

## God's Grace in the Devil's Den

Daniel 1:1–21

Studies in Daniel #2

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**I** WANT to begin by asking you to think of the great tragedies of the twentieth century. World War I: 50 million dead. World War II: 70 million dead. Communism: 100 million dead. Tragic. Now think back and ask yourself, “If I was a Jew, what was the greatest tragedy we experienced?” Around the year 600BC the new great kingdom of the Middle East was Babylon. As verses 1–3 describe, because of Judah’s sins, the Lord **gave** his own people to the Babylonians led by Nebuchadnezzar. They invaded the Lord’s Promised Land; they destroyed the Lord’s city Jerusalem and his house the temple; they took the Lord’s children captive and exiled them to Babylon. If you were a Jew, this probably felt like the end of the world. There, Daniel wrote to encourage his brothers and sisters that the sovereign God brought them there and to exhort them to live faithfully to him for the next seventy years. Daniel 1 is the story of *God’s grace in the devil’s den*.

### **The Devil’s Tactics of Conquest (vv. 1–7)**

God **gave** King Jehoiakim, the temple furnishings, and captives into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar (vv. 1–3). The devil thought this meant God

abandoned them so he went to work! Notice *the devil's tactics of conquest*.

The first tactic was *isolation*: **Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family** (“seed of the kingdom”) **and of the nobility** (v. 3). He took a select few of the upper echelons of society for a special cause. **Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah of the tribe of Judah** (v. 6). Those the king chose were **youths**—not children but young men, perhaps 14–15 years old.<sup>1</sup> They had to be **without blemish** as physical form was associated with mental ability in the ancient world; they had to be **of good appearance**, meaning handsome; they had to be **skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning**, meaning a mental capacity; and they had to be **competent to stand in the king's palace**, meaning a physical ability to serve (v. 4). Nebuchadnezzar wanted young, good-looking, and smart young men as trophies to grace his halls.

And these select few were exposed to a second tactic: *indoctrination*. These were taken **to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans** (v. 4). As we say, whoever controls the young generation, controls the future. Nebuchadnezzar had to win the hearts and minds of all

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<sup>1</sup> Young, 40.

the Jews, not just conquer them. The way to do that was through the political elite. This is how societies have worked for thousands of years; it's how it works today. Let me plead with you parents that no matter where your kids go to school to teach them that this world is God's! In 17+ years as pastor of this church I've heard it all when it comes to parents who are worried about keeping their children in the faith: "If we only had our own Christian school; if we only all home-schooled co-operatively; if we only had a youth group; if we only did short-term missions' trips; if we only..."

Brothers and sisters, teach your children the Word at home, show them the importance of the Lord's Day by your commitment to public worship, and pray for the Holy Spirit to give them new hearts!

But how would a pagan conqueror get Jews to forsake their scrolls from God for the scrolls of his gods? Notice the tactic of *sedation*: **the king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate, and of the wine that he drank** (v. 5). One of the tactics the Devil uses to lure us away from the Word is luxury and prosperity. While the rest of the Jews were exiles, these men were the king's guests. Again, how often do we complain to the church about our children's lack of interest in the things of God all the while we have allowed them to be shaped by the world!

The final strategy was *identification*: **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** (v. 7). We're not quite sure what the names actually mean, but it's clear that the two names associated with Yahweh—**Hananiah** and **Azariah**—were changed to reflect Babylonian gods as **Shadrach** has something to do with Marduk and **Abednego** is servant of Nebo.<sup>2</sup> What's Nebuchadnezzar's overall tactic here? He gave them an extreme makeover: a new culture in their literature, new luxury unlike other captives, and new identities with new names to would help them forget their God. We face these same tactics, brothers and sisters. Every time we go online, turn on the car radio, open a book, or talk with a neighbor. And sadly, churches follow suit with all their methods and strategies. It's no wonder one person said the church is a mile wide but an inch deep.

### **Daniel's Tactics of Commitment (vv. 8–20)**

Someone has to take a stand! Someone did. Remember, Daniel's purpose here is to encourage the Jews that God is in control but also to exhort to faithfulness. Notice *Daniel's tactics of commitment*.

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<sup>2</sup> See Davis, 30 n9.

First, there's his *resolution*. In verse 7 **the chief of the eunuchs gave** (lit, "set," *sim*) **them names: Daniel he called** (lit, "set," *sim*) **Belteshazzar**, and then right after in verse 8 we read, **but Daniel resolved** (lit, "set," *sim*) **that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank** (v. 8). Why does Daniel do this? One view says because some of the Babylonian food would've been forbidden by the Law. It's possible but how would wine fit this interpretation? Another view is Daniel resolved this because the king's food would've been associated with sacrifices to the gods. Most likely it was, but again, how would Daniel be assured the food he *did* ask for wasn't also? Another view is Daniel decided this because to take the king's food showed allegiance to the king. But again, so would have eating any food that Daniel ate).<sup>3</sup> It's possible that there's a little of all this involved, but I think the best possible interpretation of Daniel's decision is that after all Nebuchadnezzar's attempts to remake Daniel and his friends, Daniel decided to draw *this* last line in the sand to show that he was not completely assimilated but had his own identity as a child of God. If I asked you to think of one example of Daniel's heroism, what would you think of? Stopping the mouths of lions in the den (Heb. 11). But Daniel's actions at the dining table

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<sup>3</sup> Davis, 31-32.

were just as heroic and as his actions in the den of lions. And what this shows us is that Satan attacks the children of God by using the world not merely in obvious and outward ways to attack us face to face, but subtly, in causing us to accommodate and assimilate.<sup>4</sup> What's your line in the sand?

Daniel's second tactic is *graciousness*. **Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself.** Daniel graciously asked this of the chief. He didn't pretend to be a martyr, he wasn't a zealot about his "conscience being bound" as we so often claim! After Daniel's request **the chief** explained, **"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"** (v. 10). It seems Daniel's graciousness removed some of the wall of hostility as the **chief** only turned down *this* proposal of not eating the king's food, but left the door open.

So **Daniel** proposed another way **to the steward** another official **whom the chief of the eunuchs had assigned over Daniel** and his friends (v. 11). He asked him to do a **"test...for ten days; let us be given vegetables** (what is sown, so veg, fruit, beans, even to bread) **to eat and water to**

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<sup>4</sup> Veldkamp, 16.

**drink. 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"** (vv. 12–13). Amazingly **the steward...listened to them in this matter** (v. 14). Amazingly Daniel's test worked! He and his friends were **better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youths who ate the king's food. So the steward took away their food and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables** (vv. 15–16). And we see that Daniel's resolve and graciousness also led to the outcome that **at the end of the time** of their three years of training (v. 5), **when the king had commanded that they should be brought in...the king spoke with them, and among all of them none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah...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** (vv. 18, 19, 20). Daniel loved the Lord with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength; and God blesses commitment.

### **God's Testimony to His Covenant (vv. 2, 9, 17, 21)**

Here's the big question I've been holding off until now: why is it that all of Satan's strategies manifested in Nebuchadnezzar's tactics were

ineffective in the lives of Daniel and his friends? And why, in contrast, were they particularly blessed in appearance and wisdom, which is what Nebuchadnezzar wanted in the first place—good looking and sharp thinking trophies of his conquest? Notice *God's testimony to his covenant*.

There's a key word in this chapter that shows up three times in key places: **gave** (*natan*). In verse 2 **the Lord gave** the Jews **into** Nebuchadnezzar's **hand**. That emphasized his sovereignty but also his covenant faithfulness as he had said he would do this if Israel was disobedient to him.

But in verses 9 and 17 the emphasis of the Lord's giving is on his gracious covenant faithfulness: **God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs** (v. 9). Why would the chief be so disarmed? Why would the steward listen? Why would pagans care about their captives? How did Daniel and his friends look so healthy? God gave this! And how did Daniel and his friends distinguish themselves in learning above their peers? **God gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams** (v. 17).



This chapter takes place at the beginning of Israel's 70 years of captivity, but it gives us a preview of the end: **and Daniel was there until the first year of King Cyrus** (v. 21). What a testimony of God's faithfulness to his covenant promises! This story is about assimilating Jews into the Babylonian kingdom; but it gives a glimpse of the outcome: **Daniel**, not **Belteshazzar**, remained through Babylon's rise and fall. He belonged to the LORD way before he belonged to Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel experienced Psalm 137: "By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our lyres. ...How shall we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?" (vv. 1-2, 4) But he also experienced Psalm 126: "When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy" (vv. 1-2).

The ultimate illustration of this is how Neb made Daniel read the Babylonian books, take a Babylonian name, and try by the delicacies of Babylonian luxury to get him to become Babylonian; yet, Daniel remained faithful. And because he did, the day would come when wise men from the East would bow to the King of kings and Lord of lords!