

GOD THE SUSTAINER

A Gospel-Centered Exploration in
DANIEL and **EZRA**



DANIEL AKIN & WALTER R. STRICKLAND II



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ABOUT THE GOSPEL PROJECT

Some people see the Bible as a collection of stories with morals for life application. But it's so much more. Sure, the Bible has some stories in it, but it's also full of poetry, history, codes of law and civilization, songs, prophecy, letters—even a love letter. When you tie it all together, something remarkable happens. A story is revealed. One story. The story of redemption through Jesus. This is *The Gospel Project*.

When we begin to see the Bible as the story of redemption through Jesus Christ, God's plan to rescue the world from sin and death, our perspective changes. We no longer look primarily for what the Bible says about us but instead see what it tells us about God and what He has done. After all, it's the gospel that saves us, and when we encounter Jesus in the pages of Scripture, the gospel works on us, transforming us into His image. *We become God's gospel project.*

ABOUT THE WRITERS



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HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

Welcome to *The Gospel Project*, a gospel-centered small-group study that dives deep into the things of God, lifts up Jesus, focuses on the grand story of Scripture, and drives participants to be on mission. This small-group Bible study provides opportunities to study the Bible and to encounter the living Christ. *The Gospel Project* provides you with tools and resources to purposefully study God's Word and to grow in the faith and knowledge of God's Son. And what's more, you can do so in the company of others, encouraging and building up one another. Here are some things to remember that will help you maximize the usefulness of this resource:

GATHER A GROUP. We grow in the faith best in community with other believers, as we love, encourage, correct, and challenge one another. The life of a disciple of Christ was never meant to be lived alone, in isolation.

PRAY. Pray regularly for your group members.

PREPARE. This resource includes the Bible study content, three devotionals, and discussion questions for each session. Work through the session and devotionals in preparation for each group session. Take notes and record your own questions. Also consider the follow-up questions so you are ready to participate in and add to the discussion, bringing up your own notes and questions where appropriate.

RESOURCE YOURSELF. Make good use of the additional resources available on the Web at gospelproject.com/additionalresources and search for this specific title. Download a podcast. Read a blog post. Be intentional about learning from others in the faith. For tips on how to better lead groups or additional ideas for leading this Bible study, visit: ministrygrid.com/web/thegospelproject.

GROUP TIME. Gather together with your group to discuss the session and devotional content. Work through the follow-up questions and your own questions. Discuss the material and the implications for the lives of believers and the mission to which we have been called.

OVERFLOW. Remember... *The Gospel Project* is not just a Bible study. *We* are the project. The gospel is working on us. Don't let your preparation time be simply about the content. Let the truths of God's Word soak in as you study. Let God work on your heart first, and then pray that He will change the hearts of the other people in your group.



SESSION 1

STAY FAITHFUL IN EXILE

“Sometimes God may allow hardship to reach us because he wants his mercy to reach beyond us.”¹

DALE RALPH DAVIS

INDIVIDUAL STUDY

When we find our feet forcibly planted in the soil of an anti-God, anti-Christian culture, it is vitally important for our hearts to be drawn to God and our minds immersed in His Word. The apostle Paul told the early Christians, “Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:2). One of the best examples of such non-conformity comes from the Book of Daniel, from the story of four Hebrew teenagers who were plucked from their country and taken captive to the evil empire of Babylon.

The theme of the Book of Daniel is the sovereignty of God in working all things for good. He is sovereign over the big things, and He is sovereign over small things. He is sovereign over history and He is sovereign over the future. The Book of Daniel calls God’s people to consistent faithfulness and continued obedience even in the midst of hardship. It tells a story of people—their tragedies and triumphs, struggles, pitfalls, and vindications. It speaks about those who stood tall despite persecution—all because they wanted to remain faithful to God.

What are some Christian beliefs or practices that cause us to stand out from the world today?

In this session, we are inspired by the courage and faithfulness of Daniel and his friends. Because they remained true to their identity as God’s chosen people and were willing to demonstrate their trust in God through their actions, they provided a testimony to God’s power and goodness while in exile. As believers, we are sojourners and exiles in this world, redeemed by the blood of Jesus and called to be a testimony to His grace by remaining true to our identity in Christ.

It has been said that among the persecuted church around the world, many believers say their two favorite books in the Bible are Daniel and Revelation. Why? Because both teach that in the end our God wins! As we begin our study of Daniel, we start with a story that shows God “winning” on behalf of four faithful Hebrew teens in a foreign land.

Throughout the week, engage the daily study sections on your own. Each highlights the powerful and lasting impact of staying true to your identity in Christ. There are three daily readings to prepare you before your group meets for this session. Interact with the Scriptures and be ready to interact with your small group.

1 Remember Your True Identity

How do we live in exile? To begin, we must recognize the hand of God in our circumstances. God may send us to a difficult place to spread His name among the nations. God often brings suffering into the lives of His people to demonstrate His sovereignty, strengthen our faith, show Himself wise and strong, and put His glory on display among the nations that they might be drawn to Him, as He did in this story.

The hero of this story is not the Hebrew teenagers but the all-powerful God of grace who keeps His promises. As we begin the Book of Daniel, we are introduced to four remarkable young men who were uprooted and replanted in the harsh and wicked soil of the Babylonian Empire. They may have been away from home, but they were not outside the sovereign plan of God.

¹ In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and laid siege to it. ² The Lord handed Jehoiakim king 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.

³ The king ordered Ashpenaz, the chief of his court officials, to bring some of the Israelites from the royal family and from the nobility—⁴ 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—and to teach them the Chaldean language and literature. ⁵ 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 serve in the king's court. ⁶ Among them, from the descendants of Judah, were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. ⁷ The chief official gave them other names: he gave the name Belteshazzar to Daniel, Shadrach to Hananiah, Meshach to Mishael, and Abednego to Azariah.

DANIEL 1:1-7

On the surface, God's people were invaded and taken captive. But from a different perspective we see that God's people were now free to bring God's light into enemy territory. Babylon was now being infiltrated by the Lord's "army." Israel would be oppressed and her people scattered, but the nations would now have a witness among them to God.

In what ways is our identity as God's people strengthened by remembering that our present circumstances are no accident?

In order for God's people to be salt and light in the evil empire of Babylon, they would need to be prepared for the challenges such a culture would throw at them—challenges designed to lead them away from God. Look at the pressures Daniel and his three friends had to face:

Isolation. The Babylonian strategy was to seize upon the Hebrews' vulnerability once they were separated from all that was familiar—homeland, family, and friends (see v. 3). Over time, they would be more likely to abandon their faith and become like the Babylonians.

Indoctrination. The young men were enrolled in an educational school for three years to become experts in the Babylonian language, philosophy, literature, science, history, and astrology, including their pagan, polytheistic religion (see vv. 4-5).

Assimilation. The Hebrews were expected to change their minds and their lifestyle, to eat and drink like the Babylonians, enticing them with the delicacies and privileges of their new life (see v. 5). This would wear them down and win them over to the dark side.

Confusion. Finally, the young men were given new names (v. 7). In the ancient world, a name went to the core of a person's identity, so this was a way of reorienting their lives away from their past and toward the pagan gods of Babylonian culture.

As Christians, we too are pressured to conform to the ways of this world. How might it be easy to fall prey to these strategies?

In what ways can we strengthen our identity in Christ when facing the pressures of our culture?

2

Embrace the Risk of Holiness

The story of these four Hebrew teenagers brings Psalm 1 to mind. This psalm affirms the one who refuses to be seduced by “the advice of the wicked” and instead finds delight in the law of the Lord (Ps. 1:1-2). Daniel and his friends were determined not to abandon their convictions or their commitment to God. Read how they responded.

⁸ 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 official not to defile himself. ⁹ God had granted Daniel favor and compassion from the chief official, ¹⁰ yet he said to Daniel, “My lord the king assigned your food and drink. I’m afraid of what would happen if he saw your faces looking thinner than those of the other young men your age. You would endanger my life with the king.”

¹¹ So Daniel said to the guard whom the chief official had assigned to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, ¹² “Please test your servants for 10 days. Let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. ¹³ 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.” ¹⁴ He agreed with them about this and tested them for 10 days. ¹⁵ At the end of 10 days they looked better and healthier than all the young men who were eating the king’s food. ¹⁶ So the guard continued to remove their food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables.

DANIEL 1:8-16

Notice how Daniel resisted the temptation to defile himself (see v. 8). The immersion into the world of pagan Babylon had not won over his heart or mind. Babylon was where he lived, but Babylon would never be his home. Like his forefather Abraham, Daniel was “looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Heb. 11:10).

The text doesn’t explain why the food was problematic for Daniel. It may have been that the food was unclean for a Hebrew (see Lev. 11:1-23). It may have been that the food was offered to idols or that it may have communicated an absolute allegiance to the king that Daniel reserved for God alone (see Deut. 6:13-19).

Daniel and his friends were forced into Babylon, but they would not be forced to let Babylon into them. So with courage and conviction, Daniel requested the freedom to disregard the king’s order and not defile himself.

What do you think prepared Daniel and his friends to resist this moment of compromise?

Daniel not only had conviction but he also had wisdom. He walked in holiness and humility. He shared his faith and convictions with Ashpenaz, and God “granted Daniel favor and compassion from the chief official” (Dan. 1:9). Daniel stood his ground, but he did so with grace and humility. He was not arrogant or rude. He was not obnoxious or stubborn. He kindly and winsomely won over his superior (see vv. 10-16). Daniel believed and trusted God to honor his commitment to obedience.

Charles Swindoll summarizes the lesson we learn in Daniel’s risky holiness: “In a world filled with people who rebel against the divine King, it is inevitable that believers of all ages will face situations in which their convictions will be challenged. We who are parents need to prepare our children for those occasions by both teaching them God’s truth and modeling integrity. And all of us who are Christians need to personally commit ourselves to living God’s way regardless of the temptations to live otherwise.”² This is what Daniel and his friends had been taught. This is how they would live or die.

What did Daniel believe about God that made possible this kind of courage?

In what ways does your commitment to holiness demonstrate your trust in God’s goodness and power?

3

Testify to God's Grace

Daniel and his friends had faith that God would honor the risk they were taking in seeking to be holy. It was already settled in their hearts that they would remain faithful to their God, no matter what. In the following verses, we see Daniel and his friends testifying to God's grace and power through their service, their wisdom, and their understanding.

¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ At the end of the time that the king had said to present them, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. ¹⁹ The king interviewed them, and among all of them, no one was found equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. So they began to serve in the king's court. ²⁰ In every matter of wisdom and understanding that the king consulted them about, he found them 10 times better than all the diviner-priests and mediums in his entire kingdom. ²¹ Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.

DANIEL 1:17-21

Here, for the third time in one chapter, God gives something (see also vv. 2,9). In this case, He gave the four youths "knowledge and understanding in every kind of literature and wisdom." These were "Proverbs men" with the ability to see the things of life and this world from God's perspective and to act accordingly.

There is striking irony in the situation. God gave the four Jewish boys "knowledge and understanding." Tremper Longman writes, "Of course, Nebuchadnezzar and those involved in their education would take the credit for their brilliance, but Daniel and the others would know to whom the credit was due ... For now, however, the divine origin of Daniel's success is only understood in private by the four."³ And now, by the gift of God's divine revelation, we know the real story too.

God blessed Daniel spiritually by giving him the ability to understand "visions and dreams of every kind" (v. 17). This gift from God would prove extremely valuable in chapter 2 and beyond (cf. 4:4-27; 5:11-31; 7:1-8:27; 9:20-27; 10:1-12:13).

Wisdom is often in short supply in our world. In what ways does a Christian's wisdom and understanding give glory to God?

After their three years of education, the four Hebrew teens were brought by the chief official to stand before King Nebuchadnezzar (see 1:18). They were head and shoulders above all the rest. “No one was found equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah”; therefore, “they began to serve in the king’s court” (v. 19). They were brought right into the palace and into the king’s court—they were that impressive!

Nebuchadnezzar gave the four Hebrews key administrative posts. He was confident they would serve and represent him well. Already in this Old Testament narrative we see the living out of the cardinal principle in Colossians 3:23-24: “Whatever you do, do it enthusiastically, as something done for the Lord and not for men, knowing that you will receive the reward of an inheritance from the Lord. You serve the Lord Christ.” Yes, “whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for God’s glory” (1 Cor. 10:31). And Daniel 1:21 is not so much a footnote as it is a summary of the long life and ministry of Daniel on account of his faithfulness to God.

“Daniel served in an influential position for seventy years. His integrity and uncompromising character had far-reaching results. God gave him the influence that led to the decree of Cyrus to send the Israelites back to their land; influence that led to the rebuilding of the wall under Nehemiah and the reestablishing of the nation of Israel; influence that eventually led the wise men to crown the King who was born in Bethlehem. Daniel was behind the scenes of the history of the Messiah as well as the Messiah’s people. His prophecy glorifies the ‘KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS’ (Rev. 19:16) who reigns forever.”⁴

How has your walk with God been impacted by the testimony of grace from people in previous generations?

How might your walk with God impact future generations?



GROUP STUDY

Warm Up

How would you describe your true identity in Christ?

In what other places are you tempted to find your identity?

What might be some benefits of living out of your true identity in Christ—for yourself and for others?

We should no longer define ourselves by what others say or how we feel. Instead we look to who God says we are. When we find our identity in the eternal things of Christ, we will not be crushed by failure and struggles, be swayed by worldly success, or despair over disappointments. We were created to reflect the glory of God, and we will never find true contentment apart from Him.

During this time, you will have an opportunity to discuss what God revealed to you throughout the week. Listed on the next page are some of the questions from your daily reading assignments. They will guide your small group discussion.

“For those who love God do not seek after the God of all in just one place, but even in the midst of this misfortune they worshiped as if in the house of the Creator.”⁴

THEODORET OF CYR

Discussion

1. In what ways is our identity as God's people strengthened by remembering that our present circumstances are no accident?
2. As Christians, we too are pressured to conform to the ways of this world. How might it be easy to fall prey to these strategies?
3. In what ways can we strengthen our identity in Christ when facing the pressures of our culture?
4. What do you think prepared Daniel and his friends to resist this moment of compromise? What did Daniel believe about God that made possible this kind of courage?
5. In what ways does your commitment to holiness demonstrate your trust in God's goodness and power?
6. In what ways does a Christian's wisdom and understanding give glory to God?
7. How has your walk with God been impacted by the testimony of grace from people in previous generations?
8. How might your walk with God impact future generations?

Conclusion

Daniel and his three companions remained faithful to their true identity, obeyed God, and became a shining testimony and witness both to God's providence and His grace. He sent them on a missionary journey, leaving all that was familiar, that they might bear a faithful and true witness to kings and nations in foreign lands.

Daniel and his friends point forward to another Hebrew who would arrive 600 years later. Like Daniel and his friends, the Son of God would leave His home and willingly embrace a sinful world without defiling Himself even once (see 2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; 1 Pet. 2:21-25). He would find "favor with God and with people" (Luke 2:52). When He was still a child, His teachers "were astounded at His understanding and His answers" (Luke 2:47).⁶ Jesus is the embodiment of the wisdom of God (see 1 Cor. 1:30; Col. 2:3).

Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah gave a faithful witness before Ashpenaz and Nebuchadnezzar and were brought to live in the king's palace. Jesus, in contrast, gave a faithful witness before Herod and Pilate and was nailed to a cross. And yet, it is by His death that all who trust Him will live forever with the King of kings and Lord of lords in His eternal palace.

Spend some time praying this for you and for your group:

"God, thank You for the way Daniel's life points us to Your Son who willingly embraced a sinful world without defiling Himself and through His death and resurrection became the greatest picture of Your grace the world has ever known. Help us to live in a manner that reflects our thankfulness for the sacrifice made for us as well as our true identity in You. Give us the strength to live as a testimony to both Your providence and Your grace."

1. Dale Ralph Davis, *The Message of Daniel*, in *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2013), 36.
2. Charles R. Swindoll, *Daniel: God's Pattern for the Future* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986), 17.
3. Tremper Longman III, *Daniel*, in *NIVAC Bundle 4: Major Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999) [eBook].
4. John MacArthur, *An Uncompromising Life* (Chicago: Moody, 1988), 61-62.
5. Theodoret of Cyr, *Commentary on Daniel*, 1.8, quoted in *Ezekiel, Daniel*, eds. Kenneth Stevenson and Michael Glerup, vol. XIII in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2008), 158-59.
6. David Helm, *Daniel for You* (Purcellville, VA: The Good Book Company, 2015), 28.
7. J. Hudson Taylor, quoted in *Expect Great Things: Mission Quotes That Inform and Inspire*, comp. Marvin J. Newell (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2013), 89.

