

# **Be Strong and of Good Courage: Preparing Our Children for the Nations and the Counter-Cultures of this World**

## **Daniel 1:1-21**

**Introduction:** 1) When we find our feet forcibly planted in the soil of an anti-god, anti-Christian culture, it is absolutely imperative that our heart be drawn to heaven and our mind immersed in the Word of God. As Paul wrote in Colossians 3:1-2, “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.” As Paul adds in Romans 12:2, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.” Such words were essential for four Hebrew teenagers who had been plucked from their families and their country and taken captive to the evil empire of that day, the empire of Babylon. Their names are Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah (1:6).

2) The theme of the book called Daniel is quite simply the sovereignty of God in all things. He is sovereign over the big things like international powers and He is sovereign over small things like the apparently insignificant lives of teenagers. He is sovereign over history and is sovereign concerning the future. Our God is sovereign.

3) Though it is something of an oversimplification, the book can be divided into 2 parts: chs 1-6 the prophet (the man) and chs 7-12 the prophecies (the message), with Daniel as the central figure.

4) The contents of the book span a time period from c.605-539 B.C. Using both narrative and apocalyptic vision, Daniel encourages God's people to trust in God's providence and remain faithful no matter what because our Lord is in complete control. Ronald Pierce highlights three specific themes that naturally flow out of this basic proposition: 1) "God is able to rescue and reward faithful servants; 2) God holds accountable people and kings who oppose him and 3) in the end, God will replace all earthly kingdoms with his eternal kingdom" (*Daniel, Teach the Text*, 9).

5) My good friend and New Testament scholar, Bob Stein, told me once that he had discovered among the persecuted church around the world that two of their favorite books in the Bible are Daniel and Revelation. Why? Because both teach, they said, that in the end, our God wins! Daniel 1 reveals that God won the day for 4 faithful Hebrew teens in a foreign and distant land away from family and friends. How did God do it? What was He up to?

## **I. God may sovereignly send you to a difficult place to spread His Name**

### **among the nations**

**1:1-3**

- 1) Dale Davis well says, “Sometimes God may allow hardships to reach us because he wants his mercy to reach beyond us” (*The Message of Daniel*, BST, 36). Now, his purpose in doing so is almost always multifaceted. God brings suffering into the lives of His people to demonstrate His sovereignty, strengthen our faith, show Himself wise and strong, and put His glory on display among the nations that they might be drawn to Him.
  
- 2) That there is pain in all of this for us is often the case. That there is great gain for the glory of God and the advance of His kingdom is certain. Such a perspective will help us remember who the true hero of Daniel is. It is not the Hebrew teenagers. It is a sovereign all-powerful God of grace who, as Bryan Chapell notes, “uses his sovereign power to maintain his covenant promises forever. This gospel according to Daniel should give us courage against our foes, hope in our distress and perseverance in our trials” (*The Gospel According to Daniel*, 9).

### 1) God works in spite of the sins of His people 1:1-2

- Throughout history foreign and hostile armies have invaded nations with acts of aggression and war. The results have been tragic: land destroyed,

property destroyed and confiscated, POW's taken captive and sent away to foreign lands never to see family and friends again. This is what happened to Daniel and his friends. They were uprooted and replanted in the harsh and wicked soil of the Babylonian Empire. And, this is where the surprise comes in, it was God's doing. It was God's plan.

- Verse 1 provides the historical context. Verse 2 provides the theological explanation (note vs. 2, 9, and 17). Judah, the southern kingdom, had been in political and spiritual decline for quite some time. During the reign of Jehoiakim (609 – 598 B.C.), one of Judah's worst kings who was nothing like his father, godly king Josiah, in the year 605 B.C. , King Nebuchadnezzar (he reigned from 605- 562 B.C.) of Babylon attacked Jerusalem (v.1). This happened because “the Lord gave Jehoiakim into his hand” along with certain vessels of the house of God. The vessels of God, trophies of war, were transported to Babylon and placed in the house of a pagan God in Babylon, probably Marduk, the chief god of the Babylonians. This was a way of saying, “our god is better and stronger than your god.” Daniel says, “not so!” The people of God have sinned and the real God is judging them. And, in the process, he is extending His presence among the nations. God is at work even through the sins of his people.

## 2) God works as He scatters His people 1:3

- There would be three deportations to Babylon (605, 597, 586 B.C.).  
In Deuteronomy 28, the Lord had warned His people that if they disobeyed Him, curses would come upon them (Deut. 28:15). These curses would include military defeat (v. 25) and deportation (v. 64).  
God kept his word.
- In addition to the temple vessels that were brought to “the land of Shinar” (Babylon), Nebuchadnezzar order a man named Ashpenaz to deport members “both of the royal family and of the nobility.” This was intended to strip the nation of its best and brightest as verse 4 makes clear, and it also would benefit Babylon. And yet don’t miss what God is doing. This is a divine invasion of enemy territory! The city of man is being invaded by the city of God to draw from Augustine! Shinar, Babylon, the land of Ziggurats (remember the tower of Babel and Genesis 10?), idols and false gods, the city that opposes the true God, is now being infiltrated by the Lord’s army. It is a small incursion to be sure, but one that will accomplish far more than anyone could imagine. The so called “times of the Gentiles has started (Luke 21:29). Israel will be oppressed and her people

scattered, but the nations will now have a witness among them to the one true and living God.

**II. Be prepared for the challenges non-Christian cultures will throw at you to lead you away from God 1:3-7**

1) We all have what is called a “worldview,” a particular way of looking at and seeing life and the world in which we live. It shapes both the way we think and the way we live. Here are a few definitions and descriptions of a worldview to guide us:

“A worldview is a comprehensive view of life through which we think, understand, and judge, and which determines our approach to life and meaning.”

“A worldview is that basic set of assumptions that gives meaning to one’s thoughts. A worldview is the set of assumptions that someone has about the way things are, about what things are, about why things are.”

-Russ Bush, Professor of Philosophy, Southeastern Seminary

“A worldview is a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic make-up of our world.”

-James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview*

*Catalogue*, expanded ed, (Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity, 1988), 17.

“One’s worldview is perhaps best reflected by one’s answers to the ‘ultimate questions of life’: Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going? What’s it all about? Is there a god? How can I live and die happily? What are good and evil? [What would I die for?]

-James h. Olthius, “On Worldviews, “Christians Scholar’s Review 15, no.2 (1985): 153-164.

Today we live in a post-Christian context with an increasingly non-Christian and secular worldview. There is pressure from every direction to force us to conform to the mindset and the spirit of the age. This challenge is not new. Daniel and his 3 friends faced the same challenges.

#### 1) Isolation 1:3

- The first step in making Babylonians out of the 4 Hebrew teenagers (called “youth” in v.4) was isolation from their homeland, family and friends (v.3). This would have been traumatic and a shock to their system, throwing their world into a tailspin. They would be extremely vulnerable isolated and separated from all that was familiar, making them far more susceptible to the “new ideas” they would encounter. This

Babylonian strategy would increase the likelihood of their deconversion to their faith in the Lord God and their conversion to the world view of Babylon.

- I see this same strategy successfully employed by the evil one in our own day. However, in our case, it is voluntary! Naively and sometimes willingly parents send their children off to a secular college or university as lambs prepared for slaughter. Isolated from their church and Christian friends, they are quickly seduced by so-called intellectual elites and walk away from Christ. The evil one knows what he is doing!

## 2) Indoctrination 1:4

Verse 4 affirms these 4 young men were among the best of the Israelis. In addition to coming from “the royal family and of the nobility” (v.3), they were good looking (“without blemish, of good appearance”, probably indicating that they were not made eunuchs). They were smart (“skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning,” and they were blessed with leadership and interpersonal skills (“competent to stand in the king’s palace”). They were ideal candidates to be taught “the literature and language of the Chaldeans,” to be enrolled in an educational indoctrination school “for three years” (v.5). Brainwashing was to begin



immediately in a world unlike anything they had ever know. The University of Babylon would give them a 1<sup>st</sup> class secular education in Babylonian language, philosophy, literature, science, history and astrology. Religion would have been a part of the curriculum as well as they were taught the mythologies of Babylon, the greatness of Marduk and the importance of the pantheon of polytheistic deities that dominated the ancient Near Eastern world. Dream interpretation and omen reading would also be on their required course load. The New Age really isn't new is it?! It is simply the Old Age wrapped up in a different package! "Think like a Babylonian" was a popular song these Hebrews were to learn and love to sing.

### 3) Assimilation 1:5

Converting these followers of Yahweh into followers of Babylon required a total immersion into the world of Babylon. Change their minds was a start. Change their lifestyle and you have them! They were to eat like a Babylonian and drink like a Babylonian. The goal was entice them with the delicacies and privileges of their new life. Such an immersion would wear them down and eventually win them over to the dark side. A full court program of seduction and conversion is underway. But Nebuchadnezzar and

his team are not finished. In three years these boys will be given a final exam before the king. One final stratagem is applied.

#### 4) Confusion 1:6-7

For the first time we are introduced to four of the Hebrew aristocracy exiled to Babylon. Certainly there were others, but the book of Daniel records only the story of these four. Each was from “the tribe of Judah” (v.6). And as Pierce and others point out, “The youths’ Hebrew names honor the one true God, Yahweh. The name Daniel translates, “Elohim is my judge”; Hananiah, “Yahweh is gracious”; Mishael, “Who is like Elohim?”; and Azariah, “Yahweh helps” (p.13). Changing names today is not a big deal. In the ancient world it was huge. It went to the very identity and core of who a person was. The new names are familiar to most of us; at least 3 of them are:

Daniel → Belteshazzar

Hananiah → Shadrach

Mishael → Meshach

Azariah → Abednego

The exact meanings of these new Babylonian names is not certain, though “certainly they were intended to honor Babylonian gods in similar ways” to their

Hebrew names (Pierce, p.13). And, they were intended to confuse these young men and reorient them away from Yahweh and towards the pagan gods of their new home. Never was it more important for these four teens to be in the world but not of the world. But would they? Could They? The rest of the story provides our answer and it is a good one!

### **III. Determine early in your life and heart that you will not compromise your convictions and commitments to God            1:8-13**

When I think of these 4 Hebrew teenagers, Psalm 1 immediately comes to my mind. And, don't forget. At one time Psalms 1-2 were joined together. Psalm 1 depicts the character of the Messiah-King. Psalm 2 promises His reign! Psalm 1 speaks of the man who is not enticed and seduced by "the counsel of the wicked" (1). No, the "law of the Lord is his delight" (2). This accurately and beautifully describes Daniel and his friends. Having been raised and trained by Godly parents and grandparents, they loved the Lord their God with all of their heart, soul, mind and strength (Deut. 6:4; Matt. 22:37).

They had been prepared, I have no doubt, by their parents and spiritual mentors for this day and they would be of good courage and stand strong in the Lord!

1) Resist the temptation to defile yourself            1:8

- “But Daniel resolved” begins verse 8. The immersion into the worldview of pagan Babylon would not win his heart or his mind. Babylon is where he would live but Babylon would never be his home. Like his fore-father Abraham, “he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God” (Heb. 11:10).
- And exactly what did “Daniel resolve?” He resolved “that he would not defile himself with the King’s food, or with the wine he drank.” The reason Daniel viewed the food and wine defiling is not completely clear. It may have been dietary. The food was unclean for a Hebrew (cf. Lev. 11:1-23). It may have been religious or spiritual. These items had been offered to idols (Deut. 6:3-15). It may have been symbolic. He would not pledge absolute loyalty to the king. Dale Davis proffers what he calls the defensive view, and personally I am drawn to it. He writes, “Babylon was simply smothering Daniel and his friends. Daniel may well have thought, “There is real danger here: I could get sucked up into this and neutered by it all!” He recognized that if Babylon [the world and its values] gets into you, the show is over” (Daniel, BST, 32). Daniel and his friends were forced to be in Babylon but they would not let Babylon get into them. They made a conscious and determined decision to say No!

- With courage and conviction Daniel approached the chief of the eunuchs and requested that he allow him to disregard the king's order and not defile himself. What amazing boys the parents of those 4 had raised. The stand they were taking had been years in the making. It did not happen over night.

2) Win the favor of those in authority when possible 1:9-10

- Daniel not only had conviction, he also had wisdom. He was blessed by God to walk in holiness and humility, a rare combination in any age. God honored his servant as a result. As the “Lord gave Jehoiakim” into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar (v.2), He “gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs.” Daniel shared his faith and convictions with Ashpenaz and it moved this lost official. He was moved “to show favor (Heb. *hesed*) and sympathy to Daniel” (*NIV*). Daniel stood his ground but he did so with grace and humility. He was not arrogant or rude. He was not obnoxious or stubborn. He kindly and winsomely won over his superior in this instance (cf. Joseph, Gen 39:4 and Esther, Esther 2:9).
- Still, as impressed as Ashpenaz was with Daniel, he feared more the wrath of the king and the possibility of losing his head! This is quite

understandable to say the least. If Daniel and his friends look poorly on inspection day, it is Ashpenaz who will suffer the most, probably not them. He will be the one held responsible. Daniel has won the admiration and favor and concern of his pagan captor, but things appear to be at an impasse. It appears we have an unsolvable dilemma.

3) Wisely offer alternative solutions that are win/win 1:11-13

Daniel exhibits a wisdom far beyond his years, a wisdom that could have only come from God. It appears there are only 2 options. Option 1: They defile themselves. Option 2: Their new friend Ashpenaz loses his head. Daniel, however, proposes a 3<sup>rd</sup> way, one where everybody wins. He drops down the chain of command to the steward or “guard” (*NIV*) that Ashpenaz had assigned over them (v.11) and proposes an alternative solution: “Test your servants for ten days;” let us be given veggies and water and then see who look best. The number 10 may be literal or symbolic. The issue is Daniel asks for a test and in essence puts his God to the test. He is believing and trusting God to honor their convictions and commitments to obeying His Word. Their diet would be very simple, and in the process it would not break Mosaic laws, be offered to pagan gods, and not unduly obligate the four Hebrews to the Babylonian king

(Pierce, 19). Chapell is right, “holiness is risky business...society may praise idealism, but it rarely tolerates living those ideals” (p.17). Daniel knew that defilement would only further distance him from His Lord. He would risk it all to keep that from happening. It was worth it. I really appreciate Chuck Swindoll’s summary of these verses: “In a world filled with people who rebel against the divine King, it is inevitable that believers of all ages will face situations in which their convictions will be challenged. We who are parents need to prepare our children for those occasions by both teaching them God’s truth and modeling integrity. And all of us who are Christians need to personally commit ourselves to living God’s way regardless of the temptations to live otherwise” (*Daniel: God’s Pattern For the Future*, 17). This is what Daniel and his friends had been taught. This is how they would live or die.

#### **IV. Trust God to honor your devotion and faithfulness to Him 1:14-21**

The great missionary to China, Hudson Taylor, said, “unless there is the element of *extreme risk* in our exploits for God, there is no need for faith” (*Expect Great Things*, 89, emp. mine). There is little doubt that Daniel and his friend’s faith that God would honor their devotion had the element of extreme risk. The fact is the extreme risk potentially could involve the death

of Ashpenaz, his steward and Daniel and his friends. However, they had settled in their hearts long ago that they would remain faithful to their God no matter what. Compromise was a word that was not in their vocabulary when it came to spiritual conviction and commitments. God honored this, and did so in an incredible way!

1) God blessed them physically            1:14-16

The steward of the chief eunuch listened to four Hebrews and allowed them to pursue this dietary test “for ten days,” for a short, definite and limited time (v.14). The test was a resounding success as God blessed them and rewarded their devotion to Him. They “were better in appearance and fatter in flesh (*HCSB*, “healthier”) than all the youths who ate the king’s food” (v.15). *The Message* says, “they looked better and more robust than all the others.” Daniel and his friends had resisted what Heinrich Bullinger (1504-75) called the king’s “sweet poison” (Quoted in Marvin Olasky, “Dare to be a Daniel”, *World*, 9-15-15, p.64). The steward, as a result of their appearance and strength, “took away their food and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables” (v.16). Daniel and his friends had honored God and God had honored them by giving them favor with the guard and a healthy body. Tremper Longman summarizes it quite well: “[Daniel]



proposes this time a brief ten-day test...the guard agrees; the test works; and the four eat vegetables to the glory of God for three years” (*Daniel*, NIVAC, 54).

## 2) God blessed them mentally 1:17, 20

For the third time God gives (1:2, 9). Here God gives the four youths “learning and skill in all literature and wisdom.” Verse 20 informs us that “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.” These were “Proverbs men” with the ability to see the things of life and this world from God’s perspective and to act accordingly. Again, there is striking irony in the situation. “God gave the four Judeans knowledge and understanding.” Of course Nebuchadnezzar and those involved in their education would take the credit for their brilliance, but Daniel and the others would know to whom the credit, was due....for now, however, the divine origin of Daniel’s success is only understood in private by the four” (Longman, 54). And now, by the gift of God’s divine revelation, we know the real story too.

## 3) God blessed them spiritually 1:17

- God specifically blessed Daniel spiritually by giving him “understanding is all visions and dreams.” This gift from God would prove extremely valuable in chapter 2 and beyond (cf. 4:4-27; 5:11-31; 7:1-8:27; 9:20-27; 10:1-12:13).
- John MacArthur notes, “God enabled Daniel to interpret dreams and to receive visions. Visions and dreams were both a means of revelation from God, the former occurring while awake and the latter, while asleep. So, Daniel, was gifted as a seer, or prophet. As such, he was to serve as the very vehicle of God’s divine revelations. This verse, then, becomes the backdrop for the rest of Daniel’s prophecy” (*An Uncompromising Life*, 49).

#### 4) God blessed them socially 1:18-21

- After their three years of education, the four Hebrew teens are brought by the chief of the eunuchs to stand before the king, Nebuchadnezzar (v.18). They stood head and shoulders above all the rest, “none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.” Therefore “they entered the King’s service” (*NIV*, v. 20). They were brought right into the palace and into the king’s court; they were that impressive! Socially, educationally and personally excelling “10 times better than

all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his kingdom,”

Nebuchadnezzar gave the four Hebrews key administrative posts. He

was confident that they would serve him well and represent him well.

Already in this Old Testament narrative we see the living out of that

cardinal principle in Colossians 3:22-24, “Slaves, obey in everything

those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as

people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.

Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men,

knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your

reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.” Yes, “whether you eat or

drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31).

- Verse 21 is not so much a footnote as it is a summary of the long life and ministry of Daniel. Miller speculates that he lived 85 or 90 years (ca. 620-535 B.C.) noting that “Daniel lived through the entire Neo-Babylonian period (the exile) and continued into the reign of Cyrus (when the Jews were released from captivity), and thus outliving his Babylonian captors” (Daniel, NAC, 74-75). MacArthur notes just how far the influence of the exiled teen possibly extends before it is all said and done. I like what he surmises a lot! He writes:

“Daniel served in his influential position for seventy years. His integrity and uncompromising character had far-reaching results, for when I see the wise men coming from the East, I think of the impact Daniel’s theology must have had upon the Chaldean’s astrology. God gave him the influence that I believe led to the decree of Cyrus to send the people back to their land...influence that led to the rebuilding of the wall under Nehemiah and to the reestablishing of the nation of Israel...influence that eventually led the wise men to come to crown the King who was born in Bethlehem. Daniel was behind the scenes of the history of the Messiah as well as the Messiah’s people. Daniel had unlimited influence for through his prophecy he brings homage to the one who is the “KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS” (Rev. 19:16) who reigns forever” (p.50).

**Conclusion: How does this text point to Christ?**

- 1) Daniel and his three companions remained faithful to their true identity, obeyed God, and were a shining testimony and witness both to God’s providence and His grace. He sent them on a missionary journey, leaving all that was familiar, that they might bear a faithful and true witness to kings

and nations in foreign lands. They beautifully typify another Hebrew who will arrive 600 years later who was also sent to a foreign land to bear witness to the one true God, a Jew by the name of Jesus. Like Daniel and his friends, the Son of God would leave His home and willingly embrace a sinful world without defiling Himself even once (2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; 1 Pet. 2:21-25). Like these Hebrew boys, He “would find favor with God and man (Luke 2:40 and 52). When he was still a child, his teachers “were amazed at his understanding and his answers” (Luke 2:47)” [David Helm, *Daniel For You*, 28]. Jesus is the embodiment of the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:30).

2) There is a certain divine irony in all this that is hard to miss. It is grace-filled and gospel rich. Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah will give a faithful witness before Ashpenaz and Nebuchadnezzar and be brought to live in the king’s palace. Jesus, in contrast, would give a faithful witness before Herod and Pilate and be nailed to a cross. And yet it is by His death that all who trust Him will live forever with the King of kings and Lord of lords in His eternal palace. So, be strong and of good courage in whatever it is that God calls you to do. He is with you and He is accomplishing so much more than meets the eye!