

Daniel 1.1–21

Stand up!

Amington (Online)

Sunday 17 January 2021

Daniel: Faithful in Exile (1)

Intro

I listen to a podcast called ‘You’re Dead To Me’, about people from history. The presenter begins with a segment called, ‘What do you know’, where he tries to guess what we, the listeners, might know about the person featured in that episode. I wonder – what do you know about Daniel?

- I imagine all of us would say something about a lions’ den – although do you know *why* Daniel was put in the lions’ den?
- Daniel had three friends: Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, better known as Shadrach, Mesach, and Abednego, who were thrown into the fiery furnace.
- You may know Daniel as the *other* person in the Bible famous for interpreting dreams – the first being Joseph. Daniel interprets dreams for his king: Nebuchadnezzar.

- Finally, most of you will know the phrase, ‘The writing’s on the wall’ – but did you know it comes from Daniel who is called on to interpret some *actual* writing on an *actual* wall?

In around 600BC Jerusalem and the Southern Kingdom of Judah had been conquered by Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian armies. God’s Temple had been ransacked and its treasures carried off to be stored in the temple in Babylon (1-2).

The important people and ruling classes – which included Daniel (3) – were separated and shipped off to live across the Babylonian empire. This was quite common in those days, to stop rebellions.

The prophets had been warning God’s people for centuries that this would happen, because the people had been turning away from God and worshipping idols. They didn’t listen – and so eventually God punished them by giving them what they wanted: he shipped them off to serve their foreign gods in a foreign land.

To those in exile it looked and felt as if God had abandoned his people. But as we shall see in the book of Daniel, that was far from the truth. God would rescue them one day – the exile was **God’s will for now, but not forever**¹ – and in the meantime he would be at work in and through those who stayed **faithful in exile**.

A New Start (1-7)

An iPhone and a firework were arrested on New Year's Eve. One was charged and the other was let off.

At the beginning of the year, I made a resolution to lose 15 pounds. Only 20 more to go...

For me the New Year so far has felt less like a new start, and more like that line from *The Who* **meet the new boss, same as the old boss**. We are still unable to meet our families and friends, still unable to meet together for worship services, still unable to live our lives as we wish. We are facing some of the same things that Daniel did, only we are stuck in our homes, whereas he was taken away from his.

And actually what he faced was much, much worse. Along with other young men, he was forced to learn the Babylonian language and read Babylonian literature, forced to eat Babylonian food, even forced to use a Babylonian name (4-7).

We call that: brainwashing. Over three years these young men were to be so assimilated into Babylonian culture and life that they would forget their home and be good and loyal and faithful servants of their new Babylonian masters.

Verses 1-7 go from bad to worse: they begin with Israel's national and religious defeat (1), humiliation (2), and then assimilation. The best of the ruling classes, who might form the resistance or even a rebellion, were exiled and forced to serve a new king.

As new starts go, this ain't a good 'un.

But...

One of the most important words in the Bible is 'but'. It's a little word but it usually marks an important shift in what's going on. We have one of them here, in Daniel 1.8: **but Daniel resolved not to defile himself**. Like we often do at a New Start or a New Year, he made a New Resolution.

A New Resolution (8-16)

I thought I got lost on New Year's Eve this year, *but* then I found the Auld Lang sign.

Some astronauts wanted to have a New Year's party on the moon, *but* they didn't planet in time.

Let's hear what happened next to Daniel:

Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself in this way. Now God had caused the official to show favour and compassion to Daniel, but he said, 'I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men of your age? The king would have my head!'

So Daniel said to his guard, 'Please test your servants for ten days: give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food.' He agreed to this and tested them for ten days.

At the end of 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.

Daniel 1.8-16 (NIV, abridged)

A diet of only vegetables and water... shudder. I'm not sure which I'd find harder to give up completely: meat or wine!

Why did Daniel make his stand here? Eating meat and drinking wine was not forbidden by God – in fact it's commanded. Perhaps it was to do with not eating pork (which *was* forbidden), or not eating meat sacrificed to idols in Babylonian temples? Maybe in part, but that doesn't explain the wine.

I think it was like fasting, having a daily reminder that they were different, that they didn't belong to the Babylonians, that they were *God's* people. It was a way of holding onto their true identity, even while their masters tried to brainwash them. It would have been easier to give in completely, but they wanted to stay faithful in exile, and not lose sight who they really were.

I read this and I wonder, what would I have done? Would I have made the same resolution as Daniel? Would I have had the courage to stand up for my faith, amid such pressure to conform?

And yet, friends we face a similar pressure to confirm today, in this country. We don't have the threat of punishment by death hanging over us, but in many ways our culture *is* brainwashing us. Maybe it already has! We see and hear a constant drip drip drip of ideas about identity, about desire, about sex, about what's right and wrong, which are not godly, which do not come from God – and yet we accept them as if they are gospel truth.

We even reject the Bible when it warns us that we are turning away from God – the exact same thing that God’s people have always done, the exact thing which led to them being exiled in Daniel.

But Daniel was different: he made a stand, found a way of holding onto his identity in God in the face of Babylonian culture.

How can we, how can *you*, hold on to your identity in Christ? How can you remind yourself every day of who you are, to help you stand up instead of giving in? I’m not going to answer that – it’s for you to think about this week.

A New Hope (17-21)

A retired man volunteered to entertain patients in hospitals and nursing homes. He went to one place with his portable keyboard. He told some jokes and sang some songs at patients’ bedsides. When he finished he said, in farewell, ‘I hope you get better.’

One elderly gentleman replied, ‘I hope you get better, too.’

After three years of this, Daniel and his friends ended up the best in the kingdom, **ten times better** in **wisdom** and **understanding** than the rest (20). And what I love, is that had nothing to do with the training they receiving from their Babylonian masters:

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.

Daniel 1.17 (NIV)

God honoured their courage, their faithfulness. When Daniel stood up for God, he found he wasn't on sinking sand but on solid ground. The Babylonians thought they were brainwashing these Jewish leaders – but actually *God* was preparing them for a life at the heart of the government of his people's enemies.

Who's in charge? Nebuchadnezzar? No. Even in the very heart of Babylon, God was at work through his faithful servants.

Verse 21 ends this chapter with dynamite: **and Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.**

Cyrus was not Babylonian but *Persian*, he conquered those who had conquered and humiliated Israel: **mighty Babylon has fallen but God's servant continues;**² God's servant **Daniel remained;** Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar did not.

This is a warning to God's enemies, and an encouragement to God's people.

This is the new hope contained in Daniel: **the servants of God will simply out-endure the kingdoms of this age.**³ **The nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain**, it says in Psalm 2.1.

And so God calls *his* people to **faithful endurance**.

That's why this series is called 'faithful *in* exile'. It's not about escape or insurrection – it's about being faithful *in* exile, living faithful lives *in* the world, holding onto our identity as God's children *in* the face of temptation and pressure to conform.

Daniel had the courage to stand up, to hold on to who he was in God. How can we, how can *you* do the same? How can *you* remind yourself of who you are in Jesus, every day, so we can stay faithful to God, rather than giving in to the world's way.

Daniel resolved not to defile himself (7)... and **Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus** (21).

May we stand up, may we be faithful, and may we endure.

¹ Dale Ralph Davis, *The Message of Daniel* (London: IVP, 2013), 48.

² Davis, *Daniel*, 36.

³ Davis, *Daniel*, 37.