

DAY 3

DANIEL RISES IN FAVOR BEFORE THE KING

DANIEL 1:17-21

SCRIPTURE READING AND INSIGHTS

Begin by reading Daniel 1:17-21 in your favorite Bible. As you read, remember that those who obey the Word of God are truly blessed (Psalm 119:2; Luke 11:28; Revelation 1:3).

In yesterday's lesson, we considered Daniel's faithfulness to God while living in a pagan society. Today we'll see Daniel's providential rise in favor with the king. With your Bible still accessible, consider the following insights on the biblical text, verse by verse.

Daniel 1:17

God gave them learning and skill (1:17): As a result of God's special gifting, the four Hebrew youths were equipped with reasoning skills that enabled them to think clearly and logically. They gained a heightened discernment that enabled them to interpret events and circumstances in their true light.

Wisdom (1:17): The Hebrew word for wisdom is *hokmah*. This word was commonly used for the skill of craftsmen, sailors, singers, administrators, and counselors. *Hokmah* pointed to the experience and efficiency of these various workers in using their skills. Similarly, a person who possesses *hokmah* in his spiritual life and relationship to God is both knowledgeable and experienced in following God's way. Biblical wisdom involves skill in the

art of godly living. This broad wisdom makes for skilled living and empowers people to be successful at home, at work, in human relationships, in finances, in eternal issues, and much more. Daniel and his friends received *hokmah* from God.

We might note in passing that God has not stopped giving His people wisdom when they need it. In James 1:5 we are promised, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him." Also, God often uses people with excellent educational backgrounds. This was certainly true of Moses (Acts 7:22), Daniel and his friends, and the apostle Paul (Acts 22:3).

Understanding in all visions and dreams (1:17): Daniel had a gift that set him apart from all others in Babylon. He was given a special ability to understand visions and dreams. Others in Babylon may have known as much about literature as Daniel did, but no one else had his special, God-given ability to interpret dreams. How could they? The false gods of Babylon (who were not really gods at all) could not help the magicians or enchanters understand dreams. Only the one true God knows the meaning of dreams, and as we will see, God conveyed those meanings to Daniel (see Daniel 2:2-11; 4:6-7).

Of course, when God gives His people learning and skill, He doesn't intend for those gifts to lie stagnant in their lives. Rather, He gives His people these qualities so they can be used. We will see throughout the rest of the book of Daniel that these four youths put to excellent use the gifts of learning and skill God gave them.

Daniel 1:18-19

At the end of the time (1:18): This refers back to verse 5—"They were to be educated for three years, and at the end of that time they were to stand before the king." Now the time had come.

Brought them in (1:18): Ashpenaz, the chief eunuch, now displayed his students of three years before Nebuchadnezzar for their final examination. Though Ashpenaz was no doubt confident in his abilities as a trainer, he nevertheless likely experienced some anxiety, knowing that a failure to please Nebuchadnezzar could lead to punishment or even death.

The king spoke with them (1:19): The king gave an oral examination to all those present, likely covering topics that were most important to him and his agenda.

Among all of them (1:19): Recall from verses 5 and 6 that these four youths were among a larger group of youths that the king commanded to be trained. Apparently, the entire group of youths now stood before the king.

None was found like (1:19): Daniel and his three friends were the cream of the crop among all those trained. As a result of the special abilities God gave them, they were clearly superior to all others. At this time, they would have been about 20 years old—about the age of a modern college student.

Therefore they stood before the king (1:19): One is reminded of Proverbs 22:29: “Do you see a man skillful in his work? He will stand before kings.”

Daniel 1:20-21

In every matter of wisdom and understanding (1:20): The final examination was comprehensive. It covered a wide spectrum of topics and issues. The four youths didn't excel in only a few of these topics but rather in “every matter” that was brought up.

Ten times better (1:20): This phrase signifies completeness or fullness. The four youths were completely superior to the others around them. They outshone everyone else. They stood heads and shoulders above the others.

This again brings to mind Joseph, to whom God also gave special abilities. Pharaoh “sent and called for all the magicians of Egypt and all its wise men. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but there was none who could interpret them to Pharaoh” (Genesis 41:8). With God's help, Joseph succeeded where all others had failed. “Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘Since God has shown you all this, there is none so discerning and wise as you are’” (Genesis 41:39).

Magicians and enchanters (1:20): These individuals typically used divination, astrological charts, and soothsaying to ascertain their answers. They were occultists, and as occultists they were energized by demonic spirits, though they claimed to be spokesmen for Babylon's pagan gods.

One must not miss the religious significance of what is going on here. The contest between the four youths and the magicians and enchanters is very much a contest between the one true God and the many false gods of Babylon.

The four youths stood out because the one true God was the source of their wisdom and skills. All others dimmed in their presence because they derived their power from false gods, which were, in fact, nonexistent. The false gods were no competition with the one true God of Israel.

We witness a similar contest between the true God and false gods in Moses' ongoing confrontation with Pharaoh over the Jews' slavery. Moses expressed God's absolute incomparability in two ways. The most common was negation—"There is no one like the LORD our God" (Exodus 8:10). The other way was by rhetorical questions, such as "Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods?" (Exodus 15:11). The implied answer is, "No one in all the universe." This was particularly significant in view of Moses' experience in Egypt, which was brimming with false gods.

God used ten plagues to openly demonstrate His superiority over the gods of Egypt. For example, the first plague, which turned the Nile's water into blood (Exodus 7:14-25), was a judgment against one of Egypt's most prominent gods. The Nile itself was worshiped as a god, and as its water was virtually the lifeblood of Egypt, this blow was devastating. The Exodus account reveals that Nilus, the Egyptian river god, was impotent in the face of the true God of Scripture.

The ninth plague brought darkness to the whole land (Exodus 10:21-29). This was a judgment against the Egyptian sun god, Re. The sun god was regarded as the creator, father, and king of the gods. He was considered the most distinguished god in the pantheon and was praised as stronger, mightier, and more divine than the other gods. But Re was nowhere to be found when the true God of Scripture darkened the land.

Babylon was now learning the same lesson the Egyptians had learned much earlier. But in the present case, the true God's victory over Babylon's false gods was evident in the four youths' superiority over all the magicians and enchanters of Babylon.

Until the first year of King Cyrus (1:21): Daniel's ministry in the royal court of Babylon continued until the overthrow of the Babylonian Empire by Cyrus in 539 BC. Daniel was one of the first captives exiled to Babylon, but he lived to see the first exiles return to Jerusalem in 538 BC under Cyrus's decree.

MAJOR THEMES

1. *Dreams in Bible times.* In Old Testament times, God often communicated with believers as well as unbelievers through dreams. Here are a few examples:

Abimelech (Genesis 20:3-7)	Pharaoh's butler and baker (Genesis 40:5)
Jacob (Genesis 28:12; 31:10)	Pharaoh himself (Genesis 41:1-8)
Laban (Genesis 31:24)	a Midianite (Judges 7:13-14)
Joseph (Genesis 37:9-11)	Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 2:1)

Such revelatory dreams continued in New Testament times, such as Joseph's dream about Mary's pregnancy by the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:20; see also 2:12-13, 19). Today, we have the Bible as God's primary means of revelation (2 Timothy 3:15-17). Interestingly, however, Acts 2:17 tells us, "In the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams."

2. *Magicians and enchanters.* The king of Babylon often consulted with occultists (magicians and enchanters) for wisdom. It was thought that such individuals had supernatural insights. God, of course, condemns all forms of occultism, including magic (Exodus 22:18; Leviticus 19:31; Deuteronomy 18:9-13; Ezekiel 13:18; Acts 19:19-20; Galatians 5:20; Revelation 9:21; 21:8). The magicians were influenced by demons, while Daniel was influenced by God. No wonder Daniel could provide answers when the magicians could not (Daniel 1:20).

DIGGING DEEPER WITH CROSS-REFERENCES

The interpretation of dreams—Genesis 40:8, 12, 18; 41:12, 25; Daniel 1:17; 2:4, 28, 36, 45; 4:20, 24

God's people exalted—Genesis 41:41; Exodus 7:1; 11:3; Joshua 3:7; 4:14; 1 Samuel 2:8; Job 5:11; Psalms 27:6; 37:34; 113:7; 145:14; 148:14; Isaiah

40:31; Habakkuk 3:19; Matthew 23:12; 25:21; Luke 13:30; 14:11; Romans 8:18; 1 Corinthians 6:2; 1 Peter 5:6

LIFE LESSONS

1. *God gives special abilities.* Daniel 1:17 tells us that God gave Daniel and his friends special abilities that enabled them to serve well. In fact, Scripture often reveals God giving special abilities to people. Christians today are equipped with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which are to be used in serving the body of Christ (see Romans 12:6; 1 Corinthians 12:4; Ephesians 4:11). The gifts God gives one believer are often different from the gifts He gives another. But we all serve the same body.
2. *Adapting to new circumstances.* Sometimes God allows us to experience circumstances that are outside our comfort zone. When that happens, it is best to adapt to our new circumstances and find ways to serve God. Daniel and his friends excelled in their assigned tasks in Babylon (Daniel 1:20). Likewise, after Joseph was betrayed by his brothers, he served God faithfully in every new circumstance that befell him (for example, see Genesis 39:4-6, 21-23). When the apostle Paul was thrown in jail, he didn't wallow in self-pity but was used by God in writing some of the New Testament books (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon). The lesson we learn is simple: Be ready and willing to serve God in every situation!

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Can you think of another person in Scripture who received great learning and wisdom from God? (See 1 Kings 3:12, 28.) What does God's gift of such learning say about His sovereignty? What does it say about His grace?
2. Do you think Daniel and his friends were living examples of the truth found in Proverbs 4:23? How so?
3. Do you know what your spiritual gifts are? (Not sure? The best way to find out is to get involved in ministry at your local church. Spiritual gifts typically surface in the context of ministry.)