

# THE GOSPEL PROJECT – CHRONOLOGICAL EXILE and RETURN GOD THE SUSTAINER *How to Stay Faithful in Exile*

The disobedience of many led to the people of Judah being disgraced and taken into captivity by the godless nation of Babylon. The obedience of a few during that 70 year captivity reveals how God sustains His children even in the darkest of times. Daniel was a teenager when he was taken from Jerusalem to Babylon. He would never return home. In more than 60 years of his life in Babylon, Daniel would face many challenges; yet, in all those years in exile, he did what was important, that is, he grew stronger in his commitment to God, his Sustainer. Daniel became the kind of person that David wrote about in *Psalms 1:3* *He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.*

Daniel's lifetime of being sustained by the LORD took root in a place far away from his home. By the world's standards, it would have been a 'wonderful' place. Its Hanging Gardens were one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. There was a wall around Babylon wide enough to ride four chariots around the top side by side. It was situated near the Garden of Eden region and the area (Shinar) where the Tower of Babel – a monument to human pride was built. It is believed to be close to what we know today as Baghdad in Iraq. In Daniel's time, the city of Babylon was the premier city of the pre-Christian world. It was the most powerful empire that had existed up until that time. However, it lasted for only 70 years. Daniel would be there from its rise to its fall – all the while remembering his true identity.

**Read Daniel 1:1-7 (ESV)** <sup>1</sup> *In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it.* <sup>2</sup> *And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God. And he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his god.* <sup>3</sup> *Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility,* <sup>4</sup> *youths without blemish, of good appearance and skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king's palace, and to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans.* <sup>5</sup> *The king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate, and of the wine that he drank. They were to be educated for three years, and at the end of that time they were to stand before the king.* <sup>6</sup> *Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah of the tribe of Judah.* <sup>7</sup> *And the chief of the eunuchs gave them names: Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego.*

Daniel notes in verse 2 that it was the LORD who gave Jehoiakim, king of Judah, into Nebuchadnezzar's hand. Daniel acknowledged the sovereignty of God's plan from the beginning of Daniel's arrival in Babylon. God moves in the affairs of nations through each generation of mankind to accomplish His purposes and to bring in

His Kingdom. Long before, Jesus taught His disciples to pray in **Matthew 6:10 (ESV)** <sup>10</sup> *Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven* – Daniel understood the sovereignty of God in all of life’s situations. Daniel lived during a period of history before the coming of Christ. However, it is generally believed that Daniel in his old age had a vision of Christ Himself (**Daniel 10:5-7**). The God of Heaven and Earth is our Sustainer. No matter what our life’s circumstances, once we have seen Jesus, we are forever changed! And we need to live like it!

When Nebuchadnezzar invaded Jerusalem, he took treasures from the temple of God and put them in the temples of his god. Next, he took the brightest and best of Jerusalem’s young men (the Jewish ‘treasures’ held in jars of clay) with the mission of molding them into officials who would serve Babylon – proving in his mind Babylon’s superiority to the Jews and their one God, Jehovah. They were to be trained for three years and then enter the king’s service. The young men apparently put up no resistance to studying the Babylonian language and literature. Missionaries today know that the best way to reach people for the one true God is to know the language of the people and to understand its culture. God’s mission team in long ago Babylon was no different.

Ashpenaz was the chief eunuch guarding the family of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. He administered the diet and life-style of Daniel and his three friends, giving them new Babylonian names. The name of the true and living God was replaced by the names of the false gods of Babylon; but would we expect unbelievers to do anything else? However, from the actions of these four men we are reminded that a name change does not have to reflect a heart change. They remained faithful to the one true God.

They were also given food from the king’s table. This was considered a special privilege. They were to eat what the king ate. They were to live as the world lived. Embrace the risk of holiness.

**Read Daniel 1:8-16 (ESV)** <sup>8</sup> *But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king’s food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself.* <sup>9</sup> *And God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs,* <sup>10</sup> *and the chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, “I fear my lord the king, who assigned your food and your drink; for why should he see that you were in worse condition than the youths who are of your own age? So you would endanger my head with the king.”* <sup>11</sup> *Then Daniel said to the steward whom the chief of the eunuchs had assigned over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah,* <sup>12</sup> *“Test your servants for ten days; let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink.* <sup>13</sup> *Then let our appearance and the appearance of the youths who eat the king’s food be observed by you, and deal with your servants according to what you see.”* <sup>14</sup> *So he listened to them in this matter, and tested them for ten days.* <sup>15</sup> *At the end of ten days it was seen that they were better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youths who ate the king’s food.* <sup>16</sup> *So the steward took away their food and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables.*

Possibly, their reason for rejecting food was because most of the meat from the king’s table probably came from animals sacrificed to Babylonian gods. When Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness, Jesus said in **Matthew 4:4 (ESV)** <sup>4</sup> ... *“It is written, “‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of*

*God.* "If Daniel and his friends ate the food and wine offered to them, it would give an appearance of giving their loyalty to idols. Recall the KJV of Paul's words to the Thessalonians recorded in **1 Thessalonians. 5:22** *Abstain from all appearance of evil.*

The Gospel Project commentator pointed out a small detail that I had never noticed before. When Ashpenaz refused to give the young men the new diet, Daniel then made his request of their immediate guard. In the past, I made the mistake of thinking that it was Ashpenaz to whom Daniel offered the trial period. To me, this a reminder from God's Word in order to do the LORD's will we need to remain persistent to do what we know in our heart is right.

The KJV translates the food that Daniel asked for as pulse. The ESV translates what he requested to be served as vegetables generally peas, beans, and lentils. In Hebrew pulse meant "things that have been sown;" therefore, this designation could have included grain. Daniel's proposal of a food test reminds me of a test God suggested in **Malachi 3:10 (ESV)** <sup>10</sup> *Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need.*

And when the test was ended, Daniel and his friends looked healthier and better nourished than those who ate the royal food. The self-control of these men in their youth prepared them for God's work of a lifetime of service for Him. People struggling with any temptation can draw strength from the successful example of these four youths' efforts to remain faithful in small things which eventually led to their faithfulness in bigger things. Look for ways to identify to God's grace.

**Read Daniel 1:17-21 (ESV)** <sup>17</sup> *As for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams.* <sup>18</sup> *At the end of the time, when the king had commanded that they should be brought in, the chief of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar.* <sup>19</sup> *And the king spoke with them, and among all of them none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Therefore they stood before the king.* <sup>20</sup> *And in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanterers that were in all his kingdom.* <sup>21</sup> *And Daniel was there until the first year of King Cyrus.*

Daniel does not mention their specific studies; most likely, they were taught the religion of Babylon as well as the system of astrology that formed the basis for both their religion and their science. The king's official counselors had to be able to interpret dreams and various omens, because understanding the times and knowing the future were both important to the king's success. The young men were given what we would call a "secular education" steeped in the superstition of that day.

Should the people of God learn "the wisdom of this world" when we have the inspired and infallible Word of God to instruct us? Some sincere believers think that all "worldly education" is sinful, while others, just as sincere, believe that God's people should understand the mindset of the world but not be controlled by it. That is the belief I hold. Robert Murray M'Cheyne, a minister in the Church of Scotland in the 1800s wrote in a letter

to a friend, “Beware of the atmosphere of the classics. True, we ought to know them; but only as chemists handle poison—to discover their qualities, not to infect their blood with them.”

By understanding the mindset of the Babylonian people, especially the king's magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers, Daniel and his three friends were better able to show them the superiority of God's wisdom. The LORD gives us what we need. In fact, He gave Daniel a special gift of understanding visions and dreams. In the first half of his book, Daniel interpreted the visions and dreams of others, but in the last half, he received visions of his own from the Lord.

Through the circumstances of life, these young men were being pressured to conform to their captors' way of life; however, their hearts chose to be transformed. *Romans 12:2 (ESV)*<sup>2</sup> *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

Isolation, indoctrination, assimilation, and confusion were the Babylonian tools of seduction. If we are not on guard, we can fall prey to those same tools.

It is easy to recognize the tremendous pressures they faced. It began with **isolation** from their home and families. Who would care what they did to survive in this foreign land? God cared then and He still cares today! Don't allow yourself to become isolated from other believers. If for some reason that is not possible, understand you are never isolated from God. *Hebrews 13:5 (ESV)*<sup>5</sup> *... for he has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.”*

Beware of the world that is working to **indoctrinate** you with its beliefs. Don't allow this world to cause you to become an educated 'fool.' *Psalms 14:1 (ESV)*<sup>1</sup> *The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.”...*

Refrain from being **assimilated** into the world around you. Another word for assimilate is absorb. In other words, don't soak up the world! *Ephesians 5:18 (ESV)*<sup>18</sup> *And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit.* Focus on soaking up God's Word instead of the fleeting fancies of this world!

The Babylonians tried to confuse the Jews by exposing them to different religions, new names, new experiences. Trust the Lord and stand firm in His truth! *Ephesians 4:14 (ESV)*<sup>14</sup> *so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.*

The LORD had called the descendants of Abraham to be a unique people who did not walk in the counsel of the wicked. Time and time again, they walked in ways that pleased themselves instead of God. In Daniel and his friends we do find descendants of Abraham who delighted in the God who sustained them no matter what their circumstance. He will help us do the same no matter where we are.