

## Daniel 1 - The courage to stand out

There's a good reason why soldiers and certain wild animals wear camouflage. Blending in is a tool for survival. If you're getting noticed, you're open to attack. If you're going to stand out, you need a good reason, and you need courage.

Read through the Bible, and you'll read about God's people standing out from the crowd and getting themselves noticed. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we can expect to be called to stand out too, where we live and love and work and play.

We're continuing our series on courage this week and next, and reminding ourselves of that quote: 'The Church in the West doesn't need more teaching, it needs more courage.' And in Daniel 1, we read about God's people standing out, and changing the world as they do. Today we're going to learn from that. We're going to find the good reason, and find the courage. So we can stand out and change things round here too.

Daniel 1 starts with the story of God's people in Judah being deported by the invading foreign power of Babylon. Can you imagine yourself amongst these people? Captured... exiled... thrown into a new land, a new culture... still alive, but at the whim of authorities who could crush you at any time. Wouldn't the sensible thing to do be to... blend in? Keep the head down, keep quiet, fall in line, don't rock the boat...

Especially if you were one of Daniel and his friends. Look at vv.3-6. They were noticed as special. They got an unconditional for the University of Babylon (but this wasn't an offer, it was conscription). The curriculum here was Babylonian culture, literature, religion and customs; and the menu was the finest Babylonian food from the King's table.

The whole project these lads were being enrolled into was an indoctrination. Being moulded to become what the culture wanted them to be. It was a factory for producing Babylon-shaped leaders. It was an 'If you want to get on around here, do it this way' culture. 'Eat this. Wear that. Read this. Don't stick out.'

But Daniel and his friends *did* stick out. They stood out for their *ability*, and for their *integrity*. Before we get to that, though...

*Do you prefer to blend in or stand out? Why?*

As a Christian, you can stand out with your *ability*. That takes courage, because it puts you in the spotlight and under the microscope.

Dan Walker has done that in his work in journalism and media enough to make it to being a presenter of BBC Breakfast and Football Focus. He's very public about his Christian belief. When Walker got the BBC Breakfast gig, the press questioned whether a Creationist could objectively interview people. Walker's media and social media output is heavily under the spotlight, and open to media comment.

Francis Collins was the Director of the Human Genome Project, a highly influential project in the scientific community mapping the human genome. Again, very publicly, Collins is a Christian. That's meant him taking on the extra work of writing and speaking to challenge the popular myth that science and faith don't match up, and making the case that they do.

In vv.3-6 we read about Daniel and his friends being part of a number who stood out for their *ability*. Quick learners. Smart, able, educated people. They had demonstrated ability that got them noticed, and gave them opportunities in influential places (even if this was all in a place they didn't really want to be).

Look ahead to vv.17-20, and we read more about how Daniel and his friends *especially* stood out. They stood out as *better* than their colleagues at their work as government advisors - ten times better, v.20 says. You can imagine the consequences of that. Jealousy and bitterness from peers overlooked for promotions in the court. A very high level of scrutiny over their work. Being open to everybody's criticisms the more attention they got.

Standing out in their ability and their work was not the easy choice here. Blending in and keeping the head down was. They could have told themselves a couple of stories here to justify holding back from their full potential, and even rooted it in their faith in God.

They could have sold themselves a kind of bitter zealous faith. 'We're here in Babylon against our will... these people attacked us and mocked our God... helping them is helping God's enemies... we won't offer our best work for *them!*'

Or they could have sold themselves a false humility lie. They could have said, 'We don't want to show off... we don't want to act like we're better than

others... we don't want others to miss out on opportunities that we don't mind missing...'

But Daniel and his friends didn't go down either of those roads. They followed God's lead in the letter that the exile community received from the prophet Jeremiah. It's the one with the verse everyone sticks up in their house to reassure them - Jeremiah 29:11, 'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'

Well, just before that, the letter told God's people to build homes, marry, settle and, in v.7 - '...seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.' Daniel and his mates had read God's Word. So they didn't buy the lie that goes, 'I'm too zealous for God to give my best to this heathen workplace!'

They didn't buy the false humility lie either. Because they recognised that the ability they had been given was from God, and it was their responsibility to put it to use. Back in Daniel 1:17 - 'To these four young men *God gave* knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds.'

These guys used the gifts that *God* had given them to stand out in the working environment they were in. God hasn't made us all postgraduate language and diplomacy experts with top government jobs like these lads. He didn't give all of them the same gift either - it was only Daniel who got the dreams and visions interpretation stuff.

But God's given *you* something - something to take, use, develop, and excel in. It could be in your workplace or family or friendship group or a community of people you live amongst or spend time with. God will give us different things to stand out with. But to find your thing, and then develop it and use it to bless those around you and bring glory and greater fame to *God* - that's one way that Daniel 1 teaches God's people to stand out.

The result of Daniel and his friends standing out in their God-given ability was that they became the go to guys. They developed a reputation for being worth consulting - which in their case happened to mean shaping a nation from the seat of power.

What if all of us, in our church, became the go to guys and girls to consult about some area of life and work? It could be a medical technique, or a way of handling difficult relationships. It could be an engineering breakthrough, or being the one the family comes to for wisdom. It could be an educational method, or the one in the neighbourhood that people would knock on the door of for help.

What if the missional communities we're going to form from now on become go to places that people *want* to come and be involved in, because they're the best places to go for various kinds of life giving activity, and the best people to spend time doing it with?

*What's the thing God has made you able in? How do you use it? How might you develop so that you really stand out from everyone else with it?*

When, as a Christian, you make the most of the talents God has given you and stand out in your ability as a doctor, nurse, teacher, painter and decorator, carer, physiotherapist, early years practitioner, student, businessman, neighbour, lawyer, engineer (etc....) you begin to draw attention. So when people start looking closely at you, standing out for your *ability* needs to be coupled with standing out for your *integrity*.

You don't have to be a celebrity Christian to stand out. This is Gary Grant. I bet you've never heard of him, right? He's the owner of toy store chain The Entertainer (there's been one in the Eastgate since last Christmas). As a Christian he has stood out in his business ability enough to keep a 100% family owned retail business going through hard economic times. And he has stood out in his integrity for some of the choices he makes about running these stores.

The Entertainer doesn't open on Sundays. They announce that on their shop radio: 'We're closed on Sundays so our staff can be with their families.' If Grant is uncomfortable with a particular toy or brand being sold to children, they won't stock it. He and his staff prayed earnestly for their business rivals Woolworths on the brink of their collapse.

And the press have picked up and reported on all of this. And it's a story of standing out with a combination of ability and integrity. News that we want the world to hear, and associate with the name of Jesus.

Daniel and his friends stood out for their integrity as well as their ability. In vv. 8-16, we read about Daniel and co asking for the vegetarian option - when

that wasn't really an option. It's not that these lads believed God only wants us to eat vegetables. But God's people at the time did live under food purity laws from the Old Testament.

There were laws about what meat was clean and what was unclean for Jews, and rules about the draining of blood. None of these, of course, were observed by their captors. So for these young men trying to live their faith with integrity, the only thing they could do in conscience was ask not to eat any of the very fine food that was literally put on a plate for them.

It took courage to ask to be different here. Refusing the prescribed diet was obviously a no-no, since the first guy they ask about this, the chief official, says, 'I sympathise, but if I go along with this and it goes wrong, it's my head on the block.' Drawing attention, and possibly putting themselves in danger - was trying to be faithful to God really *worth* that?

And what about when the stance you take out of faithfulness to God risks a cost for others around you? For Daniel and his friends, their integrity meant pressure on the chief official who said, 'Sorry, but no...' The guard appointed over them who did help...

For you, it might be some business that falls through and affects you and your team, because you're not in good conscience about the who or how of the deal. Or your colleague's workload has increased because you've refused to do something as a Christian. Your friends at school are starting to get abuse because they don't disown you when you won't cross lines with sex, drugs and alcohol.

Daniel & co didn't back down from acting the way they felt was right under God, even if that caused inconvenience, discomfort or risk to others. Actually, in vv.11-16, they invited those others around them to observe their life choices, and see if things didn't actually turn out *better*.

Standing out with integrity as Christians and drawing people's attention with it doesn't shy away from showing the results. It publishes them. Our church's vision is 'People discovering and sharing that life in Jesus is infinitely fuller.' Our money-where-the-mouth is living out of that is for people to see how our life stands out with integrity, and to observe over time that this really is a better, fuller, more wonderful life than the profit-is-the-bottom-line, rest-is-for-the-lazy, everyone's-a-rival, look-after-number-one world that we live in.

Live and work with integrity. Don't hide it, show it. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, '...let your light *shine* before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.' Peter learned from that, lived it out, and passed it on to us in 1 Peter 2:12 - 'Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.'

Let people see your integrity. So that people can taste and see that the Lord is good. The Lord is better. And life with Him is infinitely fuller.

*What are the places in your life and work where a choice for integrity is risky for you and those around you? Pray for these to become opportunities for people to see that 'life in Jesus is infinitely fuller.'*

This is my friend who is originally from Pakistan. I won't use his name on a recording. A few years ago, a double suicide bomb attack on a church in Pakistan killed 122 people and injured 170 more. His mother was amongst those killed. That Christian community stood out. And they suffered for it. The next week, 500 people turned up to worship Jesus.

What happened? Another suicide bomb attack on the church. This one failed, because security was up that week. The bomber sadly killed even more people that week; but it was the unfortunate surrounding population rather than the targeted Christians. The following week, 800 people turned up to worship Jesus.

Why stand out? Why risk your reputation, career prospects, friendships, or even like those worshippers in Taliban territory, your lives for the sake of the God of the Bible? The stories in Daniel's book teach us two good reasons that we need. When we stand out - in our ability and in our integrity - we can signpost our God to the people who notice us. And we can see the culture around us change to honour our God.

In Daniel 2, the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar lays down an impossible gauntlet to his advisors. 'I had a dream. Tell me what it was, and tell me what it means. If you can, I'll lay riches on you. If you can't, I'll lay death upon you.' Not one person could do it.

Except Daniel. He stood out in his ability here, he described the dream and its interpretation perfectly - but crucially, he topped and tailed it with, 'It's not me, but God who makes me able to do this stand out thing.' And the result is that the highest power in the land speaks favourably about The LORD God.

In Daniel 3; Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah stand out in their integrity. It's the famous story of a king who orders a nation to worship an image of gold, and three young guys who stood out for saying, 'no - we will only worship God,' and got thrown into a fiery furnace for their troubles. They come out of the fire unscathed. And because of how they had spoken of their God and testified to His power and worth, when they come out, the King is suitably impressed with The LORD God. This time the culture change it secures is freedom of religion - at least to worship The LORD.

In Daniel 6, it's a similar story with a different king, and this time it's Daniel standing out for his integrity. The new law said, 'nobody can pray except to the King.' But Daniel would not stop praying three times a day to The LORD. The spies came. The sentence was passed. Thrown into a den of hungry lions. But again, Daniel comes out unscathed. And he testifies first and foremost to his God delivering him, and secondly to his own innocence and integrity. And the culture change that comes about? Not just tolerance of the God of the Bible, but the reverence of a nation for Him.

In Daniel 5, Daniel stands out for both his ability and his integrity. Another king in the timeline throws a raucous party treating the things of God's temple like disposable paper plates and plastic cups. A hand appears and writes something on the wall, and he's terrified (this is where we get the phrase, 'The writing's on the wall').

Daniel is called on to step in and use his gift. And to do it faithfully, he has to speak truth to power. He has to deliver the news that what the king has seen means his days are numbered. Not an easy message to deliver. Not if you want your own days *not* to be numbered. But again, in this, Daniel changes the language from 'the spirit of the gods that is in you' (as the king puts it), to 'The Most High God' that enables Daniel and judges the king. Pointing to God, and directly calling out the sin in the culture around him.

The good reason for standing out as Christians is that when we do - both in ability and integrity - we can take the attention we've drawn and point it to Jesus. We can tell people, *He's* what makes us able. *He's* what makes us different. *He's* the God worth knowing and worshipping. And we can be part of transforming the culture around us in Kingdom ways - where God is honoured and revered, and His ways become more and more the ways of our workplaces and homes and communities.

There are environments we are in as God's people that need a signpost to Jesus and cultural transformation. The companies we work in that rip people off or treat people poorly. The staff room reeking of gossip. Trades cutting corners and doing shoddy jobs. Friendship circles picking on a person or talking behind their backs.

People 'doing the minimum'. People hiding or shelving their abilities. Work practice that is profit or power driven. Shunning responsibility with over humility in a, 'yes, but what do I know?' way. Families set on nursing grudges and never hoping for healing in relationships. People mocking or disobeying The LORD - where being 'part of this' means going against The LORD's lead. Bribes, blackmails, favours and lies - whether instigating or participating in these.

God's people can be agents of change in all these places and more. If we have the courage to stand out - to excel in the things that God has made us able to excel in, and to make choices for integrity that also draw attention - then we could see the Kingdom of God grow.

Last time I spoke on courage, I spoke about where the courage we need comes from. This time, the courage we're looking at comes from the motives we have. If we really are motivated to bring God fame and honour - to get God noticed and get people intrigued by Him... to live for 'Hallowed be your name' as well as praying for it...

And if we're really motivated to see 'God's Kingdom come, and His will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven' - then those motives will be the source of our courage to stand out in ability and integrity, and see the world around us change.