

# INTRODUCTION

There are certain moments throughout history where one particular Bible story or another carry profound significance and shed light on the road ahead for God's people. The right text for the right time. As our western society becomes increasingly secular, I believe Daniel's story is such a story for today.

In Daniel 1 we read of Jerusalem besieged then conquered by the Babylonians. Daniel, along with many other promising young men, was taken into exile to be trained in the ways of his captors. Despite all the temptations and pressures, Daniel stays true to the God of Israel and lives a life of remarkable significance. His faith is steady, his engagement with Babylon high-achieving, his discernment motivating. Yet Daniel was young when he was taken, mid to late teens, most likely. So, as I allow the story of Daniel to marinate in my imagination I have to ask: who inspired Daniel's wisdom and tenacity, which we so desperately need in the church today? Who disciplined Daniel? How was Daniel prepared to live for God's Kingdom in a foreign land?

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Perhaps he had a mentor growing up who continued to instruct him in those early days of exile?

The idea of a mature believer equipping Daniel took hold of me and has grown into this book of letters. To start, I created a fictional character called Abel, who would act as Daniel's mentor. Here's the premise: Abel was a bondservant to Daniel's family and became Daniel's tutor. When Daniel is taken by the Babylonians, Abel decides to write letters for Daniel so he can learn to live free while in exile, to be godly in a foreign land.

I tried to write these letters as true as I could, not thinking of us today so much, but asking what would discipleship look like at this point of history in the ancient world. Abel's letters draw from the teaching of Jeremiah, Israel's prophet at that time, and other key Old Testament passages and stories.

But I bet you're asking: why would I read a bunch of old made-up letters? It is my hope Abel's letters act like triggers in your mind, helping to spark your imagination towards how you can live for Jesus today. This is not a book about 'try harder' or 'be better'. Rather it's about a perspective shift. As a fellow follower of Jesus, I want to help you face the questions we all have as we become increasingly surrounded by a secular culture. The times they are a changing, but Jesus' offer of life in all its fullness remains. And I believe, with my whole being, that we can not only face this incoming tide but see it for what it is, and embrace a higher call to live free, with Jesus as our King, the Bible

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as our compass, prayer as our guide and God's presence as our home.

There are three sections, each followed by a 'Time to Discuss' which includes some discussion questions and suggested Bible reading. You can do this on your own but you'll gain so much more if you read the book with a friend, a small group or an older Christian. I recommend that you agree to meet four times to discuss and pray. Once, as you begin this journey together, and then at the end of each section, where you'll find the questions to discuss.

Before you start, here are my top tips for reading this book:

- Watch the Bible Project's video: 'The Way of the Exile'. You'll find it at [bibleproject.com/explore/video/the-way-of-the-exile/](https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/the-way-of-the-exile/)
- Download a Bible app, stick in your headphones, go for a walk and listen to Daniel chapters 1–6 in one go. It'll take just over half an hour and you'll get 3,400 steps in!
- Read with a pen or highlighter in your hand and a Bible by your side. This book should look messy when you're finished!

Daniel could have easily despaired when the Babylonians led him into exile, but he stood firm, trusting his God. The story captures me. And that fascination has led me to share these letters with you now. But as we start this journey let's

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not forget that it is Daniel's God, not Daniel, who made the difference and moved the nations like pawns. And it is the same God who has placed me here and you where you are. And it is He who will guide us to be salt and light through the uncharted waters of a post-truth, secularising world.

So the question is, are you ready? Are you ready to follow Jesus into exile and live free on this godly adventure, serving the higher throne?



### **To think about:**

1. Do you think Daniel's experience is similar to the conditions in which we live as Christians today?  
How or how not?
2. If you are reading this with a friend, small group or older Christian: How can you get the most out of this book and your times together?



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*One wise person went up against a city  
of warriors  
and brought down the stronghold in which  
they trusted.*

*(Proverbs 21:22, NRSV)*





Dear Daniel,

You're gone. And I cannot believe it. The future looks different for all of us, and our world will never be the same again. We were warned of this, but it is so final now, so eternal. Some things I do know though. You are on the cusp of adventure: the world is still your gift and God is still your guide. I have confidence, knowing the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is also God over Babylon. And I have little doubt that God's grace will guide you. His love and goodness will follow you even in this hour.

I'm planning to write you a series of letters over these coming days. I'll make arrangements to send them to you – through Mishael, probably. I do not know how much I will get to write – is there any hope for an old servant like me during these times? Educated, yes; potential, no. I'm at peace should I be lost in this invasion. You, however, who are young and of noble birth, have been given the opportunity of exile.

My understanding is the Babylonians are not like the historical occupying forces we read about during your schooling. They seek to re-educate, to rebrand the people they capture, tuning them to sing the Babylonian anthem. There is a sophistication in their brutality – it's not just power but a comprehensive vision that sets them apart. Yet while they have access to the information of the nations, it does not make them wise; while they have sciences, astronomy and sorcery, it does not make them right; while King Nebuchadnezzar has power, he does not sit on *the* throne.

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I will write these letters to keep you company, and to give you some helpful perspectives and instruction as you enter this new beginning. I say this in hope, knowing at any moment my life could be over. But if I achieve anything in my final days, it'll be this.

My dear Daniel, may the rhythms of worshipful living make you feel so alive, so focused and so bright in a city so dead, so distracted and so dark. Though Babylon will change you, I pray that you will change Babylon all the more as you soar with the God of Jacob, inspiring integrity, bringing peace and pointing towards the King of Kings.

Keep your eyes open,

Abel







## SECTION ONE

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### Questions I Think You Will Be Asking

*Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon has devoured us,  
he has thrown us into confusion.*

*(Jeremiah 51:34)*



# IN WHOSE STORY AM I?

*If you, Israel, will return,  
then return to me.*

*(Jeremiah 4:1)*

Dear Daniel,

It would seem God is not fatigued in telling stories. His imagination must be endless, revealing a new chapter with each one of us. The story He is telling with our lives, in this exile, is beyond my creative capacity, but not God's. When we read the history books of our nation, we see He has a mastery of storytelling in which every aspect of our lives – even the hurt – can somehow be part of His grand narrative. It is both global and local, present-day and across the centuries; it involves you there and me here. And the invite still stands: to participate from His side; to be part of His kingdom; to live free from the fear that the story might end badly.

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For now, we must live by faith in the Storyteller. Yet what joy we will have in the end when we can look back over these years and see God's guiding hand over us.

So let's think about that end for a moment. Say you reach 80 years. Imagine yourself as 'old man Daniel', writing out the story of your life: what do you want him to write? How do you want him to describe his first year in Babylon? What regrets do you hope he doesn't have?

I am not suggesting you can determine the plot of your life. You can, however, decide what kind of man you want to be. How will you respond to threat? Where will you show generosity? Will you be someone who takes responsibility or someone who shies away from engagement in Babylonian society?

Will you be selfish or kind?

Godly or diluted?

Decisive or ambivalent?

Prayerful or ignorant?

Consistent with your values or changeable of heart?

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I may have a history of telling you what to do – one you've outgrown – but I am going to take a few liberties of influence over these letters. I will make suggestions I trust will help you navigate the story God wants to tell with your life.

This, dear Daniel, is one of them: when you get to Babylon, rise early the next morning – before dawn – to prayerfully reflect. Imagine yourself, in 70 years' time,



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looking back over a life lived for God. Ask yourself: what kind of a man you would want to remember? What would be the contents of his character and convictions?

You have the opportunity to start again, so before you know what your opportunities are, work out what kind of man you want to be. Allow that to define you. Then, as opportunities come, you can embrace them with a knowing confidence in who you are, and in whose story you are a part.

If you don't think about who you want to be, Babylon will do that for you. You will take a seat in *their* discipleship course and begin the gradual deconstruction of your faith. Your relationship with God will be reduced to a thought you once had and placed on a shelf in your memory's bookcase, alongside the other chapters of your so-called life experiences. You will end up claiming God only in heritage and lose your distinctiveness as a follower of the One True King. Like ink that's dried up, no longer of use to the writer of a story, the dried-up disciple is of no use to God.

So let's open our eyes, remember our calling; let's play our part in the plot of God's story.

Daniel, when our father Abraham looked into the heavens and saw the constellations pulsing like waves in the giant ocean of stars, one of those stars was alight for you. When God promised him descendants who would bless the world, he had you in mind. Your life is beyond meaningful; it is divinely purposed. Your life, my life, Mishael's life: each of us is one of those stars contributing to the great project of lighting up the darkness. You are part of what God is doing.

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So take your place, and shine.

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Imagine coming to the end of your life and realising you've lived the wrong story. What a great sadness it would be to exist as a story untold, to have potential but never try. Do not make this your tale. For we are God's people, invited to be part of a story with eternal significance. Yet we can short-change ourselves by forgetting two basic truths: that God is the Author of this story, and that He invites us to play a unique role.

God is the Author of this story

God is not *our* creation and this is not *our* story. *He* is the Author of our days. Our God is not part of us or something we have constructed to make sense of the world. He is wholly other. We have not made an image to worship – it's the other way round: He made us in *His* image and calls us to worship Him. We are not inviting God into *our* lives – it's the other way round: He invites us into *His* vision for the future and beckons us to follow. This perspective is the foundation for answering your current question – 'In whose story am I?'

You play a unique role

There has never been a you before – not from the dawn of time – and there will never be anyone like you again. God created you, not someone else, for this time and in

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this place. He created you within your family and with your acquaintances, your opportunities, your challenges and your skillset. You have an original God-scripted adventure to live. And Daniel, what a setting you have in which to be godly, so take it. Take the opportunity to engage and be part of the Babylonian society, but not as a puppet. Be who God created you to be. Be the Daniel your older self would be proud of, the Daniel heaven sees.

Who knows what God may achieve in the story of your life – never mind the story of the exile; never mind the ageless story the Ancient of Days is telling across all of history. And you, Daniel, are included in God's story. Even the smallest of your acts is entwined in this grand narrative. The name you hold, the friends you make, the way you pray, the manner you address people, even the food you eat will be part of this tale.

Keep your eyes open,

Abel

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### **To think about:**

1. Imagine you are 80 years old, looking back at your life. How would you like to describe yourself from now to then? Use some of Abel's questions for Daniel, near the start of the letter, to get you thinking.
2. Spend some time in prayer thinking through the 'two basic truths', which are as true for you as they were for Daniel. Acknowledge God as the Author of your story, and accept His commission for you to play a unique role.
3. Will you rise early tomorrow to pray and think about the kind of person you are going to be?



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