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# Faithfulness and Success

A sermon on Daniel 1 by Coty Pinckney, Desiring God Community Church, Charlotte, NC, 2/25/2007

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If you believe in God and are faithful to Him, what does God promise you?

- Does He promise that you can have your best life now?
- Does He promise that those who are faithful to Him will succeed?

What does faithfulness to God entail? How do you live a faithful life before God?

Today we begin a brief series on the life of Daniel. Some would summarize his life this way: As young men, Daniel and his friends are taken into exile. All seems lost. But they have faith in God, they stand firm, and, time and again, God watches out for them. God blesses them.

Some therefore suggest that Daniel's life is a great example of a general rule: God rewards the faithful with a great life now. You too can have such a life!

In a recent sermon, Mark Dever says that Daniel is attractive to many, because he is an example of someone who is **"in** the world, but not **of** the world – yet does pretty well **by** the world."

And isn't that what most of us want? We accept Jesus' command to be in the world but not of the world. Yet most of us want to do pretty well by the world. Don't we? Shouldn't we? What do you think?

So: Does faithfulness to God imply success in this world? And what does "faithfulness to God" mean? How do we live a faithful, God-centered life?

To answer these questions, we'll begin by looking at the background to the book of Daniel. When did these events occur? Why was a foreign power invading Judah, overwhelming God's people? Then we'll look at Daniel chapter 1 under four headings before coming back to the answer our questions:

- Exile
- Resolve
- Living the Resolve
- Results of the Resolve

## Background to the Book of Daniel

God chooses the people of Israel to be the means through which He will bless all nations. God makes a covenant with them, a set of promises including both blessings and curses. From God's first promise to Abraham (Genesis 12), God has said that He will bless them so that they can be a blessing to others, and that He will use them to display His character, His glory among the nations. Time and again He elaborates and builds on these covenant promises, telling them He will watch over them, they will be His people, He will be their God, and through them He will bless all the nations through the coming of a Redeemer, a Messiah, a King who will reign forever and ever.

He also gives them responsibilities. They are to listen to Him, to follow Him, to love Him with all their heart, all their soul, and all their strength.

What about the curses? You can read of these in several places. This morning, we'll focus on Leviticus 26. In that chapter, after enumerating some of the covenant blessings, in verses 14 and 15 God says:

**If you will not listen to me . . . and if your soul abhors my rules, so that you will not do all my commandments, but break my covenant**

He then threatens a descending staircase of worse and worse punishments if the people do not respond to lighter punishments. These punishments culminate in verses 31-33:

**31 And I will lay your cities waste and will make your sanctuaries desolate, and I will not smell your pleasing aromas. 32 And I myself will devastate the land, so that your enemies who settle in it shall be appalled at it. 33 And I will scatter you among the nations, and I will unsheathe the sword after you, and your land shall be a desolation, and your cities shall be a waste.**

And that's what happens in the time of Daniel. The people of Israel again and again turned their backs on God, and rejected Him. He warned through the prophets. He punished them by their enemies. He even destroyed the northern Kingdom of Israel, the northern ten tribes, through the Assyrian empire in 722BC. Yet the southern kingdom, Judah, still did not learn the lesson. By the time the book of Daniel opens a little more than 100 years later, in 605BC, Babylon, the new great world power replacing Assyria, invades Judah, threatens Jerusalem, and makes Judah a vassal state. Nineteen years later, after a subsequent Judean king rebels against Babylon, the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar returns, besieges the city, and destroys it. Of greatest importance, he demolishes Solomon's temple, the very picture of God's presence with His people.

But Leviticus 26 does not end with these threats that are fulfilled in the time of Daniel. God graciously provides a subsequent promise:

**"Yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not spurn them, neither will I abhor them so as to destroy them utterly and break my covenant with them, for I am the LORD their God. 45 But I will for their sake remember the covenant with their forefathers, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God: I am the LORD." Leviticus 26:44-45**

That is the hope of Jews in exile: God is still faithful. God is still God. He has not rejected them utterly. If they repent, the believing remnant can be His people. He will be their God. Their promised Redeemer, their promised Messiah, will still come from the offspring of Abraham.

## Exile

As the book of Daniel opens, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, is besieging Jerusalem. But the God-centeredness of this book is clear from the beginning. Consider chapter 1 verse 2. That verse does *not* say, "Nebuchadnezzar, commander of the most powerful army on earth, forced King Jehoiakim of Judah to give tribute." That would have been true; but verse 2 highlights God's role: "The Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into [Nebuchadnezzar's] hand."

Then our text continues: "With some of the vessels of the house of God." This seems strange; why highlight these particular vessels rather than, say, what happened to the Judean army? The answer: Our text is centered on God. The act itself makes it appear as if the gods of the Babylonians are more powerful than the God of Israel. But this sentence makes clear that that is not so. *God Himself* gave vessels from His temple into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. Indeed, this is the step in fulfilling Leviticus 26:31, where God is the active agent: "I will make your sanctuaries desolate."

Verse 3 mentions the fate of Daniel and his friends for the first time. Some highly-skilled teens from noble families who display great potential are taken into exile, so that the Babylonians might

“teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans.” That is: So that they can become Babylonian Civil servants. This Babylonian school – like all schools – teaches not only information but also a worldview. This school is intended to indoctrinate these young men concerning the Babylonian gods, the Babylonian religion – even Babylonian magic arts.

The plan is for a three-year study program. During this time, they will be fed the richest food. At the conclusion, they will appear before the King for an oral examination.

Through this training, Nebuchadnezzar is both incorporating bright young men into his civil service to improve it, *and* co-opting those from conquered nations. He wants these conquered peoples to understand: “This is what happens to those from your nation who cooperate.” He is trying to create a group of foreigners who will say, “All that I am, I owe to Nebuchadnezzar and his gods. He is mighty. He is gracious. I and my people should be grateful to him.”

To help change their loyalties, Nebuchadnezzar instructs his officials to change their names. Their original names all honor God:

- Daniel means “God is my judge.”
- Hananiah means “The Lord is gracious.”
- Mishael means “Who is what God is?”
- Azariah means “The Lord has helped.”

Their new names honor Babylonian gods.

They then are thrown together with other young men of different ethnicities who also have been displaced from their homes. They are provided with the best of everything. So imagine the peer pressure. Indeed, imagine the pressure just to get along, to survive in this situation. How strong was the internal command, “Conform!”

That is what Daniel and his friends faced as young men in their teens. (Since the last verse in this chapter tells us that Daniel still served under King Cyrus 66 years later, he can’t be much older than 15 or 16 in chapter 1.) They have no family in Babylon. There is no temple. They can participate in no public worship of God. In school, they are taught a different religion. A different worldview. All those in power agree, all those who could help them in the future, hold to this different worldview. They have no one else to lean on. There is no elder to instruct them. So they face tremendous pressure: “This is your home now. Make the best of it! Fit in! Don’t make waves, and you’ll have a great life ahead of you! Figure out how to scale civil service ladder, to get closer to power, to exalt yourself. Hey, perhaps you can even do a little good in when you achieve power – *if* you play by the rules now!”

Do you feel this way? That the way to success, to your best life, to status, to education, to joy – is to *fit in*? To play your role? To hide your convictions? To do what is expected of you? Do you feel that pressure to conform? In school? In your workplace? In society? For some of you – even in your family?

How do these young men, these teens, react?

## Resolve

Verse 8: “But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king’s food or with the wine that he drank.”

He resolved that he would *not* conform. He would *not* just fit in.

We can admire that resolve. But why did he take a stand on this particular issue?

Daniel probably was not trying to keep kosher, trying to apply the cleanliness rules for food found in Leviticus. For Daniel avoid wine, and wine is not prohibited by those rules. Furthermore, Daniel 10:3 makes clear that later in his life Daniel drank wine while in Babylon. Furthermore, it is not likely that Daniel was

trying to avoid food offered to idols. If that case, even the vegetables could have been stained.

Instead, it seems that Daniel is fighting against the idea expressed above: “All that I am, I owe to Nebuchadnezzar and his gods.” Daniel is reasoning something like this: “God has put me here for a reason. I need to remember Him. I need a daily reminder that I am not my own, that whatever I accomplish is from Him. I need to remind myself that God – and not the king – is the source of my well-being.”

Daniel thus is putting into practice what Peter writes centuries later:

**Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. 1 Peter 2:11**

You see, Daniel and his friends were exiles. Aliens. Strangers in a strange land. They needed to remember:

“This is not my home. I belong to the covenant people of God. I am here because of the sins of my fathers and forefathers. God is still faithful. He will bring our descendants out from this place. I must be faithful to him. I can only fight that by abstaining from any desires that wage war against my soul. This desire for rich food, this temptation to depend on the king for everything – *will* war against my soul.”

Do you see the parallel with us? We too are aliens and strangers. This world is *not* our home. Our home is with Christ, raised with him.

As Sinclair Ferguson writes, “High living very easily masters the senses and blunts the sharp-edged commitment of young Christians.”

Daniel resolved not to eat the king’s food to avoid seeing himself as dependent on Nebuchadnezzar, and to remind himself three times every day of his dependence on God. What resolution do *you* need to make to enable you to avoid the sinful desires that wage war against your soul? To fight the fight of faith to believe? To help keep you from conforming?

The next section tells how Daniel put this resolve into practice

## Living the Resolve

**Verse 8: Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself.**

Note that Daniel asked, even though he had already resolved that he would not eat it.

**Verse 9: And God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs.**

As we read the next verse, remember that the chief eunuch’s attitude is favorable. It may not sound that way.

**10 and the chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, “I fear my lord the king, who assigned your food and your drink; for why should he see that you were in worse condition than the youths who are of your own age? So you would endanger my head with the king.”**

The chief eunuch’s reply is favorable in that he did not say, “You *will* drink this wine! You *will* eat this food!” Instead, he said: “You’ve got a problem. I hear that. But you’ve got to understand: I have a problem too. You start looking scrawny, and my head comes off. As long as you look healthy, you can eat whatever you want.”

So in verse 11, Daniel approaches the next guy lower down in the chain of command, and proposes a plan that deals with the chief eunuch’s concern, basically absolving him of any responsibility:

**11 Then Daniel said to the steward whom the chief of the eunuchs had assigned over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, 12 “Test your servants for ten days; let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. 13 Then let our appearance and the appearance of the youths who eat the king’s food be**

**observed by you, and deal with your servants according to what you see."**

Do you see how well Daniel handles this? He doesn't say, "Yuck! I can't possibly eat that stuff!" He doesn't even say, "I'm a Jew, I'll always be a Jew, and I will by no means make myself dependent on the monarch who subjugated my country!" That would be true, but not every truth need be stated. He is resolved, but he is wise and respectful. And the steward agrees:

**14 So [the steward] listened to them in this matter, and tested them for ten days.**

## The Result of the Resolve:

**15 At the end of ten days it was seen that they were better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youths who ate the king's food.**

To read this rightly, you must get over your American idea that being fat is bad. At this time – and, indeed, in most poor countries today – being fat is good. For in a nation where most people don't get enough to eat, the only people who are fat are those who are prosperous. So when we lived in Cameroon, people would sometimes comment, "Your children, they look very fat!" And that was a complement.

The clear implication: God made them healthy. God granted them favor, so that they could keep their resolve.

But God gives them more than healthy bodies.

**Verse 17: God gave them learning and skill in all literature**

That literature, remember, included learning about Babylonian gods. But by God's grace, when they take their oral exam before the king, they perform ten times better than all the others.

Verse 21 summarizes the result: Daniel was there until the first year of King Cyrus, 66 years after his exile, as we noted above. Think about the equivalent today of 65 years in senior government service. That would mean that a young adviser to President Bush today would still be advising the president in 2070 – and thus according to our laws would serve 9 different presidents. Or look backward: Daniel's term of service would be like an elderly adviser to President Bush who also advised Franklin Roosevelt.

God grants them favor. And they serve Him faithfully.

## Two questions

Let's return now to our two questions: Does faithfulness to God imply success in this world? How do we live a faithful, God-centered life?

*Does faithfulness to God imply success in this world?*

Daniel resolved not to defile himself. And God did work in Daniel's life. God gave him learning, and God graced him with a long career as a senior civil servant in Babylon.

But the point of this book is clearly *not*, "Have faith, stand firm, and you will succeed. You will have all you want. You will have the life you desire."

Why do I say that? Think now. Given the choice, would these young men have chosen life in Babylon, or life in Jerusalem with their families? What do you think these young boys prayed for primarily? I think they prayed to return home! I think they prayed that God might keep their families safe, and that they might be reunited! And what happened? They lost all contact with their families. There is no record of their ever returning home. Instead, the very king they serve subjugates Judah, besieges Jerusalem, and nineteen years after their exile, utterly destroys their home city. And their friends, relatives, and family members starve, or eat their own flesh, or are raped, or killed.

Is that success?

Daniel and his friends would gladly have given up all their accolades in Babylon if that would have saved Jerusalem from Nebuchadnezzar's destruction.

Psalm 137 gives the thoughts of at least some of these exiles:

**By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. 2 On the willows there we hung up our lyres. 3 For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" 4 How shall we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?**

Daniel was faithful to God. But he did *not* have the best life he could imagine. He did *not* have the life he wanted. He did *not* have the life he sought after. His did *not* receive the answer "Yes" to his most fervent prayers.

Furthermore, Daniel risked all chance of success in the civil service by his resolve. He was willing to throw all that away in order to be faithful to God. We see that again and again in this book. Earthly rewards *do not matter* to Daniel. Instead, his goal is to honor God. To keep God at the center of his life, despite the exile, despite living in Babylon.

My friends: Is that your goal too? Not success – but God-centeredness? Is your goal to know God, to reflect His glory?

Every one of us is like the unfaithful nation of Israel: Responsible to show what God is like, to honor Him because He created us. Yet, like the Israelites, we look for joy, pleasure, status, and success elsewhere, thus making God look at best like a nice add-on to our lives. But God is not an add-on. He is the center.

Therefore, like the nation of Israel, we deserve His punishment. Having rejected Him, we deserve His rejection. But God sent His Son Jesus to suffer, to die for our sins, so that we, by faith in Him, might be united with Him; so that the penalty for our sins might be laid on Him, and his perfectly righteous life credited to us.

So believe in Him. Trust Him. Love Him. And receive not necessarily success in this life, but something much better: The fulfillment of God's covenant promise: He will be your God, and you will be His people. You will have God Himself. Not an idyllic earthly life, but eternal life. For our Lord says,

**"This is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" John 17:3**

God is the goal. Not earthly success. God gives you Himself. And He is the greatest gift of all.

My friends, faithfulness to God does *not* imply success in this world. It implies something a thousand times better: Knowing God through Jesus Christ. The point is not that you can have your best life now through faithfulness. The point is: God is in control even of devastation and loss. God raises up nations, and brings them down. God works even in national and personal tragedies for His glory and the good of His people.

So remain faithful. Love Him. Serve Him. Follow Him. And you will receive the greatest reward of all - God Himself, through Jesus Christ.

Second question:

*How do we live a faithful, God-centered life?*

Answer: The devil is in the details.

There are two ways of considering that phrase. First, let's consider the its usual meaning: We must get the details right, or we will never achieve our most important objective.

This is true in all areas of life:

- If I say, "I have an ambition to be a surgeon," then in chemistry class I must do the daily readings.
- If I say, "My goal is to be an excellent, loving husband," I had better buy flowers for my flower-loving wife.
- If I say, "Jesus means all the world to me: I love you, Jesus!" I had better spend more than five minutes a day

reading His Word, praying to Him – and I had better spend my money, time, and energy in a way that honors Him.

Details matter. They matter now. And they matter in the future. The details of your life that you practice now have an impact on who you are in the future. This is true at all stages of life, but is especially important for young people.

Legend has it that at the start of the Oregon Trail outside of St Louis there was a sign for those settlers traveling for the next several months to the Willamette Valley: “Choose your ruts carefully; you’ll be in them 2000 miles.”

Daniel chose his ruts carefully. He resolved He would not defile himself with the king’s food. He would see from the beginning that whatever success he had came from God and not from Nebuchadnezzar.

How do *your* beliefs translate into your daily life? What foundation are you laying for the remaining 5, 10, 20, 50, or 90 years of your life? What details do you need to take care of today?

Let me raise some suggestions:

- Is there a little anger you’re nursing, that you’re holding on to? A grudge? Some bitterness? And this anger is sweet to your taste. It feels good to feel sorry for yourself. Do you need to resolve Ephesians 4:26 not to let the sun go down on your anger?
- Or maybe in your case it’s lying: Perhaps cheating a little on tests, or just subtly exalting yourself, giving the impression that you are better than you are. You think, “I’ve got to make myself look good, or I will never succeed, I will never have friends, I will never get married!” Do you need to resolve: “My yes will be yes, and my no, no.”
- Or maybe in your case, it’s giving, of time and/or money. You think, “Later in life, when I have more, *then* I can give. When I’m less busy, *then* I can devote more time to the things of God.” Do you need to resolve, like Daniel, that *all* your time belongs to God, that *every* minute, *every* dollar is a gift of God? Do you need to resolve that you will take money off the top of every paycheck to give to God’s work? Do you need to resolve that you will set aside time every day to read, to meditate on Scripture, to pray? Do you need to resolve that you will serve faithfully and spread a passion for God’s supremacy regularly?

Or maybe your case the detail concerns lust or pride or laziness or self-centeredness. What detail of your life is keeping you from being faithful?

This is doubly important for a second reason: The Devil is in the details in a second sense. A literal sense. For if Satan is unsuccessful in keeping you antagonistic to Jesus, he tries to distract you in the details of your life. He tries to make you ineffective and unproductive in your faith (2 Peter 1:8). As we noted above, part of the problem is self-discipline. We must resolve to fight the fight of faith. But our battle is not against flesh and blood, not even our own flesh and blood and inner sinfulness. We have an enemy. And he is strong. Strong enough and wily enough to cause even a man who walked with Jesus for three years to deny Him. Strong enough to cause you to fall, if left to your own resources.

Daniel knew that. Daniel knew he needed daily reminders of his dependence on God, or he would fall.

Fight that battle, my friends. The devil is in the details. Be faithful.

## Conclusion

The first long-term missionary from US soil, Adoniram Judson, sailed overseas in 1812, eventually ministering in Burma. He

served for many long years, and saw almost no success. His supporters back home grew restless. They kept asking his primary correspondent, Luther Rice, how long it would be before Judson would have an impact. Would there be any success ultimately? Or would they just keep sending money halfway around the world with no glowing reports of evangelistic success to relate?

How does Judson reply?

- Does he say, “Because I am faithful, this ministry will succeed”?
- Does he say, “Because you believe in me, the Burmese people will come to faith”?
- Does he say, “Because you prayed, there will be a great revival here”?

No. Listen to what he wrote: “If they ask again, What prospect of ultimate success is there? tell them, As much as that there is an almighty and faithful God, who will perform his promises, and no more.”

What has God promised? God is faithful. He will fulfill His promises. And His call to us is: Be faithful! Be faithful in the big decisions, and in the details. God may give us success in this world. On the other hand, He may give us a tragic life, in worldly terms. God may give us, as He gave Daniel, a combination of tragedy and success: Personal tragedy together with success at the highest levels of political power. He may give us, as He gave Daniel’s contemporary, the prophet Jeremiah, imprisonment, frustration, and seemingly no success at all. Read Jeremiah: No one ever listened to him!

But God tells us: “I am in control – of all your opponents, of all that prevents you from being mine. So be faithful! And leave the results to me. I will work to My glory and to your good.”

Like Daniel, we too are strangers and aliens. We too are in exile. We too live in a land that is not our own. We too long for our home country. We face at times persecution from the citizens of this country. We face at times the temptations to forget our homeland and to seek success, joys, pleasures, and security here.

My friends, know your true home. Hold on to God’s promises. He will never leave you nor forsake you. Make Him your hope. Trust Him. Follow Him – follow Him in all the details of your life. And know: He is a covenant keeping God. Those who are in Christ will never lose – even if they live in poverty and die in obscurity. He is true to His every promise. And He promises His people – Himself. Forevermore.

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This sermon was preached on 2/25/2007 at Desiring God Community Church in Charlotte, NC. Sinclair Ferguson’s *Daniel*, (Word, Mastering the Old Testament, 1988) and Tremper Longman’s *Daniel*, (Zondervan, The NIV Application Commentary, 1999) were helpful, particularly on the reason why Daniel refused to eat the king’s food. Mark Dever’s sermon on Daniel 1-6 of 2/4/07 was also helpful. That is available through [www.capitolhillbaptist.org](http://www.capitolhillbaptist.org). That is the source of the Dever quote; that sermon also pointed me to the Judson quote, which can be found online at <http://www.wholesomewords.org/missions/judson/judson5.html>.

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