

Four Teenagers Who Wouldn't

Daniel 1

Introduction

Turn in your Bible to the book of Daniel. We will begin a series on the life of Daniel today.

For 490 years the Israelites had been stealing from God. The covenant commandments declared that they must let the land rest every seventh year. It was a test of faith more than an agricultural ploy for more crops. They had to place their faith in God that in the sixth year, He would double the portion so they could survive the seventh year. However, the Israelites had dropped their faith in their living God and had planted on the seventh year. It was as if to say, "God, You cannot take care of us."

In reality, the Israelites had stolen the sabbatical year from God. This situation had gone on for 490 years, so the Israelites had literally stolen 70 sabbatical years from God. It is interesting to notice, as we begin this portion of study, that they are taken into captivity by the Babylonians – and that captivity will last exactly 70 years.

The Israelites were guilty of rebellion; that is, stealing. They were also guilty of idolatry. They had gone after the foreign gods of the ungodly nations. It is almost as if God said, "All right, if you're going to get into idolatry, I'm going to take you to the very center of idolatry in the known world." That center was the capital city, Babylon.

It is also fascinating to notice, as we study the consequences of their sin, that never again did idolatry become a major temptation in the life of Israel.

New Experiences for Daniel

Now our story begins in Daniel chapter 1, verse 1, where the children of Israel are taken into captivity. They are taken by the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar. They are literally taken to Babylon, not just as servants, but to become leaders; political figures in his kingdom.

I want to point out several new things as the stage is set in the life of the lad, Daniel, who is probably thirteen or fourteen years of age when taken into captivity. He and his three friends were presented with a number of new experiences.

1. First, Daniel and his friends have a new home; that is, Babylon.

Look at 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.

The Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, . . . and he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, . . .

Picture in your mind a young boy leaving the city of Jerusalem, where he had lived plainly, but appropriately. His hometown was not luxurious, but it was convenient; that is, it had the things that were needed to carry on their existence.

The Israelites were taken to the unbelievable city of Babylon. In this city, huge lions were painted in yellow and white along the walls of the streets. The massive wall that encircled this large kingdom city was so big that four chariots could be steered side by side on its top.

Babylon was a mammoth city. There is no doubt that the eyes of Daniel and his three teenage friends bulged as they looked about them in such an unbelievable place.

2. Secondly, Daniel and his friends were given new knowledge.

Notice 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, 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.

The king was looking for physically healthy, good-looking young men who had common sense and were smart or shrewd.

We get the picture from this that Daniel and his three friends had it all together, even as thirteen or fourteen year old boys. They were brainy, yet practical.

Now I have known a few people with a lot of brains in my life, and it seemed that they had difficulty tying their shoes. On the other hand, there are people who are very attractive, yet their IQ is probably close to a tomato plant or something of the sort. These four boys had it all together.

Verse 4 says that they had “understanding”. The King James Version says they had understanding of science. Now we think of the arts and sciences in terms of this century, but these boys were skilled in agriculture, architecture – the sciences of that day. They were also fluent in at least three languages.

We are told that these boys had the ability for serving in the king’s court. This means they had the stamina to take the pressure of the political arena.

It is interesting that these were not twenty-five or thirty or thirty-five year old men who were being evaluated, but thirteen year old boys.

We are also told that these boys were to be taught the literature and the language of the Chaldeans, so they were to learn one more foreign language.

Daniel and his three friends were given new knowledge.

3. Thirdly, Daniel and his friends were presented with new temptations.

Look at Daniel 1:5.

The 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.

There were two problems with the king’s choice food:

- it had been offered to idols;
- it probably included unclean meat or meat from certain animals that, according to Levitical standards, the Israelites were not allowed to eat.

The drink had also probably been offered as a libation to a god, as was the practice. Before they drank it, they would say their grace, but they would say their grace to Venus, the moon god, or the sun god, and then they would partake.

God had commanded that the Israelites not touch food that was unclean or had been offered to idols, so these boys were presented with brand new temptations.

This may not mean much to us, but just imagine a boy leaving Jerusalem. If they were ever walking down the streets of Jerusalem on Saturday morning and smelled bacon in the air, someone was in trouble. They did not have to say, “No,” to that in Jerusalem because it was never offered. However, they got to Babylon and there were brand new situations; brand new temptations.

On a secular college campus there will be temptations that are brand new. These are temptations that a Christian never had to say, “No,” to before, but will then.

The marine who unloads his duffel bag at boot camp makes a decision to put his Bible on his bed or not.

I was raised in Norfolk, Virginia. The guys stationed there leave a small mid-western town to join the Navy. They get off the ship and go downtown to face brand new temptations. The lights are glittering on massage parlors, porno shops, and places that they never knew existed. There are new temptations to say, “No,” to.

4. Fourthly, Daniel and his friends were given new names.

Notice Daniel 1:6-7, where we are introduced to our main character.

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.

The name Daniel means “God is my judge”. In the Old Testament times, the Israelites named their children with special names. The names usually pointed back to the God they served and they had meaning.

When we name our children, we spend hours thinking of all the different names that we could possibly give them. We want to give them names that sound good and that have meaning and character.

Israelites were no different in the names they gave their boys. The names Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah meant something. The Babylonians changed their names:

- Daniel, which meant, “God is my judge,” was now Belteshazzar, which meant “Baal’s prince”. Baal was the most important Canaanite god. They considered it an honor to give Daniel the name Belteshazzar or “Baal’s prince”. However, it was an insult to an Israelite boy.
- Hananiah, which meant “God is gracious,” was now Shadrach, which meant “illuminated by the sun”.
- Mishael meant “who is as great as God,” was changed to Meshach, which meant, “who is as great as Venus, or the moon god”.
- Azariah, which meant “the Lord is my help,” was now Abed-nego, which meant “the servant of Nego, or the god of fire”.

I will try to picture this for you. I am not trying to turn this pulpit into a political podium, but just imagine Russia invading America and, in the process, taking a hundred captives. They take men and women, young and old, back to Russia to be political figures in the new communistic world system. Let us say that you are one of these captives. Can you imagine the horror of being taken to a foreign country, being clothed in foreign clothes, given a foreign name, and being told, “You will learn to speak Russian now; you will no longer speak in American English. We don’t ever want to hear another word about American history; you will now study the history of Russia.”

Imagine the despair that you would feel if this happened. Daniel and his three friends were thirteen or fourteen year old boys feeling that despair at this time. It was real. Imagine the pressure.

Right Choices by Daniel

Notice in the next few verses of scripture, the choice that Daniel makes in the face of the new experiences in Babylon. Look at Daniel 1:8.

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.

The commander of the officials turns Daniel down. Look at Daniel 1:10.

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.”

Let us take note of what Daniel does not do as a result of being turned down. By noticing this, we can notice what he does do.

Daniel does not begin some kind of hate campaign against Ashpenaz. He does not start sending a petition around to all the Hebrew youths, saying, “Let’s get another guy elected as the commander of the officials.” He does not say, “Let’s sit down. Let’s not eat. Let’s fast.” Daniel never does any of this, but, in fact, respects the authority.

Daniel goes to the overseer, named Melzar, according to the King James Version, appointed by the commander of the officials, with the same request. Look at Daniel 1:11-12.

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.”

Let me summarize this. There are three ungodly influences designed to de-program these Israelite youths. Nebuchadnezzar is crafty. He is going to do subtle things so that these boys will compromise their young convictions. If he can get them to do that, then he has political figures for the rest of his empire. He does three things:

- gives them unbiblical food;
- gives them unbiblical names;
- begins teaching them unrighteous education.

Notice that Daniel only takes offense at one of these three things. Only one of them really makes a difference.

Unrighteous education was not going to hinder Daniel’s convictions in serving the Lord.

He could also live with his ungodly name. However, as we read the book of Daniel, notice that he never refers to himself as Beltshazzar – always Daniel. It is as if he was saying, “You can call me Beltshazzar on the outside, but I’m Daniel on the inside.”

Daniel takes offense at something that would create the pulling down of a conviction; the violation of the scriptures; that is, the food. He suggests that they give him vegetables, called “pulse” in the King James Version, and water.

Pulse is nothing more than green peas or dried beans. This would be the real test of faith to me. Daniel faced some tremendous things, but this was the *real* test. Can you imagine mashed peas and water for ten days? There are only so many ways you can cook the things.

If you come to our house, you will not find these things, by the way. As a matter of fact, my wife, in open rebellion, will slip a can of peas into some casserole occasionally. When the casserole is off of my plate and I am finished, there will be a little mound of peas in the left hand corner of my plate!

I have this pastoral nightmare that our church has a dinner on the grounds and no one brings potatoes or corn. I have a plate with at least thirteen sections and I feel responsible to fill every one of them. I start going down the food line and there are peas, squash, okra, asparagus, etc. I wake up in a cold sweat. If your mouth is watering after listening to this, you are from another planet.

Notice, in this passage, Daniel and his friends are normal teenagers. Mashed peas and water meant about as much to them as it would to us. They are used to homemade pancakes, homemade bread with honey, fresh butter, beef stew. I can imagine that about the eighth day, one of the guys would look at Daniel and say, “Man, you went overboard with this thing.”

However, notice what these boys did. They did something in which God would have to intervene in the situation. There was no way they were going to gain weight; there was no way they were going to look anything but sick after ten days of peas and water – God had to intervene. That is exactly what He did. These boys were normal teenagers.

I recently had the experience of taking a couple of teenage guys out for lunch. They were absolutely normal guys and everything they ordered had “jumbo” in front of it – jumbo fries and jumbo Coke. We sat

down to eat and the guys wolfed down that stuff and were gnawing on the tablecloth, while I finished my first french fry.

These fourteen year old boys had an appetite. Do not miss, by casual observation, that Daniel and his friends made a statement – and it meant something to thirteen or fourteen year old boys.

God’s Intervention for Daniel

I love the way God intervened for Daniel and his friends. Look at Daniel 1:13-16, as Daniel speaks to the overseer.

“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.

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.

God turned the pulse, or vegetables, into muscle. It was a miracle.

However, notice the very sad thing in these verses. When comparing Daniel and his three friends, they are found fatter in flesh than what? Verse 15 says, “Than all the youths who had been eating the king’s choice food.”

In other words, there were other Hebrew youths that had dropped their guard. They had thrown away their conviction; they had disobeyed God. Only four teenagers would not do this.

What a happy day this was for Daniel and his three friends, but what a sad day for the other teens who were observing this with their heads down – convicted. The other youths were guilty because they had broken the law.

Application

Let me give three principles that are timeless from this passage of scripture.

1. First, Daniel's commitment was anchored in scripture.

This was not a “fly by night” thing for Daniel. He did not just have the idea that, “Hey, I’m not going to eat that food.” Daniel was anchored in the principles of scripture.

We are never given any reference to Daniel’s parents, but I would like to thank them today – wherever they are. Perhaps they can hear us from heaven’s portal, I do not know. To Daniel’s mom and dad, “Thank you for building into Daniel, and the other children, the values that caused them, when in Babylon, to not say, as the other Hebrew children, ‘When in Babylon, do as the Babylonians.’”

Daniel and his friends were different. Evidently Daniel’s home life had taught him principles and values.

Teaching, by the way, is much more than just telling. They had to have seen it in the lives of their parents. Learning is much more than listening – it is incorporating.

If we listen to God’s word being taught and do not incorporate it, we have not learned. If we read and study the Bible on our own and do not incorporate it into our lives, we have not learned.

Evidently these parents were diligent and, as Deuteronomy chapter 6 reveals, taught their children when they stood up and when they lay down.

2. Secondly, Daniel's challenge came, regardless of outcome.

We know that Daniel did not have a little voice whispering in his ear, “Daniel, if you’ll obey Me, I’ll make sure that you gain weight; I’ll make sure that it all works out.”

Daniel did not know whether everything would work out or not. In fact, in Daniel chapter 3, when his friends would not bow down to the god that Nebuchadnezzar had erected, they did not know that they were not going to be burned to death in the fire. Their conviction was set and their decision was made, regardless of outcome.

With Daniel and his friends, there was no saying, “Lord, I’ll serve You – just make sure everything works out.”

In the same way, we should not be saying, “Lord, I dedicate my child to You – just make sure they don’t go to the mission field.”

3. Thirdly, Daniel's new home did not produce a new heart.

The Babylonians gave Daniel a new name, but they could not give him a new nature. They could change his culture, but they could not touch his character. He remained unscathed.

Young man, your language in the locker room should be no different than in the living room of your home. Young girls, your conversation with the other gals should be no different in purity than when you are talking to your mother.

A changed location should not change our natures. A different culture should not produce a different character. In fact, that culture will reveal whether or not we have incorporated godly character.

The triumph is experienced. I love happy endings and this is one of them. Notice Daniel 1:17-18.

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.

Then at the end of the days which the king had specified for presenting them, the commander of the officials [Ashpenaz] presented them before Nebuchadnezzar.

This is it – graduation day. Daniel and his friends are wearing their caps and gowns and the court musicians are playing *Pomp and Circumstance*. In they walk, ready for the interview.

Let me remind you, by the way, that they have been eating peas and water, not for ten days, but for three years. They have just completed the royal academy. They have learned the sciences. They have learned the Chaldean tongue. They have learned all the agricultural tools and all the architecture of this grand nation.

Now these teens are going to be interrogated; questioned. This is oral examination at its best. Look at Daniel 1:20.

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.

And Daniel continued until the first year of Cyrus the king.

This means that Daniel served as prime minister of Babylon for 75 years – all because he passed these early tests.

Two missing ingredients from this chapter of Daniel's life

Before we close, let me give two things that are missing in Daniel chapter 1, in case you have not caught it. There are two things that are missing in this chapter from the life of Daniel.

1. The first thing that is missing is bitterness.

There is no bitterness. There is no fist raised at God, with words such as, “God, this is what’s happened. Why did You ever let this happen? You are the God of all gods and they’ve named me after a pagan deity.”

I think I would have been bitter. These captors may have killed Daniel’s parents. They leveled Jerusalem. Now, he is in a strange land. Daniel, however, exhibits no bitterness.

Now if you get the idea from reading Daniel chapter 1 that Nebuchadnezzar is calling the shots, you have missed the point.

Look at Daniel 1:2 and underline the phrase,

The Lord gave . . .

Look at Daniel 1:9.

Now God granted Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the commander of the officials,

GOD did it. *HE* is in control.

Look at Daniel 1:17.

As for these four youths, God gave them knowledge and intelligence . . .

Daniel and the other young men were sharp. They had it all together. Yet, in the final analysis, God is the one in control. There was no need to be bitter.

2. The second thing that is missing is boasting.

At the end of Daniel chapter 1, which represents the end of three years of Daniel’s life, Daniel could have sat back and said, “Yep, you think we’re a bunch of dumb Hebrew boys. Boy, did we show you! We’re ten times better than the best astrologers and magicians that you can come up with. We’re not such a bad group of guys. We pulled this thing off. Look at us.”

However, there was no boasting.

Conclusion

How in the world did Daniel survive? Daniel chapter 1 represents 21 verses of scripture to us, yet to Daniel, it was unbelievable agony and three years of his life. How did he survive?

I was reading an illustration of a natural scientist who studied a particular sea plant that floated on top of the western ocean near the rocks. He noticed that this plant just kind of floated along in the water. It would be dashed against the rocks and beaten about with the spray and the surf and yet, even though it was a slender plant, it would survive. He decided to put on his gear and find out how.

The scientist put on his gear and began to descend. He descended 100 feet . . . 150 feet . . . 175 feet and then, found that although this plant was less than a quarter of an inch in diameter, its roots were fastened to the rocky shore below, where the water was calm. At that depth in the calm water, the plant was not moved about by the wind or the storm – it was anchored to the rock. Above, there was chaos, dashing about, and danger, yet it survived.

How did Daniel survive? In this same way. Although he was a slim, young youth, tender in his convictions and not yet really tested, somewhere, in the cool, calm water of his life, he was anchored to the Rock.

There have been other people who have faced the same chaos. Perhaps you have had similar difficulties, similar dangers, similar temptations. How can you survive? Like Daniel, you can survive by being anchored to the Rock of Jesus Christ.