

Daniel



REFORMED

EXPOSITORY

COMMENTARY

IAIN M. DUGUID

Daniel

REFORMED EXPOSITORY COMMENTARY

A Series

Series Editors

Richard D. Phillips
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Testament Editors

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Daniel M. Doriani, New Testament

Daniel

IAIN M. DUGUID



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*To Ken & Yoori Han,
Faithful fellow-laborers in the service of the gospel*

CONTENTS

Series Introduction ix

Preface xiii

1. When the World Does Its Worst (1:1–21) 3
2. Interesting Times (2:1–23) 17
3. Gone with the Wind (2:24–49) 31
4. Through the Fire (3:1–30) 45
5. The Fall and Rise of Nebuchadnezzar (4:1–37) 61
6. Weighed and Found Wanting (5:1–31) 77
7. In the Angel’s Den (6:1–28) 90
8. The Triumph of the Son of Man (7:1–28) 105
9. Living in the Valley of Darkness (8:1–26) 122
10. How to Wait for God (8:27) 136
11. Praying in the Darkness (9:1–19) 148
12. Hope in the Darkness (9:20–27) 161
13. Prepared for Battle (10:1–11:1) 176
14. Wars and Rumors of Wars (11:2–12:3) 191
15. How Long Will I Be Broken? (12:4–13) 209

Index of Scripture 225

Index of Subjects and Names 231

SERIES INTRODUCTION

In every generation there is a fresh need for the faithful exposition of God's Word in the church. At the same time, the church must constantly do the work of theology: reflecting on the teaching of Scripture, confessing its doctrines of the Christian faith, and applying them to contemporary culture. We believe that these two tasks—the expositional and the theological—are interdependent. Our doctrine must derive from the biblical text, and our understanding of any particular passage of Scripture must arise from the doctrine taught in Scripture as a whole.

We further believe that these interdependent tasks of biblical exposition and theological reflection are best undertaken in the church, and most specifically in the pulpits of the church. This is all the more true since the study of Scripture properly results in doxology and praxis—that is, in praise to God and practical application in the lives of believers. In pursuit of these ends, we are pleased to present the Reformed Expository Commentary as a fresh exposition of Scripture for our generation in the church. We hope and pray that pastors, teachers, Bible study leaders, and many others will find this series to be a faithful, inspiring, and useful resource for the study of God's infallible, inerrant Word.

The Reformed Expository Commentary has four fundamental commitments. First, these commentaries aim to be *biblical*, presenting a comprehensive exposition characterized by careful attention to the details of the text. They are not exegetical commentaries—commenting word by word or even verse by verse—but integrated expositions of whole passages of Scripture. Each commentary will thus present a sequential, systematic treatment of an entire book of the Bible, passage by passage. Second, these commentaries are unashamedly *doctrinal*. We are committed

Series Introduction

to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Each volume will teach, promote, and defend the doctrines of the Reformed faith as they are found in the Bible. Third, these commentaries are *redemptive-historical* in their orientation. We believe in the unity of the Bible and its central message of salvation in Christ. We are thus committed to a Christ-centered view of the Old Testament, in which its characters, events, regulations, and institutions are properly understood as pointing us to Christ and his gospel, as well as giving us examples to follow in living by faith. Fourth, these commentaries are *practical*, applying the text of Scripture to contemporary challenges of life—both public and private—with appropriate illustrations.

The contributors to the Reformed Expository Commentary are all pastor-scholars. As pastor, each author will first present his expositions in the pulpit ministry of his church. This means that these commentaries are rooted in the teaching of Scripture to real people in the church. While aiming to be scholarly, these expositions are not academic. Our intent is to be faithful, clear, and helpful to Christians who possess various levels of biblical and theological training—as should be true in any effective pulpit ministry. Inevitably this means that some issues of academic interest will not be covered. Nevertheless, we aim to achieve a responsible level of scholarship, seeking to promote and model this for pastors and other teachers in the church. Significant exegetical and theological difficulties, along with such historical and cultural background as is relevant to the text, will be treated with care.

We strive for a high standard of enduring excellence. This begins with the selection of the authors, all of whom have proven to be outstanding communicators of God's Word. But this pursuit of excellence is also reflected in a disciplined editorial process. Each volume is edited by both a series editor and a testament editor. The testament editors, Iain Duguid for the Old Testament and Daniel Doriani for the New Testament, are accomplished pastors and respected scholars who have taught at the seminary level. Their job is to ensure that each volume is sufficiently conversant with up-to-date scholarship and is faithful and accurate in its exposition of the text. As series editors, we oversee each volume to ensure its overall quality—including excellence of writing, soundness of teaching, and usefulness

in application. Working together as an editorial team, along with the publisher, we are devoted to ensuring that these are the best commentaries our gifted authors can provide, so that the church will be served with trustworthy and exemplary expositions of God's Word.

It is our goal and prayer that the Reformed Expository Commentary will serve the church by renewing confidence in the clarity and power of Scripture and by upholding the great doctrinal heritage of the Reformed faith. We hope that pastors who read these commentaries will be encouraged in their own expository preaching ministry, which we believe to be the best and most biblical pattern for teaching God's Word in the church. We hope that lay teachers will find these commentaries among the most useful resources they rely upon for understanding and presenting the text of the Bible. And we hope that the devotional quality of these studies of Scripture will instruct and inspire each Christian who reads them in joyful, obedient discipleship to Jesus Christ.

May the Lord bless all who read the Reformed Expository Commentary. We commit these volumes to the Lord Jesus Christ, praying that the Holy Spirit will use them for the instruction and edification of the church, with thanksgiving to God the Father for his unceasing faithfulness in building his church through the ministry of his Word.

Richard D. Phillips
Philip Graham Ryken
Series Editors

PREFACE

The Book of Daniel is both familiar and unfamiliar to most Christians, and consequently poses its own unique challenges to preachers. The stories of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace and Daniel in the lion's den are the staples of children's Bible story books and Sunday school classes, and so are well-known even in an age of increasing biblical illiteracy. Most have been taught to read them as tales intended to encourage believers to "Dare to be a Daniel," to live for Christ in a hostile world. That is indeed part of their purpose: they provide models for believers living in an alien world as to how they can both serve the culture in which they find themselves and at the same time live lives that are distinctive from that culture. They encourage believers to remain faithful, no matter what the cost. Yet the reality is that few of us can really claim to come close to the standard set for us by Daniel and his friends: we are all compromised in many ways by the pressures of our environment. It is important therefore to be reminded at the same time of the one greater than Daniel who has perfectly lived the exilic life of service and separation for us, Jesus Christ.

The latter chapters of Daniel's vision are more unfamiliar and daunting to most believers. They may have been exposed to a variety of end-times speculations constructed from an amalgam of these texts and others drawn from elsewhere in the Bible, but few have been encouraged to consider how these apocalyptic passages encourage all believers, whether or not they find themselves living during the final pages of world history. Here too, seeing the centerpiece of these visions as the exalted heavenly Son of Man who took flesh amongst us in the person of Jesus Christ can bring these often puzzling visions to bear on our everyday lives in a whole new way. It is my

Preface

prayer that this commentary will help Christians to see how the gospel of Jesus Christ is at the heart of the Book of Daniel.

These sermons were originally preached at Grace Presbyterian Church in Fallbrook, California, shortly before I moved to Pennsylvania. I would like to thank the elders and the congregation of that church for their constant love and encouragement. We all miss you greatly but are encouraged to see God's grace continuing to be poured out upon you through the ministry of my former co-pastor, Rev. Ken Han. This book is dedicated to Ken and his wife, Yoori, with gratitude to God for sending you to our church and equipping you with the gifts and character necessary for the work of gospel ministry.

I would also like to thank my wife, Barb, for her part in my own ongoing spiritual growth and development. Her ability to be open and unstintingly honest about her own sinful heart and her consequent passionate love for the grace of God in the gospel is a constant inspiration to me: I pray that as I grow in the Lord I may learn increasingly to share her humility, love, and compassion. My children have patiently endured the trials and joys of being part of a pastor's family. Thank you Jamie, Sam, Hannah, Rob, and Rosie for regularly making us look much better parents than we are. We thank the Lord for his continued work in each of your hearts and pray that you may daily grow in your knowledge of the depth of your own sin and the magnificence of your Savior, Jesus Christ.

§ *Daniel*

FAITH ENDURING THROUGH ADVERSITY

1

WHEN THE WORLD DOES ITS WORST

Daniel 1:1–21

But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way. (Dan. 1:8)



here is a fascinating genre of literature that goes by the name “Alternative Histories.” These novels imagine what life would be like if history had turned out differently from the way that it did. In the alternative history novel *SS-GB*,¹ Len Deighton imagines, “What if Adolf Hitler had focused all of his attention on invading Britain in 1940 and had not started a second front against Russia?” Very possibly, he would have made a successful assault, and the result would be a very different face for Britain and Europe today. In all likelihood, people in those countries would have grown up in a repressive police state, living in constant fear of the authorities.

For some Europeans, of course, that is not such an alternative history. I regularly teach in a small seminary in Latvia, and the young men in this

1. Len Deighton, *SS-GB: Nazi Occupied Britain, 1941* (New York: Knopf, 1979).

country know precisely what it is like to grow up under a repressive regime. After having a brief spell of independence between the two world wars, their small country was annexed by the Russians in 1940 and spent most of the next fifty years under alien rule until they were finally able to regain their freedom in 1991. It was a time of terror and intense suffering for all Latvians, and especially for the church, as their world was overrun by enemies who were determined to stamp out their culture, their language, their identity, and their religion. Anyone who was a potential leader was either executed or exiled to some distant part of the Soviet empire.

Can you imagine what it must have been like to be exiled from home to a foreign city, to be alone and scared, a long way from familiar surroundings? How would you cope in such a hostile setting? What truths could you cling to? Would you remain faithful to your former identity or simply be assimilated into your new surroundings?

THE EXPERIENCE OF EXILE

This is not entirely an imaginative exercise for us either, however. Even though our Western experience of the hostility of this world is certainly not normally as extreme as that of postwar Latvia, it nonetheless remains true for all of us that we are exiles here on earth. As citizens of heaven, Christians live as aliens and strangers in a land that is not their own, and there are times when the world's enmity to the people of God becomes evident. The hostility of the world is often shown in the efforts it makes to squeeze us into its mold. It wants to make us conform to its values and standards and not to stick out from the crowd. The pressure is on us, in school and at work, to be like everyone else in the way that we dress and the language that we use. We are expected to laugh at certain kinds of jokes and gossip about certain kinds of people. If we want to get on and be promoted in the world of business, we are pressured to leave our values and religious beliefs at the front entrance and to live a lifestyle entirely assimilated to the business community. We are expected to value the things the surrounding culture values, to pursue passionately its glittering prizes, and generally to live in obedience to its idols. We have to choose daily whether to be part of this world in which we live, or to take the difficult path of standing against it.

How do you cope in the midst of the brokenness and alienation that is life here on earth? What truths can you cling to when the jagged edges of existence are twisting against you and cutting into your flesh? What do you need to know to live a life of faith in an alien world, a world that is frequently a place of sickness and pain, of broken relationships and bitter tears, of sorrow and death? These are the questions to which the Book of Daniel will give us the answers. It is a book written to God's Old Testament people, Israel, when they were experiencing the brokenness and pain of life in exile, far away from home. It was designed to encourage them in their walk with God, who was with them in the midst of their pain.

GOD'S FAITHFULNESS IN JUDGMENT

Daniel's own story of exile began like this:

In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia and put in the treasure house of his god.

Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring in some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility—young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians. The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service. (Dan. 1:1–5)

To live faithfully in exile, we first need to know God's faithfulness. This is not altogether as comforting a truth as you might imagine, since the first aspect of God's faithfulness that we see in this chapter is God's faithfulness in judgment. Judah's exile from the land in Daniel's time was not merely an accident of fate or the tragic result of the expansionist policies of imperial Babylon in the late seventh century B.C. As Daniel 1:2 makes clear, the exile came upon Judah because the Lord handed King Jehoiakim over to the power of Nebuchadnezzar. God gave his people into the hand of their enemies.

The Lord had warned Israel of the sure consequences of their sins in the Book of Leviticus. At the beginning of Israel's history as a nation with God, he made a covenant with them, a covenant that included blessings for obedience and curses if they disobeyed (Lev. 26). If they served the Lord faithfully and kept the terms of the covenant, then they would experience his favor and blessing (26:3–13). However, if they abandoned him and violated his covenant, they would experience his wrath and disfavor (26:14–39). Their crops would be ruined and they would become prey for wild animals and for their enemies (26:19–25). If they persisted in their disobedience, the Lord would scatter them among the nations and they would waste away in exile (26:33, 39). This was exactly Israel's fate as it unfolded. Because of their persistent disobedience and rebellion against God over many generations, the Lord finally handed them over into the power of their enemies, and so they went into exile.

Yet the fate of Daniel and his friends in being dragged off into exile was not merely a fulfillment of the general covenantal curse of Leviticus 26. It was also the specific fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah in 2 Kings 20:18. Judah's King Hezekiah had received envoys and a gift from Merodach-Baladan, king of Babylon. In response, Hezekiah showed them everything that was of value in his storehouses and all of his treasures (20:13). For this action, he was roundly condemned by the prophet Isaiah.

Why was the Lord so upset with Hezekiah? What was the problem with giving the envoys from Babylon a royal tour of the palace? The answer is that in the world of ancient diplomacy, nothing came free. When Merodach-Baladan sent envoys and a gift to Hezekiah, it wasn't merely a friendly gesture of goodwill on his recovery from sickness. Rather, he was soliciting Hezekiah's help and support in his ongoing struggle against Assyria.² So when Hezekiah showed his envoys around his treasure houses, he was responding positively to Merodach-Baladan's overtures of alliance and seeking to show him that he had the resources to be a useful ally against Assyria. In spite of the Lord's miraculous deliverance of Jerusalem from the surrounding armies of Sennacherib and the Assyrians in the previous chapter of the Book of Kings, Hezekiah was now looking to political means for solving the Assyrian problem, through alliances with Babylon. Politics had replaced trust in the Lord.

2. T. R. Hobbs, *2 Kings*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1985), 294.

This is not merely an ancient temptation. Modern people too may be tempted to place their hopes in political alliances rather than wholeheartedly trusting in the Lord. The cost may be the loss of our distinctive spiritual voice as the church becomes just one more political action committee. Alternatively, we may invest our career hopes in adopting the world's methods of getting ahead, only to discover much later the cost of these methods to our homes and families.

Isaiah's word of judgment on Hezekiah's strategy was specific and severe. Because Hezekiah sought to preserve his treasures by trusting in Babylon, the Babylonians would come and carry off everything in his palace (2 Kings 20:17). Far from assuring the security of his line, his foolish spiritual alliance would result in some of his own offspring being taken off to become eunuchs in the palace of the Babylonian king (20:18). It is this specific word of judgment that is fulfilled in the opening verses of the Book of Daniel. Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem and carried off treasures from the temple of God to put in the house of his own god (Dan. 1:2), and he took some of the royal family and nobility—the descendants of Hezekiah—and put them under the charge of Ashpenaz, the chief of his court officials, or eunuchs (1:4).³ God's judgment upon the line of Hezekiah had been faithfully carried through, just as Isaiah had said.

JUDGMENT AND HOPE

Yet the recognition that their fate came from the hand of God as a faithful act of judgment was itself an encouragement to the exiles. Their future was not controlled by Babylon or its gods, but by the Lord, the God of heaven (Dan. 2:19). The one who had sent them into exile had also promised to be with them there, and ultimately to restore them from exile after a time of judgment. An implicit parallel is drawn between the sacred articles stolen from the temple and the people who were taken by Nebuchadnezzar: the young men are described as “free from defect” (*me'um*), a word more

3. The Hebrew word for “official” and “eunuch” is the same. It is not clear whether Daniel and his friends were literally made genderless in preparation for their new assignments. Some but not all of the Babylonian officials would have been literal eunuchs. The essential point of the text, however, is that what Isaiah prophesied had now come true.

commonly used of sacrifices (1:4).⁴ Just as the Lord allowed Nebuchadnezzar to carry away the temple vessels, he also allowed him to carry off some of the best of his people. That parallel further implies that just as the temple vessels would inevitably eventually make their way home (see Ezra 1:7), so too would his exiled people.⁵ God will not abandon what is his own.

This is an important point. During its hardest moments, life often seems out of control. Our fate may sometimes seem to lie in the hands of hostile people, or in the outworking of impersonal forces of one kind or another. Yet the reality is that our every experience in this world, from the apparently coincidental at one end of the spectrum, to the determined acts of wicked men and women on the other, lies under the control of our sovereign God. The sparrow does not fall to the ground without his permission (Matt. 10:29), which demonstrates that even the most trivial of events are within his view. At the other extreme, though, even the most wicked act of all time, the crucifixion of Jesus, was also the outworking of God's predetermined purpose (Acts 4:28). No sinful act ever catches God by surprise or thwarts his sovereign will. Everything that we experience in life, no matter how difficult or apparently meaningless it may seem, is God's purpose for us. For believers in Christ, each circumstance is the Lord's means of furthering his sanctifying goals. He has not abandoned or forgotten us. On the contrary, he will walk through these trials and preserve us through them by his grace.

RESISTING REPROGRAMMING

So it was that in the will of God, Daniel and his three friends found themselves exiled in Babylon: "Among these were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego" (Dan. 1:6–7).

The four were probably still only young teenagers at the time, and in Babylon they were to be exposed to an intense program of reeducation.

4. Tremper Longman III, *Daniel*, New International Version Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 49.

5. On the importance of the theme of the temple vessels, see P. R. Ackroyd, "The Temple Vessels—A Continuity Theme," in *Studies in the Religion of Ancient Israel* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972), 166–79.

First, their very names were changed. In place of their good Hebrew and Yahwistic names, Daniel (“God is my judge”), Hananiah (“the Lord is gracious”), Mishael (“Who is what God is?”), and Azariah (“The Lord is a helper”), they were assigned pagan, Babylonian names: Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (1:7). These Babylonian names invoked the help of the Babylonian gods, Marduk, Bel, and Nebo, rather than Israel’s Lord.⁶ The four young men were also instructed in the language and literature of the Babylonians, so that its myths and legends would take the place of the Scriptures as the source of their wisdom and worldview (1:4). Third, they were to be royally supplied from the king’s table, with a daily allowance of food and wine, so that they would become accustomed to a life of dependence on their new master (1:5). At the end of this three-year initiation process, with their previous identity fully obliterated, they would enter the service of Nebuchadnezzar (1:5).

This provides us with a picture of the world’s strategy of spiritual reprogramming. At its most effective, it consists of a subtle combination of threat and promise, of enforcement and encouragement. Those who are totally recalcitrant may be sent to prison camps or gulags if necessary, but the majority of the population are far more easily assimilated if they are well fed and provided for. After all, more flies are caught with honey than with vinegar. The fundamental goal of the whole procedure, though, was in one way or another to obliterate all memory of Israel and Israel’s God from the lips and the minds of these young men, and to instill into them a sense of total dependence on Nebuchadnezzar for all of the good things in life.

Isn’t this how Satan still operates today? He may violently persecute believers in some parts of the world, yet often he works more effectively by seducing and deceiving us into forgetting God and thinking that our blessings come from somewhere else. He wants us to forget the truths expressed in those Hebrew names, that God is our judge, as well as the one who shows us his grace. He wants us to forget the uniqueness of our God and the help that only he can provide. He wants to control the educational process, so

6. On the origin of the names, see John Goldingay, *Daniel*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1989), 5; on the literary significance of the renaming, see B. T. Arnold, “Word Play and Characterization in the Hebrew Bible,” in S. B. Noegel, ed., *Puns and Pundits: Word Play in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 2000), 243–47.

that our children grow up immersed in his worldview and his philosophy of life. If he can further instill in us a sense of dependence upon the material comforts that make up our way of life, or certain pleasures of this world that we have grown to love, then he can far more effectively draw us away from the Lord. His fundamental goal is always to obliterate our memory of the Lord, to reeducate our minds to his way of thinking, and to instill in us a sense that all of the good things in life come from the world around us and from the satisfaction of the desires of our own flesh.

Recognizing the Babylonian strategy helps us to see and evaluate the strategy of resistance formulated by the four young men. To be sure, they did not outwardly resist the Babylonian system. They did not refuse to work for the Babylonians, perhaps because they recognized the hand of God in their situation. They understood the word that the Lord gave through Jeremiah, that those whom he had sent to Babylon should labor there for the blessing of the place in which they found themselves (Jer. 29:4–7). As far as possible these young men sought to work within the system in which they had been placed, being good citizens of Babylon as well as of heaven. They didn't kick against the challenging providence of God, but rather accepted it as their present calling, with all of its trials, pains, and limitations. This reminds us that our calling is not to form Christian ghettos that are isolated from the world around us. On the contrary, we should be active in pursuing the common good of the community in which God has placed us, whatever challenges may face us.

MAINTAINING DUAL IDENTITIES

Yet at the same time the four friends accepted the will of God for their lives and served the Babylonian community, they also inwardly resisted the assimilation process of the Babylonian empire in a number of specific ways. In the first place, they resisted the total renaming program of the Babylonians. They didn't refuse to answer to their Babylonian names, to be sure, but they did maintain their Jewish names (and identities) as well. Daniel did not *become* Belteshazzar, even though he answered to that name, nor did Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah *become* Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They preserved their Hebrew names amongst themselves as a marker of who they really were (see 1:11, 19; 2:17); they lived with dual names as a

reminder of their dual identities, and more fundamentally as a reminder of the true nature of their God.

How can we learn from them and maintain our dual identity as citizens of two kingdoms? Surely one way is by taking every opportunity that we can to celebrate our heavenly citizenship with other believers. It is a well-observed phenomenon that exiles are often more profoundly patriotic than those who have never left the mother country. St. Patrick's Day is certainly celebrated with more enthusiasm in Boston than it ever is in Dublin, and the Fourth of July means more to Americans abroad than it does at home. Exiles desire and need opportunities to celebrate and preserve their true identity. So, as citizens of heaven, we need to take every opportunity to gather with our fellow exiles, so that we can remind one another of "home." We cannot preserve our heavenly identity on our own: left to ourselves, the pressure of the world will inevitably crush us into its mold. But together we can help one another to keep the memory of heaven strong.

We remind one another of our true citizenship when we gather week by week in our homes and in our churches. There, we talk of our true homeland and remind one another of heaven. In our church services, our goal is not simply to be equipped for more effective lives here on earth, but also, or even more, to be reminded of the heavenly realities that truly define who we are. We do not simply come together to be taught in practical steps how to be more effective husbands and wives, fathers and children, employers and employees, but also to be pointed towards our true home. To be sure, if our heavenly identity is strong, it will transform our marriages, our parenting, and our work relationships (see Eph. 5:22–6:9), for in the kingdom to which we belong, these things are done differently than they are in this world. However, the primary focus of our coming together as the church is to fix our eyes together on the kingdom of heaven, our true home.

This is done as the signs of the kingdom are displayed in our worship services, through the preaching of the Word and the celebration of the sacraments. As the Word is preached, a heavenly wisdom is proclaimed that runs counter to the wisdom of the world around us. In baptism, the sign of heavenly citizenship is placed upon us and upon our children, reminding us where our true citizenship lies. In the Lord's Supper, we eat our native food, reminding one another of the cost at which our citizenship was bought and

of the ultimate feast that awaits us at home. All of these things help us to preserve and to remember our true identity.

The four young men also preserved biblical knowledge and perspectives in the midst of a thoroughly pagan educational system. This is a challenge that increasingly faces families in our community as well. Different families will resolve to meet that challenge in different ways. Some will homeschool their children, or send them to a school with a godly, Christian ethos. Others will walk with their children through a public school setting, helping them to stand firm as believers in the midst of the world. Each of those choices may be the right one for a particular child from a particular family in a particular setting, yet each family needs to recognize the need to train their children not simply in an outward conformity to Christian morality but in a true countercultural Christian identity as citizens of heaven, living on earth. Wherever they are educated, our children need to know and understand the contemporary “language and literature of the Babylonians” and to be armed with biblical discernment into its follies and flaws.

STAYING DEPENDENT UPON GOD

The second way in which the four young men resisted assimilation into the Babylonian system, though, was that they resolved not to eat the food from the king’s table nor to drink his wine:

But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way. Now God had caused the official to show favor and sympathy to Daniel, but the official told Daniel, “I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you.”

Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, “Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see.” So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days.

At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food. So the guard took

away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead. (Dan. 1:8–16)

The issue here was not simply that the Babylonian food was not kosher—that is, prepared according to the Jewish dietary laws. Nor was the issue that the meat and wine had first been offered to Babylonian idols, for that would have been the case with the vegetables as well.⁷ If there had been something intrinsically evil about the Babylonian food, then Daniel would have had to abstain permanently from royal meat and wine, which does not seem to have been the case (see Dan. 10:3). The key to understanding why the four young men abstained from the royal food and wine is noticing that instead they chose to eat only those things that grow naturally—grains and vegetables—and to drink only naturally occurring water (1:12). This suggests that the goal of this simple lifestyle was to be constantly reminded of their dependence upon their creator God for their food, not King Nebuchadnezzar.⁸ Dependence on Nebuchadnezzar’s rich food would have been defiling because it would have repeated in their own lives the sin of King Hezekiah that brought this judgment upon God’s people in the first place (see 2 Kings 20:17).

So also we need to build into our daily routines constant reminders of our dependence upon God for all of the good things in our lives. Even such a simple act as giving thanks for our food may be a profound reminder of who has provided it for us. Keeping a daily record of the Lord’s gifts to us, from the trivial to the profound, can be another way of keeping our eyes fixed on our Creator. The practice of fasting—deliberately choosing to abstain from some of the legitimate pleasures and satisfactions in this world—can also be a powerful means in which we too can remind ourselves that this world is not our home and that its gifts are not our real treasure. Omitting a meal and instead devoting the time to prayer is a potent way of keeping our eyes fixed on our true inheritance and our hearts longing for the true feast.

Once again, though, Daniel and his friends sought to maintain their faithfulness to God by working *within* the Babylonian system, not against it. They sought permission from the chief official for their personalized diet

7. Goldingay, *Daniel*, 18.

8. Jacques Doukhan, *Daniel: The Vision of the End* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1989), 74.

plan (Dan. 1:8). The official was sympathetic to their request, but, like many government bureaucrats, he was also afraid of the potential consequences of bucking the system (1:10). Yet at the same time his response was not an outright refusal of their request, so Daniel went further down the chain of command to the guard who looked after them and proposed a ten-day test. At the end of that trial period, he could evaluate their progress. Surprisingly, at the end of this time, Daniel and his friends looked fitter (which in that context meant fatter; see 1:15) than those who had been indulging in a high-calorie lifestyle. So the guard agreed to continue to provide the four young men with the means for their alternative way of life, by which they could maintain their constant awareness of the one true God.

GOD'S FAITHFULNESS IN MERCY

The focus throughout this chapter is not simply the faithfulness of these four young men to their God, however. It is on God's faithfulness to them. It was God who caused them to find mercy (*rahamim*) in the eyes of their captors (Dan. 1:9). This was an explicit answer to King Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple. On that occasion, Solomon prayed that when the people ended up in exile, as they surely would because of their sinfulness, then the Lord would cause their captors to show them mercy (*rahamim*; 1 Kings 8:50). This mercy is exactly what the chief official showed Daniel and his friends. What is more, the outcome of their dietary test was clearly not what ordinarily would have been expected: normally people don't get fat on a simple diet of fruit and vegetables. This outcome too was a mark of God's faithfulness to these young men, honoring their commitment to him.

In addition, it was God who gave all four of them exceptional knowledge and understanding of Babylonian literature and learning and gave Daniel the unique ability to discern visions and dreams of all kinds:

To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds.

At the end of the time set by the king to bring them in, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king's service. In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the

king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom.

And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus. (Dan. 1:17–21)

God's favor upon them enabled them to answer all of Nebuchadnezzar's questions, so that he found them ten times better than all of his other advisors (1:20). God thus placed them in a unique position where they could be a blessing to their captors and build up the society in which they found themselves, while at the same time enabling them to remain true to him in the midst of extraordinary pressures.

We are perhaps so familiar with the stories of Daniel and his three friends that we may fail to realize what a remarkable work of the Lord's faithfulness their testimony was. As a result, we miss the comfort and encouragement that we can gain from their lives. If the Lord could keep these young men faithful to him in their situation, then he is surely able to keep us faithful to him in our much lesser trials and difficulties. No matter how overwhelming our situation may seem, God is able to keep us through it. It is his work from beginning to end, and he will do it.

This theme of the faithfulness of God emerges again in the brief note with which the chapter closes, which literally says: "Daniel lived until the first year of Cyrus" (Dan. 1:21). The first year of Cyrus was the year in which the decree was issued that enabled the Jews to return home (see 2 Chron. 36:22–23), some seventy years after the time when Daniel and his friends were taken into exile. We are thus reminded that God's faithfulness proved sufficient for Daniel throughout the entire time of the exile. Babylonian kings came and went. Indeed, the Babylonians themselves were replaced as the ruling world power by the Medo-Persians in the person of Cyrus, yet God sustained his faithful servant throughout the whole time. In the same way, he is able to preserve us throughout the trials and tribulations that we face, no matter how intense they may be or how long they may last. When the world does its worst, God's faithfulness is enough.

GOD'S FAITHFULNESS IN OUR SALVATION

There is one final note that we must not miss in all of this. The reality for most of us is that when we look at our lives, we find we are *not* like

Daniel and his three friends. We are far more like the nameless multitude who were deported along with Daniel, who adopted foreign names, ate the king's food, and altogether became like the Babylonians. In many respects, we are assimilated to the world system in which we live, and our futures are mortgaged to it. So if the message of this book is simply "Be like Daniel and all will be well," then we might as well stop reading now. The more we get to know Daniel, the more we come to realize that we are not Daniels.

The good news of the gospel, however, is not simply that God is faithful to those who are faithful to him. It is that a Savior has come to deliver faithless and compromised saints like us. Our salvation rests not on our ability to remain undefiled by the world, but rather on the pure and undefiled offering that Jesus has provided in our place. Jesus Christ came voluntarily into this world, with all of its pains and trials. He endured far greater temptations and sufferings than Daniel did, or than we ever will (Heb. 4:15). Yet he remained entirely faithful and pure until the very end, without spot or blemish, and grants the perfection of his obedience to all those who trust in him by faith (1 Peter 1:19). What is more, Jesus has already returned from his time of exile and now sits at the Father's right hand in heaven. He has prepared our places there, and his presence there already is the guarantee that one day we will be with him there as his people. The cross is the means by which God's faithfulness redeems the unfaithful; the resurrection and ascension are the surety of our inheritance in heaven.

Remind yourself often of this gospel. Fix your eyes on Jesus Christ crucified, raised, and exalted. He has not only pioneered the route home; he *is* the route home. Trust in him and ask him to work in you a true faithfulness. Ask him to put you in places where you can be a blessing to your community. Be a breath of heavenly wisdom in your home, your school, your workplace. Be constantly dependent upon his sanctifying work, looking to him to keep you faithful, not to your best efforts to "Be a Daniel." Finally, long for the day when his heavenly kingdom will invade this earth and bring the fullness of your inheritance.