

AGENTS *of* BABYLON

What the Prophecies of Daniel Tell Us about the End of Days



#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DR. DAVID JEREMIAH

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Agents of Babylon: What the Prophecies of Daniel Tell Us about the End of Days

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Introduction

WHY A BOOK ABOUT BABYLON?

IN 1859, CHARLES DICKENS wrote his famous novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, which was set in late eighteenth-century Paris and London. This was the time of the French Revolution, when the streets of Paris ran with blood spilled in the country's reign of terror.

The Bible could also be termed a tale of two cities: Jerusalem and Babylon. Jerusalem, of course, is the historical capital of God's chosen nation, Israel, and the future capital of His eternal Kingdom. Babylon, on the other hand, is the city the Bible uses as a recurring symbol for the world's evils—decadence, cruelty, abuse of power, and especially rebellion against God.

Babylon began as Babel, the city established by the ambitious Nimrod in his attempt to organize the first worldwide government in opposition to God (Genesis 11:1-9). Centuries later, it was the armies of Babylon that conquered Jerusalem and the city of Babylon that held the exiled Jews captive.

Babylon fell more than five centuries before Christ, but its spirit survived in subsequent world empires, including Rome, the society that executed Christ and persecuted the first Christians. Despite its strength, the Roman Empire eventually fell. We know from biblical prophecy, however, that it will revive in the end times. But as Revelation makes clear, its spirit will be that of Babylon, because it will continue what Nimrod began—humankind’s attempt to usurp the authority of God.

The other city, Jerusalem, has fallen several times and has been occupied or oppressed throughout much of history. It might seem, therefore, that Babylon, the city of man, has been stronger than Jerusalem, the city of God. But that’s not the case. Yes, Jerusalem has been persecuted, but for a good reason: its persecution has been a form of discipline designed to prepare it for its future role. The book of Revelation makes it clear that in the history-long struggle between these two cities, Jerusalem will be the ultimate victor. Revelation tells of Babylon’s final destruction and the ascendancy of Jerusalem as the permanent capital of God’s eternal Kingdom.

The natural question, then, is why I would choose to write a book about an evil city that will eventually suffer an eternally crushing defeat. The answer is that we are living in a time marked by the spirit of Babylon, and we know from biblical prophecy that this force will continue to rise until it dominates the entire world. I wrote this book to help us prepare for that time, which I am convinced is close at hand.

* * *

BABYLON FROM THE INSIDE

Nowhere in the Bible do we get a clearer picture of the nature of Babylon than in the book of Daniel. The book bears the name of its author, one of the prominent exiles forced to march to Babylon when King Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem almost six centuries

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before Christ. A study of Daniel is relevant because it portrays a period of history that is much like the culture we find ourselves in today. The first half of the book gives us a picture of the kind of people we must be to remain strong in the face of the future God reveals in the last half of the book.

I have chosen to focus this study of the book of Daniel on the personality portraits it presents to us. These are the “agents” of Babylon. In Daniel we meet two kinds of human agents. First, we see people of prayer and firm conviction who know who God is and refuse to compromise their faith by giving in to the demands of a corrupt and godless culture. Second, we see people who are filled with pride, given to debauchery, and have no respect for any god but their own glory and appetites. Most important, we meet the Agent of agents—the Most High God, who exercises His sovereign control at every twist and turn of the story.

As we encounter these agents, we will explore the prophetic visions described in the book of Daniel. These visions show us two futures. The first is a future that had not yet occurred when Daniel wrote of it but has now been explicitly fulfilled in history. It’s the story of four world empires that have risen and fallen exactly as Daniel predicted. The second future is one that is yet to come—a dark and foreboding future describing what we call the end times, which will occur before the glory of Christ fills the world forever. The explicit accuracy of the prophecies that have been fulfilled gives us absolute confidence in those that are yet to be fulfilled.

Both of these phases of Daniel’s prophecy have immense value to us today. They bring to light the cyclical nature of history and project it into the future to show us how we must live in the present so we can prepare for the time yet to come. In fact, the entire book of Daniel—both the personal portraits and the prophecies—demonstrates why the courage, conviction, and devotion to prayer portrayed by Daniel are as critical today as they were in his time.

Daniel himself lived in a time of rampant godlessness in an empire that wallowed in opulence, debauchery, arrogance, blasphemy, and pleasure—an empire that brought devastation to God’s people. Those with the discernment to read the signs of the times today (Matthew 16:2-3) recognize that the similarities between Daniel’s Babylon and today’s Western culture are signs that Daniel’s dark prophetic visions loom close on the horizon. The only way to endure is to rely on God’s strength, as Daniel did, and commit ourselves to standing up for principles of righteousness.

Years ago, Francis Schaeffer, concerned about the increasing godlessness of Western culture, wrote a book titled *How Should We Then Live?* That question can be answered vividly with the examples of courage and conviction in the book of Daniel.

Good men such as Daniel and his three godly associates didn’t prevent the fall of Babylon. That wasn’t their purpose. But they did prevent their own fall into compromise that would have swept them into perdition along with Babylon. Standing up for their faith wasn’t easy. It took enormous courage, conviction, faith, endurance, and prayer. That’s what it will take today for us to remain faithful to our God in an increasingly godless generation that is bent on following the way of Babylon into destruction.

* * *

THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

In my previous book *Agents of the Apocalypse*, I opened each chapter with a fictional narrative about the subject of the chapter and ended with an exposition of the Scripture behind the story. That structure seemed to help people engage with and understand the book of Revelation in a new way, so I decided to repeat the approach in this book.

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If you have not read *Agents of the Apocalypse*, let me explain my rationale for this approach. The fictional section of each chapter is designed to whet the reader's appetite for scriptural truth by showing the drama and excitement inherent in biblical narratives. The second section is designed to separate fact from fiction and make relevant applications to our lives. To put it another way, the fiction drives the truth into our hearts, and the Scripture behind the fiction drives it into our minds. My prayer is that this book will accomplish both of these objectives in your life.

Dr. David Jeremiah

FALL 2015

Chapter 1

THE HOSTAGE

Daniel 1:1-21

THE YOUNG MAN—hardly more than a boy—no longer bothered to brush away the flies that buzzed around his face. His tunic of fine linen was now caked with dust and sodden with sweat. The once-sturdy soles of his sandals, crafted by the finest cobbler in Jerusalem, were worn so thin that his feet were purple with bruises from treading the stones on the long, dry road.

He was dead tired, hardly able to lift a foot to take another step. Yet he and his companions kept walking, as they had every day for the past four weeks, beginning at dawn and not stopping until sunset. His only relief came when it was time to eat the meager ration of dried bread and drink the tepid water his captors provided. But it wasn't long before the hostages were prodded to get moving again, herded down the seven-hundred-mile road to Babylon.

The young man's name was Daniel. He was fourteen years old, tall and well built before the march reduced his muscular limbs to skin and bone. As miserable as the conditions were, he hardly noticed

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the flies, the bruises, the blistering heat, or even the mind-numbing exhaustion. Those challenges paled next to the horrors he'd witnessed before the march—images that were now seared into his fevered brain. The pounding of Babylonian battering rams against the walls of Jerusalem. The stream of Babylonian soldiers pouring into the city. The screams of panicked citizens as they raced through the streets. The Babylonians in their chariots, striking down men, women, and children. Worst of all, his final glimpse of his parents as they were brutally slaughtered before his eyes.

He groaned inwardly as he remembered his beloved Leah, the beautiful girl he was betrothed to, being wrenched from his arms and dragged away screaming. When he fought to free her, a Babylonian soldier knocked him unconscious and threw him onto a cart with other wounded Jews.

Daniel shuddered as he remembered the sickening feeling that came over him when he awakened in the cart. Everywhere he looked, the streets of Jerusalem were strewn with bloodied bodies. His tears flowed when he recalled passing the Temple and seeing enemy soldiers piling the sacred worship utensils onto wagons to be hauled away to Babylon. He remembered his shock as the cart carried him through the Eastern Gate, where he joined the other Jews who had been selected to march to Babylon. He looked around and noticed that all of them were young. Those who were old or middle aged or ill had been slaughtered or left in the city.

These images haunted Daniel's mind every waking hour as he made the grueling march, and they ravaged his sleep every night.

Someone behind Daniel spoke, pulling him out of his painful memories and back to the miserable present.

"I think I know you," the voice said.

Daniel turned and looked into the first familiar face he'd seen on the road to Babylon. "Hananiah!" The words cracked through his dry throat. "You survived."

THE HOSTAGE

“Yes, but I’m not convinced that’s such a blessing. The dead ones may be better off than we are. Have you seen our friends Mishael and Azariah?”

“No,” Daniel replied. “Have you seen Leah? She and I were taken at the same time, but I don’t know whether she—”

The searing pain of a whip shot across his back.

“No talking!” a soldier bellowed. “You know the rules. Speak again, and it’s ten lashes for both of you.”

The relentless march continued for weeks. Many Jews died along the way, their bodies left by the roadside for the vultures. The first hole appeared in Daniel’s sandal, and the stones of the road began to cut through his skin. The more raw his foot became, the more he struggled to keep pace. More than once he stumbled and fell, but each time he managed to get up and continue walking. He was growing delirious, no longer fully conscious of his surroundings. Yet his body kept staggering forward.

One day he was vaguely aware of a fellow journeyer saying he could see the walls of Babylon. Within hours, they passed through the gate of the city. The march came to a halt, and Daniel, more dead than alive, collapsed to the ground, unconscious.

* * *

Daniel awoke in a darkened prison cell crowded with other young men from his hometown, including Hananiah. He looked around and spotted his missing friends, Mishael and Azariah. His body was raging with a fever, and when he tried to move, he was seized by a searing pain. For the next few days, he wandered in and out of consciousness. When the pain finally subsided and he became aware enough to realize its source, he groaned with an agony that went even deeper than the physical pain. He and his three friends had been tragically mutilated. He would never be a husband. He would never be a father.

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As the prisoners healed, they were allowed to rest and were given bread and water. A few weeks later, when the captives had regained sufficient strength, their overseers began assigning them tasks. Some of the men were sent to clean stables and groom horses; others were put to work as porters, carpenters, or janitors. Daniel was ordered to the wagon yard to repair chariots and oxcarts.

The female prisoners were also put to work, washing clothing, cooking, and mending garments. Some of the women served the men at lunchtime, brought weekly changes of clean clothing, and carried drinking water to them in the heat of the day.

One day several weeks after he had begun his labor for the Babylonians, Daniel had just finished remounting a heavy wheel onto a wagon when he saw a young woman approaching with a flask of water. Her head was covered by a hood to protect her face from the sun, and Daniel, in his eagerness to drink, didn't give her a second glance.

When he lowered the flask and wiped his mouth, he caught a flash of recognition in the woman's eyes.

"Leah?" he exclaimed. "Is it you?"

"Oh, Daniel," she cried through joyful tears. "I've looked everywhere for you. I was afraid you'd been killed."

"I'm so glad you're alive! I had no idea what they might have done to you."

"We can't keep talking." She looked over her shoulder as she spoke. "They watch us at all times. Keep drinking while I tell you what I've learned."

Daniel again put the flask to his lips.

"They are getting all the young women healthy again after the march. Soon the most elite Jewish women will be pressed into the service of noblemen and officials, and the most beautiful will become the king's concubines. The rest will be free to marry, though we will remain slaves. So there is still hope that you and I may have a life together."

THE HOSTAGE

Daniel stared hard at the dusty ground. “No, Leah, we have no future together. I am no longer the man I used to be. You must count me as dead and find another husband.” He handed the flask back to her and turned away to hide his tears.

“But, Daniel—”

“You there, water girl!” the voice of a guard boomed. “Cut the talk and get on with your rounds.”

Leah stifled a sob as she walked away. Daniel returned to the carts, his vision blurred by bitter tears.

That night in his cell, Daniel writhed on the straw. He would never know the joys of marriage. He would have no descendants. His name would be cut off forever in Israel, which for a Jew was almost worse than death. *God*, he prayed silently, *what will fill this emptiness in my soul?* Finally he fell into a fitful sleep.

At dawn, however, Daniel arose calm and serene. He had received the answer to his prayer. God Himself would fill the emptiness in his life. God would be his friend, his purpose, and his comfort. That morning in the darkness of his cell, Daniel made a solemn vow that he would be faithful and true to God, just as he would have been to a wife. He wouldn't allow anything to come between him and his God.

Bolstered by his newfound dedication to God, Daniel committed each day to the Lord and to the task before him. His health returned fully, and his body grew strong from the physical labor.

One day as Daniel was replacing the damaged spokes of a chariot wheel, a guard approached and called him from his task.

“You are wanted in the food galley,” the guard said. “Stop what you're doing and report immediately.”

A dozen other male slaves were making their way to the galley when Daniel arrived. More streamed in, until the room was filled with about thirty Jewish men. Among them were his friends Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.

When everyone was assembled, two Babylonian men entered the

room and stood before them. The first was a middle-aged, dark-skinned man dressed in the robes of a Babylonian official. The second, also finely dressed, stood slightly to the side, obviously an aide or assistant.

The official stepped forward and addressed the gathering. “My name is Ashpenaz. I am chief of the eunuchs in the palace of our great king, Nebuchadnezzar—may he live forever. You have been selected from among all the Jewish men as candidates for an exceptional honor. If you are chosen, you’ll be trained for the king’s service for the next three years. You’ll learn the Babylonian language, literature, religion, philosophy, and astrology. You’ll be well cared for and fed with the same food that is served at the king’s table, including the finest meat that has been offered to the god Marduk.”

Ashpenaz looked at the young men, pleased to see the hope reflected in their faces. “All of you were picked for your health, strength, and appearance. But before you are chosen, you must meet two additional qualifications: intelligence and discernment. To determine your fitness in these areas, I will interview each of you privately.”

One by one, the young captives were ushered into Ashpenaz’s presence. Some returned quickly; others had lengthy interviews. Some came out crestfallen or angry, while others beamed with obvious pleasure. When it was Daniel’s turn, he was taken into the private chamber, where Ashpenaz sat facing him.

For the next hour, Daniel answered questions of almost every kind imaginable—political, religious, philosophical, scientific, and astrological. He solved riddles and mathematical equations. He unraveled problems of logic, named the constellations, and identified the major classifications of animals. With each answer, Daniel sensed Ashpenaz’s approval growing. After an hour or so, Ashpenaz was actually smiling, nodding his head in approbation, and commending Daniel for his astute answers.

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“You are amazingly well educated for such a young man,” he said. “How do you feel about the prospect of serving in the court of the king?”

“It would be a great honor, sir. But my commitment to my God prevents it. I cannot, under the laws of my God, eat food sacrificed to an idol.”

“Daniel, you must watch your tongue!” Ashpenaz said in a lowered voice. “Don’t call Marduk an idol in the royal palace. You could be put to death for such sacrilege, and it would be a terrible waste to lose you. Yet there’s no way I can allow you to eat any food other than what the king orders. To disobey him would mean my own death.”

“But, sir—”

“Say no more, young man. This interview is over. You are chosen for training, which means I must give you a Babylonian name. From this day forward, you are to be called Belteshazzar. Now go, Belteshazzar. Report to my steward, and he will escort you and the others to the royal palace.”

Eleven other young men were selected. The steward took them to the palace complex, where they were given baths, groomed, dressed in Babylonian robes, and assigned plush rooms. Among the men selected were Daniel’s friends Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, who had been given the Babylonian names Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego.

At the call to the evening meal, Daniel walked with his friends to the dining hall. “You know we are about to face a crisis, don’t you? We will be served food that we cannot possibly eat with a clear conscience before God.”

“What will happen when we refuse?” asked Shadrach.

“We will be executed for disobeying the king’s order. I don’t know what you will do, but I will not eat that food.”

The others affirmed Daniel’s decision. “We will stand with you,” they vowed.

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The four young men were seated at a table with the other eight captives. As they awaited the food, they introduced themselves. Eleazar, the man seated next to Daniel, had been given the Babylonian name Malik.

Malik grinned broadly. “Men, our lives have suddenly taken a turn for the better. If we are careful, we can live out our years in luxury we never could have dreamed of in Jerusalem.”

“But what about the food they will serve us?” Daniel asked. “We cannot eat anything sacrificed to idols.”

“Don’t you know that if we refuse, we will be executed?” Malik replied. “Since God put us in this place, surely He expects us to eat what is set before us. What choice do we have? He will understand our dilemma and not hold it against us.”

All the men except Daniel and his friends agreed with Malik.

Daniel opened his mouth to respond, but just then the servers brought the food. It was even more extravagant and abundant than they had imagined: fish, pheasant, pork, and aromatic meats cooked in rich sauces, plus an endless array of fruits, vegetables, cheeses, nuts, and pastries.

The eight men did not restrain themselves—they plunged into the feast with great enthusiasm. Daniel and his three friends, however, sat silently, their plates untouched and their heads bowed in prayer.

When the meal was well underway, Ashpenaz’s steward came in to check on the diners. When he saw that Daniel and his friends had not touched their food, he stormed over to them, his voice tinged with fury. “Why are you fools not eating? Are you trying to defy the king?”

“No, sir, not at all,” Daniel replied. “We told your master that our God forbids us to eat food sacrificed to idols.”

“Yes, yes, he told me that,” the steward barked. “But he didn’t believe you’d hold to it. He was sure that once the food was set before you, you would relent.” He slammed a fist onto the table. “Now eat! If you disobey, it will mean your death.”

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“But sir, don’t you see that we cannot betray our God?”

“I see that you will not,” the steward retorted. “I won’t allow you to defy the king and my master. Either you eat or you die.”

“We understand, sir. You are under orders and you must carry them out, or your own life is in danger. But let us propose a solution—a test. Give us the foods we request, and if in ten days we are not as healthy as our companions, you may do with us as you will.”

The steward resisted, but Daniel and his companions held their ground.

Finally, the steward threw up his hands. “Very well. You may try your diet for ten days. If your health, strength, or appearance wanes in any way, I will have no choice but to have you put to death.”

When the steward left the room, Malik turned to Daniel. “You stupid fools!” he sneered. “Don’t you know that you have just uttered your death sentence? There is no way you can flourish on the diet you are proposing. With no meat, you will waste away.”

“We will see,” Daniel replied. “In any case, we must obey the Lord’s commands.”

“Those laws were fine for those religious fanatics in Judah,” one of Malik’s friends jeered. “But only a fool would keep clinging to those ancient rules when times and circumstances change.”

Over the next ten days, Daniel and his three friends stuck to their simple diet of water and vegetables. At the end of the trial period, the steward couldn’t help but admit that Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego appeared stronger, healthier, and more alert than their counterparts. He not only allowed them to retain their diet for the duration of their education; he encouraged it.

* * *

After three years of training, the twelve young Jews were dressed in the finest of Babylonian garments and presented to Ashpenaz, the chief of eunuchs. He inspected each man closely, instructed them in proper

protocol, and led them into the presence of the great Nebuchadnezzar, conqueror of the known world and king of all the provinces of Babylon.

After looking over the candidates, the king called each one to stand before his throne. He posed questions, problems, and riddles similar to those Ashpenaz had posed at their initiation but even more complex. After the interviews were completed, the king sent the men away while he and his advisers deliberated.

The Jewish men were soon called back into the king's presence, where they lined up facing the throne. They stepped forward, one by one, to receive their assignments. One man was given the position of junior instructor in literature at the school for the children of Babylonian noblemen. Another became an aide to the master of numbers in the king's treasury. Others were assigned tasks as translators and tutors of children in the king's harem. One was appointed an aide to Ashpenaz.

Malik awaited his turn with eager anticipation. He was sure he would get a coveted assignment—one that would elevate him far above his peers. When his turn came, he faced the king with confidence that bordered on arrogance.

"To you, Malik," the king said, "I assign a place in the college of royal astrologers. May you serve me long and well."

It was the highest position yet given. As Malik returned to his place in line, he glanced triumphantly at Daniel, a smug smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

Then Nebuchadnezzar called Daniel and his three friends to the throne. "You four have proved yourselves to be scholars of the highest order. You possess knowledge, wisdom, and discernment surpassing any adviser or wise man in my empire. Therefore, I will retain you in my own personal service as advisers on all matters pertaining to the kingdom. May you serve me long and well."

Malik's smug smile evaporated into utter contempt. How could these four men who clung so blindly to outdated beliefs—who

thought they were better than everyone else—be elevated above him?
*This is not to be borne! Someday soon, by any means necessary, I will find
a way to bring this upstart Daniel down.*

* * *

THE SCRIPTURE BEHIND THE STORY

When governments negotiate today, it's not unusual for this formula to be used: "If you will . . . then we will . . ." That formula is actually an ancient one—in fact, God used it when calling the newly redeemed Hebrew people to Himself at Mount Sinai. The covenant that God gave through Moses was conditional, an "if . . . then" covenant. *If* Israel walked in God's ways, *then* God would bless the nation. And *if* Israel abandoned God's ways, *then* God would curse the nation. The blessings for obedience are outlined in Deuteronomy 28:1-14, and the consequences for disobedience are laid out in verses 15-68.

While the nation of Israel exhibited brief periods of faithfulness and blessing, its overall history was one of spiritual decline and discipline. The book of Judges gives us the most appalling evidences of this downward slide, telling of one rebellion against God after another. When kings began to rule over Israel, more of them were wicked than righteous—many of them worshiping idols instead of the one true God.

The high point of Israel's faithfulness occurred under the leadership of King David, but even his story is tarnished with failures. His son Solomon began well as the nation's ruler, but in the latter days of his leadership, he "turned from the LORD" (1 Kings 11:1-13).

The idols Solomon brought into Israel to please his seven hundred wives accelerated the decline. After Solomon's death, the Lord carried out a severe act of judgment by wrenching the ten northern tribes away from the southern tribes, Judah and Benjamin.

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The northern kingdom, which took the name Israel, was led by the wicked Jeroboam I and fell to new lows when they set up pagan altars at opposite ends of the kingdom to make idol worship accessible to the people (1 Kings 12:29). The southern kingdom became known as Judah. It retained Jerusalem as its capital and religious center and the lineage of David for its kings.

The northern kingdom of Israel descended rapidly into depravity until 722 BC, when it was overrun and assimilated by the Assyrians, never to be heard from again. According to the prophet Isaiah, Assyria was “the rod of [God’s] anger” against His rebellious people (Isaiah 10:5).

The destruction of Israel should have been sufficient to jar the southern kingdom of Judah into serious rededication to God. But the impact of the disaster wore off, and the people of Judah fell into the same downward spiral that had doomed their northern brothers and sisters.

The prophets of God continued to sound warnings. They prophesied coming judgment for Judah if the people continued to follow Israel’s rebellious example. One of these prophets was Isaiah, who gave the people this message from the Lord: “Behold, the days are coming when all that is in your house, and what your fathers have accumulated until this day, shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left. . . . And they shall take away some of your sons who will descend from you, whom you will beget; and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon” (Isaiah 39:6-7).

The Great Defection

In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand.

DANIEL I : I - 2

THE HOSTAGE

God's prophetic warnings to Judah went unheeded until finally, a little over a century after the fall of Israel, God's sword of judgment fell hard. The book of Daniel tells us how it happened.

Jerusalem fell to Nebuchadnezzar in 605 BC (2 Kings 24:1; 2 Chronicles 36:6), and the king deported his Jewish hostages to Babylon in three stages. The first group, which was taken immediately, included only the elite nobility. Two subsequent deportations occurred in 597 and 587 BC, leaving Jerusalem in ruins and only a few of the poor, aged, and infirm in the land.

Daniel 1:2 introduces us to the theme of the entire book: the sovereignty of God. The Lord *gave* Jehoiakim into Nebuchadnezzar's hand. "It was not Nebuchadnezzar's military might or brilliance that brought about the downfall of Jerusalem, but it was the sovereign will of God."¹

Just as the Assyrians had been God's rod of anger against Israel, Babylon performed the same disciplinary action against Judah. God said He had ordained Babylon "for judgment" and that He had "marked them for correction" (Habakkuk 1:12).

For the next seventy years, the people of Judah would live in Babylon in a constant state of upheaval under the successive control of the Babylonian, Medo-Persian, and Persian empires.

The seventy-year duration of the Babylonian captivity was not a random number; it had a significant meaning. The book of 2 Chronicles explains that the Exile fulfilled "the word of the LORD . . . until the land had enjoyed her Sabbaths. As long as she lay desolate she kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years" (2 Chronicles 36:21; see also Jeremiah 25:1-14).

To understand what it means for the land to "enjoy her Sabbaths," we must go back several centuries to the time when Israel first entered the Promised Land. At that time, God instructed the people to observe the Sabbath of the land. *Sabbath* means "rest," and as a matter of good agricultural conservation, they were to allow their fields

to lie fallow every seventh year (Leviticus 25:1-4). That year they weren't to plow; they weren't to plant.

Israel had failed to observe this one-in-seven Sabbath for 490 years. In that stretch of time, Israel should have observed seventy Sabbath years. So the Exile of seventy years, during which the Promised Land lay fallow, would make up for the deficit. If Israel would not give God the Sabbath He required, then He would take it from them by means of the captivity.

Ignoring this Sabbath law was by no means Judah's only sin. Like the country's northern counterpart, Judah had also fallen into idolatry under the reign of its kings (1 Kings 11:5; 12:28; 16:31; 2 Kings 21:3-5). Twenty kings ruled over Judah during the 345 years after its division from the northern tribes. Eight kings were good, and twelve were evil. Jehoiakim, who ruled when Jerusalem fell, was the seventeenth king, and history portrays him as one of the country's most wicked rulers, despising God's Word to the point of throwing it into the fire (Jeremiah 36:23).

The rebellion and idolatry of Judah and King Jehoiakim finally exhausted God's patience, and He chose the Babylonians—the most wicked and idolatrous nation on the earth at that time—to carry out His judgment. The irony of this choice is hard to miss: God turned evil against evil to accomplish His good purposes.

The Great Deportation

The Lord gave . . . into his hand . . . some of the articles of the house of God, which he carried into the land of Shinar to the house of his god; and he brought the articles into the treasure house of his god.

DANIEL 1:2

Soon after Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem, he received word that his father had died, so he returned to Babylon to take care

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of the affairs of the state. He left Jehoiakim on the throne but took several hostages with him, including Daniel and his three friends, to ensure the loyalty of the conquered people.

Along with the hostages, some of the “articles of the house of God” were taken to Babylon and placed in the temple of Marduk, Nebuchadnezzar’s god (Daniel 1:2). These were the holy furnishings Solomon had created for the Temple, intended for the worship of God alone (1 Kings 7:48-51).

A century earlier, Judah’s King Hezekiah had unwisely shown these treasures to a contingent of Babylonian visitors, and apparently their report was not forgotten (2 Kings 20:13). Isaiah the prophet warned Hezekiah that one day this nation would return and take away all the wealth he had accumulated (2 Kings 20:16-18; Isaiah 39:5-7). King Cyrus of Persia ultimately returned many of these articles to Jerusalem when the Jews’ captivity in Babylon ended (Ezra 1:7-8).

Nebuchadnezzar’s confiscation of these holy items was a gesture of religious dominance meant to demonstrate to the conquered Judeans that their God was too weak to save them from defeat. In that day, to conquer a nation was also to conquer its gods.

THE CONDITIONS FOR THEIR SELECTION

The king instructed Ashpenaz, the master of his eunuchs, to bring some of the children of Israel and some of the king’s descendants and some of the nobles, young men in whom there was no blemish, but good-looking, gifted in all wisdom, possessing knowledge and quick to understand, who had ability to serve in the king’s palace.

DANIEL 1:3-4

Did you know it's ten times harder to get accepted for employment at Google (one in 130 applicants is hired) than it is to get accepted to Harvard University (one in fourteen applicants is accepted)? With more than two million applicants every year, Google has an interview process that has become legendary in corporate America. On average, it takes thirty-seven days and many, many interviews to complete the job application process at Google.²

But how about a three-year application process? That's what Daniel and his friends endured when they were being groomed to serve in important roles in the Babylonian government (Daniel 1:5). The elite of Judah's young men were examined in three specific areas to see if they were qualified to serve.

The Physical Test

Those selected for service in the king's court were to be "young men in whom there was no blemish, but good-looking" (Daniel 1:4). The word for "young" in the original language usually refers to someone who is fourteen to seventeen years of age. Bible commentator Leon Wood characterizes these captives as "old enough to make the adjustment psychologically and young enough yet to learn easily and come to feel at home in the new cultural surroundings."³

The Intellectual Test

In addition to their physical prowess, the young men were to be "gifted in all wisdom, possessing knowledge and quick to understand" (Daniel 1:4). A high IQ was mandatory. Those who were to serve the king must be highly intelligent, knowledgeable, and quick to learn.

The Social Test

The king expected these men to "serve in the king's palace"—in other words, to serve in his presence (Daniel 1:5). They were to be young

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men of poise, social grace, and winsome personalities, because they had to function in a royal setting without causing embarrassment.

Further, only young men who had been born into royalty could qualify for this special assignment. They were selected from among the royal and noble families of the fallen nation. According to Josephus, Daniel and three of the young men chosen with him—Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah—were from the royal family that produced King Zedekiah, the last king of Judah.⁴

The fact that Daniel was one of the young men who met these stringent qualifications tells us much about him at the outset. He was a young man of royal blood who was good looking, intelligent, and full of social graces.

THE CURRICULUM FOR THEIR SCHOOLING

Young men . . . whom they might teach the language and literature of the Chaldeans.

DANIEL 1:4

Nebuchadnezzar's three-year training course for these gifted young men included immersion in the extremely difficult Chaldean language and an introduction to Babylon's literature and learning, including astronomy, astrology, architecture, and religion.

At this particular time in history, Babylon was a recognized center of learning and knowledge. History tells of the famous Babylonian libraries that existed at that time, containing vast volumes of literature on almost every subject.

Another name for Babylon is Chaldea, a word often associated with magic and divination—arts that were highly valued in that culture. Daniel and his three friends were to be educated in a highly sophisticated but deeply pagan environment.

THE CAMPAIGN FOR THEIR SEDUCTION

The king appointed for them a daily provision of the king's delicacies and of the wine which he drank. . . . The chief of the eunuchs gave . . . Daniel the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abed-Nego.

DANIEL 1:5-7

The indoctrination of these young men into Babylonian culture was by design. Nebuchadnezzar didn't want to simply educate them; he wanted to disengage them from their previous cultural conditioning and transform them into full-fledged Babylonians. To accomplish this, he did three things.

He Emasculated Them

Though the book of Daniel doesn't state explicitly that Daniel and his friends were made into eunuchs, it is very likely they were. After all, Ashpenaz, the man in charge of Daniel and the other young men, is referred to as "the master of [Nebuchadnezzar's] eunuchs" (Daniel 1:3). And the prophet Isaiah predicted that the Babylonians would come and carry off the riches of Judah as well as its sons: "they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon" (2 Kings 20:16-18; Isaiah 39:7).

Young men who would serve King Nebuchadnezzar in his court were allowed only one passion—the king's wishes. Therefore, it is likely that Daniel and his friends were emasculated as part of their preparation for service in the Babylonian kingdom.

He Obligated Them

Nebuchadnezzar "appointed for them a daily provision of the king's delicacies and of the wine which he drank" (Daniel 1:5). He wanted them to get accustomed to the good things of the palace so they

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would never be satisfied to leave the king's service. Making them dependent on the bounty of the king's food and drink would place them in a position of obligation to him and tether them to a lifestyle only he could provide.

He Assimilated Them

When the young men arrived in Babylon, each of them had Hebrew names that had been given to them by God-honoring parents. In order to assimilate them into the Chaldean culture, Nebuchadnezzar commanded that their Hebrew names be replaced by names affiliated with various Babylonian gods (Daniel 1:6-7).

WHAT'S IN A NAME?	
HEBREW NAME	BABYLONIAN NAME
Daniel "God is my judge"	Belteshazzar "Bel protect his life"
Hananiah "Yahweh is gracious"	Shadrach "The command of Aku"
Mishael "Who is what God is?"	Meshach "Who is what Aku is?"
Azariah "Yahweh is my helper"	Abed-Nego "Servant of Nebo"

- He changed Daniel ("God is my judge") to Belteshazzar ("Bel protect his life").
- He changed Hananiah ("Yahweh is gracious") to Shadrach ("the command of Aku"), after the Babylonian moon god.
- He changed Mishael ("Who is what God is?") to Meshach ("Who is what Aku is?").

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- And he changed Azariah (“Yahweh is my helper”) to Abed-Nego (“servant of Nebo”), after the second-greatest Babylonian god, Nebo.

Nebuchadnezzar wanted Daniel and his three friends to forget Jerusalem, their God, the Temple, and everything related to their Jewish heritage and culture. But Daniel and his friends didn’t forget.

Almost seventy years later, we see Daniel in Babylon, still praying daily as he bows in the direction of Jerusalem (Daniel 6:10). Nebuchadnezzar could change their names, but he couldn’t change their nature. Though much of Daniel’s daily life was assimilated into Babylonian culture, his heart remained centered in Jerusalem.

The Great Decision

We see a steadfast commitment to the Lord budding early on in the lives of these four young men. Almost immediately after arriving in Babylon, they encountered enormous pressure to turn their backs on God and succumb to Nebuchadnezzar’s indoctrination. It is both instructive and inspiring to see how they handled the crisis.

THE RESOLUTION

Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king’s delicacies, nor with the wine which he drank.

DANIEL 1:8

Early in his training, Daniel was confronted with the temptation to compromise his convictions. The first test came when food and wine from the king’s table was set before him. To consume that food and drink would have been wrong for two reasons: first, many

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of the foods would not have met the health and ritual standards required by Jewish law (Leviticus 11). Second, much of the food and drink had almost certainly been previously dedicated as an offering to idols.

Daniel refused to defile himself by consuming the king's foods. It was a critical decision. Had he compromised, the book of Daniel might never have been written.

THE REQUEST

[Daniel] requested of the chief of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself. . . . And the chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, "I fear my lord the king, who has appointed your food and drink. For why should he see your faces looking worse than the young men who are your age? Then you would endanger my head before the king."

DANIEL 1:8, 10

Daniel's refusal to follow the instructions of King Nebuchadnezzar placed him and his three friends in jeopardy. His decision also endangered Ashpenaz, the head of the eunuchs, who was charged with maintaining their health.

Daniel's appeal to Ashpenaz seems to have been rejected. But Daniel refused to give up. Ashpenaz placed a steward over the eunuchs in Nebuchadnezzar's court, and Daniel, still determined not to defile himself with the king's food, offered the steward a rational proposal: "Please test your servants for ten days, and let them give us vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then let our appearance be examined before you, and the appearance of the young men who eat the portion of the king's delicacies; and as you see fit, so deal with your servants" (Daniel 1:12-13).

Notice that while Daniel stood up for what he knew was right,

he did it in a courteous and respectful manner. He didn't confront the steward with an insulting demand; he made a mutually beneficial request in a dignified way, which opened the steward's receptivity.

The steward agreed to allow Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego to follow their own diet for ten days—water to drink and vegetables (literally, “that which grows from the ground”) to eat. He would check them in ten days to see whether they were still as strong and healthy as those who were eating the king's delicacies.

The Great Demonstration

The result of Daniel's dietary experiment was conclusive. He and his three friends came out superior to the other hostages in every category of comparison.

THEY HAD GREATER IMPROVEMENT

At the end of ten days their features appeared better and fatter in flesh than all the young men who ate the portion of the king's delicacies.

DANIEL 1:15

When Daniel and his friends stood up at the end of their ten-day dietary trial, they looked healthier than any of the other hostages. They probably had better skin color, greater alertness, and stronger physiques. Their appearance was superior in every way to those who had indulged in the king's menu.

How could the appearance of these men have shown such exceptional superiority in such a short time? The answer, clearly, is that God's hand was in it. He rewarded their steadfast conviction by accelerating the positive effects of their diet.

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THEY HAD GREATER INTELLIGENCE

God gave them knowledge and skill in all literature and wisdom; and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams. . . . And in all matters of wisdom and understanding about which the king examined them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers who were in all his realm.

DANIEL 1:17, 20

At the outset, these four young men had a special affinity for learning—and for applying that knowledge. We can be sure they studied diligently, and God rewarded that diligence by greatly enhancing their wisdom and understanding.

At the end of the three-year program of study, the graduates were brought before Nebuchadnezzar to be evaluated. After interviewing Daniel and his three friends, the king was astonished at the scope of their knowledge and declared them to be “ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers” in all his kingdom (Daniel 1:20).

But Daniel was the valedictorian of the class. He was found to have even greater ability than the other three, especially in the realm of visions and dreams and their interpretations (Daniel 1:17). This revelation foreshadows the rest of the book of Daniel, which is filled with visions and dreams that reach far into the future of Babylon and, indeed, of the world.

THEY HAD GREATER INFLUENCE

Now at the end of the days, . . . the king interviewed them, and among them all none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah; therefore they served before the king.

DANIEL 1:18-19

Daniel's autobiography reads like a modern-day rags-to-riches story. From his lowly position as a captive, he was promoted again and again, ultimately rising to the highest echelons in the government of his captors. Nebuchadnezzar made him ruler over the province of Babylon and the chief administrator over all the empire's leading men (Daniel 2:48).

After Nebuchadnezzar's death, Daniel continued to serve the king's successors until finally, after Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon and installed Darius as king, Daniel was made chief executive over the entire Babylonian empire (Daniel 6:3, 28). In today's terms, he was the Persian Empire's prime minister.

It's likely that Daniel influenced as many as thirteen kings and four kingdoms in his lifetime. As we will see in the following chapters, Daniel's influence on these kings was enormous. Wicked though most of the kings were, Daniel's counsel, courage, and absolute integrity often turned them away from idolatry and led them to recognize the power of the true God.

His influence in the lives of Nebuchadnezzar and Darius in particular is made evident by the fact that these great kings seemed to admire Daniel and think of him as a friend. Even though he often had to tell them what they didn't want to hear, they listened to him and respected his counsel because his honesty and loyalty were beyond question.

The account of Daniel's life is surely one of history's great success stories, a living illustration of Proverbs 22:29: "Do you see a man who excels in his work? He will stand before kings; he will not stand before unknown men."

The Great Devotion

Thus Daniel continued until the first year of King Cyrus.

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The first chapter of Daniel would be beautiful even if we didn't have this last verse. But the last verse is a message in itself.

Daniel lived to see Cyrus, the Persian leader, conquer Babylon October of 539 BC, some sixty-six years after Daniel had been taken captive. By this point Daniel was probably over eighty years old and had lived a godly life in the public eye for almost seventy of those years. He'd outlasted some of the most powerful kings the world has ever seen.

For all the miraculous works God performed through and for Daniel, it's important to note that He never delivered Daniel from Babylon. Daniel lived nearly his entire life as an exile in a foreign land—as a hostage in a culture hostile to his faith. The message of Daniel, then, is not that God will remove all forms of oppression in our lives. Instead, this account serves as a promise from God that His people can find success and remain faithful to Him even in the most trying of circumstances.

Daniel lived in a culture that was utterly pagan, yet there isn't a negative word said about him in the entire Bible. When the leaders of Babylon tried to uncover some fault in his life, they found nothing worthy of mention except his faith in God (Daniel 6:4-5).

Through all the plots and intrigues that regularly lurked in royal courts, through all the jealousy that could only be expected toward a foreigner in high office, through all the volatility and capriciousness of the kings he served, through all of the envy, conspiracies, and persecutions, Daniel continued to serve his God without wavering.

In his classic commentary on Daniel, Dr. John F. Walvoord refers to this first chapter of the book as “an eloquent testimony to the power and grace of God in a dark hour of Israel's history when the faithfulness of Daniel and his companions shines all the brighter because it is in a context of Israel's captivity and apostasy. In every age, God is looking for those whom He can use. Here were four young men whose testimony has been a source of strength to every saint in temptation.”⁵

DANIEL FOR TODAY

Welcome to Daniel's world! In studying the dramatic first chapter of this book, we can't miss its relevance to our own day—a collapsing culture, world chaos, egotistical rulers, and threatening tides driving us into the future. Yet God gave Daniel a long ministry, and the shadow of his life crossed thirteen kings, four kingdoms, and all subsequent prophetic history. Whether you're a child, a teen, or an adult, your legacy can influence the world until Christ returns. But in the meantime, here are some things we need to remember:

1. It takes conviction. Daniel made up his mind that he wouldn't be defiled. Though he was exiled from Judah, his heart was still under the control of the Lion of the tribe of Judah. Don't dilute your influence by compromising in a fallen society. Only those who plant flags in the ground of the Cross will exert influence for Christ.

2. It takes the right companions. We need friends we can pray with. Daniel had three such friends, and they had his back. God has friends like that in mind for you—in your dorm, at church, in your family, or in your neighborhood. Take the lead by finding a friend or two to pray for. Ask God to strengthen them with all power in their inner being by His Holy Spirit (Ephesians 3:16).

3. It takes calmness and courage. Notice that Daniel never panicked or overreacted in the face of opposition. Amid life-threatening situations, he remained poised and peaceful. He practiced Psalm 46:10: "Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations." We can remain calm when we have the deep, supernatural

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peace of knowing that God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble (Psalm 46:1).

The devil doesn't know what to do with people of courage and conviction—people who cultivate godly companionships and spiritual calmness. But the Lord knows what to do with them. He uses them to change the world. He'll surely use you, too, if you'll determine to be a Daniel.

