

BIBLE CHARACTERS

by

D. L. Moody

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CHAPTER 1

THE CAPTIVES IN BABYLON

"But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's meat, nor with the wine which he drank: therefore he requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself" (Daniel 1:8)

I always delight to study the life of Daniel the Prophet. The name Daniel means *GOD is my judge*. GOD is my judge: not the public is my judge; not my fellow men, but GOD. So Daniel held himself responsible to GOD. Some may ask, Who was Daniel? Listen. About six hundred years before the time of CHRIST, the sins of the kings of Judah had brought down upon them and upon the people the judgments of GOD. Jehoiakim had succeeded Jehoahaz; and Jehoiachin had succeeded Jehoiakim; and he again was succeeded by Zedekiah; and of each of these kings the record runs just the same: **"he did evil in the sight of the Lord."**

No wonder that in the days of Jehoiakim, about six hundred years before the time of CHRIST, Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, was permitted of GOD to come up against Jerusalem, and to lay siege against it and overcome it. It was probably at this time that Daniel, with some of the young princes, was carried away captive. A few years later, Jehoiachin being king, Nebuchadnezzar again came up against Jerusalem, and overcame it; when he bare away many of the temple vessels, and made several thousand captives.

And still later on, when Zedekiah was king, Nebuchadnezzar came a third time against Jerusalem to besiege it; and this time he burnt the city with fire; broke down its walls; slaughtered many of the people; and probably bore away another batch of captives to the banks of the Euphrates.

Among the earlier captives taken by the King of Babylon in the days of Jehoiakim, were four young men. Like Timothy in later times, they may have had godly mothers, who taught them the law of the Lord. Or they may perhaps have been touched by the words of Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, whom GOD had sent to the people of Judah. So, when the nation was rejecting the GOD of Israel, the GOD of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Moses, these young men took Him as their GOD: they received Him into their hearts.

Many may have mocked at Jeremiah's warnings, when he lifted up his voice against the sins of

the people; they may have laughed at his tears, and have told him to his face - just as people say nowadays of earnest preachers - that he was causing undue excitement. But these four young men would seem to have listened to the prophets voice; and they had the strength to come out for GOD.

And now they are in Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar the king commands that a certain number of the most promising of the young Jewish captives should be picked out, who might be taught the Chaldean tongue and instructed in the learning of Babylon. And the king further ordered that there should be daily set before them portions of meat from his table, and a supply of the same wine as he himself drank; and this was to go on for three years. And at the end of three years these young men were to stand before the great monarch, at that time the ruler over the whole world. Daniel and his three young friends were amongst those thus selected.

No young man ever goes from a country home to a large city - say, to a great metropolis - without grave temptations crossing his path on his entrance. And just at this turning point in his life, as in Daniel's, must lie the secret of his success or his failure. The cause of many of the failures that we see in life is, that men do not start right. Now, this young man started right. He took a character with him up to Babylon; and he was not ashamed of the religion of his mother and his father. He was not ashamed of the GOD of the Bible. Up there among those heathen idolaters he was not ashamed to let his light shine. The young Hebrew captive took his stand for GOD as he entered the gate of Babylon, and doubtless he cried to GOD to keep him steadfast. And he needed to cry hard, for he had to face great difficulties: as we shall see.

Soon comes a testing time. The king's edict goes forth, that these young men should eat the meat from the king's table. Some of that food would in all probability consist of meats prohibited by the Levitical law - the flesh of animals, of birds, and of fishes, which had been pronounced unclean, and were consequently forbidden: or in the preparation, some portion might not perhaps have been thoroughly drained of the blood, concerning which it had been declared, **"Ye shall eat the blood of no manner of flesh;"** or some part of the food may have been presented as an offering to Bel or some other Babylonish god. Some one of these circumstances, or possibly all of them united, may have determined Daniel's course of action. I do not think it took young Daniel long to make up his mind. He purposed in his heart - IN HIS HEART, mark that! - that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's meat.

If some modern Christians could have advised Daniel, they would have said, Do not act like that; do not set aside the king's meat: that is an act of Pharisaism. The moment you take your stand, and say you will not eat it, you say in effect that you are better than other people. Oh, yes; that is the kind of talk too often heard now. Men say, When you are in Rome you must do as Rome does; and such people would have pressed upon the poor young captive that, though he might obey the commandments of GOD while in his own country, yet that he could not possibly do so here in Babylon - that he could not expect to carry his religion with him into the land of his captivity. I can imagine men saying to Daniel, Look here, young man, you are too puritanical. Don't be too particular; don't have too many religious scruples. Bear in mind you are not now in Jerusalem. You will have to get over these notions, now you are here in Babylon. You are not now surrounded by friends and relatives. You are not a Jerusalem prince now. You are not surrounded by the royal family of Judah. You have been brought down from your high position. You are now a captive. And if the monarch hears about your refusing to eat the same kind of

meat that he eats, and to drink the same kind of wine that he drinks, your head will soon roll from off your shoulders. You had better be a little politic.

But this young man had piety and religion deep down in his heart: and that is the right place for it; that is where it will grow; that is where it will have power; that is where it will regulate the life. Daniel had not joined the company of the church, the faithful few in Jerusalem - because he wanted to get into society, and attain a position: that was not the reason. It was because of the love he had toward the Lord GOD of Israel.

I can imagine the astonishment of that officer, Melzar, when Daniel told him could not eat the king's meat or drink his wine. Why, what do you mean? Is there anything wrong with it? Why, it is the best the land can produce!

No, says Daniel, there is nothing wrong with it in that way; but take it away, I cannot eat it. Then Melzar tried to reason Daniel out of his scruples; but no, there stood the prophet, youth though he was at that time, firm as a rock.

So, thank GOD, this young Hebrew and his three friends said they would not eat the meat or drink the wine; and requesting that the portions might be taken away, they endeavored to persuade the overseer to bring them pulse instead.

Take away this wine, and take away this meat. Give us pulse and water. The prince of the eunuchs probably trembled for the consequences. But, yielding to their importunity, he eventually consented to let them have pulse and water for ten days. And lo! at the end of the ten days his fears were dispelled; for the faces of Daniel and his young friends were fairer and fatter than the faces of any of those who had partaken of the king's meat. The four young men had not noses, like those of too many men nowadays seen in our streets, as red as if they were just going to blossom. It is GOD's truth - and Daniel and his friends tested it - that cold water, with a clear conscience, is better than wine. They had a clear conscience; and the smile of GOD was upon them. The Lord had blessed their obedience, and the four Hebrew youths were allowed to have their own way; and in GOD's time they were brought into favor, not only with the officer set over them, but with the court and the king.

Daniel thought more of his principles than he did of earthly honor, or the esteem of men. Right was right with him. He was going to do right TODAY, and let the morrows take care of themselves. That firmness of purpose, in the strength of GOD, was the secret of his success. Right there, that very moment, he overcame. And from that hour, from that moment, he could go on conquering and to conquer, because he had started right.

Many a man is lost because he does not start right. He makes a bad start. A young man comes from his country home, and enters upon city life: temptation arises, and he becomes false to his principles. He meets with some scoffing, sneering man, who jeers at him because he goes to a church service; or because he is seen reading his Bible; or because he is known to pray to GOD - to that GOD to whom Daniel prayed in Babylon. And the young man proves to be weak-kneed: he cannot stand the scoffs, and the sneers, and the jeers, of his companions; and so he becomes untrue to his principles, and gives them up.

I want to say here to young men, that when a young man makes a wrong start, in ninety-nine

cases out of a hundred it is ruin to him. The first game of chance; the first betting transaction; the first false entry in the books; the first quarter dollar taken from the cash-box or the till; the first night spent in evil company - either of these may prove the turning-point; either of these may represent a wrong start.

If ever any persons could be said to have had a good excuse for being unfaithful to their principles, these four young men might. They had been torn away from the associations of their childhood and their youth; had been taken away from the religious influences which centered in Jerusalem, away from the temple services and sacrifices; and had been put down in Babylon among the idols and idolaters, among the wise men and soothsayers, and the whole nation was against them. They went right against the current of the whole world.

BUT GOD WAS WITH THEM.

And when a man, for the sake of principle and conscience, goes against the current of the whole world, GOD is with him; and he need not stop to consider what the consequences will be. Right is right.

But our testimony for GOD is not limited to a single act: it has to last all through our lives. So we must not imagine for a moment that Daniel had only one trial to undergo. The word to the Lord's servants is the same in all ages, "**Be thou faithful unto death.**"

This city of Babylon was a vast place. I suppose it to have been the largest city the world has ever seen. It is said to have been sixty miles round, and is understood to have consisted of an area of two hundred square miles. A line drawn through the city in either direction would measure fifteen miles. The walls are said to have had an elevation of three hundred and fifty feet: they would therefore be nearly on a level with the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral. The breadth of the walls is said to have been over eighty feet, and on the top eight chariots could run abreast. Babylon was like Chicago - so flat, that for ornamentation men had to construct artificial mounds; and, like Chicago in another particular, the products of vast regions flowed right into and through it.

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