

## Chapter 48 Daniel 1-3

### Daniel's Stories and Visions

*“Then the sovereignty, power and greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be handed over to the saints, the people of the Most High. His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship and obey him.” Daniel 7:27*

The Book of Daniel seems to naturally divide between stories and visions. Chapters 1-6 are easy enough for children to enjoy and chapters 7-12 are confusing enough for adults to ignore. Everybody knows the stories but few seem to understand the visions. The key to understanding is to hold the entire testimony of Daniel together and to let the truth of the stories interpret the visions. The familiar stories cannot stand alone without the visions and the strange visions cannot be understood apart from the stories. The Book of Daniel helps us to stay in the story by confessing what we are tempted to deny, by communicating in ways that we are tempted to forget, by confronting issues that we are tempted to ignore, and by combining what we are tempted to separate.

Daniel and his friends had the advantage of knowing that they lived in exile, but many of Christ's followers may not realize that they are also living in exile. Daniel was fully aware of God's sovereignty, but like Nebuchadnezzar, people today seem more impressed with their imperial image than with God's rule and reign. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego redefine the meaning of success in the corporate culture and the power of prayer prevails in the lions' den. Daniel believed in the physical and political dimensions of being spiritual and the spiritual side of being physical and political. In Daniel there was no divorce between his private self and his public self. Individual commitment and cosmic destiny converge under God's will. “Daniel is one of our primary documents for keeping it all together—the personal and the political, the present and the future, the soul and society” (Peterson, *The Message*, 1580).

The message of Daniel is that God's Kingdom prevails in spite of the rulers and authorities and the powers of this dark world and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Eph 6:12). The example of Daniel and his friends shows Christians how “to work out [their] salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil 2:12), how “to seek first [God's] kingdom and his righteousness” (Mt 6:33), and how not to conform to the pattern of this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of their mind (Rom 12:2). The Book of Daniel confesses that God is sovereign—we are not. This God-centered world-view is communicated confidently, even fearlessly, in spite of life-threatening danger. The followers of Jesus have much to learn from Daniel and his friends on how to operate behind enemy lines, how to subtly and subversively live the truths and confront the issues that the world ignores. The Book of Daniel unites what we are tempted to separate: heaven and earth, personal holiness and public responsibility, spirituality and the secular world, and our personal life stories and God's great Salvation History Story. The Book of Daniel is God's answer to the prayer Jesus taught his disciples, “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt 6:9-10). We are

reminded that our citizenship is in heaven (Phil 3:20) and that “the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He will reign forever and ever!” (Rev 11:15).

### **Daniel’s Contemporaries**

Daniel was probably in his late teens or early 20s in 605 B.C. when Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, besieged Jerusalem for the first time and began systematically exploiting, oppressing, and exiling the Jewish people (2 Kings 24:1-25:21). The prophet Jeremiah was in his mid 30s and Ezekiel was in his late teens.

All three prophets served long and difficult ministries shaped by the Babylonian captivity. Daniel was among an elite group of Jews whom Nebuchadnezzar exiled to Babylon in 605 B.C. for the purpose of indoctrination and assimilation. He remained in Babylon for the rest of his life, giving his final prophecy in the third year of the reign of Cyrus the Great (10:1; ca. 556 BC). Daniel lived into his late 80s or early 90s.

Jeremiah began his ministry in 627 BC and remained in Jerusalem for his whole life. For twenty-three years, from the 13<sup>th</sup> year of Josiah’s reign to the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 4<sup>th</sup> year of Jehoiakim’s reign, he prophesied that Babylon would be God’s instrument of judgment (Jeremiah 25:3). Although Nebuchadnezzar’s initial attack and first deportation came in 605 B. C., Jeremiah continued to hammer God’s message home through the reigns of Jehoiachin and Zedekiah, who considered his message treasonous capitulation to the Babylonian enemy. For forty years Jeremiah pounded away on the themes of judgment and hope. Two more sieges followed in 597 and 587 B.C. before the destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation of exiles were complete. Ezekiel was exiled to Babylon in 597 (2 Kings 24:14) and five years later he experienced God’s call to a prophetic ministry.

All three prophets were contemporaries, raised up by God to fulfill a specific and unique ministry in the life of his people. They were probably aware of each other, but it is unlikely that they knew each other personally. Their messages interface and complement one another remarkably, but there is little that suggests collusion. Both Daniel and Ezekiel may have been influenced by Jeremiah’s public ministry and mentored from a distance by his powerful preaching and Spirit-led opposition to the spirit of the times. As young men they would have been aware of Jeremiah’s famous temple sermon and his prophecy that the desolation of Jerusalem would last for seventy years (Daniel 9:2; Jeremiah 29:10). Both men demonstrate the resolve and conviction of Jeremiah, even though they were called of God to live and serve in very different situations. The eccentric prophet Ezekiel lived with the exiled refugees in a camp just outside of Babylon and the elite advisor Daniel lived in the royal court with access to the very best of Babylonian culture. Meanwhile Jeremiah lived 600 miles away in Jerusalem. Although Ezekiel and Daniel were only separated by a few miles, all three lived faithfully in three very different worlds.

The Holy Spirit comprised this remarkable trio of prophets to inspire our long obedience in the same direction. Their lives exemplify costly obedience under fire and faithfulness to the end.

Their prayers inspire in-depth devotion to Yahweh and their prophecies shape our world-view. Their messages challenge, inform and comfort the people of God and reveal Yahweh's truth. In spite of the historical and cultural distances between these three sixth-century B.C. Near Eastern prophets and today's followers of Christ, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel are essential spiritual guides for staying in the Story. From three angles we get the perspective that God is sovereign and that his Kingdom will prevail in spite of how it looks in Jerusalem or in Babylon or in New York or in Beijing.

### **God Gave**

The underlying truth of the entire book is introduced in the first chapter with a threefold repetition of the simple line stating that God gave (Daniel 1:2, 9, 17). The sovereignty of God is affirmed over rulers and kingdoms as well as in interpersonal relationships. In two out of the three situations the recipient of God's gift did not realize that God was giving them anything. I'm sure that Nebuchadnezzar never dreamed that the very God he was insulting by desecrating the Jerusalem temple was the God who was delivering Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand. Nor did the chief official over Daniel and his friends credit the Lord God with his positive attitude toward them. The four young Judeans, however, were well aware that it was God who was behind the judgment and it was God who caused the official to favor them and it was God who gave them "knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning" (1:17). The action of the sovereign God of Salvation History is at the heart of everything that happens in the Book of Daniel.

God gave Daniel the interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream (chapters 2, 4) and delivered Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego out of the fiery furnace (chapter 3). God passed judgment on King Belshazzar (chapter 5) and delivered Daniel from the lion's den (chapter 6). Daniel's vision of the four beasts (chapter 7), followed by his vision of a ram and a goat (chapter 8), are revelations from God and interpreted by God. Daniel's prayer is God-centered and God-answered (chapter 9), leading to two more God-inspired visions of the end (chapters 11-12). It is impossible to understand the Book of Daniel from a secular perspective. If God is left out, all the scholarly expertise in the world will not grasp the meaning of Daniel's stories and visions. Many modern interpreters of Daniel are bothered, not just by the sixth century prophecies, but by everything in the book.

### **Living in Exile**

The natural impulse of the Jews to resist the Babylonian oppressor was to be resisted. According to the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, Babylon was the agent of the Lord's judgment against Judah for her rebellion against Yahweh. The prophets counseled submission to Babylon, not acquiescence, surrender, not capitulation. The future of God's people rested on God's promise to a called out remnant, who would remain faithful by God's grace.

As early as 700 B.C. Isaiah prophesied to King Hezekiah that Babylon would conquer Judah. "The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your fathers have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the Lord. And some of your descendants, your own flesh and blood who will be born to you, will be taken away, and

they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon” (Isaiah 39:6-7). One hundred years later Jeremiah reiterated the prophecy, “This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years” (Jeremiah 25:11). Daniel knew these disturbing prophecies well (Daniel 9:2) and in all likelihood was kept informed of Jeremiah’s on-going prophetic ministry. He would have been aware of Jeremiah’s open letter to the second wave of exiles in 594 BC, challenging the exiles to accept the hard work ahead, warning them against delusional alternatives, and trusting in Yahweh’s deliverance. Jeremiah delivered a message of hope. The future belonged to a remnant that God would call out of captivity. In the middle of what must have been a very difficult time for the exiles, Jeremiah delivered God’s message of hope:

“‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,’ declares the Lord, ‘and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,’ declares the Lord, ‘and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile’” (29:11-14).

Jeremiah’s letter to the exiles challenged them to live into the future by obeying God today. The will of God was simple and plain: “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease” (29:5). In other words, ordinary life was meant to be the proving ground of faithfulness. They were meant to get to work, build relationships and leave the future in God’s hands. Trust in Yahweh was to be worked out in community through work, marriage, and parenting. This recalls the apostle Paul’s exhortation to the church, when he wrote, “We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ, to settle down and earn the bread they eat. And as for you, brothers and sisters, never tire of doing what is right” (2 Thess 3:11-13). The exile afforded a new opportunity for the chosen people of God to discover all over again what it meant to live faithfully and obediently. The stranglehold of false spirituality, self-indulgent materialism and sexual promiscuity, that had squeezed the life out of Jerusalem, had been broken in Babylon of all places. They were given a fresh opportunity to live for God in a foreign land. God’s plan for them, as it is for us, was to live in the world but not of the world. If we seek first Christ’s kingdom and his righteousness, God will take care of the future (Mt 6:33).

The question for Daniel and his friends, as well as for us, is where to draw the line. How are we to live in the world, but not of the world? Is it possible to be successful in the eyes of the world and at the same time faithful in eyes of God? Daniel’s experience answers that question in the affirmative and illustrates the discernment, determination and courage required to live for God in a hostile culture.

Nebuchadnezzar’s strategy was to strengthen his rule over occupied territories and conquered peoples by re-educating the best and brightest in Babylonian culture. He identified young men

“from the royal family and the nobility” who “were healthy and handsome, intelligent and well-educated, good prospects for leadership positions in the government” (Daniel 1:4, The Message). Then, he proceeded to immerse them in everything Babylonian. He had them isolated from their home culture, dressed in Babylonian fashion and indoctrinated in the language and literature of the Babylonians. They were fed the best food in Babylon prepared by the royal chefs and they were renamed in honor of the Babylonian gods. Daniel (“God is my judge”) became Belteshazzar (either ‘May [a god] protect his life’ or ‘Lady [a goddess], protect the king’). Azariah (‘Yah is my help’) became Abednego (‘servant of Nabu’). Hananiah (‘Yah has been gracious’) and Mishael (‘Who is what God is?’) becomes Shadrach (‘I am fearful (of god)’) and Meschach (‘I am of little account’) (Longman, 50-51; Baldwin, 81). What is not mentioned in the text, but suggested in the cultural background, was that these men became eunuchs. Some scholars identify Ashpenaz as “chief of the eunuchs.” The ultimate step in transforming their Jewish identity may have been castration. This would have fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy: “And some of your descendants, your own flesh and blood who will be born to you, will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon” (Isa 39:7).

All this raises the question: Does Nebuchadnezzar’s ancient strategy of assimilation rival that of the modern university today? The two situations may not be that different. Young Christians are subject to indoctrination, cultural immersion, substance abuse, challenges to their sexuality and identity transformation. We could rename UCSD, UC Babylon and San Diego State, could be renamed Nebuchadnezzar U. And it’s not just the universities that are responsible for indoctrination. The corporate and business cultures exert their influence, along with the Sports world and the Music world. The pressure to remove the Christian’s identity is everywhere, even in the churches.

Most of us are confronted by these forces in ways more similar to Daniel than to Ezekiel or Jeremiah. Like Daniel we live and work amidst powerful influences that seek to assimilate us into an ethos and world-view antithetical to being a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. We cannot escape these pressures, but we can endure in Christ. Instead of conforming and capitulating, we can strengthen our resolve to stand for Christ and His Kingdom regardless of the cultural forces arrayed against us.

Living in exile, without defilement—without the loss of our distinctive identity as the people of God, requires a strategy. How were Daniel and his friends going to swim against this tidal wave of Babylonian culture? Note that they did not confront their indoctrination with an anti-intellectual refusal to understand the literature and language of Babylon. On the contrary they excelled in their studies and graduated summa cum laude (1:17, 20; Longman, 50). Nor did they piously refuse to be called by their newly acquired pagan names. They seem to have understood the advice that Jeremiah gave, that it was God’s will for the exiles to be positive and productive in Babylon, and that this was possible without losing their identity.

Daniel’s strategy of resistance was more subversive than showy. Instead of being up-in-arms against the Babylonian culture, he made a strategic decision that quietly, yet decisively checked its influence on him and affirmed his internal commitment to Yahweh. He “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 1:8). Daniel’s decision appears to be deceptively simple, when in fact, it was a brilliant move designed to preserve his spiritual integrity. His request to eat only vegetables was not a matter of eating kosher, because “it was impossible, by definition, to keep kosher in the land of captivity (Hosea 9:3; Amos 7:17; Longman, 52). Nor was it a matter of avoiding food offered to idols, because all the food may have been presented to the Babylonian gods. Nor was Daniel trying to make a public statement by refusing the king’s food. His decision was not a public act of defiance, but a personal act of dedication. Nor was Daniel’s decision to eat only vegetables based on a healthy choice diet, even though a vegetarian diet may have been healthier to eat than all the meat and wine from the king’s table. An African would readily recognize the meaning of Daniel’s strategy because Africans tend to equate food with fuel and they would see the protein rich, high calory royal diet as a great benefit for physical and intellectual strength.

If Daniel’s decision was not based on kosher laws or religious scruples or social inhibitions or modern health concerns, what led him to this particular resolution against defilement? In a culture that readily equated food with fuel and good food with strength and energy, Daniel personally did not want to think that the king of Babylon could take credit for the health and strength of the four young Judeans. Of course, Nebuchadnezzar did take credit for their health and strength, but Daniel and his friends knew better, and so did the court official who approved the ten day test.

Daniel’s strategy of non-defilement reflected his trust in God’s faithfulness to sustain him and his friends in a foreign land, under the supervision of a foreign official, called by foreign titles, given a foreign education, and in training for service in a foreign court (Goldingay, 22). Daniel was out to prove to himself, his friends and his foreign supervisor that Yahweh was responsible for their health and strength. He drew on the wisdom of Salvation History: “Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,” says the Lord Almighty (Zechariah 4:7). High protein Babylonian health food available only to the wealthy elite, was not the reason for Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah’s physical health and intellectual alertness. By eating only ordinary vegetables available to the other Hebrew exiles on the outskirts of town, Daniel and his friends proved that Yahweh was the reason for their success.

Daniel’s strategy is consistent with Gideon’s troop reduction, David’s five smooth stones, and Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem on a donkey. The resolve of these four young men to eat only vegetables and drink water did several significant things. It united them in a common cause, expressed their solidarity with the other exiles, and placed their trust in Yahweh. Meal time must have been a constant reminder of their identity in Yahweh and undoubtedly produced some lively conversations about the Babylonian curriculum and culture. By making their trust in Yahweh the distinguishing mark of their non-conformity, they chose a strategy that worked from the inside-out. Instead of making a public spectacle of their non-defilement, they quietly, and subversively, set out to remain faithful in a hostile culture.

God seeks “insiders” like Daniel who live in the culture with a firm resolve to remain faithful to

God in spite of the pressures to compromise their distinctive identity. Those who follow Christ cannot escape being *in* the world, but they cannot afford to be *of* the world. On the night before he was crucified, Jesus prayed for all those who believed in him and focused on the tension of being in the world but not of the world. “My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world” (Jn 17:15-18).

Daniel’s commitment is *personal*, based on his trust in Yahweh, and *relational*, undertaken in cooperation with his three friends, and in solidarity with his fellow exiles. His strategy is respectful and diplomatic. He is not a threat to the king’s policy of assimilation. He does not feel the pressure to change Babylonian culture or fight against the system, but he does feel responsible to maintain his integrity before God. Daniel knows that in order to succeed God must be responsible for his success. He does not maneuver himself into a position of influence or strive to become important. He is not a self-made man climbing the ladder of success. The message of Daniel is that God is in control. Yahweh is sovereign over the nations and his Kingdom will last forever, but before Daniel turns to that message he emphasizes that God is sovereign over his life.

Daniel did his part to obey what Jeremiah the prophet advised the people of God to do: live in the land; cooperate with your captors; settle down; submit to the authorities. Daniel also followed Jeremiah by refusing to capitulate to the Babylonian world-view. He did not surrender his identity or worship their idols or conform his will to theirs. He trusted in the sovereignty of God and placed his hope in God’s Salvation History. His immediate and long-term success was sponsored by Yahweh.

The question for the followers of Jesus is whether the Babylonian captivity of the people of God in the sixth century before Christ parallels in some way the cultural captivity of the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century after Christ. Does the breakup of the southern kingdom parallel in some sense the demise of Christendom? If it does, then Jeremiah and Daniel are especially useful in guiding the church in how to interact with culture. Their strategy of how to be in the world but not of the world is important to us. First, they were spared the delusion that they were the popular spiritual majority. They did not envision widespread success in the Babylonian culture. They saw themselves as a counter-cultural minority living in exile. Second, they did not seek to impose the law of God on a pagan society. It was not their place nor within their power to demand external conformity to the will of God. Third, they sought to strengthen the integrity and character of the people of God by refusing to conform to the prevailing culture and the spirit of the age.

Today’s followers of Jesus Christ have much to learn from these three basic observations. Part of the subtlety of Satan’s strategy is to convince Christians that they are popular—much more popular than they are. Their perspective is skewed by mega-churches, large para-church ministries, best-selling books, high-profile Christian celebrities, a born-again President, and mountain top crosses. Christians are tempted to feel successful and to think that their movement is much more powerful than it really is. The problem with Christianity’s apparent success is that

it is largely based on conformity to the world. Instead of being the Body of Christ in exile, the called out community of God's people, the world looks at Christianity as a huge self-help movement with some eccentric religious ideas.

Unlike Daniel in Babylon or the Apostle Paul in the Roman Empire, some Christians feel it is their moral duty to shape the culture according to biblical laws. Since they see themselves as the moral majority they feel it is their right to expect the culture to conform to biblical morality. However the world perceives the church as a political pressure group trying to exert its political power according to its cultic-ideology. Instead of a counter-cultural community shaped by Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, Christianity becomes a moral crusade fighting for laws and legislation. In his commentary on Daniel, scholar Tremper Longman quotes the late British pastor Martin Lloyd-Jones:

“The New Testament is never interested in conduct and behavior in itself. I can go further and say that the New Testament does not make an appeal for good behavior to anyone but to Christian people. The New Testament is not interested, as such, in the morality of the world. It tells us quite plainly that you can expect nothing from the world but sin, and that in its fallen condition it is incapable of anything else. In Titus 3:3 Paul tells us that we were all once like that: ‘for we ourselves were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, and hating one another. . . .’ Thus there is nothing, according to the New Testament, that is so fatuous and so utterly futile, as to turn to such people and appeal to them to live the Christian life. . . . The truth is that it only has one message for people like that—the message of repentance” (D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Faith on Trial*, London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1965, 63; quoted in Longman, 68).

We have much to learn from Daniel on how to stay in the story while living in a culture that is either hostile or disinterested in following the risen Lord Jesus. His long obedience in the same direction reflects neither the boastful triumphalism nor the fearful insecurity which characterizes a bi-polar modern evangelicalism.