

Introduction

In the first half of the book of Daniel are recorded three times of testing of the four Hebrews named Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. The second and third trials are two of the most famous and oft-repeated stories of the Bible, even having an impact on secular literature as well. But the successes that would be enjoyed by their survival in the fiery furnace and the lion's den would not have been possible without this first, lesser known trial taking place in their teen years immediately upon their forced arrival in Babylon. This first victory serves as the foundation for the victories to follow, a lesson in the value of faithfulness to God's Word and ways. The "big" things accomplished for God are the result of consistency and faithfulness to all the "little" things shaping our daily walk and commitment to live **IN** the world but not **OF** the world.

Read verses 1-2

¹In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. ²The LORD gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along 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 he brought the vessels into the treasury of his god.

Q: What is the historical context against which the book of Daniel is set?

A: It is the first of what will ultimately be three invasions and deportations of Judah. In this first, Nebuchadnezzar does not destroy Jerusalem or the temple but takes some of its finest people and some of the things of the temple and sets up a vassal state that is supposed to be in submission to Babylon. It is not Nebuchadnezzar's intention at this point to destroy Judah, but to subjugate it.

Q: What is the spiritual context against which the book of Daniel is set?

A: It is clearly indicated in v.2 that these things came about not by the strength and will of Nebuchadnezzar, but that *"the LORD gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the vessels of the house of God"*. Nebuchadnezzar was the tool, but God was in control of it all. There is something greater at work behind these things.

Q: Where exactly is "the land of Shinar"?

A: This is southern Mesopotamia, the original birthplace of Babylon and the infamous tower of Babylon. The meaning of *"Shinar"* signifies "shake out", a reference to what God did at the tower of Babel when mankind was "shook out" and dispersed. It's ironic that they were brought to *"the house of his god"*, which can also be translated "house of his gods", as the Babylonians worshiped many gods. There is an allusion here that the spiritual scattering experienced by those participating in the tower of Babel is a scattering now experienced by the Jews themselves, the difference being in how God is using them and the ultimate, final result.

Application: *God is in control and using the **things** of this world for His greater **purpose**.*

- *How well do you recognize that God is in control of events at every level?*

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- Have you ever been used by God in what seemed like the worst personal conditions? If not, is it possible that He will?
- What are other biblical examples of this? (ex. Joseph, Moses, David, etc.)

³Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, the chief of his officials, to bring in some of the sons of Israel, including some of the royal family and of the nobles, ⁴youths in whom was no defect, who were good-looking, showing intelligence in every branch of wisdom, endowed with understanding and discerning knowledge, and who had ability for serving in the king's court; and he ordered him to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans. ⁵The king appointed for them a daily ration from the king's choice food and from the wine which he drank, and appointed that they should be educated three years, at the end of which they were to enter the king's personal service. ⁶Now among them from the sons of Judah were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. ⁷Then the commander of the officials assigned new names to them; and to Daniel he assigned the name Belteshazzar, to Hananiah Shadrach, to Mishael Meshach and to Azariah Abed-nego.

Read verses 3-7

Q: How would you describe Nebuchadnezzar's purpose? Did he just want to put good Jews to work?

A: It's obvious from all the steps taken that the overall purpose was to make them Babylonians, to embrace the culture and ways of Babylon to the exclusion of their original upbringing.

Q: What was the first step in this process?

A: Actually, it's covered in v.1-2: a new home. They would no longer have the influence of either godly parents or teachers.

Point: One of the world's best opportunities for fundamentally changing a Christian is when they're away from their home base.

Q: What is the next step as provided in v.3-4?

A: New knowledge. They had to learn the wisdom, language, culture, and way of thinking of their captors.

Point: Christians may have to study things that do not agree with God's Word, but should never, in the end, abandon their faith. Understanding the world is far different from embracing and living according to the world.

Q: What is the third step according to v.5?

A: New diet. For the next 3 years, they were going to be converted to the king's diet which would be contrary to dietary laws provided in the Mosaic Law. This would probably present an additional problem in that it was common at this time for such food to first be offered to the idols of the land, which would not just make it potentially "unhealthy", but classified biblically as blasphemy.

Point: Food and eating are repeated biblical teachings concerning God's Word. "You are what you eat" is biblically true when it comes to whose word and ways one consumes, God's or the world's?

Q: What is the final step taken in v.6-7?

A: New names. Each of them possessed God's name within his own name; the Babylonians hoped that a kind of spiritual transference into their newly assigned names would make them forget their godly roots and become more like the people with whom they were now living and studying.

- Daniel – "God is my judge" – became Belteshazzar, "Bel protects his life".
- Hananiah – "Yahweh is gracious" – became Shadrach, "the command of the moon god".

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⁸But Daniel made up his mind that he would not defile himself with the king's choice food or with the wine which he drank; so he sought permission from the commander of the officials that he might not defile himself.

⁹Now God granted Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the commander of the officials, ¹⁰and the commander of the officials said to Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king, who has appointed your food and your drink; for why should he see your faces looking more haggard than the youths who are your own age? Then you would make me forfeit my head to the king."

¹¹But Daniel said to the overseer whom the commander of the officials had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, ¹²"Please test your servants for ten days, and let us be given some vegetables to eat and water to drink. ¹³Then let our appearance be observed in your presence and the appearance of the youths who are eating the king's choice food; and deal with your servants according to what you see."

¹⁴So he listened to them in this matter and tested them for ten days. ¹⁵At the end of ten days their appearance seemed better and they were fatter than all the youths who had been eating the king's choice food. ¹⁶So the overseer continued to withhold their choice food and the wine they were to drink, and kept giving them vegetables.

- Mishael – "Who is like God?" – became Meshach, "Who is like Aku?"
- Azariah – "Yahweh is my helper" – became Abed-nego, "the servant of Nego".

Point: *The world's aim is for everyone to find a new identity that is aligned with its false beliefs and ways. It's the exact opposite process of sanctification by which we are separated and devoted wholly and exclusively to God's Word and ways alone.*

Application: *The world's aim is for everyone to find a new **identity** that is aligned with its false beliefs and ways. It's the exact opposite of the process of **sanctification** by which we are separated and devoted wholly and exclusively to **God's Word** and ways alone.*

- How has your Christianity been challenged by the introduction of a new home, new knowledge, new diet, and even a new name? How do you deal with it?
- Have you considered how the enemy uses these things to reshape you into its own vision?

Read verses 8-16

Q: What was the starting point which would ultimately lead them to victory?

A: They purposed in their hearts to obey God's Word first and foremost regardless of the circumstances and influences. They surrendered their bodies and minds to God and were willing to let God do the rest.

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to **present your bodies** a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And **do not be conformed to this world**, but **be transformed by the renewing of your mind**, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

Romans 12:1-2

Q: What are some of the alternatives by which they could have chosen to compromise?

1. "We'll obey outwardly, but inwardly we'll keep our faith."
2. "Everyone else is doing it, so we'll just go along."
3. "It's best to obey the king and do what he wants."
4. Others?

Point: *All other alternatives are, in the end, spiritual compromises which, if followed to their logical end, result in self-deception as one becomes "conformed to this world" rather than transformed into God's new creation.*

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Q: What might be significant about a test for “ten days”? How does this speak of God’s specific working?

A: Note throughout the Bible how spiritual tests are rendered in “days”, whereas His judgments are most often rendered in years. Moses was on the mount 40 days, Jesus was in the wilderness 40 days, the church in Smyrna (Rev. 2:8-11) is tested for 10 days. Just as the whole situation is still under God’s control, so is the test actually a spiritual test of faith. Combined with the dual meaning of consumption of food being obedience to God’s Word, it’s a test of personal faithfulness in tandem with an external witness for God.

Point: *How well do you consider that spiritual tests are not limited to just their personal effects, but actually serve as a witness of God to those around us?*

Q: How would you characterize Daniel’s demeanor through all of this? Did he “parade” his religion so as to embarrass others or force a confrontation?

A: Their gentleness and politeness serve as an example to us that we can hold to the truth of God’s Word within the framework and presentation of love.

Point: *How well do you consider the witnessing effect of your own attitude? Can others tell that Christ’s love is in control rather than the kinds of attitudes that religious fanatics often project?*

Application: *Spiritual tests are not limited to just their **personal** effects, but actually serve as a **witness** of God to those around us.*

- What kind of a witness are we for God in the midst of striving to maintain our Christianity in this world?
- Is it first and foremost Bible-based?
- Does it communicate the truth in love?

“But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

Matthew 6:33

Read verses 17-21

Q: How did they ultimately overcome all these influences to remain faithful to God?

A: Having originally purposed in their hearts to obey God’s Word (v.8), “God gave them” (v.17) all that they needed! He not only enabled them to learn their lessons better than all the rest but added even on top of this **HIS** knowledge and wisdom.

Point: *When spiritual faithfulness is given the top priority, all the other things in life fall into their respective places without impacting what is most important spiritually. In fact, one actually experiences spiritual growth.*

¹⁷As for these four youths, God gave them knowledge and intelligence in every branch of literature and wisdom; Daniel even understood all kinds of visions and dreams.

¹⁸Then at the end of the days which the king had specified for presenting them, the commander of the officials presented them before Nebuchadnezzar. ¹⁹The king talked with them, and out of them all not one was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king’s personal service. ²⁰As for every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king consulted them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and conjurers who were in all his realm. ²¹And Daniel continued until the first year of Cyrus the king.

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Q: Why did they find favor with Nebuchadnezzar? Was it because they pleased him more than the rest?

A: Because their priority was to please the King in Heaven, and did not worry about pleasing people or being popular, they ignored the urgings and threats of others and did that which God wanted them to do. Pleasing God first and foremost resulted in being elevated according to man's standards.

Application: Christians need to purpose in their hearts to put **Christ** first in everything, everywhere – the dining room, the classroom, and especially the **throne** room.

Overall Application

Discuss this lesson in the context of John's teaching:

Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever.

1 John 2:15-17

- *What is the example in Daniel 1 of the degree to which they did/did not "love the things in the world"? How does this compare/contrast with your own personal walk in Christ?*
- *How does this example extend to our witness to others? Are we more successful at influencing and changing them, or being changed ourselves?*
- *Why is it ultimately futile to seek after the things and ways of this world? (Hint: "The world is passing away".) How should this help set our priorities and focus our trust?*
- *How did **THIS** test/trial provide the basis for their overcoming the greater trials to come of the furnace and the lion's den? What, then, is the best preparation for the major trials we know are coming in our own life?*

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