

# **“How to Swim Upstream”**

Allan Pole on Saturday evening, November 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021



Theme: Heaven calls us to be different so we can make a difference.

Text: Daniel 1:1-21

Here's a thought from W.C. Fields: "Remember, a dead fish can float downstream, but it takes a live one to swim upstream."

Wildlife Informer describes "5 Fish that Swim Upstream" at <https://wildlifeinformer.com/fish-that-swim-upstream>, but let's focus on the salmon, the first upstream swimming fish that comes to people's minds.

The most common type of Salmon, the Atlantic Salmon, can be seen primarily on the West Coast in the Pacific. The Latin word for Atlantic Salmon translates to "leaper," which is no surprise because the swift and graceful fish can jump to heights of 12 feet! The Atlantic Salmon is a beautiful, slender fish with a small face and can weigh up to 57 pounds. Schools of these fish will travel up rivers connected to the Pacific, back to their place of birth to re-spawn. Unlike other types of Salmon, who end up dying shortly after re-spawning, the Atlantic Salmon will typically live to spawn the following year again.

We marvel at the salmon's determination to overcome the current so it can secure a future for the generations that follow. Four young men faced adversity that would have overwhelmed and consumed most people. They not only survived but they thrived. How did they do it?

We are introduced to them in Daniel 1:1-21:

1 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 in 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 these were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. 7 The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego. 8 But 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. 9 Now God had caused the official to show favour and sympathy to Daniel, 10 but the official told Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you." 11 Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, 12 "Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. 13 Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see." 14 So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days. 15 At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food. 16 So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead. 17 To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds. 18 At the end of the time set by the king to bring them in, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. 19 The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king's service. 20 In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom. 21 And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus. NIV

Nebuchadnezzar II reigned from 605 to 562 B.C. and he was the second ruler of the Chaldean kingdom based in Babylon that ruled the ancient Near East for nearly a century. During his 43 years as king of Babylon, he built many magnificent structures, including the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

Israel was divided into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah after King Solomon died. The northern kingdom of Israel was taken captive by Assyria in 722 B.C. while the southern kingdom of Judah remained for more than 100 years. Jehoiakim was king of Judah for 11 years – from 609 to 598 B.C. (according to The IVP Bible Background Commentary) - and 2 Kings 23:36 to 24:6 tells us he was evil, served Nebuchadnezzar for three years then rebelled. The Babylonians and their allies the Medes conquered the Assyrians and divided the kingdom between them. Judah fell within the

territory allotted to the Babylonians so Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, were taken captive along with many residents and treasures of Judah.

The Babylonians worshiped many gods, but the chief among them was Marduk, the god of war. His renowned temple was one of the most dominant buildings in the city of Babylon. Jewish prophets often prophesied the fall of Babylon, the capital of an empire that destroyed God's city, Jerusalem, and carried His people away as captives. The world in rebellion against God is called "Babylon" in the Book of Revelation, so Babylon is a word picture for a society that persecuted God's people but will eventually be destroyed by God before the New Jerusalem is revealed. Babylon was and is not a friendly place for worshipers of the Lord, the God revealed to us in the Bible and through Jesus Christ.

We can learn many valuable lessons from Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, but let's focus on one: heaven calls us to be different so we can make a difference.

Godly people can flourish in ungodly settings with:

### **Conviction**



James M. Freeman notes in *Manners & Customs of the Bible*:

This would have been a luxurious manner of living for these Hebrew [Jewish] boys, quite in contrast to what they had been accustomed to, and to the extremely plain diet that Daniel requested for himself and his companions. The Babylonian kings and nobles were noted for their high living. Their tables were loaded with wheat breads, meats in great variety and luscious fruits. The usual beverage was wine of the best varieties, and most of them were fond of drinking to excess. The ancient Persian kings followed the custom of the Babylonian monarchs, and fed their attendants from their own tables.

King Nebuchadnezzar valued food and drink, and he wanted their captives to share their values. To resist such luxury required conviction, courage and self-control, which is particularly commendable for these Jewish teenagers.

I thought about going on an all-almond diet. But that's just nuts!

Why was Daniel's diet so important to him? This was much more than a

physical or nutritional question of eating particular foods and drinking certain drinks. Knowing the spiritual climate in Babylon, there are at least a couple of possible reasons for Daniel's conviction about what to eat and what not to eat. The Law of Moses outlined what foods were permitted and prohibited and how they should be prepared (see Leviticus 11). The food and drink had probably been offered to idols and they wanted no part in them.

What were these young men going to do in the face of authority who wanted them to compromise? They could relent and choose to blend in with their captors and fellow captives or they could stand up for what they believed. They chose to draw a line in the sand.

American comedian W.C. Fields (1880-1946) advised, "Remember, a dead fish can float downstream, but it takes a live one to swim upstream." Jesus teaches us that we are to be in the world but not of the world (see John 17:13-19).

Have you faced or do you face pressure to do something or not do something that you feel violates your convictions? What have you done in the past? What will you do now?

Godly people can flourish in ungodly settings with:

Conviction

and

**Submission**



Lauren Phipps writes in "The frustrating, exhilarating task of swimming upstream" at <https://www.greenbiz.com/article/frustrating-exhilarating-task-swimming-upstream>:

I had the bizarre and satisfying experience of observing dozens upon dozens of salmon in their swim against the current. And let me tell you, it was nothing like I'd expected.

For one, it isn't a constant struggle. Once I got over the cartoonish juxtaposition of magnificent, fully grown coho salmon bigger than my thigh making their way up a stream ranging in depth from inches to feet, I noticed the meandering nature of their path.

Sure, there's the iconic moment that a fish will valiantly thrust its body

over waterfalls, boulders, logs and other obstacles gilded in white water in order to reach higher waters. But there are many more moments of slowness, swirling among fellow travellers in calm pools for extended periods.

Some sections of the stream could be quickly and easily traversed. Others required numerous, occasionally hilarious, attempts. A fish would boldly leap over a rock only to smack directly into the stone's face and bounce back into the water below; another would spend minutes swimming up an eventual dead-end only to have to retreat to try a different path; many would tirelessly touse [move roughly] up narrow straits shallower than their gills to circumvent other insurmountable barriers.

I watched dozens of salmon muscle through intense stretches of rough water, be overtaken by the current and pushed 20 feet backward into a familiar pool, and then immediately begin their swim back up the stream.

As I observed the spectacle of salmon, I wondered how it was possible for the fish - my supposed kindred spirits - to appear neither discouraged nor exhausted by the journey.

It turns out, swimming upstream may be easier than it looks if you're a salmon. In fact, some fish actually use less energy when swimming upstream against a current than they do going downstream with it. Like a sailboat tacking [changing course] upwind, these fish are able to ride the turbulent eddies [small whirlpools] of a stream, capitalizing on the water's forceful energy to move forward. Instead of swimming normally as they would through placid [calm] waters, the fish relax, riding the slaloms from side to side without using their primary swimming muscles. The river does much of the work.

The Jews had been conquered by Babylon and taken away as captives to a foreign land. It was a dark time for the descendants of Abraham, so these young Jewish men could have had a chip on their shoulders for the losses, pain and suffering they and their people endured. They could have tried to rebel and undermine the authority of the Babylonian king. Since their theology and worldview were very different from their captors, they would have disagreed with many of their laws. They could have spread unrest and discontent among their countrymen. They could have criticized this directive that was imposed on them. I don't imagine them seething with anger, frothing at the mouth and spewing out hateful, disrespectful remarks toward King Nebuchadnezzar and toward those who carried out his orders. I imagine them filled with humility and quiet confidence in their God and who they were in God's eyes.

Mother Teresa advised, “We learn humility through accepting humiliations cheerfully.”

Despite their captivity, Daniel and his friends were not “contrarian” in everyday life. They weren’t stubborn, belligerent or argumentative. They complied with most directives from their leaders. There are times when we will be pushed back by the stream. Our responses to these setbacks will make us or break us. Will we give up or will we keep swimming?

We need to work hard, but we need to work smart. We need to discern when to enjoy the still waters and when to swim against the current. Sometimes our conviction and our call to submit collide. This was an order that Daniel and his friends decided they could not follow. What were they going to do? They decided to appeal to authority and their spokesman, Daniel, included five ingredients:

1. Conviction. Based upon the Word of God Daniel felt this was a line he could not and would not cross.
2. Permission. Daniel humbly asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way.
3. Compassion. The official admitted to Daniel his fear of what would happen if Daniel and his friends looked worse than the other young men. Daniel could have dismissed this fear, instead, he took time to understand the official’s position and had compassion.
4. Proposition. It would have been very easy for Daniel to criticize his leaders and complain about what they were or were not doing. Instead, he brought a solution to the problem.
5. Evaluation. Daniel asked for time to prove their proposition would work. The official could review and assess the situation after ten days.

Having been in church leadership for almost all of my adult life, I fully expect there will be many disagreements along the way. I don’t want a bunch of “yes people” around me. If you and I agree on *everything*, one of us is not thinking or being honest. I don’t want people to stir up division. Instead, I want people to present solutions to me directly yet graciously and respectfully. This tells me that people aren’t just being stubborn or difficult, but that they want to work with me. Let’s try creative ideas and strategies and see if they work.

People who are consumed with media or pop culture and who go with the flow might think we are outdated, old-fashioned, irrelevant or resistant to progress. I am not saying that we need to wear old clothes to be spiritual, but I am learning that the ancient paths and principles of Scripture are as relevant today as ever. We can swim against the current while being very current!

David Nicholls wrote in "One Day", "Salmon. Salmon, salmon, salmon, salmon. I eat so much salmon at these weddings, twice a year I get this urge to swim upstream."

Daniel and his friends chose their battles carefully, and when they decided it was a hill to die on, they stood on it courageously. They took their stand and the Lord honoured them by making them outstanding. These young men rose to prominence in the Babylonian and Persian empires – the world's superpowers of their day. Daniel served for more than 60 years under four kings. The lessons we learn from him and his three friends apply to families, friendships, churches, communities, businesses, organizations, teams, governments and many other areas.

What is our attitude toward those in authority? What do we do and say when we disagree with our leaders?

I pray that we learn from Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. Godly people can flourish in ungodly settings with:

**Conviction**

and

**Submission**

Heaven calls us to be different so we can make a difference.

