

# DANIEL IN THE KING'S DEN

By David H. Roper

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We have been looking at the lives of men and women in the Old Testament against the historical setting of their times, and this morning we want to look at the ministry of Daniel.

When I was a kid, it always used to bother me when preachers said they were going to give a talk especially to young people. For the life of me, I could never remember them saying they were going to give a message specifically to people over 40, and it seemed to me that they were picking on us kids unnecessarily. I could just picture every person over 21 in the congregation turning off, or else thinking specifically of one young person in that congregation to whom the passage would apply--and I was sure that I was the one they were thinking of, so I was a little uncomfortable. However, if there is any message I have ever given that has particular application to young people, this is it, because it has to do with a young man--actually 12 to 14 years old at the time this story opens.

The interesting thing about the book of Daniel is that the Jews of the Old Testament times did not think of Daniel primarily as a prophet. He was a prophet, there is no question about it. Jesus refers to him as a prophet, and his predictions are among the most precise in scripture. He outlines for us the course of the Gentile nations, and of times yet future to our period. He describes the coming of Christ in very specific terms, even precisely dating the coming of Christ in chapter 9. So Daniel certainly was a prophet, in the sense that he made predictions.

But the Jews did not think of Daniel primarily as a prophet. We know this because the book of Daniel is not included in the section of Hebrew scriptures designated as prophetic writings. The Jewish scriptures are divided into three sections, while we divide ours into four. We have the same number of books, though the arrangement is different and the combination of books varies.

The Jews saw the first five books of the Old Testament as a unit, as we do, and they call that section of Moses' writings the Torah, the Law. The second section of scriptures they call the Nebiim, or the prophetic writings. Those books include some of our historical books, the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings (which they combine), and the books they call the Latter Prophets, the books of Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and the Minor Prophets (The Twelve, as they refer to them). But the book of Daniel is not found in that division of the Hebrew scriptures.

The book of Daniel is in the third division, which the Jews call the Kethubim, or the Writings. These were assorted writings which they did not feel were written by prophets, primarily. Therefore they looked at Daniel not as a prophet, although Jesus clearly refers to him that way, but as a statesman. He was not a prophet, priest, or king; he was what today we would call a layman.

And yet Daniel sustained an impact upon his age that very few men have had. He ministered during two great empires, the Babylonian and the Persian empires, and he had an impact upon a number of great kings during that period of time. He basically changed the course of the history of the people of God, as we will see in a moment.

The introduction to Daniel's history is given in chapter 1. I would like to read the first 7 verses to explain Daniel's circumstances during this period.

**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, along 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 he ordered Ashpenaz, the chief of the officials** [If you have a New American Standard Bible, the margin corrects that word 'officials' to "eunuchs." The term can refer to officials, but is generally used of eunuchs], **to bring in some of the sons of Israel, including some of the royal family and of the nobles, youths in whom was no defect, who were good-looking, showing intelligence in every branch of wisdom, endowed with understanding, and discerning knowledge, and who had ability for serving in the king's court; and he ordered him to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans. And the king appointed for them a daily ration from the king's choice food and from the wine which he drank, and appointed that they should be educated three years, at the end of which they were to enter the king's personal service. Now among them from the sons of Judah were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. Then the commander of the eunuchs assigned new names to them; and to Daniel he assigned the name Belteshazzar, to Hananiah Shadrach, to Mishael Meshach, and to Azariah Abed-nego.**

That gives us the circumstances of this account. Nebuchadnezzar, who is referred to here as the Babylonian king, is the well-known king who, as the crown prince of Babylon, invaded Assyria and Palestine about 606 B.C., sacked the temple, and took the vessels that remained from the tribute that had been paid repeatedly by the Judean kings to the Assyrian and Egyptian kings. Nebuchadnezzar stripped the temple of the remaining art objects and gold and silver vessels, carried them off to Babylon, and placed them in the house of his god, Marduk. Along with the sack of the temple, a number of the young Judean princes, Daniel among them, were taken back to Babylon.

While Nebuchadnezzar was in Assyria, he received word that his father, Naboplassar, had died, so he went back to Babylon to be crowned king. Nebuchadnezzar's coronation and Daniel's captivity coincide, occurring in the year 606 B.C. Daniel remained in the court of the Babylonian kings, and later the Persian king, Cyrus, from 606 to 536. He ministered about 70 years, the exact period of time of the Babylonian captivity.

In chapter 1, notice that the first verse says that Nebuchadnezzar sacked the temple and took the Judean princes in the third year have long looked at this passage in Daniel and said, "See? That is an example of a historical blunder Daniel goofed! It wasn't the third year of Jehoiakim, but the fourth year, which shows that this, after all, is a pious forgery, written much later than it actually happened. The author had forgotten by that time and made a mistake."

They used to say that, but they don't anymore, because it recently has become known that the Babylonians had an entirely different way of dating their kings. They considered the first year the year of accession, and the second year as the first year of the king's reign. Daniel, because he was living in Babylon when he wrote these words, used the Babylonian dating system.

This really caused the critics' argument to backfire, because if a Jew had been writing this as a pious fraud, later in the second century B.C., he would not have known this. He would have used the Jewish system of dating. But because Daniel was there in the palace of Nebuchadnezzar, he was accustomed to using the Babylonian system. This is another indication that this book is what it purports to be, a piece of prophetic writing from the sixth century, not something written from the second century as though it were prophecy.

You find this sort of thing cropping up repeatedly in the book of Daniel. In chapter 5, Daniel refers to Belshazzar as the last king of Babylon. Critics used to say, "Aha! See there? Daniel was wrong. Historically, he is off, because there was no King Belshazzar. The last king was Nabonidus. Everyone knows that! All the classical sources say that, Herodotus, Josephus, etc."

Again, they used to say that, but they don't anymore. An inscription has been found, written by Nabonidus, saying that he left Babylon fairly early in his reign, went off to establish a capital at Teman, and left his son Belshazzar behind to rule in Babylon. Daniel was right. This fact was unknown to all the other sources. Even Herodotus, who wrote within 50 years of the time of Babylon, did not know it. But Daniel knew because he was there. The critics said Daniel was wrong, but Daniel was there, ministering in the court of Nebuchadnezzar, and later, in the court of Belshazzar. This underscores for us again the confidence we can have in the Word of God. This is a prophetic

writing, written by Daniel at the time it is claimed to have been written, in the sixth century B.C.

Let us look at something of the condition of these young men, because I think we need to see their plight before we understand the nature of Daniel's actions. This was a distressing situation. These young men were no more than 16 years of age, and probably closer to 12, when they were taken off to Babylon. When Nebuchadnezzar went to Jerusalem and deported these young men for his court, he was looking for young, impressionable minds. A 12-year-old's mind certainly can be molded. Nebuchadnezzar wanted to transport these boys out of the Judean culture and shape and form their minds so they could serve acceptably in the king's court. That is what Nebuchadnezzar had in mind in choosing these young princes.

These boys were indeed princes. Josephus tells us that Daniel and his friends were of the family of Zedekiah. Their grandfather was Josiah. They were in the kingly line and had been pampered most of their lives. Both the Old Testament and what has been discovered from archeology indicate that Jehoiakim, who was on the throne at this time, spared nothing to make his court the finest in the land. He was overcome with the desire to build extravagantly. He put a lot of money into architecture and into his court. He wanted to live like an oriental monarch.

These young men had every possible blessing. They were pampered and cared for and served, and suddenly they were taken off to Babylon, where they were subjected to an entirely different culture. They were uprooted from their Hebrew culture, uprooted from their families, taken away from their fathers and mothers, and placed in an entirely different setting.

This passage tells us that these boys were given new names as an attempt to pull them out of their Jewish heritage. Daniel, whose name means "God is the judge", was renamed Belteshazzar, which means "Bel will protect the hostage of the king". You can see what Nebuchadnezzar is doing. He wants to force Daniel to change his allegiance from the God of Israel to Bel, who was head of the Babylonian pantheon (the Baal of the Canaanites), and to accept Bel as his protector. So his name was changed.

Hananiah, whose name means "God is gracious," was renamed Shadrach, which means "Sin (the moon god) will serve you". Again, instead of God being the gracious one, Sin, the moon god, would be his protector.

Misael, whose name means "Who is like God?" was renamed Meshach, which means "Who is this?" I am reading between the lines here, but I can picture Misael, about 12 years old, being dragged off into captivity. There he stands, with his dirty little tear-stained face, and they ask him, "What's your name?" He tries to pull himself up to his full height, and says, "Who is like God?" They laugh at him, and give him another name, "Who is this?"

The fourth little boy, Azariah, whose name means "Yahweh," or "the Lord helps," is renamed Obed-nego, which means "Nego helps". Nego, or Nebo, was another of the gods. Nebuchadnezzar took his own name from Nebo. His name means "Nebo will protect the crown." And this little boy was given another name, another title, another protector. Nebo, not Yahweh, will protect him.

The Babylonians are trying to obliterate the cultural background of these little boys, to force them into an entirely different mold. They are going to conform their thinking to Babylonian ideas. That is what is behind the change in names.

Perhaps the most degrading thing of all is that it seems very clear from this passage and from Josephus' writings that they made eunuchs of all these little boys. That was the ultimate indignity.

These boys were forced to accept Babylonian education. They were trained by the priests of that time, priests of Bel and Marduk and Ishtar, and all the pagan gods. The Babylonian culture had done a beautiful job of integrating religious and secular thinking, and so they taught astronomy and mathematics and geography from the standpoint of the pagan pantheon.

So these little boys were put into a pagan setting and taught pagan truths so that it would be difficult to know the difference between truth and error. They would be taught that  $4 + 4 = 8$ , but at the same time they were taught that it was a certain god who made the equation possible. Or they would be taught astronomy against the background of the pagan view of the identification of nature with God. The integration was complete, so that they were immersed in a pagan educational system--the best possible education that could be received at that time--but they were being taught simultaneously all the philosophies of an idolatrous system.

Fix in your mind a picture of a 12- or 13-year-old boy you know, and think of him thrust into this kind of situation. How would he respond? All the pressure was on. In addition, think a moment about what it was like in Babylon: there was idolatry on every side, with temples, walls, roads, gates, all dedicated to pagan gods; the great tower of Babel was just down the street from Nebuchadnezzar's palace; the palace itself was dedicated to the god Marduk and to the glory of Nebuchadnezzar. In the book of Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar is walking on the roof of his palace and describes as incomparable "this great Babylon that I have built!" There was no city like it. And these little boys were there in the palace.

They tell us that the walls of Nebuchadnezzar's palace were 150 feet wide. You don't tunnel out of a place like that! They could not go home. It seems from this account that only these four boys were faithful to the Lord. The other boys knuckled under, but these four little boys were faithful to God in that setting.

Daniel, we know, lived for a time in Josiah's court. Josiah was the last good king of Judah, the one under whom the last great restoration broke out. In that time the law that Manasseh had tried to destroy was found and an attempt was made to bring the whole nation back in line with the law. The reformation was short-lived and superficial, but it was a genuine attempt on the part of Josiah to conform the nation again with the ancient covenant of Israel.

These boys heard the preaching of Jeremiah, they heard the preaching of Habakkuk and Zephaniah, so they were exposed to truth. And these little boys went off to Babylon clinging to the one thing that they knew would support them: the Lord himself, as he was depicted in the Word. That was all they had. They were separated from their culture, they were separated from their families, they were uprooted--the shock must have been enormous. but they had the truth of the Word of God.

Recently I have been reading the second portion of the book of Isaiah, chapters 40 through 66, comparing it with the things that Daniel says in this book. It is so obvious, I think, that Daniel had access to the book of Isaiah. He filled his mind and heart with the truths of that book. That was all Daniel had, the Word of God, God himself, to sustain him.

The thing that is striking to me is that these young men, despite their youth, were extremely mature. There were certain things that they were willing to submit to, and there were certain things they would not submit to. There is a reason why they made the decisions that they did.

They submitted to the change of names, although certainly that was degrading. They submitted to a pagan education. In their case, they really had no alternative. If you flunk out of Nebuchadnezzar's finishing school, you're really finished. But had that been clearly wrong to them, they would not have done it, as we will see in a moment. They submitted to a number of indignities. But there was one area where Daniel would not submit, and we are given that account in verses 8 and following.

**But Daniel made up his mind that he would not defile himself with the king's choice food [this is the equivalent to our word "tidbits", the dainties from the king's table] or with the wine which he drank [This is evidently the strong drink that is prohibited in the Old Testament. Wine was not prohibited, but strong drink was, and is described as the sort of wine that "bites like an adder" , an unusually potent drink which the king himself used, but which was forbidden to the Jews]; so he sought permission from the commander of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself. Now God granted Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the commander of the eunuchs, and the commander of the eunuchs said to Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king, who has appointed your food and your drink;**

**for why should he see your faces looking more haggard than the youths who are your own age? Then he would make me forfeit my head to the king."** [The other Judean princes were eating the king's meat, but these young men were not. The commander of the eunuchs, fearing for his own life, calls to Daniel's attention what might happen to him if they continued to refuse their food] **But Daniel said to the overseer whom the commander of the officials had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, "Please test your servants for ten days, and let us be given some vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then let our appearance be observed in your presence, and the appearance of the youths who are eating the king's choice food; and deal with your servants according to what you see." So he listened to them in this matter and tested them for ten days. And at the end of ten days their appearance seemed better and they were fatter than all the youths who had been eating the king's choice food. So the overseer continued to withhold their choice food and the wine they were to drink, and kept giving them vegetables.**

Here is a line which Daniel would not cross. He was willing to submit to their system, their culture, but he would not do anything that conflicted with a clearly stated command of scripture. This is the issue. The other issues were cultural, not biblical. But in the case of diet there were certain prohibitions in scripture. The kind of food served to them was denied to the people of God. For sanitary reasons and other reasons we do not know, certain foods were unclean. The fact that Daniel says he would not defile himself with that food indicates that this was the issue. There was something about the food that was defiling, that was contrary to the Law of Moses. Therefore he would not eat it.

This is interesting to think through, and it ought to be an encouragement to us to think through our own standards. Are they cultural standards, or are they biblical standards? Most of us, frankly, believe certain things because we have been taught them all our lives. We believe them because we are Baptists, or Methodists, or Catholics, or PBC-ites, or Democrats, or Republicans, or whatever. We believe them because our pastor has told us so, or our favorite politician, or our teacher, or whoever. This is a word to remind us to sift through the things that we believe and to be certain that they are based on scripture and not on our culture.

We have unnecessarily turned off a host of people by insisting that certain standards are biblical when they are really cultural. Daniel was willing to give way in the area of culture and society, but he would not give way where scripture was at stake. That is the first thing we need to keep in mind. Have we thought through our beliefs, our moral positions, and our standards in light of scripture and scripture alone? Where any other command or ordinance contravenes scripture, we have to obey God rather than man. But if an ordinance is not contrary to scripture, then we are free in that area. That is the first thing that I see in the story of Daniel.

The second thing that I see in this section is that not only does Daniel stand fast on scripture and refuse to compromise, but he does it in a distinct way. He does not come across as self-righteous, rigid, unyielding, and condemning. He sees that his action will have a devastating effect on the people around him. So what he does is done graciously, and with real sensitivity to the people around him.

Oh, how we fail at that point as evangelicals! We are so rigidly upright and correct and insensitive that we work destruction in the lives of the people around us. We have turned them off and hurt them unnecessarily. There may be times that you have to take a stand that may hurt someone. But have you thought through the possible alternatives? Are there ways to do what you have to do biblically, and yet do it in such a way that it won't wreak havoc in the lives of the people who are responsible for you?

Daniel thought it through. He suggested what Bill Gothard calls "a creative alternative". He decided to eat vegetables. Actually, the Hebrew says "seeds", oatmeal, if you please.

Just as an aside here, for this is a very contemporary passage considering today's interest in vegetarian diets, scripture, as I understand it, does not equate a vegetarian diet with spirituality. There may be all kinds of reasons for choosing a vegetarian diet, but it is not a biblical issue. The issue here was not that Daniel chose a vegetarian diet over a meat diet; it is that the Babylonians were preparing unclean animals to eat. Therefore, Daniel chose seeds, because he knew that would not be contrary to Old Testament dietary laws. He ate grains--corn, wheat,

oats, barley--cereals. That is not a very appetizing diet, but it is what he chose. Instead of the fine wine and T-bone steaks that Nebuchadnezzar served on his table, he chose oatmeal and water.

This brings to mind another point: When you choose an alternative, it ought to be one that works a hardship on you, and not on everybody around you. Daniel did not say, "I prefer that you send back to Judah and get me kosher steaks." As a pampered little prince, he probably could have done that, but he did not. In choosing to act contrary to the king's law, he saw that he was going to cause discomfort to people around him; so he chose an alternative that would be satisfactory to everyone, even though it was to his detriment.

This is an interesting principle to think through, in terms of the times in our lives when we are faced with this kind of a decision. Do we choose the thing that works a hardship on us, and not on everybody around us? I will not attempt to be any more specific than that--you can apply the principle to your own situation. Daniel would not defile himself, but he was gracious.

I think of Paul's words, that a servant of God must not strive, but be patient and gentle, in meekness instructing those who oppose themselves. We see that Daniel's life was characterized by uprightness, but there was a gentleness and a sensitivity about him that gained the honor and respect of the people around him.

Daniel went through the testing period often days and this again shows his sensitivity to the people around him. He said, "Let's give it a trial. For ten days I'll eat oatmeal and water, and we'll see how things go, and at the end of ten days you can decide." At the end of ten days he was fatter than the other children, so the commander of the eunuchs allowed him to continue on that course. The result was that Daniel gained the respect and appreciation of the men around him.

As I read this passage I remember Paul's words describing Christ dying for sinners. What an incredible, unbelievable thing. That Christ would die for sinners, Paul says. "For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die." Though that is interpreted in various ways, I think Paul is saying that there are really two kinds of "good" men. There are the rigidly correct and upright people, and then there are the good people who do what is right, but they do it in the right way. Perhaps one would die for them. Daniel was a good man. He was highly respected and honored. He gained the admiration and support of the court of the king.

We are told in verses 17 through 21 the results of this three-year experiment by Nebuchadnezzar.

**And as for these four youths, God gave them knowledge and intelligence in every branch of literature and wisdom; Daniel even understood all kinds of visions and dreams. Then at the end of the days which the king had specified for presenting them, the commander of the eunuchs presented them before Nebuchadnezzar.** [That must have been a fateful meeting!] And the king talked with them, and out of them all not one was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah [which again leads me to believe that only these four boys stood tall in their obedience to the Law] **so they entered the king's personal service. And as for every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king consulted them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and conjurers who were in all his realm. And Daniel continued until the first year of Cyrus the king.**

Daniel outlived Nebuchadnezzar. As a matter of fact, he outlived the next six kings of Babylon. He even outlived the Babylonian empire and lived on into the third year of the reign of Cyrus of Persia. He had a tremendous impact on his age. At one time, under Nebuchadnezzar, he was the governor of the city of Babylon and all of its environs. Within fifteen years of entering the king's service, his name was proverbial in terms of wisdom. Ezekiel refers to him as being as wise as Noah and Job.

Under Belshazzar, Daniel was the third man in the kingdom, although that was a short-lived reign--only a few hours. Under Nabonidus, Belshazzar was the second king and Daniel was the third. Under King Cyrus of Persia he was one of three men who were charged with the responsibility of administrating the entire empire, which stretched from what today is Greece to India. He gained the respect of that court. His political career waxed and

waned, as political careers often do, but wherever he went he had an impact upon his age. Why? Because he was God's man.

He would not compromise himself when it came to the Word of God. Other areas did not matter, but where God had spoken, that was the final word. From a human standpoint, were it not for Daniel, the Jews would not have gotten back to their land. He literally changed the course of history. One boy, 14 years old, proceeded on a course that lasted for 70 years and changed the course of history.

When Daniel was 70 years old, Darius the king foolishly made a decree that no one could worship any other god, or make a petition to anyone other than the king himself for a period of 30 days. Daniel was in the custom of praying toward Jerusalem to his God in front of an open window every day. So the next morning, he flipped open the shutters and began to pray, as he had for 70 years. He was thrown into the lion's den, and while the king spent a sleepless night pacing the floor, concerned about Daniel, Daniel fluffed up some mangy old lion and caught 40 winks.

The next morning, when he walked out, the king said, "Surely Yahweh is the God of heaven!" While Darius never became a worshiper of Yahweh, in any real sense, he was for the first time made aware of the existence of the God of Israel and it was because of that awareness that he sent the Jews back to rebuild their temple. That would not have happened, I am convinced, were it not for Daniel's stand. One little boy, 14 years old, began a life that made an impact upon the world.

When I worked with university students, it used to break my heart to see young people who desperately wanted their lives to count grabbing onto one short-lived cause after another, throwing their lives away, doing things that they thought were worthwhile. But this passage says that the place to begin is in simple obedience to the Word of God, right where you are, among your contemporaries.

That does not necessarily mean that you will be politically successful, like Daniel. Daniel had a contemporary by the name of Jeremiah who spent most of his life in jail and was finally dragged off to Egypt and killed by one of his countrymen. By any gauge, he was none too successful, except in God's eyes. Jeremiah changed his age, also. And so we cannot predict human success--wealth, fame, and fortune--but God will use you to make an impact upon your age. And we adults can encourage younger people to this end.

Father, we have been called to live in similar times. There are the same pressures, there are no standards, those who believe in absolutes are exposed to ridicule, and our culture is squeezing us into a mold. We thank you that we, like Daniel, can stand on the basis of the Word, because we have the same Lord available to us that he had. We ask that we, like Daniel, will have a great influence on our times. We know that we can pray this prayer in confidence, because this, likewise, is your desire. This we ask in Christ's name, Amen.

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