



INTRODUCTION

If I mentioned the name Daniel in connection with the Bible, the first words most people would associate him with are “lion’s den.”

Sure, Daniel was thrown into a lair of hungry lions because he disobeyed a decree to bow and worship only King Darius when he was caught praying to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But it’s what Daniel did long before he entered the lion’s den that has always resonated with me.

When Daniel was in his teenage years, he was among the most handsome, physically fit, and intelligent young men in the royal line of Judah. Then disaster struck: King Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian ruler of the most powerful nation in the civilized world at the time, assembled a massive army to march into Jerusalem and to conquer the land in 605 B.C.

To demonstrate his dominance, King Nebuchadnezzar cherry-picked Jerusalem’s best and brightest minds and most beautiful women as captives. Daniel, along with three young men his age—Hananiah, Misha-el, and Azariah—were carted off to Babylon, along with all of Judah’s livestock and the Temple treasure.

There’s every indication that this quartet was treated well because they were seen as assets by the King’s court. They were the best of the best, the crème de la crème who would have gotten perfect 2400 scores on their SATs or aced their law school entrance exams today. Think National Merit Scholars.

Biblical academics believe this Fab Four was around fourteen years old when they were placed under the guidance of Ashpenaz, who was in charge of the palace personnel, to teach them the Chaldean language and literature.



Like hotshot recruits entering college, they were assigned the best foods from the King's own kitchen during their training period. Nothing would be spared for these elite scholars who looked—as well as acted—the part.

Daniel and his three friends may have grown up in spiritually deprived Judah, but somebody in their lives—a parent, an uncle, a rabbi, or a prophet—must have modeled how they should serve God. That's the best explanation I have for why they refused to eat the rich foods set before them at the King's table.

You see, these “foods” were considered detestable to the God of heaven whom they faithfully served. Perhaps they were presented with meats that had been sacrificed to idols, or meats that were unclean because the animals had been strangled or contaminated with blood or fat—or all of the above. More likely, though, they were offered meats that God forbade His people to eat in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. I'm talking about pork, rabbits, camels, badgers, snakes, and flesh-eating birds such as vultures.

Shellfish was also unclean according to the ancient law, but it's doubtful that lobster or scampi were on King Nebuchadnezzar's menu because Babylon was too far away from a salt-water ocean. But they could have been served catfish, eel, or other smooth-skinned species that were also off limits according to God's commands.

Daniel also passed on the King's wine. While there was no scriptural injunction against drinking wine, perhaps Daniel knew the pitfalls that awaited those consuming excess alcohol and wanted to truly present his body to God as a living sacrifice. After all, the Babylonians were attempting to change his worldview by giving him a Chaldean education, to change his loyalty by giving him a new name (Daniel was called Belteschazzar, while Hananiah, Misha-el, and Azariah became the celebrated Shadrach, Meshach, and Abegnego who would later walk into the fiery furnace), and to change his lifestyle by giving him a new diet.

So, when presented with the King's banquet, Daniel politely inquired, *You got anything else to eat?*

When told no, he asked if he and his compatriots could consume a different diet that would be blessed by their God, which made Ashpenaz—in charge of



their well-being—very nervous. He was afraid they would become pale and thin compared to the Babylonian youths in palace training. They wouldn't measure up. They'd fall behind.

“Give me and my buddies ten days,” Daniel said. “That's all I ask. Let us eat only pulse and drink only water. If at the end of ten days we don't look better and look healthier than the young Babylonian men, then we'll eat the foods supplied by the King. Case closed.”

I always marvel at the faith and courage it must have taken Daniel to risk his life for what he believed in. He simply was unwilling to dishonor God's commands, even in the area of diet.

Ashpenaz knew his head was on the chopping block if these four youths—the best of the best of Judah—became weaklings and lost their physical edge. When Daniel pressed his case, the steward reluctantly agreed to their experiment. The four could eat their pulse—the ripe, edible seeds and produce of a wide range of plants—and drink only water for ten days.

In a sense, Daniel was placing his life on the line as well, but he was willing to put God's principles for healthy eating to the test. The story goes that for ten days they ate only pulse and drank only water. At the end of their experiment, they were found to be greater in health and excelled in wisdom and mental acuity and clarity when compared to their Babylonian counterparts. No one was smarter, better looking, or healthier than Daniel, Hananiah, Misha-el, and Azariah.

Based on the objective results of following their “Maker's Diet,” the four young Hebrews were allowed to continue consuming a diet approved by God for the balance of the three-year training program. Scripture tells us that when they were examined by King Nebuchadnezzar himself, they were found to be “ten times better” in health, wisdom, and understanding than the leading young men of Babylon who had received the same education.

Ten times better? When you stop and think about it, that was quite a feat back then and would be a massive advantage today. One-hundredth of a second—comparable to the length of a fingernail in this case—was the difference between Michael Phelps coming home from the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games with a record eight gold medals versus seven golds and one silver



around his neck. Likewise, the blink of an eye is often the difference between winning a sprint to the finish line in a bike race, on the 400-meter running track, at a speed-skating rink, or in the swimming pool. Victory in sport is always a tiny differential of far less than 1 percent.

Yet Daniel and his three friends were “ten times better,” which is almost like lapping the field in a middle-distance running race. Imagine if you were found to be ten times the student, ten times the teacher, ten times more effective as an attorney, ten times more proficient in sales, ten times more precise as a surgeon, or ten times stronger and faster than the competition. Think of the advantage you would have over everyone.

In other words, imagine that you were LeBron James for a moment. Okay, I’m exaggerating, but sometimes when I see LeBron take over an NBA basketball game in the waning moments, I can imagine what it’s like for someone to be clearly head and shoulders above the competition. That’s what Daniel must have been like against his competition in the palace court. He was ten times better, which is why the King gave him more and more responsibilities.

The author of the Book of Daniel was Daniel himself. This was his story, and the Spirit of God inspired his words. Compared to some of the other miraculous events described in the book—interpreting King Nebuchadnezzar’s dreams; Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego walking in and out of the roaring flames inside the furnace; Daniel surviving without a scratch in a den of hungry lions; and seeing astounding visions from God Himself—I still believe that Daniel’s steadfast faith and the fact that he and his friends excelled to the point of being “ten times better” than other young men in the palace court is the greatest miracle recounted in the Book of Daniel.

WHY DANIEL RESONATES TODAY

Another reason why I identify with Daniel’s amazing journey of faith is because I wasn’t much older than he was when I faced a similar life-changing choice:





At the age of nineteen, do I follow the conventional wisdom on how to treat several incurable diseases that jeopardized my life? Or do I follow God's plan for good health set forth in the Bible?

I had just finished my freshman year at Florida State University when I took a counselor position at a summer church camp. Out of nowhere, I was hit with nausea, stomach cramps, high fever, and horrible digestive problems. That was the first wave; the follow-up was a tsunami of violent diarrhea that knocked me for a loop and sapped any remaining energy I had. I would drop twenty pounds from my already lean frame in just six days at camp.

My health deteriorated over the next few months, and I was forced to withdraw from college at the start of my sophomore year. I went back home to Palm Beach Gardens, Florida, where my parents knew something was seriously wrong. When my fever spiked to 105 degrees, they immediately stepped into action, filling our bathtub with ice and cold water. My father gently eased my fever-ridden body into the chilly bathwater, but I was close to incoherent.

My parents rushed me to the local hospital, where specialists and medical technicians conducted various tests, including a sigmoidoscopy and an upper GI series that allowed them to examine the condition in my intestinal tract and look for any irregularities.

I was examined by a gastroenterologist, who recognized the symptoms of high fever, night sweats, loss of appetite, general feeling of weakness, severe abdominal cramps, and diarrhea—often bloody—as symptoms of inflammatory bowel disease. After running a battery of diagnostic tests, the doctor delivered a stunning verdict: I was stricken with a digestive ailment known as Crohn's disease.

"How do we treat it?" I asked.

"There's no known cure," replied the gastroenterologist. "You'll probably be on powerful anti-inflammatory and immunosuppressives for the rest of your life. You could be facing surgery to remove parts of your small intestine and potentially your colon."

My doctor then rattled off words such as "resection" and "colectomy" and "ostomy." None of those terms were familiar to me, and later I would learn what they really meant: I would have to live with the surgical removal of my



colon and wear bags to collect fecal waste from my body. To a nineteen-year-old preparing to find his way in the world, that sounded like a fate worse than death.

Neither my parents nor I liked that scenario, so we set out on a path that would take me to sixty-nine doctors, medical practitioners, and health experts and attempt treatments ranging from conventional medicine to “natural cures.” We tapped every medical and nutritional mind we could, and I personally read more than three hundred books on health and nutrition. I tried every possible diet out there in my attempt to leave no stone unturned.

Nothing stopped the death spiral that my health was in. I lost nearly half of my body weight and was reduced to 104 pounds, a frightfully thin figure who resembled a concentration camp survivor. The medical team treating me prepared my parents for the news that I might not make it.

I'll never forget the night in my hospital room when nurses, phlebotomists, and doctors desperately tried to get an IV in me to rehydrate my shriveled body. After one failed attempt, a nurse ran out of my hospital room. I overheard her say, “This young man isn't going to make it until the next morning.”

I truly believed this was it for me. I was ready to die and go home to be with the Lord. After four hours of agony, they successfully inserted a needle into my vein.

I woke up the next morning alive, but I was far from healed. When my condition stabilized, I was sent home with a half-dozen medications to deal with the stabbing pains in my gut, and I made dozens of trips to the bathroom each day.

It was about that time when I made a commitment to God. “Lord, if you heal me and I come out of this alive,” I prayed, “and if I can help just one person overcome a horrific disease like mine, this living hell will have all been worth it.”

I also took a major step of faith in asking my mother to take my picture. She was reluctant to do so and even asked me if she could wait to take the photo when I looked better. I demanded she take the picture now, as I wanted the world to see what God was about to do in my life.