



INTRODUCTION


I've always loved puppet shows. If you've ever seen a good one, you know what it's like—the puppets seem to have a life all their own. It's *so* fun!

The book of Daniel is like a puppet show where God is the puppeteer. This puppet show, however, is very sad.

You see, for centuries God warned His people, Israel, that judgment was coming for their sin. But did they listen? Not at all!

So, God took the strings of a "puppet" country called Babylon. He allowed the evil Babylonians to steal God's people from their homes in Jerusalem. As a result, most Israelites soon lived in Babylon, far from what they knew as "home," both in location and morality.

The situation seemed hopeless for Israel. Babylonians were known for their evil ways. They wanted nothing to do with God and treated His people horribly.



But God had plans to strengthen Israel, even in the middle of one of their most embarrassing moments.

This is where Daniel comes in.

Daniel was just a teenage boy when his family left for Babylon. But, God blessed him with extraordinary wisdom. As you'll soon read, he quickly became one of the most important men in Babylon, even though he was from Israel. He won the respect of the leaders and was the person God spoke to the most during this period of time.

Most of all, Daniel gave the people of Israel hope that God had not left them and that faithfulness was still worth it.

Today we need Daniel more than ever. While we aren't in the same situation as the Israelites, we still face the values of Babylon every day. Daniel helps us know what following God looks like when most of the world does not believe in Him. In fact, according to most researchers, the number of evangelical Christians is less than 10% worldwide! So, whether you feel it yet or not, it's going to take a lot of wisdom to follow Jesus for the rest of your life!

Daniel helps our faith grow as we see that God is in control of all things, even when life feels crazy. He is the puppeteer of His creation. He is in charge of all kings and kingdoms. He raises up those who honor Him and humbles those who think too highly of their own power.

Most of all, Daniel points us to Jesus, who will finally and fully defeat all evil and bring His people to their eternal, forever home.

FAR FROM HOME

Daniel 1

If only everyone had been paying attention, the book of Daniel might have never happened. But it did. And even though it's a tragedy of sorts, it's good because God was at work.

You see, for years, prophets (like Isaiah and Jeremiah) warned people that God wouldn't put up with their sinful ways much longer. Eventually, out of love for Israel (another name for God's people), He used another country to discipline them.

That country was known as Babylon.

Here's how it happened...

In the year 605 BC, a man named Jehoiakim was the king of Israel. However, he only led for two years because, during his third year, God sent the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar (pronounced Neb-ah-kahd-nez-er), to capture Israel and take them far from home.

That's right! The book of Daniel is about one BIG kidnapping, which is also known as "exile."

Nebuchadnezzar took thousands of Israelites back to Babylon. God's people went from the Promised Land, where they enjoyed the protection of God, to a land far, far away. In Babylon, God was the last thing on anyone's mind. What a sad, sad turn of events!

It wasn't long until Nebuchadnezzar met the royal family of Israel. He grew especially interested in the smartest and brightest of the children.

You see, Nebuchadnezzar wanted these children to learn the language of the Babylonians. He tried to teach them all about their new home. He even gave them super-yummy food to eat!

After three years of learning, the most promising Israelite children went to work for the king. Among these children were Azariah, Mishael, Hananiah, and Daniel.

But these would not be their names for much longer. Nebuchadnezzar's assistants changed their names from Israelite to Babylonian names. This was no small matter. In fact, it was a way for Nebuchadnezzar to remove some of their identity as the people of God. They'd already lost their homes and familiar friends and places. Now, they'd lost the one thing they'd had since birth!

Their new names were: Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, and Daniel was known as Belteshazzar (for our purposes, though, we'll keep calling Daniel by his birth name).

These names may sound very unusual, but they were music to Nebuchadnezzar's ears. Each name was an insult to the One True God, or a celebration of one of his pretend gods.

Daniel, though, would not play Nebuchadnezzar's foolish games. When the king wanted the boys to eat and drink mouth-watering Babylonian food and wine, Daniel knew he wasn't honoring God.

So, Daniel asked one of the king's helpers to bring him different food. But the helper refused, saying, "I'm not so sure about that. If you don't eat the king's rich, savory food, your health will suffer. It will become obvious to everyone that you've disobeyed the king."

Daniel replied, "Let's put this to the test. For ten days, give us only vegetables and water. Then, see how we look next to the other children who eat the rich, savory food of the king."

This was quite a risky request! How would a bunch of lettuce-eaters look compared to those who ate extravagant meals after a week and a half?





But you should know that this story is about much more than what Daniel ate. In fact, this is how the whole book of Daniel goes:

1. Daniel faces a challenge.
2. Daniel honors God.
3. God prepares Daniel for an even greater challenge.

As you'll see in a few chapters, this vegetable diet was only the beginning of Daniel's problems.

Miraculously, after ten days, Daniel and his friends were healthier and stronger than the children who ate the rich, savory food. God had clearly protected and strengthened them!

The four boys grew in wisdom and knowledge as they lived in the king's palace. God honored their faithfulness. Daniel even gained the ability to understand dreams (this skill will become quite useful in just a few pages)!

Nebuchadnezzar called Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to his chambers at the end of their three years of learning.

"When it comes to wisdom and understanding, there is not a single person in all my kingdom who's like these four boys," the king declared.

And so, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were given places of honor in Babylon. They worked for the king and lived in his palace.

But would they stay faithful to God? Day after day, they were now far from home in a land that seemed ready to shake their faith at every turn in the road.

Kaleidoscope Corner

The Name Game

In this first chapter of Daniel, our friends receive a name change from King Nebuchadnezzar. This was a BIG deal because it was about a lot more than just a name. The king was trying to slowly mold his star students into the ways of the Babylonians.

Here's what their names meant before and after the change. Notice that some of the names had more than one meaning.

Daniel, which means "God is my judge," became Belteshazzar, which means "O Lady (another name for the wife of the Babylonian god Bel), protect the king!"

Hananiah, which means "Yahweh is gracious," became Shadrach, which means "I am very fearful (of God)" or "The command of Aku (the Babylonian moon god)."

Misrael, which means "Who is what God is?" became Meshach, which means "I am of little account" or "Who is like (the Babylonian god) Aku?"

Azariah, which means "Yahweh is a helper," became Abednego, which means "The servant of the shining one (the Babylonian god Nebo)."

Of course, these new names meant very little in the long run. God knew each of these boys by name. In fact, the most important name they had was "child of God."