

UNIT 1: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Lesson 8

April 25, 2026

Faithful to God in Babylon:

God rewards those who choose to follow His ways.

THE LESSON OVERVIEW

The first chapter in the Book of Daniel follows the plight of four young Jewish men exiled to Babylon, who resisted religious /cultural assimilation despite intense pressure to do so. Determined to uphold their Jewish religious vows as much as possible, adhering instead to a diet consistent with their faith. Their commitment led to remarkable health and vitality, setting them apart from those around them. Their loyalty was rewarded by God with outstanding wisdom, understanding, and skills, surpassing all their peers and earning high recognition in the royal court. This lesson emphasizes the power of unwavering faithfulness.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Book of Daniel recounts events spanning from Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar's initial conquest of Jerusalem in 605 BC to the third year of Persian King Cyrus's reign in 536 BC, covering Judah's 70-year exile in Babylon. Daniel, who was believed to have been from Jerusalem's upper class, was selected for exile as Nebuchadnezzar sought out people of noble standing among the subjugated population. This prestigious status features prominently in the narrative, indicating Daniel's far-reaching influence and esteemed position as the account covers a pivotal era in Biblical history and the ancient geopolitics of the Near East.

THE LESSON OUTLINE

1. EXILED TO A PAGAN SOCIETY: Daniel 1:1-7.

- A. Exiled to Babylon, (1-5)
- B. Four Young Men Chosen, (6-7)

2. FAITHFULNESS TO GOD TESTED: Daniel 1:8-16.

- A. We Will Not Be Defiled, (8-14)
- B. Healthier Than the Rest, (15-16)

3. GOD REWARDS FAITHFULNESS: Daniel 1:17-21.

- A. Understanding, Wisdom, and Ability, (17)
- B. Ten Times More Capable, (18-21)

DISCUSSING THE LESSON

1. EXILED TO A PAGAN SOCIETY: Daniel 1:1-7.

A. Exiled to Babylon, Daniel 1:1-5.

The Book of Daniel is an excellent example of why it is important to understand the Bible's place within history. Chapter 1 opens with a description of the first of three major invasions of Judah by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. The first invasion took place in 605 BC, followed by a second in 597 and a third in 587; the third led to the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple in 586 BC. (See also 2 Kings 24:1-7 for the story of King Jehoiakim.) The exile from the Promised Land extended seventy years, until around 536 BC. Judah's captivity had a divine purpose (v. 2), ultimately to draw God's people back to Himself. Therefore, it is key to read Daniel with a sense of God's sovereign plan guiding all that happens.

In that period of history, triumphant kings would capture noble, skilled, and educated people to bring to the capital city of the victorious country, as seen in verses 3-5. The qualities Nebuchadnezzar sought in the Hebrew men who would enter his service are outlined: "Young men in whom there was no blemish, but good-looking, gifted in all wisdom, possessing knowledge and quick to understand, who had ability to serve in the king's palace, and whom they might teach the language and literature of the Chaldeans" (v. 4 NKJV). As the account in Daniel proceeds, we see how God worked through these four young men even in Babylonian captivity.

B. Four Young Men Chosen, Daniel 1:6-7.

With the historical setting in place, the account turns to the four faithful Hebrew men chosen by Nebuchadnezzar (and, ultimately, by God) who would figure prominently in the Scriptures. The text reveals that these four men were among a larger group of young men taken to Babylon to serve the king (v.6). They stood out because of their exceptional faith in and faithfulness to God during the difficult times. As was often the custom (see Genesis 41:45; Esther 2:7), these four exiled captives were given foreign names: Daniel, meaning "God is my judge," was renamed Belteshazzar; Hananiah, meaning "The Lord is gracious," was renamed Shadrach; Mishael, meaning "Who belongs to God?" was renamed Meshach; and Azariah, meaning "The Lord has helped," was renamed Abednego. These names are significant because the Hebrew names testify to the one true God, while the Babylonian names allude to pagan deities (including Bel, Aku, and Nebo). In a sense, these names foreshadow the conflict that will take place between pagan powers and the God of Israel, who is repeatedly triumphant throughout the book.

While our world today is far removed from ancient Babylon, the similarities are surprising. As we explore the upcoming chapters of Daniel, we'll discover the danger of pride, the challenges of remaining faithful to God, and the value of following His guidance. These timeless lessons provide practical wisdom for the struggles we face. Over the next few weeks, as we dive into the stories of these four Hebrew men, be on the lookout for parallels to what Christian's experience in today's increasingly secular society. Their journey offers insights that still resonate in our lives today.

2. FAITHFULNESS TO GOD TESTED: Daniel 1: 8-16.

A. We Will Not Be Defiled, Daniel 1:8-14.

Why would these four men refuse to consume food and drink from the King's table? These are two likely reasons. First, some of the choice foods of ancient Babylon, such as pork, violated the Jewish dietary laws (see Leviticus 11; Deuteronomy 14:1-21). Even foods that were otherwise clean would not have been prepared in kosher fashion, with the blood drained from

them as required by the Law (Leviticus 17). Eating these foods would have made Daniel and his friends ceremonially unclean before God by violating His commands. Second, most of this food and drink would have been offered to pagan gods beforehand, so eating it would have been indirect participation in pagan ritual worship.

Daniel, acting as the spokesperson for the four men, asked that they be allowed to honor their dietary practices, causing some pushback (Daniel 1:10-14). The king's official immediately voiced his concerns, which were rooted in fear of King Nebuchadnezzar, who could be brutal and demanding. If the king notices the Hebrews looking malnourished, he would know that they were not eating well. Daniel faced a dilemma: Refusing the food was an insult to the king that could put them out of favor with him, which could cause problems from demotion to punishment. Moreover, the other exiles may have pressured Daniel to relent, for the good of them all. After all, this was the best food of the kingdom, and Jerusalem and the temple (not yet destroyed) were hundreds of miles away.

Still, Daniel and his friends would not compromise. Instead, he proposed a test in which they would consume only vegetables and water for ten days. Afterward, if they looked well, they would be allowed to continue the diet. The official assigned to them had compassion and even affection for the four men (v. 9); even so, Daniel's proposition would have been difficult to accept. Although he would have preferred that the four men eat from the king's table, the official allowed them to proceed with their proposed test (v. 14).

B. Healthier Than the Rest, Daniel 1:15-16.

Ten days later, the test concluded with irrefutable results. God's favor upon Daniel and his friends became clear, as they "appeared fairer and fatter in flesh than all the children which did eat the portion of the king's meat" (v. 15). The phrase "fatter in flesh" is a Hebrew idiom that meant they looked healthier than all the others. While vegetables are certainly healthy food in themselves, and a vegetarian diet can be healthy, the message here is that God intervened supernaturally on their behalf. Ashpenaz, the supervisor of the eunuchs, had not expected to discover their healthier appearance. In a predominately agrarian society, except for fish in coastal areas, meat was uncommon in the diet of most ancient people, with only the rich routinely eating it, especially choice meat. Therefore, those who ate the king's diet could easily be compared to the general population, with those eating royal food appearing healthier.

This account is the first of several that demonstrate God's care, favor, and intervention upon His faithful followers in Babylon. Those who observed them – fellow exiles, the king, and the king's officials – would see that the one true, all-powerful God was acting on their behalf. In this case, they would be permitted to continue eating and thriving with a diet consistent with God's commands. Commitment to God is always the best decision and is rewarded by Him.

As the world becomes increasingly secular and hostile to Christianity, we as Christians face growing challenges in staying true to our faith. Beliefs and values that were once clear and accepted are now questioned, criticized, or even outright opposed. This shift invites more profound reflection on what it means to hold onto Christian convictions in a changing cultural landscape. We can draw inspiration for the lives of four men who offer valuable lessons about living out our faith in God. Their stories remind us how to balance steadfast belief with the complexities of modern life.

3. GOD REWARDS FAITHFULNESS: Daniel 1:17-21.

A. Understanding, Wisdom, and Ability, Daniel 1:17.

Daniel and his friends had been taken to Babylon in Mesopotamia as exiles, far from the Promised Land, to dwell in a hostile pagan land. They were supremely faithful to the Lord and careful to observe His commands – very likely more faithful than any of the other exiles. They served in positions of honor and influence in the shadow of the great King Nebuchadnezzar. And God was with these men, protecting them and enabling them for what was a special purpose within the plan of God for His people. Against this backdrop, verse 17 identifies three distinct gifts that God had given them in preparation for what was emerging as their role in the ongoing purposes of God: “As for these four children, God gave them knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom.” Each of these gifts (knowledge, skill, wisdom) is distinct and important, working together to equip these four for their mission. The word “knowledge,” coupled with “wisdom,” referred to both intellectual acuity and practical living.

Why would they need such knowledge? They had been forcibly moved from Judah to Mesopotamia, a strange and foreign place; therefore, being able to think through and live within these circumstances, especially in the court of the king, would be critical. It would typically take years to develop such knowledge and wisdom, yet God gifted it to them. Related to knowledge is “skill,” referring to insight and ability that brings success and prosperity in one’s endeavors. For example, a successful mechanic is skilled at understanding and engine and can repair it to function at its highest level. Being skilled generally is the result of study and training, but in this case, God enabled these men to have this skill at the beginning of their service to the king.

Although often thought of as a spiritual virtue, “wisdom” is also practical in the Biblical context. Wisdom has been defined, in part, as “understanding the nature of the world and one’s place and purpose in it.” Wisdom is knowledge used in its most effective way with proper discernment. In addition, Daniel was granted the ability to understand visions and dreams. In the ancient world, such an ability was seen as giving the person special access to or understanding of divine works in the world. In the upcoming chapters of Daniel, this God-given ability is critical to survival and success.

B. Ten Times More Capable, Daniel 1:18-21.

God’s gifting brought immediately rewards to Daniel and his friends. King Nebuchadnezzar was immediately impressed with them. They were noticeably more capable than any of the other choice captives from Judah. Even more remarkably, they showed themselves to be more capable and valuable than even the king’s prized advisors: “In all matters of wisdom and understanding, that the king enquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers that were in all his realm” (v. 20).

What an incredible scene! By God’s empowerment, these captives – people typically deemed quite inferior to their Babylonian captors – far exceeded the capability of Nebuchadnezzar’s most valued assistants. Furthermore, the historical note in verse 21 is key: “Daniel continued

even unto the first year of king Cyrus.” These gifts and assignments were not short-term. Daniel would outlive Nebuchadnezzar and his reign, surviving to the reign of King Cyrus, beginning around 535 BC, when Daniel would be around ninety years old. Truly, God was in this situation.

Daniel 1 reminds us of how God shows His faithfulness during tough times, offering hope and assurance. Daniel and his friends faced challenges that resonate with our own struggles, yet God was always there, guiding and providing for them. This chapter isn’t just about reflecting on the past – it’s also a reminder to trust God with our future. He’s always working, and that gives us something to look forward to. As you think about the blessings in your life, let those moments spark gratitude and fill you with hope for what’s ahead, knowing that through Christ, great things are yet to come.

CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP

As followers of Jesus Christ, we should renew our vision for the marvelous ways God takes care of us. Just as He cared for His people long ago, He will continue to take care of His people today.

MINISTRY IN ACTION

The Christian life is richly rewarded with help to follow Christ today, as well as hope for everlasting tomorrows. This week, encourage someone with the promise of hope in Christ.

WORKSHEET

Who Was King Nebuchadnezzar?

Most people, when reading the Book of Daniel, have no idea of the significance of Nebuchadnezzar as a ruler in the ancient world. In contrast to this lack of knowledge, “Nebuchadnezzar is celebrated by the historians of antiquity for the splendor of his building operations as well as for the brilliance of his military exploits: (The New International Dictionary of the Bible).

Likewise, the Book of Daniel tells of the significance of Nebuchadnezzar and the empire he ruled for 45 years (606-561 BC).

Much more than a Jewish captive in Babylon, by God’s providence, Daniel became a trusted and highly valued friend and counselor to Nebuchadnezzar. The significance of the king and his empire is revealed in the words of Daniel.

Interpreting a dream Nebuchadnezzar had about four worldly empires (Babylonian, Persian, Greek, Roman), Daniel said to Nebuchadnezzar, “You, O king, are a king of kings. For the God of Heaven has given you a kingdom, power, strength, and glory ... you are this head of gold” (Daniel 2:37-38).

Interpreting another of Nebuchadnezzar’s dreams, about a great tree, Daniel said to him, “It is you, O king, who have grown and become strong; for your greatness has grown and reaches to the heavens, and your dominion to the end of the earth” (4:22).

Nebuchadnezzar wrote in a decree, “I ... was at rest in my house, and flourishing in my palace” (4:4), “after having subdued Syria, Phoenicia, Judea, Egypt, and Arabia. It was probably these great conquests that puffed him up with pride and brought that [divine] chastisement upon him which he afterwards describes [in Daniel 4”28-33]” (Adam Clarke).

Even the great Nebuchadnezzar was persuaded to acknowledge and praise the God of Israel as “the Most High” and “the King of heaven” (4:34, 37).

Interpreting a King's Dream

Daniel 2:36-45

- **What did each of these items represent?**
 - **Head of gold:**
 - **Chest and arms of silver:**
 - **Belly and thighs of bronze:**
 - **Legs of Iron:**
 - **Feet and toes of clay and iron:**
 - **Kingdom cut from a mountain:**