

## *Developing an Excellent Spirit (Daniel 5:12)*

### **The 1st conflict: An initial test of faith**

At the very outset of the Book of Daniel we are introduced to the first conflict of four young Jewish exiles. These young men were Daniel and his three friends Hanaiah, Mishael and Azariah. The conflict which they faced was between pagan self-indulgence and godly abstinence. Daniel and his three friends had been called to the king's palace to be trained in the king's college for service to the king. They were required to part take the character that governed the kingdom and to do things that were forbidden by the Jewish Law. On the surface, this one issue might seem to have been a small matter. However, it was only part of a total policy to destroy the young men's faith in God. These young men were given new names. Apparently, this was an attempt probably to wipe away their past life with its emphasis on God and to identify them with the Babylonian culture and its influences. Their old names had identified them with the God of Israel. Now, their new names were supposed to identify them with the gods of Babylon.

<b>Meaning of the Hebrew names:</b>	<b>Meaning of the Babylonian names:</b>
Daniel: God is Judge	Belteshazzar: Chief god of Babylon
Hananiah: The Lord shows grace	Shadrach: Servant of the moon god
Mishael: Who is equal to God?	Meshach: The shadow of the prince
Azariah: The Lord helps	Abednego: The god of wisdom

These four young Jews were exposed to the corrupting influences of pagan court life and rule like many of you have also been introduced to in our modern world. The idolatry of their teachers and the ungodly customs of Babylon are not new in our world, today. Moreover, their homeland had been destroyed and their religious centre was no more there. They had lost their freedom. Yet, they were not afflicted because they purposed in their hearts to be faithful to God. And because of their decision to put God first Daniel and his friends were also honoured by God. This means, to develop an excellent spirit you must put God first in your life. Daniel and his friends gave no sign of indecision. They knew what was right and they purposed to do it. The first test proved to be a stepping stone to more responsible service and a more effective witness for God. Moreover, it indicated a set of minds and the priorities which these young men had as values concerning their faith in God. Today I ask you: What are your values?

### **The 2nd conflict: Pagan magic versus heavenly wisdom**

As you can observe when you read the Book of Daniel chapter two, the second conflict involved the challenge of pagan magic versus divine wisdom. Many kings before and after Nebuchadnezzar were concerned about the extensive empire which they had built. So, they praised their gods for their effort. Nebuchadnezzar himself questioned whether his kingdom would last after his death. Would wise heirs maintain what he had achieved? In his concern, God gave this worldly king a dream. The dream revealed an outline of the history of the world from his own time even to the second coming of Christ. The dream troubled him so much that he didn't find rest anymore. Even worse, however, King Nebuchadnezzar pretended not to know what he had dreamed. It is possible that he had really forgotten the dream, but it is also possible that he just wanted to put his magicians to test. However, he demanded from his magicians, astrologers, enchanters, and sorcerers to tell him the dream and interpret it then to him. He said that he didn't want them to tell lies to him. The magicians were baffled by this incredible request. They said that no man could ever know what another had dreamed. The

pagan magicians failed to respond to the king's challenge. Therefore, he decreed that all the wise men of Babylon should be put to death. This included Daniel and his three friends even though they had not been given the chance to respond to the king's request. When Daniel heard about the king's decision, he asked the executioner why the king had acted so harshly. When he learned that the pagan magicians had failed and created a crisis, Daniel asked permission to speak to the king. Daniel had asked this in faith, trusting that God can reveal secrets. Now he asked his friends to pray with him that God would tell them the dream and its interpretation. The solution then would satisfy the king's demand, and it would show the superiority of God's divine wisdom over all pagan magicians. Moreover, it would free Daniel and his friends from the death penalty. Daniel and his friends received the interpretation of the dream from God. The dream meant that the kingdom of Nebuchadnezzar was going to end soon and the kingdoms after it would become weaker and weaker one after the other. Now Daniel and his friends would live and continue to shine as godly lights in Babylon's darkness. And you are also called to shine in the dark world which surrounding you.

### **The 3rd conflict: Idolatry versus loyalty**

Chapter 3 of the Book of Daniel gives details of Nebuchadnezzar's attempt to establish a state religion. He maybe believed that this would unify his empire. Whatever the reason was, Nebuchadnezzar set up a huge image and demanded that everyone should bow and worship it whenever a sign for this was given. There was no room for an alternative loyalty. One had to either bow to the image or would be burned in a blazing fire. This decree meant that the young Jews had to decide whether they would keep their spiritual conviction and their loyalty to God or adopt the standard imposed by Babylon. Daniel was at this time somewhere else. Fortunately, for his friends the decision was not difficult. These young men had already shown their faith in God, before, and they were committed to His Word. A person who is faithful in little can also be faithful in much. So, when this time came, their minds were already made up as they showed by their behaviour. It takes more than a king's condemnation to make true servants of God sin against their convictions. The result was the immediate sentence of death. However, a multitude watched when the faith of these three young men was rewarded. During the blazing fire, they were walking together with a fourth person whom Nebuchadnezzar described as a "son of the gods". When they came out, they were not burned at all! They walked out of the death penalty to the glory of God and to the admiration of the assembled Babylonian leaders. Now Nebuchadnezzar made a decree that there was no God besides the God of these young believers. He went even further and commanded that everyone who would speak against their God would be killed together with his family. From this time on, Nebuchadnezzar promoted Daniel's friends, again, in the civil affairs of Babylon. Christ in you is the hope of glory. The Word of God which the young men cherished above all things became flesh among them in their situation.

### **The 4th conflict: A king's pride versus God's sovereignty**

As you read the 4th chapter of the Book of Daniel, you will learn that King Nebuchadnezzar experienced several dramatic events in his life. The Highest God brought these experiences to him as a punishment. Even though God had demonstrated His power and wisdom to Nebuchadnezzar, nothing seemed to change his mind and pride. As you read, you shall see that God wanted Nebuchadnezzar to know that He was the One Who had made him what he had become. But more was necessary before the king was ready to humble himself and give God the rightful place in his thinking and actions. Please, keep these things in mind as you examine this conflict! Nebuchadnezzar was enjoying peace in his prosperous kingdom. His energy had been turned from the task of consolidating his empire to refining his rule over the affairs of Babylon. His government was running smoothly at that time like well oiled machine. As a result, he was able to turn his attention to internal developments. He began massive public

works. These included projects like the building of fortifications. The city was beautiful. It had a lot of palaces, temples and attractive public building and the famous hanging gardens. The king was apparently well-satisfied with his imperial and domestic achievements. However, at this point God gave Nebuchadnezzar a dream that was intended to bring about a change in his attitude and behaviour. The “shining star” Daniel who had interpreted the other dream before, did advise the king to repent and change his actions and attitude to receive God’s mercy. Whatever his immediate reaction was, the king did soon forget Daniel’s advice. Only a year later Nebuchadnezzar boasted: “Is not this the great Babylon I have built by my might, power and the glory of my majesty?” Immediately, God’s judgement fell on him. This was why the king lost his sanity for an extended period. He lived apart from people in the open field. During this time, his kingdom was maintained by his advisers. Daniel and his friends were without a doubt among these advisers. After this period of extreme abasement, Nebuchadnezzar was restored to his kingdom. As a result of this conflict, the king’s proud spirit was broken, and his spiritual priorities were recorded as he gladly acknowledged God’s control over the affairs of all human race. The main point of this chapter as you read it on your own is about God’s sovereignty in establishing and maintaining the kingdoms of men. Daniel wanted us to know that God never lost control of His creation, for history is His story, and you and I play a part of it.

#### **The 5th conflict: Man’s impiety versus divine sovereignty**

The 5th chapter of the Book of Daniel introduces a final scene in the history of Babylon. Here, the kingdom of Babylon is in obvious decline. A powerful army of Medes and Persians were surrounding the city. Nebuchadnezzar’s successor King Nabonidus was away from the city, and his elder son Belshazzar acted as king-regent in his absence. This was the setting in which the young king chose to celebrate a wild party. The proud young ruler commanded that the sacred vessels which had earlier been taken from the Hebrew temple in Jerusalem should be brought and be used when he was toasting the gods of Babylon. This nasty move of impiety brought an immediate reaction from God. The finger of a hand appeared and wrote a strange message on the wall. It said: “Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin.” The king was frightened. His nobles were baffled. This was the conflict in chapter 5. The terrified ruler sent for his enchanters, astrologists, and diviners to interpret the message, but none of them could help. The queen, however, remembered the service that Daniel had given during Nebuchadnezzar’s reign. So, he was brought to the king and was promised a great reward if he could interpret the writing. He was promised to become, then, the third ruler of the kingdom together with Belshazzar and his father King Nabonidus. Daniel moved quickly to the meaning of the mysterious message. He said: “This is the interpretation of each word: Mene: God has numbered your kingdom and finished it. Tekel: You have been weighed in the balances and found wanting. Peres: Your kingdom has been divided and given to the Medes and Persians.” This was a crucial hour in the history of Babylon. Despite the knowledge that his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar had greatly humbled for his ignorance, Belshazzar had ignored his accountability to God. Furthermore, he had presumed to insult the God Who controls life by drinking out of the sacred vessels. Beyond this, he was praising the worthless and lifeless idols of Babylon. Therefore, his actions were weighed in the divine scales, and he was found to fall short of what God required as basic of common sense of human. The kingdom of Babylon had reached its end, and it was to be succeeded by the Medes and Persians as God had already revealed to Nebuchadnezzar in chapter 2 through Daniel. The 5th chapter ends with statement that at this very night Belshazzar was slain. Before, he had announced that Daniel should become the third person in the kingdom. Also, in this chapter Daniel is titled “a man with an excellent spirit”. Daniel had begun his trust in God when he still young, and out of this he later developed this excellent spirit.

### **The 6th conflict: Jealously versus God's providential care**

As chapter 5 of the Book of Daniel ended, we saw Babylon fall. And Darius the Mede took the kingdom on behalf of the Medo-Persian Empire. Now Daniel and his fellow exiles were under the control of this empire. Nevertheless, we see that Daniel had a place of prominence as one of the three chief administrators over the realm. In this position, Daniel distinguished himself that the king intended to make him the chief administrator. This intent, however, caused undercurrent of criticism and jealousy among the other administrators. While Daniel was both a foreigner and an exiled Jew, he was also a distinguished civil servant. He was trustworthy, diligent and incorrupt. The reason for the reaction of Daniel's enemies was jealousy over the promotion and perhaps prejudice because of his country people and religion. They plotted and planned traps against Daniel that he should break a law that would cause him to receive death penalty. They couldn't find anything against Daniel except something that had to do with his God. They knew that Daniel would always communicate with his God. Therefore, they came together to prepare a new law which was saying that no gods should be allowed to be worshipped in the kingdom for one month, but everyone should worship only the king, himself. Then they brought this law before the king and persuaded him to seal and establish it. Daniel, then, knew that when he prayed, he would be in danger of the death penalty. But he prayed, anyway. And he didn't pray in secret but in front of his open window. His prayer to God, then, was used as evidence to support the charge that Daniel would be disloyal to the king and be subject to the death penalty. The king, himself, did not want Daniel to be killed. But he could not reverse the law which he had established, himself. Therefore, Daniel was thrown into the lions' den. The king went home and was so worried about Daniel that he couldn't sleep. He even fasted for Daniel. Early in the morning, the king arose and went to look after Daniel. He cried with a loud voice: "Daniel, servant of the Most High God, has your God Whom you serve continuously been able to deliver you from the lions?" Daniel answered the king: "Oh king live forever!" God had intervened, bringing protection and deliverance to Daniel and destruction to his enemies. Once again, steadfast faith in God during conflict and confrontation with evil, brought glory to God and promotion to His servant. The lesson, here, for young people is that God's providential care is for them who continuously put their trust in Him in all situations. If you will put your faith and trust in God, you will never be ashamed. This conflict suggests that when one builds his life on faith and trust in God, he or she can expect to see God's providential care revealed in his or her circumstances.

### **How can I develop an excellent spirit?**

The truth of the matter is: Just as the human mind can be trained intellectually, so is the human spirit. It can also be trained spiritually. It can be built up in strength just as the body can be built up in muscles. The great Apostle Paul, the Prince of Preachers, wrote to Timothy: "For body exercise profits little, but godliness is profitable into all things. Have the promise of the life that is now and that which is to come" (1st Timothy 4:8). We go to school to train our human minds. We do sports to train our bodies. With that same way we can also train our human spirit. Proverbs 20:27 says: "The spirit of man is the candle of the Lord". This means, God is going to use our human spirit when it is born again to guide us and to communicate His plans and purposes to us. Daniel and his friends gave the Word of God the first place in their lives. They practised the Word of God daily. They instantly obeyed the voice of God through the spirit man. God communicates with our spirit, not with our reasoning factors. The spirit of man is the candle of the Lord searching all the inward parts of the belly. This means that to develop an excellent spirit, we should allow the Spirit of God to educate our spirit. We do that by practising the Word of God, not only hearing it. As we have learned through these six chapters of the Book of Daniel, Daniel and his friends grew spiritually because they were doers of God's Word. They were wise and shined among the darkness that was around them. With so many different voices surrounding us, it is sometimes difficult to stop and listen to

the Word of God and obey His directions. Families and friends are always ready to give us their opinions and advice. Daniel and his friends did also have this experience. But however, an essential part of their training to develop an excellent spirit was their determination to listen to what God's Word had to say to them. They paid attention to God's Word. They inclined their ears into His Word, they did not allow the Word of God to depart from their eyes, but rather they kept it during their heart. Jesus says in Matthew 12:34 that the abundance of the heart is what the mouth will speak. The overflowing of what they had in their hearts brought the results in these six chapters. As they presented God to the Babylonians, through them the Babylonians knew that God exists and is the supreme ruler of all mankind. Later in the chapters 7-12, Daniel says in his prophecies that those who will follow these patterns will be wise and shine in the times and kingdoms to come. Paul told Timothy in 2nd Timothy 2:19-22 that the Lord knows those who are His, and everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness. In a large house, there are articles not only of gold and silver but also of wood and clay. Some are for noble purposes, and some are for ignoble purposes. If a man cleanses himself from the latter, he will be an instrument for nobles' purposes made holy and useful to the Master, prepared to do a good work. Flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness, faith and love and peace along with those who call on the name of the Lord. We all have the choice, and the choice is yours. You can be like Daniel or one of his friends in our world, today.

If you have not received Jesus as your personal Lord and Saviour, I invite you to the Champion of Love Whose love is unspeakable.

Yours in His service, F.P. Arthur (a missionary from Ghana)