

Sermons & Presentations

Title: Taking Faith to Work
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The INTRO: Play this video - Seven Dwarfs - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HI0x0KYChq4>

This is Labour Day weekend and today, as summer comes to a close, we consider the annual cycle or cadence of a 'working year' while taking time to enjoy one final 'break', and we look at God's calling in our life as it relates to work. Typically, this is the time of the year that we hit 'reset' and shift from 'vacation' to 'vocation'.

[Add the types of work that are present in your congregation, including volunteer & unpaid work]:

Ask, "Does your 'work' matter to God?"

The "Hook" - Which of these statements best describes you?

- My work has special meaning because I have been called to do what I'm doing regardless of how much time it takes or how little money I earn; I was put on earth to do what I am doing.
- I am pursuing a lifelong career which I feel is important; I chose to do this kind of work throughout my life; I might change where I work, but I'm not likely to change the kind of work I do.
- I am paid to perform a service; I have been paid to do other things at other times, and I am willing to do other types of work in the future if the pay and security are better.
- I do not have paid employment at this time; I am uncertain about what sort of paid employment to seek, if any, but I find plenty of unpaid work to do.

Work is one of the most significant parts of our lives. Of the 168 hours we are given each week, most of us will spend at least 35 - 40 at the workplace. Some spend closer to 60 or 70, sometimes juggling two jobs or more. One of the most pressing questions for a Christian to answer, then, is, "[How do I think biblically about work?](#)"

We all understand that the words labour, work, career, job, and vocation are often interchangeable. But deep down, I imagine we all long for some form of work, paid or unpaid, that is meaningful, that matches who we are and is life-giving.

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We were made for work. In Christian theology, this is referred to as the “cultural mandate,” the command given by God to the first man, recorded [Genesis 1:28-31](#).

- Human beings were created in the image of God for the purpose of subduing the earth, ruling over the created order as the vicegerents of God. In the words of J. I. Packer, “Man was made to manage God’s world, and this stewardship is part of the human vocation in Christ. It calls for hard work, with God’s honour and the good of others as its goal.”
 - *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs*
- Labour is one of the most important ways in which we bear God’s image, for God himself is a God who works ([Gen. 2:2-3](#)). “In contrast to Greek mythology, where the gods live a life of celestial loafing, the Bible pictures God himself as a ceaseless worker.” As John Stott writes, “Our potential for creative work is an essential part of our godlikeness.”
 - *Issues Facing Christians Today*
- Discovering our true identify is not only about ‘work’, but it does include our work: “Vocation does not mean scrambling toward some prize just beyond my reach but accepting the treasure of true self I already possess. Vocation does not come from a voice “out there” calling me to be something I am not. It comes from a voice “in here” calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given me at birth by God.”
 - *Let Your Life Speak, Parker Palmer*
- Charles Ringma (Regent College) describes the Cultural Mandate this way: It is "... joining God in God’s caring, sustaining and transforming activity on earth."

The Story of Daniel as exemplar of taking faith to work (see full study notes at end of the document)

The Book of Daniel contains countless references and teachings about thinking biblically about our work, but today, we want to focus on just the first chapter.

Our reading today was from [Daniel 1:3-8, 17-20](#)

Disaster has struck – key issue = where is Yahweh? Has God forgotten his people who have been taken into captivity?

The picture of “work” in this passage may echo with the experiences some of you feel when you go to work.

- Babylon is a whole world, a culture, a government set up to run apart from the true and living God, it’s set up to run on idolatrous principles, in allegiance to false gods. Their ‘workplace’ is **not neutral** in religious terms—it is thoroughly, completely **anti-Yahweh**. We need to remember this, because it shows us that Daniel and his friends were able to be

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faithful in a very difficult environment, a place that was genuinely hostile to their faith in Yahweh.

- Daniel is placed in a type of vocational training program - The goal of the education system: “after that they were to enter the king’s service.” God-given talents are nurtured through focused training, in preparation for service.
- Daniel was what we would typically refer to as a lay person (not a member of the priestly class): Daniel and co. are highly ranked laymen in the service of a pagan ruler.
- Daniel and his friends are forced into service of the pagan king of Babylon.
- They are confronted with this very difficult question: How can they serve Yahweh and the pagan king simultaneously?
- Selected for their “natural abilities” – key issue = what God-given talents are necessary for the world’s success?
- They are assigned new names – can they maintain their distinct identity as servants of Yahweh under the pressures of an alien, hostile culture?
- They refuse the pagan food –integrity seen in refusal to compromise faithfulness to Torah, even at great risk. What are the consequences of the ethical choices believers make in the workplace? How do they choose to live out their faith?
- God gave both “natural” and “supernatural” understanding to Daniel: recognizing and nurturing natural talents, learned skills and spiritual gifts
- God’s faithfulness in multiple ways – key issue = recognizing God as the main actor in the workplace!

Lessons from Daniel Chapter One:

1) Even when our work is not what we might have preferred, and even when our workplace is not conducive to our faith, God is present there and actively at work in that context, and at work in the lives of his faithful people, and even working in and through the lives of people who do not recognize or honour him.

2) No matter where we are, no matter how “pagan” our surrounding environment in the workplace might be, we are called by God to trust in God, and to remain faithful to God’s revelation of what is acceptable to him and morally right, even at risk to ourselves.

3) God shows himself to be the incomparable, faithful God, even in the small, daily matters of life and work. What concerns God most of all is displaying his own glory for all the world to see and experience.

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Conclusion

Work Matters:

- Work as a source of identity
- Work as a source of relationships
- Work as a source of obligatory activity
- Work as an opportunity to develop skills and creativity
- Work as a source of income and control
- Work as a factor which structures time
- Work as a source of sense of purpose

And whatever the workplace and the type of work being done, the key take-away is that we can live out our calling and faithfulness to God in and through our work.

Poem - To Be of Use

By Marge Piercy

The people I love the best

jump into work head first

without dallying in the shallows

and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.

They seem to become natives of that element,

the black sleek heads of seals

bouncing like half-submerged balls.

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,

who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,

who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,

who do what has to be done, again and again.

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*I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along
who are not parlour generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.
The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.*

Closing Act of Dedication: Call all the teachers, school administrators, tutors, school volunteers, lunchroom attendants, trustees, etc. forward and offer a prayer of dedication and commitment to faithfulness and excellence in their service s they begin a new school year.

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STUDY NOTES – Daniel Chapter One

Faith at Work: Daniel, chapter 1

- Daniel is an exemplar of faith to us in many ways, as we shall see.
- He is the case par excellence of a faithful servant of God, a “lay person” with a vital ministry in his workplace—in a very difficult, tense, challenging workplace at that!
- We can learn a great deal about workplace ministry from Daniel—but, the most important thing about the figure of Daniel as the OT tells his story is not what Daniel does, but the God that Daniel serves!
- What stands out so boldly from these pages is the greatness, majesty, and unrivalled supremacy of Yahweh, the Lord God Almighty, whom Daniel serves.

Daniel 1

- Disaster has struck. The unthinkable has happened! The temple in Jerusalem has been profaned by pagan invaders, and the temple vessels used in worship have been stolen by the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, who has laid siege to the city itself. He has put them in the house of his god, the pagan god of Babylon, called Marduk (1:2). The way the story is told makes it clear that Nebuchadnezzar is thinking that these stolen goods were “deity symbols” and that his triumph proves that his god (the pagan gods of Babylon) were stronger than the God of Israel. So, the first issue that this book is raising, from the very first verse, is very simple: **where is the true and living God?** Can he defend himself and his people from the domination of the false gods and false empire of Babylon? Will the foreign, pagan invaders and their pagan idols win? Is Yahweh at work in the history of nations?
- There is a strong hint that Yahweh is still in control, and that he has not forgotten his people, not abandoned his purposes for their salvation—in verse 2 it says: “And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into [Nebuchadnezzar’s] hand.” Most commentators agree that the key theme of Daniel is the sovereignty of God—in 5:21, “the most high God is sovereign over the kingdoms of men.”
- Daniel has been taken into captivity in Babylon—and we need to remember that Babylon in the OT, from the incident of the Tower of Babel onwards, symbolizes the very epitome of sin and idolatry. Babylon is a whole world, a culture, a government set up to run apart from the true and living God, it’s set up to run on idolatrous principles, in allegiance to false gods. It is **not neutral** in religious terms—it is thoroughly, completely **anti-Yahweh**. We need to remember this, because it shows us that Daniel and his friends were able to be faithful in a very difficult environment, a place that was genuinely hostile to their faith in Yahweh.

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- The king brings in very talented young Israelites (1:4), in order to teach them the ways of the Babylonian culture and prepare them for leadership. This is customary in the ancient world: the aristocratic young men were adopted into the king’s own entourage. They would have had no choice about it, and no alternatives available. It was a three-year project—sounds like an undergraduate university degree in Babylonian languages and culture!
- The goal of the education system: “after that they were to enter the king’s service.” In other words, this was their vocational training program. Their future work and career had been determined for them. They would be high-level servants in the king’s court.
- What we see, therefore, is how these young men lived out their faith in their workplace!
- Notice the issues are getting clearer, step by step: whom would the young Israelites **serve**? Would they serve the pagan king and his empire? Would they refuse, as a matter of principle, to get involved at all? Or would they find a way of remaining faithful to the true and living God, even amid the hostile, pagan environment? Would it be possible to serve both the true and living God, and the pagan king, at the same time? If so, how so? On what basis? With what limitations? Using what strategies?
- They were “talented” Israelites—“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.” They would have been teenagers, in fact. All these wonderful traits are testimony to God’s own work in creation. God had made them this way, given them all sorts of natural talents and capacities.
- In verse 6, we are told their names:

Daniel = God is my judge	Beltshazzar = “Bel, protect his life” b/c Bel is another name for the Babylonian god, Marduk
Hananiah = The Lord has been gracious	Shadrach = command of Aku (Sumerian moon god)
Mishael = Who is what God is? (an affirmation of the incomparable nature of God, with the implied answer, “there is none like our God.”)	Meshach = Who is what Aku is?
Azariah = The Lord has helped	Abednego = Servant of Nego/Nebo (ie, the god Nabu).

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- Why all this detail about changing their names? Re-naming the young undergraduates would have been customary because (a) it was convenient to use local rather than foreign names; (b) it helped to integrate them into the system, rather than having them stick out; c) it asserted the dominance of the Babylonian king over them, since it is an act of power or even coercion.
- Even today, immigrants to Canada are forced to give up their own names! Children from Asian families here in Ontario go to register their children for school, and give an Asian name, and are told: “You must give an English name.”
- What is at issue? **IDENTITY**. Our names tell us who we are, in a deep sense, even today. To be forced to change your name is to be forced to accept a new identity, to become part of a new culture against your will. Re-naming them was a decisive step in the process of transforming them into Babylonians, as they leave behind their Israelite names and therefore Israelite identities.
- It is worth recalling that in our culture, our workplaces have a powerful impact on us in terms of shaping our identity. “What we do” for a living, the kind of work we do, comes to define us in basic ways. You know the familiar, automatic sequence: “Hello, what’s your name? What do you do?” Each of our jobs and workplaces has its own cultural system, its religious practices, its customs, its rituals, its values, its expectations, its written and unwritten rules for what to think, what to say, what to wear, what to do. The young Israelites would have faced this in their foreign, alien workplace—a real challenge to their faith.
- Notice that their names, and identities, were directly related to their God! Their very names were indicative of who they were—more accurately, whose they were. The names testified to who Yahweh is, and what he has done, to his incomparable splendour.
- So, the text is forcing the question: will they abandon their identities as belonging to Yahweh, or will they maintain an allegiance to Yahweh, even when forced to have a new name, a name related to the pagan god or gods whom they recognize as idols?
- For us as Christians, our very name or designation as “Christians” means we are Christ’s own, that we belong to Christ. That is our deepest, truest identity.
- We are told that, despite this challenge to his identity and allegiance to Yahweh, that 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 sympathy to Daniel...”
- Like everyone in a secular workplace, Daniel faces an expectation that he will engage in a form of behaviour that he knows is unacceptable. The king’s food would not have been prepared in ways consistent with Israelite dietary laws. The food and wine would probably have been offered to idols in a religious ceremony, then used for food. Some of it could have been from animals that were considered unclean in OT law (e.g., pork). So, for these reasons, eating the king’s food would have been deeply offensive to Daniel’s faith.
- Daniel stands his ground. He does not compromise, in this situation—not when something basic to his moral outlook and faith commitment was at stake. Eating unclean foods or foods offered to idols was beyond the pale, and he stood firm.

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- But notice, too, that he does not despair, either. He comes up with an alternative solution! It's very creative, and the text tells us that God grants him favour, by arranging for the king's official to show favour to Daniel (even at risk to himself—he fears for his own head, his very life!!).
- The alternative is that Daniel and his friends eat vegetables and water for 10 days, and after 10 days, they look fine—healthy, fit, and well. In fact, they look better than the other young trainees who were eating the king's food!
- What is going on there? Just a medical detail? No, a tip in the text that Yahweh is the true God, and obeying his ways leads to prosperity and blessing, because God is trustworthy. In the battle of rival gods, Yahweh is winning the battle over food!
- The key point here is that God honours Daniel's faithfulness. Their health and fitness is testimony to God's own provision and protection over them.
- And as they studied in the Babylonian university, "God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning" (1:17a). They had God-given natural abilities, and as they studied, God was with them—God gave them knowledge. The text is saying that this was not merely a human achievement, not something they should boast about, but rather a gift and blessing of God. The subjects would not have been very appealing to Israelites and were probably very challenging to their own faith on a repeated basis. Learning the language and literature of the pagan culture would have meant digging into territory that was deeply at odds with their own faith in Yahweh—stories about their gods and religion would have been at the heart of it. But this knowledge was essential for their daily work in the king's court, and the true and living God, Yahweh, granted them knowledge and understanding of it.
- What else did God do? "And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds" (1:17b). Visions and dreams were the ways of supernatural communication, then and now.
- The key point here is that they are being positioned by Yahweh to have a central role, to display real leadership, to exercise a powerful influence on the pagan context. They have the knowledge and skills needed to have an influence—they become God's own representatives in a pagan setting. They are not being equipped and raised up to become "religious leaders" in the sense of religious institutions, but to be faithful witnesses in a hostile, secular territory of the workplace, the king's palace.
- When they came to graduate and enter the king's service, they faced the final exam, face to face with the king himself! That must have been quite a scene, very daunting! The result? "He found them 10 times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom" (1:20). They got an A+ in their studies. Another testimony to the supremacy of Yahweh, who has won the battle over food, and now the battle over academics! He is the incomparable God. But notice that he proves himself to be incomparable in small ways, in faithfulness to his faithful people, amid the ordinary events of daily life. He blesses and provides for them, over the 3 years of preparation for public life, at each step showing that he has no rivals, and that he is worthy of their allegiance, and that he is actually in charge of the whole situation—achieving his purposes, even when they seem hidden or hard to detect.

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- The final word in the text is that Daniel remained there, throughout the entire exile, until the deliverance by Cyrus—he had staying power, longevity, and eventually, great influence.

Lessons:

1. Even when our work is not what we might have preferred, and even when our workplace is not conducive to our faith, God is present there and actively at work in that context, and at work in the lives of his faithful people, and even working in and through the lives of people who do not recognize or honour him.
2. No matter where we are, no matter how “pagan” our surrounding environment in the workplace might be, we are called by God to trust in God, and to remain faithful to God’s revelation of what is acceptable to him and morally right, even at risk to ourselves.
3. God shows himself to be the incomparable, faithful God, even in the small, daily matters of life and work. What concerns God most of all is displaying his own glory for all the world to see and experience.