

# 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?**

## 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?***

## 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?

## ***Part I: Overview***

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**Key Text:** *Daniel 1:17*

**Study Focus:** *Daniel 1, Genesis 39, Esther 4, Esther 5.*

**Introduction:** Daniel 1 sets the stage for what unfolds throughout the book and introduces its main themes. God emerges as the main character of the book, ruling over the kings and kingdoms of the world and helping His faithful people as they experience life in a foreign land. Among a multitude of captives, four young people navigate with unprecedented wisdom the complexities of the Babylonian court as they commit their hearts to remaining faithful to the God of their fathers.

**Lesson Themes:** This week's lesson highlights three major topics:

- 1. The Context of Daniel.** Even amid such a tragic event as the exile, God is in control. The exile did not take place as an unexpected incident triggered by the power of Babylon, but as the culmination of God's long-announced judgment over an impenitent people.
- 2. The Education of Daniel.** As they went through the educational process, Daniel and his companions decided to resist the indoctrination of the empire. Although external appearances indicated that God had lost the battle to the pagan deities, these young men remained faithful and acted according to God's Word.
- 3. The Wisdom of Daniel.** One important aspect of the characterization of Daniel and his companions is that they were wise. This characterization refers to more than intellectual wisdom or knowledge; it indicates a divinely given ability to see life from God's perspective.

**Life Application:** Although life may be marked by unexplained and difficult circumstances, the God we serve has all things under control and can turn the bad into good. Our worldview—which consists of those underlying ideas and convictions that inform our perception of God and reality in general—is a very important tool in helping us navigate our way through life. Let Scripture be the source and foundation for our worldview, as it was for Daniel's.



## *Part II: Commentary*

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### **1. The Context of Daniel**

The exile did not take place as an unexpected incident, triggered by the power of Babylon, or as an arbitrary decision of God. Indeed, several prophets already had warned God's people that, unless they repented from their sins and turned back to the covenant, they would be punished by foreign forces that would destroy the temple and take them captive to a foreign land. The prophet Jeremiah, who prophesied during those times, also urged the royal authorities of Judah to submit to Babylon, because that was God's will. So, after many unheeded warnings, Nebuchadnezzar came up to Jerusalem and brought Judah under the control of the Babylonian Empire.

In order to understand the experience of Daniel and his friends, we need to bear in mind that the exile was a mass deportation of a population from their native land in order to destroy their identity and thus facilitate the control by the dominating power. Such deportation usually aimed at the higher classes, the nobles, the leaders, the thinkers. Only the poor were allowed to stay in the homeland, which often had been devastated by war. Such political and military strategy was widely practiced in the ancient world by the Assyrians and Babylonians. In 722 B.C. the Assyrians brought northern Israel to an end and deported vast portions of its population to other parts of the empire. Judah did not pay attention to the fate of its neighbor and met the same fate at the hands of the Babylonians.

The Bible records three significant Babylonian incursions and deportations against Judah. The first one took place in 605 B.C., when Nebuchadnezzar, after defeating the Egyptians in Carchemish, marched against Judah. He took some captives, among whom were Daniel and his three friends. In 597 B.C., given the political maneuvers of Jehoiakim to insist on a political alliance with Egypt, Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judah for the second time and deported another chunk of the population. Among the deportees were the prophet Ezekiel and King Jehoiachin, the son of Jehoiakim, who had died shortly before the invasion. Nebuchadnezzar put Zedekiah (Jehoiachin's uncle) on the throne, hoping to secure his loyalty to Babylon. But despite the continuous admonitions of Jeremiah, the new king persisted in seeking Egyptian help to resist the Babylonian domination. Eventually, Nebuchadnezzar lost patience and in 586 B.C. marched against Judah; this time the Babylonians razed Jerusalem and the temple and deported another chunk of the population to Babylon.

## 2. The Education of Daniel

It may be useful to consider the Babylonian education system. Such knowledge gives us an idea of what kinds of subjects the Hebrew captives were exposed to and what kind of worldview they confronted.

The first stage of Babylonian education involved the learning of the two major languages common to the Babylonians: Aramaic, which was becoming an international language at that time, and Akkadian, which was the literary language used to convey the religious and cultural traditions of the empire. Akkadian required the mastery of a complex cuneiform writing system with hundreds of characters. In this first stage, the students would study texts recounting stories to which Babylonian youths were exposed since childhood, such as the legends of Gilgamesh, Sargon, and Nāram-Sîn.

In the second stage, students were introduced to many more texts, which were intended to hone their literary skills and help them develop a Babylonian worldview. One author thus described this second stage: “Its purpose, then, was twofold: to fill the student’s mind with the theological and political ideology current in the capital and to prepare him for an apprenticeship as a junior *āšipu*, a position that we know from colophons was held by many novice scribes. As far as exposure to literature goes, the storytelling that characterized the first phase has given way to more serious matters, the inculcation of a world-view and the acquisition of practical expertise.”—A. R. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1:36.

We do not know the details of the specific curriculum assigned to Daniel and his friends. But the description above gives an idea of how education was carried out in Babylon during that time. The academic program imposed upon Daniel and his companions may have been as demanding as the one described above. But Daniel and his friends excelled in all the wisdom and knowledge promoted by the University of Babylon!

## 3. The Wisdom of Daniel

One important aspect of the characters of Daniel and his companions is that they are wise. As Daniel tries to circumvent the challenges of the Babylonian indoctrination, especially in regard to food, he acts with unsurpassed tact and wisdom in order to avoid eating from the king’s table. Subsequently, Daniel and his companions are found to be 10 times wiser than all the other sages of Babylon. At the end of the book, we find mention of those of understanding and of the wise, who will be persecuted by evil powers but will emerge victorious at last (*Dan. 11:33, 35; Dan. 12:3*). But in order to better appreciate the theme of wisdom in Daniel, it may be

helpful to look at how this theme is treated elsewhere in the Bible.

One of the most fascinating biblical themes is the notion of wisdom. There are even some significant sections of the Bible designated as wisdom literature. Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes along with Song of Songs and several psalms have been counted as wisdom texts. Wisdom texts place strong emphasis on obedience to the Law of God, which usually results in a good life. Wisdom texts in general do not ground their messages on the Exodus or other major saving events, but make frequent references or allusions to Creation. God is the Creator who establishes certain laws that govern the cosmos and society. Therefore, those who abide by God's laws are more likely to be surrounded by God's blessings. The book of Job shows that there are exceptions to this rule; however, the exception eventually proves the rule, because, in the end, Job receives back his prosperous and happy life.

Daniel is portrayed as a wise man, but not primarily because he mastered the intricacies of the language and literature of the Babylonians. Rather, he can be said to be wise because he was loyal to the Lord. It was because of his theological convictions that Daniel refused the royal menu and opted for legumes and water, based on the diet established by God at Creation. Moreover, Daniel did not receive his wisdom merely through diligence and self-discipline. It was a God-given wisdom in recognition of the faith and trust that Daniel displayed. Such wisdom went far beyond the complexities of the university curriculum; it was wisdom that enabled Daniel to interpret dreams and understand God's overarching plan for human history.

### ***Part III: Life Application***

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- 1. The book of Daniel pictures the Lord as allowing a foreign nation to trample upon His own people and pillage His own temple. What can you learn from God's character on the basis of this event?**

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- 2. How do the circumstances of Daniel in the Babylonian court compare to those of Joseph in Egypt and Esther in Persia? Who do you think faced the hardest challenges? If you were given the option to choose, in whose shoes would you like to be?**

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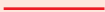


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**3. This week’s lesson opens the possibility for some self-examination. Ask your class members to reflect upon the following:**

- How would I view God if He allowed a foreign army to invade my country, destroy my culture, and deport me to a foreign land?
- What would I do if I were offered a prominent office in the government, as long as I participated in parties and partook of the foods and drinks offered therein?
- Is it more difficult to be obedient to the Lord in your own land among your own people or among foreigners in a distant country? Explain.
- In what ways can I build a worldview that gives me clarity to evaluate the culture around me and avoid its pitfalls?
- When faced with challenges related to Sabbath keeping, integrity in my business or job, relationships with non-Christian or non-Seventh-day Adventist friends, et cetera, how do I fare in comparison to Daniel?

*Notes*




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