

Into the Storm
Week 1: Face the Storm
Daniel 1

What did the buffalo say to his son? “Bye, son.”

If you haven’t heard, IU has reclaimed the Bison as our official school mascot! There was a push towards this back in 2020, led by a faculty member who attends Sherwood Oaks. It’s a pretty incredible story, and he found out that if you start a publicity campaign to bring back a mascot, IU will actually give you what’s called a, “Cease & Desist” order. It’s very official. Comes from lawyers and everything.

But, 5 years later, those efforts paid off, and now, I think we’re going to have the coolest mascot in the BIG 10! Definitely better than Brutus Buckeye or whatever this guy is...(Purdue Pete image)

I love the new mascot, but I love the reason behind it even more. Yeah, bison used to roam this area back in the day, but they’re also known for being strong and resilient. And one of my favorite facts about bison is that, when there’s a storm coming, they turn and face it head on. Instead of running away from storms like most animals do, bison actually turn and walk into the storm. It’s their way of facing hardships head on instead of trying to avoid them.

That’s the image behind this series that we’re launching today. Life is full of pressures and challenges and, for those of us who are followers of Jesus, there is a cultural headwind that is pushing against us. And the temptation we sometimes feel is to turn and run away from these storms. Or we try to avoid them. But, what if, instead of running from them, we walked into the storm with courage and faith and resilience?

I think that’s the kind of life that God is calling us into. It’s a life that doesn’t compromise or conform to the world around us. It’s a life of quiet strength and resolve to faithfully walk with the Lord, wherever He leads us, even if it’s into difficult places and situations. And there are so many places we see this lived out in Scripture, but one of my favorites is in the book of Daniel, so that’s where we’ll be over the next few weeks.

Before we jump in, let’s pray.

A few years ago, Quentin Bemis, our Worship Minister, introduced me to the Marvel movies. I’d never seen one, so we set up a movie night to watch the first Ironman and I was hooked. I think my favorite thing about these movies is the way the characters develop over the series. You get their origin stories, you watch them develop over time. One of my favorite characters is Thor.

I was thinking about this as college students came back to campus this week. Thor's story kinda resembles the story of a college student...*hang with me!*

Freshman Thor – Young, optimistic, a little arrogant, but lovable. He's kinda like an uncaged animal, but ready for an adventure.

Sophomore Thor – Sophomore Thor has seen some things. His optimism is replaced with some battle wounds. He's a little more realistic about the challenges ahead of him. He's lost some friends and gained some enemies, but he's still standing.

Junior Thor – He's just kinda mailing it in. He's given up. Life has been tough. He's wondering what all of this is for. Having a little existential crisis. Not taking care of himself physically or emotionally.

Senior Thor – Now the end is in sight. He's laser focused. Crushing any obstacle that gets in his way.

I think back through my college years, and that tracks! But, let's go ahead and remove the labels **(show image)**. I'm curious, which one of these images captures where you are in life right now?

Feeling good, optimistic?

Got some battle scars and challenges ahead and you're just trying to survive?

Are you kinda mailing it in right now? You haven't fully given up, but you're also not really trying?

Or do you feel pretty focused on the things that matter?

Wherever you are, you probably didn't just get there overnight. Good, bad, or ugly, you can probably look back and see a series of decisions or events that maybe seemed small in the moment, but have led you to where you are today. They could be your decisions, or the decisions of someone else, but we can all look back on our life and see how it all came together to get us where we are today.

And many of us in here believe that the Lord is using all of these things to shape and mold and steer us down the right path.

The same is true for the nation of Israel. Put that last Thor image back up.

- Israel had some good days early on. God made a promise with Abraham to turn him into a great nation that would bless the world for generations to come. These early days weren't perfect, but good things were happening.

- But then they were taken captive and became slaves in Egypt. When God set them free, they wandered in the desert for 40 years. They faced a lot of challenges, but God fought their battles and they eventually received the Promised Land. It wasn't easy, but they built a Temple in Jerusalem where they could come and worship the Lord.
- But, after a while, things started to change. They were being led by bad kings who made poor choices and turned their backs on God. The people were led astray by their political and spiritual leaders. The Kingdom of Israel was torn in two because they couldn't figure out how to get along. God's people stopped caring about their covenant relationship with Him. Even when God sent prophets to warn them and call them back to their first love, they ignored them and refused to listen.

One bright spot during this time was King Josiah. He tore down idols and restored the temple so people could worship the Lord. He pointed people back to God, but after Josiah died, his son, Jehoiakim, quickly unraveled all of the progress his father had made. He led Judah right back down the same old path away from the Lord.

And that brings us to our text today. After centuries of choosing to ignore God and rebel against him, this is what we read...(READ Daniel 1:1-2)

King Jehoiakim could have resolved in his heart to keep moving in the direction his father started taking them, but that's not what he does. Instead, he chooses to lead God's people back into rebellion, and as a consequence for their choice, of their sin, verse 2 says "The Lord delivered" them to Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and they were carried away into exile. (Show map)

Get our bearings. Modern day Baghdad, Iraq. About 500 miles from Jerusalem as the crow flies, but they would have followed along the Euphrates for fresh water, so it was about a 900 mile trip. Like walking from here to Denver. Would have taken them about 2-3 months.

But the physical distance didn't compare to the spiritual and cultural differences. It had to feel like they were picked up and dropped off into a whole other world. Babylon was the largest city in the world at the time. Compared to Jerusalem, it would have felt like going from living in a small town to New York City overnight.

Statues of their gods towered over everything. Archeologists have found the saying, "Our gods are powerful. Our king is supreme" written everywhere. Babylon was drenched in idolatry. They had 50 temples dedicated to different gods and goddesses. Daily life revolved around appeasing the gods. Babylon's education centered around astrology and divination and mythology. It all would have left them feeling completely out of place. Verse 3...(READ Daniel 1:3-7)

Don't miss what's going on here. These young men are in their mid to late teens. They're the best and the brightest from Jerusalem. They would have had all kinds of colleges throwing scholarship money at them. They've been uprooted from everything they've ever known and dropped into this strange new land.

And Babylon didn't just want to relocate them, they wanted to reprogram these young men to assimilate into their new culture. They would have been encouraged to be whoever they wanted to be and do whatever they wanted to do. They didn't have to live under God's law anymore. In fact, they were encouraged not to.

And what we see in these first few verses of chapter 1 is that Daniel and his friends jumped right in to their new culture. They learned the language. They attended the schools. They studied Babylonian literature, which, no doubt would have included stories about the gods they worshiped. They would have studied the magic arts and beliefs that pushed up against their own faith, but we get the sense throughout the entire book of Daniel that these young men excelled in their studies.

They were fully immersed into their new culture, even to the point of having their names changed to words that glorified Babylonian gods.

Through all of these changes, these four young men are being indoctrinated into their new culture. But, notice that Daniel and his friends just seem to go along with it. They don't put up a fight, they don't boycott or resist. They seem to just be going along with these things because they know that, in the long run, none of **these changes** matter.

They could learn new ideas, but they didn't have to change their beliefs. The Babylonians could change their names, but it wouldn't change who they were in the eyes of God. Daniel and his friends could have fought back against their new culture and new way of life, but when it came to the inconsequential things, they chose not to make a big deal out of it. They just trusted God and that He was in control.

And, because of that, they were able to gain influence for when it really mattered. And what really mattered came down to the food they were offered from the king's table. Look at verse 8...(READ vs. 8)

So, after going along with all of these other changes, what is it about eating from the king's table to made Daniel and his friends draw the line? Here's what I think. I think that all of the other changes in their new culture only forced Daniel and his friends to compromises their traditions. Things they'd always known like their language, what they studied, their names, I'm sure their clothing changed.

But, when it came to the food, that was a different story. Eating from the king's table would have required a compromise in their faith that Daniel and his friends weren't willing to make. You see, the food the king ate would have first been used as a sacrifice to the gods of

the Babylonians. It would have been meat offered up in worship to an idol and the wine had probably been offered as well and that was forbidden in OT law. They were probably also served food that went against the cultural **laws** of Judaism and all of it would have left Daniel compromising his faith. Having to disobey God.

And so, in verse 8, we read that Daniel “resolved not to defile himself” with this food. That word “resolved” means to set one’s heart on something. It’s this inner conviction that requires courage and resilience. They resolved not to break the Lord’s command and eat food that had been sacrificed to idols from the king’s table. Even if it meant putting themselves in harm’s way.

They could have easily chosen to “go along to get along,” but that’s not what they did. Instead, they turned and walked into the storm.

Now, let’s just pause and think about this for a second. These are teenage boys. They could have easily justified compromising their convictions. They could have easily given into peer pressure and said, “Hey, you got to go along to get along.”

Plus, I don’t know a teenage boy that has ever turned down food! And not just any food. This was probably the best food they had ever seen. Even though they came from royalty, these meals would have included pork, which means bacon! And, if you’ve never tasted bacon before, and all of the sudden you smell bacon and see others enjoying bacon...it would be **really hard** not to eat bacon!

Still, Daniel resolved not to break the Lord’s command and eat the food served from the king’s table. And this decision could have been seen as a direct insult to the king and put them in a lot of danger, **but Daniel and his friends knew that they answered to a higher authority than the king or the culture**, and it was a risk they were willing to take for the sake of their faith in God. So, **they refused to compromise from the beginning**. They didn’t even entertain the idea because they had seen where the sin of their nation had led them and they didn’t want any part of it.

So, knowing all that was at risk, they faced the storm head on and offered a compromise. They would eat nothing but fruits and vegetables and grains for 10 days while everyone else ate from the king’s table. At the end of those 10 days, if Daniel and his friends looked weaker than the others, they’d eat the meat and drink the wine, but if they looked healthier, they could stick to their own diet.

After 10 days, they looked better than everyone else, so the official took away everyone else’s food and only gave them fruits and veggies and grains. Which means Daniel probably wasn’t very popular, but doing what’s right rarely is. And at the end of chapter 1, this is what we read...(READ Daniel 1:17-21)

Don't miss that last verse. After three years of training, Daniel entered into the king's service around 601 B.C. Cyrus became king in 536 B.C. That means, for 65 years, under three different kings, God allowed Daniel to influence this culture that he had been uprooted and planted into. A culture very different from what he was used to. ***A culture that he never bowed to...but he did adjust to.***

That's one of the things I love about this account of Daniel and his friends. They knew the difference between a mountain and a molehill. They didn't fight every battle, but when it came to an issue that would compromise their faith, they weren't afraid to turn and walk into the storm, even if it might cost them something.

The truth is, I don't always get this right. We don't always get it right. Sometimes, **we make mountains out of molehills**, don't we? We split hairs over things like worship style and church traditions and whether or not our worship minister should wear a hat on stage, and if he does, should he have it on backwards?! As humans, we're really good at fighting about our preferences while the real mission of the church, to make disciples, gets completely forgotten about.

But then there are other times when **we make molehills out of mountains**. We downplay things that we ought to take seriously. We minimize our sin and treat dishonesty and gossip and sexual sin as "not a big deal." We shrug off the things we fill our hearts and minds with as just entertainment. We stay silent or shrink back in situations when our faith in Christ is mocked or dismissed instead of standing humbly in truth and grace.

Daniel and his friends didn't waste energy on molehills, but they also didn't minimize the mountains. They resolved to remain faithful where it mattered most and to walk into those storms with courage and trust in the Lord.

Honestly, there are times I'm like Daniel. I resolve not to defile myself and live faithfully for the Lord. I stand strong and fight the right battles. But there are other times when I look a whole lot more like Jehoiakim. I make compromises. I take my eyes off the Lord and go my own way and do my own thing. I want to resolve in my own heart to honor the Lord and there are times I get it right and times I don't. It's why I still need Jesus.

And that's really who this sermon is all about. I don't want to stand up here and tell you, "You need to be more like Daniel!" or "You need to be less like Jehoiakim!" I read this chapter and I realize, *I don't need to be more like anyone, I just need more Jesus!*

You see, Jesus is the true and better Daniel. Jesus left his Heavenly home and entered into a hostile world that tried to strip him of his loyalty to God. Jesus faced temptation in every way, but perfectly resisted and remained faithful to His father. Jesus embodied grace and humility and he grew in favor amongst the poor and the powerful.

Most of all, Jesus showed us how to live as exiles in a land that is not our home. How to walk faithfully into the storm to love God and love others. And where Daniel resolved in his heart not to defile himself, Jesus resolved in his heart to seek and save us for those times when we make compromises and we go our own way and do our own thing.

Luke 9:51 says, “As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.”

That word “resolutely” is an echo of the resolve that Daniel had. It is an intentional, settled, unwavering resolve to move in a direction. Daniel’s resolve set the course of his life in a place that was not his home, and Jesus’ resolve set the course for our salvation, so that we could find our home in the Lord.

And that’s why we come to this table every week. Communion reminds us that our hope isn’t in how strong *our* resolve is, but in how perfect *His* resolve was. My resolve wavers. Yours does too. Some days we stand strong, other days we stumble. Some days we run into the storm, some days we run away from it.

But Jesus never wavered. He set His face toward Jerusalem. He walked into the storm of the cross with unwavering resolve so that even when we compromise, His grace covers us.

So today, as we take the bread and the cup, we’re remembering the One whose body was broken and whose blood was shed because He resolved to seek and save us. And we’re invited to put our trust not in our own strength, but in His finished work.

If you’re here today and you’ve never placed your faith in Him, this is your invitation. Stop trying to muscle your way through life on your own resolve, and trust the One who walked into the storm for you.

And if you are a follower of Jesus, then as you take communion today, let it be your way of saying, “Jesus, I want to set my heart on You again. I want to walk faithfully into the storm with You.”