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Daniel and Work

Theology of Work Project

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Introduction to Daniel

How can you follow God and thrive in the secular world at the same time? Almost every workplace Christian faces this question daily, and many find the answer so difficult they are tempted to give up. Daniel, the central character of the Book of Daniel, faces the question under extreme circumstances. Exiled from Jerusalem when God's people are conquered by the Babylonian empire, he must live out his life in an environment very hostile to the Most High God. Yet circumstances bring him to a position of high opportunity in the service of the Babylonian king. Should he withdraw from the corrupt and profane Babylonian government and seek a life pleasing to God in an enclave among other Jews? Should he relegate his faith to a private, personal sphere, perhaps praying to God in his closet, while living the life of Babylonian power and influence indistinguishably from those around him? Daniel chooses neither. Instead he embarks on a promising career while remaining publicly devoted to God. The story of how he navigates these treacherous waters is both guidebook and case study for today's workplace Christians.

Is Daniel a Model for Christians Today?

Here and elsewhere we proceed as if Daniel and his companions model actions and attitudes that Christians can learn from and apply to their situations today. But is this really so?

The reasons against viewing Daniel as a model are his unique situation and gifts. In the Book of Daniel, the future of Israel and the entire Near East for the ensuing 500 years is at stake. Israel is an enslaved, occupied nation. When things get rough, Daniel and his friends can't just quit their jobs and go somewhere else. Lives are at stake. Given the crucial importance of the events to the nation of God's people, perhaps God took a more dramatic role in Daniel's situation than he might in ours today.

And indeed, God endows Daniel with miraculous abilities that few if any workplace Christians can expect today. Knowing and interpreting another person's dream without being told it, surviving a den of lions, seeing the future history of nations for hundreds of years — these are gifts far beyond what we experience in the contemporary workplace.

These factors suggest that we should emulate Daniel's trust in God, admire his character, marvel at his gifts, and stand in awe of God's mighty works. But we should be reluctant to try applying all of the particulars in the Book of Daniel to our lives at work.

On the other hand, why is the Book of Daniel in the Bible, if not because God means it to give us guidance? Is it only a history of what happened thousands of years ago? Does it apply only to Israel in exile? One clue may be given in 1 Corinthians 2, which has striking parallels to Daniel 4. In both, the pagan rulers of their ages cannot understand a mystery put before them by God, but the spirit-filled person(s) of God can understand. This parallel — which seems intentional on Paul's part — makes Daniel a role model for Christians, or at least for spiritually mature Christians. "Those who are spiritual discern all things" (1 Cor. 2:15). Daniel may be exceptional, but that is exactly what makes him a role model worthy of inclusion in the Bible. Moreover, the Book of Daniel itself may suggest that others follow in Daniel's footsteps. His friends — like us, far lesser in gifts and stature than Daniel — are nonetheless gifted by God for their particular roles in their specific circumstances.

The Steering Committee of the Theology of Work Project did not arrive at a unanimous view on this question. The majority held that Daniel does apply to today's workplace, while the minority viewed that it does not, or does so only lightly. We offer this the remainder of our analysis of the Book of Daniel for those who wish to explore the book's possible contemporary applications. But we do not claim that this is the only correct approach to Daniel. At the very least, we caution readers against making simplistic applications, against expecting God to do everything in our lives that he did in Daniel's, against the arrogance of thinking we are as righteous as Daniel, and against the narcissism that our situations have the cosmic importance that his did.

The Big Picture of the Book of Daniel

The Book of Daniel can be perplexing. It begins straightforwardly enough, with Daniel and his companions facing pressure to assimilate to the pleasures and vices of the Babylonian royal court. But the narrative becomes increasingly strange as dreams, visions and prophecies come into the picture. At the halfway point (chapter 7), the book becomes unmistakably apocalyptic, portending the rise and fall of future kings and kingdoms, using imagery of bizarre events and creatures.^[1] The apocalyptic genre is notoriously difficult to interpret, yet this material does contribute a few points to our understanding of work. In any case, Daniel, like Revelation — the other book-length apocalypse in the Bible — provides much valuable material relevant to work, and it is worth trying to make sense of it for a theology of work.

As it happens, the Book of Daniel offers a ready-made framework for unpacking its meaning in the workplace. That framework is a nested parallelism structure (in technical terms, a "chiasm"). This

structure consists of multiple themes, introduced in the order ABC..., then revisited in reverse order, forming a structure like this:

- Theme A, Part 1
 - Theme B, Part 1
 - Theme C, Part 1
 - Theme C, Part 2
 - Theme B, Part 2
- Theme A, Part 2

To help the reader keep track of which theme is which, the writer highlights parallel elements in both Parts of each theme. For example, Theme A in Daniel consists of a *vision* in Part 1 and a parallel *vision* in Part 2, while Theme B has *sufferings* in part 1 and more *sufferings* in part 2.

This structure is common in many books of the Bible. In Daniel, the Part 1 of each theme is relatively straightforward. Part 2 of each theme is more difficult, but referring back to the corresponding Part 1 makes it easier to make sense of the more difficult passages. In Daniel, chapter one is an introduction, and then the nested parallels begin:

- A. Vision of the future overthrow of pagan kingdoms and their replacement by God’s rule (chapter 2)
 - B. Sufferings, yet rewards, for faithful witnesses to God in the meantime (chapter 3)
 - C. Humbling/overthrow of the pagan king (chapter 4)
 - C. Humbling/overthrow of the pagan king (chapter 5)
 - B. Sufferings, yet rewards, for faithful witnesses to God in the meantime (chapter 6)
- A. Vision of the future overthrow of pagan kingdoms and their replacement by God’s rule (chapters 7-12)

This structure makes the big picture of Daniel clear. God is coming to overthrow the corrupt and arrogant pagan kingdoms where God’s people are living in exile. Although his people are suffering now, their faithful suffering is one of the chief means by which God’s power moves. This gives them a surprising ability to thrive now, a bright hope for the future, and a meaningful role to play in both present survival and future promise. We will explore the implications and applications that this big picture has for Christians in today’s workplaces. To do so, we will examine how each of the six movements outlined above are orchestrated into the overall theme.

Introduction: In Exile at Babylon U. (Daniel 1)

The Book of Daniel begins with the disaster that has finally ended the Jewish kingdom. Nebuchadnezzar (605-562 BC), the king of Babylon has conquered Jerusalem, deposed its king, and taken some of its

royals and noble young men captive. As was typical in the ancient Near East, Nebuchadnezzar made sure to take vengeance on the gods (or, in this case, God) of the vanquished nation by plundering the temple and employing its former treasures to decorate the house of his own god (1:1-3). By this we know that Nebuchadnezzar was an enemy not only to Israel, but also to Israel's God.

Among the youth taken captive were Daniel and his companions Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. They were enrolled in an indoctrination program designed to transform the exiles into loyal servants of their new king (1:4-5). This presented both an opportunity and a challenge. The opportunity was to make good lives for themselves in a hostile land, and perhaps to bring God's power and justice to their new country. The prophet Jeremiah was urging the Jewish exiles to do just that:

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (Jeremiah 29:4-7).

The challenge Daniel faced was assimilation at the expense of loyalty to his God and his people. The subjects Daniel would have studied probably included astrology, the study of animal entrails, rites of purification, sacrifice incantation, exorcism and other forms of divination and magic.^[2] These would have been odious to a devout Jew — far more at odds with Daniel's faith than most things at today's secular universities would be for modern Christians. Moreover, he and his friends had to accept changes in their very names that previously proclaimed their allegiance to God (the "el" and "iah" elements). Nonetheless, Daniel embraced the challenge, secure in the belief that God would protect his faith and loyalty. He embraced Babylonian education, but he set limits to guard against actual assimilation into the pagan culture of his captors. He resisted the rich diet that was required for all trainees, refusing to "defile himself" (1:8). The text doesn't make clear exactly what was objectionable about the diet.^[3] Cultural traditions surrounding diet are strong, especially so to Jews whose food laws distinguished them sharply from the surrounding nations (Leviticus 11; Deuteronomy 14). Perhaps keeping a separate diet gave Daniel a daily reminder of his allegiance to the Lord. Or perhaps it demonstrated that his physical prowess depended on God's favor rather than the king's dietary regimen. Perhaps the austerity of his diet kept him from developing a taste for luxury that would compromise his independence later.

In any case, the discussion of Daniel's diet highlights a much deeper point: God has a hand in the events in Daniel's life as well as in Nebuchadnezzar's, in Babylon and in every nation. Chapter 1

reflects this at the outset by stating, “the Lord let King Jehoikim of Judah fall” (1:2) and “God allowed Daniel to receive favor and compassion” (1:9). Daniel and his friends exceeded the physical development of the other novitiates not because of their genius or their diet, but because “God gave knowledge and skill in every aspect of literature and wisdom” (1:17). Daniel’s wisdom came from some source other than the elite training provided by the king’s professors, for “in every matter of wisdom and understanding concerning which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom” (1:20). This set the pattern for the remainder of the book as time and again events display the superiority of Daniel’s wisdom — and more importantly, the power of his God — over the wisdom and power of the unbelieving nations and their kings (5:14; 11:33-35; 12:3, 10).

Christians in today’s workplaces experience many similarities to Daniel and his friends in exile at the Babylonian university. There is no way to escape the workplace other than withdrawing to insular communities or choosing to work in Christian-only institutions such as churches and Christian schools. The workplace offers many (but certainly not all) Christians a variety of opportunities for personal gain, such as good pay, job security, professional achievement and stature, comfortable working conditions and interesting, creative work. In themselves, these are good things. But they tempt us with two serious evils: 1) the danger of becoming so enamored of the good material things that we become unwilling to risk their loss by standing up for what God requires of us; and 2) the spiritual danger of coming to believe that the good things come as a result of our own labor or genius, or as a result of our service to some power other than God. Moreover, the workplace often demands accommodations that in themselves are not good things, such as deception, prejudice, mistreatment of the poor and powerless, pandering to unwholesome desires, taking advantage of others in their moments of need and many more. In our times as much as in Daniel’s, it is difficult to know which accommodations are good and which are ill. Was it good or acceptable for Daniel and his friends to study astrology? Could they learn to use knowledge of the skies without becoming ensnared by the superstitions in which it was couched? Is it good for Christians to study marketing? Can they learn to use knowledge of consumer behavior without becoming ensnared in the practice of deceptive advertising or exploitative promotions? The Book of Daniel provides no specific guidelines, but it suggests some vital perspectives:

- Christians should embrace education, even if it is conducted outside the bounds of Christian accountability.
- Christians should embrace work in non-Christian and even hostile work environments.
- Christians who work or study in non- or anti-Christian environments should take care to avoid uncritical assimilation into the surrounding culture. Practices include:
 - Constant prayer and communion with God. Daniel prayed three times daily throughout his career (6:10) and with special commitment during difficult times in his work (9:3-4, 9:16-21). How many Christians actually pray for the specifics of their work lives? The Book of Daniel constantly shows that God care about the specific details of daily work.
 - Firm adherence to material markers of the faith, even if they are somewhat arbitrary. Daniel

avoided eating the king's rich food and wine because it would have compromised his loyalty to God. We could argue whether this particular practice is universally required by God, but we cannot doubt that a living faith requires live markers of the boundaries of faithful behavior. Chick-fil-a draws the line at opening on Sunday. Many Catholic doctors will not prescribe artificial contraception. Other Christians find respectful ways to ask their colleagues for permission to pray for them. None of these can be taken as universal requirements, and indeed all of them could be argued by other Christians. But each of them helps their practitioners avoid a slow creep of assimilation by providing constant, public markers of their faith.

- Active association and accountability with other Christians in the same kind of work. "Daniel made a request of the king, and he appointed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego over the affairs of the province of Babylon." (2:49). But few Christians have any forum where they can share concerns, questions, successes and failures with others in their field. How are lawyers to learn how to apply the faith to law, except by regular, intentional discussions with other Christian lawyers? Likewise for engineers, artisans, farmers, teachers, parents, marketing managers and every other vocation. Creating and nurturing these kinds of groups is one of the great unmet needs of workplace Christians.
- Formation of good relationships with non-believers in your workplace. God caused the official overseeing Daniel's diet to show him favor and sympathy (1:9). Daniel cooperated with God by respecting the official and looking after his welfare (1:10-14). Christians sometimes seem to go out of their way to antagonize and judge co-workers, but God's command is, "If it is possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all" (Romans 12:18). An excellent practice is to pray very specifically for God's blessings for those among whom we work.
- Adoption of a modest life style, so that attachment to money, prestige or power do not stand in the way of risking your job or career if you are pressured to do something contrary to God's commands, values or virtues. Despite reaching the pinnacle of Babylonian education, position and wealth, Daniel and his friends were constantly ready to lose everything in order to speak and act on God's word (2:24, 3:12, 4:20, 5:17, 6:10, 21).

Daniel managed to walk the tightrope of partial cultural assimilation without religious and moral compromise. The stakes were high. Daniel's career and even his life were on the line as was the life of the chief Babylonian official, Ashpenaz (Dan 1:10). Yet by God's grace, Daniel remained composed and maintained his integrity. Even Daniel's enemies would later admit that "they could find no grounds for complaint or any corruption, because he was faithful, and no negligence or corruption was found in him" (6:4).

Theme A: God will Overthrow Pagan Kingdoms and Replace Them with His Own Kingdom (Daniel 2)

For an explanation of the themes in and structure of Daniel, see the section ["The Big Picture of the Book of Daniel"](#).

Having set up in detail the life-situation faced by Daniel and his friends, the Book of Daniel now (in chapter 2) begins the first of the three themes that form the chiasmic structure described in the section above ("The Big Picture of the Book of Daniel"). This theme is that God will overthrow pagan kingdoms and replace them with his own kingdom.

Although Daniel was prospering and serving God in the midst of hostile territory, Nebuchadnezzar was becoming uneasy ruling his own land, even though his power was unchallenged. His dreams became troubled by his worries about the security of his empire. In one dream, Nebuchadnezzar saw a towering statue consisting of several elements made of different metals. The statue, enormous as it was, was smashed by a rock, and "became like chaff of the summer threshing floors" that "the wind carried...away, so that not a trace...could be found," but the rock "that struck the statue became a great mountain and filled the whole earth" (2:35). Nebuchadnezzar's magicians, enchanters and astrologers were of no use to him in interpreting this dream (2:10-11), but by God's grace Daniel knew both the dream — without being told by the king what it was — and the interpretation (2:27-28).

The episode contrasts Nebuchadnezzar's arrogance with Daniel's humility and dependence on God. Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylon were the paragon of pride. According to Daniel's interpretation, the statue's enormous metal components represented the kingdoms of Babylon and its successors (2:31-45).^[4] The astrologers' greeting to the king — "O king, live forever!" (2:4) — emphasizes the king's pretense that he himself is the source of his power and majesty. But Daniel gives the king two shocking messages:

1. Your kingdom is not the result of your own doing. Rather, "God of heaven has given [you] the kingdom, the power, and the might, and the glory" (2:37). So all your pride is foolish and vain.
2. Your kingdom is doomed. "Just as you saw that a stone was cut from the mountain not by hands, and that it crushed the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold. The great God has informed the king what shall be hereafter. The dream is certain, and its interpretation trustworthy" (2:44-45). Although this is not to happen in your time, it will bring all your supposedly mighty accomplishments to nothing.

In contrast, personal humility — and its conjoined twin, dependence on God's power — was Daniel's secret weapon for thriving. Humility allowed him to thrive, even in the exceptionally unpromising situation where he must forecast the kingdom's demise to the king himself. Daniel disclaimed any personal ability of his own. God alone has power and wisdom: "No wise men, enchanters, magicians, or astrologers can show to the king the mystery which the king has asked, but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries" (2:27).

Amazingly, this humble attitude led the king to pardon — and even accept — Daniel's brazen message. He was ready to execute his astrologers en masse, but he "fell upon his face, and worshipped Daniel" (2:46) then "made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and chief prefect over all the wise men

of Babylon” (2:48). Nebuchadnezzar even came to some kind of belief in Yahweh. “The king said to Daniel, “Truly, your God is God of gods and Lord of kings, and a revealer of mysteries, for you have been able to reveal this mystery” (2:47).

For today’s workplace Christians this offers two important points:

- God will bring the arrogance, corruption, injustice and violence of all workplaces to an end, although not necessarily during the time we work there. This is a source both of comfort and challenge. Comfort, because we are not responsible for correcting every evil in our workplaces, but only for acting faithfully in our spheres of influence, and also because the unfairness we may suffer at work is not the ultimate reality of our work. Challenge, because we are called to oppose the evil within our spheres of influence, costly to our careers as it may prove. Daniel was terrified by the severity of the message he had to deliver to Nebuchadnezzar: “Therefore, O king, may my counsel be acceptable to you: atone for your sins with righteousness, and your iniquities with mercy to the oppressed” (4:27).
- We must take our stands with humility rather than self-righteousness. We have seen how Daniel claimed no wisdom of his own. Likewise, in the first chapter, when Daniel was directed to eat from the king's table, he responded not in self righteousness, but with a question: “he asked the palace master to allow him not to defile himself” (1:8). Then he took time to understand the issue from the official’s point of view. While remaining true to his principles, he finds a compromise that will not back his boss into a corner: “Please test your servants for ten days” (1:12). As believers in the workplace, we may confuse taking a stand for Christ with stubbornness or belligerence.

Taken together, these two points illustrate both the possibilities and the dangers of applying the Book of Daniel to our work lives. At times we recognize that to be faithful to God, we must challenge people in power. But unlike Daniel, we lack the perfect reception of God’s word. Just because we feel something strongly, doesn’t mean it is truly from God. Therefore, if even Daniel was humble in God’s service, imagine how much humbler we should be. “God told me in a dream that I will be promoted above all of you,” is a word we should probably keep to ourselves, no matter how strongly we believe it. Maybe it’s best to assume that God will tell the people around us what he wants them to know, rather than directing us to tell it to them on his behalf.

Theme B: Sufferings, Yet Rewards, for Faithful Witnesses to God in the Meantime (Daniel 3)

For an explanation of the themes in and structure of Daniel, see the section ["The Big Picture of the Book of Daniel"](#).

By God’s grace, Daniel’s humility enabled him to prosper in Nebuchadnezzar’s court, even as God was preparing to cast down the king’s empire. Even so, Daniel and his friends were about to suffer under a renewed fit of Nebuchadnezzar’s arrogance. Unlike in the first and second chapters, in chapter 3 their

faithfulness to God led to their suffering. Yet even in the midst of their suffering, God rewarded their faithfulness.

For a while, it appeared as though Nebuchadnezzar himself would renounce his arrogance, submit himself to God and spare his empire the need to be overthrown by God's power. Regrettably, however, the very dream that led Nebuchadnezzar to recognize God's hand on Daniel may also be what incited the king to build a golden image that he required all his subjects to worship (3:1, 5-6). The edifice signified the resurgent pride of the Babylonian king. Its gigantic structure (ninety feet high) was constructed on the level "plain of Dura" which would have exaggerated the commanding presence of the image (3:1).

The king's disgraced astrologers saw a chance for revenge on Daniel. They played off of the king's resurgent pride and accused Daniel's friends of failing to worship the image (3:8-12). The friends readily admitted their guilt and refused to worship the image, despite the king's threat to throw them in to a fiery furnace (3:13-18). After years of successfully bridging the tension between the pagan environment of the Babylonian court and their fidelity to God, they faced a situation where no compromise was possible without violating their integrity. Previously, they served as models of how to thrive by following God in a hostile environment. Now they had to serve as models of how to suffer in the same environment. This they do with gusto.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defense to you in this matter. If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up." (3:16-18).

Today's workplace Christians seldom face such extreme hostility, at least in the western world. But we could be ordered to do something that we cannot do in good conscience. Or, more likely, we might wake up one day and realize that we are already compromising God's desires for our work by the goals we pursue, the powers we exercise, the relationships we misuse or the compromises we make. In any case, there may well come a day when we recognize that we must make a radical change, such as saying, "No," being fired, resigning, blowing the whistle or standing up for someone else. We should expect to suffer for doing so. The fact that we may be doing God's will should not lead us to expect God will prevent us from facing the consequences imposed by the powers that be. Working as a Christian is not another shortcut to success, but instead brings the constant danger of suffering.

This episode is especially poignant because it shows that Daniel and his friends lived in the same world we do. In our world, if you stand up to a boss over an issue of, say, sexual harassment or falsification of

data, the most likely outcome is that you will be punished, marginalized, sullied, misunderstood and maybe fired. Even if you succeed in ending the abuse and removing the offender from power, your own reputation may well suffer irreparable damage. It's so difficult to prove that you were right, and people are so reluctant to get involved, that the institution may protect itself by getting rid of you alongside the true offender. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego apparently expected no less for themselves, for they say outright that God may not intervene in their case. "If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us...let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods" (3:17-18). Nonetheless, to them, being faithful to God was the right thing to do, whether or not it was path to success.

In this they are indeed models for us. We need to learn to speak the truth clearly, with humility, in our own workplaces. General Peter Pace, a former chairman of the U.S. military's Joint Chiefs of Staff, has said, "What I have come to really admire is something I call intellectual courage. This is the ability to sit in a room full of very powerful people, and see a conversation going in one direction, and feeling in your gut that something is not right, and having the temerity to say, 'I see it differently, and here's why.'" [5] In practice, courage often results from being prepared. Daniel's friends knew the dangers inherent in their positions, and they were prepared to face the consequences of standing firm in their convictions. We should know where the ethical edges in our workplaces are and think through in advance what we would do if asked to do something contrary to God's word. "You need to know in advance what your 'walk-away' conditions are and practice your resignation speech for every job you take," was the advice of a long-time Harvard Business School professor. "Otherwise you can be lulled into doing almost anything, step-by-step." [6]

Theme C: Humbling and Overthrow of the Pagan King (Daniel 4)

Chapters 4 and 5 of the Book of Daniel are to be read in concert, chapter 4 introducing theme C of the chiasm, and chapter 5 reprising it (see "[The Big Picture in the Book of Daniel](#)" for an explanation of the themes in and structure of Daniel). The topic of both is the humbling or overthrow of the pagan kingdom. The magnificence of Babylon serves as the common setting for the humiliation of Nebuchadnezzar in chapter 4 and the demise of King Belshazzar in chapter 5.

In chapter 4, both Babylon's magnificence and the king's arrogance reached their zeniths. Yet once again, the king was troubled by his dreams. He saw an enormous tree whose "top reached to heaven" (4:11), which provided fruit and shelter for all the animals. But at the command from a "holy watcher, coming down from heaven" (4:13), the tree was cut down and the animals scattered. In the dream the stump became a man whose mind was changed into that of an animal and who was constrained to live among the animals and plants for an extended time (4:13-16). The king commands Daniel to interpret the dream, once again requiring Daniel to give unpleasant news to an emotionally unstable monarch (

4:18-19). The interpretation is that the tree represents Nebuchadnezzar himself, who will be punished for his arrogance by being driven insane and made to live like a wild animal until he will “know that the Most High has sovereignty over the kingdom of mortals and gives it to whom he will” (4:25). Despite the stark warning, Nebuchadnezzar persisted in his pride, even boasting, “Is this not magnificent Babylon, which I have built as a royal capital by my mighty power and for my glorious majesty?” (4:30). As a result, he was punished as the dream foretold (4:33).

But perhaps Daniel’s confrontational interpretation made a difference, for after a long time in the wilderness, the king repents, glorifies God, and both his sanity and his kingdom are restored to him (4:34-37). Daniel’s stand did not persuade the king to renounce his arrogance before disaster struck, but it opened a door for the king’s repentance and restoration after the fact.

At times our respectful, principled stands may lead to transformation in our workplaces, too. A consultant at an international management consulting firm — call him Vince — tells a story of confronting someone with a bit too much self-importance.^[7] Vince was put in charge of a team of promising young employees at one of the firm’s clients, a large industrial company. At the start of the project, a senior partner from the firm began to give a pep talk to the team. One of the client team members — call him Gary — interrupted him. Gary began to question the validity of the project. “Before we embark on this project,” said Gary, “I think we should evaluate whether consulting firms like yours actually add value to their clients. I’ve been reading some articles that say this kind of study may not be as useful as it’s cracked up to be.” The senior partner found a way to continue his pep talk, but afterwards he told Vince, “Get Gary off the team.” Vince — mindful of Jesus’ command to forgive a brother seventy-seven times (Matthew 18:22) — asked permission to see if he could get Gary to change his attitude. “It just doesn’t seem right to damage his career over one mistake, big as it was,” he said. “You have two weeks,” the partner replied, “and you’re putting yourself on the line, too.” By God’s grace — according to Vince — Gary did come to see the validity of the project and flung himself into the work wholeheartedly. The senior partner recognized the change and, at the end of the project, singled out Gary for special recognition at the closing banquet. Vince’s stand made a difference for both Gary and his company.

Theme C Revisited: Humbling and Overthrow of the Pagan King (Daniel 5)

For an explanation of the themes in and structure of the Book of Daniel, see the section ["The Big Picture in the Book of Daniel"](#).

Theme C, as introduced in chapter 5, concerns the humbling of the pagan king, but not his actual overthrow. The theme is revisited in chapter 5 in terms of the destruction of the Babylonian empire. Babylon’s extravagance had few parallels in the ancient world.^[8] It was an impregnable fortress built

of two walls, an inner and outer wall, with the outer wall as long as 11 miles and the height as great as 40 feet. A processional boulevard led to the spectacle of the Ishtar Gate, one of the city's eight gates, which displayed glittering blue-glazed brick. The city contained as many as 50 temples and numerous palaces. The famed "Hanging Gardens," known primarily from ancient historians, was one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Yet after the death of the strong-armed Nebuchadnezzar in 562 BC, the city's downfall took barely 20 years. The Persian king Cyrus (559-530 BC) took the city in 539 BC without significant resistance.

This momentous change in the political landscape is told from the perspective of what occurred in the palace of the new ruler, Belshazzar, on the night of the city's fall.^[9] Belshazzar, at a sumptuous banquet, defiled the sacred Jewish goblets stolen from the temple of Jerusalem and blasphemed the Lord as the meal degenerated into a drunken orgy (5:1-4). Then, "immediately the fingers of a human hand appeared and began writing on the plaster of the wall" (5:5). Belshazzar, proud ruler of the magnificent empire of Babylon, was so frightened by the handwriting on the wall that his face turned pale and his knees knocked together (5:6). Neither he nor his enchanters, astrologers and diviners were able to understand what it meant (5:7-9). Only Daniel could perceive its message of doom: "The God in whose power is your very breath, and to whom belong all your ways, you have not honored" (5:23). "You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting" (5:27). "Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians" (5:28). And indeed, "That very night Belshazzar, the Chaldean king, was killed. And Darius the Mede received the kingdom..." (5:30).

In the end, God does bring the evil kingdom to an end. God's final victory, not our personal effectiveness, is the great hope of God's people. By all means, we should bloom where we are planted. If the opportunity arises, we can and should make a difference. Engagement, not withdrawal, is the model we see in every page of the Book of Daniel. But our engagement with the world is not grounded on the expectation that we will achieve a certain degree of success, or that God will make us immune from the sufferings we see around us. It is grounded on the knowledge that everything good that happens in the midst of the fallen world is only a foretaste of the incomparable goodness that will come when God brings his own kingdom forth on earth. Ultimately, the question, "Whose side are you on?" matters more than, "What have you done for me lately?"

Theme B Revisited: Sufferings, Yet Rewards, for Faithful Witnesses to God in the Meantime (Daniel 6)

For an explanation of the themes in and structure of the Book of Daniel, see the section ["The Big Picture in the Book of Daniel"](#).

At this point the chiasmic structure of Daniel revisits Theme B: that faithful witnesses to God experience

both suffering and reward while the pagan kingdom persists. Chapter 6 narrates a conspiratorial threat to Daniel's life, set in the reign of the Persian monarch Darius the Great (522-486 BC). Daniel's competence merited his promotion to ruler over all the new empire, subservient only to the king himself (6:3). But his rivals contrived a plan that exploited the only vulnerability the man had — Daniel's daily habit of prayer to his God. Darius was duped by the conspirators into decreeing a ban for 30 days on all religious expression except for prayer directed to the king. The penalty was death in the lion's den. To his great distress, Darius could not rescind the order since, according to tradition, "the law of the Medes and the Persians...cannot be revoked" (6:8). Darius, although the most powerful man of his day, tied his own hands, making it impossible to rescue his favored administrator. The king conceded to Daniel, "May your God, whom you faithfully serve, deliver you!" (6:16). And the Lord's angel performed what the king asked but could not perform. Daniel was thrown in the lions' den overnight, but emerged in the morning unwounded (6:17-23). This led the king to issue an edict of reverence for Daniel's God and to remove the threat of annihilation for the Jews as they continued to worship God (6:26-27). Not even the implacable laws of the Medes and Persians could insure the end of God's people. God's power overcame human deceit and royal dictate.

Nonetheless, Daniel did experience what most of us would call suffering along the way. Being the target of a government-sponsored character assassination attempt (6:4-6) must have been a grueling experience, even if he was eventually cleared. Likewise, openly defying the king's edict for conscience' sake (6:10-12) was a dangerous, if courageous, act. Daniel suffered immediate arrest and was thrown into a den of lions (6:16-17). We should not let Daniel's eventual deliverance (6:21-23) lead us to imagine that the experience wasn't painful and disturbing, to say the least. There are three lessons we can learn from Daniel's faithful witness to God:

- Daniel did not limit himself to tasks he was certain he could accomplish on his own steam. There is no way to practice being thrown into a lion's den! Rather, he did his work on a daily basis in dependence on God. Daniel prayed three times a day (6:10). He acknowledged God in every tough issue he faced. We, too, have to recognize we cannot fulfill our callings on our own.
- Daniel epitomized the call Jesus would later give to be salt and light (Matthew 5:13-16) in our workplaces. Even Daniel's enemies had to admit, "We shall not find any ground for complaint against this Daniel unless we find it in connection with the law of his God" (6:5). This meant that he was able to confront difficult situations with truth, and actually bring about change. This happens several times when Daniel and his friends take a careful stand for the truth and it leads to a new decree by the king (2:46-49; 3:28-30; 4:36-37; 5:29; 6:25-28).
- Daniel's success in bringing about change demonstrates that God cares about the everyday issues of governance in a broken society. Just because God intends to replace the current regime eventually, doesn't mean he doesn't care about making it more just, more fruitful, more livable now. Sometimes we don't engage with God in our work because we believe that our work doesn't seem important to God. But each decision is important to our God, and every worker needs to know this. The question that the theology of Daniel presents the worker is, "Whose kingdom are you building?" Daniel excelled

in his occupation laboring on behalf of the world's kingdoms, *and* he maintained his integrity as a citizen of God's kingdom. His service to the pagan kings *was* his service for the purposes of God. Christian workers must labor well in the here and now, knowing that the significance of our labor both resides in *and* transcends the here and now.

Theme A Revisited: God will Overthrow Pagan Kingdoms and Replace Them with His Own Kingdom (Dan 7)

For an explanation of the themes in and structure of the Book of Daniel, see the section ["The Big Picture in the Book of Daniel"](#).

At this point the Book of Daniel brings us back to its first theme, that God will someday replace the corrupt kingdoms of this world with his own kingdom. Like Daniel and his companions, by God's grace we may find a way to get by — and perhaps even a way to thrive — as exiles here in the meantime. Yet the chief hope we have lies not in making the best of the present situation, but in anticipating the joy of coming kingdom of God.

Therefore perseverance becomes a crucial virtue. We have to persevere until Christ returns to put things to right. Perseverance is a virtue praised in classical philosophy and in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Sometimes we encounter it in quotable packages, such as Einstein's admission, "It's not that I'm so smart, it's just that I stay with problems longer." The New Testament confirms the value of perseverance: "Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him" (James 1:12). Perseverance in the life of the believer has its basis and source in the Lord God. It is not a matter of human integrity or honor. Christian endurance rests on the veracity of God's eternal covenant promises.

Beginning in Chapter 7, the Book of Daniel becomes frankly apocalyptic in genre. Apocalyptic literature, a special kind of prophetic oracle, describes the cataclysmic events of the last days. It was widespread in early Jewish and Christian literature. Among its traits are a rich symbolism (chapter 7), description of the final universal battle between good and evil (11:40-12:4) and a heavenly interpreter who explains the meaning of the vision to the prophet (7:16, 23; 8:15; 9:21-23; 10:14). The prophet is exhorted to persevere faithfully until the vision is fulfilled (7:25-27; 9:24; 10:18-19; 12:1-4, 13). This literary form accentuates the author's message about perseverance.

Chapters 7-12 recount how Daniel received haunting visions, which he reports in first-person testimony. The net result is a series of prophecies that envisages the tribulations of God's people at the hands of despotic leaders but which end in triumph secured by God's appointed deliverer. The book ends with an exhortation of perseverance to Daniel. "Happy are those who persevere and attain the thousand three hundred thirty-five days. But you, go your way, and rest; you shall rise for your reward at the end of the

days” (12:12-13).

Oppression against God’s people is a constant theme of these chapters (7:21, 25; 9:26; 10:1). The oppressor — revealed by history to be Antiochus IV Epiphanes^[10] — is described in disturbing surrealistic images. He is the vicious “little horn” (“abomination that desolates” (“contemptible person” in 11:21 who rejects the traditional gods of his ancestors, making himself to be the supreme deity (“Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58).

The message of assurance from chapters 7-12 for workers is the assurance of a final reckoning that will justly reward the faithful work we do in life. In the here and now, good work is not always rewarded according to its honorable contributions to society. Its results are not even visible to us in many cases. Daniel and his friends turn the hearts of kings not once but many times. But it wasn't long before the kings reverted to their old selves. So in our workplaces, our role as salt and light can hold back evil, but often will not lead to a permanent change. This doesn't diminish our responsibility in being salt and light, but the fruits of our labor will not be fully visible until the kingdom of God is fulfilled.

Conclusion to Daniel

The Book of Daniel provides a hopeful picture of how God’s people can survive and even thrive in a hostile environment by remaining faithful to God. God, according to the Book of Daniel, cares deeply about the everyday lives of individuals and societies in a broken world. God intervenes directly in daily life, and also gives Daniel miraculous gifts that make it possible to thrive under an oppressive regime. Yet by no means does the Book of Daniel promise worldly success as a reward for faithfulness. Rather, it promises both suffering and reward in mortal life, and thereby demonstrates that faithfulness and integrity are the keys to living well in this life as well as in the coming kingdom of God.

Daniel and his friends model many practical applications for workplace Christians: engaging with culture, adopting lifelong habits that build faithfulness and virtue, sharing in fellowship with Christian co-workers, adopting a modest life style, forming friendships with non-believers, showing genuine humility, taking a principled stand in workplace situations, embracing challenges we know we cannot meet without God’s help, bringing salt and light to our workplaces, working with excellence and diligence in whatever our jobs are, anticipating suffering as a result of Christian faithfulness in the workplace, and persevering until God brings his kingdom — and our faithful labor — to fruition. We cannot know in advance whether our faithfulness to God’s ways will result in worldly success or failure, any more than Daniel’s friends could know whether they would be saved from the fiery furnace or burned up. But, like them, we can acknowledge that serving God in our work is what truly matters.

Key Verses and Themes in Daniel

VERSE		THEME
Daniel 1:11-14 Then Daniel asked the guard whom the palace master had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah: "Please test your servants for ten days. Let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. You can then compare our appearance with the appearance of the young men who eat the royal rations, and deal with your servants according to what you observe." So he agreed to this proposal and tested them for ten days.		Humility is the key to good relationships with God and people
Daniel 1:8 But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the royal rations of food and wine; so he asked the palace master to allow him not to defile himself.		We need to resist assimilation to culture that violates God's ways
Daniel 1:9 Now God allowed Daniel to receive favor and compassion from the palace master.		Following God leads to a mix of suffering and rewards in life
Daniel 1:20 In every matter of wisdom and understanding concerning which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom.		God gives us abilities to work with excellence, even in corrupt workplaces
Daniel 2:24 Therefore Daniel went to Arioch, whom the king had appointed to destroy the wise men of Babylon, and said to him, "Do not destroy the wise men of Babylon; bring me in before the king, and I will give the king the interpretation."		We are called to embrace work beyond what we can accomplish by our own power
Daniel 2:27 Daniel answered the king, "No wise men, enchanters, magicians, or diviners can show to the king the mystery that the king is asking."		Humility is the key to good relationships with God and people

<p>Daniel 2:47 The king said to Daniel, “Truly, your God is God of gods and Lord of kings, and a revealer of mysteries, for you have been able to reveal this mystery.”</p>		<p>Our witness can make a difference in our workplaces</p>
<p>Daniel 2:48 Then the king promoted Daniel, gave him many great gifts, and made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon and chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon.</p>		<p>Following God leads to a mix of suffering and rewards in life</p>
<p>Daniel 3:16-18 Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defense to you in this matter. If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up.”</p>		<p>We need to be prepared to face suffering in the workplace</p>
<p>Daniel 4:27 “Therefore, O king, may my counsel be acceptable to you: atone for your sins with righteousness, and your iniquities with mercy to the oppressed, so that your prosperity may be prolonged.”</p>		<p>We need to take a (humble) stand for what is right in the workplace</p>
<p>Daniel 4:33 Immediately the sentence was fulfilled against Nebuchadnezzar. He was driven away from human society, ate grass like oxen, and his body was bathed with the dew of heaven, until his hair grew as long as eagles’ feathers and his nails became like birds’ claws.</p>		<p>God will bring the rules and kingdoms of the earth to an end</p>
<p>Daniel 5:14 I have heard of you that a spirit of the gods is in you, and that enlightenment, understanding, and excellent wisdom are found in you.</p>		<p>God gives us abilities to work with excellence, even in corrupt workplaces</p>
<p>Daniel 5:17 Then Daniel answered in the presence of the king, “Let your gifts be for yourself, or give your rewards to someone else! Nevertheless I will read the writing to the king and let him know the interpretation.”</p>		<p>A modest life style enables us to resist assimilation to corruption</p>

<p>Daniel 6:3 Soon Daniel distinguished himself above all the other presidents and satraps because an excellent spirit was in him, and the king planned to appoint him over the whole kingdom.</p>		<p>God gives us abilities to work with excellence, even in corrupt workplaces</p>
<p>Daniel 6:4 So the presidents and the satraps tried to find grounds for complaint against Daniel in connection with the kingdom. But they could find no grounds for complaint or any corruption, because he was faithful, and no negligence or corruption could be found in him.</p>		<p>A modest life style enables us to resist assimilation to corruption</p>
<p>Daniel 6:10 Although Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he continued to go to his house, which had windows in its upper room open toward Jerusalem, and to get down on his knees three times a day to pray to his God and praise him, just as he had done previously.</p>		<p>Prayer is an essential practice for working faithfully</p>
<p>Daniel 6:16 Then the king gave the command, and Daniel was brought and thrown into the den of lions.</p>		<p>Following God leads to a mix of suffering and rewards in life</p>
<p>Daniel 6:25-28 Then King Darius wrote to all peoples and nations of every language throughout the whole world: "May you have abundant prosperity! I make a decree, that in all my royal dominion people should tremble and fear before the God of Daniel: For he is the living God, enduring forever. His kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion has no end. He delivers and rescues, he works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth; for he has saved Daniel from the power of the lions." So this Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian.</p>		<p>Our witness can make a difference in our workplaces</p>
<p>Daniel 7:21 As I looked, this horn made war with the holy ones and was prevailing over them.</p>		<p>We need to be prepared to face suffering in the workplace</p>
<p>Daniel 9:3-4 Then I turned to the Lord God, to seek an answer by prayer and supplication with fasting and sackcloth and ashes. I prayed to the LORD my God and made confession...</p>		<p>Prayer is an essential practice for working faithfully</p>

<p>Daniel 12:1 At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book.</p>		<p>God calls us to persevere where we are until he brings his kingdom to fulfillment</p>
<p>Daniel 12:12-13 Happy are those who persevere and attain the thousand three hundred thirty-five days. But you, go your way, and rest; you shall rise for your reward at the end of the days.</p>		<p>God calls us to persevere where we are until he brings his kingdom to fulfillment</p>

ENDNOTES

- [1] The visions in chapters 7 through 12 — suitably interpreted — closely match the actual unfolding of events in the succession of the Babylonian, Persian, Egyptian and Greek empires over hundreds of years. This is especially true of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (11:31-39), and therefore many scholars date the writing of the book to his times, ca. 165 BC. Language, historical references and genre are complicating factors. The dating of the book colors how the prophecies are interpreted. If it is dated ca. 165 BC, then the prophecies describe historical events under the guise of prophecy (i.e., after the fact). The chief problem with this viewpoint is it has the effect of undercutting the theology of the book itself. The ability of the prophet to foresee future events speaks to the key theological theme: God will bring about what the prophet has been given to foresee because of God’s sovereign rule over the nations. For a thorough discussion of the late date theory, see J. J. Collins, *Daniel, Hermeneia* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) and J. Goldingay, *Daniel, Word Biblical Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989). For the traditional conservative view, see J. Baldwin, *Daniel, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978) and S. Miller, *Daniel, New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), and T. Longman, *Daniel, NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999). In any case, resolving this question is not directly necessary for understanding what the book says about work. In our discussion, we will accept the book’s attribution of Daniel’s words and visions to Daniel of the 6th century BC.
- [2] John E. Goldingay, *Daniel*, (Dallas: Word, 1989), 16-17.
- [3] The food laws in their technical detail may not have been the issue since wine was permitted by

Jewish law, and since later we learn that Daniel did find suitable meat to eat in Babylon (10:3). Nonetheless, there seems to be a hint of objection to the king's diet, per se, reminiscent of the Corinthians' qualms about eating meat sacrificed to idols (1 Corinthians 8:1-13). The best explanation is Daniel's resistance to assimilation. For the assimilation view, see Goldingay, Daniel, 19; Collins, Daniel, 143; for refusal to commend the king's diet, see Longman, Daniel, 53.

- [4] The metals of the image in chapter 2 and the bestial kingdoms in chapter 7 are parallel references to the succession of these four earthly kingdoms: Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome; the alternative view that presupposes the work is second century contends for Babylon, Median, Persia, and Greece.
- [5] Peter Pace, "The Truth as I Know It," interview by Al Erisman and David Gautschi, *Ethix* 61 (September 2008), referenced online at blog.spu.edu/ethix/2008/09/03/the-truth-as-i-know-it.
- [6] Memory recounted to the Theology of Work Project by an anonymous correspondent, April 2010.
- [7] Name withheld at request of source, telephone interview by William Messenger, January 17, 2010.
- [8] E. Klengel-Brandt, "Babylon," *Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 251-56; Bill T. Arnold, *Who Were the Babylonians?* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), 96-99.
- [9] Belshazzar was not a descendant of Nebuchadnezzar, but the son of and co-regent with King Nabonidus (556-539 BC) who had come to the throne in a military coup.
- [10] John Whitehorse, "Antiochus," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1.269-70.