

Dare to Stand Alone

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 06 August 2006

Preacher: Rod McArdle

[0 : 00] The incident is etched in my mind, one of those defining moments in your life. I'd come to faith in the Lord Jesus about halfway through my seven years in merchant banking, and I'd changed employers about the same time.

After the first three and a half years of considerable success with successful divestments of large enterprises, life in merchant banking all of a sudden had become very difficult.

Victoria was falling headlong into recession, and large deals with commensurate large success fees, which of course is the required diet of any mergers and acquisition business, large deals were drawing up.

The corporate finance office of which I was a part was under pressure. I was under pressure. And for the first time in my career, employment stability wasn't a given.

And to add to this my recent decision to be a disciple of Jesus Christ and then my consequent Bible study, all of that was sharpening my conscience, a conscience that had become dulled over the years.

[1 : 13] And I found myself regularly asking a question like this, how should I, as a follower of Christ, live in the success-at-all-cost mentality world of mergers and acquisition?

The incident is etched in my mind. You see, we had very few assignments on our books, but one assignment that my boss had was advising a business on a large debt-raising and expansion program.

My boss was going on leave. So late one afternoon, he asked me to take over this assignment. Sounds good? Well, my heart sank.

I can still remember where I was sitting. Although the business had a glittering public face, I was not comfortable using whatever gifts God had given me to further the inroads of this industry into the community.

And as I was briefed on the assignment, my heart was racing. I mean, what should I do to knock it back and might see me make a very quick exit into a difficult employment market?

[2 : 20] I mean, was this the place where I needed to make a stand as a Christian? Did I need to draw a line in the sand regardless of the circumstances? See, the Bible teaches that if you're a Christian, then you live in a world that is hostile to our Saviour and Lord.

I mean, we can quickly observe the truth of that hostility with overt persecution of Christians in parts of Africa, Asia and the Middle East. But hostility to our faith can also come in far more subtler forms and, in fact, be marketed in a way that's very seductive.

And as we journey through Daniel over the next six weeks, we'll see constantly that Daniel is living in an environment which is hostile to his faith in Yahweh.

But the manifestation of that hostility varies considerably as you go through the book. Daniel's in Babylon. It's the 6th century BC.

He's a captive and he is captive in an extraordinarily powerful world kingdom. It's about 605 BC. It's the third year of the reign of King Jehoiakim of Judah.

[3 : 36] That's what we read in verse 1. And the final date marker that we've got in the book is actually in chapter 10 where we read in the third year of King Cyrus of Persia.

That's about 537 BC. So the book spans probably about 70 years in Daniel's life. Just think for a moment how a person like Daniel could have felt towards God, could have felt towards government because of what had happened to him.

You see, from the little that's said about Daniel's early childhood, we can surmise that he grew up in Judah, perhaps even in Jerusalem. He was likely born of parents of high social rank in Judah, possibly even of royal blood.

But Daniel's life changed dramatically for the worse, or at least that's how it seemed, through absolutely no fault of his own. Long before Daniel's day, the United Kingdom of Israel, once ruled by Saul, David, and then finally Solomon, it had divided into two nations.

And the northern kingdom, referred to in scripture as Israel, was consistently wicked, worshipping idols and forsaking the law of God. The southern kingdom, referred to as Judah, was often wicked too, but it did have some times of repentance and revival.

[5 : 05] Well, God sent prophets, and the prophets warned of future judgment against Israel if she didn't repent from her wicked ways. What did Israel do? She didn't listen.

And God's judgment came upon the nation in the form of the defeat and then the dispersion by the Assyrians. Syria, of course, was eager just to keep extending her boundaries by adding the southern kingdom of Judah.

But God intervened, spared Judah from the hand of the Assyrians. And God pointed to the fall of Israel, the northern kingdom, at the hand of the Assyrians.

He pointed to this as an object lesson to the southern kingdom. He warned them of a similar fate at the hands of Babylon if they didn't turn from their ways.

Judah didn't heed those warnings. And so captivity came to the southern kingdom as well. So Daniel, along with a number of other Hebrew Jews, were part of the first wave of captives taken back to Babylon.

[6 : 13] And then several attacks on Jerusalem followed. Many Hebrews were deported to Babylon and stayed about 70 years in captivity.

So think of Daniel. He's torn from his land. He's torn from his family, torn from his friends. And as far as we know, he never saw his homeland again.

Just think about that for a moment. How easy it would be if we were Daniel to become bitter towards Babylon, towards his own people. Indeed, it was their wickedness that had brought on God's judgment.

And perhaps even bitter towards God. Because we read in verse 2 that it was God who gave Jehoiakim, king of Judah, into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar.

Before we look at chapter 1, just a couple of brief comments on the structure of the book. See, as you read through Daniel, you'll see that it's got lots of historical information. It's got biographical information.

[7 : 14] As well as these apocalyptic visions of the future. These apocalyptic visions, they describe the course of world history, but they do it in terms of non-human symbols.

As I mentioned earlier, similar to what you find in the book of Revelation. As you read through the book, you'll see at one level it's just simply got two halves. The first six chapters are simply meant to convey to the reader something like this.

Go and do likewise. I mean, you remember the old Sunday school expression for those who went to Sunday school? Dare to be a Daniel. But even in these first six chapters, there are highly symbolic dreams that need interpretation.

And then the last part, chapters 7 to 12, contain a record of Daniel's visions of God's purposes for the future. And someone's described these apocalyptic visions in this back part as God's picture book.

But considering this book as simply two halves, 1 to 6 and 7 to 12, is actually still a bit too simplistic. Because in fact, chapters 2 to 7, so overlapping, are written in Aramaic.

[8 : 30] And chapters 1 and then 8 to 12 are written in Hebrew. So we do need to read the book of Daniel as a whole. In this sermon series, we're just going to look at the first six chapters.

And then we'll pick up the rest in a future series. So these first six chapters, they do contain historical facts. But we oughtn't to approach it trying to read it like a modern history book.

Because the six stories that are presented are highly selective. And we, as the reader under the illumination of the Spirit, need to keep concentrating, asking the Lord to show us the theological message being presented.

So you think of it this way. The backdrop is the 6th century BC. But the key emphases that we'll see time and again are God's sovereignty over all things and the necessity of living out the obedience of faith.

Living it out regardless of the circumstances in which either Daniel found himself or, as we apply it, the circumstances that we might find ourselves in.

[9 : 39] So if you turn with me to the text, verses 1 to 2, disaster. In the third year of the reign of King Jehoi, King of Judah, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it.

What have we got? History. A description. It looks back to about 600 BC. And it's a description, if you like, of the ascendancy of the Babylonian kingdom.

Verse 2. The Lord let King Jehoi, King of Judah, fall into his power, as well as some of the vessels of the house of God. These he brought to the land of Shina and placed the vessels in the treasury of his gods.

You see, now when you come to verse 2, we see immediately how important it is to see things, if you like, through a theological lens. Man is active in history. That's clear.

But God is also active in those same historical events. Well then, what about trying simply for a moment in your mind to put yourself in the sandals of the average Judean captive?

[10 : 45] What a disaster. You can imagine the thoughts that go through their mind. I mean, we're God's people. I mean, we're his treasured possession.

These wicked, perverse Babylonians have defeated us. They've defeated us, God's people. And more than that, they've plundered our temple.

The place where God, in a particular sense, dwelt. And they've taken back our temple vessels into the treasury of those Babylonian gods. What a disaster.

I mean, what blasphemy. God, what on earth's happening. Where are you? It's not surprising that the exiles sang the song recorded in Psalm 137.

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, there we wept when we remembered Zion or Jerusalem. On the willows, there we hung up our harps.

[11 : 42] But friends, God wasn't an absentee landlord. He's the true and living God who is in absolute and total control.

So in fact, verse 2 tells us that it was God who'd brought on this disaster. What a national calamity. And it's into this crisis, and it was a crisis, that God raises up a young teenage Jew, Daniel.

Probably between 15 and 20 years of age. To demonstrate that God still cares for those who trust him. Whatever the situation.

Daniel, of course, didn't have any illusions about his situation. He was in hostile territory. He was a captive in a foreign land. But he knew that in being there, it wasn't an accident.

It wasn't, if you like, a matter of chance. He knew that God was in control. That God was faithful to his promises. Indeed, that Judah had been judged for its persistent wickedness, just as the Lord had promised.

[12 : 52] Verses 3 to 7. The king's brilliant strategy. The old Nebuchadnezzar, he was no dummy. This guy was a brilliant military leader.

And he understood a thing or two about cementing his control of conquered lands. Just think what he did. I mean, firstly, isolation. He gets the Jews out of their country, and especially away from Jerusalem.

Away from all of the influences and reminders of their culture, and particularly the reminders of their faith. Secondly, what does he do? He seduces and indoctrinates, or at least seeks to, the upper echelons of Israelite society.

If you like, he skims off the cream of Jewish society. The good-looking ones. The smart ones. Why those? Because they're the ones who would most likely be the lightning rod for any uprising down the road.

Verse 3. Then the king commanded his palace master, Ashpenaz, to bring some of the Israelites of the royal family and of the nobility, young men without physical defect and handsome, versed in every branch of wisdom, endowed with knowledge and insight, and competent to serve in the king's palace.

[14 : 08] They were to be taught the literature and language of the Chaldeans. They were to be educated for three years so that at the end of that time they could be stationed in the king's court. Among them were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah from the tribe of Judah.

The palace master gave them other names. Daniel he called Belteshazzar. Hananiah he called Shadrach. And Mishael he called Meshach.

And Azariah he called Abednego. Seduction, indoctrination. This was actually a subtle attack. See, I think the Babylonian psychology was something like this.

Every man has his price. Friends, hostility has many guises. What was the aim of this?

Simply for these young guys, these prime guys, if you like, to forget their Jewish identity and to forget their allegiance to God. Look with me then at verses 6 and 7.

[15:14] You see, they were actually given new names. It was significant because the new names they were given actually reflect Babylonian deities. Whilst their Hebrew names, which testified to their allegiance to God, were not used by their Babylonian masters.

I mean, it's a little bit like all of a sudden changing the vicar's name to, what should we call him? Mohammed Barker. For Daniel and his mates, hearing these new names every day, every day being called by these different names, was just added temptation to consider themselves, in fact, citizens of Babylon.

Young men, they were far from home. They were being fettered by the most powerful king in the ancient Near East. I mean, it's not hard to imagine that this was enticing.

I mean, a bright future was assured for these guys in the Babylonian kingdom. They just simply needed to play the game.

It's a bit like, I think, getting an automatic entry into Melbourne Uni and then being given a three-bedroom tri-level apartment at Dockside with perhaps a monthly Chadston shopping gift voucher, \$10,000 per month.

[16:39] How's your materialism? Perhaps also a holiday unit at Noosa thrown in. So, in our school life, in our college lives, in our work lives, there are lots of pressures to conform to the world.

Hostility brought on, if you like, by the kingdom of darkness to the Lord Jesus himself and to his followers, it's not always a machete. It's not always imprisonment.

It's not always torture. It's not always a firing squad. There are, I think it's fair to say, some indications on the horizon that there is going to be more overt hostility in so-called Western Christian countries.

But by far, our greatest danger is simply being sucked into the world around us, its values, its view of reality, its morals or lack of them, its priorities.

So, living as a Christian in a hostile territory requires us to be constantly aware of avoiding actually two extreme positions, two ends of the spectrum, neither of which reflect God's will for us.

[17:54] If you like, this end. We perceive that the society in which we live is just so intolerant to our beliefs. What do we do? We just sort of get over here in a holy huddle.

What's the other temptation for us? The other end of the spectrum is that we embrace the culture just so much that we simply lose our distinctiveness as God's people.

So, the big practical question is simply this. Where do we compromise? Where do we stand firm? It's interesting. Daniel and his three mates, look what they went along with. They went along with being part of the Babylonian elite education system. They didn't launch any public attack on the Babylonian internet, decrying their new names.

They didn't stage a sit-in at this Babylonian university, which was in fact so much of a feature of my own days at uni.

[18:58] No, they didn't do any of that. But notice the first part of verse 5. The king assigned them a daily portion of the royal rations of food and wine.

Verses 8 to 14. The line in the sand. Verse 8. But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the royal rations of food and wine.

I mean, why would he do this? I mean, why food? Why food and wine? It can't have been, contrary to many of the commentators, that this was, if you like, because of Old Testament laws.

I mean, wine is not prohibited in the Old Testament law. And Daniel refused the Babylonian wine. Was it just as simple that Babylonian wine wasn't as good as the Bortleys?

I mean, Daniel had put up with a changed name. He'd gone to and was going to Babylon's most prestigious uni.

[20:03] Why food and wine? Well, look again at verse 8. Notice, Daniel resolved that he would not, note the word, defile himself.

The use of defile perhaps suggests that this was a religious issue for Daniel and his mates. You see, in that ancient Near East world, eating was taken as a sign of fellowship.

And Daniel's first loyalty was to Yahweh, his God, the God of Israel. Perhaps also Daniel perceived that the king's food and wine was an effort to seduce him into pleasures that he had not known previously.

Whatever the reason, we do know this, Daniel drew a line in the sand, living in this alien and pagan culture.

He didn't sort of wait, sitting back, self-rationalising, saying, I think I might actually draw that line when I'm in a more prestigious, a more powerful position in the Babylonian kingdom.

[21 : 14] He drew it early. Well, I went home from work after that meeting with my boss. I told Cheryl the situation that I was confronted with. I told Cheryl that I believed I'd be dishonouring the Lord to help make this particular business succeed to a greater extent.

I drew a line in the sand, with the knowledge that it might catalyse the bank to ask me to leave. You see, assignments were so hard to come by.

I was expecting that the reaction might be something like this. Listen, hear what you're saying, but we can't afford this pious choosing, this assignment, not that one. We simply need success fees. Well, having prayed about it through the night, I told my boss the next morning, I sought to do it as graciously as I could, of my decision. Do you notice in verse, at the end of verse 8, that Daniel didn't put on a scene?

There was no sort of beating of his chest. It was just a spirit of humility and respect to the palace master. See, friends, we don't have to be obnoxious to be faithful to God.

[22 : 30] Now, my boss responded, that's not a surprise, I would have been taken back if you'd accepted the assignment. Well, for Daniel, he could have faced extreme consequences.

Nebuchadnezzar was simply a despot. I mean, look at verse 10, the palace master says, I'm afraid of my Lord, the King. Well, the Lord upheld me in my work situation for the next three years.

I have to say it was never easy. I seemed to be always under pressure. And Brendan, who'd just been born about that time, 618 grams, just bigger than my hand, he was home, critically sick, surviving on an oxygen cylinder.

Looking back on it, it was simply a time of enormous testing for what was actually a very young faith. verses 15 to 21, the great reversal.

Daniel and the boys, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah go on this vegetable and water diet for 10 days. Pretty boring, don't you think? I mean, it's hardly the sort of approach that you see taken by contestants in the Mr. Universe competition, of which I thought tonight we went very close to seeing a representation of.

[23 : 46] Verse 15, at the end of 10 days, it was observed that they appeared better and fatter than all the young men who'd been eating the royal rations. You see, they were just simply in great shape.

Against all reason, against all expectation, the young men were healthier, they were fatter, despite eating inferior food, which I'm sure would have been a lot better than donuts and fake cream.

Look, friends, the point of the text is not, isn't it great to be a vegetarian? The text speaks to the superiority of remaining faithful to God over, against, compromise.

Verse 16, so the guard continued to withdraw their royal rations and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables. Verse 18, at the end of the time that the king had set for them to be brought in, the palace master brought them into the presence of Nebuchadnezzar and the king spoke with them.

And among them all, no one was found to compare with Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Therefore, they were stationed in the king's court.

[24 : 57] In every matter of wisdom and understanding concerning which the king inquired of them, in every matter, he found them 10 times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom.

I wonder if you noticed as we've just sort of whipped through the chapter, the references to God's direct action. Firstly, God handed King Jehoiakim over to the king of Babylon.

Secondly, God gave the young teenagers favour with the palace master. And thirdly, notice verse 17.

To these four young men, God gave knowledge and skill in every aspect of literature and wisdom. Daniel also had insight into all visions and dreams.

You see, friends, it's just simply this. God is in control. It's a statement. The question is, do you believe it?

[26 : 07] Do you believe it in your daily life? Do you believe it in the midst of difficulties and great trials? Chapter finishes and Daniel continued there until the first year of King Cyrus.

Daniel actually survived the entire period of the Babylonian captivity. You see, it was 537 BC, 67 years after the events of verses 1 and 2, that the Babylonian Empire was crushed by the Persian army under King Cyrus.

God is the one who permitted the exile for Judah to be taken into captivity. And God is able to preserve his faithful servants for the future that he has for them.

Friends, a sovereign God does not promise to rescue us from every difficulty that arises in our lives, from every difficulty that we face in a hostile world.

But God, rather, still reigns supreme and sovereign. He alone deserves, indeed, he demands our trust.

[27 : 22] For he is the sovereign God. God. And Daniel's life reveals that and in the midst of Babylon, Daniel found that to be true, that he is, indeed, the sovereign Lord.

So, who's in charge? You see, the power of Nebuchadnezzar would have just sort of literally been in Daniel's face every day during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar.

Just a young man, just a boy in some ways, living in a world, living in a world hostile to his faith.

How did Daniel respond to this?

Complete trust in the Lord. You see, there's great truth in the Sunday school line challenge, dare to be a Daniel.

As we go through this great book, we'll consistently see that Daniel's integrity, that his reputation, they are never impugned by his indoctrination into the Babylonian elite.

[28 : 36] The application that comes out of a chapter like this is just, it's as if there's just a large neon sign before us. where is my line, where is your line in the sand?

I mean, what are the pressures in your life that are pushing you away from an intimate walk with the Lord? What do you need to do in order to apply verse 8 in practical terms in your daily life?

But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself. You see, friends, it's simply this is the question. Where do you need to draw the line in the sand?

I mean, if you're involved with stuff, if you're taking part in stuff that's troubling you in your inner person, then do you actually trust the Lord to draw the line?

Can you trust that God is going to honour you as you honour him? The precise application of this will vary from Christian to Christian.

[29 : 47] It might be as simple as pulling back from the type of parties that you've been attending. You might be in a relationship or conducting a relationship in a manner that's not pleasing to the Lord.

It might be, and it often is, the fact that career success has simply become an obsession and you need to radically change your priorities so that you can spend more time with God's people, spend more time with the Lord in prayer, in Bible study.

What if you're older? What is it that pulls you away? Sometimes it can be nearly sort of an obsessive zeal for grandkids and family, often recreation and leisure.

for each of us, there will be lines that we need to draw, or at least we need to make sure that those lines are a lot clearer. I want to encourage you to spend time in prayer before the Lord, and in doing that, be open to the convicting ministry of the Holy Spirit, because the applications will be very specific in each of our lives.

I also want to encourage you to seek the counsel of other Christians, because you see, Daniel's request in verse 8, it wasn't random, it wasn't ill-considered.

[31 : 15] We can likely imagine that Daniel and his mates had sat around discussing their line in the sand, seeking guidance, probably reading the scriptures, certainly praying.

Throughout this great book, Daniel again and again, is portrayed as a man of prayer. So as you work through what your stand or stands need to be as a Christian, be careful not to end up at either end of that spectrum.

You see, don't retreat into a holy huddle. if you end up like the Amish, you're not getting the gospel into the world.

On the other end of the spectrum, be careful that you are not so much in the world, that there is at the end of the day no distinctiveness, that you're a follower, a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Lord greatly blessed and just extraordinarily used Daniel as his man in a foreign land. And Daniel was just an average bloke, an average bloke who had great trust in a sovereign Lord.

[32 : 41] God. So do you dare to stand for God for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ and for the sake of his gospel?

Amen.