
Ten Times Better

The theme of the book of Daniel is God's sovereign rule over all the nations through all of history. In this first chapter, we see how this theme transforms the way we deal with the world around us. In Peter's first epistle, he addresses us as "aliens" and "sojourners" (1 Peter 1:1; 2:11, 12), because our home is in Heaven, and we are merely passing through this present world as exiles from our home. It is very helpful, then, when we turn to a book like Daniel, written by one who spent over 70 years in physical exile from Jerusalem, in order to learn how to relate to the world around us.

Daniel 1

In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God. And he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his god. Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility, youths without blemish, of good appearance and skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king's palace, and to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans. The king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate, and of the wine that he drank. They were to be educated for three years, and at the end of that time they were to stand before the king. Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah of the tribe of Judah. And the chief of the eunuchs gave them names: Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego.

But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself. And God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs, and the chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, "I fear my lord the king, who assigned your food and your drink; for why should he see that you were in worse condition than the youths who are of your own age? So you would endanger my head with the king." Then Daniel said to the steward whom the chief of the eunuchs had assigned over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, "Test your servants for ten days; let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then let our appearance and the appearance of the youths who eat the king's food be observed by you, and deal with your servants according to what you see." So he listened to them in this matter, and tested them for ten days. At the end of ten days it was seen that they were better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youths who ate the king's food. So the steward took away their food and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables.

As for these four youths, yGod gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams. At the end of the time, when the king had commanded that they should be brought in, the chief of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar. And the king spoke with them, and among all of them none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Therefore they stood before the king. And in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his kingdom. And Daniel was there until the first year of King Cyrus.

I. God has sent His people into exile (1:1,2)

This story begins in 605 BC when the great and powerful Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, the newest world power, besieges Jerusalem and captures some of its key citizens into exile. Later, of course, in 586 BC, he totally destroys the city of Jerusalem, including Solomon's beautiful temple. But the most important truth to observe in verse 2 is that, amidst all the worldly powers, there is one Power Who is in ultimate control: "and the Lord gave...."

II. Our captivity brings us into tension with our captors (1:3-16)

A. Our captors seek to transform us (vs. 3-7)

Notice that Nebuchadnezzar carefully chooses his captives. They are (vs.3, 4a):

- From prominent families
- Young (probably around 14)
- Physically attractive
- Well educated and intelligent

Notice also that Nebuchadnezzar carefully trained them. He gave them (vs. 4b-7):

- Cross-cultural training
- The best food he had
- The best education he could offer
- Access to the royal court
- New names (reflecting Babylon's gods)

Note that every environment, including the one you live in, attempts to conform you to its dominant religion and worldview. This is why Paul says to the Roman believers, "do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind..." (Romans 12:2). And this is exactly what Daniel did.

B. We must faithfully engage our captors' culture (vs. 8-16)

We are not quite sure why Daniel refused the food from the king's table. It was probably not because of Jewish dietary laws (since wine, for example, was not forbidden), but probably rather because the king's food was first of all offered to the Babylonian gods in worship, an act Daniel refused to perform. But, for whatever reason, Daniel's example is very instructive for us in handling our own cultural challenges.

There are several models of dealing with culture which Christians have employed through the centuries:

- **Accommodation**—going along with the dominant cultural norms and blending them into the faith (as in liberal Protestantism);
- **Withdrawal**—separating oneself from the culture (as with the Amish, who refuse even to use certain forms of technology);
- **Dominance**—taking over the culture through coercive political means (as with the Christian right wing);
- **Faithful Engagement**—living in the world, engaging its life and institutions as much as possible, while living a holy life. This is what Daniel did. He participated fully in Babylonian life when possible without moral compromise.

III. God will bless, use, and keep us while we are in captivity (vs. 17-21)

Nebuchadnezzar is great. Babylon is great. God is infinitely greater, and He loves His children. See how, once again, He exercises His sovereignty: “and God gave Daniel favor and compassion...” (v. 9); “God gave them learning and skill...” (v. 17). These young men were blessed with great wisdom, they were given access to the most powerful court in the world, and they were beautifully preserved by God. Verse 21 tells us that Daniel stood before that court until the very end of the Babylonian empire, when Daniel was over 80 years old. Kingdoms come and go, but God’s people live forever!

Discussion Questions

1. When are you most tempted to doubt God’s sovereign control of everything in the world and in your life?
2. Why is His sovereignty a source of great comfort to His people?
3. In what ways does our dominant culture seek to transform us?
4. What are the keys to “faithful engagement” for the Christian in our society?
5. Share examples of how God has blessed, kept, and preserved His people in our own day?