**LESSON I**

**Daniel: A Life of Unwavering Obedience and Trust, Greatly Used and Rewarded by God**

**1:1-7**

**God gives his people into Nebuchadnezzar’s hands (1:1-7):**

By the time of Jehoiakim’s reign, the vast majority of Judah’s people had ignored the covenant warnings and consequences that Moses detailed in Lev 25:1-7; 26:14-39, and Deut 28:15-68. Similarly, they had rejected the prophet’s warnings to repent (II Ki 17:13; 21:1-18; 24:20). Although Daniel and his colleagues were too young to have participated in Israel’s national disobedience, nonetheless, they suffered as all other Israelites did when God disciplined his covenant people. When God gave Judah into Nebuchadnezzar’s control, he gave young innocent people to him along with the older, unrepentant people. This national corporate discipline highlights the sins of the wicked (bringing about the discipline) vs. the suffering of the righteous and God’s protection and preservation of them during their suffering.

**1:1-2:** 1. *In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it.* 2. *The Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the vessels of the house of God; and he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and he brought the vessels into the treasury of his god.*

These verses give the historical setting of the 1st siege and capture of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. This occurred *in the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah* in approximately 605 BC (described also in II Ki 24:1-2; II Ch 36:5-7).

**V 1.** Why did this happen? The capture of Jerusalem and the 1st deportation of Jews to Babylon were the fulfillment of multiple warnings from the prophets of Israel’s coming disaster because of sin. Israel had forsaken the law and ignored the Mosaic covenant (Is 24:1-6). They had ignored the Sabbath day and the sabbatic year (Lev 25:1-7; II Chro 36:20-21; Jer 34:12-22). In effect, the 70 years of captivity occurred because the every 7th year sabbath (Lev 25:1-7) had not been kept for 490 years dating back to the days of Eli, ca. 1107-1067. The captivity was God’s way of reclaiming the land and giving it its overdue rest.

Israel also had gone into idolatry (I Ki 11:5; 12:28; 16:31; 18:19; II Ki 21:3-5; II Ch 28:2-3) and had been warned of coming disaster because of their lack of repentance (Jer 7:24-8:3; 44:20-23). Thus, in addition to not keeping the every 7th year sabbath, they were carried off into Babylon, a center of idolatry and one of the most wicked cities of the ancient world because of idolatry. It’s as if God said, “you want idolatry, I’ll give you idolatry. All you can stand!” It is noteworthy, that after the Babylonian captivity, Israel never again had a major problem with idolatry.

Israel also had lapsed into severe moral depravity. All the prophets spoke of this time and time again. E.g., Isaiah wrote: *Alas, sinful nation, people weighed down with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, sons who act corruptly! They have abandoned the Lord, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they have turned away from him. Where will you be stricken again as you continue in your rebellion? The whole head is sick and the whole heart is faint. From the soul of the feet even to the head, there is nothing sound in it, only bruises, welts, and raw wounds, not pressed out or bandaged, nor softened with oil. Your land is desolate, your cities are burned with fire, your fields, strangers are devouring them in your presence; its desolation is overthrown by strangers. Unless the Lord of hosts had left us a few survivors, we would be like Sodom, we would be like Gomorrah* (Is 1:4-9)*.*

Here we have the ironic judgment of God against his people: Because of sin and ignoring multiple warnings to repent, Israel is being carried off captive to wicked Babylon, a nation whose sins far exceeded those of Israel (cf. Habakkuk).

The first siege and the first capture of Israel’s citizens marks the beginning of the end for Jerusalem and its temple, which were made glorious by David and Solomon. This is a key point: When the word of the Lord is ignored and violated, divine judgment inevitably will fall. The spiritual lessons embodied in the destruction of Jerusalem, its temple, and the captivity of its people, should be reflected upon by the church and its people today, which too often are *holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power* (II Ti 3:5). John Walvoord wrote “Worldly saints do not capture the world but they become instead the world’s captives.”

**V. 2** In verse 2 there is the phrase *and he brought them to the land of Shinar to the house of his god* which refers to the vessels taken from the temple and not to the deportation of the captives. Critics of Daniel find fault with this phrase because nowhere else is it expressly stated that Daniel and his colleagues were carried into captivity at this time. However, the obvious explanation is that mention of carrying off captives here is unnecessary in light of the subsequent verses where the king commands Ashpenaz *to bring in some of the sons of Israel, including some of the royal family and of the nobles … who had ability to serve in the king’s court (*1:3-4). There was no need for Daniel to refer to it twice.

Bringing *the vessels of the house of God … to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god* (Nebuchadnezzar’s god Marduk) was the natural thing for Nebuchadnezzar to do, which would attribute the victory of the Babylonians over Israel to the Babylonian deities. Later other vessels would be brought over from the temple in Jerusalem (II Ch 36:18), which all were used on the fateful night of Belshazzar’s drunken feast when Babylon was overtaken by the Medes and Persians, Dan 5:1-2, 30. Shinar is used as an alternative term for Babylon with a negative nuance of a place hostile to faith. It is associated with Nimrod who founded Babylon (Gen 10:6-12), the tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9), and is the place where wickedness is banished (Zech 5:5-11).

**1:3-7**: 3. *Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, the chief of his officials, to bring in some of the sons of Israel, including some of the royal family and the nobles,* 4. *youths in whom was no defect, who were good looking, showing intelligence in every branch of wisdom, endowed with understanding and discerning knowledge, and who had ability for serving in the king’s court; and he ordered them to teach them the literature and the language of the Chaldeans.* 5. *The king appointed for them a daily ration from the king’s choice food and from the wine which he drank, and appointed that they should be educated three years, at the end of which they were to enter \*

*the king’s personal service.* 6. *Now among them from the sons of Judah were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.* 7. *Then the commander of the officials assigned new names to them; and to Daniel he assigned the name of Belteshazzar, to Hananiah, Shadrach, to Mishael, Meshach, and to Azariah, Abednego.*

**V 3.** Empires do not run on money alone. They require considerable human resources. So, like tyrants before him, Nebuchadnezzar takes captives from Jerusalem into his service. Isaiah had predicted this (Is 39:7). He commanded the chief of his officials, Ashpenaz, to bring the best from the sons of Israel, emphasizing males from the royal family and the king’s nobles. Nebuchadnezzar also took other large groups when he captured Jerusalem in 597 BC (II Ki 24:10-17). The word translated “officials” can also be rendered as eunuch; but it is a general term and does not require that the persons involved were castrated. Josephus suggests that Daniel and his 3 Hebrew colleagues were made eunuchs in order to work in the king’s court. This is not suggested anywhere in the text and scholars argue that the requirement that the boys be perfect physically (“no defect”), would preclude their castration.

Bringing many royal and noble sons to Babylon would have achieved several objectives for Nebuchadnezzar: 1. They would serve as hostages to help keep the royal family of Judah, back in Israel, subservient to Nebuchadnezzar. 2. To emphasize Judah’s vassal status (in relation to Babylon and no longer Egypt). 3. To augment the manpower and workforce in the temple and palace. 4. To assist Nebuchadnezzar to help him do well in governing (as his counselors to help him make good decisions) and to appear to be fully in charge. 5. To be administrative officials to help maintain good relations between the government of Babylon and the Israelite captives. 6. Their presence would be a pleasant reminder to Nebuchadnezzar of his conquest and success in battle against Jerusalem.

**V 4.** Besides a noble lineage, these captives had to be young and physically attractive (without physical defects). They had to have certain mental qualities: they needed to show “intelligence in every branch of wisdom, endowed with understanding and discerning knowledge.” They needed good physical attributes so they could stand in the king’s palace where he met his subjects and foreign dignitaries and be an asset to him. They needed the intellectual attainments so they could advise the king publicly and privately and oversee the king’s affairs. The term “wisdom” is a broad word that summarizes all that is taught in the books of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. It emphasizes careful and balanced living. “Discerning” means the ability to examine situations and make sound decisions. “Knowledge” refers to the ability to learn and to retain information and apply it with discernment in difficult situations. With all these requirements, the pool of potential candidates would be significantly reduced. Those with the necessary prerequisites would be taught “the literature and the language of the Chaldeans”. They were to learn to read, write and speak like the Babylonian wise men. Their native Hebrew language would now take 2nd place. The language of the Chaldeans would have been Aramaic. “Chaldeans” could have reference to the entire population of Babylon and its surrounding country or specifically to a much smaller group of wise men who because of their learning and skill in problem solving became the ruling class in Babylon. The amount of literature from this group of wise men would have been extensive.

Daniel and his colleagues were being trained to join an elite group of individuals. The wise men were the guardians of traditional sacred lore that was developed and preserved in Babylon over centuries and included topics such as natural history, mathematics, medicine, astronomy (they founded the science of astronomy and for 360 years kept meticulous astronomical records; e.g., determined the year as 365 days, 6 hours, 15 minutes, and 41 seconds, Unger), and myth. The learning had a practical purpose designed to be applied to life through the practice of astrology, purification rites, incantation (casting magic spells with words), exorcism, and other forms of divination and magic. They also interpreted dreams and made predictions. All of these activities they were expected to do for the king. It was a demanding profession but it brought much social prestige to the men. They had nearly complete sway Babylon.

**V 5.** The education Daniel and his colleagues received did not by itself violate their religious convictions but their new environment and circumstances soon presented real challenges to them. Among these was the fact that they had a daily provision of food and wine from the king’s table “appointed” or assigned to them in some sort of numerical distribution. Ancient literature describes this practice frequently of the provision of food to the dependents of a royal household. In fact, there is a reference to Nebuchadnezzar receiving deliveries of food for the sustenance of the sons of Judah from the 10th to the 35th year of his reign. This provision of the king was intended to give them ample food supply to enable them to pursue their education for a 3-year period. The goal was to make them dependent on and subservient to the king and to bring them to intellectual maturity in the things and the culture of Babylon to enable them to “enter the king’s personal service” (literally to “stand before the king”) and be a help to him. This meant to take a position of responsibility before the king and to become his servant (to do whatever he wanted of them whenever he wanted it).

**V 6-7**. Daniel and his 3 colleagues are mentioned here for the first time. Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah are named from the tribe of Judah.

The “commander of the officials” assigns them new names, Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, respectively. The power to assign new names shows the Babylonians were in authority but Daniel does not always follow that authority. He refers to himself and his colleagues by both their Hebrew and Babylonian names (e.g., 2:17; 3:12, 14, 19, 20, etc.). Royal renaming was supposed to be an honor conferred by the king to mark the recipient’s new status and a sign of the expectation of complete loyalty to the king. This expectation of explicit loyalty will get Daniel’s colleagues in trouble in chapter 3.

The name Daniel is a familiar one in the Bible and is used of 3 other individuals (I Ch 3:1, a son of David; Ezra 8:2, a son of Ithamar; and, Neh 10:6, a priest). In Ezek 14:14, 20, and 28:3 there is a reference to Daniel the prophet by Ezekiel, a contemporary of Daniel.

The change in the names of Daniel and his companions focuses attention on the meaning of their Hebrew and Babylonian names. Scholars agree that Daniel means “God is Judge”, or “God has judged”, or “my judge is God”. Hananiah whose name also appears in the bible referring to other persons (I Ch 25:23; II Ch 26:11; Jer 36:12, etc.) means “Jehovah is gracious” or “Jehovah has been gracious”. Mishael (Ex 6:22; Neh 8:4) may be understood to mean “who is he that is God”, or “who is what God is”. Azariah may be interpreted to mean “the Lord helps” or “Jehovah has helped.”

Significantly, all these Hebrew names reflect their relationship to the God of Israel and in the custom of their time, denotes godly parents. This could explain, perhaps, why these young men remained faithful to God, i.e., they had godly homes as young children and in their early adolescent years and they were raised in the fear of the Lord. Even in the days of Israel’s apostasy, there were those who corresponded to Elijah’s 7000 who had not bowed the knee to Baal.

All four of the young men are given Babylonian names as was the custom when a person entered into a new land and servitude (Gen 17:5; 41:45; IOI Sa 2:24-25; II Kin 23:34; 24:17; Est 2:7). Daniel’s new name, Belteshazzar means “protect his life”, or “may Bel protect his life.” Bel was a god of Babylon (cf., Baal, the god of Canaanites). Hananiah was given the name Shadrach, which could mean “command of Aku”, the moon god. Mishael is given the name Meshach, which means “who is what Aku (the moon god) is”. Azariah is given the name Abednego, which may mean servant of Nebo with Nebo corrupted to “nego”. Nebo was the son of the Babylonian god Bel.

Daniel generally prefers his Hebrew name, but frequently uses the Babylonian name of his colleagues. The fact that they were given totally heathen names does not indicate that they strayed from God.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Describe why Israel was taken into captivity
2. Why was the duration of Israel’s captivity 70 years
3. Provide examples of God’s sovereign control over Israel’s captivity