

## Living By Conviction In a World of Compromise

SERIES: DANIEL: LIVING BY FAITH IN A FAITHLESS WORLD

All of us enjoy riddles. A riddle is a question or a statement that puzzles us and forces us to think. The Bible is full of riddles. One of my favorites was written by man named Agur. He wrote, "Four things are small but exceedingly wise..." He went on to talk about ants who aren't strong but work hard in the summer, badgers who aren't mighty but know enough to hide in the rocks, and locusts who have no leader but are wise enough to go out in ranks. I can understand those, but his last example has always puzzled me. He says, "The lizard you may grasp with the hands, yet it is found in King's palaces." I know the proverb is true. As a boy I caught lizards with my hands and though we didn't live in a king's palace, I found more than one scampering through our house. If they got into our home they could just as easily get into a King's palace. I know it could happen but what can be learned from a lizard in a king's palace? The thing that comes to mind is that a lizard is out of place in a king's palace. You can hold a lizard in your hand, but who wants to? They're creepy and ugly. But there they are in the presence of a king!

When I think of a lizard in a king's palace, I can't help but think of Daniel. Daniel was just a young man, a teenager. Besides that, he was a Jew living as part of a persecuted minority in the great nation of Babylon. You might say Daniel could easily be grasped with the hands, but Daniel spent many years in a king's palace. How does that happen? How does a lizard find itself in a king's palace? How can you and I, ordinary people, easy to grasp with the hand, end up in places we never dreamed possible; places of impact and honor and significance?

To answer this question we have to understand some of the background of this book. The book of Daniel opens with an apparent disaster. The king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, besieges Jerusalem, plunders God's Temple, and hauls the sacred articles back to Babylon where he lays them at the feet of his god, who we know was no god at all. He then takes some of the best and brightest of Israel's youth and carts them back with him to Babylon for what he considered a "proper education." Eventually, he practically absorbed the whole population of Judah to Babylon. This was an apparent disaster for the people of God. This was a disaster that presented them with both a theological problem and a practical problem.

Theologically, they were faced with something they never thought God would allow. They believed they were God's people and as long as they kept up their religion God would never allow his people to suffer defeat and possible annihilation at the hands of a pagan nation. They didn't have a category for that. What about his promises? What about his power? But it happened, and now they were forced to work this through theologically. This is why it's so important that the writer of Daniel tells us right off the bat in v. 2 that it was the Lord who gave Jehoiakim, king of Judah, into Nebuchadnezzar's hand. In the face of this apparent disaster the writer affirms the absolute sovereignty of God. He says, in spite of appearances, God is still in control.

But this also presented the people of God with a practical problem. How would God's people learn to live in a nation full of idol worshipers? How would they keep their distinctive as the people of God and prevent being swallowed up by Babylonian culture? This, of course, is exactly the question we face every day, isn't it? How do we live in the midst of a world which by the very force of numbers, and through a subtly powerful cultural assault, tries to squeeze us into its mold, and push those who live their lives with rigorous faith in God to the cultural margins reserved for fanatics and goof balls? This is a practical problem.

Recently, a teenage boy from Arizona wrote a poem that captures the pressure we often feel in this area. It's called, "A New School Prayer."

Now I sit me down in school  
Where praying is against the rule  
For this great nation under God  
Finds mention of him very odd.

Our hair can be purple, orange or green,  
That's no offense; it's a freedom scene.  
The law is specific, the law is precise,  
Prayers spoken aloud is a serious vice.

For praying in a public hall  
Might offend someone with no faith at all.  
In silence alone we must mediate,  
God's name is prohibited by the state.

We're allowed to cuss and dress like freaks,  
And pierce our noses, tongues and cheeks.  
They've outlawed guns, but first the Bible.  
To quote the good book makes me liable.

We can elect a pregnant senior queen,  
And the unwed Daddy, our senior king.  
It's inappropriate to teach right from wrong,  
We're taught that such judgments do not belong.

We can get our condoms and birth controls,  
Study witchcraft, vampires and totem poles.  
But the Ten Commandments are not allowed,  
No word of God must reach this crowd.

It's scary here I must confess,  
When chaos reigns the school's a mess.  
So, Lord, this silent plea I make:  
Should I be shot, my soul please take.

It's appropriate that this was written by a teenager because this may have been how Daniel and his friends felt in Babylon.

### **I. WE MUST MAKE HARD CHOICES DANIEL 1:3-8a**

**“Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, the chief of his officials, to bring in some of the sons of Israel, including some of the royal family and of the nobles, youths in whom was no defect, who were good-looking, showing intelligence in every branch of wisdom, endowed with understanding, and discerning knowledge, and who had ability for serving in the king’s court; and he ordered him to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans. And the king appointed for them a daily ration from the king’s choice food and from the wine which he drank, and appointed that they should be educated three years, at the end of which they were to enter the king’s personal service. Now among them from the sons of Judah were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. Then the commander of the officials assigned new names to them; and to Daniel he assigned the name Belteshazzar, to Hananiah Shadrach, to Mishael Meshach, and to Azariah Abed-nego. But Daniel made up his mind that he would not defile himself with the king’s choice food or with the wine which he drank;”**

Daniel and his friends are brought to the University of Babylon for an education that would lead to a job in the king's court. Nebuchadnezzar hoped to accomplish several things through this. He could use these boys as leverage if things got out of control back in Jerusalem. He could use them for his own growing bureaucracy. And there was also the hope that these future leaders would influence their people to accept their plight in Babylon as a blessing in disguise. Nebuchadnezzar is a complicated character. We're going to see that as this book unfolds. Even here in this chapter we will see he is a mixture. I think at this point he's really trying to be diplomatic, humanitarian, a man of peace. Maybe he's brought in an image consultant and some focus groups. They want a kinder and gentler Nebuchadnezzar.

Daniel and his three friends are clearly the best and the brightest of Israel's youth. Not only were they the sons of Jewish nobility, they had gone through a rigorous screening process to be chosen as candidates for service in the king's court. The entrance exams were tough. They had to be physically and intellectually outstanding. They had to look like Tom Cruise and think like Bill Gates. That was just to get into the school! We think our kids have a hard time getting into the college!

Their education was no piece of cake. It was a three-year program. They had to learn the literature and the language of the Chaldeans. The Chaldeans were an ancient tribe in the Persian Gulf that eventually took over what was known as Babylon. Learning their language meant learning Sumerian and Akkadian cuneiform, a very complicated syllabic writing system. There were some benefits. The King graciously fed them from his own table; they could even drink his finest wine. I'm not sure what the drinking age was in Babylon but it clearly was younger than it is here! This is all very heady stuff for a teenage boy. This is like a full ride to Harvard with the promise of six figures and stock options when you get out. But this is also very dangerous stuff. The literature of the Chaldeans was

saturated with information about omens, magic and incantations. This would have included a detailed study of astrological charts. Of course, the practice of such things was forbidden in God's law. The King's table was certainly set with food that had been sacrificed to idols and was unclean by Jewish standards. Notice also their names were changed. Each one of their names includes the name of God. Daniel means "God is my judge." Their new names include the names of Babylonian gods. We say what's in a name, but names are important (John Stinks story). Daniel and his friends are at risk of losing their distinctiveness as part of God's people.

What do we learn from Daniel and his friends about how to handle this? There have always been two ways of dealing with this problem. There is the way of withdrawing from or in some cases fighting against culture. Stay in your holy huddle. Don't mix it up with the world. Be separate. Avoid contamination from the world by running from it or fighting it. Daniel and his friends could have said, "We're good; you're bad." They could have formed a resistance movement. On the other hand, they could have allowed themselves to be totally absorbed in Babylonian culture. When in Babylon, do what the Babylonians do. You have to go along to get along. We don't want to be viewed as weird, so we will just blend in; we won't rock the boat. The history of the church has been set in these two extremes of withdrawal and absorption.

Daniel and his friends did neither. Daniel and his friends understood that these were hard choices. And they adopted a policy that we might call "cooperation without compromise." They said yes to some things and they said no to other things. On the one hand, they didn't try to totally withdraw from Babylonian culture. They didn't say all this stuff is evil and we won't have any part of it. They didn't plant bombs in the king's palace. They didn't refuse to go to class. They didn't refuse to read the books. They didn't protest when their teacher called them by their Babylonian names. I think they dressed like Babylonians. They participated and engaged themselves in Babylonian culture.

On the other hand, they didn't allow themselves to be totally absorbed by Babylonian culture. Here is where Daniel made the very hard choice NOT to eat the king's choice food or drink his wine. It's an interesting place that Daniel chose to draw the line. Food! It's interesting because if it was just a matter of the dietary restrictions of the law, why would he refuse the wine? That wasn't against God's law. And if it were just a matter of the food being sacrificed to idols, why would they later agree to eating vegetables? The vegetables would also be sacrificed to an idol. But why here, with food? I think that Daniel knew that he had to draw the line somewhere. In those days, sitting down and eating from another's table was an important gesture of friendship and trust. I believe Daniel saw in this seemingly small thing a much larger thing of the heart. "I can't let myself become so chummy and accepting and ingratiated to these people that I forget who I am and who I belong to." He understood that for him this was an important external symbol of his internal loyalty to God. If he gave way here in this seemingly small thing, he would be giving away far too much ground in the realm of his heart.

This is amazing when you consider this was a 14-year-old boy. How would your 14-year-old do in that situation? Would he know what to say no to? Would he know what to say yes to? How about your 18-year-old when he goes off to college? What will he say yes to and no to? Will he join a fraternity? Will he go to the parties? Who will he date? What will they do on that date? How will his internal convictions take outward shape? Where will they learn

what to do? Sunday School? That helps. Youth group? That helps, too. Their peers? I doubt it. They learn by hearing from you and watching you. Of course, it doesn't seem that way. "Oh, Dad, there you go again. Enough with the lecture." "Mom, do we have to go again? Why do we do this routine every Sunday? I'm sick of it. It's so boring." This is where moms and dads need to hold the line. Your kids don't know what is best for them now. The time will come when it will click in but until it does you have to be willing to be the bad guy.

How do YOU decide what to say yes to and no to? Start by determining where the pressure points are in your world. Where are you most likely to compromise? Where are you finding that your small choices are much larger heart issues? Then determine beforehand what your convictions are. Get yourself in the word of God and begin to form some convictions about what you will and will not do. If the word doesn't speak to an issue clearly, ask yourself, "Can I do this with a clear conscience? Can I thank God for this? Is this a place where it's worth fighting the battle?" Whatever you do, let your behavior be guided by principle rather than the moral inspiration of the moment. You should also set up some accountability with other believers. Daniel made this decision and the others followed but thank God they had each other for support and accountability. You need someone in your life that knows your pressure points and loves you enough to ask you the hard questions.

How does a lizard wind up in a king's palace? He starts by making some hard choices. He chooses cooperation without compromise. This raises the question of how we actually carry this out in practice. Daniel helps us here as well.

## **II. WE MUST COURAGEOUSLY AND CREATIVELY STEP OUT WITH A VIEW TO GOD'S INVOLVEMENT 1:8B-16**

**"...so he sought permission from the commander of the officials that he might not defile himself. Now God granted Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the commander of the officials, and the commander of the officials said to Daniel, 'I am afraid of my lord the king, who has appointed your food and your drink; for why should he see your faces looking more haggard than the youths who are your own age? Then you would make me forfeit my head to the king.' But Daniel said to the overseer whom the commander of the officials had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, 'Please test your servants for ten days, and let us be given some vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then let our appearance be observed in your presence, and the appearance of the youths who are eating the king's choice food; and deal with your servants according to what you see.' So he listened to them in this matter and tested them for ten days. And at the end of ten days their appearance seemed better and they were fatter than all the youths who had been eating the king's choice food. So the overseer continued to withhold their choice food and the wine they were to drink, and kept giving them vegetables."**

The choice to not eat the king's food was a dangerous one. It could be seen as a seditious act. We can imagine Daniel thinking this thing through, wondering how to live out this decision in a way that might best glorify God. We can imagine him praying about an open door. Finally, the right time comes.

He seeks permission from the commander of the officials to refrain from eating the king's food. The commander says, "Listen Daniel, if you don't eat this food and stay healthy and fatten up, when it comes time for your interview with the king, we're both going to be in a heap of trouble." Basically, the guy said no. Request denied. Plan A has failed. At that point, Daniel could have just given up. Or he could have just crossed his arms and said, "Too bad, I'm not eating." But Daniel kept at it. He came up with Plan B. There was a subordinate to the commander, an official assigned to Daniel and his friends, and Daniel requested that he and his buddies be allowed to go on Weight Watchers and see how they looked at the end of ten days. This was a very crafty move on Daniel's part. I can see this official begin to think this thing through: "If I feed Daniel and his friends just vegetables, someone's going to have to get rid of all this fine food and wine I'm supposed to be feeding them. My wife is going to love me for this. My kids will love me for this. No more hamburger. We're talking filet mignon! Sure, I'll risk it Daniel." Daniel is no dummy! Ten days go by and the official has gained ten pounds but Daniel and his friends have gained fifteen and it's all muscle! So for three years Daniel and his friends had this little thing going with the official, and everyone is happy.

What do we see in Daniel's actions at this point in the story? I see courage. No doubt, it was a dangerous thing to make this request. And no one was going to do it for him. Prayer surely covered it, but Daniel had to make a move. There are times when we have to make that move. We know that it could very well be a costly move. We might lose the job. We might surrender the friendship. We might get labeled.

But, I also see creativity and tact. He uses his head. He tries to work within the system. He has a plan. He interacts with his superiors with respect. He's not demanding. He seeks permission. Twice he refers to him and his friends as "your servants." Just because we may be right, just because we might know God, doesn't give us the right to be a jerk! Hold to your convictions, but hold them with grace and respect and compassion for those around you.

Finally, I see that this was a step of faith. Daniel was doing something here that if God didn't come through for him he was sunk! Daniel believed that God was intimately involved in the affairs of his life. The writer wants us to know that God came through. In v. 9 God pops his head up again in the narrative, **"Now God granted Daniel favor in the sight of the commander of the officials."** Did you catch that? Daniel made the hard choice to not eat the food. Daniel moved out in faith. But God prepared the hearts of those around him to ensure his success. And God made sure he and his friends were fatter with vegetables and water than they would have been with filet mignon and the king's Cabernet.

How does a lizard wind up in a king's palace? He makes the hard choices to live by his convictions rather than compromise. He steps out with courage and creativity and faith. He believes God will come through for him. But Daniel is still in school. And the time would come when he would come before the king.

## **III. GOD HONORS THOSE WHO HONOR HIM 1:17-21**

**"And as for these four youths, God gave them knowledge and intelligence in every branch of literature and wisdom; Daniel even understood all kinds of visions and dreams. Then at the end of the days which the king had specified for presenting**

**them, the commander of the officials presented them before Nebuchadnezzar. And the king talked with them, and out of them all not one was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king's personal service. And as for every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king consulted them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and conjurers who were in all his realm. And Daniel continued until the first year of Cyrus the king."**

For the third time in this brief chapter the writer tells us that God gave something and the same word is used in each instance. In v. 2 God gave Jehoiakim into Nebuchadnezzar's hand. In v. 9 God gave Daniel favor with the commander. And here in v. 17 God gave these four young men knowledge and intelligence. He even gave Daniel a special gift of interpreting visions and dreams. I don't think this means they didn't have to study and learn and do the work. They still didn't withdraw. I think it means that as they studied and learned and did the work that God blessed them in a supernatural way. They graduated at the top of their class, *summa cum laude*, and they are brought to the king and he finds them heads and tails above everyone.

I've told you before that I wasn't much of a student in high school. I survived largely by cheating. But I came to Christ just before graduation, and I entered college knowing that not only was I ill prepared but as a follower of Christ I was going to have to do my own work. I studied hard, I never cheated. God honored that decision. When I graduated four years later, it was with the highest honors. God will honor those who honor him. Sometimes he chooses to honor us in ways that include earthly success. Like Daniel, he places us in a strategic position to make an impact for him. Sometimes that honor is experienced in other ways. We end up losing the job, or the house, or the relationship. There have been people who have made the choice to honor God and gotten killed for it. Sometimes our choices to honor God costs us. But God still honors those who honor him. There is the honor that comes on earth and there is honor which comes in heaven.

## **CONCLUSION**

Daniel 1 ends with a statement that Daniel hung around the King's palace until the first year of King Cyrus. That's another 66 years. That's outliving the Babylonian empire and several kings who succeeded Nebuchadnezzar.

How does a lizard find itself in a king's palace? He makes the hard choices to be in the world but not of the world; to cooperate but not to compromise. He steps out with courage and creativity and faith, believing that God will intervene. And God will honor that. He will honor those who honor him. One way or another, he will give us a strategic place in his kingdom. It may be here on earth, or it may be later in heaven. One way or another, we will find ourselves in the king's palace.