

Welcome: We are in a four-part series through the book of Daniel called *Stand Strong*. Though Daniel was written over 2,500 years ago, it is one of the most practical books in all of Scripture that gives us a picture of what it looks like to live as a follower of Jesus in a culture and world that does not align with the values and priorities of God or His Kingdom!

So...we're asking the question, "How do we live a believing life in an unbelieving world?" How does being a Christian shape the way we go about our work and business? How we lead our families? How does the gospel lead us to engage our communities and world in relevant and redemptive ways?

Last week, from Daniel chapter 1, we found that as Christians we are not called to **assimilate** into the culture; that is to become like the culture with its values and customs, so that there is nothing distinctive or different about our lives! But neither should we **abandon** our culture and become indifferent or pessimistic toward it! No...as followers of Jesus whose lives are being transformed by Him, we are called to engage our culture and community with His heart! To be loyal to our heavenly Father while loving our neighbors!

My prayer is that you would see the profound influence you can have in this world as you live for the good of your neighbors and the glory of Christ.

Kenneth Latourette, a historian in the mid-20th century, wrote a work on the history of the expansion of Christianity in which he described Christianity's influence over the last 2,000 years.

*"No life ever lived on this planet has been so influential in the affairs of men like the life of Jesus Christ. From that brief life and its apparent frustration has flowed a more powerful force for the triumphant waging of man's long battle than any other ever known by the human race. By it millions have been lifted from illiteracy and ignorance and have been placed upon the road of growing intellectual freedom and control over the physical environment. It has done more to allay the physical ills of disease and famine than any other impulse known to man. It's emancipated millions from chattel slavery and millions of others from addiction to vice. It has protected tens of millions in exploitation by their fellows. It's been the most fruitful source of movement to lessen the horrors of war and to put the relations of men and nations on the basis of justice and of peace. **Christ and his church have had an enormous influence.** And if only we were out and out for Jesus Christ in the fullness of our commitment, then we would have far more influence than we do. Kenneth Latourette*

How do we stand strong in our commitment to Jesus Christ so that we might influence in our world for His name?

Look with me at Daniel, chapter 2...

"One night during the second year of his reign, Nebuchadnezzar had such disturbing dreams that he couldn't sleep." Daniel 2:1

Now...let me take the next few moments to set the scene for you. Nebuchadnezzar was the ruler of Babylon, a massive and impressive empire that during the 7th and 6th centuries BC encompassed most of what we know as the Middle East. As Nebuchadnezzar continued to expand his rule through military conquest, He gained enormous power and wealth and was respected and feared by other nations.

Nothing on earth could present any real threat to Nebuchadnezzar's security! Yet, one night as he slept, he was awakened by a dream that haunted him! **Look at verse 2...**

"(Nebuchadnezzar) called in his magicians, enchanters, sorcerers, and astrologers, and he demanded that they tell him what he had dreamed. As they stood before the king, he said, 'I have had a dream that deeply troubles me, and I must know what it means. Then the astrologers answered the king in Aramaic, 'Long live the king! Tell us the dream, and we will tell you what it means.' But the king said to the astrologers, 'I am serious about this. If you don't tell me what my dream was and what it means, you will be torn limb from limb, and your houses will be turned into heaps of rubble. But if you tell me what I dreamed and what the dream means, I will give you many wonderful gifts and honors. Just tell me the dream and what it means!'" Daniel 2:2-6

You might think that your boss at work is irritable or unfair, but most likely they have never threatened to tear you limb from limb and turn your house into heaps of rubble! If so...it's probably time to prepare your resume, ok!

Now...the wild thing about the Nebuchadnezzar's request is that he insists his advisors tell him both the dream and its meaning...or face the consequences!

Look at their response in verse 10...

"No one on earth can tell the king his dream! And no king, however great and powerful, has ever asked such a thing of any magician, enchanter, or astrologer! The king's demand is impossible. No one except the gods can tell you your dream, and they do not live here among the people." Daniel 2:10-11

At this, the text says that Nebuchadnezzar became furious and ordered that all the wise men of Babylon be executed...

"And because of the king's decree men were sent to find and kill Daniel and his friends (Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego)." 2:13

If you remember from last week, Daniel was a Jewish young man who was taken from Judah into exile in Babylon where he was promoted up through the ranks to serve as an advisor to Nebuchadnezzar.

So...when Daniel heard that the lives of he and his friends are on the line, he went to see the king to request time to interpret the dream. Then, with his friends, Daniel began praying that God would reveal the dream. Later that night, the text says, Daniel had a vision in which the dream and its meaning was revealed. So, Daniel requested an audience with the king, and there he shared with Nebuchadnezzar the meaning of the dream!

Dreams – Now, I don't know what your dreams are like, but most of mine are a very random and bizarre weaving together of events and encounters that I forget the moment I awake! But occasionally, I'll remember a dream because it is connected to a significant circumstance or person in my life. And I often find that I dream about things that concern me!

Naked Dream – For several years after I started teaching at Harbor, one of my greatest fears was that I would stand up here and make a fool of myself. During that same time, I kid you not...I had a recurring dream that as I stood before you on Sunday mornings, I was virtually naked. And as I tried to overlook that small detail, I would discover that my notes were out of order, and I often couldn't find our text in my Bible...and though I did my very best to play it off, I think you noticed. And each time, as I was getting ready to run off the stage in embarrassment, I woke up! **You ever had that kind of dream? Disturbing and bizarre, but true to your fears!** Nebuchadnezzar's dream is not a random collection of events and circumstances. In verse 30, Daniel says to him...

"God wants you to understand what was in your heart." 2:30

In his dream, Nebuchadnezzar saw an enormous shining statue of a man...the head was made of gold...the body of silver, bronze, and iron...with feet of iron and clay! **In chapter three, we'll see that Nebuchadnezzar had always dreamed of building a Statue of Liberty sized monument of himself at which the nations would bow in worship!** So far, the dream is going pretty well. **Until** a rock cut from a mountain struck the feet of iron and clay smashing them to bits, crushing the entire statue. Then came a wind that blew away the rubble and in its place stood the rock that became a great mountain and covered the whole earth!

Now...look at verse 36...

*"That was the dream. Now we will tell the king what it means. Your Majesty, you are the greatest of kings. The God of heaven has given you sovereignty, power, strength, and honor. He has made you the ruler over all the inhabited world and has put even the wild animals and birds under your control. You are the head of gold. **(Sounds good)** But after your kingdom comes to an end, another kingdom, inferior to yours, will rise to take your place." Daniel 2:36-39*

Now...if you keep reading the narrative (and we won't for sake of time), you'll see that four kingdoms rise and fall until they are replaced by a final kingdom, built not by man...but by God. It is a kingdom that can never be destroyed or conquered!

Now that we have the historical setting for this text...let's ask the obvious question. *"What in the world does a 2,500 year old narrative about kings and kingdoms and frightening dreams have to do with us?"*

Nebuchadnezzar came to Babylon with a dream to be great. He wanted to show the world how powerful he could become so they would see him as towering and looming and glorious. And he did become one of the most powerful and influential people in all of history. Yet, in his dream, he had feet of clay! Though Babylon seemed impenetrable, it was in fact weak and fragile.

While many scholars have gotten lost in the historical details or implications of this text, the meaning and application of the dream is much simpler!

We do the very same thing as Nebuchadnezzar, don't we? We may not dream of kingdoms and 90 foot tall statues of ourselves, but we dream of greatness!

Car Pool – If you doubt that what I say is true...drive a car full of 6th and 7th grade boys to school a couple of times a week and listen to them trying to one up each other in topics from music knowledge to basketball shots to deodorant choices to which girl spoke to them at recess!

From an early age, there is something in us that says, *"I know that I should be great and I want to be great, so I've got to find something or someone out there to make me great. To tell me that I'm special."* And as we get older, the desire to be great doesn't go away...age intensifies our search.

Some of us try to find greatness by looking great! We give attention and time to our bodies...not merely to stay healthy...but to prove that we're worthwhile! We live in a culture that accentuates this pressure, especially for young women! It says, 'ladies, if you can look great in a man's eyes, you'll be something.'

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Some of us try to find greatness financially. Others through our career and success! And we believe that these things are what will make us impenetrable.

Many of us are after a great lifestyle that will make us comfortable and happy and attractive to others.

It could be one of these or a thousand other things. But please hear me. God is saying the same thing to us that He said to Nebuchadnezzar.

If we build our lives on anything other than Him, we'll eventually be haunted by fear and anxiety. The moment something threatens our foundation and shows us how weak it actually is, we'll crumble!

If you're building your life on a great career, the prospect of retirement will haunt you; but if you're building your life on a comfortable retirement, financial instability or physical illness will undo you. If you need romance and sex to be great, singleness will tear you apart. If you need to look great, the mirror will haunt you! If you're looking to a marriage to tell you you're great, you'll eventually be crushed by unmet expectations!

If you build your life on anything other than God himself...you will be standing on feet of clay...and you'll eventually fall!

For a moment, let me explain why it is that I believe we long for greatness and how the desire to be great, or...the desire for our lives to matter...is part of what it means to be human. And yet, when it comes to searching for greatness, why it is that we tend to look in all the wrong places!

In Genesis chapter 2, after God created man and woman in his image...God gave them the divine mandate to fill the earth and govern it as His representatives? Do you remember what God said after He took a step back and saw the work of His hands?

"Then God looked over all he had made, and he saw that it was very good."
Genesis 2:31

Very good = Exceedingly Good!

For a moment, think about all the things that we say are 'good.' We had a good day at work...but we're really looking forward to a good weekend! Summer in New England is good...playing with my children in the yard, walks on the beach, summer sunsets, all very good. Ice cream in New England is good. Getting ice cream twice in

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one day is...very good (bucket lists)! Going out with Beth last weekend without children for the first time since Lydia was born...very, very, very good!

When you say that something is very good, do you mean, 'that thing was ok. It met my expectations. It passed the test.' Or, do you mean, 'it satisfied my desire and brought me delight!'

Do you realize that when God created humanity...he looked at us and said, 'you satisfy my desire. You bring me delight!'

If you think I'm overemphasizing the point, read Psalm 8.

"O Lord, our Lord, your majestic name fills the earth! Your glory is higher than the heavens. You have taught children and infants to tell of your strength..."

Psalm 8:1-2a

(The Psalmist says, 'God...you are good...you are great.)

"When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers – the moon and the stars you set in place – what are mere mortals that you should think about them, human beings that you should care for them? You made them only a little lower than God and crowned them with glory (greatness) and honor. You gave them charge of everything you made, putting all things under their authority – O Lord, our Lord, your majestic name fills the earth!" Psalm 8:3-6, 9

Do you see that from the beginning of time, God crowned humanity with glory and honor! He made you in His image, to be the object of His love so that you would delight in knowing and honoring Him in all that you do...

This is where we find true greatness! Simply by delighting in the presence of our great God!

Field Trip – In the last two weeks, I've had the pleasure of joining both of my girls, 1st and 3rd grade, for their class field trips! There was a point in each trip where Karlie and Elise took my hand and held it for several minutes, and I thank God that they are still at an age where holding dad's hand in front of their peers isn't un-cool! Now, Elise's class went to Lego Land (there are all kinds of side-benefits to being a dad). But Karlie's class went to Lowell for civics day, and afterwards Karlie said to me... 'Dad, the trip was pretty boring, but the thing that made the trip great was that you were there.'

Karlie was saying, "Dad, just being by your side, holding your hand, being the object of your delight is where I find significance."

This is where we true greatness is found! In the presence of our great God...as the object of His great love!

Now, as you follow the narrative of Genesis...it is only when Adam and Eve decided that they wanted to be great like God instead of looking to God for their greatness that things began to fall apart!

In the same way, Nebuchadnezzar attempted to find greatness in power, wealth and fame rather than honoring God and filling the world of His greatness!

Don't we do the same? Isn't it true that we have walked away from God to establish our own greatness! To build dazzling images of ourselves to prove to the world that we're special!

The Bible calls this sin! Sin is a destructive force that separates us from God and brings decay and ruin in our lives! It weakens our foundation until the very things upon which we have built our fragile lives start to crumble.

But there is HOPE!

Do you remember the rock in Nebuchadnezzar's dream that crushed all of the other kingdoms?

The rock represents God's kingdom! It is not a political kingdom that advances through military might and conquest, but a kingdom that advances in the hearts of men and women who are loyal to the King!

Every other historical empire has advanced through conquest and bloodshed or forced submission, but the Kingdom of God came when Jesus Christ, God's Son, came into our world!

Gospel – Jesus was the King, but He didn't come to crush and destroy us, even though our sin has made us enemies of God. He came to be crushed and shed His blood for us!

Jesus did not come to force us into submission. Rather, He gave his life so we would willingly lay down our lives for Him! The Bible says that Jesus died for you because He loves you and He wants nothing more than for you to step back into His love!

Jesus died, but three days later God raised Him from the dead to initiate an eternal kingdom of love, peace, wholeness, and justice that can never be overcome!

Though we have all sinned, and deserve to spend an eternity outside of God's presence, God invites us back into a relationship with Him. And we enter this relationship when we acknowledge our sin, confess it to Him, and place the trust of our lives in what Jesus Christ has done for us! When you place your trust in Jesus, you reenter the relationship that you were created for! The only place where you will find true greatness!

Close

As we close, I want to give you two very practical points of application. When you build your life on Jesus Christ, there are two very specific ways that He will enable you to stand strong!

1. Rest in God's Greatness

Here is Daniel, separated from his homeland, in captivity under a pagan king in a pagan culture, and yet Daniel does not waver or despair! He remained confident in God's greatness!

Why?

Daniel had an unshakeable confidence in God sovereignty. In fact, after God revealed the dream to Daniel, He broke out in worship!

"Praise the name of God forever and ever, for he has all wisdom and power. He controls the course of world events; he removes kings and sets up other kings. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the scholars. He reveals deep and mysterious things and knows what lies hidden in darkness, though he is surrounded by light."

Daniel 2:20-22

Daniel understood that God was not only in control of his circumstances...but He was in control of history!

Isn't it true that the majority of our worry and despair comes because we are not in control over circumstances!

We worry about not having enough money...and we worry about losing the money we have. We worry when we get sick and when we're healthy we worry about becoming sick. We worry about not performing well at work...and we worry that we'll always have to work! We worry about that we'll always be single...and when we get married, we worry about losing our spouse! We're more like Nebuchadnezzar. These things haunt us and keep us up at night!

We worry...because we're not in control and we're foolish enough to think that if we were in control, everything would be ok!

But learn from Daniel! Daniel wasn't in control...and yet, He worshiped the God who is sovereign over all circumstances!

The greatest weapon against worry is worship!

If you're worrying about something today...bow in worship! Worship God because what is hidden from you is visible to Him! You might not know how your circumstances will turn out or how your story will end, but He does! And when you build your life on Him and His promises, you will be able to stand strong in His greatness!

There are very few more powerful ways to show the world the greatness of God than when you are able to rest in the midst of the storm!

If you want to stand strong...first, rest in His greatness... Then, Discover True Greatness!

2. Discover True Greatness

There is an irony all through the book of Daniel. Nebuchadnezzar is the greatest ruler in all of history during this time and yet he is destined to fall. Daniel is a servant in a pagan land, separated from his home and yet he rises to true greatness and God uses Him in remarkable ways!

How?

Daniel built His life on the One True God. He was surrounded by wealth and power and esteem, yet thru it all He understood that True Greatness comes from serving God alone.

In Matthew chapter 20, Jesus described to His disciples what makes a person truly great!

"Jesus called (his disciples) together and said, 'You know that the rulers in this world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first (great) among you must become your slave. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.'" Matthew 20:25-28

**When you stand confident in God's greatness...it frees you for True Greatness!
It frees you to live your life for the good of your neighbor and the glory of God!**

Work – When you are confident in God's greatness, you don't need work to be great...so you can be a great worker. Free from the pressure to gain other's approval! Free from the pressure to step over people to get to the top!

Marriage – When you are confident in God's great love, you don't need your spouse in order to be great. So, you can serve your spouse...men, you can give your life for your wife's beauty and wholeness in spite of her imperfections; ladies, you can love and respect your husband in spite of his flaws!

Money – When you are confident in God's greatness, you don't need your money or lifestyle to make you great! Instead, you can leverage your resources for the good of your neighbor and God's glory!

And in all of this...God is glorified!

Prayer