

# “God Gave Daniel Favor and Compassion”

## The Second in a Series of Sermons on the Book of Daniel

*Texts: Daniel 1:8-21; Matthew 4:1-11*

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Perhaps you heard the same sermons on Daniel I did growing up. As Daniel resisted the temptation to embrace worldly ways, keeping his faith under pressure to conform, so we too should resist “worldliness” and stand strong in our beliefs in the face of those who reject them. The application we were to draw from this was not to smoke, drink, date non-Christians, lie, steal, and so on, when non-Christians tell us these things are OK. While there is truth in this, when we read of Daniel being forced to resist the pressure to compromise his faith we are tempted to read Daniel’s struggle in light of our own struggles to live godly lives and progress in our sanctification. But, as I will suggest throughout this series, we should understand Daniel’s situation as much more like that which a Christian in modern Syria and Iraq must endure when their community has been overrun by ISIS. Daniel faced a constant, coercive, and humiliating pressure to reject his religion and his national citizenship, to embrace foreign gods, foreign rulers, and a way of life completely alien to the faith of Israel’s patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Daniel faced intense pressure to conform at a level difficult for us to imagine, especially when we consider that he was still a youth serving in the royal court (and therefore in the presence) of the very king (Nebuchadnezzar) who was attempting to subjugate Daniel’s people and nation through the most diabolical of means. Throughout his struggle to not compromise his fundamental beliefs, YHWH is with him every step of the way, all the while directing the affairs of kings and nations to their divinely-appointed ends.

As we resume our series on the Book of Daniel, we consider two related themes as we continue to work our way through the opening chapter of Daniel. Last time we covered introductory and background matters, and established the fact that in the prophecy of Daniel two elements unfold simultaneously throughout the book. One element is Daniel’s stress upon God’s sovereign control over all of history, as YHWH brings Israel through a time of judgment (exile) and restoration (a new Exodus) leading up to the coming of the Messiah, and then on to the end of the age. The second element is God’s providential care for Daniel and his three friends while they struggle to remain faithful to YHWH while in Babylon. It is this second element of Daniel’s prophecy we will consider in this sermon as two related sub-themes appear—Nebuchadnezzar’s coercive attempts to turn young Hebrew royals into pagan Babylonians, and Daniel’s resistance to this intense pressure to conform to the king’s scheme to weaken, if not destroy, the people of Israel through Babylonian domination.

The opening verses of Daniel reveal the details of Nebuchadnezzar’s efforts to cripple the nation of Israel, as well as explaining the circumstances which led to Daniel’s captivity and exile in Babylon in 605 BC. We read in verses 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, 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.”* We can date this to precisely 605 BC when Nebuchadnezzar (who is still crown prince and not yet king) led the Babylonians to victory over an Egyptian army led by Pharaoh Neco at Carchemish (modern Syria).<sup>1</sup> Pursuing the routed Egyptians, Nebuchadnezzar went south to Jerusalem, laying siege to the city, when

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<sup>1</sup> This campaign is capably recounted in: Steinmann, Daniel, 79-85.

word came to him that his father had died. Nebuchadnezzar returned to Babylon for his coronation.

With Palestine firmly under Babylonian control, Nebuchadnezzar returned later that year to carry the spoils of his victory back to Babylon—a sign of his power and success as newly crowned king. The evidence from ancient sources (i.e., Josephus, and the Babylonian Chronicle) indicates that Jerusalem was besieged at this time, but not conquered. Daniel tells us that “*the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God.*” Jehoiakim was taken in shackles to Babylon (he was later released and returned to Judah) along with a number of the vessels (implements) used for the worship of YHWH in the Jerusalem temple. Jehoiakim was now the vassal (subject) of Nebuchadnezzar, and paid tribute to his new Babylonian suzerain. Eventually the relationship between the Babylonians and Judah became strained, Judah allying with Egypt, whose armies later defeated Nebuchadnezzar, prompting Nebuchadnezzar to return in 587 and destroy Jerusalem and the temple.

Daniel is clear that YHWH “gave over” to Nebuchadnezzar Israel’s king (Jehoiakim), as well as vessels from the temple. No doubt, the reason was that Israel had become unfaithful to YHWH and was embracing the pagan gods of their Canaanite neighbors. The temple vessels may have been a form of tribute which the weak and cowed Jehoiakim offered to his Babylonian suzerains. But let us not miss the symbolism behind this as well as the intentions of the Babylonians. Perhaps the vessels were selected by the Babylonians—“we’ll take these and spare the city.” But it is possible that the temple vessels were freely given up by Jehoiakim as tribute to Nebuchadnezzar. If this is the case, and it may very well be, then his act reveals that saving his own hide was more important to Judah’s humiliated king than YHWH’s honor. We know from Daniel 5:2-4, that these same vessels will be used by King Belshazzar to honor the “gods” of gold, silver, iron, bronze, and wood, an act which prompts YHWH’s judgment.

Regardless of how these vessels ended up in Babylonian hands, Daniel describes them as being taken to “Shinar,” the ancient name for the location of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9). The use of the name “Shinar” instead of Babylon is surely intentional on Daniel’s part, because he sees Babylon as a place of sin and rebellion against God just as Babel had been (cf. Zechariah 5:11).<sup>2</sup> The fact that these vessels were placed in *the treasury of [Nebuchadnezzar’s] god [Marduk, perhaps?]* tells us that not only were these vessels a valuable spoil of war added to the royal treasury, but that this was an act of a pagan king showing utter contempt for YHWH, the weak “god” of the humiliated Jews.

The very act of taking the vessels used for the worship of YHWH and then placing them in the temple of pagan “gods” demonstrates to the demoralized citizens of Judah and Jerusalem the total dominance of Babylon. Israel’s king is in shackles, and items used for the worship of YHWH are now dedicated to pagan deities. It is not the value of the vessels which matters to Daniel (although they were worth a great deal). What matters is the symbolism of dedicating these vessels to Babylonian gods. Nebuchadnezzar is sending a symbolic message (as we will see throughout the balance of our time) that his kingdom is superior to Judah, that his gods are superior to YHWH, and that he has no intention of allowing Judah and Jerusalem to continue on as anything more than a weakened client state of Babylon. In fact, he will take a number of actions to ensure that Judah and Jerusalem never do return to the power and prestige they possessed in the days of David and Solomon. Jerusalem and its temple can stand for now, but they must serve Nebuchadnezzar’s kingdom, not YHWH’s.

We also see the first act of defiance and resistance from Daniel in this recounting of events, identifying

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<sup>2</sup> Baldwin, Daniel, 87.

the city of Babylon as “Shinar,” thereby reminding his readers from the opening verses that Babylon and its king are no match for YHWH who brought a quick and final end to Babel and its Ziggurat (tower) built as symbol of human power and defiance against the true and living God, YHWH. From the opening verses of Daniel’s prophecy, the prophet speaks of a battle shaping up between YHWH and his servants, and Nebuchadnezzar and his empire. As Daniel will make plain, this is a battle Nebuchadnezzar cannot win. If YHWH gave these vessels over to Nebuchadnezzar (as a form of judgment upon Israel), YHWH will take them back (as judgment upon Babylon) when the Jews return with these vessels to Jerusalem to rebuild their temple during the Exodus from Babylon to Jerusalem as recounted in Ezra-Nehemiah.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout what follows in verses 3-7, we get a sense of Nebuchadnezzar’s diabolical plan to weaken, if not eliminate the Jews as a threat to his kingdom. We in the modern west forget the lengths to which the ancients would go to eliminate their enemies from the face of the earth. Unlike us, they thought of long term consequences. DNA testing shows that nearly 8% of all men living in Central Asia today are descendants of Genghis Khan (so are .05% of all men living today). Khan impregnated as many women as possible because any children born to his conquered subjects would be loyal to him, fight in his successor’s armies, and lose all attachments to their original tribal group—the tribal identity of the father determined the child’s national identity. For the same reason, Alexander the Great ordered his Greek soldiers to impregnate as many women as possible wherever his army went (not just as the spoils of war) but because he knew these children would be Greek, regardless of their previous national identity. This baby boom would overwhelm defeated enemies for generations to come by replacing their depleted populations with the biological children of the victors. This is why both Ezra and Nehemiah so strongly opposed Israelites intermarrying with Canaanite pagans—the children of such a union were far more likely to be pagans than Hebrews. Islam has learned this lesson, and spreads so rapidly in the modern world—not by conversion or conquest—but by live births of children born to Muslim fathers, in many cases, to non-Muslim women. As the birth rate of western nations decline, the birth rate of Muslims rapidly increases. Do the math. Think of the long term effect.

Nebuchadnezzar thought in similar ways of total conquest and subjugation as we will see in our text. But instead of impregnating Jewish women by Babylonian soldiers, Nebuchadnezzar will do the opposite. He will seek to rob the kingdom of Judah (Israel) of as many members of its royal line and nobility as he can, thereby weakening the Jewish people’s identity by eliminating future generations of Jewish kings and nobles. He will also subjugate as many of the next generation of Jews as possible to Babylonian authority, culture and religion, leaving future generations of Judah without its best and brightest, and its royal lineage—the reason behind the kidnaping of Daniel and the others. A nation without a royal line and nobility will eventually cease to be a nation. Bright and capable captives would be made to serve Babylonian interests, not those of Israel—a further sign of Babylonian domination.

This method of subjugation becomes clear in verses 3-4, when we read that “*then the king [Nebuchadnezzar] 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, and to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans.*” Ashpenaz is described as Nebuchadnezzar’s chief eunuch. There is much debate about whether or not Ashpenaz was himself a eunuch (castrated) or was the head official over Nebuchadnezzar’s eunuchs who served in the

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<sup>3</sup> Baldwin, Daniel, 87.

Babylonian court. The term as used here likely means “official.”<sup>4</sup>

When we read that Nebuchadnezzar commanded him to select “*some of the people of Israel,*” specifically members of “*the royal family and of the nobility, youths without blemish, of good appearance,*” the question arises as to whether or not Daniel and his three friends were made eunuchs. Josephus and other Jewish writers mention this happened to a number of Jewish captives during this time, and the language used of them—“*good appearance*”—is used elsewhere of women, which may indicate that these young men were indeed made eunuchs.<sup>5</sup> There is nothing in the text to determine this one way or the other.

A number of Hebrew boys were taken captive—removed from their Jewish noble families and homes—and made subjects of the Babylonians. If they were made eunuchs, the reason is obvious in light of Nebuchadnezzar’s goal of subjugation. Nebuchadnezzar will take the best and the brightest of the next generation of Jewish youth and force them to live out their lives as servants of Israel’s enemy, unable to produce future Jewish royals and nobles through procreation. Obviously healthy and capable (whether eunuchs or not), they will make good servants and will be re-educated to serve Babylonian interests. These “sons of Israel” will be transformed into servants of Babylon and made to worship Babylonian “gods.” Possessing wisdom and knowledge, they will be forced to learn the language of the Chaldeans (Sumarian, Akkadian, and Aramaic) and taught the culture and manners necessary to serve in the Babylonian court.<sup>6</sup> Nebuchadnezzar would not only gain capable servants, each of these servants was a living testament to Babylon’s dominance over its enemies—in the case of Daniel, his three friends and those like them, Jewish royalty will serve the Babylonian king in his court.

To complete the transformation, the Jewish youth were introduced to daily life in the court (no doubt along with similar youths from other subjugated peoples and nations), furthering their indoctrination into Babylonian culture, but also severing their ties to the religions and nations of their youth. Part of this process, we are told in verse 5, was that these boys were given royal cuisine directly from the king’s table. “*The king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate, and of the wine that he drank.*” Cultivating a taste for the “finer things” of life, and becoming dependant upon the king for such things was part of the process. “*They were to be educated for three years, and at the end of that time they were to stand before the king.*” Standing before the king marked the completion of the process and their official entrance into the Babylonian court—a sort of “transformation completed” ceremony.

At some point in the process, the captives were renamed in a further act of severing them from their families and faith in YHWH. In the ancient world “naming” someone was of great significance. According to verse 7, “*among these 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.*” No doubt, there were many Jewish youths under-going this “indoctrination,” but Daniel only names four—himself and three others. What we might miss is their subtle resistance to their Babylonian captors as seen in the names given these Jewish youths.

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<sup>4</sup> John E. Goldingay, *Daniel: Word Biblical Commentary*, Vol. 30 (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 5; Steinmann, *Daniel*, 90-91.

<sup>5</sup> Steinmann, *Daniel*, 90-91.

<sup>6</sup> See D.J. Wiseman’s article, “Chaldeans” in *ISBE.*, 1.632.

The names of each (Daniel – Belteshazzar; Hananiah – Shadrach; Mishael – Meshach; Azariah – Abednego) reveal signs of alteration. Their four original Hebrew names honored YHWH (seen in the suffixes “El” and “Yah”). The new names given them by the Babylonians were intended to honor Babylonian deities but were purposely altered through the addition or changing of consonants in the name (Belt instead of “Bel” “ch” instead of “uk” in Shadrach, “nego” instead of nabu in Abednego). This seems to be a deliberate resistance on the part of the four Jewish youths to the pagan names given them. Daniel and his friends could not do anything about what the Babylonians called them—associating them with pagan gods. But they refused to call each other by pagan names—deliberately butchering the names given them by the Babylonians to honor pagan gods.<sup>7</sup> This misspelling is deliberate, and the level of their resistance to their captors becomes clear in the balance of the chapter.

We read in verse 8 that “*Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king’s food, or with the wine that he drank.*” There is some important word play here important to the larger story. The verb “to set” (ESV “resolved”) is used of Daniel’s resolve to resist the king’s command to eat the royal food. The same verb was used in verse 7 when the Babylonians “set” (“gave them”) pagan names on these four Jewish youths. Now Daniel “sets” out to do otherwise than commanded. The name change represents an outward change which the Babylonians regard as completion of the inward transformation from Hebrew to Babylonian. But Daniel’s resolve indicates otherwise to the reader. Outwardly, Daniel is a Babylonian. Inwardly, he remains a Jew.<sup>8</sup>

Resolved not to conform, Daniel “*asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself.*” Why make an issue of the king’s food? Was it because the food was not “kosher,” or that it had been sacrificed to idols? All the food from Babylon was unclean from a Jewish perspective, yet wine was not prohibited to Jews, so the “uncleanness” of the food is not the only reason for Daniel’s action. Rather, the implication of ancient near-eastern practice regarding fellowship meals seems to be the root of Daniel’s objection.<sup>9</sup> To eat from the king’s table was to enter into a bond of fellowship with Nebuchadnezzar. The Jews regarded such fellowship meals as a sign and seal of covenant ratification and renewal with YHWH. If Daniel ate the king’s food, he was acknowledging devotion to the king—not merely as the king’s servant (which Daniel could and did faithfully for the rest of his life), but this meant acknowledging Nebuchadnezzaer as his covenant Lord (which Daniel refuses to do). Daniel will honor Nebuchadnezzar as head of civil government, but not will worship the king as his covenant “lord,” nor will he worship the king’s gods, something implied by “table fellowship” with Nebuchadnezzar.

It is YHWH’s call of Daniel to his prophetic office which “steals” Daniel’s resistance. As we saw with Ezra and Nehemiah, it is YHWH who ultimately causes Daniel to succeed. In verse 9, we read, “*and God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs.*” God is with Daniel and his companions in the midst of these darkest days of their captivity and exile. As the story unfolds, we read of the chief eunuch’s unwillingness to go along with Daniel’s request, because he might fail the king. “*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.’*” As we will see in chapter 2, such fear was

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<sup>7</sup> Steinmann, Daniel, 92-93.

<sup>8</sup> Steinmann, Daniel, 93.

<sup>9</sup> Baldwin, Daniel, 91-92.

understandable in the royal court, where the king could order the death of anyone who did not do his duty or who was insubordinate. If Daniel became weak or sickly he will be killed along with Ashpenaz.

Daniel (having been given wisdom and compassion by YHWH), next approaches the chief steward (who serves under Ashpenaz) and makes him an offer he cannot refuse. Daniel resists in such a way that he neither compromises his faith in YHWH nor offends the steward, who answers to Ashpenaz, who, in turn ultimately answers directly to the king. *“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.’”* The steward went along with Daniel’s request to “be tested.”

According to verses 14-17, *“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 vegetables.”* At the end of ten days of testing, Daniel demonstrates that a Nutri-Bullet diet is superior to the king’s gluten and fat-laden diet, and he is allowed to eat only vegetables. I am being facetious, because the key point is not what was eaten or not, but is yet another indication of God working in and through the young Daniel. In fact, this is the third time in this chapter that we told of God’s control over events.<sup>10</sup> God “gave” Jehoiakim into Nebuchadnezzar’s hand (v.2). God “gave” Daniel favor with the chief eunuch and his staff (v. 9). In verse 17 we read that at the conclusion of the time of testing it is apparent that, *“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.”* The latter being the main reason why Daniel succeeds in the royal court and rises to such prominence and a theme to which we will return later.

The outcome of the test does not tell us that vegetables are superior to Babylonian fare. Rather, it tells us that God’s hand is on these four young Jews (likely thirteen or fourteen years of age), giving them intelligence and wisdom beyond their years, and honoring their desire to remain faithful servants of YHWH, even though they have been forced to serve the very king who will bring such calamity upon the Jewish people. In this time of testing we see YHWH’s control of world events, even while his fatherly hand is on four young Jewish boys kidnaped from their homes. Nebuchadnezzar seeks to weaken, dominate, and if necessary, eliminate God’s people in the cruelest of ways, while four poor Jewish boys successfully resist the tremendous pressure they are under and maintain the faith of their fathers.

As a result of the successful outcome of the ten-day test (a period which reappears on Revelation 2:10 as the length of trial for the church in Smyrna),<sup>11</sup> Daniel and his friends have not only resisted bowing the knee to a pagan king and his court, they are allowed to eat their own food, and still come to the king’s attention. As we read in verses 18-21 (a passage to which we will return next time), *“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 Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. 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. And Daniel was there until the first year*

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<sup>10</sup> Steinmann, Daniel, 101.

<sup>11</sup> Hamilton, With the Clouds of Heaven, 69.

*of King Cyrus.*” Daniel was taken to Babylon as a youth, but when he writes this book he is an old man, now serving in a Persian court under a Persian king. God has kept his word—Nebuchadnezzar is long gone, as is the empire which Daniel and his three compatriots so faithfully resisted.

What, then, do we take with us from this remarkable story of coercion and resistance? To Jews reading this in the generations to come, it is clearly a story of God’s faithfulness to his people in times of exile and distress. Daniel resists paganism, the temptation to make his captor his “lord,” and the temptation to disobey God’s law for the sake of expediency. Yet, God blesses Daniel, he comes to the king’s attention, he serves in the king’s court, and he lives on well after Nebuchadnezzar’s death. God is with him.

For Christians, Daniel’s obedience points ahead to Jesus’ perfect obedience.<sup>12</sup> As Daniel resisted Nebuchadnezzar’s food and devotion to Babylonian deities, Christians see in this a small foreshadowing of Jesus resisting the temptation to bow to Satan but one time in exchange for all the kingdoms of the world (about which we read in our New Testament lesson from Matthew 4:1-11). And just as God gave Daniel and his companions over to Nebuchadnezzar for as yet unseen redemptive historical purposes, so too God gave his own beloved Son Jesus over to the Romans, who crucified him so that we might be forgiven of our sins. And just as God raised Daniel to a position of respect and honor in the Babylonian and Persian courts, so too God raised Jesus from the dead and then placed him at the position of highest honor—*“Therefore God has highly exalted [Jesus] and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father”* (Philippians 2:9–11).

God gave Daniel favor and compassion. YHWH “gave” a Jewish youth made to serve in a pagan court a life as a prophet of the most high, one quoted by Jesus as foretelling his own messianic mission, and who by resisting the paganism all around him, points us ahead to the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, who defeated the source of all such temptations—the devil himself.

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<sup>12</sup> See Sidney Greidanus, Preaching Christ from Daniel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 51-53.