

Dare to Live Differently: A Study of Daniel 1-6

Dare to Believe

Daniel 1-2

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Al Mohler, president of Southern Seminary, was recently interviewed by NPR about the changing landscape of Christianity in America. The setting was the Together for the Gospel conference, a gathering of 10,000 pastors and leaders from all over the country under the banner of what it means to be Protestant, with a particular emphasis on Evangelicalism historical roots in “protest.” The word often gets lost in the name Protestant.

During the interview, Mohler addressed the cultural challenges that Evangelical Christians face with foundational issues related to morality. Whether its extra-marital sex, same-sex marriage, transgender issues, no-fault divorce or religious liberty issues, he was identifying that our culture and society are changing rapidly. I’m sure that is not news to you. We are in the midst of a very tumultuous cultural moment.

But it was the following statement that caught my attention. I think it is an accurate summary, not only of what is happening in our culture, but what is happening inside the church as well:

“Conservative Christians in America are undergoing a huge shift in the way we see ourselves in the world. We are on the losing side of a massive change that’s not going to be reversed, in all likelihood, in our lifetimes. Christians must adapt to the changed cultural circumstances by finding a way to live faithfully in a world in which we’re going to be a moral exception.”¹

I think Mohler is right. But you shouldn’t hear his words as defeatist or pessimistic.

Russell Moore, in his excellent book *Onward – Engaging the Culture Without Losing the Gospel*, suggests that this moral tide change does not necessarily mean that God has given up on American Christianity. Rather, “it may be a sign that God is rescuing American Christianity from itself” and that the church has a unique opportunity to reclaim our role as strangers and exiles on earth (Heb. 11:13), starting with the strangeness of the gospel.²

Dare to Live Differently

Today we are starting a short new series on the life of Daniel called “Dare to Live Differently.” It is a new series but not a new theme. I don’t know if you’ve put it all together yet, but I have been intentionally taking us on a journey in 2016. We started in Lamentations, learning how to deal with the emotions of

¹ <http://www.npr.org/2016/05/10/476651373/as-u-s-attitudes-change-some-evangelicals-dig-in-others-adapt>

² Russell Moore, *Onward – Engaging the Culture Without Losing the Gospel*, (Nashville: B&H Books, 2015), 7.

God's hard providence and His judgment. Then we studied Heaven, where are true citizenship lies. In September we'll start a verse by verse study of the book of 1 Peter, where we'll learn what it means to be a Christian exile. The working title for the series is "Coming Out Christian."

The point is to help us avoid a Christianity that is indistinguishable from the culture around us and to avoid a Christianity that walls itself off to the culture around it. Instead, to borrow a term from Russell Moore, I'm trying to help us embrace an *engaged alienation* – "a Christianity that preserves the distinctiveness of our gospel while not retreating from our callings as neighbors, and friends, and citizens."³

Now we will see this in principle and propositional form in 1 Peter, but I want to have us see it through the lens of the life of Daniel first. I want to illustrate what it means to be an exile, to live differently, by taking four weeks to see how this was worked out in very particular and difficult moment in biblical history.

And my hope is that you will be motivated, encouraged, and challenged by the life of Daniel while recognizing that the end goal is **not** to be like Daniel. Ultimately Daniel's story is not about him. My hope is that you are exhorted to embrace what it means to follow Jesus in our culture and to stand in line with countless men and women in history who dared to live differently because of their passion to honor God.

Background of Daniel

In order to understand the reason why we are looking at Daniel, you need to know some of the background behind this book. The setting and message are very important, and we learn a few details very quickly.

In verses 1-2 we learn that the story is set in the context of the Babylonian captivity. God had warned the people of Israel and Judah that if they continued to disobey Him, foreign nations would be sent as the agents of divine discipline. In 722 BC the Northern Kingdom fell to the invasion of the Assyrians. Subsequently the Southern Kingdom (Judah) was repeatedly warned that they were next if they didn't repent.

God raised up the Babylonian Empire, the dominant superpower in the Ancient Near East, to become His rod of discipline for Judah. After Babylon defeated the Egyptian army, Judah became a vassal state of the Babylonian Empire, and Babylon used a system of deportations to integrate other nations into their culture. In verses 3-4 this plan is stated very clearly:

³ Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility, ⁴ youths without blemish, of good appearance and skillful in all wisdom,

³ Moore, 8.

endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king's palace, and to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans. Daniel 1:3-4 (ESV)

Daniel and his three friends were a part of this deportation. They were political refugees who were brought to Babylon for the purpose of educating them in all the elements of Babylonian life. Daniel and his friends were apparently part of the upper echelon in the nation of Judah. They were a part of the ruling class of people in Jerusalem. This was the first of a number of deportations which eventually led to the final destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., about 20 years after Daniel arrived in Babylon.

At this time in history and under the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon was the largest city in the world, somewhere between 150,000–200,000 people. Its massive walls, impressive gates, extensive construction and its seven-storied ziggurat temple to the god Marduk made the city the center of the civilized world.

But the city of Babylon is more than just a city; it is a metaphor. From its founding in the tower of Babel (Genesis 11) to the use of the word in Revelation 18 to describe the anti-God mindset in the world, Babylon is a metaphor for worldly, rebellious, and antagonistic culture. “Babylon” means more than a city in the Bible in the same way that “Vegas” means more than Las Vegas as city.

The book of Daniel, however, was not written simply to record the story of Daniel. The first six chapters record what happened to Daniel and his friends, but the second half of the book (chapters 7-12) are apocalyptic in nature, showing the reader a vision of God's control over history. These chapters are designed to give hope to those who would read the book that God still preserves His people even when they are in exile and the future looks bleak.

Therefore, the hero of the book of Daniel is not Daniel. It is God. He is the one who cares for His people by placing Daniel in the court of Nebuchadnezzar. God is the one who reveals the dream. God is the one who delivers the three friends from the furnace of fire. And God is the one who closes the mouth of the lion. And yet, Daniel and his three friend are in the middle of it all.

So while this book is first and foremost about God's deliverance through exile, it is still a book that provides encouragement for how to live in the midst of that kind of moment in history. The end of chapter one makes a stunning statement as to how long Daniel served: “until the first year of King Cyrus” (1:21)—the total of 70 years! Daniel was providentially positioned to serve in four different administrations over seven decades. It is an amazing story of God's faithfulness and the courage of a man to live in Babylon without letting Babylon live in him.

Daniel dared to live differently. And the first two chapters help us to see how he dared to believe in his God.

Dare to Believe with Wise Conviction

Daniel and his three friends were part of a systematic Babylonian indoctrination program. They would have had no choice in the matter since they were political prisoners and had been kidnapped from their

homeland. What's more, they all would have been quite young – likely teenagers. And yet they set their sights on living as believers in a foreign country in less than ideal circumstances.

They were being groomed for some kind of service within the Babylonian Empire. Some suggest that they may have been a part of assimilating other Jews or perhaps providing official oversight over their own people, as they too were brought to Babylon. We are not entirely sure.

In verses 5-6 we get a sense of the plan, and we learn their names. They were given the royal treatment, being given the same food and wine that was served to the king. No one was treated better, and it must have been a part of the program to help them see how wonderful their lives could be if they would go along with the program.

The plan, according to verse 5, was a three-year education program. After that they would stand before the king, and their roles would be determined. The king would appoint them based upon their assimilation into the Babylonian culture.

Their names were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, and the text is very clear that they were “of the tribe of Judah.” Clearly their Jewish heritage is part of the central message of this verse. But that only sets up the Babylonian names they were given. Each of their names has a connection to a Babylonian deity. They were given new names, and every time their names were pronounced they heard statements like “Protect the King, wife of Bel” or “Who is like Aku?” or “servant of the shining one.”

Now what is fascinating here is the fact that Daniel and his three friends did not make an issue out of their re-naming but they did about what they were served to eat. In verse 8 we read “Daniel resolved (‘made up his mind’ – NASB; ‘purposed in his heart’ – KJV) that he would not defile himself with the king’s food or with the wine he drank.”

Why did Daniel draw this line? Candidly, we are not totally sure. Some think that it was because the food would have been ceremonially unclean, but Daniel eats this kind of food later in his life in Daniel 10:3. Some suggest that the food may have been sacrificed to idols. The one view that I like the best is that Daniel and his friends “avoided the luxurious diet of the king’s table as a way of protecting themselves from being ensnared by the temptations of the Babylonian culture.”⁴ Their diet reminded them that they were exiles. Their food choice was a protest against the Babylonian system. It doesn’t seem to be a moral requirement. Rather it was a chosen conviction, a way to be “in” but not “of” Babylon.

But what is equally fascinating and telling is how they chose to express their conviction. These young men were wise beyond their years. According to verse 8, Daniel appealed to the chief of the eunuchs that he might be allowed to not defile himself. God stepped in and gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of this man. Daniel’s request was received with grace and understanding, likely due to the manner in which Daniel approached this issue. Take note of this. We’ll come back to it at the end.

⁴ Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 1587

However, there is problem with Daniel's request. If Daniel and his friends do not look healthy, the chief eunuch will be held responsible, and he could be killed (v. 10). Therefore, Daniel wisely suggests that the servant test the idea for ten days to see if their conviction could be accommodated. Daniel found a way to hold his conviction without needlessly harming the eunuch. And at the end of the testing period, sure enough, the four Hebrew young men looked better than the rest. Therefore (v. 16), the steward removed all of the king's food.

The effect in verses 17-20 is amazing. God's favor was on these four young men. The theme of "God gave" emerges once again in verse 17. We saw it the first time in verse 9 in regard to favor and compassion. Now it appears in regard to learning, skill in all literature, and wisdom while Daniel was also given understanding in visions and dreams.

And in verses 19-20 we see that their learning, study, and favor of God paid off in an amazing way:

¹⁹ And the king spoke with them, and among all of them none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Therefore they stood before the king. ²⁰ And in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his kingdom. Daniel 1:19-20 (ESV)

Daniel and his three friends learned how to navigate the Babylonian culture without falling into the ditch of blind osmosis or the ditch of cultural isolation. What's more they figured out how to be convictional while being wise. They didn't fight the Babylonian names, but they requested to have a different diet. And they must have studied and worked hard to learn everything that they needed. It was clear that God's blessing was on them. They figured out how to follow their God in the midst of a hostile culture. They dared to believe, and they did it with conviction that is wise. And Daniel was blessed with influence, according to verse 21, for 70 years!

We will talk about this more later, but can I just encourage you with the fact that Evangelicalism needs more people who are both convictional and wise. We need people who "contend for the culture . . . not those who are at war with the culture."⁵ We need people who know their Bible, who are known for the fruit of the Spirit, and who know their field of study really, really well.

Dare to Believe with Dependent Faith

Chapter 2 shows us a life-or-death crisis that took place in the second year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign, and this narrative shows us the way in which Daniel and his friends trusted God in the midst of very challenging circumstances. We see them dare to believe in God with dependent faith.

At this moment in Babylonian history Nebuchadnezzar was probably about 30 years old. Eight years earlier he conquered Assyria and razed the capital city of Nineveh to the ground. He had routed the Egyptian army, and he occupied the lands of Syria and modern-day Israel. Damascus, Tyre, Sidon, and

⁵ Moore, 8.

Jerusalem were all vassal states.⁶ And along with his military success, Nebuchadnezzar was a deeply religious man. There is actually a prayer that he prayed to Marduk before being seated on the throne that is housed in the British Library.⁷ He was named after the God Nebu, the Babylonian god of wisdom.

Nebuchadnezzar's worldview would have put great emphasis on dreams. Babylonians believed that the gods communicated through dreams, so when the king is troubled, can't sleep, and apparently cannot remember his dream, he faces a major crisis. Because knowing the will of the gods was paramount in Babylonian culture, the king needed to know the meaning and the dream.

Therefore, the king summoned the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers, and the Chaldeans. He called his advisors who specialized in such important matters (v, 2). After he tells them that he has had a dream, they understandably ask him to tell them the dream (v, 4). Therein lies the dangerous problem: the king wanted to know the meaning of a dream that he cannot remember. He threatens his advisors with their very lives if they do not deliver on the dream. After they appeal to Nebuchadnezzar's sensibility, things only get worse. He accuses them of stalling, lying, and treason (v. 9). And in his anger he orders the execution of all the wise men in Babylon, which would have included Daniel and his three friends.

Once again Daniel enters the picture. As Daniel and his friends are being sought for execution, he makes yet another appeal. Verse 14 is very clear: "Daniel replied with prudence and discretion . . ." The NIV says "wisdom and tact." Daniel's maturity shines through as he is able to keep calm, think clearly, exercise faith, and speak wisely.⁸ He wisely asks a question about the urgency of the decree in verse 15, and then he asks for time to meet with the king to reveal the interpretation to him. Now understanding visions is Daniel's gift, but this is a great exercise of faith.

In verse 17 we see the value of his friends as they share the burden together and commit to seeking mercy from the God of heaven. God answered Daniel's prayer, revealed the dream to him, and that led Daniel into a beautiful celebration of God's glory, might, and power in verses 20-23:

²⁰ Daniel answered and said: "Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might. ²¹ He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding; ²² he reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwells with him. ²³ To you, O God of my fathers, I give thanks and praise, for you have given me wisdom and might, and have now made known to me what we asked of you, for you have made known to us the king's matter." Daniel 2:20-23 (ESV)

Daniel was brought before Nebuchadnezzar to reveal the dream to him, and he uses the moment to be humble and to honor God:

²⁷ Daniel answered the king and said, "No wise men, enchanters, magicians, or astrologers can show to the king the mystery that the king has asked, ²⁸ but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and

⁶ David Helm, *Daniel For You*, (Purcellville, Virginia: The Good Book Company, 2015), 29-30.

⁷ Helm, 30.

⁸ Joyce Baldwin, *Daniel - Tyndale OT Commentaries*, (Downers Grove: IVP, 1978), 89.

he has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days. Your dream and the visions of your head as you lay in bed are these...³⁰ But as for me, this mystery has been revealed to me, not because of any wisdom that I have more than all the living, but in order that the interpretation may be made known to the king, and that you may know the thoughts of your mind. Daniel 2:27–28, 30 (ESV)

Daniel's God-centeredness and godliness shine in this moment. He doesn't miss the opportunity to make sure that the greatness of God is on display. Even though he is in the presence of the most powerful man in the world, he points beyond earthly power to God's power.

In verses 31-45 Daniel reveals to the king the dream, which involved a great statue whose head, chest, legs, and feet represented various kingdoms. And a stone broke the statue into pieces and became a great mountain and filled the whole earth (2:35). This image is meant to communicate that "the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed" (2:44). Nebuchadnezzar may be powerful, but his kingdom is not God's eternal kingdom.

The King's response in verses 46-49 is stunning. King Nebuchadnezzar fell on his face before Daniel and paid homage to him. He acknowledged the power of the one true God ("your God is God of gods and Lord of kings"). He promoted Daniel as the ruler over Babylon and chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon (v. 48). And Daniel did not forget about his three friends. He arranged for them to be appointed over particular affairs in the province of Babylon. Daniel's dependent faith created an amazing opportunity to honor his God, to influence the King, and to do good for his people.

In the midst of a national crisis with an angry, irrational king, Daniel sought the Lord and stood in the gap for the people of God. Daniel was a deeply God-centered man and was able to shine in the midst of a life-or-death situation. He dared to believe with dependent faith.

How to Live Differently

What can we learn from these two chapters, the life of Daniel and his three friends, and how should we think about our own culture? How do we preserve the uniqueness of the gospel without retreating from our culture? Let me give you a few suggestions about what we need to believe.

1. Dare to believe that God is in control. The Bible is very clear that God is the one who "changes times and seasons . . . He removes kings and sets up kings" (Dan. 2:21). This truth means that you can rest knowing that God controls who owns your company, who moves in next door, who becomes your boss, which employees report to you, who will fill the vacancy on the Supreme Court, and who will be our next President. God is never out of control. He is always working. Therefore, Christians ought to be the most calm, faith-filled, and joyful people – regardless of circumstances – on the planet.

2. Dare to resolve to live a godly life. The Bible calls us to be a people who are marked by godliness and good works. 1 Peter 2:11-12 says, "I urge you as sojourners and exiles, to abstain from the passions of the flesh . . . keep your conduct honorable among the Gentiles." Each of us has to work this out differently before the Lord, but are there any areas of "resolve" in your life? Or have you just allowed the

thinking, the affections, and the way of the culture to shape you? Is there anything unique about your life that would mark you as a follower of Jesus?

3. Dare to be wise and tactful. The message of the gospel has often been hindered because of how God's people were unwise, foolish, or unprepared for critical moments when they were called to give an answer or to speak on behalf of the body of Christ. Pray that God would give you wisdom to know which battle to fight, where to draw the line, and how to be gracious and kind in what you say and do. Our culture needs to see winsome and gracious conviction on the part of God's people.

4. Dare to be a person of gospel influence. Why has God placed you where you are in life? What situations or circumstances do you find yourself in? What seat at the table have you been given? What crisis has God allowed you to witness? Don't miss the opportunity to embrace the divinely given opportunity to share the gospel, provide your input, or give wise and biblical counsel. And then strive for and pray for favor so that you can continue to have even more influence while keeping your pride in check.

5. Dare to be an engaged alien. The gospel message, that Jesus died for our sins, is strange to the world. What is amazing grace to us is incredibly strange to them. To live according to the morality of the Bible and allow the teachings of Scripture to define our thinking in the 21st Century is odd to many. And yet that should not make us retreat, dig a moat around our home, or be silent. We are strangers and aliens, and yet we are called to be engaged. Our mission is to go into the world and herald the Good News. The gospel and its ethic has always been strange to the world.

Russell Moore tells the story of engaging in a conversation with a woman who had never talked with a person who truly believed in heterosexual marriage and sexual expression as being reserved only for those in marriage. After her shock wore off regarding his belief in a biblical morality and after she stopped laughing at his views, she said "Seriously, do you know how strange this sounds to me?" And to that response, Moore said, "Yes, I do. It sounds strange to me too. But what you should know is, we believe even stranger things than that. We believe a previously dead man is going to show up in the sky, on a horse."⁹

Let us dare to believe. Let us dare to live differently.

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⁹ Moore, 10.