

# From Jerusalem *to* Babylon



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *2 Kings 21:10–16; Daniel 1; Gal. 2:19, 20; Matt. 16:24–26, 2 Cor. 4:17; James 1:5.*

**Memory Text:** “As for these four young men, God gave them knowledge and skill in all literature and wisdom; and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams” (*Daniel 1:17, NKJV*).

**T**he Bible does not shy away from showing the weaknesses of fallen humanity. From Genesis 3 onward, human sinfulness and its sad results are prominently displayed. At the same time, too, we also see cases of those who show great faithfulness to God, even when faced with powerful incentives to be anything but faithful. And some of the most poignant examples of such faithfulness are seen in the book of Daniel.

However, as we study Daniel, let us keep in mind that the true hero of the book is God. We are so used to stories that stress the faithfulness of Daniel and his friends that we may forget to exalt the faithfulness of the One who guided and sustained those four young men as they confronted the power and allure of the Babylonian Empire. To be faithful is enough of a challenge in one's own land and place, let alone when facing the pressure of a foreign land, culture, and religion. But the human protagonists meet the challenges because, like the apostle Paul, they “know whom [they] have believed” (*2 Tim. 1:12*), and in Him they trust.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 11.

## God's Sovereignty

At first glance the book of Daniel begins with a somber note of defeat. Judah has capitulated to Nebuchadnezzar, and the temple vessels have been taken from Jerusalem to the land of Shinar. The word *Shinar* appears in the Bible in Genesis 11:2 as the location of the Tower of Babel. Shinar is an ominous sign, as it alludes to a project rooted in open defiance of God. But even if the builders of Babel failed in their attempt to reach the heavens, external appearances suggested that Nebuchadnezzar and his gods—located in the land of Shinar—had overpowered the covenant God of Israel.

Still, the opening lines of Daniel make it clear that the defeat of Jerusalem is not credited to the superior power of the Babylonian king; rather, it has occurred because “the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his [Nebuchadnezzar’s] hand” (*Dan. 1:2, NKJV*). Much earlier, God announces that should His people forget Him and break the covenant, He would send them as captives to a foreign land. So, Daniel knows that behind and beyond the military power of Babylon, the God of heaven is leading the march of history. It is this clear view of God’s sovereignty that sustains these young men and gives them strength and courage to face the temptation and pressure of the Babylonian Empire.

**Read** 2 Kings 21:10–16, 2 Kings 24:18–20, and Jeremiah 3:13. Why does God give Judah and Jerusalem into the hands of the Babylonians?

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As we face the challenges of the twenty-first century, we need to recapture the perception of God that is so vividly reflected in the book of Daniel. According to this book, the God whom we serve not only drives the forces of history through His sovereignty but also mercifully intervenes in the lives of His people to provide them with crucial help in times of need. And as we shall see later, what God did for the Hebrew captives He will do for His people in the end time, regardless of the various attacks on them and their faith.

**What are some of the challenges your faith faces now, either from outside sources, from within the church, or from your own personal defects of character? How can you learn to lean on the power of God to help you overcome whatever is before you?**

## Faith Under Pressure

**Read** Daniel 1. What pressures are put on these young men to conform?

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Upon arrival in Babylon, these four young men have to face a most serious challenge to their faith and convictions: they are selected to undergo special training in order to serve the king. Ancient kings would often recruit some of their best captives to serve in the royal palace, and, thereby, switch their loyalty to the king and the gods of the empire that captured them. Indeed, the whole process was intended to effect a conversion and indoctrination that would result in a change of worldview. As part of that process, the Hebrew captives have their names changed. A new name signals a change of ownership and a change of destiny. Thus, by renaming the captives, the Babylonians intend to assert authority over them and force them to assimilate the values and culture of Babylon. Their original names, which point to the God of Israel, are replaced with names honoring foreign deities. In addition, the king determines that the young men should eat from his table. Eating from the king's food had deep implications in antiquity. It meant undivided allegiance to the king and reflected dependence on him. And as the food was usually offered to the god or gods of the empire, eating also had a profound religious meaning. It obviously meant acceptance of and participation in the king's worship system.

Thus, Daniel and his companions find themselves in challenging circumstances. For them to remain loyal to God and survive the overwhelming power of the imperial system demands nothing less than a miracle. To further complicate matters, the city of Babylon itself also stood as a monumental expression of human achievement. The architectural beauty of the Babylonian temples, the hanging gardens, and the Euphrates River meandering across the city conveyed an image of unsurpassable might and glory. So, Daniel and his friends are offered an opportunity for promotion and the chance to enjoy the benefits and prosperity of this system. They can cease to be Hebrew captives and become royal officers. Will they compromise their principles to tread the easy path to glory?

**In what ways could these boys have rationalized a decision to compromise their convictions? In what ways might you now be facing similar, if subtler, challenges?**

## Firm Resolution

**Read** Daniel 1:7–20. We see two factors at work here: Daniel’s free will and the intervention of God. What important principle also exists here?

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It appears that the four Hebrew captives do not object to their Babylonian names. Most likely there is nothing they can do about it, apart from using their Hebrew names among themselves. But in regard to the food and wine from the king’s table, it is certainly in their power to consume it or not. Thus, the free choice of the four men is very important here.

However, if an officer can change their names, he also can change the menu. There are two likely reasons the four do not want to eat from the king’s table.

First, the meals from the king’s table may contain unclean meats (*Leviticus 11*). Second, food is first offered as a meal to the god’s image and then sent to the king for his consumption. Thus, when Daniel makes clear, without resorting to subterfuge or deception, that his request has a religious motivation (i.e., the food at the palace will defile him and his friends [*Dan. 1:8*]), he is being very courageous.

As we look into the interaction between Daniel and the Babylonian officer, a few important points stand out. First, Daniel seems to understand well the difficult position of the officer, so he proposed a test. Ten days of consuming the alternative meals should suffice to demonstrate the benefits of the diet and thus to put down the fears of the officer. Second, Daniel’s certainty that the outcome would be so positive within such a short time span stems from absolute confidence in God. Third, the choice of a diet of vegetables and water points back to the food God gave humanity at Creation (*see Gen. 1:29*), a fact that perhaps influences Daniel’s choice, as well. After all, what could be a better diet than the one God originally gave us?

**What is so important about Daniel’s free choice that opens the way for God to act as He does (*see Dan. 1:9*)? What lessons can we draw from this about the importance of our choices? How should our trust in God impact our choices?**

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## Unblemished and Wise

Daniel and his companions are chosen for royal service because they fit within the profile established by Nebuchadnezzar. According to the king, palace officers must have “no blemish” and be “good-looking” (*Dan. 1:4, NKJV*). Interestingly, sacrifices and people serving in the sanctuary should have no “blemish” (*Lev. 22:17–25, 21:16–24*). The Babylonian king seems to compare himself to the God of Israel insofar as he demands similar qualifications for those serving in his palace. On the other hand, such qualifications may inadvertently suggest that Daniel and his compatriots were living sacrifices for God as they faced the challenges of the Babylonian Empire.

**Read** Galatians 2:19, 20; Matthew 16:24–26; and 2 Corinthians 4:17. What do these verses tell us about how we can stay faithful amid whatever temptations we face?

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God honors the loyalty of the four Hebrew captives, and at the end of their 10-day testing period they look healthier and better nourished than the other students who have eaten from the royal table. So, God gives His four servants “knowledge and skill in all literature and wisdom,” and to Daniel alone God gives “understanding in all visions and dreams” (*Dan. 1:17, NKJV*). This gift will play a significant role in Daniel’s prophetic ministry.

Just as God honors the faith of His servants in the Babylonian court, He gives us wisdom as we face the challenges of the world. From the experience of Daniel and his companions, we learn that it is indeed possible to remain untainted by the corrupting elements of our society. We also learn that we do not need to isolate ourselves from society and its cultural life in order to serve God. Daniel and his companions not only live amid a culture built on lies and errors and myths but are schooled on those lies and errors and myths. And yet, they remain faithful.

**No matter where we live, we face the challenge of staying faithful to what we believe amid cultural and social influences that are contrary to that belief. Identify the negative influences in your culture, and ask yourself: *How well am I defying them?***

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## Final Exam

**Read Daniel 1:17–21. What is the key to the success of the four men?**

*(See also Job 38:36, Prov. 2:6, and James 1:5.)*

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After three years of training in the “Babylonian University,” the four Hebrews are brought before the king for the final examination. They not only are healthier than the other students, but they surpass them in knowledge and wisdom. The four are immediately hired to serve the king. We shouldn’t forget that this “knowledge and wisdom” no doubt comprises a lot of paganism. Yet, they learn it anyway, and obviously they learn it well, too, even if they don’t believe it.

Nebuchadnezzar may think that such an accomplishment would have something to do with the palace diet and the training program the four students have undergone. However, Daniel and his companions know, and the narrative clearly shows, that their superior performance owes nothing to the Babylonian system. Everything comes from God. What a powerful example of what God can do for those who trust Him. We should not fear the overwhelming power of media, governments, and other institutions that may threaten to destroy our identity as God’s children. As we place our confidence in God, we can be sure that He can sustain us in difficult moments and preserve us against all odds. The key is for us to make the right choices when confronted with challenges to our faith.

Looking at Daniel 1, we learn some very important lessons about God: (1) God is in control of history. (2) God gives wisdom so that we can navigate the hostile environment of our culture and society. (3) God honors those who trust in Him through inner conviction and lifestyle.

The chapter concludes by pointing out that “Daniel continued until the first year of King Cyrus” (*Dan. 1:21, NKJV*). The mention of Cyrus here is significant: it provides a glimpse of hope amid an experience of exile. Cyrus is the one chosen by God to liberate His people and allow them to go back to Jerusalem. Though the chapter begins with the appearance of defeat and exile, it concludes with a glimpse of hope and a homecoming. This is our God: even amid the most difficult moments of our lives, He always opens a window of hope so that we can see the glory and joy that lie beyond the suffering and pain.

**Further Thought:** “Daniel and his companions in Babylon were, in their youth, apparently more favored of fortune than was Joseph in the earlier years of his life in Egypt; yet they were subjected to tests of character scarcely less severe. From the comparative simplicity of their Judean home these youth of royal line were transported to the most magnificent of cities, to the court of its greatest monarch, and were singled out to be trained for the king’s special service. Strong were the temptations surrounding them in that corrupt and luxurious court. The fact that they, the worshipers of Jehovah, were captives to Babylon; that the vessels of God’s house had been placed in the temple of the gods of Babylon; that the king of Israel was himself a prisoner in the hands of the Babylonians, was boastfully cited by the victors as evidence that their religion and customs were superior to the religion and customs of the Hebrews. Under such circumstances, through the very humiliations that Israel’s departure from His commandments had invited, God gave to Babylon evidence of His supremacy, of the holiness of His requirements, and of the sure result of obedience. And this testimony He gave, as alone it could be given, through those who still held fast their loyalty.”—Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 54.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 In class, talk about the various cultural and social challenges that you face as Christians in your society. What are they, and how can the church as a whole learn to respond to them?
- 2 Think about how easy it would have been for Daniel and the others to have compromised their faith. After all, the Babylonians were the conquerors. The Jewish nation had been defeated. What more “proof” was needed that the Babylonian “gods” were greater than the God of Israel, and thus Daniel and his companions needed to accept that fact? In this case, what important biblical truths might they have held on to that helped sustain them during this time? (See *Jer. 5:19 and 7:22–34*.) What should this tell us about how important it is to know our Bibles and to understand “present truth”?
- 3 Why is faithfulness so important, not just for ourselves but for those for whom our faithfulness witnesses to the character of the Lord, whom we seek to serve?