

Faithful To God in Testing Times: Lessons from Daniel and his friends

Daniel 1

By Pastor Peter Anderson

The book of Daniel is full of drama. It contains some of the best-known stories in the Bible, stories like Daniel in the lion's den and Daniel's three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, in the fiery furnace. I heard of one parent who refers to that story as "the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Into-Bed-You-Go." Of course, these dramatic events are not just bedtime stories for children. In fact, they teach us very important truths that are powerfully relevant for today.

Daniel and his friends were probably still in their teens when Judah was invaded and their whole world came crashing down around them. They found themselves uprooted from all that was familiar and dragged off as hostages and slaves to a foreign land (Babylon).

Our world today also faces massive problems. Nation after nation is in turmoil. Just think of Russia and Ukraine! And in the West, we live in what some call a post-Christian society where 'right' is regarded as 'wrong' and 'wrong' is accepted as 'right'. When it comes to Christians being a witness for Jesus in our secular, increasingly pagan society, and making a stand for what is right—the challenges and pressures we face are very similar to those faced by Daniel and his friends.

In Daniel chapter 1, which we are going to study this morning, the fact God is intimately involved is specifically mentioned three times—in verse 2 and again in v.9 and in v 17. When everything seems to be out of control, we discover that in fact God is very much in control—and this bring us to the first of three truths about God that I want us to notice in this passage:

1. God is Sovereign Over History and over the Nations (vrs 1-5)

Yes, God is sovereign over all that is happening in the world. He has not lost control!

It was in 605 BC that the powerful armies of Babylon, the new world power, invaded Judah sweeping aside all resistance. The defenses of Jerusalem were breached, and king Jehoiakim of Judah was deposed, and many leading citizens dragged off into exile in Babylon.

We read from verse 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."**

These events must have seemed like total disaster to God's people. All along they had presumed God would deliver them from their enemies. He certainly had in the past. So, when the Babylonians conquered Judah, the Jewish people had a major crisis of faith.

What they may not have wanted to admit was that it was their sin and disobedience as a nation that had led to this disaster. They had despised God's prophets and for a long time had been going their own way, even worshipping false gods. This disaster was part of God's judgment upon the nation. Disaster is not always God's judgment of course but, in this case, it certainly was!

God had allowed the Babylonian invasion. His people needed to realise that what had happened was part of God's loving discipline and judgment. They needed to repent and turn back to the Lord.

Daniel understood this truth. He writes, "... **the Lord delivered Jehoiakim**" into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar. In verse 2 Daniel uses the word 'Adonai' (the Lord) which means "Lord and Master". The Lord is our Master. As our Master, He is in control over us and what happens to us.

Some of Daniel's fellow countrymen may have asked, "*Daniel, do you mean God allowed us to be defeated by the Babylonians? Are you saying that God allowed them to desecrate the Temple and carry us into exile?*"

Yes, what must have seemed a catastrophe to God's people, Daniel describes as being part of God's sovereign plan. He had allowed it to happen. It was righteous punishment for their sin and rebellion.

We as Christians today sometimes have a very narrow, self-centred view of God. We feel He owes it to us to make sure everything is always good and easy for us. We think we can carry on doing our own thing, even doing things that deep down we know are wrong and displeasing to God. Sooner or later, however, the Lord, our Master, will hold us accountable.

Of course, as I mentioned a moment ago, not all the bad things that happen to us are punishment for disobedience and sin. I don't think Daniel and his three young friends, for example, had been disobeying God, worshipping idols, or living in rebellion. Not at all. They were young men who loved God and wanted to obey and serve Him. Yet, through no fault of their own, they were caught up in the tragic events of 605 BC and dragged off into captivity.

What do we do when disaster strikes, when our ideas of who God is and what He should do go up in smoke? What do we do when facing tragedy or unexpected trials? What do we do when all our prayers seem to go unanswered, or all our plans seem to come to nothing? What do we do when precious relationships are broken? Of course, if we have been living in rebellion or disobedience we need to repent, but if like Daniel and his friends, and like the prophet Jeremiah, we personally have not rebelled against the Lord, then whatever happens, whatever tragedy strikes, we can hold onto the truth that God is in control, and He cares. And like young Daniel we can be reassured that God always sees the bigger picture. He knows the beginning and the end.

In 1949 when the Communists took control of China, many feared for the future of the Christian Church. Back then there were only about 1 million Christians in China, and all missionaries had to leave. All these years later, despite times of great persecution, the Church has not been wiped out but rather it has grown—to possibly well over 100 million today. God, after all, was in control!

God's sovereignty over kings and nations points to the fact His Kingdom is an eternal Kingdom and will never pass away. For us looking at what is happening, there may be mysteries, things we do not understand, but with God there are never any mistakes.

2. God Has a Plan for His People (vrs 3-16)

Not only is God sovereign over the nations, but He has a plan for His people. He allowed Babylon to conquer Judah and take His people into captivity, but He also had a plan for His people in captivity, and He had a plan for the young men taken captive to Babylon. We read in vrs 3 & 4,

“3 Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king’s service 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.”

The Babylonians took some of the leading people of Jerusalem into exile and young Daniel and his three friends were among them. They and other gifted and promising young people were offered incredible new opportunities of study in Babylon. But Daniel and his 3 friends faced a dilemma. *“Now that they were living in a totally alien culture, with completely different religious beliefs and values, how were they going to react?”*

Don’t we face similar challenges today? Some of us are immigrants. We may have experienced the difficulties of being a foreigner in a new country. We need to adjust to a new culture and way of doing things. For those who are not mother-tongue speakers of English this is particularly difficult. Immigrants often find their qualifications are not accepted here. It can be humiliating and discouraging. Life is so different. At least as immigrants we chose to come here, unlike the exiles from Judah who had no choice.

Those taken into exile in Babylon had different reactions to their new circumstances. Some allowed themselves to get **absorbed into the new culture**. They may have said, *“We used to live in Jerusalem, but now we live in Babylon. Jerusalem was yesterday, today it is Babylon. When in Babylon do as the Babylonians do.”* Babylon was a great melting pot of secular culture and pagan religion. It was easy to follow the crowd. The faith of those Jews allowing themselves simply to get absorbed into Babylonian culture was not strong enough to survive. They compromised their values and lost their distinctiveness.

Others among the Jewish exiles, however, chose the path of **active resistance to all change**. They would let everyone know they were going to fight to remain distinctive. The kind of attitude these extremely patriotic exiles had is reflected perhaps in the words of Psalm 137 where we read – **“By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’ How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?”** (Psalm 137:1-4) The answer is, of course we can sing the songs of the Lord in a foreign land. Why not? But these guys, resistant to all change, were not ready to adapt and could only think of what it was like back home. This may sound the most patriotic approach but is it the right one? There is another kind of reaction we must consider.

The third kind of reaction can be seen in Daniel and his 3 friends. It was the approach of **“cooperation without compromise”**. Daniel was not going to assume everything in Babylon was bad. He would respect the Babylonians and their culture, and he would learn all he could, but he would never compromise his faith or his values. He was going to impact the Babylonian culture for good, not be defeated by or absorbed into their culture.

This was a difficult road to walk but it was the way recommended by the prophet Jeremiah who sent a letter to the exiles. In Jeremiah 29:4-7 we read: **“This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ‘Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters.**

... seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.’”

As we clearly see from his prayer chapter 9:4, 5, Daniel knew that God’s people had been exiled to Babylon because of their rebellion and sin, but he also followed the advice of Jeremiah that while in Babylon the exiles should **“build houses and settle down”**, they should **“seek the peace and prosperity of the city”** and they should pray for Babylon.

God’s people were not simply to be absorbed into Babylonian society losing all that was distinctive. Nor were they to withdraw into isolation. No, they were to get involved and make a difference. This was Daniel’s approach—to receive the best education possible, yet never to forget his heritage and the values he held dear.

God wants us to get involved too. He doesn’t want us to live in a kind of Christian ghetto – *“Us four, no more, shut the door”*. He wants us to impact our society for Him. He wants us to contribute to society, to be good citizens—and all the while to be a godly example, a true witness for Him.

Daniel and his friends took the opportunity to join the special education programme offered by the king. They were offered full scholarships, including board and tuition and the promise of future employment. So, we read in v5, **“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.”**

Although Daniel and his friends decided to get involved, they quickly discovered that their approach of cooperation without compromise was not easy. And it is not easy for us today either. As with Daniel and his friends, it means we are to say yes to some things but no to others.

One of the things Daniel and his friends did accept was new names. We read in vrs 6 & 7, **“6 Among those who were chosen 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.”**

Some people may be happy to have their name changed, like the guy who had the name John Smellie. When he reached the age of 21, he went to the government office where names can be changed. The officer asked him his name. *“John Smellie”*, he replied. *“Oh, I can see why you might want to change your name!”* said the officer. *“What name do you want instead?”* The man said, *“I want to change my name to William Smellie”*.

Normally we would not want to change our names. When we move to live in another culture, however, we may give ourselves a name that others can more easily remember. My wife’s Chinese name is Su Fang but after her family moved to NZ in the 1970s, her Kiwi friends found it easier to call her Elizabeth, an English name she had been given. When my late wife and I began our service with OMF in Taiwan we were able to choose Chinese names.

In the case of Daniel and his three friends, however, they were all given new names whether they liked it or not. This was no small change for their original names reflected their Jewish faith while the names they were given included references to Babylon's gods. For example, the name Daniel means, "God is my judge" whereas his new Babylonian name Belteshazzar meant "Bel, protect his life". Bel, also called Marduk, was the chief Babylonian god.

Forcing them to change their names was a subtle but powerful attempt by the Babylonians to turn their hearts away from God. However, although Daniel and his friends had little choice but to accept their new names, they remained true in their hearts to God. They gladly entered a new university and took their education seriously. However, Daniel and his friends faced another powerful test.

They were introduced to the lavish comfort and affluence of life in the palace. As we read earlier in v.5, **"The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table."** As you can imagine, this was very different to what they had been used to during the siege of Jerusalem and during the months they had been captives. It must have seemed too good to be true.

However, Daniel saw a problem, and he was not prepared to say yes to everything. In v.8 we read, **"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."**

Daniel was a Jew and Jews were not supposed to eat certain things, like pork. This was something Daniel had been taught from when he was a young boy. He had accepted the values taught by his parents, and those values guided his choices, even in pagan Babylon.

Parents, what you teach your kids when they are very young, what you model for them, will shape their future. Daniel felt he could not compromise in this area for although eating certain foods was only something outward, it was a custom that made Jews distinctive. For him it was a matter of conscience.

I felt this way about playing club rugby on a Sunday. The Bible never said I couldn't play on a Sunday, but I felt Sunday was special and I never wanted to miss church because of a rugby game. God must come first, so I told my club I would only be available to play on Saturdays. I guess they were short of scrum halves (halfbacks) for I know that for at least one big match, originally scheduled for a Sunday, they arranged with the opposing team for the game to be switched to Saturday so that I could play. Not playing competitive sport on a Sunday was for me a matter of principle.

So too for Daniel, not eating the king's rich food and not drinking the king's wine was a matter of principle. His decision on these matters obviously caused a problem, but this is when we notice the second mention of God being directly involved. God was watching over His servants and moving on their behalf. V.9 says, **"Now God had caused the official to show favour and compassion to Daniel."**

Some of you will know, I worked in Asia for 29 years, and for much of that time was involved in a Christian-based NGO called Jian Hua Foundation. JHF helped place and support Christian professionals (such as teachers, medical workers, businesspeople, etc.) in China, and we also engaged in relief and development projects. I could tell you many stories of how I saw the Lord moving in the hearts of officials in China opening doors for our people and projects. God is in the business of opening closed doors!

In Daniel's case, although the official was very sympathetic, he was also afraid that he might lose his head if he agreed to Daniel's request. We read in v.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.’”**

After all, Nebuchadnezzar was a ruthless dictator, and he might not be happy. Daniel wisely didn't push the official but instead asked their guard if they could try an experiment.

“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.’”

Daniel and his friends asked to be allowed, for just ten days, rather than to eat the king's rich food or drink the king's wine, to have a simple (and no doubt far healthier) diet. The guard, we are told, **“¹⁴ ... agreed to this and tested them for ten days.”**

Here again, we see God working on behalf of His servants. In v.15ff we read, **“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.”**

I do not think this Scripture is telling us to become vegetarians, but clearly the diet Daniel and his friends were allowed was altogether better for them than the rich, possibly unhealthy, food the king had offered. There is no question that what we put into our bodies, what we eat and what we drink affects our physical health and well-being.

Regarding their health and physical well-being, God guided His servants in Babylon. May He also guide us in taking good care of our physical, mental, and spiritual health. May He also give us wisdom and courage to remain faithful to His Word and to what we know is right, despite possibly having to face misunderstanding and even opposition.

We come, finally, to our third heading and to a third truth about God that we see in this chapter:

3. God Gifts His Servants for Effective Ministry (vrs 17-21)

God clearly blessed Daniel and his friends and gave them incredible gifts. Not only were they very much healthier than all the other students but v17 tells us: **“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.”**

It was God who gave them knowledge and understanding. This is the third place in this chapter where God's involvement is specifically mentioned. Daniel and his three friends had taken a stand on principle and God had blessed and honoured them.

God's promise is, **“Those who honour me I will honour, but those who despise me will be disdained.”** (1 Samuel 2:30)

At the end of the three-year course the king not only found them better than the rest of the class, but even wiser than all his leading officials throughout the empire. In fact, they were *ten times* better.

So, we read in vrs 18-20, **“At the end of the time set by the king to bring them into his service, 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.”**

God honoured these four young men for their courage and loyalty. On completion of their studies, they entered the king’s service, and as we see in the next chapter, each of them was given a high position where they could use their influence for God. The Lord could entrust them with such positions and influence because, regardless of the risk or the cost, they had been faithful to Him in small matters. They remained faithful to their Lord and were always ready to give Him the glory.

This is such an important principle for us living in our secular, non-Christian society. Christians should be totally honest and reliable, hard-working, respectful, and kind. We should be an example at home, at work, at church, and in the community. When we are not, God’s great Name is brought into dishonour and non-believers are stumbled and find excuses for not believing. “Just look at those Christians!” they say.

Daniel and his friends however were wonderful examples, even though living and working in a totally pagan and at times hostile environment.

In chapter 2, when Daniel was able to interpret Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, he says unashamedly in 2:27 & 28, **“No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about, ²⁸ but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries.”**

Daniel knew that God alone had gifted them. There was no room for pride or boasting. This too is so important for anyone seeking to serve the Lord. In 1 Peter 5:5 the apostle writing about humility says, **“God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”**

Human pride, especially in followers of Christ, is totally out of place. Do you want God to oppose you? Then be proud and boastful. Do you want to receive God’s free unmerited mercy and grace? Then serve Him with humility—humility towards God and humility towards others. Always point others to Jesus, not to yourself.

Daniel was such a person. He always sought to give God the glory.

Chapter 1 ends with an amazing statement. We read in v.21, **“And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.”** Daniel not only outlived Nebuchadnezzar, but he also saw the demise of the Babylonian Empire and served under the Medes and Persians. It was under the Persian King Cyrus that the first groups of Jews were allowed to return to Jerusalem.

Daniel had a long and fruitful life serving God. It all began when as a young man he determined to live in humble obedience to God, his Master and Lord.

Queen Elizabeth II also had a long and fruitful life of service to the King of kings. She began serving when a young woman of just 25. As the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, said in his sermon at her funeral on 19 September 2022, “Her example was not set through her position or her ambition, but through whom she

followed. ... her allegiance to God was given before any person gave allegiance to her. Her service to so many people in this nation, the Commonwealth and the world, had its foundation in her following Christ.”

In the seventy years of her reign, Queen Elizabeth set an example of a leader who dedicated her life to the service of Jesus Christ and of others.

There can be no greater honour for any of us than to be servants of the Lord Jesus Christ, always ready and willing to serve anywhere and in any capacity He may choose.

May the lessons we learn from Daniel and his three friends—young men of faith and godliness in a hostile world—be our inspiration today.