

I want to teach you a little song I learned as a kid in Sunday School years ago. Maybe you learned it, too! “Dare to be a Daniel. Dare to stand alone. Dare to have a purpose firm and dare to make it known.” I’m beginning today a series of four messages on one of the great characters in all of the Bible: Daniel. I’m calling it “Dare To Be A Daniel” after that little song. We’re going to sing it all four Sundays! My hope is to imprint that song on your subconscious! My goal is to have you humming that little song as you drive to work or push your grocery cart around the store. Why is it daring to be like Daniel? Because he’s a man of God in so many ways – his life, his actions, his decisions, the way he dealt with problems in his own life. You’ll be both encouraged and challenged by Daniel.

Here are a few facts you should know about Daniel. He was a Jew born in the kingdom of Judah some 600 years before Jesus. In Daniel’s day the big bully on the block in the Middle East was the Babylonian Empire with its headquarters in the great city of Babylon. Ironically, the ruins of that great city are in a country that’s very much a part of our lives – present day Iraq. Probably the Babylonians’ greatest king was a man by the name of Nebuchadnezzar. He laid siege to the capital of Judah – Jerusalem – and eventually forced a surrender. He then rounded up the most outstanding young men Judah had to offer – the “crème de la crème” – and had them shipped back to Babylon to become high class slaves at the royal court. Daniel was one of those young men – probably no more than 14 or 15 years old at the time. Daniel apparently never returned to his native land. He lived out his long life serving a series of Babylonian kings.

Read with me now the first chapter of the book of Daniel. The key verse today is v. 8: But Daniel resolved (or purposed, or made up his mind) not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way.” There are some interesting parallels between Daniel’s life and your life. How so? First, Daniel was a resident alien. He was the citizen of one country who lived most of his life in another country. Now, we’re blessed here in our church to have members and friends of the congregation who are literally resident aliens. You’re the citizen of another country but you now live in the United States of America. But in a spiritual sense, every follower of Jesus is also a resident alien. The Bible says you are actually a citizen of Heaven, but you live out your life in this world. You are in this world but you are not of this world. Second, Daniel knew he was in a spiritual battle. He knew the Devil was trying to destroy him personally through Babylonian culture. He knew he had to choose God’s way consciously and determine to live for God in a spiritually hostile environment. My friend, if you’re a follower of Jesus, you’re in a spiritual battle every day, too. You have a powerful spiritual enemy, the Devil, who is trying to destroy you personally through godless aspects of American culture. So using Daniel as an example, let’s contrast four tactics the Devil uses to defeat and destroy God’s people with four strategies God wants you to utilize to achieve spiritual victory in your life.

ISOLATION OR COMPANIONSHIP

The Devil wants to isolate you. The Devil is always trying to get you away from God and God's people. This is what Nebuchadnezzar tried to do to Daniel and his three friends. He shipped them off to Babylon so that their family and friends – as well as their God (or so Nebuchadnezzar thought) – would gradually lose their influence in their lives. By isolating them, Nebuchadnezzar hoped to break their spirits and thoroughly “Babylonianize” them. It was shrewd. He didn't throw these four men into prison or treat them poorly. No, he wines and dines them. He trains them for successful careers at the very highest levels of Babylonian society. He offers them the security of guaranteed, high paying jobs for life.

When the Devil wants to undermine or destroy your relationship with God, he'll try to isolate you. He knows you're no match for him one on one. If he can get you alone – away from God, away from people who love and serve God – he can destroy you spiritually. He's got numerous ways of doing that. He'll insinuate that time spent reading the Bible or praying is a waste of time. He'll convince you that you only have to go to church occasionally if at all. He'll suggest that you just don't need a Sunday Bible class or a small group experience. He's done a great job of brainwashing many American Christians into believing that because you've worked so hard all week long, Sundays should be for sleeping in, for catching up on chores and for personal recreation rather than for worship, for learning more of God's Word or for deepening relationships with God's people.

The Devil works hard to isolate you in other ways. He convinces you that you don't have the time or energy to serve the Lord in some concrete, practical way. He'll get you chasing this, that or the next thing so that doing anything for the Lord and His Kingdom is just no longer a priority. The result? Isolation. The Devil also loves to get you to isolate yourself when you face problems and difficulties. That's a great temptation for me. If I'm having a bad day or a bad week, my first desire is to go isolate myself. Then, the Devil has a greater opportunity to depress me, discourage me and fill me with fear and doubt.

That's the Devil's strategy. What can you do? Do what Daniel did. By refusing to eat Nebuchadnezzar's food, Daniel was saying, in effect, that he wanted to maintain a relationship with God and God's people. He chose godly companionship. Yes, he might be living in Babylon, but his home was – and would always be – Jerusalem. The values he learned as a child and the relationship with God he enjoyed weren't shaken by Nebuchadnezzar's tactics. Yes, there were times when Daniel had to stand alone, but not here. He and his three buddies stood together on this matter of eating the king's food. At other times, Daniel and his friends stood together when they faced difficult times. In the next chapter, Daniel was asked to interpret the meaning of one of Nebuchadnezzar's dreams. It was a moment of great crisis. Here's what Daniel did: “Then Daniel went home and told his friends Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah what had happened. He urged them to ask the God of heaven to show

them his mercy by telling them the secret, so they would not be executed along with the other wise men of Babylon.” (Dan. 2:17-18 NLT) Godly companionship!

Understand what the Devil wants to do. He wants to isolate you from God and God’s people. Like Daniel, make up your mind to keep doing the things that keep you in touch with God and with His people. Read Gods’ Word and pray regularly. That’s a spiritual letter, a phone call, an e-mail or a text message from your real home – Heaven! Never forsake worship or spiritual interaction with God’s people. That will help to remind you of your real home. The Bible says, “And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near.” (Heb. 10:25 NLT) When problems or difficulties come into your life, don’t go and isolate yourself. Get other followers of Jesus together and “urge them to plead for mercy from the God of Heaven.” Here’s a second contrast from Daniel:

INDOCTRINATION OR TRANSFORMATION

The Devil is all about indoctrinating you. He wants to get you to think about this world like he does and to think about life and how to live it like he does. This was Nebuchadnezzar’s strategy with Daniel and his friends. Instead of killing off everybody in Jerusalem, he tells his chief of staff, “Go out and hand pick some choice young men who seem to have it all together. No losers! Get the sharpest young minds you can find and bring them to me. Then let’s give them a three year, post graduate crash course in everything Babylonian.” And that’s exactly what happened. Daniel and his three friends got their PhD’s in Babylonian Culture at an impressionable age – about 14-17 years of age.

When the Devil wants to undermine or destroy your faith, he’ll try and indoctrinate you. Here’s just a few examples. Teenagers, he wants you to believe that sex before marriage is just another lifestyle option. There are no consequences! Working man or working woman, he wants you to believe what really matters most in life is a well-paying job that results in an affluent lifestyle and a comfortable retirement. That’s what counts! The culture we live in is, by and large, the Devil’s school. It’s OK to admire Jesus, as long as you don’t get passionate about Him. It’s OK to be a little dishonest, because only big, major dishonesty matters. It’s OK to make the purpose of your life to collect or consume stuff. It’s OK to be a racist, to be contemptuous of poor people or to be dominated by pride. It’s OK to tip the Lord in your giving rather than to tithe. In thousands of ways, the Devil is trying to indoctrinate you every single day.

Daniel challenges me. He made up his mind what he was going to believe. He got to know Babylonian culture better than many Babylonians, but he never believed it was true. He never allowed it to shape his thinking, mold his values, or influence his actions. For instance, Babylonian culture was riddled with idolatry. Daniel steadfastly refused to bow his knee to any idol or even any king who pretended to be a god. Daniel believed in the one, true God alone. He believed

in what God had said to His people and in what He had done for them. Daniel refused to get molded into whatever Nebuchadnezzar wanted him to become. Daniel might well be the best example of what the Bible says, “Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God’s will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.” (Romans 12:2 NLT)

Learn from Daniel’s example, my friend. Everyday you live in a culture that’s trying to shape and mold you. The good news is that you can resist it. Daniel did! Sure, there will be times when you’ll feel the pressure to compromise and give into how the culture thinks and what the culture does, but you can resist and you can be triumphant. Daniel figured out how to function within the culture but not sell out to it. You can know how the culture thinks and operates better than anyone else, but still not believe its lies. You don’t have to compromise. You don’t have to give in. You don’t have to go along. Instead, you can allow the Holy Spirit to transform your mind so that every day it gets a little more like how Jesus operated when He was here on Earth. Don’t allow the Devil to indoctrinate you! Make up your mind to give your mind to God and allow Him to transform it daily. Here’s a third contrast from Daniel and his story:

CONFUSION OR IDENTITY

The Devil wants to confuse you. About what? He wants to confuse you as to who you are, to whom you belong and about what God has done for you in Jesus. Nebuchadnezzar changed the names of Daniel and his three friends once he got them to Babylon. Each of their original names – Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah – contained the Old Testament names for God – either “El or “Yah” which is short for “Yahweh.” But when they got to Babylon, they were given new names – Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Those names contained in them the names of different Babylonian gods such as Bel and Nabu. Why is that a big deal? Nebuchadnezzar was trying to confuse those young men. He was trying to get them to forget who they were and to whom they belonged. Nebuchadnezzar was saying in effect, “I’m going to undermine your identity. I’m going to strip you of your old identity and give you a new one.” Nebuchadnezzar had the power to change their names, but not their hearts. No name change was going to confuse them. That’s the underlying reason why Daniel and his three friends refused to eat the king’s food. He could change their names, but not their loyalty and allegiance to the one, true God.

Another great example of this refusal to get confused over their identity is found over in Daniel 3. That’s the well-known story of how Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to worship Nebuchadnezzar’s golden idol. Do you remember what they said to him? “... ‘O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God whom we serve is able to save us. He will rescue us from your power, Your Majesty. But even if he doesn’t, we want to make it clear to you, Your Majesty, that we will

never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you have set up.” (Daniel 3: 16-18 NLT) No confusion there! No identity crisis there!

Understand what the Devil wants to do. He wants to define you. He wants to tell you who you are how you should think of yourself. He'll do everything in his power to get you to forget that you belong to God and what God has done for you. But Daniel had made up his mind who he was. Daniel knew he belonged to God and that he was made in God's image. Do you know who you are? Daniel knew he was a special, different and unique creature? Do you know that about yourself? In fact, you know some things that Daniel could not have known. You know how much God loves you because He sent His Son to die on a cross for your sins and be raised to life again. You know you're so important to Him that He allowed His Son's blood to be shed for you. You know that you matter so much to God that He provided a way for you to have an eternal relationship with Him. Daniel didn't know any of that, because he lived 600 years before Jesus. But you can know it. And you can live your life in the light of that truth every day. Don't let the Devil confuse you. Let God alone define you. A fourth contrast:

COMPROMISE OR FAITHFULNESS

The Devil loves to get you to compromise. He wants you to compromise your standards, your values, your morals and – above all – your relationship with God. That's what's behind this story about Nebuchadnezzar's food. You might ask, "What's the big deal? Sounds like good food to me!" Sure, Nebuchadnezzar probably served up some entrees that included animals that were considered non-kosher or unclean by Jewish people. But that doesn't explain why these four men refused the king's wine or got really picky about all the other items on the menu. Here's why this mattered. Daniel and his three friends rejected Nebuchadnezzar's feasts because before all this food was consumed it was offered up as a sacrifice to the Babylonian gods. To eat this food, then, was to participate in a Babylonian worship service. It was a form of idolatry.

The Devil is very slick about getting you to compromise – just like Nebuchadnezzar was with Daniel and his friends. He dangles the pleasure of some temptation in front of you. Have you noticed recently what four, growing teenage boys tend to do to food – any food, all food, even stuff that doesn't look like food? The Devil will tell you no one's looking and no one cares. They were hundreds of miles from home. Besides, Jerusalem was just a memory. And it sure looked like God had abandoned them. The Devil wraps temptation into things like security and opportunity. Why be different? Why stand out? Why not just go along? Why risk getting powerful people irritated at you? The Devil will take the same approach with you. It's a tried and true methodology. He dangles temptation in front of you and makes it as alluring as possible. He convinces you that no one sees and no one cares. He'll even wrap the temptation around with issues that seem to affect your security or some kind of opportunity in life.

Here's what impresses me about Daniel. Before he was carted off to Babylon, he'd made a fundamental decision to worship and follow God alone. He'd already made up his mind to be faithful to God whatever it cost him personally. That gave Daniel courage to say no when this particular temptation surfaced. He'd already committed himself to doing the right thing and being loyal to God. Here's one reason temptation is such a problem. You often don't make up your mind to be faithful before the temptation arrives on your doorstep. Yes, you might have a general desire to be honest, to be pure, to be good, but that's not enough when the devil dangles some particularly tantalizing temptation right in front of you. A few examples. When do you decide to be honest and have integrity in small, every day work matters? Before you start working. When do you decide to not have sex before marriage? Before you start dating. When do you decide not to abuse drugs or alcohol? Before you're offered them. When do you decide to put Jesus at the center of your marriage? Before you get married. When do you decide that you're not going to live to consume? Before you have any money. When do you figure out to raise your kids in the knowledge of the Lord? Before you have kids. The Bible says something devastating about one of Israel's kings who failed badly. It says, "He did evil because he had not set his heart on seeking the LORD." (2 Chronicles 12:14 NIV) The simple fact is that you will do evil if you don't set your heart to seek the Lord, too. You compromise when you haven't made the conscious decision to be faithful.

Daniel chose God. When the temptation arrived, Daniel already knew what he was going to do. And God honored his faithfulness and that of his three friends. At the end of this ten day experiment, those four teenagers looked far healthier than any of the other students. Three years later on graduation day at Babylon State University, those four men were so far and away superior to the others in the class that any comparison was ludicrous. God cannot and will not honor disloyalty, unfaithfulness or disobedience to Him. But God can and will always honor loyalty, faithfulness and obedience. That didn't mean Daniel and his three friends didn't go through more tests and trials. The rest of the book of Daniel tells about several major crises in these men's lives. Even if you're faithful to God, you'll still get tested and tried. Remember the Devil is out to get you to compromise every day. Don't be his victim. Learn from Daniel's example.

The Battle of Antietam in 1862 lasted for 12 hours and ranks as the bloodiest single day of the Civil War with 10,000 Confederate casualties and even more on the Union side. As the sun went down and the battle ended, you could hear the anguished cries of thousands of wounded men. The battle was a draw from a military standpoint. George McClellan, a rather mediocre Union general, was able to stop the thrust of Robert E. Lee, the brilliant Confederate general, into Maryland forcing Lee to retire on the Virginia side of the Potomac River. Why? Two Union soldiers had found a written copy of Lee's battle plans and delivered them to McClellan before the battle started. Likewise, you are no match for the Devil or his tactics. But as with George McClellan, your enemy's plans have fallen into your hands. The Bible reveals his strategies – isolation, indoctrination,

confusion and compromise. When you allow the Holy Spirit's power to flow through you, you can resist and defeat the Devil. Keep on seeking godly companionship. Keep on allowing the Holy Spirit to transform you. Know who you are and whose you are. Keep on being faithful. Like Daniel, keep on choosing God every day. Like Daniel, keep on making it your purpose to obey and honor God come what may. Dare to be a Daniel!