

Daniel
First Lessons in Sovereignty
Daniel 1
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Well, we return tonight to Daniel. The last time we were able to study this together, we really just introduced the book. I gave you an overview of the book, and I'm not going to go back over that, so if you missed it you'll need to go back and sort of catch up with us, because there is some foundation that I laid that's important. But tonight, we want to move forward. I've entitled this message, and really Daniel 1, "First Lessons in Sovereignty".

Daniel was written by one of the most powerful men. Think about this now, we're just sort of used to "Yeah, it's Daniel." But Daniel was written by one of the most powerful men in the ancient empire of Babylon and his story was a most unlikely one. Chapters 1 - 6 provide us a glimpse of his personal experiences as well of that of his friends there in Babylon. But it's important to understand that, (I did mention this last time) that these six historical narratives (the first six chapters), and then you get to the visions that come beginning in Chapter 7 - but these first six chapters, these historical narratives, are not a history of Israel in Babylon, nor are they a biography of Daniel and his friends. Remember, Daniel covers a time span of more than 60 years.

But Daniel only records six events instead. Daniel strategically chose these six events to drive home his primary theme. And let me remind you of this, here's the point of the book of Daniel: Yahweh is sovereign over the lives of individuals, the affairs of nations, the span of empires and all of human history. That's our God.

Tonight, we come to Daniel 1, which serves primarily as a kind of introduction to the rest of the book, a prologue if you will. It sets the scene for the other narratives to follow in 2, 3, and 6 and for the visions that Daniel will have in 7 - 12, here in chapter 1. Daniel provides us with his identity, and with the amazing circumstances by which he arrived in Babylon as a young Jewish man and rose to power in that great empire. The theme of this first of the six narratives is this, God is sovereign in the lives of His children and arranges the details of their lives for their good and for God's own strategic and eternal purposes. That's the message of this chapter.

And while none of us are Daniel, and none of us will have such a strategic place in the flow of human history, our lives are no different. God is every bit as involved in the details of life, to work for our good and to satisfy His own strategic and eternal purposes.

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We're going to see that unfold here in this first chapter. So, let's work our way through, then, this first chapter. It begins as we see these first lessons in sovereignty. The first lesson really comes in 1:1 and 2, God sovereignly fulfills His word.

Look at verse 1. "In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem and besieged it." This is a statement of simple history and yet there is so much theology here. There is so much to learn in these first two verses. First of all, we need to learn a little bit of the history. Who was this man, Jehoiakim, king of Judah? Now you remember that, after Solomon, the kingdom of Israel split. It was only united, you remember, a united kingdom under three kings, under Saul and then David and then David's son Solomon. After Solomon's death the kingdom divided. It was no longer one, but rather two huge pieces. There was the Northern Kingdom as it was called, or Israel; and there was the Southern Kingdom, or Judah, because the Southern Kingdom consisted primarily of two tribes, Judah and Benjamin.

And so, it's simply called Judah and the other is called Israel, but divided: two separate kings, two separate territories, two separate histories. Jehoiakim, we're told, was king of Judah after the kingdom was divided.

Now understand that after the kingdom was divided, there were nineteen kings that ruled over Judah for a period of 345 years. Only eight of those nineteen are called "good" in any sense in Scripture. The other eleven are all called evil. Jehoiakim was the seventeenth of the nineteen and one of the evil ones. But it wasn't necessary; it didn't have to be. This man had a godly heritage.

In fact, he was the oldest son, Jehoiakim was the oldest son of one of those godly kings, a man by the name of Josiah. At Josiah's death, Jehoiakim's younger brother, a man by the name of Jehoahaz, became king. But before he had served even three months, Pharaoh Necho from Egypt came and dethroned him and placed his older brother Eliakim on the throne and renamed him Jehoiakim. Now, Jehoiakim and his kingship didn't turn out very well.

In fact, if you read any of the Scriptures you know that he was the one who burned Jeremiah's book. He was the one who wasted state funds building an unnecessary palace, and because of his checkered history, Jeremiah predicted that he would be quote, "buried with the burial of an

ass” end quote. Jehoiakim reigned for 11 years. Eleven years he was king. Verse 1 refers here to his third year.

He came to the throne in 608 B.C. and so his third year, then, was 605 B.C. That’s the year of these events. It was the third year of his reign by Jewish reckoning, and that’s why it’s called that here. Jeremiah 46 calls it the fourth year of his reign by a different method of reckoning, the Babylonian method of rank reckoning, and I will not take you through all the history of that, but that’s the reason there seems to be that disparity. Now here, for the first time in verse 1, we meet one of the central characters of this book and one of my favorite characters in all the Bible. You’re going to love to get to know this man before and after he encounters the true God, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon in secular history. If you studied any ancient history at all, in secular history this man is known as Nebuchadrezzar, not –nezzar. I have to say that carefully because it’s so close.

But after the fall of the Assyria - here’s the history of him - after the fall of the Assyrian Empire a Chaldean named Nabopolassar took over the throne of Babylon. Through a series of alliances Nabopolassar created what’s called the neo-Babylonian Empire. His son, Nabopolassar’s son, was Nebuchadnezzar the II, or the man we call Nebuchadnezzar. He was one of the greatest human kings of all time.

He reigned for forty-three years from 605 B.C. to 562 B.C. He was a brilliant military strategist. He was a great builder, an architect, and he was a statesman par excellence.

Verse 1 says, “In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem and besieged it.” The background of that is one I mentioned to you last time. In the late seventh century, Egypt and Babylon were fighting for control of that narrow little strip of land that we call Israel.

The reason for it, by the way, is not that it’s such a wonderful place to hang out, it’s because it’s so strategically placed. It is literally the land-bridge between the ancient continents of the world, Europe and Asia and Africa. If you wanted to get from one to the other there was only one place that made sense, and it’s that tiny little strip of land called Israel. And so, they were fighting, Egypt and Babylon were fighting over that piece of land, and in their battle there were skirmishes, really. For a time only small portions of their armies were sort of back and forth, but a large-scale decisive battle came in May or June of the year 605 B.C., this very year that Daniel

begins with. The Babylonian army was under the leadership of Nebuchadnezzar, its crown prince. He attacked the Egyptian army on the upper Euphrates River at a city called Carchemish. The Babylonians decisively defeated the Egyptians, and the Egyptians retreated south to their homeland.

This gave complete control of Palestine to the Babylonians. Nebuchadnezzar moved south toward Jerusalem, and he put the city of Jerusalem under siege. In early August of 605 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar took control of the city of Jerusalem. Notice how verse 2 puts it. We're told in verse 1 he laid siege to it, and verse 2 says, "... 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."

Now, it's really important to note what Daniel says, "The Lord gave Judah into his hand." There are a couple of things to note there. First of all, the name for God, "Lord", this is not the most common Old Testament word that's translated the "Lord", the one you find in all caps, which is God's personal name, YAHWEH.

Instead the one used here is "Adonai". It refers to God as the Supreme Sovereign, the Supreme Ruler. Daniel's point from the very beginning is that God was in complete control of the situation. He was the Ruler, the Adonai, the Sovereign, and it says, "He gave." You see it was neither Nebuchadnezzar's military might nor Jehoiakim's inherent weakness that was ultimately behind Judah's defeat. God gave Judah into his hand.

But here's something you're going to see again and again throughout the book of Daniel. God uses ordinary means. He uses the army of Nebuchadnezzar. My point is God is nowhere to be seen, and yet He's pulling all the strings. He is the Ruler, the Sovereign, the Master of the situation. It's the same thing with our lives. You've never seen God, and yet just as really, He is doing in your life and in mine, in the affairs of this world, just what He was doing here.

Now in this first verse then, what I want you to see, I'm sorry the second verse, Daniel drives home the theme of his book, God's sovereignty over all of human history. "The Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah, into his hand..." [and then he adds in verse 2,] "... along with some of the vessels of the house of God." These were temple vessels, gold and silver cups and utensils that were made hundreds of years before by Solomon in 900 B.C., but even this was not Nebuchadnezzar's doing, because this was God's doing.

In fact, I want to take you back. I want to take you back a hundred years before verse 2. A hundred years and the interaction of a man name Hezekiah with Isaiah. Go back to the book of Isaiah, and look at chapter 39. Isaiah 39:1 says that the ...

king of Babylon, [not Nebuchadnezzar at that time a hundred years before] sent letters and a present to Hezekiah, for he'd heard that he had been sick and recovered. Hezekiah was pleased.

[You remember the episode; Hezekiah prayed, and the Lord had restored his health.] Hezekiah was pleased, And [he] showed them [that is, this group from Babylon] *all* his treasure house, the silver, the gold, the spices, the precious oil, his whole armory and all that was found in his treasuries. There was nothing in his house nor in all his dominion, [including the Temple] that Hezekiah did not show them. Then Isaiah the prophet came to King Hezekiah and said to him, "What did these men say and from where have they come to you?" Hezekiah said, "They have come to me from a far country, from Babylon." He said, "What have they seen in your house?" So, Hezekiah answered, "They've seen all that is in my house. There is nothing among my treasuries that I have not shown them."

Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah [now listen folks, this is 701 B.C., this is a hundred years before, "Behold, the days are coming,"] "Hear the word of the LORD of hosts: 'Behold, the days are coming, when all that is in your house, and all that your fathers have laid up in store to this day, will be carried to Babylon. Nothing will be left,' says ..." [YAHWEH. He's the Sovereign One; He's the Master, He's in control.] "And *some* of your sons, who issue from you, whom you will beget, will be taken away, and they will become officials in the palace of the king of Babylon." Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, "The word of the LORD which you have spoken is good." For he thought, 'For there will be peace and truth in my days'."

So, what I want you to see is that the fact that Nebuchadnezzar took some of the temple articles back to Babylon was not in some way a testimony to the weakness of Israel's God. Instead, it was exactly what He had said would happen a hundred years before, and He declared it before it happened, and He made it happen. He's Adonai. He is Master, Sovereign, and the Most High God. Now go back to Daniel and notice Daniel 1:2. It says, "And he brought them" (these

vessels of the house of God) “to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and he brought the vessels into the treasury of his god.”

Now here’s how it happened. I told you that in early August he took the city of Jerusalem; the siege was effective. But on August 15th of that same year, or perhaps the 16th [we can’t be absolutely sure] Nebuchadnezzar received word at Jerusalem that his father king Nabopolassar had died in Babylon. Remember he’s the crown prince and he’s a long way away from the country and the kingdom that is now his. And so, he was forced to rush home in order to claim the throne and consolidate his power.

And so, he immediately leaves Jerusalem and heads back to Mesopotamia, back to Babylon, and on September 6th, 605 B.C., he arrived in Babylon. And on that same day he was crowned king. Now when I say Babylon, I don’t know what comes into your mind, but I can tell you what should come into your mind. It was the main city and capital of Babylonia. Under Nebuchadnezzar the city of Babylon had become, think of this, the largest city that had ever existed in the history of the world up to that time. It covered twenty-two hundred acres, and it featured some of the world’s most beautiful and impressive buildings.

It was a remarkable city about 50 miles south of modern Baghdad. By far, the most impressive thing about this city was its defenses. You can see from the slide that it’s surrounded by a wall. That slide does not do justice to that wall. In fact, the city was surrounded by two double-wall systems. The outer wall was at least 12 - 14 miles in circumference. It was a huge wall. In fact, it was 84 feet thick. It was the equivalent of a two-lane road on the top of the wall; and that outer wall, not only was it 12 - 14 miles in circumference it was 50 - 75 feet high with guard towers positioned every 125 feet. And those guard towers rose above that 50 - 75-foot wall another 25 feet. That’s just the outer wall. Then there was a space, and then there was the inner wall, and it was almost as impressive. It was 55 feet thick and probably higher than the outer wall.

And then there was the river Euphrates which ran through the heart of the city, providing a constant supply of water. And what the engineers did was, they diverted a portion of the Euphrates to form a small moat around the eastern portion of the city.

As you can see there in the slide, fortified gates were named after the gods of Babylon. It was a magnificent city and within the city there were more than 50 temples to Babylon’s various gods.

But without question the main temple was to Marduk. You could see it there outlined in the very center of the city next to the Euphrates River. It was on the east bank of the Euphrates.

And this was Marduk's temple. He was generous, this Babylonian god, because his temple contained numerous chapels for other gods who could be worshipped there. But the chapel for Marduk was the main one, and it was decorated with cedar paneling, with gold, with alabaster and semiprecious stones. It also featured a seven-story high ziggurat.

Daniel tells us Nebuchadnezzar brought the vessels from the temple of God to the land of Shinar. By the way, that's a sort of anachronism that takes us back to the description of the town where the Tower of Babel was, and he brought it to the treasury of his god. It was almost certainly to the temple of Marduk.

Now what was he doing by bringing these items from the temple of God into the temple of his God? Nebuchadnezzar was giving credit to Marduk for his defeat of Israel. He was saying, Marduk is greater than Israel's God, and he has given us the victory.

That's why Daniel begins and says the Lord gave Jehoiakim into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar. Now already, just with these first two verses, as we survey and look at how God is sovereignly controlling the flow of history. I want to point out just a couple of crucial lessons we've learned just in these first two verses already about God.

First of all, we've learned that God is sovereign. He's sovereign over kings and nations. He's sovereign over Jehoiakim. He's sovereign over Nebuchadnezzar. He's sovereign over the kingdom of Judah, and He's sovereign over the kingdom of Babylon. He is in control, He is Adonai. He is Ruler, Sovereign Master. And thank God, that's still true today.

Secondly, God is faithful. He is faithful to His word even in judgment. We don't like to think about that too much, but God does what He says and what happens in Daniel 1:1-2, is God's faithfulness to His Word.

Go back to Deuteronomy 28. When God gave His law through Moses and it's recounted here in Deuteronomy, we find that God explained what would happen, what the consequences of the people of Israel's disobedience would be. They would invite God's judgment. Notice verse 47, Deuteronomy 28:47.

“Because you did not serve the LORD your God with joy and a glad heart, for the abundance of all things; therefore you shall serve your enemies whom the LORD will send against you, in hunger, in thirst, in nakedness, and in the lack of all things; and He will put an iron yoke on your neck until He has destroyed you. The LORD will bring a nation against you from afar, from the end of the earth, as the eagle swoops down, a nation whose language you shall not understand, a nation of fierce countenance who will have no respect for the old, nor show favor to the young.”

He goes on to say they will destroy your land, verse 52, they’ll “besiege you in all your towns until your high and fortified walls in which you trusted come down throughout your land, [and] it shall besiege you,” look at verse 58, “If you are not careful to observe all the words of this law which are written in this book, to fear this honored and awesome name, the LORD your God...”

This is what He will do. That’s what’s going on in Daniel 1:1-2. And while we love the faithfulness of God in His promises of mercy and grace, we ought to learn to appreciate the fact that God always does what He says, be it blessing or be it a judgment. God is faithful to His Word.

Thirdly, we learn in those two verses that we’ve begun with, that God is humble. Have you ever thought about this? I thought about this a lot recently as I’ve been thinking through a number of things, even with the life of Christ. God is humble. I mean, God allows for His own name to be dishonored for 70 years. The vessels of the temple, eventually all the stuff that was in the temple, come[s] to the treasuries of Marduk and all the Babylonians say, “Look, how great! Praise Marduk from whom all blessings flow!” and God allows it, the only true, living God allows it.

Why? Well, He does it for the benefit of those who are already His people. God had a plan to purify His people, but not just that, He does it for the salvation of those who were not His people. We’ll see more about that later. But isn’t this just like God to be – I mean, we see this in Christ, right? Christ, who enjoyed the glories of heaven, was willing to come down and be shamed and be disrespected, to be treated badly, to be humbled, for the sake of those whom He loved. This is our God. This is what He’s like.

So, we already have learned some amazing things about God. Let's go on as we look at the second scene in Daniel 1, God sovereignly fulfills His word in verses 1 and 2.

Secondly, God sovereignly orchestrates the lives of His children in verses 3 - 7. Now, in this section we are introduced to four young Judeans who become the chief characters of these first six chapters. Notice verse 3, "Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, the chief of his officials, to bring in some of the sons of Israel." Ashpenaz is clearly an important official in Nebuchadnezzar's court. He's called the chief of his officials, which, by the way, can also be translated the master of the eunuchs. In light of that, some have conjectured that Daniel may have been made a eunuch, that is, emasculated.

This was common in ancient times, and some point out that Daniel had no children and therefore, maybe this is what happened. However, you can't really jump to that conclusion because the same word is used to refer to Potiphar in Genesis 37, who was clearly married. So, I think we can't make a case from that. It simply means, and it's translated here, the chief of his officials.

Now the wording makes it clear that these young men had no choice in this. Notice the king ordered Ashpenaz to bring in some of the sons of Israel. This was completely outside of their control. But again, Adonai, the Sovereign One was in control.

Now, when he brings them to Babylon, this is one of three deportations to Babylon that occur over the years that Daniel is there. The first of them is the one that includes him. It happens when Nebuchadnezzar returns back to the land of Babylon because of the death of his father, to be crowned king. We don't know if he took them with him at that time, or he simply set them aside and told someone to bring them later. But Daniel and other royalty were taken to Babylon at that time, the first deportation in 605.

The second deportation happens in 598. King Jehoiachin, not -chim, Jehoiachin also known as Jeconiah and Ezekiel were captured at this time, and they were deported. That's in 598.

The third deportation to Babylon occurs in 586. This is the big one. This is when Nebuchadnezzar returns because of the refusal to pay tribute money. He returns, and he destroys the city of Jerusalem. He destroys the temple. He carries all but the poorest and the oldest into Babylon. That happens in 586. But this is the first, when it says "bring ... some of the sons of Israel."

Verse 3 goes on to say, “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.” Now that may read in Hebrew, it’s a little unclear of the reading, but it may read like this: “Children of Israel, even of the king’s seed and of the princes.”

I think that’s the preferred reading here, and I think Daniel was probably in the royal line. In fact, according to Josephus the Jewish historian, Daniel and his friends were in fact members of Zedekiah’s royal family. And you remember what we just read in Isaiah 39, where a hundred years before God had said through Isaiah, some of your descendants Hezekiah, some of the royal seed is going to Babylon? That’s fulfilled here.

It seems that Nebuchadnezzar’s purpose wasn’t so much to punish these boys, as it was to consolidate his control of the Jews and to strengthen his long-term rule by making them part of his court. Now in verse 4, Daniel explains Nebuchadnezzar’s selection process. Notice what he says. Bring the nobility, but make sure they are youths in whom was no defect, who were good looking, showing intelligence and every brand of wisdom, endowed with understanding and discerning knowledge, and who had ability for serving in the king’s court.

Some of you are looking at that job description, that list of qualifications, and going, “Yeah, here I am. Sign me up.” Here are the qualifications for Jews to be trained for government service in Babylon. First of all, he says youths. Although that particular Hebrew word is not definitive as to age, it’s very unlikely that Daniel was older than 15 years old at this time. Why do we say that? Because remember, he serves for 67 years when the Persian kingdom begins. So, he’s quite old at that point; if you add 15 and 67 you can see that. Now we’re getting somewhere. So, he had to have been in his teens, probably around 14 or 15 years of age. Also, Plato says that the Persians, the kingdom right after Babylon that captured Babylon, the Persians began their higher education at 14, and Xenophon says they completed it at 17. So, three years of higher education was common in the Near East at that time and it began at 14. Likely Daniel was in that neighborhood, 14 or 15 years old.

Also, it says these youths were those in whom was no defect. This word is used of the sacrificial animals. It means there were, they had to be free from obvious bodily blemishes and from physical handicaps.

They also had to be good-looking, the word's handsome. They had to have a pleasing appearance probably both in their facial features and in their shape.

Showing intelligence; they had to be mentally sharp. This word has to do with learning capacity in every branch of wisdom. They couldn't be specialists; and it says endowed with understanding and discerning knowledge. The Hebrew is very interesting here. Literally, it says they have to be knowers of knowledge and understanders of knowledge. In other words, they have to be able to accumulate factual knowledge, and they have to be able to comprehend that knowledge to do something with it.

And then finally it says they had to have ability for serving in the king's court. This refers primarily to their demeanor, to their demeanor and their personality. They had to be socially poised; they had to be polished. They needed to have the proper manners, and they had to have confidence and acquaintance with social expectations. They needed to behave like royalty. So, Daniel and his friends then were not chosen at random. This wasn't a matter of luck, even from a human standpoint. Clearly one of the qualifications they had nothing to do with, they were descendants of the royal line. But the rest of it was preparation. Daniel and his friends had already demonstrated themselves superior before Nebuchadnezzar ever arrived.

My mind always goes back to a line that one of my seminary professors beat into our heads when we were in seminary. And it's this, "There's always a prepared place for a prepared man." God always has a prepared place for a prepared man or woman. Now, notice the wisdom of Nebuchadnezzar here.

We're going to begin to see a little bit about this guy and how he thinks. He chose men for the right qualities. He educated them in postgraduate work, and he was even willing, as we'll see, to learn from them. No wonder God called Nebuchadnezzar the head of gold. Now verse 4 goes on to explain their sort of total Babylonian makeover. Verse 4 says, "... and he ordered him to teach them the language of," excuse me, "the literature and language of the Chaldeans." That refers to the classical literature of ancient Akkadian cuneiform. Cuneiform was written on clay tablets, using wedge shaped impressions created by a wooden stylus.

Maybe you've seen pictures of cuneiform. Thousands of tablets have been found by archaeologists, some even dating to the time of Abraham, and in Babylon that's where the

knowledge of the ancient world was amassed. They got the records from Assyria and Babylon became the center of world learning. And this is what these boys were studying.

But notice Nebuchadnezzar was not merely concerned that they'd be prepared mentally but also physically. Verse 5 says the king appointed for them a daily ration from the king's choice food and the wine which he drank. Notice how the text puts it. Literally in the Hebrew it's, "the king apportioned." "The king apportioned for them a daily ration from the king's choice food and the wine which he drank." In other words, Nebuchadnezzar himself was involved in the details of the amount of food and the kind of food that each man was to eat. That becomes very important in just a moment. This was very specific. From Nebuchadnezzar himself, the most powerful man on the planet.

Now, daily ration here – you know, don't think like those diets where they give you like, a pea and a leaf of lettuce. We're not talking about that here. This is more of a Texas-style diet. The kings of the ancient world were known for their feasts. Many attended their banquets, and there was always more food than could be consumed. Why? Because that put their greatness on display; the more food, the better. The implication here is not that Daniel and his friends lived on this meager ration, but rather they could indulge themselves like kings to whatever extent they wanted, and there was nothing short about the quality of the food. In other words, this was not like a buffet at Cici's pizza. This was the real thing; this was quality food (sorry Justin).

The implication is that Daniel and his friends could indulge himself to whatever extent they desired of the best and the finest, verse 5 says. "And, appointed that they should be educated three years, at the end of which, they were to enter the king's personal service." Now in verse 6 we meet four of these young men that have been described so far.

"Now among them," by the way, that language "among them" implies there were others. There were certainly others from other countries Nebuchadnezzar was trying to bring up in his court, these who could help him rule these countries he had captured, but there were probably more Jewish young men as well. But among the ones that Nebuchadnezzar brought, "... among them from the sons of Judah were ..." (these four) "... Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah." Daniel only mentions four. But as I said, there were likely more from Judah as well as from other Middle Eastern nations that Nebuchadnezzar has conquered.

So, what happened to the others from Judah? Well, we don't know. Maybe some of them join Daniel and his friends and stay loyal to God. Or maybe they just went along, became assimilated into Babylonian culture, and they fade into the background of biblical history.

Now we learn their Hebrew names, and by the way, all four of these young men, their names contain one of the names of God. Either "El," which is the sort of generic word in Hebrew for God, or "-iah," like Isaiah or Hananiah. That ending is a form of "Yah" from the shortened form of God's name, Yahweh. OK. So, all of their names referenced the true God of Israel. Daniel, his name means "God is my judge."

Don't think "judge" in the sense of, you know, some television drama. We're not about that kind of judge. We're talking about ruler, is the idea. Now you can see how his name fits with what's going on in this book. God is my Ruler, my Judge. Hananiah means, "Yahweh is gracious," Mishaël, "Who is like God?" and Azariah, "Yahweh has helped." These were their Hebrew names. Verse 7 says, "Then the commander of the officials," probably the man we've already met, Ashpenaz, "assigned new names to them; and to Daniel he assigned the name Belteshazzar, to Hananiah Shadrach, to Mishaël Meshach and to Azariah Abednego." The commander assigned new names to them. Why? Well it's very obvious, because, remember what I just told you, all four of their Hebrew names contained a reference to the one true and living God. All four of their Babylonian names contain references to the pagan gods of Babylon.

Let me show you. Their new Chaldean names were first of all Belteshazzar, which means Bel, it means "Lord" – it's a reference to Marduk in this context, the main god of Babylon – "Lord will protect," and by that it means Marduk will protect. Then there's Shadrach which means "the inspiration" or possibly "command of Aku." Aku was the Samarian moon god. Meshach, "Who is like Aku?" And then Abednego is a little bit of a turn of phrase. It means "the servant of Nego" or more likely Nebo, which was the second highest God in the Babylonian pantheon.

Now why did Nebuchadnezzar rename them? It's pretty obvious isn't it? It was not only an attempt to immerse them in the life and culture of Babylon and to eradicate their former culture, but more importantly, it was to remove from them the references in their daily life to the true and living God and to replace them with cheap, tawdry substitutes. Notice the total effort to convert these boys while they're young and involved in their education. Let me say that again. Notice the total effort to convert them while they're young and involved in their education, parents. There is a powerful lesson here. Don't be naive.

And if you're students, don't be naïve. The school you attend, the college you go to, the old alma mater - she isn't what she used to be, and they are desperately trying to do to you, if you're a student, or to your kids if you're a parent, what Nebuchadnezzar was trying to do to these boys. I guarantee it. It happens with all the schools right here in North Texas, with all the old wonderful schools that people send their kids to across the state of Texas. They desperately want to assimilate you into their culture. They want to remove all the marks that distinguish you as a worshipper of the true God.

With Daniel and his friends, the Babylonians change, think about this, they change their location, they change their education, they change their vocation, they even change their names. But what they could not change was their heart devotion to the God of Israel; but don't miss the point. The focus of this paragraph isn't Daniel and his four friends. You know, often when we hear this chapter taught it's about, "Look at Daniel, look at what a wonderful guy he was." And he was, but he's not the point. Because God is the one who made him that. The focus of this chapter is God.

Don't miss what's going on here. Nebuchadnezzar thought he was in control of the destinies of these four young men. And from a human vantage point, that is exactly how it looks. If you had been a fly on the wall in ancient Babylon, you would have said, "Wow. Look at what Nebuchadnezzar is doing in their lives." But that simply wasn't the reality.

God had a plan for these four. God gave Jehoiakim and the vessels of His temple and these young men into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, and Nebuchadnezzar could do absolutely nothing but further the sovereign God's purpose. It's Genesis 50:20, isn't it, where Joseph says, "... you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, and to preserve many people alive."

There's a third important point about God's sovereignty and a lesson about God's sovereignty in Daniel 1. Not only God sovereignly fulfills His word in verses 1 and 2, God sovereignly orchestrates the lives of His children in verses 3 - 7, but God sovereignly blesses the obedience of His children in verses 8 - 16.

Verse 8 says, "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 Hebrew for “made up his mind” is literally “he placed upon his heart.”

He didn’t wait for the crisis moment; he made a decision beforehand. He determined in his heart. Notice what it says, “that he would not defile himself.” That language is used a number of times in the Old Testament to talk about moral or ceremonial defilement in the law of Moses. That’s what he’s talking about here. That’s what he’s thinking about. Now here’s the question. Why would eating Nebuchadnezzar’s fine food defile him? Well, there are likely two problems, two reasons that he would be defiled by eating it. First of all, some of the food and drink was contrary to Mosaic Law. For example, the Babylonians ate pork. I can go with them that far. They also ate horse; I can’t go that far.

In other cases, the problem wasn’t the food itself, it was how it was prepared. You remember that in eating meat, in the Mosaic law it had to have the blood drained, and that wasn’t always done, still isn’t done in some places around the world.

A second problem, the reason this food would defile them, was that the first portion of both the food and the wine was often offered to pagan idols. You had the same problem, right, in Corinth, 1 Corinthians 10:20.

So, in the case of this first problem, if he ate something that the law specifically said don’t eat, or food that was prepared in a way that the law said don’t eat it, then he would be in active disobedience to God.

In the case of the second problem, he would have been tacitly recognizing the existence of the gods of Babylon. Now you know you read this chapter and we - when I was growing up - I’m sure isn’t still sung, but there was a song called, “Dare to be a Daniel” and you know, be brave and courageous like he was, and we think it was easy. Let me tell you, this was not an easy decision. In fact, let me give you just a few of the reasons that, if Daniel had been a little weaker, he might have convinced himself not to do this. Think about the reasons this was such a hard decision for Daniel and his friends.

First of all, remember this order came from the king. He is the one who personally picked the food and the amounts, and so not to follow it was direct disobedience to the most powerful man

on the planet, who could kill you in a heartbeat. There was no law that governed him. He did what he wanted.

Secondly, if they disobeyed, they could face severe punishment.

Thirdly, to turn down the King's food would likely have undermined their chances for future advancement.

Another reason is, this was likely the best food that was available in Babylon; and therefore, it was extremely desirable. You know, okay, you have a choice. You can have Ruth's Chris steak, or you can go to McDonald's. Which would you like? They were 900 miles from home, and no one at home would ever know. They could have rationalized that God hadn't protected them from captivity; and therefore, they didn't have any choice. And God didn't really deserve obedience anyway; He hadn't protected them, look at what He had allowed to happen to them. And I can promise you this, they were undoubtedly facing extreme peer pressure. Oh, there were a lot of reasons to go along.

You want to talk boldness? Consider this. Notice what the text says, "... he sought permission that he might not defile himself." Wouldn't you have loved to have that conversation? Think of the repercussions of this. He's a captive, and he says, "Listen, I can't eat the king's food because it will defile me."

Courage is based on convictions, and convictions are based on a knowledge of God's Word and His will. Verse 9 says, "Now God granted Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the commander of the officials...." Notice that expression, "God granted favor." Here again is the same Hebrew expression we met in verse 2, "God gave." This is the second time, and we're going to see it a third time. God gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar. Here God gave Daniel, literally the Hebrew says, "hesed," "loyal love and compassion". In other words, the head of the officials of Nebuchadnezzar, Ashpenaz, he really liked these guys, and he felt for them. Human success is the result of God's action, not ours. God granted him favor. Verse 10, and the commander of the officials said to Daniel - now you know what you expect to read after it says, "God granted him favor." What do you expect the next verse to say? "Go ahead, Daniel. Go ahead, and you just do what you want." Now what he says, "And the commander 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.” Now think about what he just said to Daniel.

He said, “No.” And he said, “I’m not going to go along with this because if I go along with it, I might lose my head.” What’s he saying to Daniel? Ashpenaz was afraid that any variation in Nebuchadnezzar’s menu might affect their health and their appearance. If he granted the request, he could end up losing his own life. Verse 11, “But Daniel said to the overseer,” now we’ve changed. He’s not - he’s talked to Ashpenaz - and Ashpenaz said “No.” He obviously said it nicely, because God granted Daniel favor with him, but he still said “No.” So, Daniel’s not done. Ashpenaz had denied his request, but Daniel was undaunted. “... Daniel said to the overseer whom the commander of the officials had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah....” So, here’s the guy who’s directly over them, who reports to Ashpenaz, he sought his permission. Notice his wisdom here.

Daniel understands that his superiors have a job to do and suggests that his way will achieve those ends better, and he proposes a test period to prove it. Verse 12, “Please test your servants for ten days, and let us be given some vegetables to eat and water to drink.” Again, I would love to have a recording of that conversation. You know, “Let me get this straight. You get the king’s food, but you don’t want to eat that because it’s somehow going defile you, and you want vegetables and water.”

He suggests a ten-day test. Now the word vegetables is literally “that which grows from seeds sown,” so it includes vegetables and includes fruits and includes grains and the bread made from grains. Now, I know what some of you are thinking, before you go and start your Daniel diet or you try to make an argument here for going vegan or something like that, let me remind you that Jesus and the Apostles ate meat. In fact, Jewish people were commanded by God to eat meat in the sacrificial system, including at Passover every year. I like that.

Verse 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.” Now this was remarkable faith on the part of Daniel. He truly believed that in ten days’ time, God would so miraculously intervene in their appearance, that this official would be convinced of the value of their menu. This is God intervening. This is not, “Oh here’s a wonderfully healthy way to eat.”

The overseer that Ashpenaz had appointed agrees with him. The test begins. Verse 15, “At the end of ten days their appearance seemed better and they were fatter” [how did that happen on that kind of diet] “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 which they were to drink, and kept giving them vegetables.”

It seems like from the language that’s used here and the tense of the Hebrew verbs, that he proceeded to do this on a day-to-day basis, and it’s possible that he notified his superior concerning the outcome of the test and Ashpenaz ultimately gave his approval. And so, it goes. God sovereignly blesses the obedience of His children.

There’s a fourth and final lesson in this first chapter, and that’s that God sovereignly equips and places His children for His eternal purposes. We see this in verses 17- 21. Verse 17 says,

“As for these *four* youths” [here we are again number three – “God gave,”] “God gave them knowledge and intelligence in every branch of literature and wisdom; Daniel even understood all *kinds* of visions and dreams.” Now notice first of all, knowledge, that’s the facts which are learned. Intelligence is the ability to explain the nature and significance of that knowledge, its’ comprehension, in other words, in every branch of literature, literally books of wisdom. In other words, they knew and understood the books of wisdom or the content of all the trained minds in Babylon. And God, notice verse 17, gave Daniel special ability to interpret all kinds of dreams and visions before the Scripture was completed. God often used these vehicles for revelation. Interestingly enough, the Babylonians believe that normal dreams carried messages, but Scripture teaches God used only certain dreams to bring revelation. And this verse prepares us for the dreams and visions that will follow in the book of Daniel.

Notice verse 18, “Then at the end of the days which the king had specified for presenting them,” [in other words, after the three years of education; this is sometime between 601 and 603 B.C.] “the commander of the officials presented them before Nebuchadnezzar.” They were brought personally before Nebuchadnezzar, and he interviewed them. He examined these young men either individually, or perhaps in small groups in order to make specific and individual judgments about their future capacity to serve in his government. He scrutinized their ability to be fluent in Akkadian and in Aramaic, the extent of their knowledge, their personal appearance and other characteristics.

Verse 20 says, “As for every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king consulted them, he found them ten times better”; literally in Hebrew, ten hands, ten people better ...” [That’s just a Hebrew expression to say, far superior.] He found them far superior to “all the magicians *and* conjurers who *were* in all his realm.” They were far superior, first of all, to the magicians. We’re going to meet this group again. The word comes from a word meaning “engraver.” It means engraver of hieroglyphic writings in cuneiform. It was a priestly caste who claimed to possess occult knowledge and who kept those records of astrology and everything else written down in cuneiform. And then there were the conjurers. This was a group who practiced incantation by movement of breath and supposedly conjured up dead spirits.

They professed great wisdom, but when he interviewed these young men, he found that they were ten times better, far superior in every branch of knowledge he asked them about. Verse 21 says, “And Daniel continued until the first year of Cyrus the king.” The first year of Cyrus. That’s 539 B.C. That indicates not the end of Daniel’s ministry, but how far in Babylon he went. Daniel is still alive according to 10:1, in the third year of Cyrus in 537 B.C. The point is this; Daniel was the first exile to arrive in Babylon, in the first group. And he was there by God’s providence when the bulk of them arrived, and he was there and in control at one of the most powerful positions in all of Babylon through the end of the Babylonian Empire into the Medo-Persian Empire, and he saw the declaration for the people of Israel to return to the land of Israel.

In other words, here at the beginning of the book, Daniel wished to indicate that he outlasted the Babylonian kings, two of which were assassinated. He outlasted four Babylonian kings; two of them were assassinated. He survived the fall of the Babylonian Empire to Cyrus, the Medo-Persian. He lived through all of that, and yet he continued to serve in high office. This was 66 years, this reference in verse 21, 66 years after Daniel had been taken captive from his nation. At that point he was about 81 years old, and Daniel and God’s people had found God to be faithful through that captivity.

Very briefly, there are some important lessons for us to learn from Daniel 1. Let me just give them to you, just to provoke your thought.

First of all we learn here God’s seriousness about sin. If you doubt that, then just remember the 70 years of Babylonian exile.

Secondly, we learn about God's faithfulness to His people. Just look at His dealings with Daniel and these friends of his.

Thirdly, we learn about God's desire for obedience regardless of what it costs. Consider Daniel's unwillingness to compromise. Listen, God expects the same of us.

Number four, we learn about God's providence over every event.

Daniel's captivity looked, on the surface, like the end of the world, but it was God's plan. God's purpose in sending Daniel and his friends to Babylon was not judgement, but mercy to His people. In fact, the testimony of Daniel to the wise men of Babylon, (think about this) his testimony of God reaches far beyond his time, because five hundred years later after Daniel, wise men arrived from the east looking for Him who was born King of the Jews.

Where did they get that knowledge? They got it almost certainly from the residual knowledge that came from the influence of Daniel. Sinclair Ferguson writes, "We tend to see our trials as isolated nightmares. God however sees them from a different perspective. They are important and connected punctuation marks in the biography of grace that He is writing in our lives." And when you look back on the life you can see it.

Number five, God's sovereign rule over all over every aspect of government, whether nations, kings, officials, supervisors, the guy responsible for feeding Daniel and his friends.

And number six, God can enable us to live lives of faithfulness to Him even when we, too, are surrounded by pagan influences and pagan propaganda. Like Daniel, God can enable us to set our hearts to serving Him wholeheartedly and entirely, and He can preserve us. That's the message of Daniel.

Let's pray together.

Father, thank you for these rich truths. Thank you for this magnificent story. Thank you, Father, for Daniel and his friends. But we freely acknowledge they are not the heroes of the story, You are; because You gave, and You gave, and You gave.

Father, help us to love You, to worship You, to follow You, to trust You with our lives, knowing that You are just as involved even when it looks like it did then, that You are completely uninvolved. Lord, may we trust You, may we serve You, may we be faithful by Your strength, by Your faithfulness.

We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.