

Take Time to be Holy: Resolution for Holiness

Daniel 1:1-21

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan](#)

November 30, 1997

If you have your Bibles, I would invite you to turn with me to the book of Daniel. The very first chapter of that book. The book of Daniel is a great mystery to some and a great encouragement to others. The context of this book is the Babylonian exile. The people of God have, by the very beginning of this book, begun to reap the harvest of bitterness that Isaiah and Jeremiah and the other prophets had told the people of the Lord they would experience if they turned their backs on God, if they did not take heed to His ways. Already by the year 605 B.C., six centuries before Christ, the deportation to Babylon had begun. Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, a Chaldean by blood, was in an expansionist plan to take over as much of the middle eastern world as he could and Jerusalem was one of his first targets.

This exile, though it may have looked like God was out of control, was in fact, according to God's own prophets, His punishment against Israel's sin and rebellion. That is a key, by the way, to understanding the book of Daniel and his whole view of the sovereignty of God. The exile, we should not underestimate, with regard to its impact on Israel, the exile into Babylon meant functionally the end of Israel as a nation. Yes, it's true that after Israel came back after a period of time, there were a series of monarchs in the land of Judah known as the Hasmoneans, and we enter into what was known as the Maccabean period. But Israel was never an independent nation again. She was always a tributary to some larger nation. And so the captivity into which the children of Israel began to be taken in 605 B.C. was the end of the nation of Israel.

This captivity also very importantly leads to an increased expectation and longing for the Messiah in Israel. The prophets in the time of the captivity focus the hopes of the people of God on the coming of the Messiah to relieve the suffering of God's people and to establish the kingdom of David again. By the way, this period of the exile, is also one of the four great periods of miracles in the Bible. A casual observer of Scripture might think that miracles happen all the time in the Scripture, but if one studies the Scripture chronologically, there are great ages in which God manifests Himself in miracles. There is not a continuous succession of miracles done in the Bible. There are particular times in which God focuses on

great and miraculous deeds more than others, and even to the exclusion of others. One of the first great periods of miracles or of the miraculous was, of course, the Exodus. There, God parted the Red Sea. There, God showed signs and wonders to the Egyptians. There, God did wonders to bring the children of Israel into Canaan. The second great period of miracles was in the time of Elijah and Elisha, when He showed great wonders in the midst of Israel. The third great period of miracles in the Bible is this period of Daniel, the period of the exile, and He did wonders in that time. The fourth great period of miracles in the Bible is the Apostolic Age, with the coming of our Lord and Savior and the great manifestations of signs and wonders by our Lord and by His disciples.

In the exile, another thing that we learn is that the exile is an opportunity for God to show Himself to be the God of the nations. It was very common in the nations around Israel to believe that there was perhaps one god, that there was one god for their particular people, and there was another god in their land. It's a view known as henotheism in contrast to monotheism which says there is one god, period. Henotheism said, well, there's one god, but there's one god for this land and this people and another god for this other land and this other people. The exile, in the taking of Israel into another culture, and another land, and another nation, gave God the opportunity to show that there was but one true God over all the heavens and the earth.

This book of Daniel, then, occurs in the midst of the exile and the book itself provides us a 70-year slice of Daniel's life. It takes us from probably Daniel's teenage years all the way into the ninth decade of his life. We see about 70 years of his existence as the dates that we are given run from about 605 B.C. down to about 537 B.C.

Daniel's work was to minister hope to his people and to minister the truth to those who were his captors. He had a prophetic gift, but apparently Daniel never held the prophetic office. Daniel was a statesman. He was a son of the Jewish court. He had noble blood. He may well have been of royal blood, but he never himself claims to be of the office of a prophet. We know that the Jewish people after the time of Daniel did not consider him to be a prophet by office. They placed his book amongst the writings of the Old Testament and opposed to the prophets in the Old Testament. So they considered him to be different from Ezekiel, and Isaiah and Jeremiah. not holding the office of the prophet or being of the school of the prophet or the sons of the prophets, but being a statesman that the Lord had given a distinctive prophetic gift.

Daniel, though he was a politician, was not like some of the politicians we think of today. He constantly had a God-centered view of government of politics and of history. The book of Daniel itself is a piece of resistance literature. It is a book written for the people of God living in a world which is opposed to them. Daniel's book, first of all, gives us a call to perseverance. His message is, 'Don't give up when it seems that the world is in offense over against God and His people.'

Don't give up.'

A second message of his book is to call us to faithfulness. His word is not only don't give up, but his word to us is 'stand firm.' Be ready to stand firm, even though you are flooded with the thought form of the world around you. Even though it seems that the things that you believe as a believer, as a follower of the one true God are out of fashion in your day and time, you stand firm. Stand firm in your thinking. Stand firm in your living. Stand firm in your spiritual and religious resolves. So he calls us to perseverance and he also calls us to faithfulness.

But he also calls us to hope. Even in the most traumatic experience in the history of Israel, the exile into Babylon, where it seemed like God's promises to David had failed, even in that circumstance, Daniel teaches us that God's judgment will rest upon the kingdoms of the world. There is reason to hope even in the midst of the most severe tragedy.

Now, as I said to begin with, this book is a mystery. I am gratefully comforted by the fact that in Daniel 12: 8, Daniel himself admits that he does not understand some of his prophecy. There are many mysteries in this book, and so we will focus on the big picture because it my firm conviction that that's what Daniel did. When Daniel couldn't understand the details of his prophecy, he went back to the big picture, and the big picture always gave him hope. And I'm convinced that we will not understand the smaller details of the book, if we don't understand the bigger details of the book, if we don't understand the great themes of the book. And so our goal as we go through this book will be to see the big picture because that's Daniel's own approach.

The central question of this book is, "How can a Christian sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" And that is so directly applicable to where we are today. Because this land which was once ours, the society that used to be permeated with Christian thinking, which used to be permeated with the moral principles which we have adhered to for thousands of years now appears to us as a strange land. We seem to be confronted with a culture that is sometimes baffling even to understand. Where did this stuff come from? We are called upon to sing the Lord's song in a strange land. Some of you students really have to sing the Lord's song in a strange land because you're in the universities and colleges of this land, and the strangeness of some of the teaching there really is mystifying and baffling. But we have the opportunity by grace and faith and scripture and prayer and fellowship and obedience and hope to respond to the strangeness of this land. This book of Daniel really is responding to the question asked in Psalm 137. As the Psalmist laments being by the River of Babylon and being demanded to sing for his captors, how can the believer continue to sing in that setting? This book gives us the answer. So let's hear God's holy word beginning in Daniel, chapter 1, verse 1:

Daniel 1

This first chapter records for us the stage. It explains to us how these fine young Jewish nobles ended up in the Babylonian court and it records for us their first test, their first challenge living in a different culture, surrounded by a different world view, surrounded by a different pattern of living, surrounded by a very different religious belief system than the one in which they had grown up. And there are many important lessons for us to learn in this passage, impossible in a passage this large and this rich to do justice to everything. So we have to isolate ourselves to a few things. I'd like to direct you to three or four things tonight which the Lord would instruct us in.

I. We must grasp and embrace that God is sovereign even in His people's tragedy.

First of all I want you to notice verses 1 and 2. There we have recorded for us the indignation of God. God had promised through Jeremiah and Isaiah and through the prophets, that if the children of God turned their backs upon Him, He would carry them off into exile, and that is precisely what is recorded for us in verses 1 and 2. But even in the midst of that terrible news, the news of the indignation and wrath of God being visited upon His children and them being taken into exile, there is a great word of truth for us. And we learn that truth that we must grasp and embrace, that God is sovereign even in His people's tragedy. We learn that even in the very phrasing of verses 1 and 2. We must grasp and embrace that God is sovereign even in His people's tragedy. Look at verses 1 and 2: "In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. The Lord gave Jehoiakim, king of Judah, into his hand." The opening verses, you see, give us a picture of history from two perspectives. The first verse gives you a blow-by-blow account of the event, but the first words of the second verse explains to you the meaning behind and under the events. The first verse tells you about the children of Jerusalem being taken into captivity. The second verse tells you why. The first verse may look like the God of Israel has fallen prey to the false gods of Babylon. The second verse makes it clear that even the exile itself has been done by the determinant counsel of God. Notice the strength of the phrasing. "The Lord gave Jehoiakim, king of Judah, into his hand." The Lord was sovereign even in the exile. Here we see a beautiful balance between event and meaning, between history and between the theology which underlies that history. And if you will, between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. Nebuchadnezzar really wanted to take over Jerusalem. God determined from the very beginning of the world that Nebuchadnezzar would take over Jerusalem. God's sovereignty and man's responsibility side by side.

You will also notice in the second verse that we are told that the children of Israel, not that they are taken into Babylon, but they are taken into the land of Shinar. Wonder how long it has been since that title had been used for the land

of Babylon? We know the very first use of that name traces all the way back to Genesis, chapter 10, and to the story of the tower of Babel. You see what Daniel is doing here? He's reminding you that this is not just a battle between the nation state of Judah and the nation state of Babylon. This is a battle between the city of God and the city of man, between Jerusalem as representatives of God's people and Babylon, the land of Shinar, the land of ziggurat, the land of false gods, the city of this world, the city of man, the city of those opposed to God. This very phrase reminds us that there is a spiritual battle which is going to be unfolded in the book of Daniel, even though in the first six chapters of Daniel, he will focus on contemporary political events. He will look at those political events distinctively through the eyes of faith, and he will see God's hand at work in those particular events.

There's another phrase in that second verse that points the same thing out, and that is the fact that these vessels that were taken from Jerusalem were taken where? To the house of his god. Nebuchadnezzar comes to Jerusalem to the house of God and carries away vessels to the house of his god. Clearly Daniel is setting you up in the first two verses to look at these events in secular history as events in which God is intimately involved. God is sovereign. And interestingly, the very way that Daniel describes the exile in verses 1 and 2 reminds us that the downfall of Jerusalem is not proof against the God of Israel. It is not proof that God is not sovereign. It is not proof against His existence or His power or His plan. The downfall of Jerusalem and the exile is, on the contrary, positive proof of the sovereignty of the God of Israel. Why? Because all the way back in Deuteronomy chapter 28, God had promised Israel that if she went astray He would send her into exile. And now, almost a thousand years later, a patient and long suffering God is fulfilling His promise. You see, the exile is not a proof that God's plan has failed; it's a proof that God's plan has been fulfilled, and this is so important for our understanding of the whole of Daniel. It is Daniel's belief that God is in control that enables Him to do so well in captivity. He knows that there is nothing incidental in human life and there is nothing accidental in human life, and it is that that gives Daniel confidence to be such a productive believer in the city of his exile.

We also must recognize that Daniel's later faithfulness, his later heroism, was the mature fruit of the life and a character that had been forged in the midst of adversity from the beginning of his days as a young man. He had been tested from the time of his youth, and his ability to stand firm before the mightiest kings on earth in his day did not appear out of nothing overnight. It appeared because God had been crafting and forging the heart and character of a godly man in accordance with His word in the crucible of experience. And Daniel, no wonder we admire him, he is a trophy of the grace of God at work in a man's heart. What resolution this man has, what courage and bravery, how can we not but admire him? He is a testimony to God's grace at work. And so we see that God is sovereign even in his people's tragedy. The exile is not an accident. It is a work of the will of God.

II. We must be aware of the stratagems of worldliness

Secondly, we notice in verses 3 through 7, the story of how Daniel and his friends came to be in the Babylonian court. That is explained for you there in that passage. How was it that the sons of nobles of Jerusalem, the sons even of royal families, would end up in the Babylonian court. We are told exactly what happens in that passage, but we are also told of a truth underlying it. That truth reminds us that we must be aware of the stratagems of worldliness. In this passage we are basically told how Nebuchadnezzar and his men planned to brainwash the nobility of Jerusalem. This passage contains for us the plan for indoctrinating young, brilliant Israelites into a false worldview and to repatriating them into a new culture and nation. Nebuchadnezzar's plan for overthrowing the people of God does not simply involve military might. Isn't it interesting that this is in the year 605. Remember it's going to be almost twenty years before the fall of Jerusalem is complete, and it's going to happen in three stages.

Nebuchadnezzar and his successors are going to come back in three stages to take over Jerusalem. But in his first attack on Jerusalem, he does not attempt to wipe out Jewish culture like a blank slate. He first takes the most brilliant minds in Israel and he takes them from their culture, from their families, and he places them in his court, thus robbing Israel of its best minds for a new generation thus bringing into his service the best minds of this client state, and thus attempting to make them think like Babylonians. Nebuchadnezzar's plan has been used before and it has been used since, and there are some today attempting to impact modern young people in universities and in colleges just like Nebuchadnezzar attempted to do in this passage.

I want you to notice the four-fold strategy that Nebuchadnezzar has to take over the minds and the desires of the people of God. First of all, the first platform, or a plank of his platform or strategy to capture the minds of these young Israelites is to isolate them. They are isolated from Jerusalem. They are isolated from their families. They are isolated from the means of grace, from weekly worship, from the sacrificial system, from the reading and the hearing of the word, from the prophetic testimony of the preachers of God in Israel. They are isolated from the means of grace. And isolated from the means of grace, he hopes they will be open to the thinking of the Babylonians.

Next, notice that they are indoctrinated. They are taught the language and the literature of Babylon. Now that may seem harmless enough. Oh, they're just doing some courses in Babylonian literature. They are just learning the Babylonian language. But the goal there is to indoctrinate them into the thinking, into the worldview of Babylonians. It is to make them in their minds Babylonians. Notice also that he takes a third approach to cause them to compromise. He puts before them rich food and delicacies and great privileges in the court by giving them high living and comfort and position and status and reputation and

importance. He hopes to wean their desires from their God and their people and to draw their desires to Babylon and to all the privileges that it can involve.

And, notice finally, that he attempts to bring confusion in the very hearts and minds of these young people. He gives them new names. Now again, you'll read many commentators and say, "Oh, this is perfectly harmless. They're just giving them new names because it would have been hard for the Babylonians to pronounce, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah." Rubbish. They are being given new names so that day after day after day they will be called by Babylonian names, Chaldean names to be precise. Names, by the way, connected with the god of the Babylonians so that they will forget who they are. And so the four-fold plan for indoctrination, for brain washing is set in place by some brilliant mastermind in Nebuchadnezzar's court.

This reminds us, our friend, that how we think determines how we live. How we think about God, about ourselves, about the world around us, about other folks; this determines how we will live. Our outlook, our worldview matters. The battle for Christianity today continues to be a battle for the mind and it is one of the great services that we have to offer to the whole of the evangelical tradition. As believers in the Reformed tradition, we are to be concerned for sound theology and teaching, and we are to be concerned to be faithful to the scriptural principles and the scriptural worldview set forth for us in the word of God. The former minister of this congregation, Dr. John Reed Miller, very often repeated a dictum of his to me. He would say this: "Presbyterianism is the intellectual muffle system of evangelical Christianity. If we go soft in our thinking, in our faithfulness to scriptural patterns of teaching, then the rest of evangelicalism is in trouble, because we have always had this service to offer to the whole of evangelical Christianity: That we know our doctrine, we know our teaching and we're faithful to it." That's important for us to remember in the world in which we live. We are, perhaps my friends, more at risk of infiltration in our world view today than if we were under a totalitarian state, because it's interesting how being lured to another world view is more subtle and successful than someone attempting to force you into another world view. Ivan Denisovich and Hiayasha, the Russian Baptist in Solzhenitsyn's Book, A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, were able to resist the indoctrination of a totalitarian state in a Siberian gulag because they were attempting to force them into a new way of thinking. Hiayasha, the Baptist, had his faith and he had his Scripture that he hid under the mattress and read, day after day. That type of explicit assault is sometimes easier to recognize and resist than the subtle, alluring temptations which say, 'Come, do it this way, it will be better for you.' We ourselves must be on guard for the stratagems of worldliness in our own society.

III. We must consciously resolve to resist worldliness in our minds and desires

We learn in verses 8 through 16 another truth. Here we see Daniel's strategy for resistance. How would Daniel resist this battle for his mind? We learn here about Daniel and his friends' faithfulness and we learn the principle that we must consciously resolve to resist worldliness in our minds and our desires. We must consciously resolve to resist worldliness in our minds and in our desires. Daniel's strategy for resistance is a model for the servants of God under the pressure of temptation. He does at least three things here.

First of all, we are told that Daniel resolves to be holy. Daniel decides, he purposes, he makes up his mind that he will not be contaminated by the court of Babylon. We are told this in verse 8. Secondly, however, and this is such an interesting combination, I want you to note that Daniel does not do this in an obnoxious and a braggadocio way. Daniel does it with genuine humility and modesty. He had cultivated a good relationship with his captors and he does not say, 'I will not eat this food.' He goes to his court official and he says, 'I humbly request to you that you permit me and my friends not to eat this food.' And the Lord honored Daniel's humility and no doubt Daniel's humility spoke much to those around him. And in his humility he offers a respectful request that the Lord eventually causes that court official to honor. That is an important point because when Christians are pushed against by an antagonistic culture, our tendency is to want to come out swinging and sometimes it is the soft answer which the Lord wants for us as we speak to a hostile culture. Because ultimately our desire is not to wipe them off the face of the earth, it's to convert them to Christ. And the soft answer of humility is so often the most striking arrow in the weapons of God's arsenal.

Thirdly, notice that in response Daniel believes. Daniel's fate is apparent. He resolves to be holy. He is humble in his response, but he is a man who believes. He trusts and he expects that God would be faithful to his desire to be faithful. When his captor says, 'I can't do this. I'd lose my head if you look worse than the other men,' Daniel comes back with a plan and he says, 'Look, just give me ten days, I know that we are going to look better.' Understand that Daniel is not being presumptuous here. Daniel is just certain that in some way God is going to honor his desire to be faithful to the Lord in a strange land. Daniel may not have had any idea how God was going to do that, but Daniel was confident, his faith was confident. He was assured of God's power and of God's promises.

Do we have that kind of resolution? Do we have that kind of assurance when we face the world? You know, it's funny how Presbyterians who ought to have the highest view of God's sovereignty and of our lives sometimes have the least expectations that the Lord will really do anything dramatic. We think, 'Oh well, we'll do our best, but I know that there's not much hope that it's going to change.' And we're supposed to have this incredible doctrine of God's sovereignty and grace, so that when God does the least little thing we're, 'Wow, how unexpected, how surprising!' We're amazed that the Lord actually honors His word. We ought to have the highest expectations, not out of presumption, but out of confidence in

the Lord's power and His providence.

IV. We must remember that God honors faithfulness

Finally, if you'll look in verses 17 through 21, we see God honoring Daniel and his friends in their faithfulness. He elevates them to positions of influence. He puts them in a place in the culture where they will have strategic impact and influence on the Babylonians. And that reminds us that we must remember that God honors faithfulness. Daniel and his friends excel their peers. They not only look as good, they not only perform as well as their peers, they excel their peers when the test comes. God is faithful and sovereign over His servant's situation. Their test in this circumstance had long-term repercussions.

First of all, their testing, their desire to stand firm in this experience prepared them for further tests. There is no doubt that Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah would not have been ready to lay down their lives in the fiery furnace had they not gone through this test. Was not our Lord's life the same way? He went from test to test to test in increasing intensity on the way to the cross. And if it is so in the life of Daniel and his friends, and if it is so in the life of our Lord, should we not expect it to be so in our own? God is in the testing of our life. Think of the witness that Daniel and his friends had upon their captors. We hear in Jesus' time of His nativity, that Magi came from the east. Were they men who had learned from a tradition which had been handed down from those who had been taught by Daniel? That's one of those questions I want to ask when I get to heaven. I don't know but maybe that is one of the repercussions of Daniel's faithfulness. Daniel and his friends were faithful in the midst of trial and they believed that God was sovereign in their trials. Sinclair Ferguson tells us, "All too frequently, we take a different view of our trials and temptations. We view them as isolated nightmares. God, however, sees them from a different perspective. They are important and connected punctuation marks in the biography of grace he is writing in our lives." I wish I could write a sentence like that, just once. "They are important and connected punctuation marks in the biography of grace He is writing in our lives." They give formation, direction, and character to our lives. They are all part of the tapestry He is weaving in history. He uses them to build up our strength and to prepare us to surmount greater obstacles and perhaps fiercer temptations.

One of the lessons that we learn in this passage is that it is not who you are, or where you are, but what you are that matters in God's kingdom. It is our character and faithfulness, not our situation, not our location, not our reputation that matters. May the Lord grant us resolution for holiness. Let's look to Him in prayer.

Our Father, we thank You for this word. It is a grand word. As we study it over the weeks to come, we pray that You would make us not simply like Daniel, but

like our Savior who was greater than Daniel and taught us how to live a kingdom life in a fallen world. Help us to do this by grace for we ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

©2013 First Presbyterian Church.

This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template.

Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine*

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, **subscriptions are free**. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).