

DISCOVERING

DANIEL

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FINDING OUR HOPE IN GOD'S
PROPHETIC PLAN AMID GLOBAL CHAOS

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BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *REVEALING REVELATION*

WITH DR. RICK YOHN

DISCOVERING DANIEL

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I dedicate this book...

to God, whose presence is the only source of perfect peace during the darkest of times.

to my family, friends, and ministry partners. It is your love, prayers, and support that give me the strength and resources to carry out that to which God has called me.

to the innocent civilians who were killed and those who were taken hostage by the terrorist group Hamas on October 7, 2023. I also acknowledge the sorrow and pain of my nation as we seek to heal from this twenty-first century holocaust. We will fight, we will heal, and, with the help of the one true God, we will emerge stronger than ever before. Hamas believed it could win this fight, but, as we can clearly see in the book of Daniel, God has a different plan.

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HOME IN A FOREIGN LAND

Hope. Such a beautiful word filled with excitement and anticipation. Hope feels like spring, like something new and better is on the horizon. Hope says that no matter how life looks now, you just need to be patient. You just need to endure. Soon enough, the situation will change, the tide will turn. Righteousness will prevail. The pain will disappear. Justice and peace will take the upper hand and all will once again be right for you and for everyone around you.

There was a time not long ago that hope was brimming all over our world. The Berlin Wall had fallen. Communism had collapsed. The Cold War was extinguished. Optimism was in the air. Old enemies started to become friends, then partners. Political disagreement existed but was carried out with an air of civility.

But that is not what we find now. Today, we are living in a world of hatred, disagreement, warfare.

Contrary to many times in our history, most modern wars are not fought on the battlefield. The conflicts do not involve bullets or missiles. Instead, the armies are unleashed in the entertainment industry, in the classroom, and on social media. The lines of division are

drawn up on many fronts. Subjectivity is pitted against truth. Relativism stands against absolutism. Aberration fights tradition, and individual expression wars against morality.

Because the fight is in the realm of ideas and standards, allegiances can be easily blurred. Those in the church often find themselves on both sides of the front, aiming their weapons at one another. Life used to be so much easier when we had an enemy that we could easily define. In those days, when we saw the enemy faltering, our hope quotient went up. When the enemy gained a victory, hope waned.

Today, in our world where the enemy is powerful but often clandestine, discouragement about the future comes much easier. We feel the adversary's forces all around us, and we can't help but see defeat after defeat at the ballot box, on the movie screen, in the television news, and on the streets of our cities. The enemy's victories are even reaching into the church as one denomination after another kowtows to public mores in the name of relevance and evangelism.

Daniel lived in a time when the enemy was much more tangible. They were easily recognized as the burly men with the swords who were bursting into your house, killing your father, kidnapping your sister, and absconding with all your possessions. Yet we find in the book of Daniel hope during the darkest of times. And even though Daniel's enemy was flesh and blood, Daniel's attitude and actions set a precedent for how we can deal with our foes despite them being cultural and spiritual.

What does it look like to live in a way that will bring you hope in this decaying society of moral relativism, subjective truth, and a total disregard for God's Word? And how can you get through to those on the other side when the animosity is so great? This is a question that believers must answer. The darkness of sin is a global phenomenon. The devil is at work in every corner of the world. But it is because of this darkness that hope shines so brightly.

Ramat Gan, near Tel Aviv, is the hub of Israel's lucrative diamond

industry. Beautiful stones from all over the world pass through the Diamond Exchange District on their way to jewelry stores. From there, they will eventually hang around the necks, clasp to the wrists, or encircle the fingers of men and women from all backgrounds and nationalities and ethnicities. When the purveyors of these gems want to show off their luster, they will often place a piece of black velvet on a table. Then, taking a pair of tweezers, they will carefully lift a stone and place it on the cloth. The stark contrast between the stone and the black background will cause the diamond to shine and sparkle, clearly showing its brilliance and beauty.

That is the hope and mission of the believer in this dark culture. When you find someone who truly has the light of Christ in them, the brilliance of their spiritual optimism draws people in. Why? Because others want it too. In this book, we will look at how we can live a life of hope in this confused world. And we will also see how we can shine that glory of Christ in us in such a way that we can lead family, friends, neighbors, coworkers, all those we love to find that same peace, joy, and satisfaction.

Is it possible to find hope for today in words that a prophet wrote 2,500 years ago? Absolutely, because the two key elements of this book are as relevant today as they were back then. In fact, today they are even more relatable. First, Daniel set an example through his life of standing strong for God when you are living surrounded by the enemy. Second, Daniel's prophecies of the end times only gain in significance as we rapidly near their fulfillment.

But before we can dig too deeply into the life and teachings of this great prophet, we need some background. In one of my previous books, I said that it was important for me to tell you where I sit before I tell you where I stand. In other words, learning a little about me will help you as you process what I am teaching. The same is true for Daniel. To truly understand what he wrote, we need to learn more about him and the times in which he was living.

The Thousand-Foot View

Daniel is different than most prophetic books of the Bible. Typically, what you'll find are men chosen by God to speak words of truth and warning to the kings of Israel and Judah. They were the "turn or burn" preachers of their day, passing on God's words to the Jews, saying, "Hey, you remember that covenant we made long ago when I said that if you obey Me I'll give you blessings, but if you don't then it'll be curses? Well, since you ditched obedience a long time back, here come the punishments."

Daniel's charge from God was different. Jeremiah and Ezekiel were already doing a bang-up job telling God's chosen people how they had failed and warning them that the hammer was about to come down. No need to add another voice to their ranks. Instead, God moved this young prophet into a unique position in which he had access to the most powerful king in the world at that time—King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. The first eight chapters of Daniel's book are filled with words of warning to this great king, along with a couple other monarchs thrown in for good measure. His job was to remind them that there is a God in heaven who is truly in charge. Sure, these kings were pretty special, but there is One who is much, much greater than they.

Then, in chapters 9–12, Daniel left the present time completely. His focus shifted forward generations and then two-and-a-half millennia as he received directly from God His divine plan for the nation of Israel. But on his way to our era, Daniel made a pit stop during which he predicted with absolute precision the day that the Messiah would enter Jerusalem riding on the back of a donkey. It's truly mind-blowing.

Throughout the book we are reminded that our God is sovereign. He rules over the affairs of mankind. He will set one ruler in place as He puts down another. As supreme over creation, He also has a purpose and a plan for nations and for individuals, and He carries

them out in His time and in His way. He is a faithful God who can and will fulfill all that He has promised.

But God is not just the Big Picture God. He also cares about each individual, particularly when those people are following Him. We see this in His loving care for Daniel and his companions. Daniel was a man who stood above his peers. He never compromised his convictions and never wavered in his faith. Because of his fidelity to the Lord, God gave him the amazing ability to understand and interpret dreams. Then the Lord miraculously placed this young man in the remarkable situation of using this gift to impact the Babylonian king.

The format and layout of Daniel is unique within the Bible—half historical narrative and half prophetic utterance. In this book, I will walk you through Daniel's writings chapter by chapter, just as I did in my previous book *Revealing Revelation*. As we go through, we'll come across some passages that are difficult to interpret. If there is any place where, even after careful study, the meaning remains ambiguous, I'll let you know that. I will not speculate without telling you that I'm doing so, and I will never be dogmatic about something that isn't clearly spelled out in Scripture. Ultimately, my prayer is that by the time you finish this book, the hope that you will find in this kidnapped exilic Jew will grant you peace and stoke your anticipation for the plans that God has for you and for all His people.

Invasion

Imagine a young teenager huddling with his family in the palace. The small closet is dark and cold. The only sounds are the whimpers of his younger sister, the soft prayers of his mother, and the screams of the people out in the street.

When newly crowned King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came marching to Jerusalem, Daniel and his friends had crowded along the top of the city walls to see this great fighting force and its mighty king. It had only been a short time since word had reached the royal courts

of Judah that Nebuchadnezzar, crown prince at the time, had secured a resounding victory against the Egyptians and the few remaining Assyrians in a battle at Carchemish in Syria. Babylon's King Nabopolassar, Nebuchadnezzar's father, had died soon after, and the most powerful crown in the world had passed to the man who was now approaching Jerusalem's gates.

Those with more common sense than a group of teenage boys had found them up on the walls and hurried them away from their exposed location to a place of safety. Daniel was of royal blood, so his place of safety was the palace. The growing screams from outside the luxurious dwelling were the first indication that Nebuchadnezzar had not come on a social call. Soon, young Daniel could hear a skirmish—metal on metal, metal on wood. Then the crash of doors being kicked in echoed through the palace, the sound bouncing from one marble wall to another. He began shaking, pressing tightly up against the side of his mother.

Door after door was slammed open. Still, Daniel jumped and cried out when theirs was flung wide. A soldier, his uniform splattered with blood, stepped in, and Daniel's mother began to plead for her children. Ignoring her, the soldier scanned their faces, finally locking eyes with Daniel. Stepping forward, he grabbed the boy by his wrist and yanked him to his feet. Daniel's sister screamed. Before he had time to turn and say goodbye, he was pulled out the door and dragged across the palace floors. That was the last time he ever saw his mother.

Daniel soon found himself on the city streets. The scene was awful. The bodies of men, soldiers, and civilians were strewn everywhere. Some had their wives and children weeping over them, others were alone, draped over a stall or splayed across stone steps. The path Daniel and his captor were taking retraced his earlier steps back toward the gates of the city.

As they neared their destination, Daniel spotted a group of young

men—all in their teens like he was. Each of them had some sort of connection to the crown, be it direct or indirect. They had all been lined up facing toward the gate. The soldier who was holding Daniel's arm roughly pulled him to the end of the line and indicated that he should stand there. Soon, several others were deposited next to him, extending the row even further.

Daniel sweated as he stood, partly due to the sun and partly due to fear. To his right stood his cousin, Azariah.

“Do you know what’s going on here?” he asked.

Azariah shook his head, then he motioned with his chin and said, “No, but look over there.”

On a raised platform beyond a phalanx of guards, a man in his mid-twenties sat on a travel throne. One after another, men approached him, dropped to their knees, said a few words, then were dismissed with a short comment or a simple wave. Having been raised around the royal family, Daniel had seen kings in the past. But none had the presence, the stateliness, the sheer power of the young man he saw on that throne.

Soon, several Babylonian men approached the line of Judean youths. They were not dressed as soldiers. Instead, they looked more like men of the court—soft and clean-shaven. One by one, they examined the teens. They had each pull at their hair and show their teeth. There were a few they had remove their tunics so that they could examine their physiques more closely. At the end of each examination, one of the men either pointed toward the gate or toward the city. Immediately, a soldier stepped forward, took hold of the young men, and removed them in the direction indicated.

The men came to Azariah. After a thorough examination, he was pointed toward the gate. Daniel saw terror in his cousin's eyes as he looked back before passing outside the walls. Then it was Daniel's turn. Behind him was the palace and his mom. But for some reason, he had an unshakable feeling that his place was through the gate.

Maybe it was because Azariah went that way, maybe it was because the soldiers who were taking teens back into the city seemed to be much rougher with them. Or maybe it was something bigger.

Ultimately, he didn't have time to analyze his feelings. The Babylonian pointed toward the gate, and Daniel was led through. As he passed the throne where Nebuchadnezzar sat, he turned toward him. For a moment, his eyes locked with those of the king, who just happened to be looking his way. A flood of emotion flowed through Daniel unlike anything he had experienced before. Something deep inside this teenage boy told him that this would not be the last time that he would stare into the eyes of this king.

God had given Daniel a mission: to be a light to the Gentiles. Chances are the teen who was deported from his comfortable life in Jerusalem to a court in a foreign land was completely unaware of this plan for his life. But what we do see with Daniel and his friends was that despite not understanding God's plan, they still trusted that He had one. So when God shifted their location and living circumstances because He needed them elsewhere, they didn't kick or scream. They accepted their new normal, remained true to God, and waited for opportunities to be used by Him.

Throughout Scripture, we see God using difficult times to accomplish His will. We never would have heard of Moses if God had not allowed the Egyptians to enslave Israel. Gideon would never have made the pages of the Bible if God didn't give the Midianites freedom to oppress His chosen people. And VeggieTales never would have made Jonah the lead asparagus in their first feature-length movie if the prophet hadn't spent three long, smelly days being digested by a fish.

God has given each of His followers a mission based on how He has created and gifted them. By mission, I'm talking about the reason that God placed each of us on this planet. You may have one great mission, or you may have numerous charges that change and

evolve as you go through life. Either way, what is clear is that we are here for a reason. Paul emphasized that point when he wrote, “We are [God’s] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10).

Daniel and his friends couldn’t accomplish their mission lounging in the comfort of the Jerusalem palace. In the same way, there are times when God needs to move us around or shake us up a bit to ensure we are perfectly staged to accomplish His will. Often, we don’t understand what God is doing or why. Usually it is only when we look back, in hindsight, that we can make sense of the difficult times.

Because of the struggles within my parents’ marriage, my brother and I were first sent to relatives, then into the foster care system. It was not an easy life. I was provided for and I had a roof over my head, but there was no love for me within my foster family. When I was a teen, this aloneness led me to despair, and I prepared to take my own life. But God stayed my hand, and it was at my lowest point that I was introduced to the true Messiah through the *Jesus* movie. If I had been reared in a happy, traditional home, I don’t know that I would have ever come to the point that I was ready to accept something as radical to a Jewish boy as faith in the Messiah. So while I do not relish those difficult days, I am so thankful for them because they brought me to the point of my salvation.

That’s why it is so important, particularly in the bad times, to be looking for God. Always He is there to walk us through the difficulty as a loving Father would. But we also need to keep our eyes and ears tuned in because He may be opening doors that will allow us to make a difference in the lives of those around us.

God moved Daniel, and He did so for a reason. But what was it that led to King Nebuchadnezzar marching on Jerusalem and stealing away the best and the brightest of the city’s youth?

A Promised Punishment

Israel had become a great nation under the leadership of King David and his son, Solomon. But the greatness was short-lived. For all the wisdom Solomon had been given by God, there was still one area in which he was a complete idiot—women.

King Solomon loved many foreign women, as well as the daughter of Pharaoh: women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians, and Hittites—from the nations of whom the LORD had said to the children of Israel, “You shall not intermarry with them, nor they with you. Surely they will turn away your hearts after their gods.” Solomon clung to these in love. And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart. For it was so, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned his heart after other gods; and his heart was not loyal to the LORD his God, as was the heart of his father David (1 Kings 11:1-4).

Solomon knew the rule. He knew the reason for the rule. He knew the potential consequences for breaking the rule. Yet he said to himself, “It’ll be different for me.” How many people over the millennia have approached sin with that same arrogance? Just one drink, just one kiss, just one look at that website. Solomon thought he could handle the temptations. Turns out he couldn’t, and he brought the nation down with him.

When Solomon died, he turned over his spiritually struggling nation to his spiritually bankrupt son, Rehoboam. The wisdom of Solomon was legendary, the wisdom of Rehoboam—not so much. It wasn’t long before the kingdom was split in two. Ten tribes rebelled against Jerusalem to form the northern kingdom of Israel. Two remained with the house of David to form Judah. The northern kingdom was

quick to reject the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, creating two golden calf gods and setting one each at the top and bottom of the nation for easy idol-worshipping access.

Despite their rebellion, though, God still loved the people of the north. He sent Elijah, Elisha, Amos, Hosea, and other prophets to tell His people to come back to Him. But Israel was having none of it. The Lord finally had enough, and, in 722 BC, He brought the Assyrians down on the kingdom. The result was utter devastation, and most of the Jews were removed from the land. In their place, Assyria's King Shalmaneser filled the population vacuum with Gentiles from other conquered lands. Soon, the region came to be known as "Galilee of the Gentiles" (Isaiah 9:1).

From their homes to the south, the people of Judah watched the demise of their sister, Israel. But rather than heed the warning and straighten up their ways, their attitude was, "Wow! Stinks to be them. Probably ought to go sacrifice a child to Molech in the Valley of Hinnom, just to stay safe." Once again, God sent prophets to turn them around. Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah, Zephaniah, Habakkuk, and Joel all took their shots at bringing the nation to repentance. But the people didn't listen to them.

By this time in 605 BC, as mentioned above, the Assyrians were no more. In their place was the military juggernaut of Babylon. God tapped Nebuchadnezzar on the shoulder and pointed him toward Jerusalem. The king came, the city fell, and Daniel, along with many other Jews, was removed from the land and taken to Babylon in this first of three deportations spread over a period of two decades. It is during this event that the book of Daniel opens.

CHAPTER 1

SETTING THE STANDARD

DANIEL 1

Outside your window, the view is black as pitch. But what the night is lacking in light, it is more than making up for in sound. You can hear the rain pounding, followed by what feels like the clatter of a million BBs as hail pelts the roof. You huddle your family close together and try to calm your children by singing little refrains like, “We love the thunder ‘cause the thunder brings rain.” Every rural, small-town kid knows that rain is always a good thing.

Suddenly, a siren pierces through the din. Tornado! You and your wife each scoop up one of the little ones, while your oldest leaps to her feet. You scramble for the steps that lead to the basement. Just before you follow your wife down the stairs, you hear a growing rumble. It’s close. Once underground, you hold each other tightly in a small, protected cement alcove as what sounds like a freight train approaches. Soon, the noise is deafening, and you hear glass smashing and wood snapping overhead. The floor above you gives way and crashes around your hideaway. Rainwater begins to cover the floor. Your children are crying, your wife is loudly telling them it will be

okay, and you are praying with everything you have for the protection of your family.

Then it's passed. The blast of the tornado pulls away. The rumble of the thunder grows fainter. Soon, all you can hear is rain hitting the debris around you and the sound of dozens of car alarms. You tell your wife to wait with the children as you step out to explore. The view is devastating. You look up and see stars peeking through the clouds—stars where the ceiling of your basement should be. Your house is gone. Your possessions are gone. All that's left of your former life is huddled with their arms around one other in a corner of your basement. You pause for a moment and thank God for such a marvelous blessing.

I've never gone through a tornado. Dr. Rick Yohn, my writing collaborator on this book, has experienced several, and he has also seen firsthand the aftermath of some very devastating twisters. As he and his wife, Linda, drove through some recently hit areas and talked with survivors, many of whom had lost everything, they witnessed differing reactions. Some were in complete shock. Others expressed inconsolable sorrow. But there were many more who, despite their loss, were feeling incredible relief. "We may have lost everything," they would say, "but at least we have each other."

The Babylonians swept through Jerusalem like a tornado. Death, destruction, and loss trailed behind them. By the time Daniel and his friends began their long trek to the capital city, they had nothing left of their former lives. And when I say nothing, I don't just mean they lost their possessions and their comfortable royal lives. After a tornado hits, at least there is the hope that between insurance money and some help from the government, people can rebuild their homes and their businesses. Maybe life can one day get back to normal again.

But for Daniel's gang, normal was a state of being that no longer existed. They had been in the line of nobility to become somebody

in the nation of Judah. They were being groomed for high positions, name recognition, and a life of power in their line of service. Those dreams were now shattered, and all that faced them was an uncertain future that might include slavery, servitude, or possibly a quick death.

One has to believe that the question of “Why?” crossed Daniel’s mind. Why would God have allowed a heathen nation like Babylon to invade and enslave God’s chosen people? But because of Daniel’s upbringing, the answer to this seemingly huge conundrum was quite easy. Daniel was brought up with a knowledge of the Word of God. He would be familiar with the warnings of the prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah. Being within the royal circle, he had seen how the kings since the days of Josiah had rebelled against the God of their fathers and were following pagan deities. What had been promised since the days of Moses was coming to pass. If the nation rebelled, God would bring punishment. And, as so often happens, the children were about to pay the price for the sins of their fathers.

Daniel and his friends could have been angry at God and bitter against the generations that came before them. That is how so many people react when they are innocent victims of other people’s sins. And, for those who have been victimized, it is totally understandable that they may descend into long-lasting anger and depression. But what Daniel shows us is that there is a better path. There is a way that lifts one up, rather than letting past circumstances grind one into the ground. It is the way of hope, the way of faith, the way of God.

Death March to Babylon

We don’t know what the journey was like for Daniel and his friends. Often, when prisoners were transported, they were stripped naked, chained together, and forced to walk the distance, likely barefooted. You may have heard the term *death march*, a forced march of

prisoners of war during which those who cannot continue are killed or simply left along the roadside to die. One of the most famous of these in recent history was World War II's Bataan Death March. In April 1942, 66,000 Filipino and 10,000 American prisoners of war were forced to trek 66 miles through horrific conditions. Those who fell by the wayside were beaten, bayoneted, or shot. Only 54,000 of the original 76,000 made it all the way to the destination.

Think of how violent and cruel that forced journey was. Now, let's look at the Babylonian death march. Instead of 66 miles, the straight-line distance between Jerusalem and Babylon is more than 550 miles. But nobody traveled in a straight line between the two cities, because lying in the gap was the vast Arabian Desert. Those making the journey were forced to travel north, then arc over the desert in what was known as the Fertile Crescent. Only then could one make the descent southward to Babylon.

So how long of a journey did they make? Rather than look at distance, the best way to estimate the length of the trip is in time. Somewhat less than a century after Daniel and company travelled east to Babylon, Ezra the priest brought a contingent of exiles back west, going home to Jerusalem. We read of his journey, "On the first day of the first month he began his journey from Babylon, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, according to the good hand of his God upon him" (Ezra 7:9). Feel free to check my math, but by my calculation, that was a four-month road trip. But Ezra and his cohorts were likely in much better shape than the prisoner-of-war crew that was being shuffled into exile. Daniel's trip probably took a little longer and cost many more lives. Were Daniel and his friends forced to walk the whole way, or were they carted in caged wagons because of their royal pedigree? That's a question we can't answer. What we do know is that it had to have been a world-shattering experience for these teens.

And the shake-ups didn't end when they arrived.

A Whole New World

Everything was different. Have you ever visited a foreign country on vacation, one with a different language, culture, and government structure? Very quickly, you realized that you had some challenges ahead of you. It's likely you had moments of stumbling through asking for directions or ordering meals. Your one consolation through the embarrassment was that you would soon be back in your own country, surrounded by people who thought like you and spoke your language.

Daniel and his friends didn't have that luxury of return. When they arrived in Babylon, they knew that this was where they would stay. They didn't even have the comfort of remaining with the rest of the Jewish exiles. Nebuchadnezzar had a plan for them, and holding on to their roots and their identities was not part of it.

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, 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 (Daniel 1:3-4).

Young King Nebuchadnezzar had done some traveling during his military campaigns. Something he had learned as he moved from city to city and culture to culture was that there were some very smart, high-quality young men out in the world. Their only drawback was that they were not Babylonian—yet. His plan was to take their best and brightest and make them his best and brightest.

Who were these cream-of-the-crop candidates? We see from the above passage that they were young men. Old guys need not apply.

Second, they had noble blood flowing through their veins. Sorry peasants and all you riffraff, you're out. Third, they had to be good-looking and without a blemish. The king's court had its standards, after all. Finally, they had to be some smart cookies. Nebuchadnezzar wanted young men who not only had a strong grasp on their own culture's wisdom and knowledge, but who had the ability to quickly pick up the Chaldean language and literature.

One qualification that was not included was that they had to adhere to a common belief system. They were welcome to hold on to whatever gods they worshipped back in their home country. The only caveat was that their old ways could not interfere with Babylon's new ways. Go ahead and worship your gods, as long as you worship our gods first. For most polytheistic pagan cultures, this was no problem. For the Jews, it was *the* problem. Written long before in the number one slot on those stone tablets was the command, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Deuteronomy 5:7). There was no wiggle room allowed, even if it was at the demand of a king.

There was another major change facing Daniel and his friends. This one was life-altering and permanent. Several generations earlier, King Hezekiah became sick with a terminal illness. He cried out to God, and the Lord graciously extended his life. At that time, a fledgling kingdom sent envoys with some letters and a present to the king, congratulating him on his recovery. Hezekiah was feeling a little full of himself and decided he wanted to show off to these foreigners. So he gave them a tour of Jerusalem, including his gold and silver, his spices, and his armory. The kingdom these men came from was Babylon.

Soon after their departure, the prophet Isaiah paid Hezekiah a visit. He told the king that he had done a very foolish thing by letting his pride get the best of him and putting all his treasures on display. Then Isaiah prophesied to Hezekiah of a coming time:

Hear the word of the LORD of hosts: “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,” says the LORD. “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 39:5-7).

Daniel and his friends were the fulfillment of this prophecy. They were taken away to Babylon, where they would have been made eunuchs. As additional evidence of this fact, look back to Daniel 1:3. Who was it that was in charge of the young men at their departure? It was Ashpenaz, the master of King Nebuchadnezzar’s eunuchs. Not only were these young men taken from their homes, transported to a faraway land, and placed in a culture that was the polar opposite of righteous and monotheistic, but they were also sexually mutilated so that they would never be able to have children. All their dreams about being a father, passing on the family name, bouncing a toddler on their knee, all gone with a cut. If Job’s wife had been there, she would have concluded that they should just “Curse God and die!” (Job 2:9).

Yet still, we see Daniel and his friends holding on to their hope.

Acclimation and Assimilation

The king was now faced with a strategic decision. Here was a batch of freshly arrived Jerusalem eunuchs to join the ones he already had from Egypt and Assyria. If his plan were to work of using these young men as sources of wisdom and influence within his court, he had to make sure their loyalties lay with him. Assassination and intrigue were a constant within the halls of many palaces. If these guys were going to use their brains to plot and scheme, Nebuchadnezzar wanted to make sure they were plotting for him and not

against him. He had to find a way to separate them from the loyalty they felt to the homes they left and direct it instead to the land in which they now lived.

There was one great advantage Nebuchadnezzar had with his future advisors. They were all young. Youthful minds are easier to reprogram. They are adaptable. It causes far less grief for a child or teen to acclimate to a new situation than it does an adult. Whereas a captured soldier may need to be compelled at the point of a sword to serve, a young person can be persuaded with a harsh word or, better yet, an incentive. Thus, what we find in Daniel 1 is a strategy of reprogram and reward.

The first part of the reprogramming was a rebranding. These young men were no longer Jews, they were Babylonians. Thus, they needed Babylonian names.

Now from among those of the sons of Judah were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. 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 (Daniel 1:6-7).

Back in that time, names meant something. Today, few people understand the origin of their name or its meaning, beyond it maybe belonging to a family member, friend, or historical figure. In the time of Daniel, names were typically used to express character or, more frequently, to honor God. As part of the reprogramming process, Ashpenaz, chief of the eunuchs, instituted a significant change for these young Jews. Their names would still elicit praise, but to a different deity.

Marduk was the chief god of Babylon, the protector of the city. He was also known as Bel, which many might recognize from the Hebrew pronunciation of his name, Baal. His son, Nabu, was the god

of wisdom and literature. Mount Nebo, Moses' vantage point of the Promised Land before his death, bears the name of this "announcer" god. A third god who was worshipped in Babylon was the moon god, Aku. It is these three gods who find their way into the appellations of our newly minted Babylonians.

Daniel's name means "God is my judge." In its place, he was given Belteshazzar, "Bel protect the prince." Imagine this young man, while striving to remain true to his Lord, being labeled with the name of Baal, the one false god who had likely been the greatest stumbling block for wayward Jews over the centuries. Hananiah, who at birth had been given the God-affirming name "Yahweh has acted graciously," was rechristened with one that celebrated creation rather than the Creator—Shadrach, the "command of Aku." Mishael's name became Meshach. "Who is like God?" became "Who is like Aku?" So similar, but so very different. Finally, there was Azariah, whose name celebrated the true God who lovingly comes alongside His people—"Yahweh has helped." His name became Abednego, or "Servant of Nabu."

Did this rebranding work to separate these young men from their past? That we are studying the book of Daniel instead of the book of Belteshazzar gives us a hint. With just a few exceptions, whenever Daniel mentioned his Babylonian name, he used some version of the formula "Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar." The only times he didn't use that formula in his book was chapter 4, which is when King Nebuchadnezzar had taken the role of storyteller.

If Daniel insisted on using his own Jewish name in his book, why did he refer to his friends by their Babylonian names? First, we need to realize that there are only three contexts where Daniel talks about these three companions. One is when they are introduced, and we learn about their name conversions. The second is at the end of chapter 2, when the young prophet reveals to Nebuchadnezzar the meaning of his dream. At the end, we read:

Daniel petitioned the king, and he set Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego over the affairs of the province of Babylon; but Daniel sat in the gate of the king (Daniel 2:49).

This refers to official court business, so it makes sense that Daniel would use the court names of his friends. The final usage is the entirety of chapter 3, in which we read the tale of the fiery furnace. His use of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego there is just good storytelling. From a writer's point of view, having to remind the reader who is who as Daniel switched from his narrative to Babylonian character's quotes would make the account unreadable. So, like the great author he is, the prophet streamlined his story by using his friends' Babylonian names, and let us all sit back to enjoy the action.

When deciding whether to fight against these new names, it seems like Daniel and friends decided to go with the flow. There's nothing in the Mosaic law that prohibited a certain kind of name. And, since they were likely brought up with a knowledge of Jewish history, they would know that having a foreign god in one's name wasn't unprecedented. The great hero judge Gideon, after he destroyed the altar of Baal, was given the name Jerubbaal, which means "contender with Baal" or "Baal judges." Certainly that was a different context, but ultimately, Belteshazzar and Jerubbaal shared the same false god in their names. So these young men took the "Call me anything you like, just don't call me late for dinner" approach. It turned out, though, that dinner was where the true test of their commitment to God would come.

A Change of Diet

Being raised among royalty had many privileges, one of which was good food. Daniel has been portrayed by some health-conscious folks as a committed vegetarian. I would call his vegetarianism more situational, because the chances that he stuck to the green stuff before he was hauled away to Babylon are very slim. In the palace at Jerusalem,

food of all types was not a problem. King Solomon's spread was especially opulent:

Now Solomon's provision for one day was thirty kors of fine flour, sixty kors of meal, ten fatted oxen, twenty oxen from the pastures, and one hundred sheep, besides deer, gazelles, roebucks, and fatted fowl (1 Kings 4:22-23).

Certainly the economic situation had changed since the Solomonic heyday, but I have no doubt that meat was still on the palace menu. Once he got to Babylon, Daniel became a vegetarian because he had to, not because he wanted to.

When Daniel arrived in Babylon, he wasn't thrown as a captive into a cell and fed bread and water. That would not work with Nebuchadnezzar's plan of having these young men "serve before the king" (Daniel 1:5). To get the best out of them, he needed them smart and healthy. So he ordered that these new court recruits be given "a daily provision of the king's delicacies and of the wine which he drank" (verse 5). For most of those who had been taken with Daniel, eating this royal food was wonderful. Mealtime would have included meats, fish, and vegetables cooked into amazing dishes using spices from all over the world. Babylon might have begun to feel more like a foreign study program at a royal university than forced captivity. Well, except for the whole eunuch thing. But imprisonment in a distant land certainly could have been a lot worse.

But while everybody else was celebrating the menu, Daniel was faced with a dilemma.

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; therefore he requested of the chief of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself (verse 8).

God was very specific in the Mosaic law about what animals could and couldn't be eaten. There would have been much from the king's table that didn't meet up with God's standards. Some might ask, "Why didn't Daniel just eat around the bad stuff? If they served him surf and turf, couldn't he just shove the lobster to the side and eat the steak?" That wouldn't have worked because the problem was more than just a kosher one. Most meat in those days was offered to the gods before it came to the plate. In Babylon, it seems this was also true of the wine because Daniel decided to reject it also.

Was eating this food really that big of a deal? Think about it: Daniel had been uprooted from his comfortable home. He had been forced on a four-month journey. Then when he arrived, he had been mutilated and told that he was to serve the one responsible for his mutilation. All in all, it had been a lousy period of his life. Could he really be blamed if he partook in some of the few pleasures still available to him? What if he still prayed, read the Scriptures, and tried to always do the right thing? Couldn't he compromise in this one little area? It's not like there were any rabbis around to condemn him. Besides, wasn't it God who had allowed this whole upheaval to happen?

This takes me back to the Garden of Eden and the satanic logic used to seduce Eve into compromise:

[The serpent] said to the woman, "Has God indeed said, 'You shall not eat of every tree of the garden?'"

And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; but of the fruit of the tree which *is* in the midst of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.'"

Then the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes

will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:1-5).

First, the serpent challenged God’s word—“Has God indeed said...?” Then he challenged God’s character—“You will not surely die,” implying that God had lied. The enemy likely used the same tactic on Daniel. “Would compromising the dietary laws really be that bad, given your situation?” And, “God is the one who got you into this mess. See how He’s repaid your righteousness?”

This same kind of spiritual seduction is rampant today, especially in the church. “We’re grown adults, and we’ve both been married before. Is it really that big of a deal if we sleep together?” “God has let me get into this financial mess. Surely, He can’t expect me to tithe when I’m already just getting by.” There’s a reason we are admonished to be wise as a serpent (see Matthew 10:16). The devil is exceptional at using twisted logic to make sin seem not only okay, but beneficial and our right.

But righteousness is not fluid. Morality is not situational. God has called us to a standard, and when we flaunt that standard, it creates a barrier between ourselves and Him. Daniel was committed to ensuring that his actions were never responsible for driving a wedge between himself and God.

Though most of the captive Jews were unfaithful to God, those who placed Him first in their lives did not go unnoticed by their Father in heaven. After Daniel and his friends were confronted with the non-kosher, idol-sacrificed diet, we see two very important words: “But Daniel.” That beautiful conjunction “but” is so often used in Scripture to contrast the unrighteous with the righteous, the bad news with the good, destruction with hope.

Remember back in Genesis when God looked around the world and saw how corrupt mankind had become? It grieved Him when He compared the beauty of when it all started with the sinful ugliness of what it had become.

So the LORD said, “I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast, creeping thing and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.” But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD (Genesis 6:7-8).

There was sin, sorrow, and impending destruction. Then came those future-altering words, “But Noah,” and with them came hope and joy and an incredible glimpse into how holiness and love are perfectly balanced in the character of God.

Daniel would not give in like the others. He would not defile himself with the king’s menu. He would stand for his beliefs. But he knew this was a risk. Standing against the orders of the king was a near foolproof method for getting yourself killed. So to pull this off, he and his buddies were going to have to be smart.

They formulated a plan.

But God was way ahead of them. Even before they had made their commitment, He was at work preparing their overseer to be open to their suggestion. “Now God had brought Daniel into the favor and goodwill of the chief of the eunuchs” (Daniel 1:9). This is why we never need to fear doing the right thing. Before we are even faced with a moral dilemma, God knows whether we will say yes to righteousness, and He has already begun working out the situation.

The Boys Make a Stand

Daniel and his boys determined to stand with God and not eat the food. They knew the potential consequences, but to them, faithfulness was more important than life. How did they approach it? Did they go on strike? Did they march around the dining hall with chants and signs? Absolutely not. Instead of using a negative approach to a negative situation, they turned it around to a positive.

Daniel said to the steward whom the chief of the eunuchs had set over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, “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.” So he consented with them in this matter, and tested them ten days (Daniel 1:11-14).

The steward hesitated. He was afraid for his life. If anything went awry with his charges, it wouldn’t just cause him a reprimand or even his job. A downturn in the health of Daniel, et al., said the man, “would endanger my head before the king” (verse 10). That’s even worse than some of the punishments I and my fellow soldiers experienced in the Israeli Defense Forces, although only slightly. So Daniel made him a proposition he couldn’t refuse: “Feed us vegetables and water for ten days, then see how we are.” It was brilliant! No downside for the steward, only the potential of positive results. The man readily agreed.

Ten days passed, and it was time for the inspection. The steward looked the four young men over and saw that “their features appeared better and fatter in flesh than all the young men who ate the portion of the king’s delicacies” (verse 15). So amazing were the results that the rest of the young men had their “delicacies” taken away and replaced with vegetables, instantaneously making Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego the most disliked members of the king’s training program.

God’s hand is so wonderfully evident in this account. A vegetarian diet can certainly bring noticeable changes in a person’s health over time. But for there to be that significant a difference in only ten days shows that God was there quite literally tipping the scales

in their favor. This takes us back to the point we discussed earlier. When we determine to do what is right, the Lord will be there with us 100 percent of the time. He won't just be watching us from a distance, rooting for us and hoping it all turns out okay. He will be intimately and intricately involved.

And the blessings for obedience are ongoing. God didn't just help out Daniel and his friends in this instance, then say, "See you around." As they kept their eyes on Him, He kept His eyes on them.

As for these four young men, God gave them knowledge and skill in all literature and wisdom; and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams. Now at the end of the days, when the king had said that they should be brought in, the chief of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar. Then the king interviewed them, and among them all none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah; therefore they served before the king. 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 (verses 17-20).

God caused them to excel through the program. Then, at graduation, they not only outshone the rest of their class, but these teens were far wiser than any of the seasoned wise men in the kingdom. Now, I'd like to attribute this to the fact that, like me, they were Jews of the tribe of Judah. However, quality of this type goes far beyond even that pedigree. These young men reaped what they had sown. They were faithful in their actions, and the Lord was faithful in His gifts and blessings.

It is unlikely that any of us will face a life-and-death decision over righteousness. But we do face situations every day when we have the

choice to say yes to God or yes to ourselves. Some of these may be big decisions, but most will be small. In those lesser times, the enemy may whisper in our ear as he did to Eve, “It’s really no big deal. Just this one time.”

Every decision as to whether we sin or not is a big one, because every sin is big. Not only does it separate us from our closeness with God, but it has a cumulative effect. Jesus told His disciples, “He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much” (Luke 16:10). I have seen far too many believers shipwreck their faith after giving in to little sinful compromises.

Peace comes from knowing you are right with God. Hope comes from holding on to the promises the Lord gives to us when we are right with Him. Daniel experienced a bounty of spiritual blessings because of his faithfulness. In the next chapter, we’ll see that faithfulness take him into the throne room of the king.