

God's Way Out

"For Us and For Our Little Ones"

"Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river of Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance."

Ezra 8:21.

Lesson 11. At the Dictator's Court

If you are planning for the education of your children, read in this chapter of the principles which brought four young men to leading scholastic attainment.

NEBUCHADNEZZAR, king of Babylon, was a real man--no myth about him! He lived from 641 BC, to 561 BC. Eighty years! [1] He reigned four years as co-regent with his father, Nabopolassar, then forty years alone. He was a real dictator. We know about his life from five hundred written contracts which have been unearthed, and from thirty inscriptions on buildings or memorials. Also from writers of the Bible: Daniel, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel; and ancient historians like Berosus, Menander, Megasthenes, and others. [2]

The ruined buildings of his great city are still out there in the desert near the Euphrates River, two hundred miles south of the Haifa oil-pipe line. They are open to inspection by anyone. You can go by taxi from Baghdad, or take a train to "Babylon Halt" if it deigns to stop there. [3] No, there is no myth about the story of Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel! This dreaded king swooped down on Jerusalem in the third year of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, about 606 BC. After a short siege the defenders of the city were overcome and submitted to the conqueror.

"And the king spoke unto Ashpenaz the master of his eunuchs, that he should bring certain of the children of Israel, and of the king's seed, and of the princes. "Children in whom was no blemish, but well favored, and skilful in all wisdom, and cunning in knowledge, and understanding science, and such as had ability in them to stand in the king's palace, and whom they might teach the learning and the tongue of the Chaldeans."

Thus it came about that a group of Hebrew youths on their march north, turned round to gaze at their native city for the last time. Daniel and his three companions, with many others, were saying farewell to their Judean hills. And farewell to Jerusalem! As prisoners of the great king Nebuchadnezzar they were travelling to the distant city of Babylon, hundreds of miles away. With bearded Babylonian soldiers guarding them--no chance of escape--they slowly traveled north.

North, past the plains of Megiddo, where once God had delivered Israel by Deborah and Barak. [4] Past Mount Carmel, away over on the west, where God had answered Elijah's faith. by sending down fire from heaven. North, past Zarephath, where God had miraculously caused the widow's oil and flour to multiply for Elijah's sake. [5] Ah! where was the God of Elijah now? He had made a way out for Noah and Joseph, Moses and Hezekiah. But now He seemed strangely far off.

A hundred years before, when good king Hezekiah reigned in Jerusalem, God worked mighty miracles on his behalf. At that time Merodach-baladan, king of Babylon, had sent his messengers south along this very road with presents and greetings to the Judean king.

How very different things were now! Had Hezekiah only remembered to point those men to the true God, Daniel and his friends might have been spared this sad separation. But instead, Hezekiah had shown the ambassadors all the gold and silver vessels of the temple, with all his other treasures. The ambassadors had returned to Babylon with tales of gold instead of testimonies to God.

No wonder Babylon had coveted those treasures ever since. That was the reason those golden vessels were in that wagon over there--also going to Babylon. Was this God's way out? Isaiah the prophet had warned Hezekiah of this danger. "Behold, the days come, that all that is in your house, and that which thy fathers have laid up in store until this day, shall be carried to Babylon: nothing shall be left, said the Lord.

"And of thy sons that shall issue from thee, which thou shall beget, shall they take away; and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon." [6] Like every other prophecy from God, this one had been fulfilled. Here were the sons of the royal line on their way to the palace of Babylon, just as the prophet had said!

It was good that Hebrew mothers had steadfastly trained these boys for this emergency. While they had doubtless shown them the prophetic scrolls with the predictions mentioned, they also had shown them the prophecies which told them of God's love and care for His faithful children. They had filled their minds with the assurance of the presence of God, and taught them the law of kindness and courtesy, goodwill and practical helpfulness.

So, as the young prisoners journeyed north, they lifted up their hearts in prayer to God and thought of His promises of protection. Had not God instructed Isaiah: "Comfort you, comfort you My people?" [7]

One day, not far distant perhaps, the Lord God would come with strong hand and would rule over the earth, bringing fair Eden back again; He would gather the lambs with His arms; He would carry them in His bosom, and would gently lead those that were with young. As they marched by the side of the cedar-clad mountains of Lebanon and under the shadow of Mount Hermon, they had cause to remember that the mighty God in whom they trusted was He who “comprehended the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales, and the hills in a balance.” [8]

Surely He would take care of them. Surely He will take care of our loved ones who trust in Him. After travelling north many days they came to the great road junction and turned east to the Euphrates River.

“God brought Daniel into favor and tender love with the prince of the eunuchs.” This handsome boy who combined cheerful helpfulness with high principle, won the favor of the Babylonian officer. When they reached the Euphrates they had left the hills and mountains behind. Now they marched through a fruitful plain, almost as level as the sea. Not much rain fell in this region, but great irrigation canals intersected the land, carrying the life-giving water from the river to the fields. No wonder the captives were astonished!

“What marvelous wheat-fields, my lord Ashpenaz! What a fruitful, verdant land is this!”

“Yea, Daniel, my lad, the wheat fields of Babylon deserve to be famous. Sow a bushel of wheat here and thou shall have two hundred bushels to harvest. Maybe three hundred. See the blade of that wheat, too. Each blade the breadth of four of thy fingers.” [9]

“Great harvests and a great river, my lord Ashpenaz. Much greater than our river Jordan at home.”

“Yea, lad. Everything in the land of Babylon shall be great and mighty. Great is my lord Nebuchadnezzar, and great and mighty is the city of Babylon, the glory of the Chaldeans--as thou shall soon see.”

What Was Babylon Like?

“Babylon must be a wonderful city, my lord Ashpenaz?”

“Does thou see this river, Daniel? The city of Babylon is so great that the river which enters at one corner must flow full six leagues before it flows out at the other corner.” “Six leagues! What a great city!”

“In truth it is; and its walls are over three hundred feet in height. So thick are they at the top that there is good room for chariots and horses to race along. And the river banks are lined with mighty walls, too.” [10]

“If only Jerusalem had possessed such walls, my lord.” “Ha, ha! yea, it would have been hard for my lord the king to force his way in. Then, too, the moat around Babylon is full of water far deeper than your river Jordan.”

“Was not Babylon first called Babel—confusion--because here God confounded the language of the builders of the tower of Babel.”

“Aye, lad, so say the Hebrew writings. But in our Chaldee language, ‘Babel’ means ‘Gate of God.’ Gate of our great god Bel, who gives us the victory over the nations. Great is Bel.”

Soon the captives and their guards arrived at Babylon. They tramped over the great moat bridge, through the gateway with its massive brazen doors, under the archway in the mighty walls, and into the famous city of which they had been speaking. The outlook was none too bright for these boys. They never dreamed--how should they know that one of their number was to show God's way out for the whole world's troubles--the way back to Eden? God often plans to give us some joyful surprise.

Nebuchadnezzar was at this time about thirty-five years of age. Strong, clever, ambitious, and intolerant of opposition, he planned to make Babylon the greatest monarchy on earth. “Did I not help Nabopolassar, my father, to smash the power of mighty Assyria? Have I not made an alliance with the king of Media by marrying Amytis, his daughter? I have been successful in my western wars. If I fight with all energy in the present, and plan swiftly for the future, my fame may ring down the ages forever!”

Following this plan he seems to have chosen the best of the youth of the conquered nations to be educated as wise advisers of the king. They could then influence their own countrymen to be loyal confederates of the great monarch of Babylon.

Nebuchadnezzar Plans Their Education

“You are to be taught the learning and the tongue of the Chaldees, the Babylonians' learning, my lads. You are to study three years, and then my lord the king will question you himself. He hath graciously ordained that you shall eat the same food and drink the same wine that he himself drinks, so that you may be

strong in body and mind. Does thou understand, Daniel? My servant Melzar shall be over you to help you." So spoke the king's officer.

"But, my lord Ashpenaz, is not the king's food first offered to the gods of Babylon" inquired Daniel.

"Yea, it is offered to Bel and Merodach and Nebo, that their strength and spirit may be in the eater."

"Then, my lord Ashpenaz, may we humbly ask that thou wilt give us other food. For thou knows that we worship the Lord Jehovah of the Hebrews, and He hath commanded us that we worship none other gods. Let them give us pulse--the food which makes strong the men who toil in the fields," pleaded Daniel.

It was a bold request, more than Asphenaz dared grant. "I fear my lord the king, Daniel. If he should see you looking worse than the other youth of your sort, then will you make me endanger my head to the king!"

Daniel tried Melzar: "Prove thy servants, I beseech thee, ten days; and let them give us pulse to eat, and water to drink. Then let our faces be compared with the others--and as thou sees, so deal with thy servants!"

That fearless, smiling, respectful youth was hard to refuse. "It will not hurt to make this trial," thought Melzar. So he consented, and "at the end of ten days their countenances appeared fairer and fatter in flesh than all the children which did eat the portion of the king's meat." So Melzar for the future let them have the simple food of their choice.

Judean Parents Versus Babylon's Learning

Now they begin their studies of the Babylonian learning. Tremble, you fathers and mothers in far Judea! The king hopes to turn their allegiance from God the Creator to the worship of Bel and Merodach. How often faithless men in great universities turn young lives into the path of unbelief!

But the Judean parents had laid a good foundation, and God blessed their faithful work. He made their sons a mighty influence for good. The Chaldeans' language was a difficult one to learn. Instead of using our twenty-six letters of the alphabet, they had over five hundred signs. Yet these Hebrews passed with honors. In astronomy and the science of figures the Chaldeans had made much progress. "The clear sky and the unbroken horizon of the Chaldean plains, lending an unusually brilliant aspect to the heavens, naturally led the Chaldeans to the study of the stars.

“They early divided the zodiac into twelve signs, and named the zodiacal constellations, a memorial of their astronomical attainments which will remain for ever inscribed upon the great circle of the heavens. They foretold eclipses, constructed sundials of various patterns, divided the year into twelve months, and the day and night into twelve hours each.” They used the week of seven days, and “the seventh, fourteenth, nineteenth, twenty-first, and twenty-eighth days of the lunar month were kept like the Jewish Sabbath, and were actually so named in Assyria!” [11]

Made mentally clear-sighted by their home training in the Scriptures, the young Hebrews were quick to discern the true and the false in this learning. Many of the mysteries and much of the vagueness of the worldly teaching disappeared before the light shed by the writings of Moses, David, Solomon, Isaiah, and the other sacred books from which their parents had taught them.

They studied hard, and God blessed them. “As for these four children, God gave them knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom: and Daniel had, understanding in all visions and dreams!”

What Will the Examination Show?

The three years' course passed rapidly by. At its close the king examined all. The great test had come. Ashpenaz, Daniel's old friend, brought them in before the king. With deep interest the lord of Babylon set them questions and listened to their answers. Imagine that examination of old. The king finds they are rapidly acquiring proficiency in writing with the wedge-shaped characters of the Chaldean language. They already speak the king's own tongue reasonably well.

In history: “Who was the founder of Babylon the great?”

“Nimrod, the great-grandson of Noah, your majesty.”

“And Egypt, with all its Pharaohs—who founded that nation?”

“It was Mimaim, uncle of Nimrod and grandson of Noah.”

“The nations of the west, Greece and the lands beyond—who were the founders of Greece?”

“Javan, the grandson of Noah, your majesty. Javan and his sons were the founders of Greece with its isles and some of the lands of the west.” [12]

The wise men of Babylon taught that the earth was supported on two great mountains. Daniel could say with assurance: “No. God stretches out the northern stars over empty space. He hangs the earth on nothing.” [13]

“Tell me of the stars in their courses. Does Bel, the great god, dwell in the sun? Does the goddess Ishtar live in the morning star or in the moon?”

“Your majesty, the God of heaven, the great Jehovah, created the glorious sun and the gracious moon to be lights for the children of men. And the great God upholds and directs them still by the word of His power. He brings forth the stars of the zodiac in their season.” [14] “Nay-yet-” the king was visibly interested. “What is the saros?”

“The saros, your majesty, is a period of a little more than eighteen years during which all the solar and lunar eclipses repeat themselves. Knowing of this, we can predict the eclipses of the future.” So the questioning went on--language, history, mathematics, astronomy, theology. To all the questions came simple, direct answers from these four. God had blessed their loyalty to Him.

Nebuchadnezzar was greatly impressed. To himself he, thought, and probably declared aloud: “Why! In all matters of wisdom and understanding that I have inquired of them I find them ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers that are in my realm. Marvelous!”

So these four young men received their appointments at the king's court of Babylon. Henceforth they were counted among the king's wise men. The principles of the Bible taught by godly parents had proved themselves the best foundation. Those principles were God's way out of ignorance into the highest education. Strange experience. What had God in store for them?

REFERENCES:

1. Myers' General History, Pages 58, 60.
2. International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia, Page 2127.
3. Through Lands of the Bible, Page 64.
4. Judges 5:19.
5. 1 Kings 18:37-38, 17:9-16.
6. Isaiah 39.
7. Isaiah 40:1.
8. Isaiah 40:12.
9. Herodotus (Penguin Edition), Page 67.
10. Ibid., Pages 60, 61.
11. Myers' General History, Page 47.
12. Genesis 10.
13. Job 26:7.
14. Job 38:32.

OH THAT MEN
WOULD PRAISE
THE LORD
FOR HIS
GOODNESS

PSALM 107. 8

