

Daniel 1:1–21 (CEB)

[As the Babylonians complete their conquest of Jerusalem, four talented young men are taken away to the city of Babylon where they will serve Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian ruler. The Emperor decides that the young men will be given royal rations so that they can be strong and ready to serve. The problem for the four is that eating the king's food will violate the food laws of these Jews.]

⁸Daniel decided that he wouldn't pollute himself with the king's rations or the royal wine, and he appealed to the chief official in hopes that he wouldn't have to do so. ⁹Now God had established faithful loyalty between Daniel and the chief official; ¹⁰but the chief official said to Daniel, "I'm afraid of my master, the king, who has mandated what you are to eat and drink. What will happen if he sees your faces looking thinner than the other young men in your group? The king will have my head because of you!"

¹¹So Daniel spoke to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah: ¹²"Why not test your servants for ten days? You could give us a diet of vegetables to eat and water to drink. ¹³Then compare our appearance to the appearance of the young men who eat the king's food. Then deal with your servants according to what you see."

¹⁴The guard decided to go along with their plan and tested them for ten days. ¹⁵At the end of ten days they looked better and healthier than all the young men who were eating the king's food. ¹⁶So the guard kept taking away their rations and the wine they were supposed to drink and gave them vegetables instead. ¹⁷And God gave knowledge, mastery of all literature, and wisdom to these four men. Daniel himself gained understanding of every type of vision and dream.

¹⁸When the time came to review the young men as the king had ordered, the chief official brought them before Nebuchadnezzar. ¹⁹When the king spoke with them, he found no one as good as Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. So they took their place in the king's service. ²⁰Whenever the king consulted them about any aspect of wisdom and understanding, he found them head and shoulders above all the dream interpreters and enchanters in his entire kingdom. ²¹And Daniel stayed in the king's service until the first year of King Cyrus.

Philippians 4:11–13 (CEB)

¹¹I'm not saying this because I need anything, for I have learned how to be content in any circumstance. ¹²I know the experience of being in need and of having more than enough; I have learned the secret to being content in any and every circumstance, whether full or hungry or whether having plenty or being poor. ¹³I can endure all these things through the power of the one who gives me strength.

Ever feel like you are living in a strange world, that seems stranger and stranger all the time. Daniel, Peter, and Paul are all here to help.

Daniel had enjoyed his life of privilege. As part of Israel's ruling class, Daniel was well-educated and quite comfortable. He was smart, organized, strong-willed, and confident. He had everything going for him. He was young and on top of the world.

But when they came . . . they came for Daniel too.

As Jerusalem and the remaining Israelites slowly succumbed to the power of Babylon, demands were made of the king of Judah. Jerusalem's best and brightest were to be sent to Babylon to serve their king, Nebuchadnezzar. So Daniel and others began the thousand-mile journey.

Daniel's mind sought to keep up with the changes that had swept over him and his heart struggled to deal with the pain of separation and loss. A comfort was the fact that three of his friends had also been turned over to Nebuchadnezzar: Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.

It begins

The journey had been hard. At times Daniel had feared he would never even reach Babylon. But he did. And he and his friends settled into their new lives, determined to make the best of it. What choice did they really have? There was no prospect of ever returning home; Babylon was one of the mightiest empires ever known. So, they would try to serve their new king well and stay true to their God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Daniel and his friends soon confronted the choices thrust upon them by this strange world called Babylon. It began with names, just names. Which seems like a small thing to us but would have been anything but small to these young Jews. Their proper Israelite names were taken from them. All four would now be known by Babylonian names: Daniel as Belteshazzar, his friends as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

As Daniel and his friends tried to deal with the affront of being given Babylonians, they were quickly thrust into a much more significant crisis.

Being now in service to Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel and his friends were expected to eat the king's rations. This would be far better fare than the commoners of Babylon could ever contemplate eating. It was to make the four Jews strong and sharp and suitable for the king's service.

But of course, the problem presented by the king's food was clear. Such food, though delicious and nutritious, would often be conceived and prepared in violation of the Jewish food laws. Not only would pork be served, but also shrimp and other foods that were forbidden under the Law of Moses.

God had already softened the heart of the Babylonian official toward Daniel and his friends. So, when Daniel suggested they be allowed to live on vegetables and water for ten days and see how they did, the official agreed.

And, not surprisingly for those who know God, when the ten days were over Daniel and his friends were doing better than the young men who had been eating the King's food!

So, Daniel and his friends were allowed to stay on their special "kosher" diet and a crisis was passed. God had more gifts for Daniel and the others, but those stories are for a future week.

A strange world

Many Christians increasingly feel like Daniel, that they are living in a stranger and stranger world. Vices embraced, virtues abandoned. The social fabric tearing further and further apart. To make matters worse, politicians and news outlets stoke anxieties and fears, filling the days with self-pronounced crises and breaking news.

What is a person to do? What is a Christian to do? How do we follow Jesus in a culture of fear? Perhaps Daniel can show us the way . . . and Paul and Peter.

"Cast all your anxiety on him" (1 Peter 5:7)

Anxiety has always been part of the human condition. In the first century, people were no less anxious and stressed out than we are now, even when times were good – much less than when they were bad.

For the ancients, including the Babylonians, the heavens were populated with countless gods and goddesses, any of whom might take a disliking toward you or your neighbors on a whim. The pantheon of the gods was like one big soap opera, far removed from any human control. The gods would do what they wanted, when they wanted. People coped with the whims of the gods in different ways. Some, like the Epicureans, decided that since they couldn't control their capricious gods, they'd simply grab all the pleasure and happiness they could in life. Others, like the Stoics, sought to make themselves immune to anxiety by learning a detached self-sufficiency, which they called "contentment."

Far from promoting some sort of detached self-sufficiency, Peter urges the Christians to throw their anxieties and worries upon God, for it is God who cares for these believers. It is God who will “restore, support, strengthen, and establish” the believers, even as they discipline themselves and stay vigilant. Peterson paraphrases Peter this way: “this generous God . . . will have you put together and on your feet for good. He gets the last word; yes, he does.” So it was with Daniel, so it is with us still.

In his letter to the Christians in Philippi, Paul even uses the language of the Stoics. This is the only place in his letters that Paul refers to himself as “content” (*autarkes* in the Greek). Paul would often use the language and vocabulary of his audience when he spoke to them about Jesus Christ. But Paul always meant something different too; there was always a Christian perspective. For the Stoics, contentment was all about being independent, needing no one else. That way, the “content” person couldn’t be harmed by the emotions or slights or needs of others. Obviously, Paul means something quite different; it is resting in the Lord whatever comes. Paul, you see, is writing from prison and he knows that he may soon be executed. Nonetheless, his letter to the Philippians is filled with joy. He has learned to be content in all things, even facing imprisonment and execution.

How has Paul learned this? What is his “secret”? Paul has learned that he can do all things – such as being content in all circumstances – through God. It is God who gives Paul the strength that he needs to be free from worry and anxiety. It is God who strengthened Daniel as he began his new life in the strange new world.

Paul’s “secret” is that he has come to understand and truly embrace the psalmist’s portrait of God as the good shepherd. Though Paul languishes in prison, he will “fear no evil,” confident that God will lead him to green pastures and still water. Paul’s cup will always overflow – in all circumstances. He knows that he will dwell in God’s house forever, because nothing – “not death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers . . . nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:38-39). Such confidence in God and the strength he provides is the basis for Paul’s joyful contentment . . . and Peter’s . . . and our own.

Unlearning “self-reliance”

Daniel, Peter, and Paul point us in the same direction – toward God. Peterson renders 1 Peter 5:6-7 this way: “So be content with who you are, and don’t put on airs. God’s strong hand is on you; he’ll promote you at the right time. Live carefree before God; he is most careful with you.”

I was taught to be self-reliant, always ready to “pull myself up by the bootstraps.” Many of us are. Understood correctly, self-reliance is a good thing. Paul supported himself with his skills as a tent-maker rather than relying on others for financial support. He was committed to his ministry and knew that he couldn’t stand by and leave it up to others. He knew that he was God’s agent, not God’s puppet. “Contentment” for Paul and Peter did not mean just laying back and waiting for life to run you over. Daniel took the initiative to suggest a way out of the diet dilemma.

But as we are inclined to do in all things, too often we turn a healthy self-reliance into an unhealthy self-sufficiency. We forget that we actually need others. We forget that just as God is inherently relational, so are we. We are not independent of others, we are dependent upon them to help us realize our purpose and to teach us about love. God does not call us to some sort of self-sufficient isolation, but to fellowship.

More even than that, we are dependent upon God. Indeed, much of the biblical story is devoted to shaking us out of our misguided self-sufficiency and self-centeredness. The long story of God and his people makes us realize that we are dependent upon God, that it is he who strengthens us and enables us to accomplish all that we do, even as our own work and efforts are necessary. Further, we are to remain faithful to God, to stay true to his ways. May Daniel be our guide in this!

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, Jeremiah 29 From exile, Jeremiah writes a letter to the exiled.	Tuesday, Lamentations 1 A song of sadness for the death of Jerusalem
Wednesday, Daniel 1 Exile to Babylon and the first test	Thursday, Daniel 2 The king lays down an impossible challenge. God enables Daniel to meet that challenge.
Friday, 1 Peter 5 Humble yourselves and throw all your anxieties upon God	Weekly Joys and Concerns

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class

We are studying Paul's letter, 1 Corinthians

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the book of Judges

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

A new series beginning April 3:

***Making Sense of Revelation:
The Theology of John's Apocalypse***

Sermon Notes
