

Daniel 1: Together, in service, in exile, in Babylon

¡Buenos Dias! Kia ora!

I'm Ben and I am a Kiwi. That's what we call ourselves in New Zealand. Out of all of the animals we could choose to be our national animal – we chose the tiny, flightless, endangered, *half-blind* bird!

Then we say with pride – we are Kiwis!

Our country is an interesting one – you may not know where it is though because *often* we're left of the world map.

And apparently our accent can be quite hard to understand. So if you meet someone this week, and you're not sure if they're speaking English or not, they *might* just have a New Zealand accent – please be gracious with us!

Our country is very multicultural - let me tell you a bit about my family:

My dad was born and raised in New Zealand and my mum is from Scotland. I have a sister-in-law from Korea, and a brother-in-law from Nigeria. Our closest family friends are from Samoa. Our family celebrations are amazing! The food is incredible!

We'll have the hearty roast beef with Yorkshire pudding, and maybe the spicy Scottish haggis.

Then there's the potent kimchi and tasty bulgogi from Korea. This food is delicious! *Ee eumshig dil uen mashiseoyo!*

Also add the tangy egusi soup and flavoursome jollof rice from Nigeria and the Samoan delicacy of raw fish in coconut milk!

Then of course, we finish the meal with Pavlova – the *kiwi* dessert!

Diverse cultures around meal tables is something that's happening all over the world today – it's happening right here at World Assembly! It lets us get to know who people are and what they value. *To share food is to share culture and identity.* This is what we see in Daniel 1 – a group of young Jewish men are faced with a meal table foreign to them. Will they share in the *Babylonian* culture and identity? What will they choose to value, and how will they choose to live in a culture foreign to their own?

Daniel 1 begins with a mighty act of God:

I. The Lord who is faithful *delivers* faithless Judah!!!

But this isn't the kind of deliverance that Judah would have wanted. This is the *judgment* that the prophet Jeremiah had warned would come if the people did not repent and put their trust back in the *just* God. But they choose their own way of living instead of the way intended by God.

So when Nebuchadnezzar lays siege on Judah, what happens? God remains faithful to his covenant: God delivers the faithless nation into exile *as he had promised he would.*

The nation of Judah is defeated.

Not only this, but Nebuchadnezzar also takes away the items of the temple of the one true God and places them in the house of his god. Daniel chapter 5 tells us that these items were those of gold and silver: *the best and most sacred items*, stolen as a Babylonian trophy.

It would have been disgusting and *offensive* for Judah to see their temple defiled. And not only are these items stolen, but we see them again in Daniel 5 being used in a feast worshiping Babylonian gods. The holy items of gold and silver, dedicated to the transcendent, invisible God, are used to worship idols of wood and stone.

Does this mean God has been defeated?

But despite a conquered nation and desecrated temple – surely they can look to the next generation; the future leaders and the nobility. There must be a strong handsome hero that will come and rescue them!

Well Babylon also took their heroes.

They took the young, the handsome, and the intelligent. The *best* were taken, and marched away from their home to serve the Babylonian king - knowing each step closer to Babylon is a step away from Jerusalem; away from their land; away from their identity. Each step seems to take them further from the promises of God.

They aren't just taken but Daniel and his friends are given new names. Daniel – whose name means “God is my judge” is given a name referring to a Babylonian idol – Belteshazzar, “Keeper of Bel's treasure”. These men were the treasure of Israel – and now Daniel is told that he is the keeper of a foreign god's treasure! The others also get new names relating to pagan idols – every time someone calls their name, they're reminded: they're in Babylon now.

The nation is defeated, the temple is defiled, and the future leaders are removed.

Where is God? Has he abandoned his people? Has he abandoned his promises?

By all outward appearances, hope seems lost.

We can relate to this, can't we?

In our world, hopeless situations seem to surround us. The news and media tell us of the devastations happening all across the globe: we hear and we feel overwhelmed and insignificant. Is there no solution? No hope?

And there are situations that don't make the headlines but that are just as real; the challenges and struggles we face each day at university.

In New Zealand, it feels like a constant battle. But often we're not even fighting against overt opposition, but against apathy. How can we have dialogue with people who are disinterested or who have already made up their minds?

I hear the stories of how, decades ago, the IFES Evangelical Union at my university used to have a weekly gathering of around four hundred committed students. I know it's meant to encourage me, but it just *feels so distant* from our small group of about 25 that meets now.

It feels like we pray, and nothing happens. We share, and no-one responds. We try to live holy lives and we're called bigots, and if we do something wrong we called hypocrites.

We all have different challenges, but we can find ourselves asking the same question - has God abandoned us?!

Well if we look back to verse 2 it is God who delivered Judah into exile. Although the outward circumstances are bleak, God is in control. The Lord remains sovereign despite the situation. He kept his promise and will keep his promise!

We must not make conclusions solely based on outward appearances. Rather than look at what may seem hopeless, we look at who God is and what he has promised!

And Daniel confronts us! He resolves that although he *lives in the Babylonian culture*, he will not be defiled.

II. And God who is loving shows favour to Daniel.

Despite being in exile after coming from siege and famine, after having his comforts stripped and being marched through the desert, when he is offered the rich food and wine from the king's table he has the boldness to decline.

We can't be sure exactly what the reason was – but Daniel knew there was *something* about eating from the king's table that *he* could not participate in and still faithfully serve God.

Rather than choosing the ease and comfort of blending in to the culture, Daniel chooses to remain committed to the sovereign God.

Like Daniel, *we can't forget that God still reigns.* He hasn't forgotten his promise. He hasn't forgotten Daniel and he does not forget us!

Daniel acts, knowing God's character – he asks Ashpenaz for permission to not defile himself. But Ashpenaz is afraid, and doesn't want to defy the orders given by Nebuchadnezzar, the totalitarian ruler, the dictator of Babylon. We can see the reason for his concern – elsewhere in Daniel the king does not hesitate to kill those who go against his way. Nebuchadnezzar's orders were *absolute* – anything else meant death.

But Daniel and his friends had *confidence in a greater king.*

Daniel asks the steward, “test us and compare us!” – Test our way of living, committed to the True King, with the way of Babylon, committed to Nebuchadnezzar.

This surprisingly *ordinary* decision of choosing vegetables and water over meat and wine produces an *extraordinary* outcome.

Their homes have been taken, God's temple has been desecrated, and their identity has been stolen. But not only does the group appear stronger and better nourished than the others, *they are undefiled before God.* This is the triumph here!

Daniel and his friends choose to live counter-culturally through the small decisions of everyday life. Though they live in Babylon, they honour the true king before the king of the nation. They honour God before the values of the culture.

Though we face challenges in our universities, we know we can expect God to remain true to his character. We know that God works through the small decisions we make in order to remain faithful to Him. It requires patience, but we can wait expectantly, because He is the king above all other powers and influences of this world, and He remains faithful to his people.

We see God continue to show this faithfulness by giving *understanding* to the group of friends.

III. As they study, God gives them knowledge and understanding in all kinds of literature and learning.

We see here an engagement with the culture. To be undefiled is not staying away from the Babylonian learning– but in fact over the three years they commit themselves to excellence in their studies.

They would have learnt about the language and laws of the country, the art and the music, the history, philosophy and religion, the astronomy, mathematics and war strategy... you name it!

They understand the Psalmist who said, “The earth is the Lord’s and *everything* in it”. The friends recognize the call to learn about God’s creation in a way that honours Him.

And when compared at the end of their education, the *Jewish exiles* are superior to all the rest in the Babylonian kingdom!

Daniel 1 sounds a lot like our university experience – this group may have been the first university Christian fellowship! This story could be one from IFES:

Four young men are studying for three years in a foreign environment, hostile to their beliefs. They realise the way of life required for their study conflicts with their faith, so despite a terrifying head of department, they try to convince the lecturers and course administrators to allow them to carry out their studies in a way different to university protocol. Against all circumstances they get permission and the result stuns us! This group is found to be excellent, and the *whole university* gets to see a glimpse of God’s glory because of their decision.

They are together, in service, in exile, in Babylon!

Now I haven’t heard this exact story, but in New Zealand we have heard *these kinds* of stories happening all throughout IFES and it is a huge encouragement to us in our little corner of the world!

Let me tell you about Zach – a kiwi student who’s doing a doctorate in evolutionary biology. In his 2nd year of undergraduate study, he was inspired by a university debate where three ordinary Christian students clearly presented the advantages of a Christian view of ethics over a naturalistic view.

He decided that he could do something like that, and has gone on to lead similar events, and has been awarded scholarships from the Rationalist and Humanist society of New Zealand to fund his research. Even now he is in Europe speaking at various conferences about evolution, genetics and philosophy. Zach is a very ordinary guy who is in the heart of an atheistic and secularist environment. But he is committed to developing a Christian mind and applying it in a way that adorns that Gospel, and is found to be excellent, honouring God in what he does.

Through ordinary people we see all kinds of unexpected victories like this. These are a surprise and a comfort considering the bleak appearances of the start of the chapter and the situations we can find ourselves in today.

And though there is joy in this, that isn’t the how the chapter ends.

“Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.” The reign of Cyrus began about seventy years after this time.

I’m a jazz musician: part of my art is to resolve things well. I tried hard to get the last sub-point in my outline to follow the pattern of the others. I tried to resolve but I couldn’t. Daniel 1 does not resolve! We don’t have the “happily ever after” ending that we see in fairy tale stories.

If the *measure* of whether there is hope is being in exile or not – then the end is really no different from the start. Daniel is still in exile.

But that's *not* the measure is it?

Seventy years later, despite a new king of *that empire* – *there is still the same true King*.

Two and a half thousand years later, despite new rulers, new dictators and seemingly hopeless situations, there is *the same true King*.

Daniel 1 isn't a story about heroes. This isn't a Hollywood movie. Maybe Daniel is a protagonist in the story but he's no hero – he doesn't rescue Judah from exile. At the end he's still in Babylon!

After this conference, students at university will still be hostile to the Gospel and Christians will still be persecuted and martyred around the world.

But we know that God *reigns* despite the circumstances! God continues to use groups like Daniel and his friends and groups in IFES to bring glory to himself.

It's in the small decisions to remain undefiled before God rather choosing the ease and comfort of fitting in. It's through *ordinary people* who engage with culture in order to demonstrate the wisdom of God.

We can go, as these ordinary students and staff united under the *promise* of God! Daniel didn't know the ending, but we do! We know that God does fulfil his promise through Jesus! Jesus who dies... but does rise again!

So we can have confidence when we are tempted to despair because of hopeless circumstances – we trust in God who is faithful to his people.

We can have boldness when trying to holy lives in places that don't value righteousness – because we know God shows compassion towards those entrusted to him.

We can be excellent in our subjects – because we know it is God who gives understanding and insight.

And in all of this, God's glory will be displayed throughout the earth.

So we can go: Together, in Christ, in Mission, in the University.

Amen.