

Daniel 6
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Ellen Crawford True

Holy Atomic Habits

I confess I'm still going through withdrawal from the Olympics coming to an end.

Granted, I am less tempted to watch television in the middle of the day (which was much easier to do on vacation), but I miss the shared camaraderie that we found in watching a kid with glasses help his team win bronze in gymnastics, a woman who has wrestled publicly with mental health challenges wow the universe and win gold, and yes, that one basketball player in particular who cheekily bid the entire nation of France "night night" with shot after breathtaking shot. I also miss the inspiration. I love the backstories revealing the stumbles these athletes overcame along with the success they achieved. I relished the glimpses of the work and the commitment and the communities that went into shaping these athletes into the Olympians they now are. I was even impressed by a VISA commercial for goodness sakes:

Show me your prodigies, wunderkinds, overnight successes...the once-in-a-generation talents, and we'll show you the late nights, the early risers, tough days, the relentless fighters taking small steps forward to make big things happen.¹

Yes, Simone Biles and Steph Curry and Steve Nedoroscik have gifts and skills that very few have AND they took an infinite number of small steps to achieve what they have achieved and become the gymnast, the basketball player, and the pommel horse guy we have come to know and admire.

¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TvK7h5T_zzo

As I wrote earlier in the week, this morning's story from Daniel follows a plotline that is very similar to last week's story of Daniel's friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. The court officials and muckety mucks are jealous and conniving just as they were last week, and the good guys are saved from injury and death both times. It's true that this week's king is more sympathetic than last week's, and hungry lions are not the same as a fiery furnace, but it's tempting to say it's basically the same story. Except, we get one detail that we did not get last week, a window that speaks directly to what it means to live a life of faith and witness as a Jew living in the age of the Persian empire and as a Christian here and now. As verse ten reads in the Common English Bible:

When Daniel learned that the document had been signed, he went to his house ... Daniel knelt down, prayed, and praised his God three times that day, just like he always did.²

Just like he always did... The writer wants to highlight Daniel's courage and his faithfulness. I also think it matters that this pattern of prayer, this practice is simply what Daniel always does because it is who Daniel is. He is a person of faith. He is a person who prays. He is a person who knows and trusts that this king is not all-powerful, not in any ultimate way anyway. The arbitrary decisions of the king of the month do not change Daniel in any essential way, nor does the threat change how he lives and moves in the world.

It's been 28 years since I was enrolled as a student, but each August is the same. With each new school year, I make grand plans. I decide that I am going to pack my lunch, drink eight glasses of water, get at least seven hours of sleep, walk at least 10,000 steps daily, and fill my new calendar out meticulously so that everything goes just as it should. And it usually works for

² Daniel 6: 10, CEB

a week tops. So I was intrigued when I saw several posts about a book entitled *Atomic Habits* by James Clear. He builds on the notion that atoms are tiny pieces of a much larger system and that small practices can ultimately shape our systems in large-scale ways. Clear contends that habits and identity are linked, that “your habits are how you embody your identity.”³ According to Clear,

The word identity was originally derived from the Latin words *essentitas*, which means being, and *identidem*, which means repeatedly. Your identity is literally your ‘repeated beingness.’⁴

I think Clear is on to something. While he and I might debate his idea that we can change our identity (You are a beloved child of God, period, full stop, and so is Mr. Clear, and so am I, and so are they, and nothing can change that important truth.), I do believe there is something powerful in the connection between what we do and who we understand ourselves to be. Clear emphasizes, “It’s one thing to say I’m the type of person who wants this. It’s something very different to say I’m the type of person who is this.”⁵ And Clear contends that it takes small steps to build these habits, practice and more practice and small steps.

Someone taught Daniel to pray. Someone encouraged him to turn toward his heart’s home and pray to the God of his ancestors. And to do it again and again and again until it was as natural as breathing, until he became not simply a person who stops and breathes and attends to his connection with the Lord of All but also a person who embodies prayer, a person who is a pray-er. The text tells us that he always did this. *Always*. The writer of 1 Thessalonians calls us to

³ James Clear, *Atomic Habits*, Kindle version, 36.

⁴ Clear, 36.

⁵ Clear, 33.

pray always, too. That's a high bar. If I can't manage to find a way to keep my desk straight or drink eight glasses of water a day, I'm fairly certain that my perfectly praying without ceasing is a no go. The good news is that my failure to pray as I should might keep me on the good side of a fickle despot; the bad news is that if I somehow get tossed to the lions I'm in big trouble. After all, the text tells me that Daniel is saved because he is faithful and righteous and that he prays three times a day no matter what.

I made a point of saying last week that faith is not a transaction. That is still true. This story of Daniel's being saved is in the end more about God's power and God's goodness than Daniel's. My beloved seminary professor, Sib Towner says it much more eloquently:

For many faithful people whose steadiness and trust ought to have earned them their safety, no angel stopped the lions' mouth or knocked down the cross or turned off the gas; and yet they, too—in the power of their faith—have overcome the ultimate fear that their deaths were meaningless and their lives failures.⁶

There is no human formula that results in God doing what we want God to do. As Towner says: "God is not simply programmed by human blamelessness."⁷ Daniel knows this, just as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did. Daniel does not pray three times a day to shield himself from the perils of the lions' den. Daniel prays three times a day because of who he is and because of and in response to who he knows God to be. Daniel's story is and was intended to give hope to a people living in diaspora, scattered throughout an empire that remains bound by the whims of fickle human rulers and their courts. As beloved as he is in the royal court, Daniel knows in his

⁶ W. Sibley Towner, *Daniel*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching (Louisville: Westminster, 1984) 86.

⁷ Towner, 90.

very core that his ultimate allegiance is to the God of all creation, the God who cares for the king and the peasant and the Olympian and the refugee and the unhoused in equal measure. Daniel is no overnight sensation. He is who he is, and he does what he always does because of who he knows God to be, regardless of who sits on any earthly throne.

As this new school year begins, try as I may, I will not win an Olympic medal for keeping my desk straight or drinking all the water I should or getting enough sleep. And that's ok. By the unshakeable grace of God, I have a hunch that this story may be encouraging me to practice something else, to adopt a different habit that is not all about me. Perhaps I and we can hear Daniel's story as an invitation to consider what our habits say about who we understand God to be. What do we *always* do? What are we known for? How does what we do serve not to earn God's grace but to embody that grace? What do our habits say about our being claimed by the God who loves us beyond measure and whose kingdom is truly without end?

Maybe it's offering a prayer for a stranger who crosses our path on our way to work each morning. Maybe it's singing a favorite hymn in the shower. Maybe it's taking a few deep breaths over that first cup of coffee or tea to give thanks for the breath in our lungs. Maybe it looks like taking a day off from social media, stepping away from the snark for a bit to remember that God loves each and every one of us, unfiltered and gullible and misguided and fallible as we—and they—may be. Maybe it's turning off the talking heads once a week, the ones who quite literally bank on getting our pulse racing and using that time to shift our gaze out and up and marvel at the world God so dearly loves. Maybe it's taking a good long glance in the mirror and practice seeing ourselves as adoringly as God does.

What small step, what holy atomic habit might we begin to practice in the days ahead so that we—both individually and as a community—reflect more vibrantly the God we meet in Jesus Christ, the God who treasures us more expansively than the universe and more precisely than our very atoms? What might we be known for? What might we do that speaks to the abundant unearned grace we have received in Jesus Christ? What might we practice and begin to embody that honors the God who stands with us and loves us?

Which, by the way, God always does.

In the name of that God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.