

Sunday School Notes 13 October 2019: Daniel and friends

King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon was an incredibly important king in ancient times. His empire was the centre of the world. But God is in charge of history (It is His story, after all!) and, when we read the stories about Nebuchadnezzar in the Bible, we are reminded that his becoming so powerful was known to God and was part of God's great plan [In various places (eg Isa 45-47) the destruction of the Babylonian empire and Babylon itself is predicted – as is the fact that the Jews would be released after 70 years (Jer 25:11)]. Nebuchadnezzar was great because God allowed him to take power. God is always in charge of history, even though we don't recognise this every time.

When Nebuchadnezzar's troops conquered a city, they looted the temples there. It seems they thought that if they took away things from the god of the city, it proved that their gods were more powerful! Nebuchadnezzar was a very religious man and wanted to please his gods. So they seized gold and bronze cups, jugs, lamps, basins, firepans, etc. (1 Kgs 7:48-50) from the temple of God in Jerusalem, thinking they were weakening God. But of course, God doesn't live in any temple or church and people can pray to him without gold items around.

The invaders also took prisoners – hostages who were taken away to Babylon with the threat that these captives would be killed if the conquered city did not respect the Babylonians and pay them huge amounts of money. These prisoners were generally the sons of the important families, the future leaders who would therefore not be able to lead a rebellion in their home countries. During Nebuchadnezzar's rule, however, they would not become slaves, but citizens.

I wonder how these captives felt when they arrived in Babylon! They had trekked for hundreds of kilometres and must have wondered if they would ever get there. And now the city loomed up in front of them. We know from archaeology and history that the entrance to the city was built to impress. The main processional road was 21 metres wide, and ran for about 1 km. It was lined with huge buildings 15 metres high and their walls were decorated in gold with dragons, bulls and flowers. All this was calculated to make the prisoners feel very small and unimportant.

But Nebuchadnezzar chose to use some of these young Jewish men to help him rule his conquered cities. He told his palace master to select the best, physically and intellectually, to serve him as civil servants. (Dan 1:3-4). Historical sources suggest that these youngsters would have been between 14-18 years of age. They were to attend a kind of university for 3 years where they would learn the Babylonian language and literature. Archaeology explains that they would have to study history, economics, medicine and astrology – and they probably had to learn 3 new languages too! They had to learn to think like Babylonians. The first thing Nebuchadnezzar organised, therefore, was to change their Jewish names to Babylonian ones.

Among the chosen group were four young chaps whose stories have been preserved for us in Scripture – their names were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. We know about them because there is a book called Daniel which tells of their adventures.

The four boys were determined to remain faithful to God. They accepted their new names, but decided that they would not disobey God's rules and that they would rely on him to help them. This shows they were very close to God as most Jews still thought God was only interested in them in Judah – and yet these boys realised God was with them in Babylon.

The way they chose to show their faith was by not eating the king's food. Probably it contained things which Jews were instructed not to eat; possibly the food had also been offered to idols. We don't know exactly what their thinking was. When Daniel told the palace master, the palace master was put on the spot! Nebuchadnezzar would punish him if he did not obey him, especially if this meant the people he was responsible for did not thrive as well as the others.

But God had made him respect and like Daniel and the palace-master agreed to allow them a 10-day trial in which they would eat only vegetables and drink water. When he inspected them after the 10 period was over, these boys were healthier than the others! God was looking after them because they were trying to obey him, even in a foreign land.

At the end of their training, these four were the top students. This was God's doing, not theirs. And for the rest of their lives these four remained true to God. They never saw Jerusalem again; we don't know if they saw their families again. But God was with them and showed this in many ways. God never let them down.

And while all this was happening in far-off Babylon, Jeremiah was warning God's people that they must be true to their God. Jeremiah told them that God's command was that they should co-operate with the enemy forces so that lives would not be lost, but no-one listened. Daniel and his friends co-operated, without losing their faith, and they lived and got promotion. Jeremiah's messages were true.

But remember, while those 4 boys got promoted, Jeremiah suffered – even though it was the same God in charge. God has purposes which are far bigger than us and we have to trust him to organise the best for every circumstance. We don't know where God will take us but his way will be the best.

Will you dare to be a Daniel (or a Jeremiah)?