



**BETHEL**  
PRESBYTERIAN

# **MINISTRY OF THE WORD**

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## The Sovereignty of God's Blessing

The sovereignty of God is a major theme of Daniel. During this era, God's people suffered through a tragedy which turned their entire world upside down!

Think of that which constitutes your world today. We begin first with our person which involves our health, ability, talents, language, possessions, and the like. We then move on to our families with its culture and people~ parents, siblings, grandparents and the like. We then consider our community, which would include our school, friends, jobs, markets, civil order, language, culture, shopping, transportation, and the like. With that we think of our state and

then our country which involves hundreds of shades of beloved practices, conveniences, opportunities, promises, services, etc. And most fundamentally, we think of our forever family, the body of Christ. Housed in all these things is love, security, happiness, joy, protection, culture, etc. Which if just one element is removed, we are tempted to think that our world has come to an end. Think of what happens when a job is lost, our health is compromised, or we lose a loved one or friend. God's people during the era of Daniel lost NOT just one or two of these core elements; THEY LOST THEM ALL! Everything I just mentioned and more... in one moment!

Yet can you believe that during this time the Lord not only was with His people, BUT He continued to advance His purpose and Kingdom in and through it all? You can and do, only because of books like Daniel! With Daniel we can say, *“Though the fig tree should not blossom, and there be no fruit on the vines...’ we will live and thrive because Our God Reigns!”*

Now, there are multiple facets to the glorious message of God's sovereignty which Daniel puts forth in this book. As we begin looking at this prophecy in earnest considering its first and most important message, in fact THE message which God wants us all to bear in mind as we consider the valley of the shadow of death, the crucible, or the rest of this book: the sovereignty of God's blessing.

## Background/Setting

Daniel 1:1-2, “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, 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.”

Again the year is 605 BC and the national apostasy of God's people is finally being addressed! As God promised when the nation was established, if nation/king rebelled against the Lord, then they would be “...struck down before [its] enemies; and those who hate [Judah will] rule over [them]...” (Leviticus 26:17)!

We know that in Judah's case, this judgment came in three different movements: 605, 597, and 586 BC. Daniel represents the first movement which occurred in 605 BC. At this time, the temple was ransacked and the vessels used in the worship of God were taken to “the land of Shinar” (an allusion to the Tower of Babel where the war between God and Satan's Kingdom occurred on a large scale) where they were symbolically placed in subjection to the Babylonian god in its temple. And so continued the battle that rages even today between God and the people of this world, a battle which will culminate on the last day when Christ conquers the Kingdoms of this world (Revelations 11:15)!<sup>1</sup>

Yet from Daniel 1 it is important to note that Daniel/God is clear in this text as the ruler of the nations and He is the one who gave Judah over to the Babylonians! It wasn't a false god, fate, or any other impersonal or phony force! God was directly behind the exile! This is hugely

important.

Daniel 1:3-4, “Then 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, youths in whom was no defect [the word used here is significant; it was used primarily in the Old Testament for sacrificial offerings (Leviticus 21:17, 18, 21; 22:20) which truly is what these four boys were!], 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.”

This represented the first and primary tribute required of Judah at this point from Nebuchadnezzar, the nation’s youth! The plan was to take the brightest and best that Judah had to offer, brain-wash them, and then benefit from these individuals as a nation. For example, who would be the ones to deal with the newly arriving Jewish exiles if there should be problems? None other than the sons of Jerusalem’s nobility and intelligentsia! The brain-washing began by taking these Jewish boys, isolating them from their people and culture, and then putting them in a vigorous course of instruction.

Daniel 1:5-7, “And the king appointed for them a daily ration from the king’s choice food and from the wine which he drank [this is pleasure galore; few if any in Jerusalem or Babylon ate this well; the design behind this was to tear down their inhibitions and resentments], and *appointed* that they should be educated three years [this was their indoctrination!], at the end of which they were to enter the king’s personal service [talk about a privileged future]. Now among them from the sons of Judah were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. Then 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.”

With this, the focus of this history turns to four Jewish boys most likely ranging in age from 12 to 15 years old; Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. This is significant for of all peoples, children would be the most vulnerable to the rigors and temptations of exile! And so clearly the fate of the nation was housed in these four boys! What God would do with them, weak and vulnerable as they were, He could do with anyone and everyone in Christ!

Who were these boys?

In the ancient world first note that:

- (1) They weren’t boys, but young men (Jewish boys became men at 12 years of age)!
- (2) Clearly they were solid in their faith. Daniel 1:4 said that they were “endowed with understanding, and discerning knowledge.” This means that they were well-versed in God’s word such that they were able to apply it to a variety of settings!
- (3) With this we conclude that they most likely were raised by parents who were impacted by Josiah’s revival of 622 BC. As such they gave their children important names,

significant names:

- a. Daniel: "God is my Judge"
- b. Mishael: "Who is like the Lord?"
- c. Hananiah: "The Lord is Gracious"
- d. Azariah: "The Lord is my Helper"

The future of Judah ironically became embodied in these four children whom God would use to conquer the greatest world empire the Near East at the time ever saw, and they wouldn't so much as raise a dagger!

As their parents watched them leave (which would have occurred if the children were to be brainwashed, meaning the parents didn't accompany them), no doubt they wondered whether or not their boys would stand fast in Christ (we are talking about young men like Abel Nelson, Micah Storrie, Noah Cassidy, and Alex Stansbery; they are the age of Daniel and his friends). At first, the jury was out as immediately the brainwashing began. The first thing the Babylonians did was change their name:

- Daniel became Belteshazzar- "Bel [a Babylonian deity] Protect the King."
- Hananiah became Shadrach- "Servant of Aku" (another Babylonian god).
- Mishael became Meshach- "Who is what Aku is?"
- Azariah became Abednego- "Servant of Nego" (or Nebo, the god of vegetation).

They then, as we have seen, were isolated from their people. Next came temptation, as their diet was restricted to a Babylonian menu fit for a king. Then there was indoctrination as they began a rigorous study of Babylonian literature, politics, history, and religion, being taught, "the literature and language of the Chaldeans" (Daniel 1:4). And much, much more!

Yet and again, who is it that brought Daniel and his three friends to Babylon? Who is it that was walking beside them, before them, and within? Was it NOT "Adonai" - the ruler of all world powers? With Emanuel accompanying these boys, the exile (or any wilderness for that matter) could very well become a spring! It is unto this that Daniel gives us an incredible example of how God sovereignly blessed these boys.

### Example of God's Blessing

Daniel 1:8a, "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..."

There is much debate as to what would have defiled Daniel and his friends in the meal. Some say it was defiled because the food would have been offered to idols. The only problem with this is that later Daniel ate basically the same fare as offered here (cf. Daniel 10:3)! Others say that the blood would NOT have been drained from the meat (Leviticus 17:10-14). Still others suggest that in Babylon no distinction was made between clean and unclean animals, and

therefore to eat the king's meat would have been to break the Levitical food laws (Leviticus 3:17; 11:1–47). There was, for instance, no taboo in Babylon when it came to pig (and pork was highly prized). Horse was also eaten freely. This has some merit! A fourth suggestion is that the food offered to Daniel here was ritually unclean (Ezra 4:13; Hosea 9:3, 4). This perhaps has the most going for it since the word used in v. 8 for “defile” refers to being “ritually defiled.”

The truth be known, we have no clue as to what Daniel and his friends found objectionable in the royal food placed before them. And we don't need to know. What is only of significance is that participation for Daniel and his three friends involved a ritual defiling of such significance that they went to great lengths to avoid it! In other words, — and this is the key — that which moved these young men was NOT the power and wonder of Nebuchadnezzar or his Kingdom, their own whim/will or fear, BUT the word/Law/glory of God! Unlike Eli who was moved by the “weight” of his children and so “honored his sons above God” (cf. 1 Samuel 2:29), Daniel and His friends clearly were moved by the weight of God and His commands!<sup>2</sup>

## The Conflict

Notice that this conviction resulted in conflict.

Daniel 1:8b, 10, “...so [Daniel] sought *permission* from the commander of the officials that he might not defile himself... 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.’”

This was a serious conflict. On the one hand, a compromised conscience doesn't make for a good student. On the other hand, Daniel here is rejecting the food given to him by Nebuchadnezzar which would have been viewed as an act of treason! Yet, as the commander's fate was tied to Daniel's, the Babylonian official rejected Daniel outright! Truly, if Daniel should look haggardly on account of a poor diet, the commander would lose his head! That led to a secret contest.

Daniel 1:11-14, “But Daniel said to the overseer whom the commander of the officials had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, ‘Please test your servants for ten days, and let us be given some vegetables to eat and water to drink. 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.’ So he listened to them in this matter and tested them for ten days.”

This is an interesting interchange. Daniel is now talking with “the overseer whom the commander of the officials had appointed...” In other words, this is a minor official who most likely lived with the four boys. Now in private this minor official agreed to a diet change which only could have occurred by exchanging his own meals with that of the boys, a trade he no doubt didn't mind; besides it would only be for ten days! Recall, Daniel agreed that if after ten

days there was any decline in health, he and his companions would eat the king's food.

Daniel 1:15-16, "And 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. So the overseer continued to withhold their choice food and the wine they were to drink, and kept giving them vegetables."

This is rather incredible! Were Daniel and his friends here eating a superior diet? By all accounts, "No!" But that is not the point! The point is that God deigned to bless the conviction of Daniel and his friends. Truly, they could have been eating candy for every meal and it wouldn't have mattered. What mattered was NOT what went into Daniel's mouth, BUT what was in his heart!

This is not to exalt motive above conduct. But it is to recognize that right conduct with wrong motive is sin! Daniel endeavored to honor God by his life because he first honored God in his heart! And God responded.

It is important that we understand that this entire book revolves around Daniel being an example to the child of God as to how to thrive as strangers and aliens in a foreign land! Hebrew is a "dramatic" language and while it doesn't come out and say that so-and-so is the bad guy and there is not a sign above the head announcing that "this is the good guy" we are left to watch the story unfold and draw conclusions from the account. In this way, we have said that Hebrew is more inclined to show it than say it. For example:

- How do we know Saul is the bad guy and David the good guy in 1 Samuel? The text never says!
- Is Cain ever designated the villain in Genesis 4?
- Is Eli a good guy? Or is he a bad guy? His sons clearly were evil- but again this is derived from the text; it is rarely overtly stated! And when it is, it is because there is a higher purpose in mind in the story-telling.
- It is rather striking that the history of the nation given to us in Samuel begins with Hannah's prayer of dedication (1 Samuel 2) and ends with David's prayer of dedication (2 Samuel 23). The implication is that if only God's people would live with the same devotion and mind as expressed by Hannah and David in these songs, the nation would do well!

The book of Daniel revolves around Daniel as a case study for the people of God going into exile. The fate of the nation truly was typified by these four boys! What God would do with them, He could do with everyone in Christ! But, and this is key, they had to have the faith of Daniel and his three companions! If they would believe as did Daniel, they too would thrive; it might not be as dramatic, but it is just as emphatic! This is a major theme of Daniel, speaking of the atrocities of Antiochus Epiphanes:

Daniel 11:32, "And by smooth *words* he will turn to godlessness those who act wickedly

toward the covenant, but the people who know their God will display strength and take action.”

Is this not Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego? Is this not Daniel? This was and is the message that God gives to all His people entering the valley! The righteous will thrive by stubbornly holding on to God (Habakkuk 2:4)! But the “servant of God” who values pleasure, wealth, comfort, and praise above God in the end will “act wickedly toward the covenant.”

Speaking of the end times:

Daniel 12:10, “Many will be purged, purified and refined [In other words, it is going to be a horrible time of testing]; but the wicked will act wickedly, and none of the wicked will understand, but those who have insight will understand.”

Again, who are the ones who thrive in difficult times? Those who have wisdom/understanding and so a heart which holds fast to the Lord and His word! Again, was this not Daniel and his three friends?!

Another major themes and messages of this book is this: Stubbornly cling to God by faith; hold fast your confidence which has a great reward (Hebrews 10:35) and like Daniel, you too will thrive in the valley of the shadow of death! Yet sadly, on account of a fear of moralism, today many preachers have all but denied this important lesson and so the role that God intended this prophetic book to play in our lives. For example, Tremper Longman wrote this:

...we must point out that the primary purpose for these texts is not to teach us how to behave, but rather to point us to God. (Longman, 1999, p. 57)

On the surface this sounds great; yet you must see that it eviscerates the place and priority that God intended this book to play in the lives of His exiled people! Throughout this book, Daniel and his three friends are offered to us as role models for the hundreds of thousands of Jews soon to be exiled- specifically what they are to think and do when they enter the exile (ironically, Daniel and his friends ultimately would become that for which Nebuchadnezzar took them: trail blazers who would facilitate God’s people as they entered into exile, yet in a way Nebuchadnezzar never dreamt; but God did)! So yes, the purpose of Daniel is to point us to God! But it also was given to flesh out Habakkuk 2:4: “...the just shall live by his [personal] faith!” This, you must see, is ethical (and references one’s behavior)!

So how is this NOT moralism, “Be like Daniel! Dare to be a Daniel!”? Any more than it is NOT moralism when we read Paul’s exhortation:

Philippians 3:17, “Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us.”

In other words, dare to be a Paul! Yet this is NOT the glorification of Paul as a moral being.

RATHER, it is the exaltation of Paul as an example of Christ.

1 Corinthians 11:1, "Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ."

It is in this way we "Dare to be a Paul... or a Daniel... or an Elizabeth... or Hannah... or David!" These Bible characters flesh out what it means to live as saints, though sinners, with one foot in the Kingdom of God and the other in the Kingdom of man! They demonstrate the life that God blesses!

So what does it look like to live by a stubborn, holding-on-to God no matter the circumstances (Habakkuk 2:4)? This example of Daniel instructs us. What is the first thing Daniel did when he entered into exile?

- Did he weep and lament his loss?
- Did he curse God for doing what the Lord promised He would do in the case of national rebellion?
- Did he give up and so embrace the world of Babylon?
- Did he endeavor NOT to ruffle the feathers of his captors?
- Did he attempt to manipulate God with promises of devotion if only the Lord would restore the former years?

Clearly, Daniel "entrusted his soul to a faithful Creator in doing what is right" (1 Peter 4:19)! Look with me at the opening words of this opening chapter of both this book and God's people in exile:

Daniel 1:8a, "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..."

Again, we don't know why the king's choice food and drink would have defiled Daniel. But that is not important (if it were, it would have been stated). What is important is the posture of Daniel entering into the valley of the shadow of death! He went there NOT as a reactor or a victim! RATHER, he entered into the valley thoughtfully, purposefully, deliberately with a conviction: he would serve the Lord (Joshua 24:15)!

- From the smallest things to the largest, he would not compromise his fidelity to Christ!
- Let him be ridiculed, made fun of, impoverished, or tortured! He would not compromise his trust in the Lord!
- Let God be found true, though every man be found a liar (Romans 3:4a)!!!

Christian, have you made such a resolution in your life? In your marriage? In your parenting? In your education? In what you do with your friends? In your relationship with the opposite sex? Faithfulness to God in the small things, purity and priority of life (beginning with faith in Christ and knowing the word of God), is that which will change the course of your life more than money, fame, and power! I love the exhortation of Sinclair Ferguson:



...true faithfulness in Scripture is first exercised in small things and in private. If we fail there, any faithfulness we show in public will be hypocrisy, a performance for the crowd and not an expression of loyalty to our Lord. ¶ Daniel and his three friends were under intense pressure. Their consciences (educated by God's Word and devoted to it) were under attack. The pressures to conform were intense. No doubt there were others, Jerusalem-born like themselves, who laughed at their sensitivities. What harm would good food do them, or new names? It is interesting and instructive to see their response. What did Daniel do?... ¶ 'Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself' (v. 8). He realized that for the child of God some things cannot be negotiated or compromised. From the outset, therefore, he refused the court's delicacies. In many ways his usefulness in the kingdom of God throughout the rest of the book depends on this single decision. Had he not made it, or even left it until later while he maneuvered for a position of bargaining strength, he would not have found himself in the positions he later occupied nor would he have been faithful enough to cope with them as he did. Instead, from the beginning, in what to others seemed a trivial matter, he nailed his colors to the mast. In doing so, he gained a bridgehead into enemy-occupied territory and found himself increasingly strong in the Lord. (Ferguson, 1988, pp. 33, 34)

Now how he did this and how it all worked will be that to which we turn next week! For now, may God give us all the grace to work out our salvation, ever and always trusting Christ, with such conviction and devotion!

## Bibliography

- Ferguson, S. B. (1988). *The Preacher's Commentary – Volume 21, Daniel*. Dallas, TX: Word Publishig.
- Longman, T. (1999). *The NIV Application Commentary: Daniel*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

### End Note(s)

<sup>1</sup> Speaking of this battle, the world has a bad track record when it openly and flagrantly exalts itself over God by placing His holy vessels in subjection to a false god (think of 1 Samuel 5-6); but that is getting way ahead of ourselves as we'll talk about this in the coming months!

<sup>2</sup> Would you notice that this occurred early on... at the start! See Daniel didn't wait till he was in a position of power to live and act as a Christian. He flew his flag early! Think of it: by the time silent Christians have gained their coveted social position, most have lost all moral strength to confess Him. Truly it is difficult to confess Christ when you arrive if you have denied Him along the way!

### VISIT US WHEN IN Broomfield, COLORADO

Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10<sup>th</sup> Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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### About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on June 22, 2014. Greg is the minister of Bethel Presbyterian Church