

Richard Culp worked in the hot California sun as foreman of a large ranching operation. He and his wife, Geneva, also owned their own farm, consisting of 200 acres of almond trees. Then years of bad weather and skimpy harvests forced Richard to take on additional work, but even that didn't help. So, he and Geneva took on additional loans to pay their farming expenses, but that only put them deeper in debt. They spent many sleepless nights struggling to find a way to cover all their obligations, but that wasn't enough. One day, Geneva brought Richard the bad news: "Richard," she said. "I've just been to the farm credit company and they've taken it all! We're being forced to sell. They have a buyer; there's no price negotiation. All they want is our signatures."

They cried as they realized all they had worked for was gone, and on top of that, they still owed \$100,000 even after all their assets were seized. Richard was 50 years old and had been farming all his life. Two of their eight children were still at home, and they had no money to start over. Even so, Richard says, "In spite of the overwhelming loss and grief, I knew that God was in control of our situation."

Richard and Geneva were trusting the Lord, but that didn't make things better. In fact, things got worse. Two weeks after the creditors took their farm, Richard lost his job as a ranch foreman. Their family moved into a compact rental unit, and they began working a series of minimum wage jobs, including a stint at a fast-food restaurant. There were many times they didn't have money for groceries and living expenses, but God provided for them through their family, their friends, and their church.

A year-and-a-half later, Richard and Geneva were offered a management position at an exclusive, 2,600-acre waterfowl hunting club in northern California. Richard says, "As we served at the club in numerous ways, we realized again and again that money and possessions cannot bring happiness. We had lost everything, yet we had joy in our lives."

*Then after they had been at the club for about a year, Richard received a call from the head of the credit company that had taken their farm. He wanted to talk with them and insisted on making the hour's drive out to the hunting club. As they sat together, the head of the credit company said, "I want to ask you something personal. A friend of mine recently lost everything he owned and his wife just took her own life. We at the office noticed that you two are handling this crisis differently than most people do. **Can you tell me what your secret is?"***

Richard was happy to explain. “We believe in the God of the Bible,” he said. “He is sovereign over our lives, and He is in control. Even though our loss was great and our pain was real, we are confident of this: God has proven sufficient and He is able to take care of us.”

This morning, we are beginning our study through the book of **Daniel** – a book, just like this story which reminds us that no matter what happens in life – even when all seems lost, there is a God, He is sovereign, He is able, and He is always at work.

Daniel is a book in the Old Testament that many of you may be familiar with. As you know, it’s a book of history involving real people, in real places, at real times. It’s a book filled with great stories like Daniel in the lion’s den – stories of integrity and courage seemingly against all odds, and it’s a book riddled with prophecy – some of which we touched on when we made our way through the book of **Revelation** some time ago. General speaking though, the book of Daniel is about the sovereignty of God, in this case His sovereignty over kings and kingdoms – kings and kingdoms that have already come and gone, and also kings and kingdoms that are still yet to come.

So, to begin this book, let’s review some history. If you remember, God’s people – the Jews left Egypt after 400 years of bondage and they eventually made their way to the Promised Land. For the next 300 or so years, during the time of the **Judges**, through many ups and downs, the Israelites conquered the inhabitants of their land and they established it as their own kingdom. Then, sometime around 1050 B.C., God’s people demanded a king – other nations had kings and they wanted a king too, and so Saul was anointed as the first king, and all the twelve tribes of Israel were united under his leadership. Now, as you might recall, King Saul had his problems. We might remember him as a man driven by pride and jealousy, but ultimately, it was his failure to trust and obey God that led to his downfall. Saul was unfit to lead, he was rejected by God, but God had another man in mind, and David becomes the next king. Later, in 970 B.C., David’s son Solomon becomes king and for the next forty years the kingdom enjoyed both prosperity and peace, and during this time the temple in Jerusalem was built.

After King Solomon died, civil war broke out and the united kingdom was no longer united. To the north, ten tribes came together to become the northern kingdom – also called *Israel*. To the south, the remaining two tribes partnered up to become the southern kingdom – also called *Judah*, and their capital was *Jerusalem*. For many years, these two kingdoms were in conflict – they turned on

one another, but not only that, they also turned away from their God. They turned from the one true God and instead worshipped false gods and turned to idolatry, especially those in the northern kingdom of *Israel*.

Now God had warned His people all the way back in **Deuteronomy** and said to them in so many words through Moses, *“If you do not serve Me, you will serve your enemies whom I will send against you. From a distant nation they will come. They will swoop down on you like vultures, they will devour your resources, they will destroy your cities, and they will bring you down”* and true to God’s word, there was a distant nation – another kingdom who had their eyes on Israel – the Assyrians.

The Assyrians dominated the known world at that time, and the Jews often had to pay tribute to them and in some cases fight them off. The Jews hated the Assyrians and this is why **Jonah** ran in the opposite direction when God commanded him to go to their capital city of Nineveh to preach to them. He hated them that much.

Anyway, in 722 B.C., the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of *Israel* and they deported many of the Israelites to other conquered nations while at the same time they imported foreigners into *Israel*. This was a standard strategy of the Assyrians – mix the people up, promote intermarriage, dilute the bloodlines, defile the cultures, and as a consequence – dispel any notion of nationalism that could lead to rebellion against the Assyrians, and if you recall, this mixture of bloodlines between the Jews and the foreigners produced what we know to be the Samaritans who were despised by the pure blood Jews.

Now back to the larger world stage for a moment. A storm was brewing – a new kingdom was stretching its wings – the Babylonians had emerged on the scene and they went to war against the Assyrians.

During this long-drawn-out war, there came a time when the Assyrians needed help, and they reached out to the Egyptians to the south. Well, the Egyptians marched their army up through the land of Judah and a battle ensued with the Jews. It doesn’t go well for the Jews, but this battle creates a delay for Egyptian help to the Assyrians. The Assyrians were eventually defeated and their capital city of Nineveh was destroyed. Then, about two years later, the Egyptians finally show up to the party in Turkey to help the Assyrians, but they are too late, and they too get a beating from the Babylonians. The Egyptians were defeated and chased southward back to Egypt through the land of Judah.

The Babylonians had defeated their rivals – they were the new bullies on the block so to speak, and they sought to extend their dominance in the known world and that brings us to **Daniel 1**, beginning with **verse 1**.

¹In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. ²The Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along 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 he brought the vessels into the treasury of his god.

As I just mentioned, the Babylonians chased the fleeing Egyptians back to Egypt, and either along the way or on their way back, the Babylonians thought “*Hey, since we are in the neighborhood, let’s conquer Judah and capture their capital city of Jerusalem*” and that’s what they did.

This happened in 605 B.C., and it was the first of three invasions by the Babylonians stretching over a period of some 19 years. So, our story begins with the fall of Judah – a fall prophesied by the prophet **Jeremiah** who had specifically warned the people of Judah this was going to happen if they did not repent from their wickedness, but God’s people would not listen, and just as Jeremiah and other prophets had prophesied – and look at the beginning of **verse 2** – **the Lord gave** Judah into the hands of the Babylonians. You see, this was not a victory for **Nebuchadnezzar** per se – this was an act of God who essentially said “*enough is enough.*” Nebuchadnezzar was simply God’s chosen instrument to carry out God’s sovereign plan.

Judah was conquered and their capital city of Jerusalem was captured, and then to add insult to injury, God’s people watched as the Babylonian army entered their holy temple, removed some of the sacred articles and utensils used for worship, and carried them off as trophies of war to **Shinar** which was an ancient name for Babylon. This was the Babylonian way of saying, “*Our god is bigger and better than your God.*”

This was a low point for God’s people. **How could God let this happen? How could God allow the Babylonians to take His treasures from the temple?** Well, the truth is, God’s treasures had been long since gone. God’s real treasures were the hearts of His people, and in Daniel’s day, those hearts had been in the temples of idols for many years. Their hearts were far from God, and now they were being judged, and rightly so after being warned so many times, but be that may, God is sovereign and unbeknownst to them, He’s at work.

So, some the articles and the utensils for worship in the temple were carried off to Babylon, but that's not all. Beginning with **verse 3**, we read,

³Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, the chief of his officials, to bring in some of the sons of Israel, including some of the royal family and of the nobles, ⁴youths in whom was no defect, who were good-looking, showing intelligence in every branch of wisdom, endowed with understanding and discerning knowledge, and who had ability for serving in the king's court; and he ordered him to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans.

We are told that Nebuchadnezzar orders **Ashpenaz** to strip Judah of some of its best and brightest and deport them back to Babylon.

Earlier, we talked about the strategy of the Assyrians to mix up the conquered people so as to weaken any notion of nationality, but the Babylonians had a different strategy. What they did was to scoop up the *cream of the crop* of a conquered nation and bring them back to Babylon to be indoctrinated into the Babylonian culture, and once they were fully indoctrinated and proved to be loyal, eventually they would be returned back to their homelands in leadership positions to influence their nations in the Babylonian way.

That was the Babylonian strategy, and in this particular case, some of the boys – historians suggest 50 to 75 of them who met certain qualifications, were snatched from their homes and the people they knew and loved, ripped from all that was familiar to them, and they were taken to Babylon. There they would be isolated and vulnerable – ideal conditions for brainwashing.

Now of the boys who were taken from Judah, we begin to zero in on four of them. Let's continue with **verse 5**.

⁵The king appointed for them a daily ration from the king's choice food and from the wine which he drank, and appointed that they should be educated three years, at the end of which they were to enter the king's personal service. ⁶Now among them from the sons of Judah were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. ⁷Then the commander of the officials assigned new names to them; and to Daniel he assigned the name Belteshazzar, to Hananiah Shadrach, to Mishael Meshach and to Azariah Abed-nego.

From this passage, it's clear that Nebuchadnezzar's goal was to immerse these four teenagers, who were probably around the age of 15, into the world of Babylon.

And notice, they weren't *tortured* – instead they were *seduced* with privileges and delicacies to change their lifestyles, and they were given new names to change their identities. To us, changing a name may not be a big deal, but in the ancient world – it was huge for a name represented the core of who a person was, and for these four young Jews, their names actually honored the one true God.

Daniel translates to “*God is my Judge.*” The name **Hananiah** means “*God is gracious.*” **Mishael** translates to “*Who is like God?*” And **Azariah** means “*God is my help.*” Put that together: *God is my Judge, but He is gracious. Who is like God for He is my help.*

These four teenagers had been named and raised by godly parents, but now their names had been changed to names which link them to false gods, all clearly done for the purpose of enticing these four teenagers to leave behind their roots, their culture, and their God and to adopt a Babylonian world view.

So, the Babylonian's had a three-year indoctrination plan for Daniel and his friends so that they may enter into the **king's personal service**, but the question is, given the difficult circumstances: “*Which king will they truly serve?*” and beginning with **verse 8**, we learn the answer. We read,

⁸ But Daniel made up his mind that he would not defile himself with the king's choice food or with the wine which he drank; so he sought permission from the commander of the officials that he might not defile himself. ⁹ Now God granted Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the commander of the officials, ¹⁰ and the commander of the officials said to Daniel, “I am afraid of my lord the king, who has appointed your food and your drink; for why should he see your faces looking more haggard than the youths who are your own age? Then you would make me forfeit my head to the king.” ¹¹ But Daniel said to the overseer whom the commander of the officials had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, ¹² “Please test your servants for ten days, and let us be given some vegetables to eat and water to drink. ¹³ Then let our appearance be observed in your presence and the appearance of the youths who are eating the king's choice food; and deal with your servants according to what you see.” ¹⁴ So he listened to them in this matter and tested them for ten days. ¹⁵ At the end of ten days their appearance seemed better and they were fatter than all the youths who had been eating the king's choice food. ¹⁶ So the overseer continued to withhold their choice food and the wine they were to drink, and kept giving them vegetables.

“**But Daniel**” – those two words would set him apart throughout his entire life – “**but Daniel**”, in the midst of all the craziness would not compromise, he would be different, and he was determined not to be **defiled** with the king’s choice food and wine.

Now, what’s wrong with the king’s food and wine? Surely it was the best in the land – it’s food fit for a king, but there were two issues with it. First, this food was not kosher according to Jewish food laws, and secondly, it may have been offered to idols and the eating and drinking of it would imply some acknowledgment of those false gods.

Daniel just couldn’t do it and let’s think about that for a moment. In light of all that’s occurred, Daniel could have easily given in and compromised, and why not – **where is God in all of this?** Look at what’s happened to Daniel. **Does God even care? Can God really be trusted?** Those are questions we might ask when all seems lost, but somehow Daniel remained resolved to do right by His God. For Daniel, this was a matter of the heart, and so he requested – as an experiment, that they only be given vegetables and water for ten days just to see what happens.

And for the second time, we see God at work behind the scenes – **God granted favor** – this time working on the heart of the overseer to produce kindness and sympathy towards Daniel, and despite his fear of the king, the overseer agreed to the experiment, and sure enough after ten days – God blessed Daniel and his friends, and they looked stronger and healthier than all the others who had been eating the king’s choice food.

So, Daniel and his friends were given vegetables and water, but God gave them something more. Beginning with **verse 17** we are told,

¹⁷ As for these four youths, God gave them knowledge and intelligence in every branch of literature and wisdom; Daniel even understood all kinds of visions and dreams. ¹⁸ Then at the end of the days which the king had specified for presenting them, the commander of the officials presented them before Nebuchadnezzar. ¹⁹ The king talked with them, and out of them all not one was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king’s personal service. ²⁰ As for every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king consulted them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and conjurers who were in all his realm. ²¹ And Daniel continued until the first year of Cyrus the king.

In this passage we see that Daniel's resolve to honor God moved him and his friends into positions of influence. We are told that **God gave** Daniel and his friends knowledge and wisdom in all things, so much so, that Daniel could even understand visions and dreams of all kinds.

So, after three years of training, all of the graduates are brought before the king, and in **verse 19**, the king found none equal to Daniel and his friends, and they begin to work in the king's service.

Now, I want to draw your attention to the last verse – **“And Daniel continued until the first year of Cyrus the king.”** It's a subtle verse, one you might ignore, but it speaks volumes to the sovereignty of God and His work in the world, even in a pagan world.

As we read in this first chapter, all seemed lost as Daniel was kidnapped and indoctrinated by the Babylonians for three years, but for some 70 years later, all the way up to King **Cyrus** of the Persian Empire, Daniel would personally speak God's words into the ears of four different pagan kings to influence them. So, with the advantage of some hindsight, one might ask – **“Who was really influencing who?”** And speaking of Daniel's influence, just so you know, it would be King Cyrus who would allow God's people to return to their Promised Land after 70 years in Babylon.

No matter the king or the kingdom, no matter the circumstances – even when all seems lost, God is sovereign and He is at work. And as for you and me, yes, it might seem that we are stuck in Babylon so to speak, but our hearts should belong to our God who reigns in heaven.

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