



# SUCCESS

## AND FAILURE IN THE HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONS

**Nirmalan Arulanantham** looks at two Old Testament figures to see what they can teach us about thriving and surviving in the modern healthcare system.



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**H**ealthcare professionals are programmed for success. Doctors, nurses, paramedics, pharmacists, and physiotherapists are all in careers with clear pathways. Effortless career progression and success are ideals that are celebrated. Christians working in healthcare may unwittingly absorb

these values and expect success in both their work, personal, and church lives. The successful professional, married with children, and also a church elder is, perhaps, a celebrated ideal. They manage to work a full-time job, while also finding time for family and playing an active part in church life.

Life teaches us that things are rarely so simple. The NHS is facing ever increasing pressures, with staff shortages and mounting patient demand and expectations. A failed exam, a broken relationship, or a new health complaint can add fuel to the fire when someone is already under pressure at work.

### a difficult work environment

The series *Cardiac Arrest* from the 1990s which was set in a fictional hospital in the North of England.<sup>1</sup> It was written by Jed Mercurio, who was a disillusioned doctor turned screenwriter. It characterised an NHS that is plagued by low morale, impossible working conditions, and difficult staff. Dr Andrew Collin is a

slightly nervous, overconscientious junior Christian doctor bullied by his senior colleagues, who ends up becoming cynical and having an affair with a nurse. Dr Rajesh Rajah is a Hindu doctor waiting for an arranged marriage, but meanwhile pursuing a promiscuous lifestyle, unknown to his parents. There is one scene where a little child is being resuscitated by a team while some nurses at the desk callously order a pepperoni pizza. Managers are portrayed as being driven by targets with no concern for the wellbeing of the staff. Most of us who have worked in the NHS will relate to seeing most of these caricatures at some stage, although thankfully not at the same time in the same hospital, and usually in a milder form.

### the Bible, the NHS, and serving in Babylon

Having worked in the NHS for 27 years, it is not uncommon for me to hear people dreaming of the 'promised land of retirement' away from the stresses and strains of a difficult job. Christians will not be surprised that the Bible, and the Old Testament in particular, has a lot to offer us in terms of navigating and thriving in difficult circumstances. Christians are called to serve throughout our lives. We serve a heavenly master until our last breath. The stories of Joseph and Daniel are inspiring and encouraging.

## Joseph (Genesis 37, 39-41)

The up-down-up trajectory of Joseph's life can be inspirational. Joseph is very much the spoilt, good-looking son of Jacob and Rachel. He manages to annoy his older brothers, who sell him to slave traders (a valley in his life trajectory). He gets to Egypt where he is employed by Potiphar and does well (a brief mountain top) until he is accused of attempted rape by Mrs Potiphar. He ends up in the Egyptian equivalent of Wormwood scrubs (another valley). But here again the Lord rescues him, putting him in good favour with the jailer, and he is given a supervisory role over other prisoners. After helping the cupbearer, he is mentioned to Pharaoh (two years later!) and ends up as Prime Minister of Egypt navigating the country through an international crisis.

## lessons we can learn from Joseph

Joseph's perseverance in the midst of challenges is an encouragement to us all. God was with Joseph (Genesis 39:2). He kept his faith. Similarly, we too should not be overly surprised if and when we face difficulties and challenges. Deciding when to stop persevering and change course is a matter of wisdom that senior colleagues and pastors and church friends can help with. Some people may find that they are a 'square peg in a round hole' and may wish to change career. Trials and setbacks can equip us with resilience in the face of adversity. Joseph must have learnt a lot of skills of diplomacy in Potiphar's house and the prison.

## Joseph and forward planning

Joseph reminds us of the importance of forward planning. How many of our apparent crises are caused by poor planning of time, finances, work-life balance, and omitting the Sabbath rest? We may over-commit ourselves with work and church activities when our families need attention. Judicious planning of annual and study leave can make a potentially stressful time a lot smoother. How many of us have thought ahead to 2030 and what we will be doing? Being disorganised is not a Christian virtue!

## Daniel (Daniel 1-6)

Daniel was a Hebrew teenager who was deported to serve in the court of Nebuchadnezzar in the late seventh century BC. He was an extremely talented individual, good looking and clever. He was given a Babylonian name – Belteshazzar – which would have been depersonalising. An extraordinary individual, he served under three separate regimes – Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, and Cyrus – spanning 70 years. Many of his contemporaries would have been executed (indeed three of them faced a fiery furnace,<sup>2</sup> and Daniel himself a den of lions,<sup>3</sup> all for refusing to

compromise their faith!). Nevertheless, he was an excellent employee, being both diligent and tactful.

## serving in Babylon

Christians can take heart that even when serving in a system that can often be challenging, we should aim to not only survive, but THRIVE. Daniel can teach us many lessons. While diligent and dutiful, we can see that he was happy to compromise in non-essential matters but was unwavering when it came to matters of principle. He was polite and judicious when he disagreed with those in authority over him. He made his points diplomatically, winning him favour with the Babylonians.

*The chief ministers and the satraps tried to find grounds for charges against Daniel in his conduct of government affairs, but they were unable to do so. They could find no corruption in him, because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent. Finally these men said, 'We will never find any basis for charges against this man Daniel unless it has something to do with the law of his God.'* (Daniel 6:4-5)

## Daniel and prayer

Daniel serves as an example of how we should pray. He was regular and disciplined in his prayer habits. And he had an excellent workplace prayer group in Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah (Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego) who prayed with him and for him. As healthcare professionals we need prayer support from the home church as well as Christian colleagues. We need to use discretion when sharing prayer requests as there may be issues of patient confidentiality involved.

## other sources of help

In addition to the obvious source of help from pastors and Christian friends, we should not neglect GPs, counsellors and coaches who can offer advice and help. Both Joseph and Daniel benefitted from the kindness and care of people who were not believers (another example is Joseph and the jailer). We need to look for skilled individuals to offer help and advice when it is necessary.

## conclusion

The stories of both Joseph and Daniel are examples of people of God who thrived and succeeded despite very difficult circumstances. For a Christian this means we have hope even in the midst of a difficult work atmosphere and gives us opportunity to shine. Life carries no guarantees, and we can rest assured that even if things do not turn out the way we expect, the Lord is still in control as we journey towards our permanent home. ◉



Helen Baxendale and Andrew Lancel, stars of *Cardiac Arrest*



## key points

- The harsh environment that the NHS can sometimes be for Christian health professionals is not as overwhelming as it sometimes seems when we look at the lives of Joseph and Daniel from the Bible.
- Both men's lives show us how we can live authentically as Christians and serve our teams and employers well.
- Above all, both stories show that God can use failure and set back as much as success to achieve his ends.



## References (accessed 22/11/2023)

1. At time of publication, the original *Cardiac Arrest* TV series is accessible in the UK on BBC iPlayer at [bbc.in/470gba9](https://www.bbc.com/iplayer/series/470gba9)
2. Daniel 3
3. Daniel 6