

Background for studying Daniel

When Judah fell to Babylon in the sixth century BC, most of the ruling families were taken captive along with King Jehoiakim. Daniel and his three friends likely were in their teen years when taken to Babylon as exiles from Judah. Nebuchadnezzar ordered Ashpenaz, a court official, to choose promising young men from the Israelite royal family and nobility for service in his court. They were to be selected because of their appearance, intelligence, and ability to learn. Daniel and his three friends were among those chosen by the king's officials to be thoroughly indoctrinated into the language, customs, and literature of the Babylonians. They would eat the same fine food as the king. For three years they would be trained to enter the king's service.

These four men had been given Hebrew names by godly parents that would remind them of the God they served. The names were as follows: Daniel, which means *God is my Judge*; Hananiah, which means *the grace of the Lord*; Mishael, meaning *Who is what God is?* And Azariah, which means *Yahweh has helped*. The king did not want these young men to have names that reminded them of their faith in God. The chief official was told to give them new names. Their names were changed to Babylonian names that made reference to pagan gods: Daniel to Belteshazzar; Hananiah to Shadrach; Mishael to Meshach; and Azariah to Abednego. It was believed that these Babylonian names would help to assimilate the young men more readily into their new culture. Nebuchadnezzar wanted to change the young men's ways of thinking, worshiping, and living. One thing he could not change was Daniel's heart.

Daniel and his friends faced a real dilemma when the royal food and drink were set before them. These godly young men were faced with an issue of obedience and faith. Daniel demonstrated his faith when he made up his mind not to defile himself and asked permission not to eat the food. His request to be exempt from eating the king's food was based on his deep religious conviction. Daniel remembered the dietary laws he had been taught. He knew that many of the foods eaten at the Babylonian court would have been considered unclean according to the Mosaic Law (see Leviticus 11:47). The royal food may have included forbidden meats. Daniel was afraid that he might unknowingly violate the commandment of God. He also knew that the food was first offered to idols before it was eaten. Eating the food would mean he acknowledged pagan gods.

When faced with this decision, Daniel had a number of factors to take into account as he made his choice. Although none are explicitly stated, these could have been considered:

- (1) Refusing the food could have been seen as an act of disobedience and insult.
- (2) Daniel and his friends may have felt the pressure from the other young men to eat the food. Their decision might set them apart.
- (3) Their refusal to eat the food offered could have jeopardized further advancement in the king's court.

(4) Daniel was choosing not to eat the best food in the land.

(5) It would have been easy to give in and eat the food. Who would know? Judah was a long way away. Daniel's parents were not around. Others might not know of their actions, but God would know.

(6) They could have questioned where God was when they were taken into captivity.

They chose not to be bitter but to remain faithful. Daniel's decision was a courageous act. He would accept his education and a new name, but he would reject the food offered to him. He showed self-control by choosing God's way rather than the king's way. What was the chief official to do? He felt he could not disobey Nebuchadnezzar's order to serve the young men the privileged diet. Would the Hebrew youths' choice of food adversely affect their physical condition? The chief official was afraid of the king's anger if they suffered physically from the vegetarian diet. He literally feared for his own life. Daniel approached the steward and proposed a ten-day period of testing; they would be allowed to eat vegetables and drink water for that time. Daniel had tremendous faith. He believed that God would honor his humble decision and bring about an improvement in their appearance. At the end of ten days, their appearance would be compared with those who ate the king's royal food and drank his wine. The experiment proved to be successful. Physically they were healthier and better nourished than the others. Mentally, they had superior knowledge and skill in wisdom and literature. From then on, the daily diet of the four continued to be vegetables and water. Daniel and his friends responded to what was right and won a victory for their health and for their faith. They had faced the pressure to compromise and had remained loyal to God.

Honored by God (Daniel 1:18-21) At the conclusion of the three years of intensive educational training, Daniel and his friends were presented to Nebuchadnezzar. They possessed wisdom that this king and his kingdom had never known. Not only did they excel among their fellow Hebrew students, but also the king found them to be ten times wiser than all the magicians and astrologers in Babylon. In addition, Daniel was given ability to understand visions and dreams of all kinds. The four students impressed the king so much that he appointed them to his own personal staff of advisors.

Daniel dared to take a stand against the customs and fashions of the world, in obedience to the word of God. Daniel stood for God, and God honored his loyalty and obedience.