

Group Study Outline

Daniel 1 Theme Sentence

God rules; a tyrant may be in charge and enslave God's people, but one day they will rule with Him.

Launching Question

Does God rule over everything that happens in the world?

READ Daniel 1:1-2 and 9:11-13

What has happened to God's people?

We know (eg from Psalm 137) how dreadful this felt: why would it feel so bad?

Why would what happens to 'the vessels' be so devastating?

'Shinah' (2), another name for Babylon, last appeared in Gen 11:2 ... what might be the significance of using that name again here?

So why was it God who 'gave' (2) his people over to Nebuchadnezzar?

Thinking it through

How does God's involvement in these first two verses provide reassurance for us?

READ Daniel 1:1-21

What is Nebuchadnezzar attempting to do (eg in v 3-4 etc), do you think?

How is this similar to what happened back in Genesis 11:1-9 (cf v 6-7 esp)?

In what ways do Daniel and his friends embrace the new culture?

We've already noticed how God 'gave' in v2. What do you make of the same 'gave' word in vv 9, 17? What does this tell us about God's providential rule?

In what ways do Daniel and his friends refuse to compromise in Babylon?

Why do they draw the line where they do? (eg why not refuse the new names?)

In what ways would eating the king's food indicate more than a free lunch?

Look at Mark 10:21 ... why does Jesus point out the man's wealth?

Thinking it through

Read 3:18 and 6:10. Why was the lesson learnt as undergrads so important?

What was this lesson that they learnt?

What kind of things might be parallels for us in the UK in the C21st? where should we draw the line as God's people living in a pagan world?

Wrapping it up

What is the significance of verse 21?

Is this verse an indication of a promise of prosperity for God's people?

How is Daniel a model of what it means to be faithful to God in a pagan culture?

Why is it that he's faithful to God rather than following all the ways of Babylon?

What do we learn from Daniel 1 about God's control of his world?

Daniel 1



Introduction to the main theme of the book

In their book 'How to read the Bible for all its worth', Fee and Stuart make the bold statement that 'no Bible narrative was written about you!' One way we treat bits of the Bible (like Daniel) as if they are written about us is when we directly apply to ourselves (for example) the way that Daniel and his friends stand up for God in a pagan culture. But this book is not primarily about them, let alone us. **This is a book about God** – he is the hero, and we learn big lessons for us from 'the big picture' of what is going on historically with the nation of Israel and why, and God's overall purposes for the world.

The book tells a tale of two cities:

- **Jerusalem** is God's holy city. If we want to see it, we need to look up (cf Revelation 21: 2) ... it's not here yet, but it is coming.
- **Babylon** is where God's people live until the new Jerusalem comes. God's people are in exile, living in a city that represents human depravity (cf Genesis 11:1-9). We are 'aliens and strangers' (1 Peter 2:11-12).

A good subtitle would be 'Kingdoms in conflict'. The message of the book to God's exiled people is that God's kingdom will outlast every human kingdom and his power is greater than every superpower (see [Introduction Notes](#) for more detail). Daniel 1 is a key chapter that introduces all these main themes.

[NS]

Daniel 1 Theme Sentence

God rules; a tyrant may be in charge and enslave God's people, but one day they will rule with Him.

Application

- God exercises his rule over this world ... that not only includes making Barack Obama US President, but also over apparently mundane things like the number of hairs on my head! This is immensely reassuring.
- When bad things happen, even to God's people, God is no less exercising his rule. God will always keep his promises and fulfil his purposes. Can we not entrust ourselves to be loyal to him above all others?
- It is not an easy thing to work out how live as one of God's people in a pagan world. We will seek the welfare of the society around us and be fully engrossed in its culture; but there will (probably/always?) be a point where we need to say 'no' to the equivalent of eating the king's food.

Commentary

GOD RULES ... WHEN HIS PEOPLE ARE IN CHAINS

1-2 The book of *Daniel* only explicitly mentions a Jewish king in these introductory verses; there is little interest hereafter in any concept of a national Israel. The unthinkable has happened: the temple has been profaned, the temple vessels taken and used as part of the apparatus of idolatry. We are not told here why it has happened, but the historical information sets this in the context of 2 Kings 23:36-24:7 ... 'surely this came upon Judah at the command of the Lord, to remove them out of his sight' (3). Daniel 9:11-13 makes it unambiguous: the covenant Lord has remained true to his covenant and the ultimate covenant curse of exile has rightly been fulfilled as divine punishment for Israel's disobedience (cf Deuteronomy 28:15-68).

This is all packed into the surprising words that start verse 2: 'The Lord gave ...'. Read this as a crisis of all that the nation stood for. 'A great nation in a prosperous land' has become a land invaded (2) with all the best people carried off (3f). But the message here is that even in such an apparent disaster, God still rules. He has done it. He is keeping his promises, and that is why his people are in exile.

Babylon is significantly described as 'Shinar' which is the location for the great rebellion of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11:4, and for a 'temple' which houses the sins of the earth in Zechariah 5:11. So Shinar represents a challenge to God's rule and a centre of depravity, and that is where the exiles now find themselves. As at the tower-building in Genesis 11, Nebuchadnezzar is attempting to order the world through a common set of unities (- one language, one social policy, one common bond of education, etc) without reference to the Creator. However well-intentioned it may be, however 'cultured' it may seem, it is rebellion. It is the land of the proud who defy the Lord.

GOD RULES ... WHEN A TYRRANT IS IN CHARGE

3-4 Nebuchadnezzar's foreign policy was clever political manoeuvring. By indoctrinating the potential leaders of a vassal state at undergraduate level in his private university with all things Babylonian (4b), he was moulding potential rebels into dependents.

6-7 But behind this is a more sinister attempt to impose world unity: the new names given to these four men establish a new identity via a new relationship to Babylon, to Babylon's gods (with reference to their gods included in some new names) and therefore to Babylon's king. This is an attempt to order the world with Nebuchadnezzar at the centre.

9, 15, 17 make it explicit that God is work even whilst Nebuchadnezzar embarks on such an anti-god policy. It is our God who gives his people knowledge and understanding (- even, note, in pagan literature and civilisation!). It is our God who caused a pagan official to think well of

them (9). And it seems a fair inference that (in 15) it is our God who makes his people (appear) healthy. Matthew 10:30 makes a similar point about the extent of God's providential rule, again in the context of not cowering timidly at powerful tyrants. The God who 'gave' in verse 2, is the same God who 'gave' in verses 9 and 17.

GOD RULES ... AND HIS PEOPLE WILL TOO

8 is the turning point in the lives of these four. But before we note what they said 'no' to, see what they said 'yes' to: a pagan education, a change of name, a political career. No doubt many would have told Daniel he was a compromiser! But Jeremiah 29:7 is important.

But they will not 'defile' themselves. This principled stand has nothing to do with the advantages of being vegetarian (!), nor is it about Jewish kosher food (since they also refuse wine which the food laws allow). It may be that the food would have been closely connected to idol worship (though the text doesn't say that, and the vegetables would surely be similarly contaminated). The most likely explanation is that 'there's no such thing as a free lunch'. Like today's business lunch, food is a way of buttering up the client, and in the ancient Near East, a sign of friendship or political alliance (cf 11:26). To eat food from the king's table then would be a sign of total dependence on Nebuchadnezzar for food, and in eating it, Daniel and his friends would be assigning loyalty to him as their provider. This is the point to say 'no', and to affirm a higher loyalty to the Lord who reigns.

It's worth pondering whether Daniel and 'The Furnace Three' would have made the stands asked of them later (- in Daniel's case, as an 80 year-old man, in chapter 6!) if they had not learnt to say 'no' here, as young undergraduates.

If we belong to God, there is a point for us too to say 'no' to the king's food. All kinds of people may claim an allegiance from us that would rival the Lord who rules. It may be team spirit, company loyalty, peer pressure, national self-interest, the boss ... or what/whoever. But there is a point where to continue to acquiesce would sap our moral and spiritual fibre. (Mark 10:21 may give a potential NT parallel.) At that point, we graciously but boldly must make a stand: 'here and no further. God rules, and I'm on his side.' Just as it was for Daniel, the point at which we find ourselves saying 'no' may be as mundane-seeming as food ... not in itself a clear right/wrong issue and not necessarily the issue we'd pick as a battle ground.

21 is a crushing conclusion to the chapter. Daniel outlasted not only Nebuchadnezzar, but also his son, and so his entire dynasty. It will become a big theme in the book that God's people will turn out to be the winning side, not necessarily now (where God's people may well continue to be trodden on and abused), but in the future world where things are put to rights. Note that Daniel's faith survives even when all the institutions of his religion are removed. That's why he is the model of what it means to be 'the faithful'.