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The Story: Daniel in Exile Daniel 1-6

As most of you know, I lived in St. Andrews, Scotland for two years. Because Scotland is so far north, it meant that in the summer, we were playing croquet at 11:00pm... with light to spare. But the flip side came in winter when Stygian darkness descended upon the town by 3:00 and didn't release us from its grip until late the next morning. Winters were long and dark and cold.

I'll bet I'm not the only one who thinks the recent chapters of the Story have felt like a long Scottish winter night—a string of evil kings, God's nation torn in two, prophets crying out in despair over the faithlessness of God's people. Well, after a long slog through a dark time in the history of God's people, you are about to read some encouraging stuff! If you've flagged a bit in your reading of the Story, time to jump back in. It will bless you! Daniel is a story of unfailing heroism, and it is my favorite prophetic book.

Recognize this guy? [Picture] Cyndi was going through our attic the other day and found this picture of your beloved pastor in his twenties... about ten years ago. I was in Bakersfield doing youth work, finishing seminary. I'm sure you'd agree, I haven't changed a bit!

Our story opens with a group of young men who are sent off to a training program of their own. Only they didn't have much say about it. The book of Daniel begins with Jerusalem under siege by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, the super power of the time. After crushing the resistance, Neb gathers up the best and brightest of the youth and ships them off to headquarters to be assimilated into Babylonian culture—kind of like the Borg, for you Star Trek fans.

This book is a story of heroic people living faithfully in captivity—heroes like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego! When Nebuchadnezzar built a 90-foot golden statue, these boys refused to bow before it even though it meant being tossed into a fiery furnace. But God delivered, and his name was honored even in a pagan land.

Decades later, another hero, Daniel, takes the stage. By now, he is in his eighties but still going strong. Listen to this story:

It pleased King Darius to appoint 120 satraps to rule throughout the kingdom, with three administrators over them, one of whom was Daniel... 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.

You remember King Solomon, right? Here was the wisest and richest king of all time. He came so close to the finish line but stumbled tragically at the last, leading his nation into idolatry and disaster. Solomon started so well, but it doesn't matter how you start. What matters is how you finish! That you throw yourself victoriously across the finish line of your life! Solomon stumbled at the end and his legacy will always be tarnished. I have a pastor friend who, in his sixties, had a moral lapse. Decades of faithful ministry but, so close to the end, he collapsed and his legacy will always be shadowed. How I long to finish my race well.

Daniel did! He served eight kings from two different kingdoms and now, in his eighties, is still growing strong. He "distinguished" himself to the point that, like Joseph, the king put him in charge of everything. And when Daniel's rivals combed through his life, they could find nothing that would destroy his reputation. Listen to verse 4 again: "They could find no corruption in him, because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent." This is how we make Christ known, even in workplaces or schools or communities that sometimes feel like a foreign land: We live lives of such integrity and diligence that even the pagans can't help but esteem us and entrust more and more to our care.

But what always attends such success? Jealousy! How many times have we read of jealous rivals seeking to destroy godly leaders: Joseph's jealous brothers; Saul jealous of David; jealous sorcerers who ratted out Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Daniel's rivals could not stand the fact that this foreigner had held a place of influence for 60 years. They wanted to destroy him. It is often the case. When you seek to live a life of purity and integrity, you will be entrusted with more and more responsibility, and you will create enemies of those who long to have what you have but lack the character or the competency to earn it on their own. Be ready. Your godly life will make enemies!

Daniel's enemies knew of his unbending devotion to God, so they came up with a plan to take him out. They talked King Darius into making a law that, for thirty days, no one could pray to anyone other than King Darius. If they did it was into the lions' den with them! Darius' ego got the best of him so he issued the decree. And talk about heroic... listen to the very next verse:

...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.

It was their plan from the beginning. Daniel's habit of thrice-daily prayer made him an easy target. They knew that Daniel would never agree to such an edict. They knew he would pray, as he always had, and they caught him in the act. Reading this story has convicted me about my own dry and inconsistent prayer life. This idea of getting on my knees three times daily has inspired me. So I put it in my phone as a reminder. If Daniel could do it, if Muslims can do it, why wouldn't I want to humble myself before God in thanksgiving throughout the day? I wonder how many of you would be willing to try this with me for a week?

Anyhow, after trapping Daniel, his enemies trap the king! They remind Darius of his own decree and then spring the trap: Daniel, his trusted advisor, has broken the law and must be thrown to the lions. Darius is sick when he realizes what a fool he has been. He is gutless, too. He was the king; he could have made a new edict if he wanted to, but he would lose face and the ego that got him into this mess wouldn't let him out. Listen:

¹⁶So 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!" ¹⁷A stone was brought and placed over the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet ring and with the rings of his nobles, so that Daniel's situation might not be changed.

¹⁸Then the king returned to his palace and spent the night without eating and without any entertainment being brought to him. And he could not sleep. ¹⁹At the first light of dawn, the king got up and hurried to the lions' den. ²⁰When he came near the den, he called to Daniel in an anguished voice, "Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to rescue you from the lions?"

²¹Daniel answered, "O king, live forever! ²²My 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. Nor have I ever done any wrong before you, O king."

Daniel is lifted out, and then Darius' relief turns to wrath. He orders all of Daniel's enemies, along with their wives and children, thrown to the lions. "...before they reached the floor of the den, the lions overpowered them and crushed all their bones."

Then Darius issues a new decree: "Daniel's God is the living God and he endures forever, his dominion will never end. He rescues and he saves; he performs signs and wonders in the heavens and on the earth..." Really, this is the theme of the whole book! A sovereign God who reigns over all times, places and leaders... even when evil seems to be winning. With our world in turmoil, isn't this a message we need to cling to?

This story raises an important question: What difference do I make where God has placed me? Sometimes it feels like we live in a foreign land... a place of captivity, doesn't it: like we don't really belong... where everything that matters most to us is ridiculed and demeaned? But Daniel teaches us that whether we are a student, a stay-at-home mom, a doctor, a teacher, a soldier... we can make a difference by our enduring witness. The question is, what kind of witness?

It seems to me that Christians can be one of three kinds. We can be Chameleons: wherever we are, whoever we are around, whatever we are doing... we just blend into the background. No one would ever have a clue that you are a follower of Christ because you conform so comfortably to your surroundings. Chameleons never make a difference. They just blend in. Daniel stood out from the crowd because he was not willing to compromise his core values, no matter the cost.

On the other hand you can be a Crusader: so determined to make a difference for Christ, that every day is a battle. You take stands you don't need to take, make enemies you didn't need to make, because you wade into life with a chip on your shoulder and sword in your hand. You make a difference, all right, but you can do as much harm as you do good. Daniel learned to accommodate his life and his message to his culture in a way that did not compromise his core convictions.

Chameleon, Crusader... there's a third-option: Christ-like. Isn't Daniel a glimpse of Jesus, the Scarlet Thread woven into God's story? On one hand, Jesus entered right into the life of his people. He went to parties, he befriended sinners, he lived and laughed and fished and worshiped. He was Immanuel, God with us. On the other hand, Jesus was absolutely prepared take a stand on matters of conviction. He cleared money-changers from the temple, he faced down those ready to stone a woman to death, he raised his voice in anger when broken people were mistreated by religious leaders.

When we look at Daniel, the Scarlet Thread shines through, doesn't it? An innocent man, betrayed and led to his death, buried in a tomb. A stone rolled across the door, a seal marking the stone, a witness running to the tomb in the early morning hours and discovering that God has done the impossible—He has raised his servant from certain death to life? That is the story of Daniel, but it also the story of Jesus hundreds of years before Daniel was born.

See what I mean? This story is like a shaft of light that bursts into the darkness. It is a story of a faithful, courageous man who offers his life to God. And it is the story of a great and sovereign God who is in complete control, even when evil seems to be winning.

This feast we share is a celebration of that God who triumphs over evil, who raises his sons and daughters from the pit and who empowers us to live heroic, enduring lives of witness.