

RESOLVED TO FOLLOW, DANIEL 1

Discovering the Sovereign God

◆**Intro:** One lady recalls, “when I was 22, I was in a serious car accident, and my boyfriend was killed. I have gone through a lot of surgery and am now doing well. When that happened, I lost my faith.” Elie Wiesel, survivor of Auschwitz, Professor of Humanities at Boston University, and prolific writer on the Holocaust seemed to lose his Jewish faith on account of the atrocities of WW2. While in Auschwitz, Wiesel was torn from his mother and sisters and forced to watch his father get beaten to death by Nazi guards. And in 605 BC the most powerful army of ancient history invaded Jerusalem and dragged Daniel and many other Jews 900 miles to Babylon. Babylonians were known for their cruelty. They were known to pierce a large hook through the chin and jaw of a captive and drag them off by it. Those were dark times. The pressure to abandon faith in God was high. Have hardships ever made you wonder if it really pays to follow God? On that question, Daniel stands like a welcome road sign in the wilderness telling us...

◆**1. Even in my darkest times, God’s still got me.**

Everything about Daniel’s circumstance is pushing him toward the loss of his faith and encouraging him to give up on God.

◆Daniel 1:2 And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia and put in the treasure house of his god.

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◆ When Nebuchadnezzar conquered a people, he'd sack their temple and put the stuff in his temple. It was a tangible way to say, "Your god couldn't stop me! Your god lost!"

◆ v6-7 As if that weren't enough, the Jewish lads (around 15 year of age) whose names in Hebrew all refer to their own God (Daniel: *God is my Judge*; Hannah: *The Lord shows grace*; Mishael: *Who is what God is?* Azariah: *The Lord helps*) –get renamed each in honor of Babylonian gods: Belteshazzar = may Bel protect; Shadrach = inspired by Aku; Mishach = Who is what Aku is? , and Abednego = servant of Nego!

◆ Do you see the deliberate re-education going on here? Every time someone calls Daniel they will be saying "the god Bel protects". After a while, you start to think it automatically, just like you start to live out the lines of the songs you keep singing with on Spotify.

◆ v4-5 Nebuchadnezzar was a genius at reformatting people. First remove them from their land so all is unfamiliar. Mix them with other captives so their background is dissolved. Then give them free tuition at the University of Babylon. Free room and board. You see what's happening, right? You want to change culture, start with the young, control the education. They are slowly getting indoctrinated.

◆ v2, 4 both name Babylon in our English text, but in the Hebrew they are *Shinar, and Chaldeans*. What are those

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names, you ask? Shinar is the place where the Tower of Babel was constructed, and early human culture forsook the God of Adam and Eve. Chaldea was the pagan place God called Abraham to leave in order to become a follower of the true God, and the father of a nation of Israel.

◆ So what's happening in Daniel 1 is that everything is going backward! The bad guys are winning! Daniel and his friends are being press-fit into the old pagan beginnings. They are renamed under pagan gods. They are re-educated in pagan learning. Talk about the pressure to conform and to give up on God!

◆ **A.** And this is why Daniel wrote his story down. He wrote it for the Israelite people who found themselves in exile under the unwelcome control and pressure of foreign kings, far from the Promised Land. Daniel's book is God's reminder that even when it might look like the bad guys are winning, God is never gone, and God is never dethroned. When everything appears to be headed in the opposite direction of good, God is still guiding. Don't miss it. Because God never misses a beat!

◆ Take a look at Daniel's carefully chosen terms! Verse 2 reminds us that it's not Nebuchadnezzar that determined who won the war in Judea. "The Lord *appointed* Jehoiakim into his hand". Verse 9 observes that "God *appointed* (*same word in Hebrew*) the official to show favor and sympathy to Daniel." Verse 17 celebrates that "God *appointed* knowledge and understanding" to the young

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Israelite men. It wasn't just because their parents were always good with history and math that they were smart. It wasn't just because the guard had a soft disposition that they got to experiment with the food. It wasn't just because Babylon was the greatest world power ever in history, that they got dragged off to a foreign land. It was because God "appointed" these things. Who's directing the course of the river of life? God is. Not Nebuchadnezzar, not Trump, not Biden, not China, not the USA. God

◆ And friends, God appoints everything in your life as well. God is in control. Either his active will causes certain things to take place, or his passive will allows certain other things to take place, but we are assured throughout the Scriptures that when we are followers of the True God, he will guide everything for our good in the end. We might have to wait to see it, but in the end it will be good. That's his sovereign promise.

◆ *Romans 8:28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

◆ **B.** We're going to see this repeatedly throughout the Book of Daniel because the theme of the whole writing is that God is Sovereign: that's a powerful term for being in total control, at all times, in all places, without exception, or qualification.

"Sovereign" means God is unlimited, unhampered, unrestricted, boundless, supreme, predominant, autonomous. Sovereign

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means there is no one higher, no one greater, no one like our God!

◆ And when you think government is about as bad as it could ever get... or when you conclude that it sure looks like God isn't real, or at least isn't interested in your puny life... or when your so frustrated that everything goes wrong for you while it looks like everyone else is a shining example of human happiness (they're not, btw), you need to remember that the true God, Israel's God, is the Sovereign God.

◆ He is the Ruler of rulers. He is the Head of state. He is the overlord, and the Governor of governors. He is the king. He is the Emperor of emperors, the Sultan, the Regent, the Monarch. God is Sovereign!

◆ His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: "What have you done?"

Dan.4:34-35

◆ [SING NO ONE HIGHER....]

◆ And if you want to survive through the worst of circumstances without becoming the worst form of yourself, you need to remember this, and worship God for who he is. This will comfort your heart even in the face of death, which we will see multiple times later in Daniel's book.

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◆ **2. God is particularly present when I am decidedly devoted.** Sometimes we are tempted to hear things like I've just been saying and casually think that it is God's job to only bring you happiness and success. But that is not what I'm saying. Daniel did go into exile and, as far as we know, neither he, nor his equally prominent friends ever did go back and see the Promised Land again in their life times. In addition, hearing of God's sovereignty might make us think it makes no difference how I chose to live because God is going to work it all out. Yes, but God lets you cooperate and have an effect on how you experience life and him!

◆ A. Now people have been known to interpolate all kinds of interesting ideas out of a text. Daniel 1 has been used to claim we should only eat vegetables and not drink wine. We can be certain that this is not why Daniel wrote down his story to the Israelites in exile. Most of them had no possible access to meat or wine in the first place. This chapter has been used to teach the importance and limitations of education. But that is not Daniel's point. The central thrust of our text comes in Daniel's decision to do his best to obey God even when circumstances are pushing him not to.

◆ Daniel's use of words tips us off to this. Both verse 7 and 8 begin with the same very (yasem: he placed or set, or decided). The guard *set* new names on them. But Daniel *set* himself not to defile himself, as though in direct opposition

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to the indoctrination. Daniel doesn't want to be Babylonian.

He may be in Babylon, but he's resolved to be God's.

◆B. Why do you think he objected to eating meat and wine? He didn't object to going to the pagan school. He didn't object to being called a new name. (Of course the powers of Babylon didn't really pander to your choice of names or personal pronouns like we do today.) Do you want to know why the meat thing was a big deal? Because in ancient history the meat was often sacrificed to an idol first, and then sold for eating. In fact, temples often included dining halls! Daniel did not want to defile himself by condoning a pagan religion in the act of eating that which was offered to a false god. So he looks for a strategic way to get around it, also without causing a great deal of disruption (another good example btw).

◆What if you and I were that resolved to the laws of our God? What if you and I were that serious about obeying God's word in a pagan culture? What might that look like? And what if Daniel had used the logic a lot of us use?

◆"Everyone else is doing it."

◆"I'm this far gone, I might as well go all the way."

◆"It's only meat and wine. I don't really believe in those gods so what can it hurt?"

◆"If I don't do this, I will miss out on a position of greater influence for good later."

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◆“What difference could this one little choice possibly make?”

◆C. Here’s the second lesson: Even when you are being squeezed to conform, there is a better option to be transformed by God.

◆*Romans 12:2 Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God’s will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.*

◆And the outcome? I would like to suggest that Daniel and his friends were appointed to places of prominent authority to use their influence for the True God, while serving under a flawed ruler *because they were devoted followers of the True God.* They were influence-ers rather than influence-ees. Daniel, we know, was youth when captured, but would outlive all the kings of Babylon and also serve the Persians who conquered them. Babylon literature is not being read today, but Daniel is. What about you? Are you an influencer, or an influencee?

◆**Conclusion:** This is the challenge before us in the pressure of an extravagant, excessive culture, where faith in God is in the minority, and ungodliness is often in power. Do we have the courage to imitate Daniel’s resolve and be influence for God in a foreign place that feels far from home? Susan Ashton sings this lyric:

Within the scheme of things
Well I know where I stand
My convictions they define who I am

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Some move the boundaries at any cost
But there is a line, I will not cross
No riding on the fence - no alibis
No building on the sands of compromise
I won't be borrowed and I can't be bought
There is a line, I will not cross.

◆ Listen, you can draw lines like that when you know that God is the sovereign! As Paul writes, our citizenship is in heaven and we eagerly await a savior from there! (Phil3:20) And just as Daniel was taken from the Promised Land to sinful Babylon, so Jesus was sent from heaven to this sinful world. Just as God gave Daniel wisdom, God gave Jesus wisdom. And just as God guided Daniel to a place of great rulership and authority, so God's Son raised to the place of greatest authority. So set your heart in heaven, and it won't matter where you are on earth. A heart that's God's can survive anywhere.