

## **DARE TO HAVE A COURAGEOUS HEART**

## **DANIEL 6**

The president of a Fortune 500 corporation was so impressed by a book entitled "Men and Women of God" that he called a downtown Chicago bookstore and ordered 350 copies. He wanted to give it to all of the executives in his company to read. The bookstore sent back an e-mail message which read, "We cannot find 350 'Men and Women of God' in Chicago. Try Los Angeles." Men and women of God are indeed hard to find in this world. There may not have been 350 men and women of God in the ancient city of Babylon some 2600 years ago, but God did all He wanted to do and more in that place through one faithful man of God. That man's name was Daniel.

I know you've been eagerly anticipating all week singing that little Sunday School song with me again, haven't you? Here we go! "Dare to be a Daniel. Dare to stand alone. Dare to have a purpose firm and dare to make it known!" How do you go about living your life for God? Daniel is a great example of how to do that. As a teenager, he made up his mind to honor God with his life. Right there is an important point. You don't just drift into a God-honoring life by accident. It can only ever happen when you bring together a personal, conscious decision as well as the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. Last week, we reflected on how Daniel had a purpose and will to live for God. Today, I want you to see with me that Daniel, also, had a courageous heart.

Again, who was Daniel? He was a Jew born some 600 years before Jesus. When he was a teenager, the Babylonian army swept into the country of Judah and destroyed the capital city of Jerusalem. King Nebuchadnezzar sent some of the most promising, gifted young Jewish men back to his capital city of Babylon to become a class of elite slaves in his royal court. Daniel apparently never returned to his homeland. Instead he lived out his life serving God faithfully in the court of several successive Babylonian kings.

Last week in Daniel 1, we saw Daniel as a teenager. Today our focus is on Daniel 6 where Daniel is probably in his 70s or 80s. Perhaps that's why we hear no mention of his great friends and fellow Jews, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. They'd likely died by this time. Let's read this great story from Daniel 6 and then think about it together. This story about Daniel and the lion's den defined Daniel's life. It's certainly one of the great stories in the entire Bible. In it we see clearly the courageous heart of this man of God. Do you have a courageous heart? If you're a child of God and a follower of Jesus today, you're called to have a courageous heart. Here's a question to try and answer:

### **WHY IS GODLY COURAGE NEEDED?**

The first answer to that question is this: the continual fact of spiritual conflict in this life. Daniel's life and story is a lesson in what some call "spiritual warfare." It's a fact that God and the Devil are locked in battle for the souls of human

beings. True, God has won the decisive battle in this war when Jesus died on the cross and then rose from the dead. But even though the Devil is a defeated enemy on a cosmic scale, he can still do an enormous amount of damage on a personal level. You can learn a lot about the Devil's strategies by simply observing what he tried to do to Daniel. He was there trying to compromise and destroy him as a teenager. And he was still trying to undermine Daniel even when Daniel's an old man.

God had given Daniel tremendous talents. One Babylonian ruler after another recognized his superior intelligence, his administrative genius, his leadership abilities, his sterling character, his spotless integrity and his "excellent spirit." At this time in his life, Daniel was one of only three men who actually supervised the day to day operations of the vast Babylonian Empire on the king's behalf. And the king at this time – a man by the name of Darius – was so impressed with Daniel that he was thinking of elevating him to an exclusive No. 2 position in the empire. Daniel was one formidable person. No doubt he threatened some other very ambitious men who wanted to see Daniel's influence and power curtailed. So they got together and conspired against him. They couldn't dig up any dirt from his personal life or from how he did his job. Too much integrity there!

So these conspirators concocted an alternate plan that would force Daniel to choose between the one true God and the false gods of the Babylonians. Let's look again at what they said to King Darius. "So the administrators and high officers went to the king and said, 'Long live King Darius! We are all in agreement (an outright lie because they'd never consulted Daniel) —we administrators, officials, high officers, advisers, and governors—that the king should make a law that will be strictly enforced. Give orders that for the next thirty days any person who prays to anyone, divine or human—except to you, Your Majesty—will be thrown into the den of lions. And now, Your Majesty, issue and sign this law so it cannot be changed, an official law of the Medes and Persians that cannot be revoked.'" (Daniel 6:6-8 NLT)

Now, King Darius probably thought this was just some harmless flattery. All the Babylonian kings liked to think of themselves as divine. That's one reason why their decrees couldn't be altered or repealed. How could you be wrong if you were a god? Behind all this political intrigue – kind of like a puppet master pulling the strings of his puppets – the Devil was trying to undermine, ruin and ultimately destroy Daniel. The threat for disobeying this royal edict? Getting thrown into a pit of hungry lions. How fitting! It reminds me of how the Bible describes the Devil himself in another place. "Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour." (1 Peter 5:8 NLT) He certainly wanted to devour Daniel. And he wants to devour you and me. Nothing brings greater satisfaction to the Devil than destroying people – particularly those who want to live for God and honor God.

Here's a fact of your spiritual life you must come to grips with sooner or later. You're right smack in the middle of a spiritual war. Until the day you die, you are going to live in the midst of continual spiritual conflict. Sometimes it will erupt and rage like a volcano and you'll be very much aware of it. At other times, it will die down and you'll be tempted to think it's over. It will never be over – not in this life. You have an enemy – the Devil - who is no match for God but who can beat the tar out of you any day of the week with one hand tied behind his back! His personal mission is to thwart God's will and purpose whenever and with whomever he can. He tries to keep people away from Jesus at all costs. If he fails there and a person become a follower of Jesus, then the Devil tries anything and everything to tempt you, depress you, frustrate you, discourage you, deceive you and trick you. His goal for every follower of Jesus is to ruin you spiritually and make you an embarrassment to God all at the same time. Every day of your life, the Devil is looking at you and asking, "How can I ruin him? How can I mess up her life? How can I get him to dishonor God? How can I get her to compromise her faith?" The continual fact of spiritual conflict is one reason why you need godly courage – why you need God to give you a courageous heart.

Here's another reason why you need a courageous heart – the continual temptation to compromise your faith. Last week we learned that was one of the Devil's key strategies. "Go ahead, Daniel, eat the king's food. So what if it's been offered to idols. Who's gonna know? Who's gonna care? This is great stuff. Enjoy! Why risk getting some pretty important people ticked off at you, Daniel?" But Daniel refused to compromise. He was not going to take part in a Babylonian worship service by eating that food. I'm certain there were many temptations to compromise over Daniel's long and illustrious career working in the Babylonian court. But Daniel had held firm. Now, at the end of his life, he faced yet another high stakes temptation to compromise.

Can't you just hear what the Devil might have whispered into Daniel's mind? "Daniel, now be reasonable, won't you? You've lived a long, successful life. You've been so faithful to God. You've been in a position to help the Jewish people. Where would they be without you? Daniel, you don't want to give up all this power - this influence – that you could use for such noble, good purposes. It's only 30 days. Just don't pray to God for a month. Darius didn't say that you actually have to pray to him. Just don't pray to anyone else. Daniel, go with the flow just this once and ride it out!"

But Daniel refused to compromise. He prayed three times a day and to discontinue that daily, personal surrender to God was an act of compromise. God could never be honored by a decision not to pray to Him for a month. Here's a great takeaway from Daniel's story. When you're faced with a decision – be it in your home, at your place of work, in a relationship, wherever and with whomever – and there's a doubt in your mind about what to do, ask yourself this question, "How can I best honor the Lord in my decision?" Here's something else to consider. If the decision to do the godly and right thing is being made

harder because of some threat real or imagined – maybe the loss of a relationship, maybe the loss of a promotion, perhaps the loss of some kind of security – you can be very sure that the Devil is right there with a smirk on this face just waiting for you to cave in and compromise.

Imagine this scene. Eric Valli, a professional photographer for *National Geographic* magazine is dangling from a 400 foot cliff in Nepal. Nearby on a rope ladder is another man named Mani Lal doing what he has done for decades: hunting honey. There in the foothills of the Himalayan Mountains, the cliffs shelter honeycombs of the world's largest honeybee. Thousands of bees are buzzing around both men. Mani Lal, who's been stung hundreds of times, is calm. Eric Valli thought he was going to freak out. But he knew if he did, the bees would freak out and then he'd be dead. So he took a deep breath and relaxed. Getting stung was better than being dead at the bottom of the cliff. He overcame his fears and won a photo competition for his efforts. Some followers of Jesus have given into fears of persecution, rejection, testing and temptation and have compromised their faith as a result. They've let go of the lifeline that is Jesus Himself and their faith has crashed.

So why didn't Daniel compromise? He recognized something you and I forget very easily. It's easy to assume that all the great tests of your faith happen when you first become a Christian. It's easy to assume that the longer you follow Jesus the more the devil backs off and leaves you alone. That's wrong. That's not the case at all. As a result, you can fail to stay alert to the Devil's schemes. Daniel discovered that the greatest test of his faith came at the end of his life not when he was a young man. Why did the Lord allow Daniel to be tested then? It wasn't to destroy Daniel. Instead, God allowed it to confirm Daniel's courage and faith in the Lord. What the Devil offers as a temptation, God turns into a test. Andrew McClaren put it like this, "In temptation we are told: do this pleasant thing and do not be hindered by the fact that it is wrong. But in testing, we are told: do this difficult thing and do not be hindered by the fact that it is tough."

Daniel must have realized God had been preparing him for just such a moment. He didn't say, "Well, Lord, here I've been faithful to You all these years. You shouldn't care if I slip up just once." Quite the contrary. Daniel recognized that God was giving him the opportunity to reach a climax of courage and faithfulness to the Lord. Don't let your faithfulness to God in the past become a reason to compromise now in the present. Be faithful. Stay faithful. The greatest tests of your faithfulness to the Lord may yet be ahead of you. Don't let that thought make you fearful or fill you with dread. God simply wants to confirm your faithfulness and reveal that courageous heart so that you will bring honor to Him.

Did you hear about the man who was bragging about the fact he'd cut off the tail of a man-eating lion with his pocket knife? Someone asked him why he hadn't cut off the lion's head instead. The man replied, "Someone had already done that!" The point is that God doesn't give you easy challenges. Tests will come

that risk your comfort and security. It takes courage to face that. It will be scary at times. I have no trouble believing Daniel was deeply frightened as he was being lowered into that pit of hungry lions. Eddie Rickenbacker, the World War 1 flying ace from right here in Columbus, summed it up well: “Courage is doing what you are afraid to do. There is never courage unless you are scared.” Now, here’s a second question to ask in light of this story.

## HOW IS GODLY COURAGE POSSIBLE?

Like Daniel, godly courage is only possible when you already have a personal commitment to God. It must start there. The Bible assumes that. It says, “The eyes of the LORD search the whole earth in order to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him....” (2 Chronicles 16:9 NLT) In other words, God doesn’t promise to strengthen the hearts of those who aren’t personally committed to Him. When that relationship is present, God promises to give you His courage just like He did for Daniel. “So be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid and do not panic before them. For the LORD your God will personally go ahead of you. He will neither fail you nor abandon you.” (Deuteronomy 31:6 NLT) A courageous heart for God starts with a commitment to God.

But it’s deeper than that. Like Daniel, godly courage is possible when you recognize God is to be feared and valued the most. Here’s a thought: when you do something courageous, it reveals what you fear the most and what you value the most. I think of a silly story about a frog who got stuck in a pothole and couldn’t jump out because the hole was so deep. His little frog friends tried to help him out. They encouraged him to jump higher. They shoved a stick into the hole so he could climb out. Nothing worked. Finally, they told him they were going to take a break for supper. As they hopped away, however, they heard a sound behind them. They turned around and – lo and behold – it was none other than their little frog friend who’d been stuck in the pothole. Now he was following close behind them. Amazed, they asked him, “How on earth did you get out of that hole?” He said, “Well, I had to get out! This big truck was coming down the road straight for me!” When you do something courageous, it reveals what you fear the most and what you value the most.

Daniel feared the Lord and valued the Lord more than any other human being – even very powerful ones - , more than safety and security and more than life itself. That’s why he had courage. There was only One he did not want to disappoint. Only One he did not want to fail. Only One he did not want to dishonor. If it was a choice between pleasing God or pleasing people, Daniel chose God every time. If it was a choice between making powerful people upset or disappointing God, Daniel chose God every time. Perhaps Daniel thought of something Isaiah, the prophet, had written: “The LORD Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread.” (Isaiah 8:13 NIV) Or, perhaps he remembered the words of Moses, ““And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you? He requires only

that you fear the LORD your God, and live in a way that pleases him, and love him and serve him with all your heart and soul.” (Deuteronomy 10:12 NLT)

Daniel’s response to this very scary situation of being tossed into a pit full of hungry lions reminds me of what Jesus said, “Don’t be afraid of those who want to kill your body; they cannot touch your soul. Fear only God, who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” (Matthew 10:28 NLT) Christian, many of the tests and temptations of life come down to this issue. Who do you fear the most? Who do you value the most? God or people? God or worldly security? God or worldly success? Godly courage is possible precisely because you fear and value God the most. It’s still possible to be a Daniel today.

Karen Watson was described by friends as a warm and fun-loving woman. She graduated from high school and worked as a detention officer at a county jail. In her off-hours, she led a Bible study class and participated in her church's singles group. Karen joined the Valley Baptist Church in Bakersfield, California in 1997 and dedicated her life to doing missionary work. She joined the Southern Baptist International Mission Board and began restoring schools for children living in El Salvador, Mexico, Macedonia and Kosovo before traveling to Iraq in 2003. Do you remember what Iraq was like back in 2003? A very messy, dangerous place! Karen Watson was helping to set up a mobile water purification plant in Mosul on March 15, 2004 when she and three other U.S. relief workers were killed in a drive-by shooting. She was 38. Before she left for Iraq, Watson gave her pastor a two-page letter in a sealed envelope, with instructions to read it if she died overseas. When Pastor Phil Neighbors opened the letter, it began: "When God calls, there are no regrets. To obey was my objective. To suffer was expected. His glory is my reward."

That’s something that Daniel would have understood and could have said himself. That’s what’s tricky about having a courageous heart for God and the things of God. You don’t know how it’s going to end up for you personally. In Daniel’s case, there was a miraculous deliverance. In Karen Watson’s case, there was entry into the courts of Heaven. If you did know, I guess you wouldn’t need courage. But here’s what we can know. When you act courageously on His behalf, God will be glorified. God will be honored. God’s Name will be made famous. And isn’t that what matters? Dare to have a courageous heart. Dare to be a Daniel.