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Setting the scene

The historical background

Long ago God chose one man—Abraham—and promised that through him and his seed all the families of the earth would be blessed.

The one man became a family, and the family became a nation. At last the nation went down to Egypt, where it remained for four hundred years.

Then it came out. You will have heard of the plagues, and the Passover, and the coming through the Red Sea. For forty years the nation, led by Moses, wandered in the wilderness, where it received God's law and instructions concerning the tabernacle, sacrifices and priesthood. When the wilderness wanderings were over, the nation came into the promised land, under the leadership of Joshua. Before he died the land had been largely conquered and divided among the twelve tribes.

This was followed by the period of the judges—men whom

God raised up to deliver the nation from successive conquerors. Then came the period of the kings. The first king was Saul, who was followed in turn by David, Solomon and Rehoboam. All of these ruled over a united kingdom of twelve tribes.

Shortly after Rehoboam's reign began, the nation split into two. In the north was the kingdom of Israel (or Ephraim), and in the south the kingdom of Judah. The northern kingdom was composed of ten tribes and its capital was Samaria. The southern kingdom was composed of two tribes and its capital was Jerusalem. At first the two kingdoms were enemies. This was followed by a period of friendship, but eventually they were sworn enemies once more.

There were a number of different dynasties in the north, but no godly monarch ever sat on its throne. At last God moved to judge the nation, against whose apostasy He had often spoken by His prophets. The armies of mighty Assyria swept in from the north, and in 722 BC Samaria fell. The ten tribes of Israel were taken into captivity and disappeared from the face of the earth.

The southern kingdom continued for a further one hundred years. All its kings were of one dynasty and were descendants of David. The nation's life was one of increasing apostasy, and yet some of the kings were truly godly, and there were several periods of widespread spiritual awakening. In 609 BC Jehoiakim mounted the throne. His reign did nothing to arrest the prevailing idolatry and immorality, but rather increased it. The prophets warned that unless there was repentance there would be judgement, but their warnings went unheeded.

Over the horizon, in 605 BC, came Nebuchadnezzar. Over the next twenty-three years, in four successive stages, he

transported almost all the people of Judah to his native Babylon. By the rivers of Babylon they sat down and wept when they remembered Zion, and asked how they could sing the Lord's song in a strange land (Psalm 137:1, 4).

The nation had turned a deaf ear to the warnings of God, and was now being left to the mercy of its enemies. However, within the apostate nation there remained a very small number of individuals who continued to be true to God, just as the prophets had predicted. This tiny remnant loved Him, and lived to please Him, even in distant Babylon. Such a remnant existed throughout the seventy years of exile. It is true that the nation as a whole wept idolatry out of its system. But loving allegiance to Jehovah was never the experience of more than a few. After the exile the remnant became smaller and smaller. The time came when it consisted (as far as we know) of no more than Zacharias and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, Simeon and Anna, and a handful of shepherds. Nobody else in Judea was ready to welcome Abraham's promised Seed into the world. Nobody else recognized the Light who had come to lighten the Gentiles, the Glory of God's people, Israel.

In the days of the Babylonian exile this remnant was represented by Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah (Daniel 1:6). Just four candles, and a few more, shone in the godless darkness of those times. Only a handful of lives remained true to God. At a time when nobody else cared, God and His Word continued to matter to this small group.

God is not much interested in numbers, but He is insistent that He will never leave Himself without witnesses. True religion continues uninterrupted in the world, but its adherents are seldom numbered in more than handfuls. In Babylon God

was content that His true Israel should be whittled down to single figures. The first six chapters of Daniel tell us how this little remnant remained true to God in a hostile environment.

The main lesson

The previous sentence brings us to the main lesson of this book. Daniel tells us how to remain true to God in a hostile environment. It shows us how to live for Him when everything is against us. From its pages we learn how to sing the Lord's song in a strange land. Daniel and his three companions managed it. So can we.

It is possible for a person to live for God when there is nothing on his side. Noah, Abraham, Moses and David were all godly men, yet God's Word records that each of them fell, at some time, into a serious fault. Each of them has at least one blemish on his character, and some of them more than one. The Bible does not whitewash its leading characters, or pretend that they were something other than what they really were. But the same book does not record any blemish in the life of Daniel. Spirituality and integrity of character do not require ideal conditions in which to develop. They are not plants that thrive in the protection of the greenhouse, but grow best when exposed to snow, wind and hail, to drought and burning sun.

Think of it! A fourteen-year-old boy (that is all he was) was taken from his home, family and friends, and forcibly marched to a strange land. There he was subjected to a powerful and subtle form of indoctrination, which we shall read about shortly. In later years he was surrounded by jealous enemies who plotted against his life. At no time was he free from the temptation to pursue material prosperity and personal advancement at the expense of everything else. He was surrounded by evil in youth,

middle years and old age. There is hardly a temptation known to any of us that he did not have to face. And yet the Scriptures do not record a single blemish in his character! He purposed in his heart to please God, and never moved from that resolve. It is possible to live for God in a hostile world. Godliness can, and does thrive where there are no ideal circumstances.

Very few (if any) of us have faced the difficulties that Daniel faced. When we think of difficulties, we usually think only of our own. We persuade ourselves that everyone else has it easy, and that we would make more spiritual progress if we were in some other situation. The factory worker thinks that it is easier to live the Christian life in the office, while the office worker is convinced that it is easier to be a Christian housewife at home. The housewife is not aware of the difficulties of living for Christ at school, and the school student looks forward to the day when he will face the comparatively easier challenge of the factory floor. And so the circle goes on. We each imagine that nobody has difficulties as great as our own. We excuse our poor standard of Christian living by pointing to the circumstances in which we are found. The book of Daniel exposes us completely. It proves that true spirituality never depended upon things being easy.

What was Daniel's secret?

It is simple. Before he interpreted Nebuchadnezzar's dream, what did he do? He prayed (2:17-19). When he was plotted against, and then thrown into a den of lions, what was he doing? He was praying (6:10). What is chapter 9 about? It is Daniel at prayer. He was a man of prayer. A proper prayer life is half the secret of remaining true to God in a hostile world.

The other half of the secret is just as simple. In 9:2 we shall

read of Daniel examining 'books' and understanding them. What books were those? They were the prophetic books of the Old Testament that had been written by that date. In 9:11 and 9:13 we shall read of him referring to 'the law of Moses'. Daniel read, and knew his Bible. His secret is easy to define, even if not always easy to implement. He stood firm for God in a hostile world because he read his Bible and said his prayers!

These undramatic disciplines need stressing today. It is often thought that the secret of Christian living lies in our having some new and exceptional experience of God. Different terms are used by different people, but the idea is usually very much the same. It is taught that a new experience of God will lead me on to a higher plane than where I am now living. If I can only have this new experience I will never be the same again. All my energies must be devoted to seeking entry to this higher life, and I must not rest until the new experience that I seek is truly mine.

Daniel had wonderful experiences of the Lord, but he did not seek them. He sought God *for His own sake* and not for what He might do for him. He enjoyed being with Him, discerning His will from His Word, and communing with Him in prayer. We underline it again. His secret was too simple to miss: he read his Bible and said his prayers.

This, too, was the secret of the early Christian martyrs, the persecuted Reformers and their children, and the zealous and evangelizing Methodists. This was the secret of the great pioneering missionaries of the last century. They were well aware that 'the people that do know their God shall be strong, and do exploits' (11:32). Like Daniel, they lived in two worlds. Like Daniel, they often saw *that* world intervening in the affairs

of this one. They became God's friends, and 'greatly beloved' (10:19) in heaven. That was their secret!

Knowing this, let us now study the book of Daniel, and learn, in our turn, how to stand alone.