

### Staying Strong in School

Does anyone find it tough in school? Or hard being at Uni? Or maybe you've moved to a new area and you're in a new school, or maybe forced to go to another school you don't want to go to because of changes in your life?

It can be really hard being a Christian generally, especially in a world that thinks Christians are weak, or pathetic, or just a bit crazy. But it can be even tougher in school where other young people can be cruel and hurtful. Maybe you just need a bit of a lift today to help you through. Well, guess what, the Bible is the place to go! And people have been there before you. In this case we'll look at a familiar story and try to learn from what they went through – it's Daniel, chapter 1.

### Daniel 1.1-7

In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia and put in the treasure house of his god.

Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king's service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians. The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service.

Among those who were chosen were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego.

### Change and Conflict for Daniel to deal with

So here is Daniel, a young guy living in Jerusalem and doing what all young people did. He had friends, he was probably at some kind of school and was learning. We don't know what his life was like exactly but we do know that one day, things changed. Like many young people in the world, Daniel was caught up in a conflict. In his case, it was the army of Babylon who destroyed Jerusalem, probably Daniel's home city. He had to go through a huge change. He was put in a new place, a new school, with new people and even with a new language. He lost his familiar surroundings and the places he used to hang out with his friends. He was made to go somewhere that he didn't even know but had maybe only heard bad things about.

We don't know how Daniel felt or what his attitude was to these massive changes. Often we're a bit rubbish when change comes along. We may even want to go back to how things were. But like with Daniel, that's not always possible. We have a choice to make – do we complain and feel bad inside, withdrawing from people. Or do we trust in God and ask him to help us. We'll see later that's what Daniel did. He realised that God's ways were always best and so he stayed true to God and made the best of the new circumstances.

**Question** – Are you able to pray and ask God to do the same for you? Ask God to help you with changes and the difficulties you face. He is always ready to help, always listening. And God understands everything you're going through and is the very best Counsellor there is!

**Life Lesson** – Although it doesn't always feel good, God has promised that he will work all things for good in our lives (even things that aren't good or don't feel good!) for those who trust him and love him. Romans 8.28 tells us this.

## New Curriculum and New People

The army of Babylon took Daniel away from his home town by force and put him in a new 'school'. His school was the Royal School of Babylon.

I went on holiday with another family one time. I had to learn the kinds of things the new family did; their ways and habits and traditions. It was actually quite tiring as I learned to be myself and yet fit in with them.

Daniel had a new language to learn in this new place that was really unfamiliar. Not only that – he had new books and a new course to learn, the literature of the land of Babylon. It must have been really hard learning a new language and a whole bunch of new courses in this new language.

Maybe you have had to deal with some changes – in school, in teachers, in a new course. Sometimes we're not so good at this.

One time when I was working with an all-female Year 11 science class, a great teacher was no longer able to teach them due to promotion and another temporary science teacher came in. Poor woman was so unpopular and hated by the girls because she wasn't the old teacher. The girls found it impossible to adapt and the teacher wasn't as good!

What is your attitude to changes? Maybe like me at Uni, you've had to change your course. We see from the story of Daniel that Daniel did everything that the new school and course demanded of him. He drew the line when it came to dishonouring God but we'll get to that later! As far as we know, Daniel did his work and got on with his new life. Are you able to pray and ask God to help you in this way?

## A New Name

Have you ever been bullied or given a nickname that you hated? Fortunately I never had that problem but I've seen others given horrible names and it hurts the people very deeply. It's a terrible thing to be bullied, bully someone or at least not step in to help the person being bullied. As a Christian we need to be like Jesus and stand up for vulnerable people.

For Daniel and his three friends (Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah) they didn't just get a nickname – they had their actual names forcibly changed!! They became: Belteshazzar (Daniel); Shadrach (Hananiah); Meshach (Mishael) and Abednego (Azariah).

This can sometimes happen in different and more limited ways perhaps with changes in a family situation. If a parent gets married or re-married or even divorced, you may get a new surname (not everyone changes their surname but some people do). This can sometimes make people feel a bit different as if something has been stripped away from them. It can be very hard for people and we must support each other in these tough times, just as Daniel and his three friends did.

Again, we don't see Daniel making a big fuss about his new name. Actually he seems to have been pretty strong and knew who he was in God. This means that his identity wasn't tied up with his name, but in the fact that he trusted in God. All kinds of things can shake our world but the Bible tells us that God is always with us and will never leave us (Hebrews 13.5) and that Jesus is the same today, yesterday and forever (Hebrews 13.8). This means that Jesus is always for us, always loves us, always is with us.

**Life lesson** – Romans 8.37-39 tells us that nothing can separate us from God's love for us through Jesus and that we can overcome every situation through God. He calls us 'more than conquerors'. So it means with God's help, we don't just go through stuff; we don't just 'win' in life's situations because of Jesus; we actually more than win!

## Daniel 1.8-16

But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way. Now God had caused the official to show favour and compassion to Daniel, but the official told Daniel, "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 to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, "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.

At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food. So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead.

## Standing Strong

There can come times in our Christian life when we have to stand strong; when we have to take a stand.

One famous Christian speaker tells of the day she was asked to do something wrong in a job she was in. She went to the boss and refused, explaining that she was not going to do what was wrong. Not only did the boss agree with her, he promoted her because of her moral stand!

This doesn't always happen in the natural (but God always sees when you stand up against wrong and for what is right and he remembers, even if others may not!) These may be when someone asks you to do what you know is wrong; it can be when someone is being bullied; it could be when you have chance to get away with something but choose not to. Like Daniel, you sometimes have to speak up and point out a different (Godly) way. Then you have to choose that way, no matter what the cost. And this can be hard but God will always help you and prove you to be right – in his way and time.

For Daniel in the Bible, the moment came first when he was asked to eat food that had been sacrificed to idols. Daniel knew that this was wrong and a step too far. He also believed that doing what was right would ultimately lead to good, however it worked out. He didn't know that the chief official would agree with his request. He could have been put to death for doing this – so could the chief official. But something made the chief official favourable to Daniel's request...

So here's the thing – does your lifestyle and your actions mean that when you suggest something, people listen? If we always do what is right, always have integrity (we are who we say we are) and are always thinking of what's best for other people – it creates an atmosphere where people are likely to listen to what we say and trust us. Even in a difficult circumstance, it's clear that Daniel was liked and had favour with the Babylonians. What about you? Do people around you respect you? It takes time, it takes hard work and prayer. But it's a great place to be especially when people come to you to ask you!

But there are also times where we have to stand strong. I often think that people don't respect the church because it doesn't know where it stands on most things. I think people would respect the church if we were (lovingly) clear on what we believe but equally happy to get stuck in, get involved and help people. Some people will hate what you stand for and what the church stands for. I can imagine the other advisers that were being trained who weren't from Israel may have disliked Daniel. But they couldn't argue with the results as Daniel and his friends became healthier than any of the others! If we know God and do what he says, then he will prove us right.

**Life Lesson** – take a stand when you need to. Choose your battles wisely but when you know you have to stand up, do so with courage and with love. And always be who you say you are because people are watching you to see if what you say about God is true (and it is!) God will help you. Read Joshua 1.8-9 and ask God to give you this kind of courage.

## Daniel 1.17-20

To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds.

At the end of the time set by the king to bring them into his service, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishaël and Azariah; so they entered the king's service. In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom.

## Friends

Daniel spoke up to the king's official on behalf of himself and his three friends. They worked together and stood strong together. If you've ever watched or heard of the famous programme called 'The Three Musketeers' you may have heard their catchphrase: "All for one and one for all !"

When we're struggling in life it's good to go to God first in prayer. But we also need each other. This is where good friends can support us in person or even on social media; where a good Christian Union can help us; where a good church and youth group keeps us lifted up or where family can help. If you really have no-one to help you, talk to a teacher or an adult in school that you trust, especially if they are a Christian and understand the issues you may be going through. They will likely pray for you too when you're not around (in their own time). Don't shut yourself off. Daniel didn't shut himself in his room – he carried on and no doubt hung out with his buddies to support each other through all they went through.

**Life Point** – Jesus is closer to you than a brother (Proverbs 18.24) but we also need each other. Don't lock others out but find others to support you, make you laugh and pray for you.

## Understanding

I was once told that I was doing something wrong when working as a teaching assistant in school. The person who told me this had very little understanding of what I was doing. (I was chatting with distressed young people before they went into the classroom to help calm them and just spending time with students in the 'atrium' area to listen to them as a youth worker would). I knew that what God had called me to do was making a huge difference to students so prayed that God would prove this to be right. Two days later I was in a conference with various other staff as we related to each other what we did in school. The person who told me off was at this meeting. I told another member of staff just generally what I did and in front of everyone they said that what I did was amazing and that every school in the country should have someone doing what I did – a mix of chaplain, teaching assistant and youth worker! God answered my prayer!

Daniel was proved right. Here's the thing in school and Uni and life... Things may be tough and they may be unfair. You may be like Daniel put in a situation that is hard and you'd rather not be in. But you can react in the right way and one good choice always leads to another. And lots of good choices lead to good outcomes. This builds character and means you will be the kind of person people will want to know, to employ, to turn to for help and who will always be in demand!

If we keep on going through the hard times, God will help us and God will bring good from it. As people say – we can't always choose what happens to us in life but we can choose how we react.

## Prayer

Lord, thank you that you work all things for good to those who love you and know you. Lord I commit my situation to you and ask you to bring great things from it. Where people need to change I pray they would change. Where I need friends and support, I pray you would bring the right people into my life. Where circumstances need to change, I pray that your will is done and your Kingdom comes. I pray certain things very specifically and thank you Lord that you promised in John 15.7 that 'if I remain in you and your words remain in me I can ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for me.' You also say in John 15.16 that 'whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you'. So I ask you these things in the name of Jesus and thank you for what you've done, what you're doing and what you will do, to answer my prayers for myself and others in the same situations. Amen.