

THE ATTEMPTED SUBVERSION
OF CONVERSIONS
DANIEL 1:1-7

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Last week as we began our study of the Book of Daniel, we imagined what it might be like if Communist China was to force the United States into surrendering by virtue of its possession of a terrible new weapon that I called the death laser. We supposed that the Chinese Communists came to our area and took some of our young people, some of you perhaps, off to Beijing to be trained for government service. We wondered what pressures they might face and how their Christian faith might be affected. We saw that Daniel and his three friends faced a similar kind of situation 600 years before the coming of Christ.

In the summer of 1980 or 1981 I met a fascinating fellow twenties at Word of Life youth camp in upstate New York. I brought a church youth group to the camp and ended up in the same cabin with this guy who was in his early twenties and helping out as a counselor. His name was Nikolai Pankratz. (PROJECTOR ON--- NIKOLAI PANKRATZ) This is what he looked like when he was part of a Christian music group that toured the US.

Nikolai came from a Christian family that was ethnically German. But the family lived in the Soviet Union. Nikolai was born near the Chinese border. Shortly after his birth his family moved further north into Siberia. Seven years later they moved to the Black Sea region, where they then applied for a visa to move to their ancestral homeland of Germany. After four years that visa was finally granted. In West Germany Nikolai served in the navy. Eventually he made his way to the US with his brother. They got a scholarship to Liberty University and were preparing for further Christian ministry. At the same time he and his brother were helping to prepare Christian radio programs that were being broadcast into Russia.

It was fascinating to hear what it was like to be a Christian in Russia. Nikolai described some of the forces that were brought to bear to subvert, or weaken, his Christian faith. One thing that the government used to do that was the school system. Nikolai said that in grade school every student was required to wear a badge that contained a picture of Lenin, who was influential in introducing Communism to Russia.

Nikolai said that one day when he was about eight years old, he decided that it wasn't right for him as a Christian to wear that badge. So he took it off. His teacher made him stand in a corner until he was willing to put it back on. He finally gave in.

There were also legal pressures that Nikolai and his family faced. They were part of an unregistered, or underground, church, which was illegal. One time they were attending a

Christian wedding, and right in the middle of the ceremony the secret police raided it. The Christians surrounded the bride and groom, but the KGB broke through and hauled off the groom. He was sent to prison for two years. How is that for wanting to have a Christian wedding?

Nikolai later became involved in developing a business that helped American companies and entrepreneurs break into the business market in Russia. He has served on the board of several corporations, and he has assisted Christian organizations like World Relief to have involvement in that country. (PROJECTOR OFF)

I suspect that Daniel and his three friends faced some of the same pressures that Nikolai and his family faced as the government of Babylon sought to weaken their faith in the God of Israel. As we consider this story, I'm convinced that we also will discover that some of the same pressures are at work even in our society, including our educational system, that would seek to undermine our Christian faith. Perhaps they are not as obvious and direct as the pressures faced by Daniel and by Nikolai, but in the long run they may be just as dangerous.

Last week we found out that the events described here took place at the end of the seventh century before Christ. Because of the idolatry and apostasy of the southern kingdom of Judah (PROJECTOR ON--- BABYLONIAN EMPIRE 3) God raised up the nation of Babylon to punish the Jewish people. In a series of three different invasions Judah and its capital of Jerusalem were conquered by the Babylonians. It is the first of these invasions--- the one in 605 BC--- that is described in #1.

I.

We are going to look then at THE BACKGROUND OF THE ATTEMPTED SUBVERSION (I. THE BACKGROUND OF THE ATTEMPTED SUBVERSION), which is Roman numeral I in the outline on the back of the bulletin. Verse one of Daniel #1 says, **“In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it.”**

When Nebuchadnezzar led the Babylonian army to Jerusalem, his father Nabopolassar was still on the throne. During the siege of the city his father died. Nebuchadnezzar hurriedly finished the job and returned to Babylon to receive the crown.

Calling Nebuchadnezzar king in v. 1 is similar to a statement that we might make that President Biden went to college at the University of Delaware. We would accept that as a true statement, and we wouldn't understand it to mean that he was actually President when he went to college. Such is the intention that the author has here, I believe, in speaking about Nebuchadnezzar as king.

Notice in v. 2 that Daniel recognizes that it is God who is sovereignly responsible for Jewish King Jehoiakim being given into Nebuchadnezzar's hand: **“And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God. And he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and**

placed the vessels in the treasury of his god “ The way that Nebuchadnezzar looked at it this victory was proof that the Babylonian gods were stronger than the God of Israel. That is why Nebuchadnezzar takes some of the religious articles from the temple in Jerusalem back to Shinar, which is another name for Babylon, the capital of the Babylonian Empire. There he brings the religious articles to the temple of his god.

Archaeologists have discovered the remains of 53 different temples (MARDUK TEMPLE) in Babylon dedicated to the various gods that were worshipped there. The chief of the Babylonian gods was Marduk, who was also called Bel. His temple occupied 60 acres of land. This a reconstruction of Marduk’s temple, based upon the historical and archaeological evidence.

(MARDUK) This is a sketch of an image of Marduk himself. To Nebuchadnezzar the placing of the religious articles from the temple to YHWH, the God of Israel, into the temple of Marduk, signified that Marduk was more powerful than the God of Israel.

That is not all that was brought back to Babylon. (PROJECTOR OFF) According to vv. 3 & 4 in our text, **“Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility, youths without blemish, of good appearance and skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king's palace, and to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans.”** What purpose did these youths serve? When the Babylonians conquered a country, they took with them the most talented young people from the royal families of that nation. They had two reasons for doing that.

First, they would get the best possible leadership material for their own government. Eventually they would be able to use many of these young people to administer their own native lands. Of course they would also have to get them to accept the Babylonian way of thinking about life and politics. But if you can get kids when they are fairly young and can mold them toward a certain way of thinking, then you can use them to accomplish your agenda.

The second reason for taking these young people was that the Babylonians had potential hostages. The kings of these conquered nations--- Judah included--- would think twice about rebelling when they considered the fact that their sons or nephews or grandsons were in Babylon. Perhaps they would be killed or imprisoned or mistreated in some other way if their relatives in the conquered country misbehaved. Thus it was decided, according to the last part of v. 5, that these young men would be **“educated for three years, and at the end of that time they were to stand before the king.”**

II.

Consider next THE OBJECTS OF THE ATTEMPTED SUBVERSION. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE OBJECTS OF THE ATTEMPTED SUBVERSION) The Babylonians did not choose to bring back with them every young man in the royal family. They had further qualifications in mind when they went looking for potential leaders. These

qualifications are significant because they also are the characteristics of the men that God greatly used to make an impact on that generation in those challenging circumstances. Let's take a look at them.

A.

First, there were PHYSICAL QUALIFICATIONS. Verse 4 says that they were "youths," which means that the people chosen were probably in their early teens. Plato says that the Persians, who succeeded the Babylonians on the world stage of dominance later in the century, began formal, intensive education of young men at age 14. The culture dictated that these leaders would also be males.

Ashpenaz, the chief official, was also to find young men who had no defect. The word "defect" was usually used in reference to physical defects. The people who were chosen were apparently to be without physical handicap and in good physical condition. Later on we shall see that one of them, Daniel, was to be actively involved in serving the government and in serving the Lord well into his eighties, perhaps even into his nineties. He must have seen the value of taking care of his physical body. For he was able to serve the Lord for a long and full life. Modern science has indeed demonstrated that physical activity and exercise is a vital ingredient to longevity.

The young men were also to be good looking, literally it says "good in appearance." Appearance involves more than the physical characteristics that we are given. It also involves dress and the image that we have of ourselves. As Christians we can appreciate the importance of these things. What we wear and how we present ourselves says something about who we are. In my case it also says that I have a wife who watches over my clothes. Otherwise my colors wouldn't match, and my clothes wouldn't fit quite right.

The term "eunuch" originally was used of men who were neutered. Sometimes such eunuchs were put in charge of harems, where they would be regarded as less of a threat to women of the royal court. The scholars are uncertain about whether Daniel and his three friends would have undergone this treatment. Sometimes the word seems to have been used of people who were simply officials in ancient governments.

B.

INTELLECTUAL QUALIFICATIONS (II. A. B. INTELLECTUAL QUALIFICATIONS) were also involved in the selection of these young men. Verse 4 says that they were to be "**skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning...**" I interpret this to mean that they were first to be thinkers--- to have insight into matters that required wisdom, the use of knowledge. These guys had ability to evaluate, to reason, to judge, and to think correctly.

Unfortunately formal education does not always produce this kind of thinking ability. There are students who are produced who have a certain skill, or who have certain information at their command, but often they don't know how to think effectively.

Especially this is true when it comes to making moral decisions. That is where parental involvement is critical to the development of our kids.

Not only were the selected students “skillful in all wisdom,” but they also were “endowed with knowledge.” That is, they had acquired an extensive information base. They had learned the basic subjects of education. They had certain information in their possession.

They also were “understanding learning.” I take that to mean that they were teachable. They were good learners. We speak today of lifelong learners. That is what they were. That is what we should strive to be.

C.

Nebuchadnezzar and company had interest in a third set of qualifications. They wanted men who were “**competent to stand in the king's palace**”--- literally, “who had strength for standing in the king’s court.” The Babylonians were looking for young people with SOCIAL QUALIFICATIONS--- (II. A. B. C. SOCIAL QUALIFICATIONS) with poise and confidence and manners. They didn’t want somebody wandering around the palace like Gomer Pyle, saying, “Golly.”

As Christians we have been commanded by our Lord to go into all the world and make disciples of all the nations. The development of social skills is important to that task. We can’t share the gospel well and make an impact upon the world if we don’t know how to relate to people.

D.

These were the three areas of qualification that the Babylonian leaders were seeking in their potential leaders. Verse 6 tells us that among the ones they picked from Judah were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. In these four individuals we are going to see that the Babylonians got more than they anticipated. For these guys had a fourth set of qualifications. They had SPIRITUAL QUALIFICATIONS. (II. A. B. C. D. SPIRITUAL QUALIFICATIONS) It is this spiritual element that distinguished them from all of the other students, and it is this quality of spirituality that was of primary importance to the Lord, and that can be attractive to unbelievers.

I was reading this week about a Saudi Arabian guy who came to the US for graduate studies in engineering. He was a devout Muslim who had memorized most of the Quran. A Christian family befriended him and had him at their home for several meals, including at Thanksgiving. He later said, “**This family had never shared the gospel with me, but they had shown me what the gospel looks like. And on that day, I walked out of their home with great doubts about my faith and its teachings.**”

Later Al Fadi went to work for an American engineering company. One of his fellow workers was a Christian. He says, “**...when he invited me to his home for Christmas dinner, I noticed that his wife and kids had the same qualities. They were just like**

the family I had met in college.” This prompted the Saudi Arabian guy to further investigate Christianity. Today he is a teacher at Arizona Christian University. (Christianity Today, Jan.-Feb. 2023)

Where did the Jewish boys get their spirituality stuff? Judah was devastated because the Jews as a whole had turned away from God. So the culture didn't provide a lot of support. There were probably two positive influences on the spiritual development of these young men. One was that they had to have come from godly homes. These guys are examples of what a good Jewish home was capable of producing. In the same way Nikolai Pankratz is a great example of what a Christian family can produce even in a situation of great persecution in the old Soviet Union.

A second positive influence probably had to do with a revival that occurred during the rule of good King Josiah. While these four young men were children, Josiah, who was probably a relative, was king. According to 2 Chronicles #34 he sought to follow the Lord. He sought to eliminate idol worship, and he promoted obedience to God's Word. Unfortunately the king died in battle at an early age.

III.

Let's look finally at THE METHODOLOGY OF THE ATTEMPTED SUBVERSION. (III. THE METHODOLOGY OF THE ATTEMPTED SUBVERSION) The thinking of the Babylonians was that in order for these young captives to become effective administrators in their government, they had to become loyal. The way to create loyalty was to get them to buy into the Babylonian view of life, to accept their world view. That required a training program, and that training program would confront Daniel and his three friends with three threats to their religious faith that made them what they were. In our remaining time today we are going to consider two of those threats. Next time we will look at the third.

A.

The first threat had to do with their identity. Notice in v. 7 that the names of these young men were changed. We aren't certain about the meaning of all of these Hebrew and Babylonian names, but it was probably something like this: (MEANING OF NAMES-DANIEL)

Daniel=God is judge

Belteshazzar=May Bel protect his life

Hananiah=Yah is gracious

Shadrach=Command of Aku (moon god)

Mishael=Who is what God is

Meshach=Who is what Aku is

Azariah=Yah helps
as a corrupted form of Nebo)

Abed-nego=Servant of Nebo (god of wisdom) (Nego

These young Jewish men had been given names by their godly parents to remind them of the God that they worshipped. But the Babylonians needed to change that. They were to become servants of the Babylonians and the Babylonian gods. So they were given names to remind them of what their new identity was to be. Every time that their names were called there was a subtle reminder of the loyalty that they were expected to have to the Babylonian gods. (PROJECTOR OFF)

To Nikolai Pankratz in grade school in the Soviet Union it was a badge with the picture of Lenin that he was expected to wear each day. He belonged to Lenin. In 2019 Kroger employees in Arkansas were given aprons to wear with the gay pride logo. Two Christian women objected to that, saying that they believed that practicing homosexuality was a sin, and that they could not be supportive of that. They were fired for refusing to wear the aprons.

Further along in the educational system and in society at large we Christians are sometimes labeled as fundamentalists or right wing extremists. We are given a badge to wear by the opinion makers of our day. We are put into the same camp as Islamic fundamentalists and terrorists. An effort is made to subvert the identity of us who possess the real truth and who have the correct answers to the most important questions of life.

How can we respond to that? We can speak up for what is right and true. We can vote for candidates for office who have values that are consistent with the Bible. We can write letters that make sense to the editor and to our representatives in government about issues where there is a clear Christian position. Most importantly, we can live consistent Christian lives.

B.

There was a second threat that Daniel and his three friends faced to their spiritual commitment. That threat came from their EDUCATION. (III. A. B. THEIR EDUCATION) The last part of v. 4 says that they were to be taught the literature and language of the Chaldeans. The term "Chaldeans" in this instance is used as an ethnic, or racial, term to describe the ruling class among the Babylonians. Aramaic was the language which the Chaldeans spoke. Most of the Babylonians spoke Akkadian, which was probably the language of government.

As a result of archaeological discoveries we know quite a bit about the literature and the language of the Chaldeans, and we know quite a bit about the program of instruction that would have been followed. We know that these Jewish young people would have learned three or four more languages. They would have studied astrology, astronomy, natural history, math and comparative religions. We know that students in Babylonian schools copied sign lists, word lists, paradigms, legal materials, religious documents, fables, omen texts, math and astrology texts, economic data, and historical accounts.

We even have some of the specific literature that they would have studied. They would have been taught, for example (GILGAMESH EPIC), the Gilgamesh Epic, which

described a supposed incident in early history. Daniel and his friends would have read passages like this:

“Utnapishtim said to... Gilgamesh: ‘I will reveal to you, Gilgamesh, a hidden matter and a secret of the gods I will tell you: Shurippok... that city was ancient as were the gods within it, when their heart led the great gods to produce the flood.... Man of Shurippok... tear down this house, build a ship! Give up possessions, seek thou life. Forswear worldly goods and keep the soul alive! Aboard the ship take the seed of all living things. The ship that you shall build, her dimensions shall be to measure. Equal shall be her width and her length.’”

The story goes on to give some other remarkable parallels with the Genesis account of Noah and the Flood.

I can hear the Babylonian teacher of these Jewish young people saying, “There are some things that are true about your story of Noah and the ark. But there never really was such a person as Noah. That part is not true. It was Gilgamesh who was there.”

They also would have studied (ENUMA ELISH) Enuma Elish, the Babylonian version of creation. They would have read passages like this:

“When Marduk [chief of the Babylonian gods] hears the words of the gods, his heart prompts him to fashion artful works. Opening his mouth, he addresses Ea [another god] to impart the plan he had conceived in his heart: ‘Blood I will mass and cause bones to be. I will establish a savage--- man I will create. he shall be charged with the service of the gods that they may be at ease.’”

“Daniel and friends, man was created by the gods. But it was Marduk who was responsible for that creation.”

“Christian young people, there are some things that are correct about your Biblical story of creation. (PROJECTOR OFF) The Genesis description of the general order of the creation of the kinds of life is true. But you can’t really believe that there were such people as Adam and Eve. It’s a legend, a myth. You need to listen to the high priests of science. The scientific doctrine of evolution tells us where life really came from.” ---Do you see? We face the same threat in our educational system that Daniel and his friends faced 2600 years ago.

Since 1980 millions of people, including many of our young people in school, have watched Carl Sagan’s *Cosmos* series (PROJECTOR ON--- COSMOS). At the beginning of the series Sagan declares, **“The cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be. It is the universe that made us and we are creatures of the cosmos.”** He treats religious views of creation as a foolish superstition. The closest that he comes to approving religion is this statement: **“Our ancestors worshipped the sun and they were far from foolish. It makes good sense to revere the sun and stars, because we are their children.”** (PROJECTOR OFF)

What is really being promoted is only another religion. It is the religion of materialism and humanism. The public educational system is a key means of promoting this religion. *The Humanist*, the magazine of the American Humanist Association, argued a number of years ago, “...**the battle for humankind’s future must be waged and won in the public school classroom by teachers who correctly perceive their role as the proselytizers of a new faith; a religion of humanity... utilizing a classroom instead of a pulpit to convey humanist values in whatever subject they teach...**” (Jan./Feb. 1983)

What are these values? The Humanist Manifesto I and II identify some of them. They include evolution, individual autonomy (not the autonomy of a sovereign God), situation ethics, sexual permissiveness, anti-theism, socialism, and global citizenship.

This secular and humanistic influence of public schools has extended into American colleges and universities. Leftist professors have flooded American higher education and have squelched conservative intellectuals. History professor emeritus from UCLA Russell Jacoby recently opined, “...**their students, however, constitute an unmitigated disaster, intellectually and politically, as they enter the workforce. They might be the American version of the old Soviet apparatchiks, functionaries who carry out party policies. Intellectually, they fetishize buzz words (diversity, marginality, power differential, white privilege, group safety, hegemony, gender fluidity and the rest) that they plaster over everything.**” (*The Tablet*, 12/18/2022)

How did Daniel and his three friends handle the threat to their Jewish faith? They compared everything that they heard to the Jewish faith that they had learned. What did not fit, they threw out. If it contradicted the Hebrew Scriptures, they didn’t believe it. They participated in the Babylonian educational system, and they mastered the education that they received, but it did not master them. In v. 20 we read, “**And in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his kingdom.**”

How will our young people respond to some of the things that they are taught in school? The Lord wants them to respond in a similar way that Daniel and his three friends did. If it contradicts the Bible, don’t believe it. If they try to tell you that man evolved from apes, toss it out. If they try to tell you that sex outside of marriage is OK, don’t buy it.

We parents need to watch over the education of our kids and grand kids. Some of us may need to consider alternatives to public school. In any case it is ultimately our responsibility to instill godly values and discernment in our young people. That parental involvement may have been what made the difference in the life of Daniel and his three friends, and that is certainly what made the difference in the life of Nikolai Pankratz.

The Book of Daniel will answer two questions for us: How should we live in an often godless society? And: “Is God worthy of my trust? Our study today deals primarily with that first question: How should we live in an often godless society? There are two parts

to that answer. First, we need to grow and mature in the physical, intellectual, social and spiritual areas of life. The men that God used and who survived the negative influences of their culture were well-rounded individuals. But they had especially developed their relationship with God. Today that relationship begins by putting our trust in Jesus Christ as our Savior.

The other part of the answer is that we need to be aware of the forces in our culture that would seek to weaken our Christian commitment. We need to evaluate what we hear and see by God's Word. We especially need to help our young people learn how to do the same thing.