



LifeStone

AMPLIFY CHRIST

VOLUME 1

Daniel

God's people upstage the Babylonian king

God's sovereignty is displayed across many kingdoms and across time

Jonah

God teaches Jonah a lesson about His mercy

A Tale of Two Prophets



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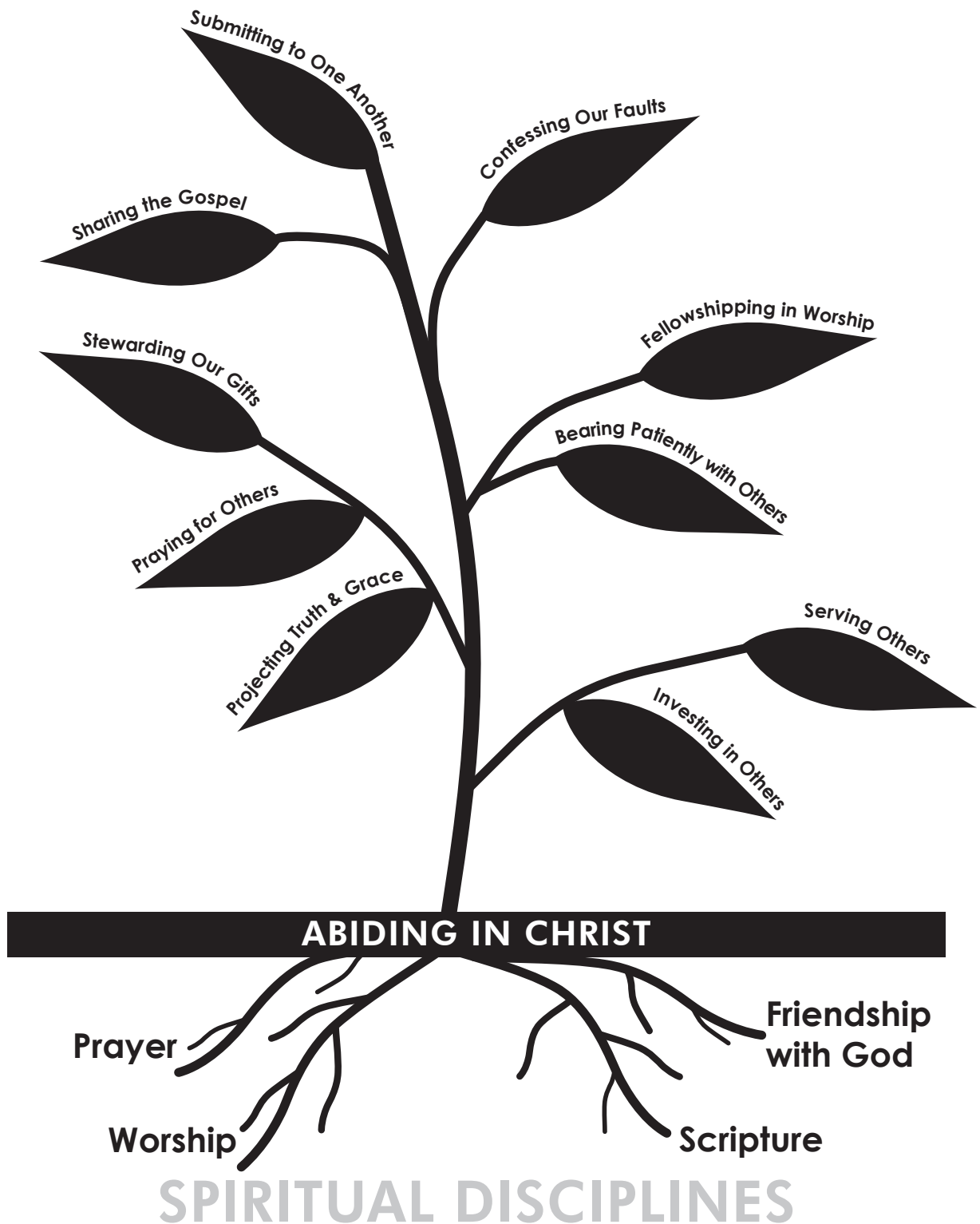
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OUR MISSION

LifeStone exists to empower **DISCIPLES** to make **DISCIPLES**. We seek to fulfill our mission by publishing Bible study and **DISCIPLESHIP** curriculum as well as offering real-life application training. We equip **DISCIPLES** as they journey through the various stages of life. As **DISCIPLES** grow in Christ, we continue to partner with them and their churches through training and other resources to empower **DISCIPLES** to make **DISCIPLES**.

DISCIPLE MAKING



FROM OUR PRESIDENT AND EDITOR IN CHIEF

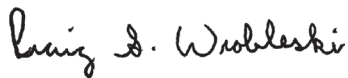
Dear Almighty Father,

Thank You for Your unconditional grace and mercy bestowed on LifeStone Ministries for 120 years. We are humbled by Your Son, the Master-Servant, who became the living stone rejected by men. You love us and build us up to be spiritual storehouses. We pray for Your strength and courage to be the living stones in our culture. We pray for perseverance to sacrifice ourselves to live wholly in subjection to Jesus Christ. May we glorify You in all our words and deeds as we strive to grow Your flock to spiritual maturity. We pray for the filling of the Holy Spirit as we engage Your flock.

Lord, we pray that this exposition of Your Word meets 2 Timothy 3:16. May the lessons contained in this labor of love emulate profitable teaching, graceful correction, and righteous training. We pray for all those who will be receiving instruction from these lessons. We pray for the teachers to approach this inspirational work with humility and meekness. May Your holy character and love for us leap from the pages and bring us all to our knees in thanksgiving.

Our glorious King, may we build the confidence and convictions of Christian leaders in our homes, churches, and missional fields to fulfill the Great Commission. Let us be renewed with strength and peace to empower Christian disciples to make disciples.

Under truth and grace,



Craig S. Wrobleski, M. Div., D. Min.
President & CEO
LifeStone Ministries

Dear Christ follower,

Our mission at LifeStone Ministries is to empower Christians to make disciples. We desire to partner with churches in this discipleship process. We have created a discipleship tool to help churches fulfill their calling. This new publication—*Amplify Christ*, as we call it—features a simple yet comprehensive five-step Bible study method that focuses on robust Bible learning and biblical application in a world that is often hostile to Christ's teaching.

Amplify Christ is not just another Bible curriculum. Discipleship requires a significant level of commitment from both teacher and student. Our discipleship tool likewise requires serious commitment. Leaders will need to inspire a group of people—maybe as few as one or two—to commit to spiritual formation and discipleship by investing their time and being willing to share their successes and failures. Group members can expect to read the lesson each week for an hour. Above all, group members will need to be honest with and encourage one another every week.

We have published this new discipleship tool and now prayerfully entrust it to you. We pray with all our hearts that the Holy Spirit will use it mightily to transform your lives and the lives of your group members, churches, and communities.

Sincerely,



James M. Leonard, Ph.D.
Editor in Chief
LifeStone Ministries

HOW TO USE AMPLIFY CHRIST

Christian discipleship is a matter of following the Master's footprints. The first disciples did just that—they followed Jesus from place to place, shared the same meals, slept at the same campsites, celebrated the same special occasions, and met the same people. In all these experiences, Jesus taught them verbally and through His actions. The disciples saw Jesus react to different people in different situations. They examined His work habits, observed His demeanor, and scrutinized how He practiced what He preached.

Even though we moderns can't follow Jesus physically, we are nonetheless called to be like Him in word and deed, conformed to His image. This is our calling, and we dare not ignore it. The only way we can know how to follow in Jesus' footprints is to learn about Him in the Bible. In the New Testament, eyewitnesses and other early disciples detail Jesus' life, ministry, and teaching. Similarly, the Old Testament helps us understand God's intentions for us through stories, worship materials, prophetic messages, and the Mosaic Law. God has given us His precious Scriptures to know how we should live. For this reason, disciples should have an intense thirst and hunger for God's Word.

Modern-day disciples, however, sometimes get discouraged about reading the Bible because of its antiquity and foreign culture. Sometimes they get so enthralled by the Bible's antiquity and alien culture that they fail to apply its teaching. Modern-day disciples may segment a familiar verse from its context and fail to understand its intended meaning, and sometimes they fail to integrate Scripture into theology.

For all these reasons, our new discipleship tool emphasizes five key elements for Scripture study. We hope *Amplify Christ* helps you become more like Christ.

THE METHOD

FIVE KEY ELEMENTS

- 1. Amplify the Background.** Because the Bible was written long ago in a culture different from ours, we investigate rigorously to bridge the gap separating us moderns from the biblical writers. We present to our readers those backgrounds that help them understand the biblical passage.
- 2. Amplify the Text.** One of the legacy features of our publications is the exposition of the text. We focus on the original author's intended message to his original audience, addressing the question, What was the author conveying to them back then? We hone in on the verse-by-verse details to explain the passage's big picture.
- 3. Amplify the Context.** Many Christians see Scripture as piecemeal. We want disciples to see how individual stories and texts are connected to the whole biblical story. We read the text as sentences within a paragraph and paragraphs within a larger text unit. This is basic exegesis. But our readers should also understand how the entirety of a book fits into the whole of Scripture and the larger biblical history. We write to show how each text interconnects to form a majestic and awe-inspiring picture of God's plan.
- 4. Amplify the Faith.** Christians need to allow Scripture to inform their thinking and basic Christian doctrine. We believe that God inspired His Word and that we should accept it as the rule of our lives as we seek to follow the Spirit's guidance. To this end, we spell out how the biblical text informs Bible doctrines and how we should think.
- 5. Amplify Your Life.** Our goal is not to create a bunch of smart, brainiac Christians. Yes, we want Christians to be competent readers of the Bible, but this is not enough. We do everything we can to help disciples apply the text to their lives so that they grow in Christ's likeness. We think deeply about the text, explicitly seeking ways to articulate the principles of the ancient text to us today and to the specific individual. We are most urgent about the Christian formation of Christ followers.

TIMELINE

Unknown	Adam and Eve
Unknown	Noah
Unknown	Tower of Babel
2166-1991 B.C.	Life of Abraham
1916-1806 B.C.	Life of Joseph
1876-1446 B.C.	Israelites in Egypt
1446 B.C.	Exodus
1446 B.C.	Law at Sinai
1446-1406 B.C.	Wilderness wandering
1406-1399 B.C.	Joshua leads the Conquest
1360-1075 B.C.	Judges Period
1051-931 B.C.	United monarchy
1011-971 B.C.	David reigns
959 B.C.	Solomon builds the temple
931-586 B.C.	Divided monarchy
722 B.C.	Assyria conquers Israel
605 B.C.	Babylon conquers Assyria
586 B.C.	Babylon conquers Judah/temple destroyed
539 B.C.	Persia conquers Babylon
538 B.C.	Exiles return to Judah
515 B.C.	Temple rebuilt
458 B.C.	Ezra returns to Israel from Babylon
445 B.C.	Nehemiah rebuilds the wall
331 B.C.	Greece conquers Persia
175-164 B.C.	Seleucid rule over Israel by Antiochus IV Epiphanes
63 B.C.	Rome captures Jerusalem
7 to 4 B.C.	Birth of Jesus
A.D. 26-30	Jesus' ministry
A.D. 30	Jesus' death and resurrection
A.D. 45-56	Paul's missionary journeys
A.D. 70	Rome destroys the temple

IMPORTANT DATES

God's "Weakness" Surpasses Nebuchadnezzar's "Strength"

Co-written by James Frohlich and James M. Leonard

READ AND TAKE NOTE

Read Daniel 1. Look for:

- the historical circumstances (vss. 1-2)
- the depiction of God as "giver" (vss. 2, 9, 17)
- repetitive elements (references to the royal meals provided by the king)
- divinely directed irony (vss. 20, 21)

FIND IT

Lamentations

Ezekiel

Daniel

Hosea

Joel

Who: God

King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon

Daniel and his three friends—youths taken as war loot

What: a test proving God's superior provision over the feasts of the world's greatest king

When: around 605-602 B.C.

Where: city of Babylon, near the Euphrates River, about fifty-five miles south of modern Baghdad

Why: to demonstrate God's sovereignty to His people over evil powers

How: by giving health and strength to His faithful servants despite their meager provisions

Spiritual Formation: Disciples are loyal to the Lord in all circumstances.





AMPLIFY THE BACKGROUND

Few Israelites could have imagined the intimidating greatness of the ancient city of Babylon. By 605 B.C., the city had amassed itself into a menacing world empire, having devoured its great foe Assyria before turning its gaze to Jerusalem. The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar besieged the holy city, reduced King Jehoiakim to a mere puppet, looted the temple's holy vessels, and enslaved many of the city's inhabitants.

In great humiliation, these abducted victims were force-marched barefoot and naked, or nearly so (Micah 1:8), about nine hundred miles to Babylon. Approaching the city, they saw its many temples bedecked with monstrous images of Babylonian deities that mockingly stared down at them. Enormous crowds welcomed the victorious Nebuchadnezzar home and cheered his human war loot as they were paraded into the city.

Four youths from Jerusalem, however, were rescued from enslavement and earmarked for a special role. Nebuchadnezzar had ordered his officer Ashpenaz, chief of the eunuchs, to select well-educated youths from the royal Jewish family who had no physical defects and an aptitude to learn (Daniel 1:3-4). Newly enthroned Nebuchadnezzar ordered them to be taught the history, culture, and language of the Chaldeans (Babylonians) so that they might serve in the king's court.

Serving in the king's court, however, came at a devastating cost. About one hundred years earlier, Isaiah issued a dire prophecy against the kingdom of Judah. The Lord declared that the Babylonians would plunder King Hezekiah's royal

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treasury and take some of his own blood relatives and castrate them to serve as eunuchs (Isaiah 39:5-7).

While our lesson text does not explicitly assert that the four Hebrew youths were castrated, the limited time frame for the fulfillment of this prophecy (from 605-586 B.C.) likely points to the situation of Daniel 1. Ancient readers familiar with the times probably assumed as much, so an explicit statement was unnecessary. As a matter of fact, the four youths were put under the custody of the chief of eunuchs (vs. 10). (Some versions render the Hebrew word as “official” because the term does not always have the technical sense of “eunuch.” Here, the more technical term “eunuch,” however, is probably more accurate.)

The policy was consequential. Daniel and his friends would not be able to father any royal heirs who might later revolt. Further, Mosaic Law barred eunuchs from temple sacrifices (Deuteronomy 23:1), and they would likely become outcasts. Castration was an extreme way of depleting all hope of escape from Babylon or returning home to any kind of normal life. By all accounts, they were without family and community.

The surgery was meant to enforce dependency on the king of Babylon. Accordingly, Nebuchadnezzar gave them the choicest food from his own table, royal accommodations, and, eventually, administrative power as they proved their loyalty to him. He wanted his captives to confess, “The king of Babylon is my shepherd; I shall not want” (cf. Psalm 23:1). The Babylonians imagined themselves as having defeated not only the nation of Israel but also Israel’s God. The Babylonians, however, were not in control. It was God who delivered Israel to the Babylonians due to His people’s sin (cf. Daniel 1:2).

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

In what ways does God seem defeated and not in control over the historical situation depicted in Daniel 1? How does a careful reading of Daniel 1 correct such thinking?

Under their dire circumstances, Daniel and his friends had every earthly reason to turn their allegiance and confidence away from God. In Daniel 1, then, this background highlights two great questions: Will the four Hebrews turn their loyalty from God to the king? Is God relevant and faithful to the four Hebrews even in Babylon?

AMPLIFY THE TEXT

GOD’S PROVISION TESTED (Daniel 1:8-14)

Daniel’s Request (Daniel 1:8). Daniel 1:1-7 gives us a picture of four traumatized Hebrew youths, brutally abducted from their families by a foreign aggressor. They were subjugated to a seemingly all-powerful despot who had sinister designs for them—to make them serve as eunuchs in his pagan administration. They seem altogether helpless to resist Nebuchadnezzar’s erasure of their cultural identity. As a gesture of his authority, he even imposed on them new blasphemous Babylonian

names that replaced their pious Hebrew names. With every tool in his ample arsenal, Nebuchadnezzar was determined to press the Hebrew youths into conformity to the mold of the Babylonian world (cf. Romans 12:1-2). Given the immense weight of the pressure, it is shocking to read what happens next.

THOUGHTS

How to Avoid Conformity

- **offer yourself to God as a living sacrifice**
- **do not let this old world squeeze you into its mold**
- **let your mind be renewed so that you are transformed to be like Christ**

from Romans 12:1-2

Daniel 1:8 begins with the heroic declaration that Daniel “resolved.” Four youths stood against the evil powers and institutional structures that comprised this great empire. Although they were deprived of everything good in their lives, the young men resolved not to defile themselves by surrendering their allegiance to the colossal figure, King Nebuchadnezzar.

Specifically, they refused to eat the food from the king’s table, accepting only the paltry diet of vegetables and water. This must have been a very difficult decision—all the Hebrews deported by Babylon were very likely food-insecure, living on the meager scraps from the time of the siege of Jerusalem until they arrived in distant Babylon.

Some have suggested the underlying principle for rejecting the royal food was the Mosaic Law. The meat may have come from an unclean animal (Leviticus 11) or may have still contained blood (17:10-14). Possibly, the meat and wine were offered to idols, so partaking of them would amount to idol worship. In the Old Testament, however, defilement can refer to many types of sins, such as murder (Lamentations 4:13-14) or marrying a non-Israelite (Nehemiah 13:23-29), not just breaking dietary laws (what we call “keeping kosher” today).

Indeed, the text of Daniel does not emphasize kosher issues. The text emphasizes—through a five-fold repetition—that the food prescribed to the four was provided by the king (1:5, 10) from his own royal table and was the very food the king ate (vss. 5, 8, 13, 15). In contrast, the vegetables and water, a poor person’s diet, are not called the king’s food (vs. 12). Thus, the text connects the extravagant meat and wine with the king’s strength and authority, contrasting it with food associated with poverty and weakness. Those who refused to partake of the king’s rich food necessarily would need to get their strength from somewhere or from someone else. Far from caving under the heavy pressures of the Babylonian world, Daniel and his friends were resolved. They refused to depend on the king’s bounty precisely because they were fiercely bound in loyalty to their God.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

What clue does the book of Daniel give to explain what causes defilement?

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Daniel's Request Denied (Daniel 1:9-10). Despite everything, Daniel requested to be excused from the king's royal food and receive mere vegetables and water. Although the Lord granted Daniel favor with Ashpenaz, the chief of the eunuchs, his request was denied. Occupied with his own fate, Ashpenaz feared that the proposed diet would make Daniel look like the seven bad cows of Pharaoh's dream—skinny, emaciated, and not profitable (Genesis 41). Ashpenaz would be responsible for a bad return on the king's investment. Although sympathetic, he denied Daniel's request.

Daniel's Proposal (Daniel 1:11-14). Still, Daniel was resolved. He went to a subordinate, the steward whom Ashpenaz had placed over him. This time, he qualified his request, proposing a time limit of ten days. This was long enough to see if the test would work but not so long that any sign of malnutrition would be severe.

The proposed ten-day diet would reflect their loyalty and trust in God for provision and test God's faithfulness toward His people. The situation posed a great contest. Would the seemingly superior food from the table of Nebuchadnezzar and his gods produce stockier, stronger, and healthier servants, or would the true God provide health and strength to make His four faithful servants obviously more robust, even though they had the same diet as the least fortunate Jews in exile?

GOD'S PROVISION DEMONSTRATED (Daniel 1:15-16)

The Youths Pass the Ten-Day Test. Despite their vegetable and water diet, Daniel and his friends outshined the competition. They looked better and healthier than all those who ate the meat and drank the wine. Yet again, in verse 15, the provisions are specifically called the king's food, emphasizing that the story is not about kosher foods. Rather, the story is a contrast between God's faithful provision and the ironically poor provision of the king of Babylon.

All Blessings Flow from God. Indeed, the provisions seemed to mirror the situation of God's people. God promised Israel a land flowing with milk and honey—theologically, a restored Eden. Nebuchadnezzar besieged God's holy city, Jerusalem, impoverishing the land and starving the people. He then usurped God's role as provider, giving those in his care meat and wine—symbols of his strength. Meanwhile, God's loyal servants were captives, likely even eunuchs, eating only vegetables and drinking only water—signs that the Babylonian gods had dwarfed the defeated God of Israel.

In the book of Daniel, however, things are not always as they seem. As He demonstrates time and again in this book, God is sovereignly in control, even while His people were in a foreign land.

GOD'S PEOPLE SUCCEED (Daniel 1:17-21)

The Youths Excel (Daniel 1:17-20). God emphatically does not concede His role as provider to the kings or the powers of this present evil age. In Daniel 1, it was God who granted. In verse 17, we are told that God gave knowledge to the four Hebrew youths. In verse 2, God gave Jehoiakim, king of Judah, over to Nebuchadnezzar. In verse 9, God gave Daniel favor with Ashpenaz, the chief of the eunuchs. The depiction of God as giver shows His sovereign control over His people's situation. Although He allowed them to be taken captive, He was still working in their favor, both in their relationships with their foreign captors and in their ability to learn.

After the three-year instructional period, the four Hebrew friends excelled in the requisite skills that were outlined in verse 4, and not by just a little. The king

and his officials found no one comparable to the fantastic four—an astonishing feat for the traumatized youths who had lost everything and were living on meager provisions. Indeed, regarding Babylonian science and wisdom, the four were hyperbolically described as ten times superior to anyone else in the realm. Clearly, it was God who granted to the Hebrew youths a special aptitude that exceeded the highest standards of Babylon. To Daniel in particular, God gave the ability to interpret dreams and visions, a gift that would serve him well in the years to come.

Daniel and his friends resolved. God provided. But what would happen to Babylon?

Daniel Outlasts Babylon (Daniel 1:21). Daniel 1:21 reports that Daniel outlived the relatively short life of the Babylonian Empire. The report has Daniel alive and well in Babylon until King Cyrus. This refers to Cyrus II, the great king of Medo-Persia who conquered Babylon in 539 B.C. Daniel 10:1 indicates that Daniel was still active until at least the third year of Cyrus. Thus, Daniel's ministry spanned the whole Babylonian period. He outlived Nebuchadnezzar and his entire dynasty, witnessing Babylon's fall to the invading Medo-Persian army. Despite suffering in captivity and living on meager provisions, God's servant outlasted the mighty and dreaded Babylonian kingdom. The point is clear: God's people, and thus God Himself, may have appeared to be weak due to the Babylonian Captivity, but, in the end, God won.

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A Pattern to Follow

Daniel's resolve to keep his faith in God provides us with some helpful principles to follow when we face policies that contradict our faith.

- 1. Pray for favor.** We are not told when God gave Daniel favor before Ashpenaz, only that He did. This should encourage us to pray that God would grant us favor with our superiors so that they will be inclined to grant requests that arise from a purity of heart.
- 2. Give a well-explained reason for your request.** Daniel explained to Ashpenaz that he did not want to eat the king's food because he did not want to be defiled. When we face similar challenges, we should speak to the appropriate authority and explain why we are concerned.
- 3. Realize that everyone has a job to do.** Although Ashpenaz was sympathetic toward Daniel, he did not grant Daniel's request, for fear that his own life would be surrendered if the four were malnourished due to his failure to follow the king's orders. This is an understandable dilemma. Sometimes the red tape of bureaucracy may lead a boss to say no. We need not be overly discouraged or feel personally attacked if a request is denied under such circumstances. We should remember that those over us often have someone over them to whom they must answer, and we should consider how our request could negatively impact that dynamic.
- 4. Offer a creative win-win proposal that allows the authority to still be in charge.** Daniel's ten-day trial proposal accounted for the policy's rationale (loyal and healthy captives for the king) and for the rejection of his initial request (prolonged dietary restrictions would lead to malnutrition). It also allowed Daniel and his friends to avoid defilement for a time. After the ten-day trial, the final decision was still left with the steward. That would be like saying to your boss, "Would it be OK if I try this for a week or two, just to see how it goes?" in hopes that your request will be approved permanently. The boss retains control in the short term (after all, you're asking permission) and in the long term (the boss can reevaluate and have the final say after a short test period).
- 5. Don't be overly sensitive.** Daniel and his friends could have asked for several different exemptions. They could have asked not to have their names changed or not to be educated in Babylonian literature or language. But they

didn't. They reserved their request only for the most important of matters. Likewise, we should not be overly sensitive, looking for ways to be offended and asking for exceptions on a regular basis. Save your special requests, and only use them for matters that clearly violate your conscience.

6. Trust God with the results. We are not always guaranteed to get the results we want. In the next lesson, we will see a situation where no compromise could be struck. When our attempts to avoid certain policies fail, we must, as the three friends did in the next lesson, advise our superiors that we cannot comply and trust God with the results.

7. Have a tight fellowship with believers. Daniel did not take his stand by himself. He stood in solidarity with his three friends. In the context of Christian fellowship, believers are able to encourage one another to withstand pressure to conform. In the utmost grief and discouragement and under the severest of circumstances, the four encouraged one another, nurtured healing, and helped stave off depression. We too should do so in our present evil age. The temptation to abandon our commitments to God can often be averted through our fellowship with other believers.

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AMPLIFY THE CONTEXT

PLACE IN THE BIBLE

The book of Daniel occurs near the end of the Old Testament story, transitioning from the tragic end of the Israelite monarchy toward an emphasis on the glorious coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. In fulfillment of Genesis 12:1-3, God had given Abraham's descendants the Promised Land and later rescued them from Egyptian bondage, establishing them as His special people. He also promised them a kingdom and a perpetual kingship through King David's descendants. The curses threatened in Deuteronomy 27 through 28 for unfaithfulness, however, came to pass, and the gifts of land and kingship were revoked. It is in this context that the book of Daniel opens, noting the actual defeat of Judah's King Jehoiakim by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar; the inconceivable plundering of God's temple, implying the apparent defeat of Israel's God, Yahweh, by the Babylonian gods; and the humiliating captivity of Judah's best youths from the royal household. Through a series of visions in the last half of Daniel, long periods of suffering are projected, to be remedied only by the coming Messiah.

PLACE IN THE STORY OF SALVATION

The story of Daniel is linked to the early period of the Bible by the rare term "the land of Shinar" (Gen. 11:2; sometimes translated as "Babylonia"). In Genesis 11:2, Shinar is where people sought to build the Tower of Babel to reach up to the heavens as an act of human independence. This human-centered quest for autonomy seemed to have been achieved in the Babylon of Daniel's day, when there was something of a one-world government, with the brutal imposition of Babylonian culture and the restoration of a single language (Dumbrell, *The Faith of Israel*, 2nd ed., Baker, 304-305). Just as God was concerned, however, about the events in Genesis 11, He was likewise concerned with Babylon's actions. It is God alone who establishes kings and kingdoms (Daniel 2:20-21).

The call of Abraham in Genesis 12 is the divine response to the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11. God sets Himself as the initiator and perfecter of the new world system, not humans. He raised up Abraham and his family, and through his

faithful descendants, or rather Descendant (Jesus), He will bring about the fulfillment of a new kingdom. In the New Testament, this kingdom is called no less than “the kingdom of God” or “the kingdom of heaven.” Although God’s faithful servants won favor in Daniel 1, they would be severely persecuted in Daniel 3 and throughout the book. In the end, however, the great rock cut out of a mountain will smash the great image that depicts the monstrous kingdoms of the world (2:44-45). At that time, the messianic Son of Man will come with the clouds of heaven and will take his place with the Ancient of Days. His dominion is everlasting, and His kingdom will endure forever (7:14).

PLACE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Jesus’ central message was all about the kingdom of God. He presented Himself as the great stone that would crush all opposition to God’s kingdom, even as He would become the chief cornerstone of God’s faithful community (Matthew 21:42-44). The book of Daniel looks with great anticipation to the final book of the Bible, Revelation, when the loud heavenly voices declare that the kingdom of our Lord has entered this world and that He shall reign forever (Revelation 11:15).

AMPLIFY THE FAITH

The main theological lesson of Daniel 1 is the sovereignty of God—that God is in control. This is a complex issue of great import. Scholarly views differ significantly, ranging from a deterministic view in which God causes everything to happen (meticulous sovereignty or exhaustive determinism) to a view whereby God limits His sovereignty to allow human freedom (libertarian free will).

While some Bible passages may indeed suggest that God causes an individual to do certain things (cf. Proverbs 21:1), the Bible generally depicts God as interacting with individuals personally, as if people make decisions for themselves; after all, God created the human race in His image as thinking, feeling, and acting beings. He gave them the ability to choose to disobey Him (cf. Genesis 3:1-19). Jesus wept over Jerusalem, lamenting that He had often desired to gather her children as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but they were not willing (Matthew 23:37). Joshua gathered the Israelites together and told them to choose on that very day whom they would serve (Joshua 24:15). Conversely, the Joseph narrative where Joseph told his brothers that God redeemed their evil intentions (Genesis 37—50) is often conceived as supporting some degree of meticulous sovereignty.

The doctrine of sovereignty is very relevant. When people find themselves in traumatic situations like the four Hebrews in Daniel 1, they often question why God would have allowed such terrible things to happen. In our most grievous days, the doctrine of God’s sovereignty—that God is still in control—helps us trust in God. Although Daniel and his friends were captives, the Lord was still in charge of their circumstances. Likewise, although Babylon may have viewed itself as the sovereign power of the day, the Lord controlled the extent of its power and could easily take it away—as He eventually did (Daniel 5:30-31). The story in Daniel 1 conveys God’s sovereignty in four significant ways.

First, God is sovereign in His decision to punish unfaithfulness. Throughout the Old Testament, the Lord threatened to punish His people for disobedience.

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One of these punishments was the exile (Deuteronomy 28:36), which was the revocation of the gift of land from the people, resulting in their deportation to a foreign nation. Another punishment was the loss of the Davidic monarchy in 586 B.C. It is because He is sovereign that God can punish people for their sins. We certainly must not assume that a person's hardship derives from divine punishment, but God may in fact send punitive hardships to people as the consequence of sin.

Second, God imposes Himself into the everyday lives of people and sovereignly orchestrates their relationships and abilities. Despite the judgment of exile, the Lord graciously allowed Daniel to have favor with the chief of the eunuchs (Daniel 1:9). He also granted Daniel and his friends a special ability of comprehension (vs. 17). Thus, in His sovereignty, God orchestrates His people's relationships and abilities. In fact, many believers testify that God has intervened in their lives, making certain relationships possible or empowering them to accomplish things that were far beyond their natural abilities. Some can even detail unusual events and situations that directly led to their conversion.

Third, God's sovereign work includes a person's initiative. God used Daniel's resolve and his creative proposal to avoid defilement. Daniel's initiative came from his heartfelt commitment to please God. In His sovereignty, God blessed Daniel's initiative so that it was well received by those in charge of the Hebrews' training. Christians need to understand that God blesses them when they are purely motivated by the desire to please Him.

Fourth, God is sovereign over world powers. Although the brutal Nebuchadnezzar took many of God's people captive and stole vessels from the temple, God oversaw the king's authority. It was God who allowed Nebuchadnezzar to overpower Jehoiakim, king of Judah (vs. 2). It was God who granted power and allowed one nation to capture another. Any king or ruler, at any moment in time, has authority only because God has decided to grant it, and God, at any moment in time, can choose to take it away according to His purposes.

As we live in a world that often seems to be spinning out of control, with nation rising against nation, Christians need not panic, for God is still in control. Nothing befalls us except that which pours through the nail-scarred hands of the one who loved us so much that He lay down His life for us.

AMPLIFY YOUR LIFE

In Daniel 1, God's people faced difficult and discouraging circumstances that, sadly, some of us today can relate to. Many of the Israelites despaired so much that they likely concluded that God was not strong enough to defend them or did not care for them. For the four in particular, their desolation would have been exacerbated if they were indeed forced to become eunuchs. Sometimes our circumstances are so bleak that it is hard to imagine what good, if any, could result.

It is precisely in these seemingly hopeless moments, however, that God directs our lives. Through adversity, God might be opening up new relationships that will be beneficial for our future well-being. God might be granting us the ability to accomplish a job quicker than we thought possible or allowing us to quickly comprehend new material. Even in our darkest days, God can use where we go, what we do, whom we meet, and the ensuing results for His own purposes. He can and

does work in all these events to guide us to a brighter future and lead us to new opportunities, with the ultimate goal of bringing us into conformity with Christ.

As with the exile, sometimes our negative circumstances may be the result of sin. Even so, the consequences and effects of sin are not outside of God's sovereign control. He faithfully works in these situations to bring us closer to Himself and lead us to spiritual maturity.

Just as Daniel and his friends had no say in Babylon besieging Jerusalem, sometimes our difficulties are the result of bigger circumstances outside of our control. Yet they are not outside God's control. A boss who institutes new rules, a newly elected official who changes policies, or a neighbor who causes disruption are permitted by God for a reason. We may not always know what the reason is, but we can be sure that He uses these circumstances to accomplish His purposes both for us individually and for His kingdom.

As with the Hebrew captives, so also our lives are not always as they appear. In our own moments of despair and desolation, God grabs our attention and works behind the scenes to lead us to His desired end. In our most miserable circumstances, there is comfort and joy in knowing that God can use any circumstance to form Christ's character in us. Allow God to use difficult trials to strengthen your loyalty to Him. God is not an irrelevant religious construct that you can relegate to a forgotten corner of your heart. He wants to purify all your heart and rule it in its entirety. Be like Daniel, and allow your loyalty to God to be proven through the storms of life that rage against you.

NOTES

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Imagine you have a church friend who is a single parent. She was without work for several months, but she started a new job a few weeks ago. She's happy about the opportunity but expressed concern last week because her largely commission-based job is not providing enough money to meet her family's needs. She now comes to you for advice because she found out that everyone in her department is using deceitful practices to boost their sales and commission. She does not want to be unethical, but she is falling further and further behind in her sales. How could you encourage her with the story in Daniel 1?
2. Have you ever asked to be exempt from a policy for conscience reasons? What was the result?
3. How might this story direct you to act when you disagree with official policies at work or elsewhere?
4. When have you felt as if God were powerless? What caused you to think this, and what was the outcome?
5. What current situation would you change if you could? How might God still be working in this circumstance?
6. Are there any ways in which you are currently relying on something other than God for your provision? If so, what are one or two things you could do to change this? Write your answer in the space below.
