

Daniel 1      “Eating and Learning: How to Live as a Christian in a Foreign Land” Dec 3, 2017

Every generation thinks that it is worse now than it has ever been.

Lamentations was written so that each generation can weep and wail over their misery.

Every generation also thinks that it is so bad now that this *must* be the end!

Daniel was written so that each generation can see that it may not be time yet!

Lamentations and Daniel are very different books –  
but they share at least one thing in common.

In our Bibles they are placed among the prophets –  
while the Hebrew Bible placed them among the writings.

We saw that the book of Lamentations does not contain much that would be called “prophecy” –  
either in terms of predicting or in terms of preaching.

Daniel also does not read like one of the prophets.  
Sure, there are dreams and visions –  
but those are actually rather rare among the prophets.  
Daniel fits better in the genre of “apocalyptic” –  
something that you find at the end of Ezekiel,  
or in the book of Revelation.

But in spite of some of the strange features of the book,  
Daniel is not a difficult book to understand.

The point of the book is quite obvious.

Sinclair Ferguson puts it well:

“The heart of the book’s message is...the good news of the kingdom of God.  
Nations and empires, thrones and dominions will rise and fall,  
but the city of God will endure.  
His kingdom will last forever, and the gates of hell shall not withstand it.  
The stone cut without hands will break into pieces the idols of man’s creation  
and ultimately grow into a mountain that will fill the whole earth....  
The Christian who sees and believes this will soon learn how to sing the Lord’s song  
in whatever foreign land He places us in.” (19)

The Book of Daniel has a very clear and coherent structure.

I’ve given that structure to you in your bulletin –  
but I may need to explain it!  
What you are looking at is a double chiasm!

At the center of the book is the central theme of city of God.  
Chapters 1, 9, and 12 are at the center of the story.

But then chapters 2-7 form a clear chiasm around chapter 1.  
 Chapters 2 and 7 deal with the four kingdoms (the four beasts).  
 Chapters 3 and 6 deal with the particular trials of Daniel and his friends  
 (the Fiery Furnace and the Lions' Den) –  
 moments when Daniel and his friends faced persecution and death  
 for the sake of their faith.  
 Chapters 4 and 5 then deal with the trials of the Kings of Babylon –  
 how Nebuchadnezzar passed the test – but Belshazzar did not.

The second half of the book then expounds the themes of chapters 2 and 7 –  
 what did Nebuchadnezzar's dream really mean?  
 Chapter 8 connects with 7 (the chiasm is doubling back on itself!),  
 even talking about how the *beasts* could not defeat the ram.  
 And chapters 10-11 expound Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the four kingdoms.

But at the center of the second half of the book is chapter 9 –  
 Daniel's Prayer for the restoration of Jerusalem.  
 And the book concludes with God's promise of that restoration in chapter 12.

2 – Nebuchadnezzar's Dream of Four Kingdoms      10-11 – Daniel's Vision of the Kingdoms  
 3 – Nebuchadnezzar's Golden Image (the Fiery Furnace)  
     4 – Nebuchadnezzar's Humiliation and Restoration  
 1 – Jerusalem and Babylon                      9 – 70 Weeks for Jerusalem    12 – The Time of the End  
     5 – Belshazzar's Pride and Fall  
     6 – Darius' Decree (the Lions' Den)  
 7 – Daniel's Vision of Four Beasts                      8 – The Ram and the Goat vs. the Beasts

The first part of Daniel (chapters 1-6)  
 takes the form of a third person narrative –  
 stories *about* Daniel and his friends.

The second part of Daniel (chapters 7-12)  
 takes the form of first person description of dreams and visions.

But the division into parts is not so simple!  
 After all, the book of Daniel is written in *two different languages*.  
 Chapter 1 and then chapters 8-12 are written in Hebrew (like the rest of the OT).  
 But chapters 2-7 are written in Aramaic –  
 the language of politics and diplomacy in the ancient world.

In other words, most of the stories about Daniel and his friends  
 (while they were living in Babylon and Persia)  
 are written in the language of the Babylonian court.  
 But *also* Daniel's first vision is written in that language.

But then in chapter 8, it switches back to Hebrew.

While this switch is doing many things –

the one thing that I want to highlight here

is that the change in language has the effect of *uniting* the book  
across the “stories” and “visions.”

Of course, the *content* of the visions also unites the book.

Nebuchadnezzar’s vision in chapter 2 will continue to be expounded.

But for tonight, we will focus just on how chapter 1 sets the stage *in Hebrew*.

Chapter 1 is structured by three things that the Lord *gave*.

In verse 2, the Lord gave Jehoiakim in Nebuchadnezzar’s hand.

In verse 9, God gave Daniel favor in the chief eunuch’s sight.

And in verse 17, God gave Daniel and his friends learning and skill.

### **1. “The Lord Gave Jehoiakim into His Hand” – Hostages in a Foreign Land (1-7)**

Verse 1 takes us back to the time of Jehoiakim,

the son of Josiah.

There are three deportations of people from Judah to Babylon.

The first is this one – the third year of Jehoiakim (605 BC).

The second was in 597 – when Ezekiel was taken into captivity.

The third was after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC.

In the book of Kings the first deportation is only referred to briefly –

In 2 Kings 24:1, we are told that in Jehoiakim’s days,

“Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came up,  
and Jehoiakim became his servant three years.”

It was common in those days for hostages to be given – as pledges of good behavior –

so when it says that “Jehoiakim became his servant” –

it would make sense that various hostages would be taken –  
youths from the royal family and from the nobility.

In Isaiah 39, back in the days of King Hezekiah (around the year 700 B.C.),

Hezekiah had welcomed envoys from Babylon

(back when Babylon was just a little upstart city –

challenging great might of Assyria) –

and Hezekiah showed them all his storehouses

(the implication being that Jerusalem had the resources to assist Babylon  
against Assyria!).

But the prophet Isaiah had chided Hezekiah for this, saying:

“Behold, the days are coming,

when all that is in your house,

and that which your fathers have stored up till this day,  
shall be carried to Babylon.

Nothing shall be left, says the LORD.  
And some of your own sons, who will come from you, whom you will father,  
shall be taken away,  
and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.” (Is 39:6-7)

Now that day has come.

But I want you to pay attention to *how* the book of Daniel tells this story:

**a. Two Kings, Two Cities, Two Temples, Two Gods (v1-2)**

*In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. <sup>2</sup> And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God. And he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his god.*

Daniel has a strong focus on liturgy and on matters related to worship and the temple.

The ceremonial laws play a key role here in chapter 1 (on remaining *clean*)  
and throughout the book of Daniel.

You see it already in verse 2 with the vessels of the house of God  
being placed in the treasury of Nebuchadnezzar’s god.

In verses 1-2 there are two kings, two cities, two temples, and two gods.

Everything is set up in parallel:

Jehoiakim and Nebuchadnezzar,  
Jerusalem and Babylon,  
the house of God and the house of *his* god.

The only disjunction is found in that while Adonai is named in verse 2,  
the other god is *not* named at all.

It is simply “his god.”

The gods of Babylon will never be named in the book of Daniel.

You can see them everywhere in the background –

but Daniel never “honors” them by naming them!

In the eyes of the nations, Marduk has triumphed over Yahweh –

as the vessels from Yahweh’s temple are placed in Marduk’s temple.

But this is the way that Yahweh gains the victory over the nations!

Captivity and exile are the way to glory!

That was true in the book of Samuel,

when the ark of the covenant was taken into the temple of Dagon.

And it will be true in the gospels,

when Jesus will be crucified by the Romans.

The only way to glory is the way of the cross.

The incarnation – where the Word became flesh –  
the humiliation of the Son of God –  
is a theme that runs throughout the whole of the Scriptures!

And yet the chief actor in chapter 1 (and throughout Daniel) remains the Lord God of Israel.  
God is the one who gave Jehoiakim into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar.  
God is the one who gave Daniel favor in the sight of the chief eunuch.  
God is the one who gave Daniel and his friends wisdom and skill.

Here there is no lament over Jerusalem (that will come in Daniel 9).  
Here the focus is on how God works all things together for good  
for those who love him – for those who are called according to his purpose.

Undoubtedly being carried away as hostages to Babylon was a frightening experience!  
(And that's why we have the book of Lamentations!)  
But you cannot live forever in Lamentations!  
God *calls you* to live for him in the midst of a foreign culture.

And we see this particularly in verses 3-5:

#### **b. Cult and Culture (v3-5)**

<sup>3</sup> Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family<sup>[a]</sup> and of the nobility, <sup>4</sup> youths without blemish, of good appearance and skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king's palace, and to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans. <sup>5</sup> The king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate, and of the wine that he drank. They were to be educated for three years, and at the end of that time they were to stand before the king.

Nebuchadnezzar wants these Israelite youths to understand and embrace Chaldean culture.  
We often think of “culture” as something neutral –  
but it is important to understand that the idea of *culture*  
is rooted in the idea of *cultus* – worship.  
Culture is *always* shaped and formed by cult – by worship practices.

The book of Daniel will be very helpful for teaching us  
how to engage with modern culture while remaining faithful to our God.

Here, in verse 3, Nebuchadnezzar commands Ashpenaz (his chief eunuch)  
to choose some of the people of Israel and train them in Babylonian culture.

As one commentator puts it,  
“They are to have status, looks, brains, and ‘presence.’” (Davis, 30)  
At least, that's the way the Babylonians would put it.

But if you pay attention to the language used,  
these are to be “youths without blemish” –  
language that reminds us of the characteristics of the priests in Leviticus.  
They are also to be of “good appearance” –  
language that was used of David in 1 Samuel 16 and 17.  
They are also to be “skillful in all wisdom” –  
language that is also used of David four times in 1 Samuel 18,  
and frequently of Solomon.  
Indeed, *all of this language* is used regularly of David and Solomon.

In other words, while Nebuchadnezzar is just thinking about status, looks, brains, and presence,  
the book of Daniel is using language to show us  
that these young men are priestly and kingly in their qualities.

In this way Daniel and his friends are not representative of “ordinary Israelites.”  
They are the cream of the crop –  
they prefigure our Lord Jesus Christ –  
as they endure humiliation and testing on behalf of the people of God.

And they are set the task of studying “the literature and language of the Chaldeans.”  
This would mean learning Akkadian and Aramaic –  
and studying theology, history, astronomy, mathematics, and medicine.  
Babylon had been a center of learning and writing for more than a thousand years  
so they would have access to the finest libraries in the ancient world!

Much of Babylonian learning blended religious and scientific observation.  
Their astronomers studied the heavens religiously!  
They believed that the movements of the heavenly bodies affected things on earth,  
and one of the most common ways that people had access  
to this heavenly information was through dreams.

So Daniel and his friends would have learned all of this – and more!

And while our text is written from an Israelite standpoint – in Hebrew –  
it is worth pointing out that from the Babylonian standpoint,  
there is a certain generosity in bringing these poor provincials  
into the grand and glorious circle of Babylonian culture and wisdom!  
Sure, there is a political motive:  
if young people from conquered nations  
learn to appreciate Babylonian culture and wisdom,  
then they may be able to “elevate” their countrymen  
and thus these “foreign” nations can be made a permanent part of the empire!

This is a sort of *cultural imperialism* –  
Of course these benighted provincials would benefit from our superior wisdom!

You see the same tendency in American imperialism in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.  
The American way of doing things may work well for America.

But why do we think that it will work for other nations?

The Arab spring a few years ago  
demonstrated very clearly that American-style democracy  
did not make life better for Egyptian minorities –  
because the Egyptian people simply voted in an Islamist government  
that would make sure that there would never be another free election!

America has demonstrated repeatedly that we are more like Babylon  
than we are like Jerusalem!

We try to impose our culture through economic and political force –  
sometimes even military force.

And further, like Babylon, we think that education  
will transform the hearts and minds of our enemies and persuade them of our wisdom!

### **c. Daniel and His Friends (v6-7)**

*<sup>6</sup> Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah of the tribe of Judah. <sup>7</sup> And the chief of the eunuchs gave them names: Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego.*

But it's not just about "education."

Nebuchadnezzar wants these Israelite youth to fully embrace their new world.

And so among their humiliation is the stripping away of all that they had once known –  
even their names.

Daniel (God is my Judge)

becomes Belteshazzar (O Lady protect the King)

Hananiah (Yahweh is gracious)

becomes Shadrach (command of Aku – the moon god)

Mishael (Who is what God is?)

becomes Meshach (Who is like Aku?)

Azariah (Yahweh is a helper)

becomes Abednego (servant of Nebo – the shining one).

In other words, all of them had been named with the name of God –  
and now they must be called by the names of other gods!

We struggle today with the question of how to use gendered pronouns.

If a man says, "call me a woman" –

what do you do?

Well, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah had a worse problem:

it wasn't merely "call me something I'm not" –  
they themselves were renamed with the names of foreign gods.

From now on your name is not Azariah (Yahweh is a helper).  
Your name is Abednego (Servant of Nebo).

It is instructive to us to then watch how Daniel and his friends respond to this situation.  
They accept their new names.  
This *is* what they will be called.  
They embrace this new education – and do very well in their examinations!

In Hebrew, the verbs in verse 7 are the same as the first verb in verse 8.  
The chief eunuch "set" the names of Daniel and his friends.  
Now Daniel *sets himself* to not defile himself with the king's food.

In Hebrew, it is very clear that the chief eunuch is setting one standard –  
and now Daniel is setting another!

Notice where they draw the line:

## **2. "God Gave Daniel Favor" – Why Eating Food Sacrificed to Idols Is Worse than Pagan Learning (8-16)**

### **a. The Problem of Defilement (v8)**

<sup>8</sup> *But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself.*

Why is this the issue for Daniel?

Pagan learning is not a problem.

After all, my God made the heavens and the earth –  
therefore, everything that I am studying belongs to God.  
All truth is God's truth.

Being called by a pagan name may be frustrating –  
but I am not sinning by answering to that name.

I am simply acknowledging that things are not the way they should be right now!!

But eating the king's food – drinking the king's wine – that is a different matter!

All the meat in the Babylonian court has been sacrificed to the Babylonian gods.  
All the wine has been offered in a drink offering to the gods of Babylon.

To eat the king's meat and drink the king's wine  
is to partake of the covenant meal with Marduk.

Now, some have argued that even the vegetables would have been offered to Marduk.

That may be.

But the point here is *not* a rigid observance of every detail of Levitical law.



Rather, the point is that Daniel is choosing to draw the line  
at a point where it is *possible* to find accommodation.  
And at a point of daily practice –  
where the rhythms and patterns of daily life  
will function to remind him and his friends  
that while they are servants of the King of Babylon,  
they still belong *more* to the Lord God of Israel!

Think about it!

If they refuse their new names, they will likely be killed –  
and furthermore, God never said anything about names!

But what they eat?

In refusing the King's meat and wine  
Daniel and his friends are quietly declaring their adherence  
to the LORD God of Israel.

If you go back and read the food laws in Leviticus –  
you will be struck by the repetitions of the phrase,  
“I am the LORD your God.”

Observing the food laws are one of the basic ways  
that Israelites maintain their distinctive identity.

The basic point is that Daniel does not want to be squeezed into the mold of Babylon.

He cannot guarantee that *everything* he eats will be kosher!

But by refusing the meat and wine of the king,  
he is preserving his distinctive identity as belonging to GOD –  
not to Nebuchadnezzar.

We are not obligated by the food laws of the OT –

but Paul will speak of the importance of not eating meat sacrificed to idols –  
because we should not partake of the table of demons!

It's not that the meat itself is defiled –

rather, it is the *significance* of the meal.

If eating this meal identifies you with Babylon –

with the gods of the nations –

with the powers of this age –

then don't eat the meal!

This is why fasting is a useful Christian discipline.

When we fast, we are saying that we belong God.

Our culture prizes food.

We have turned our ordinary meals into banquets!

So Daniel makes the request to Ashpenaz – the chief eunuch.

It's important for us to also pay attention to the *manner* in which  
Daniel makes the request.

He does not stage a public protest.

A public protest would shame the chief eunuch –

and thus would almost certainly *not end well* for Daniel!

You see Daniel’s wisdom clearly in how he goes privately to the chief eunuch,  
thereby enabling the back-and-forth of a quiet conversation.

And so verse 9 tells us that:

**b. The Compassion of the Steward (v9-16)**

<sup>9</sup> *And God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs, <sup>10</sup> and the chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, “I fear my lord the king, who assigned your food and your drink; for why should he see that you were in worse condition than the youths who are of your own age? So you would endanger my head with the king.”*

In other words, I would like to do what you ask –  
but not at the risk of my life!

Now, that may not sound like “favor and compassion” from Ashpenaz!

It sounds like he is saying “no.”

But that’s because we are modern Midwestern Americans!

We like people who say exactly what they are thinking!

But anyone from a culture that is used to more indirect speech  
would immediately see an opening in this “NO!”

namely: “why should he see that you were in worse condition...”

In other words, Ashpenaz says to Daniel,

“So long as you guys *look* good – and make me look good – I don’t care what you do!”

That’s why Daniel feels perfectly comfortable going to the steward appointed by Ashpenaz:

<sup>11</sup> *Then Daniel said to the steward whom the chief of the eunuchs had assigned over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, <sup>12</sup> “Test your servants for ten days; let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. <sup>13</sup> Then let our appearance and the appearance of the youths who eat the king’s food be observed by you, and deal with your servants according to what you see.”*

Ten days is a short enough time that any ill-effect could be quickly reversed  
before the king finds out!

<sup>14</sup> *So he listened to them in this matter, and tested them for ten days. <sup>15</sup> At the end of ten days it was seen that they were better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youths who ate the king’s food. <sup>16</sup> So the steward took away their food and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables.*

“Vegetables” would include fruits and grains – basically all the produce of the ground.

I like how one commentator puts this:

“Daniel and the three are feeling their way forward in a moment without a spiritual map. The narrative they knew of divine faithfulness in history has come to an end, and all they can do is improvise acts of faithfulness in a land where they cannot see the old monuments.” (Sumner, 126)

But I want you to see the pattern here:

The turning point in chapter 1 comes when Daniel takes a stand.  
As long as Daniel and his friends are “going with the flow” of Babylonian culture, there will be no story to tell.  
It is only at the point of resistance –  
where Daniel and his friends determine to live a faithful life  
in the middle of Babylonian culture –  
only there do you see the glory of God revealed!

And the result is seen in verse 17

### **3. “God Gave Them Learning and Skill” – Wisdom and Pagan Learning (17-21)**

*17 As for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams. 18 At the end of the time, when the king had commanded that they should be brought in, the chief of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar. 19 And the king spoke with them, and among all of them none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Therefore they stood before the king. 20 And in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his kingdom. 21 And Daniel was there until the first year of King Cyrus.*

And the result is that God gave these youths learning and skill in all literature and wisdom.

Daniel alone is given understanding in all visions and dreams.  
But the other three – Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah –  
are included as being “ten times better” in their wisdom and understanding  
“than all the magicians and enchanters” of Babylon.

Notice the quiet reversal of verses 1-2.

In verses 1-2, God gave Jerusalem over to Babylon  
Now God gives the youths of Jerusalem high standing in Babylon.

Indeed, over the coming chapters we will see these youths come to play a key role  
in the governing of Babylon!

But when you watch how they rule –  
they rule with wisdom and grace.

They do not seek to “subvert” Babylon.

They seek the peace – the welfare – of the city where they have been called.

They love their enemies and do good to those who persecute them.

Verse 21 then tells us:

*And Daniel was there until the first year of King Cyrus.*

The first year of King Cyrus was the year 539 B.C.

That's 66 years after Daniel was taken captive from Jerusalem.

By 539, Daniel would have been at least 80 years old.

Kingdoms rise.

Kingdoms fall.

But God's people endure amidst the wrack and ruin of empires.

In Dale Ralph Davis's memorable way of saying it:

“So in verse 21 Babylon, the hairy-chested macho brute of the world,

has dropped with a thud into the mausoleum of history,

while fragile Daniel, servant of the Most High God, is still on his feet.”

The servants of God will outlast the empires of this age!

“The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments,

and I will never blot his name out of the book of life.” (Rev. 3:5)