

Mission in a Pagan Land: Daniel and Company



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Daniel 1–3, 6.*

Memory Text: “But 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, NIV*).

Key Thought: The accounts of Daniel and his companions in Babylon offer us insights into faithfulness and mission that remain relevant even after twenty-six hundred years.

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose” (*Rom. 8:28*).

In the darkest of circumstances, when things seem to be going totally wrong, we can comfort ourselves that in the end all things will work together for good. Not that all things are good but only that, with God, they can work together for good. We are not guaranteed it will be the way we want it; and we may never witness the good that does finally result. But the promise remains.

This week we will focus on God turning bad into good in the experience of four young Jewish men who, through no fault of their own, were exiled to a foreign country. Yet, because of their unwavering commitment, God was able to use them as witnesses for His purposes and power. Through various ordeals, such as a fiery furnace and a den of lions, God not only displayed His care for Daniel and his friends, but He demonstrated His power before pagans who knew only their idols. Who but God knows the eternal results of the faithfulness displayed by these young Hebrews?

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 13.*

A Spiritual Foundation

Most of us know the basic story of Daniel and his friends, who were taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, about six hundred years before Christ. Through their faithfulness, God used these young men to further His plans and mission in Babylon, the world's most powerful nation at the time. Yet, to a large extent the stories of Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah are a tribute to the faithful training by their parents.

Jewish families were not to take lightly the duty of instructing their children. Much of this took place through storytelling, an important part of family life. Parents were to tell and retell the stories of God's leading in the history of their nation. Children were to learn how following God's commandments leads to life, while disregarding them leads to death.

Read Deuteronomy 6:6, 7 (*see also Deut. 4:9*). **What spiritual principle is found here that is important, not just for children but for all of us? In what ways is daily, personal devotions a means of applying this principle in our own lives?**

The parents of Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah could not have predicted what would happen to their children. But through faithful, daily religious instruction, they provided a strong spiritual foundation for the rest of their lives. How important that parents seek to do the same for their own children today. At the same time, the constant dwelling upon God, the constant recounting of the miracles, the goodness, and the love of God can be as much a benefit to the parents as to the children. Even for those who do not have children or for those whose children are gone, how important to keep the reality, goodness, and power of God before us at all times. After all, how can we share with others what we, ourselves, have not experienced?

How consistent are you in your personal devotions? How can they help strengthen faith and make us better witnesses?

The Early Tests

Immediately after the boys arrived in Babylon, it was clear that Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah would face many temptations and negative influences.

Read Daniel 1:4. Where does the first potential attack on their faith occur? Why could it be so deadly?

It is all too true that what we read, what we are exposed to, cannot help influencing our thoughts. Perhaps for the first time in their lives, these young men were exposed to literature that espoused values and beliefs opposed to what they had been taught. In Babylonian literature they were confronted with astrology, false gods, and myths of various descriptions. The battle for their minds, and hence their souls, had begun (*see Phil. 4:8*). And it was a battle for their bodies, as well, which, as modern science has aptly shown, is linked intimately with our minds.

Read Daniel 1:8. What key word there shows why Daniel and his friends (*see vs. 12–14*) did not want to partake of the king's food?

The key word is *defile*, which in Hebrew means just that, to “pollute, defile.” Thus, for these young men, the issue was not just healthful living or a mere preference. It was a moral issue.

What kind of excuses could they have made to themselves to justify eating the food?

From the beginning of their time in Babylon, the four young men resolved to stand for principle, no matter what the cost. It set the pattern for the rest of their time in Babylon, where more than once they were tested for their faith. Through their faithfulness, they bore a strong witness to the God of heaven.

It is a human tendency to make excuses for bad choices or wrong behavior. In what areas of your life do you rationalize what you do? What steps can you take to deal with this spiritually dangerous tendency?

No Compromise

The biblical story clearly shows God's involvement in the lives of the Babylonians—interacting with King Nebuchadnezzar and later with King Cyrus. He is portrayed as the God not only of the children of Israel but of all nations.

Read Isaiah 56:1–8. Think of the time when it was written. What is the crucial point made there?

Read Daniel 1:6, 7. What is going on here? What reasons did their captors have for doing this?

The meaning of names was important to Jewish families, and children were named carefully. The names Daniel (God is my Judge), Hananiah (God has favored), Mishael (who is what God is), and Azariah (Jehovah has helped) reflect the high priority the parents placed on their children's spiritual lives.

Nebuchadnezzar's top official, Ashpenaz, gives the four young Jewish men new Babylonian names—Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—which were mainly tributes to Babylonian gods.

But that is the closest these four men would get to idolatry, names over which they had no choice but to go by. Under God's blessing they soon moved into prominent positions in the court and government of Babylon.

After their period of preparation, Ashpenaz presents the four young men to the king. The king talks with them and “found none equal” to them (*Dan. 1:19, NIV*). “In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom” (*vs. 20, NIV*).

What a tremendous testimony to what God could do through four faithful young men. Taken from obscurity in Jerusalem to the court of the most powerful person in the world, they rose to the occasion and stood before the king as witnesses to the power of God.

Why was it acceptable for the four Jewish young men to take pagan names but not acceptable for them to eat pagan food? How do we draw the line in our own lives between what are merely cultural issues and what are moral or religious ones? Be prepared to discuss your answer in class.

Interpreter of Dreams

Daniel and his companions had made it to the highest levels of the court in Babylon, the greatest empire in the world at that time. However, as in most of the courts of power, perils awaited them.

Read Daniel 2:1–13 and answer the following questions:

1 How were the wise men trying to fool the king?

2 How did the king ensure that their tricks would be of no avail?

3 What words of the wise men revealed the impossibility of what the king asked? Why would those words later help witness to the power of God?

God had earlier given Daniel the gift of interpreting dreams and visions (*Dan. 1:17*), but Daniel was not going to be presumptuous and take anything for granted. He gathered together his three friends and urged them to pray (*Dan. 2:18*), for clearly without divine intervention they were going to meet the same fate as the charlatans and frauds in the king's court.

Read Daniel's prayer of thanksgiving (*Dan. 2:20–23*). What is the essence of his prayer? What hope and encouragement can you take from it for yourself, whatever situation you are facing?

Most of us know the rest of the story (if not, then read the chapter). Think about what it meant for the monarch of the greatest empire in the world to bow down and worship a foreign captive in his court (*vss. 46–48*)! The king was obviously impressed, no matter how much more he had to learn.

Through Daniel, then, God spares the lives of the wise men throughout Babylon, leads a pagan king to at least the beginnings of belief in the true God, and advances Daniel and his friends to positions of authority, where they can be greater witnesses for Him.

Two Life-or-Death Tests

Two more major tests give Daniel and his three friends opportunity to witness to the true God in a public and influential way.

As much as your time allows, read through Daniel 3 and the test of faith the three Hebrew boys faced there.

Read Daniel 3:16–18. What is the essence of what they were saying? How is the principle still important for all believers today? *See also Matt. 10:28.*

Read Daniel 3:28–30 to see just how impressed the king was regarding what he had seen. Though the king still had a lot to learn, through the faithfulness of these young men, a powerful witness for the living God was spread through the pagan world.

Again, as much as your time allows, read through the story of Daniel in the lions' den (*Daniel 6*), another test of faith but now in a new kingdom.

What evidence can you find in the chapter that shows that the king already knew something about the power of Daniel's God?

What kind of testimony does Darius give about Daniel's God? How accurate a testimony is it? What does this show about what God can reveal to pagans about His power and wisdom without the Written Word?

Imagine if in both stories these Jews would have compromised to save their own lives. Again, how easy in both situations it would have been to rationalize doing the easy thing. Instead, they remained faithful, and as a result, they helped spread a knowledge of the true God.

In the past, have you sought the easy way out and compromised what you knew was right? How did you feel? How can you fortify yourself in faith so that whenever the next test comes, you do what you know is right?

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “In the Court of Babylon,” pp. 479–490; “Nebuchadnezzar’s Dream,” pp. 491–502; and “The Fiery Furnace,” pp. 503–513, in *Prophets and Kings*.

“As God called Daniel to witness for Him in Babylon, so He calls us to be His witnesses in the world today. In the smallest as well as the largest affairs of life, He desires us to reveal to men the principles of His kingdom. Many are waiting for some great work to be brought to them, while daily they lose opportunities for revealing faithfulness to God. Daily they fail of discharging with wholeheartedness the little duties of life. While they wait for some large work in which they may exercise supposedly great talents, and thus satisfy their ambitious longings, their days pass away.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 487, 488.

“The tidings of their wonderful deliverance were carried to many countries by the representatives of the different nations that had been invited by Nebuchadnezzar to the dedication. Through the faithfulness of His children, God was glorified in all the earth.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 512.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ As a class, talk about your answers to the question at the end of Tuesday’s lesson.
- ❷ The stories in Daniel are powerful lessons of how, by staying faithful to God in trying circumstances, these men were able to witness to others about the Lord. At the same time, how many of us have heard stories of folk doing crazy things in the name of God, even to the point of losing their lives? When faced with a difficult situation, how can we know whether we should stand firm or whether we could be a more effective witness for God by showing our willingness to compromise with the given situation?
- ❸ For every Daniel in the lions’ den story, there is a story of John the Baptist. How are we to understand these different endings?

Summary: The book of Daniel describes the experience of four young men who, in the face of massive challenges to their faith, remain true to principle and to their God. Their faithfulness is a dramatic witness not only to the people and rulers of Babylon but also to people of surrounding nations.

Terrorist Meets the Savior

by VASANTHAKUMAR VETHAMUTHU

I was a political activist in my village in India. I worked for justice and fair treatment for the poor of the community. But some politicians didn't like me and wanted me out of their way. So, when a clash between two groups in the community resulted in the death of several people, I was accused of inciting the riot. I had nothing to do with it, but some politicians called me a terrorist and had me put into jail. The judge, however, saw the injustice and gave me probation. However, the accusation made me an outcast in my own village and among the people I had sought to help.

My own church disfellowshipped me, so I decided to build my own church on land at the edge of the village where my family and I could worship. As I was building the church, I met an Adventist pastor. When he learned why I was building a church, he said, "That's a good idea. But since you are building a new church, why not make it a true Bible-believing church, an Adventist church?"

I was intrigued and listened to this man explain the Sabbath, the state of the dead, and other basic Bible doctrines I didn't know. I agreed to make my church a Sabbath keeping church. I helped the pastor hold evangelistic meetings in the area, though some of my political enemies accused me of political activism again, and we had to stop the meetings.

After explaining our position to the police, they finally allowed the meetings to continue. The pastor focused his talks on God's love, salvation, and general topics, but in our private studies, he challenged me to study the Bible to understand the Sabbath and other important doctrines. I did, and I realized they all were true. I began telling people about the Sabbath. I knew that the Christians in the village would not accept it, so I told my idol worshiping friends and invited them to come to meetings in the half-finished church.

Following the pastor's meetings, 35 people were baptized, including my wife, my father, and me. The new church members and even some non-Adventist believers worked to finish the new church. Some two hundred people came to the dedication, including some political officials. It was a grand day for the entire village.

I have given up my political activity and now work for Christ. I am driven by the love of God rather than social justice. Now I work as a lay evangelist in my area, helping the pastor and going from village to village to teach people about Christ. We now have congregations in eight nearby villages. Your Thirteenth Sabbath offerings provided two of these congregations with simple chapels. Thank you for your gifts to God that support God's work in India.

VASANTHAKUMAR VETHAMUTHU is a lay evangelist in India.