

Daniel 1:1-8 “When the Sovereign Lord Doesn’t Seem Sovereign”^{**1}

Main Idea: At times in the Bible, as in our own lives, the sovereign God doesn’t seem sovereign. But He indeed is, as He demonstrates for us in two ways in Daniel 1:1-8.

- I. We see the Lord’s sovereignty in a nation’s tragedy (1-2).
 - A. Jerusalem was attacked.
 - B. The Jews were taken captive.
 - C. The temple was desecrated.
- II. We see the Lord’s sovereignty in a remnant’s test (3-8).
 - A. They confronted the unfamiliar (3-5).
 - B. They confronted the ungodly (6-7).
 1. They were tempted to lose their identity.
 2. They were tempted to lose their allegiance.
 - C. Daniel chose the unpopular (8).
 1. He was a man of principle.
 2. He was a man of purity.

Make It Personal: What do we learn from Daniel?

1. The book of Daniel points us to Christ.
2. The book of Daniel shows us how to make much of Christ in a hostile world.

God is sovereign, but at times He doesn’t seem sovereign.

Do you have anything in your life or in the world around you that you’re struggling to understand? I have good news for you. The Lord has given us a special book to show us the difference His sovereignty makes when He doesn’t seem sovereign. Let’s read from this book.

Scripture Reading: Daniel 1:1-8

Who is the main character in the book of Daniel?

When many look at the book of Daniel, they see Daniel. And his three friends. In other words, they see the purpose of this book as providing us with moral examples. Which it does. And we’ll consider the examples of Daniel and his three friends, with biblical warrant too. We’re told in 1 Corinthians 10:11, “These things [accounts concerning Israel in the Old Testament] happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us.”

But the book of Daniel isn’t about Daniel, not primarily. It’s about *God*. What we just read reveals God to us. The Bible is God’s self-disclosure. We saw this last year when we studied Esther. And a few years ago in Ruth. Yes, the Lord gives us some moral lessons in these accounts, but most importantly, He gives us Himself.

This morning we are beginning a study in what is a life-changing book. Daniel is packed with relevance for us. It shows us how to live for God in a secular world, for the events of Daniel take place, not in the Promised Land, but in a nation much like ours. God’s people, like Daniel, found themselves immersed in a pagan culture. They had no temple and no sacrificial system. Yet they learned how to live as the covenant people of God in a context of pagan opposition to the true and living God.

Daniel shows us how God’s program works in a secular world. In that sense, it provides an important transition from the Old Testament theocracy to New Testament sojourning. Daniel shows us how to live for God when you are the minority, when you’re outnumbered by pagan critics.

** Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For an earlier development of this passage, see the Daniel series at WBC in 1996.

My friends, more and more this is the situation confronting the American Church in the 21st century. We do not live in a Christian nation. We are a minority. So how should we live in this world?

God shows us in the book of Daniel. He shows us that He is sovereign, even when He doesn't seem sovereign. And He demonstrates this for us at the very beginning of the book in two ways. In Daniel 1:1-8, first, in a nation's tragedy (1-2), and second, in a remnant's testing (3-8).

I. We see the Lord's sovereignty in a nation's tragedy (1-2).

Notice the setting in verse 1, "In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it."

Now that's a tragedy, and it's been brewing for decades. In fact, God's prophets had warned His people time after time, to no avail.

A century before Isaiah had pleaded in behalf of God in Isaiah 1:18-20, "Come now, let us reason together," says the LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best from the land; but if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword." For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

Sadly, God's people chose the latter. They didn't listen to Isaiah, nor to Amos, nor Joel, nor the other prophets.

So the inevitable occurred. The ungodly people of Yahweh felt the heavy hand of God's judgment, just like He said they would. God raised up the mighty nation of Babylon to chastise His defiant children.

The tragedy came in three forms, as described by Daniel in verses 1-2.

A. Jerusalem was attacked.

The text says it happened in the third year while Jehoiakim was king. The northern kingdom of Israel was already gone, having been conquered and deported in 722 BC by the cruel Assyrians. But the southern kingdom, known as Judah, coasted along for another century plus, teeter-tottering with sin, until the wrath of God would be assuaged no longer.

Then, Nebuchadnezzar attacked the city of David, the city of peace, Jerusalem, and when the dust settled, the place was in shambles.

As a result, another tragedy took place.

B. The Jews were taken captive.

Notice verse 2, "And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia and put in the treasure house of his god."

That's a stunning statement. Listen to it again. *And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand.*

Lest we think the fall of Jerusalem was an indication that God went on vacation, or that He was outmaneuvered by the devil, verse 2 informs us that God is sovereign even in the tragedy of the captivity of His people.

The Lord delivered. The Lord delivered Jehoiakim into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. The Lord delivered the people of Judah into the same hands. The hand of God is sovereign over the affairs of men.

Just think of the timeless truth behind that statement. Who really is in control of world events in our day? Is the United Nations? Is President Obama? Never forget this. The God who is, the God who acted in the sixth century BC, is the One who raises up

nations, and takes them down, who raises up leaders, and brings them down. Think of that when you watch the news coverage of the presidential primaries.

History tells us that the Jews were not taken captive during one Babylonian campaign, but three. There were three stages in the fall of Judah.

1. *The first stage: 605 B.C.*
2. *The second stage: 597 B.C.*
3. *The third stage: 586 B.C.*

Daniel mentions only the first stage, and as far as he was concerned, the 70-year captivity period started in 605 B.C., the date on which the shackles were placed on his wrists. It's that date which will be important for figuring the end of the captivity, which God predicted would occur 70 years later (Jer 29:10).

For now, notice a third tragedy.

C. The temple was desecrated.

Notice the entirety of verse 2, "And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia and put in the treasure house of his god."

When it was all said and done, the Babylonians destroyed the very temple of God. They demolished the place God had graciously provided for sacrifices, to make atonement for sinners.

But now it's gone, destroyed by the ruthless Babylonians. And to pour salt in the stinging wounds of the Jews, they plundered the temple articles and placed them in the house of their gods. It was a symbolic gesture that said, "Our gods are stronger than yours."

Talk about in your face! And where was God in this tragedy? Was He unable to prevent this? Was Yaweh less powerful than Bel and Marduk, the gods of the Babylonians? How could He allow His own temple to be desecrated by these worshippers of rival gods?

And then we notice verse 2 again, "The Lord delivered." This tragedy was no accident, no quirk of fate, no sign of weakness.

In fact, the real issue here is not how could God allow pagans to desecrate His temple. The real problem was that God's own people had been desecrating His reputation for year after year after year. Until God took action.

Several years ago I heard the story about Moshe Diane, Israel's great military genius, who traveled to New Dehli, India. Moseh Diane was the man who led Israel to the miracle victory in the Six-Day war in 1967. The press in New Dehli asked Moshe about this incredible win, and he responded by saying, "The God Who was, is. The God Who did, does."

If you are a God-fearing person, you are no doubt concerned about the moral direction of our nation. You may even wonder, "What's going to happen to the church if so-and-so gets elected?" I believe as good Christian citizens, we ought to be involved in the political process, but never forget this. God's program is not dependent on a political party or platform. God is not a democrat. He is not a republican either. He already has a platform. He's intent on establishing His kingdom, which He is doing now one life at a time, through the message of His saving Son Jesus, and will establish on earth when His triumphant Son returns.

My friend, God used a dictator like Nebuchadnezzar to accomplish His plan. He is sovereign. We see His sovereignty in a nation's tragedy 2,500 years ago, and in the national tragedies in our world today. We may not know what the Lord is up to, but He

does. He's at work, raising up kingdoms and taking them down, moving history towards His intended goal. And He wants us to trust Him.

But He demonstrates His sovereignty in a second way in our text. It too gives us incentive to trust Him.

II. We see the Lord's sovereignty in a remnant's test (3-8).

Let's not misunderstand something. The fact that God judged the nation of Judah did not mean there were no godly people in Judah. There was a remnant. God always has His remnant. And through that remnant, God continued His work towards redeeming a people from every nation.

So the same tragedy that God used to discipline His wayward chosen nation He also used to strengthen the character of His faithful remnant.

Let's take a look at the test in verses 3-8. It was a test in character development taken by four pupils which most of us first met years ago in Sunday School. Their names: Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. What kind of test did these men face? It involved three challenges (we'll see the outcome next week, the Lord willing).

A. They confronted the unfamiliar (3-5).

Verse 3 takes us to Babylon, "Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring in some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility."²

Nebechadnezzar passed down an executive order to his chief of staff, Ashpenaz. He wanted him to recruit top-notch young people for his service, and then put them through a vigorous training program.

There was a political motivation behind this decision. How do you break the backbone of a nation you just conquered, particularly a nation with a strong national identity? The answer is you enroll their most promising youth, their future leaders, in your service. You make them dependent upon you by showering them with privileges which would ensure their loyalty to you.

That's what Nebuchadnezzar did. He utilized the same kind of denationalization and brainwashing that the Soviet communists practiced just a generation ago.

What kind of youth did Nebuchadnezzar seek? Verse 4 tells us, "...young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians."

So Nebechadnezzar wanted the cream of the crop. The young men with the brightest minds, the healthiest bodies, and the highest aptitude for learning and leading. Go get them, said the king to Ashpenaz.

Which he did. And what did Nebuchadnezzar do with these recruits? Notice verse 5, "The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service."³

So the training program was to last three years. It included everything from the kitchen to the classroom. And don't forget the goal of the king. He wanted to completely convert the young Hebrew recruits to the Babylonian way of life. He wanted to make

² AV, "And the king spoke unto Ashpenaz, the master of his eunuchs, that he should bring certain of the children of Israel, and of the king's seed, and of the princes."

³ AV, "And the king appointed them a daily provision of the king's food, and of the wine which he drank, so nourishing them three years that, at the end of them, they might stand before the king."

them think like Babylonians, look like Babylonians, behave like Babylonians, and even worship like Babylonians.

That of course created a real dilemma for these young Jews. Apparently the majority just went with the program, but four of them did not.

Verse 6 gives us their Hebrew names, “Among these were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah.”

Verse 7 indicates, “The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego.”

Speculation suggests that these four fellows were teenagers, between the ages of fourteen and nineteen.⁴ Just think about all the unfamiliar things that confronted them. They faced four things they’d never encountered before.

1. *A new country* -- They were in Babylon now, more than 800 miles from their familiar homeland, in what today is modern Iraq. We’ve talked recently about the special challenges our young people face when they go off to college. These young men were taken to another country, away from mom and dad, against their will.

2. *A new leader* -- A pagan leader at that. They are members of God’s chosen nation, and they’re used to having a descendant of David as their ruler. But not now. They are now subjects of a man who, rather than believing in their God, is convinced He is a weak, regional failure that he just conquered.

3. *A new language* -- It’s interesting that parts of the book of Daniel are written in Hebrew and parts in Aramaic. This presupposes that its readers were bilingual. You had to be to survive.

4. *A new culture* – The culture is different in Babylon. The clothing styles, the entertainment, the social customs, it’s all different.

What are these young men going to do as they confront the unfamiliar?

By the way, it’s good to remember something. The people of the true and living God can function and even flourish in any culture. Do you know why? It’s because God did not give us merely a religious system that’s tied to a culture, but a relationship with Himself secured by the work of His Son Jesus Christ.

I’ve had the great privilege to experience many cultures. I’ve traveled to Ukraine, Romania, Albania, to Thailand, Brazil, Peru, France, Israel, and others. I’ve worshipped with brothers and sisters in those places and noticed two things. One, we do have some cultural differences. But two, we have the same vibrant relationship with the living God, for we have come to know His Son as our mutual Lord and Savior.

So there’s challenge #1 in the test. Four Hebrew teens confronted the unfamiliar.

B. They confronted the ungodly (6-7).

What would you do if you were in a strange place, with no family members and no other church members, and you had the opportunity to sin without getting caught? Those of you who travel frequently for business know what I mean.

Joe Stowell⁵ shares about a leader of a major ministry who noticed a lady across the lobby as he checked into a hotel. He reached his room and was unloosening his tie when he heard a knock and opened the door. It was her, wanting to come in. For a flash of a moment he paused...then closed the door and walked back into the room alone.

Daniel and his friends faced temptation on two fronts.

1. *They were tempted to lose their identity.*

⁴ Strauss, 37.

⁵ in *Perilous Pursuits*, p. 30

Their God-given identity. We see this in the name changes in verse 7. When the teens arrived in Babylon, they were given new names, Babylonians names, to replace their Hebrew names. This was a very real threat to their identity as God's people.

Though we can't be dogmatic on the meaning of the names, Gaebelien suggests the following:⁶ Daniel (God is my judge) to Belteshazzar (Bel's prince). Hananiah (Beloved of the LORD) to Shadrach (Illumined by the sun). Mishael (Who is as God) to Meshach (Who is like Venus). Azariah (no meaning given; possibly Yahweh has helped) to Abednego (The servant of Nego).⁷

Just think. With these mandatory name changes, the young men were tempted to lose their identity as the people of God. Did they? We'll see in a moment, but before we do, never forget this. Our *character* is linked to our *identity*.

How I see myself affects how I live. If I see myself as "one of the guys," rather than one who is in Christ, then I'll do what the guys do rather than what Christ would have me do.

Now let's examine a second temptation.

2. *They were tempted to lose their allegiance.*

We see this in verse 8, regarding eating the king's food. "But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way."

It's interesting that Daniel accepted a new name, a new language, a new leader, but he protested when they tried to give him new food. To eat the food was to cross the line. But why?

It's hard to be certain, but several suggestions have been made. One is that Daniel wouldn't eat the meat because it had been previously offered to false gods. Another possibility is because to eat the king's meat would have been to break the Jewish Law (Lev 3:17; 11:1-47), since pork was highly prized in Babylon, and horse was also eaten freely.

Possibly, but I think there's a more likely reason. In the eastern culture, to share a meal together is to commit oneself to acceptance and friendship. When we eat together, we are now one.

But we are not one with the world, not if God has redeemed us. So later John will say, "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world (1 John 2:15)."

One commentator makes this observation, "Pagan food and drink may simply epitomize the pagan uncleanness associated with exile. This reflects the fact that what we eat and drink, like what we wear and how we speak, generally constitutes an outward expression of our self-identity and commitments."⁸

The issue in verse 8 is covenant allegiance. For Daniel to eat the king's food would be to say, "My new friend and master is Nebuchadnezzar. I give my allegiance to him."

But Daniel had already given his allegiance to Another. His heart belonged to the Living God, and he would not compromise that devotion.

So guess what he did? After the four Hebrews faced the unfamiliar and the ungodly, Daniel choose the unpopular.

⁶ in Strauss, 38

⁷ It's interesting that Daniel seemed to retain his Hebrew name, while the other are typically referred to by their Babylonian names.

⁸ John Goldingay, p. 19.

C. Daniel chose the unpopular (8).

“But Daniel resolved not to defile himself.” Just Daniel? What about the other three? Apparently, Daniel was the leader of the four Hebrews for verse 8 says (in the AV), “But Daniel purposed in his heart,” and verse 14 indicates that the other three agreed with him.

One thing's for sure. Daniel's priorities were firm. He chose to live a life pleasing to God, even if it meant standing alone.

How we need more Christians like Daniel! A. W. Tozer once observed, “A whole new generation of Christians has come up believing that it is possible to 'accept' Christ without forsaking the world.” Yet such an attitude smacks in the face passages like 1 John 2:15, “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” (also 2 Cor 6:14)

How did Daniel ever make it? How could such a young person stand for God, resist the peer-pressure, and choose the unpopular? He could for two reasons.

1. *He was a man of principle.* Where did he get that principle? From the Word of God. Evidently the work of prophets like Jeremiah, Zephaniah, and Habakkuk had not been in vain. These prophets had prepared the God-fearing minority in Jerusalem for the inevitable exile that was coming. We can assume that the four teenagers' parents had also taught them the Word of God. And it stuck.

There's a good reminder here for parents. Our aim is to teach our children how to function in the world, not retreat from it, and when we're not around. It's not enough to teach them WHAT to think, but HOW to think, how to apply God's truth to real life situations.

They could change Daniel's name, but they couldn't change his nature, his culture, but not his character.

How could Daniel chose the unpopular? First, because he was a man of Word-shaped principle.

2. *He was a man of purity.* Daniel purposes in his heart that he would not “defile” himself. The word means “to contaminate.” Purity was a priority for him. He was cooperative with his ungodly supervisor, but not compromising. He wasn't afraid to say no to what God forbids.

In his helpful book *Man in the Mirror*, Patrick Morley tells the story about a man named Steve.⁹ Steve and his wife sold their businesses, enrolled in a graduate school out of state, and purchased a home near the university. When they went to close the mortgage on the new house, the mortgage company wanted him to falsify some financial information.

Steve told them, “I can't do that.” They replied, “It's no big deal. Everybody does it.” To which Steve responded, “I don't think you understand, I can't do that.”

The banker fidgeted as he spoke, “It just goes in the file; nobody will ever even look at it. Besides, if you don't then we can't give you the loan.”

Steve and his wife were Christians. They really believed God had led them to the decision to return to school. It would have been so easy to justify their actions. But they didn't. Steve decided to return to school locally instead of moving out of state on a lie. He lost the house, but kept something much more valuable, something many have forfeited time and time again--his integrity.

⁹ *Man in the Mirror*, p. 40

Daniel, by God's grace, was a man of principle and purity. And these things happened as examples, says 1 Corinthians 10.

So what about you, and me? Perhaps you're thinking of some embarrassing moments in your past when you didn't do what Daniel did. You didn't resolve not to defile yourself. The truth is, that's true of every one of us, including Daniel.

We're all sinners. But thankfully, in His grace God provides a way out.

First, confess your sin to Him and experience His cleansing. For Daniel, since the altar was destroyed, that meant looking ahead to the final lamb God would send. For us, it's looking back to the Lamb who was slain in our place, Jesus.

Second, as did Zacchaeus in Luke 19, resolve to make restitution. Go to those to whom you've lied or cheated. Go to those who have seen your unethical actions. Ask for their forgiveness. Tell them, "I belong to Christ. What I did in the past was wrong. I wish I could change it, but I can't. I've asked God to forgive me, and He has because of Christ. Now I want to ask for your forgiveness."

Brothers and sisters, we need Daniels today, men and women of character in a world of compromise. This character doesn't earn favor with God. It's the result of it. And it points the attention of an onlooking world to the One who made it possible, our righteous Savior.

Make It Personal: What do we learn from Daniel?

1. The book of Daniel points us to Christ.

The Law and the prophets, it all points to Him. That's what Jesus said. How so in Daniel 1? In Daniel 1 we see the reason why we need Jesus. Sin. Even the chosen people of God have sinned and fallen short of His glory, and we're just like them. Sinners.

But we see something else in Daniel 1. Grace. In His grace God preserved a remnant of His people through which He would work to advance His saving plan. He preserved four teenage boys, and enabled them to stand for Him. And as we'll see, He eventually used them to make Himself known to the world in His sovereign splendor.

"By grace are you saved," says God's Word (Eph 2:8).

Again I ask, do you know the God of grace? Have you experienced the saving grace of God, and are you putting that grace on display in your life?

2. The book of Daniel shows us how to make much of Christ in a hostile world.

So what do we do when the sovereign Lord doesn't seem sovereign? Daniel challenges us to make two resolutions.

One, I must live by principle. The driving question in my mind must be, not, "Will it hurt me?" nor, "Can I get away with it?" but "Is it right?"

Two, I must live by principles. The fact is there are lots of life-situations the Bible does not address specifically. There were no copyright laws, no websites, no tax returns with corners to cut, when the Bible was written. So what do you do? Do whatever you think is right? No. Daniel teaches us to apply the principles of God's Word to the situations of life.

To make much of Christ I live by principle and by the principles of God's Word. We'll see how in future weeks in Daniel.