

SERIES: The Ministry of the Market Place

SERMON: **Daniel and the Three Hebrew Young Men: Courage and Character Come Before Career**

SCRIPTURE: Daniel 1, 2, 3, 6

SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus

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In our series on *The Ministry of the Market Place*, we come today to perhaps the most familiar of all the biblical characters we will examine—Belteshazzar, better known by his Hebrew name, Daniel, along with his three friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah—better known, strangely, by their Babylonian names—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. If you know any Bible stories at all, you probably know about these men, but familiarity must not be allowed to breed contempt toward the profound truths inherent in their stories. I believe there are some key principles for our work lives that can be gained examining the careers of these four young men.

Daniel is often thought of as a prophet, and he did make some pretty amazing prophecies, but Daniel was never a full-time prophet. He was first a hostage of war, then a member of the civil service in Babylon assigned to serve the king, then ruler over the province of Babylon, then the third highest official in the whole Babylonian empire, and finally a very high official in the Medo-Persian Empire that succeeded the Babylonian Empire. In total Daniel was a successful government servant for over 70 years!

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were taken hostage by the Babylonians at the same time Daniel was taken. They, too, entered government service, and after surviving the fiery furnace they were promoted in the province of Babylon, but we are given no further details about their careers.

I have entitled my message today, “Daniel and the three Hebrew Young Men: Courage and Character Come Before Career.” These two qualities—courage and godly character—seem to stand out in four major scenes in the lives of these men. The message is clear: their success was a gift from God, but it was also related to the incredible way they demonstrated courage and character.

Scene #1: Hostages in a foreign land. (1:1-21)

When Nebuchadnezzar first besieged Jerusalem in 605 B. C., he defeated King Jehoiakim and took hostages, not to torture and kill them but to have them serve in his administration. He wanted the cream of the crop of Jewish young men—those old enough to make the adjustment psychologically yet young enough to learn easily and come to feel at home in their new cultural surroundings. Older teens seemed to be the best bet. To the best of our knowledge, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego never saw their homeland again.

What is clear is that all of the were exceptional young men. Look at Daniel 1:3-5:

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.

All the hostages may have been exceptional—physically, intellectually, socially, and psychologically—but these four seem to be unique in regard to their spiritual commitments. This comes out in verse 8, where Daniel is mentioned but is speaking in behalf of his friends as well:

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. Now God had caused the official to show favor and sympathy to Daniel, but the official told Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you."

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.

Why would the king's food defile them? First, because it most likely would include unclean animals, perhaps pork or shellfish, which the Jews were not to eat. Second, because the food was most likely offered to the gods of Babylon. But it was not an easy decision for these young men to refuse the diet offered them. The quality of the food must have been very attractive, and refusing to eat it was a sure way to spoil all chance of advancement, especially since the King himself, according to verse 10, had established the diet. Furthermore, just like Joseph these young men were a long way from home and no one would know. Since God had not protected them from being taken hostage, what did they owe Him? Besides, diet seems like be such a relatively small issue—why get hung up on little things? And finally, Daniel's first request to be exempted from the king's food was refused, so he could easily have said, "I tried." But instead he approaches the official in charge of the hostages with a creative alternative, which is eventually accepted on a trial basis.

The creative alternative produces an amazing result—the four Hebrews appear healthier and better nourished than any of the others. They enter the king's service according to verse 19, because the king can find no one equal to them. They are assigned to that branch of the intelligence service that included the wise men and magicians who were called upon from time to time to help the king make decisions of state. It says in verse 20, "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."

This is no accident, nor is it a result of their vegetarian diet. It specifically states in v. 17 that "To these four young men God *gave* knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and

learning.” But clearly the implication is that the decision on the part of these four young men to refuse defilement is related to the blessings they receive from God. Courage and character come before career.

Scene #2: Daniel appointed ruler over the province of Babylon. (2:1-23, 48-49)

This portion of the story focuses particularly on Daniel rather than Shadrach, Meshach or Abednego, though the other three are mentioned at the end. Nebuchadnezzar had a dream, which he wanted interpreted, so he called upon the royal interpreters. So troubled was he by this dream that he wanted to be absolutely certain that the wise men of Babylon weren't just blowing smoke. So he demanded that they tell him the dream *before* they interpret it. After all, he reasoned, if they're wise enough for the latter, they ought to be able to do the former. It's kind of like saying, "If a faith healer can do arthritis (which we can't see), let him do teeth (which we can see!)." No room for shenanigans here. Their response, however, is quite understandable, 2:10:

"There is not a man on earth who can do what the king asks! No king, however great and mighty, has ever asked such a thing of any magician or enchanter or astrologer. What the king asks is too difficult. No one can reveal it to the king except the gods, and they do not live among men."

Nebuchadnezzar isn't very happy and over-reacts a little—he orders all the wise men of Babylon to be executed. When Daniel learns that he and his friends will also die (since they are in the wise men's guild), he asks for 24 hours to discern the dream and interpret it. Then he prays. And God answers. We don't have time this morning to talk about the dream, but Nebuchadnezzar was very impressed when Daniel revealed it *and* interpreted it.

Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell prostrate before Daniel and paid him honor and ordered that an offering and incense be presented to him. The king said to Daniel, "Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery."

Then the king placed Daniel in a high position and lavished many gifts on him. He made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men. Moreover, at Daniel's request the king appointed Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego administrators over the province of Babylon, while Daniel himself remained at the royal court (2:46-49).

Once again we find Daniel exercising enormous courage—in challenging the king's decree to put the wise men to death, in assuming God would reveal the dream and its interpretation to him, and in going before Nebuchadnezzar with that information (knowing he would certainly be killed if the answer were not absolutely accurate). And God rewards him—He causes Daniel to be appointed ruler over the entire province of Babylon, gives him great wealth, and gives him authority over all the wise men, and even looks with favor on Daniel's friends. Once again Daniel puts character and courage before career, and God blesses him.

Scene #3: Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego promoted in the province of Babylon. (3:1-30)

There is no greater example of courage and character in the entire Bible (other than Jesus going to the cross) than what we find in Daniel chapter 3, where Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are now the focus rather than Daniel. The story is familiar to almost every Bible student. King Nebuchadnezzar makes an image of gold nine stories high and orders everyone to bow down to it. Can you even imagine a 90-foot-tall statue gleaming in the sunlight? Secular history doesn't mention this image, but it does tell us enough about Nebuchadnezzar to cause us to believe this story. His Hanging Gardens and some of his other exploits make it clear that Nebuchadnezzar was capable of some amazing building projects as well as some amazing ego trips.

Everyone in Babylon bows down to the image except for the three Hebrew young men. (Why Daniel isn't mentioned here is anyone's guess; perhaps he was out of the country on royal business; we can be sure he also would have refused to bow down). Some of their fellow-wise men, undoubtedly jealous because of the promotions Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego received at the end of chapter 2, report their insubordination to Nebuchadnezzar, who gives them another chance, probably in deference to their sponsor, Daniel, or perhaps because he had found their work to be superior. Look at verse 13:

Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king, and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good (I'll overlook the whole thing). But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?"

Their response to Nebuchadnezzar's threat is classic courage and is one of my favorite passages in the entire Bible, Daniel 3:16-18:

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."

How many of us are willing to say, "God is able . . . , and He will . . . , but even if He does not, I will do the right thing"? God is able to help me pass this course even if I do not cheat like all my friends are doing, but even if He does not, I will not cheat. God is able to give me a promotion even if I refuse to cook the books as my boss is asking me to do, but even if He does not, I will not do it. God is able to help our family stay out of debt even if I stay home to take care of my preschoolers and we choose to live on one salary, but even if He does not, my children are too important to me to put into daycare every day.

God does rescue the three young men, as you well know, and they walk unscathed out of the furnace without so much as the smell of burnt hair, even though it was so hot it consumed the men who threw them in. Nebuchadnezzar then speaks profound truth in verse 28: "Praise be to

the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God." But he misses one point: Yahweh isn't their own God; He is the only God. Nebuchadnezzar has yet to learn that.

This vignette concludes in verse 30 where we are told, "Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the province of Babylon." This is the last we read in the Bible about the three Hebrew young men. But we have heard enough to know that courage and godly character were embedded in their spiritual DNA. I doubt if any of us will ever be asked to risk as much as these three young men were asked, but it is not impossible. After all, there have been more martyrs for the Christian faith in the past century than during any comparable time in church history. On Tuesday of this week I found the following article on the Voice of the Martyrs website:

On October 2nd at 2:30 p.m., Lorans Wageah Emeel, a 15-year-old Christian girl, was kidnaped from a public bus by Muslims in the Egyptian city of El Mahala Al Kobra, about 60 miles north of Cairo. The abductors were trying to force Lorans, a student of Saida Nafesa High School, to deny Christ and accept Islam. Her father received the following text messages during the abduction: "The girl is not accepting easily, but she will embrace Islam for sure. Take the rest of your daughters and leave the city, or you will lose them one by one." The Emeel family gathered at the police station, pleading with the officers to arrest a certain Muslim man for the kidnaping.

However the teen managed to escape from her Muslim captors, who drugged and threatened to rape her. While the terrorists were taking a break from a Ramadan fast, she broke out of her detention room located in Helwan, a suburb just south of Cairo. Prior to allowing her to reunite with her family, however, State Security Investigation officials told Lorans that if she did not deny the kidnaping, she would never see her parents again.

The kidnaping of Christian teenage girls in Muslim nations has reached into the thousands. Many are forced through physical violence to convert to Islam. Other girls are often lured into becoming Muslims with promises of material wealth. The Voice of the Martyrs sponsors safe houses in Islamic countries to protect Christian teenage girls who have been threatened with or have escaped from abduction.

Friends, the relatively minor risks we face for our faith are all the more reason why we should exhibit courage and character in the market place.

Now we can't leave the book of Daniel without touching upon one more incredible event in which these same qualities of courage and character are exhibited.

Scene #4: Daniel, one of three Vice Presidents over the Medo-Persian Empire, prospers even further under both Darius the Mede and Cyrus the Persian. (Daniel 6:1-28, 9:1)

Daniel 6 may be the single best-known story in the whole Bible—Daniel in the lions' den. I will only mention a few highlights, but first let's get the historical setting into our minds. The time lapse between the fiery furnace and the lion's den is many decades. Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach

and Abednego were taken captive at the very start of the 70-year Babylonian Captivity of Israel. Chapter 5:32 marks the end of that Captivity. It says, “That very night (the night of the handwriting on the wall) Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians was slain, and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom at the age of sixty-two.” If Daniel was an older teen at the time he was taken captive, he is now in his upper 80's. At the start of chapter 6 the Babylonian Empire is toast and the Medo-Persian Empire has begun, but Daniel is still the same person—a man of character and courage. Look at 6:1-5:

It pleased Darius to appoint 120 satraps to rule throughout the kingdom, with three administrators over them, one of whom was Daniel. (By the way, when new rulers take over, they generally bring in their own cronies. Rarely do they choose someone from the previous administration to be in a position of great power and influence. But Daniel, Prime Minister in the Babylonian empire, continues to serve in the Medo-Persian Empire—a real tribute to his ability and trustworthiness). The satraps were made accountable to them (the three administrators) so that the king might not suffer loss. Now Daniel so distinguished himself among the administrators and the satraps by his exceptional qualities that the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom. At this, the administrators and the satraps tried to find grounds for charges against Daniel in his conduct of government affairs, but they were unable to do so. They could find no corruption in him, because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent. Finally these men said, "We will never find any basis for charges against this man Daniel unless it has something to do with the law of his God."

I dearly love that last sentence, but please understand that Daniel's enemies are not suggesting that any *legitimate* charges are likely to be found in his conduct relative to the law of his God. They are bent on exploiting three things: (1) Daniel's absolute consistency in regard to his faith, (2) a unique provision in Persian law—that certain laws signed by the king could not be repealed, and (3) the king's monstrous ego!

You know the story, how they convince the king to issue a decree that anyone who prays to any god or man other than the king himself for 30 days would be thrown into a den of hungry lions. And how Daniel went home, and *as was his custom* got down on his knees before an upstairs window opened toward Jerusalem and prayed to the God of heaven. Every one of us would have been tempted at least to pray in a different place, or to pray in a different manner, one that could not be detected (say, with eyes open while driving our chariot home), or to excuse ourselves on the basis that a dead person can't serve God. But not Daniel. He sees no reason to change his habit pattern; anything else would demonstrate a lack of courage and character on his part; it's unthinkable.

When all is said and done, of course, God spares Daniel, his accusers are all thrown into the lions' den, and while we aren't told specifically, it appears that Daniel winds up in the job Darius had originally planned to give him—Prime Minister of the Medo-Persian Empire. What we are told in 6:28 is, “So Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian.”

By the way, I can't help but contrast Daniel with another politician whose career I have watched close-up for years. For 28 years Dick Gephardt was the Representative of the 3rd Congressional district including south St. Louis County and predecessor to Nancy Pelosi as Democratic leader in the House. He was a solidly pro-life Southern Baptist, and it was his pro-life position that originally got him elected from this strongly Catholic district. He wrote in 1984,

"Life is the division of human cells, a process that begins with conception. The (Supreme Court's abortion) ruling was unjust, and it is incumbent on the Congress to correct the injustice. . . . I have always been supportive of pro-life legislation. I intend to remain steadfast on this issue. . . . I believe that the life of the unborn should be protected at all costs."

But less than two years later he decided to run for President. He realized that he could never be nominated by the Democrat party as a pro-life candidate, so he switched—not parties but convictions. Overnight he became strongly pro-choice, backing the most radical pro-choice legislation, even refusing to vote against partial-birth abortion. Gephardt lost his bid for the nomination, of course, in 1988 and again in 2004, but more importantly, he lost all moral credibility.

Now, I have one more point I feel obligated to make:

Caution. It's not always this neat and tidy.

These four stories from the book of Daniel are pretty amazing, and they beautifully illustrate the point that character and courage must come before career. However, I don't want to lead you astray into thinking that God *always* responds to courage and character in the market place with great blessing and stupendous miracles such as we find in the Book of Daniel. Turn with me for a moment to the eleventh chapter of Hebrews. This is, of course, the Believers' Hall of Faith that lists some of the great heroes of the OT. We revel in the stories of Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Rahab. Then in verse 32 the author finds himself running out of space.

And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again.

But it is very important to read a few more verses:

Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned, they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

It would be dishonest to give you the impression that character and courage in the market place

will *always* result in rescue and reward. But it's the right thing anyway. The very next verse in Hebrews 11 says, "These were *all* commended for their faith." Whether victor or victim, God honors faithfulness, character, and courage.

Friends, I don't care what aspect of the market place you work in, whether government or business or sales or education or whatever, God calls you to exhibit godly character and great courage in standing for truth, honesty, integrity, morality. More often than not I believe it will lead to success, but I cannot guarantee that. Some of you may actually suffer because of it. I call upon all of us to do it anyway.¹

Conclusion: I read a book this week entitled *Eyes of the Tailless Animals, Prison Memoirs of a North Korean Woman*. I don't recommend it for those with weak stomachs, but I want to read one section where Soon Ok Lee talks about her experience in the North Korean gulag. A Communist herself, she was nevertheless thrown into prison for the crime of refusing to satisfy the greed of a government officer. While in prison she witnessed the horrendous tortures and mass killings of hundreds of Christians and could not understand why they stubbornly refused to bend to the government's demands that they deny Christ. She later came to understand their steadfast faith after escaping to South Korea where she found the Lord. There is one particular section of the book which reminded me of Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace. It's entitled, *The Smelting Factory*. It has a very different outcome, but nevertheless presses home the theme of courage and character.

One night in February 1992, I went to the smelting factory. The work was almost done for the day and I had to check the daily production.

I saw eight Christian prisoners carrying a big metal kettle holding molten iron. An officer called to them using very vile words. "Tomorrow is a 'cleaning the mind' day. Tomorrow, you will go out and tell everyone that there is nothing in heaven to believe in; there is no God. Otherwise you will be killed. Do you understand?"

There was silence. Not one of the prisoners responded to the officer. He didn't wait long for an answer because he didn't like to be ignored. He knew that tomorrow was an important day for re-education and he wanted the believers to recant. He yelled at the prisoners, "Why are you so quiet? Answer me! Answer me now!"

No one said a word.

The officer became furious and began to curse at the men. At the top of his voice, he screamed, "All eight of you come here and put your face down to the ground!"

They came just as he ordered. They sat on their knees and then bent their heads down.

The officer called over other male prisoners, "We cannot let these men live. They think they don't know who I am. Bring boiling liquid iron from the furnace and pour it on them!"

The male prisoners' faces were full of fear. The liquid iron was 1,200 degrees. They hesitated to do this terrible thing.

The officer gave them a fierce scowl. "Do you want to die with them?"

The frightened prisoners ran to get a kettle of molten iron. Then they poured the boiling iron on top of the people of God kneeling so quietly.

Suddenly, the smell of burning flesh assailed my nostrils. The bodies began to shrivel from the intense heat as the liquid metal burned right through their flesh.

I fell to the ground and almost fainted from shock. The impact on me was so tremendous that I screamed as if I were crazy. Other prisoners in the factory screamed in horror as the eight Christians died.

I looked at their shrunken bodies and wondered in my heart, What do they believe? What do they see in the empty sky? What could be more important to them than their lives?

In the years I was in prison, I saw many believers die. Yet they never, never denied the God who is in heaven. All they had to do was say they don't believe in religion and they would have been released.

I didn't understand what made them not fear death. Their unbelievable faith brought a big question into my heart: What did they see, and what am I missing?

Well, the answer to her questions comes immediately following the Hall of Faith in Hebrews 12:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses (witnesses like Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, and some unnamed Korean prisoners), let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart (Hebrews 12:1-3).

Let's pray.

i. One of the most fascinating references to Daniel in the Bible comes from the prophet Ezekiel. It's not typical for the prophets to mention one another, primarily because most lived in different centuries and in different countries, and both transportation and communication were difficult. However, Ezekiel and Daniel were contemporaries. As we have already mentioned, Daniel was taken hostage by Nebuchadnezzar in 605 B.C. Well, Nebuchadnezzar came back and besieged Jerusalem again eight years later in 597 B.C. This time 10,000 leading citizens were taken hostage, and Ezekiel was one of them. No doubt when Ezekiel arrived in Babylon he soon heard about this outstanding Jewish young man who had attained such a high place in the government in such a short time. He must have also heard that Daniel had accomplished that without compromising his faith or his moral standards.

In his own prophetic book Ezekiel mentions Daniel three times. I want us to look at one of those references—from chapter 14, starting in verse 12:

The word of the LORD came to me: "Son of man, if a country sins against me by being unfaithful and I stretch out my hand against it to cut off its food supply and send famine upon it and kill its men and their animals, even if these three men—Noah, Daniel

and Job—were in it, they could save only themselves by their righteousness, declares the Sovereign LORD.

Do you remember the story of Abraham and the grief he expressed over God's planned destruction of Sodom? He said, "But Lord, what about all the righteous people who live there?" And God said, "Like who?" Abraham couldn't name any but he was sure there were some. So God said, "OK, I won't destroy the city if you can find 50 righteous people." He couldn't, but he then changed his proposal, "What about 45?" Then 40, 30, 20, and finally 10. There weren't even ten, and Sodom was destroyed.

In essence here's what Ezekiel seems to be saying in this passage: if God decides to wipe a nation out, the three most righteous people in human history couldn't talk God out of it—they would only be spared themselves. Now look at the three he chooses—Noah, Job, and Daniel. Abraham doesn't make the list, nor Joseph, nor Moses, nor David. The only ones he mentions are the man whom God spared from a world-wide flood, the man over whom God duel with Satan himself, and Daniel. This is even more remarkable when one recognizes that those who live in a prior generation tend to be viewed through rose-colored glasses. Both Noah and Job lived several millennia prior to Ezekiel's writing, while Daniel was still alive. Yet, here he is—listed as one of the greatest heroes of faith of all time. It was his courage, it was his character that Ezekiel was celebrating.