

## The Lord reigns in a foreign land: Living Differently - Daniel 1

Imagine it: The first trip to university, the car full of stuff, and the emotion of leaving your son or daughter, for the first time perhaps, to live away from home. Some of you may have had that experience? Others will have seen films or can imagine it. The emotion runs high! There's pride, a real sense of achievement as the kids are no longer kids, they're looking after themselves, cooking, shopping, cleaning, studying. There's the **sadness** that they won't be there any more at home, you'll probably miss them, even if they were messy! It's an emotional, but ultimately a fantastic time, a milestone.

In Daniel chapter 1, Daniel and his friends leave home and head off to Babylonian university. Except, sadly, the scene here couldn't be more different to what we just imagined could it?

Daniel is one of the smartest Jewish boys, a quick learner, he's sharp, good with people, even good looking! (v4) And that's why he's been chosen for university.

Chosen, by a foreign, invading power.

Daniel has been torn away from his family – taken by force (after some kind of battle where some people would no-doubt have died, and where Israel, a tiny nation, had surrendered). Daniel is taken away from his own country, to a pagan capital city (away from his parents) where they worship other Gods, they act immorally, all sorts.

And it's a brilliant plan actually. The British used to do it when we colonised places. Don't just stay in a place and rule over it, but give the brightest and best from that land *your own* education, and ultimately, have them rule their own people for you.

When we study any part of the bible, it's important to know the context, particularly in the old testament.

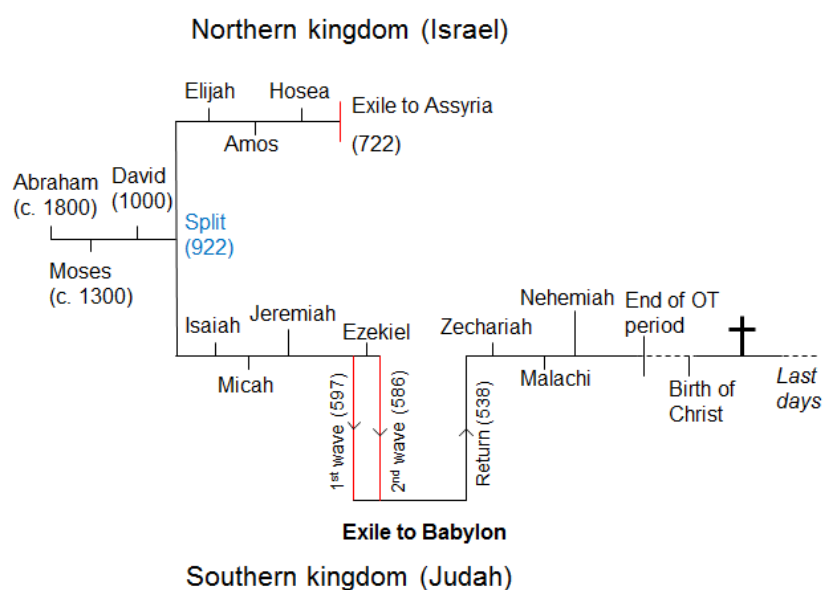
If you didn't know, God's people split in two, soon after king David and Solomon.

The northern peoples, called Israel, and the smaller, and more faithful to God, southern peoples, called Judah.

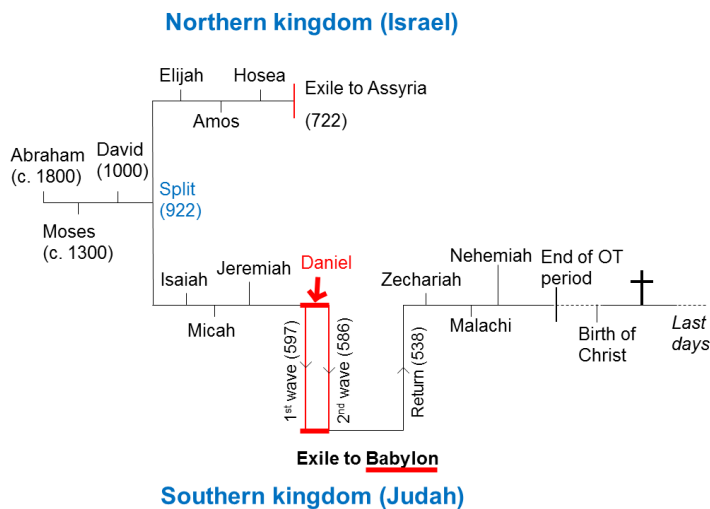
Both north and south ultimately were conquered.

The north, 722 years before Jesus, conquered by the Assyrians.

The south, by the Babylonians, in two stages, in 597 and then 586 years before Jesus.



(Picture taken from "God's big picture" by Vaughan Roberts, why not give it a read?)



The book of Daniel spans lots of this time and our chapter today comes as part of the build-up to the first great conquest

Why is that important?

Well the book is all about what it is like to live faithfully to God when you are away from your spiritual home – in exile – living amongst a pagan people.

It answers the question – does the lord reign here – with a resounding yes!

And along with 1 Peter, it is one of the two books in the bible whose focus is all about how we should live away from (our spiritual) home, trusting God, and living for him.

So here's my question.

Do you feel like the lord reigns here in Stevenage?

Are we living in the city of God? Where everyone looks to honour him and his ways, where we are surrounded by spiritual family. Where the Stevenage way (or the British way even) is the lord's way?

Well the answer is no! We're not, do you feel that? The bible teaches that there is only one place like that, heaven.

And until we go to be there, it's like we're in a foreign land, in exile, waiting to return to our God.

To use picture language, we're living in Babylon! We're in exile.

And the bible book of 1 Peter uses that language too, listen to these verses: <sup>11</sup> Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. <sup>12</sup> Live such good lives among the pagans [that's unbelievers] that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us."

So let me explain what you can expect from the book of Daniel.

You can expect to learn about your God, the God of Daniel, and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who reigns everywhere, all over the world, at all times – even when we might feel far away from him.

And we can expect to learn how we should live, how to conduct ourselves in his world, even when the world around us does not live for him and know him.

And Chapter 1 of the book of Daniel gives us 3 lessons for how we live.

The first two, in a pair – Don't **withdraw** from the world, be involved, but 2<sup>nd</sup> don't **compromise**. And then lastly, don't **fear**, the lord reigns.

So first, **Don't withdraw**

If you've ever heard a talk on Daniel 1 before, it probably made a lot of v8, "Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine"

And that's right, it's an important verse, and we'll come to it in a moment.

But too often people forget what comes before. Before Daniel says no to something, he says yes, and yes again, and yes again – to some really quite surprising things.

So in v3-7 Daniel and his friends say yes, to

- A pagan education.

Babylon was a huge and impressive capital city. This king, Nebuchadnezzar built the hanging gardens of Babylon!

And the Babylonian people were highly sophisticated: in literature, astronomy, maths and science. This university education was going to be impressive. Especially to a very clever boy like Daniel!

But be under no illusions. The city was full of worship of other gods, many gods, as well as all sorts of magical arts and sorcery. And that worldview would have underpinned the whole education system.

Their *plan* actually was that this education would strip Daniel and his friends of their devotion to God. To win them over to Babylonian ways.

And on top of that Daniel and his friends *also* said yes to

- A political career

V5 "they were to be trained for 3 years, and after that to enter the king's service"

You see it wasn't just the education, they were actually to become officials within this pagan nation – the very nation which stole them away from their parents! Destroyed countless buildings and families from God's people. They were to work for them, and high up too!

It seems like betrayal – betrayal of God and his people! Surely they've compromised.

And they also accept

- A change of name

Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah have their names changed to Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

Their names were about YHWH, God, the Lord:

-el like on the end of dani-el and misha-el means God.

And yah on the end, like: Hanani-yah and azari-yah comes from YHWH,

These names spoke about God's grace, and his power and how he helps his people.

And the names they are given talk instead about Babylonian gods Bel, Aku and Neko, and praise *them*.

Surely having God written out of their very names, that's something to resist and fight against, surely?!!

But they say yes – they allow it.

And we need to remember) even when in a pagan society, do not withdraw.

They don't kick up a stink, they don't argue and fight, they get on, become involved, and become part of that land.

It's so easy in our minds to start being critical, critical of the society around us, as laws are passed which we don't like, which dishonour God. As Christian prayers are banned in schools or on TV or whatever. There are all kinds of things in society which dishonour God, which don't reflect his ways.

And as our nation becomes less and less Christian, that is happening more and more. How do you feel?

Do you criticise, feel separate, retreat amongst Christians? Either in your mind, or in practise? Who are your friends, who do you talk to? Are you ever in situations where it's an *effort* to be there in the world, where you feel out of place?

Daniel and his friends do not withdraw. Actually Daniel knows the prophet Jeremiah really well, and Jeremiah 29 said:

<sup>4</sup> "This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: <sup>5</sup> "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. [have children! And] seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."

Don't withdraw. But secondly, **don't compromise either.**

They said yes to this and that, but, they did say no, they drew a line! "Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way."

Notice how polite he is, he speaks fairly and gently with the chief official, he doesn't make a scene – but he does say no.

Now there are a couple of theories why he draws the line here.

- Is it because the food wasn't coacher, and they'd have been violating Jewish food law?  
Well in *that* case, they could drink the wine, so it can't be that.
- Was it because the food was likely blessed and offered to pagan gods first?  
Well in *that* case, the vegetables would have been offered too. So it can't be that.
- I'm persuaded that, as a best guess, the reason is because of the relationship it implied to the king. Like a close and binding relationship between them and the king. Later on in the book of Daniel, you see, in chapter 11v26 the people who are *closest to the king* are described as "those who eat the king's provisions".  
It's about relationship. The ones who eat from the king's table are his friends and closest allies.

It's like Daniel and his friends are saying this:

Look, O king, I'll take your education, your new name, I'll even work in your palace as a top advisor. But, you can't have me, I won't be bound to you, because I'm in covenant relationship to the king of kings and lord of lords.

What you want O king, you can't have, because I'm his, and that will never change.

They drew the line, and they remained faithful.

I think it's important to notice that the way they draw the line affects them, it cuts backwards, inwards. It's them who miss out.

The food from the king's table would have been a---mazing!

They are missing out on the Michelin star beef, to have veg. They're missing the £100 a bottle wine!

They are the ones who miss out.

In no way, are they extra work or difficult. Notice how in v10, the guard has fears that they'll get thin and unhealthy, but Daniel doesn't stamp his feet, he offers a test, to show the guard and it's ok.

The lesson is clear, we mustn't compromise. We must draw the line. We are *not* simply part of this culture we live in, "when in Stevenage do what everyone from Stevenage does", no, there is a line.

We must draw the line. But take note that where they draw the line impacts on them, and they face the consequences of it.

Sometimes where we draw the line is obvious – if you're asked to tell a lie at work, or if some advertising, or a press release, just isn't true, as a Christian the line comes before that.

At times we'll get those things wrong, and we need to come back to the lord Jesus for forgiveness, and we get a fresh start.

But sometimes, where to draw the line isn't clear.

Think of one of the God's of this age, materialism and comfort.

When some of our Christian brothers or sisters come and visit from Africa they look at how much money we spend on houses, beds, sofas, cars, TVs and so on, and they are amazed.

They wonder if we've compromised – are we worshiping this god of material comfort?

And we should hear that challenge. Are we just people of this world and it's ways? I hope not! we need to draw the line.

But how much *is* godly for a Christian to spend on a car?

How much should we spend on a night out, or a nice meal?

Think about it – and draw a line – but draw your own line.

It's different for different people.

For some people, a Christian going into a pub is extraordinary. Why would you go into a place of drunken ungodliness? And for some the line needs to be before that, yet for some it's ok.

Some draw the line before watching an 18 rated film, others: anything with swearing.

Sometimes the lord draws the line very clearly – do not lie

But sometimes we've got to be wise, we need to decide – where should I draw the line?

But you must draw a line, somewhere. Somewhere which ensures you keep yourself pure for the lord.

Are you drawing that line? Are you willing to deny yourself things? Daniel and his mates miss out on that great food! Because they are most interested in honouring God, and ultimately, they live for him above all. Don't compromise.

Those are the first two lessons, don't withdraw, and don't compromise!

Lastly, a really positive encouragement for us, a truth about our God.

**Don't fear, our God reigns.**

The disaster that had come upon the Jewish people can't really be overstated. After the siege from a far stronger and superior army, their family lives were torn apart, and their religious life was shattered too. V2 mentions that the articles in the temple (probably) of gold and silver were carried off and put in the temples of the babylonian gods!

There is no doubt there would have been tears and desperate questioning as people asked "why lord, why didn't you stop this, couldn't you have prevented it, what's going on"

And **we** sometimes ask that don't we – when things seem to go wrong, we wonder what is God doing? Does he rule?

And yet the clear message of the chapter (&book!) is that **God is in control**, things may be bad, but he still reigns. And his people do not need to be afraid.

Later on in the book we see God's power and rule over huge nations and affairs of the world.

There's something of that in v2 "The **Lord** delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into Nebuchadnezzar's hand"

It was the lord's doing. It's not out of his control.

But the chapter mainly focusses on individuals:

In v9, Daniel is courageous to draw his line, and what happens v9 "God caused the official to show favour and sympathy with Daniel". You see, God is at work, even in Babylon.

V15 "At the end of the ten days they looked *healthier* and *better* nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food"

And we are supposed to understand, (sorry vegetarians this is not actually vegetarian propaganda) we understand that the lord worked a miracle, and sustained them.

And the lord's control is underlined again in v17 "To these four young men **God** gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds."

And so they finished top of the class. And it was **God's** doing. Daniel ends up as the top official, ruling and making all kinds of decisions in Babylon.

And we are to understand that God was protecting them and guiding them, and all his people, all the way through – even when it looked terrible, even when everything seemed to be going wrong.

You can imagine people coming along side Daniel in the royal court, and saying "why risk your life over a bit of food – you've got a good position here in the royal court, your prospects are excellent, don't risk it, just play along here, it's only small"

They're afraid of the king, to them: it doesn't make sense, Daniel doesn't fear of the king. "You could end up in a great job with real influence, you could do good!"

But Daniel fears the lord, and him alone – the beginning of wisdom.

Daniel drew the line on something small, and later when he was really tested, when he was told to worship the king and him alone, or face the lion's den. Daniel is faithful then too.

And we face that same threat:

The world thinks "It's all very well going to church on a Sunday and that's fine, but please, leave your religion and your Christ out of the rest of life, you'll get along much more if you just fit in" "Leave him out of your relationships, or the workplace, for goodness sake don't *talk* about him. You'll just seem weird – you'll get on so much better if you just stay quiet!" "After all, look around, it just doesn't look like he rules here does it?"

But he does.

And we would be wise to fear him, don't be afraid.

Our world should hold no fear for us, we are in the hands of our Lord, wherever we are! So we read the terrible news of what happened in France – don't be afraid of the threat of violence against a priest in a church. Be wise, but don't be afraid – our God reigns.

The threat of financial instability and change because of Brexit. The politicians and banks may not have seen it coming, be wise, but don't be afraid – the lord knew and was in complete control.

The uncertainty of bad health, with scan results due back about cancer or something else, don't be afraid, the lord reigns.

There may be times when our lives seem to be falling apart.

And this is not to say that the evil of people, or the mistakes and bad choices we make aren't involved – they are.

But the lord reigns over all, even in those hardest times, even in Babylon, he is in control!

And his people, are safe in his hands, his good hands!

And so, we need not be afraid.

Don't withdraw, don't compromise, and don't be afraid!

Let's pray.

Lord God, you reign here in Stevenage, across the land, and across the whole world. Help us to live well, amongst the people you have placed us with, but never compromising – instead representing you well, and trusting you always, and not being afraid. We ask it in Jesus' name, **amen**.