

How to Stand Up for God

Texts: Daniel 1, 2, and 6

General Direction

The Babylonian captivity provides the setting for the faith exploits of the prophet Daniel. [Deliver this message after the reading for Week 9 is completed.]

Back Story

After generations of breaking the covenant through idol worship, the Lord allows the Israelites to be conquered by the Babylonian army. Babylon, the first world empire, succeeds in attacking Jerusalem in 605 BC. The temple built by King Solomon is looted, and the articles of the temple are carried off to Babylon and placed in the temple of Nebuchadnezzar's god (Daniel 1:2). Critical to this story is the reputation of Yahweh, God of Israel. The significance of the temple articles being moved to a temple in Babylon was that the Babylonians saw this as a sign that their gods had defeated the God of Israel. Not only is the reputation of Israel at an all-time low, but the reputation of the God of the Jews is in a shambles. How will he demonstrate that he is still God of all the earth?

The events in the book of Daniel take place in Babylon, where Daniel and other outstanding young men of Israel have been deported. Here, the God of Israel will re-establish his reputation and exalt his name through a handful of his followers in Nebuchadnezzar's court.

Sermon Purpose and Outline

When God's name suffers because of the behavior of his followers, what can you do to elevate his reputation?

Sermon Question: What can I do to positively affect God's reputation?

- Stand alone if you have to Daniel 1:6-21
- State what God has done Daniel 2:24-49
- Stay faithful when threatened Daniel 6

Sermon Introduction

Sometimes the reputation of God suffers because of the regrettable behavior of professing Christians.

You are walking through the break room at work and overhear a conversation. A woman in your office is venting about why she will never attend church because of some past grievances. As you pour your coffee you overhear her litany of disappointment.

“As a child, we went to this little church near our house. There was some issue, then there were all these angry meetings that tore the church apart. I bet some of those people still aren’t speaking to each other! Then I had a boss who was on a church board, and the guy was a cheat and a liar. Then there’s that televangelist who was living a double life. A fraud! I’ll never go back. I want no part of that.”

Have you ever been faced with accusations like that from hurt people? You can’t blame them! With Christians like that in the world, who needs pagans? Believe me, people are looking at the lives of professing Christians, and they’re looking hard. They’re trying to determine whether they measure up to what they think a Christian ought to be. With every observation they make, they’re attributing a notch on the good side or a notch on the bad side of the tally sheet they’re keeping on God. So, what can we do to counteract the negative press and the hurtful behaviors of some of these so-called Christians? Is there anything we can do to help give God a good name?

Today, as we continue through the scriptures in our journey of faith, we are going to look at the life of someone who lived at a desperate time, a time when God’s reputation was at an all-time low because of the behavior of his people Israel.

The city of Jerusalem has been attacked by the Babylonian army and the temple looted. With the diminished reputation of Israel came a diminished respect for Israel’s God. In this study of Daniel and his friends, we will see how God re-establishes his reputation and exalts his name through a handful of followers in Nebuchadnezzar’s court.

Connection to the Overarching Theme: The Journey of Faith

Daniel and his friends respond to the tests of their captivity faithfully because of a foundational belief that God can be trusted. Without this faith, they would never withstand the forces that ripped them from their homeland and exiled them far away in Babylon. As we explore the faithfulness of Daniel and his friends, we will see that a life of courage demands that we affirm again and again that God can be trusted. This is the essence of the journey of faith.

Sermon Question: What can I do to positively affect God's reputation?

So... here's the question: When God's name suffers because of the behavior of his followers, what can you do? The answer to this question is critical, because someone's view and understanding of God may be hinging on your response.

1. Stand alone if you have to Daniel 1:6-21

Textual Explanation

When Nebuchadnezzar successfully attacks Jerusalem in 605 BC, he deports the best and brightest young men from Israel. This seems to have been a common practice after invading a country. Nebuchadnezzar's goal was to staff his government with the best minds from his conquered territories. Once deportees were in Babylon, they experienced a three-year educational process where they learned the Babylonian language, literature, and etiquette. Those who distinguished themselves would be given top positions in his government.

Four Hebrew youth are part of this deportation. Their Hebrew names are Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. As part of their indoctrination into Babylonian life, they are given the Babylonian names Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego. Linguists disagree about the meaning of the Hebrew names as well as the Babylonian names, but it seems clear that the Hebrew names made reference to the God of Israel, while the Babylonian names honored Babylonian gods (Daniel 1:6,7).

Here is one possible interpretation of the names:

Hebrew Names

Daniel: God is Judge Hananiah: Yahweh is gracious Mishael: Who is what God is
Azariah: Whom Yahweh helps

Babylonian Names

Belteshazzar: May Bel protect his life Shadrach: Command of Aku Meshach: Who is what Aku is? Abed-Nego: Servant of Nego

Their name change was part of the king's plan to totally indoctrinate his captives into Babylonian thinking and worship.

The story of Chapter 1 is all about food! Daniel and his friends want to refrain from the king's diet, perhaps for reasons related to Jewish dietary laws, or perhaps because meat and wine were first offered to Babylonian gods before being offered to the young men. Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the king's food (Daniel 1:8).

He requested a ten-day trial for himself and his friends, to prove that an alternative diet of vegetables and water would not compromise their appearance and jeopardize the life of their supervisor. After ten days, their appearance and complexion was superior, so they were granted their diet throughout their three-year orientation period. At the end of three years, when examined by Nebuchadnezzar, they were found to be exceptional in every way (1:20).

What's happening here? Four faithful young men are elevating the reputation of the God of Israel in Babylon by holding to the commitments they made before they ever arrived in Babylon. They stood alone in the king's court by not eating from the king's menu.

Illustrations

- An eighth-grade girl observes that her friends are becoming increasingly gossipy and catty. She knows that this cannot enhance God's reputation in the world. **Like Daniel, she resolves: "I won't eat from that menu."**
- Meanwhile her big brother is bussing tables at a restaurant. The drill is the same every night. After work, all the employees drive down the road to another restaurant for a beer. It's never just "a beer," but hours of drinking. The life pattern he observes revolves around work, alcohol consumption and sleep. He knows that falling into this lifestyle cannot possible enhance the reputation of God in the world. **Like Daniel, he resolves: "I won't eat from that menu."**
- Their father is undergoing a similar experience. He exits a sales meeting where it is abundantly clear that sales are to be made even if it involves a litany of lies about the product, delivery dates, or competitors. He does not want to anger his manager and fears that he might be demoted, or even fired, if he fails to comply. It is time for steel resolution: **"I won't eat from that menu."**

Cross Reference

Romans 12:2

"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but **be transformed** by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."

Timeless Principal

Note the wording of Daniel 1:8: Daniel **resolved** not to defile himself with the royal food and wine. Do you deeply desire to positively affect the reputation of God? You can do so by not buying into the way of life that the world around you is engaged in. People notice when you act on your convictions. Decide ahead of time to stand alone if you have to, if that's what it takes to obey God's principles, no matter the apparent cost.

2. State what God has done Daniel 2:24-49

Textual Explanation

The drama in Daniel 2 revolves around the interpretation of a dream. Nebuchadnezzar has a disturbing dream and demands that his wise men give him not only the interpretation, but also the contents of his dream. When they are unable to comply, he sentences them to death. Daniel and his friends learn of the king's edict, and they commit themselves to fervent prayer that the dream and the interpretation will be revealed. The Lord provides Daniel with both the dream and its interpretation.

Note carefully the language used by Daniel when he approaches Nebuchadnezzar. When the king asks if Daniel is able to give him the dream and interpretation, Daniel flatly denies his ability. Instead he replies:

"There is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries. He has shown King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen in days to come." Daniel 2:28

Here, rather than claiming to be a great magician with magical powers, Daniel states

The dream is about a statue of a man made of four substances. A mighty stone then crushes the statue. The interpretation of the dream is that there will be four successive empires, which will in turn be replaced by a kingdom that will never end. The dream is prophesying the Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman empires which will rise and fall. These will some day be replaced by the Kingdom of Christ, which will have no end. Nebuchadnezzar responds by honoring Daniel's God.

Daniel 2:46, 47

"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.'"

What's going on here? Remember that Babylon has conquered Israel, and that the reputation of the God of Israel is in shambles. Through Daniel and his friends, God is elevating his reputation as God of gods, and the Lord of kings.

Illustrations

As I read of the kingdom that will never pass away, I am drawn to the words of Handel's *Hallelujah Chorus*:

"The kingdom of this world/Is become/the kingdom of our Lord, And of His Christ, and of His Christ; And He shall reign forever and ever/Forever and ever, forever and ever.

King of kings, and Lord of lords/And Lord of lords, And He shall reign forever and ever/King of kings, forever and ever, And Lord of lords/Hallelujah! Hallelujah!"

The moon has no light of its own. It simply reflects the light of the sun. In the same way Daniel claimed to have no power of his own, but to "reflect" the wisdom and knowledge of God. Jesus used the imagery of light to emphasize this in Matthew 5:16:

"In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."

Application

When we state what God has done, he is the one whose reputation is enhanced. He receives the praise. You can positively affect the reputation of God by giving him the credit for the things that happen in your life.

- Has he answered your prayer? Tell people about it!
- Has he blessed you? Give him the credit!
- Has he resolved a problem you were facing? Give him the glory!

And don't just tell your stories about God's greatness to other believers. Use the same "Christian" words, with the same honor going to God, when you tell the story to those who might not share your beliefs. That's how you can positively affect God's reputation in the world.

3. Stay faithful when threatened Daniel 6

Textual Explanation

As we turn to Daniel 6, decades have passed. Daniel is an old man. The Babylonian empire has been swept away by the Persians. Daniel now serves Darius, king of the Persians. Daniel has risen to a post of such influence that those around him respond with jealousy and murderous hatred. Unable to find any evidence that he is corrupt, they seek his death through the only evidence that can be used against him. Daniel visibly prays to the God of Israel three times a day. These prayers are more than structured piety for Daniel. They are a reflection of his deep reverence for God through consistently connecting with him.

The events in Daniel 6 occur when the city of Jerusalem and the temple are in utter ruins. Note the prayer of King Solomon in 2 Chronicles 6:38-39. Solomon prays that God will show his mercy in the case of a future rebellion and deportation.

"If they turn back to you with all their heart and soul in the land of their captivity where they were taken, and pray toward the land you gave their fathers, toward the city you have chosen and toward the temple I have built for your name; then from heaven, your dwelling place, hear their prayer and their pleas, and uphold their cause. And forgive your people, who have sinned against you."

Daniel is doing just what Solomon prayed: he is faithfully facing Jerusalem each day and praying for its restoration. It is in this context that the events unfold.

Daniel's adversaries persuade Darius to pass a law which prohibits any petition to anyone other than himself, under penalty of death. This law, which catered to Darius' ego, will trap Daniel if he continues to pray to Yahweh.

Daniel continues faithfully to pray, knowing that his actions may result in his death. Darius is grief-stricken when he learns that his law has trapped Daniel, but he cannot find a loophole in the irrevocable mandate he has passed. Daniel, unwilling to alter his loyalty to the Lord, is thrown into a den of lions.

The ending of the story is well-known, but the point of the story is often missed. Note the critical wording in the resolution of the drama in Daniel 6:20-26. The reputation of Israel's God is what is on the line.

*"When he came near the den, he called to Daniel in an anguished voice, 'Daniel, **servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to rescue you from the lions?**' Daniel answered, 'O king, live forever! **My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in his sight. Nor have I ever done any wrong before you, O king.'** Then King Darius wrote to all the peoples, nations and men of every language throughout the land: 'May you prosper greatly! I issue a decree that in every part of my kingdom people **must fear and reverence the God of Daniel.** For he is the living God and he endures forever; his kingdom will not be destroyed, his dominion will never end.'*

The story concludes with a proclamation recognizing reverence for the God of Israel, which really has been the major theme of each story to this point.

Timeless Principal

Since the beginning of time, the journey of faith has required courage to stay faithful to God. Abraham moved to a faraway land. Gideon faced a large army with a small force of men, and Jeremiah faithfully prophesied to a belligerent people. Now Daniel, one of the giants of faith, bravely approaches an open window and continues to pray, even though his life is threatened. It is hard to imagine a greater picture of steadfast faithfulness than this aged saint shuffling to the window and kneeling to pray.

You can positively affect the reputation of God when you stay faithful, though threatened. People are watching what you'll do if you're ridiculed for your beliefs, or if you're pressured to compromise your standards, or if you're having to persevere in a difficult relationship. Will you stay faithful to God? Will you keep practicing your Christian faith, or will you cave under pressure? Stay faithful, even if you're threatened.

Closing

These three stories share a common denominator. God uses people to show who he really is. Despite Jerusalem being in ruins and the temple destroyed, he restores his reputation in Babylon through his faithful servant Daniel. Daniel and his friends elevate God's reputation by trusting in his goodness, greatness, and power.

Now, here's the question for today. How might God desire to make his goodness, greatness, power, and love known through you? As professing Christians grow increasingly careless with God's reputation, how might God use your life to elevate his name in this world?

Think of our earlier scenario of the conversation in the break room at work: a woman wounded by a church fight, turned off by an inconsistent boss, disillusioned by a hypocritical Christian leader. How could your consistency and faithfulness be used to reach into that person's life? You simply never know how God will choose to use your life.

Stand alone if you have to State what God has done Stay faithful when threatened