

A Study in Daniel 1

The Setting of Daniel: Faithfulness in the Day of Ruin

We begin our study of the book of Daniel, chapter 1, verse 1.

"In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, came Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, unto Jerusalem, and besieged it. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim, king of Judah, into his hand, and a part of the vessels of the house of God. And he carried them into the land of Shinar, to the house of his God, and he brought the vessels into the treasure house of his God."

"And the king spoke unto Ashpenaz, the chief of his eunuchs, that he should bring of the children of Israel, both of the royal seed and of the nobles, youths in whom there was no blemish, of a goodly countenance, and skilful in all wisdom, and acquainted with knowledge, and understanding science, and such as had ability in them to stand in the king's palace, and whom they might teach the learning and the language of the Chaldeans. And the king appointed unto them a daily provision of the king's delicate food, and of the wine that he drank, to nourish them there three years, that at the end thereof they might stand before the king."

"Now among these were of the children of Judah, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. And the prince of the eunuchs gave them names: to Daniel he gave the name Belteshazzar; and to Hananiah, Shadrach; and to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego."

"But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the king's delicate food, nor with the wine which he drank. And he requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself. And God granted Daniel favour and mercy before the prince of the eunuchs."

"And the prince of the eunuchs said unto Daniel, I fear my lord the king, who hath appointed your food and your drink. For why should he see your faces worse liking than the youths who are of your age? So would ye endanger my head with the king. And Daniel said to the steward whom the prince of the eunuchs had set over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, Prove thy servants, I beseech thee, ten days, and let them give us pulse to eat, and water to drink. Then let our countenances be looked upon before thee and the countenance of the youths that eat of the king's delicate food. And as thou seest, deal with thy servants."

"And he hearkened unto them in this matter, and proved them ten days. And at the end of ten days their countenances appeared fairer and fatter in flesh than all the youths that ate of the king's delicate food. So the steward took away their delicate food and the wine that they should drink, and gave them pulse."

"As for these four youths, God gave them knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom. And Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams. And at the end of the days that the king had said he should bring them in, the prince of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar. And the king spoke with them; and among them all was found none like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. And they stood before the king. And in all matters of judicious wisdom as to which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the scribes and magicians that were in all his realm. And Daniel continued even unto the first year of king Cyrus."

Where Daniel Falls in History

In this study we have been reading through history in order — from Genesis 1:1, through the creation and fall of man, the flood, the call of Abraham, the establishment of Israel as God's people, their deliverance from Egypt, their wanderings in the wilderness, their imperfect possession of the land, and the succession of kings from Saul to David and beyond. Daniel comes near the very end of that long line of kings, when Israel's condition had deteriorated to its worst.

A principle worth establishing at the outset is this: prophecy is occasioned by failure. When there is failure, God sends a prophet. A prophet is one who speaks on behalf of another — a mouthpiece. Daniel was such a one, speaking on behalf of God. And the very fact that the prophets arose is itself a testimony to Israel's failure in their responsibility before the Lord.

In Deuteronomy 28, before Israel had entered the land, God had laid out with great plainness both the blessings that would follow faithfulness and the curses that would follow disobedience. Fourteen verses of blessing. Then a much longer passage of cursing — including the warning of verse 49 that God would bring a nation from afar like an eagle, a nation whose tongue they did not understand, which would besiege them in all their gates. And verses 63 and 64 speak of being plucked from their land and scattered among all peoples to the ends of the earth. Every one of those words came to pass.

The Times of the Gentiles Begin

The last chapters of 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles mark the end of the history of man placed in responsibility before God through Israel. They mark the beginning of what Daniel himself will call the times of the Gentiles. Up to this point, the Lord had His throne established in Jerusalem, dealing with

the nations through His people. Now that arrangement comes to a close. Israel had failed in their responsibility, and the Lord takes it away. He commits government into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon — the first of the great Gentile powers to hold this position.

That times of the Gentiles does not change again until the Lord returns and sets up His kingdom. There is the period of Israel's responsibility, then the times of the Gentiles, then the Lord reigning in Jerusalem. That is the framework within which Daniel's prophecy unfolds.

And 2 Chronicles 36 records, in almost the very last verse of the historical books, that it was the word of Jehovah by the mouth of Jeremiah that was being accomplished when Cyrus made his decree — the same Cyrus who appears at the end of Daniel chapter 1. Jeremiah is the bridge between the historical books and the prophetic books. His ministry spans this entire period of Israel's final failure and the beginning of the captivity.

The Good Figs and the Bad Figs

Jeremiah 24 contains a vision the Lord gave to Jeremiah of two baskets of figs set before the temple. One basket had very good figs — the first ripe. The other had figs so bad they could not be eaten. And the Lord's explanation was this: Like these good figs, so will I regard for good those that are carried away captive from Judah. The captives — the ones taken to Babylon — were the good figs. And the bad figs? Zedekiah the king, his princes, and those who remained in Jerusalem and fought against Nebuchadnezzar.

This challenges what the natural mind would assume. Was Nebuchadnezzar not a wicked, idolatrous king? Was Israel not the Lord's people? Should they not have defended themselves? But Ezekiel records that it was the Lord who directed Nebuchadnezzar's steps toward Jerusalem — even though Nebuchadnezzar himself consulted his idols and divination to decide which way to march. The Lord was using that pagan king as the rod of His chastisement upon His own people, because He had warned them and warned them, and they had not turned.

Those who understood the Lord's ways were the good figs. They said: this is what God has appointed, and we will submit to it. They let themselves be taken captive. That is not weakness — that is obedience. And it is from that godly remnant that Daniel and his three companions come. Daniel did not emerge out of nowhere. He came out of that company of people who had submitted to the word of the Lord through His prophet and had done what God said.

Jeremiah's Final Warning — and the False Prophet Hananiah

It was not simply that Israel petered out and the Lord gave up on them. At the very end, He sent two prophets — Jeremiah and Ezekiel — to tell them to repent. Jeremiah 27 records the word of the Lord to King Zedekiah and to the surrounding kings who were urging him to resist Nebuchadnezzar: Now I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, my servant. It shall come to pass that the nation which will not put their neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon, that nation I will visit with the sword, with famine, and with pestilence.

The Lord told Zedekiah precisely what would happen to him if he obeyed or if he disobeyed. He saw Nebuchadnezzar face to face — Nebuchadnezzar killed Zedekiah's sons before his eyes, then put Zedekiah's eyes out, and he died in prison in Babylon. Jeremiah had told him he would see Nebuchadnezzar with his own eyes, be taken captive, and die there without seeing it. Both things were true: he saw Nebuchadnezzar, and then he was blinded. Everything came to pass exactly as the prophet said.

And there was also a false prophet in Jeremiah's own day — Hananiah — who stood before the people in Jeremiah 28 and said, Thus saith Jehovah of hosts: I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two full years I will bring again the vessels of the Lord's house. He even took the wooden yoke from Jeremiah's neck and broke it as a sign. Jeremiah's answer was simple: In two years we will see whether your word is from the Lord or not. Hananiah died before the two years were up. The Lord took care of it. He did not need to be stoned. The Lord ensured that the false prophet got justice.

Why did so many listen to Hananiah instead of Jeremiah? Because Hananiah told them what they wanted to hear. They wanted to stay in their land, in their city, with their self-determination. It was their will they were doing. And false prophets in every age tell people what they want to hear. There are false prophets in our day too. We need discernment, a close walk with the Lord, and the indwelling Spirit to show us what is true and what is false. There is no substitute for knowing the Lord and knowing His ways.

Daniel — The Good Fig in Babylon

Daniel was a captive. He was a prisoner of the most powerful ruler on earth. He spent nearly all of his adult life as a prisoner. And yet he was exactly where the Lord wanted him. The same was true of Jeremiah — thrown into prison by his own countrymen, in Jerusalem while the captivity was happening in Babylon, and yet in the Lord's will. The faithful suffer right along with the unfaithful. They do not remove themselves from the circumstances God has appointed. Daniel did not flee to Egypt or try to find some easier place. He submitted, and the Lord was with him in Babylon.

And from that place of submission, the Lord brought out things of extraordinary value. The prophecies that came through Daniel being in Babylon are among the most remarkable in all of Scripture. That is

what the Lord had for him — and it started with obedience. Not with spectacular gifts or prominent position, but with a young man purposing in his heart that he would not defile himself with the king's food. A quiet, personal decision of conscience, made at the very beginning. The Lord saw it, and the Lord honored it.

The king's food had been offered to idols — that is why Daniel would not eat it. He was not a picky eater. He had a conscience toward God, and he acted on it. And the Lord put a fence around him: the prince of the eunuchs, who could easily have had him removed or punished, found himself unable to do anything but like Daniel. The Lord made him noticed. The Lord gave him and his companions wisdom that exceeded all the magicians and scribes of Babylon by ten times. It does not happen without obedience. It always starts there.

A Day of Ruin — and What Faithfulness Looks Like in It

What kind of day do we live in with respect to the assembly of God? It is not like Joshua's day, when the people were entering the land in their strength. It is like Jeremiah and Daniel's day — a day of ruin. The testimony of the Lord on earth has been broken. It is like a pot that is shattered, as Jeremiah says, and it cannot be put back together again on its own. The unity of the body of Christ as an outward testimony will not be restored as it was in the days of the apostles.

But we can be a Jeremiah. We can be a Daniel. It starts in the same place — submitting to the Lord, understanding His ways, walking in obedience to Him even when the ruin is all around us and the vast bulk of those who call themselves the Lord's people are going another way. The faithful do not pull themselves aloof and say, we have heard the prophet, so we are going off to some safer place. They are in the midst of it, bearing witness, walking faithfully, submitting to what the Lord has appointed. And the Lord takes pleasure in that. He is with them in it. And from that place of faithfulness in the ruins, He brings out things of lasting worth.

Lord willing, we will take up the details of Daniel chapter 1 next time.