

Who Is In Charge?

Daniel 1

If you were raised in Sunday School, you may remember Daniel as a sweet story by little flannel graph characters. That might have been a good way to learn it when we were kids, but this book has some teeth in it.

The book of Daniel has 12 chapters. The first six chapters are historical narratives to be studied. They're Daniel in the lion's den, the fiery furnace, Nebuchadnezzar's vision. Chapters 7 through 12 are prophecies. Daniel saw the future. It happened exactly as he prophesied. There is also a portion of Daniel's prophecy that hasn't happened yet. Daniel's showing us what's going to happen. The history section is also prophecy, meaning, it didn't just happen. It was supposed to be enduring. It was supposed to teach us forever that what happened to him is going to happen to the next generation, and to the next generation, and to the next generation, and you can use it as a guide for how to live a Godly life in an ungodly culture.

The message of this book is that, despite circumstances and appearances, God is still in control. Almost every one of us has, at some time or another, or is right now or will be in the future where you're in the tunnel of chaos and the darkness. You can't see the light at the end of the tunnel. You have no evidence at all that God is at work around you.

There were hundreds of years where Israel was captive in Egypt. They experienced deliverance then they began wandering in the wilderness. They got into the Promised Land. They fought and won a lot of battles. Over time, the temple was built under David and Solomon. They were a united kingdom around 922 B.C. where both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah were united under King David. They were living the dream God had for them. Everything God had promised was coming true. They were a united nation, and they were happy in their land.

Israel was a united kingdom under Saul, David, and Solomon. Under Solomon's son, Rehoboam, the kingdom had a civil war and was split in two. There was the northern kingdom, which was called Israel. It was composed of 10 tribes, and the southern kingdom, Judah, which had two tribes. The northern kingdom was more wicked than the southern. It had 19 kings, and all of them were evil. The nation of Israel had continually rejected God. You can love God and still reject God. People who sin or walk away from God's standard and ways would tell you, "I love God." What they've lost is the fear of the Lord. They stopped respecting God and fearing God. They go their own way, and this is not something novel or new. This happened in cycle, after cycle, after cycle. God used the pagan Assyrian nation to invade the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 BC, and they took them captive to Assyria.

The southern kingdom was a little more righteous. They had a few righteous kings, like Josiah and Hezekiah, and they didn't fall until 586 BC. This is where the story picks up in Daniel chapter 1, around 605 BC, and the southern kingdom that encompassed Jerusalem and the temple and all of the southern area, fell to Babylon forces. This is where Daniel comes in. The country that had been promised by God to be a nation was starting to fall apart. That was the official fall day, when Babylon finally took them all captive. The prophets warned that what happened to Israel, the northern kingdom, would happen to Judah, the southern kingdom if they didn't repent. Prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah said to the southern kingdom would be taken captive as well. Micah 3:11–12 essentially says, *"Remember what happened to your brothers and sisters in the north when they disobeyed God? If you don't repent, God is going to do the same thing. He will use a pagan people, the Babylonians to take us into captivity."*

- Isaiah: Before the final fall of Judah, Isaiah prophesied that the Babylonians would carry away the kingdom's wealth and leaders into exile. The Assyrian threat gave way to the new and more powerful Babylonian Empire, which would ultimately deliver the final judgment on Judah.
- Ezekiel: The prophet Ezekiel, who ministered while in exile in Babylon, continued to warn the exiles and those who remained in Jerusalem. He received a prophecy against "the south," using the imagery of a fire that would destroy every tree, symbolizing the complete and inescapable judgment of God on the land of Judah.
- Jeremiah: Known as the "weeping prophet," Jeremiah tirelessly warned Judah of its impending destruction and the Babylonian captivity. He stressed that their unfaithfulness had sealed their fate, and destruction was unavoidable.

Ultimately, Judah's unrepentant idolatry and wickedness, observed despite Israel's earlier collapse, led to the fulfillment of these prophecies. And the prophets specifically said, "Because you violated God's law, God is going to punish you," particularly laws about the tithe and about the sabbath.

About 200 years later, things changed. In 722 BC, the northern kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians. Slowly, the dream unraveled.

The nation of Israel, who had been extremely blessed by God, and was given the law, they forgot it. They'd gone generations without reading the Word of God.

God had said, "If you continually reject me, I'm going to allow you to go your own way." A lot of the things that we interpret as God punishing us isn't God punishing us. It's us punishing us. We've walked out from underneath the covering of Almighty God.

The nation of Israel did this, and God warned them, "If you do this, I am going to allow you to be taken captive by a foreign land." That land is called Babylon. The spirit of Babylon still exists in our world today, and it ultimately will be judged. You can read about Babylon being judged in the book of Revelation. What is happening in our culture right now is not new.

Daniel was part of the generation that was taken into captivity by the Babylonians, and that's modern-day Iraq. It was the Persian empire, and they came, led by King Nebuchadnezzar, and brought God's people into bondage for 70 years.

"In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it." Daniel 1:1

Babylon came in and completely decimated and took over the city and the surrounding nation known as Judah. In addition to that, as a violation to this very holy country, they went into the temple and not only destroyed the temple, they also took the most sacred articles out of the temple back to their temple pagan where they worshipped the gods they had made up and the animal gods. It was on the Plain of Shinar, which is back from Genesis 11, where the Tower of Babel was built a thousand years before.

"The Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his (Nebuchadnezzar's) hand, along with some of the articles from the temple." Daniel 1:2

Daniel is giving us both the inside and the outside perspective of this story...a rearview mirror perspective. Those who are inside the story can't see, but the author has the perspective as an outsider, to describe the character and the nature of God...the fact that God was actually at work from the very beginning. Even before Daniel's resolution, God's hand was at work. It was not Nebuchadnezzar's might and power that overcame Judah. It was God allowing it to happen.

You might be in a situation where the good news for you is the belief that, even though you can't see God at work, but because of the character and the nature of God, it would be impossible for Him not to be at work. God exists and is strong and is working.

There are two forces at work in this world:

One that brings us great beauty and joy and goodness.

Another that is full of wickedness and evil and pain and devastation.

Daniel reminds us that we are not simply pawns in the hands of a hostile power, but there is a divine sovereignty at work for our good. The author is pulling the curtain back to show us God is at work.

The entire book of Daniel is about, *"Who will save us?"*

It is laying the groundwork for the Messiah. In the midst of hard times in your life or in the lives of other people, you can know God is moving toward His appointed goal. Over and over again, God has this repetitive action of redemption in Scripture when His people are faithless, when we sin, when we drift far away from God, when forces of evil invade our lives and make our lives turn out so different than the hopes and dreams that we had for them. In the book of Isaiah is a prophecy about the deliverance of God's people from Babylon.

"In that day the Lord will reach out His hand a second time to reclaim His people." Isaiah 11:11

"A second time" is a metaphor for "repeatedly." God will reach out His hand over and over and over again to save us. What's true is sometimes God is most powerfully at work when He seems absent. He is working repetitively for our redemption, again and again and again.

For many people right now life is difficult. There is a kind of pain and hurt and distance from God that is confusing. The life we thought we once saw, we don't see any more. God works in a very bleak time in Israel's history and in Daniel's life so that you will know He will work for you. His fingerprints are everywhere, and He is at work. His goodness has not changed in spite of our trouble. He is at work in our lives, in our souls, and in this world.

If Daniel were here, he would say to us, "The world invites you to live small. I dare you to trust God when you cannot see what he is doing – to stay pure, to finish your education, to serve your boss as serving the Lord, to live on a budget, to stay committed to your marriage. I dare you to live for God and for good, to stand up for who God created you to become. Live for big ideas and take some bold actions."

The truth that was set into the soul of Daniel that gave guidance and guarded his heart. You need this in your life too: "Israel has fallen, but God does not fall." People had fallen, and the nation had fallen, but that did not mean God had fallen. When Jehoiakim fell, God did not fall. Empires, parents, his own parents and their generation failed, and it cost Daniel his future and he was taken into captivity.

We live in a day where jobs fall, economies fall, stocks fall, companies fall, marriages fall, churches fall, leaders fall, people fall, but God does not fall. Nebuchadnezzar thought this meant that there was no God, that Jehovah had fallen. It seemingly changed things on earth, but it did not change things in heaven.

Since Daniel was in a royal blood line and was gifted, he was rising above all the others. He had a bright future. But now, since Israel has fallen, all of his dreams have fallen with it. The parents and family all made choices that affected his life, and yet God is still in control in his life.

"And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand" Daniel 1:2

This is a clear fact that God is still in charge. We might have brought it upon ourselves. We dishonored God. We disobeyed God and thought it was no big deal, and it wasn't.

Daniel 9:4 is Daniel's prayer of confession.

"I prayed to the Lord my God and confessed: 'Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws. We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes and our ancestors, and to all the people of the land. 'Lord, you are righteous, but this day we are covered with shame—the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem and all Israel, both near and far, in all the countries where you have scattered us because of our unfaithfulness to you. We and our kings, our princes and our ancestors are covered with shame, Lord, because we have sinned against you. The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him; we have not obeyed the Lord our God or kept the laws he gave us through his servants the prophets. All Israel has transgressed your law and turned away, refusing to obey you.'" Daniel 9:4-11

They were telling Daniel, “We have conquered you, Daniel. We just took your God’s treasures and put them in our temple. Don’t believe in your God anymore. Become a part of our system. Since your kingdom has fallen Daniel, you fall too..., let your faith fall, don’t live boldly in front of others because this stuff is not true.” But Daniel believed in his soul that that was not true. Look at their names. Babylon was saying this is not true. Daniel steps up in his mid-teens and still believes there is none like God, “He is my judge. Even though I live under a foreign king, I will not follow him.” Even in servitude, he believes God is gracious. What are you believing these days?

We live in a world where we see things fall—Big Lots falls, Banks falls, Carolina Basketball falls, Freddie Mack and Fannie Mae fall. Maybe we feel like we are getting moved around, but God has not fallen. He is still in charge—always has been, always will be.

Daniel would not quit on God. His philosophy was, “I will be bold for God when I do not understand what is going on around me.” It did not shake him up. He was honest about what he could and could not control in this world.

They took hostage the finest young men of noble and royal families. It describes these young men who were taken out of the nation of Judah and back into Babylon as young men without physical defect...young men who were handsome. Kevin Costner, Brad Pitt, Leonardo DiCaprio and Glenn Powell.

They were the most handsome, intelligent, and gifted men. They were the smartest ones. They had an aptitude for all kinds of learning. They were well informed and quick to understand. They were put into training in the king's courts to serve the king. It would be like waking up tomorrow morning and realizing our entire state had been taken over by troops from Iran who destroyed every town, came into our church and took our beautiful stained glass and our Bibles back to their country, and took the best and the brightest young boys from our church.

The book opens with a survey of the city from the mount of Mount Olives. The city and temple are in ruins, devastated, with smoke rising, mothers and fathers weeping and wailing for their missing children, and a nation and a people who are confused, disoriented, and overcome in their grief. Their lives are not turning out the way they thought they would, and they are discouraged.

In one moment, they have gone from God's chosen nation to a nation that is conquered, dispersed, pillaged, and alone. They asked, “Is there a God at work at all?” The words God gave to Abraham back in Genesis chapter 12:2-3, where God promises, “*I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you. I will make your name great. Then I will cause you to be a blessing. Everybody on the earth will be blessed through you.*” They are confused as what has happened. They're in the tunnel, and there is no light at either end.

The story tells us that in verse 5, the king grabbed Daniel and his three friends and many others who were held hostage from Judah and many of the other Babylonian young men of that age. They were put under the tutelage of some of the officials to study and become learned in the literature and language of Babylonia and the interpretation of dreams and in everything the king needed.

What's the answer for following God when life is turned upside down?

1. Don’t Let The Culture Define You

“Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king’s service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility— young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king’s palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians. The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king’s table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king’s service. Among those who were chosen were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego.” Daniel 1:3-7

Daniel was about 16 years old when this story unfolded. He is a great model for our students' generation. They don't have to be defeated by our culture. They can lead in our culture. He served in four different empires. He never bowed, never compromised his faith, but he had influence in that generation. God wants us to make a difference in our own generation. We want to have influence in our generation. He lost everything, his homeland was destroyed, and everything that was dear to him was taken with no promise of return. Most likely because he served in the court of the king. Daniel stayed in Babylon for 65 years through 4 kings.

Is it possible in circumstances like these to really believe, live, and act as if God is at work when your life is upside down, and the dreams you had and the hopes you thought would come true have been destroyed?

They took their Hebrew names which were given with so much meaning from the time they were old enough to understand what their names meant. It taught them about their faith in God. Even their names were taken away.

Daniel meant "*God is judge.*" His name is changed to Belteshazzar which means "*May Baal protect his life.*" Baal was one of the many gods the Babylonians worshipped.

Hananiah grew up from the time he was a little boy being told his name meant "*Jehovah is gracious.*" My guess is Hananiah was having a hard time believing that right now. His name was taken away, and he was called Shadrach, which means "*He who is in command of Aku,*" which was another one of the many gods the Babylonians worshipped.

Instead of viewing him as gracious, kind, and loving (all implied by the name Hananiah), this new name echoed with the kind of fear you'd feel standing before a tyrant, a maniac, or a monster. In every case, the Hebrew captives new names obliterated the true nature of God that had been represented by their names and reoriented their identities to become people who served their Babylonian masters.

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations." Jerimiah 1:5

You are a coheir with Jesus, adopted into the family of the King and granted eternal life with him in heaven after your mortal life on earth has ended.

Society continues to redefine gender, gender relationships, and marriage, which is reminiscent of the gender change in Daniel's renaming. Things that were once inherent to who we are have now become flexible and up for debate. The enemy tries to change our identities by making it seem foolish to remain faithful to God. Most Christians today are intimidated by the world. We have become convinced we should keep our faith private, relegated to church one day a week.

Mishael, meant "*Who is He that is God?*" The name that was given to him was Meshach, which means "*Who is Aku,*" another one of the gods they worshipped. Then his final friend, Azariah, meant "*Jehovah has helped.*" He must have wondered if that was that true. The Babylonians said, "It doesn't matter because you're new name is Abednego, a servant of *Nabu*. Everything was gone from these young men.

W.C. Fields once said, "*It ain't what they call you that matters; it's what you answer to that matters.*"

Names are important. What we believe about ourselves influences every decision we make and every action we take. We all have names. Whether or not we reflect the characteristics of our given names at birth is not the point. What matters most is the name we have written on our hearts and minds. It's what we believe about ourselves and then live out.

- Perhaps you've let sickness define you.
- You might let your relationships define you.
- Perhaps rejection, divorce, and betrayal have become your identity
- You may have let circumstances determine your name

The names you allow to label you often title the scripts you live by. What you believe in dictates what you live out.

The number one goal of your Enemy, the Devil, is to attack your identity. He wants to give you a different name-----one that stands in direct contrast to the name God gave you when he created you. The enemy utilizes false labels by convincing us to allow our past to define who we are. He calls us “liar” or “hypocrite”, “failure” or “unclean”. This is the big one---the struggle so many of us have that drags us down and undermines our faith.

When we let God control our lives, he gives us a new identity. Jacob went from being a coward, who deceived his father and conned his brother out of his birthright, to being Israel, the nation of God’s chosen people. Abram went from being a wandering nomad with a problem telling the truth, to Abraham, an unlikely father at an old age whom God blessed for all generations. Peter (Simeon) and Paul (Saul) in the New Testament---two more examples of new identities proclaimed by new names.

God doesn’t see what you are based on where you are now; he sees what you can become based on where he wants to take you. When we’re not connected to our God-given identities, we will plug in to other outlets to define ourselves. It’s our physical appearance and an attempt to remain beautiful and youthful. Many of us attempt to define ourselves by our possessions and monetary worth. We let money rule our lives and try to enjoy the fleeting moments of false security based on the number in our bank accounts or market portfolios.

“The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.” 1 Samuel 16:7

2. Dare To Be Different

In a world where people go out of their way to be difficult. Stand out! Be different. You can't make a difference if you aren't different. The goal of Christianity isn't to go to church and check a spiritual box. The goal of Christianity is to become like Jesus, to let Him transform us, and Daniel did that. He became different because he had exceptional qualities.

We will never make a mark in a culture until we allow God to put His exceptional qualities on the inside of us.

“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.” Daniel 1:8

You might give that rich food and wine to everybody else, but for me and my friends, we'd like to do it differently. We'd like to be on a diet of vegetables and water.

Daniel is putting in place something that will remind him and his three friends that whatever success or hardships might come their way in the future, God is still in control. Daniel proposes a before-and-after test. Give us 10 days on the vegetables and the water and see if, at the end of that 10 days, we don't look better than the other guys. After the end of 10 days, Daniel and his three friends were so vigorous and robust compared to those who were eating food from the table of the king, the chief official put the whole group on a diet of vegetables and water.

God is showing Daniel it is possible, even in exile - Even when your life is turned upside down and isn't going the way you wanted it to go - you can still please God. It's possible to be faithful in a faith-less culture.

Daniel takes a stand and puts a stake in the ground to say, “This diet will be a reminder to us that whatever comes our way...in spite of everything else being taken away from us...I believe God is still in control.”

God gave them supernatural ability because God was getting them in position for the rest of the book of Daniel. These young men had no idea that it's about to get worse. The gap between what Daniel believes and what Nebuchadnezzar believes is going to grow. There are going to be calls to bow down and worship Nebuchadnezzar or be thrown into a furnace if he doesn't. There is a den of lions if they don't stop praying. There are all kinds of things coming up that God is giving them the strength to handle before they even know it's happening.

Daniel would tell us today, “I have walked this journey. Do not quit on God for God has not quit on you.”

“You can change my name, change where I live, but you will not change my resolve. You may have changed everything about me, but I will serve God.” He always stayed in the service of the King of kings.

I dare you to not quit on God. I dare you to trust God, to live larger than lions, live what you say what you believe, to bow to God when the world bows to gold. I dare you to settle into God’s peace in the midst of unrelenting pressure. I dare you to stand for truth rather than bow to fear. I dare you to reject fear and deepen your faith. I dare you to live for something larger than yourself. I dare you to own your blame rather than blame God. I dare you to suffer for being Godly rather than foolish. I dare you to tell the truth about what you can and cannot control.

Next week in chapter 2 when asked to interpret the dream of Nebuchanezar Daniel will make a statement we all must repeat in the most pressured and disappointing moments of our lives, “*But there is a God in heaven...*” Daniel 2:28

In spite of what is happening on earth, there is a God in heaven. It will keep you stable when it looks like everything is coming to pieces. There is a God in heaven, and He rules in the affairs of men. God is in control! He is running the show.

3. Depend On God To Deliver

“At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food. So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead. 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. At the end of the time set by the king to bring them into his service, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king’s service.” Daniel 1:15-19

Being tested those ten days resulted in their situation being ten times better. Life is full of tests. Everything great is learned and earned through pain.

*“How gracious he will be when you cry for help! As soon as he hears, he will answer you. Although the Lord gives you the **bread of adversity** and the **water of affliction**, your teachers will be hidden no more; with your own eyes you will see them. Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you saying, “**This is the way; walk in it.**”* Isaiah 30:19-21

“In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.” 1 Peter 1:6-7

God tests us to refine us, not to punish us.

“I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. However, none of these things move me, neither do I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace.” Acts 20:23

“Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.” Romans 5:3-4

“Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.” Romans 12:12

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” James 1:2-4

“Test me, Lord, and try me, examine my heart and my mind.” Psalm 26:2

“Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” Psalm 139:23-24

“The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but the Lord tests the heart.” Proverbs 17:3

Courage often fuels our ability to endure tests and overcome obstacles. Courage is the condition of your heart that allows you to believe you’ll succeed without knowing how you’ll succeed. The English word courage evolved from *cour*, the Middle English word meaning “the heart,” the seat of one’s deepest feelings. This usage evolved from Old French, *corage*, and originally from the Latin word for “heart,” *cor*.

Our hearts are the battle ground between our trials and our convictions.