

Sermon Given by

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Daniel 1 - "Discipleship with distinction"

The date was the 31st October 1517, the place was Wittenberg in Germany, the man, Martin Luther. Luther was a monk who had become increasingly discouraged and weighed down by his own sin and by the abuses of the church. But through his study of the Bible he had come to see that salvation could never be earned by doing good deeds and performing religious rituals as he'd always been taught. Rather salvation was a free gift given by God to those who repented of their sins and trusted in Jesus. He was appalled that the church was failing to teach people the true gospel and instead enslaving them to a religion of works and ritual. Finally his patience broke. He resolved to make a stand. And on that day in October 1517, he nailed his 95 Theses to the church door in Wittenberg, 95 statements which showed the world what was wrong with the church of his day. Four years later, Luther was asked to stand before the Emperor himself and deny what he'd written and had been preaching. Luther said this: 'I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason and my conscience is captive to the word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. May God help me.' It was a stand which was to have huge effect for good.

Today we're beginning to look at the book of Daniel, which, in many ways is about taking a stand. It's about living for God in a pagan world, which of course is vitally relevant to our situation here in 2010. So let's turn to chapter 1 and join these four lads, who were most likely teenagers at the time of chapter 1, as they enter the University of Babylon as young freshers. 3 things for us to take on board: 1) Recognise where you live. 2) Resolve to make a stand. 3) Remember who's in charge

So the first thing we learn from Daniel 1 is that we must **recognise where we live**. I don't mean Garden Fields, or Courtyards or the like - I mean recognise the fact that, as the Jews of Daniel's day were living in literal Babylon, so we live in spiritual Babylon. V1: ***'In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia and put in the treasure house of his god.'*** This is a description of the fall of Jerusalem and the exile of the Jews in about 600 BC. And for Israel, it was the grimmest event in her history. Much of the population were killed, many starved to death during the siege. It was horrific. And in the end, the land, the city of Jerusalem and even the Temple, God's holy place, were completely destroyed, and the people carted off into exile. But strange as it may seem, that wasn't the worst of it. The worst thing of all was that it seemed that God had been defeated – that's symbolised by Nebuchadnezzar carrying off the Temple articles, the precious artefacts of God, and placing them in his god's temple in v2. It looked as if God was defeated and the Babylonian gods were supreme. 1-0 or so it seemed to Bel and Nebo, the gods of Babylon.

This situation of exile and being aliens is precisely the way the NT describes Christians. Our real home is heaven where we are heading, but for the time being we are in exile, away from our true home. We were thinking about this two weeks ago and how we live in a society where increasingly the values and ideas are alien to the Christian. I listed some of the many overtly anti-Christian laws that have been passed in recent years. We live in an age where 4 isms hold sway over our culture.

Secularism is rife, saying that God must have no place in our lives. Pluralism saying that religious variety is the spice of life and that all religions are equally valid. Then there's Relativism saying no truth is The Truth, but rather all truths are valid. And finally Materialism, which says that this world is all there is, so make the most of it and get what you can.

That is the air we breathe today. We are in spiritual Babylon. We live in an alien culture. We hear about church attendance going down nationally and mosque attendance going up, or we hear of church buildings being turned into houses or, in certain areas, Hindu temples or nightclubs. All around us the Lord seems to be 'losing market share'. The writer A.N. Wilson used to be an ardent atheist but just a few years back he became a Christian. In a newspaper article a year ago, looking back on how he'd become an atheist in the first place he asked: "Why did I, along with so many others, become so dismissive of Christianity? Like most educated people in Britain and Northern Europe (I was born in 1950), I have grown up in a culture that is overwhelmingly secular and anti-religious. The universities, broadcasters and media generally are not merely non-religious, they are positively anti." Daniel and his friends lived in literal Babylon, a culture utterly opposed to God and his ways. We live in spiritual Babylon, a society increasingly opposed to God and his ways. Recognise where you live.

2) Resolve to make a stand

When King Nebuchadnezzar took over a country, he would take its young future leaders away to Babylon and he sought to assimilate them mentally, culturally, spiritually to the Babylonian way – in short he sought to Babylonise them! Look how they did it. v3: ***'Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring in 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 these 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.'*** The plan was to get them to forget their past and see the wonders of the new regime. How was this to happen? V5 ***"He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians."*** Language is very powerful at making people conform. In our society that's what political correctness is all about – it's a form of control. Take, for example, the way that opinion-makers are training us not to talk about 'husbands' and 'wives' and 'marriage' but about 'partners' and 'partnerships'. It's not just language; there's a whole ideology behind it – namely the overthrow of the normality of marriage and the normalising of cohabitation and homosexual relationships. We need to think about the language people are trying to make us use. Then there was the literature of the Babylonians. For us today the national curriculum, TV and the media, films and novels are very powerful at making people conform to spiritual Babylonia. So, for example, how many people now doubt the historical credibility of Christianity because of reading Dan Brown grinding his axe in The Da Vinci Code? How many people have come to accept as normal all sorts of lifestyles and beliefs because they're slowly drip-fed to us through Eastenders and Friends and all the rest? Don't get me wrong; we're not to withdraw from the world. We can't help but be part of this world. And this is where the Lord Jesus wants us to be, for now, as witnesses to him. And Daniel shows that we can and should be part of it. So he didn't think to himself, 'A believer can't go to a secular university for three years' – which is basically what he did in Babylon. He'd have studied a whole lot of stuff that was totally opposed to the Bible and its world-view. But the point is that we need to think about all the messages that are coming at us - we don't have to swallow the thinking of Babylon. We can – and must – filter it and learn to think critically about everything we read and hear and watch. We need to spot the beliefs this world is trying to conform us to.

And nor did Daniel think to himself, 'A believer can't go into a secular work-place' – which is basically what he did next, in the Babylonian civil service. He shows that we can and should be part of the world, studying it, working in it, witnessing to it, serving it. But the lesson is: be part of the world but draw the line. Resolve to make a stand. V8: ***'But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way.'*** This was not some whim of Daniel as he and his mates were chatting in the campus cafeteria one day. No they resolved to do it. The Hebrew word has overtones of serious thought and prayerful determination. But of course the big question is why the food? Why not the lectures? Daniel and his friends could have boycotted the lectures and refused to have been taught. Why not resist the isolation from their homeland. They could have campaigned outside the palace with placards saying 'Release the Jerusalem Four'. Why not the names? They had had their names changed v7. Their original names had spoken of the uniqueness, the goodness and the faithfulness of YAHWEH. Their new names signified allegiance to Babylonian gods. They had been re-branded as children of false gods. Why not take their stand on this? But for whatever reason they didn't. It was the food. There's been no end of suggestions as to why this was so - perhaps obedience to Jewish food laws, perhaps because the food was sacrificed to idols. There is a hint that Daniel felt that to eat the food might defile him in v8. We're not quite sure but for whatever reason it was here that they decided to draw the line. It may not have been a big issue. But it was here that they resolved to make their stand. The king might try all he could to make them Babylonian, but at the end of the day, Daniel knew where his true allegiance lay - to the King of kings, Yahweh. I guess he would have received some flak from other Jews. 'Come on Daniel, don't rock the boat and give us a bad name – people will start calling you a fundamentalist. Just eat the food and run. When in Rome and all that!'

But Daniel, praise God, would not be shaken. He resolved to take his stand. And it wasn't without cost too. He could easily have been killed for it. Notice in v10 that the first official didn't want anything to do with it. Daniel took his stand. It was as if he was saying: 'Look you can remove me from my home, you can teach me all you like, you can even change my name, but you cannot change my heart. And to show it I'm drawing the line here. I will not eat the king's food. My allegiance is to God. Here I stand. I can do no other.' And what a vital lesson that is for us today. Because the point is that making a stand for Christ however small shows where our true allegiance lies. It may be something small, but unless we stand on the small things, then we'll never stand on the big things. I think of an old flat mate of mine who joined the Parachute Regiment with the TA. The Paras are a rough tough lot and before long the instructors realised that my friend Nick didn't swear. They tried to force him to swear but he refused. He drew the line and resolved to obey God not his instructors. I had breakfast on Thursday with a Christian friend who's involved in medical research and he said how he had to draw the line by making it clear to his supervisor that as a Christian he could not have anything to do with human embryo stem cell research. He was told it might limit his study but that was a cost well worth paying. When I was converted in my first term at university I was in my college football team and there was great pressure to get drunk on socials. I had to resolve to limit myself to one pint and then hit the orange juice and face the teasing that inevitably came. I remember hearing of a Christian who was asked at a job interview whether he would be prepared to lie for the company. Good job. Good salary. Interview had gone well up to that point. But what must a Christian say? No. What was the cost? End of interview and his prospects with that company. He took his stand. For Christians in the financial world it may be that the markets dictate X but because I'm a Christian I will have to do Y. We're all constantly confronted with those "crunch times" when we need to take a stand. Might be speaking out against the constant foul language in your office or resolving not to join in the back-biting or the smutty jokes or the culture of moaning at work. It may be a small stand. But you've laid your cards on the table. You're a citizen of heaven first and foremost, a follower of the King of kings. There comes a point when our identity as Christians is under threat and we need to dig our stake into the ground and say, "Here I stand, I can do no other." Or perhaps the pressing issue for you isn't such a public stand but

you realise that you're in danger of being assimilated by Babylon and you need to resolve positively say to start reading God's word for yourself day by day or negatively to say no to a particular luxury that you don't need and to give the money to fund gospel ministry. Or you need to stop watching some programme or website that is a stumbling block to your godliness. Whatever it is do something - take a stand.

Recognise where you live, resolve to make a stand, and then finally **remember who's in charge**. And that becomes clear in the rest of the chapter, especially as we get to v9: 'Now God had caused the official to show favour and sympathy to Daniel.' V9 is actually very surprising. For God's people at that time it might have appeared as if God was dead – that God was defeated by the gods of Babylon? But here we're reminded that God is alive and well in Babylon. He's at work in the officials making them friendly towards Daniel. And so when Daniel makes his stand they are willing to let him do it, despite what Nebuchadnezzar had said. Daniel and his friends are allowed a ten day trial period. Vegetables and water for them! And the outcome? V15: **'At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food.'** This is not a mandate for Christian vegetarianism. Rather it's God's way of saying to Daniel. 'I honour your stand.' God is in charge even in Babylon. But that's not the end. Because in v18, when the degree is over, the exams have been sat, the papers marked, and the oral exam before the king himself is over, what do we discover? V19: **'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.'** And this is no fluke. It wasn't just a question of the questions they revised for coming up! No, v17 tells us that God gave them knowledge and understanding. Once again it was God working behind the scenes. And that is the central message of Daniel. God is in control. He is the Lord of history. Did you notice who it was that brought about the exile in v2? **'The Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into Babylon's hand.'**

God used Babylon as his punishment for Judah's persistent rebellion. God is the true King. And even Babylon will one day fall. We get a hint in the final verse of the chapter. V21: **'And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.'** Who is Cyrus? The King of Persia. The new superpower who in 539BC would overthrow the Babylonians. No human power lasts forever. God would one day overthrow the Babylonian empire. The kings of this earth will come and go but God and his word stand forever. And that is the key truth which will strengthen us to take a stand. God is the real King. It was a tough decision Daniel had to face. Who am I really serving. God or Babylon? And his answer was God. It's not that we will always be rescued in the way Daniel and his friends were. God may bring things to a happy conclusion if we take a stand. Daniel was promoted. But God doesn't promise that. In fact before Daniel has finished his book he'll warn of severe suffering for Christians who take a stand. But what enables us to take that stand is the truth that God is in control. And one day he will right all the wrongs. One day spiritual Babylon, this world with all it's pain and injustice will be held to account. How do we know? Because of Easter Sunday - we know that God is alive. Jesus is Lord and He will return to judge.

Martin Luther had no idea that his stand for God's truth would lead to what we call the Reformation. He took his stand because he believed it needed to be taken. He served the true and living God the real King of the world. Will we do the same? Recognise where you live, resolve to take a stand and remember who's in charge.

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)