

Daniel

I was named Daniel by my parents. They were devout Jews and part of the royal family of Judah. When Jerusalem was conquered by Nebuchadnezzar, I was one of a group of adolescents who were felt to be potential assets to the Babylonian Empire.

I was given the name Belteshazzar and put into a three-year program of preparation for examination by the king. It almost ended before it began when I realized that the king's food was ceremonially unclean to us Jews. I don't know if it was foolishness or courage, but I and my three friends asked the official in charge of us for permission to eat vegetables – to be sure there was no pork or meat offered to idols. He feared that we would not thrive, and he would be punished – beheaded most likely.

The LORD influenced him to allow an experiment, and also caused a mere 10-day trial to demonstrate a significant improvement in our appearance and performance. (What in the world was in that Babylonian diet, narcotics?) After the experiment, although we were not even close to the end of the prescribed preparation time, the king interviewed us and graded us at the top of the class. We immediately entered his service.

It was not long before the commander of the king's guard, Ariach was his name, came to tell us that the king's entire staff were to be executed. Of course, this got our attention. Being on the bottom of the seniority list, we had no idea what had happened. It seems that the king had a dream, called his various advisors, magicians, sorcerers, enchanters and astrologers for an interpretation, and got evasive answers. He had made it harder by asking them to first tell him the dream and then give the interpretation. He was shrewd and was familiar with the double talk of professional soothsayers.

I probably risked my life again by asking to see Nebuchadnezzar so I could beg for more time. Then I, together with my three friends, now known as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, prayed, pleading with the LORD for mercy. During the night, the mystery was revealed to me in a dream. We returned to Ariach and told him to call off the executions and take me before the king to interpret his dream. Of course, if I did not have it right, we would be instantly executed, but we had seen the LORD perform the miracle of the 10-day diet!

I first made it clear that no human being could answer the question, but only the God of heaven. I explained that Nebuchadnezzar had seen an enormous image, with a golden head, silver shoulders and arms, bronze belly, iron legs and feet made of mixed clay and iron. A rock was cut out, not by human hands, struck the statue and broke it to dust which blew away. The rock grew into a mountain. We watched the king's face as I told him this. He was trying to show no emotion, but we could clearly see that he was astonished. I knew we had gotten it right and proceeded with the interpretation. Nebuchadnezzar was the head of gold and would be followed by successively inferior kings and finally replaced by an eternal Kingdom established by the God of Heaven.

The king said, "Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery." He made me ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed me in charge of all his wise men. And for a while things were stable. We were held in fear, if not high regard, by our jealous colleagues. Nobody dared question the king, of course.

The next big event took place when I was busy in the palace and all the officials of the empire were called to the plain of Dura where Nebuchadnezzar had set up an enormous image, all of gold. The symbolism was not hard for us to catch -- he was not satisfied with being the head and wanted to be the whole statue. The public did not know this because the dream and its interpretation were state secrets. No absolute ruler likes to have it made known that he will not rule forever! Nebuchadnezzar was so insistent that everybody bow down and worship the image that he set the penalty for disobedience as incineration.

He had already acknowledged that my God was the God of gods and the Lord of kings, but apparently believed that he could change the future. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had sort of been in my shadow up to that time, but they were about to participate in the most dramatic example of trusting the LORD ever to occur! When the music started, the signal to bow before the image, they remained standing. When Nebuchadnezzar got the report, he made sure they understood the question. "If you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?" Their response was perfect, "If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."

The LORD chose to miraculously preserve them and even joined them in the furnace! They came out without a burn and not even smelling of smoke. Did this make the pagan king a believer? He issued a proclamation, "I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way." But do you notice that it was not personal? That lack of personal commitment became clear sometime later when he boasted to himself, "Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?" He was answered by a voice from heaven, "This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: Your royal authority has been taken from you. You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes."

This had already been foretold in a dream of a great tree being cut down, with only its stump left, then the stump changed into a beast for seven periods of time. When I had interpreted that dream, I told the king I wished it would come true only to his enemies, but having been shown the truth, I was very bold. "O king, be pleased to accept my advice: Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue."

But he did not and spent 7 years living as a beast before he acknowledged the LORD. "At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored. Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble." Nebuchadnezzar was a great man, and it took a series of spectacular miracles to humble him.

His grandson, Belshazzar, grew up in privilege and had no idea of how to form or even maintain an empire. His father, Nabonidus, had taken a leave of absence to worship the moon goddess. Belshazzar was throwing an elaborate party when he called for drinks to be served in the gold and silver vessels that had been taken from the Temple in Jerusalem. At that point, a hand appeared and wrote "Mene, Mene, Tekel, Parsin" on the wall. That sobered the crowd in a hurry! I had not been consulted for a long time but after the main advisors were stumped, the queen remembered me, and I was called. Belshazzar made a typically wordy request and promised rewards for the solution. The LORD showed me the meaning, "Your days are numbered and coming to an end. You are weighed

on the scales and found wanting. Your kingdom will be divided between the Medes and the Persians." That night it came true.

My position in the palace was not eliminated, as would have been the usual practice after a hostile takeover. Having foretold the victory, I was given status and responsibility by Darius the Mede, although I was by that time a very old man. This made Darius' own loyalists jealous and led them to concoct a scheme to catch me breaking a law. The Medes and Persians had an unusual system in that a law once passed could never be revoked. They tricked the king into signing a decree that for 30 days, no one could pray to anyone other than the king. I knew of the law but did not omit my practice of prayers to the LORD three times a day. The king was notified of this by the plotters. Darius agonized over the dilemma but could not find a way out. He reluctantly had me thrown into the lions' den, saying, "May the God whom you serve continually, rescue you." He could not eat and did not sleep all night.

I was ready to die but realized that if I were saved, it would demonstrate the power of the LORD to yet another king. It was barely light the next morning when the king spoke to me from the opening of the den after having the stone removed. His voice trembled when he said, "Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to rescue you from the lions?" I answered with proper protocol, "O king, live forever! My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me." He immediately gave orders to lift me out of the den.

Those who plotted against me were then thrown, with their families, into the lions' den. I would not have done it, but the king was so upset by their deception, he knew they could not be trusted with the affairs of state. Darius was succeeded by Cyrus who allowed my people, the Jews, to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple, just as Isaiah had predicted 170 years before!

There were other dreams given me by God. They partly had to do with attaching more details to the dream of Nebuchadnezzar about the succession of kingdoms. There was a timetable: "Seventy 'sevens' are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy." I was given amazing revelations and made responsible to write them down for future generations. I heard, but I did not understand. So, I asked the angel, "My lord, what will the outcome of all this be?" He replied, "Go your way, Daniel, because the words are closed up and sealed until the time of the end. Many will be purified, made spotless and refined, but the wicked will continue to be wicked. None of the wicked will understand, but those who are wise will understand."

I missed out on what many consider the normal blessings of life. I had neither wife nor children. But I was involved in great events in the history of Judah. I served before pagan kings and saw Nebuchadnezzar humble himself before the LORD and saw Cyrus authorize rebuilding of the Temple. When I confessed my sins and those of my people to the LORD, I was called "highly esteemed" by a powerful angel and given glimpses into the spiritual warfare going on around me. I was instructed to write down some of the visions and to seal others for the future. Have you read those words? Has the LORD revealed the interpretation yet? The most important thing, despite the convoluted battles and changes of government, comes down to the final point of Nebuchadnezzar's first dream, "The God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed." That's all we really need to know.

Daniel 1–12, Isaiah 45, Matthew 24