

CHAPTER 18, DANIEL IN EXILE

TIMELESS TRUTH: THE FAITHFUL PROSPER WHILE THE FAITHLESS FALL.

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

Judah's best and brightest were deported to Babylon when Jerusalem was conquered by Nebuchadnezzar's armies. Daniel and his trio of friends were among their ranks. King Nebuchadnezzar introduced them to their new homeland by enrolling the four young men in his exclusive three-year "How to Live Like a Babylonian" Training Academy. Students were lavished with food and wine from the king's table and invited to enjoy the cosmopolitan pleasures of the world's most sophisticated city. Daniel and his companions graciously resisted. They asked for vegetarian meals so they could stay faithful to Jewish dietary laws. The king's official worried that their meager diet might leave them pallid and weakened, but God blessed their choice with academic success and physical stamina. They flourished and the ruler of the world's greatest empire took notice.

The king awoke one morning having been greatly troubled by a dream. He demanded an explanation of its meaning from his wise men and also expected them to tell the dream itself as a guarantee of accuracy. Failure was no big deal except for the accompanying death sentence. The request was impossible, of course, except that God revealed both the events of the dream and their meaning to his servant, Daniel. Nebuchadnezzar had dreamed of a four-layered statue. Its head of gold represented Babylon's might. The remaining layers of silver, bronze, and iron symbolized world empires that had not yet risen to power. Daniel's interpretation satisfied the king and saved his life and the lives of all the magicians and wise men in the kingdom. King Nebuchadnezzar promoted Daniel to ruler over Babylon, made high-level officials of his three friends, and worshipped Daniel's God.

This devotion, however, was only temporary, as the king's advisors played to his pride. He built a gold statue in his own honor and all were commanded to bow down and worship at its feet. Daniel's three friends, Meshach, Shadrach, and Abednego, were faced with a grim choice: idolatry or death. They refused to bow. The king was enraged and ordered them to be thrown into a fiery furnace. They defied the king's last chance order and chose to remain faithful even in the face of death. The fire was stoked and the young men were bound and thrown into the inferno. An astonished king watched a fourth man join them as they walked unbound and unharmed through the fire. And once again the king praised their God.

Nebuchadnezzar was succeeded by Belshazzar. King Belshazzar threw a grand party using the holy goblets they had stolen in the raid of Jerusalem's temple. The LORD sent him a mysteriously written message that appeared on the wall of the banquet hall. The king was terrified...for good reason. Daniel explained that the message said the king would soon meet his Maker. That same night the Persian army invaded Babylon. Belshazzar was killed and Persia became the silver layer in the statue King Nebuchadnezzar had dreamed of years before.

The new king, Darius of Persia, gave Daniel a promotion. Daniel's rivals were jealous and plotted his death. They deceived Darius into signing an irrevocable decree forbidding prayer to anyone except the king. The penalty was a single night stay in a cave of hungry lions. Daniel responded by doing as he had always done; he knelt and prayed. Of course, the king's officials felt "duty bound" to bring such dangerous activity to the king's attention and Darius was forced to throw his trusted servant to the lions. So, the king spent a restless night and rose in the morning to find that Daniel was safe and sound in the lions den. And the great King of Persia worshipped Daniel's God.

While Daniel, his friends, and the other exiles were kept in Babylon during the seventy years of captivity. The prophet Jeremiah carried out his duties in the ravaged city of Jerusalem. Jeremiah sent a letter of hope to the captives reminding them that God would one day bring them back to Jerusalem and encouraging them to prosper even as exiles in a foreign land. Daniel had done just that. He watched the rise and fall of kings and kingdoms and remained faithful. In the great Upper Story of God, Babylon had been a detour rather than a destination.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: What's one of the strangest dreams you can recall?

1. Daniel stands out among the prophets. How is he like other Old Testament prophets and how is he different?
2. Jerusalem and God's Temple were in ruins and most of the Jews were living in exile. It is easy to see how one could lose faith. What helped them hold on to faith? What helps you hold on to faith when you experience difficulties?
3. Look back at God's covenant with Abraham (p. 13 or Gen. 12:1-3). How was it fulfilled through Daniel and his three friends?
4. Compare the story of Daniel with the story of Joseph. Do you view difficulties the way they did? Why or why not?
5. List the various ways that God revealed His supernatural power in this chapter. What message did God's actions send to the exiles? What impression did He make on the gentile leaders?
6. When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to bow down to the golden idol, they did not know whether God would save them or not. How do you stand up for God when you know the results could be disastrous?
7. How did Daniel regard the various governmental authorities? Look up Romans 13:1-7, 1 Timothy 2:1-2, and Titus 3:1. How should Christians regard governments?
8. How did God show Himself to be sovereign over human kingdoms and rulers? How does this help you view our world today?
9. Jeremiah's message (p. 260-261) was sent in a letter from Jerusalem to the exiles in Babylon. What was God's Lower Story and Upper Story promises to them?

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.

CLOSING PRAYER

CHAPTER 19, THE RETURN HOME

Journal your answers to these questions as you read through the chapter this week. You may wish to read one day and journal the next, or spread the questions over the whole week.

DAY 1

1. If you had been an Israelite exile in Babylon when King Cyrus permitted your return, would you have returned to the Promised Land or would you have remained in Babylon? Why?
2. How had the LORD's 70-year discipline affected the people of Israel? Have you experienced personal change as a result of the LORD's discipline?

DAY 2

1. What did Israel's enemies do to undermine their efforts to rebuild their temple (p. 265)? When have you experienced a similar situation wherein someone tried to undermine something important to you? How did you respond?
2. Read pages 266-267 and list the reasons the temple work had ceased. Do you struggle with misplaced priorities? What are some ways you can reprioritize your life?
3. Some were disappointed that the new temple was no match to the glory and beauty of Solomon's temple. How can such comparisons be dangerous? According to Haggai's second message (p. 267-268), what is the remedy for their – and our – discouragement?

DAY 3

1. Haggai the Prophet encouraged the people to get back to work on the temple building project that had stalled for sixteen years (p. 267). Are there areas of your spiritual growth that have stalled out?
2. Review Zechariah's message of hope and promise. What did God promise the faithful Israelites He would do? List the ways they were to respond to God's grace (p. 269). How do you rate in these areas?