

# BACK TO SCHOOL

DANIEL 1:1-7 SEPTEMBER 5, 2018

It is back-to-school season. All over town campuses are up and running again. Our young adults are packed up and headed to their colleges. I was surprised to learn that “the back-to-school shopping season is the second-largest seasonal shopping period of the year [when it comes to] consumer spending.”<sup>1</sup> The average back-to-school spending per US household is about \$700 dollars, amounting to tens of billions of dollars.

A new school year presents opportunities for our students to grow and to learn, to be recognized for things like student of the month, maybe valedictorian, letter in a sport, get that starring role in the drama, win the award for most school spirit or graduate Summa Cum Laude. All of those *can*, perhaps, be good things. But the life and the testimony of Daniel challenges each of us to take an honest look at what we are aiming for in our own lives and in the lives of our kids and our families.

Think about this question: What was Daniel’s greatest accomplishment? When we meet him, he’s just “transferred schools” from Jerusalem to Babylon, and by the end of his story he will have become the most successful man in the entire empire other than the king himself. He’ll have wealth and position and prestige. At each point in his story he was the top of his class, the leader in his field, the man others go to for answers. He had access. He had accomplishments. He had awards.

But, when we read these chapters, it’s clear that what made him remarkable, what made Daniel *matter* was not the earthly achievements. The great accomplishment of Daniel *was the work of God in his life*. The way God used him. The word God showed him. And it’s clear that, in Daniel’s *own* mind, living out his faith *was* his greatest goal. Not the best education. Not the best position. His mind was made up to *serve* God, at the expense of all other things if necessary.

This evening, as we take a look at our text, I’d suggest that Daniel’s example challenges us to move our goal posts out quite a bit further than we would *naturally* tend to place them.

If you’re a parent, you’ve got goals and hopes for your little ones. You naturally crave their success and recognition. If you’re *not* a parent, or that phase of life has past, this all still applies to you, because your *own* life is on a trajectory. Daniel dares us to take a real look at our goals and see what we are launching ourselves toward. And it pulls back the wool on what the world’s system really is.

Our text opens in chapter 1, verse 1, where we read:

**Daniel 1:1 - In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it.**

The year is around 605 BC. Nebuchadnezzar has only recently received the throne of Babylon and would rule for 43 years, during which time the empire would control much of the civilized world.<sup>2</sup>

I find it immensely interesting that the book does *not* start in the first person, describing Daniel’s capture. Instead, the first character we’re introduced to is Nebuchadnezzar. He’s a remarkable historical figure. During this period, it’s estimated that Babylon was the largest city in the world,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.statista.com/topics/2143/back-to-school-statistics-and-facts/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babylonia>

maybe the first ever to reach a population of over 200,000.<sup>3</sup> Nebuchadnezzar ruled with absolute power. Daniel will later describe him as a man who killed whoever he wanted, established whatever he wanted. The king was a great warrior, but he was also a great builder. By all accounts, Babylon was a magnificent city. We'll see that Nebuchadnezzar had his share of mental problems. He could be incredibly hasty, to his own hurt. But he could also be patient. He was willing to lay sieges to his enemies, undertake long building projects, establish a training program for his cabinet members that lasted 3 years. He was a man of absolute power, incredible ambition, great ingenuity and cavernous pride. He could be brutal or benevolent, thoughtful or impulsive. You could count on him to fly of the handle at any given moment, but also to truly follow through on what he said he would do, whether it be good or bad. In the Bible we discover he was a man whom God used to discipline his people, a man to whom God revealed a great vision of the future. And a man whom God loved and wanted to save. He was the world's king. The head of the *system* in which Daniel found himself.

**Daniel 1:2 - <sup>2</sup> And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with 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.**

A great doctrinal theme in the book of Daniel is the sovereignty of God. It's shown right here. Babylon's victory was something *allowed* by God for *His* purposes. Seven times we'll see some variation of the phrase "into his hand". Whether it's here in verse 2 or later in chapter 3 when Nebuchadnezzar pompously boasts that no god could save the 3 Hebrews out of his hand. Later in chapter 7 it will be used in reference to the Anti-Christ. But despite how the circumstances may seem, the message of Daniel is clear: It is *the Lord* who holds life in His hands. We can trust our God, who holds our future and holds the world in His hands. You are not adrift in your circumstances. You are beloved of God, who knows you and has a plan for your life.

Again, I find it surprising how Daniel opens the book. The first *character* is this Chaldean king and then we're told about these gold and silver vessels taken from the cupboards of the temple. Who cares? Well, it's setting up a cosmic contest. Nebuchadnezzar took these articles into the temple of his god, as a symbol that Jehovah was dead and the Babylonian deity had won.

It also begins to show the great contrast between *the Lord's way* and *the world's way*. Most of us are pretty familiar with these passages. As we see Nebuchadnezzar doing his thing here, it puts on display the difference. What is valuable? What is the trophy we're struggling for? What's the goal? Nebuchadnezzar takes these *spoils* as proof of the supposed power of his inanimate idols. God is going to use His *servants* to prove His own *living* power. The Babylonian points to a cup and says, "Look how great Marduk is!" Here's what Paul said, concerning God's work in us:

**2 Corinthians 4:7 - <sup>7</sup> But we have this treasure [the Gospel] in earthen vessels, [our lives] that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.**

A lot is set up in these opening 2 verses. But we note that, from an earthly perspective, the story starts with our heroes in total defeat. Of course, we know that our God loves a good underdog story.

**Daniel 1:3 - <sup>3</sup> Then 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,**

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<sup>3</sup> Tertius Chandler. *Four Thousand Years of Urban Growth: An Historical Census*

It's not clear how many of these youth were taken. Some commentators think it was 50 or 60, some think it was thousands. What's significant is that Daniel and his 3 friends were not the *only* Hebrews taken, therefore, not the *only* Hebrews in chapter 1 with the defiled food, chapter 3 with the golden image or chapter 6 with the command not to pray. Yet, it seems that in these scenes, it may have been only these 4 who stood their ground and honored God rather than men.

We learn here that Daniel and his pals were of distinguished background. They were, perhaps, relatives of King Hezekiah. At *least* they were part of the noble class. They would have been well educated and well taken care of, and would've been in their teens at the time. But here they were forcibly taken from their homes to Babylon as hostages. Big difference between them and, say, Esther. As you know from our studies in Esther, a careful reading reveals that, though she and the others Jews were exiled at the time (which was decades after Daniel 1), her participation in Ahasuerus' sensual beauty contest was *voluntary*. Daniel and his friends weren't in this situation because they *wanted* to be, but because they were *forced* to be.

In verse 4 we're given a description of the boys. They were:

**Daniel 1:4 - 4 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, and whom they might teach the language and literature of the Chaldeans.**

Now, here's where we start to get into it. From the human perspective, Daniel was the cream of the crop. Nebuchadnezzar was looking for young guys who would be his palace court, his brain trust, an all-star team that looked good around town. He was going to give them immense responsibility in administrating the empire. They would be given the finest education and the highest positions in the known world. These were boys that were going to be molded into leaders of men with the highest degrees and the best jobs who could model on the side!

Sure, they had been taken as hostages, but when we look at what was being offered to them, we sort of understand why Hezekiah had been *happy* when this event was prophesied so many years before. Isaiah came and told him, "Hey man, you messed up. Babylon is going to come and take your sons captive." And Hezekiah responded: "That's *great!*" We wince when we read that. But then, in our own lives, it's so hard to shake free of the ideas we're bombarded with by our culture. That the most important thing is getting into *the right* college. And getting the best job with the most material success. That those targets should be the primary goal of much of our lives.

The book of Daniel turns the values of the world upside down. He received *all* those things that we're told are the most important. He had the *best* background then the *best* education then the *best* job in the greatest empire. He rose through the ranks and received recognition. He was 10 times better than the next guy on the list in terms of skill, ability and achievement.

But what we find in the 4 or 5 stories from his life that we're given is that *none of that* ended up making the difference that mattered. What *mattered* was his heart for the Lord. What mattered was that he *served* the Lord and devoted his life to *honoring* God. Had Daniel *not* made that the goal of his life, he would've made it out of chapter 1, but he wouldn't have survived chapter 2. In chapter 1, a bunch of Hebrews are enrolled in this program, and all but 4 give in to the world's system. They effectively *become* Babylonian. But they all make it through the program. They lay hold of the "Babylonian dream." But, in chapter 2, Nebuchadnezzar has this vision, calls all these guys, says, "tell me my dream and explain it." They can't, so the king says, "Ok, then you all die." And the

guards go out and begin killing these guys until God uses one of His *faithful* servants to save their lives.

Those things that *seemed* so significant to the world's way of thinking, their looks, their ability, their intellect, those *aren't* the things that made Daniel *Daniel*. It was prayer. Revelation. Integrity. Holiness. *That's* what put him in the Scriptures.

You see, our goal for ourselves and our kids can't be the list from verse 4. Why? Because, as shown in what we see here, life changes in a moment. You might be a *prince* one day and a *prisoner* the next. And because real power is not intellectual or physical, but spiritual. The testimony of Daniel's life is that it was the Lord who gave the vigor, the Lord who give the understanding, the Lord who gave the favor, the Lord who gave the increase.

In the mean time, notice that Babylon's plan was to take these boys, mine their potential and make them *Babylonian*. Their work would be for Babylon. Their minds would be full of Babylon. Their language would be changed. Their culture would be changed. Partly by duress, partly by delicacies.

**Daniel 1:5 - <sup>5</sup> And the king appointed for them a daily provision of the king's delicacies and of the wine which he drank, and three years of training for them, so that at the end of *that time* they might serve before the king.**

Nebuchadnezzar was a smart guy. This was a great deal. On the one hand you had gone from prince to prisoner, but then on the other you went from siege to stuffing your face. Nebuchadnezzar was wining and dining them, then giving them training and job placement. Of course, as we'll find out, terms and conditions applied. This guy who was treating you so well today might murder you tomorrow. Because he didn't *love* these boys like the King of kings does. He didn't care about their future. He was ready, at any minute, to wipe them out wholesale. He'd find *new* captives. He'd find new trophies to install in his palace. But think about *our* King. Watch Him move in and around Daniel's life. He protected Daniel. He guided Daniel. He encouraged Daniel. He had intentions and opportunities and a future for Daniel. And Daniel *knew* that. We don't know about his life before Babylon, but clearly he had been raised to trust the Lord and to have confidence in Him no matter what. He had been taught that the most important thing was to live by faith. And he had been trained to know that he could live out his relationship to God whether he was in Jerusalem or in Babylon, in private or in public, when things were good or when things were bad.

**Daniel 1:6-7 - <sup>6</sup> Now from among those of the sons of Judah were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. <sup>7</sup> To them the chief of the eunuchs gave names: he gave Daniel *the name* Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abed-Nego.**

Scholars argue over the specifics of the meanings of all these names, but here's what we know: All 4 of the Hebrew names were *Godly* names. They include references to God's name and praise His greatness. It gives an indication that all 4 of these boys grew up in very devout, very spiritual homes. That's also clear from their bold, Godly character. All 4 of the *new* names are ungodly, praising the false deities of Babylon. You see, the world was seeking to *redefine* these guys. "We're not just giving you a new degree or a new job, we're going to redefine who you are. What you think, what you believe, how you behave." To accomplish this, Babylon would use feasts and favors and force and fear. But Daniel and his friends were able to rise above all those methods and circumstances and become the men we know them to be: great servants of the Most High God.

Imagine for a moment that their parents or mentors had aimed these boys' lives only at those things we read about in verse 4. Those temporal marks of 'success'. The best education. The best looks. The best performance. What would've happened to them?

One of the main takeaways from this book is that when you launch a life, take care where you aim. We talk about "failure to launch" among the Millennial generation where they seem unable to move into the phase of life where they become independent and responsible for themselves. But just as bad as *failure* to launch is to launch a life in the wrong direction. Whether that's *your* life or your kids' lives. Is the court of Babylon the best I can do? Is that the thing I am most excited about and most dedicated toward? In whatever way it presents itself. Whether it's that degree or the promotion or the award or the ranking. Or do I believe what the Bible says about me, that there is a profoundly *other* point to life, one that the Lord works out in me as I walk with Him wherever He has scattered me?

Should we just not care about studies or any worldly accomplishments? No. That's not what I'm saying. After all, God *made* Daniel who he was. God fashioned him purposely to be remarkable in his appearance and his intellect. God gave him that astounding IQ. God scattered Daniel into the noble family which resulted in him going to Babylon and being put in this position. It's *good* that Daniel developed his mind and these other things. But it will become altogether clear that these *earthly* markers were no significant help to the things that truly mattered in Daniel's story and they were not the goal Daniel was aiming at. His target was *much* higher. And, as a result, rather than be successful on earth and one day go to God in eternity, Daniel was able to bring God with him *in* his earthly life and make a lasting eternal difference, whether in pits or in palaces. No matter the temptations or the trials that came his way. To God be the glory, great things *He* has done.