

## Daniel 1 Exiled in Paradise

Everyone has a 'back story', a personal history, a collection of actions, choices and events that brought us to be where we are in our present circumstances. Where we go from here depends greatly on whether or not we've learned anything that will affect the choices we make today.

605 years before Christ, Daniel and his friends had a back story. The most recent dramatic event was that these bright young people from influential Israeli families had been deported to serve foreign king Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon. They had seen their capital city Jerusalem overrun by foreigners, their king deposed, quite possibly some family and friends killed or imprisoned. They were effectively prisoners in exile, with no choice but to learn a new language and serve an alien administration.

Now some might have thought it not so bad. These four were to be given a top education free of charge, assured of prestigious future careers in this legendary city of culture and meanwhile food prepared daily by the king's own chef! Some might have said these lads had 'landed on their feet'!

But these four were godly young men who knew only too well there was a reason behind these events. They knew that while we human beings have freedom to choose what we do and must be held responsible for our actions, over and above all that happens is a Sovereign God Who is working through His plan and purpose to His glory. He can prosper individuals, families, communities and nations and equally He may humble individuals, families, communities and nations.

It had pleased the Almighty to bless their ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the nation descended from them in the 'promised land' of Canaan. But now He had surrendered the land and people into the hands of others. The reason was national disobedience.

Despite the Lord's faithful generosity and the gracious warnings of His messengers the prophets, the people of Israel had largely and consistently welcomed the sensual worship of foreign idols, so-called 'gods' from other nations. Now here's poetic justice as the Lord allows their peaceful homeland of promise to be taken over by foreigners and its young princes exiled to serve in a different land, one swamped by idolatrous beliefs and cruel practices.

We are fools if we take God's blessing for granted as some kind of human right. His blessing rests on those who forsake the idols of this world to reverently trust and obey Him.

So immediately Daniel and friends had to adjust massively to their new circumstances. They welcomed the opportunity to study and learn and would in time become some of Nebuchadnezzar's most talented and trusted officials but right away they faced the challenge of being assimilated into Babylonian culture and society.

Nebuchadnezzar shrewdly gave captives from other regions Babylonian names, a bit like a badge or uniform. We can imagine the 'spin'. 'So welcome to the team! These new name badges will give you access to all the government offices you need and all the services and privileges available there. We trust you like your new homes and look forward to working with you!'

Their Hebrew birth names all referred to the Lord their God. Daniel means 'God is my Judge', Hananiah means 'The Lord shows grace', Mishael means 'Who is like God?' and Azariah means 'The Lord helps'.

The problem was that the new names all had references to the king or his Babylonian idols. The world has this tendency to try and wipe out the revelation of the true God and His truth and impose a uniform identity based on human pride and invention. It claims to be diverse and inclusive but it can quickly become intolerant with dissenters.

While they don't appear to have made a fuss about the new names, these young men did take a stand early on with the issue of food. As Jews, one way of expressing their loyalty to their God was to observe the guidelines given by Moses regarding certain foods. It's worth noting Daniel didn't stage a noisy protest but very tactfully asked permission to carry on this practise. We're told God caused the official to be sympathetic and furthermore kept His servants healthy on a modest diet.

Scripture teaches that God honours those who honour Him. He clearly blessed these young men even in exile and over time used them as an influence for good in that society.

For now let's try and imagine some of the questions Daniel might have been asking as they struggled to come to terms with their story so far, one of trauma, unexpected opportunities and challenges. I can think of three questions he may have asked about God, and three he could have asked about himself and his friends. And we can benefit from asking the same questions.

I don't think atheism was an option for Daniel, he never stopped believing in the God of his ancestors. However he was in unfamiliar territory now. Was his

God Lord in Babylon? We might put it a different way: *Is the Lord still in control* when disaster seems to have overtaken us, or when people of faith are become a tiny minority? It's estimated Babylon had over 1000 pagan temples. How could four previously defeated believers with just one God between them hope to survive?

And that's the next question. God, their God, had miraculously saved Jerusalem back in King Hezekiah's day but did His angelic army have jurisdiction abroad? *Can God still protect His servants* in a foreign or hostile environment? Can our God save globally?

We might not immediately think of this third one but remember the background. *Would God still be willing* to use His people after they had failed Him and were clearly being disciplined through this bitter experience of exile? If circumstances of life sometimes make us feel like we've failed and opportunities are gone and it's all over and done, is there yet hope? Might we still be of some use to our God and our community?

The answers are yes, yes and yes, as we'll see in the following chapters!

But now three questions for Daniel and for us:

Will we still *trust* in God, even if times are difficult, even if it seems He may be disciplining us for our idolatrous ways?

Will we learn from previous mistakes and dare now to *keep* God's ways, even if the majority in society think and practise differently?

*When* do we need to decide about these things?

The answers to the first two? - Maybe or Don't know.

The answer to the third one is easy – NOW!

Let's pray.