

**“Victims No More”**  
**Daniel 1:1-21**  
**January 24, 2016**

---

**INTRODUCTION:**

Daniel was taken into exile to Babylon during the first wave of exiles, and he would spend the rest of his life in that nation. Our situation is like that of Daniel because we too are exiles living in a land that is not our true home. Like him, we are often without power and at the mercy of the decision-makers who have power. When the story begins, Daniel has about as little power as can be imagined, a recent teenage immigrant without family or resources. Everything about his life is directed by a man who seems to have all the power, the mighty King Nebuchadnezzar. But Daniel's lack of power does not result in a lack of impact. The author of this book hints at that in the two verses that bracket this chapter. He picks up the story of Daniel at the beginning of the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, and then informs us at the end of the chapter that Daniel was still there when Cyrus began to rule. Cyrus was the king of a new empire, the Persian Empire. Not only did the powerless Daniel outlast the mighty King Nebuchadnezzar, he also outlasted Babylon. And he had great impact on all these kings.

As we begin his story in this first chapter, I am struck by the absence of self-pity in Daniel's attitude. That is all the more striking to me in light of the prevalence of the victim mentality present in our own culture. It seems that in our day, everything is always someone else's fault and we are all just victims of other people's bad behavior or of circumstances beyond our control. In his book *Blame It On the Brain*, Ed Welch tells about watching a press conference in which a prominent politician was caught on camera buying and using illegal drugs. This politician had been accused of wrongdoing prior to that, but nothing could ever stick. But now he was caught red-handed and was walking to the microphones to face the music. As he was moving toward the podium, a reporter called out, "Why did you do it? Why did you lie to us all these years?" His response was immediate. "I didn't do it," he said. "My brain was messed up. It was my brain that did it. My disease did it!"

Christians have not been immune from the victim mentality of our culture. How many times have we heard whining from Christians about the biased, unfair media? How many Christians seem to have nothing better to do than to complain about all the godless, liberal politicians who are ruining our country? What I find striking about Daniel in this first chapter is the complete absence of such a victim mentality, even though he had been brutally victimized. Instead, trusting in God, he accepted where he was and made choices about what he should do. Let's look at this more carefully, that we might learn how we can live more effectively as exiles in our day.

## I. A Victim Victimized

It is easy to overlook the traumatic suffering endured by Daniel and his friends in their Babylonian exile. Consider, for example, his age. The word used in verse 4, *youth*, was a word that would normally apply to a teenager. Daniel was almost certainly not over twenty years old, and may possibly have been much younger. He was separated from his parents and marched 700 miles to a land of strange customs and a foreign language. I would imagine significant homesickness must have been experienced by these teenaged boys. Things did not improve once they arrived in Babylon. The precious articles of the temple, something like Israel's national treasures, were taken to Babylon and placed in the temple of a false god. This was common practice in this day, as seen many centuries earlier when the Philistines captured the ark of the covenant and placed it in the temple of Dagon. It was intended to show the might of their god over the god of the defeated nation. Everyone remembers the poisoning of the oak trees at Toomer's Corner in Auburn. These weren't just oak trees, but symbols to Auburn fans of football victories. Such symbols touch our emotions, and Daniel's sadness was multiplied in the display of these symbols in the temple of this Babylonian god.

King Nebuchadnezzar had plans for Daniel and his friends. They became students in the King's College of Babylon. Why would he bother to educate these young men from a captured nation? It was not done out of any motive of kindness. As we're going to learn later in the story, Nebuchadnezzar was something of a megalomaniac with great plans for himself and his kingdom. He wanted to conquer as much of the world as he could. Though his army was the strongest of its day, he had a limited number of soldiers, and he wanted to control Judah with a minimal outlay of soldiers. So his plan was to train promising leaders in Babylonian ways, including Babylonian religion, and send them back to their land in positions of leadership, but serving Babylonian purposes. So Daniel was made to study the literature and language of the Chaldeans. Notice that verse 4 says *Chaldeans*, not *Babylonians*. It is true that the two are somewhat synonymous, but the word "Chaldean" soon became a byword for "magician" or "diviner," because the religion and literature of the Chaldeans was so focused on such things. So Daniel was forced to study such things from a perspective he would have rejected as a good Jewish young man.

And then his name was changed, reflecting again on his loss of identity. Names in the Bible are far more significant than in our culture. Their meanings were emphasized. Daniel means "God is my Judge." The name he was given by Nebuchadnezzar, "Belteshazzar," includes the name of a Babylonian god and means "May Bel protect his life." Finally, it was likely that Daniel was also made a eunuch. While we are not told that explicitly in this passage, it was the

general practice for any who served in the king's palace to be made eunuchs. It was prophesied in Isaiah 39 that many of the offspring of King Hezekiah (of whom it is likely that Daniel was numbered) would become **“eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon”** (Is. 40:7). There is also no record of Daniel marrying. So he was also traumatized by a loss of his ability to father children for the rest of his life.

Though Daniel's victimization may be more severe than most, all who live in this fallen world have experienced life as a victim of malevolent forces beyond our control. We get hurt by unkind words and the actions of others, by sickness, by financial setbacks or by any number of unwanted and unpleasant things in life. The issue isn't how to avoid such things, but how to respond to them when they happen. Our sinful response is normally either anger, passivity, or a combination of the two. The response of faith that we see in Daniel is to trust in a sovereign God and to make choices in light of that. Let's look at that next.

## **II. A Victim Makes a Choice**

Daniel's choice was to draw the line in the area of food and drink. **“Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank”** (v. 8). It's unclear why Daniel would have defiled himself by eating this food. Some think the king's food would have been unclean by the standards of clean and unclean food found in the Mosaic law. Others think that the food was defiled because it had been offered first to Babylonian gods. It was the common practice in this day to offer sumptuous food to the gods, after which any leftovers would be brought to the king for him to enjoy. I don't imagine such an arrangement would ever have left any king short of food. After the king ate his fill, the still abundant leftovers would have been available to Daniel and the other young men in training. Whatever the reason for the defilement of this food in Daniel's mind, he decided that he would draw the line here, presumably being willing to die rather than defile himself.

I want to point out that Daniel's choice was marked by both wisdom and faith. Note first his wisdom. He didn't foolishly draw a line in the sand and then just give up. Instead, he thought through the best way to execute his decision that would give him the best chance of success. So he first approached the chief of the eunuchs and asked him for a dietary exception to the king's order about the food. The chief had too much at stake to allow such a thing, and so he refused Daniel's request. So Daniel approached someone with less at stake, the steward whom the chief had assigned to Daniel. He made it as easy as possible for the steward to grant his request by simply asking for a ten day test of a diet of vegetables and water. When Daniel's appearance after the ten days was superior to those who had eaten the king's food, he saw that there was

little at stake in granting Daniel's request, so he did so. It probably didn't hurt either that the steward could then eat the food from the king's table that was intended for Daniel.

We also can see Daniel's faith. Daniel believed in the sovereignty of God, that Jehovah is in control of all things for the benefit of his people. We can see that in the three times our text says that God "gave" something. Notice how this is seen in the first two verses of the book. We read in the first verse that Nebuchadnezzar besieged and conquered Jerusalem, and then in the second verse that it was the Lord who gave him this victory. By faith, Daniel believed that God was active in great tragedies. The second "gave" occurs in verse 9, where it says that God gave Daniel favor with the chief of the eunuchs. God is able to cause one person to like another. The third "gave" is in verse 17, where we read that God gave Daniel and his three friends learning and skill. Let's consider that next.

### **III. A Victim Vindicated**

To the casual observer, Daniel's God appears to be weak. The items used for his worship are now in a pagan temple, and the nation he founded and gave to Abraham's descendants seems to be ruined beyond all hope of recovery. But a more careful consideration, as we have just seen, reveals that God is not at all done. He is working behind the scenes to accomplish his will, and in the process to vindicate Daniel. So we read that Daniel's diet led to better results than those who ate from the king's table. Someone told me this week about a new Christian diet program called "Daniel's Diet" which claims biblical warrant for a simple, natural diet like his. I think that is a significant misreading of this text. We ought not draw the conclusion here that since Daniel ate only vegetables and water, we should too. The point of the text isn't that God blessed Daniel because of *what* he ate, but *in spite* of what he ate. If anything, the conclusion we ought to draw from this is the power of saying the blessing before we eat, asking God to bless our food to nourish our bodies.

A second vindication comes at the end of their three years of education. The king himself examined them and found Daniel and his three friends ten times better than even his most experienced magicians and enchanters. Again, the impressive results were not due to their native intelligence or hard work, but to God's blessing upon them.

So what we see here is that God continues to be at work even when everything on the outside looks as if he isn't. As the readers of Daniel 1, we are taken behind the curtain and shown what is going on with God. Nebuchadnezzar didn't know any of this. At the time he was examining Daniel, he was probably congratulating himself on how well his plan was working. But

what was really happening was the work of God to accomplish his will, a will that was good for Daniel, the people of Israel, and even for the megalomaniac Nebuchadnezzar. It is the same thing we see with Jesus. To all outward appearances, it looked as if God's purposes were all being thwarted. Jesus looked weak, not strong, just like Daniel. But when we see the full picture, we understand that God wasn't being weak; he was being merciful. He was coming not as a conqueror but as a man of wisdom and understanding. And unlike Daniel, he came to bear sins of megalomaniacs like you and me.

It is when we know this God that we are able to step away from the self-pitying victim mentality. God is at work always to accomplish his purposes, and his purposes for any of us who know Jesus are always and only good. When we fall into self-pity, we are simply not believing that. This can happen in the most common activities of life. It can happen when you're driving and get caught in a traffic jam. If you respond with self-pity, you are not believing in the kind of active God we see in Daniel 1. That kind of God can bless to his children any situation, just like he blessed Daniel's simple diet. Self-pity can happen when you're doing the dishes, working in the yard. In my experience, the cancer of victimhood is particularly present in marriages, slowly eating away at the life and happiness God intended for the marriage. It has happened to me in all of those activities and more, and it needs to be repented of.

## **CONCLUSION:**

I want to close with an application. God calls us to make choices that stem from having the kind of active, sovereign God we have, rather than being paralyzed with self-pity and the victim mentality. Of course, the irony is that even those paralyzed with self-pity make choices, because the failure to choose is to choose. It is to choose to pay for your sins yourself by your self-pity instead of receiving the free forgiveness Jesus gives. But you can never pay for your own sins; only the blood of Jesus will do that.

As Daniel made a choice, we are called to do the same. We are to choose to follow Jesus in big ways and small. It may be something as simple as choosing to make a phone call you've been needing to make. You may find it a good exercise to ask yourself the question frequently, "What choice does God want me to make as I follow him and believe that in Jesus he is for me?" When you do so, you will be amazed at the hope God brings. In Jesus, you are a victim no more. You are a conqueror by his power, just like Daniel. So live your life in exile trusting this great God of ours.