

# Living Distinctively

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## Daniel 1 and 2

During Lent this year, we're going to be looking at the story of Daniel from the Old Testament. We're also going to be using a new book by Jeff Lucas – *'Singing in Babylon: Finding Purpose in Life's Second Choices'* as we consider what the book of Daniel has to teach us in 2021 in the midst of a pandemic.

The story of Daniel unfolded 2,600 years ago, around 600 years before Christ. At one level, the book of Daniel is an account of the Exile. The Exile began in 605BC when Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, besieged Jerusalem, defeated Jehoiakim king of Judah and took Daniel and his friends to Babylon as part of the first 'phase' of the exile. The second 'phase' was in 597BC, with the final 'phase' in 586BC when Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed.

The events described in chapter 1 take place at the beginning of the exile and cover a three-year period. Daniel finds himself deported, probably as a hostage, with a few friends to this strange land of Babylon. He was now in a location and situation where absolutely everything about the culture – music, food, customs, religion, philosophy, education, values – was all utterly foreign to him. He and his three friends – Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah – were to be trained for three years with a view to entering the king's service. The text uses the Hebrew word *'yeladim'*, frequently used for *'lads'* to tell us that they were young. Some commentators say they may have been between twelve and, at the most, eighteen. Historians believe that Babylonian children began serious education at the age of fourteen, and that Nebuchadnezzar would have demanded impressionable youngsters who could be shaped by a rigorous training programme. These young men were the most able, gifted and connected of their generation. And, if Nebuchadnezzar could influence them through his elite training programme – if you like, King's College, Babylon, if he could put God out of their lives, to eradicate their Jewishness, the effect would be felt for generations to come.

The lads had lost particular privileges that were theirs back in Jerusalem. Verse 3 of the first chapter tells us that those chosen for service in the foreign palace were from *'the royal family and the nobility'*. And the king they were now forced to serve was impulsive, murderous, and vicious beyond belief, and his plundering of the temple was a deliberate act of mockery and blasphemy. So, exile for these four lads was devastating. They had been separated from

everything they held precious. They left behind the Promised Land – the place of God’s bountiful provision, and the temple – viewed by the Jewish people as the place where God dwelled on the earth. The training programme would include the language and literature of the Chaldean people, astronomy, mathematics, natural history, mythological literature, agriculture and architecture, and magic, astrology and sorcery. Although these young men were not being trained as soothsayers but as upper-level administrators and advisors, nevertheless, the purpose of this curriculum was to change the way they thought: their worldview, their value system.

They would have been brought into Babylon almost certainly through the Ishtar Gate. Built both to impress and intimidate, the Ishtar Gate was an awesome sight, not only its sheer scale, but the striking blue and gold stonework with reliefs of bulls and dragons, the guardians of the city. Passing through the gate, captives entered the tunnel-like atmosphere of the Ishtar Way with its high walls and reliefs of lions joining the bulls and dragons. These young men would have been left in no doubt as to the sheer power of Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylon and the pressure to conform. What kind of pressure, you may ask? Nebuchadnezzar’s tactic was systematic indoctrination. He changed their location, their language, their diet and their names.

The name changes are striking. All of the boys had Hebrew names which refer to the one true and living God. Daniel means ‘God is judge’, Hananiah ‘Yahweh is gracious’, Mishael ‘Who is what God is?’, and Azariah ‘Yahweh is a helper’. All are given names that reflect the Gods of Babylon, in particular Bel, Aku and Nebo. Moreover, the Hebrew verb translated ‘gave’ in verse seven is literally ‘*put new names on them*’. The verb is strong, associated with imposition and force, indicative of Nebuchadnezzar’s desire to forcibly put God out of their lives.

If, at one level, the book of Daniel is an account of the Exile, its message as a whole is that God *rules*. Chapter 1 is the first of three ‘*conflict chapters*’ – where Daniel and his friends make a stand in defence of their faith. Here in chapter 1, the focus is on all four, although Daniel takes centre-stage. In chapter 3, the spotlight falls on Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, or Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego as they came to be known and, in chapter 6, Daniel alone is the focus. The purpose of these conflict chapters is to show how God’s people are to live in the light of the fact that he rules. As exiles in the world, God calls his people to live distinctively. To live distinctively is costly, but God’s

people are to trust God. And, as God's people live distinctively, God *advances* his kingdom.

We see this in this first chapter when Daniel politely asks the official for permission not to take the royal food and wine. Daniel takes the initiative, and the sense we get from the text is that these young men are looking for an opportunity to make their allegiance to God known, simply to be open and public about their faith. And what becomes obvious in this chapter is how God intervenes. We read in verse 9 that God had *'caused the official to show favour and sympathy to Daniel,'* and ensures that Daniel and his friends come through the ten-day testing period looking healthier and better nourished than all the others. We then read in verse 17 that *'to these four men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning'* so that they graduate as top students. And to Daniel we read that he specifically gave the ability to *'understand visions and dreams of all kinds'*, a gift he would use on a number of occasions.

So, through these young men living distinctively, God advances his kingdom. In this first chapter, Daniel and his friends, with their faith clear and strong, graduate into positions of influence in Babylon. And in chapter 2, through Daniel's interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream, the king falls prostrate before Daniel saying, *'Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries'*, his first faltering step in a long journey to faith.

But, what has this got to do with us, thousands of years later?

In his book *'Singing in Babylon'*, Jeff Lucas reminds us in the story of Daniel we see four friends living a life they would never have chosen. While they knew that this had happened as a result of God's judgment on the Jewish nation for consistently defying the Lord, and that God had warned his people that persistence in evil would lead to captivity, Daniel and his friends must have wondered: *'Why now? Why us? What did we do?'*

Over this last year, those questions have been on the lips of many as we've lived through a global pandemic which isn't yet over. In the first lockdown, we all experienced collective shock. Ordered to stay home, everyday life came to a screeching halt. Deserted high streets and railway stations that once teemed with bustling shoppers and commuters gave an apocalyptic feel to the summer.

Devastated care homes. Tearful, exhausted medics. Nightingale hospitals constructed in weeks. Eye-watering unemployment figures and economic predictions. Tearful students enraged at results determined by an algorithm.

We were all staggered, bewildered. How could this be happening?

Tragically, this has been no fleeting nightmare, and we've all had to get accustomed to regular hand-washing, social distancing, wearing of face-coverings, queuing outside shops, track and trace, and more lockdowns. In short, we've had to adapt and learn. Over this last year I, for one, have learned new skills in recording services, downloading music, editing movies, uploading to YouTube, holding meetings over Zoom and substituting the telephone for home visits in a way that feels uncomfortable and woefully inadequate. Adapt is what I've needed to do. And so have many of you.

And Jeff Lucas points out that that's exactly what Daniel and his friends did in their second-choice home in Babylon. But Daniel and his friends didn't just survive in Babylon, which is good news, as they were to spend the rest of their lives there. They would have to navigate through some very challenging episodes which included furnaces and lions. But, despite all the challenges, they *flourished*.

And they flourished by living distinctively. This meant saying 'yes' to some things – they didn't protest the curriculum they were forced to follow, or even the Babylonian names they were given - but saying 'no' to others. It meant coming clean about their convictions and showing where their true allegiance lay. And it's the same for us. As Christians we're not called to fight every battle, but there will be situations that we will need to say 'no' to, and to be open about why we're doing so. This is the case for Christians of any age, but particularly so for our young people. With this in mind, maybe this week, each of us can commit to praying for our young people, that they would embrace God's call to live distinctively and to be bold about their faith. Because through our witness to the world around us, God advances his kingdom. May he give us all the strength to know that, whilst we're living in times not of our choosing, in times that can appear frightening and uncertain, he has this covered and we *will* come through. Miles away from family and home, Daniel experienced great heartache, but he also discovered that God had trekked to Babylon with him, in the same way that he remains close to each and every one of us today.