

## **Standout: A Noble Mind-set**

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Have you ever wondered how other people see you? As you may know, I have one of those jobs can influence the way people see me. I'm a psychiatrist – which means that when I tell people what I do, they tend to look at me funny!

Being a doctor, I know that the two letters before my name alone can make people look at me differently. I remember getting on a plane one time and the cabin crew looked at my boarding card, saw the title, and asked whether I was “a clever doctor or a useful doctor”. I replied that I was neither, “but my wife's a GP”.

More recently though, I had an experience which made me wonder whether what matters more is not how others see us, but how we see ourselves. About a year ago, I was walking through the NNUH to drop off a blood test. I don't work at the NNUH, but have reason to visit there on occasions such as that. I was thinking about how different my experience and expectation of hospital was to so many others. To me, in that moment, hospital was just a place of work. I felt relaxed being there, happy even, at ease.

Then on 30<sup>th</sup> August 2017, I broke my leg playing football. I may not have told you before, I try not to mention it too often! What I've noticed, looking back now, and as I was preparing this message, is how my attitude to hospital changed when I went from being a doctor to being a patient. I know now the anxiety that others feel going into hospital. I know the fear. I know the stress. I know the anticipation of waiting for a test result. I know the worry ahead of an important appointment. Most strikingly perhaps was that first night I went in. Being seen by the doctor in A&E. They didn't x-ray me that night. I went away with crutches and a brace, but no diagnosis of a fracture. I remember going away unsure of the conclusion reached; pretty sure something had been missed; but saying nothing. Helena had similar suspicions, but equally didn't raise that concern. We later reflected on our likely experience comparative to the person that had seen us. I'd probably worked in that A&E for as long as they had. Yet we didn't question, didn't challenge, didn't want to make a fuss. Why? Because I was the patient, not the doctor.

The same hospital in which I felt so at ease as a doctor felt very different as a patient. The same place carried a whole different set of emotions when how I saw myself changed. Most notably though, I went from an empowered professional to a passive patient – not because my knowledge changed, nor my experience, nor the hospital itself. All because how I saw myself changed.

Could it be that my experience has a wider application? Could it be that what matters is less how others see us, and more how we see ourselves? Not that how others see us doesn't matter at all – but that how we see ourselves has a greater impact and influence on our lives?

As you may be aware, we're partway through this Standout series. This series is partly about how we can stand-out in our world – how we can stand up for what we believe in or what

matters most, even when that challenges the culture of the world around us. My capacity to stand out was certainly affected by my view of myself. Perhaps the same is true for you.

Also though, the dictionary defines a standout (noun) as “a person or thing of exceptional quality or ability”. As an adjective, it means “exceptionally good”. I think there is something highly attractive about those definitions. I don’t know about you, but I’d love to be known as that kind of standout. I’d love someone to say that I had exceptional quality or ability. I’d love to be known as exceptionally good. That my work would be known as being “exceptionally good”. That my relationships with others – my friendships, my marriage – would be “exceptionally good”. That my finances would be “exceptionally good”.

But, I wonder, is it possible to be a standout in that sense if we don’t see ourselves that way? Can others ever see us as “a person of exceptional quality or ability”, if we don’t see ourselves like that? Can we be known as “exceptionally good” if the thought that we might be that way never crosses our mind?

I’m not suggesting we should be arrogant or proud – others in this series have rightly underlined the value of humility, and of servanthood as a path to greatness. I’m simply asking whether our view of ourselves can limit our potential. Whether we can ever truly stand out if we don’t see ourselves a certain way.

As we’ll explore in a little while, there is some scientific evidence – both in social psychology and neuroscience – that backs up the significance of how we see ourselves when it comes to our impact in the world. But first, I want us to look at a Biblical example. This is an example which applies, incidentally, whether you’d say you were a Christian or not. It is a passage that we’ve looked at already in this series; and is about an individual that is a major inspiration for what we’re exploring this month and next. Let me read to you from Daniel 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. 2 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. 3 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— 4 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. 5 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. 6 Among those who were chosen were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. 7 The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Beltshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego.

This is our introduction to Daniel. The hero of this story, after whom the book is named. As this passage tells us, Daniel was a Hebrew noble, at a time when Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, besieged and conquered Jerusalem. Daniel, along with some of the other young

men, was taken away to the king's service. He was to be trained in the king's court; to serve in the king's palace; to eat the king's food and drink his wine.

King Nebuchadnezzar was a smart fellow. He knew that the way to make a lasting impression in the world was not just to conquer people, but to win them over to his cause. He is seeking here to brainwash the best and brightest of the nation he has conquered. To indoctrinate them into the ways of his kingdom – to teach them to think and act and even eat like he did. He wants influence – the kind of influence that comes not just by winning a battle for a city, but by winning over the hearts and minds of those he has conquered as well.

As Pastor Tom highlighted earlier in this series, that would have been both an honouring and a harrowing experience. Yes, Daniel was set up to be well-fed, well-trained and, for the most part, well looked after. But there would have been trauma too. He would've been taught things that went entirely against what he believed – required to learn all about witchcraft, for example; expected to become proficient in its practice. Worse though, he would likely have been castrated - a move intended to literally instil a sense of impotence, to keep him focused on his job and not on any woman in the king's court; to break his spirit as well as his body; while removing the prospect of any future other than that serving the king.

The thing that is striking about Daniel though is that it didn't really work. Not the castration necessarily – Daniel is not recorded as having a wife, nor fathering children. But the brainwashing, it didn't really happen. Daniel continues, as we read on through-out the book, to be an independent and innovative thinker. He is a man who is more than willing to stand up to the status quo. By rights, this man - who was plucked from his home country, indoctrinated into alien and unwelcome customs, castrated and subjugated – should have become a meek, subservient follower. But Daniel doesn't. Time and again, he stands up and he speaks out.

What is apparent over the next few chapters is how confidently Daniel is prepared to challenge the status quo; how ready he is to assert what he believes. If you read on in this chapter, for example, Daniel challenges the food he is due to be fed, going against the king's command. Later, he is prepared to stand up to the king. He boldly offers a challenging interpretation of the king's dream, for example. Later, serving another king, Daniel boldly interprets a message from God, telling the king that he has been "weighed in the balance and found wanting". He is prepared to tell one king he'll go mad for a bit; another king that his kingdom will crumble; and on another occasion tells the king that he will die that very night. Daniel too stands up for what he believes – as well as taking a stance on the food issue, he is prepared to keep following God in prayer and daily devotion, even when it leads to him being thrown into a lion's den.

By rights, what we should see in the life of Daniel is a man suffering the ongoing effects of trauma. His life should be marked and defined by what we'd now call PTSD. He should be a wreck – emotionally and psychologically. Yet instead he is robust, confident and bold. A standout in every way.

But why? How? I think a key factor is highlighted in those words we read a few minutes ago. Who did the king pick for his services? “Some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility”. Daniel was at best royalty, and at least nobility. Long before Nebuchadnezzar got his hands on Daniel, he has already been raised in a royal court – brought up in the court of a different king and taught how to serve a different God – the one true God. Daniel was a young man when pressed into Nebuchadnezzar’s service. Which meant that his personality – his sense of self and view of the world – had already been formed – set in stone, pretty much, not under the command of Nebuchadnezzar, but under the king of Judah and, more importantly, to the glory of the Lord God instead.

Daniel’s view of himself would’ve been set in place before Nebuchadnezzar carried him off. He was raised as a noble, through the key childhood years that most define who we think we are. Daniel may not have been seen as a noble by others in Babylon, not at first, but every example shows that that is how Daniel saw himself – as one of noble birth, one raised in a royal family. I am convinced that Daniel knew who he was – that he had a noble mind-set that influenced everything else he did.

We see this in the confidence that Daniel displays, even in chapter 1 of the book that bears his name. How easy is it to stand up to the king’s officials? If you see yourself as a prisoner of war, it’s not that easy. But if you see yourself as a noble? Pretty sure you’d feel more confident about asserting your views. The same then is true in every example that follows. Daniel is a man prepared to serve, but who does not seem to see himself as of less value than any of those he speaks to or works for. They may be king, but he is noble too – and, unlike them, he knows the authority of the God he serves.

Daniel’s example resonates with what we see in modern psychology. Studies show that those who perceive themselves to have greater social status have comparatively higher levels of serotonin. Serotonin is a key neurotransmitter when it comes to mediating mood – and those with higher levels are less likely to experience low mood and anxiety; more likely to feel confident and relaxed; more likely to successfully navigate stressful situations. Other studies have suggested, though with less certainty, that even our posture can impact on our serotonin levels – and that those who hold themselves confidently are more likely to experience a corresponding increase in these positive neurotransmitters.

There is reason to think that these factors are evident in Daniel – that his inner sense of nobility, hard-wired into him before he is taken captive, is protective against the stresses and challenges that later come his way.

Daniel displays noble qualities as well. We see how he is defined, as Pastor Tom and others have highlighted, by integrity, diligence, hard work. He is open, honest and true to his word – even when others seek to manipulate or play political games. He sticks to what he believes, even when it costs him or threatens his life. He speaks plainly, honestly and directly, even to royalty, even when it puts his life at risk.

We see in Daniel a noble mind-set which insulates him from the stresses he faces and allows him to stand out even when toe to toe with the most influential people in the land.

Which is all well and good for Daniel. But what about us? How does understanding his noble mind-set help us to stand out? How does it influence how we see ourselves?

Well, the startling reality is that it is not just Daniel who had reason to see himself as noble – the same is true for everyone who identifies as a Christian as well.

In 1 Peter 2:9, the apostle Peter describes the church like this...

**1 Peter 2:9** - 9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

A chosen people; a royal priesthood; special and set apart by God. That's a pretty powerful statement, isn't it? People called out of darkness, into wonderful light.

It isn't just Peter who implies nobility for those who follow Jesus – the apostle Paul puts it this way. As he writes about the Holy Spirit in his letter to the Romans, Paul outlines this powerful truth...

**Romans 8:15-18 (NLT)** - 15 So you have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you received God's Spirit when he adopted you as his own children. Now we call him, "Abba, Father." 16 For his Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm that we are God's children. 17 And since we are his children, we are his heirs. In fact, together with Christ we are heirs of God's glory. But if we are to share his glory, we must also share his suffering. 18 Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will reveal to us later.

What Paul asserts here is so powerful. He writes of how those that follow Jesus are adopted into the family of God. We can call God "Abba, Father" – that word, "Abba", expresses closeness – like "Dad". We then are God's children – adopted by Him. Not only that though, but we become co-heirs with Christ. Heirs of God's glory. We too take on noble standing; royal status; claiming Christ's inheritance as our own.

While Daniel was of noble birth, those of us that are Christians are of noble re-birth. We are adopted into God's family. We become heirs of Christ's inheritance. We become part of a "royal priesthood". Like Daniel, we are set apart for God's service – empowered to shine a light in the darkness of difficulty, to stand toe-to-toe with the most influential of people; infused with purpose that pervades and prevails beyond our present circumstances.

We need to learn to see ourselves with the same nobility that marked Daniel's life; to understand our place in God's family; to recognise that we are part of this "royal priesthood"; to consider ourselves co-heirs with Christ.

But the way we will instil this within us – how we will internalise it, hard-wire it into our understanding of ourselves – will not be easy. Paul here draws our attention not only to the glory that we share, but also to the suffering. He writes as though suffering is an essential step in taking ownership of this new heaven-sent understanding of who we are. This is perhaps the most striking thing about Daniel – that the challenges he faces do not cause him

to question who he is, but only seem to reinforce his determination to stand up for what he believes. This too, I believe, is a cultural trait – one which Daniel would've come to understand as he grew up in Jerusalem, but one which we can live out ourselves.

We see in the passage we read earlier that Nebuchadnezzar attempted to change Daniel's name to Beltshazzar. Pastor Tom spoke brilliantly a few weeks ago about the significance of this – about how this was another attempt at ownership and control. This name change was another attempt to define Daniel's identity – but it did not stick. After all, what is the book called? Not Beltshazzar right?! And it seems the name did not even really outlast the life of king Nebuchadnezzar.

But it is not just Nebuchadnezzar who is in the renaming game. On notable occasions through the Bible, we see others given a new name by God. In each situation, the new name represents a new identity – a sense of who they are in God.

But one more than any other perhaps defined Daniel's sense of who he was.

In Genesis 32, we read some of the account of the life of a man called Jacob, who had stolen his brother's inheritance and gone on the run. He had dreams of a bigger life than he was entitled to by birth, yet was finding life hard going along the way. One night, he sent his wives and his possessions across a river, but when he came to cross, a man stood in his way...

**Genesis 32:24 – 28** - 24 So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. 25 When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. 26 Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." 27 The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. 28 Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome."

This then is the first time we hear that name – "Israel". Some scholars suggest this was an angel that Jacob wrestled with, but two verses later Jacob reflects that he "saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared". This Godly change of name far, far outlasts the one Nebuchadnezzar attempts with Daniel. This is the birth of the nation whom Daniel would one day come to represent. When those Israelites nobles were dragged away by Nebuchadnezzar, it was this name that they carried with them. Israel.

That name is significant – because it means "he struggled with God" or "God contended". Hard-wired into Daniel's understanding of himself, of the family he was born into, of the God he represented - was this sense that wrestling with God was not something to be avoided, but embraced. That difficulties need not invalidate his understanding of God, but could refine it. That his sense of who he was in God could be forged in the fight.

If we want to internalise a new mind-set – a noble mind-set – we need to be prepared for a fight. We need to press on through the difficulties – embracing our share of suffering that Paul describes in Romans 8. That it is not an easy challenge, but it is a powerful thought –

that going through the tough stuff doesn't have to make us question who we are, but can instead reinforce our sense that God is at work in us.

Suffering alone though will not instil a new sense of purpose and possibility. Suffering alone will only make us bitter or cynical or worse. What makes a difference is the sense that we suffer *with Christ*. It is as we go through challenges consciously aware of God with us that we grow. That'll take some wrestling, not just revelation. We will argue with God. We will question Him. We will want to know what the hell He is up to or even where He is at times. And that's OK. God doesn't mind a bit of wrestling. He doesn't mind the fight. What matters is that we keep going to Him, we don't turn back or turn away.

At the end of this passage, Israel, now called, is left with a limp. It is the mark he wrestled with God and came out the other side. I know what it's like to have a limp. 9 months I've been working on this illustration! But this limp isn't a bad thing necessarily. It is for my speed of movement, maybe, but it represents progress in its own way. It says I faced a challenge, but I'm still standing. I faced difficulty, but I'm still moving. Yeah, I've got some marks; yes, I've got some scars; yes, it isn't as easy as I'd like – but I've been through the challenge, I've been through the dark times – I'm still moving forwards – and what's more I am not the same.

Your suffering need not separate you from God. Indeed, I am convinced from the example we see in Daniel, in Israel and in Paul's writing, that if you want to fully understand who you are in God, you have to go through some difficult times with him. Those difficult periods reveal who we really are; they refine us like a fire – and they can forge something stronger if we stay close to God through the experience.

If you want to truly instil a noble mind-set, you have to be prepared for some challenges. What matters is not whether you face difficulties – because you will – but whether you maintain your connection with God through it all. So get angry with Him if you have to; question Him if you must; rage to the heavens if you think it'll help – but don't disconnect from Him. Because the lesson of Jacob to Israel is that sometimes you've got to wrestle with God to discover who you are.

You don't have to be ashamed of your limp – physical or metaphorical – so long as you know what it means. You don't have to be afraid of difficulties, so long as you don't disconnect from God when life gets dark. You can get stronger through stressful situations, not even by agreeing with God all the time, but simply by going through the process with Him. Sometimes you just have to adjust your posture, to put your head up and your shoulders back, to remind yourself that you are adopted into God's family, you are a co-heir with Christ; and that who walks with you in you is stronger than the challenges ahead.

We are all but out of time for today, but I hope what we have explored will have helped you. We see in Daniel that our capacity to become a standout person – someone of exceptional quality or ability – is related less to how others see us, and more to how we see ourselves. Daniel's life was marked by a noble mind-set – that allowed him to speak boldly to kings, confidently to those in authority and to stand up for what he believed. We too can know that same understanding – as a royal priesthood; a chosen people; adopted by God, as co-

heirs with Christ. Yet that is forged not in the good times, but in the tough times – solidified as we choose to walk with God – even wrestle with Him – instead of walking away.

Imagine what would happen if we could embrace this understanding. What would it do in us and in our world? Imagine the kind of confidence that comes from knowing who you are. Imagine approaching your boss with the kind of assuredness we see in Daniel. Imagine challenging the status quo or being the one who initiates change. Imagine what that sense of nobility would do for your friendships, in your family; at work or in school. Imagine if we saw the kind of impact that Daniel saw – as he became known as one of exceptional quality and ability – able to thrive and flourish whatever life threw his way.

Imagine too what it might do in our city. Daniel's life touched a whole nation – leading it back to God time and again. Perhaps if people saw in us a sense of confidence born out of that noble mind-set, they would ask how we found it and whether they could experience it for themselves. Perhaps if they saw us getting stronger even in the midst of stressful circumstances, they would ask where our resilience came from; and would find the strength to press on through challenges themselves.

We can see a revolution in ourselves and in our city if we will wrestle with God through suffering, instead of walking away. If we will cultivate within ourselves that God given sense of who we are. If we will boldly step forward as that royal priesthood, those chosen people; adopted in God's family; co-heirs with Christ.

Let's pray.