

I. Set Up

A. Welcome / Introduction / Fill out Card /

B. Today we're in our 6th week of the "Future You" series, where we're looking at the character qualities required for us to successfully navigate life in light of an uncertain and rapidly changing future. In an effort to do that, we're looking at the lives of Daniel and his friends.

C. Today, we're looking at the need for obedience, and the fact that life just works better when we live lives of integrity...a steady commitment to what is good and honorable. We're not talking about perfection, because no one is perfect. And we've all experienced times when we've messed up and have to apologize as a result. You may remember some of these more famous examples."

1. <https://www.dropbox.com/s/lkoow3w1e3sumw4/Apologies%20v4%20To%20err.m4v?dl=0>

D. Of course, that could have been any of us up there. We mess up just like celebrities do. It's just that when we mess up, our apology isn't posted on YouTube.

E. Right now...

II. Quotes:

A. "Faith is not a once-done act, but a continuous gaze of the heart at the triune God. Faith is the gaze of a soul upon a saving God. When we lift our inward eyes to gaze upon God we are sure to meet friendly eyes gazing back at us."

B. When you run 80 miles of a 100 mile race, you are half way done. (Quote from an ultra-marathoner).

III. Introduction:

A. At the very end of last week's second debate between Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump, the moderator asked the candidates what they admired about each other. Clinton complimented Trump's children, and in turn Trump noted something about Hilary that I have also admired about her – and admired about him, and about Obama and Bush and Clinton and Bush and Reagan and an assortment of other politicians of all stripes before that. He said, "She doesn't give up."

B. I am particularly impressed with their tenacity. It doesn't appear to matter how bad it gets. Long after I would have given up and crawled under a rock, they get back up, brush themselves off and press ahead.

C. We can learn something from that. Especially in a culture where many people seem to be losing their resilience.

1. In "The Grace of Grit," Skye Jethani worries that we seem to be losing our grit, noting that his maternal grandparents fought the Nazis - his grandfather was shot down in a B17 and his paternal grandmother was a nurse for Patton. While his paternal grandparents escaped from Pakistan during the partition of India in '47. Meanwhile he enjoys a memory foam mattress and his kids collect participation trophies.

2. This past week *The Wall Street Journal* reported that the number of college students seeking help for anxiety related issues has spiked fifty percent in the last five years.¹

D. I'm not sure we are resilient as we used to be. And that's a bad thing. There is something noble about it – something inspiring. This week I went back and watched the classic boxing scene in *Cool Hand Luke*, where Paul Newman keeps getting back up. He is completely out matched by Dragline, played by George Kennedy, who is bigger than he is. But Neaman (Luke) will not stay down, and eventually Dragline can't take it anymore and he walks away. He realizes that this is someone stronger and better than he is.

E. We see this quality in Daniel, although it took me a while to identify it. Many of the qualities he exhibits are easy to name: his courage, faith and wisdom jump out. I had trouble labeling this one. For a while I called it self-leadership. I changed that to pressure under fire, then I called it depth. For a while I thought Daniel's skill was that, like David, he knew how to "encourage himself in the Lord."² At some point I started calling it obedience – and that is certainly part of it. Daniel does what is asked of him. He does the right thing even when it's hard and will get him thrown in jail or worse.

I. I love the passage in chapter 6 where, after his jealous colleagues had set a trap – getting Darius to sign a decree that anyone who prays to anyone other than Nebuchadnezzar will be fed to the lions, Daniel violates the law. He knowingly walks right into their trap. They do not scare him. He will do the right thing (obey) even if it cost him his life. In so many ways he was a man among boys.

F. For a while I thought Daniel's genius was his obedience. But I eventually decided that it was a bit more than that. It was obedience over time. It was his righteous tenacity, his constancy of purpose, resilience – which is the opposite of quitting. It's the ability to bend but not break in the face of adversity, perhaps to grow stronger because of it.

G. We get a hint of this in chapter 1:8, where we are told that Daniel "purposed" in his heart that he was going to follow God. Some translations say "resolved." Some say "determined." It then emerges between the lines in chapter 5. There Daniel is called up by Beltshazzar after Beltshazzar's Mom remembers how Daniel had helped her husband, King Nebuchadnezzar, back when he was in trouble. I'm reading, Daniel 5:10. This is after the hand has appeared and written on the wall:

1. The queen, hearing the voices of the king and his nobles, came into the banquet hall. "May the king live forever!" she said. "Don't be alarmed! Don't look so pale! There is a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods in him. In the time of your father he was found to have insight and intelligence and wisdom like that of the gods. Your father, King Nebuchadnezzar, appointed him chief of the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners. He did this because Daniel, whom the king called Belteshazzar, was found to have a keen mind and knowledge and understanding, and also the ability to interpret dreams, explain riddles and solve difficult problems. Call for Daniel, and he will tell you what the writing means."

H. A few things struck me about this text:

1. First, Daniel is still around almost three decades later. That is a bit surprising.

2. Second, he had been forgotten – the fact that Beltshazzar has to be told about him suggests that Nebuchadnezzar had become enamored by others.
 3. Third, he is still faithful. It doesn't matter where he is out front and center or in some basement office, he continues to follow God. And his answer to Belshazzar suggests that he is even wiser and more thoughtful than before.
- I. It becomes clear that unlike many others, Daniel ends well – and ending well requires many things, one of them is tenacity.

IV. Let me step back from Daniel 5 and frame my comments. I feel the need to do this because – well, this is one of those times when I am celebrating something that has to be understood in context or I do more harm than good. I want to make five points:

- A. One: The Gospel of Jesus Christ is based on grace not works.
1. Christianity is not “this I do,” but “this He did.” It's not me picking myself up by my bootstraps and trying harder.
 2. The Gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope.³
 3. If you've been around you've seen this (Spiritual Spectrum) but there is so much confusion here I want to go over it again.
- B. We are called – and expected – to obey.
1. We looked at this last week. I John 2:3f: We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands. Whoever says, “I know him,” but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person. But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.
 2. There are things we are expected to do – repent, confess, worship God, love and serve others, care for the less fortunate. And there are things we are expected not to do: lie, cheat, steal, sleep around. We will never be able to keep the standard we are called to – especially since it's not just our actions that matter, but also our heart. But we should be trending in the right direction.
 3. We should see growth. If you do not see growth, you need to sit up and pay attention. Go back and read Matthew 25.
- C. Three: We are not just called to obey once, but over and over again, even when it's hard.
1. In, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, Eugene Peterson reflects on Psalms 120-134, songs the Jews sang as they climbed up to Jerusalem to worship. (It's on the top of a big hill). And these Psalms reflect on the fact that the growth we want takes time.
 2. Let me remind you, the Christian life is a marathon not a sprint. And marathons are hard. In some ways, the life of faith gets easier. We come to love and appreciate the things we should. Whatever we do is easier to do again – good and bad. We can dig deep ruts that make patterns easy to follow.
 3. But there are other aspects of this where it does not. And sin, over time, can grow stronger and distort our heart.

- D. Four: Because long term obedience is hard, it is rare.
1. A lot more people start well than end well.⁴ The Christian life reminds me a bit of the Indy 500. Thirty-three cars start the race. They are loud and proud. When the Green Light is there they spring ahead. And after corner two they come flying out around 200 mph. It's amazing. It's really amazing. And then... they all start dropping out. Mechanical failures, wrecks, whatever. Far fewer than 33 cars finish the race. The same holds in the Christian life.
 2. Caleb is one who runs through the tape. He is celebrated in Joshua 14. There we see that, though he is eighty-five years old, he is full of energy and passion. There are some who finish well, but not many. There are some who grow stronger and more resilient over time. But that is not the typical pattern. If the Bible is our guide, more people fade than end well.⁵
 3. We see this if we reflect on why certain passages are written.
 - a) Paul's complaint in I Cor. 3 (that he had to offer milk to people who should be adults and eating meat) suggests that not many people grow as we'd like and expect.
 - b) The four soils illustration Jesus uses explains why some who get a fast start will not finish.
 - c) Paul's admonition to the Philippians to "press on towards the goal" is because some were not.
 - d) The book of Hebrews is essentially a long letter telling people who are thinking about quitting to keep running.
 - e) Galatians 6 is even more specific: "do not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap if we do not give up."
 4. We also see this if we look at the lives of those in the Bible. In a Howard Hendricks noted that of 100 people in the Bible about whom there was adequate data to tell how they finished, less than one-third ended well.⁶ Think about it:
 - a) As a young man, David is faithful; he is a man after God's own hearth; he kills Goliath; he does the right things. But at some point he begins to stray and largely as a result things unwind for him. The last part of his life is like a bad soap opera.
 - b) The same can be said about Solomon, David's son.
 - c) We read good things about Josiah through most of his life, but in the end he makes some bad moves and things unravel.
 - d) Uziah follows a similar pattern. He does the right thing for a long time but then grows jealous and tanks.
- E. Five: It can be done. You can make it. 1: The Gospel is based on grace not our works; 2) We are expected to obey; 3) not just once but over and over; 4) this is hard, consequently it is rare; 5) It can be done.
1. You can keep growing. You can overcome the trials you are facing. You can. You can. You can. In Romans 8:37 Paul tells us that, we can be "more than conquerors" through Him who loved us.

2. I know that some of you have been knocked down – loss of job, loss of a child, cancer, betrayal, you are lonely, you are scared. Life can be very, very hard. I'm sorry. But you can keep going. You can move forward. You can.

V. For whatever reason, the study of resilience has recently taken off lately.

A. In Angela Lee Duckworth's book, *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, she documents how she cracked the code related to West Point cadets. For well over a hundred years the academies had struggled to determine who would make it and who wouldn't. They were horrible at predicting. IQ, athletic ability, family or origin, none of these things proved a valid measure. And then Duckworth cracked the code. In her book she notes that intelligence, opportunity and even material resources offer limited value when "uncoupled from a high tolerance for pain and perseverance." But a willingness to get back up, stick with a difficult task and focus on future rewards rather than immediate gratification are telling. In other words, the tortoise with grit beats the hare with brains."

B. In *Resilience: The Science of Mastering Life's Greatest Challenges*, Steve Southwick reports on the gains made by people struggling with PTSD, noting that there are a handful of things they all have in common: optimism, a moral compass, a willingness to face their fears, training in how to face a crisis, and more

C. In his book, *A Resilient Life*, Gordon MacDonald, notes that in his early thirties he realized that: he could attribute most of his accomplishments to his personality – and that had taken him as far as it was likely to. And, he came from a family of quitters. He then rehearses the steps he took to understand resilience from a biblical perspective.

D. What you get from all of these is that the Bible was right 2,000 years earlier when it said, there will be times when life takes grit and stamina – resilience – to win. But we can be much more resilient than we think.

E. I think too many Christians think that coming to faith is the big deal, and while it is a big deal – one that changes eternity – it doesn't mark the end, only the beginning and we need to spend a bit more time celebrating ending well.⁷

F. There are a half dozen other points I might make here:

1. Technology is making soft in ways we do not fully appreciate.
2. Quitting is addictive.
3. Our culture is now filled with de-commitment devices.⁸
4. Surviving success is often harder than surviving failure.

VI. But let me land by briefly noting three things:

A. Having the right friends is key. I am convinced that Daniel did as well as he did because he was not alone. We will pick up on that more next week.

B. Expecting life to be hard helps. Daniel and friends didn't think life would be easy. We shouldn't either. We have been told that it will be difficult. Peter said, "Do not be surprised when you encounter various trials."⁹ In John 15 Jesus tells us to expect pushback. Expecting it makes it a lot easier to handle. Hard is a lot harder when you are expecting easy; and by the way, hard can be good. God does some of his best work when things are hard.

1. I had lunch this week with a man who said something I have heard 1,000 times. He described the kind of trial you do not wish on anyone, and then said, “It’s been a great blessing in my life.”

C. The last thing I’ll say is, quitting doesn’t work.

1. This past week I went back and read some of the blog entries I wrote in the weeks after my stroke. I was interested in one day in particular.

2. I had worked hard to stay motivated. Positive. On this particular day I got pretty down. One of my least favorite things to do was an aerobics routine. There would be four or five of us in a circle. All in wheelchairs. I had just started to clue in enough to realize that everyone around me was not only in really bad shape physically, but also likely clinically depressed.

3. I was discouraged by the realization that these were my peers. I was embarrassed by the fact that I had asked for weights for one particular routine, I was given a choice of 1, 2 or 5 pound weights. I had chosen five and then had to set it down after a while.

4. Up until that moment I had done every kind of therapy session they offered. I did all the extra workouts in physical therapy, occupational therapy and speech therapy – which were the staple of my recovery. In addition to that I went to music therapy, art therapy and canine therapy. If anyone was offering anything I went. But on this day I cut out of aerobics, went to my room, got back in to bed, pulled the covers over my head and cried. I was ready to give up. I was very frustrated by where I was.

5. And then I experienced what C.S. Lewis wrote about in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, “Crying is OK while it lasts. But at some point you have to stop crying and you have to decide what comes next.” And so, after about ten minutes of hiding under the covers I realized, “This isn’t really a way forward.” So I got back out of bed and back in the wheel chair and rolled my way back to therapy.

6. I understand the urge to quit. It hits all of us from time to time. But it’s not a real wise option. “Do not grow weary of doing the right thing.” “Press on towards the goal for the prize of the higher calling of God in Christ Jesus.”

VII. Men and women, you have the spiritual stamina to make it – to run the entire race. But you might have to work harder to access it.

VIII. If you want to take a next step, there are three things that come to mind

A. The spiritual check-in is a chance to meet one-on-one for a private discussion with a pastor or someone from the Soul Care Team to think about where you are at. You can sign up for those on-line.

B. Secondly, on Nov. 5th we are having a prayer retreat, which is designed to teach you how to spend time in prayer. You do not need to be a great prayer warrior to sign up for this. It’s more a workshop that a time where you are set up and left on your own.

C. Third, today we have a ministry fair at all three campuses. Go out and look around at ways you can get involved serving others.

IX. Daniel faced bigger hurdles than we are facing. And he marched ahead. One day at a time. On step. Do the right thing. Press On.

X. Announcements:

1. John Stephen Akhwari, a Tanzanian runner who was competing in an Olympic Marathon back in 1968 in Mexico City. He was limping with a leg that was bloodied and bandaged. The other runners had finished. He struggled and the crowd watched him finish. When he was done he was asked, why he had kept at it. “My country did not send me to Mexico City to start the race. They sent me to finish.” Men and women, we are called to press on towards the goal for the prize of the higher calling of God in Christ Jesus.¹⁰

¹ Andrea Petersen, “Students Flood College Mental-Health Centers”, *Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 10, 2016.

² I Samuel 30:6

³ This definition is from Tim Keller. It is found in his book on marriage.

⁴ Every Memorial Day weekend 33 cars line up at a track in Indianapolis for a 500 mile race. They look incredible and start with a roar, accelerating up to speeds of 200 mph as they emerge out of the second turn. But before long they start dropping out. In the end, far more cars start the race than finish. In one sense, the same thing happens in life. A lot more people start with a bang than end that way. Today – as we continue our series from Daniel – we are going to be thinking about the fact that Daniel finished well.

⁵ I like the definition of finishing well used by Terry Walling and Robert Clinton: “being more in love with Christ, more committed to his service and more devoted to godly leadership at the end of life than in the beginning.”

⁶ How Hendricks claims that “the thing that surfaced over and over was a failure, not in their knowledge of Scripture but in failing to apply Scripture in their lives.” Bob Buford, *Finishing Well*, p. 124.

⁷ “Stephen Ambrose’s book *Nothing Like It in the World* tells the story of the building of the transcontinental railroad in America. “The railroad took brains, muscle, and sweat in quantities and scope never before put into a single project,” Ambrose wrote in his eminently readable history lesson.

Early in the story, Ambrose describes the moment when construction was to begin and certain California people decided that there ought to be a great ceremony. A host of dignitaries were invited to gather at the place where the first rail was to be laid.

One of those invited was Collis Huntington, perhaps the railroad’s most important West coast backer in California. But he declined, saying:

If you want to jubilate [celebrate] over driving the first spike, go ahead and do it. I don’t. those mountains over there look too ugly. We may fail, and if we do, I want to have as few people know it as we can...*Anybody can drive the first spike, but there are months of labor and unrest between the first and the last spike.* (Emphasis mine)

Huntington was not romanced by *first* spikes, by premature celebration. It was the *last spike* in the process that grabbed his attention. Everything in between the first and last spike was his big picture, and until the picture was all filled in, he wasn’t celebrating.

When construction of the railroad was finally completed in May of 1869, a last spike, a golden one at that, was pounded into place, and two locomotives (one from the east; the other from the west) moved forward until they touched. A telegram was sent to President Ulysses S. Grant: “Sir: we have the honor to report that the last rail is laid, *the last spike is driven*, the Pacific Railroad is finished.”

“*The last rail is laid, the last spike is driven*” (emphasis mine). Now maybe Collis Huntington had something to celebrate.” Gordon MacDonald, *The Resilient Life*, p. 43.

⁸ In an speech on Christian Higher Education, David Brooks develops this a bit more. He notes that what is valued today is keeping all of our options open, but he says, life doesn't work that way. He argues that things work best – and we are the most free – when we learn what options to close down.

⁹ I Peter 4:12.

¹⁰ A PowerBar commercial makes a similar point. Powerbars are energy bars. The commercial shows a marathon runner appearing to be about to win the race. He raises his arms in victory and then fails to break through the tape, fall backwards and is passed. The words that flash on the screen are, “Don't Bonk.” The message is clear. No one want to Bonk. We want to finish the race well.