

STUDIES IN BIBLICAL LEADERSHIP

Daniel, Administrator of Two Empires

The story of Daniel's life takes place during one of the darkest periods in Old Testament history. The Northern Kingdom of Israel had been destroyed in 722 B.C. by the Assyrians and approximately a century later the Southern Kingdom of Judah was conquered by the Babylonians. The best and brightest youth of Judah were deported to Babylon for imperial service to King Nebuchadnezzar; Daniel was part of the first group of exiles taken to the capital of their oppressor in the year 605 B.C.

The Babylonians were wise conquerors and, rather than eliminating the leadership elites of the nations that they defeated, they chose young men from "good stock" (royal lineage) to be trained as imperial administrators. Daniel was one of these privileged young men. He was described as "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" (Daniel 1:4).

Daniel's Character

What becomes immediately clear in this story is the strength of Daniel's character. Although chosen for this privileged position, Daniel had a clear sense of his own distinctiveness as a Jew. He decided that he would defile himself if he ate royal food which had been sacrificed to pagan idols. He chose to be faithful to God's commandments, despite the risk of being "selected out" of the imperial service, and God honored his integrity by causing his Babylonian supervisors "to show favor and sympathy" to him (1:9). Daniel and his three young friends stood their ground, refusing to compromise their beliefs by eating non-kosher food, which other young imperial trainees could have easily dismissed as a "minor point." Rather than justifying this violation of their religious beliefs, as young people might be tempted to do in the early stages of their professional careers, these young men held firm.

Because of God's blessing on Daniel and his three companions, they excelled in their work, due to their "knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning" (1:17). In addition, God gave Daniel the special ability to interpret dreams and visions. When faced with a troubling dream, King Nebuchadnezzar threatened to execute all of his counselors unless they could tell him what he dreamt and what the dream meant. In an authoritarian regime like Babylon, there was no court of appeals, no human rights commission to hear the grievances of the king's advisors!

Daniel, empowered by God, was able to interpret Nebuchadnezzar's dream and, as a result, was immediately rewarded by the king. He was appointed ruler of the province of Babylon and given the job as administrator of all of the king's counselors or, to use a

contemporary parallel, made head of the king's "think tank."

Daniel's courage and conviction, combined with his keen mind and excellent training, resulted in a series of leadership positions under Nebuchadnezzar and his successor, Belshazzar. In a replay of an earlier experience, Daniel was once again called in to interpret handwriting on the wall during one of King Belshazzar's banquets for his royal court. Despite his sober interpretation, which predicted the fall of the Babylonian empire, Daniel was appointed by Belshazzar to be "the third highest ruler in the kingdom" (5:29).

That same night, Belshazzar was killed and his empire was taken over by Darius, the Mede. By God's grace, Daniel somehow survived this transfer of power, emerging as one of three administrators who oversaw 120 provinces of King Darius's empire. When jealous rivals in Darius' court tried to find ways of undermining Daniel's position, his remarkable character qualities were again evident. Daniel's enemies "could find no corruption in him, because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent" (6:4). His only vulnerability, in their eyes, was his commitment to "the law of his God."

We all know the story of Daniel in the lions' den. His courage, conviction and consistency are vividly displayed. When faced with the law prohibiting prayer to any god by Darius, Daniel never hesitated. He gave thanks to God three times each day "just as he had done before."

Lessons from Daniel's Life

As I studied Daniel's life, I wondered if he was the closest to a perfect man or woman in the Bible. When King Darius, against his own wishes, was forced to order Daniel to be thrown into the lions' den, he cried out "May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you" (6:16) -- which is, in fact, what happened. Because of Daniel's courage and commitment to God, King Darius subsequently issued a decree testifying that "the God of Daniel ... is the living God and he endures forever" (6:26).

There is no indication in this story that Daniel pursued leadership positions or tried to manipulate events so that he could appear before various pagan rulers, hoping to be chosen as a member of the imperial court. Daniel was rewarded because of his outstanding abilities, given to him by God, and because of his courage and integrity.

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