

While mentioned frequently in both the Old and New Testaments, fasting is not a practice kept by many Christians today. In our fast food culture, many fear that if we don't eat at least three meals a day (not to mention the snacks) that we will starve. Yet, if we are to follow the One who emptied himself not only of food, but of divine right and prerogative (c.f., Philippians 2), we too must engage in the practice of kenosis: of emptying. My experience of fasting is that it frees me to focus my "whole self" on God in prayer. Ultimately the joint practice of fasting and prayer is intended to help us align both will and work with God. Often, the practice of fasting and prayer reveals those things that control us and thereby hold us apart from God. As Brian Taylor writes in *Becoming Christ*: "Self denial is profoundly contemplative for it works by the process of human subtraction and divine addition." For those who cannot fast from food, fasting is not limited to food. You can fast abstaining from the media and creature comforts, all for the purpose for drawing closer to God in prayer.

Some practical guidelines:

- Do not fast when you are sick.
- If you are new to fasting, start with a single meal and then work up to a longer period.
- Stay hydrated; always drink plenty of water, if necessary have a small cup of coffee or tea to avoid a headache.
- Don't break your fast with a large meal.

Some key biblical texts on fasting:

- Seeking a word from God: I Samuel 7:6; Nehemiah 1:4; Esther 4:16; Daniel 1:8
- Jesus on fasting: Matthew 4:2; Mark 2:18-19; Luke 5:33
- The early church seeking God's will: Acts 13:2-3
- A warning on fasting: Isaiah 58:3-7; Matthew 6:16; Luke 18:9-14

A word of challenge *Beware in your prayer, above everything, of limiting God, not only by unbelief, but by trying to figure out what He will do. Expect unexpected things, above all that we ask or think. Each time you intercede, be quiet first and worship God in His glory. Think of what He can do, of how He delights to hear the Christian pray, of your place in Christ; and expect great things. –Andrew Murray.*

The Year of Daniel

Chapter One

Chapter Outline

- 1:1-2 A generation delivered into exile
- 1:3-7 Training for service to king and culture
- 1:8-16 Daniel resolved...
- 1:17-20 Success for Daniel and his friends
- 1:21 Daniel's ministry in exile

Memory Verse

But Daniel resolved not to defile himself. 1:8a

Additional Reading

- John 17, In the world but not of it
- Acts 4:13-31, Peter and John resolve
- I Timothy 4:1-16, Practicing Godliness

Daniel 1 In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. 2 And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia and put in the treasure house of his god.

3 Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king's service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility— 4 young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians. 5 The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service. 6 Among those who were chosen were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. 7 The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego.

8 But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way. 9 Now God had caused the official to show favor and compassion to Daniel, 10 but the official told Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you."

11 Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, 12 "Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. 13 Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see." 14 So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days.

15 At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food. 16 So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead. 17 To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds.

18 At the end of the time set by the king to bring them into his service, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. 19 The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king's service. 20 In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom. 21 And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.

Historical Background: The Book of Daniel was addressed to Israelites living in Babylonian exile. It opens with Nebuchadnezzar moving against Jerusalem. The king's strategy was brilliant and beautifully executed. Undo a nation by removing a generation of leadership. While it took two more invasions to complete the fall of Jerusalem, the victory was assured when they carried the brightest and best into exile.

But that is not the whole strategy. Nebuchadnezzar understood the importance of "friendly captivity." Daniel, his three friends, and the other young men taken into exile were to be trained in the king's court and share in the food from his table. The goal was to convert an entire generation of Israelites to Babylonian ways.

Contemporary Relevance: The question has been asked: why Daniel? The parallel between ancient Babylon and our contemporary American culture is closer than we might want to acknowledge. Just as Babylon was a "culture of seduction," so our consumer-driven society seeks to seduce us. Like Daniel, we too live in a strange land that is often at odds with our faith. The worship of self through personal gratification is prized over responsibility to community.

Herein lies the challenge: to be in the world, but not of it (see John 17). As Longman in The NIV Application Study Bible notes: "Daniel endured much cultural assimilation, yet he knew where it was appropriate for him to draw the line of distinction" (p. 66). Daniel offers a faithful model and core practices by which we can remember who and whose we are that we might indeed be blessed to be a blessing. As we will see over the course of this year, Daniel does not simply offer a pattern of behavior, but rather multiple strategies for culture engagement, even as we remain faithful to God in Christ.

Questions for Reflection

1. Ancient Babylon has been described as a "culture of seduction." In what way is our culture one of seduction?
2. What strategies did the King use to convert Daniel and his friends? How are we challenged in similar ways?
3. How do the actions of Daniel and his friends instruct us as we seek to be "in the world but not of it" even as we serve the needs of our communities?