

Daniel 1:1-7

Introduction

Over the last two weeks, we've been introducing the book of Daniel. The first week we looked at how Daniel is put together—or the structure of Daniel—with its “stories” in the first half and its visions in the second half very carefully woven together with the use of a sandwich. We saw how the narrative stories are the key to rightly understanding and applying all the apocalyptic visions because they're the practical examples in history of what the apocalyptic visions declare will happen in the future. The past gives us insight and understanding into the meaning of the future. The same God who is at work in the past is also the one who holds and guides the future. We also saw how the book of Daniel is bracketed with the themes of death and resurrection – or of exile and restoration. Israel returned from its exile after seventy years and that in itself was a kind of resurrection, but the ultimate return from exile – which includes not only Jews, but also *us* – will not happen until a sevenfold seventy years has passed, and that final restoration of all God's people will only be fulfilled in their physical and bodily resurrection from the dead.

In week one we emphasized the “structure” of Daniel and what this structure tells us about the meaning and the application of Daniel. In the second week (last week), we looked more closely at the historical setting and background of Daniel.

□ **Daniel 1:1** — In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it.

We saw that behind this simple and short statement was a long story of political and military alliances, of political intrigue and changing allegiances, of strategic battles being fought, of three major world powers competing for dominance and all the rest of the nation-states caught in the middle plotting and fighting for their survival. This is a story that could be told in any history textbook, but in the Scriptures we see that in all the affairs of these world powers—of Assyria, of Egypt, of Babylon—and of all the smaller nations surrounding Judah, it was God who was behind *everything* and guiding *everything*, working all things according to His purpose and will. We read in verse two:

□ **Daniel 1:2a** — *And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into [Nebuchadnezzar's] hand...*

Even Israel's exile is according to God's sovereign purposes and we know that what God has ultimately purposed for His people is their redemption. So what this tells us is that as horrible as exile is, and as connected as it is with human depravity and sin, God has decreed Israel's exile as the next step in the progress of His own saving work. As a righteous and a covenant-keeping man how was Daniel to explain his own participation in the exile of his people? How was he to make sense of this? The solution was not to be found in his own rebellion, but rather—in the end—in God's continuing promises to him of salvation and redemption. Daniel is still a sinner. He still needs God's salvation. And this exile, he believes and knows, is just a further step in God's plan to bring to him—and to bring to all of God's people—that salvation. Even as death, in the Bible, becomes the prelude to resurrection, so also exile, in the Bible, becomes the prelude

to a restoration that ushers in a future far greater and far more glorious than the past. And it's this conviction—it's this deep down certainty of the sovereignty of God that enables God's people to live faithfully even in exile. We always have to remember that exile is still exile; it's always a constant danger and threat to the identity of God's people *as God's people*. And it's precisely this reality of the danger and the threat of exile that calls us to recognize the sovereignty of God in our exile—so that we might live wise and uncompromising lives of faithfulness in this present world. And that leads right into this morning and our third and last introductory sermon.

In week one we emphasized the “structure” of Daniel and what this structure tells us about Daniel's meaning and application. In week two we focused in on the historical background of Daniel and what this background tells us about Daniel's meaning and application. This morning, we're going to look at where Daniel comes in the order of the Old Testament books and what this “canonical placement” tells us about the meaning and the application of Daniel. We read in Daniel chapter one, verses 1-4:

I. Daniel 1:1–4 — In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. 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. 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 learning, and competent to stand in the king's palace...**

Our first question here might be: Why does the king of Babylon want Jewish young men to be brought to Babylon to serve in his own court (or we could say *his own administration*)? We'll come back to that question in a minute. But first, we need to pay very careful attention to the kind of young men that the king of Babylon is looking for.

“Youths without blemish [and] of good appearance.” That's straightforward and simple enough, isn't it? Apparently, Nebuchadnezzar doesn't want any “eyesores” in his palace (at least not by the “superficial” definitions of his day). To the contrary! Everyone who serves in the king's court must actually “adorn” and “grace” his court by their physical presence and add to the whole effect of its beauty and loftiness. But Nebuchadnezzar isn't *just* interested in how his court officials look. Their outward, physical “excellence” was to be the appropriate “wrapping” or “cover,” as it were, for a corresponding inward mental and “moral” excellence. In other words, the cover of the book (the outward appearance) is meant to be the fitting sign of what's inside – which means that these youths must not only be without blemish and of good appearance, but also:

“Skillful/prudent in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge [knowing knowledge], understanding learning [understanding insight/discernment], and [therefore] competent to stand in the king's palace.” Do you see the piling up of words here? It's actually very purposeful. It's meant to grab our attention and tell us something important. What we have here is a collection of three pairs of

words that are all together meant to communicate a single idea. The question is, what is the idea that's being communicated?

Remember, this is a pagan Babylonian king commanding his chief eunuch to find and bring to Babylon (so they can serve in his court) youths who meet this description. So the question is, what is a pagan, Babylonian king looking for? Is he looking for young men who are wise, and discerning, and understanding and prudent? Or is he just looking for highly intelligent and smart young men who are quick learners? The first alternative sounds more "spiritual" and "biblical" to us. It might sound to us like Nebuchadnezzar's looking for young men who "fear the LORD (Yahweh)" as the beginning of wisdom. It might sound like he's looking for young men who know how to live their lives skillfully as the outworking of their obedience to Yahweh's laws and commands. But we know that can't be true. After all, this is a pagan Babylonian king. So maybe we should opt for the second, less spiritual sounding alternative. The NIV says that Nebuchadnezzar wanted youths "showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand." The NCV says he was looking for young men who were "well educated, capable of learning and [capable of] understanding." Do you see how these translations take out the biblical "wisdom" flavor so this verse can make more sense in a pagan context? But even Israel's pagan neighbors had their own "wisdom literature" which could often sound very much like the biblical book of Proverbs. So these nations weren't just interested in how intelligent you were or in how much head-knowledge you had. Nebuchadnezzar would have valued those who had discernment and insight into the "heart of things" and the skill to carefully apply their learning and knowledge.

Of course, there's still a difference between Babylonian wisdom and Hebrew, biblical wisdom. The Bible's wisdom is always rooted in and growing out of the fear of Yahweh, the one true God. The Bible's wisdom is always specifically the skill of carefully discerning the application of Yahweh's laws and Yahweh's commandments to every part of life and to every sphere of life inside the covenant relationship. So we could say in one sense that there's no true wisdom anywhere outside of the Bible or outside of God's covenant people. On the other hand, the Babylonians did still value more than just intelligence and head-knowledge. They also valued their own version of wisdom and of skillful living. They also valued the "skill" of being able to perceive and have insight into the heart of things. So the point here has to be more than just youths who are "well-informed," "well-educated," and "capable of learning and understanding" (cf. NIV; NCV). In fact, when they're taken all together, the six Hebrew words that describe the kind of young men Nebuchadnezzar is looking for are like a big flashing neon sign pointing us to the inspired biblical "wisdom literature" of Israel (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and even many of the Psalms).

Of the sixty times that the first word (*sakal*; skillful/prudent) appears in the Old Testament, 27 of these times are in Job, Psalms, and Proverbs and nine of these times are in Daniel (1:4, 17; 8:25; 9:13, 22, 25; 11:33, 35; 12:3, 10). The noun that's related to this verb (*sekel*) is used to describe King Solomon:

- **2 Chronicles 2:12** — Blessed be the LORD God of Israel, who made heaven and earth, who has given King David a wise son, who has **discretion** and understanding, who will build a temple for the LORD and a royal palace for himself.

Of the 149 times that the second word (*hakmah*; wisdom) appears in the Old Testament, 91 of these times are in Job, Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes and three of these times are in Daniel (1:4, 17, 20). This word is also used 26 times in 1 Kings and 2 Chronicles to describe King Solomon. Here's just one example:

- **2 Chronicles 9:22–23** — Thus King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in **wisdom**. And all the kings of the earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his **wisdom**, which God had put into his mind.

The next two words are related (“knowing knowledge” / “endowed with knowledge”). Of the 89 times that the noun *daath* (knowledge) appears in the Old Testament, 61 of these times are in Job, Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes and two of these times are in Daniel (1:4; 12:4).

Of the 169 times that the fifth word (*byn*; understanding) appears in the Old Testament, 83 of these times are in Job, Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes and 22 of these times are in Daniel (1:4, 17; 8:5, 16-17, 23, 27; 9:2, 22-23; 10:1, 11-12, 14; 11:30, 33, 37; 12:8, 10). It's also used three times in 1 Kings chapter three to describe King Solomon:

- **1 Kings 3:9–12** — “Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may **discern** between good and evil...” It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. And God said to him, “Because you have asked... for yourself **understanding** to discern what is right, behold, I now do according to your word. Behold, I give you a wise and **discerning** mind.”

The noun form of this word (*bynah*; understanding) is also used to describe Daniel in verse 20. Of the 38 times that this word appears in the Old Testament, 23 of these times are in Proverbs and Job and four of these times are in Daniel (1:20; 8:15; 9:22; 10:1). We find this word also in 2 Chronicles chapter two, describing King Solomon:

- **2 Chronicles 2:12** — Blessed be the LORD God of Israel, who made heaven and earth, who has given King David a wise son, who has *discretion* and **understanding**, who will build a temple for the LORD and a royal palace for himself.

The sixth word (*madda*; insight/discernment) appears only six times in the Old Testament – one time in Ecclesiastes (wisdom literature), two times in Daniel (1:4, 17), and three times in 2 Chronicles where it's used to describe King Solomon:

- **2 Chronicles 1:10–12** — “Give me now wisdom and **knowledge** to go out and come in before this people, for who can govern this people of yours, which is so great?” God answered Solomon, “Because this was in your heart, and you have... asked for wisdom and

knowledge for yourself that you may govern my people over whom I have made you king, wisdom and **knowledge** are granted to you.”

What we have here, then, is an amazing collection, or we could even say a “constellation” of words that, taken all together, is obviously meant to point us to true biblical wisdom: “prudent in all wisdom, knowing knowledge, understanding insight/discernment.” Five of these words are associated with the wisdom of King Solomon. Four of these words also appear all clustered together in the prologue to the book of Proverbs:

- Proverbs 1:1–7 — The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel: **To know [yadah] wisdom [hakmah]** and instruction, to **understand [byn]** words of **insight [bynah]**, to receive instruction in **wise dealing [sakal]**, in righteousness, justice, and equity; to give prudence to the simple, **knowledge [daath]** and discretion to the youth— Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one **who understands [byn]** obtain guidance, to **understand [byn]** a proverb and a saying, the words of the wise and their riddles. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of **knowledge [daath]**; fools despise **wisdom [hakmah]** and instruction.

Why am I making such a big deal out of all this? Our English Old Testaments are divided into four sections: Law (the first five books of Moses; Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy), History (Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles), Poetry (Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon), and the Major and Minor Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, **Daniel**, Hosea, Joel, Amos, etc.) So when we think of the book of Daniel, we generally think of the prophets. Jesus Himself refers to Daniel as a prophet (Mat. 24:15). But the Hebrew Old Testament is divided into different sections and follows a very different order. It’s sometimes called the TaNaK with each of the three consonants standing for a different section of the Old Testament. The *Torah* is first (the **Law**; the first five books of Moses), the *Nevi'im* are second (the former and latter **Prophets**; Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, the Book of the Twelve [Hosea, Joel, Amos, etc.]) and then the *Kethuvim* come last (the **Writings**; Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra/Nehemiah, Chronicles). Notice where the book of Daniel is placed in the Hebrew Old Testament – it’s placed in the Writings, in the same general category with the books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. And there’s a *reason* for this. Yes, Daniel was a prophet and there are certainly many prophecies in Daniel, but the emphasis in Daniel is not really on Daniel the prophet, but rather on Daniel the “wise man.” 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 skillfully in exile on the basis of his insight into the sovereign, saving purposes of God. No, Nebuchadnezzar was not looking for youths with true biblical wisdom, but the point is that this is exactly what he got. And so we see in this the message and the application of Daniel – that we, too, are called to live skillfully and wisely in exile on the basis of the insight that we have been given into the sovereign, saving purposes of God. So now we return, again, to our text as we really just finish setting the stage for next week.

II. 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 prudent in all wisdom, knowing knowledge, understanding insight/discernment,

and competent to stand in the king's palace, **and to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans. 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.**

Do you feel right away the tension, and the question that's immediately raised? What will it mean to live wisely in the true fear of the Lord while being taught the literature and language of the Chaldeans, being assigned a daily portion of the king's food and wine, and being educated in Babylon for three years? Remember that the point of exile was to "kill" a nation without actually having to kill all of its people. The point of exile was to strip peoples and nations of their identity so they could be absorbed into the ruling empire. That's exactly what's happening here on a much smaller scale (before the "real" exile happened [in 597 BC, 586 BC, and 581 BC]). Notice that Nebuchadnezzar singles out youths *from the royal family and from the nobility*. These youths would have been the next generation of leaders in Israel, so by taking them to Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar hopes to weaken the resolve and the ability of the people to rebel against him. Nebuchadnezzar probably also needs more qualified officials in his own court to manage his growing empire. But finally, and most importantly for us, Nebuchadnezzar hopes to take the next generation of Israel's leaders and acculturate them to the ways and customs of Babylon – perhaps before sending *some* of them back to Judah. His goal is to weaken their loyalty to their own people and to the God of their own people on the one hand, and on the other hand to assimilate and absorb them into the Chaldean way of life.

This is what Daniel is actually emphasizing when he says that Nebuchadnezzar commanded his chief eunuch to "bring some of the people of *Israel*." Remember that after King Solomon, the nation of Israel split into two separate nations. After this split of Israel, neither half could technically claim for itself the national title of Israel (though this title was far more often applied to the northern kingdom of Samaria). So the political name of the southern kingdom was no longer Israel, but Judah. Daniel says in verse one: "In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of *Judah*"; and in verse two: "The Lord gave Jehoiakim king of *Judah* into his hand." Whenever the Babylonians refer to where Daniel's originally from, they always refer to him as being an exile from the land of *Judah* (2:25; 5:13; 6:13). "Israel," then, in Daniel is not a political or a national title, but rather a theological description – it's a purposeful and a careful reminder of the Jews' identity as Yahweh's chosen people. They belong to Him, not to Nebuchadnezzar. They remain under all the obligations of the covenant even in their exile. Politically they may no longer be the *nation* of Israel, but theologically, they *are* still the *people* of Israel – Yahweh's people. So now we can feel the tension in these words. After twice referring to "Jehoiakim, king of *Judah*," Daniel writes: "Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of **the people of Israel**... and to teach them the literature and language **of the Chaldeans**."

III. Daniel 1:6 — Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah of the tribe of Judah.

Just like with the name "Israel" so these names, too, are weighted with meaning. Notice that just like *yis-ra-el*, two of these names also have an *el* ending: Daniel and Mishael. *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?” The other two names share a different ending: Hananiah and Azariah, or in the Hebrew, *Hanan-yah* and *Azar-yah*. *Yah* is an abbreviated form of *Yahweh*, the covenant name of Israel’s God, and so *Hanan-yah* means “Yahweh has been gracious” and *Azar-yah* means “Yahweh has helped.” What we need to understand is that these Hebrew names don’t derive their meaning from some other language like most English names do. So, for example, when a Jew called someone by the name “*hanan-yah*,” he was actually saying *in Hebrew*, “Yahweh (*yah*) has been gracious (*hanan*).” That’s something like naming one of our children “faith” or “hope” except that in Hebrew the name is actually something more like a complete sentence with a subject, a verb, and an object. The identity of these young men as members of the people of *Israel* was embedded and woven into their names. Especially in a time when the meaning of a person’s name held far greater significance than it does today, these names were constant, very prominent reminders that these youths belonged not to Nebuchadnezzar, but to Yahweh, the God of *Israel*. And so it’s in this light that we can really feel the significance of verse seven:

IV. Daniel 1:7 — 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.

It doesn’t seem that anyone knows for sure exactly what these Babylonian names mean, but they do seem to be names that are all honoring Babylonian gods. For example, Belteshazzar seems to represent a form of the name of the Babylonian god, “Bel,” and Abednego apparently represents a form of the name of the Babylonian god “Nabu.” Can you imagine having your name changed *at all*? Most of us would probably feel like we’d just been struck at the very core of who we are. If everyone I know (and don’t know) suddenly conspired together to call me “Chris” I think I might truly struggle with something of an identity crisis. But this would be nothing compared to what’s going on here in Daniel. Can you imagine going from being called *Da-niy-yel* to being called *Belteshazzar* — from being called *Azar-yah* to being called *Abednego*? Can you begin to feel the real threat that these name changes represent?

The question that Daniel’s inviting us to ask is this: In light of the insight that God’s people have been given into the sovereign, saving purposes of God, how are they to live life skillfully—wisely—even during their exile in a foreign land? While living in Babylon, even in “the land of Shinar,” how do they continue to walk each day in the true fear of the Lord? This is what we’ll come back to explore next week, and in the weeks to follow. For right now, though, we can simply ask ourselves: In light of the insight that I have been given into the sovereign saving purposes of God, am I living life skillfully, in the fear of the Lord? Could I be described as someone “skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding insight and discernment”?