



SUNDAY SCHOOL MINISTRY

Discipleship Plan

Year Six
Israel in Exile
(Part 1)

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The Divided Kingdom

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Daniel is Taken to Babylon

“The king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility, ... among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah of the tribe of Judah” (vv. 3–6).

- Daniel 1:1–7

Returning to the Old Testament prophets, we come to the book of Daniel, which records the ministry and visions of the next prophet in our chronological study. Daniel 1 establishes a time frame for the prophet’s ministry. Based on the historical events described in verses 1 and 21, Daniel ministered from 605–539/538 BC. This makes him a contemporary of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, though Daniel’s ministry ended after theirs.

Daniel has endured more criticism than just about any other prophetic book. Although the events of the book and the way they are described indicate that it was written in the sixth century BC, Bible critics often date the book nearly four hundred years later. Antisupernaturalism tends to drive this conclusion. Since the nineteenth century, many “scholars” have denied either God’s existence or that He would intervene in history even if He did exist. Since Daniel 7–12 predicts with uncanny accuracy the rise of world powers such as Greece, which occurred long after Daniel’s ministry, many scholars dismiss the book as *vaticinium ex eventu*—prophecy written after the events it allegedly predicts.

Relating some of Daniel’s material to what other not-always-reliable sources of ancient history describe is not always easy. Still, there is no real reason to date the book later than the sixth century BC apart from the unwarranted presupposition that God either does not exist or does not reveal His future plans. Though the book of Daniel was written in the sixth century BC, the prophet’s ministry began with his exile to Babylon in 605 BC after Nebuchadnezzar’s first incursion into Palestine (2 Kings 24:1a).

At first, Nebuchadnezzar’s success against Jerusalem left even the godliest person wondering whether Yahweh, the covenant Lord of Israel, had suffered a defeat. Daniel 1:2 answers that question, explaining that “the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into [Nebuchadnezzar’s] hand.” Jerusalem was not captured because God was too weak to protect it; rather, the enemy of Judah—Nebuchadnezzar—was himself a tool in the Lord’s hands to discipline His people. Falling prey to Babylon was not God’s fault but was due to the sin of the Judahites. John Calvin comments, “King Nebuchadnezzar did not possess Jerusalem, and was not the conqueror of the nation by his own valor, or counsel, or good luck, but because God wished to humble his people.” Again and again we will see the Lord revealed as the sovereign determiner of history in our study of Daniel.

Coram Deo

God is the sovereign Lord of history who causes kingdoms to rise and fall according to His decree. Nothing happens apart from His having ordained it in eternity past, and this is a comforting truth. It tells us that everything in history has a purpose even if we cannot now discern what that purpose happens to be. All events great and small are being used of the Lord to advance His glory and our good, and His control over all things is the only way we can be confident of that precious truth.

Passages for Further Study

Jeremiah 43

Habakkuk 1:5–11

Zechariah 11:15–17

1 Timothy 6:13–16

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Lesson 1: God's Presence in Exile

Primary Verse: "As for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams." Daniel 1:17 (ESV)

Teaching Text: Daniel 1

Supporting Text: 2 Kings 21:10-15; 2 Kings 24; Ezekiel 18:1-9

God's Sovereign Hand in Exile: In the first chapter of the book of Daniel, we find three instances in which the verb "gave" is attributed to God (Daniel 1:2, 9, 17). The repetition of the phrase tells us God was neither absent from the events of the exile, nor was his presence removed from His people in their exile. Daniel 1:2 places God's sovereign hand directly in the defeat and capture of Jerusalem. It reads: "the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into [Nebuchadnezzar's] hand." The exile wasn't a mere military or political overthrow but the very judgement of God for the sins of His covenant people (2 Kings 24:3). There is often a temptation to "absolve" God from tragic situations. In these moments, let's remember that while God never authors or approves of evil, it is still His sovereign hand that permits all things (Isaiah 45:7). In difficult times, we can receive this comforting truth: Our God permits evil to fulfil His good purposes (Genesis 50:15-20).

God's Compassion in Exile: "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" was a proverb used by the exiles in attributing their sufferings to the sins of past generations (Ezekiel 18:2). One might be tempted to agree with them in reading Daniel 1:1-4. Due to Judah's disobedience, Daniel, a youth without blemish, skilled in knowledge, and born from noble stock, was captured like vessel to the house of a foreign god, far away from the land of Abraham his father. This is true. Yet, God's response to the exiles in Ezekiel 18:1-9 is also proved by God's compassion toward righteous Daniel (Daniel 1:9-21). God gives Daniel favor in the sight of Nebuchadnezzar's chief eunuch and he and his companions are spared from defiling themselves from the king's food (Leviticus 11). In Daniel 1:17, God gives Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah learning and skill in all literature and wisdom, promoting them before their captors. God's *hesed* (steadfast covenant love) meets Daniel and his companions in Babylon, showing that God responds according to the acts of each individual; the righteous man doesn't die for the sins of his father, but he shall surely live (Ezekiel 18:9).

God's Wisdom in Exile: Despite their relative youth, these four Hebrew boys knew enough to trust God's word rather than their eyes and appetites. Beyond their own faithfulness, God's wisdom is also on display. Remember the steward himself, though inclined to impose the Babylonian diet upon them, could see that their divinely-prescribed food restrictions made them "better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youths who ate the king's food" (Daniel 1:15). When put to the test, God's wisdom is proven whether it be in our diet, doctrine, or deeds as commanded by Him in His word.

Questions to Consider: How does the faithfulness of Daniel and his companions prove suffering never excuses distrust of God or disobedience to His Word?

Challenging the Class: Reads Acts 2:22-23. How did God govern the ultimate evil for the purposes of bringing about His plan for our ultimate good?

Lesson 2: Nebuchadnezzar's Exile: Presuming on the Riches of God's Patience

Primary Verse: "Even as the words were on his lips, a voice came from heaven, 'This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: Your royal authority has been taken from you. You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like the ox. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes.'" Daniel 4:31-32 (NIV)

Teaching Text: Daniel 4

Supporting Text: Daniel 2-3

God Reveals His Ways Through Dreams: See how gracious the King of Heaven is! God has been to the proverbial drawing board and made plans on the rising and falling of empires. He has secured the beginning and end of nations according to His wisdom, pleasure, and glory while keeping in mind the covenant and promises He has made to His own. Without being under any obligation to do so, however, He informs His lowly vessel, the King of Babylon by way of dreams. In Exodus 33:13, Moses pleaded and David prayed for in Psalm 25:4; God grants Nebuchadnezzar without recorded request. Clearly, in both dreams, God reveals He is actively orchestrating human history on a personal and global scale to reveal His own glory in the earth. He *will* have His way despite the sinful pride and pomp of man's vainglory!

God Reveals Himself in a Furnace: Remember the head of gold from King Nebuchadnezzar's first dream (Daniel 2:31-32)? Could it be it was out of selective hearing and a wicked fixation on his own glory that inspired the construction of his image of gold (Daniel 3:1)? Whatever the case may be, his futile attempt to manifest his earthly authority became occasion for Yahweh to reveal His eternal glory and faithfulness forever. Thousands of years later, no one knows what became of Nebuchadnezzar's idolatrous image, but in the same span of time, billions and billions have heard of three Hebrew boys who were rewarded with a personal visit from their covenant God. They stood for Him when He was not visible, He drew near to ensure and enable them to stand firm for Him under fire—*literally!*

God Reveals His Authority to Exalt and Humble in Exile: The gentile king of Babylon received two direct and personal messages from the God of Israel, Maker of Heaven and Earth. Both dreams were revealed and interpreted by a faithful prophet and yet, he failed to give heed. Doesn't that sound like Israel's failure to listen to God's prophets who faithfully reminded them of and expounded upon God's word? Just as they suffered exile, so too would this king. Ultimately, God's judgement and grace are revealed in Nebuchadnezzar's micro-exilic experience as He will be in the exiles of Israel and Judah.

Questions to Consider: Is God under any obligation to personally reveal Himself? Why or why not? Have you ever been guilty of focusing on one portion of God's word to the exclusion of another part of His word? When did that happen and why do you think we are prone to such temptations? Consider the wonderful words King Nebuchadnezzar uses to speak of God (Daniel 2:46-47, 3:28-4:3). How can a man say such things about God and yet be so far from Him? What warning, if any, should we receive from this?

Challenging the Class: All the human actors in the Bible are co-stars, God is always in the leading role! Are your eyes opened to see Him revealed in His Word by His Spirit?

Lesson 3: God's Power in Exile: That His Name May be Proclaimed in All the Earth

Primary Verse: "Then King Darius wrote to those of every people, nation, and language who live on the whole earth: 'I issue a decree that in all my royal dominion, people must tremble in fear before the God of Daniel: For he is the living God, and he endures forever; his kingdom will never be destroyed, and his dominion has no end.'" Daniel 6:25-26 (CSB)

Teaching Text: Daniel 5-6

Supporting Text: Daniel 2:46-49; 4:1-3; 4:34-37, Exodus 9:13-21, Joshua 2:1-11

God's Fame in Israel's Deliverance: God's purpose in the Exodus was multifaceted. He acts out of concern for Israel (Exodus 3:7) and in faithfulness to His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Exodus 6:8). He also acts for the renown of His own name. Consider God's words to Pharaoh in Exodus 9:15-16: "By now I could have stretched out my hand and struck you and your people with a plague, and you would have been obliterated from the earth. However, I have let you live for this purpose: to show you my power and to make my name known on the whole earth." God preserves the oppressive Pharaoh/Egypt so that His power to save Israel might be known among the watching nations. Rahab's words in Joshua 2:8-11 tell us this plan was fulfilled.

God's Fame in Israel's Judgement: God's regard for the spread of His name among the nations was central in His deliverance and blessing of Israel. In the book of Daniel, we find the judgement and the decline of His people do not hinder God's plan to proclaim His name in all the earth. Judah's exile becomes a useful setting for the dramatic display of God's wisdom, power and glory in Babylon. There, God shows He is the revealer of mysteries (Daniel 2:46-49); the Most High God (Daniel 3:26); the Sovereign God who lifts and brings low (Daniel 4:28-37; 5:24-31); and the Living God who controls creation (Daniel 6:25-28). Whether for their deliverance or in judgement of their sins, God deals with His people for the sake of His own glory.

A God After His Own Glory: When sinful wo/men seek their own glory, we call it narcissism, when they seek God's glory, the Bible calls it right. See John 7:18: "The one who speaks for himself seeks his own glory. But He who seeks the glory of the One who sent Him is true, and there is no unrighteousness in Him. God's passion to spread His name is love, not narcissism, for there is no name under heaven given to people by which we must be saved (John 7:18). God's fame among the nations leads to the repentance and salvation of sinners (Joshua 2:8-11).

Questions to Consider: Christians are forgiven sinners but we are sinners nonetheless. This being true, how easy is it for you to speak and serve for your own glory as opposed to the glory of God?

Challenging the Class: Read Jesus high priestly prayer in John 17 (note verses 1-5; 24). How important is God's glory to Jesus? What does Jesus' glory "before the world existed" signify about His deity? How does verse 24 speak to the truth of this statement: Jesus has redeemed His people--by His life, death, and resurrection--so that you can see and savor God's glory forever.

Lesson 4: Daniel's Prayer: A Lesson in Confession

Primary Verse: "And I prayed to the Lord my God, and made confession, and said, "O Lord, great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant and mercy with those who love Him, and with those who keep His commandments, we have sinned and committed iniquity, we have done wickedly and rebelled, even by departing from Your precepts and Your judgments." Daniel 9:4-5 (NKJV)

Teaching Text: Daniel 9

Supporting Text: Jeremiah 25:11, 12; 29:10

A Prayer of Confession: We are rarely more insistent than when demanding another to admit their wrongs to us. However, we are rarely as ready to make excuses as when others demand us to apologize and make amends for our wrongs. It would behoove every one of us to study at the feet of the prophet Daniel whose prayer represents the apex of apologies. Nobody admits wrong, exposes evil attitudes, repents of rebellion and seeks forgiveness, quite like this prophet! While many before him called men and women to repentance, this prophet leads people in prayer. We do well to follow in his steps!

A Prayer of Supplication: Think of all the different pleas Daniel could have submitted on behalf of his people. They suffered from humiliation and often being at the bottom of the social totem pole. Those left in Judah were forced to face the ruins of their beloved city and the psycho-social consequences of such trauma. Yet, with the national embarrassment and cultural upheaval of Israel clearly in view, Daniel's primary concern is God's glorious name and reputation. Knowing God's faithfulness to His own word, Daniel's request is not based so much on the need of God's people, as it is on the vindication and fulfillment of God's message through the prophet Jeremiah (see supporting text). How instructive!

A Prayer Centered on God: Perhaps the most puzzling part of Daniel's prayer is the person praying. We know that Daniel is merely a youth, possibly even a pre-teen, in the earliest part of the book named for him. Not knowing how long he had already been in Babylon, he may have been a small child when originally carried off into exile. And yet, he prays in a way that shows he counts himself along with earlier generations of Abraham's descendants whose disobedience merited the punishment and discipline of exile. Why would Daniel include himself? Is it possible he is more focused and concerned about God being offended than maintaining a self-appointed innocence?

Questions to Consider: How many specific charges does Daniel confess and admit to in this prayer? How many times does he use the word "we" or "our" thus including himself in the wrongs committed against God? Considering how often he prays with a group/collective mentality, does the prayer deny or minimize his own personal relationship with God? Why or why not? How committed to intercessory prayer are you? Do your prayers reflect your commitment to family, friends, church family and their needs before God?

Challenging the Class: What is the basis of your requests for forgiveness? What are you asking God for? Can you come up with better requests than the things God promises to give? Is there a better rationale for God's mercy than His Son's blood?

Blame It on Babylon

by *Kevin DeYoung*

In the book of Revelation, Babylon is a symbol of all that's wrong in the world. It's the system, the way things are in a sinful creation. Babylon is worldliness. If you study Revelation 17, you'll notice three things about the prostitute Babylon. First, she is attractive. She has royal clothes, purple and scarlet. She glitters with gold and is decked out in pearls and precious stones. She's got her best threads on, alluring and seductive.

Second, the influence of Babylon is pervasive. She sits on many waters, which are peoples, multitudes, nations, and languages (Rev. 17:15). Babylon the city literally sat on many waters (Ps. 137:1; Jer. 51:13), but water here is a metaphor for influence. Babylon is connected and powerful. She is not one kingdom in one place at one time but the pervasive worldliness that reigns in every country, every culture, and every government.

Third, Babylon is impressive. John says, in verse 6, "When I saw her, I marveled greatly." He was astonished at her influence, her power, and her hold on the inhabitants of the earth. The ways of the world always seem more impressive than the way of a crucified Savior.

So how do we avoid the crushing weight of Babylon the Great? The first step is to admit we live in Babylon. Everyone does. We are all tempted to drink from the golden cup filled with abominable things (Rev. 17:4). Every culture has its "isms" to tempt us to idolatry. In Africa, the test of faithfulness may involve animism and polygamy. In South America, it might be syncretistic versions of Catholicism. In Asia, it might be ancestor worship. In America, the "isms" are a little different:

Scientism: truth is only found in what can be measured, tested, and published by peer review.

Biological Determinism: I am what my genes tell me to be.

Journeyism: As long as I keep searching, maybe people will quit bothering me to find something.

Experienceism: The good life can be found only through travel, adventure, and novelty.

Protestism: If I always speak out against the evil out there, I can ignore the evil inside.

Healthism: Younger is always better, and when I get old there will be a pill and a workout video to help me feel young again.

Entertainmentism: If it doesn't make me feel something right now, it can't be worth my time.

Voyeurism: My life is disappointing and boring, so I will do all I can to peer in on celebrities whose lives are more exciting and more dysfunctional.

Sportsism: I live and die every weekend based on how well twenty-year-old men push each other over while running around in tights chasing a ball.

Partyism: Life pretty much stinks most days, but once or twice a week I have the time of my life; later, I throw up.

Politicsism: Everything bad is the other guy's fault, and everything that needs to change in the world can be voted on by Congress.

Familyism: Christ and His church take a back seat to soccer and band.

Sexualityism: My parts are my business, and God cannot tell me what they're for or when or how to use them.

Shoppingism: It's not idolatry if it's for my kids or on sale.

Advocacyism: I care therefore I am.

I could go on and on about all the other worldly "isms" of our day. But you get the point. We live and breathe worldliness.

The answer is not to hide in a holy huddle in some Christian ghetto. The problem with the Christian subculture isn't that it's too otherworldly but that it is almost always too worldly. Sure, some of the movies and music change, but the way of thinking is still the same. The experienceism, the healthism, the entertainmentism are all there because finding an alternative to Babylon is more difficult than watching different movies. It's living by a different story. It's being shaped by a different set of assumptions. It's demonstrating a different ethic. It's being supremely relevant to a dying world by smashing the idol of relevance. If you want to always be relevant, you must deal with the things that touch eternity, and if you are dealing with eternal things, you always seem a bit irrelevant.

We're foolish if we think that we are not surrounded by Babylon. Everyone is. Worldliness in this country will ruin far more spiritual lives than Islam and new-age spiritualities. "In the world, not of the world," Jesus said. Easier said than done. "Can a man carry fire next to his chest and his clothes not be burned? Or can one walk on hot coals and his feet not be scorched?" (Prov. 6:27-28). Beware of all the subtle ways the world wants to squeeze you into its mold.

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