

Daniel 1:6-20

Introduction

Last week we saw that though Daniel was a prophet and though there are certainly many prophecies in Daniel, the emphasis in Daniel is not really on Daniel the prophet, but rather on Daniel the “wise man” – the man of wisdom. The emphasis in Daniel is not really on Daniel the prophet, but rather on Daniel the man who shows us what it looks like to live life skillfully in exile on the basis of the insight that has been given him into the sovereign, saving purposes of God. We read in verses 3-5 of Daniel chapter one:

- **Daniel 1:3-5** — Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility, youths without blemish, of good appearance and skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding insight/discernment, and competent to stand in the king’s palace.

Of course, Nebuchadnezzar wasn’t looking for young men with true biblical wisdom. He wasn’t looking for youths who knew how to live life skillfully on the basis of their insight into God’s sovereign, saving purposes. But the irony of the language here in these verses is that this really is what’s at stake for these youths *from the “people of Israel”* (1:3) who are now to be taught “the literature and the language of the *Chaldeans*” (1:4) What will it look like to live life skillfully *in exile* when a foreign king is attempting to weaken your loyalty to your own people and to the God of your own people on the one hand, and on the other hand to assimilate and absorb you into the Chaldean way of life?

The youths from the people of Israel were assigned 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 (1:5). We ended last week with verses 6-7:

I. Daniel 1:6-7 — Among these [youths] were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah of the tribe of Judah. 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.

Remember that the identity of these young men as members of the people of *Yis-ra-el* – of God’s covenant people – was embedded in their names. *El* is an abbreviated form of the Hebrew word for “God,” *Elohim*, and so *da-niy-yel* means “*God* is my Judge” and *mi-sha-el* means “Who is what *God* is?” *Yah* is an abbreviated form of *Yahweh*, so Hananiah (*Hanan-yah*) means “Yahweh has been gracious” and Azariah (*Azar-yah*) means “Yahweh has helped.”

Now this is really important. Did their names *make* them members of God’s covenant people? No, of course not! There was nothing magical in their names so that changing their names made them any less a part of God’s people than they were before. Their names were “just” a way of celebrating their identity. They were a constant reminder of who they were as members of the people that God had chosen for Himself. So now we need to ask ourselves the same question that I’m sure Daniel had to ask himself: When Nebuchadnezzar gives them new names honoring

Babylonian gods (cf. Dan. 4:8) and symbolizing the new identity that he expects them to take among the Chaldean people, how should Daniel and his three friends respond? What will it look like to live life “skillfully” in this situation?

On the one hand, since it’s not their names that make their identity, it’s really not the end of the world is it? There is a sense in which we can rightfully say, “It’s *just* a name.” So throughout the book of Daniel, we see that Daniel and his three friends have no problem responding to these new, Babylonian names. Daniel doesn’t even have a problem referring to himself and to the others by their new names if it helps to keep things simpler.

□ **Daniel 4:19** — The king answered and said, “Belteshazzar, let not the dream or the interpretation alarm you.” Belteshazzar answered and said, “My lord, may the dream be for those who hate you...”

Belteshazzar didn’t answer and say, “That’s not my name and until you call me ‘*Daniel*’ I’m not going to tell you the interpretation of your dream.” We see a similar example with Daniel’s three friends:

□ **Daniel 3:26** — Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the door of the burning fiery furnace; he declared, “*Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego*, servants of the Most High God, come out, and come here!” Then *Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego* came out from the fire.

Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednego didn’t say, “Those aren’t our names and until you call us Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah we’re not coming out from the fire.” Daniel and his three friends accepted the fact that these were the names by which the Babylonians would call them and that they would respond to these names without any objections. At the end of the day it’s not what others choose to call them that determines who they really are or where their loyalty and allegiance really lies.

And yet—do their names not matter at all? Does this mean that—except for any sentimental attachments—Daniel and his friends should have no objections to these new names that have been given to them in honor of the Babylonian gods? How far should we really be able to go in telling ourselves, “It’s just a name”? The answer to that question, I believe, is this: Only so far as wisdom and the strength of our love and devotion to the Lord will allow. Yes, Daniel could have said: “It’s just a name. What’s the difference? From now on my name is Belteshazzar because I know it doesn’t really change anything.” Technically, that might be true. But practically, what might this be revealing about the strength of Daniel’s love and devotion to the Lord – especially in the culture of Daniel’s day, *and especially in the midst of exile*? When I’m truly devoted to the Lord and cherishing my identity as a member of His chosen people, what will it mean to me when my name is changed from *Da-niy-yel* to *Belteshazzar* (“Bel protect his life” or “Bel protect the king?”), from *Hanan-yah* to *Shadrach* (possibly, “The command of Aku” or “The command of Marduk”), from *Mi-sha-el* to *Meshach* (possibly, “Who is what Aku is?”), and from *Azar-yah* to *Abednego* (“Servant of Nebo”)? On the one hand, I can accept that others are going to call me by this name and I can answer to this name without objection because this is something over which I have no control and because the name doesn’t make me who I am, but can I ever really

be at peace with this name? It's just a name!—yes—but because of the strength of my devotion to the Lord I simply *cannot*—no matter how hard I might ever try—I cannot, and *must* not own that name myself.

And so it appears that “Belteshazzar,” “Shadrach,” “Meshach,” and “Abednego” are not actually the names that Nebuchadnezzar’s chief eunuch gave to these four young men. All of these names are so difficult that a number of scholars and commentators have concluded they’ve been deliberately altered and corrupted—or “misspelled”—by Daniel. So it seems likely that the *real* name given to Daniel was *Belshazzar*, and not the misspelled *Belteshazzar*. Likewise, the real name given to Azariah was probably *Abednebo* and not the purposely altered *Abednego*. The other names are even more difficult and so it’s even more difficult to guess at the original names that probably lie behind them. So what is Daniel doing here? Is he overreacting? Is he just making a big deal out of nothing? What do you think? Daniel twists and misspells these names—especially the parts of the names identifying the gods (*Bel* to *Belt* / *Nebo* to *Nego*)—not because he really thinks that a name has any magical power to make him who he is; he does this only because of the depth of his love and devotion to the Lord, the only true God, and also because he wisely recognizes the real threat and the real danger of exile. *Because of that love and devotion in the midst of the threat of exile*, these names grieve him. *Because of that love and devotion in the midst of the threat of exile*, when Daniel writes these names himself he never fails to “misspell” them as an expression of his rejection of all these so-called “gods” that are totally powerless to save. *Because of that love and devotion in the midst of the threat of exile*, it’s the Hebrew names “*Da-niy-yel*,” “*Hanan-yah*,” “*Mi-sha-el*,” and “*Azar-yah*” that these four youths *continue* to own as their only “true” names.

- **Daniel 1:11** — Then Daniel said to the steward whom the chief of the eunuchs had assigned over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah...
- **Daniel 1:19** — And the king spoke with them, and among all of them none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.
- **Daniel 2:17** — Then Daniel went to his house and made the matter known to Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, his companions...

The names “Shadrach,” “Meshach,” and “Abednego” are used only in chapter three (cf. also 2:49) in a context where these youths are being spoken about and spoken to *by Babylonians* (cf. 3:12, 14). Did you ever wonder if Daniel would be disappointed that most of us are far more familiar with “Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednego” than we are with Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah? We’ll hear the name “Belteshazzar” nine more times in the book of Daniel, and every time it will be in a context where it’s prefaced with something like this:

- **Daniel 2:26** — The king declared **to Daniel**, whose name was Belteshazzar...
- **Daniel 10:1** — In the third year of Cyrus king of Persia a word was revealed **to Daniel**, who was named Belteshazzar...
- **Daniel 4:8–9, 18–19** (cf. 5:12) — At last **Daniel** came in before me [is this Nebuchadnezzar’s acknowledgement of the God of Israel?]*—*he who was named Belteshazzar after the name of my god...—and I told him the dream, saying, “O Belteshazzar, chief of the magicians... tell me the visions of my dream that I saw and their

interpretation... O Belteshazzar, tell me the interpretation... **Then Daniel**, whose name was Belteshazzar...

After we're told of the new name given to Daniel, that name (Belteshazzar) appears only nine more times, but it's the name "*Da-niy-yel*" that appears 73 more times, and it's specifically this *name* that Daniel seems to emphasize and even take special pleasure in.

- **Daniel 7:15** — As for **me, Daniel**, my spirit within me was anxious...
- **Daniel 7:28** — As for **me, Daniel**, my thoughts greatly alarmed me...
- **Daniel 8:1** — In the third year... a vision appeared to **me, Daniel**...
- **Daniel 8:27** — **I, Daniel**, was overcome and lay sick for some days.
- **Daniel 9:2** — In the first year... **I, Daniel**, perceived in the books...
- **Daniel 10:2** — In those days **I, Daniel**, was mourning for three weeks.
- **Daniel 10:7** — **I, Daniel**, alone saw the vision...
- **Daniel 12:5** — Then **I, Daniel**, looked, and behold...

Not only does Daniel go to extra lengths to refer *to himself* by this name, but so, too, does the angelic messenger from God:

- **Daniel 9:22** — **O Daniel**, I have now come out to give you insight and understanding.
- **Daniel 10:11** — **O Daniel**, man greatly loved...
- **Daniel 10:12** — Fear not, **Daniel**...
- **Daniel 12:4** — But **you, Daniel**, shut up the words and seal the book...
- **Daniel 12:9** — Go your way, **Daniel**...

One commentator writes: "It appears that in [the Babylonians'] attempt to give the Judean youths a new identity and allegiance, they bestowed names that associate them with Babylonian gods. The remarkable fact is that the Hebrew youths did not choose to fight this battle" (Longman). That's true to a point, but it's not at all the full picture, is it? Yes, Daniel and his friends can accept that others are going to call them by these names and they can even answer to these names without any objection or pangs of conscience because "they're just names"—right? That's the battle they're not going to fight. And yet they cannot—they simply *cannot*—own these names themselves because, on the other hand, they're *not* "just names"—are they? They're a constant affront to these Hebrew youths' most deeply held convictions and identity. They're a constant representation of the very real threat of exile. The point, here, isn't just sentimentality (I miss my old name), and neither is it "legalism" (these names have some power of their own) – it's theology, and devotion, and wisdom. Because of their love and devotion to the Lord in the midst of the threat of exile—because of how they cherished their identity as members of God's covenant people *Yis-ra-el*, there *is* a battle here that these Hebrew youths are willing to fight – even with respect to their names. Are you beginning to see *in this* what "skillful living" looks like? We read in verse seven:

II. Daniel 1:7a — And the chief of the eunuchs gave them names...

That sounds innocent enough, doesn't it? But let's look a little closer. The normal word that's used for "naming" is the Hebrew *qara*; for example, "he *called* his name Solomon" (2 Sam. 12:24; cf. Gen. 35:10; 41:45; Ruth 4:17). *Qara* is used in the Old Testament for naming someone 95 times. But there are four times where a different word is used. *Sym* means "to set" or "put" or "place" something.

- **Judges 8:31** — [Gideon's] concubine... also bore him a son, and he called his name [lit. "he set (*sym*) his name to be"] Abimelech.
- **Nehemiah 9:7** — You are the LORD, the God who chose Abram... and gave him the name [lit. "set (*sym*) for him the name"] Abraham.
- **2 Kings 17:34** — They do not follow the statutes... that the LORD commanded the children of Jacob, whom he named [lit. "whose name he set (*sym*) to be"] Israel.

In all three of these examples, the one doing the naming is expressing his own authority and intentions. Gideon arrogantly "set" his own son's name to be Abimelech, which means "My father is king." When God sets a new name for Abram and then also for Jacob, he's asserting his authority and also expressing his own gracious intentions for "Abraham" and "Israel." The only other place where this word, *sym*, is used in the context of naming someone is here in Daniel chapter one.

"And the chief of the eunuchs *set* [*way-ya-sem*] for them names..." When Daniel uses this expression, I think he's trying to communicate something ominous. The chief of the eunuchs doesn't just "call" them by new names, he "sets" for them new names. And so what Daniel perceives in this renaming is an attack on their identity as God's people. What Daniel perceives in this renaming is the Babylonians' intention to absorb him and his three companions into their pagan culture. What Daniel perceives in this renaming is the inescapable threat and danger of exile. Do we perceive this same threat and danger in our exile today? That's actually one of the prerequisites for living life skillfully and wisely.

We go on to read in verse eight:

III. Daniel 1:8a — But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank.

Literally: "But Daniel *set* (*way-ya-sem*) his heart that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank." The chief of the eunuchs "set for them names," and in response to this, Daniel "set his heart."

What was the problem with eating the king's food or drinking the king's wine? Did it have something to do with the unclean animals that God had commanded his people not to eat? Maybe. But wine is never mentioned in the food laws of Israel and Daniel specifically "sets his heart" not to defile himself with the wine that the king drinks. Does this have something to do with the king's food having been sacrificed to idols? Maybe, but even the grains and fruits and vegetables that Daniel requests would probably be just as likely to have been offered to idols.

Later on, in chapter ten, we learn that the much older Daniel had no objections to eating meat or drinking wine in Babylon (10:2-3). So what is Daniel so concerned about?

Notice the emphasis on the fact that this is the *king's* “food” (*pat-bag*) and the wine that the *king* drank. Aside from Daniel 1 the only other place in the Old Testament where we find this word for “food” is in Daniel chapter eleven:

□ **Daniel 11:25–26** — Plots shall be devised against [the king of the south]. *Even those who eat his food (pat-bag) shall break him.*

The point here is that those who enjoy eating the king's food are normally assumed to be the most loyal and the most devoted to the king. So try to put yourself in Daniel's shoes. To quote one commentator: “Nebuchadnezzar has just defiled the temple in Jerusalem and plundered its utensils... Daniel is about to undergo a process of induction into Babylonian culture (including its religion). His name has been changed from one extolling the God of Israel to one invoking a Babylonian deity” (Lucas). How, then, can Daniel bring himself to sit down and enjoy the meat and the wine and all the rich foods that come from this pagan king's table?

Is Daniel overreacting? Is he making a big deal out of nothing? At the end of the day it's not the food that he eats that determines who he is or where his loyalties really lie is it? *And yet*, does the food that he eats not matter at all? Yes, Daniel could have said: “It's just the king's food. What's the difference? I can eat the king's food because I know it doesn't change anything.”

Technically, that might be true. But *practically*, what might this reveal about the strength of Daniel's love and devotion to the Lord – especially in the culture of Daniel's day; *especially* in that context of the constant threat and danger of exile?

Are you seeing here, again, what skillful living looks like? For Daniel, when he sets his heart on this it's not just a way of *avoiding* defilement, it's a way for him to positively express and make concrete his loyalty and devotion to the God of Israel (cf. Lucas). It's a way for him to proactively fight back, not against the Babylonian officials (they're not the real enemy), but rather against that constant threat of assimilation – of being squeezed into the mold of the pagan culture that's all around him. What are the ways that we choose to do this today as we live, just like Daniel, in exile – with all the threats and all the dangers that this exile brings? Do we know what it is to live based on positive *conviction* (*not* legalism!), or do we seek only to avoid any awareness of guilt? We go on to read in the second half of verse 8:

IV. Daniel 1:8 — Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself.

Daniel handles himself with tact and humility (with wisdom). He “*asks*” the chief of the eunuchs to “*allow*” him not to defile himself. What if the chief of the eunuchs had refused his request? I'm not sure what Daniel would have done then (I'm not sure what *wisdom* would have looked like in that situation), but in any case, that's not what happened. We read in verses 9-10:

V. Daniel 1:9–10 — And God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs, 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.”

The chief of the eunuchs isn’t exaggerating when he talks about his head being endangered with the king. If Daniel’s appearance should be sub-par, and if it should come to light that the chief of the eunuchs had approved a different diet than what the king had prescribed, his life could easily be forfeit. That’s what makes it so amazing that he doesn’t deny Daniel’s request outright. He basically says to Daniel: “I wouldn’t personally have a problem with this if I knew you wouldn’t suffer any adverse physical effects, but I can’t give any official permission for fear I’d lose my life.”

Daniel sees that it’s God who has given him even this amount of favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs, so instead of giving up, he presses on. Daniel has “*set his heart*” on not defiling himself with the king’s food. Daniel has “*set his heart*” on concretely expressing in this way his love and devotion to the Lord.

VI. Daniel 1:11–13 — Then Daniel said to the steward whom the chief of the eunuchs had assigned over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, “Test your servants for ten days; let us be given vegetables to eat and water to 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.”

Once again, we see Daniel’s tact and wisdom. This time he goes to someone of lesser authority (the steward), having already been given permission to do this *in so many words*, and he proposes a ten day probationary period in which he and his companions will be given only grains, and fruits, and vegetables to eat and water to drink. (The word for “vegetables” has more the meaning of “vegetation” rather than just “peas, and broccoli, and green beans.”) Then, after the ten days probation, the steward can either continue that diet—or not, based on what he sees.

VII. Daniel 1:14–16 — So he listened to them in this matter, and tested them for ten days. 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. So the steward took away their food and the wine they were to drink, and gave them [grains, fruits, and vegetables.]

Daniel “set his heart” not to eat the king’s food or drink the king’s wine not because he believed that food had any magical power to change his identity or make him someone different. Daniel “set his heart” not to eat the king’s food or drink the king’s wine because of the depth of his love and devotion to the only true God and because he perceived the real threat of exile. You could say that this was Daniel’s way of making his devotion concrete and so also of guarding that devotion and maintaining it against the constant barrage of the pagan culture around him.

There’s no fixed formula here, is there? And yet Daniel does model for us what it looks like to live wisely—to live skillfully—in exile. We read in verses 17-20:

VIII. Daniel 1:17–20 — 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. 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. And the king spoke with them, and among all of them none was found like *Da-niy-yel*, *Hanan-yah*, *Mi-sha-el*, and *Azar-yah*. Therefore they stood before the king. 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.

In verse two, “the Lord *gave* Jehoiakim king of Judah into [Nebuchadnezzar’s] hand.” In verse nine, “God *gave* Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs.” In verse seventeen, “God *gave* [Daniel and his three companions] learning and skill in all literature and wisdom.” Behind this story, and behind all the history of God’s people, are always the *sovereign, saving* purposes of God. And it’s this greatness of God as the only true God that calls us, just like Daniel, to “set our hearts” on never defiling ourselves with the king’s food – on always guarding and maintaining (even as we *live in* this world), our distinctive and most precious identity as those who have been called and chosen by God through the Gospel of His Son.

The ability to truly live life skillfully is not something that can be learned in a textbook. Instead, it’s a gift that God gives freely to those who ask – to those who “set their hearts” on never defiling themselves with the king’s food. It’s a gift that God gives freely in the actual day-to-day living of our lives as we truly seek first after him.

- **James 1:5–8** — If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

I want to especially encourage all of the young people here to remember that Daniel was certainly in his teens, and very likely in his early teens (perhaps fourteen years old) when he “set his heart” not to defile himself with the king’s food. You’re never too young to live life wisely and skillfully. You’re never too young to be characterized by “conviction.” Listen to what the Psalmist writes:

- **Psalm 119:99–100** (cf. 1 Tim. 4:12) — I have more *understanding* than all my teachers, for *your testimonies are my meditation*. I *understand* more than the aged, for *I keep your precepts*.