

**LESSONS FROM BABYLON 1**  
**“DON’T BE QUICK TO CONFORM”**

Daniel 1:1-21

February 6 & 7, 2021

“There was a young Christian man in a southern university. He made the football team as the starting split end. And he continually was before God saying, ‘Help me in the climax of moments to be absolutely honest. I pray for honesty – that one mark of integrity. I want to be that, Lord, and I’ll work on it through the season.’

“The rival team came that night, homecoming. He ran his route and went into the end zone. The quarterback shot him the pass and he got it low. He landed on it, and the referee shouted, ‘Touchdown!’ But that boy knew he had trapped that ball. (For you who aren’t into that, it means that he didn’t really catch it. He landed on it while it was on the ground and it looked like he caught it.) The stands were just cheering, you know, sending him on his way, the hero of the game. He said, ‘Wait a minute.’ (Can you imagine this?) He walked up to the referee and shook his head. He said, ‘I trapped it.’ The referee canceled the touchdown and they lost the game.

“Now, you may not understand much about football, but you know what it is to be a fan. And that boy stood all alone, not only against a team that said, ‘What does it matter, man?’ but against the stands full of people. He said, ‘I can’t take the credit. I did not catch it.’”<sup>1</sup>

This story demonstrates the life of one striving to live his life with complete integrity and trust in God’s direction for his life. It seems to be a rare quality in folks today. To be truly honest rather than receive the glory of honor and recognition at conforming to what is wrong, is so important.

And this is a good beginning for us as we open up the life of Daniel and his friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah in this series I’m calling “Lessons From Babylon.” Let’s learn how to be people of Character in the midst of a Babylonian world.

As we look into the Old Testament book of Daniel, we can learn important lessons about how to stand up against the popular culture, to live lives of integrity, purity, righteousness, and godliness. Let

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<sup>1</sup> (Charles Swindoll, *Swindoll’s Ultimate Book of Illustrations & Quotes*, [Nashville/ Thomas Nelson, 1998] pg. 304

us use the examples of Daniel and his friends to direct us to being people of godly character.

Looking at the opening verses in chapter 1 of Daniel, we see that these four young Hebrew princes had been taken captive in Jerusalem by King Nebuchadnezzar's armies during the reign of King Jehoiakim (2 Kings 24:1-4, Daniel 1:1-2) shortly before the Babylonian exile. King Jehoiakim had sinned against the Lord, following the disgusting practices of previous kings, and so God allowed Nebuchadnezzar to invade and capture the land of Judah, including Jerusalem. Many of the royal princes and people of royalty in Jerusalem were seized and had been taken back as captives to Babylon, a city of immense size and population situated near the Euphrates River.

"It might have been the largest city the world had ever seen," says Dwight L. Moody in his book *Daniel, Man of God: Being a Man of Character in a Babylonian World*. He says, Babylon "is said to have been sixty miles around and is understood to have consisted of an area of two hundred square miles. A line drawn through the city in either direction would measure fifteen miles. The walls had an elevation of three hundred and fifty feet; they would therefore be nearly on a level with the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral in London. The breadth (thickness) of the walls was over eighty feet and eight chariots could run abreast on the top. Babylon was like Chicago – so flat that for ornamentation men had to construct artificial mounds. Like Chicago in another way, the products of vast regions flowed right into and through it." The population of the city could have numbered into the range of 1.2 million people.<sup>2</sup>

Now, imagine country boys going to that large city. Not only was it a new culture and a new language, but along with the city comes many more opportunities to stray from any religious convictions that they had learned previously. They were far away from any religious guidelines and restrictions. They were no longer under the influence of their parents. They were captives from another country, so they were expected to do as they were told, with no arguments, no complaints, and no resistance. Under these conditions, it would be easy to assume that these four young men were pressured hard to conform to the environment surrounding them. It would be understandable if they lost their perspective on what

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<sup>2</sup> (Dwight L. Moody, *Daniel, Man of God*, [Abbotsford, WI: Aneko Press, Revised Edition, 2018] pg. 7)

was right and wrong and merely assimilate into the popular culture around them.

Yet we can be pretty sure that Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah would have heard the preaching and warning of the prophet Jeremiah, telling the people of Jerusalem to turn away from the sins of their kings and return to worshipping and following the Lord God, as King Jehoiakim's father, Josiah, had done. These four were growing up during the reign of King Josiah, and they would have experienced the spiritual reforms that he had brought to Judah during his 31 years in leadership. But when Jehoiakim became king, he once more turned the country back to the worship of idols and the evil practices of kings before Josiah. But having been raised in an environment of spiritual growth and revival, these four men continued to grow deep in their faith, fully convinced in the guidance and protection of the Lord God. Though we are not told what their religious upbringing was, we begin to see its affect as they present themselves among the people in Babylon.

We see it first of all, when they were noticed by King Nebuchadnezzar as being prominent and outstanding young men from among the royal families of Jerusalem who had been taken to Babylon. Then they were picked out by Nebuchadnezzar's chief official, Ashpenaz, as men who were "*handsome, intelligent, well-trained, quick to learn, and free from physical defects, so that they would be qualified to serve in the royal court. Ashpenaz was to teach them to read and write the Babylonian language*" (Daniel 1:4). Looking at the qualifications set by Nebuchadnezzar, these were men who were the "cream of the crop" from all of those who came from Jerusalem, and they were going to be transformed into true Babylonian statesmen, for the glory of the king and the benefit of Babylon. They were specifically picked and offered special privileges in order to prepare them for service to Babylon.

And once they were selected as being the best of the captives, they were to be given royal diets like everyone else in the king's palace. "*...every day they were to be given the same food and wine as the members of the royal court. After three years of this training they were to appear before the king*" (Dan. 1:5). Wow! Who wouldn't want that? The best meat, the best drink, the best of Babylon, right there on your table at every meal! What delicacies might they enjoy? What delicious meals they would

have? The delights of the royal household of the king was being offered to tempt their palates every day. These young men faced these huge temptations, and their success or failure would depend upon how they responded to this new culture around them. Much like young men and women going off to college today, being on their own for the first time in their lives, they face all kinds of temptations to all sorts of different practices and opportunities.

But remember the upbringing of these four young men. They were Israelites from Judah, raised to follow the commands of God, living within His standards, and having only Him as their God. They had seen first-hand the dangers of abandoning the devotion and obedience to the Lord God. That's what got them in Babylon in the first place. It was the sin of King Jehoiakim that led to the fall of Jerusalem. Even though they were striving to be faithful to the Lord in all their ways, they were now captives in Babylon. So what could they do? It's not typical for captives to begin to dictate what they want from their captors. Usually it's the other way around, captives doing what they are told to do by their captors.

But Daniel *“made up his mind not to let himself become ritually unclean by eating the food and drinking the wine of the royal court”* (Dan. 1:8). Faced with tremendous opportunities from the king of Babylon, Daniel and his friends chose to follow the ways of the Lord. They were determined to be faithful to God, even as captives in Babylon, and this determination started them off right on their course of to being faithful servants of the Lord in a foreign land. *“They took their character with them to Babylon and were not ashamed of the religion of their father and mother. They were not ashamed of the God of the Bible.”*<sup>3</sup>

Among the godless people in Babylon, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were not ashamed to let their light shine. They took their stand for the Lord God even as they entered the mighty gates of the city, and their desperate faith worked within them as they cried out to the Lord for guidance to keep them steadfast and true. They would need to cry hard to the Lord for His protection and guidance, for they had to face great difficulties, as we will see in the next few weeks.

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<sup>3</sup> (D. L. Moody, *Daniel, Man of God*, pg. 2)

So along came the king's edict, setting the dietary plans for the captives chosen to be trained in the Babylonian culture and language, and it was time to put their faith into practice. This edict went against all that they had been trained in Judah. Their faith tradition and the Levitical Law prevented them from eating much of what the king presented. The meats would have been from many animals and birds forbidden by God to eat, them being deemed unclean by the Lord. And the preparation of those meats would not have followed God's standards, not having been drained of blood first before eating it. And much of the food would possibly have been offered as sacrifices to Bel or some other Babylonian god. And this determined the course of action for Daniel. Despite argument trying to minimize his convictions, Daniel stood against the edict and "*made up his mind* (that is, "purposed in his heart," NASB) *that he would not let himself become ritually unclean by eating the food and drinking the wine of the royal court.*" (Dan. 1:8).

"If some modern Christians could have advised Daniel, they may have said, 'Don't act like that; don't set aside the king's meat; that is an act of Pharisaism. The moment you take your stand and say you will not eat it, you say in effect that you are better than other people.' O yes, that is the kind of talk that is too often heard now. People say, 'When you are in Rome, you must do as the Roman does.' Such people would have pressed upon the poor young captive that he could not possibly stand for God in Babylon even though he might obey God's commandments while at home. He could not expect to carry his religion with him into the land of his captivity."

"I can imagine men saying to Daniel, 'Look here, young man, you are too puritanical. Don't be too particular; don't have too many religious scruples. Bear in mind you are not in Jerusalem now. You will have to get over these notions now that you are here in Babylon. You are not surrounded by friends and relatives. You are not a Jerusalem prince now. You are not surrounded by the royal family of Judah. You have been brought down from your high position. You are now a captive. And if the monarch hears about you refusing to eat the same meat that he eats, or drink the same wine that he drinks, your head will soon roll off your shoulders. You had better be a little more politically correct.'

But this young man had devotion and religion deep down in his heart...just the right place for it.”<sup>4</sup>

Young pastors entering the ministry today hear a similar thing from some leaders of the church. They had better give up their strict conservative up-bringing and conform to the new mindset of the liberal church today, or they may find them self serving small, struggling congregations for their whole career. Don't make yourself better than anyone else. Don't cross the bishop or you may not see another good appointment. Don't make yourself unappointable by holding on to such conservative guidelines. Just fall in line with what the bishop tells you to do. Don't rock the boat and you won't get wet.

But Daniel had his faith deep down in his heart, rooted as a foundation to his whole life. That's the best place for it to grow from, for what is in your heart dictates the rest of your life. Daniel's faith in God was not there for him to please the people around him, but to stand as an example to the people of what God expects from the rest of us. He allowed his love for the Lord God to determine his life and he was willing to stand upon that foundation, even in the midst of captivity. So he stood firmly against any sort of persuasion attempt to conform to the king's demands.

Instead, Daniel goes to Ashpenaz with his concern and asks for his help. Listen to how God delivers Daniel and his friends from the situation. (READ Daniel 1:9-21).

All of the king's officials were afraid of what would happen if the king found out that Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah wanted nothing to do with his food. Though they pressured them to conform to the king's edict, Daniel and the others offered a simple test, "tell you what," they said. "*Test us for ten days. Give us vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then compare us with the young men who are eating the food of the royal court, and base your decision on how we look*" (Dan. 1:12-13). It was a simple way to test the wisdom of the request of Daniel: a 10 day trial period to evaluate whether or not they would concede to the different meal plan. As worried as he was about it, the guard went along with the test, and at the end of those 10 days "*they looked healthier and stronger than all those who had been eating the royal food*" (Dan. 1:15). They trusted God and He delivered and blessed them.

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<sup>4</sup> (D. L. Moody, *Daniel, Man of God*, pg. 4)

“The four young men did not have noses like those of many men in our streets, as red as if they were going to blossom. It is God’s truth – and Daniel and his friends tested it – that cold water with a clear conscience is better than wine. They had a clear conscience, and the smile of God was upon them. The Lord had blessed their obedience, and the four Hebrew youths were allowed to have their own way. In God’s time they were brought into favor, not only with the officer over them, but also with the court and the king.

“Daniel thought more of his principles than he did of earthly honor or the esteem of men. Right was right with him. He was going to do right that day and let the tomorrows take care of themselves. That firmness of purpose in the strength of God was the secret of his success. Right there, that very moment, he overcame. And from that hour, from that moment, he could go on conquering and to conquer, because he had started right.”<sup>5</sup> He continually put his trust in the Lord.

Many people lose in life because they don’t start right. The young person going off to college in the big city finds many temptations available to them. A person challenges them about their convictions and they begin to desire the pleasing of man rather than the pleasing of God. So they give up on their reading the Bible, or they stop going to church, or they abandon their prayer time with God. And the more they give up their convictions, the weaker they are to stand strong against the temptations around them until they become untrue to their principles and give them up completely. “*Do not be deceived: Bad company corrupts good morals*” (I Corinthians 15:33).

In 95% of those who start out wrong in life, it is the beginning of their ruin. One compromised standard leads to another, and then another until the whole life is ruined, and there is no foundation left to stand upon. And once the foundation is gone, the whole life crumbles and is destroyed. It is always best, no matter how difficult it may be, to stand strong on the foundations of the Lord in order to find the success that He desires you to have in your life.

And look at what happened when Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah devoted themselves to

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<sup>5</sup> (D. L. Moody, *Daniel, Man of God*, pg. 5)

following the Lord rather than the king. *“So from then on the guard let them continue to eat vegetables instead of what the King provided. God gave the four young men knowledge and skill in literature and philosophy. In addition, He gave Daniel skill in interpreting visions and dreams. At the end of the three years set by the king, Ashpenaz took all the young men to Nebuchadnezzar. The king talked with them all and Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah impressed him more than any of the others. So they became members of the king’s court...”* (Dan. 1:16-19).

“When a [person], for the sake of principle and conscience, goes against the current of the whole world, God is with [them], and [they] need not stop to consider what the consequences will be. God has said, *‘Have I not commanded you: Be strong and courageous! Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go’* (Joshua 1:9).”<sup>6</sup>

When you stand up for God and commit your life to Him, He will be with you to guide you and bless you in all that you do. He will protect you and use you to be a light in the darkness that surrounds you. But this is not just a one-time decision. It is not a one-time act that makes us approved to God. It is a life-long journey that starts out with one decision to follow the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and that leads to another, and another, and another, until the pattern is pervasive in our lives and all we do is based upon that commitment to be faithful to God. Oh, we may make mistakes along the way, but once we begin right and establish that foundation for our life in godliness and faithfulness in all we do, for the glory of God, we will never be forsaken from God Himself. He is willing to forgive the mistakes we make, and stand us up again on our feet again so that we can continue on our journey with commitment to following Him. That is such an important factor in our lives, but it is one that we must decide upon each and every day of our life. We choose to follow the Lord Jesus Christ in all we do, and God gives us the courage, the words, and the wisdom to make it happen.

So do not be quick to conform to the ways of this world, but live faithfully committed to serving the Lord your whole life. The Lord God will go with you, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> (D. L. Moody, *Daniel, Man of God*, pg. 7)