

# **Dare to stand alone**

The book of Daniel simply explained

Stuart Olyott

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DOLL

'Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all'  
(Proverbs 31:29)



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## Introduction

**T**his book is for those who would like to read and enjoy the book of Daniel. If you want to read all the boring theories that scholars have dreamed up, you must look elsewhere. If you want convincing that Daniel was written in the sixth century BC, and not in the second, as many writers now claim, your starting point should be E.J. Young's book mentioned on page 182. This book does not deal with such matters. Its aim is much more straightforward. It is to excite you to read Daniel for yourself, and to see what its message is for our times.

Daniel is basically a very easy book to understand. Its first six chapters are narrative. These are followed by six highly symbolic and apparently mysterious chapters, about which there has been considerable controversy. But they are not that difficult. The whole book is full of practical help—especially for believers who find themselves standing alone in the classroom or at work, or among their family and friends.

May the God of Daniel Himself draw near to us as we search  
His holy Word!

**Stuart Olyott**  
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# 1

## Setting the scene

### **The historical background**

**L**ong ago God chose one man—Abraham—and promised that through him and his seed all the families of the earth would be blessed.

The one man became a family, and the family became a nation. At last the nation went down to Egypt, where it remained for four hundred years.

Then it came out. You will have heard of the plagues, and the Passover, and the coming through the Red Sea. For forty years the nation, led by Moses, wandered in the wilderness, where it received God's law and instructions concerning the tabernacle, sacrifices and priesthood. When the wilderness wanderings were over, the nation came into the promised land, under the leadership of Joshua. Before he died the land had been largely conquered and divided among the twelve tribes.

This was followed by the period of the judges—men whom

God raised up to deliver the nation from successive conquerors. Then came the period of the kings. The first king was Saul, who was followed in turn by David, Solomon and Rehoboam. All of these ruled over a united kingdom of twelve tribes.

Shortly after Rehoboam's reign began, the nation split into two. In the north was the kingdom of Israel (or Ephraim), and in the south the kingdom of Judah. The northern kingdom was composed of ten tribes and its capital was Samaria. The southern kingdom was composed of two tribes and its capital was Jerusalem. At first the two kingdoms were enemies. This was followed by a period of friendship, but eventually they were sworn enemies once more.

There were a number of different dynasties in the north, but no godly monarch ever sat on its throne. At last God moved to judge the nation, against whose apostasy He had often spoken by His prophets. The armies of mighty Assyria swept in from the north, and in 722 BC Samaria fell. The ten tribes of Israel were taken into captivity and disappeared from the face of the earth.

The southern kingdom continued for a further one hundred years. All its kings were of one dynasty and were descendants of David. The nation's life was one of increasing apostasy, and yet some of the kings were truly godly, and there were several periods of widespread spiritual awakening. In 609 BC Jehoiakim mounted the throne. His reign did nothing to arrest the prevailing idolatry and immorality, but rather increased it. The prophets warned that unless there was repentance there would be judgement, but their warnings went unheeded.

Over the horizon, in 605 BC, came Nebuchadnezzar. Over the next twenty-three years, in four successive stages, he

transported almost all the people of Judah to his native Babylon. By the rivers of Babylon they sat down and wept when they remembered Zion, and asked how they could sing the Lord's song in a strange land (Psalm 137:1, 4).

The nation had turned a deaf ear to the warnings of God, and was now being left to the mercy of its enemies. However, within the apostate nation there remained a very small number of individuals who continued to be true to God, just as the prophets had predicted. This tiny remnant loved Him, and lived to please Him, even in distant Babylon. Such a remnant existed throughout the seventy years of exile. It is true that the nation as a whole wept idolatry out of its system. But loving allegiance to Jehovah was never the experience of more than a few. After the exile the remnant became smaller and smaller. The time came when it consisted (as far as we know) of no more than Zacharias and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, Simeon and Anna, and a handful of shepherds. Nobody else in Judea was ready to welcome Abraham's promised Seed into the world. Nobody else recognized the Light who had come to lighten the Gentiles, the Glory of God's people, Israel.

In the days of the Babylonian exile this remnant was represented by Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah (Daniel 1:6). Just four candles, and a few more, shone in the godless darkness of those times. Only a handful of lives remained true to God. At a time when nobody else cared, God and His Word continued to matter to this small group.

God is not much interested in numbers, but He is insistent that He will never leave Himself without witnesses. True religion continues uninterrupted in the world, but its adherents are seldom numbered in more than handfuls. In Babylon God

was content that His true Israel should be whittled down to single figures. The first six chapters of Daniel tell us how this little remnant remained true to God in a hostile environment.

### **The main lesson**

The previous sentence brings us to the main lesson of this book. Daniel tells us how to remain true to God in a hostile environment. It shows us how to live for Him when everything is against us. From its pages we learn how to sing the Lord's song in a strange land. Daniel and his three companions managed it. So can we.

It is possible for a person to live for God when there is nothing on his side. Noah, Abraham, Moses and David were all godly men, yet God's Word records that each of them fell, at some time, into a serious fault. Each of them has at least one blemish on his character, and some of them more than one. The Bible does not whitewash its leading characters, or pretend that they were something other than what they really were. But the same book does not record any blemish in the life of Daniel. Spirituality and integrity of character do not require ideal conditions in which to develop. They are not plants that thrive in the protection of the greenhouse, but grow best when exposed to snow, wind and hail, to drought and burning sun.

Think of it! A fourteen-year-old boy (that is all he was) was taken from his home, family and friends, and forcibly marched to a strange land. There he was subjected to a powerful and subtle form of indoctrination, which we shall read about shortly. In later years he was surrounded by jealous enemies who plotted against his life. At no time was he free from the temptation to pursue material prosperity and personal advancement at the expense of everything else. He was surrounded by evil in youth,

middle years and old age. There is hardly a temptation known to any of us that he did not have to face. And yet the Scriptures do not record a single blemish in his character! He purposed in his heart to please God, and never moved from that resolve. It is possible to live for God in a hostile world. Godliness can, and does thrive where there are no ideal circumstances.

Very few (if any) of us have faced the difficulties that Daniel faced. When we think of difficulties, we usually think only of our own. We persuade ourselves that everyone else has it easy, and that we would make more spiritual progress if we were in some other situation. The factory worker thinks that it is easier to live the Christian life in the office, while the office worker is convinced that it is easier to be a Christian housewife at home. The housewife is not aware of the difficulties of living for Christ at school, and the school student looks forward to the day when he will face the comparatively easier challenge of the factory floor. And so the circle goes on. We each imagine that nobody has difficulties as great as our own. We excuse our poor standard of Christian living by pointing to the circumstances in which we are found. The book of Daniel exposes us completely. It proves that true spirituality never depended upon things being easy.

What was Daniel's secret?

It is simple. Before he interpreted Nebuchadnezzar's dream, what did he do? He prayed (2:17-19). When he was plotted against, and then thrown into a den of lions, what was he doing? He was praying (6:10). What is chapter 9 about? It is Daniel at prayer. He was a man of prayer. A proper prayer life is half the secret of remaining true to God in a hostile world.

The other half of the secret is just as simple. In 9:2 we shall

read of Daniel examining 'books' and understanding them. What books were those? They were the prophetic books of the Old Testament that had been written by that date. In 9:11 and 9:13 we shall read of him referring to 'the law of Moses'. Daniel read, and knew his Bible. His secret is easy to define, even if not always easy to implement. He stood firm for God in a hostile world because he read his Bible and said his prayers!

These undramatic disciplines need stressing today. It is often thought that the secret of Christian living lies in our having some new and exceptional experience of God. Different terms are used by different people, but the idea is usually very much the same. It is taught that a new experience of God will lead me on to a higher plane than where I am now living. If I can only have this new experience I will never be the same again. All my energies must be devoted to seeking entry to this higher life, and I must not rest until the new experience that I seek is truly mine.

Daniel had wonderful experiences of the Lord, but he did not seek them. He sought God *for His own sake* and not for what He might do for him. He enjoyed being with Him, discerning His will from His Word, and communing with Him in prayer. We underline it again. His secret was too simple to miss: he read his Bible and said his prayers.

This, too, was the secret of the early Christian martyrs, the persecuted Reformers and their children, and the zealous and evangelizing Methodists. This was the secret of the great pioneering missionaries of the last century. They were well aware that 'the people that do know their God shall be strong, and do exploits' (11:32). Like Daniel, they lived in two worlds. Like Daniel, they often saw *that* world intervening in the affairs

of this one. They became God's friends, and 'greatly beloved' (10:19) in heaven. That was their secret!

Knowing this, let us now study the book of Daniel, and learn, in our turn, how to stand alone.





# 2

## Off to Babylon!

*Please read Daniel 1*

**T**he first chapter of Daniel, like the last, is very brief. It is a simple and straightforward narrative designed to teach us at the outset a lesson that we must not miss. The chapter divides into four parts.

### **Nebuchadnezzar's expedition against Jerusalem**

The first two verses tell us about Nebuchadnezzar's expedition against Jerusalem. It is important that we remember that we are not reading a fable. We are dealing with history—with events which really took place.

It is 605 BC. From Babylon comes Nebuchadnezzar, who has just become King of Babylon earlier in the same year. He besieges Jerusalem. He defeats it, enters it and takes off to Babylon just what and whom he likes. However, he does not take

the king. Jehoiakim remains as his puppet king for the next eight years. After that he is to rebel, and will be ruined.

But Nebuchadnezzar does take to Babylon a number of captives, and a large part of the temple treasures. The city remains intact, but the temple is spoiled. This was no accident. It was the Lord's doing, as are all historical events. For too long the Jews had trusted in the temple, and not in the Lord whom they claimed to worship there. Despite the warnings of the prophets, they had believed that the very existence of the temple would guarantee them immunity from any threatened invasion. 'As long as we have the temple, we are safe,' they had said. 'Do you think that Jehovah will ever let His temple be destroyed? Of course not! When the temple is threatened He will certainly step in to rescue us.'

Believing this, the nation had continued in its sin. The idolatry, immorality and injustice had gone on unabated. The lying and stealing increased without restraint. They were sure that, however they lived, the temple would save them. But it had not. It was now in ruins and a pagan king was carrying its treasures into the house of his god, and into his treasury. By these events God demonstrated that He would not tolerate sin, wherever it was found. He would have turned from His anger, had the people turned to *Him*. But trust in His temple was no substitute for repentance.

God rules, whether His temple exists or not. He remains God, whatever happens on earth. Indeed, whatever happens on earth occurs because He *is* God. 'The *Lord* gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand' (2). He is perfectly in control of history and well able to implement His threats. The conquered city, the spoiled temple, the transported treasures and the weeping

captives—they were all His doing, and for the furtherance of His purposes. The experience of His people was defeat, ruin and destruction. He remained the undefeated God, working in and through it all.

### **Daniel and his three companions introduced**

It is with this scene before us that verses 3 to 7 now introduce us to the main characters of the book. It comes about like this.

Nebuchadnezzar was brilliant. He was a genius, and far too subtle to fall into the mistake of the Pharaoh who had oppressed the Hebrews in Egypt. You will remember that his approach had been thoroughly crude. He had treated the Hebrews like slaves, crushed them and put them under the jackboot.

There is always a high risk that people treated like that will revolt. This was something that Nebuchadnezzar wanted to avoid at all costs. Babylon was conquering the world. Before long the number of people conquered would be far greater than those who had conquered them. It would be militarily impossible for Babylon to sustain an oppressive regime throughout the known world. There were simply too many people to keep down, and too few soldiers to do it. Another way would have to be found by which the conquered nations could be kept loyal to the empire.

Nebuchadnezzar's method was to take the cream from every nation that he conquered, and to assimilate it into the Babylonian civil service. In this way the various parts of his ever-increasing dominions were ruled by those who would otherwise be captives. Those who rebelled would have to rebel against their own people—perhaps against their own sons.

This was the method that Nebuchadnezzar employed when

he conquered Judah, as verse 3 makes clear. He instructed Ashpenaz, ‘the master of his eunuchs’ (that is, the chief official of his civil service) to take the very best of Judah’s youth, and to put them into places of responsibility. They were to enter his personal kingly service and growing administration. They were to walk the corridors of power. Ashpenaz was to look for likely candidates from the royalty and nobility of the Jewish nation.

Some people teach that such young men were then made into eunuchs, but this cannot be so, for verse 4 tells us that they had to be wholly without defect. This verse also tells us that they had to be good-looking, intelligent in every branch of learning, well-informed, and young men who were fit to take their place in the king’s personal service. Nebuchadnezzar was to have only the best!

Once selected, these young people were to embark upon a comprehensive programme of re-education where particular importance was to be laid upon a thorough grounding in the language and literature of the Babylonians. Nothing would be permitted to distract them from their studies. In addition to language and literature, the next three years were to be filled with lessons in mathematics, science, navigation, politics, history and geography—in fact the whole spectrum of Babylonian learning was going to be instilled into their young minds. The last thing they were going to need to think about was their food and drink. This would be prepared for them, and served just as if they were members of the royal household (5).

How many students reading these pages have been diverted from their studies because, living in a bed-sit, they have had to shop for their own food and to prepare their own meals? No such danger faced Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. They

had nothing but their studies to think about. They were even to forget that they were Jews and were to become Babylonians. They were to forget that they were God's servants, and were to become the servants of an earthly king.

This explains verse 7. It was Babylonian policy that all those selected for re-education and special training should have their names changed. Daniel (which means 'God has judged') became Belteshazzar ('Keeper of the hidden treasures of Bel'). Hananiah ('Jehovah has been gracious') became Shadrach. We do not know what that name means, but it contains the name of the pagan deity Marduk. Mishael ('Who is like God?') became Meshach—a name which contains one of the ancient forms of the name for the deity Venus. Azariah ('Jehovah has helped') became Abed-nego ('the servant of Nebo').

When we look at the four original names we find that two of them end in 'el', which is one of the names of God; and two of them end in 'iah' or 'jah', which is a shorthand version of 'Jehovah'. These names are changed by the Babylonians to names which refer to the pagan deities of Bel, Marduk, Venus and Nebo. The four boys would have been fourteen years old when their names were changed, for this was the age at which the Babylonians entered young people upon their programme of re-education. They were to be given no rest until they had a thorough grasp of all that was required of them. That would be three years later. Stolen from their homes, told to forget their God, intensively re-educated in a pagan culture—how would these young boys fare? Would they remain true to their God, and to what they knew to be right? Or would they capitulate?

Is it possible that they also faced pressure from another source? Could it be that, as they marched off, some of the Jews

applauded and said, ‘Captivity isn’t going to be so bad for them. The king is going to do something for our boys. Our boys are going to *be* somebody?’

Yes, the boys *were* going to be somebody—but at the expense of losing their identity as the children of God. Would they be able to withstand the pressure? And can the Christian today stand firm when the media and society at large bombard his mind day and night, putting him under pressure to change his mind and to think differently? Is it possible for him to remember his privileged status as a child of God, and to live accordingly, when everything around him is telling him to give his mind to *other* things?

### **Their stand**

What happened next is in verses 8 to 16, and to understand these verses we must recall why the Jews were going into captivity at all. The whole nation was at a low level spiritually, and therefore morally too. The crying sin had been idolatry. The exile was a punishment for all of the nation’s sins, but for that one in particular, and they were to remain in Babylon until they had finished with it for ever. Whatever mistakes the Jews fell into in the post-exilic period, idolatry was not one of them. The exile cured them for good. But at the time the exile occurred, idolatry was a feature of the national life, and what marked out the godly remnant from all the others was their adamant refusal to have anything to do with it.

Imagine, then, these four boys starting their re-education. They are told that instead of preparing their own food, they are to be fed from the royal table. The reason that they turned down the royal food was not because of the Jewish food laws. They could at least have had the wine, for no Jewish food law

ever forbade it. The reason for their refusal was that the food from the king's table had been offered to idols before it was served. Every Babylonian kingly meal began with an act of pagan worship. They were a lot more diligent about this than many Christians are about saying grace before eating. Nothing was eaten and nothing was drunk until it was dedicated to certain pagan deities. Those who ate the food were reckoned to have participated in the pagan rites. It was precisely because they refused to compromise with idolatry that the four boys had a place among the godly remnant. They were certainly not going to have anything to do with it now.

'But, Daniel, aren't you being rather extreme?' That is how many people would talk today. They would say, 'Why make a fuss about such a small thing as eating food offered to idols? You could lose your head for refusing food from the king's table. Why not put your scruples aside? Just think what influence you can have by being in the civil service in Babylon. Perhaps you could get to the very top. Wouldn't it be marvellous for one of God's children to be in such a position? As it is, you are endangering your very life. Even if you don't lose your head, it seems likely that you will end up in a dungeon. You will certainly never get to the top unless you obey the king's instructions.'

The reply of Daniel, and each of his three companions, is 'No! I will not eat, because I will abstain from every appearance of evil. Although it means great personal danger, and although it might cost me my life, I would rather rot in a dungeon or die by execution than be associated with idolatry. I would rather die than sin even a little.' *That* is the spirit to which we refer when we say, 'Dare to be a Daniel!'

Of course, we must not get the impression that Daniel was

unpleasant in the way that he refused the royal food. The language of verse 8 is very careful. 'Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's meat, nor with the wine which he drank: therefore he *requested* of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself.' He went to the chief official and put his point to him. He remained firm and principled, but was also kind and courteous as he asked to be released from his obligation to eat the food.

The sheer integrity of Daniel had already brought him into favour with the chief official (9), but he, not unnaturally, was a bit worried about his own head. 'Look, Daniel, if you don't turn out like you are supposed to, it is all up with me.'

The measure of Daniel is seen in that he refused to give up. He was not going to be moved. In verses 11 to 14 we see him going to the official below the chief official and saying, 'Just give us ten days trial. For ten days let us eat nothing but pulse.'

'Pulse' certainly sounds very far from appetizing! In fact it was a mixture of fresh vegetables and fresh fruit. Daniel was suggesting a diet of perpetual salad! It did not matter to him how often he had it. Anything would be better than eating food which was associated with the worship of idols.

'Just give us ten days trial, and no wine—we will drink water instead.' Daniel's example is worthy of our serious consideration. He was wise, tactful, kind and sensitive. But he was also firm.

Verses 15 and 16 tell us of the effect of this unvaried diet. The boys in no way suffered by their abstinence from the luxurious foods of the king's table. Even after ten days there was a noticeable improvement in their complexion, and they were



equally obviously making good progress physically—and in every way were very much better than those who continued with the prescribed diet.

The lesson is that *nobody* loses out by refusing to compromise. The official's fears were entirely allayed, and he gave permission for the boys to remain permanently on their chosen diet. Nobody had been offended. Yet neither Daniel nor his three companions had compromised. They had been faithful in little, and this was to be the beginning of their being faithful in much.

If Daniel had not stood firm at this point, could he possibly have stood firm later, when threatened with death in a lions' den? If his three companions had compromised in their early life, how would they have fared when faced by a burning fiery furnace? It is because they honoured God in a small thing that they were able to honour Him when bigger issues were at stake. People who fall into serious sins only do so because they have learned to tolerate smaller ones.

### **The outcome**

The immediate outcome of their courageous and spiritual action is recorded in verses 17 to 21. They had put God before every other consideration. He in turn honoured them, and stirred up in their lives gifts which they had never dreamed that they had.

This often happens. I knew a man years ago who was totally illiterate. He could not read so much as a word. When the Lord saved him, he concluded that he could walk with God better if he could read His Word. With considerable perseverance, and at great personal cost, he set about learning to read. In doing so he discovered (to his amazement) that he had really quite a good mind. He became an avid reader, and managed to get a job as

a postman. In more recent years he has become a pastor. Since his childhood everybody had said that nothing would become of him. When he put God first, and determined to please Him, he suddenly discovered that he had gifts which neither he, nor anyone else, had ever imagined he possessed.

This is precisely what happened to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. They put God first, and set themselves to their studies. He blessed them with brilliance.

Has something similar happened in your own experience? You saw something that needed doing and, for the Lord's sake alone, you set yourself to do it. In doing so, you discovered that you possessed gifts of which you were entirely ignorant previously. You became aware, perhaps, that you had a flair for administration, or that you could communicate easily with young people. Gifts came to light in your life simply because you put God first and, very often, the discovery of these gifts has later put you in good stead in your daily work as well. This experience is in no way appreciably different from what happened in Daniel 1. Daniel, of course, had another gift as well. It is to figure prominently in this book, and receives its first mention in verse 17.

And so, at last, the three-year course ended. It was time for the final exams. As in the British universities of bygone days, these exams were not written, but oral. The students had to appear before the king, who personally examined each one and gave his assessment. His estimate of Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah is preserved for us in verses 19 and 20. They were better than all the other students. But that is not all. They were better than even the existing graduates who had finished their studies, and were now occupying leading positions in the empire. In fact

they were *ten* times better! As a result each of the four found himself in a high position where he could use his influence for God. The Lord could entrust them with such promotion because they had demonstrated at base level that, come what may, even when in personal danger, they would remain true to Him. Daniel was to remain in such a position for seventy years (21)!

Many believers are yearning for higher positions where they can have more spiritual influence. Teachers long to be heads, juniors look forward to being managers, and union members hope to become shop stewards. 'If only I were there,' they say, 'what influence I could have for the Lord!'

None of us can make a higher position count for God unless we live for Him *now*, where we are. If we are unwilling to stand up and be counted for Him over small things, how will we ever do so over bigger things? Is it possible to be faithful in much without first being faithful in little? If we cannot resist comparatively small temptations, what will we do when they are intensified?

The central lesson of Daniel 1 can be summarized in a single phrase: 'Them that honour me I will honour' (1 Samuel 2:30).