

Daniel: Extravagant Providence

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There is something quite extraordinary about the love of God for his people. It is, as we know, similar to the love of a father for his children, but also superior. He is a Father of infinite patience and boundless mercy. He is a Father whose providence for His people can only be described as extravagant in its excess.

We have come to know this care as His grace – or undeserved favour – *in Christ Jesus*. But I think this extravagant care was on display even earlier, particularly during the time of Daniel the prophet. If we read between the lines and find the back story of God’s people amongst all the visions and dreams, we find some incredible providential care at work.

Daniel’s story

Let’s start with Daniel chapter one and the first of the three attacks on Jerusalem in around 605 BC. We want to try and understand the story line of the people in between the key events highlighted by Daniel’s record.

In chapter one, Nebuchadnezzar besieges Jerusalem.¹ Ashpenaz the chief officer takes captive the royal family and the nobility.² The brightest and best of these captives are educated in the ways of the Chaldeans for three years.³ Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah are found to be ten times better than all the rest of the captives.⁴ They are given positions in the royal court.⁵

¹ Dan 1:1

² Dan 1:3

³ Dan 1:4

⁴ Dan 1:20

⁵ Dan 1:19

Chapter two is about Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the nations with the head of gold, chest and arms of silver, belly and thighs of brass, legs of iron, and feet of iron and clay. Daniel interprets the dream. Following the interpretation, Daniel is made ruler over all the province of Babylon and chief over all the wise men (the magicians, enchanters, and astrologers).⁶

So, ironically, Daniel is now in charge of all those who taught him. After just three years, he is promoted to the position of chief governor of the king, which is pretty amazing considering both his age and the fact that he's a foreigner among them. A Jewish boy is now ruling over the Babylonian elders.

Next, in chapter three, Nebuchadnezzar is not satisfied with his dream, in which his kingdom is only a *head* of gold, so he makes an image of *all* gold for everyone to bow down to. And, of course, we know that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refuse to bow down and are thrown into the fiery furnace, where they are delivered by an angel. And then Nebuchadnezzar promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the province of Babylon.⁷

In chapter four, Nebuchadnezzar dreams of a great tree that is chopped down. The dream has its fulfilment in Nebuchadnezzar himself when he says,

"Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power ... and for the glory of my majesty?" (Dan 4:30)

Then Nebuchadnezzar became like a beast of the field and ate grass like an ox. Although we are not told, it is quite likely that Daniel – as second in command of Babylon – would have ruled in Nebuchadnezzar's absence. So, Daniel would have reigned over Babylon for seven years while Nebuchadnezzar had a 'mental breakdown'.⁸

In chapter 5, Belshazzar holds a feast where a hand writes on the wall the inscription: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, and PARSIN. After Daniel interprets the text, Belshazzar makes Daniel the third ruler in the kingdom. Later that very same night, Belshazzar is killed by the Medes and Persians.⁹

⁶ Dan 2:48

⁷ Dan 3:30

⁸ Dan 4:33

⁹ Dan 5:29

In chapter six, Darius the Mede becomes king of Babylon and makes Daniel one of three chief rulers over 120 provincial governors.¹⁰ This then leads to jealousy and the episode of the lions' den. After this, Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius until at least the third year of the reign of Cyrus the Persian.¹¹

So, all in all, Daniel rules through the reigns of four different kings that he mentions, plus one more mentioned in 2 Kings, Evil-Merodach.¹² It is highly unusual for right-hand men to remain in favour with five different kings in succession. Invariably, conquerors appoint their own friends and trusted advisors, rather than rely on existing governors who might be loyal to their predecessors.

Lastly, as part of setting the scene by way of introduction, let's look at the age and historic timeline of Daniel. In 605 BC, Daniel goes into exile as a teenager of about 17 years old. We're not told Daniel's age, but there are two men in the Old Testament who go into exile to rule, Daniel and Joseph. They both interpret dreams and rise to power, in what I think is clearly a pattern or type starting at the age of 17.¹³

After three years of education, Daniel stands before Nebuchadnezzar at the age of 20. After 70 years of captivity, Cyrus decrees that the Jews can go and rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. It is 536 BC and Cyrus is in the first year of his reign. Three years later, we have the last recorded historical date in the book of Daniel.¹⁴ So, we know Daniel lived to *at least* the age of 90. And he was in authority for an incredible *70 years*, comparable to Queen Elizabeth II of England.

However, Daniel surprisingly doesn't return with the exiles under Zerubbabel. Why was that, especially for someone so passionate about his God? Perhaps he was too old to make the journey? However that appears unlikely, as he was a man of considerable means, and able to travel in comfort. And he certainly wasn't the only old one:

¹⁰ Dan 6:1-2

¹¹ Dan 6:28; Dan 10:1

¹² 2Ki 25

¹³ Gen 37:2

¹⁴ Dan 10:1

Many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. (Ezra 3:12)

I would suggest that an alternative reason for Daniel not returning to Jerusalem is that perhaps he believed he could do more good in the position of influence he found himself in – in Babylon. Let's explore that idea in some more detail: the idea that Daniel was in power for 70 years from age 20 to 90, through the reign of 5 different kings, who all kept him in authority while God's people were in exile. It is Daniel himself who says that God rules in the kingdoms of men.

I think that he was talking from personal experience.

Daniel's influence

After Daniel's first dream interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's image, we read:

The king gave Daniel high honours and many great gifts and made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon and chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon. (Dan 2:48)

Daniel is made ruler, and yet his first recorded act in authority is *not* for the king or himself, but for his *friends*:

Daniel made a request of the king, and he appointed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego over the affairs of the province of Babylon. But Daniel remained at the king's court. (Dan 2:49)

There in the very next verse, before the famous incident of the fiery furnace, immediately after his promotion, his first thought was this, 'How can I use this advantage for the good of others?' I wonder if that would even cross our minds? When we get a promotion or material blessing, do we immediately think of others? Or do we think, 'What can I do for myself?' This was Daniel's first act of influencing for good, using his position and authority for his friends, and it sets the stage for what is to follow.

I also think Daniel's influence was far wider than his close circle of friends. Look at what Jeremiah says:

"Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their

produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” (Jer 29:4-5,11)

We need to read this in the context that the Israelites were in captivity as *slaves* to the Babylonians:

“For we are slaves. Yet our God has not forsaken us in our slavery but has extended to us his steadfast love before the kings of Persia.” (Ezra 9:9)

And so God says to build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce; take wives and have sons and daughters. He has plans to prosper and not harm; plans for a hope and a future. It all sounds pretty good.

But now contrast this to the cruel bondage in Egypt:

They set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens. They built for Pharaoh store cities, Pithom and Raamses. (Ex 1:11)

So they ruthlessly made the people of Israel work as slaves and made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field. In all their work they ruthlessly made them work as slaves. (Ex 1:13-14)

And the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help, and their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. (Ex 2:23)

Why such a different experience between Babylon and Egypt? The Babylonians were not friendly, gentle people in their conquests. They were as brutal and savage as the Egyptians (as we'll see shortly), but there is not a *single* word of their cruel oppression of the Israelites.

I believe this is because Daniel would simply not have allowed it, not on his watch. Sure, his people were in captivity (and justly so for their sins), but under his authority and governorship in Babylon, they would be treated with the respect and dignity deserving of all God's children. This is Daniel again using his position and influence for the good of others.

In the book of Jeremiah, there is another illustration of this point. The Babylonians are attacking Judah and Jerusalem in their third wave of attacks.

In the ninth year of Zedekiah king of Judah, in the tenth month, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and all his army came against Jerusalem and besieged it. (Jer 39:1)

And the king of Babylon slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah at Riblah before his eyes, and the king of Babylon slaughtered all the nobles of Judah. He put out the eyes of Zedekiah and bound him in chains to take him to Babylon. The Chaldeans burned the king's house and the house of the people and broke down the walls of Jerusalem. (Jer 39:6-8)

The Babylonians were brutal. And yet we then read:

Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon gave command concerning Jeremiah through Nebuzaradan, the captain of the guard, saying, "Take him, look after him well, and do him no harm, but deal with him as he tells you." (Jer 39:11-12)

Why do you think he said that? How would Nebuchadnezzar even know who Jeremiah was or care about him? Have you ever wondered why he would do that for some random stranger in a vassal country hundreds of miles away? I'd suggest that again it can only be through the influence of Daniel back in Babylon advising the king, telling Nebuchadnezzar to please look after the prophet Jeremiah.

In the book of Kings, there is another example of Daniel at work:

In the thirty-seventh year of the exile of Jehoiachin king of Judah, in the twelfth month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, Evil-merodach king of Babylon, in the year that he began to reign, graciously freed Jehoiachin king of Judah from prison. And he spoke kindly to him and gave him a seat above the seats of the kings who were with him in Babylon. So Jehoiachin put off his prison garments. And every day of his life he dined regularly at the king's table, and for his allowance, a regular allowance was given him by the king, according to his daily needs, as long as he lived. (2Ki 25:27-29)

What a strange thing to do for a prisoner! Maybe set him free if he's not your enemy but rather one from a previous regime. But why set him above all the other kings? Why provide for him a daily allowance for life? Why invite him to your royal table? Once again, I can only assume that at dinner he sat next to Daniel, who had influenced the king to do this generous act.

Daniel's motivation may also have been to assist in the fulfillment of God's promise made to Solomon:

"I will establish your royal throne over Israel forever, as I promised David your father, saying, 'You shall not lack a man on the throne of Israel.'" (1Ki 9:5)

After all, how was the Messiah supposed to arise and save Israel if the royal line was in prison? Once again Daniel is at work behind the scenes leveraging his position and relationship with the king for the good of God's people and particularly Jehoiachin.

The next incident to consider is recorded at the end of 2 Chronicles¹⁵ and repeated in Ezra:

In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing:

“Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel, for he is the God who is in Jerusalem.” (Ezra 1:1-3)

And so, Cyrus released the captives under Zerubbabel. He gave them vessels of silver and gold, goods, beasts, and costly wares, plus the vessels of the house of the LORD and cedar from Lebanon to build the temple. Again, we have to stop and ask, *Why would he do this?* I understand releasing prisoners from a previous regime, but the loss – of the nation's slave labour force, the wealth from the treasury, and the cedar from Lebanon given to build something in a country hundreds of miles away – just makes no sense.

I believe the most logical explanation again has to be the influence of Daniel. After all, this was the temple of his God and, like David, Daniel wanted to provide for its building and to pray towards it three times a day.

And finally, we have one more example of Daniel's influence, something that occurred over 500 years later:

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” (Matt 2:1-2)

As we discussed earlier, Daniel was the minister of education, being made chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon, the magicians, enchanters, Chaldeans, and astrologers. So, what did Daniel teach them?

¹⁵ 2Chr 36:22-23

And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the LORD. (Is 60:3,6)

And so, they did exactly as prophesied by Isaiah. Down through the centuries, Daniel was still influencing the wise men of Babylon to seek the Jewish Messiah.

Let's summarise these illustrations of Daniel's influence for the good of God's people:

- Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were promoted,
- the Israelite slaves in exile were treated decently,
- Jeremiah was looked after by the marauding Babylonian army,
- Jehoiachin was released from prison and fed at the king's table,
- Zerubbabel had generous provisions made for their return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple, and
- the wise men came from the east to worship the Messiah.

Exhortations from Daniel

Daniel truly used his position of authority for the benefit of others. The question for us is, What are we doing to use our influence for the good of others versus our own good? How do we leverage our assets or relationships to better serve our fellow men and women? As Paul says, *Let no one seek his own good, but everyone the good of his neighbour (1Co 10:24)*. There is no doubt an exhortation in that for each one of us to do better, but that's actually not what originally inspired this article. Let's go back to the reason why Daniel was in his position in the first place.

At the end of the book of Deuteronomy in chapter 28, there are the blessings and curses pronounced from Mount Ebal and Mount Gerazim. There are just 15 verses of blessing and then 50 verses of the most horrific curses you can imagine: disease, famine, persecution, disaster to the point where you wish for death and even to eat your children in the siege. Then finally, after all these curses, God says:

"You shall be plucked off the land that you are entering to take possession of it. And the LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other." (Dt 28:63-64)

This is the final punishment after God has sent his servants the prophets, rising up early over and over again. They would not listen, so eventually He says to Jeremiah:

“As for you, do not pray for this people, or lift up a cry or prayer for them, and do not intercede with me, for I will not hear you.” (Jer 7:16)

Don't waste your time anymore. The time has finally come for exile to Babylon. And yet, incredibly, God positions Daniel there *in the land of exile* to take care of His people. A man *greatly beloved*¹⁶ and in whom is an *excellent spirit*.¹⁷ Not just any man, but the *best*. It's unbelievable! This is the God we worship, who even when He is so angry with His people that He sends them into exile, He still arranges for Daniel to be in charge in Babylon to look after them.

His promise is *“I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Heb 13:5)*. And as Moses said, *The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms (Dt 33:27)*. Even when we are at rock bottom, even when his anger has sent us into exile, even then, underneath that, are the everlasting arms of the eternal God. What an amazing, compassionate, gracious God who loves us like a father pities his children.

And so, too, it is for us.

In all things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. (Rom 8:37)

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:35,38-39)

This is the exhortation of Daniel in exile. He is an agent of God's undying love and compassion for his children. Nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus, and nothing could separate Israel from the love of God which was in the prophet Daniel.

This extravagant providence had in fact been spoken of by Daniel's contemporary, the prophet Ezekiel:

“Thus says the Lord GOD: Though I removed them far off among the nations, and though I scattered them among the countries, yet I have been a sanctuary to them for a while in the countries where they have gone.” (Eze 11:16)

¹⁶ Dan 10:11,19

¹⁷ Dan 5:12,14

Through his servant Daniel, Yahweh was truly their sanctuary, their refuge from the storm, their rock in whom to trust.

We will take one last glimpse of this amazing man. In chapter six of the book of Daniel, the 120 jealous governors influenced Darius to sign a decree that *whoever makes petition to any god or man for thirty days, except to you, O king, shall be cast into the den of lions (Dan 6:7)*. King Darius signs the document, and in the very next verse we read:

When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem. He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously. (Dan 6:10)

In his moment of dire need and distress, *he gave thanks*. That's quite extraordinary! He was not pleading for his life, not crying for mercy, but giving thanks. What was he giving thanks for? We're not told, but I think he gave thanks for all the opportunities he had had to prosper people, to give them a hope and a future. How do I know that? Because we are similarly told by Paul:

That the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." (1Co 11:23)

What was Jesus giving thanks for? We assume that we give thanks for the same thing as Jesus did. He gave thanks, so we do likewise. However, we give thanks *for Jesus* and what he has done for us. So what was Jesus giving thanks for? Certainly not for the piece of bread, but what it represents. This Passover was going to give a hope and a future to his body of believers. For that, he gave thanks – in the face of scourging and an excruciating death.

These are amazing men – Daniel and Jesus – who thought of others before themselves, men who used their influence for good. As the writer to the Hebrews says:

Wherefore He is able also to save to the uttermost them that come unto God by Him, seeing He ever lives to make intercession for us. (Heb 7:25)

Though we remain still in exile from the New Jerusalem, God has provided a man for us, and not just any man, but a man *greatly beloved*, and in whom is an *excellent spirit*. Amen.