

Living for God in an Evil World: The Book of Daniel

Daniel and his three friends found themselves in a foreign land. They were challenged to abandon their faith and embrace the ungodly practices of the Babylonians. These men remained faithful to God in spite of temptation. Using four stories from their lives, we will look at key questions followers of Jesus must answer to remain faithful in an evil world: How did I get here? Who will I worship? How will I get through this? Why is everything falling apart?

Lesson #1: How Did I Get Here?

In this lesson we discuss what led to the Babylonian Captivity. Daniel and his friends were in Babylon because of Israel's attachment to evil practices.

Big Idea/Focus: Evil is powerful and we should avoid it.

Passage: Daniel 1:1-5

Introduction:

After years of disobedience, Judah was defeated by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. This defeat was more than just a defeat in battle, it represented the collective failures of God's people over years. They lost the battle long before the enemy took the field. Daniel, Shadrach, Meshack and Abed-nego are in Babylon because of others disobedience.

They had to wonder, "Why am I here? What have I done to deserve this?"

We see in this story, the impact of evil and what it means to be lost.

Story/Illustration: Tell a story about how you were lost once. Emphasize what you did wrong to get to the wrong place.

Dialogue Opportunity: Ask someone to share a funny story about being lost.

Teaching:

Part One: How did I get here?

1) I followed the wrong people.

Jeremiah 46 tells the story of defeat. King Jehoiakim aligned himself with Pharaoh in Egypt. When Nebuchadnezzar defeated Pharaoh, he turned his attention to Judah. Aligning with the wrong people – especially people who are not following Jesus – puts you in a difficult place.

Leader Notes:

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Dialogue Opportunity – Have the group build a list of the wrong people to follow. Build a profile of a group not to follow. Using that list, look at qualities and characteristics of the wrong people.

Dialogue Opportunity – If we know this, why do we continue to follow these people?

2) I ignore God's warnings.

In Isaiah 39:6-7, God warned Judah that if they continued to disobey him, Babylon would defeat them. The very prophecy of Isaiah 36 happens to Daniel. When we ignore God's warnings we place ourselves in danger!

Dialogue Opportunity: How does God warn us today?

Dialogue Opportunity: What does ignoring God look like today?

Dialogue Opportunity: Do you think ignoring God is more foolishness or arrogance? Which is more dangerous: thinking you are smarter than God or thinking God doesn't know what he's talking about?

Part Two: What does Evil do to me?

When evil attacks us, it has devastating consequences. When we surrender to its power, even in judgement like this, we are devastated. In this section, we are going to analyze the effect of evil.

Dialogue Opportunity: Before you begin, have the students read the verses again. This time, have them identify the consequences of defeat. Make a list of the things the text reveals. Your list should come straight from the Bible. Then start a second list. Have them give their opinion on “unsaid” consequences. The feelings, emotions, rest of the story moments for those who were captured and left behind. Then look at the following:

(1) Evil removes sacred practices from my life.

²...take some of the sacred objects from the Temple of God. So Nebuchadnezzar took them back to the land of Babylonia* and placed them in the treasure-house of his god.

Nebuchadnezzar took the sacred objects of God away from Jerusalem. He removed the way to worship. He devalued the spiritual values of the Jewish people. Evil gets in the way of godly practices and activities.

Dialogue Opportunity: What does this look like in our world today? We don't have armies attacking us, but how does evil/sin rob us of sacred practices?

Leader Notes:

Dialogue Opportunity: What sacred practices are important to maintain? How do we “recapture” the ones that are lost?

Illustration/Story: Tell a story about a sacred/spiritual practice that is important to you. Have others share what a story as well.

(2) Evil robs me of potential.

The King took the best men from Judah and brought them back to Babylon. His goal was to eliminate the best from Judah and then indoctrinate them in his ways. He would stop his enemy by converting his enemies' best to his side.

Dialogue Opportunity: Do you agree with the statement, evil/sin robs me of my potential? If no, why? If yes, how have you seen this play out?

(3) Evil cuts me off from godly influences.

In taking the young men to Babylon, they no longer had access to priests, prophets and family. They would be cut off from spiritual practices and the relationships that matter. It is sad to watch how sin/evil removes people from the godly influences they've had.

Dialogue Opportunity: *How important is it to stay connected to godly influences? How do we balance this with connecting to new, important voices in our life? How do you tell the difference between a godly voice and an evil voice?*

Conclusion/Application:

Challenge the group to avoid evil. Talk through the lessons learned and discuss how we are to avoid temptation and evil in today's world.

Have them think about the impact sin/evil has already had on them. Look back over the consequences and pray together over the areas of their life that have been impacted by evil.

Leader Notes:

Lesson #2 How Will I Worship?

What is the object of our worship? In a world of competing voices, which one will we give our allegiance to? Which one will we focus on in complete surrender. What will our worship look like and who will receive our worship? How will we worship God – daily or just at a church service?

Big Idea/Focus: Worshipping our God is an intentional decision we make every day.

Passage Covered: Daniel 3

Introduction:

We love to worship. In church and especially for young adults, worship is a favorite part of the service. Sometimes we enjoy worship for not the best reasons. We like the emotion, we like the feeling of being together moving towards something, and we like music.

The Bible is clear, however. Worship, true worship, is not defined by emotion or even by a specific act or practice. Worship, true worship, is an expression of our spirit—who we are on the inside—and an action in every area of our lives. Your whole life can be an expression of worship to God.

***Dialogue Opportunity:** What does worship, outside of religious circles look like? What things do people worship other than God?*

Worship of things may not be the statue Nebuchadnezzar built of himself, but we worship many things today. We worship at the throne of entertainment. A popular show is called – American Idol!

Daniel 3 is one of the most amazing stories in the Bible. The focus is often on God's deliverance of the Hebrew children. In this lesson, we look at what their actions say about their worship of God and what lessons we can learn.

Teaching/Discussion:

God-focused worship is becoming more and more uncommon. Worship with our whole lives is essential for followers of Jesus. Worship can't be 20 minutes in a service with other Christians. It has to be a daily activity.

(1) God focused worship is not normal.

Our culture is "me" focused, not God focused. In an increasingly secular world, we've replaced the false idols of folk religion with the statue to ourselves. What I want, what I need, what I deserve are demands. We put ourselves in front of God.

(2) God-focused worship is a purposeful decision.

***Dialogue Opportunity:** Read Ephesians 5:19-20. Paul talks about two kinds of worship:*

Leader Notes:

What is the difference in the two? Which is more important to you?

When we purposefully decide to worship, we keep God at the center of our lives and ourselves in the appropriate position of humility. The Hebrew children worshipped God because they believed God should be worshipped.

(3) God-focused worship separates you from others.

There is a price to worshipping God in an increasingly secular culture. The Hebrew children stood for God – literally. People will be “bothered” when we put God first in our lives.

Dialogue Opportunity: What are the consequences for worshipping God today? What is the price for standing for Him? Have others share their experiences.

(4) God-focused worship has nothing to do with the outcome.

The men believed God would save them, but if He didn't it wouldn't affect their worship. Worship of God is about Him, not what He does for us. Worship of God is not tied to the benefits of being with God.

Dialogue Opportunity: Do we worship in our modern church services because of our love for God or how much we enjoy the experience of worshipping in song? Is this a problem? Is it wrong? What can we do differently?

(5) God-focused worship leads others to worship.

The result of their stand for God was that others worshipped God. Their stand for God was an encouragement to the people watching. Worship tells the story of God and how great He is. Our worship can be evangelistic.

Conclusion/Application:

Challenge students to live a life of worship rather than just singing during worship services. Challenge them to give their lives to the worship of God, no matter the price.

Leader Notes:

Commitment to Jesus is not a guarantee of an easy life. It can be the opposite. Christ-followers are not exempt from crisis. In fact, our commitment will lead to persecution, attack, and other challenges. Commitment cannot be tied to how we feel or what we experience.

Passage Covered: Daniel 6

Daniel seemed to be flourishing. In spite of being far from home, he made the most of the opportunity God had given him in Babylon. His commitment to God stayed strong. Others were jealous of this and they attacked him where they knew he was most vulnerable – his faith. Daniel's commitment to God was not tied to blessing, safety or opportunity. It is clear Daniel's commitment was an act of obedience – not something to manipulate God.

- How do these believers remain faithful in persecution?
- What is our responsibility to our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ?
- What can we learn from them?

Dialogue Opportunity: What areas do you feel Christian commitment is under attack? What should our response be? Did Daniel do right when he disobeyed the King? What does that look like in our lives? When do we obey authority or disobey authority?

Leader Notes:

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(2) When I'm committed, I will upset others.

Daniel's enemies were jealous of him. Notice they could not find fault in him. Integrity must be a part of our lives. Even when we do all things right, some will be frustrated at our commitment to God. If you are the only Christian in your family, this can cause conflict. Your decision to do right highlights their decision to do wrong.

***Dialogue Opportunity:** Why do you think people are upset at our commitment to God? How should we respond when people attack our commitment?*

(3) When I'm committed, I will inspire others.

The opposite is also true. Some, like King Darius, will be inspired by our commitment. Part of our job as Christians is to inspire others to want a different life. To paraphrase St. Peter's words, we are to live such good lives that non-Christians want to serve God.

(4) When I'm committed, God responds.

Daniel is faithful. God keeps him safe from the lions through the night. He sent angel to keep Daniel safe. God responded to faithful commitment with his protection and blessing.

***Dialogue Opportunity:** Does this mean we will have no problems as a follower of Jesus? What does God's response look like in our lives? How should we feel if we don't get the deliverance we want?*

(5) When I'm committed, others worship.

King Darius, a pagan king, rejoiced and worshipped God. Our commitment leads others to worship God as well. When they see what God does in our lives, they respond with their own worship. Our commitment is contagious.

***Dialogue Opportunity:** What makes our commitment attractive to people not following Jesus? What about us is contagious?*

Conclusion/Application:

It's possible that the people you are leading are going through a difficult time. It's possible their commitment level is waning. End the lesson talking about the importance of staying committed and faithful. Have prayer for people who feel like they are in their own "lion's den" at the moment and need God to respond to their commitments.

Lesson #4: Why is Everything Falling Apart?

Belshazzar is one of the greatest tragic fools of the Bible. His story is short but instructive. So far we've seen what good decisions Daniel, Shadrach, Meshack and Abed-nego made. In this lesson, we see the opposite. God uses Daniel to point out the destruction sin has in a person's life.

Big Idea/Focus: Sin will destroy you, so avoid it.

Passage Covered: Daniel 8

Introduction:

We get the phrase “the writing is on the wall” from this story. What does that mean? When we use that phrase, what are we trying to communicate?

Belshazzar has a drunken wild party that ends in his death. History tells us these parties would last for weeks. Belshazzar partied while the Kingdom crumbled. He defiled God's holy items, he forgot God's man (Daniel), and he ignored God's message. Sin was a destructive force in his life.

Dialogue Opportunity: *It is tough to talk about sin. What is sin to you? If someone wasn't a Christian, had no connection with the Bible, how would you explain sin?*

Sin led Belshazzar's kingdom to fall apart. While not always true, whenever our world is falling apart, we should be asking ourselves if this is the result of sin. Could it be your life is a wreck because of the decisions you've made that have taken you away from God? Is this because of sin in your life?

This is a good passage to read the whole story and use the verses as jumping-off points to talk about the mistakes below. Many people will not know this story. This will be new to them. But don't just read it, story-tell it. Have different people read different parts. Let one person be Daniel, another the narrator, another Belshazzar. Let your lesson be a "running commentary."

As Belshazzar starts the party, he takes the objects of worship and uses them to have an orgy. When Nebuchadnezzar invaded Jerusalem, he took these items from the temple. These goblets were designed and dedicated for worship. Belshazzar is feeling pretty good about himself. There is no Jehovah God. To prove it, Belshazzar got the precious things out of the temple and said, "Let's drink to our gods – the gods of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood and stone." Belshazzar was worshipping money and mocking God. He is driven by pleasure. He is trying to be the man. God becomes angry.

Leader Notes:

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Teaching/Discussion:

Let's look at the mistakes of Belshazzar so we don't repeat them. When the hand began to write on the wall, Belshazzar panicked. He asked for help from anyone he could find, but got no answer. Finally, the Queen showed up and told him to go get Daniel. Verse 13 is very significant. The King said: *"...Are you Daniel, one of the exiles my father the king brought from Judah?"* The King had no idea who Daniel was. This was his first mistake:

Mistake #1 – Remove God’s people from my life. Cause: I’m arrogant

He didn't know who Daniel was. How could such a famous man, not be known? The queen knew him. But the king didn't. Wow!

Dialogue Opportunity: Why do you think Belshazzar didn't know who Daniel was? How could he not know?

Dialogue Opportunity: Why do we limit God's people's voices in our own lives? Why do we stop listening to the people God sends us?

Mistake #2 – Ignore God’s warnings. Cause: I’m foolish

Over the next few verses, God used Daniel to warn Belshazzar. He told him that the Kingdom would be overrun. You expect Belshazzar to respond with repentance. You expect Belshazzar to beg for forgiveness. But that's not what happened – in spite of a hand writing on a wall and in spite of Daniel's warnings. Belshazzar made mistake #2

When we ignore God, we set ourselves up for failure. We must respond to God with humble repentance. Foolishness leads to ignoring God. It doesn't make sense. Worse than that, we make mistake #3:

Mistake #3 – Act like nothing is wrong. Cause: I’m delusional.

Sin convinces you that you can keep going with no consequence. Belshazzar goes right back to partying. He doesn't even attempt to stop. Delusional, he acts like nothing is wrong. This is the result of his arrogance and foolishness.

Conclusion/Application:

During the conclusion, dialogue with the group about the consequences of sin. Talk about the impact sin has on a person. One leader puts it this way: "Sin makes you stupid. When you are in sin, you do things no person in their right mind would do." Talk through this statement. Do they believe it is true?

Lead a time of repentance and prayer.

Leader Notes:

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