

## **Daniel: Daring to be Different. Daniel 1**

Writing in yesterday's Australian on the move to legalise euthanasia in the Australian states Paul Kelly said "Australia is turning into a global leader in cultural arrogance thinking it can usurp God's role in human affairs without consequence." [Weekend Australian May 29-30 p. 15] and he reflects on the inconsistencies and contradictions introduced into Australian public policy by relying on 'a secular rationalism where human desire determines the moral order.'

He is not alone in thinking we live in a society that is determined to remove God from public life and enshrine human desire and reason as the ultimate guide, the ultimate source and judge of right and wrong.

And whether secular rationalism rolls off our tongue or not, we see the changes he is talking about.

Right and wrong – at least in the area of sexual behaviour – is now determined increasingly by what people say is right for them, or by what offends them. Abortion and euthanasia are enshrined in our state because the wishes of a conscious adult about their own life trump other, longstanding, moral concerns, undermine the sanctity of life that has been the foundation of our morality.

And we are also noticing an increasing intolerance of alternate views, whether that is cancelling people on social media or from speaking on university campuses if they, like J K Rowling the author of the Harry Potter books, question and fail to support the latest attempt to bring justice to some perceived victim group like trans people, or the portrayal of those who support marriage being between a man and a woman as evil, oppressive, anti-human.

These changes are not just out there, in the media. They are seeping into everyday life – whether it is in what our children are being taught at school about inclusion and the legitimacy of same sex relationships, or into the workplace where employees are expected to express their support by wearing purple or putting a rainbow flag logo on their work email signature, or even – in the change and suppression legislation – in government intrusion into conversations we might have in our homes with trans or same sex attracted young people.

We live in a society that is placing its faith in another gospel, what Steve McAlpine has called in his book “Being the Bad Guys”, the gospel of expressive individualism – the idea that human flourishing, the good life, salvation, is found in maximising individual human choice, in people being free to and supported in expressing their desires, another gospel that is founded on and promotes the worship of other gods – the gods of human reason, human pleasure, or human power – power expressed in being accountable for right and wrong only to oneself, in the freedom to be true to yourself.

For followers of this other gospel Steve says Christians are increasingly the bad guys, the enemies of human flourishing because of their commitment to God and His authority over life, authority to declare what is right and wrong, and to hold us accountable to His standards; the bad guys because we believe the life of human flourishing is found in trusting and following Jesus, dying to self not following self

Now you might not put it together as Steve does – and I commend his book  
And you might not use the words Paul Kelly does

But I think we all feel that change – whether it is in worrying about exclusion at our work place if we express what we believe, or even worrying about losing our jobs if we don’t support inclusion initiatives; or in talking to our children about what their teacher is saying or the lifestyle she is living, and having to think hard about how we teach them right and wrong without exposing them to being the odd one out at school or getting themselves into trouble when they repeat what they have learnt at home; or increasingly in censoring what we say in private conversations, fearful of condemnation.

We feel the change and in the face of this change we need encouragement to keep trusting and following our Lord Jesus and guidance about how to live in a society that is indifferent or hostile to the Christian faith, how to keep loving our neighbours in truth.

God’s word is rich in resources for encouragement and guidance, and one of the books that is full of encouragement and instruction about how to live in a pagan society is the ancient book of Daniel and we are going to spend the next few weeks in Daniel before we return to Matthew

What were Daniel’s circumstances? Not promising

**Daniel’s circumstances and ours vv. 1-7**

## The apparent vanquishing of God vv. 1-2

*1 In the third year of the reign of King Jehoiakim of Judah, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came to Jerusalem and laid siege to it. <sup>2</sup> The Lord handed King Jehoiakim of Judah over to him, along with some of the vessels from the house of God. Nebuchadnezzar carried them to the land of Babylon, to the house of his god, and put the vessels in the treasury of his god.*

The story opens around 605 BC. Babylon is the rising power, and Nebuchadnezzar the soon to be King of Babylon has just defeated the Egyptians and the remnants of the Assyrian empire at the battle of Carchemish. It would appear as part of the tidying up he blockaded Jerusalem, where the King had been an Egyptian ally. Jehoiakim submitted, giving Nebuchadnezzar booty and hostages taken, as we heard, to be trained for the Babylonian civil service, to keep the empire that had subjugated them and would in a few years destroy Jerusalem running.

Now we read v. 2 that the Lord handed over King Jehoiakim – but that is not how Daniel’s Babylonian captors would see it.

For them the defeat of Jehoiakim was the defeat of Jehoiakim’s God and the triumph of their gods, particularly Nebuchadnezzar’s personal god Marduk. And they had proof of that triumph. The placing of some of the vessels – expensive serving utensils and bowls – from the temple of the Lord into the temple of Nebuchadnezzar’s god was a way of saying that Marduk was so powerful and the Jewish god so weak that Marduk had plundered his house and taken booty.

For the Babylonians amongst whom Daniel would live the God of the Jews was a defeated, a vanquished god, without power to do things, determine outcomes, in the world, vanquished by their idols.

And isn’t that the way our society increasingly sees the god of Christians?

Whatever people might think and worship privately, the Christian God is seen as powerless – powerless to enact His judgements – so there is no need to do what He says; powerless to bring prosperity or create woe, so He can be safely ignored.

He has been vanquished by .... By, the myth goes, the power of human reason, by our collective determination to do without him

Daniel comes to a society that thinks God has been vanquished, has no role to play in society

### **The seduction of privileged opportunity vv. 3-5**

And in this society Daniel faces straight away the seduction of privileged opportunity

*<sup>3</sup> The king ordered Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the Israelites from the royal family and from the nobility— <sup>4</sup> young men without any physical defect, good-looking, suitable for instruction in all wisdom, knowledgeable, perceptive, and capable of serving in the king's palace. He was to teach them the Chaldean language and literature. <sup>5</sup> The king assigned them daily provisions from the royal food and from the wine that he drank. They were to be trained for three years, and at the end of that time they were to attend the king.*

It was a pretty rough start – taken as prisoners, hostages from Jerusalem. But Daniel is an able young man, selected for his ability, health and looks. And if he works hard at the Babylonian curriculum and passes the entrance exam conducted by the king a secure place is open to him at the heart of power, in serving the empire's administration.

He may have started as the follower of a vanquished god from a people who were on the outside of Babylonian life, but there is a pathway for him to meaningful and important work, to security and power, to being on the inside. All he has to do is immerse himself in the conqueror's learning and culture, and it is not all bad. There is lots to learn, and Daniel will.

And the process is not too bad either – the king will support him through this time with food from his own stores. He will experience how good life is in the royal service, in being in the favour of this great king. And all the time he is learning he can depend on the king where he works for the king, that this pagan king is the source of his continuing life and wellbeing.

And our society offers us and our young people the same seductive possibility. A life of privileged wealth and power – for the secular west is both wealthy and powerful – if we will immerse ourselves in its culture, in its world view, and come to depend on it for our provision, for our security and meaning.

And like the learning of the Babylonians – it is not all bad. On the contrary, there is much useful to learn. But all the time there is the message, like the message being given to Daniel, that security and belonging, a place in the place of power, is found in acceptance of its view of the world and dependence on that power and only that power, for like Daniel’s god, the Christian God is vanquished. There is no other power – nothing else that can sustain our flourishing – but the secular west and its idols. We face, like Daniel, the seduction of privileged opportunity.

And to complete Daniel and his friends’ resocialisation as willing servants of the empire they are given new names by their conquerors, by their benevolent masters

**The imposition of a new identity – shaped by an idolatrous culture vv. 6-7**

<sup>6</sup> Among them, from the Judahites, were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. <sup>7</sup> The chief eunuch gave them names; he gave the name Belteshazzar to Daniel, Shadrach to Hananiah, Meshach to Mishael, and Abednego to Azariah.

With this change of name the old identity which was characterised by loyalty to the LORD, the God of Israel, is to be stripped away and replaced with loyalty to Babylon’s idols and a recognition that their past has gone.

Look at the names

Old Name	Meaning	New name	Meaning
Daniel	God is my judge	Belteshazzar	Lady [Belet, wife of the god Bel] protect the king
Hananiah	Yah has been gracious	Shadrach	I am very fearful
Mishael	Who is what God is	Meshach	I am of little account
Azariah	Yah has helped	Abednego	Servant of Nabu [a play on the name of the

			Babylonian god Nabu]
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With this name change the exclusion of the LORD from their lives is complete. Their identity now is to be found in service of the king and his gods, and dependence on the king and his gods for their life and their progress in life.

Identity and address are pretty hot topics in our society.

Some of you may be in workplaces where you have been asked what pronoun you want to be addressed by, accompanied by the insistence that you address others by the pronoun they want to be addressed by – in the name of not offending anyone.

What this is saying is that the individual is the source of their own identity, a claim that you are who you think yourself to be. Our society is seeking to draw us into a world where we accept we give ourselves our fundamental identity – that it doesn't come from creation, from our biology as men and women; it doesn't come from relationship to those outside us – whether that is God, or our parents, or others; it comes from within each of us. To demand the right to determine how others address you is actually to claim a god like power, a royal power.

Like Daniel's society our society claims the right to give you a new identity by empowering you to create your own. It tells you you can find your life by turning in on yourself, by reference only to your own desires. It insists on it as it is one of the great blessing of the gospel of expressive individualism, and by that detach you from your identity as God given, from locating who you are in your creation as embodied people in a web or relationships and salvation.

Our circumstances are like Daniel's.

In fact the pressure of an idolatrous society giving him his identity, claiming his loyalty, proclaiming itself as the source of his life and the good life, is more immediate and powerful for him.

He is a hostage. He has no way home, no other life than life in the king's service.

How will Daniel respond?

Will he accept his new identity? Will he accept that the Lord is vanquished so that he comes to rely on Nebuchednezzar and his gods for life, for who he is?

### **Daniel's response – a determination to keep a faithful identity**

#### **The issue of difference vv. 8-10**

*<sup>8</sup> Daniel determined that he would not defile himself with the king's food or with the wine he drank. So he asked permission from the chief eunuch not to defile himself. <sup>9</sup> God had granted Daniel kindness and compassion from the chief eunuch, <sup>10</sup> yet he said to Daniel, "I fear my lord the king, who assigned your food and drink. What if he sees your faces looking thinner than the other young men your age? You would endanger my life with the king."*

Daniel is determined to resist, determined that he will not abandon his identity as one of the LORD's people, and the focus of his resistance is his determination "that he would not defile himself the with king's food or with the wine he drank."

The issue with the food is defilement. Defilement comes from the language and the teaching of Leviticus. God had said in Leviticus that He was the holy God and his people should be holy, set apart for Him, set apart by their loyalty to His instruction, His Torah given to Moses.

Defilement is the action of becoming unholy, unclean – and so unable to continue amongst Lord's people, unable to come to the LORD. To become defiled was to be excluded from the LORD's presence and His people.

Now there has been a lot of discussion about why the king's food and wine would defile. Some have suggested it would be because notionally it had all been offered to Nebuchednezzar's idols, or that it could never be guaranteed to be kosher. One commentator listed seven starting options.

But the issue is not so much any particular feature of the food and whether it broke this or that particular law. Rather it is the whole context. Eating and drinking would be to let himself be absorbed completely into the idolatrous pagan world, living as if he was dependent on the gift of this pagan king for life and flourishing and so owing his loyalty to the king. The important thing is that Daniel knew that partaking of that food and drink would defile.

Daniel is determined to not let that happen, determined to remain one of the LORD's people even when all around thought that Israel's God was finished, determined to show by what he does who is truly God.

People wonder why Daniel expresses his determination to be the LORD's person in what he eats and drinks. Why didn't he object to the pagan curriculum he was taught, or the name change?

But what you are taught is outside you, and you can filter and critique it by what you know to be true. What people choose to call you is up to them, and if you know who you are it doesn't trouble

But what you do, how you live, on whom you rely for your daily bread - that reveals what you truly believe, that will distinguish you from or absorb you into your pagan neighbours

Daniel wants to be the LORD's person and is not embarrassed to be known as the LORD's person.

And so Daniel is determined not to defile himself with the king's food and drink, and he puts that conviction into action.

He asks the chief eunuch for permission to be different – and that takes a lot of courage, to express dissatisfaction with what the king is providing and requiring. The consequences for those who displeased the king, as the chief eunuch says, could be fatal.

And when the chief eunuch indicates he is reluctant to grant Daniel's request because it could imperil his own life if he was seen to not have taken care of those entrusted to him by the King, the King who might, for example, think they were looking less healthy because someone had given the lads inferior rations to profit from selling the king's food on the black market – we see the reasonableness of true faith in the true God.

### **The reasonableness of faith vv. 11-16**

<sup>11</sup> So Daniel said to the guard whom the chief eunuch had assigned to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, <sup>12</sup> "Please test your servants for ten days. Let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. <sup>13</sup> Then examine our appearance and the appearance of the young men who are eating the king's food, and deal with your servants based on what you see." <sup>14</sup> He agreed with them about this and tested them for ten days. <sup>15</sup> At the end of ten days they looked better and healthier than all the young men who were eating the king's



*food.* <sup>16</sup> *So the guard continued to remove their food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables.*

Daniel doesn't carry on or threaten to go on strike. He is not going to insist that others endanger their lives for him.

But doesn't give up.

He was respectful of the responsibilities of those put over him, of their accountability to the king.

And so he proposes a test to his direct supervisor, a test that would assure them that they were not putting themselves in danger by agreeing to Daniel's request – a diet of vegetables and water, and an assessment of their condition after ten days.

Daniel's choice of diet does not come from dietary conviction, a knowledge or belief that vegetables were healthier. The defiling power of the king's diet was the issue, not its healthiness

And we know Daniel did not continue as a vegetarian. In Daniel 10:3 as Daniel is mourning for three weeks Daniel says "I didn't eat any rich food, no meat or wine entered my mouth, and I didn't put any oil on my body until the three weeks were over," implying that he was eating meat before those three weeks, and resumed eating meat after that time.

Rather the diet is chosen because, not coming from what the king ate and drank v. 5, vegetables did not defile, In fact it was as different from the King's food as it was possible to be. Water for wine, vegetables for the king's rich food, for meat and fat. Daniel and his friends would be sustained not by some imitation of the king's diet but its complete opposite. Their sustaining and health would have a completely different source.

The supervisor agreed, and the test was passed with flying colours. A determination to rely on the Lord, to remain His people, left them v. 15 healthier and looking better. They weren't losers from wanting to be loyal to the Lord.

We are living in an increasingly contested age when the good of living faithful to the Lord is not self-evident to many. They have doubts about it. Daniel can be our model here.

Like Daniel, if we believe that a certain course of action or requirement is inconsistent with being loyal to Jesus – we should try and change it from the start. That shows those we are dealing with that we disagree in principle with what is being asked of us, and it's not just that something we have found later doesn't suit us.

And like Daniel, if we want to be exempt from some general mandate, or be able to work or speak consistent with our faith, we ought to be respectful of the responsibilities of those over us

Responsibilities to ensure a harmonious workplace, or to carry out the orders of their superiors or the policy of the department – say of health or education. We should not be expecting others, no matter how much they like us or get on with us, to be putting themselves at risk for our convictions. It is always helpful, as Daniel did, to come with alternatives that allow them to discharge their responsibilities as well as let us live faithfully – that there are, for example, other ways of addressing people respectfully than being compelled to use their preferred pronoun and we can be relied on to do that.

And we should never be afraid of the assessment of the good of living God's way, especially in an age where critics suggest the Christian life is harmful for people. We should be able to show its good in our own lives, and in the lives of our families. And there is evidence.

John Dickson has an episode of his undeceptions podcast that asks whether Christianity is bad for your mental health and presents evidence for its beneficial effect – with good and accessible references.

<https://undeceptions.com/podcast/mental-health>

Or the first chapter of Rebecca McLaughlin's 'Confronting Christianity' Crossway 2019 looks at the evidence for the Christian faith's beneficial effect on life and happiness. Know those resources so you can point people to them.

### **The source of Daniel's determination**

Daniel acted on his conviction but Daniel did took courage and confidence in God for it risked so much. Where did a young man, coming from a defeated nation, living at the centre of pagan power, surrounded by the great wealth of empire, offered a place within the administration of the empire, get that courageous determination from?

We are not told a lot of Daniel's background and early training, but some things emerge as we go on through the book.

Firstly, we know he knew and believed what God had said in making a covenant with Israel.

When he is praying in Daniel 9 he says

**Knew the covenant 9:7-14**

*Daniel 9: <sup>9</sup> Compassion and forgiveness belong to the Lord our God, though we have rebelled against him <sup>10</sup> and have not obeyed the LORD our God by following his instructions that he set before us through his servants the prophets.*

*<sup>11</sup> All Israel has broken your law and turned away, refusing to obey you. The promised curse written in the law of Moses, the servant of God, has been poured out on us because we have sinned against him. <sup>12</sup> He has carried out his words that he spoke against us and against our rulers by bringing on us a disaster that is so great that nothing like what has been done to Jerusalem has ever been done under all of heaven. <sup>13</sup> Just as it is written in the law of Moses, all this disaster has come on us, yet we have not sought the favor of the LORD our God by turning from our iniquities and paying attention to your truth.*

He did not learn the covenant in Babylon, but in Jerusalem before he was deported. Knowing and believing God's word he saw Jehoiakim's defeat, and Jerusalem's subsequent destruction, as they were. Not as evidence that the Lord was defeated, but as proof the Lord reigned and was fulfilling His word, doing through the rise and fall of empires exactly what He said He would do.

His confidence came through meditating on the Torah and prophets, from knowing God in His word. HE knew and it had been confirmed in his hard experience the truth of what it taught - that God was the Creator, the God of the whole earth, who ruled in Babylon as much as in Jerusalem, and who could save His people wherever they were.

And we know that His relationship with the LORD was not just a matter of head knowledge. In chapter 6 we read

**Habits of piety 6:10**

*Daniel 6: <sup>10</sup> When Daniel learned that the document had been signed, he went into his house. The windows in its upstairs room opened toward Jerusalem, and*

*three times a day he got down on his knees, prayed, and gave thanks to his God, just as he had done before.*

Daniel had a real relationship with his God, a practice of prayer that spoke of His dependence on and hope in the LORD.

Hopefully parents you are encouraged. Daniel's faith and the practices that sustained it, that allowed him to persevere in facing both the seduction and oppression of a pagan society, were established early on – in his home. We should work at that from the earliest, while we can – for who knows what will befall our children

Faith in God's word sustained by a habit of prayer – this allowed Daniel to be different, to persevere in a pagan culture living faithfully to the LORD as it will us.

And his faith was vindicated.

The text makes plain the source of Daniel's prospering. People's dismissing of God does not make God any less God, any less active in His world, any less able to keep and provide for His people. Three time through this chapter it speaks of the LORD giving -

### **The source of Daniel's success**

*v. <sup>2</sup> The Lord handed [gave] King Jehoiakim of Judah over to him,*

The Lord rules the affairs of nations. His judgments are enacted on the page of history

*v. <sup>9</sup> God had granted [given] Daniel kindness and compassion from the chief eunuch,*

And the Lord is active in the lives of individuals. He can turn the hearts of kings and their servants, of politicians and bosses, or principals and magistrates, to look favourably upon His people

*v. <sup>17</sup> God gave these four young men knowledge and understanding in every kind of literature and wisdom. Daniel also understood visions and dreams of every kind. <sup>18</sup> At the end of the time that the king had said to present them, the chief eunuch presented them to Nebuchadnezzar.*

And the Lord is the source of our accomplishments. From Him comes success in the public world, the world of the university, business, government.

Relationship with Him who rules over all is the foundation of human prospering.

We let God become small in our minds.

Just because the world thinks He is excluded from our society and affairs, we can start to think and act that way.

We can think it all depends on us, and so we become thankless people, who rely on our own schemes and plans.

But Daniel knew the LORD ruled over all things, nothing is too hard for Him, and that He can be trusted to fulfill His word in all circumstances. And so Daniel's plan in a world that despised God was to live to please Him, to entrust his life and future into the LORD's hands by being faithful to Him.

And the outcome.

### **Daniel's outcome vv. 18-20**

<sup>19</sup> *The king interviewed them, and among all of them, no one was found equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. So they began to attend the king.*

<sup>20</sup> *In every matter of wisdom and understanding that the king consulted them about, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and mediums in his entire kingdom.* <sup>21</sup> *Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.*

Daniel and his friends are publicly vindicated. They found academic success, they prospered, seeking first God's reign, His rule, in their lives. Unknowingly in his testament to their competence the ruler who claimed to have vanquished God testified to the LORD's faithfulness

And this was not a one off.

Daniel 1 establishes the pattern of Daniel's life as the book will show us

And it is Daniel, depending on the LORD, v. 21 who outlasts the whole Babylonian state.

For all their power

For all their claim to be the source of security and prosperity

For all their claim to be able to give Daniel an abiding identity

It is Daniel, faithful to the LORD, who endures, Daniel who in chapter 5 pronounces and witnesses their end [Daniel 5], Daniel who abides and as one of the people of the LORD finishes with a hope of resurrection [Dan. 12:1-3], an eternal identity in trusting the LORD.

But it is not just Daniel who is vindicated through Daniel's determination to be different in a pagan world, different by persevering as one of the Lord's people.

Through faithful Daniel the LORD vindicates Himself, shows Himself in the very heart of pagan power to be God, the One who is King, who rules over and judges kings and nations, who knows the future and brings it to pass

The Lord does that here – it is the one who trusts the vanquished God who prospers beyond His peers. The Lord shows in Daniel's life that He has in His hands success or failure in the real world, even in a society that chooses to believe He has no power.

And through Daniel He will bring, as we will see, even pagan Kings – Nebuchednezzar and Darius – to confess that it is He, not they, who rules

Through Daniel's determination to be one of His holy people, the LORD will display His glory

And in this Daniel points us to Jesus, and to our calling as followers of the Lord Jesus

Jesus was determined to do God's will, to be His person –

He maintained that determination in the face of the ultimate expression of human power, the power to kill, and the most extreme human attempt to vanquish God from His world

Unlike Daniel Jesus was not spared death. He experienced that dismissal of God in His death, death for our sin.

And in His faithfulness he was vindicated by God in God raising Him from the dead to immortality, a life that outlasts all His oppressors

In vindicating His faithful Son Jesus the Father was also vindicating His own glory, the glory of His faithfulness, power and love

**The encouragement of Daniel**

Daniel points us to Jesus, and he points us to and encourages us in our own calling as followers of Jesus in a world that is increasingly like Daniel's

A world that thinks God is vanquished

That claims to be the source of the life of human flourishing on its own, without God, and seeks to seduce us away from the Lord with its promises of power and prosperity

A world that would insist we have our identity apart from God, by repudiating God in favour of our own rule

Daniel showed in his own life that the claims of the idolaters were lies

And in the life, death and triumphant resurrection of our Lord that Daniel points us to we know they are lies

Jesus is Killed, got rid of out of the world, vanquished – to rise with all authority. The world cannot get rid of its Creator

And the Lord Jesus, the one risen with all authority, the authority to judge and forgive, says those who seek to save their lives, to find life in themselves, to be the source of their own prosperity and identity by rejecting Him, will lose it, but those who lose their life for His sake, to follow Him, will find it, will find life and an enduring identity as God's daughters and sons

His word is true.

The LORD is, and the LORD reigns – even where His people are dispossessed and despised, or suspected and envied

And we see in Daniel 1 his people's calling, our calling as believers in Jesus

To have the courage to be different by being determined to live the holy life He commands in all we do

To have such confidence in the God who is the God of the whole world, that we can be reasonable, considerate of the position of others, open to examination, when we live differently

To not withdraw from the world but participate in it openly as the Lord's person

So that through the obedience of our faith

The LORD will demonstrate that HE is, and HE reigns, even in a world that rejects Him.