

**“In the Jaws of a Dilemma”**

**The Book of Daniel**

*Sermon Series: The Story Chapter 18 Daniel in Exile*

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hoglund

The Woodside Church

May 31, 2015

It's graduation season. Over the next couple of weeks you'll hear quotes from famous speakers at ceremonies around the country. Perhaps you'll even attend a commencement. Since many of these speeches are pretty bad, I thought I'd provide you with a list of quotes from better speeches. So when everyone gets bored with the current speaker, you can pull these out and impress your friends.

“Life has no remote. Get up and change it yourself.” Mark A. Cooper

“Follow your passion, stay true to yourself, never follow someone else's path unless you're in the woods and you're lost and you see a path then by all means you should follow that.” Ellen Degeneres

“So, what's it like in the real world? Well, the food is better, but beyond that, I don't recommend it.” Bill Watterson (Creator of the comic strip Calvin and Hobbes)

“If you think nobody cares if you're alive, try missing a couple of payments.” Earl Wilson

“You will never have more energy or enthusiasm, hair, or brain cells than you have today.” Tom and Ray Magliozzi (Click and Clack the Tappet Brothers from Car Talk)

“If you think you are too small to be effective, you have never been in bed with a mosquito.” Bette Reese

Some years ago in Hollidaysburg, Pennsylvania a graduation speech caused a storm of controversy. Shannon Wray is not a celebrity. She is simply a graduating senior who earned the honor of giving an address at graduation. The school asked Shannon to speak about the past, including how friendships helped her get through high school. Shannon decided to write about her best friend.

He, even more so than the people I love, has been there every day, never forcing me to do anything, but always encouraging me to stretch my limits and strive for the best He has to offer. His name is Jesus; He is my greatest friend. It is because of Him that I have achieved and succeeded, and, no matter how much knowledge Hollidaysburg High has bestowed upon me, I would know nothing if I didn't know Him.

After reading a copy of Shannon's speech, the teachers in charge of graduation forbid her talk about Jesus. They censored her statements and prohibited Shannon from making other religious references in her speech. Shannon was in the jaws of a dilemma. Should she remain true to her Best Friend or abide by the rules of her teachers?

If Jesus is your best friend, if He is your Savior and Lord, then you can expect to face the same opposition which confronted Shannon. That's the reality of what is ahead for all who follow Jesus. Recently a *New York Times* headline announced, "Big Drop in Share of Americans Calling Themselves Christian." It reported:

The Christian share of adults in the United States has declined sharply since 2007, affecting nearly all major Christian traditions and denominations, and crossing age, race and region, according to an extensive survey by the Pew Research Center. Seventy-one percent of American adults were Christian in 2014, the lowest estimate from any sizable survey to date, and a decline of 5 million adults and 8 percentage points since a similar Pew survey in 2007. The Christian share of the population has been declining for decades. It is not confined to the coasts, the cities, the young or the other liberal and more secular groups where one might expect it, either. "The decline is taking place in every region of the country, including the Bible Belt," said Alan Cooperman, the director of religion research at the Pew Research Center.<sup>1</sup>

The Roman Catholic Church and Mainline Protestant churches such as the Presbyterian Church (USA) are the largest losers. The strongest increase is among those who declare themselves "Unaffiliated" which means they identify as atheist, agnostic or not interested. In seven years this group rose from 16% to 23% of the American population. That's 53 million people. There is no earthly reason to believe this trend will stop.

I am not trying to scare you. I am simply stating a fact: those of us who follow Jesus in America will increasingly feel like we don't fit in. We will stand out from the crowd. We will have to take stands in the crowd. We will find ourselves going against the crowd. We will feel like we are in exile in our own homeland. That should not surprise us or distress us. All through the Bible we see faithful people face fiery trials far worse than this. So how do we give our allegiance to Jesus in a land that is giving up on Him?

Follow Daniel's example in Exile. Last week Gloria preached about the Fall of Israel to Assyria in 722 BC, the three deportations of Judah to Babylon ending in the burning of Solomon's Temple and the Fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC. Now comes the Exile – often called the Babylonian Exile. The nation of Judah lives in Babylon – modern day Iraq. This 70 year period shapes the people of Judah into the Jewish people. Unlike the 10 tribes of Israel in the north who lose their identity and disappear, the southern kingdom of Judah keeps and strengthens its relationship with God while in exile.

The start of the Exile looks very dark. During the first deportation the royal family, the priests, the court officials, the artists are marched into exile in Babylon while the poor are left in the land. Nebuchadnezzar severs the head of Judah from the body and

---

<sup>1</sup> Nate Cohn, "Big Drop in Share of Americans Calling Themselves Christian" *New York Times*, May 12, 2015 [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/12/upshot/big-drop-in-share-of-americans-calling-themselves-christian.html?\\_r=0&abt=0002&abg=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/12/upshot/big-drop-in-share-of-americans-calling-themselves-christian.html?_r=0&abt=0002&abg=1)

carries it away as a trophy of war. To add to their shame, the barefoot column of refugees must follow the clanking caravan of golden vessels looted from the royal palace and the Temple of Solomon. The sun glints off their brilliant lost treasures and blinds their tear filled eyes. Every step takes them farther from their beloved home. Every step brings them closer to a dark future in an unholy land. As they cross the Jordan River the captives know they will never see their homeland again. Many also believe they will never see their God again. Some say He was beaten by the stronger Babylonian gods. Others claim He is not powerful enough to reach beyond the Jordan River. Maybe they are children of a lesser god, a weaker god.

But there is one among the marchers who serves a Mighty God. His name is Daniel. He is one of those perfect kids that make you sick. His test scores always ruin the curve. Being head of the class is bad enough but Daniel also has chiseled features and muscles to spare. He was on the fast track to a promising career in the court of Jerusalem. But now the court of Jerusalem stumbles along on a slow track as it marches away in chains. His hopes and dreams evaporate. His intelligence will be wasted. And his muscles will earn him a job digging irrigation ditches as a slave in Babylon. Such a future would drive anyone to despair. Yet Daniel excels in one final area: faith. He trusts in the God of Israel. Against all evidence, against all hope, Daniel is convinced the Lord is not imprisoned in the Promised Land. He is not locked inside a stone temple. He is not beaten by the lifeless idols of the Babylonians. He is the Lord of all nations, the Creator of heaven and earth. He will not forget or forsake His people. No land is beyond His reach.

To his surprise, Daniel winds up not in the slave quarters, but in the royal academy of Babylon. His classmates are the cream of the crop, harvested from all the nations under Babylonian control. Daniel and three other Israelites, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, are in the gifted program. For three years they learn the Babylonian language and culture. The goal is to assimilate and absorb them into the new culture. To make the transformation complete, each pupil is renamed after a Babylonian deity. Daniel and his three friends are dubbed Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. The four Israelites know their God will be washed from their brains if they do not resist. So they decide to take a stand. They go on a diet.

That's our first step in taking a stand for God: **Don't Consume All the Culture Dishes Out.** Daniel's school cafeteria serves delicious entrees and the finest beverages right from the king's table. "But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine" (Daniel 1:8). The four friends fill their plates with vegetables and drink only water. When Ashpenaz the chief official sees this he says,

"I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you." Daniel then said, "Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see." So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days. (Daniel 1:10, 12-14)

Why did they refuse the rich food? Well it was not kosher. But more than that, Daniel took this stand to show he may look like a Babylonian on the outside, but inside he is still a temple for God's Spirit. This ten day vegetarian diet is a simple yet powerful pledge of allegiance to God. The Babylonians may own his body, but the Lord has his heart. And the Lord honored his fast. Daniel and his friends were healthier than their classmates. Moreover, Daniel was given the eyes to see God's visions and dreams.

We constantly consume what the culture dishes out. It's not all bad. Some shows are like healthy vegetables and fresh clean water. Yet a lot is spiritual junk food – exaggerated flavor with no nutritional value. Last Lent I resolved to give up Netflix. I spent too much time consuming what it dished out. Frankly, it takes more time to find one good movie than actually watching the movie. When we finally settle on one, it often turns out to be boring at best. That's why one or both of us always falls asleep. Worst of all, I realized I was wasting hours of my life watching other people have a life. So I firmly decided not to watch Netflix in Lent. Do you know what happened? I started watching movies on Comcast. Some people go to AA. I am a CC – Culture Consumer.

What's wrong with consuming what culture dishes out? It makes us into its image. I would rather be made into the image of Jesus. I don't think it is an accident that during the same period that belief in Jesus is declining we see the rise of cursing and swearing, the justification of lying and stealing, the promotion of drugs and gambling, the growth of violence and sex as entertainment. In short, when you cut out the first four of the Ten Commandments – the ones that cover our relationship with God - the other six fall apart. Daniel shows us one way to stand up for God in this culture is to be careful what we consume. Let's do what we tell our kids to do: turn off the TV, tablet, internet, game system and go out and get a life. Spend more time relating to your family, helping your neighbors, serving the poor, praying and reading God's Word. Let God shape you into the image of Jesus. Let your insides be a temple of the Holy Spirit.

Daniel also shows us that to take a stand in this culture **Don't Fall For the gods of The Culture**. In Daniel chapter 3 we read:

King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, sixty cubits high and six cubits wide, and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. Then the herald loudly proclaimed, "Nations and peoples of every language, this is what you are commanded to do: As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace." (Daniel 3:1,4-6)

Everyone falls down and worships the idol – everyone except Daniel's three friends Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Furious with rage, King Nebuchadnezzar orders the three to fall down in worship or fall into the fiery furnace. But they reply,

King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. (Daniel 3:16-17)

What are the gods of this culture? A god is whatever you are willing to sacrifice your time, money, energy and relationships to. One of the gods we fall for is "fitting in." We are willing to give up a lot just to fit in. Notice how easy it is:

- For children to abandon friends in order to be accepted by the "in" clique
- For Christian teens to drink or experiment with drugs to fit in at a party
- For a group to be united by gossip and character assassination
- For workers to let their ethics slide in order to please the boss or the customers
- For two people to wander into adultery
- For us to be silent about our faith while others criticize God
- For us to enjoy our abundance while thousands will not live to see tomorrow

We desperately long to fit in. We will even shed our religion in order to be acceptable. Why? Often those who don't fit in pay a price. We don't want to be left out or kicked out. We may face some heat but probably not a fiery furnace.

The three friends were confident that God would save them from the fire. But then they added this one extra line.

But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up. (Daniel 3: 18)

They were willing to pay the price. That's a powerful lesson. The way to hang on to God is to let go of the results. When the three friends were thrown into the fire an amazing wonder appeared. King Nebuchadnezzar said,

Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods. (Daniel 3:25).

The Son of God, Jesus, was with them in the fire. I once met with a Christian college student who told me he tattoo across his heart the words "But Even If Not." He said every morning, when he looks in the mirror, he wants to be reminded that even if the day does not go as he desires, he will still stand for God because he knows God is with him.

Finally, Daniel teaches us when we take a stand **Don't Buckle or Battle the Culture, Just Bless**. Daniel stood for the Lord. He neither buckled under nor battled the king. He used his gifts to bless each administration. Amazingly, Daniel remained in the palace while kings came and went, while empires rose and fell. When he was an old man, the mighty Babylonian empire fell to the Persians. The trials, however, were not over for old Daniel. A new law was passed by jealous officials just to get rid of him.

The royal administrators, prefects, satraps, advisers and governors have all agreed that the king should issue an edict and enforce the decree that anyone who prays to any god or human being during the next thirty days, except to you, Your Majesty, shall be thrown into the lions' den. (Daniel 6:7)

Talk about being in the jaws of a dilemma. That would certainly cause me to pause. Not Daniel. His years of faithful service to God trained him for this moment.

Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before. (Daniel 6:10)

Daniel doesn't give in. He doesn't lower himself to the tactics of his enemies. He does not petition the king for repeal. He simply falls down on his knees and prays to God. This is not a spiritual 911 call. Daniel does what he has done three times a day, every day of his life. And what does he pray? He gives thanks to God. We give thanks for God's blessings. Daniel gives thanks in the jaws of the worst dilemma of his life.

How can he do this? Daniel prays the price. All those hours on his knees prepared him to face this dilemma peacefully. In reality Daniel does not face a dilemma. He knows exactly what to do. He is willing to obey the law of the land. But it is more important to obey the higher law of God. His soul is prepared. He is ready to serve the Lord to the end. He doesn't buckle under or battle the king. He blesses the king and probably even prays for the enemies who want to throw him in the lions' den. And, as you probably know, Daniel didn't become dinner for the lions. Because of Daniel's willingness to take a stand, Darius the king proclaimed,

I issue a decree that in every part of my kingdom people must fear and reverence the God of Daniel. For he is the living God and he endures forever; his kingdom will not be destroyed, his dominion will never end. (Daniel 6:26).

Don't battle. Don't buckle. Be a blessing to others.

It would have been easy for Shannon Wray to buckle under pressure and be quiet. How could one high school senior hope to speak in the face of these school officials? But Shannon believed if she deleted references to God, her speech would be a lie. Jesus Christ is her best friend and the one most responsible for her making it through high school. Shannon did not back down. Instead, she took a stand. She informed the school that their censorship of her speech violated the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. So on a warm June night, Shannon Wray took her stand before her classmates at Hollidaysburg and announced that Jesus Christ is her best friend.

The time is coming when your faith will be challenged and tested in your school, your workplace, your neighborhood, your home.

Will you take a stand for your Best Friend?