



Daniel

דניאל

Chapter 1

FAITH IN A HOSTILE CULTURE

As the book of Daniel opens, we see how this young man of faith deals with the first challenges of his new pagan environment. His example is one that should be an inspiration to all of us.

Nebuchadnezzar, just a general of Babylon at this time and the son of Nabopolassar the king, has just defeated the Assyrians and sent the Egyptians retreating. He now turns his attention on Jerusalem. Jeremiah records that God called Nebuchadnezzar, the king of a hostile pagan nation, “His servant” and gave command of the wild animals to this king. Daniel 2:38 adds that even the birds of the air were under his command.

NEBUCHADNEZZAR

- Nebuchadnezzar II was the second king of the Chaldean kingdom centered at Babylon. He ruled from 605BC-562BC. He allied himself with the Medes to divide up Assyria by conquering the last bastion of the former realm at Carcemish on the Euphrates river. The Medes would later align themselves with the Persians to conquer Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar made his base of operations at Riblah in Syria.
- He was the son of Nabopolassar, a Chaldean who won independence from the Assyrian empire in 626BC, reigning for 21 years after that. Nabopolassar died in August of 605BC, at which time his son Nebuchadnezzar, who had just besieged Jerusalem, took the title and had to hurry back to Babylon.
- Nebuchadnezzar was harsh in his penalties. He was known to roast his officers over a slow fire if their performance disappointed him. Other Babylonian practices begun by his father were equally cruel.
- Jeremiah records that God called Nebuchadnezzar “His servant” and gave command of the wild animals to the king. Daniel 2:38 adds that even the birds of the air were under his command.

“Now I will give your countries to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, who is my servant. I have put everything, even the wild animals, under his control.”

—Jeremiah 27:6 (NLT)



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DANIEL 1:1

In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it.

- The Babylonians measured a king's reign from the first full year, beginning with the start of the year. The partial year prior to that is called "the year of ascension" or "the year he became king." The Jews (those of the southern kingdom of Judah) measured a king's reign from the day he became king. This explains why Daniel (writing from Babylon) says it was the third year of Jehoiakim when Jeremiah says it was in the fourth year of Jehoiakim.

DANIEL 1:2

And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God. He carried them into the land of Shinar [Babylon] to the house of his god and he took the vessels to the treasure house of his god.

- When a king would conquer a nation it was common practice to take the most sacred things from that country to his own land and place them in the temple of his gods. This was a visible symbol of power and control over a people group. Nebuchadnezzar's "treasure house of his god" was just north of his palace in Babylon. The Babylonians honored many gods. The names of their gods were associated with people's names, street names, and almost every other naming convention used.
- The chief god of Babylon was Marduk, a dragon-shaped god. There were others treated with almost as much reverence, including Ishtar the goddess of fertility. The worship of Ishtar (a practice that included a golden egg as part of the symbolism) remained with the world for hundreds of years. It was eventually converted into the Christian celebration of Easter (the name originates from the name Ishtar) to remove this pagan celebration, explaining why rabbits and eggs are part of the symbolism associated with Easter.
- From the beginning, Daniel goes out of his way to make it clear that God is the one who calls the shots in life. He attributes the power of kings, a person's intelligence, wisdom or the ability to interpret dreams entirely to God. He gives God credit for everything, even the loss of Jehoiakim's kingdom.
- The temple objects taken will play a role in the final destruction of Babylon when co-regent Belshazzar calls for them as part of a defiant party.



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DANIEL 1:3-5

And the king spoke to Ashpenaz the master of his eunuchs, that he should bring in some of the sons of Israel, of the royal line and of the nobles;

youths in whom was no blemish, but handsome, skillful in all wisdom, having knowledge and understanding science, young men who had the ability to stand in the king's palace; and that he should teach them the knowledge and language of the Chaldeans.

And the king appointed for them a daily portion of the king's food, and of the wine which he drank. He ordered that they should be nourished three years, and that at the end of the three years they should be presented before the king.

- Some scholars interpret the reference to sons as “children,” which is accurate enough provided you don't assume they are young children. It is clear from the emphasis on this passage that physical attributes play a large role in this selection process. Children do not have well-developed physiques.
- Ashpenaz, the chief of the royal officials, was charged both with selecting and training candidates. Punishment for failure was harsh, so these officers took their responsibilities very seriously.
- The Hebrew word “saris” translated by some Bibles as “eunuch” (the NIV more accurately interprets this as “chief of the court officials”) does not necessarily mean a castrated male as we commonly use that term (which came from the Greek). Joseph's boss Potiphar was also a “saris” and he was married, so he was clearly not a eunuch as we understand that term. The word simply refers to an officer of the palace, though some --specifically those working in the harem -- were castrated to ensure that they were not tempted.
- It should not be assumed that these young men actually ate at the king's table. The phrase simply means that they ate ordinary food that came from the royal storehouse and paid for from the king's budget, although it would be food that would be offered to idols before being prepared or served.
- Daniel and his friends would be learning the Akkadian language (cuneiform script) as well as some of the highly detailed scientific knowledge that Babylon was known for. It should never be assumed that he was taught magical arts or other pagan practices as Daniel would never have allowed himself to learn such things. This perception comes from a misunderstanding of the origin of the word “magi” or “magician.” The word interpreted “magicians” in many Bibles comes from the root word “stylus” which was the instrument used to create the complex Akkadian cuneiform wedge-shaped script.



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DANIEL 1:6-7

Now among these were, of the sons of Judah, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.

And the prince of the eunuchs gave new names to them: to Daniel he gave the name of Beltshazzar; to Hananiah, the name of Shadrach; to Mishael, he gave the name of Meshach; and to Azariah, the name of Abed-nego.

- It was common practice to give new names to captives as a final sign of domination over them. Imagine that your nation has just been subdued by a hostile force and you've been taken captive. The only thing you have left is your name. Taking that from you is designed to strip you of any remaining allegiance to your former citizenship or nationalistic association. In the case of Daniel and his friends, their Hebrew meanings were simply distorted to reflect the gods of the Babylonians instead of their previous relation to Jehovah, the God of the Jews.

HEBREW NAME	MEANING	BABYLONIAN NAME	MEANING
Daniel	God is my judge	Beltshazzar	may Bel protect his life
Hananiah	Yahweh has been gracious	Shadrach	command of Aku (lunar god)
Mishael	Who is like God?	Meshach	Who is like Aku?
Azariah	the LORD has helped	Abednego	servant of Nebo

DANIEL 1:8-10

But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the king's food, nor with the wine which he drank: therefore he requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself in this way.

Now God caused the prince of the eunuchs to find kindness and compassion towards Daniel.

And the prince of the eunuchs said to Daniel, "I fear my lord the king, who has appointed your food and your drink. Why should he see your faces worse looking than the other youths that are your age? The king would then have my head because of you."

- Note how Daniel always gives the credit to God. He indicates that it was God who granted favor to Daniel in his relationship with the guards, not Daniel's personal charm or wisdom.



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- Although the Jews were required to follow strict dietary laws (see Leviticus 11, Deuteronomy 14), it is possible that the bigger concern for Daniel was the likelihood that the food served would have been offered to idols before being served. Since wine is specified in Daniel's objection but was not a scriptural restriction, the difficulty Daniel had went much deeper than the kind of food involved.

DANIEL 1:11-13

Then Daniel said to the steward whom the prince of the eunuchs had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah:

“Test your servants, I ask you, for ten days. Let them give us vegetables to eat and water to drink.

Then look upon us, and compare our appearance to that of the youths that eat of the king's delicacies; and as you see fit, deal with your servants.”

- Daniel offered a test for ten days, allowing the guy in charge to draw his own conclusion. He would then accept whatever decision was made at that time. Not only does this demonstrate enormous faith in God, it reflects wisdom and grace. This is an interesting test, because the diet he suggested is similar to what modern bodybuilding competitors use to quickly reduce water retention, making their muscles “pop out” more prominently.

DANIEL 1:14-16

So he agreed to this, and tested them ten days.

At the end of ten days their appearance was better, and they looked more physically developed, than all the youths that ate the king's food.

So the steward took away their food, and the wine that they should drink, and gave them vegetables.

- This passage is often misunderstood because of less-than-ideal translations. Some English Bibles interpret the Hebrew word “bawri” as “fatter” which is a poor translation. The word refers to increased appearance of flesh, but doesn't necessarily mean fat. Bawri can just as accurately be interpreted as “more muscular.” The Babylonians were interested in physique; they wanted these guys to look muscular and powerful. In this context, the word clearly means that the young men had the appearance of being more muscular, a common result of reduced water retention. It's a common short-term diet used by fitness competitors.



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DANIEL 1:17-20

¹⁷ Now as for these four young men, God gave them knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom. And Daniel had understanding of visions and dreams.

¹⁸ At the end of the days which the king had appointed for bringing them in, the prince of the palace staff brought them before Nebuchadnezzar.

¹⁹ The king talked with them; and among them all were found none like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah: therefore they were brought before the king to serve him.

²⁰ And in every area of wisdom and understanding which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his entire realm.

- Notice again how Daniel attributes any skills, knowledge or wisdom he has to God.
- It is hard to know whether the end of the time set by the king for having the trainees presented before him was the end of the full three years of the training program. The king does not seem to know Daniel yet, suggesting that this took place before the events of chapter 2. The interview may have been within the first few months or weeks since the training program began. The concern over their physical appearance suggests there wasn't enough time for the officers in charge to correct a potential problem with physical condition before the interview with the king would happen. On the other hand, the passage refers to the men entering the king's service which suggests they were interviewed at the end of their training program. This may mean that part of their training program was an apprenticeship -- on the job training.
- The king finds them "ten times better" than all the other wise men in the country. This is an interesting insight into Nebuchadnezzar's impulsive nature and tendency to exaggerate. Obviously God had made these men vastly superior to others, but it would be impossible to measure them as "ten times" better. Their many qualities are combined, but as an example consider IQ alone: if the smartest man in the land had an IQ of merely 140, a ten-fold increase would require Daniel and his friends to have an IQ of 1,400 which is an impossible figure.

DANIEL 1:21

And Daniel continued there until the first year of King Cyrus.

- Daniel would serve the entire remaining years of the 70-year Babylonian captivity, since the captives were released from Babylon in the first year of Cyrus. Brought to Babylon as a teen and beginning his service four to five years later, he would serve at least 65 years, making him nearly 90 by the time of Cyrus.