kent Teague - they are both scientists with Phd's and believers). You can pursue academic excellence and still be a follower of Jesus. Don't let anyone fool you into believing that faith in God is for the foolish or uneducated.

Daniel had to live and work in a pagan environment, but he chose not to defile himself. The environment around you may indeed be defiling but you don't have to choose to defile yourself. You don't have to participate. He refused to surrender to the sinfulness of the culture.

Amazingly it was over food that Daniel took a stand. Perhaps he saw that this was a battle he could win. The bible says, **“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.”**

#### **Daniel 1:8**

He didn't want to eat food that had been offered to idols, food that was not kosher, so he requested vegetables and water. Notice how he appealed to the guard; “Test us for ten days and see what happens.” At the end of ten days, Daniel and his friends looked healthier and better nourished than all the others who ate the royal food. Later in Daniel (10:3) he speaks of eating meat and drinking wine, but at this season of his life, it was important for Daniel to take this stand.

Remember I said the king had plundered the golden articles from the temple in Jerusalem? That was because there was no god they could carry back, no idol like the other cultures, so they brought back these instruments of the temple. To the Babylonians it was a sign that their god was mightier than the God of Israel.

Daniel's decision to forego the food and wine of the king and at the end of the ten days he was healthier and better nourished was a sign to the king's court that the God of the Israelites was still with them. He was not locked up in a storeroom some where. The Babylonians couldn't see him, but Daniel's health was proof that his God was with him. It was proof to Daniel and friends that if they honored God he would honor them – that this was not about their physical appearance or their intellectual gifts, this was about God granting them help and favor. God was with them. If they chose not to compromise, not to conform to the world but to stand with the Lord and obey his word, God would stand with them and be with them. It was an important lesson.

We are all being pressured to conform to the values of a world without God. The bible says **“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” Romans 12:2.** We are supposed to be transformers and not conformers! Let’s be like Daniel - let’s resolve not to defile ourselves, resolve not to allow ourselves to be squeezed into the mold of this world, but let’s be world changers - transforming the culture and the values around us by our obedience to God and our faith. Our students are heading back to school. Like Daniel, a teenager being pressured to conform to an ungodly culture, but like Daniel, God is with you even when the world is pressuring you to change! Be resolute. Be steadfast. Be faithful.

**God is with you when it all looks impossible!** Daniel is known as one of the men in the court who could interpret dreams but in chapter two he is given a challenge that is impossible. The king has been troubled by a dream but he is afraid his advisors will try to mislead him by their interpretation so he tells them they must first tell him what he has dreamed and then tell him what it means. It’s impossible. They tell him **“There is not a man on earth who can do what the king asks...No one can reveal it to the king except the gods and they do not live among men.” Daniel 2:10-11**

In response to this, the king orders that all the wise men of Babylon, which would include Daniel and his three friends, be put to death. Men were sent to find Daniel and friends in order to execute them (2:13).

Daniel appealed to the officer and to the king and asked for time to seek the Lord. Daniel and friends prayed and during the night the Lord revealed the dream and its’ interpretation. Daniel went to the king and told him, **“No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about, but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries. He has shown King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen in days to come.” Daniel 2:27-28**

Daniel tells the king what he had dreamed as he slept in his bed and he gave him the interpretation as the Lord had given it to Daniel. He told him, “The great God has shown the king what will take place in the future. The dream is true and the interpretation is trustworthy.” The king fell before Daniel and said, **“Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries for you were able to reveal this mystery.”** The king then

elevated Daniel and his friends to places of authority in his kingdom.

You may be up against an impossible situation and there is no way out, no solution coming to you, you can't possibly find an answer, no one could, but remember, "there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries." There is a God who invited us to ask him if we needed wisdom and promised to generously give to us that wisdom and help we need. There is a God who is with us, even when we are facing the impossible. With God all things are possible. Don't give up, not as long as there is a God in heaven who is with you and who cares about you. Finally,

**God is with you when the lions have you surrounded!** Daniel has known his share of danger and life-threatening situations over the years. By this time in chapter 6 he has served four kings in four different administrations. The Persians now control Babylon and Daniel has once again distinguished himself as a man of integrity and godly character. The king knows he is being cheated by some of his governors so he makes them all accountable to Daniel because he knows of his integrity. The governors hate Daniel and begin looking for some weakness they can exploit to defeat him. They find nothing. The bible says, "they could find no corruption in him, because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent." 65 years and they could find nothing for which to accuse him! 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 6:5**

They appeal to the king's ego and suggest that for thirty days no one be allowed to pray to any man or any god and instead pray only to the king himself, recognizing him as divine. Furthermore they suggest that anyone caught praying to anyone, man or god, besides the king be thrown into a den of lions. Proud of himself the king signs this edict and according to the law of the Medes and Persians this law was irreversible – not even the king could change it.

These wicked governors watched Daniel's home to see what he would do when he heard of the decree. Notice what the bible says concerning Daniel. **"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."** Daniel 6:10

The governors immediately told the king that Daniel had ignored the edict of the king and was praying three times a day just as always. Heartbroken because the king loved and respected

Daniel, he tried to figure out a way to spare his life, but it was another of those impossible situations. With no means of escape and no way to void the edict of the king, Daniel is thrown into a den of lions. The king shouts to him, **“May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!” Daniel 6:16**

What a powerful assessment of Daniel by a pagan king – that Daniel served God continually. You see, for Daniel, nothing had changed when the king signed an edict banning prayer. This is what he had been doing since he was a teenager. I love verse 10 - “just as he had done before.” This was the pattern for Daniel - a life of consistent prayer. Daniel is now in his eighties as they throw him into that den of hungry lions, but he had faced it all before. All these years of exile the enemy of his soul had been trying to devour him and destroy him and all these years Daniel had remained resolute, just as he had been when he refused the king’s food and wine. Resolute, that he would not defile himself, resolute that he would not compromise his faith.

Three times a day Daniel would kneel at an open window, facing Jerusalem. The city was in ruins, the temple wasn’t even there any more, having been destroyed, and yet Daniel faced it as a reminder, that God was with him, that God was faithful. Daniel 9 tells us he had read Jeremiah’s prophecy. He knew the desolation of Jerusalem would only last 70 years and he was getting close to the end of that 70 years. So in faith Daniel knelt at that open window and prayed toward Jerusalem, believing that the time was about right for God to honor his promise and rebuild that city. In faith Daniel prayed for the Lord to be with him and with those in exile all these years. He prayed for restoration, for forgiveness, for salvation. He prayed for God’s mercy. Daniel knew that God had been faithful and would be faithful. He knew the Lord was with him, even if he was surrounded by lions.

Early the next morning the king came running to see what had happened to Daniel and calling out to him he heard Daniel’s voice answering, **“My God sent his angel and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me because I was found innocent in his sight....and when Daniel was lifted from the den, no wound was found on him, because he had trusted in his God.” Daniel 6:22-23**

Daniel trusted in his God, continually and God was with him, even when the lions had him surrounded. You may feel like you’ve been surrounded by lions today yourself. Facing the

worst, but the angel of the Lord is ready to come close the mouth of those lions. Trust in the Lord like Daniel and watch God shut their mouths.

Surrounded by skeptics, critics, accusers, but the Lord can shut their mouths and deliver you from them as well. He is the faithful God and he is with us!

Whatever your circumstances, God is with you. He promised to never leave us or forsake us. Even in exile, God was with Daniel and his friends. He is with you. Maybe you are facing an impossible situation like Daniel did in chapter 2 and you need revelation, wisdom, insight. God is with you. Maybe you are being pressured to conform, to compromise, pressured to defile yourself like Daniel in chapter 1. Make a decision today like Daniel, resolve not to defile yourself with the sinful offerings of the world. Or maybe you are surrounded by lions like Daniel in chapter 6. No way out. No escape, but God is with you and because Daniel trusted in the Lord, God shut the mouths of the lions and no harm came to him.

This thing isn't over for you. God rules and when necessary, he over-rules. Be faithful like Daniel. Keep praying. Keep trusting and God will see you through.