

READING PLAN: DANIEL

Day One

Read Daniel 1:1-9

Everybody loves a good reward. Whether for a job well-done or a project that is finally complete, being recognized for our hard work motivates us toward greater things.

It's always a good idea to keep the reward in our minds while we are in the thick of our work. Those monotonous days of working and repeating and sweating and stumbling are going to wear us thin. When we know what's at stake, we can plow through those times with greater intensity.

Daniel was an Israelite. As a young boy, he'd been trained in the things of God. He not only read and memorized the Word of God, but he lived it, practiced it, and modeled it for others. His relationship with God was more than a list of rules to live by - it was personal. He prayed and studied and lived out his faith as intimate moments with his God.

So, it's no surprise that Daniel stood up against the Babylonian king and his offensive rules. It was never a question of whether or not Daniel would obey God rather than men. Obeying God came first.

It begs the question for each of us - how extreme is our devotion to God? When we are faced with temptations, peer pressure, and moments of laziness, will we stand in obedience to God's call on our lives?

Questions:

1. What types of rewards do you like to receive? Are there limits to what you'll do for those rewards? What are they?
2. What areas of your life are a challenge for you to trust God in? What reward would motivate you to trust Him more? Is that even a fair question to ask?
3. Take time this week to examine the possible rewards of obeying God in areas where you struggle to obey.

Day Two

Read Daniel 1:8-20

“You are what you eat.” is a popular saying among adults. In other words, whatever you put into your body is going to have a lasting effect on the condition of your body - whether good or bad. Most teenagers don't give a second thought about the long term effects of food. I can consume thousands of calories in one sitting and come back for more! The adults in my life tell me it will come back to haunt me later in life. For now, I'm enjoying the freedom of eating what I want.

Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, wanted to break Daniel's connection to his homeland and make him into a true Babylonian. This was a methodical process, including every aspect of his life, right down to his diet. The king ordered his new subjects to eat the food of Babylonian kings, which were rich and heavy in calories - the fast track to fat - which was a cultural norm for wealthy people at that time.

But diet was a critical aspect of God's training plan with his people. There were certain kinds of food a Hebrew was never supposed to eat. Daniel and his friends knew what those foods were, and saying “yes” to those foods meant saying “no” to their identity as the people of God. The first stage of Daniel's training in Babylonian customs became the first spiritual test of Daniel's personal training in godliness - would he do what was commanded of him by his captors or would he do what he had committed himself to do before God? Would he eat to fit in and move up or eat to stay faithful and trust God?

The diet wasn't the issue - his commitment to God's plan for his life was. Daniel and his friends trusted God and God raised them up to be chosen by the king to hold key roles in the Babylonian court.

Questions:

1. If you were subjected to a rule that was against what you knew to be right how would you respond?
2. Based on your personal training for godliness, what types of things would take you off your training plan? How would you react if you were asked to do them?
3. Trusting and following God was Daniel's best option in this story. How so? In what ways are trusting and following God your best option as you relate to people around you?

Day Three

Read Daniel 2

Daniel served as an adviser to King Nebuchadnezzar. He was an intimidating king who was demanding and made decisions that were not thought out. His paranoid behavior made it nearly impossible to serve him consistently with any kind of success. Once he demanded his advisers interpret his dream - if they got it right, they would gain unbelievable power and wealth. If they got it wrong, they would suffer a horrible death. How do you like those options?

His advisers told the king the truth: "What the king asks is too difficult. No one can reveal it to the king except the gods." This was not a good response for a paranoid king: Nebuchadnezzar ordered all of his advisers to be killed.

Thankfully Daniel knew the whole truth. He turned to God with the king's unusual request, and God provided deliverance for Daniel and all the king's advisers by revealing and interpreting the dream through Daniel.

Daniel played a small, but important part of this episode. The advisers had been right all along: only God (big G) could meet the king's demand, and God chose to do it through Daniel. Daniel had a moment where he could have accepted all the glory for himself and claimed special powers of dream interpretation. He could have set himself up for a life of comfort and power. But Daniel saw that he and the king were both parts of God's bigger plan; God gave the dream to Nebuchadnezzar and the interpretation to Daniel. Between the two of them, God's plan moved forward. This was God's victory and once again Daniel told the king the truth.

"No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about," Daniel said. "But there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries."

Nebuchadnezzar agreed. "Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries."

Giving God credit for His work in our lives is always the smarter move.

Questions:

1. What do you think Daniel was thinking when he was asked to do the impossible?
2. When you are asked to do what seems impossible, how quickly do you turn to God? What can keep you from turning to him right away?
3. How is your relationship with God affected by knowing that He is able to do the impossible?
4. Are there any impossible situations that you are facing right now that you need to trust and talk to God about? If yes, take some time now and talk to Him about it.

Day Four

Read Daniel 6:1-11

Back in the '90s, the Nike brand adopted a timeless new catchphrase - Just Do It. The phrase was meant to motivate people to achieve something great - to follow a new course apart from the norm.

Rules can be a lot like that as well. We hear the phrase "Some rules are meant to be broken". It can motivate us to break away from the status quo. Sometimes it can be an excuse to do something we want to do, regardless of whether we should or not.

Society can come up with some pretty interesting rules - some that are actually offensive to God. Any rule that directs us to go against the Word of God is wrong. Breaking those rules is the right thing to do and God trains us to do the right thing.

Daniel faced rules that he knew were unacceptable to God. While serving under King Darius, Daniel was put in a precarious situation. The king had been tricked by enemies of Daniel into making an unjust rule. By playing on the vanity of the king, they convinced him to draft a rule that Daniel would never be able to follow in good conscience - thirty days of worship solely of King Darius. Anyone who broke this rule would be thrown into a den of hungry lions.

Part of God's training program for Daniel was regular times of worship with Him. This habit of worship would set the stage for all the other things God wanted to do through Daniel. Daniel pursued his spiritual training and therefore violated a man-made rule he could never obey. By violating this rule, he faced consequences he could never survive on his own.

Questions:

1. What do you think Daniel felt when everyone around him was saying "Just do it"?
2. Describe a time when you've been asked to do something you could not do in good conscience. How did you feel? How did you respond?
3. What are some of the hardest consequences of doing the right thing? What are some of the best results of doing the right thing?

Day Five

Read Daniel 6:11-23

After Daniel violated King Darius' rule, he had to face the consequence. King Darius had no choice but to send his best and most trusted advisor to the lion's den. After all, it was his rule. Ancient kings kept lion dens as a place of punishment for people who violated their laws. The lions were kept hungry so that they would eagerly maul any person that was tossed to them - to the entertainment of the kingly court. Being sent to the lions' den was a horribly gory death sentence.

Darius spent the day trying to get around the foolish rule he had made to save Daniel from death. But he couldn't do it. He was beaten at his own game by his own rules - according to his constitution, no law in his kingdom could be repealed. Even though Darius' power trip had been fed for thirty days, Darius had zero power over Daniel's life or death.

Nightfall came and Daniel was tossed inside the pit. Darius held out hope that God would deliver his trusted advisor. Daniel held out hope that God would rescue him. The night in the lions' den was a test - not of Darius's authority or Daniel's training, but of God's ability to protect his players. Darius had proved that he was not a god worth worshipping; "Would Daniel's God prove different?"

You know the story. God passed the test. And Daniel, because of his faithfulness to his training and trust in his trainer, learned firsthand what God's players always learn in time. You can trust God's training. You can trust your Trainer. He has your best interests at heart, and he can help when no one else can.

Questions:

1. What do you think was going through Daniel's mind as he was thrown into the lion's den?
2. What man-made gods compete with the living God for your worship?
3. When is it hardest for you to trust God? When has God surprised you by his ability to come through for you?
4. How does it feel to know that God is protecting you? How does that affect your relationship with Him?