

The Commitment of Daniel

How can a godly person navigate dangerous spiritual straits, achieve secular success, and still remain true to his faith? When the challenges of society constantly change, how can the victory of faith be won repeatedly by a man determined to do right in every circumstance? The encouraging example of Daniel in the Old Testament illustrates how these questions can be answered. To think of Daniel is to think of both “faith” and “success,” and to study Daniel is to learn how faith and success can be joined harmoniously in the life of one good man.

In the World vs. Of The World. Uprooted from the security of his homeland and taken captive to pagan Babylon, Daniel was soon recognized as a promising candidate for government service under Nebuchadnezzar. But the training regimen for this position included a diet which Daniel could not eat, and he “purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king’s delicacies, nor with the wine which he drank” (Dan. 1:8). Daniel risked his career on this decision, but the risk was a wise one — eventually Nebuchadnezzar found Daniel and his friends “ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers who were in his realm” (1:20). Godliness did not obstruct Daniel’s career. It advanced it!

The distinguished service rendered by Daniel throughout the reigns of successive Babylonian and Medo-Persian kings strikingly demonstrates that the godly can take their place in the society where they find themselves and play their part in current affairs. They can remain true to God, bringing glory to God and blessing to men. Daniel’s attitude is exceptionally fine. He lost no time moaning about how much easier it was back home to be faithful to God. He chose not to stick his head in the sand and hide from his new environment. He made no attempt to isolate himself. Instead, Daniel faced the challenge of the present moment and dared to exercise the courage of his convictions where he was. In doing so, he gained the unqualified respect of his superiors, and ultimately rose to a position second only to the king himself (cf. 2:46-48; 5:11,12; 6:1-3,28).

Today, men and women are needed who understand that God is not served in the monastery, but in the marketplace. The Christian refreshes and strengthens himself among fellow believers, but his service to God cannot end there. Inevitably, he must live and work among unbelievers, and when he does, he will need the encouragement of a Daniel, who knew that one can penetrate the world without imitating it, that one can be in the world without the world getting in him. He will need to remember the prayer of Jesus for His apostles: “I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one” (Jn. 17:15). It is not only impossible to go “out of the world” (1 Cor. 5:10), it is a mistake to try. Jesus said His followers were the “salt of the earth” (Mt. 5:13), and salt which remains in the salt shaker does little good for anyone.

Not everyone, of course, has the strength of character and faith Daniel had. Many are the modern-day Christians who could not handle the special risks of Daniel’s high position. The potentially compromising situations, the scheming of envious rivals, and the unrelenting criticism which go with leadership careers have been the undoing of more than a few who rashly involved themselves in spiritually hazardous circumstances. Daniel shows only that survival is possible, not that it is easy. There is a large difference between “courage” and “foolhardiness” — the weak are far better off to stay out of places and positions that threaten their spiritual well-being. It is well to remember that the good Daniel was able to do in his high office would have been as nothing compared to the damage he would have done had he broken under the pressure and compromised his faith.

But it is heartening to know that Daniel did not break. His character was so unimpeachable and his reputation so clean that even his keenest critics took it for granted that his God would come first, no matter what. Only that kind of consistency can gain the respect Daniel enjoyed. Watered-down, easily-compromised “convictions” not only are repugnant to God, they are rarely admired even by the world. The “cultural chameleon,” who has no identity of his own but merely changes his colors to match society around him, has the respect of few. Daniel’s success among unbelievers is impressive evidence that one can grow in favor with God and man, but it takes a consistency that is extraordinary. Let those of us take notice who think one must copy the world to have its respect. It is not so!

Obedience Vs. Expedience. Daniel’s career spanned the governments of several kings. His service was rendered over many years in situations that were frequently changing. Had he not understood the difference between “obedience” and “expedience,” it is unlikely that Daniel could have maintained his consistent character amid these shifting scenes. There surely must have been times when he was tempted to conform his conduct to the dictates of good “politics,” but he perceived that true obedience to God demands rising above such considerations. We can be thankful for the example of this man who never flattered anyone to gain personal advantage. In his interpretation of dreams, for example, he never doctored the message to suit what his superiors would want to hear. His faithfulness did not depend on any particular set of favorable circumstances. He was as loyal in any one situation as another, showing himself to be a man of substance, interested above all else in pleasing God.

Peer pressure was as powerful in Daniel’s day as it is now, but so far as we know he never yielded to it if it meant disobeying God. Daniel had more conviction than to go with the flow, carried along with the tide of popular opinion. He steered a course of his own choosing, governing his actions by values and principles he had already decided on. In this respect, Daniel proved himself superior to most of us, who tend to make up the rules as we go. Regardless of what others might be doing, Daniel’s ultimate concern was with the question: what is right? His conscience would not allow him to ignore the fixed rules of righteousness, no matter how great the pressure of his peers.

Sacrificial Faith Vs. Superficial Faith. Daniel’s conduct in various crises reflects the fact that his faith in God was deep and genuine. There was no shallowness or superficiality about him. His commitment was authentic. He actually relied on God. And it was this utter dependence upon God that saved him from danger in the lions’ den: “Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no injury whatever was found on him, because he believed in his God” (6:23). Like the faith of Noah, Abraham, David, and many others before him, Daniel’s commitment to God was in the heart, as well as the head. He knew God, as well as the Scriptures of God. Those of us who read of Daniel may never be thrust into the physical dangers he was, but it is important to understand that the reliance upon God which turned out to be Daniel’s salvation was built up in the years before he knew exactly how it was going to be needed!

Faith of the quality of Daniel’s is not available to be “turned on” in some unexpected crisis if there are no reservoirs to draw from. These reservoirs are filled only by daily communion with God. It is ironic that the thing for which Daniel was sentenced to death, his praying, was the very thing that had prepared him to survive the ordeal unscathed. The relation between his faithfulness and his prayerfulness is no coincidence. Each reinforced the other. Daniel had confidence in God because he daily communicated with God. Having regularly built up his trust in God over the course of many years, Daniel was able in occasional special difficulties to call upon a faith that he knew would be there. How very different from us who neglect our daily devotional activities and then are dismayed to find that we have no faith when we need it most.

Daniel was used to praying. It had become a regular part of his daily activity, probably from childhood. Without a doubt, Daniel's praying was more than habit, but it is significant that it was his custom, his daily practice. Threatened with death if he continued to pray, he went home, "and in his upper room, with his windows opened toward Jerusalem, he knelt down on his knees three times that day, and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as was his custom since early days" (6: 10). Over 90 years old at this time, Daniel simply did what he had long before trained himself to do. It was not the first time nor the last, when Satan's onslaughts were thrown back by the force of good habits.

The experience of Daniel illustrates why it is so important for parents to teach their children to pray daily, and to attend to the other activities that build spiritual vitality and strength. It is impossible to know in advance what our children may have to face when they are Daniel's age. When the time comes for their faith to be tested, it will be greatly to their advantage to be accustomed to doing the right thing. Parents who fail to weave such habits into the fabric of their children's lives are depriving them of the crucial advantage of being able later to fall back on childhood training as a reserve of power and protection. When temptation rears its ugly head, that resource may mean the difference between standing and falling. What a pity if, in the hour of trial, our children are missing the sturdiness of habits we could have helped them acquire!

Because of Daniel's total confidence in God's wisdom and power, he was a man of courage. Morally, as well as physically, he was brave. No threat of danger could unnerve him spiritually. And Daniel's gallantry is all the more astounding when we recall that he sometimes stood alone. He would surely have been able to identify with what Paul later wrote: "At my first defense no one stood with me, but all forsook me . . . But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me . . . And I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion" (2 Tim. 4:16,17). Like Daniel and Paul, we may never know God is all we need until God is all we have. Stripped of every means of external human support, we may learn what Paul meant when he said, When I am weak, then I am strong " (2 Cor. 12: 10).

The faith and courage of Daniel together produced an impressive decisiveness that is sorely needed by many of us now. When the path of duty was clear to Daniel, he promptly acted. He wasted no time in hesitation, trying to figure a way of having it both ways. Faced with important choices, he chose! Progress nearly always comes from having the will to choose between alternatives, rather than trying to combine them. The success which attended Daniel's daring decisiveness warns us against that dangerous moral wishy-washiness that wavers between right and wrong.

Conclusion. Daniel had his priorities straight. Putting God first was not a matter of convenience — it was a settled conviction. His values and principles were not for sale at any price, nor would they be surrendered under threats of physical punishment. His integrity was far more valuable to him than anything he could have gained by compromising it. We can learn from Daniel that the unpleasant pressures that are brought to bear upon the man of integrity are at the worst annoyances. They can do no real harm, nor can they keep him from the success that really counts.

Let us remember, however, that Daniel was a man of faith, as well as integrity. His honesty and straightforwardness were founded on his godliness. His many victories were the victories of genuine trust in the God of heaven. The depth and substance of his character are attributable to his fellowship with his Creator. The quality of his faith enhanced the quality of his life. And, because he was thoroughly committed to God, he altered the world he lived in. His life powerfully demonstrates that men of commitment move the world — because the world cannot move them. Were Daniel alive today he would no doubt frequently recall us to what was written

by the apostle John: “Whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world — our faith” (1 Jn. 5:4).

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