

# **Living Courageously: A Life of Distinction**

## **Daniel 1:1-21**

**A sermon preached by Dr. Calvin Warpula,  
at the West University Church of Christ, Houston, Texas,  
on January 16, 2011**

God's mercies are as old as eternity and yet they are new every morning. I experienced these mercies in your love and care for me while I was in the hospital last week. I am healthy now, thank the Lord, and appreciate so much my ministry with you here at West University.

On Saturday morning I turned on the History channel to watch whatever was on during my breakfast. The story was about the War of 1812, the forgotten war. As I watched the drama of that war that shaped America unfold, I thought to myself, "Here are people, events and facts I never knew. These truths are very important in our country's history and the determination of its future. How could I have missed all these things." I learned about James and Dolly Madison, about the burning of our nation's capital, about the battle for Baltimore and the strategic importance of Ft. McHenry. I heard about the big flag that flew there and how it inspired a lawyer from Georgetown, France Scott Key, to write the poem, "In Defense of Ft. McHenry." This poem was widely published and in 1931 became our nation's national anthem, "The Star Spangled Banner." I learned about the British drive to split the nation and control the north in Canada and the west and the south through the Mississippi River by their hopeful conquest of New Orleans. The greatest army in the world came with 10,000 troops against Gen. Andrew Jackson with only 4000 militia. Jackson won a great victory at the Battle of New Orleans. If he had not, the new American republic would have crumbled and we would all be British citizens today.

When the program signed off, I sat there shaking my head and pondering, "How could I have not appreciated all these valiant men and women who made it possible for our young republic to overcome such adversity. I need to know more so I can better value our country and what these brave citizens did to defend and preserve her."

That's the same way with the Bible. This book is filled with great stories of God working in the lives of men and women to forge a physical nation, Israel, and a spiritual, world-wide community, the church. Thank

God for the Bible. I need to read it, mediate on it, pray over it, and love it and obey it as God talks to me in these precious truths.

Today, I am beginning a series of six lessons on Living Courageously, the stories of Daniel and his companions in the OT book of Daniel. These are stories we have heard from childhood and yet they continue to challenge our minds today. I urge you to pick up the Bible and read these stories afresh. God is going to show us some life changing lessons here that will determine the future of our lives and our families, as well as our church.

You have heard the reading of Daniel chapter one. Keep your Bible open there, please, while we see what God wants us to know here.

Verse two vividly describes the battle of the two gods: one, the real and living God, Jehovah, the eternal, loving, all powerful spirit, and the gods of the Babylonians, gods made out of metal, wood and stone, dumb, lifeless gods.

The strange thing though is that the living God allowed his people to be invaded by pagan powers. God allowed the treasures of the temple of the worship of the only one and true living God to be desecrated and robbed of its gold utensils used in sacrifice to him. Notice v. 2 again: [read it]

Why did God allow his temple to be robbed and his people delivered into the hands of the enemy?

Why? Because the Lord himself was behind all this disciplining and punishing his people for their wickedness. God is merciful, forgiving and kind but there comes a time when his impenitent people must be disciplined for their sins or they will end up destroying themselves. The prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel describe the idolatry, the graft, the greed, the adulteries, the heartlessness, the mistreatment of widows, orphans and the poor, and the abandonment of the sabbathical year. So in 605 B. C. God sends Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon to capture his people and make their slaves of the Babylonians. Nebuchadnezzar sets up a puppet government that will pay him heavy taxes and serve the Babylonian empire. Among the thousands of slaves that Nebuchadnezzar takes with him back to Babylon are four Hebrew boys, still in their teens, maybe 15 or 16 years old at the time. These boys are Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah.

Now these boys were prime young men. They were of the royal family, they were handsome, they had no physical blemishes, they were intelligent, quick to learn, and qualified to serve in the king's service. These four young men then were robbed of their parents, never to see them again. They were forcefully transported 750 miles to the east to the Babylonian capital city there to serve the pagan king.

For three years, these boys were to be educated in all the wisdom and knowledge of the Babylonians. They were to learn a strange new language, they were to read strange new stories of Babylonian history and exploits, and they were to pass difficult exams and tests to prove themselves worthy to advise and serve the king of Babylon. They were, in effect, given the equivalent of Rhodes Scholarships to Oxford University.

**The first amazing fact I notice about these boys is that they were but youths and yet they were so committed to God.**

Sometimes we have the idea that young people are not important, that they are just part of the landscape or furniture and that they cannot make a difference for God in the world. How false we are! Some of the greatest and favorite stories in the Bible are told about these four young men. They influenced their world for God. They encouraged other Israelite youth to stand for the Lord, they changed the heart of the pagan king, Nebuchadnezzar and they have gone down in biblical history as among the heroes of the faith. Here are boys in their mid teens who are dedicated to serving the Lord.

Serving God in their youth was the beginning of a lifetime of serving God. Daniel served God here in Babylon into the reign of King Cyrus of Persia who conquered Babylon in 539 B.C. That means that Daniel had been in Babylon 66 years and would be in his eighties when he was thrown into the lions' den in chapter 6.

But these boys were not born with knowledge of God or a commitment to him. At birth, they were not even aware of God's existence. Where did they get this great faith? They learned it from their parents and other influential adults. We do not even know the parents' names. We know nothing about them except that their children had life changing faith.

Parents are so important in the growth and lives of their children. Our children usually imitate us. If we love God, they will love God. If we go to church, they will go to church. If we pray at home and emphasize spiritual values and biblical materials, like nightly Bible stories, then they will grow up to be people of faith. If we give generously and liberally to help the Lord's work, and teach them to give and save, then they will do the same when they are older. If we share with the homeless, if we help the poor, if we serve others, then our children will copy our lives. We are determining now what our children will be tomorrow.

Our children are watching us. What we are today is what they will be tomorrow. When Rick was nine years old, he went with me to the store. I bought a few things, gave the clerk a twenty dollar bill, received my change

and pocketed it. As I was driving away, I realized that the lady had given me back a dollar too much. So I turned the car around, drove back a mile, waited in line, and gave the clerk a dollar back. Twenty years later, when Rick was now a grown man with a family of his own, he asked me if I remembered that incident. He said, "Dad I remember it well. You taught me the meaning of honesty." My other son, Tim, is now 42 years old. A few years ago, I was in his home in Midland and saw an open Bible with some notes he had written. These were goals he had established for his life. Number one, he wanted to put God first in all things. Number two, he wanted to love his wife and his children and provide for them. Number three, he wanted to manage his finances well and give God ten per cent of his income. Seeing those goals brought great joy to my heart. I remembered what the apostle John wrote, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth" (3 John 4).

The most important thing you can give your children is faith, no money, not cars, not electronic tools, not a first class education, not athletic training, but God. How are you doing in that respect? Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were once babies, then little boys, then young men, then teenagers. Every step of the way their parents were there to love them, teach them, and nurture them. Let me ask the young families here today: How are you doing? If your children grow up to be just like you, and they probably will, then will God be pleased? Are you pleased with the results?

It makes my heart leap for joy when I see our youth participating in ministry projects, Wednesday night classes, Leadership Training for Christ, and the worship services. I admire our young parents like Kerry and Melinda Lackey who have their twins, Nathan and Natalie, here for every service. I admire Brian and Melissa Deaver and their bringing little Zoie to church on Wed. nights. I appreciate Olga making sure Aryssa is involved, and Jim and Lu Ann wanting their boys, Wade and Seth, to be here. I am so pleased when someone like Claire Richey wants to talk with me about being baptized. When young Sam Richey leads the Scripture here in church or serves communion, I see myself there doing that fifty years ago. I am thrilled when I see Jordan and Brandon Hinrichs having a part. And there is Terry and Vesna Scarborough who always bring their three children to classes and activities. And I could go on and on and talk about Andrew Tan, and Madeline Bird, and Ethan, Caleb and Chloe Herrera.

I want you older folks to encourage these young families in the rearing of their children for God. Mary Fletcher has never taught an adult class as far as I know but she has trained our children now for 15 years in the nursery and little classes. Our Little Lambs and our God's Flock are not

babysitting services. They are training for God. Singing, reading, telling stories, loving, and learning that church is a safe and good place are shaping these little minds for eternity.

Now if some of you feel that you have not been doing this, you can talk to God about it in your heart, and begin today. Say to God and to yourself, "Lord, I want to do better. I want to serve you. I want more than anything else for my children to know you now and eventually to come live with you forever in heaven. And Lord, I am willing to pay any price to see that that is done."

Let me add here something that must not be overlooked: We that are older, that are grandparents, can help make memories for our children and grandchildren. Judy and I are in our 60s. We have been married 45 years. Judy's mother is 89 years old and still very active. Presently, Judy is in Austin taking care of five grandchildren. Her mother is also there with her now. Judy wrote an email about what is happening at the house and the influence of her nearly 90-year-old mother. Hear these excerpts from her letter:

The kids greeted mother at the door with lots of enthusiasm. She was happy that they remembered her and were so happy to see her.

We had ordered pizza and they fought over who would sit by Grandma Hammitt. We have tried to work out a schedule so all could have their turn.

This morning she has done everything. She has always been able to work circles around me. She helped with breakfast, entertained and dressed Presley, played trains with Cooper, played hide and seek with Parker, played the DS with the boys (she says she may get one after she gets home), and refereed a few skirmishes.

It is cold and rainy in Austin. Everyone is playing quietly. Presley is asleep and mom is writing in her memory book. She is writing down many of the details of her life with dad and saving them for us kids. The older I get, the more I appreciate the way she has conducted her life. She has been a servant, always putting her family ahead of herself. She has had a strong sense of commitment in the giving of her life to the care of others. She had the ability to make people who were invited in by us feel like they belonged. She stood firmly by dad during good times and not so good times. That example has meant a lot to me. When I felt like I wanted to give up on my marriage, I remembered the perseverance of my parents. Trials make

a marriage beautiful. My parents survived and I am so thankful that they never gave up. I am able to enjoy the fruits of her life and bring them over to my own. I am not always successful but I know to keep trying.

This shows the power of older people even in the lives of their adult children and the love and respect they can enjoy from their great grandchildren.

**The second amazing fact is that these four young men were willing to adapt in ways that are acceptable but they stood their ground in a kind and loving way when it came to matters of faith.**

The boys accepted the change of their names. What could they do about it if the government wanted to officially list them on the census with new names honoring Babylonian deities? After all, it is not our name that makes us what we are. It is we that make our name. Originally, and at birth, the boys were given names that honored God. All of their names have a reference to God in them. The “el” in Daniel and Mishael is a name for God. The “iah” in Hananiah and Azariah is another name for God from the name “Jehovah.” Daniel means, “God is my judge.” But he was re-named Belteshazzar which is from the deity Bel or Marduk and means “Bel, protect his life.” Hananiah means, “the Lord shows grace.” But his new Babylonian name, Shadrach means, “command of Aku,” a Babylonian deity. “Mishael means, “Who is what God is?” but his new name, Meshach, means, “Who is what Aku is?” Azariah means, “The Lord helps,” but his new name, Abednego, means, “servant of Nebo (Nabu).” The government could change their names but not their morals or their hearts.

All names have meaning but the important thing is not what the name we wear means but the life we live. These boys lived for God.

You can see this in the fact that they refused to compromise their faith in eating the king’s food and drinking his wines. The king wanted these young men to be the best in the land. He wanted to grow and develop a leadership team that would be superior to anything else on earth. So he fed them directly from his own table. The boys ate what the king ate. Now to eat what the king eats would be a treat to most people. The king drinks the best wines and eats filet mignon, bananas foster, crepe suzette, kippered herring, escargot, peacock brains, and swine fattened on acorns from the king’s forest. The boys had not been reared on that kind of food. They had eaten only kosher foods, foods that were approved by the law of Moses in

Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Kosher food means no seafood that did not have scales and no pork products of any kind. The king would eat all of these. So the boys made a kind request, not a demand, but a gentle request that they be tested for ten days by eating only the food that their consciences approved and by drinking only water. They requested “vegetables” or “pulse,” grains, foods grown in the ground, for ten days. The chief steward agreed to the test. After ten days, the boys were ruddier, better nourished, healthier than all the others eating the rich delicacies off the king’s table.

One-third of American children are overweight from eating too many French fries, pizza, chips, cookies and soda pop. School districts are now changing their diets to include more vegetables, fruits and salads. This makes for healthier living.

These boys were 750 miles from home, they were controlled by a powerful, conquering army, they were serving a pagan king, and yet they stood up for their faith in God, and God blessed them for it.

It is never wrong to do right and it is never right to do wrong. We need to stand up for what is right. We need to do it in a spirit of gentleness and meekness like they did. The Bible says, [read 2 Tim. 2:22-25]. We as God’s people cannot go with the flow when it comes to matters of violating the ethical, moral, and spiritual teachings of the word of God, no matter what the cost.

Our faith is more important than our jobs, our careers, our education, and our lives. When we do right, we may have to pay a price, but God will see that all is well in the end. Notice how God worked in the lives of these young men: [read vs. 17-20]. No one has ever served God and regretted it. Serving God brings the best rewards now and forever. The life of faith is the best of all possible lives and has a retirement plan that is out of this world.

We need this same type of commitment in our lives today. These boys were surrounded by a pagan environment. There was every reason in the world to do wrong and to follow the majority. They were separated from their parents. They would never see home or them again. They were in a hostile country. Idols were everywhere. Immorality was the pleasure of the day. A life of ease, fun, excitement, drink and sex could have been their goal if they had not first been committed to God, no matter what. These boys life with God was not just a set of intellectual ideas but it was a living, vital relationship of love.

Let me ask you: what is the most important thing in your life? What are you living for? What is the one thing that motivates you more than anything else? What would you hang onto, even if you were stripped of everything else? I hope the answer is God and your faith. Nothing is as

important as your faith and living a life of faith and growing and nurturing that faith. That life gives us peace with God now and peace with God forever.

These boys stuck with their ancient faith. This way of worship and life went aback 800 years before this time to the laws given by Moses at Sinai. Today, we need to teach our children, and we all need to be committed to God's word that goes back some 1900 plus years to the preaching and teaching of the apostles of Jesus Christ. Some people today are attracted by churches that resemble MTV, or Disney World with high tech sophisticated music and preaching. But all of this only speaks of the rootlessness of our times. This type of religion is designed to please man—people do in worship to God whatever they want to do that gives them an emotional buzz. We need stability, a foundation for our lives, and this can only be found by going back to the past---all the way back to Jesus Christ and his foundational principles for living.

**The third amazing fact in this story today is that these young men bonded and banded themselves together to encourage and support one another.**

They helped hold each other up. God wants us to have good friends that help us through life. These friendship connections are what makes life so enjoyable and manageable.

Jesus sent his disciples out two by two because he knew they needed each other. Jesus built his church because he wanted us to be a community of believers helping, serving, loving, encouraging, and ministering to and with each other.

This is not always true though. Sometimes the loneliest place is the church because we do not feel the connection with others. Maybe the reason is we are not letting ourselves get close to others. We want to improve our people connections, our love and care for each other. That's the power of our small groups, of our classes, of our ministries together. If you want to feel closer to someone, attend a class with them, talk to them, hear their story, listen to them, pray with them, eat with them, and spend times with them. Coming together in church is God's way of meeting our deep emotional needs for connection with other human beings. God created us that way. He even said in the beginning, "It is not good for man to be alone." I encourage you today to get out of your cave and make yourself available to others. Go up and talk to others, share a lunch with them, invite them to your home, accept invitations to be with people, attend a small group, come on Wednesday nights, come to Bible study at 9:30 before

Sunday worship, stay for the fellowship meals, participate in a ministry, work with the children and youth. We want the church to be like Cheers, the neighborhood bar in Boston, “where everybody knows your name and where they are always glad you came.”

We need each other. We really do.

These three amazing facts from chapter one make this story:

- These boys had strong, parental teaching and guidance and it changed their lives forever.
- These boys were willing to adapt in some ways but in others they stood firmly for God in a pagan and hostile world.
- These boys supported and encouraged each other.

We have so much more than these four boys had 2600 years ago. We have the complete revelation of God in his word. We have Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. We have 2000 years of Christian history of saints living their lives for God that encourage us.

Two children who lived in a big city next door to a big church building rode the bus to school every day. Their mother worried that one day something would go wrong and they might get lost. She wrote down their address and directions and gave it to each child with the instructions, “If you get lost, show this to some adult.” Several weeks later somehow the children were put off of the bus in the wrong neighborhood. Then they realized that they did not have the paper with their address and directions. The little boy began to cry, but his sister grabbed him by the hand and bravely walked more than two miles through city streets, turning corners with deliberateness. When she finally made it home, her mother was nearly out of her mind.

“What happened?” How did you find your way back?” she asked.

The girl said, “Since we live next to this big church with that great cross on the top, I just walked toward the cross and made it home!”

When we find ourselves lost in this world, we must simply look for the cross. When trouble comes, we must keep our eyes on the cross. When we don’t know which way to go, we must look for the cross. The way of the cross leads home.

You can come to the cross today and Jesus will save you from all your sins. All you need is to accept his sacrificial death for your sins by turning back from your sins, trusting in him and being baptized in his name. He will forgive you your sins and give you his Holy Spirit. Whosoever will may come while we stand and sing.

-cwarpula@westchurch.com