

DARE TO BE DIFFERENT
Daniel 1:1-21

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“Dare to be different” is a great lesson from Daniel. Everyone who lives as a follower, a disciple, of Jesus will face situations such as the one that Daniel and his friends faced in Babylonia. God’s people are to be obedient even when it means being unpopular or going against prevailing cultural practices. Jesus, himself, asserts, “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide...that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Matt. 7:13-14).

Can you imagine a more difficult time than now to be a student, a young person, who is trying to live for Christ. Congregation, the reality is that we are at war with the forces of evil – those who would call truth a lie and a lie the truth. Our story in Daniel prompts the question: When our future leaders leave our care, have they formed a faith that will stand trial by fire? Will they stand strong or cave in to the culture around them?

You think about the cauldron of confusion in which our students try to live faithful lives for Christ today. Our culture tells them there is no absolute truth. You have your truth; I have my truth. There certainly is no such thing as God’s absolute truth. They have to try to decide right from wrong in a culture that calls the godless good.

We live in a time of turbulent cultural currents. The media takes a dominant idea and promotes it, if adopted by a critical mass of people who want to believe it so badly they will close their minds to all contrary evidence. When such a cultural movement gains momentum, people will stare at the facts and filter out what they don’t want to believe. And the more people who believe the myth, the more difficult it is for those who wish to counter it. In a spirit of euphoria, all warning signs are brushed aside, and, before we know it, we are in a world where facts do not matter. (Erwin Lutzer, as quoted in Dr. Jim Denison, *The Coming Tsunami*, forthcoming publication)

The media – neither the right nor the left actually report news. Rather, they promote agendas. Remember the good old days when the news anchor would tell you the who, what, when, where, and why? Instead, today, journalists write from a clear set of predetermined values, and they are disinterested in any effort at the truth. Their agenda is to persuade you, their audience, to adopt their worldview. Remember when Walter Cronkite was known as the most trusted man in America because he was an objective news reporter? Once we trusted our newsmen.

Even corporate America has jumped on the Babylonian bandwagon. Absurdly, Ritz Crackers commercials push an agenda. I’m sitting watching what I think is an advertisement for a good snack cracker when a man with a beard applies lipstick before welcoming the young gay man from the opening vignette into a festive gathering with other LGBTQ party goers. Oh, the commercial goes all the way, sure enough – it features two gay men and transgender, nonbinary extras. What?

Why? All I need Nabisco to do is to make me a good snack cracker, not try to form my theology. And, of course, if you say anything – like I have today – then you are labeled a hater.

G.K. Chesterton said so long ago, “When men choose not to believe in God, they do not, therefore, believe in nothing. They become capable of believing in anything.”

We are already there. As one seminary president noted (Albert Mohler), “The Christian church has long been understood by the culture at large to be the guardian of what is right and righteous. But now the situation is fundamentally reversed. The culture generally identifies Christians as on the wrong side of morality. The moral revolution in our culture is now so complete that those who will not join it are understood to be deficient, intolerant, and harmful to society.”

How did we get here? We are in Babylon again.

While governor of New York, Andrew Cuomo, spoke out against extreme conservatives who are both right-to-life and anti-gay, claiming they have “no place in the state of New York.” We live in a culture where those who hold traditional moral values or protect unborn babies are considered hate mongers. If you go against the current of this culture, you will find yourself locked down on Facebook and social media for being a hater – meaning you spoke the truth with courage.

Things were not so much different in Daniel’s day, as he and his friends are held captive to the chaotic culture of the Chaldeans.

Delivered into Enemy Hands (1:1-2)

Without delay, the writer immerses his readers into action: the Babylonians are besieging Jerusalem during the reign of Jehoiakim. The historical marker in the text—the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim—suggests 605 B.C. as the time of this turmoil. As the Babylonians were expanding their kingdom, Jerusalem was attacked repeatedly, and the city’s “fall” occurred over a three-stage period, spanning the years of 605, 597, and 587 B.C. The actual events recorded here in Daniel 1 are part of the first (605 B.C.) campaign.

More important than chronological questions, however, are the theological questions that emerge from the first two verses of Daniel. In antiquity, it was believed that nations rose and fell, won and lost military battles, based upon the power of their god(s). The theological crisis is clear: the god of the Babylonians overpowered the God of ancient Israel. Nebuchadnezzar has subjugated Jerusalem, taken away the temple vessels, and deported the best and the brightest future leaders to Babylon. Thus, the God of the people of Jerusalem has been robbed of his possessions and his people, as his temple treasures and choice servants are deported to Babylon. Outward appearances make the victor clear—Nebuchadnezzar and his evil empire.

Lest we find ourselves lamenting over the loss to the ungodly enemy, the writer of Daniel explains that God, the apparent loser, remains Lord over all events and actors. By declaring that the Lord (’ādōnai, the name that displays God’s sovereignty) “gave” Jehoiakim, king of Judah, and the temple vessels into the hands of the Babylonians, the writer reassures us that God does, after all, have a plan for his people.

Isaiah the prophet declared much earlier, during the reign of Hezekiah, that, “ ‘Behold, the days are coming when all that is in your house and all that your fathers have laid up in store to this day shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left,’ says the Lord. ‘And some of your sons who shall issue from you, whom you shall beget, shall be taken away, and they shall become officials in the palace of the king of Babylon’ ” (Isaiah 39:6-7; compare Deuteronomy 28:47, 49, 52, 58).

Despite the Babylonian victory, the Lord was still sovereign over all events. He had, in fact, previously proclaimed through the prophet Isaiah the coming catastrophe in Jerusalem. King Jehoiakim was doing evil in the sight of the Lord (2 Chronicles 36:5), and there was the inevitable consequence of judgment. “To give” (sometimes translated “granted”) is used three times in this opening chapter (1:2, 9, 17), weaving the narrative together in such a way as to triply demonstrate God’s sovereignty in all cases.

Trained for Service (1:3-7)

Nebuchadnezzar was, indeed, visionary as he depleted his conquered countries of their best and brightest citizens. Members of the royal family and outstanding descendants of the nobles were taken to serve the king who had conquered them. Judah was, therefore, robbed of her very best human resources, the next generation of leaders.

The sons of Israel who were selected had to meet certain qualifications according to the command of the king. First, they were to be with “no defect.” The king wanted young men (probably age 14 or 15) who were without blemish, meaning they had no physical faults. Second, they were to be “good looking,” handsome as they stood, perhaps, heads and shoulders above their peers. Third, they had to demonstrate “intellectual ability,” showing their intelligence, understanding, and discernment. Put plainly, Nebuchadnezzar wanted to confiscate the best looking and most intelligent future leaders for his own court. Removing the “cream of the crop” from Jerusalem and exposing them to a thoroughly Babylonian education, the king was looking beyond the immediate victory toward continued dominance over the defeated nation.

Practically, we can easily see that Nebuchadnezzar was employing a four-fold approach in his recruiting and re-educating of the Jewish lads.

A. First, he used isolation by carrying them off to Babylon and removing them from everything that it might mean to be a citizen of Jerusalem. As Old Testament scholar Sinclair Ferguson concluded, “Separated from the furnace of godliness, the king anticipated that the last dying embers of true faithfulness to the Lord would die out.”

B. Second, he used indoctrination as they were taught “the language and literature of the Chaldeans” (v. 4). Daniel and his friends, therefore, would learn to speak and write in the language of Babylon, which included Akkadian and Aramaic. To speak like a Chaldean, Nebuchadnezzar hoped, would lead these young men to think like Chaldeans and draw them away from their Jewish roots.

C. The third technique employed by Nebuchadnezzar was compromise. Being offered the king’s choice food and best spirits (wine), Daniel realized this would ultimately compromise his commitment to the Lord. The seduction of such fineries would only serve to further remove Daniel

and his companions from the life they had known in Jerusalem. Perhaps Ferguson best captured the essence of the Babylonian technique when he wrote, “The good life that Daniel was offered was intended by the king to wean him away from the hard life to which God had called him.”

D. Finally, Nebuchadnezzar employed confusion as a way to further distance Daniel and his friends from their homeland. By changing their names, he was attempting to change their God. Their names given at birth recalled their relationship with Yahweh, while their new names contained a reference to the gods of Babylon.

Our modern madness denies basic biology between boys and girls, turns a blind eye to murder through abortion, and pushes a new racism which is a radical reversal of the colorblind dreams of Baptist pastor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. Jim Denison says that the formula used in our cultural war is easy to discern: take sinful behavior and normalize it, then legalize it, and then stigmatize Christians like us who disagree.

Quite thoroughly, therefore, Nebuchadnezzar was trying to teach these young men to think like Babylonians, live like Babylonians, and worship like Babylonians. While their new opportunity was a result of the Babylonian victory in besieging Jerusalem, the offer to study at the feet of Babylon’s best scholars and eat from Babylon’s best table surely tempted Daniel and his friends to compromise, forgetting their faithfulness to God.

Dared to be Different (1:8-16)

We quickly feel a change in the narrative’s tone when we read the word “BUT.” Our author is trying to indicate that though Daniel and his friends were offered a three-year scholarship at Babylon’s best “university,” they would remain decidedly different from their peers. Concerning the exact nature of “defilement” in regard to accepting food from the king’s table, multiple factors may be at work. First, Levitical laws as to clean and unclean animals would not have been observed by the Babylonians in the selection and preparation of their food. Second, often the food served had previously been offered to idols. We, in fact, see that same concern in the city of Corinth much later in the first century (1 Corinthians 10:25-28).

Daniel’s objection to the royal food lies in the long tradition of biblical purity, as his ultimate concern is defilement.

With verse 9, we are once again reminded that God is a primary actor and that Daniel and his friends are simply a supporting cast. Despite his concerns that the Jewish lads will fall behind their peers on their vegetarian diet, the commander of the officials agreed to give Daniel and company a ten-day trial period during which they could partake of the plant-based diet and drink water.

This is the second time our writer uses the language “God gave” (translated “God granted” in the NASB); remember, the same language was used in verse 2 when God “gave” Jehoiakim into Nebuchadnezzar’s hands. God was even able to direct the hearts of the captors to accomplish his sovereign will. Though he feared not only losing his job but also his head (Nebuchadnezzar was widely known for his rash decisions, 2:5, 12; 3:13ff.), Ashpenaz, by the prompting of God, was willing to concede to Daniel’s deal.

By verse 15, the time of testing had ended, and the results of avoiding the rich, royal food were to be examined. Much to the surprise of the Babylonians, those on the diet of vegetables, fruits, and grain (all would have been included in the term *zērōa'*, “everything which grows from sown seed”) appeared to be more robust and better nourished than those who ate the rich Babylonian food. Literally, the text says that they looked “good and fat of flesh,” meaning they were better nourished than those eating the richer food. At the end of the ten days, God had honored Daniel’s desire for purity.

Presented Before the King (1:17-21)

In verse 17, we find the third time in which God is “giving something over to someone.” Remember in verse 2, he gave Jehoiakim over to the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar. In verse 9, he gave the chief official sympathy toward Daniel and his friends. And now in verse 17, we read that “God gave” the four Jewish lads knowledge and understanding. On the surface, it looked like Nebuchadnezzar’s academy of wisdom had produced great results. On another level, the reader knows that God is the giver of all good gifts, including those bestowed upon Daniel and his friends. Daniel alone stands out as the one gifted with the wisdom for understanding dreams and visions. Daniel, suddenly, is seen as a prophet, one to whom God gives visions and dreams and the ability to foretell the future (see chapters 4-5). We are reminded of Joseph’s ability to interpret dreams (Genesis 40-41).

Using modern metaphors, we might say that “graduation day arrived” (vs. 18-20). The three years of schooling were over, and the king was ready to assess candidates for service in his kingdom. Verse 19 says “they entered the king’s service,” which is a literal translation for “they stood before the king.” Not only had the food made Daniel and his friends more physically fit, they had become more mentally aware, ten times more adept than Babylon’s best magicians and enchanters. Babylonian magicians performed serious functions for the king. The inference was that they were in touch with the world of spirits and the gods, and they used rites and spells to heal, cast out demons, and counter an evil spell placed upon the king.

Apparently Daniel’s life was from about 620 to 535 B.C., perhaps living around 85 years of age. The point the writer is trying to make in verse 21 is that Daniel lived through the entire neo-Babylonian period (the exile of approximately 70 years) and continued into the reign of Cyrus, when the Jews were released from captivity. As a statement of victory, we are being told that Daniel outlived his Babylonian masters.

Conclusion

This first chapter of Daniel gives us numerous reasons to pause and ponder the rich theology of this ancient text. What lessons are we to learn from Daniel 1? How can our own lives be enriched by the story of a faithful servant who lived so long ago?

Perhaps these are important points to ponder.

(1) Even when it appears as if evil has won the day, we might later discover that God makes the forces of evil serve his greater purposes. At the beginning of the story, it seems clear that God’s people have been defeated and the Babylonians have triumphed. While the people of Jerusalem would have been crying, “Where is God in this catastrophe? Has God forgotten his people?”, the reality was that God was sovereign even in the movement and the victories of enemy nations. In

reality, God had already foretold all that would take place through his prophet Isaiah (39:6-7). Therefore, even Nebuchadnezzar's victory was not by the force of his own hands. Jehoiakim did evil in the sight of the Lord (2 Chronicles 36:5), and the inevitable consequence was judgment.

(2) God's judgment leads to mercy. We must not forget that God is always faithful to his word. We are quick to rejoice that God is faithful to bless his people, but he is, likewise, no less faithful in his judgments. The ultimate purpose of God's allowing his people to fall into foreign hands was for their restoration and rededication to being uniquely his people. Even in Babylon, Daniel fulfilled what it means "to sing the Lord's song in a foreign land" (Psalm 137:4). Could God be cleansing His church today – seeing who's real – by letting us dwell in the Chaldean culture again?

(3) God looks after those who are faithful. Daniel refused to be defiled by eating the portion "from the king's table." Whatever this meant (see above), eating the king's rich food was clearly going to cause compromise in the lives of Daniel and his friends. Just like Daniel, it is our responsibility to neither compromise nor conform when it comes to defiling ourselves by participating in a fallen culture.

(4) God is the giver of all good gifts. Despite the fact that we know the Jewish youths were doing their best "in the Chaldean college," the reality is God honored all of their efforts by giving them good gifts of knowledge, insight, wisdom, and understanding. And, in the special case of Daniel, the ability to interpret dreams.

God's people have been taken captive by the Babylonians once again. But this time we are exiled in our own homes, as cultural currents are trampling truth, balking at basic biology, ensuring insanity, and calling Christians "haters" every time we have the courage to confront the chaos caused by denying God's boundaries.

We must raise a generation of Daniels who dare to be different, a generation that will live by God's word, refuse to compromise with the Chaldeans, and live model lives with grace and love – loving their neighbor as they love themselves. We can't do it with hate or anger – just truth and love, like Daniel.