

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

Dare to Speak

Daniel 4-5

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“We have to build bridges of grace that can bear the weight of truth.”

If you have been around College Park over the last eight years, you have probably heard me say that in any number of settings. It is a statement that I picked up from Randy Alcorn in his book *The Grace and Truth Paradox – Responding with Christlike Balance*. I love that sentence because I feel like it gets at a few really important things when it comes to following Jesus, both generally and specifically, in dealing with challenging scenarios.

First and foremost, grace and truth are the two words that the apostle John uses to describe Jesus in the first chapter of John’s gospel. According to 1:14, John would summarize the essence of his experience of Christ as being “full of grace and truth.” So the combination of these two words is central to who Christ is and what He does.

The sentence also acknowledges that being a Christian means embracing both grace and truth. Most of us tend toward one or the other. I would guess that our congregation is nearly comprised of about half of each, and you may even find yourself shifting or adjusting over the years. Spiritual maturity means finding an appropriate balance between these two categories.

Finally, I love the statement that we need to build bridges of grace that can bear the weight of truth because it acknowledges how linked grace and truth are to one another. Grace without truth is simply being kind and nice without any eternal purposes, and it can actually lead to making people more comfortable in their rebellion against God. On the other hand, truth without grace can be incredibly off-putting and offensive as people come to feel that you are only interested in proselytizing without any real concern for the them as a person.

Building bridges of grace that can bear the weight of truth has been a helpful phrase for me to use as I try to distill the importance of both grace and truth, and as I try to keep them in balance. There are moments when the weightiness of biblical truth must be spoken, and underneath is the supporting structure of many other moments of grace.

Dare to Live Differently

Today we are in week three of a study on the life of Daniel as we look at some examples of what it means to live differently. The point of this series 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, it is 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.”¹ We need to be both engaged and aliens in the same way that we need to embrace both grace and truth.

In the first week of this series, we learned about Daniel and his three friends’ daring choice to believe in God. That resulted in their decision to ask for a different diet and in Daniel’s interpretation of the dream. We saw that these young men, likely teenagers, chose to believe that God was in control of their lives and that they could follow the One, True God while thousands of miles away from home as political prisoners. They were trying to figure out how to live in Babylon without Babylon living in them.

Last week we walked through the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and their refusal to bow down to the golden statue. They dared to stand while believing that God could be trusted. God was going to deliver them from Nebuchanezzar, either by a miraculous rescue from the fiery furnace or by their untimely death. But they were not going to worship a foreign god.

Now there is a significant gap in time between these chapters. In chapter 4 it is believed that Daniel is at least a middle aged man, and in chapter 5, it appears that he is much older – maybe in his eighties.² We find that Daniel still has significant influence within the court of the Babylonian Empire and in various administrations.

Remember that the Babylonian Empire was the cultural and political center of the Ancient Near East at this time. It was a city that likely had a population of 150,000-200,000 people, and it contained a massive wall, multiple palaces, and temples to various gods. It was a city filled with idolatry, power, wealth, and religious pluralism.

In chapters four and five we see that Daniel is called upon to deliver God’s message to two political leaders: Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar. God had positioned him within the court of the king, and Daniel dared to speak on God’s behalf. He was called upon to speak truth to power.

The message to both kings is very similar. Daniel points these powerful leaders to the all-powerful God, calling them to turn from their proud actions and idolatry. He bears witness to what he knows to be true about God, and he reminds powerful kings and powerful kingdoms that they are not truly ultimate in the world. Daniel is a trustworthy and clear witness for God’s truth. He dared to speak with truthful tenderness and urgency. Let’s see how this develops in the text.

Truth with Tenderness

Chapter four begins with as a first person testimonial from Nebuchadnezzar, as the King of Babylon shares the great lesson that he learned in the story that follows. Verse 3 serves as a great summary:

³ How great are his signs, how mighty his wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and his dominion endures from generation to generation. Daniel 4:3 (ESV)

¹ Moore, 8.

² David Helm, *Daniel For You*, (Purcellville, Virginia: The Good Book Company, 2015), 67, 90.

Both chapters are designed to demonstrate the supreme power of God's kingdom and dominion. It is hard to miss this theme since the words "kingdom" and "dominion" are used over twenty times. Remember that the book of Daniel is not about Daniel, his three friends, Nebuchadnezzar, or any future king. The book is about God's supremacy over all things, including a powerful human system of government.

I cannot think of anything more powerful, from a human standpoint, than to rule a nation. Running your life, home, or your own company is one thing. But when you rule a nation, you have money, military, and land at your control. And the point of these chapters is simply that those systems that seem so powerful to us are nothing to God. Every once in a while, God sends someone to keep things in perspective. In this moment of history, that man is Daniel. He knew about the "other" kingdom.

So how did Nebuchadnezzar learn this lesson?

Once again we see God using a dream and Daniel's interpretation of it. According to the king's own testimony in verse four, he was at the pinnacle of his career as ruler over Babylon. He was "at ease in my house and prospering" (4:4). And then he had another disturbing dream (4:5). Once again he called for the wise men of his day to interpret his dream, and this time he told them the dream. However, no one could interpret the dream for the king (4:7), or maybe they didn't want to interpret it for him.

Daniel enters the picture, and he is still held in great regard by the king of Babylon. He is described as one who has the spirit of the gods and for whom no mystery is too great (4:9). Daniel is still the chief of the magicians, and he has not lost any of his influence over the years. Somehow he had figured out how to be faithful to God while faithfully serving the king of Babylon. He was still a person of influence.

The king proceeds to tell Daniel the dream in verses 10-17. A large and globally honored tree is marked to be chopped down by an angelic messenger from heaven – called a "watcher." Additionally, the vision involves a scary proclamation regarding a person losing his mind and becoming like a beast. And the purpose of this vision is stated clearly in verse 17b:

... to the end that the living may know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will and sets over it the lowliest of men.' Daniel 4:17 (ESV)

Nebuchadnezzar has clearly received a revelation from God, and he turned to Daniel. Don't miss the significance of this simple fact. Daniel's reputation, godliness, and gifts made him someone to whom the king could turn in the midst of this crisis. We have no idea how many other times, if any, this kind of situation presented itself. When deeply troubled, Nebuchadnezzar turned to Daniel. We'll talk more about this at the end of the message, but I'd like to get you thinking even now about this question: Would people even know to turn to you? When crisis hits, have you built a big enough bridge of grace that people know to call you for help? Week after week, month after month, year after year, decision after decision, you are building the opportunity to speak into the crisis. It may take a long time, but strive to be the kind of person that people call when the bottom drops out.

In verse 19 the passage shifts away from the first person account to the interpretation of the dream. As Daniel considers what he has heard, he is troubled. The ESV says that Daniel was “dismayed” and “alarmed.” Other translations render these words as “greatly perplexed” and “terrified” (NIV) or “overcome” and “frightened” (NLT). Apparently, it was obvious to Nebuchadnezzar because he instructs Daniel to tell him the dream regardless of what it means (4:19).

As Daniel reluctantly shares the message, he begins by wishing that the dream would be applied to the King’s enemies (4:19). Daniel is a reluctant messenger. He cares for this king, and yet he must tell him what the dream actually means.

Verses 20-26 detail Daniel’s interpretation as he tells the king that the tree to be chopped down is him. The king will be driven from his position of honor and power, and he will become like a wild animal, losing his sense of reason. All of this would come about so that the king would know that “the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will” (4:25). And Daniel appeals to the king to repent so that he might be spared from judgment:

²⁷ Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you: break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed, that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your prosperity.” Daniel 4:27 (ESV)

Daniel was calling upon Nebuchadnezzar to follow the ways of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and to humbly acknowledge his place in the world in light of God’s rule. Daniel was issuing the king a tender warning. He was a reluctant messenger to a person in power about the limitations of his reign. Daniel was God’s messenger to connect this earthly king to the truth beyond himself.

Do you know that this is essentially the role of the church in the world? God ordained that the church would be the means by which God’s message, the gospel, would be proclaimed:

⁸ To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹ and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, ¹⁰ so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. ¹¹ This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, ¹² in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him. Ephesians 3:8–12 (ESV)

It is the church that has been entrusted with the following life-changing truths:

- The gospel is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes (Rom. 1:16)
- The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18)
- There is no one righteous, not even one (Rom. 3:11)
- All have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory (Rom. 3:23)
- The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 6:23)
- There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1)

- I am sure that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:37-39)
- From him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen (Rom. 11:36)

You see, the church, corporately, and you, individually, are the “witnesses” of this Good News. And it is our calling in the world to communicate the message about God with the love of God pointing people toward the ultimate reality that is found in Jesus Christ.

Nebuchadnezzar was given a revelation from God through this dream. Daniel tenderly communicated the truth of it to him. We have the full revelation of God in the person of Christ and in the Word about Christ. We have been called to be the kind of people who tenderly but clearly help people to understand what God has said.

Back in Daniel 4 we see that Nebuchadnezzar listened to Daniel’s counsel for a while, but about a year later the warning was fully realized. After a proud moment on the top of one of his palaces, the King went mad. He became like an animal, just as Daniel had warned. After his sanity returned, Nebuchadnezzar came to realize his place in the world and the supremacy of his creator.

³⁷ Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to humble. Daniel 4:37 (ESV)

And Daniel played a critical role of delivering God’s message in the context of tenderness and a life of credibility with a powerful king. He dared to speak the truth but did so with a God-centered humility.

Truth with Urgency

The second story in which Daniel is called to speak involves a different king. His name is Belshazzar, and we know from history that he is the son of Nabonidus, a ruler that shared the throne with Nebuchadnezzar. Archeological evidence suggests that well over 20 years had passed between chapters four and five, and Daniel was probably a man in his eighties.³

Additionally, it is suggested that Nabonidus had temporarily given the throne to Belshazzar while he was away from the city for an extended period of time. At some point, the city of Babylon was under the threat of invasion from the Persian Empire. Given the nature of battles for cities during this time period, the Persian army must have had the city of Babylon surrounded.

In the midst of this politically and militarily challenging environment, Belshazzar holds a great feast with many invited guests. Either Belshazzar was a bit delusional to the threat around him or he was using this celebration as way to communicate his confidence in Babylonian supremacy. Perhaps the party was meant to serve as some kind confidence builder, or maybe it was designed to drown out the fears of his leaders or himself. The timing is odd and brazen.

³ Helm, 90.

In the midst of the party, the king orders that the golden vessels from Jerusalem should be brought out as the utensils for their lavish gala (5:2). After they retrieve these vessels, the king, his lords, his wives and his concubines drank from them and “praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood and stone” (5:3-4). They were offering toast after toast to their false gods while using the vessels taken from the temple of the One True God. The arrogance and the intended message were clear. David Helm, in commenting on this section, says, “The king was declaring to everyone that with his hand, he had a firm grip on God. He owned Yahweh.”⁴ But his celebration was short-lived.

I find it fascinating that Jesus uses the same kind imagery when talking about the coming judgment at the end of world. In Matthew 24 he says it like this:

³⁸ For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, ³⁹ and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Matthew 24:38–39 (ESV)

The picture of judgment in the Bible normally involves people acting as if there is none. They are carrying on with no sense of what is coming their way. That may even describe some of you. There is just this sense of invincibility that you have or that you at least try to portray to people. But it doesn’t take a lot for everything to change.

In verse 5 we see that suddenly a human hand appeared, and it wrote on the wall of the king’s palace. We know from 5:25 that the words were “MENE, MENE, TEKEL, and PARSIN.” These four words are meant to send the king a message, and he is deathly afraid. Verse 6 indicates that his color changed, his thoughts alarmed him, his limbs grew weak, and his knees knocked together. The party-hearty, “can’t-touch-this” King is filled with panic, and he calls out loudly to have the wise men brought in to interpret the meaning of the words.

Yet again we see the influence and reputation of Daniel. In verse 10, the queen mother suggests that Daniel should be brought in to interpret the four words. She describes him as a man in whom is the spirit of the gods . . . an excellent spirit, knowledgeable and understanding to interpret dreams . . . and solve problems (5:11-12). When Daniel is summoned to King Belshazzar’s presence, he says, “I have heard of you that the spirit of the gods is in you, and that light and understanding and excellent wisdom are found in you” (5:14).

If we are right that Daniel is about 80 years old, just consider the beauty and the power of a lifetime testimony that brings you into the presence of the King for this kind of moment. Somehow Daniel figured out how to honor the Lord and to be faithful to Him, and to *not* allow the Babylonian culture to take away his godly influence. And now he’s given the opportunity to speak. The king is in crisis.

Daniel’s words are clear and urgent. They do not have the level of tenderness that we heard in chapter 4. That may be because of the shallowness of Belshazzar as a ruler, his relationship with Nebuchadnezzar, or

⁴ Helm, 91.

because of the dangerous situation with Persia surrounding the city. Belshazzar may have been one of those delusional leaders who is suddenly ready to listen.

The interpretation of the four words is found in verses 24-28, but it is in the introduction that we hear Daniel's message. Belshazzar knew what happened to Nebuchadnezzar – that his heart was lifted up, his spirit was hardened so he acted proudly, and how he was brought down and his glory taken from him (5:20). Take note of those words! Belshazzar knew about the insanity of the previous king, and how the Most High God had made it clear who was really supreme. The king knew all of this.

Daniel's words are meant to be a strong rebuke to this arrogant king:

²² And you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this, ²³ but you have lifted up yourself against the Lord of heaven. And the vessels of his house have been brought in before you, and you and your lords, your wives, and your concubines have drunk wine from them. And you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which do not see or hear or know, but the God in whose hand is your breath, and whose are all your ways, you have not honored. Daniel 5:22–23 (ESV)

Don't miss that last sentence! *"The God in whose hand is your breath, and whose are all your ways, you have not honored."* What a statement. Daniel is bringing moral and spiritual clarity to this king and to the kingdom. In the midst of all the partying, Daniel brought a dose of divine reality to the throne-room. He brought God's message to a king filled with self-congratulatory idolatry.

Finally, Daniel interprets the writing on the wall: "Counted, Counted. Found Wanting. Divided." The message was simply that God had numbered the days of Belshazzar. God had weighed his days in the balance and found them wanting. And God had decreed that his kingdom should be divided and given to the Medes and the Persians. Daniel's message was simply a message of divine justice and judgment. The very God Belshazzar had mocked by virtue of the utensils he used was now bringing an end to his reign. It was over.

And that night, according to verses 30-31, Belshazzar was killed, and Darius the Mede ruled in his place. Divine judgment had finally come, and Daniel was providentially positioned to interpret God's words.

How Do We Live Differently?

What can we learn from chapters four and five of Daniel? How should we think about these chapters in light of where we live and where our culture is today? A few thoughts:

1. Build lots of grace bridges over time. In order to speak the truth of God to people in need you have to earn the right to be heard. We have to be the kind of people whose lives match your message. We need to be characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal. 5:22). We have to love our neighbors as ourselves (Mark 12:30). We need to serve others, knowing that we are ultimately serving Christ (Eph. 6:5-7). In small and consistent ways, we need to build the kind of relationships with others that provide the opportunity for another conversation at the right time.

2. Remember that the Word is the Revelation of God to mankind. It might be tempting to read the story of Daniel and think, “I would know what to say if God directly told me like he did Daniel.” But I know that Daniel would much rather have had the full revelation of God through the Scriptures. We have in our possession the living Word of God which is a discerner of the thoughts and the intentions of the heart (Heb. 4:12). We have the revelation of God! We must know it and we must, when appropriate, share it.

3. Beware of the fear of man or the intimidation of success. God placed Daniel near some people who seemed terribly successful and powerful, and yet they also needed the truth of God’s message. Every person has deep spiritual needs, and the most powerful and the most successful have just as many needs as everyone else. Realize that behind the power, might, and success is a person who is broken and in need of a Savior.

4. When the time is right, speak biblical truth with clarity and tenderness. Over Daniel’s lifetime we only have a record of a few defining moments. There may have been a few more; we don’t know. But the reality is that important conversations and crisis moments do not come around that often. Pray for them. Watch for them. And when they come, speak in a way that balances truth and grace. God may have placed you right where you are for this particular moment. Take a breath. Pray and pray. Be kind. And speak with clarity.

And if it doesn’t go perfectly, or if you don’t say everything exactly correctly, just rest in the fact that God is the one who controls all the events of this life. In the end, God doesn’t need us. And yet He chooses to use us to build bridges of grace that can bear the weight of truth.

Dare to life differently by daring to speak.

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