




THE COMMUNITY

Daniel | CHARACTER COUNTS

What Do I Need to Know About the Passage?

Daniel 1

Background

In 605 BC., the Babylonians invaded Judah and their holy city, Jerusalem. In three separate deportations, starting in 605 BC. and ending in 587 BC, many of the Jews were led to Babylon as captives. The young men of nobler upbringing were taken to the king's palace to be prepared for service to the king. The three years of training and education involved a rigorous program of mental conditioning. The goal was to strip these young men of their families and culture and imbed in them new loyalties to Babylon – her gods, language and culture, thus providing an environment of the most extreme form of pressure to compromise on both belief and behavior.

Daniel 1:1-4

From the onset, Daniel and his friends (Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego) distinguish themselves in a variety of ways. First, the text says that they were “handsome” or more literally “pleasing in appearance.” While, indeed, they may have been handsome, the phrase can mean that they presented themselves attractively: they looked clean, neat, well-groomed, etc. While not everyone can be handsome, in this sense, anyone can be pleasing in appearance. They also “showed aptitude for every area of learning.” This means they were ambitious students, and they applied themselves to their studies. As a result, they were “quick to understand” and make applications from what they learned. It also says that they were “qualified to serve in the palace.” This speaks of social ability; they knew how to act appropriately in different social settings.

The Book of Daniel serves as a manual for how to act and have an impact for God in a hostile and godless culture. As such, these descriptions are more than, well, descriptions. They are set before us in the manner of, “If you want unbelievers to notice God in your life, act like this.” These descriptions do not seem to be culturally bound, meaning this isn't just how to have an impact for Christ in the Bronze Age. It is these very same qualities today that distinguish people in college or in the marketplace as Christ-followers. The passage forces us to think how we as Christians present ourselves in a godless world: we might have as much sex appeal as Dick Cheney, but we can be pleasing in appearance; we may not be a savant, but we can apply ourselves in our classes and jobs; and we might not be gifted socially, but we can be polite, kind and refrain from picking our noses when people are looking.

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What's the Big Idea?

Character Series: The main intent of these character studies is to help your group become more familiar with the entire Bible and to see how the Old Testament connects to the New, telling one complete story of redemption which reaches its climax in Christ.

This Study: With God's enablement we can walk with God and in godliness amidst a culture hostile to faith. As a result, we will have a powerful witness and see the expansion of God's kingdom.

What's the Problem?

Environments hostile to faith tend to corrupt us rather than us transforming them.

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Daniel 1:5-7

As part of the reconditioning program, they were to be educated, and in certain areas, re-educated. Their names were changed to mold them to the Babylonian culture. The name changes were significant. For example, Daniel's Hebrew name, which meant "God is my Judge" was changed to Belteshazzar which meant "Bel (a Babylonian god) protects his life." To this name change, Daniel and his friends voice no objection.

However, when it came to partaking of the royal meat and wine, Daniel and his friends refuse; they draw a boundary. Why? It was common practice for the meat and wine to be sacrificed to the Babylonian gods before they were consumed. To take part in the food was to take part in the sacrifice, which was to take part in worshipping a foreign god, and that they would have no part of.

Two things are worthy of note. One is that Daniel and his friends did make concessions to fit in with the culture. They did say "yes" to the education and the name change. They chose not to drop out of the culture, but were good learners, applied themselves and were ambitious. Sometimes it can be easier to remove oneself from a hostile culture than to stay in it, but in "checking-out" we miss the opportunity to be a witness. It's the meek, not the Amish, who will inherit the earth.

Second, Daniel did draw certain boundary lines: he was not willing to compromise on actions he saw as sinful and in opposition to his faith. There are several responses from this lesson. You can touch on all of them but make sure you focus on the first. If you are to be in the presence of (and have a ministry to) nonbelievers, you will have to navigate accordingly. Discernment, faith and integrity are prerequisites for knowing when to blend in and when to stick out. Daniel walked the line.

Daniel 1:8-14

Daniel and his friends make a deal with the guard: if he will simply serve them vegetables and water for ten days, they vow they'll look even healthier than those eating the royal food (this would have been especially true if the royal food consisted of Cheetos, Whoppers, and fudge). Thus, in saying "no" to the royal food, Daniel at the same time was trusting God to provide for him, protect him and give him favor.

This dynamic of faith is critical to maintaining godly character. Our own desires often fuel the pressure to compromise. To choose to say "no" to these pressures, we must be grounded in faith that God will provide for our needs in a godly way and in His timing. Self-control will never be enough to maintain integrity against extreme pressure; our choices must be empowered by faith as well.

Daniel 1: 14-21

The result: God, of course, meets their need. At the end of the ten days, they are far healthier than those who ate the Royal Cheetos and Gummy Bears. The end result is that God blesses them and gives them favor in the eyes of everyone. So much so, that the king himself declares that these young men are "ten times better" than the offspring of Babylon. That's having an impact!

Christ the Cultural Transformer

Jesus Christ is the transformer of culture. The degree to which we manifest Christ is the degree to which we will transform and impact our environment; to the extent that we do not manifest Christ and live out His resurrected life, we will find ourselves corrupted and influenced by our environment. If you think of the way that Jesus has transformed virtually every culture, you'll see Daniel in the first chapter as a pointer to Christ.

What's Our Response?

There are several responses from this lesson. You can touch on all of them but make sure you focus on the first.

1. If needs and desires are not being met through intimacy with Christ, no amount of self control can ward off the pressure of sin, corruption and compromise. Apart from Christ we can not be like Daniel.
2. In an environment hostile to faith we not only need God's empowerment but we need the support of other believers. Daniel had community and accountability. We need them too.
3. As Daniel had a transforming influence on those around him, you want the group to consider their witness. Their focus shouldn't simply be on not being corrupted but on influencing others for God.

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What Are the Questions?

Daniel 1

Launch

When have you ever felt like a foreigner? When you feel out of place, what do you do to fit in? If you found yourself alone in a strange city, in what way might you be most likely to compromise in your faith?

Explore

Read Daniel Chapter 1.

1. From your knowledge of the Old Testament, when were the Jews taken into captivity in Babylon? How long did it last? When some of the Jews returned, what was the first thing they did?
2. Read verses 4-7. Why were these men taken to the palace in Babylon and selected to enter the king's service?
3. Look at the description of Daniel and his friends in 1:3-4. As "handsome" does not refer to their "facial features," what does it mean? As "showing aptitude" does not mean "brilliant" what does it mean? And what does it mean to be "qualified to serve?"
4. As you look at this list of qualities, what strikes you as a strength of yours? A weakness?
5. When you think of people who manifest integrity and godly character, who comes to mind?
6. Which of these qualities seems most important within our culture?
7. What tactics were used not only to train these young men, but in some sense, to brainwash them?

8. Daniel and his friends accepted the education Babylon offered, the chance to attain positions of status in the palace, even new names. Why do you think they agreed to these, but wouldn't eat the food and wine?

9. Have there been times recently when you have found yourself tempted to make a seemingly small compromise with sin?

10. Daniel and his friends show great discernment in knowing when to fit in and when not to. What has helped you to discern?

11. Look at vv. 8-14. A choice to stand against compromise is not just an exercise of the will, but also of faith. How did Daniel exercise faith? How have you had to exercise faith?

12. Read vv. 15-21. Describe one way where your potential ministry to others has been negatively impacted by your actions and one way it's been positively effected?

13. While his choices were significant, it is clear that God gave Daniel favor. What does it mean for God to give favor in the eyes of others? Have you experienced this?

Apply

14. Where do you feel the greatest pressure to conform to the surrounding culture? What makes this pressure so strong?
15. How do you discern what to say "yes" to and what to say "no" to? Daniel had accountability through his three friends. Do you have someone who provides this for you?

16. As you say "no" to meeting your needs in sinful ways, how are you trusting God to meet your needs in proper ways? How are you experiencing Christ meeting your needs right now? How are you not?

17. How have you seen God use you as a transforming presence?

NOTES:

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What Are the Answers?

1. The time period is roughly 600 BC; the captivity lasted 70 years; and the first thing they did when they returned was to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem.
2. These were the noblest young men in Judah. There, they were educated and brought under loyalty to the Babylonian culture, language and gods, before being given positions of service within the palace and kingdom.
3. “Handsome” means “pleasing in appearance” (how they presented themselves). You don’t have to be brilliant to be a “good learner and teachable.” “Qualified to serve in the palace” means socially proficient and responsible.
4. Allow the group to discuss.
5. Allow the group to discuss.
6. Allow the group to discuss.
7. They were educated in the Babylonian culture, taught the language (Akkadian) and their names were changed to Babylonian names.
8. The royal food and wine, before being consumed, was offered on an altar as a sacrifice to the Babylonian gods. Daniel and his friends saw this as participating in worshipping false gods.
9. Allow the group to discuss.
10. Among other things, discernment requires a close walk with God, accountability and a walk of faith.
11. Daniel has to trust God to provide for his nourishment and to give him favor with the guard. While a strong will is necessary to stand firm against compromise, the group needs to see that faith is critical as well. Allow the group to share.
12. Allow the group to discuss.
13. Allow the group to discuss.
14. Allow the group to discuss.
15. Don’t miss this opportunity to talk about accountability relationships: walking by faith, good choices and God’s enablement do not replace the need for community.
16. This is the heart of the study. If needs and desires are not being met through intimacy with Christ, no amount of self control can ward off the pressure of sin, corruption and compromise.
17. Here, you’re pointing the focus back outward: they are blessed by God to be a blessing to others.

Memorize

As a review, give everyone a sheet of paper and have them number from 1-27. Then give them time to write in the books and share how they did.

This last week is certainly not least. These last twelve books are referred to as the Minor Prophets because they are all relatively short books.

The Minor Prophets are:

Hosea
Joel
Amos
Obadiah
Jonah
Micah
Nahum
Habakkuk
Zephaniah
Haggai
Zechariah
Malachi



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