

Nail your colours to the mast ... Daniel 1:1-21

'Nail your colours to the mast' is a well known phrase ... that's what this first chapter is all about - for you and me, it's a daily challenge: to nail our colours to the mast.

I was fascinated to discover the origins of the saying:

The expression was coined in reference to the exploits of the crew of HMS Venerable at the famous Battle of Camperdown – that's when the English and Dutch ships were vying for supremacy, it was all part of the French Revolutionary Wars in October 1797.

The English fleet was led by HMS Venerable, the flagship of Admiral Adam Duncan. To begin with, the battle didn't go well for the Royal Navy. The main mast of Duncan's vessel was struck.

As a result, the admiral's blue standard was brought crashing down. Not good. Because this could've been interpreted as meaning that Duncan had surrendered to the enemy.

That's when Jack Crawford stepped up to the plate. He realised what was happening. He was a young man, in his early twenties from the NE of England. He climbed up what was left of the flimsy mast with the standard tucked under his arm. That's when he nailed it back to where it should've been. The rest of the fleet could see it.

That was an act of valour, of selfless bravery ... one man's cool head and a young man's decisive action proved crucial in the battle and Duncan's forces were eventually victorious. Needless to say, Jack Crawford returned

home to a hero's welcome in Sunderland - there's a statue of him in Mowbray Park.

Now we know what it means - and that's what Daniel does right here in chapter one. So let's turn to the Word of God and read the first two verses:

1:1-2

The Lord is sovereign – history affirms it

The drums of war were beating in the Middle East. Two superpowers, Egypt and Babylon. Both wanted to be top dog. This was their all-consuming passion. It was only a matter of time before they would clash in a confrontation that would radically change the face of global politics.

In the summer of 605 BC - and that's a crucial date to remember: the inevitable happened when the seemingly invincible Babylonian army, under the brilliant leadership of the crown prince, Nebuchadnezzar, attacked the Egyptian army at Carchemish on the upper Euphrates River.

That was hugely significant - and momentous as it opened up the land of Judah to be ruled by the notorious Babylonians. There is no contest between peashooters and tanks.

By early August 605 BC, Nebuchadnezzar assumed control of the golden city of Jerusalem. In the middle of that same month, Nebuchadnezzar's father, King Nabopolassar died as a man in his early fifties.

When he heard the news, the crown prince rushed home to claim the throne, but he did not go empty handed. See this ... this is what we have right here in verses 1-2.

Before making a beeline back home from Jerusalem, he ransacked the temple, he took with him some of the holy vessels, and a contingent of fine young men. Within three weeks, on the day of his arrival in early September, he was crowned king of the rapidly expanding empire.

The stage is set

The two main characters on-stage are Jehoiakim and Nebuchadnezzar. Jehoiakim was the eighteenth king of Judah (one of two tribes who remained faithful and loyal to the family of David), and the second son of saintly Josiah (1 Chronicles 3:15).

He was a pathetic king, nothing more than a spineless puppet. His track record left a lot to be desired: for example, he was culpable when he cut and burned Jeremiah's scroll (Jeremiah 36:20-23); he was incapable when it came to leadership and squandered state funds to build himself a magnificent new palace (Jeremiah 22:13-17).

He was on the throne for eleven too-long years, he was 'buried like a dead donkey, dragged out of Jerusalem and dumped outside the gates' (Jeremiah 22:19, NLT). An ignoble death for a man who was an ass. A timely lesson to all of us: a godly mother and father does not guarantee godly children.

Nebuchadnezzar was one of the most impressive rulers of ancient times. He ruled for forty-three years, he governed Babylon in its heyday; a time of 'radical secular humanism.' He was renowned as a military marksman, a statesman *par excellence*, and a prestigious builder who left behind Babylon's beautiful Ishtar Gate (which has been reconstructed in

Berlin's famous Pergamom Museum), the grand Processional Way, and the Hanging Gardens.

Two kings whose names are etched on the granite of history, for better or worse, are mentioned in verse one.

However, there is a third king whose name does not appear in verse one, but whose presence, as we shall see, is evident in verse 2, and throughout the rest of the book as in 2:20-22. Elsewhere, he is acclaimed as King of the ages and King of kings.

God does what he does because he is who he is

There is a telltale statement at the beginning of verse 2, where we read, *And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand.* At the outset of this extraordinary book, the message is as clear as daylight: the sovereign God is in full control. And that holds true today in 2020.

As God, he determines the failures and fortunes of man. He is Lord of all, and because of that, Nebuchadnezzar scored a military victory over his arch-enemy. He whipped the opposition into submission, but God allowed it to happen.

This is one of many incidents in the book - it's a superb example of the active sovereignty of God in the affairs of man and nation. The Lord is involved in human history. The old saying is true that: Man proposes, God disposes.

All that happened was not only in line with the flawless character of God, it actually fulfilled the word of God ... Isaiah predicted it in 39:6-7; Micah, his contemporary, shared the burden (Micah 4:10), and Jeremiah strongly hinted at it in 46:2.

So this event should not surprise us at all; this history in a capsule pays tribute to the unerring faithfulness of our Most High God.

Look at it from another angle: this is a divine invasion of enemy territory! We must not miss what the sovereign God is doing in it all. A nation that opposes the true God of Israel is now being infiltrated by the Lord's army.

A small incursion to be sure, but given time and the ripening of God's purpose, one that will accomplish far more than anyone could possibly imagine. The so-called 'times of the Gentiles' (Luke 21:29) has started.

Israel will be oppressed and her people scattered, but the nations will now have a witness among them to the one true and living God. Why did God allow it to happen?

Quite simply, to teach his covenant people a lesson that a holy God always judges sin; if they sow the wind they reap the whirlwind (Hosea 8:7). Like it or not, the harvest is always gathered home. God would rather have his people living in captivity in a pagan land, than living like pagans in the Holy Land. When a nation disobeys the word of God and departs from the worship of God they are living under the dark storm cloud of imminent judgment. Idolatry, immorality, and injustice toward the poor and needy is a recipe for disaster.

Hence, the invasion by the armies from the eastern bloc in 605 BC, then later in 597 BC and 586 BC. In that sense, the curtain fell on Judah for she was erased from the national scene. She was a people and a nation in exile; a people with no temple, no king, and no land.

1:3-5

Nothing but the best will do

See what's happening here: nothing but the brightest and best for Nebuchadnezzar! It was the crème de la crème that he was deporting eight hundred miles east of Jerusalem across the Syrian desert. The skimmed milk he left behind.

Historians tell us that between 50 and 75 of these young men were transported. It was those of noble birth, of good heritage, those with a respectable family history, even of royal lineage that he wanted to accompany him back to the royal court in Babylon. He knew what he wanted, he got what he wanted.

For these teenagers, their credentials are impeccable. They were kidnapped; they were handsome and healthy, they were intelligent and innovative. They were top of the class, ticked all the boxes. These guys would get a scholarship to any first-rate university - they really are that good.

For three years they would be students in the local blue ribbon university where they would be instructed, or more likely, indoctrinated in the language and literature of the Chaldeans by some of the world's top scholars.

This was the language of Abraham. It reminds me of Moses, of whom the Bible says, 'was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action.'

When they graduated from the Oxford of Babylon, they would have a first-class honours degree to frame and hang on their apartment wall. In between times, they would be given a makeover and brainwashed with the system in an attempt to remove any vestige of godliness and biblical truth.

On a human level, their future was neatly mapped out, it seemed deliciously rosy. They were under the watchful eye and guiding hand of Ashpenaz, a kind-of Vice President of Human Resources within the system.

They would be employed as advisers in the service of the king, on the payroll of the Babylonian Civil Service. It looked amazing. As we shall discover later on in the chapter, looks can be deceiving.

1:6-7

A new identity

These four guys from the tribe of Judah were all richly blessed with a godly background and that is reflected in their names ... which bore testimony in one way or another to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The powers that be in Babylon are keen to repackage them with a total new identity, more in keeping with the Babylonian culture and worldview.

Daniel whose name means 'Elohim is my judge' becomes Belteshazzar (*Elohim* is one of the Hebrew names for God); Hananiah whose name means 'Yahweh is gracious' becomes Shadrach (*Yahweh* is the personal name of the God of Scripture); Mishael whose name means 'Who is what *Elohim* is?' becomes Meshach; and Azariah whose name means 'Yahweh is my helper' becomes Abednego.

The meaning of their Babylonian names is difficult to suss, but they are more than likely associated with some cultic figure or god. Pharaoh did something similar to Joseph when he chose to call him Zaphenath-Paneah (Genesis 41:45). Esther, as she is better

known, was actually called Hadassah at birth, until her name was changed (Esther 2:7).

This was peer pressure at its very worst. The young men had no say in the matter, it was forced upon them. They were being groomed for earthly glory. It was a subtle attempt to delete their past, to treat them as long lost sons who've now found their way back home! A man's name and appearance may change, but that does not alter his nature. Daniel did not *become* Belteshazzar, even though he answered to that name; he is still the same person on the inside. A new home does not have to change your heart. Daniel and his buddies were in Babylon, but they would not let Babylon get into them!

1:8-10

Conformer or transformer

I love those opening words for they show to us the gritty tenacity of this young man! Daniel *resolved*. In spite of all that was happening around him and to him, Daniel dug in his heels and he would not buckle, or bend, or bottle it, under such enormous pressure.

He has mettle. An unashamed boldness. Like the ancient Gadites, Daniel has the 'face of a lion.' Not too many things intimidate a lion!

The Babylonians had their rigid agenda of assimilation and they were determined to impose it on Daniel and his friends: but did you notice, he was having none of it. He is a man of steely resolution, and for him, this was a bridge too far.

His approach is easily summed up with these words: where the Scriptures draw a line, he draws a line. Daniel was not prepared to sacrifice his honest, sincerely held convictions

on the altar of expediency. Not for all the tea in Shinar was he willing to toe their party line. He had had enough of being squeezed into Babylon's mould. Like Jack Crawford in my story, Daniel nailed his colours to the mast!

There is a golden nugget at the beginning of verse 9 (similar to verse 2) which, again, underlines the sovereignty of a gracious God, *and God gave*. The chief was oblivious to it, but the text confirms that he had a soft spot in his heart for Daniel. Unwittingly, unknowingly, the Lord was working in this man's life.

So often that is the case, even in our own lives and circumstances. The silent purposes of God are being outworked day after day and it is only when we look back with 20/20 vision that we can track the guiding hand of God.

Dining in King's College, Babylon

The question is: Why was Daniel not so enamoured with the king's food and wine? To be honest, there is no straightforward answer! Maybe the food from the royal table included meats - such as pork - that were off limits to Jewish people; they were not kosher and were labelled 'unclean' in the long list of banned foods in Leviticus 11:1-23.

Or maybe, the food, of Michelin Star quality, had been offered to idols before being taken to the king's tables for human consumption.

It seems to me that this was a key moment in Daniel's development. All that life throws at us, in good times and bad times, is never wasted. We put it down to experience gained. Life can be a steep learning curve for you and me as God is working his purpose out in our lives.

So Daniel's aspiration to do what was right at this point actually lays the groundwork for his

response when larger upheavals intrude upon his life, such as the raging fire of chapter 3 and the ravenous lions of chapter 6. The timeless principle holds true: he who is faithful in small things will be faithful in greater things.

So far as Daniel was concerned, this was a good time for him to make his move. He showed remarkable wisdom for a young man of his age when he first approached the boss, the chief eunuch. He was direct in what he said, he was polite, he was upfront, he did not beat about the bush or fumble over his words.

In spite of the evident warmth in their relationship, Ashpenaz was not overly enthusiastic about Daniel's request; in fact, he blew it out of the water. He torpedoed it. If he'd said 'yes' to it and it had gone pear-shaped, then he himself would have been in seriously big trouble, hence the comment, *so you would endanger my head with the king*.

I wonder how Daniel felt. He did not throw a tantrum or engage in histrionics. Nothing melodramatic. He kept his thoughts to himself rather than reading the riot act with Ashpenaz.

It would have been understandable if Daniel had muttered under his breath something about the heavy-handedness, and the crass insensitivity of the regime.

Daniel's decorum under pressure is most admirable and he deserves a lot of credit for handling himself so terrifically well. Even though Plan A fell at the first hurdle, he was conscious and confident that God would work it all out in his way and in his time.

Here is another commendable trait in Daniel's character for he does not give up easily. He is not one for throwing the towel into the ring too

soon! If at first you do not succeed, you try again! His next move was to go down a notch on the chain of command.

1:11-20

Daniel's veggie diet

Leave it to Daniel, there is always a Plan B up his sleeve. His second attempt for a different menu was reasonable, respectful, and rational – plenty of vegetables, lots of fresh fruit, and litres of spring water.

I mean, it seems ridiculous to turn your back on the luxurious fare of the royal table for daily rations of greens and H₂O. It is like eating an iceberg lettuce garnished with strawberries or broccoli and beans when you could be enjoying a sirloin steak with all the trimmings!

Even more remarkable is that the steward gave it the green light; that's an answer to Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple (1 Kings 8:50), and a beautiful illustration of Psalm 106:46 where we read, 'He caused them to be pitied by all who held them captive.'

He was happy to run with Daniel's dietary request. A little token of kindness where and when it was least expected. It may surprise us, but no matter how we look at it, this is grace at work in Babylon's heartland. A reminder, again, that there is nothing parochial about the Lord of time and eternity for he is omnipresent. In Jerusalem. In Babylon. And wherever you are right now, God is there too. The proof of the pudding is always in the eating. Maybe a vegetarian type diet was not dessert-like, but it certainly worked. After ten days, the four young men looked absolutely amazing.

Living on the bare essentials of a spartan diet they have flourished. They are a picture of health. Their minds are more alert and they have excelled in their study of language and literature.

It is important to note in verse 17 that Daniel alone *had understanding in all visions and dreams*. Visions are when you are awake and dreams are when you are asleep, and both were a means of divine revelation, as we shall see. This piece of info paves the way for the rest of the book.

So we can say this about them: they are better looking, better learned, and better liked; when they came under the scrutiny of the king he was quite taken aback. He acknowledged that they were ten times better in their oral examination than the rest of his courtiers.

They are streets ahead of the others - and there were 50+ more of them! These guys passed the test without cheating. Only God can do that. Imagine how many employees of Apple or Microsoft, BMW or Chrysler, have been personally chosen by the CEO. Daniel and his buddies were!

The lesson is: Put God first and everything else will fit into place (Proverbs 3:5-6; Matthew 6:33). As my mother used to often say: God is no man's debtor. There are no losers when God's providence is on show.

Twists and turns on the path, humps and hollows along the way, yes, but God is merely taking us to a new level in our relationship with himself and in our usefulness to others. Daniel and his friends know all about that!

1:21

There is life after Babylon

Why do I say that? The Hebrew text of this verse contains only seven words, but they pack a knockout punch. For whatever reason, the writer has pressed the fast-forward button on his keyboard and given us an intriguing piece of information concerning the fate of Babylon as well as the position of Daniel.

At face value, this could be mistaken for one of those statements of fact not worth a second glance. We read it and all too quickly move on to chapter 2 which sounds an awful lot more interesting. A serious error of judgment on our part ... let me explain:

Nebuchadnezzar, a few guys in-between, and Belshazzar of chapter 5 are now dead and gone. As Isaac Watts wisely noted, 'Time, like an ever-rolling stream, bears all its sons away.' Babylon has fallen. See that! Cyrus and the Persians are at the helm, the year is 539 BC.

And where is Daniel? Daniel is sitting at his desk! The global power of Babylon was snuffed out when Cyrus invaded, but God's faithful servant continues to shine and serve in situ. Perseverance. Stick-at-it-ness!

And a few centuries later, when the Magi or the wise men came from this same region to Bethlehem to worship the Christ child, it was because their forefathers had heard of him from Daniel and passed the account down through the generations.

We see how the tables have turned in chapter 1, and at the same time, we discover the sweet reality of God's continuing faithfulness to his people when earthly kingdoms rise and fall.

Babylon, the macho brute of the world, has dropped with a thud into the mausoleum of history, while fragile Daniel (probably now in his early 80s), servant of the Most High God, is still on his feet. And he was still there in the third year of Cyrus (10:1). A very old man. All because he dared to nail his colours to the mast! That's why he went to the lions ...!