

Daniel Series Part 2

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[0 : 0 0] It's tough to be a Christian at school. It's tough to be a Christian at college or university. It's tough to be a Christian in politics. It's tough to be a Christian in the arts. It's tough to be a Christian in the academy. Well, this could take a while if we carry on, so let's just summarize, shall we? It's just tough to be a Christian in Scotland today.

Our worldview, many of our values, our priorities are or should be very different to the society that we are part of and, more importantly, where God has placed us. We need assistance. We need guidance and instruction on how we are to live faithfully and fruitfully in this land, in this day, in this generation. And Daniel can help us. If we just cast our mind back one week to the big lesson that we learned as we began our study of Daniel last Sunday, the big lesson of the whole book of Daniel, the big lesson that God is in control from beginning to end and at every point in between. God was in control in the sending of His own people into exile as an act of faithful judgment upon them. God was in control in their return from exile at the very time and by the very means that He had appointed. He was in control also of the life and circumstances of Daniel, keeping him in the royal court as emperors and indeed empires came and went. And we don't want to go over old ground. We don't want to go over what we considered in some detail a week ago. But it is important as we continue to remember where we began and the big lesson learned. Indeed, week by week, on every occasion that we turn to this book, it is necessary for us to have that very much as underpinning all that we consider. God is in control. So, Daniel is in Babylon by God's decree.

But how is Daniel to live in Babylon? And the first chapter provides answers to this question and answers that apply very directly to us in our own situation, to you, where you are, as you would seek to live a life that is faithful to the Lord in difficult circumstances. And I think in this chapter there are three realities described that I want us to consider. The first reality that we want to consider is that for Daniel there was a challenge to be faced, a challenge to be faced. And we'll consider that challenge as it's set out for us in verses 3 to 7. We're going to be thinking of verses 3 through to verse 20. Last week we thought of verses 1 and 2 and the final verse. So, we're thinking of what's in the middle. And in the middle, the first reality presented for us is this, a challenge to be faced. But then, secondly, in this chapter we have a line to be drawn. From verses 8 to 16, we have that account for us, a line to be drawn. And then, finally, we have what I'm describing as an opportunity to excel. Three realities that faced Daniel there in Babylon. A challenge to be faced, a line to be faced, a line to be drawn, and an opportunity to excel. Well, let's think of each of these in turn. First of all, a challenge to be faced. Let's read these verses, verses 3 to 7 of Daniel chapter 1. It's on page 883 of the church Bible. Daniel chapter 1, verses 3 to 7.

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. 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, Mishach, and to Azariah, Abednego.

What is the challenge to be faced that is presented for us here? What is behind the seemingly generous treatment of the Hebrew deportees? They're housed, it would seem, in relative comfort. They are fed.

[5 : 51] They are to be educated, and in the current controversy in our own country, they're going to be educated. There's no fees, no loans to be repaid subsequently, certainly not financial ones.

They seem to be so well treated there in Babylon. Maybe Nebuchadnezzar wasn't such a bad guy after all. Look at how well he treats his enemies, how he provides for them so generously.

What is going on in this treatment that they are receiving? Well, what was going on was a battle as intense and certainly as or more strategic than any battle fought at the gates of Jerusalem.

This was a battle for the hearts and minds of a new generation. Nebuchadnezzar was a clever man. He was a foolish man, but he was also a clever man. And as a clever man, he had discovered that military victories keep you in control for a season, but long-term domination of a people requires re-education. Now, it wasn't practical for Nebuchadnezzar to organize the re-education of all the young people of Judah. But if he could re-educate the elites, and if he could get them young and impressionable in this task of re-education, then he knew that these young men, able as they were, young and impressionable as they were, influential as they could become, these men having assimilated this education they would receive could in turn influence others. And he would gain a stranglehold on that people far greater than anything he could have achieved by use of military might. So, what is the objective of

Nebuchadnezzar as concerns these four young men who are presented to us, Daniel and his three friends? Well, the objective, we could put it this way, is to Babylonize them. To Babylonize them. Well, that sounds quite painful, but what does it involve to be Babylonized? Well, these young men are to dress Babylonian. They are to speak Babylonian. They are to eat Babylonian. They are to behave Babylonian. They are to assimilate all things Babylonian. How they feel, their values, their priorities, their prejudices, everything. And most of all, most of all, these men are to think Babylonian. This is what Nebuchadnezzar aspires to, that they would think Babylonian. The goal is that these young men who begin as unwilling captives of Babylon will become citizens of Babylon. Indeed, proud and contented citizens with no need for chains to keep them far from Jerusalem. No, they would remain in Babylon of their own free will if this strategy of Nebuchadnezzar would achieve its objective of Babylonizing them.

[9 : 11] Now, the strategy had a number of intertwined strands. It involved new names. There is reference to them, and we'll come back to that just in a moment. It involved new instruction in the language and literature of the Babylonians. It involved a new diet from the king's table, and so on and so forth. The strategy also involved a combination of threat and promise, of enforcement and encouragement. There was a sense in which they were being obliged to do these things, and yet there was also a sense in which they were being seduced into this new lifestyle and this new way of living, this new way of thinking, of being Babylonian.

They could be, on one hand, forced into the Babylonian mold, but they could also be lured into that same mold. Now, time does not allow us to examine or explore all of these different strands of one united strategy, but there is one action that illustrates the process, and that is the change of names that we made reference to just a moment ago. And if we limit ourselves simply to one of the names, we could helpfully consider all of them, both the Hebrew names and the Babylonian names and their significance, but to think of one will be sufficient for our purposes, and if we stick with Daniel himself.

Daniel's name in Hebrew means God is my judge. That final part of Daniel, the EL, is the Hebrew reference to God or name for God. And then the meaning of the name, God is my judge. Well, he was to have a new name. His new name, as we're told there in verse 7, was to be Belteshazzar. And there, rather than the God of Israel, the God of Israel being at the heart of his identity, finding expression in his name, there was to be a new God, the God Bel or Marduk. And the meaning of the name being that this God would protect his life. And so, in this seemingly simple and superficial action of changing his name, the God of Israel, the God of Israel in a stroke is supplanted by the God of Babylon. Or certainly, this was the intent behind the change of name. Well, this may or may not be all very interesting, but what has it got to do with you? Well, what it has to do with you is this, that the battle between Jerusalem and Babylon, the battle between the church and the world, the battle between the kingdom of Jesus and the kingdom of Satan is a permanent one. It is one that continues to rage today. And the battlefield, or certainly one of the principal battlefields, is your mind. And the prize for the victor is your identity, your allegiance. And there are powerful and dark forces that want to influence the way you think, the way we all think. This is particularly relevant for those who are young, for those who are in higher education and who are being bombarded with ideas and knowledge from all directions. But of course, it is relevant also for all of us. So many influences that would seek to determine and mold the way that we think. You'll encounter these influences in lecture halls, and on reading lists. You'll encounter them as you watch TV or as you read the newspaper, as you socialize with friends and classmates. And the remarkable feature of this battle, or one of the remarkable features of this battle, is that most don't even realize that it is going on. Many of those who are on the side of Babylon have never heard of Babylon. Many of the movers and shakers in the kingdom of Satan don't even believe that Satan exists. In fact, if they had the misfortune of hearing what

I'm speaking about now, they would smile wryly and say, well, what nonsense is he on about? Satan? We don't believe in Satan? See, this is the irony of it in a sense. This is the peculiarity.

Those who are on his side don't even acknowledge his existence. And of course, and this is perhaps more relevant for those of us here this morning, many of those whose minds are being seduced and molded are blissfully unaware of what is going on. And perhaps you are one of them. Well, Daniel knew what was going on. Maybe he didn't know the whole picture, but Daniel had a pretty good idea of what was going on and what was at stake in this challenge that he was being faced with. He knew what kingdom he was a citizen of, and this boy was not for changing kingdoms, neither by force nor by seduction.

[14 : 28] And what about you? What kingdom are you in? Do you appreciate the nature of the challenge to be faced? Are you feeling the pressure to conform, or are you being seduced by the rich food of Babylon? What you need in this battle, what we all need, is a transformed mind that would allow us to respond and to defend ourselves in the face of these pressures, and indeed to overcome those who would stand against us. We need a transformed mind. We need the mind of Christ in the face of the constant, unrelenting, seductive pressure to conform, to behave, and to think like everybody else.

The Apostle Paul has wise words of instruction, and we've read them earlier in the service there in Romans chapter 12 and verse 2. He identifies the crucial importance of the mind. Let's remind ourselves of what he says in that verse, do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is, His good, pleasing, and perfect will. How will you know what to do? How will you know what to think? How will you know how to live in this world and in this generation? Well, you will know in the measure that your mind is renewed by the work of the Holy Spirit as He would apply the Word of God to your mind. So you will undergo that transformation, that renewal that will enable you to know what to do and to make the right decisions.

And as you do wage this battle, as you do face this challenge, the challenge that Daniel and his friends also had to face, always remember the big message which we have already noted, that God is in control. So there is a challenge to be faced by Daniel, but there is also a line to be drawn, a line to be drawn. And verses 8 to 16 relate for us what the particular matter was where that line was drawn by Daniel. Let's just read these verses as we move into considering this line to be drawn.

At verse 8 of chapter 1, 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 in 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 of 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. A line to be drawn. We are not to conform. We've read that in Romans. It's implicit in what we've already said concerning the challenge that Daniel had to face and that we also have to face. We are not to conform. We are to be different. Well that sounds fine in here. But out there when you are bombarded, it's tough to know what to do. It's tough to know how to think. It's not always obvious what you should think. It's not always evident what you should do, even when you want to do the right thing. Even when there is in you a genuine desire to be loyal in your allegiance to the Lord, sometimes it's difficult to know what you should do. Where do you draw the line? Daniel had to struggle with that question. He had to choose his battles carefully. He wore the clothes that were given to him without complaint. He read the books that he was provided with. He studied their philosophy. He even accepted a new name that he was given without protest. Though he did maintain his own name, as is evident from reading through the whole book. But sooner or later, or I suspect sooner or sooner, he was going to have to draw the line. Now, as it turns out, in what we're presented with here in this chapter, the line was drawn on this issue of food from the royal table. Now, it is by no means immediately obvious why this would be an issue. Daniel does say that to have eaten of this food would have been to defile himself. That certainly gives us a clue. It points us in a certain direction as to what the issue was. But the reality is that we don't know for sure what the big issue here was. Why was it that on this issue

[20 : 10] Daniel drew the line? As I say, many ideas are floated and presented and argued, and this is not the occasion to explore them all. Some would suggest that the food that he was being asked to eat was ceremonially unclean and that as a loyal Jew or Hebrew, he was not willing to participate.

Others speak of how this food might have been offered to Babylonian idols, and so for that reason, he was not willing to participate. And the ideas and the theories are many. And they have their strengths, but also there are ways of questioning them and asking whether they are adequate explanation.

I wonder whether it's actually the case that this matter was not something where it was absolutely clear what Daniel should do. Perhaps this is a case where it was not a clearly black and white issue.

It was a tough call for Daniel, and he had to make the call. There wasn't a default position. He had to do something. Either he ate or he did not eat. He had to decide. He had to bring to consideration as he considered these matters, maybe a multitude of factors and ideas and convictions and come to a conclusion.

Whatever those thoughts were, whatever his thinking process was, he came to the conclusion that this was where he had to draw the line. It may be that in the grand scheme of things, this wasn't a huge issue. But isn't it often the case for us that our character is formed and our allegiances are revealed often in those matters that are not huge. It's in the small things, in the difficult things, and the things that aren't altogether clear that it becomes evident who we are and where we stand.

[22 : 24] What is certainly true, for whatever reasons he may have had and good reasons clearly he did have, Daniel chose to draw the line on the matter of the royal food. He would not partake of the royal food. He would not, to use his own language, defile himself in this way. Well, that was what Daniel did.

He drew the line. And as we fast forward to our own circumstances here and to your own life and your own challenges, you too must know where to draw the line. You too, with Daniel, must determine not to defile yourself. As you study, as you live, as you mingle with those around you, there will be many occasions where you have to draw lines. There will be, maybe in your academic endeavor, scientific facts that you must reject, presuppositions that you won't share. There will be parties that you will not go to. There will be jokes that you won't laugh at. But just to complicate your life, there will be much science that you will embrace, presuppositions that you will share, parties that you will go to, and jokes that you will laugh at, and legitimately so. How will you know? How will you know what you can do or what you cannot do? How will you know where to draw the line? How did Daniel know?

Now, what I've suggested, or I've confessed to a measure of ignorance in terms of having any certainty as to why on this particular matter, Daniel chose to do what he did. But one thing I can say with greater certainty is those elements that would have helped him make the right decision.

And I think the most significant element that helped him make the right decision is that Daniel was a man who knew his God. He knew his God. In chapter 2 and from verse 20 through to verse 23, we have Daniel praising the God of heaven. And in the language that he uses, he reveals this deep and intimate knowledge of God. He knows his God. Praise be to the name of God forever and ever. Wisdom and power is his. He changes times and seasons. He sets up kings and deposes them. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning. He reveals deep and hidden things. He knows what lies in darkness and light dwells with him. I thank and praise you, O God of my fathers. You have given me wisdom and power.

You have made known to me what we asked of you. You have made known to us the dream of the king. Now, we'll come to that dream on another occasion. But I read these verses simply to illustrate the fact that in the making of these decisions, in these tough calls, in knowing where to draw the line, Daniel was assisted by his knowledge of God. He knows God and he depends upon God. This is the Daniel who prayed three times a day. He depends on his God. He seeks God's help. This is a Daniel also who has godly friends who can advise him and help him in that same chapter 2. And just before that, expression of praise, we read in verse 17, in the context of this dream that he has to interpret, then Daniel returned to his house and explained the matter to his friends. And so I say to you, if you are to do the right thing, if you are to draw the line where it should be drawn, if you are to make that tough call and make the right tough call, then it is necessary for you to know your God, to depend upon your God, to be surrounded by those who are your friends and who share your worldview. By all means, you may have and will have friends who do not share your worldview, but do not allow yourself to be isolated, particularly those who are young. If you're isolated in your faith, then you're vulnerable. Daniel was in Babylon, but he had these friends who he could go to, who he could speak to, who he could ask advice from. And that too is something that we need. If we are to draw the line where it ought to be drawn, if we are to make those tough calls when they need to be made. I can't give you any easy answers as to where you must draw the line, but draw the line you must. And when you do, do so with resolve. The story is told of a soldier in a barracks. It was told as a true story. I have no reason to doubt that it is a true story. And this particular soldier would come back, and it was his custom to do so, having been out on the town. He would come back to the barracks late at night or in the early hours, completely plastered. He would wake everybody up who was sleeping in the barracks, and in the middle of the barracks, he would challenge any of his fellow soldiers to a fight.

[27:17] And the way he would challenge them to fight is he would draw an imaginary line in front of him, and he'd say, anybody who wants to cross this line, come on down. And this would happen week after week, and his fellow soldiers really had little interest in this drunken challenge. Perhaps some of them were frightened. He was a very burly and strong man, or some simply weren't interested, and so would wait for him to get tired or bored, and the moment would pass. But on one occasion, when he came back, and the same speech was given, I challenge any of you, any of you to cross this line. And one soldier jumped out of bed and said, okay. And he came up, and he crossed the imaginary line. And the drunken soldier was very confused. What do I do now? This had never happened before. So what did he do? Well, very quickly, he took three steps back, and he drew another imaginary line. Now, I don't think it's necessary to insult your intelligence by applying the principle that lies behind that particular anecdote. You must draw the line, and you must do so with resolve. But then finally, we said that in this chapter, there is another reality presented to us, not only a challenge to be faced, not only a line to be drawn, but also an opportunity to excel. Verses 17 to 20. Let's just read these verses. Verse 17 of Daniel chapter 1.

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 the whole kingdom.

One thing that drawing the line most certainly did not involve was withdrawing from Babylon or the royal court. Now, in the case of Daniel, that was simply not an option, even if he had wished to.

He simply was not able to do that. But though in the case of Daniel, withdrawing from Babylon, withdrawing from the royal court was not an option, it is also the case that for us, even if we could physically do so, even if we had the freedom to do so, it is not an option for us to withdraw from this hostile society, to live in our own ghettos and simply not get involved. That is not what we are called to do. We are called to be salt and light. We are called to be light in the darkness and salt in an insipid and rotting society. That is where we must be. We must be in Babylon. We must be in the world, but not of the world. And certainly for Daniel, his drawing the line did not involve withdrawing from the place where he was. Far from withdrawing, Daniel excelled in the royal court.

He excelled in the study of Babylonian language and philosophy and science. Did Daniel agree with all that he encountered in those Babylonian writings? Well, most assuredly not.

[30 : 59] Some of it he probably found laughable. Some of it he certainly would have found offensive. Some of it he would have found stimulating and challenging, and he would have found common ground, no doubt, in some aspects of Babylonian knowledge and philosophy. He was able in that literature to discover truth and virtue, as well as to identify falsehood and blasphemy. And there were no taboo subjects for Daniel, no realm of study that was off limits for a follower of Yahweh. And he excelled in them all. We've read the verses there in the end or towards the end of the chapter. To these four young men, God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. God given understanding of this pagan philosophy and literature. And then we have the opinion of the king himself, who determines that these men were found to be ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in the kingdom. Why is it that Daniel and his friends were able to excel in such a way?

Well, we have read, God it was who granted them this wisdom, but they also had to exercise and to cultivate this gift of wisdom that God had given them, and this they did so. And so too for you.

For those of you particularly who are engaged in study of one kind or another, you should excel in the field of study where God has placed you, be it molecular biology or nuclear physics, medical ethics or psychology, economics or educational theory, philosophy, literature, music, the arts, and the list of course could go on and on and on. Now, I would say this, note that to excel in this field does not necessarily mean being top of the class. That will be partly a function of the measure in which God has granted you intellectual capacity and God gives as He chooses and He gives differently. But it does mean that you will be the very best that you can be, and perhaps for some it will indeed be being at the very top of the class. Well, for others that may not be the position that you occupy. Now, in this challenge to excel, in this opportunity to excel, will you agree with everything your lecturer says?

Well, I certainly hope that you will not. Some of what you will be taught will be laughable, will be offensive. There will be presuppositions that fly in the face of a biblically informed worldview.

And what will you do when that happens? Will you run away and cry? Will you throw in the towel? Will you look for safer options for study? Will you keep your head down and simply avoid problems?

[33 : 57] No, what you must do is study, and study with a passion, and grasp the opportunity to excel, and do so with the assurance that this world is God's world, confident in the knowledge that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is not only your personal Savior, to use good evangelical language, but He is the Lord of all, the Lord of all, the Lord of the universe. That in Him, in Jesus Christ, your Savior, all the things hold together. I've quoted in the past the Dutch theologian and statesman, Abraham Kuyper, who at the inauguration of the Free University of Amsterdam gave a speech that is very well known, and in it he pronounced the following famous words, in the total expanse of human life that is not a single square inch of which the Christ, who alone is sovereign, does not declare, that is mine. And this is your Lord. This is your Savior.

This is the one that you follow. Are they stirring words? I hope they are stirring words. But is this an original notion that Kuyper presents? Well, Daniel would quibble with its originality.

So, as we draw things to a close, how are you to live? How are we to live as Christians in 21st century Scotland? Well, we are to live recognizing and understanding the challenge to be faced.

We are to live resolved to draw the lines that need to be drawn, and we are to live intent on grasping the opportunities to excel as God would enable us and help us do so. Let us pray.