

In the Fire: A Daniel Study
The Pressure to Conform

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Welcome everyone! A few years ago, I had the chance to spend some time with a local blacksmith. He welcomed me and a friend into his shop and showed us how he made all sorts of different metal objects: horseshoes, knives, wheels, axes—you name it. He even gave us a hands-on lesson. We placed unshaped metal in the forge at over 2,000 degrees, hot enough that the metal began to melt. We took it out, banged on it, put it back in, took it back out, banged on it some more. It was absolutely incredible watching something as strong as metal be placed in a fire and come out, able to be formed and fashioned into a different shape.

We are beginning a new series today on the book of Daniel called, “In the Fire,” and what we are going to learn throughout the summer as we study this book together is that, just like a blacksmith takes metal, puts it in a fire, and then shapes it according to a design, God often does the same thing with us. We all go through fiery experiences in life, where the heat is turned on and there is pressure from every side (with our family, at work, with our friends, financially), and instead of our seeing those seasons as necessary evils that we have to endure and make it through, I believe God wants us to see those challenging seasons as opportunities for us not only to worship Him, but for God to form and fashion us into the people He wants us to be, to shape and mold us into people who, in every way, look, live, and love like Jesus. As we study this book together, we were going to see that instead of our crumbling in the crucible, God uses our difficult circumstances to conform His people to the image of Christ.

Today, we are going to start in Daniel chapter 1. If you have your Bibles, turn there with me. Let me take a moment to set the context for you. The Jewish people had been locked in a struggle with the Babylonian Empire for decades. (Please view the video recording of this sermon to see a map.) Babylon was growing stronger and stronger, and as they pushed their dominion west, they had their eyes on gaining complete control over the nation of Judah. That’s where our story picks up in the year 605 BC in Daniel 1:1. “In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it.”

The ancient city of Jerusalem had a circumference of about three miles. Babylon had tens of thousands of soldiers and they surrounded the city, preventing the people from receiving supplies. When the Jewish people ran out of food and water, they had to surrender. The Babylonians captured the city and raided the temple, and they not only took the most valuable possessions they found back home with them, but they also took with them the best and brightest people:

The king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his officials, to bring into the king’s service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility—young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king’s palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians. The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king’s table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king’s service. Among those who were chosen were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego. (Daniel 1:3-7)

This was all a part of a very brilliant kingdom-expansion policy. Whenever Babylon defeated a new region, they would take the most promising individuals from that region—the best and the brightest—and bring them back to the capital and try to make them thoroughly Babylonian. They would be given a Babylonian education, be immersed in Babylonian culture, and be given a Babylonian worldview, even a Babylonian name. It was a very strategic and purposeful process of indoctrination and assimilation. Once

these impressionable young people became Babylonian through and through, the Babylonians would send them out as diplomats and governors throughout the empire, often to their home region where they knew the local language and culture and had connections. It was an ingenious idea, but for it to work, they had to get people from all different walks of life to surrender their former identity and allegiances and become first and foremost Babylonians.

The Babylonians had a four-fold strategy for indoctrination and assimilation. First, *youth*. They recruited people when they were young—still teenagers and very impressionable. It's a lot easier to shape the vision and values of a 16-year-old than those of a 60-year-old, so they started young!

Second, *education*. The Babylonians taught the young men the language and literature of their culture. They learned about the history of Babylon, the government structure of Babylon, and the metanarratives that shaped the ethos of the empire.

Third, *names*. The Babylonians gave the young men new names. The four guys in our story are named Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, but when they were taken to Babylon they were given new names, names with very different meanings, names that were intended to shape their identity in entirely new ways.

Daniel = "God is my judge"
Hananiah = "Who is like God"
Mishael = "God is gracious"
Azariah = "God is my helper"

Beltshazzar = "May *Bel* protect the king"
Shadrach = "Who is like *Aku*"
Meshach = "*Aku* is exulted"
Abednego = "Servant of *Nebo*"

The names they were given at birth reminded the Jewish people of the God they served and worshipped, but those names were stripped away, and they were given new names about new gods who they were now supposed to serve and worship.

The fourth element of the indoctrination and assimilation plan was their *diet*. Daniel 1:5 says, "The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table." At first this may not seem like much. I mean, everyone's got to eat, right? But this was a big deal for two reasons. First, this food would not have been a part of a kosher Jewish diet, so in eating it they would be violating commands from the Old Testament. And more than that, before the food came to them it would have first been dedicated to the Babylonian gods, so eating it would have been an expression of idolatry. For multiple reasons, these men knew deep down that they were not supposed to eat this food.

The young men had absolutely no say over the first three strategies deployed by the Babylonians. They couldn't do anything about their age, they couldn't do anything about the curriculum they were being taught in school, they couldn't control what names their captors decided to call them, but when it came to the food they put in their body, this was one thing they could do something about. Look at verse 8: "Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine..." The word "*resolve*" is an important word. Other translations say, "Daniel *made up his mind* not to defile himself" (NASB) or "Daniel *purposed in his heart* not to defile himself" (KJV). I love the courage and conviction of Daniel and his friends. These are young men who lived through a siege. They saw what the power and might of the Babylonian army could do, how it could crush those who stood against it. But they had determination and resolve. They said, "You can take me away from my family and change the place where I live, you can force me to speak a new language and you can call me a different name, but you cannot change my character. Because I have *resolved*, I have *made up my mind*, I have *purposed in my heart*, that no matter how intense the pressure, no matter how strong the temptation, there are certain lines I will not cross. I

will not acquiesce to the prevailing winds of culture. I will not take the easy way out. I will be a person of character, not compromise.”

I think that is where this story has particular relevance for us today. We find ourselves immersed in a culture where every single day there is pressure to compromise, pressure to conform, pressure to make little concessions here and there to blend in with the world around us rather than to stand out as followers of Christ. And just like in this story, we must decide if we dare to be different.

There are two types of pressure people can face when it comes to making concessions: hard pressure and soft pressure. Hard pressure is the threat of persecution: financial persecution, physical persecution, even death. I had lunch with a pastor from Iraq a few years ago and he told me that one Sunday he baptized 11 people; by the next week, six of them had been killed. That’s hard persecution. It takes unbelievable courage to be faithful in the midst of it. By God’s grace Christians do not face that kind of pressure in the Western world. But we still face pressure to conform—it’s just soft pressure.

There is the threat of being labeled a prude if you wait until marriage to be with the person you are dating, like we are called to in God’s word.

There is the threat of being cast as a bigot if you hold to the traditional understanding of gender and sexuality, like we are called to in God’s word.

There is the threat of losing ground professionally if we don’t cut corners to get ahead but rather keep our integrity even in small areas, like we are called to in God’s word.

Especially for young people, there is the threat of losing friendships or social standing if we don’t embrace the partying or the drinking like those around us, and the fear of becoming irrelevant if we refuse to watch the shows or the movies or engage with social media like the rest of our friends.

In so many ways, all around us, there is pressure to conform, pressure to fit in, pressure to concede. But God is calling us to be people of character, not compromise. Daniel and his friends knew that. Listen to what they did:

Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, “Please test your servants for ten days: give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see.” So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days. At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food.... At the end of the time set by the king to bring them into his service, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah; so they entered the king’s service. In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom. (Daniel 1:11-20)

Daniel and his friends demonstrated their character, they stuck to their convictions, they honored God, and because of that, God honored them.

This passage is all about establishing God-honoring character. And I think there are two essential lessons about character we need to take away from this chapter. Here’s the first. *Your community will shape your character.* One of the questions I ask myself after reading a passage like this is, “How did these young

men, just teenagers at the time, have the courage to make a decision like this?" Though there are probably a lot of good answers to that question—we can assume they had good parents and that they learned the Scriptures from a young age—one element we know for sure is that they had a strong community. Those men weren't in it alone. They weren't by themselves. They had the support and encouragement that comes from other people to do what they might not have been able to do on their own. We have to be wise and purposeful about who we are spending the majority of our time with. We all like to think we have what it takes to withstand temptation by ourselves, but there is a strength that comes in numbers that is undeniable. I remember when I was younger having a mentor tell me, "If you are standing on top of a ten-story building holding a rope, and one of your friends is standing on the sidewalk down below, holding the other end of the rope, what's more likely to happen—for you to pull him up, or for him to pull you down? Try as you might, the force of gravity is hard to overcome. But if you have 3, 4 or 5 other people with you on top of that building and you're not doing all the pulling alone, your chance of success just went through the roof!" Every one of us needs community to help us become the man or woman God is calling us to be—not people who look like the world around us, but people who look like Christ. That's the testimony of two of my good friends at this church, Mike and Johanna Dwiggin. Take a moment and listen to their story. (Please view the video recording of this sermon to see the video).

I love that story. And I've heard so many others share a similar story. Your community shapes your character. Worldly influences can pull us down; godly influences can pull us up. If you are surrounded by people who love Jesus and are passionately following Him, chances are you'll grow in your love and passion for Him as well. Like Daniel and his friends, like Mike and Johanna, are you surrounding yourself with people who are helping you make wise decisions, who are calling you to higher levels of maturity and sacrifice, who are sharpening the language you use, your leadership at work, your love for your spouse, your intentionality with your kids, your heart for evangelism? Let me ask another question: when people are around you, do they feel like they are being encouraged in Christ and called to a higher level of commitment in their faith? We want to be around the type of people, and be the type of people, who make it possible to follow God faithfully in the midst of all the pressures of the world. If you are looking for help establishing some Christ-centered community, we have great options available for this summer and Rooted picks up in the fall!

So our first lesson is *your community will shape your character*. The second is *your character will shape your future*. The opportunities these men had, the influence they were entrusted with, and the legacies they left behind were all made possible by the character they established early on in life. After they made the decision to not to eat or drink anything that had been defiled, their skill and insight catapulted above their peers. They weren't 1% or 10% better than the rest; Daniel 1:20 says they were ten times better—1,000% better than everyone else in all the whole kingdom. The lie that we are told, and the fear that grips us, is that if we prioritize our character, stick to our convictions, and make decisions that will honor Christ, we'll lose ground. But because they honored God, God gave these men ground they never could have taken on their own. When I was twenty-four a mentor taught me three simple words that have been emblazoned in my mind ever since: *obedience opens doors*. When you are faithful to God, even in the small areas that no one else sees, God sees. And God will open doors for you that you could have never opened yourself. Our tendency is to think that God is up in heaven, gazing down at the earth, looking for really influential, really prominent people (celebrities, billionaires, politicians) who He can move to increasing levels of faithfulness. But what the Bible teaches is that God is actually looking for faithful people who He can move to increasing levels of influence and prominence. Listen to what we read in 2 Chronicles 16:9—"For the eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to Him." God wants to find people who are fully committed to Him, people who, when the pressure is on and the temptation is high, will chose to honor Him, even in the small areas of life. Those are the people God honors. Jesus said in Matthew 25:23, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things." We tend to believe that if we want to be successful, we have to work hard, study hard, hone our craft, and grind it out. And

though all those things are good and true, more important than any of that is establishing God-honoring character, so in everything we do, in big areas and small areas alike, we seek to follow the example of Jesus. We are not conformed into the pattern of the world; we are shaped into the image of Christ. John Ortberg has said, “If you have honesty, integrity and character, nothing else matters. If you don’t have honesty, integrity and character, nothing else matters.” He’s right.

As I wrap up, I want to say a word to our young people. High school students, college students, recent graduates, your entire life is ahead of you. There is so much of your future that is still to be determined, so much of your story that is still to be written. Take to heart what we have learned today from God’s word. Build your closest friendships with people who love God. Don’t become like everyone else in the world and give into the pressures of our culture. Become a man or a woman of character, not compromise, and trust that as you chose to be faithful to God, He will always be faithful to you.