

THE
G O S P E L
A C C O R D I N G T O
D A N I E L

A CHRIST-CENTERED APPROACH

BRYAN CHAPPELL



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To the faithful people of Grace Presbyterian Church whose love of Scripture, the grace of the gospel, and my family provides constant encouragement and great joy in serving the One who comes in glory on the clouds of heaven to receive an everlasting kingdom for all peoples, nations, and languages.

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Introduction

If I were writing a regular introduction to the book of Daniel, I would inform readers that Daniel records the events and visions of his life more than five hundred years before the birth of Christ. I would add that Daniel and his people are in captive exile in Babylon at the time of his writing. Israel's wayward idolatries have led to this discipline from God that is also preparation for the nation's greater fruitfulness in the future. Finally, I would give some detail of the successive rulers under whom Daniel served and the successive kingdoms Daniel prophesied during his long years of captivity. These are important facts, and they can be researched at greater depth in any good study Bible or commentary.¹ But rehearsing these facts is not my purpose in writing this book.

My passion and privilege for the past three decades have been to help others see the presence of the gospel throughout Scripture. My contention has been that Christ's grace does not wait until the last chapters of Matthew to make its appearance but rather is the dawning light increasing throughout Scripture toward the day of the Savior. Jesus contends the same when, after his resurrection, he speaks to disciples on the road to Emmaus and "beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27).

Of course, key questions for us are: (1) How do all the Scriptures bear witness to Christ? and (2) Why is this important?

How All the Scriptures Bear Witness to Christ

Christ-centered exposition of Scripture should not require us to reveal Jesus by some mysterious magic of allegory or typology. Rather, solid exposition

should identify how every text functions in furthering our understanding of who Christ is, what the Father sent him to do, and why. The goal is not to make Jesus magically appear in every detail of Hebrew history or prophecy but rather to show where every text stands in relation to the ultimate revelation of the person and/or work of Christ. To do this we must discern the message of grace unfolding throughout Scripture, of which Jesus is the culmination.

Our goal as expounders of God's Word—to state it again—is not to force every text to mention Jesus, but to show how every text furthers our understanding of God's grace, of which Christ Jesus is the ultimate revelation. In many and varied ways the Lord shows us that he provides what humanity cannot provide for itself, including what he spiritually requires. As he provides food for the hungry, rest for the weary, strength for the weak, faithfulness for the unfaithful, and a blessed future for those with a sinful past, we gain more and more understanding of the merciful nature of our God. Both the dawning and the full light of grace prepare and enable the people of God to understand who Jesus is, what he does, and the honor due him.

Keeping Sight of the Witness of Grace

This Christ-centered approach to discerning the gospel in all Scripture becomes important when we read Daniel's accounts because his amazing little book has so much else to capture our attention. Daniel combines classic stories of epic heroism with spectacular revelations of the power of God to orchestrate future events for his ultimate glory. As a consequence, we may not see the gospel truths of Daniel if we fall into two common but errant approaches to the book: making Daniel the object of our hero worship or making Daniel the subject of our debates.

Avoiding Hero Worship

We are tempted to make Daniel the object of our worship in the first half of the book, which is largely a biography of his life. Daniel's courage and faithfulness in a land of cruelty and captivity can easily tempt us to make him the primary hero of the text. In doing so we neglect Daniel's own message: God is the hero. God saves a sinful and weak people; he preserves young men from impurity and old men from lions; he answers prayer and interprets dreams; he exalts the humble and humbles the proud; he vindicates the faithful and vanquishes the profane; he rescues covenant-forsaking people by returning them to the land of the covenant; and he promises a glorious future to those with a sinful past. Daniel acts on the grace God repeatedly provides, but God

is always the One who first provides the opportunity, resources, and rescue needed for Daniel's faithfulness. If we reverse the order and make God's grace dependent on Daniel's goodness, then we forsake the gospel message that Daniel is telling and produce the hero worship of adventure tales rather than the divine worship of the gospel according to Daniel.

Maintaining Redemptive Focus

The second half of the book contains prophetic content that can make us susceptible to a second interpretive error: making Daniel primarily the subject of our debates about eschatology (the end time). The book of Daniel contains some of the most amazing and detailed prophesies in all of Scripture. Centuries and millennia in advance, Daniel predicts events as momentous as the succession of vast empires and relates details as precise as the symptoms of a disease that will slay a future king. Daniel also speaks about the future of the people of God in visions that are hard to understand and that relate to some events still future to us.

These are incredibly important prophesies, but we can become so stressed and combative about the interpretation of particular aspects that we neglect the prophet's central message: God will rescue his people from the miseries of their sin by the work of the Messiah. The righteous will be vindicated, evil will be destroyed, and the covenant blessings will prevail because Jesus will reign. All this occurs *not* because humans control their fate or deserve God's redemption but because the God of grace uses his sovereign power to maintain his covenant promises forever. This gospel according to Daniel should give us courage against our foes, hope in our distress, and perseverance in our trials—if we will not let every prophetic mystery derail us from the main message of prevailing grace.

Why the Witness to Grace Is So Important

To Keep the Message Christian

Why should we take care to maintain focus on the gospel of grace in our interpretations of Daniel? The first reason is to keep our messages Christian. We are not Jews, Muslims, or Hindus whose followers may believe our status with God is determined by our performance. We believe that Christ's finished work is our only hope. To make Daniel simply an example of one who fulfills God's moral imperatives and thus earns his blessing is essentially an unchristian message. Apart from God's justifying, enabling, and preserving grace, no

human can do what God requires to be done. Jesus said, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). Interpretations of Daniel devoid of the enabling grace of Christ—even in its Old Testament forms of unmerited divine provision—implicitly deny the necessity of Christ.

A key question that we must ask ourselves at the end of every exposition of Scripture is, “Would my message have been acceptable in a synagogue or mosque?” Was our core message only “Be as good as this biblical hero,” or “Be better than other people,” or, at least, “Be better than you were last week”? If any of these are the primary message we take from Daniel, then we inevitably leave people with the understanding that their status before God depends on their performance. That message is inevitable in virtually every other faith, but cannot represent the Christianity of the Bible.

To Provide the Power of Grace

The power of grace to stimulate love for God is the ultimate reason we preach redemptive interpretations of Scripture. Sermons marked by consistent adulation of the mercy of God continually fill the Christian heart with more cause to love God. This love becomes the *primary* motivation for Christian obedience as hearts in which the Spirit dwells respond with love for their Savior. This is why the apostle Paul could say the grace of God actually is “training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age” (Titus 2:11–12).

Our teaching and preaching should be designed to fuel a preeminent love for God that makes doing his will the believer’s greatest joy (2 Cor. 5:9), knowing that this joy is the strength for fulfilling our responsibilities (Neh. 8:10). The great Protestant Reformers reminded us that the task of those who teach and preach the Bible is not to harangue or guilt parishioners into “slavish duty” but rather to fill them up with “a childlike love” for God by extolling the wonders of his grace (Westminster Confession of Faith, XX.i). Consistent proclamation of motivating and enabling grace drives despair, pride, and disobedience from the Christian life. Despair dies when we know our failures are not greater than the grace of God. Pride has no place when we know our performance is not the basis of his love for us. Disobedience departs when our greatest desire is to walk with the Savior who loved us and gave himself for us.

Thus, emphasizing the grace of all the Scriptures is not simply an interpretive scheme required by the Bible’s overarching themes; it is regular exposure of the heart of God to ignite love for him in the heart of believers. We preach grace in order to fan into flame zeal for our Savior. Our informational goals remain in place (we need to teach people what to believe and what to do), but

relational and spiritual goals remain primary. We never neglect expounding the gospel truths that pervade Scripture in order to fill the hearts of believers with love for God that drives out love for the world. For without love for the world, its temptations and disappointments have no power. We simply are not tempted to do what we have no desire to do or to despair over what we do not hold most dear. Grace leads to godliness. That is why it is so important to find and flesh out the gospel of grace in the book of Daniel.

If we are able to discern that the prophet's heroism is really a gift of God, and if we come to see that Daniel's prophecies are really a means of encouraging us to not be overwhelmed by the discouragements of a broken world—because God is unrelentingly working his redemption plan for his wayward people—then we will have discerned the good news of the gospel Daniel wanted us to know, even if we still have a few questions about his prophesies.

1

The Undeiled

— DANIEL 1 —

In recent years much of my time has been spent helping different generations of church leaders understand each other. An older generation came of age during a time of a perceived Christian consensus in our nation. The goal of many of those believers was to encourage the “moral majority” to become active enough politically to control the institutions of our society. A following generation matured in a time when Christian young people could only perceive themselves as a minority in a pluralistic culture, and its leaders have not sought to obtain control so much as credibility. For these younger leaders the pressing question is, “How do we make Christianity credible to a society that wants nothing to do with the faith of our fathers?” The Bible, with great prior wisdom, prepares for the questions of such a younger generation with the historical accounts of Daniel and his friends. They are young people forced by a Babylonian invasion to leave their culture of majority faith and, as captives, live their faith as a minority in a culture whose majority follows a pagan pluralism. For Daniel to make the historic faith of Israel credible in such a culture is an immense challenge that contains timely instruction for us. How will he and his young friends be faithful among the faithless? The answer is in living their convictions with undeiled courage such as we find in the first chapter of Daniel:

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 gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God. And he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his god. Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility, youths without blemish, of good appearance and skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king's palace, and to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans. The king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate, and of the wine that he drank. They were to be educated for three years, and at the end of that time they were to stand before the king. Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah of the tribe of Judah. And the chief of the eunuchs gave them names: Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego.

But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself. And God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs, and the chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, "I fear my lord the king, who assigned your food and your drink;

for why should he see that you were in worse condition than the youths who are of your own age? So you would endanger my head with the king." Then Daniel said to the steward whom the chief of the eunuchs had assigned over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, "Test your servants for ten days; let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then let our appearance and the appearance of the youths who eat the king's food be observed by you, and deal with your servants according to what you see." So he listened to them in this matter, and tested them for ten days. At the end of ten days it was seen that they were better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youths who ate the king's food. So the steward took away their food and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables.

As for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams. At the end of the time, when the king had commanded that they should be brought in, the chief of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar. And the king spoke with them, and among all of them none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Therefore they stood before the king. And in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his kingdom. And Daniel was there until the first year of King Cyrus. (Dan. 1:1-21)

Almost three decades after several people were killed because someone put cyanide in Tylenol bottles to blackmail the manufacturer, newspaper headlines announced that police might be closing in on the culprit. The story of the deadly contamination is a distant memory to most of us now, but when I was in seminary it was an immediate concern to a student friend of mine and his

wife. She worked as a quality control inspector at a pharmaceutical company in order to support the family. One day, through mistaken procedures, a major order of syringes was contaminated and would not pass inspection. When the wife of my friend reported the contamination to her boss, he quickly computed the costs of reproducing the order and made a “cost-effective” decision: ship the order. He ordered her to sign the inspection clearance despite the contamination. She refused.

Because of government regulations, she was the only one that could sign the clearance. So the syringes did not ship that day. The next day, a Friday, the wife got a visit from the company president. He said that he would give her the weekend to think it over, but if the forms were not signed on Monday, her job would be in jeopardy.

In fact, much more than her job was in jeopardy. Because the wife’s job was this couple’s only means of support, the husband’s education and ministry future were also in jeopardy. All their hopes, dreams, and family plans of many years could be shattered as a result of a choice to be made over the next two days. For this young couple, all the high-minded doctrine they had been receiving in seminary about God’s attributes, power, and provision boiled down to one very concrete decision. Could they afford to remain undeclared from the contamination the world was urging them to approve? Was the witness of holiness worth what it would cost?

This couple’s predicament was not unique to them, of course. In all ages God’s people are pressured to pollute the purity of their dedication to God. The pressures come from an array of sources: bosses, finances, competitors, friends, relatives, and congregations, as well as our own desires for success and significance. This couple faced such pressures. You have faced them. Daniel and his friends faced them. These pressures face anyone who seeks to live an undeclared life in a world of sin. That is why the Bible, in order to help us face these pressures, speaks so plainly about the risks, reasons, and rewards of holiness.

The Risks of Holiness

The account of Daniel and his friends makes it clear that there are risks to holiness. The Bible is practical enough to tell us to play “heads-up baseball.” Get prepared. Pay attention. You cannot do what your position in the culture requires if you do not know what is likely to come your way. And what is likely to come your way as a faithful believer is risk.

What Are the Risks?

The facts of Daniel's life are simple enough. He was a prisoner of war in Babylon. He had come from a noble family. But Babylon's conquest, deportation, and captivity of the people of Judah apparently dimmed any hope of power or honor that Daniel might have had. Although his future once looked bright, it now lay in dark shadows. Then came an unexpected ray of hope: King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon wanted some young Israelites trained for government service, probably for the purpose of managing fellow captives. As a result, Daniel and other promising Jewish slaves began training for positions of honor and power. They faced the possibility of going from being the king's slaves to being in the king's governing service. All Daniel and his friends needed to do was to go along, accept the privileges offered, and then the future that had looked so bleak would be bright again. And, of course, Daniel needed to keep his head down to keep his head on. To question the king's decisions not only would jeopardize Daniel's future but, in pagan Babylon, also would jeopardize his life (1:10).

But Daniel *did* question. For reasons that are not entirely clear, Daniel believed he would defile himself if he took the meat and drink that were offered to him. It is possible that the food had been included in some practice of idolatry, but it is also possible that accepting the fine fare simply seemed wrong to Daniel in light of the suffering of the rest of Israel. At any rate, the Bible says, "Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself" (1:8).

Some idea of the risk involved in such a request is made apparent in the response of the chief of the guards: "I fear my lord the king, who assigned your food and your drink; for why should he see that you were in worse condition than the youths who are of your own age? So you would endanger my head with the king" (1:10). Translation in plain English: "The king will chop my head off if I don't keep you—his prize captives—in good shape." Daniel responded, "OK, give us vegetables and water for ten days and see if we look any worse than the others" (1:12–13, paraphrase). Then the guard whom God had already caused to favor Daniel (1:9) agreed to this "vegan diet."

These facts are so familiar to us and so bathed in the aura of Sunday-school story time that we may no longer be able to connect with their reality. I cannot help but relate them to the accounts of John McCain in the 2008 presidential campaign. Regardless of political affiliation, everyone acknowledged that he was a true war hero. We should remember why. He was the son of a high-ranking naval officer, but he graduated fifth from the bottom of his class at

the Naval Academy. The future looked bleak for such a graduate, so he took the risk and volunteered for combat duty as a Navy pilot in the Vietnam War. On his twenty-third mission, he was shot down. In the crash, he broke both arms and a leg. He was then captured and put in a primitive prison where his wounds could not properly heal. When his captors discovered the identity of his father—and that McCain was military “royalty”—they offered him the opportunity to be released, but only if he made certain compromises. They said, “You’ll get out of this hell, out of this pain, out of this disgrace, if you will just testify to our gracious handling of you.” McCain refused to defile himself by betraying his country and fellow prisoners with such a lie. As a consequence, he spent five and a half years in prison with over half in solitary confinement, and with his wounds not only improperly treated but used as a means to torture him. John McCain’s experience reminds us that, in the real world, doing the right thing is no guarantee of good results.

Why Mention the Risks?

Decisions not to defile—to be faithful and act righteously—really can involve terrible risk. Why state this again? Because when we are removed from the pressures, we may find it easy to say that we would not struggle to risk security and success to maintain faithfulness to our nation or to our God. But it is not that easy! And the Lord cares enough about us to put this clear message in Scripture: holiness is risky business. If we do not know this or will not face such hard realities, then we are not ready for the battles that are surely in our path.

It does not take real war conditions to be in a real war for holiness. If you were being asked to sign a clearance form for contaminated products and the decision determined the future of your career and family plans, would the choice really be easy? The wife of my friend did refuse to sign the forms for the contaminated syringes. And she was fired.

We should never minimize the risks of holiness. The Bible does not. We should not pretend that living for the Lord is always painless, easy, or fun—for then we are abandoning and abusing those who have suffered for their stand for God and his holiness. Whenever we pretend that holiness is easy, we isolate and undermine those who must take a stand in this world. And a time will come when every believer must make such a stand. Our society may praise idealism, but it rarely tolerates living those ideals. And the problems are not just in our dealings with others. We, too, have personal idolatries that can jeopardize holiness and produce defilement. Some of the idols we are prone to serve include success, security, position, pleasure, or just being admired. They may not sound

sinister, but to sacrifice holiness to obtain them is just as defiling as the food that Nebuchadnezzar offered to Daniel and his friends. University students are often tempted by moral compromise and dishonesty in academics or finances because those are pressures common in college. Young parents may be tempted by feelings of being trapped or victimized by the degree of care their children need. The drive to succeed can tempt those in business to act without integrity or compassion. All of these pressures are normal and should be expected in the pursuit of holiness; if we do not know this or do not acknowledge it, then we will not be prepared for the challenges that are sure to come.

Recent events in Haiti reminded me that in his teens my son contracted a parasite on a mission trip to that impoverished nation. The parasite triggered Crohn's disease—a chronic and incurable illness. There was risk in his witness; there always is. The risks may be very different for different persons. The risks may not be to health but to income, seniority, or position. But regardless of the difference in the *nature* of the risks, we help each other by acknowledging that risk is *normal* for believers. As my daughter began seminary recently and took a job at a computing firm to pay the bills, her coworkers encouraged her to lie to meet her employer's requirements. What was so telling about this to me was that when I went to seminary thirty years earlier, coworkers at my outside job also encouraged me to lie about quotas that I had to meet. For both of us, the decision to dedicate our lives to the Lord seemed to bring some of the greatest temptations to betray him.

Of course, the experiences of my daughter and me are not unique. We should acknowledge that, whether because of the products they make or the practices they approve, many Christians feel compromised every day in the workplace. Confusion about what to do, fear of consequences, and lack of faith in God's provision inhibit their holiness, but nothing is more crippling than the sense of being alone: "It's just me; no one else has these struggles. God makes their lives easy, but he's forgotten me." Others need our confession that we also face challenges in order to maintain their bravery.

There is a fellowship of risk that enfolds all who strive for holiness. We will each be more willing to stand for the Lord and less prone to fall into discouragement when we are aware of the risks we share with faithful believers, like seminarians before us, missionaries before us, business leaders before us, Daniels before us—and a Savior before us. Do not forget where the story of Daniel leads. From these captive people will come generations of suffering people who will be relieved by a suffering Savior. We should expect nothing else. The world that opposes the things of God will oppose those who seek to live for him. That is part of the story. We just have to remember that it is not the end of the story.

The Reasons for Holiness

If there are such risks to holiness, then we need to know why the Lord allows them. Why not simply make the work of the faithful easy?

Preparation

The first reason that God allows us to face such risks is that they are preparation for spiritual battles that always lie ahead. Starting with this first chapter, the book of Daniel goes from one thrilling adventure to the next. A quick scan of the next five chapters will reveal more encounters with death-dealing kings, nightmare visions, a giant idol of gold, a foray into a fiery furnace, a king turned into a wild animal, and a prophet thrown to the lions. Adventure movie directors should love this material. Each trial leads to a new and greater challenge. And that's just the point. Contamination continues to threaten lives kept pure for God. Each initial choice of holiness is preparation for later battles.

Our tendency when facing today's battles is to wonder why God is abandoning us to such difficulty. Instead, Daniel helps us to understand that the Lord is not *abandoning* but *preparing* us for greater work in the future. Only weeks after assuming responsibilities at the first church I pastored full-time after seminary, I discovered that one of my officers was living with a woman not his wife. Other officers and many families in the church had their livelihoods entangled with a company well known for its ethical and moral transgressions. Generational antipathies divided other families, and some of our spiritually mature leaders, on whose help I was depending, unexpectedly died. More than once I wondered if the Lord had put me to work and then gone on vacation. One day I was strengthened when I overheard a godly woman in our church speculate with another, "I wonder what the Lord is preparing Bryan to do that requires him to go through so much testing?"

That comment was scary in that it made me wonder what lay ahead that could be worse than these circumstances. But the comment also helped me to think that the trials were not purposeless. The Lord was *preparing*, not *abandoning*. And since that period, there has never been a time in my ministry without challenge: sometimes relational, sometimes financial, sometimes denominational. I spoke to our seminary board recently about a major challenge on the horizon, but I reminded them that they had supported me years previous in a similar set of events. The Lord had not only brought us through the past but was then preparing us for the present.

If you don't think that way—that present trial is preparing for future purposes, that God is giving you experience and strength by testing your

mettle—then present trials will overwhelm you. I have mentioned often to students my experience of being in line at my own seminary graduation. I looked down the line of my graduating friends and recognized that every single one of us had been through a major life trial during seminary. Suddenly I realized that Satan had been doing whatever he could to stop us. If such opposition is all we see, then discouragement will destroy us. But if we are able to see that the Lord is also preparing his servants—never allowing more than we can stand but stretching, molding, and strengthening us for greater work in his kingdom—then we can face today’s battle with the resolution and hope that the Lord intends. That is how it was for Daniel and his friends, too. Today’s battles were preparation for tomorrow’s. The Lord was preparing them to be his instruments. If I had not had trials in seminary, I would not have been ready for those in the local church; if I had not had trials in the local church, I would not have been ready for those in the denomination; if I had not had those in the denomination, I would not be ready to serve the wider church today.

Protection

The perspective that present trials are preparation for tomorrow’s battles underscores another reason that the Lord allows the pressures of defilement: protection. By being prepared, we are being protected from the consequences of our enemy’s victories. Daniel will face greater battles than this test of his diet. He will have greater responsibilities than whether to eat vegetables or sweets. As a consequence of committing to serve the Lord with integrity, Daniel was without defilement (1:8). The biblical term for “defile,” used without a negative term attached to it, means “to redeem.” However, in this negative mode, the word includes the notion of desecration. The implication is that Daniel wished to be spiritually protected from the taint of sin. His desire for holiness kept his heart close to God. As a result, Daniel not only grew in the knowledge of Babylonian literature and learning, but he also had understanding of visions and dreams from God (1:17). The understanding that Daniel had of God’s ways indicates that his holiness helped preserve a closeness with the Lord—a fellowship of Daniel’s spirit with the Spirit of God—so that he could face Satan’s assaults with wisdom and courage. Prepared by the lesser battles of this day, Daniel will also be protected in the greater battles of tomorrow.

During my summers as a college student I worked for a major road construction company in western Tennessee. As an assistant to one of the supervisors, I earned excellent pay. That was important because the university I attended was very expensive and neither I nor my family had the money to pay for my

education. Besides, jobs were hard to come by, so it was vital to my future that I hold this one.

One morning my supervisor told me I was doing such a good job for him and the company that he was going to give me a special privilege. He owned a hunting lodge in a nearby county, and he wanted me to spend a day or two there enjoying the outdoors. I thanked him for the offer but explained I needed every day of work I could get for college expenses and could not afford the time off.

“Don’t worry about that,” he said. “You just do a little painting and repairing at my cabin while you’re there, and I’ll keep you on the payroll.”

I was off like a shot. By that evening I was at the cabin savoring a meal of fresh, fried catfish and looking forward to another day of little work and lots of fun. Then the telephone rang. It was my father calling. When he arrived home from work that evening, my mother had explained where I was and under what arrangements.

“What are you doing collecting company pay for private work?” my dad asked.

Well, I had not quite thought of it that way. I did not want to think of it that way. “Dad,” I said, “I can’t go back to my boss now and tell him what he asked me to do is unethical. He may get offended, and I may lose this job. How am I going to get through school if I don’t have this job?”

Dad replied, “I know you need this job to prepare for what you want to do. I also know what you need to prepare for life, and this is not it.”

I went home. I knew he was right. And, as time has lengthened since the situation, I have understood even more how right he was. My father accurately saw that careless ethics early in life could lead to greater compromises and worse consequences. If the deceit, however slight it seemed, had worked that time, what kind of precedent would it have established in my life? Would I have looked back at some point on a successful career and said, “See how beneficial it was for me to be unethical at that point?” If so, what decisions might I have been tempted to make at difficult moments in that career? In what greater dangers might I have placed myself by believing that past compromise helped me? My father’s insistence on non-defilement was preparation for life *and* protection from greater wrong down the road.

One reason the careless defilement of holy commitments cannot be permitted is that it only leads to further harm. Defilement distances God’s people from his protections. If we do not practice holiness today, his standards do not protect us tomorrow. The consequences of sin are pleasant only for a season (Heb. 11:25), but then the result is great hurt. God loves us enough to protect us from this future hurt by calling us to present holiness. The trial is never without purpose. God protects us from greater harm by giving us the

opportunities to learn how to depend on him now, so that the later trials and temptations do not overwhelm us. This is why we need to make sure we have present commitment to holiness. Because of pressures and difficulties, you and I may be tempted to say, “I will serve the Lord better . . . later.” My response to that is, “No, you will not! And neither will I.” Whether our present trials are personal, private, moral, financial, or familial, if we are not preparing for tomorrow’s battles with holiness today, we will not be spiritually strong enough to stand for the Lord later. Today’s trials are the training ground for tomorrow’s battlefield. The time to be undefiled is now. Later is too late.

The Rewards of Holiness

Welfare

The preparation and protection afforded by Daniel’s holiness indicate that God’s commands for purity are neither arbitrary nor capricious. The Bible’s call to holiness reflects our God’s desire for us not to walk away from the goodness he wants to provide in our lives—goodness that accompanies holiness. There are rewards of holiness evident in Daniel’s life that we need to understand. The first is his personal welfare.

God made provision for his goodness to be evident in the lives of Daniel and his friends by protecting their welfare. Apparently the vegetables and water were good for them. “At the end of the ten days it was seen that they were better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youths who ate the king’s food” (1:15). We do not know if this means a clear adolescent complexion or a strong muscular build, but it means something like that. God preserved their health. God also preserved their lives, so that a capricious king did not deem them unfit for his service and lop off their heads. God kept Daniel and his friends safe. From the little note at the end of the chapter we know that Daniel was preserved through intrigue and empire transitions until Cyrus was made king over Babylon, seventy or more years later (1:20–21).

More than that, God overwhelmingly blessed Daniel and his friends with spiritual gifts: they were made ten times wiser than all of Nebuchadnezzar’s wise men, and Daniel also had understanding of dreams and visions. Daniel’s protection of his relationship with the Lord was rewarded with a special closeness and communication that allowed him to understand the things of God. This is a very simple reminder that if we are responsible for leadership among God’s people (as pastors, lay leaders, or parents), our wisdom is inevitably tied to our piety. God gives understanding and usefulness to those who are faithful to him. Piety and spiritual discernment are inseparable.

God is more than capable of protecting us, and one of the rewards of our holiness is the preservation of our welfare. God did not abandon my seminary friend's wife, who was forced to leave her job at the pharmaceutical company. Because she would not sign the clearance forms for the contaminated syringes, the order was not delivered to the customer on time. Officials of that company investigated the delay and discovered how this woman had protected them from the contaminated syringes, even at the cost of her own job. The company for which the syringes were intended was so appreciative that they hired her and increased her pay. She finished putting her husband through seminary, and the family rejoices to this day in that expression of God's special protection.

I experienced something similar with my road-crew supervisor. When I followed my father's advice and told my boss I could not do private work for company pay, he simply said, "OK," and did not fire me.

God is more than able to provide for the welfare of those who stand for him. But now you and I have a problem, don't we? These "success stories," whether of characters biblical or contemporary, turned out so nice and neat. But life does not always come packaged with so pretty a ribbon tied around it. God is always able, but is he always willing to rescue the holy from earthly trials?

In fact, this gift of Daniel's welfare is not wrapped nearly as nicely as it may at first appear. Yes, Daniel is preserved for now, but he is also in captivity now. He will remain a captive his entire life, until he is over ninety years old. He will see his people enslaved for many decades. He will see them forced to bow to pagan gods. He will never again see his homeland. And the visions and prophecies God will grant him include predictions of the suffering of his people for many generations to come. So in what way can we speak of God *really* preserving the welfare of Daniel and his people with any sort of honest reflection of the greater context of the prophet's life?

The first way is by being reminded that there is a greater reality. This life is not the end of all things, nor is it the bulk of our existence. We are beings whose spiritual welfare is being prepared and protected beyond the confines of our earthly existence. Some of us may not receive the tangible rewards of holiness till we are in heaven with the Lord. Yet God "rewards those who seek him" (Heb. 11:6). The rewards of holiness are guaranteed, but they are not always immediate, discernible, or even present in this life. The question we face—the matter of faith we are being challenged to consider—is whether the eternal rewards are real enough to weigh against earthly risk. That is what the life of Daniel is really meant to confirm: that God is able and willing to provide what is best for his people for eternity.

Witness

The other reward of Daniel's holiness is witness. Daniel's stand for holiness clearly had an effect on others. When Daniel stood his ground, he did not stand alone. In near focus are his three friends: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. The simple message is that our holiness serves as a witness to those near us. By our holiness we demonstrate our trust in and loyalty to our Lord. But more than those close to Daniel are affected by his witness; Daniel himself was blessed. Of great reward to him, and to any who stand for their Lord, is knowledge that by our faithfulness to God in hard situations we are participating in the proclamation of our Lord's gracious nature. By standing for God in the face of risk, we declare that possessing and declaring the grace of God are more precious to us than anything this life can offer or deny.

We are meant to see Daniel's life not as a guarantee of uninterrupted glee but as a token of the irrepressible grace of God. Why are Daniel's people in captivity? The simple answer is because they have sinned. They have turned from the God of their forefathers, warped their worship of him, and compromised with his enemies. They deserve none of his attention, much less his mercy. And yet, *by the earthly blessings* of the life of Daniel, we and they are made to understand that God is still present among his people. He is still helping Daniel. God's covenant faithfulness has not left them. He is still providing for them. They have been faithless, but he remains faithful (see 2 Tim. 2:13). He has provided a witness from among the nobility (perhaps the royalty) of Israel—the nation through whom he promised a Redeemer for the nations of the earth. And when that witness and his companions honor God, the Lord shows his presence by his supernatural activity. The display of God's power in Daniel's preservation, and the continuation of his promises exhibited in the prophecies he gives to Daniel, proved our Lord's abiding care. Amid the present and future suffering of God's wayward people, Daniel's life is really a lens by which God shows that divine love is real, his covenant is unending, and his promises are more sure than anything this earth can offer. Though we may walk away from him, he will not walk away from us. Even if we fail to live as Daniel did in this account, God perseveres in his love as demonstrated through Daniel's life.

In response to Daniel's holiness—his decision to remain undefiled—God provides for Daniel's immediate welfare. But, more importantly for him and for us, through Daniel's holiness God provides a witness of the reality and perpetuity of the spiritual truths that are eternally important.

If Daniel would risk position, privilege, and life itself for a pure relationship with his God, then that must be quite a relationship and that must be

quite a God. His stand for his God *amid earthly deprivations* is a witness to the incomparable blessings of the grace of his God. By his willingness to risk everything for his God, Daniel shows how precious is a relationship with God.

There are not always tangible benefits nor only negligible damages as a result of holiness. But this life is only a moment in God's time (Ps. 39:4–5; 90). Our immediate concerns are almost nothing compared to the immensity and beauty of the plan God has for our souls. The rewards of holiness may only be tasted in the present, but we will definitely feast upon them in eternity (John 14:2; Rev. 21:4). God safeguards the personal and spiritual welfare of his own with a view to what provides for their ultimate good and the good of the lives they touch (2 Tim. 4:6–8, 16–18).

These eternal truths do not deny that Daniel's earthly circumstances remained dire in many ways. Yet God safeguarded and guided Daniel so that even the worst-seeming disasters became instruments of God's grace for him and others. A holy person is a powerful tool in God's hands even in times of trial—or especially in times of trial—for his or her witness to our souls, our families, and the nations.

We should remember that there are two groups of people not mentioned in the chapter, but definitely in view, who are affected by the witness of Daniel. The first group is the people of Israel. We know from the later prophecies of Daniel that the people of Israel will go through many generations of heartache. They will often wonder, “Is God faithful? Does he care? Can he protect?” The life of Daniel stood as a continuing witness to them that, though the present may be difficult, God's promises are greater and he is faithful.

God also intends for another group of people to know this: us! We also are witnesses to God's faithfulness through the experience of Daniel. By preserving a person named Daniel, God was preserving a nation called Israel in order to send a Savior named Jesus to save persons like us and ten thousand times ten thousand more of the same. Daniel's willingness to risk everything to make that redeeming God powerfully known expresses how great and precious is the incomparable grace of God toward those who will trust in him.

When our son's trip to Haiti resulted in the infection that triggered Crohn's disease, we worried and wept and wondered if we had been right to let him go. We were blessed to have a Christian doctor who had an eternal perspective about such questions and trials. He said to Jordan, “No regrets. You were in the service of the King, and God will use this as he knows is best.” That was an amazing thought for a young man graduating from high school and facing a lifetime of chronic illness. The Lord can use us as tools of his glory, even in the hard things—and especially in the hard things—to clarify for the world the really important things of eternity.

In our family album is a picture of my son a few years later on another mission trip to hurricane-ravaged Honduras. Next to him are his brother and his sister, who also said, “This disaster is an opportunity for the gospel. We know the risks, but we also know the eternal rewards of a holy purpose. Our circumstances may involve suffering here, but living with holy priorities through such pain will make more evident the weight of the eternal promises we say are so much more real and precious.” So in our album are more pictures of our son, Jordan, digging foundations for homes, leading impoverished children in song, and leading a Bible study in Spanish.

In one of those pictures a little girl with a red bow in her hair leans over Jordan’s New Testament to see what he is reading. She lingered after the other children had gone and, with Jordan’s witness, claimed Jesus as her Savior. Eternity will be different because a young man in our day, like a young Daniel centuries ago, took risks for the sake of honoring his God. He took those risks for a reason, knowing that such witness can bear witness to the greatness of God’s grace and the greater rewards of his eternal care. For those who know the grace of their God, there really is no greater reward than to know we have been used by him as witnesses to secure the eternal welfare of others. While we may be looking for some great plan to transform culture, God still calls us never to forget the power of simple piety. The way that we make a difference even as a minority in a culture turned from our God is to honor him with holy lives dedicated to witnessing his grace. As we pursue holiness, our spiritual welfare and witness are God’s delight—as well as our greatest reward.