

**The Point:** Even in a hostile culture, Christians are called to remain true to their identity as God's chosen people.

## HIS STORY

### Daniel and his friends were taken captive

The hero of the story we are about to read is not one of the Hebrew teenagers, but the all-powerful God of grace who keeps His promises. At the beginning of the Book of Daniel, we were introduced to four remarkable young men who were uprooted and replanted in the harsh and wicked soil of the Babylonian Empire. Though they were away from home, they were not outside the sovereign plan of God.

In order for God's people to be salt and light in the evil empire of Babylon, they would need to be prepared for the challenges such a culture would throw at them—challenges designed to lead them away from God. Look at the pressures Daniel and his three friends had to face and notice how these pressures are similar to the ones we face in our own culture today

### ► What challenges do Christians face today that might lead them away from God?

### Daniel lives according to his beliefs

Despite the Babylonian strategy to convert Daniel and his friends, the young Hebrews were determined not to abandon their convictions or their commitment to God.

Notice how Daniel resisted the temptation to defile himself (v. 8). The immersion into the world of pagan Babylon did not win over his heart or mind. The text does not explain why the food was problematic for Daniel. It may have been that the food was unclean for a Hebrew (Lev. 11:1-23); it may have been that the food was offered to idols (Deut. 6:3-15); or it may have communicated an absolute allegiance to the king that Daniel reserved for God alone.

### God gives grace to those who seek to live holy lives before Him

Daniel and his friends had faith that God would honor the risk they were taking in seeking to be holy. It was already settled in their hearts that they would remain faithful to their God, no matter what. Daniel and his friends testified to God's grace and power through their service, their wisdom, and their understanding.

### Essential Doctrines

**New Identity of the Believer:** *When a person places faith in Christ, that person undergoes a fundamental change of identity. He or she goes from being an enemy under God's wrath (Eph. 2:1-3) to being welcomed into God's family as a beloved child (Eph. 2:19). The believer in Christ is declared righteous on account of Christ's perfect life and substitutionary death and resurrection. No longer is the person a slave to sin, defined by past failures or present struggles. The person has been delivered from the realm of darkness and now belongs to the kingdom of light (Col. 1:13). Anyone who is in Christ is a "new creation" in whom the old, sinful self is passed away and the new, redeemed self is alive and progressing, until the person becomes more and more like Christ (2 Cor. 5:17).*

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## HIS STORY

### Daniel remains faithful to God

Daniel's rise in power was not because of his natural ability, but because God worked in Daniel's life, and Daniel walked with God. Still, as many have discovered, it can get lonely at the top. Success can increase your enemies. The blessings of the righteous can stir up the jealousy of the wicked. In the passage that follows, we see the plot to bring down Daniel.

The officials knew if they wanted Daniel gone, they had to use his integrity against him. By manipulating Darius into making an irreversible decree, the officials hoped to trap Daniel in an act of disobedience to the king. Their goal was not to see Daniel demoted; their goal was to see Daniel dead.

When Daniel found out Darius signed an edict honoring himself as the exclusive deity of the empire, what did he do? What he had always done. He obeyed God rather than man. He continued a pattern of spiritual devotion that had marked his life for years, a pattern his enemies knew well. He went to his home, upstairs to the place of prayer, where the windows were open toward Jerusalem. He then got down on his knees and prayed three times daily, as he had always done.

### Daniel trusts God for deliverance

Godly people seek to remain faithful to God, no matter what may happen or what circumstances they may encounter. In this passage, Daniel demonstrated his complete dependence on the Lord for rescue.

King Darius was upset about the situation and tried to find a way to deliver a man he obviously admired, appreciated, and respected. Unfortunately, Darius was caught in a trap of his own making. His evil administrators reminded him once more (the decree is mentioned four times for emphasis and effect) of the binding nature of the law of the Medes and Persians. When the King made a law, even he was bound by his words.

### God saves Daniel and glorifies His name

So what happened next? The next morning king Darius returned, fully expecting the den to be the tomb for whatever remained of Daniel's body. But Darius was in for a surprise.

We see how God used this entire story to show His greatness to the pagan world. Darius was clearly impacted by God's miraculous deliverance of Daniel. His declaration accomplishes at least two important purposes: It recognizes the greatness, even the superiority, of Israel's God; and it cancels out the irrevocable edict of verses 6-9. This is an amazing example of how God can even use unbelievers to proclaim His glory. As Proverbs 21:1 says, "A king's heart is like streams of water in the Lord's hand: He directs it wherever He chooses."

► **Make a list of the attributes given to God in Darius' song. How is God's ultimate mission of receiving glory and honor from people of all nations revealed in this song?**

### Essential Doctrines

**Priesthood of the Believer:** *God's intention for humanity is that we be a kingdom of priests, not just a kingdom with priests. Although God set up the priestly system in the Old Testament due to the sinfulness of humanity and people's need for a mediator, His ultimate purpose is that we come to God directly, through the mediating work of Jesus Christ, thus eliminating the need of another priest. Because of the work of Christ on the cross (exemplified in His tearing down the curtain that prevented access into the holy of holies, Christians are free to approach God with boldness (Rom. 5:1-5; Heb. 4:14-16).*

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## HIS STORY

### God sends the Israelites home

The first six chapters of Ezra highlight God's sovereignty in the preservation of His people. God brought His chosen people, Israel, back into the land of promise. What's more, He used the ruler of the nation to accomplish His purposes.

After years of living in exile, the people of God were sovereignly given free passage to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. God moved within the heart of the king to not only allow His people to return and rebuild the temple, but to also provide the finances for their mission. The king encouraged people to give a voluntary gift to the Israelites as they returned, much like the type of offerings we are called to give today.

► **When have you witnessed God using unlikely people, like the pagan king here, to provide for His people? Explain.**

### The people journey back to Jerusalem and worship God

Consider the scene as these exiles returned to their land. The Lord had not been worshiped in Jerusalem in fifty years, since the city's fall. So, it's not surprising that the first concern of the community was to lift up name of the Lord, even though the temple was not fully constructed.

While the people of God fully intended to rebuild the temple, they knew a physical temple wasn't a requirement to worship God. Before the temple's grand re-opening, even before all of the once familiar things were restored in Jerusalem, the people simply worshiped God with a cheerful heart.

### The reconstruction of the temple begins

Worship is at the center of life in the community of faith. In the Jews' return to Jerusalem, their worship highlighted God's goodness to His people for allowing them to return and reconstruct the temple. Notice the multifaceted nature of their worship and how it exalted the Lord.

The people gathered together to celebrate the new foundation that was in place for the temple. However, the primary purpose of their gathering was to worship God, the One the temple points to.

### Essential Doctrines

**Preservation of Scripture:** *God has chosen to reveal Himself to humanity through the text of Scripture, having inspired it and directed it to be free from error. God has also acted providentially throughout the course of history to ensure the biblical text is faithfully preserved for future generations. Our belief in the preservation of Scripture is supported by investigation into how the canon of Scripture was formed, and how manuscripts were faithfully transmitted throughout the centuries.*

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## HIS STORY

### The people faced opposition with the rebuilding of the temple

In the previous session, we learned that the exiled Jews were returning in waves to Jerusalem, where they began the process of laying a foundation for a new temple. The Jews had permission to rebuild, but they still faced opposition, and this opposition took on two forms. Let's take a look.

The reason the Jews declined their help was due to the simple reason that even though these neighbors made sacrifices to God, they didn't worship Him alone—they also worshiped the false gods in their pantheon. These returning Jews knew the history of their people all too well—how they would be drawn away from God because they participated in the idolatry of the surrounding nations. Having learned their lesson about falling into idolatry and risking God's judgment and discipline once more, the Jews decided that they alone would build the temple. This was their way of saying that the Lord alone was God and no other "god" would be worshiped with this new temple.

► **What are some ways you can guard your mind from idol worship? How can you make sure your worship is not influenced by those idols?**

### God's people listened to God's word

God used two prophets, Haggai and Zachariah, to rebuke and exhort God's people who were in desperate need of encouragement. The prophets' mission was to bring about spiritual renewal and to motivate the people to restore proper worship of the Lord.

The prophetic message was clear: When God and His work are neglected, He removes His blessing and the people and community become spiritually malnourished.

### The temple was finally rebuilt

On March 12, 515 B. C., the celebration began—four years after the work was renewed and twenty years after the efforts began (Ezra 3:8). The completion of the temple was nearly 70 years after Solomon's temple fell in 586 B. C., just as Jeremiah prophesied (Jer. 25:12-14; 29:10).

The celebrations that followed the construction were a vital part of living as the people of God—there were occasions of fellowship, worship, and of glorifying God. In essence, these days of celebration helped God's people remember His saving acts from generation to generation.

## Essential Doctrines

**Inerrancy of Scripture:** *Inerrancy refers to the belief that the Scripture is completely truthful, without any mixture of error in all its teachings, no matter what subject it addresses. Believing the Scriptures to be inerrant does not preclude the biblical authors' inclusion of observations from a human observer, the use of round numbers, unusual grammatical constructions, or varying perspectives on a particular event. It does mean, however, that Scripture is an infallible guide to salvation and that it is truthful in all that it affirms (Matt. 5:18; John 10:35; Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18).*

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## HIS STORY

### God's people faced extinction

In our journey through the Bible, we have seen how the Babylonian and Assyrian empires took God's people into exile. As the Persian Empire spread across the world, it became more and more difficult for God's people to maintain their Jewish identity. There were many Jews who questioned or lost their faith during these times. But God had promised to maintain a remnant of His people, and so faithful Jews passed down their heritage and faith to new generations of children.

Esther was one such child. She was an orphan—raised by her cousin Mordecai. In addition to her difficult family situation, Esther belonged to an immigrant family, which means she was part of a religious, racial, and cultural minority. The dominant culture in Persia was so unfriendly to Jews that Mordecai and Esther felt the need to hide their cultural identity. Esther knew what it meant to be an outsider.

- ▶ **When have you felt like an “outsider” because of your faith? How do you respond in these situations?**

### Mordecai believed in God's sovereign plan for deliverance

Mordecai hoped that Esther would rely on her position to seek protection for their people. Mordecai recognized the role he had in God's plan to preserve His people, and he recognized the role Esther might have as well.

### Esther risked her life for the sake of her people

Like Esther, many of us have had tough experiences. But God has a way of taking everything we are—our personalities, our experiences, our gifts and talents, our “baggage,” our hopes, our faith—and redeeming it all. Jesus died on the cross and was raised from the dead so that God could take broken people like us and make us useful for Him. We can know that nothing in our background or our present circumstances is outside of the sovereign power of God. He is always working, even when we can't see Him (Rom. 8:28).

And while we trust God's commitment to keep all of His promises, we still bear a responsibility to participate in His redemptive plan for this world and the people in it. Obedience matters. God *could* execute His purposes without our help, but He won't. He chooses to use us to accomplish His plans (Eph. 2:10).

### Essential Doctrines

**God's Providence:** *Providence refers to God's continuing work and involvement in His creation. This includes, in various degrees, God's preservation of the created order, His governance, and His care for His people (Gen. 8:21-22; Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3). Christians believe the world, and even the cosmos itself, is contingent upon God, incapable of existing apart from Him. Christians also believe in God's personal and direct intervention in the world—as opposed to a hands-off approach to creation—that affects not only the natural order, but also the individuals and events within human history.*

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## HIS STORY

### God's People are centered on the Word

Throughout Israel's history, idolatry was at the root of their rebellion against God. Because of their sin, God's people spent over 70 years in exile. Once they moved back to Jerusalem, they were able to gather publicly and worship the Lord by listening to His Word. The event was timely. The Law required the nation to gather to hear the Word of God read every seven years (Deut. 31:9-13).

► **How can you tell if a church is centered on the proclamation of God's Word or centered on something else? Why is gathering to hear God's Word so important for believers?**

### God's people revere the word together

We live in a culture where it's sometimes hard to hold a person's attention. It seems our attention spans are getting shorter and shorter. We quickly turn to electronic devices whenever we face a moment of boredom. Consider the contrast with the people of Israel and how they listened to God's Word on this day.

► **God's people respond in repentance and accountability**

### The privilege of a heart that knows God

Here we see Ezra reading the Scriptures. Some people may not have understood the language the Scriptures were written in because they had grown up in a foreign land, in exile where Hebrew was not spoken, read, or written. In response, the Levites walked among the people and took time to explain the Scriptures to them in the language they were able to understand. Once the people understood God's Word they began to weep—they were broken by their heritage of disobedience.

God provided His people with an opportunity to demonstrate their repentance. They were to celebrate the Feast of the Trumpets. This seems to be God's pattern for His people: God speaks, His people listen with open ears and hearts, He corrects them, the people are broken by their sin, and God comforts them with His Word and shows them how to live righteously.

## Essential Doctrines

**Inspiration of Scripture:** *The inspiration of Scripture refers to God's direction of the human authors of the Bible so that they composed and recorded His message to humankind in their original writings (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:19-21). Occasionally, this inspiration was achieved through dictation, where God directly spoke to the original authors. Most of the time, however, this inspiration was achieved through the supernatural influence of the Holy Spirit through the personalities of the authors so that their writings can be considered the very words of God.*

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**THE WARNING AGAINST  
SHALLOW WORSHIP**

Malachi 1:6-14; 3:7-12; 4:1-6

**The Point:** Worship involves giving God our very best.

**HIS STORY**

**The people committed shallow worship**

Notice that God gave two indictments against His people at the beginning: they showed Him no honor, and they showed Him no fear. Not only did they *not* honor and fear Him, but they *despised* His name.

*Despising* means *having an attitude of ongoing disrespect for someone or something*; it refers to the act of conveying insignificance or worthlessness upon an object, idea, or individual. The text shows us that the people did this to God by offering crippled, lame, or blinded animals to the Lord rather than the perfect, blameless sacrifice He requested. He even asked them, “Do you think that if you gave even the governor what you’re giving me that he’d be okay with it?”

► **In what ways do people “despise” God’s name today?**

► **How can you guard against this in your own life?**

**Their shallow worship minimized God’s worth**

In the first half of the Book of Malachi, God questioned the quality of the sacrifices of the people. Then, He questioned the quantity of their sacrifices.

Essentially, God told the Israelites that, despite their believing otherwise, they were far from Him. God had challenged the Israelites previously for their poor sacrifices, their lack of worship, their idolatry, and their faithlessness. *The root of the problem is the heart.* They had misappropriated their funds. In other words, they failed to deal responsibly with what God had given them. Giving is an indication of the state of our hearts, and measures how much we value God.

**Shallow worship deserves judgment**

The text speaks of a future light in the midst of Israel’s darkness. Israel expected unending blessings because of their position as God’s chosen people. However, God first informed them that He would come to set all wrongs right—beginning the process with their lukewarm worship.

The final two verses of Malachi offer the ultimate cliffhanger to the Old Testament. He ends with a promise of someone to come and a warning about things already done. “Look,” Malachi wrote, “I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before Day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers. Otherwise, I will come and strike the land with a curse.”

**Essential Doctrines**

**Worship:** *While many reduce worship to an event or the singing of worship songs, worship is first and foremost something of the heart and extends to all areas of life. The aim and focus of worship is God, giving Him the exact due of praise and adoration that He deserves. Worship should be carried out not only at a personal level within a Christian’s life, but also in joining with other Christians in the corporate act of worship and stewarding our gifts for the glory of God. Corporate worship not only serves to edify and strengthen other Christians, but it also serves as a witness to non-believers of the greatness of God.*

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