Lesson One

A Diet for Success

Focal Text
Daniel 1:1-21

Background
2 Kings 23:34-24:6

Main Idea
Hard times not only build character, but they also reveal it. How a person handles difficulties says a lot about that person’s beliefs.

Question to Explore
When you have faced a difficult situation, how did you handle it and what did it reveal about your faith?

Teaching Aim
To lead adults to learn to trust God when their world falls apart.

Quick Read
As a teenager, Daniel was taken captive to a foreign land, but he chose to continue to serve God faithfully in a hostile environment.

Introduction
“Dare to be different” is a great lesson from Daniel. Everyone who lives as a follower, a disciple, of Jesus will face situations such as the one that Daniel and his friends faced in
Babylonia. God’s people are to be obedient even when it means being unpopular or going against prevailing cultural practices. Jesus, himself, asserts, “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide…that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Matt. 7:13-14).

When “all” the other tenth graders are vaping as a rite of passage into popularity, it is hard to be true to your beliefs. When “all” the other guys at the office are going out to the “gentlemen’s club” while attending the annual out-of-town sales convention, it is hard to stay in your hotel room and catch up on your reading. But God’s people must choose obedience over popularity, truth over convenience, and faithfulness over concessions to a fallen culture. Daniel serves as a model for all disciples who dare to be different.

Commentary

Delivered into Enemy Hands (1:1-2)

Without delay, the writer immerses his readers into action: the Babylonians are besieging Jerusalem during the reign of Jehoiakim. The historical marker in the text—the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim—suggests 605 B.C. as the time of this turmoil. As the Babylonians were expanding their kingdom, Jerusalem was attacked repeatedly, and the city’s “fall” occurred over a three-stage period, spanning the years of 605, 597, and 587 B.C. The actual events recorded here in Daniel 1 are part of the first (605 B.C.) campaign.

More important than chronological questions, however, are the theological questions that emerge from the first two verses of Daniel. In antiquity, it was believed that nations rose and fell, won and lost military battles, based upon the power of their god(s). The theological crisis is clear: the god of the Babylonians overpowered the God of ancient Israel. Nebuchadnezzar has subjugated Jerusalem, taken away the temple vessels, and deported the best and the brightest future leaders to Babylon. Thus, the God of the people of Jerusalem has been robbed of his possessions and his people, as his temple treasures and choice servants are deported to Babylon. Outward appearances make the victor clear—Nebuchadnezzar and his evil empire.

Lest the reader find himself or herself lamenting over the loss to the ungodly enemy, the writer of Daniel explains that God, the apparent loser, remains Lord over all events and actors. By declaring that the Lord (’ādōnai, the name that displays God’s sovereignty) “gave” Jehoiakim, king of Judah, and the temple vessels into the hands of the Babylonians, the writer reassures us that God does, after all, have a plan for his people.

Isaiah the prophet declared even earlier, during the reign of Hezekiah, that, “Behold, the days are coming when all that is in your house and all that your fathers have laid up
in store to this day shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left,’ says the Lord. ‘And some of your sons who shall issue from you, whom you shall beget, shall be taken away, and they shall become officials in the palace of the king of Babylon!’” (Isaiah 39:6-7; compare Deuteronomy 28:47, 49, 52, 58).

Despite the Babylonian victory, the Lord was still sovereign over all events. He had, in fact, previously proclaimed through the prophet Isaiah the coming catastrophe in Jerusalem. King Jehoiakim was doing evil in the sight of the Lord (2 Chronicles 36:5), and there was the inevitable consequence of judgment. “To give” (sometimes translated “granted”) is used three times in this opening chapter (1:2, 9, 17), weaving the narrative together in such a way as to triply demonstrate God’s sovereignty in all cases.

Sadness emerges in verse 2 when we realize that the trophies of war, gold and silver, left the house of God to be transported to the house of Nebuchadnezzar’s god. “His god” is most likely a reference to Marduk, the chief god of Babylon who was worshiped by the king. Nebuchadnezzar had gone so far as to name his son Amel-Marduk (called Evil-merodach in Jeremiah 52:31-34 and 2 Kings 25:27-30) which is translated “man of Marduk.” The temple vessels were transported from Jerusalem to Shinar, a clear reference to Babylon (Isaiah 11:11; Zechariah 5:11). Shinar, in fact, was the site of the tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9; cf. 10:10) and became synonymous with opposition to God. As Old Testament scholar Joyce Baldwin concluded, Shinar was the place where wickedness was at home and uprightness could expect opposition.

**Trained for Service (1:3-7)**

Ashpenaz held the title of “the chief of his officials.” This designation, “official,” can be translated various ways, from “court official” to “eunuch” (see Isaiah 56:3). Such a designation has caused some confusion concerning whether the choice young men from Jerusalem were made eunuchs as first century Jewish historian Josephus suggested. It is far from certain, however, that Daniel and his companions were made eunuchs because Potiphar himself was referred to as a “court official,” and we know that he was married (Genesis 37:36). Most telling, however, is the description of the young men as being “without any physical defect,” (v. 4), allowing us to assume they were not mutilated in any manner. Most likely, only those who actually were assigned to the king’s harems were ever made eunuchs.

Nebuchadnezzar was, indeed, visionary as he depleted his conquered countries of their best and brightest citizens. Members of the royal family and outstanding descendants of the nobles were taken to serve the king who had conquered them. Judah was, therefore, robbed of her very best human resources, the next generation of leaders.

The sons of Israel who were selected had to meet certain qualifications according to the command of the king. First, they were to be with “no defect.” The king wanted young
men (probably age 14 or 15) who were without blemish, meaning they had no physical faults. Second, they were to be “good looking,” handsome as they stood, perhaps, heads and shoulders above their peers. Third, they had to demonstrate “intellectual ability,” showing their intelligence, understanding, and discernment. Put plainly, Nebuchadnezzar wanted to confiscate the best looking and most intelligent future leaders for his own court. Removing the “cream of the crop” from Jerusalem and exposing them to a thoroughly Babylonian education, the king was looking beyond the immediate victory toward continued dominance over the defeated nation.

Practically, we can easily see that Nebuchadnezzar was employing a four-fold approach in his recruiting and re-educating of the Jewish lads.

A. First, he used isolation by carrying them off to Babylon and removing them from everything that it might mean to be a citizen of Jerusalem. As Old Testament scholar Sinclair Ferguson concluded, “Separated from the furnace of godliness, the king anticipated that the last dying embers of true faithfulness to the Lord would die out.”

B. Second, he used indoctrination as they were taught “the language and literature of the Chaldeans” (v. 4). Daniel and his friends, therefore, would learn to speak and write in the language of Babylon, which included Akkadian and Aramaic. Archeologists have uncovered thousands of such texts. When one learns a language, one learns more than just letters and literature. To speak like a Chaldean, Nebuchadnezzar hoped, would lead these young men to think like Chaldeans and draw them away from their Jewish roots.

C. The third technique employed by Nebuchadnezzar was compromise. Being offered the king’s choice food and best spirits (wine), Daniel realized this would ultimately compromise his commitment to the Lord. The seduction of such fineries would only serve to further remove Daniel and his companions from the life they had known in Jerusalem. Perhaps Ferguson best captured the essence of the Babylonian technique when he wrote, “The good life that Daniel was offered was intended by the king to wean him away from the hard life to which God had called him.”

D. Finally, Nebuchadnezzar employed confusion as a way to further distance Daniel and his friends from their homeland. By changing their names, he was attempting to change their God. Their names given at birth recalled their relationship with Yahweh, while their new names contained a reference to the gods of Babylon (see teaching notes on verses 6-7 for more detail).

Quite thoroughly, therefore, Nebuchadnezzar was trying to teach these young men to think like Babylonians, live like Babylonians, and worship like Babylonians. While their
new opportunity was a result of the Babylonian victory in besieging Jerusalem, the offer to study at the feet of Babylon’s best scholars and eat from Babylon’s best table surely tempted Daniel and his friends to compromise, forgetting their faithfulness to God.

**Dared to be Different (1:8-16)**

As readers, we quickly feel a change in the narrative’s tone when we read the word “BUT.” Our author is trying to indicate that though Daniel and his friends were offered a three-year scholarship at Babylon’s best “university,” they would remain decidedly different from their peers. Concerning the exact nature of “defilement” in regard to accepting food from the king’s table, multiple factors may be at work. First, Levitical laws as to clean and unclean animals would not have been observed by the Babylonians in the selection and preparation of their food. Second, often the food served had previously been offered to idols. We, in fact, see that same concern in the city of Corinth much later in the first century (1 Corinthians 10:25-28). Third, the notion of “defilement” is most often used in connection with blood (Isaiah 59:3; 63:3) and with impure offerings (Malachi 1:7, 12).

While it is difficult for us to ascertain the exact issues at hand, we can conclude with great confidence that Daniel’s objection to the royal food lies in the long tradition of biblical purity, as his ultimate concern is defilement. Perhaps a Jewish writing outside of the Old Testament captures the idea of defilement best, when Tobit declared, "When I was carried away captive to Ninevah, all my brethren and my relatives ate the food of the Gentiles, but I kept myself from eating it because I remembered God with all my heart" (Tobit 1:10-11). Yet another Jewish writing, *Jubilees* (*Jub* 22:16), expresses the general idea: "Keep yourself separate from the nations, and do not eat with them; do not imitate their works nor associate yourself with them, for their works are unclean and all their ways polluted." Clearly, there is also a general assumption in the Prophets that food eaten in exile will be unclean (Ezekiel 4:13; Hosea 9:3-4).

With verse 9, we are once again reminded that God is a primary actor and that Daniel and his friends are simply a supporting cast. Despite his concerns that the Jewish lads will fall behind their peers on their vegetarian diet, the commander of the officials agreed to give Daniel and company a ten-day trial period during which they could partake of the plant-based diet and drink water.

This is the second time our writer uses the language “God gave” (translated “God granted” in the NASB); remember, the same language was used in verse 2 when God “gave” Jehoiakim into Nebuchadnezzar’s hands. God was even able to direct the hearts of the captors to accomplish his sovereign will. Though he feared not only losing his job but also his head (Nebuchadnezzar was widely known for his rash decisions, 2:5, 12; 3:13ff.), Ashpenaz, by the prompting of God, was willing to concede to Daniel’s deal.
By verse 15, the time of testing had ended, and the results of avoiding the royal food were to be examined. Much to the surprise of the Babylonians, those on the diet of vegetables, fruits, and grain (all would have been included in the term הַעֲצֵמֹת,*zērōaʿ*, “everything which grows from sown seed”) appeared to be more robust and better nourished than those who ate the rich Babylonian food. Oddly enough, most nutritional experts today recommend a nutritarian diet that promotes the consumption of fruits and vegetables. Literally, the text says that they looked “good and fat of flesh,” meaning they were better nourished than those eating the richer food. At the end of the ten days, God had honored Daniel’s desire for purity.

Presented Before the King (1:17-21)
This section divides neatly into three subsections, (a) God’s gifts to the Jewish youth, 1:17; (b) the king’s assessment of their giftedness, 1:18-20; and (c) a postscript regarding Daniel’s long time in exile, 1:21.

In verse 17, we find the third time in which God is “giving something over to someone.” Remember in verse 2, he gave Jehoiakim over to the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar. In verse 9, he gave the chief official sympathy toward Daniel and his friends. And now in verse 17, we read that “God gave” the four Jewish lads knowledge and understanding. On the surface, it looked like Nebuchadnezzar’s academy of wisdom had produced great results. On another level, the reader knows that God is the giver of all good gifts, including those bestowed upon Daniel and his friends. Daniel alone stands out as the one gifted with the wisdom for understanding dreams and visions. Daniel, suddenly, is seen as a prophet, one to whom God gives visions and dreams and the ability to foretell the future (see chapters 4-5). The reader is reminded of Joseph’s ability to interpret dreams (Genesis 40-41).

Using modern metaphors, we might say that “graduation day arrived” (vs. 18-20). The three years of schooling were over, and the king was ready to assess candidates for service in his kingdom. Verse 19 says “they entered the king’s service,” which is a literal translation for “they stood before the king.” Not only had the food made Daniel and his friends more physically fit, they had become more mentally aware, ten times more adept than Babylon’s best magicians and enchanters. Babylonian magicians performed serious functions for the king. The inference was that they were in touch with the world of spirits and the gods, and they used rites and spells to heal, cast out demons, and counter an evil spell placed upon the king.

Apparently, Daniel’s life was from about 620 to 535 B.C., perhaps living around 85 years of age. The point the writer is trying to make in verse 21 is that Daniel lived through the entire neo-Babylonian period (the exile of approximately 70 years) and continued into the reign of Cyrus, when the Jews were released from captivity. As a statement of victory, we are being told that Daniel outlived his Babylonian masters.
Conclusion
This first chapter of Daniel gives us numerous reasons to pause and ponder the rich theology of this ancient text. What lessons are we to learn from Daniel 1? How can our own lives be enriched by the story of a faithful servant who lived so long ago?

Perhaps these are important points to ponder.
(1) Even when it appears as if evil has won the day, we might later discover that God makes the forces of evil serve his greater purposes. At the beginning of the story, it seems clear that God’s people have been defeated and the Babylonians have triumphed. While the people of Jerusalem would have been crying, “Where is God in this catastrophe? Has God forgotten his people?”, the reality was that God was sovereign even in the movement and the victories of enemy nations. God had already foretold all that would take place through his prophet Isaiah (39:6-7). Therefore, even Nebuchadnezzar’s victory was not by the force of his own hands. Jehoiakim did evil in the sight of the Lord (2 Chronicles 36:5), and the inevitable consequence was judgment.

(2) God’s judgment leads to mercy. We must not forget that God is always faithful to his word. We are quick to rejoice that God is faithful to bless his people, but he is, likewise, no less faithful in his judgments. The ultimate purpose of God’s allowing his people to fall into foreign hands was for their restoration and rededication to being uniquely his people. Even in Babylon, Daniel fulfilled what it means “to sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land” (Psalm 137:4).

(3) God looks after those who are faithful. Daniel refused to be defiled by eating the portion “from the king’s table.” Whatever this meant (see above), eating the king’s rich food was clearly going to cause compromise in the lives of Daniel and his friends. Just like Daniel, it is our responsibility to neither compromise nor conform when it comes to defiling ourselves by participating in a fallen culture.

(4) God is the giver of all good gifts. Despite the fact that we know the Jewish youths were doing their best “in the Chaldean college,” the reality is God honored all of their efforts by giving them good gifts of knowledge, insight, wisdom, and understanding. And, in the special case of Daniel, the ability to interpret dreams.

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3 Tremper Longman III, Daniel, The NIV Application Commentary, 45 (see 2 Chronicles 36:5-8).
4 Sinclair Ferguson, Daniel, Mastering the Old Testament, 32.
7 Josephus, Antiquities 10.10.1.
9 Sinclair Ferguson, Daniel, Mastering the Old Testament, 35.
11 Sinclair Ferguson, Daniel, Mastering the Old Testament, 35.
13 As quoted in John J. Collins, Daniel, 143.