

Daniel: Living By Faith In A Faithless World

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SERIES: *LIVING BY FAITH IN A FAITHLESS WORLD #1*
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Dan Jacobs came to America when he was 13 years old. He had spent his first 13 years in a small town in northern England, but after his parents died in a tragic car accident, he was brought to Washington D.C. to live with his aunt and uncle. It was a difficult move; as if to another world. His parents had been strong believers; they had worked a family farm and raised Dan to work hard and love God. His aunt and uncle couldn't be more different. His mother's sister, the black sheep of the family, had run away to America after WWII with a US military officer. Eventually, they married, but she never returned home. Neither of them had time for God. He was on the fast track and eventually climbed to a top spot at the Pentagon. She had an exciting career in fashion design. Having children was always put on the back burner and eventually it was just too late. And then came Dan.

Dan never lost his faith, but he adapted quickly to life in the fast lane. Capitalizing on the work ethic he learned on the farm, he became an outstanding student. He was admitted to Yale where he double majored in history and political science. He graduated with honors, went on to grad school, and received a Ph.D from Harvard. Several job offers came his way, but he eventually landed as an Associate Professor of History at Georgetown University. It was quite a post for a young man in his late twenties. Living in the nation's capital with connections at the Pentagon, he was often asked to give advice or commentary to people in high places, even the President. Being so successful at such a young age, he had his enemies, but he was viewed as trustworthy and ethical. His faith wasn't hidden, but he didn't wear it on his sleeve. Dan Jacobs had made it. He was the last guy you would ever expect to be charged with felony treason.

Throughout his time in Washington, Dan was active in a small group of guys who were committed to helping one another put their faith to work. Little did Dan know that this group would make a decision that would change his life forever. When an opportunity came their way to smuggle Bibles into a Muslim country, they couldn't resist. The problem was that one of Dan's rivals at the University caught wind of their plan. He snuck into Dan's house and slipped an official-looking floor plan of the Pentagon into one of the Bibles, replete with instructions on how to break in and plant a bomb. Dan never even made it out of Dulles Airport. He was arrested and eventually stood trial for treason and

conspiracy to commit a federal crime against the U.S. Government.

This is a true story. It really happened. Well, sort of. His name wasn't Dan Jacobs. And he didn't come to America from England to live with his aunt and uncle. And he didn't go to Yale or Harvard or teach at George Washington University. And he never tried to smuggle Bibles into a Muslim country.

So what's left? Well, he was transplanted from one country to another as a teenager. Up until that time, he had been raised in a home with strong faith in God. He was an outstanding student. He did climb to the top in a place foreign to his faith and his fathers. He did become an advisor to more than one President. And he did get charged with treason because of his commitment to God and the jealous plan of some rivals. And his name was Dan, or Daniel, as we call him. His last name wasn't Jacobs, but he was a descendant of Jacob, and Jacob along with his descendants were called Israel.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

By the time Daniel came around, Israel had been in trouble for some time. Things started going downhill with King Solomon. Because his heart had turned away from God, Israel was divided in two. The ten northern tribes were called Israel and the two tribes left in the south were called Judah. Despite God's warnings, both kingdoms continued to turn away from God. Finally, just as he had warned, God stepped in to judge his people. First, the Assyrians took the northern tribes into captivity. A little over one hundred years later, it was Judah's turn, only this time the Babylonians invaded. The King of Israel at the time was a guy named Jehoiakim. He was one of the worst of Israel's kings. He refused to listen to God. On one occasion, he was sitting in his winter apartment when some assistants brought in a scroll on which the prophet Jeremiah had written God's word of judgment. Jehoiakim sat back and listened nonchalantly to the reading of the scroll, and then he took it, cut it into tiny pieces, and threw it into his fireplace. The Bible says, **"the king and all his servants who heard all these words showed no fear"** (Jer. 36:24).

One of the principles we see over and over again in the Bible is that we reap what we sow. There are consequences to our actions. This is true for nations and it's true for individuals. It may take a while, but sooner or later payday will come. In the case of Judah, it came at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar's attack on Jerusalem came in three phases. The first came in 605 B.C. when he cut a deal with Jehoiakim. Jehoiakim agreed to submit to Babylonian rule, and he allowed Nebuchadnezzar to take some of Israel's best and brightest young men back to Babylon. Eight years later, Jehoiakim rebelled and Nebuchadnezzar came in and captured 10,000 Jews and carried them back to Babylon. Finally, eleven years later in 586 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar made his final attack on Jerusalem and destroyed the whole city.

Where does Daniel fit into this? Daniel was one of the young men taken from Jerusalem in the first invasion. He was carted off to a foreign country as a teenager. Dan. 1:3 hints very strongly that he and his friends were from Jewish nobility. Jewish rabbis believe he was a descendant of King Hezekiah. Nebuchadnezzar's plan at this point was to control Judah without destroying it. What better way to do that than to reeducate the "best and the brightest" of Israel's youth in ways and customs of Babylon. He hoped they would be so enamored with the superior culture of the Babylonians and the opportunity for a "cushy" life in Babylon that they would influence their countryman to accept their plight as a blessing in disguise and join the great "melting pot" of life in the empire. Of course, this included bowing to a few Babylonian gods. Talk about peer pressure. It was in this pressure cooker that Daniel spent his teenage years and grew to occupy a position of tremendous influence in Babylon. Eventually he wrote a book about the whole thing.

Notice from your insert that the book of Daniel can be divided in two. The first half consists of stories that show God's faithfulness and power as Daniel and his friends lived in the midst of the kingdom of Babylon. The second half consists of Daniel's visions and dreams regarding the future and revealing God's ultimate victory over all the kingdoms of the earth. Notice Daniel had a long career; he outlived Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian empire; he continued to have an impact into the Median and Persian empires; his work spanned almost 70 years. One of the interesting features of the book is that it's bilingual; part of it is written in Hebrew and part of it is written in Aramaic. It's likely that Daniel originally wrote the whole book in Aramaic and then later the beginning and the end were written in Hebrew for a Jewish audience and acceptance into the Hebrew Bible.

It's worth mentioning that the integrity of the book of Daniel has been seriously attacked by liberal scholars for centuries. Most say that it couldn't have been written by Daniel. In the first half of the book they point to supposed historical inaccuracies which they say prove it was written long after Daniel's day. We'll deal with some of these as we go along. In the second half, they point to the fact that Daniel's prophecies were so precisely fulfilled that they had to be written after the fact. These critics fail to account for one thing. In Matthew 24:15 Jesus Christ himself identified Daniel as a prophet. If Daniel was a prophet, we would expect his predictions to be accurate in every respect; if they weren't, he wouldn't be a prophet! And like other prophets, Daniel would have written an account of his life and work.

The question is, how is this book relevant to us? I want to answer that question by drawing your attention to the three main themes of the book. These themes can be seen in the first two verses of the book. Turn to Daniel 1.

"In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the vessels of the house of God; and he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and he brought the vessels into the treasury of his god."

II. MAIN THEMES OF DANIEL

A. Apparent disaster: The first theme is what we can call apparent disaster. We've already described how Nebuchadnezzar took control of the city of Jerusalem. But notice what Daniel focuses on in v. 2. He focuses in on how the vessels from God's house were taken back to Babylon and placed in the treasury of Marduk, Nebuchadnezzar's god. Notice how he describes this. He calls Babylon "the land of Shinar" because this emphasized that the place was not just crawling with false gods, but it was also was a place which worshiped man instead of god. The land of Shinar was where the tower of Babel was built. The tower of Babel was a monument to the glory of man. We will see in this book how often pride come into play. Nebuchadnezzar proudly takes the sacred articles from the house of God and lines them up with all the stupid little idols of the Babylonians.

This would have been shocking to the people of Israel. Their tradition was full of stories which showed how no one would be able to lay dirty, sinful hands on the vessels of God without immediately paying for it. But now this heathen king dared to take them home with him, and he's gotten away with it! That just didn't fit a typical Jew's theology. Somebody had come to them and said, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life," and they

believed it. And they believed that they could always count on God to vindicate himself and keep them safe from their enemies right until the Messiah came. But now everything they believed in was turned upside down. This was an apparent disaster. You might say, "Well, they deserved it. God warned them. They were just getting what they deserved." But Daniel didn't deserve it. Daniel was a righteous young man, and from what we can tell his parents were too, but that didn't make them immune from this disaster. He would never see his parents again. Imagine how they felt when they saw their boy carted off to some land with a crummy god named Marduk.

What would this be like for us? We're all pretty excited about this building. I for one find myself dreaming once in a while about what it will be like to preach to the masses in that new worship center. But imagine with me for a minute ten years into the future. Imagine that after the excitement of the new building wears off the church starts to decline. There is a new church in town and they have a nicer building and more exciting preaching and cutting edge worship. Little by little our numbers dwindle. We go from three services to two, and pretty soon one service is all we need. You're trying to hang on, you've sacrificed and served at this church too long to give up. Before long, though, the church just can't stay afloat and we have to put the thing up for sale. The only people we can get to buy it are some Muslims who want to turn it into a Mosque where they read from the Koran and worship Allah. Imagine driving by and seeing this place once alive with the presence of God turned into a Mosque. That would be an apparent disaster. How would you handle that?

How about the apparent disasters in your own life? What do you do when you hold that baby in your arms you waited for and prayed for and now she's gone? Where do you go when your 16-year-old daughter comes home and tells you she's pregnant? What do you do when the test comes back positive? What do you do when the guy at work who lies and cheats gets the promotion? What do you do when the man you married 25 years ago decides it's his prerogative to see other women? Let me tell you something, friends, you'd better have a theology that allows for apparent disaster to take place in your life, or life will eat you alive.

B. Absolute sovereignty: The second theme that emerges from these verses is that of absolute sovereignty. Sovereignty is just a big word that means despite present appearances, God is in control. This is the singular most important message of Daniel. Who does v. 2 say was responsible for Nebuchadnezzar's ability to takeover Jerusalem? It says, "**the Lord gave Jehoiakim King of Judah into his hand...**" The Lord did it! Nebuchadnezzar thought the Lord was being

defeated; the Word says the Lord was still in control. It's worth mentioning that the word for "Lord" here is not Yahweh but *Adonai*. *Adonai* emphasizes that God is in control; that God is responsible for all that happens to his people; that he can be trusted even in the midst of disaster.

These three words, "the Lord gave" were meant to bring comfort to God's people. It was meant to let them know that despite appearances, God was still in charge and he was still fulfilling his purposes for them. So, it was true, God DID love them, and he DID have a wonderful plan for their lives. But, friends, in the middle of life you will rarely be able to discern WHY God is doing this or that. You can know the good purpose of God is being accomplished in your life, but still for the life of you not be able to figure out the reason why this or that is happening.

What are the apparent disasters in your life that by faith you must say, "I don't understand it, and I don't really like it, but I believe the Lord is in it. I believe the Lord is working out his good purpose in my life?" Child of God, you can say that even if your hardship is a result of your poor choices. Some of you are in a difficult marriage. You look back on the decision you made to marry that person and now you know were not following the Lord's direction. Maybe you married an unbeliever. Maybe you married a man or a woman who was a believer but there were red flags and you chose to ignore them. Now, ten, twenty years later you are tempted to say, "If I only had listened to the Lord, my life would be so different, so much better." And maybe you feel resigned to a life of misery. Maybe you've given up on that marriage. You need to know, despite present appearances, God is in control. There is a place for confession and repentance over past disobedience but he will even use your poor choices to work his loving purpose in your life. He can even choose to bless your marriage.

Psalms 137 is called "The Song of the Exiles." It says "**By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion.**" And then it says, "**How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?**" The answer to that question is found in the book of Daniel. Daniel teaches us to live with meaning and purpose and even joy in a foreign land, because despite appearances, God is still in control. William Cowper wrote a hymn, "God Moves in Mysterious Ways." Sometime during our study of Daniel we'll have to sing it. He writes, "Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust him for his grace; behind a frowning providence he hides a smiling face. Blind unbelief is sure to err, and scan his work in vain; God is his own interpreter, and he will make it plain."

C. Active Engagement: The question that arises from this is how then do we live? I don't want you to think Daniel is a book that tells us our choices are meaningless. One of the things the people of God would need to know as more and more of them were carted off to Babylon was how

to maintain their distinctives as God's people in this enormous melting pot. This is why the third theme of the book is that of active engagement. How would the people of God in general and Daniel in particular engage with the secular culture of Babylon? We know about the sovereignty of God but what about faithfulness to God? What does that look like in Babylon? What does that look like in a secular culture like America in the twenty-first century?

This is a huge question for us today because we no longer live in a culture dominated by Christian values. Let me summarize a few of the ways believers tend to deal with secular culture. One way is to fight it. Vote in Christian politicians. Try to get the smut off TV. Get prayer back in the schools. An extreme might be to bomb the abortion clinics. Whether you work within the system or you bypass the system, you are fighting against a godless culture. Another way is to retreat from secular culture. Forget about trying to change it; it's a lost cause. We should create our own culture with our own schools and TV stations and just stay as far away from the world as possible. An extreme of this is the Amish who avoid pretty much everything modern culture has to offer. A third way is simply to blend in. This is the camouflage approach. Faith is personal; keep it to yourself. You don't draw the line anywhere. Unfortunately, this is how most who claim to be Christians live. They profess faith but also confess their faith makes very little difference in how they live out their lives.

How we think about this makes a difference in how we approach our jobs and our neighbors. It has huge implications for how we raise our kids. Do you send them to Christian schools or public schools or keep them at home? Do you try to monitor the TV, just give into it, or do you throw it out? Do you go to cocktail parties, laugh at the jokes, and have a gin and tonic, or do you stay away? These are the kinds of questions that Daniel had to answer in Babylon. Let me tell you in general what Daniel's policy was: it was to cooperate without compromising his convictions. Daniel will teach us how to stay engaged with our culture, yet to not compromise. Daniel knew where to draw the line. He knew when to say, "Yes, I can go along with that," but he also knew when to say, "I won't do that. Here's where I draw the line."

Many of you remember the movie, *Chariots of Fire*. It was a true story about an Olympic athlete named Eric Liddell. He was a follower of Christ, and he was a runner - in that order. He was the guy who said to his sister, who was so concerned that his running was getting

in the way of his calling to be a missionary, "But when I run I feel his pleasure." When it came time to compete in the Olympics he was faced with a dilemma. His race was to be run on a Sunday and it was against the conviction of his conscience to run on the Sabbath. He chose not to run. We may or may not agree with that being the right place to draw the line, but I appreciate so much that he knew where to say no and he had the courage to do it. Eventually, he still won a gold medal, and he spent the rest of his life as a missionary in China.

We need men and women like that today. People who run, people who stay engaged with the world, but who also know where to draw the line. Like the Sunday School song goes: "Dare to be a Daniel, dare to stand alone; dare to have a purpose firm, dare to make it known."

CONCLUSION

You'll be glad to know Dan Jacobs was acquitted. He continued to teach at George Washington University. He continued to have an impact on people in power. He continued to meet with that small group. He continued to frustrate his rivals. In the end he wrote a book, and in that book he wrote something that pretty much summed up his outlook on life. He wrote,

“Let the name of God be blessed forever and ever, for wisdom and power belong to him. And it is He who changes the times and the epochs; He removes kings and establishes kings; He gives wisdom to wise men, and acknowledge to men of understanding. It is He who reveals the profound and hidden things; He knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwells with Him.” (2:20-22)