



**This Week's Reading:**

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Happy Sunday!

Welcome to the first week of our Difference Maker reading plan! Over the next three weeks, we're going to be reading through the Book of Daniel. Many scholars believe Daniel was among the last of the Old Testament books to be written, not long before Jesus entered the scene.

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Daniel tells the story of God's people after they have been taken captive and sent into exile in Babylon. The people are now faced with figuring out how to survive in a foreign land and are grappling with the question of whether God still loves them and is still with them. The book follows the titular character, Daniel, along with several other young Hebrew men from the royal line of David who now find themselves directly under the thumb of a foreign king.

Daniel is also one of the only Bible books written in two languages. The first chapter (and a few verses in the second) are in Hebrew, the language of God's people. Then the book switches to Aramaic as God's people are carted off into exile in Babylon—Aramaic was considered the common language of Babylon and the nations. This sudden swap of languages essentially invites the reader into the discomfort and disorienting nature the exile would have had on God's people. Only in the seventh chapter does the book return to Hebrew, offering a level of hope that God's people haven't completely lost their identity, and that one day, they may be restored.

As always, I'll share my notes and thoughts below on the day's readings, but one thing you don't want to miss will be the **Daily Bible Study videos** featuring thoughts from Rev. Matt Tuggle and others. You can find these videos on the [Difference Maker website](#), the [HPUMC App](#), or by following HPUMC on [Instagram](#) or [YouTube](#).

Ready to dive in?

Happy reading!

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## About the Reading

### *Monday | Daniel 1:1-21*

Daniel takes place after the period of the kings in Israel. First there was Saul, then David and his son Solomon, then a series of progressively worse kings who led the people further and further away from God. Eventually, the kingdom was split in two. While there were some kings who tried to renew faithfulness to the covenant that was established with God back during the time of Moses, ultimately, the people continued to rebel against God and do what was right in their own eyes. Finally, just as God warned them would happen, Babylon seized Jerusalem, destroyed the city, and hauled God's people off into exile.

In Deuteronomy, right as the Israelites were finally about to cross into the Promised Land, Moses tells them this:

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"See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, and death and adversity; in that I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His judgments, that you may live and multiply, and that the Lord your God may bless you in the land where you are entering to possess it. But if your heart turns away and you will not obey, but are drawn away and worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall surely perish. **You will not prolong your days in the land where you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess it.**" – Deut. 30:15-18

In other words, God told them through Moses that if you obey God, you will be blessed. But if you turn and worship other gods, you will be removed from the land. So, God prompts them, which will you choose?

Removing the people from their homeland was a common tactic by Babylon, intended to increase the likelihood that the people would be disoriented and lose their own identity, therefore making them malleable to the dominating culture in Babylon.

Our main character, Daniel, along with his friends were like young teens when brought to Babylon. They were placed in charge of the chief of eunuchs and later commissioned to work in the palace. Now, think about what that must mean. They're given to the chief of *eunuchs* to work in the palace of the king, where most male workers were made eunuchs to avoid any chance of infidelity with the queen or women of the court. It's *highly* implied that Daniel and his buddies would have suffered this same fate.

Daniel and the others enter into what would have been a customary period of about three years where they are educated on all things Babylonian. During their formative years, they would be saturated in the ways of Babylon in an attempt to rid them of their own cultural identity and bring them up in the ways of their new country.

To mark this transition, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah are given new names. One of the only characters in the Bible to bestow new names on someone is God. So, in some ways, the renaming of Daniel and the others is an

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act of humiliation, stripping them of their identity and giving them new Babylonian names. Daniel becomes Belteshazzar, Hananiah becomes Shadrach, Mishael becomes Meshach, and Azariah becomes Abednego.

Changing their names was a way of showing control over them, a way of encouraging them to think of themselves not as Hebrews, but as part of the Babylonian culture.

Why does Daniel refuse the wine and food of the king? Most likely, it would have been dedicated to the Babylonian gods. Therefore, eating it would be a defilement before the true God.

I'm no nutritionist, but a diet void of meat is not one that leads necessarily to better health, so the fact that Daniel and the others who follow his lead were deemed as "better in appearance" is clearly a mark of God's favor and intervention.

Lastly, even though Babylon is the one doing the "educating" of Daniel and the others, notice how the author points out that it was God who actually helped them to achieve learning and wisdom and skill. When they are brought before King Nebuchadnezzar, these four men stand out amongst the rest.

Doesn't this story ring familiar to you? Can you think of another biblical character (in Genesis) who found favor thanks to God in a foreign court and was put in a position of power amongst the government? How about Joseph?! As you read, look for more of these parallels between Joseph's story and Daniel's. There are many.

**Questions:**

- Why do you think God allowed the people to be carted off into exile in the first place? What do you think you would have believed about God if you were in the place of these Israelites?
  - Are there ways we today are called to compromise our faith at the behest of our culture? How do you decide what to do in these moments?
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- You've probably never been captured and taken to another country as hostage, but are there times you've ever felt "out of place" or like you didn't belong? What does faithfulness to God look like in circumstances like these?
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### *Tuesday | Daniel 2:1-16*

In the ancient Near East, dreams were seen as a way of disclosing the future. Dreams were a way for the gods to communicate with humans. But these dreams were not always straightforward and sometimes required the aid of a diviner or interpreter to make sense of them. Diviners were therefore central figures within the religious and political life of Babylon.

King Nebuchadnezzar apparently has one of these dreams in need of interpretation, and he calls upon his team of magicians, enchanters, and sorcerers to help. But not only does he want them to tell him what the dream means, for some reason, he wants them to also tell him what the dream was in the first place! And if they can't, he says they will be "torn limb from limb."

That's the kind of king that Nebuchadnezzar is. He wakes up on the wrong side of the bed, makes impossible demands, and prepares to kill whoever he wants until he gets his way.

Do you appreciate the irony of the Chaldean's response? They say, "There is not a man **on earth** who can meet the king's demand, for no great and powerful king has asked such a thing of any magician or enchanter or Chaldean."

Not a man on earth. This is powerful foreshadowing because who can do what the king has asked? Only the God of the Israelites, Yahweh! Just like in Egypt with Moses and Pharaoh's magicians, this is not only a showdown between humans. In some ways, this is a showdown between the religious power of Babylon and God, and even though they don't realize it, Babylon's wise men have already predicted the winner.

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The king doesn't appreciate this answer. So he orders that all these wise men be killed, including Daniel and the others! But instead of giving in to his fate, Daniel courageously reaches out to the king for an audience.

By the way, in verse four, it reads, "Then the Chaldeans said to the king in Aramaic..." After this is the point at which the book in its original form switches from being written in Hebrew to Aramaic.

**Questions:**

- Dreams were believed to be how the gods communicated with the people. How do you think God communicates with us today?
- What do you think inspires Daniel's courage to seek out the king rather than just go quietly to his fate with the king's decree?

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[Wednesday | Daniel 2:17-49](#)

The first thing Daniel does after seeking his audience with the king is to return home to his friends and ask them to pray with him that God would rescue them from the fate of the king's decree.

Their prayer reveals where they stand when it comes to God and the Babylonian empire.

*he removes kings and sets up kings;*

*he gives wisdom to the wise*

*and knowledge to those who have understanding;*

God is the one who is ultimately in control, no matter how much power it appears Nebuchadnezzar or his wise men possess. Not only that, but Daniel says that God is one who can "reveal deep and hidden things." Daniel has faith, therefore, that God can reveal Nebuchadnezzar's dream to him.

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Powered by prayer and armed with confidence in God, Daniel goes to the man in charge of destroying the wise men of Babylon. Look at what he says:

*"Do not destroy the wise men of Babylon; bring me in before the king, and I will show the king the interpretation."*

Daniel doesn't just argue for his sake and that of his friends; he argues on behalf of all of the wise men in Babylon. In other words, he stands as a mediator between the king and the king's people. It's a powerful move that shows Daniel's regard not just for his own life, but the lives of others who are not like him.

Daniel finally goes before the king, and when asked whether he can interpret the king's dream, Daniel responds with a no and a yes. It's not Daniel himself who has the power, but Daniel's God Yahweh who can. Daniel takes none of the credit for himself, but gives it all to God.

Daniel tells the king that God has given him a dream of what's to come in the future. In the dream, there is a great image (think idol or statue). The head was made of gold, the chest and arms silver, the midsection bronze, and the legs iron, with a mix of iron and clay for feet. All of a sudden, a stone not made from human hands strikes the image and breaks it to pieces. And while the statue is destroyed, the stone ends up filling the whole earth.

So how do we make sense of this? Daniel doesn't leave us hanging.

He informs Nebuchadnezzar that he, as king, is the head of gold on the great statue, which represents his might and glory. But there are coming future kingdoms who will rule over the earth, represented by each succeeding metal. But while all of these kingdoms will eventually come and go, there is coming another kingdom that will never be destroyed. This kingdom— the one not made by human hands— will destroy all others and last forever.

Now, scholars have debated endlessly which kingdoms each metal represents, from Persia to Greece to Rome, but in my opinion, that debate misses the heart of the interpretation. None of those kingdoms matter! Kingdoms of man will

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come and go and have throughout history, but only one kingdom lasts forever—the kingdom of God.

Jesus often spoke about God's kingdom; it was arguably the central theme of his teachings. He described how it would begin small like a mustard seed, but grow in power and might, lasting forever. This is precisely the theology of Daniel. What starts as a small stone has the power to overcome all earthly kingdoms and spread throughout the earth. What kingdom can stand against the power of God? None. Not one.

Can you imagine the gall of Daniel to say this to what is in his day the most powerful monarch in the world? To look him in the face and basically say, *sorry dude, eventually you're a goner. Your kingdom, like all others, will come crashing down.* It's a wonder he didn't lose his head right there!

Instead, Daniel is promoted. Nebuchadnezzar blesses Daniel with many gifts and honors, and cements him as a member of Nebuchadnezzar's royal advisory team. Daniel, a foreigner, is now in a place of honor in the very government who kidnapped him from his homeland.

### **Questions:**

- What does Nebuchadnezzar's dream reveal about the nature and character of God?
- We may not belong to a literal kingdom today, but we are all building our own kingdoms for ourselves, whether that be our careers, families, friend groups, or something else. What does Daniel's interpretation of the dream reveal about the fate of any kingdom that is not part of God's kingdom?

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### [Thursday | Daniel 3:1-15](#)

In all likelihood, you've probably heard at least some version of the story in chapter three before. Nebuchadnezzar builds a ridiculously large statue (an

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estimated 80-feet high), and commands his subjects to bow down and worship the image. We're not told who the statue is of or what god it depicts, and I think this is on purpose. And also, isn't it ironic that the subject of Nebuchadnezzar's dream in the last chapter was depicting him as a mighty statue, and here now he actually builds himself a mighty statue? Are you sensing the hints of pride in this king?

Idols, particularly golden images, are a pretty big theme throughout the Old Testament story. Remember the golden calf the Israelites build right after agreeing to follow the covenant rules? The very first commandment they agreed to was all about NOT worshipping idols!

*"You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 5 You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, 6 but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments." (Exodus 20:2-6)*

God's people are told never to worship an image, first because the only object of their worship ought to be Yahweh God, but also because the people themselves are supposed to act as images of God on earth. Not sure what I mean by that? [Watch this video from \(you guessed it\) the Bible Project.](#) Needless to say, worshipping the golden statue would be completely against God's commandments and essentially an act of rebellion and a swearing of allegiance to Babylon, rather than God.

This wouldn't be the first time. Many of Israel's kings would guide the people in worshipping Asherah poles (idols), while few other kings and some prophets would call the people back to faithfulness by destroying these statues. The worship of false gods is a large part of why the Israelites ended up in exile in the first place, and yet here they come face to face with the temptation once again. Have they learned their lesson?

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Daniel and his friends sure have! And it doesn't take long before someone tattles to King Nebuchadnezzar about their failure to worship the image, and it throws him into a furious rage.

Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are brought to face the king. He asks them if it's true that they refuse to worship the image nor serve the gods of Babylon. And then he warns them, if they continue to do so, immediately they will be thrown into a fiery furnace, and what god, he seemingly laughs, would be able to deliver you from *my* hands?

Again, Nebuchadnezzar's pride is on full display. He believes so much in his own power that there isn't a god on earth who could overcome his will.

Before tomorrow comes and we find out how this story resolves itself, think about the situation that Daniel and his friends are now in. All they have to do is worship a fake god and they can continue to live. But if they refuse, they face certain death. What would you do if you were in their shoes? How do you remain faithful to God when you're put in what feels in the moment like an insurmountable or impossible circumstance?

**Questions:**

- Have you ever been put in a situation where you felt forced to choose between remaining faithful to God or pleasing someone else? What did you do?

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[Friday | Daniel 3:16-30](#)

We've reached decision time. How will these Jewish men respond to the two paths set before them? Worship the statue or refuse and face death by burning? Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego's speech to Nebuchadnezzar is worth reading several times—it's *powerful!*

*"O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace,*

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*and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up."*

First, they pretty much brush it aside—we don't owe you an answer on why we choose to be faithful to our God. They believe that God is fully capable of rescuing them, if that is what God desires. But they also recognize that God may not save them. Either way, whether they face death or whether God rescues them, they flat out refuse to compromise when it comes to their allegiance to God. They will not serve any other god but Yahweh, and they will not worship any image.

Now, Rev. Tuggle shares another way to think about this as proposed by Hebrew scholars. He will likely talk about this in his video on Thursday, but the alternate view of how to interpret this speech is that these three men don't fully trust that Nebuchadnezzar will follow through on his threats. So the "if this be so," refers to if Nebuchadnezzar does follow through with the threat, then God will definitely save them. But if he doesn't follow through, then they are still not going to worship the image. This is powerful in a whole other realm, because it means they don't doubt for a second God's willingness to deliver them, only the king's stomach for executing his will.

Either way, the king is just a little ticked at what he hears. He orders the heat on the furnace to be dialed up seven times, to the point where even the guards who deliver the men into the furnace die because of the flames.

Nebuchadnezzar is willing to sacrifice his own people in order to satisfy his sense of justice or revenge.

The author takes a moment to point out this detail, along with the details about keeping on all their various pieces of clothing for a reason. There is *no earthly explanation* for how these men could possibly survive being thrown into this furnace.

Yet that is exactly what happens.

As the king peers into the flames, hoping to see the screaming writing bodies of his victims, is startled to see a vastly different image. Not only are the men

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not screaming in pain, but there is a fourth figure in the fire! The literal sense of the Aramaic behind Nebuchadnezzar's description of the fourth figure is one like a "son of God," a divine-like figure. I mean, come on! Doesn't this give you chills?

Nebuchadnezzar is so startled he draws near to the door (remember, this killed his guards earlier, that's how amazed he is). He calls forth the four men, but only Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego emerge from the flames.

All the king's men come forward to examine the victims and find that there is not a scratch or burn mark on them, not even singes on their clothing nor a smell of fire upon them. Even for a foreign king, there is only one explanation for what has just happened.

Nebuchadnezzar blesses the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and praises the courage of these men. He makes a new decree.

*"Any people, nation, or language that speaks anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins, for there is no other god who is able to rescue in this way."*

Notice, his violent ways have not changed. But something about the incident has changed the way Nebuchadnezzar views the God of Israel. It's not likely that he's been converted to a follower of this God, but more likely that he is willing to add Yahweh to the pantheon of other gods he already serves.

Finally, if you're a fan of contemporary worship music, one of my favorite songs speaks directly to this story. It's called, ["Another in the Fire" by Hillsong](#). It's a beautiful worship song and you'll probably see it crop up again in the weekly videos this week with Aaron Long.

### **Questions:**

- What do you think it would take for you to stand firm in your convictions about God, even when faced with tremendous consequences?
  - In America, we will likely never be asked to lay down our lives for our faith. But that's not the case for millions of Christians around the world.
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Take a moment to pray for these Christians who put their lives on the line every day just because of their devotion to God.

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## Dig Deeper

### Resources:

- [The Image of God | The Bible Project](#).
- Want to see a cheesy dramatization of the fiery furnace story? [Check out this scene from the Bible Series](#) that aired a few years ago on the history channel.
- ["Another in the Fire" by Hillsong](#).

### Discussion Questions:

1. Are there ways we today are called to compromise our faith at the behest of our culture? How do you decide what to do in these moments?
  2. You've probably never been captured and taken to another country as hostage, but are there times you've ever felt "out of place" or like you didn't belong? What does faithfulness to God look like in circumstances like these?
  3. Have you ever been put in a situation where you felt forced to choose between remaining faithful to God or pleasing someone else? What did you do?
  4. What do you think it would take for you to stand firm in your convictions about God, even when faced with tremendous consequences?
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