

LESSON ONE
*Daniel and
His Friends:*
OPTING FOR
FAITHFULNESS

FOCAL TEXT

Daniel 1

BACKGROUND

Daniel 1

MAIN IDEA

Daniel and his friends chose to demonstrate their faithfulness to God rather than accept the tempting offer extended by the Babylonian Empire.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

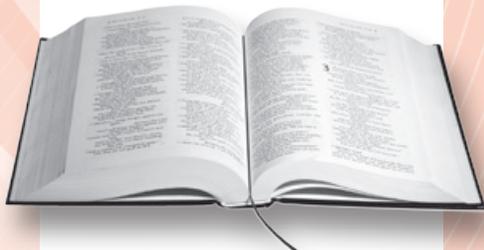
How much should we go along to get along?

STUDY AIM

To evaluate how readily I go along with situations around me instead of demonstrating faithfulness to God

QUICK READ

Daniel and his friends faced the option of *going along to get along*, but they stayed true to the values of their faith.



Many situations throughout life present us with the temptation to simply *go along to get along*. Sometimes we resist confrontation in our relationships in order to keep the peace for the day, only to realize we have created an unhealthy dynamic that may last for years or even decades.

At work we may keep quiet about practices that cross ethical lines. At church we may allow a vocal minority with a negative view to stymie Kingdom-oriented change. In yet other situations we may take the easy way out.

What does it take for us to change such behavior? What does it take to stand up for ourselves, our values, our faith, or our God when we are under strain?

The Book of Daniel offers us some principles and encouragement to live differently instead of merely *going along to get along*. Daniel's example offers us real power for changing the situations in which we often find ourselves stuck.

The events in the Book of Daniel took place during Judah's exile in Babylon 597 to 539 B.C. Take a moment to find your chronological bearings by locating Daniel in column nine (noted with the Roman numeral IX) in the chart titled "Overview of Old Testament People and Events."¹

DANIEL 1

¹ In the third year of the reign of King Jehoiakim of Judah, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. ² The Lord let King Jehoiakim of Judah fall into his power, as well as some of the vessels of the house of God. These he brought to the land of Shinar, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his gods.

³ Then the king commanded his palace master Ashpenaz to bring some of the Israelites of the royal family and of the nobility, ⁴ young men without physical defect and handsome, versed in every branch of wisdom, endowed with knowledge and insight, and competent to serve in the king's palace; they were to be taught the literature and language of the Chaldeans. ⁵ The king assigned them a daily portion of the royal rations of food and wine. They were to be educated for three years, so that at the end of that time they could be stationed in the king's court. ⁶ Among

them were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, from the tribe of Judah. ⁷ The palace master gave them other names: Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego.

⁸ But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the royal rations of food and wine; so he asked the palace master to allow him not to defile himself. ⁹ Now God allowed Daniel to receive favor and compassion from the palace master. ¹⁰ The palace master said to Daniel, I am afraid of my lord the king; he has appointed your food and your drink. If he should see you in poorer condition than the other young men of your own age, you would endanger my head with the king. ¹¹ Then Daniel asked the guard whom the palace master had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah: ¹² Please test your servants for ten days. Let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. ¹³ You can then compare our appearance with the appearance of the young men who eat the royal rations, and deal with your servants according to what you observe. ¹⁴ So he agreed to this proposal and tested them for ten days. ¹⁵ At the end of ten days it was observed that they appeared better and fatter than all the young men who had been eating the royal rations. ¹⁶ So the guard continued to withdraw their royal rations and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables. ¹⁷ To these four young men God gave knowledge and skill in every aspect of literature and wisdom; Daniel also had insight into all visions and dreams.

¹⁸ At the end of the time that the king had set for them to be brought in, the palace master brought them into the presence of Nebuchadnezzar, ¹⁹ and the king spoke with them. And among them all, no one was found to compare with Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah; therefore they were stationed in the king's court. ²⁰ In every matter of wisdom and understanding concerning which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom. ²¹ And Daniel continued there until the first year of King Cyrus.

Judah's Treasures Taken to Babylon (Dan. 1:1–5)

Verses 1–2 tell of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon laying siege to Jerusalem and God allowing King Jehoiakim of Judah to fall into his power.² The Book of Daniel makes clear that Judah fell into captivity because of God's will. The issue of God's sovereignty is a theme throughout the book, signifying at least two things: (1) the fall of Judah was a punishment from God for the nation's unrighteousness; and (2) even foreign powers such as Nebuchadnezzar held sway only under God's power.

The entirety of the Book of Daniel points to God's direct intervention in human affairs, even relative to heads of state. God's interaction with Judah's wavering faithfulness shows a direct correlation between the captivity and God's judgment on the people. The Book of Daniel is making a not-so-subtle point about the nation's captivity: *This punishment is your own fault, and if there is to be deliverance from Babylon you must be faithful to me.* Daniel's faithfulness to God is a model for all, of whatever age, who would wonder, *Does it really matter whether I remain true to my faith in God?*

Nebuchadnezzar raided Jerusalem. He took various holy objects from the temple and placed them among the treasury of "his gods" (Daniel 1:2).³ Nebuchadnezzar's taking these items from the temple itself indicates the greatness of his victory.

Temple treasures are one thing, but the true treasure Nebuchadnezzar took was not the religious items. Instead, the real prize was the people he captured. He gathered up royalty and nobility, "young men without physical defect and handsome," intelligent, "endowed with knowledge and insight" (Dan. 1:3–4). The wealth of any nation is the people, and Nebuchadnezzar was striking directly at the heart of the nation by taking the brightest and best. These were the leaders, the thinkers, the people who might be called the *brain trust* among the youth and young adults of the nation.

Nebuchadnezzar was working with a purpose in mind. He prepared the captives with a three-year education in the literature and language of the Chaldeans. They were treated well, with royal rations of food and wine. This special privilege not only was granted to forge loyalty to Nebuchadnezzar but also to create an elite court of people to deal with the affairs of his growing kingdom. He was equipping the brightest and

best from all corners of his conquered lands with the seeming intent of bettering the nation by blending the various peoples.

Daniel's Character (Dan. 1:6–10)

Among those taken were four of note from the tribe of Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. The palace master sought to strip them of their Jewish identity by changing their names: Daniel to *Beltshazzar*; Hananiah to *Shadrach*; Mishael to *Meshach*; Azariah to *Abednego*.

Daniel and three friends were noted for being among that elite group of handsome, intelligent, and knowledgeable young adults, but of them Daniel stood out. Daniel also stood out to “the palace master,” receiving “favor and compassion” from him. God’s sovereignty again was at work here, for “God allowed” this to take place. Daniel “resolved that he would not defile himself with the royal rations of food and wine,” and asked the palace master not to be required to do so (Dan. 1:8). Insisting on his usual Hebrew diet, Daniel revealed his self-discipline and courage as well as his deep faith. “The royal rations of food” might have included food considered unclean in Jewish dietary law, and the wine from the king’s table might have been used in cultic worship practices. Whatever the exact nature of “the royal rations of food and wine,” Daniel wished to remain pure before God.

The palace master was in a difficult spot if he allowed Daniel not to eat the royal rations but to eat only food acceptable to his faith and convictions. The palace master feared that the king would see Daniel’s health decline, and then the palace master would become accountable. “You would endanger my head with the king,” he said (Dan. 1:10). So Daniel made an offer.

The Bargain (Dan. 1:11–14)

Daniel made the offer directly to “the guard whom the palace master had appointed” over Daniel and his friends (Dan. 1:11). Whether the palace master was complicit in accepting the offer is not indicated. At any rate, Daniel offered the guard a way to test Daniel’s request and lessen the danger to the palace master. Daniel suggested a trial period of

A CASE STUDY

Charlie is an office worker in a medical practice and has enjoyed almost every minute of his six years there. He knows many of the patients closely and cares deeply for them. The staff has had little turnover, and relationships have been fulfilling. However, two new doctors have bought into the practice and have changed things in order to build up the profits. Charlie has seen a dramatic increase in certain tests that are expensive and anything but routine. He is concerned that patients are being treated unfairly, and so he tells his office manager, who is also a friend.

The office manager responded, "Just go with it, Charlie. More profit for the practice equals job security and maybe a year-end bonus for you and me. Just go with the flow."

Charlie has been feeling a pinch on his wallet lately, and so he thinks that maybe keeping quiet is best.

Consider these questions:

1. What does the office manager mean by *just go with the flow*?
2. What makes this situation difficult for Charlie?
3. What should Charlie do about his concerns?
4. Should Charlie stop *going along to get along*? Why? When? How?

ten days. There would be a test run of Daniel's diet with the promised payoff that Daniel's health would be at least as good as the others who had the royal rations. The guard agreed to the test.

As a result, Daniel maintained his fidelity to God, trusting God for the outcome of the test. Daniel's move was an act of faith. It was a very public refusal to *go along to get along*. Daniel very much went against the flow.

A kind of interdependence between God and Daniel emerged. Daniel could not be sure he would indeed be healthier than the other candidates in the royal academy. Even so, he trusted God would provide a pathway for him to honor God through keeping his faith's dietary code.

The Outcome (Dan. 1:15–21)

Daniel's firm priorities paid off. At the end of ten days, Daniel proved, among other things, that *eating all your vegetables is good for you!* More pointedly, though, staying faithful to God is good for you. Daniel and his three friends were healthier than the others in their company.

Daniel's insistence on the diet paid off in another way, too. God imparted additional knowledge and skill to the four, and Daniel was given a bonus skill—the ability to interpret dreams and visions.

The four friends' faithfulness to God's ways paid off in another substantial way, too. When they went before the king after their training was complete, the four—Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah—were at the head of their class. “And among them all, no one was found to compare . . .” with these four (Dan. 1:19).

The four friends' “wisdom and understanding” were found to be ten times better than anyone else in the royal courts. At every turn, Nebuchadnezzar found the four to be reliable and talented. Their excellence in their given tasks illustrates that even if they were in the employ of a foreign king their first priority was to be loyal to God.

Verse 21 suggests Daniel's service may have lasted almost sixty years, from 597 to 538 B.C.⁴ Various events of service and faithfulness to God in Daniel's lengthy life are described in the remainder of the Book of Daniel. His success can be traced to his refusal from the very beginning of his time in captivity to *go along to get along*.

Implications and Actions

The actions of Daniel and his friends demonstrate how people even in adverse situations can remain true to God and God's ways. Daniel's persistence in being faithful to God illustrates how we can move from *surviving to thriving* in our own lives.

As we encounter challenging situations, including temptations, taking moments to remember our core values as followers of God can create an inner calm and some private space to make good decisions. The pace of life doesn't always lend itself to time for thoughtful reflection. Therefore, we must be vigilant and intentional about keeping discipline in our

spiritual life and in being attentive to what the voice of the Holy Spirit may be saying to us in all the circumstances of each day.

Daniel also teaches us that we have a responsibility to be prepared and to work hard. He simply didn't expect God to show up and bless him. Rather he studied in the king's courts, he took care of his body by eating the right foods, and he honored his God by remaining disciplined. There is a partnership between each of us and God for the results of our lives, and we are called to examine daily whether we are living true to ourselves, our values, and our God.

QUESTIONS

1. What is the significance of Nebuchadnezzar's wanting to provide learning opportunities to gifted young adults "competent to serve in the king's palace" (Dan. 1:4)?

2. Daniel and his friends avoided "the royal rations of food and wine" (Dan. 1:8) and kept their typical diet as an act of refusing to become like the culture that held them in captivity. What elements of our culture should Christians resist in order to avoid a similar kind of spiritual captivity?

