

1. “To Eat or Not to Eat—That is the Question”

Texts: Daniel 1.

Quotes:

- For, after all, put it as we may to ourselves, we are all of us from birth to death guests at a table which we did not spread. The sun, the earth, love, friends, our very breath are parts of the banquet.... Shall we think of the day as a chance to come nearer to our Host, and to find out something of Him who has fed us so long? *Rebecca Harding Davis*
- You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you. *C.S. Lewis*
- Facts are meaningless; you can use facts to prove anything that’s even remotely true! Facts, schmacks. *Homer Simpson*

Introductory questions

Eating—is that the real question? Is this just about diet, or is it about reason, about cause and effect, and about principles that have good reasons? What does this story tell us about God and his purposes, even in difficult situations? It would have been easy to give up on God if you saw this experience as God failing in his promises—why didn’t Daniel and friends do so?

Discussion ideas

The intro to the lesson is an exercise in thinking logically, like Aristotle. Perhaps the first questions then would be, “Why should we think logically? Why should anything make any sense?” The answer then is that there is only one useful way of approach, and that is to examine the evidence and determine its truth or otherwise. Even the story of the diet is an example of cause and effect that makes such good sense.

The Book of Daniel begins with the stark comment that reveals God abandoning his people and allowing them to be taken into captivity. Imagine what this would have meant to an Israelite who “trusted in the promises.” How would this affect you if you had been living at that time? Is it fair that faithful believers suffer with the unfaithful? And what does this whole story do to God’s reputation? Surely Daniel and his friends must have been tempted to give up on this God who had allowed them to fall into enemy hands, who had not protected and preserved them.

In terms of the Great Controversy, what conclusions can we draw from this illustration from history? A deterministic approach would say that the experience of Israel was fated to be that way—even that this was predestined by God. But from the perspective of the issues in the Great Controversy, the capture and exile of Israel points to choice, freedom, a beneficent God who allows his created beings to decide on their future, and for sin to play out...

A discussion question from the lesson asks: “Imagine how easily Daniel and his three friends could have justified not cooperating at all with their Babylonian captors. After all, these were pagans who had destroyed their city and taken them captive. Wouldn’t death be better than working with these heathen at all, much less becoming important officials in the court of the very king who had destroyed their nation? What can we learn from the answer to this question?” What of the difference between compromise and cooperation. Plus innocent suffer with the guilty—important lesson to learn about sin and its consequences as the Great Controversy unfolds.

Ellen White Comments

Daniel and his three companions had a special work to do. Although greatly honored in this work, they did not become in any way exalted. They were scholars, being skilled in secular as well as religious knowledge; but they had studied science without being corrupted. They were well-balanced because they had yielded themselves to the control of the Holy Spirit. These youth gave to God all the glory of their secular, scientific, and religious endowments. Their learning did not come by chance; they obtained knowledge by the faithful use of their powers; and God gave them skill and understanding. True science and Bible religion are in perfect harmony. {4BC 1167}

When the four Hebrew youth were receiving an education for the king's court in Babylon, they did not feel that the blessing of the Lord was a substitute for the taxing effort required of them. They were diligent in study; for they discerned that through the grace of God their destiny depended upon their own will and action. They were to bring all their ability to the work; and by close, severe taxation of their powers, they were to make the most of their opportunities for study and labor. {4BC 1167}

There is need of a much closer study of the Word of God; especially should Daniel and the Revelation have attention as never before in the history of our work. We may have less to say in some lines, in regard to the Roman power and the Papacy, but we should call attention to what the prophets and apostles have written under the inspiration of the Spirit of God. {Ev 577.1}

Extra material

“It should be remembered that the promises and the threatenings of God are alike conditional.” Ellen G. White, *Evangelism*, p. 695. (Monday's lesson).

Contrast: “But like the stars in the vast circuit of their appointed path, God's purposes know no haste and no delay.” *Desire of Ages*, 32.

So what is it—conditional or determined? How do we understand God's relationships to us, and how this fits into the total divine plan? Can we have it both ways?

Then there's the question of where we should draw the line—both in the diet and in the pagan education they were to receive. Note this: “You notice in that story how Daniel was offered the food that was served to the king, and he turned it down. We usually use that as an argument for taking care of our health, and it certainly is not inappropriate. I think you'll find, though, the primary reason why he didn't eat that food was that it was offered to the idols first, and to eat the food offered to the idols was to acknowledge them; so he refused. It so happens, though, that the food that was offered to the idols was the less digestible food. So it turned out that to refuse the food offered to idols meant that they ate the food that was better for them. So in two ways this is significant. It was better for their health, but primarily it was a rejection of idolatry. That was what was so dangerous about refusing to take it.” A. *Graham Maxwell*.

A question in Wednesday's lesson asks, “Or could he [Daniel] have refused to study the Babylonian arts and sciences, because they were filled with divination, paganism, and other things in which he surely didn't believe?” Certainly a good point, and one that would surely have had the support of many—you are not supposed to be filling your mind with things that you don't believe and are not true...

An aside: Why not Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah? Why Shedrach. Meshach, and Abednego? Interesting we use the pagan names for Daniel's (Belteshazzar's) three friends, rather than their original Hebrew names...

2. Nebuchadnezzar's Image

Texts: Daniel 2.

Quotes:

- Think of how many religions attempt to validate themselves with prophecy. Think of how many people rely on these prophecies, however vague, however unfulfilled, to support or prop up their beliefs. Yet has there ever been a religion with the prophetic accuracy and reliability of science?... No other human institution comes close. *Carl Sagan*

Introductory questions

What is the most significant aspect of Daniel 2? Is it the prophetic prediction, or the demonstration of the direct intervention of God? This passage is often used to demonstrate the validity of belief in God—but what is it really saying? Did it convince Nebuchadnezzar of the nature and character of Daniel's God?

Discussion ideas

The most significant perspective in these chapters of Daniel is the character of God that is revealed. As always when reading Scripture we should be asking what this tells us about God, his motives, and his actions. So when it comes to Daniel's interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream there's much to think about.

When the astrologers and magicians first hear there is a royal dream to be interpreted, they must have smiled. They had invented supposed interpretations for dreams many times before—in fact it was a well-known ancient “art.” But this one had a twist—they had also to identify what the dream had actually been! It is easy to imagine the consternation when they realized they were being put on the spot—and that their inability to tell the king his dream undermined their claimed abilities... So the king's anger is not surprising, especially when he too may have had doubts about the truth of their previous “interpretations.”

Daniel's God-given gift to identify and also explain the dream came in complete contrast, and spoke so dramatically truthfully. The explanation is well known to us. The question comes, why did God wish to intervene in this way?

Certainly to try and influence events and to convince human beings of his existence, abilities, and nature.

There are many “spin-offs” here. Daniel is confirmed in his faith. Daniel and his companions are given high positions. The true God is identified. The future history of the world is revealed. The prophetic fulfillment confirms the truth of the prediction etc.

But what of the most important aspects in the Great Controversy? What is the king's reaction to the revelation of God's truth? He first falls prostrate at Daniel's feet—imagine what that act meant from an absolute Oriental monarch, and what his courtiers thought! His acknowledgement of Daniel's God is in context, but is it what God most would have wanted? His admission or “confession” is highly significant. Nebuchadnezzar acknowledges that Daniel's God is “God of gods and Lord of kings and revealer of mysteries...”

In a sense it is “so far so good.” At least God has got the king's attention. But as subsequent actions demonstrate, he has hardly even begun to know the nature and character whose abilities he has admitted. There is much more to learn. For all of us...

Ellen White Comments

God has given us powers to be used, to be developed and strengthened by education. We should reason and reflect, carefully marking the relation between cause and effect. When this is practiced, there will be, on the part of many, greater thoughtfulness and care in regard to their words and actions, that they may fully answer the purpose of God in their creation.

We should ever bear in mind that we are not only learners but teachers in this world, fitting ourselves and others for a higher sphere of action in the future life. The measure of man's usefulness is in knowing the will of God and doing it. {4T 548-9}

While Daniel clung to God with unwavering trust, the spirit of prophetic power came upon him. While honored by men with the responsibilities of the court and the secrets of the kingdom, he was honored by God as His ambassador, and taught to read the mysteries of ages to come. Heathen monarchs, through association with Heaven's representative, were constrained to acknowledge the God of Daniel. Daniel 2:47. {Ed 56.1}

So in Daniel God placed a light beside the throne of the world's greatest kingdom, that all who would might learn of the true and living God. At the court of Babylon were gathered representatives from all lands, men of the choicest talents, men the most richly endowed with natural gifts and possessed of the highest culture this world could bestow; yet amid them all the Hebrew captives were without a peer.... While faithful to his duties in the king's court, Daniel so faithfully maintained his loyalty to God that God could honor him as His messenger to the Babylonian monarch. Through him the mysteries of the future were unfolded, and Nebuchadnezzar himself was constrained to acknowledge the God of Daniel "as a God of gods, and a Lord of kings, and a revealer of secrets." Daniel 2:47. {6T 220}

Extra Material

At an evangelistic series just north of London, the local pastor had decided on novel titles for a rather traditional program. Daniel 2 became "The Truth about the Amazing Metal Man," creation "Adam's Mother's Birthday" and so on. My assigned topic was the Sabbath, transformed into "The Mysterious Number Seven."

One of the guests came up to me before the lecture. "Oh, I'm so excited to be here to find out about the mysterious number seven," he gushed. "For me, it's always been number 6 which as been so special and lucky. Now you're telling me it's sevens."

I groaned inwardly at the thought, and realized he was going to be terribly disappointed. Needless to say, we never saw him again...

So in our presentations, let us avoid the traps. For example, let us refuse the 'almost over-mastering deception' to suggest some kind of date. Some of our evangelists verge on date setting. Is this wise, bearing in mind the current situation?

Comments Ellen White: "The shortness of time is frequently urged as an incentive for seeking righteousness and making Christ our friend. This should not be the great motive with us; for it savors of selfishness. Is it necessary that the terrors of the day of God should be held before us, that we may be compelled to right action through fear? It ought not to be so." *Lift Him Up*, 98.

Like the story of Daniel 2, our presentations need to begin somewhere, but the heart of the message must be a revelation of God as he truly is. While we may wish to convince others of the truth of God's existence, his power and majesty, his plans for the future etc., the most significant aspects we can present are those that place God as the true light that reveal his goodness as he answers the challenges posed in the cosmic conflict, his desire to save all his erring children, and to give us "hope and a future."

3. The Fiery Furnace

Texts: Daniel 3.

Quotes:

- We killed all our Klingon gods centuries ago. They were more trouble than they were worth. *Lt. Cmdr. Worf, Star Trek*
- There (have) been many religions in this world over the centuries; (men) being glad to toss all their problems and frustrations into the lap of some nebulous Supreme Being. Such Beings [are] numerous and varied. They (are) never seen, capricious, [demand] to be taken on faith and faith alone... All of us, at one time or another, long to rest our head upon the breast of One stronger, wiser than ourselves; to surrender all responsibility to an All-Knowing, All-Powerful Being. Such dreams are pleasant, but then we must wake to reality. *Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman, "The Deathgate Cycle: Elven Star."*

Introductory questions

This is often cited as a great example of divine victory over paganism. But what was really God wishing to communicate? Was he pleased at the death of the guards who threw the prisoners into the furnace? What of the king's reaction? Was that God would have wanted? How does God look in this story—or did he have no alternative in the situation?

Discussion ideas

How does this story reveal the truth about God? Could it be possible to get a very wrong impression about God and his commandments from this account? Clearly it is a wonderful testimony to the faithfulness of the three Hebrews, yet in this "power showdown" is there not also ammunition the devil can use? For is the central aspect of the cosmic controversy over God's power? Is it not more about the way he *uses* his power? And the way this story can come across is as a struggle between an earthly Nebuchadnezzar and a heavenly One! Yet in the context of the situation, this autocratic and tyrannical king would hardly have been persuaded by an outpouring of love and grace... Consequent actions reveal that the king had learnt very few lessons...

He had already acknowledged the supremacy of God—from his experience with the dream. However, in contrast to the consecutive kingdoms revealed in the dream, he seems to have wanted to make his kingdom of gold the permanent one. Clearly the corrupting nature of power is at work here, as the reality of the dream and its interpretation fades and he constructs his own image of the reality he prefers (is there a message for us here too?!)

Once again this is hardly an opportunity for quiet discussion of the nature of truth. Nebuchadnezzar has to be helped by God where he is. He understands the exercise of raw power. He has threatened it against the three Hebrews whom he must have valued. Yet their refusal would have seemed to him gross insubordination, and he is furious at the loss of face. Consequently he allows his rage to order their execution. (Another reflection on the desire for power and prestige, like the Devil's desire to make himself like the Most High...)

His horror at seeing "one like the son of man" with the three now unbound "captives" in the fire is easy to understand. God at least got Nebuchadnezzar's attention. He orders them to come out (note he's still using the command operating system, even in God's visible presence!)

The king's response? He praises this ability of God to preserve his followers. He exalts the faithfulness of the three Hebrews. Then he orders that anyone who speaks against this God is to have his house torn down and themselves chopped to pieces. (As if this all-powerful God could not do this without help from Nebuchadnezzar if he so desired!) He speaks of God's salvation, but seems to miss the irony in his actions on behalf of the Almighty God. He clearly was far from knowing the truth about God personally...

Ellen White Comments on Knowing Truth for Ourselves

How shall we know for ourselves God's goodness and His love? the psalmist tells us—not, hear and know, read and know, or believe and know; but—”Taste and see that the Lord is good.” Instead of relying upon the word of another, taste for yourself. Experience is knowledge derived from experiment. Experimental religion is what is needed now. “Taste and see that the Lord is good.” 5T 221.

Thus through faith they will come to know God by and experimental knowledge. They have proved for themselves the reality of His words, the truth of His promises. They have tasted and know that the Lord is good. The beloved John had a knowledge gained through his own experience. He could testify: [1 John 1:1-3 quoted]. 8T 321.

Every ingenious inquirer is to search out the truth as it is in Jesus. CW 48.

All whom God has blessed with reasoning powers are to become intellectual Christians. They are not requested to believe without evidence; therefore Jesus has enjoined upon us all to search the Scriptures. Let the ingenious inquirer, and the one who would know for himself what is truth, exert his mental powers to search out the truth as it is in Jesus...We cannot allow these questions to be settled for us by another's mind, or another's judgment...We must know for ourselves what God has said. RH March 8, 1887.

Extra material

It's interesting to reflect on what was happening to Nebuchadnezzar's “picture of God” in all of this. Of course, he would have had his presuppositions about divine natures from the stories about Babylonian gods. From what we know, they were bloodthirsty, cruel, arrogant etc. This would have been Nebuchadnezzar's background, and the place where God would need to reach him. The witness of Daniel and his friends would have vied for his attention against that of the official priests and holy men. Like people throughout time, he would have been presented with conflicting views.

“Light direct from Heaven had been permitted to shine upon King Nebuchadnezzar, and for a little time he was influenced by the fear of God. But a few years of prosperity filled his heart with pride, and he forgot his acknowledgment of the living God. He resumed his idol worship with increased zeal and bigotry.” {SL 36}

As he tried to re-write future history by building the golden statue, even Nebuchadnezzar must have seen this as a challenge to the God who had revealed the dream in the first place. Perhaps he convinced himself that since he as king was credited with divine powers himself, (and was probably told this every day by his sycophantic courtiers), he could do what he wanted and determine his own future.

The refusal of the three Hebrews to bow down and worship the king's image indicates that they saw this as pagan/emperor worship. They would worship no false God or proud man. “The king's wrath knew no limits. In the very height of his power and glory, to be thus defied by the representatives of a despised and captive race was an insult which his proud spirit could not endure. The fiery furnace had been heated seven times more than it was wont, and into it were cast the Hebrew exiles. So furious were the flames, that the men who cast them in were burned to death”. {SL 38.1}

The humbling of the king's false vision and worship of a false god (himself) shows that God is still working with him, providing Nebuchadnezzar with confirmation that the Hebrews had the truth about God. One wonders how they described God to Nebuchadnezzar after the event. For “Jesus placed Himself by their side in the fiery furnace, and by the glory of His presence convinced the proud king of Babylon that it could be no other than the Son of God.” {SL 39.3} It would also be interesting to know what they had spoken about when they were in God's presence in the furnace...

Yet in the end Nebuchadnezzar still is operating from type, and acting in God's name in a way that must have made the true God shudder. To threaten the death penalty for speaking against this God is surely a gross perversion of the truth, and not what God would have intended at all. Yet this is the way the king with his limited perception of the nature of God chooses to act, showing that like all of us he has much to learn about the way God operates and how he would prefer we act. In all too many ways, Nebuchadnezzar was only confirming the characteristics that Satan blamed God with possessing...

4. Nebuchadnezzar's Judgment

Texts: Daniel 4.

Quotes:

- [A]s long as a man is thinking of God as an Examiner who has set him a sort of paper to do, or as the opposite party in a sort of bargain—as long as he is thinking of claims and counterclaims between himself and God—he is not yet in the right relation to Him. He is misunderstanding what he is and what God is. And he cannot get into the right relation until he has discovered the fact of our bankruptcy. *C. S. Lewis*
- But here steps in Satan, the eternal rebel, the first free-thinker and emancipator of worlds. He makes man ashamed of his bestial ignorance and obedience; he emancipates him, stamps upon his brow the seal of liberty and humanity, in urging him to disobey and eat of the fruit of knowledge. *Mikhail A. Bakunin*
- There is a commandment against bearing false witness against my neighbor. Is there no commandment against bearing false witness against God? If I were a god, I would reserve my greatest wrath, not for those who ignored me, nor for those who contradicted me, but for those who falsely quoted me. *Martin B. Brilliant*

Introductory questions

Why is God continuing to deal with Nebuchadnezzar—should he not have given up on him as an unpromising subject? Why does he continue to consult pagan astrologers when he can get the truth through Daniel? Why ask Daniel last? Is he only thankful for the ending of his “punishment”? What kind of picture of God is he developing?

Discussion ideas

Nebuchadnezzar still has much to learn. The chapter begins with an “after-the-fact” report. Nebuchadnezzar is happy to report the “miraculous signs and wonders.” But is this the way God would have chosen to communicate and deal with him?

He admits he was “contented and prosperous.” Perhaps that was why God had to get his attention again, using another dream. Why another dream—because the first one’s impact had faded, and he had clearly lapsed back into his pagan thinking, even after the furnace experience.

It is interesting that Daniel is called last. Perhaps N. was not always so keen to hear the truth. Evidently the battle for the king is still going on, and reflects the great controversy that pits truth against error.

N. would have been happy to know he was the “great tree,” a flattering reference to his extended power and might. But Daniel does not seek only to give vain praise, he lays out the truth (even though he admits it terrifies him)—the tree is cut down. Not something to tell a capricious tyrant. Daniel even gives an altar call and advises the king to give up his sins.

Evidently the king takes some of this to heart, for the judgement is not immediate. But a year later, expressing his self-satisfied pride in his accomplishments—a clear denial of the true source of greatness—and the voice from heaven tells him his greatness is being taken away from him. His sanity only returned as he “raised his eyes towards heaven.”

His words however show a continuing perspective on God. It’s still an issue of power and dominion, of his ability to humble the mighty, and how once N.’s sanity returned, he was “even greater than before...” One wonders how much he really did learn of the true nature of God...

Ellen White Comments

Exalted to the pinnacle of worldly honor, and acknowledged even by Inspiration as “a king of kings” (Ezekiel 26:7). Nebuchadnezzar nevertheless at times had ascribed to the favor of Jehovah the glory of his kingdom and the splendor of his reign. Such had been the case after his dream of the great image. His mind had been profoundly influenced by this vision and by the thought that the Babylonian Empire, universal though it was, was finally to fall, and other kingdoms were to bear sway, until at last all earthly powers were to be superseded by a kingdom set up by the God of heaven, which kingdom was never to be destroyed.

Nebuchadnezzar’s noble conception of God’s purpose concerning the nations was lost sight of later in his experience; yet when his proud spirit was humbled before the multitude on the plain of Dura, he once more had acknowledged that God’s kingdom is “an everlasting kingdom, and His dominion is from generation to generation.” An idolater by birth and training, and at the head of an idolatrous people, he had nevertheless an innate sense of justice and right, and God was able to use him as an instrument for the punishment of the rebellious and for the fulfillment of the divine purpose. “The terrible of the nations” (Ezekiel 28:7), it was given Nebuchadnezzar, after years of patient and wearing labor, to conquer Tyre; Egypt also fell a prey to his victorious armies; and as he added nation after nation to the Babylonian realm, he added more and more to his fame as the greatest ruler of the age.

It is not surprising that the successful monarch, so ambitious and so proud-spirited, should be tempted to turn aside from the path of humility, which alone leads to true greatness. In the intervals between his wars of conquest he gave much thought to the strengthening and beautifying of his capital, until at length the city of Babylon became the chief glory of his kingdom, “the golden city,” “the praise of the whole earth.” His passion as a builder, and his signal success in making Babylon one of the wonders of the world, ministered to his pride, until he was in grave danger of spoiling his record as a wise ruler whom God could continue to use as an instrument for the carrying out of the divine purpose. {PK 514-15}

Extra material

God is identified as the Slave-master of the universe, one who is to be seen as anti-individualism, restrictive of freedom, unwilling to do what He Himself requires. Such attitudes are very much visible today, with many wanting to be totally ‘autonomous’—in other words, ‘I decide what is right for me.’ It’s not hard to see how such modern-day attitudes are really just a reflection of Lucifer’s desire to ‘make himself like the Most High,’ a completely self-centered view that says there are no absolute rights and wrongs.

Tragically, such a viewpoint does lead to death, just as God said it would. Not as some imposed penalty by a divine dictator, but the inevitable result foreseen by a loving Creator.

Now put yourself in the place of God. What would be your response to the Devil’s charges and his campaign of lies? Most of us would probably be tempted to solve the situation by removing the trouble-maker!

But that is not God’s way. And had He obliterated Lucifer, the result could so easily have been misunderstood. The onlooking created beings might have seen in the destruction of Lucifer the message “attack God and He will destroy you,” so furthering the climate of distrust.

God chose to deal with Lucifer’s rebellion as He always does—with love and compassion, working to win the war not by force of arms, “*not by might nor power,*” Zechariah 4:6), but by spiritual “right,” wanting to win us back to love and trust him as he is.

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