

## **Series Daniel**

### **Scripture Daniel 1:1-6**

Today we begin a series on a unique man of God. Daniel was one of the most outstanding personalities of the Old Testament. He lived during one of the saddest periods in Israel's history, when Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed and the people of Israel were in exile in the land of Babylon.

Daniel was God's special representative during those years of exile. Daniel served as a high level government official for more than 60 years. Yahweh, which was the Hebrew name for God, guided him through several precarious situations in order that Daniel might influence the attitudes and decisions of the leaders of both the Babylonian and Persian empires. (In this respect, Daniel held positions of influence similar to that of Joseph, who guided the fortunes of Egypt through a period of famine several centuries earlier.)

Daniel was given the ability to interpret dreams and strange handwriting on the wall, predict the future, and give appropriate advice. Through him Yahweh revealed He was above all other gods and in sovereign control of the destinies of both His own chosen people and that of their pagan captors.

Some portions of the book of Daniel are historical narrative, with stories of courage and faithfulness that motivate adults and children alike. Many of us participated in Sunday School programs in which the stories of Daniel in the lion's den and the three men who were cast into the fiery furnace made for exciting lessons, and "Dare to be a Daniel" was one of the slogans we heard over and over. The book of Daniel helps us to understand how Yahweh uses specially chosen people to steer the course of human history.

In launching this study, some essential background information will be helpful, so a major part of this message will be like a history lesson. In order to get the context of the book of Daniel we need to go all the way back to the time just before the tribes of Israel moved into the Promised Land. God, through Moses, told the Israelites that they would prosper in the land if they faithfully obeyed Him, but that they would be humiliated and punished if they did not remain faithful to God.

**Read excerpts from Deuteronomy 28:1-14 and 28:15-68**

Given the conditions put forth by Yahweh, you would think that the Israelites would do their best to avoid the bad and practice the good, but that was not the case. Even before the tribes settled into the land promised to them they had developed patterns of disobedient behavior. For many decades, the disobedient behavior of the Israelites was described as “doing what was right in their own eyes” (*see Judges 21:25*).

It wasn't that God ignored their behavior. During the time of the Judges God brought punishment on them at the hands of various enemies. This was followed by repentance followed by more disobedience and more punishment. In spite of these cycles, the Israelites never seemed to learn the lessons of cause and effect regarding their sins. After the time of Solomon, there was a complete breakdown within the kingdom and it divided into northern and southern parts. God sent numerous prophets to speak against the sins of the people and to remind them of severe punishment and impending captivity, but to no avail.

God allowed the Assyrian armies to overrun the northern ten tribes in 722 BC and the people there were taken into captivity (*II Kings 17:4-23*), after which they quite literally disappeared in history. The tribe of Judah, which was the southern part of the kingdom, lasted about 115 years more, but then it also fell to the power and authority of the Babylonians.

The curses predicted in Deuteronomy were fulfilled. The final report was given in the following words: “The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent word to them through his messengers again and again, because he had pity on his people and on his dwelling place. But they mocked God's messengers, despised his words and scoffed at his prophets until the wrath of the LORD was aroused against his people and there was no remedy. He brought up against them the king of the Babylonians, who killed their young men with the sword in the sanctuary, and spared neither young man nor young woman, old man or aged. God handed all of them over to Nebuchadnezzar” (*II Chronicles 36:15-17*).

There were actually three waves of exiles taken to Babylon. Daniel and a number of other children of the noble and royal families of Israel were taken as captives to Babylon in 605 BC. Eight years later, in 597 BC, another 10,000 leading Judahites were taken to Babylon (*II Kings 24:11-16*).

The main blow to Judah came in 586 BC when, after the city of Jerusalem was besieged for two years and the people were facing starvation, the walls of the city were breached and the Babylonian army entered the city. Many of the residents were killed, and many were taken into exile. The city of Jerusalem was destroyed. The temple and the walls of the city were reduced to rubble. Judah became a province of Babylonia (*II Kings 25:1-21*). What the LORD had stated through Moses became reality. That was the condition in which Daniel lived.

### **Read Daniel 1:1-6**

The book of Daniel begins with a statement about the initial conquest of Jerusalem in 605 BC. The siege of Jerusalem was a part of the overall subjugation of key cities to the west of Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar, the new king of Babylon. For him, the year 605 BC was an especially eventful year. That was the year the armies of Babylon finally succeeded in wiping out Assyrian threats.

The city of Ninevah, the capital of Assyria, had been conquered by Nebuchadnezzar's father, Nabopolassar, in 612 BC. Because of the loss of their capital city, a large segment of the Assyrian population fled to an area about 250 miles west of Nineveh, into the fertile crescent north of Damascus. In 609 BC the Babylonians, led by King Nabopolassar, engaged these Assyrians, with the aim of totally wiping them out.

Unfortunately, it became a more difficult task than the king of Babylon anticipated. The Egyptian armies marched north through Judah to do battle on the side of the Assyrians. This motivated Josiah, the king of Judah, to join in the battle on the side of the Babylonians. The plan was for the army of Judah to hinder the advance of the Egyptian army toward the Assyrians. It was a good plan in theory, but when the soldiers of Judah intercepted the Egyptian army at the strategic Carmel pass near Megiddo, they were defeated and Josiah was killed (*II Kings 23:28-30; II Chron 35:20-24*).

The Egyptians then joined the Assyrians, but their collective armies were defeated by the Babylonians. Assyria was never again an influence in the Near East. Egypt emerged as the principal opponent of Babylonia. For three years, there were frequent skirmishes between these two powers, but no major battles. In 607 BC, the crown prince, Nebuchadnezzar, became the commander of the Babylonian forces. Finally in the spring of 605 BC, the two armies met in the great battle of Carchemish. The Egyptians were decisively defeated. The result was that Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians controlled all of Syria and Palestine — all the lands between Babylon and the Mediterranean.

It was in the summer of 605 BC that Nebuchadnezzar first focused his attention on Jerusalem. However, in August, Nabopolassar, his father, the king, died, and it was necessary for Nebuchadnezzar to return quickly to Babylon, where he received the crown in September. Later that year he returned to Syria-Palestine to more firmly establish his sovereignty over the region. By mid 604 BC, Nebuchadnezzar had solid control over all the territory which is today Iraq, Syria, Jordan, and Palestine, down to the border of Egypt.

That's a very brief version of what the history books say. However, there is a dimension of events which does not appear in history books. Notice the text in verse 2. It states that "the Lord delivered the king of Judah into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar." Nebuchadnezzar might have thought that it was the strength of his army and his competence as a leader that gained him the victories over his foes, but, in actuality, Nebuchadnezzar was only the tool used by God in the punishment of His people. The Lord's anger burned against the people because they had "abandoned the covenant of the LORD ... and went off and worshiped other gods ... Therefore He brought on them all the curses He had announced through Moses ... In furious anger, the Lord uprooted them from their land and thrust them into another land" (*Deuteronomy 29:25-28*).

The Hebrew for the title "Lord" in verse 2 is the name "Adonai," not Yahweh. "Adonai" speaks of God as the supreme master. The use of the name "Adonai" here signifies that God was the driving force behind the collapse of Jerusalem, even though the outward indications did not reveal that fact. This is an example of how our sovereign God uses the ambitions and efforts of evil humans to accomplish what He wants. The greatest example of this was, of course, the decision of evil men to have Jesus crucified. The theme of God's absolute sovereignty dominates the entire book of Daniel.

Verse 2 is the first of many indications in this book that the Lord was in control of the destinies of His people. In each of the first six chapters of the book there is described an episode which reveals the supernatural power of God. Each episode demonstrated the sovereignty of God over the circumstances and decisions of humans, no matter how powerful they were, humanly speaking.

From the viewpoint of a human observer, it seemed that the religion of the Jews was completely discredited by the domination of the Babylonians. Pagans, in general, tended to evaluate their deities in terms of the level of prosperity they provided to worshipers, in terms of favorable conditions, such as weather and economic conditions, and in terms of the success of their armies and the expansion of their territories. To the Babylonians, it seemed that Yahweh was either impotent or had abandoned His chosen people. Compared to the Babylonian's gods, Yahweh did not seem to be very strong. He had not protected His people. His temple lay in ruins. His city (Jerusalem) was desolate. The surviving Jewish people were living as captives in a foreign land. The Babylonian people assumed that the successes of their armies proved that their deities were stronger than and superior to the God of the Jews.

The Babylonians needed to understand that the success of their military campaigns was not entirely due to their power and prowess. It was necessary for the one true God to demonstrate His power and authority. The miracles in the book of Daniel were a vindication of Yahweh, substantiating that He was, in fact, the God over all gods.

Daniel lived during one of the four great periods of miracles in the history of the Jewish people. The first period came at the time of Moses and the deliverance of the Jews from Egypt. You will recall the power of Yahweh in the plagues and crossing of the Red Sea. The second period was during the era of the prophets, especially the time of Elijah and Elisha, the remarkable prophets who served in the northern part of Israel. The third great period was when Daniel and other Jews were in exile under the domination of Babylon and Persia. The fourth period was while Jesus was on the earth.

All four periods were characterized by significant developments in which God demonstrated His authority and power over dominating evil forces. The first and fourth periods were especially unique in that the miracles authenticated the establishment of the Old and New Covenants. In the time of Daniel, it was necessary for God to establish His credentials so that the pagans, among whom the Judeans had been forced to live, would have knowledge of, and have reason to think highly of, Israel's God, Yahweh.

According to verses 1 and 2, it was during the summer of 605 BC that Daniel and others were taken as captives to Babylon. Daniel was from a high class family. What becomes clear from his behavior is that his religious faith was very strong. Apparently his parents had taught him well. It is obvious that Daniel was an obedient follower of Yahweh and that he had a deep sincere trust in the God of his people.

The individuals who were selected for training were "young." Daniel was probably about 15 years old. The last verse in chapter 1 states that Daniel remained in Babylon until the first year of King Cyrus. He was the Persian king who conquered Babylon. This was in 538 BC. In other words, Daniel served in Babylon at least 67 years, after which he served in the Persian court for a short time. He must have lived until his mid or upper 80s. What is really interesting is that Daniel did not have his experience in the lion's den until he was in his mid-80s! That statement, "Dare to be a Daniel" does not apply only to children. Daniel is an example to seniors as well. From Daniel we learn that faithful, consistent kingdom living can have a very positive influence on others, even late in life. We all need to be more Daniel-like.

Daniel served in the government of Babylon throughout the full period of the 70 years' captivity which had been predicted by the prophet Jeremiah. So trustworthy and effective and wise was he as a political leader, that at one point in his life, he was appointed the third highest ranking leader in the kingdom. In his final years he had the joy of witnessing the return of the first wave of Israelites back to the land of Judah (in 538/537 BC).

Daniel was undoubtedly concerned about the welfare of the Jews during their years of captivity. Fortunately, the Jews did not have a hard and oppressive life in Babylonia, even though they were captives. Many of them lived in good farming areas, they had their own homes, they became respected artisans, they had good opportunities for employment and enjoyed a great deal of freedom of movement. They continued to follow their worship patterns.

The most likely human factor to account for the favorable circumstances of the Jews in Babylon was the influence of Daniel. God needed to have a unique man like Daniel in a high level position to look after His chosen people. Even while they were being disciplined in exile, God was watching over them. From his prominent position in the government, Daniel undoubtedly was Yahweh's man to advocate for and protect the exiled Jews.

As we study this book, we will discover that the love, compassion, and sovereignty of God are revealed to us through the most difficult circumstances and in the most amazing ways.