

Living Distinctively in Light of God's Rule

Daniel: When Kingdoms Collide

Daniel 1:1-21

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Today we start a new series in the book of Daniel. But much of what we'll learn over the next three months isn't new. Throughout 2020, we've been talking about what it means to live in exile. Book IV of the Psalms and 1 Peter taught us about life in exile.

Although we live *in* the world, we are not *of* the world. We are citizens of the city of God, living in the city of man. We need to know how to live distinctively away from our heavenly home. All throughout history, God's people have needed to learn this. And it's pretty clear this lesson is quite relevant in our day as well.

The Psalms evoke our *emotions* through poetry and *train* us how to pray in exile. First Peter engages our *head* and *teaches* us how to conduct ourselves in our exile. Daniel also deals with life in exile, but it comes at us from a different angle. It's not poetry aimed at the heart. It's not teaching aimed at the head. It's full of stories and visions that stir our imagination.

We encounter pictures of God's people and see the curtains of this world pulled back through apocalyptic perspectives. These pictures *inspire* us to be faithful in exile. Many of the themes remain the same, but the tone and templates change. We learn similar truths from a different vantage point.

I'm not going to give an overview of Daniel this morning. I'm simply going to dive into the first chapter. But the main themes and the overall aim of the book emerge in this chapter. I also hope you'll read Jordan Green's blog post on Daniel this week to get a broader orientation to the book.

Daniel 1 is divided into three parts. It's organized around a repeated phrase, which we'll talk about later. But for now, let me just give the basic division. Verses 1-7 give us the problem with living in the world. Verses 8-16 tell us how to live set-apart lives in this world. Verses 17-21 give us a picture of our calling to engage the world.

CONFIDENCE THAT GOD'S IN CONTROL (1-7)

Let's begin by reading the first part.

Daniel 1:1-7¹

¹In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. ²And 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. ³Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility, ⁴youths 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. ⁵The 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. ⁶Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah of the tribe of Judah. ⁷And the chief of the eunuchs gave them names:

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

Daniel he called *Beltshazzar*, *Hananiah* he called *Shadrach*, *Mishael* he called *Meshach*, and *Azariah* he called *Abednego*.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Right out of the gate, we see the problem this book addresses. There's a collision of kingdoms—the kingdom of God and the kingdom of man. And in this collision, there's pressure to conform to the pattern of the world.

The Collision of Kingdoms

Look at verses 1-2. In 605 BC Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem. And he brought Jehoiakim the king of Judah to Babylon, along with over five thousand vessels of gold and silver from the temple (Ezra 1:11) and placed them in the temple of his god.

God had made promises to his people to establish an everlasting kingdom. And during this time, Jerusalem was the seat of this kingdom. God made promises to establish an everlasting throne for David. Jehoiakim was sitting on that throne. But now he's in Babylon. And God promised to dwell with his people in the temple. But now the vessels are placed in the temple of Babylon's gods.

God's promises were in question. The throne and the temple were threatened. And eventually Jerusalem itself would fall in 587 BC. Two kingdoms collide. And from a human perspective, God's kingdom was being brought down by the kingdom of man.

Why did this happen? Because the people of God had placed their trust in the kingdom of man. When God established his covenant with Israel, he warned them that if they wouldn't obey him they'd be scattered among the nations (Lev. 2:33; Deut. 28:64). And later Isaiah gave a specific prophecy to Hezekiah that they'd go into captivity in Babylon. The context of Isaiah's prophecy is in 2 Kings 20.

During the reign of Hezekiah, Israel was threatened by Assyria. And during that time, Babylon sent an envoy to Jerusalem. They offered protection from Assyria if they would pay tribute to Babylon.

So, Hezekiah took the delegation from Babylon into the temple to show them all of the vessels. It was his way of saying they had deep enough pockets to pay the price of an alliance. But this was sin. They were looking to political means to save them from Assyria. Something we struggle with today as well. Even though God had already delivered them from Assyria once (2 Kings 19), they weren't trusting God now.²

And so, Isaiah told Hezekiah the vessels and the people would be carried off to Babylon (20:17-18). And we see the fulfillment of that prediction in Daniel 1. You always serve the one you trust in. Israel trusted in Babylon. Now they'll serve Babylon.

The Pressure to Conform

Babylon wasn't content with simply defeating Israel. They wanted to make the people of Israel *like* the people of Babylon. There was pressure to conform to the pattern of the world.

² Iain M. Duguid, *Daniel*, Reformed Expository Commentary

Not only are the king and the temple vessels hauled off, the best and the brightest in Jerusalem are also hauled off to Babylon. Verses 3-7 draw this out: “People . . . of the royal family and of the nobility” are brought to Babylon. In Jerusalem, they were probably trained to serve the king of Judah—to serve *God’s* kingdom. But now Nebuchadnezzar wants to train them to serve *his* kingdom.

And this will require reprogramming them. They’ll need to *unlearn* what they were taught in God’s kingdom and *learn* how to lead in man’s kingdom. How will this happen? There are three things drawn out in our passage. They’ll be given new food, a new education at the university of Babylon, and new names.

I want to highlight their new names, because I think they signify what the whole reprogramming regimen was trying to accomplish. Daniel means “God is my judge.” Hananiah means “The Lord is gracious.” Mishael means “Who is God?” And Azariah means “The Lord is my help.”

Their Hebrew names focus on their God. But their new names focus on Babylon’s gods. They’re not just culturally relevant, they have a religious connotation. They get at the heart of reprogramming them. They are new identity markers. Belteshazzar means “the wife of Bel (*a Babylonian god*) is my protection.” Shadrach means “Aku (*another Babylonian god*) is in charge.” Meshach means “Who is like Aku?” And Abednego means “I will serve Nebo.”

The whole program is trying to get these young servants of Yahweh to forget Yahweh and his ways and to serve Babylon’s gods. To look to false gods for help instead of the one true God. The names are intended to change their worldview and identity. The aim is complete assimilation to the city of man.

Do you get the picture? It’s the same picture in our day. Babylon is a placeholder in the Bible for the kingdom of this world that is at odds with the kingdom of God. From the tower of Babel at Shinar in Genesis 11 to the exile in Babylon. From Peter’s letter from Rome (which he calls Babylon), to Babylon the Great in Revelation. Babylon represents human pride and achievement. It represents the world against God. The collision of kingdoms. And Babylon applies pressure to conform us to the pattern of this world.

Confidence in God

When kingdoms collide; when our world seems to be falling apart and everything seems lost; when there are forces all around trying to fit us into the world’s mold; what should the people of God do?

There are four little words tucked into these seven verses with big significance. These words give us the main theme of this whole chapter. And they set the tone for the rest of the book. They’re right at the beginning of verse 2. “And the Lord gave. . . .”

We’ve seen that Nebuchadnezzar hauled Jehoiakim and the vessels of the temple off. But what we haven’t said is that it was *the Lord* who gave Jehoiakim and the vessels to him. “And the Lord gave.” This phrase is repeated two more times in chapter 1. In verse 9, we read, “And God gave Daniel favor and compassion.” Then in verse 17, “God gave [the four youths] learning and skill in all literature and wisdom.”

Daniel wants us to know in no uncertain terms that the exile to Babylon wasn’t lost on God. He’s superintending the whole thing. When kingdoms collide, and when there is pressure to conform to

the pattern of the world, we need to remember: God's in control of the world. And that should give us confidence to live for him.

The book of Daniel isn't mainly about us. It's mainly about God. He's in control. That's what Daniel 1 wants us to see. That's the fundamental truth here. Or the foundational truth.

But it's a truth that does still apply to us. It's a foundation on which to build. We're called to live distinctively in light of God's rule.³ So how do we do that?

Daniel and his three friends provide a compelling portrait. Their story, although different from ours, provides a pattern or a framework in which we can make sense of our lives as exiles, as citizens of heaven living here on earth.

God provided a way for them to live distinctively. We're told two more times in Daniel 1, that God gave his people something. He provided them what they needed to live in exile.

COMMITMENT TO NOT COMPROMISE (8-16)

The first thing he provided is found in verses 8-16. Let's read those verses.

Daniel 1:8-16

⁸But 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. ⁹And God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs, ¹⁰and 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." ¹¹Then Daniel said to the steward whom the chief of the eunuchs had assigned over Daniel, Hananiab, Mishael, and Azariah, ¹²"Test your servants for ten days; let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. ¹³Then 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." ¹⁴So he listened to them in this matter, and tested them for ten days. ¹⁵At 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. ¹⁶So the steward took away their food and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables.

There is a play on words in verses 7-8 that's lost in the English translation. But I don't want you to miss it. In verse 7, the English says "the chief of the eunuchs gave them names." But it literally says he "put names on" them. In verse 8, it says "Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself." But it literally says Daniel "put it on his heart" that he would not defile himself.

Babylon's trying to change him at a heart level by putting a new name on him. But Daniel put on his heart a resolve to not be changed.⁴

And this is what we learn: When there's pressure to conform to the world, we should remain clean in the world.⁵

What's going on in verse 8 when Daniel resolves to not defile himself with the king's food and wine? There are at least three options.⁶ One option is that the *kind* of food could defile him. The food may

³ Robert Fyall and Robin Sydserrff, *Teaching Daniel: From Text to Message*

⁴ Fyall and Sydserrff

⁵ David Helm, *Daniel for You*

⁶ Helm; cf. John Joseph Collins, Adela Yarbro Collins, and Frank Moore Cross, *Daniel: Hermeneia Commentary Series*

be a violation of Jewish dietary laws. Or maybe the *use* of food could defile him. Maybe it was offered to idols. Another option is that the *source* of the food would defile him. Eating food from the king's table could show that he was in fellowship with Gentiles.

We don't know for sure, but what seems clear enough is Daniel was committing to not compromise his relationship with God. They can call him Belteshazzar—the wife of Bel is my protector—but Daniel knows God's his protector and he's not willing to forget it. He resolves to remain clean in the world.

But it's not just Daniel's resolve that stands out here. It's also the *way* he seeks to fulfill his resolve. He didn't throw a fit and make a scene. He went quietly and graciously to the chief of eunuchs and asked for a diet of vegetables and water.

The chief eunuch hesitated, because Nebuchadnezzar wanted these guys in tip top shape. And if they're looking all gaunt because of their diet, Ashpenaz could lose his head.

But Daniel trusted his God and put a reasonable plan forward to the steward in verses 12-13. "Test your servants for ten days.... Then let our appearance ... be observed by you." And the results were astonishing. In verse 15 we see that Daniel and his friends "were better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youths who ate the king's food."

God provided for Daniel and his friends when they committed to stay clean. He gave them favor with the officials and he gave them health. There's not a promise here that God will always make the road easy when we resolve to live distinctively. But God will provide what we need.

There are many temptations to compromise our relationship with the Lord in this world. It's hard to commit to be clean. What are the things that tempt you to compromise? Maybe you feel that being set apart for Jesus will compromise your career advancement? Or maybe your social advancement? Others are not tempted to sell out, but maybe they're prone to be a "jerk for Jesus" in the face of opposition.

Not Daniel. His identity as a citizen of God's kingdom was most important. And he had confidence in his God. He was even willing to put God to the test. And he did that in a gracious way. What about you? Do you believe that God will provide what you need to remain clean in the world?

COMPETENCE TO STAY CONNECTED (17-21)

Daniel's resolve to remain clean is one way to live a distinctive life in light of God's rule. Verses 17-21 draw out a second way.

Daniel 1:17-21

¹⁷As for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams. ¹⁸At 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. ¹⁹And 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. ²⁰And 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. ²¹And Daniel was there until the first year of King Cyrus.

Remember the key words in this passage. God gave. God gave his people to Babylon. It was no accident; God was in control. And God gave them favor and compassion with those in leadership. Now he gives them competence to serve Nebuchadnezzar.

He gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom. And he specifically gave Daniel understanding in all visions and dreams, which will play a huge role in the book.

Babylon had a thorough training program for those who would serve in the court of the king. And I don't doubt God used that program to equip Daniel and his friends for their work. But Daniel and his friends were head and shoulders above all their classmates. They graduated with top honors. Verse 20 tells us that they were "ten times better" than anyone else. Literally it reads "ten hands" better. In other words, with their two hands, they could do the work of five men! And this was all because of *God's* work in them.

And what's the purpose of it all? It's so they can serve the king of Babylon!

What does this teach us? Even though we should remain clean in the world, we also can remain connected to the world.⁷ Daniel 1 is calling us to be set apart from the world, but it's not calling us to retreat from the world. We can be faithful *and* fruitful in the world. God provides what we need to be useful in this world.

This is so important for us to grasp. And I want to come back to it in just a minute. But first I want you to notice something amazing at the very end of this passage that I believe brings perspective to our call to stay connected to the world.

In verse 21 we read, "And Daniel was there until the first year of King Cyrus." What's the point of this verse?

Well remember where this chapter began? At the beginning of Nebuchadnezzar's reign, everything was carried *from* Jerusalem *to* Babylon. But what happens in the first year of King Cyrus? Ezra 1 tells us that in the first year of Cyrus, some of the exiles returned *from* Babylon *to* Jerusalem. So, the exile will eventually be over. Cyrus was the king of Persia. His reign marks the end of the Babylonian kingdom, and the beginning of the Medo-Persian kingdom. So, Babylon will eventually fall.

Verse 21 is teaching us that although the kingdom of man may *seem* to prevail, the kingdom of God *will* prevail. God is sovereign. And he's with his people to the end. And his people can take that truth to the bank. That's the message of Daniel.

But in the meantime, we don't shrink back from the world. No, we engage in the world. Daniel never returned to Jerusalem! He spent his life in Babylon, living distinctively in light of God's rule. He remained clean. But he also remained connected. We're called to do the same.

God placed his people in Babylon not just to punish them. He wanted them to be a witness to his enduring kingdom. And God provided for Daniel and his friends so they could be a witness. He placed them in the center of Babylon!

Life in exile is not simply something to survive. It's an opportunity to thrive, serving the city of man even while we remain citizens of the city of God.

⁷ Helm

God is in control of all of history, even when things seem to be spinning out of control. And this wasn't just true in Daniel's time. We see the same thing at the very center of history. Think of the cross. From one perspective, Jesus was crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. But from God's perspective, he was delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God (Acts 2:23). God so loved the world that *God gave* his only Son. God's in control. And God provides.

Those who place their trust in Christ as king, those bought by the blood of Christ, are now citizens of an everlasting kingdom. And because of our confidence in this enduring kingdom, we can live faithfully in this world. We can keep our conduct honorable among the Gentiles, as 1 Peter says (2:12). And we can bear witness to the world. We can proclaim the excellencies of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Pet. 2:9).

When kingdoms collide, we need to remember that God is in control. When there is pressure to conform to the pattern of the world, we need to remain clean in the world, but we also need to remain connected to the world.