

## **Altruistic Leadership in The Book of Daniel**

Robert Ball

### **Introduction**

Daniel is perhaps one of the most intriguing figures in the entire Bible. According to Smith (1992), Daniel's spiritual and moral integrity are unparalleled among the heroes of scripture. The history of Daniel's life is well chronicled in scripture and easily corroborated in secular historical records. Daniel's life and ministry are inextricably connected to the Babylonian empire and in particular a king named Nebuchadnezzar.

In 605 B. C. the Babylonians, under the leadership of King Nebuchadnezzar, fought the Egyptians in the battle of Carchemish. The Egyptians were soundly defeated which opened the way for Nebuchadnezzar to subjugate what remained of the Jewish nation in Jerusalem. According to Walvoord and Zuck (1985), Nebuchadnezzar was forced to return to Jerusalem two more times to put down the rebellion of the Jewish Kings, the final intervention coming against King Zedekiah in 586 B.C. According to Jeremiah 39, Zedekiah was taken captive, his sons were slain before his eyes, then his eyes were put out and he was taken in chains to Babylon. Jerusalem was razed by the Babylonian army including the destruction of the temple Solomon had built.

This historical summary sets the context of the life of Daniel. As a young man, perhaps just a teenager, Daniel's life was completely redefined in terms of his heritage, culture, and ability to worship in accord with the Law of Moses. Daniel's own pedigree as a prince of Israel was completely eliminated. Daniel was deported to Babylon in the first deportation of 604 B.C. where his faith and worldview were challenged and assaulted by Babylonian pagan culture and religion. It is in this seemingly dark path of life where one finds Daniel shining the brightest. It was in the land of the enemy where Daniel's faith and commitment to Jehovah God resulted in some of the most amazing and inspirational accounts found in all the Bible.

Given the incomprehensible circumstances in which Daniel found himself, this research examines Daniel's altruistic leadership style as exercised under extreme duress. According to Szumkler and Appelbaum (2008), coercion and duress often take the form of threats. Threats, perceived or real, are most effective when made against one's person or against others in close

proximity. Nebuchadnezzar was a complete despotic leader whose word was life and death. Daniel's existence hung in the precarious balance of Nebuchadnezzar's unpredictable moods. To resist the king or his decree was punishable by death. Daniel's precarious position was further exacerbated by his heritage, he was a Hebrew in a pagan land who loved and desired to worship the true and living God.

### **Altruism**

According to Guinot, Chiva, and Mallen (2015), altruism can be defined as a perpetual tendency to put the welfare of others ahead of self. Flynn and Black (2011) corroborate this definition by positing that altruistic actions elevate the needs of others above self. Kanungo and Mendonca (1996) explain and define altruism in organizational terms such as mentoring, power sharing, team building, and citizenship behavior. Simmons (1991) proposed elements of altruism which include, (1) seeking the welfare of others above self, (2) is expressed voluntarily, (3) is intentional, and (4) expects no reciprocation or reward. Given this brief overview of altruism, one can readily see the value such an attitude would bring to organizational productivity as well as the dyadic relationships within an organization. An exegetical examination of Daniel 4 reveals an altruistic approach to Daniel's interaction with King Nebuchadnezzar. Perhaps one could reasonably expect Daniel to operate altruistically given his faith foundation and experiential knowledge of the living God. The intriguing part is how Daniel continued to serve and lead altruistically while often faced with extreme duress and even coercion. Daniel provides a prototype of altruistic leadership that was not influenced or altered by his surroundings or circumstances of life. Daniel serves as a model for all who find themselves in difficult leadership circumstances. Daniel shows how altruistic leadership is not only possible under duress, but continues to be effective and productive.

### **Daniel 1, the King's Food**

The Book of Daniel opens with the historical account of the first Babylonian siege of Jerusalem. According to Nelson (2013), King Jehoiakim submitted to Nebuchadnezzar and thus become a vassal king under the realm of Babylon. God's sovereign design in the historical event is provided in the second verse, "And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with part of the vessels of the house of God: which he carried into the land of Shinar to the house of

his god; and he brought the vessels into the treasure house of his god” (Daniel 1.2). God employed the pagan nation of Babylon as His instrument of chastening against the Jewish nation by reason of the Hebrew’s perpetual sin. The oft repeated warnings of the prophets concerning the sin and rebellion of God’s people lay the foundation for God’s chastening as described in the first chapter. It was during this first encounter with Nebuchadnezzar that Daniel and his three friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, were taken captive. Daniel became an unwilling participant in the Babylonian practice of selecting the best and brightest young men of royal pedigree to be trained in Babylon for service as wise men and advisors to the king. The culture shock of being removed from one’s birth land and way of life must have been overwhelming. Yet one finds Daniel ever faithful in his unmitigated trust in God. Daniel believed in the sovereign power of God to oversee and overrule the events of his life.

After arriving in Babylon Daniel and his friends began their three-year training program where they were expected to learn the ways and culture of Babylonian society. It is reasonable to presume their lessons included Babylonian history, religion, and culture, as well as extensive studies in math, mysticism, astronomy, astrology, and engineering. Their assigned training was to prepare them to serve as skilled and educated wise men in the Babylonian government. Daniel and his friends were placed under the care of a man named Ashpenaz, master of the eunuchs. Part of their training included eating the food from the king’s table. One might be inclined to think this benefit was a blessing given that the king surely enjoyed the best foods of the land. However, for Daniel, and any other devout Jew, the food from the king’s table created a moral and spiritual dilemma. The Jews were forbidden by law from eating any unclean animals which included any meat that had been offered to idols. Nebuchadnezzar’s table contained both unclean animals and meat offered to idols. Daniel was now faced with a decision, compromise his personal integrity before God and conform to the king’s command or stand on his commitment to God and face the wrath of the king which would mean certain death. Daniels’ decision is recorded in the text, “But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king’s meat, nor with the wine which he drank: therefore he requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself” (Daniel 1.8). Daniel’s decision was to obey God rather than man.

Daniel moved diplomatically and respectfully in bringing his concern to the attention of Ashpenaz and later a man named Melzar who served under Ashpenaz. Both Ashpenaz and Melzar responded to Daniel's concern with understanding, yet both men feared the consequences of disobeying the king. It is at this juncture in the narrative one finds the first overt expression of Daniel's altruistic approach. Demonstrating genuine concern for those who might be placed in harm's way by his request, Daniel proposed a ten-day test during which he and his friends would eat vegetables and drink water. After ten days Melzar could examine Daniel and his friends to determine if they seemed to be falling behind in their physical appearance. Melzar agreed to the test. The results of the test are given, "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" (Daniel 1.15). God not only prospered Daniel and his friends with robust physical appearance, He blessed them in their academic endeavors as they excelled beyond their contemporaries in learning and wisdom.

Daniel's altruistic approach in this seeming impasse demonstrated concern and respect for both his immediate superiors as well as the testimony of his three friends. Daniel's proactive response was motivated by his personal integrity and commitment to God. In accord with Simmons' (1991) observations, Daniel's motive was purely voluntary while being intentional in his faith and practice. Daniel sought no personal reward or recognition for being faithful to God, yet God rewarded him bountifully. Furthermore, Smith, Bresnahan, and Smith (2011) identify the elements of concern, benefits to the recipient, and empathy as particular motivators for those who operate in an altruistic mode. Daniel demonstrated concern for those who would be defiled by the king's food, a desire to bring about relief from the impasse, and genuine empathy for those in charge as well as his friends and colleagues. Daniel's altruistic response was effective, even under extreme duress and pressure.

### **Daniel 2, Image of Gold**

Daniel chapter 2 opens with the account of a dream; "And in the second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar Nebuchadnezzar dreamed dreams, wherewith his spirit was troubled, and his sleep brake from him" (Daniel 2.1). According to Paschall and Hobbs (1972), the Babylonians were highly superstitious and believed dreams were a message or sign from the gods. Nebuchadnezzar summoned the wise men of his court and demanded they tell him the dream as well as reveal its meaning. The wise men were prepared to render an interpretation if the king would but

tell them the dream. Nebuchadnezzar answered, “The thing is gone from me: if ye will not make known unto me the dream, with the interpretation thereof, ye shall be cut in pieces, and your houses shall be made a dunghill” (Daniel 1.5b). According to Boice (2003), the king had not forgotten the dream; rather, he was testing the wise men. If the wise men could determine the dream without the dream being revealed, then their skill in interpreting the dream could be received as true and trustworthy. As the narrative unfolds the wise men were unable to reveal the dream or provide an interpretation. The inability of the wise men to render the desired results culminated in the king’s command to destroy all the wise men of Babylon, “For this cause the king was angry and very furious, and commanded to destroy all the wise men of Babylon. And the decree went forth that the wise men should be slain; and they sought Daniel and his fellows to be slain” (Daniel 1.12-13). A matter Daniel and his friends had no part in had the potential to be their undoing.

As junior sages, Daniel and his companions were not included in the initial audience with the king. The first news of the command to destroy the wise men of Babylon came to Daniel when Arioch, the captain of the guard, came to collect Daniel and his friends for execution. Daniel inquired as to the reason for the hasty command and Arioch shared with Daniel the events concerning the king’s dream. Daniel’s altruistic approach is seen in his response to the seemingly terminal situation. Daniel requested an audience with the king and declared that if he were given time to consider the matter and pray, he would be able to tell the dream and the interpretation. There is no doubt Daniel had genuine concern for his own life, however, one finds in the narrative a deliberate intervention by Daniel to save the lives of all the wise of Babylon as well their families. Once again the text reveals Daniel’s genuine concern and empathy for all involved, the king as well as the sages whose lives were hanging in the balance.

Daniel’s audience with the king and assurance that he could ascertain the information the king desired earned a temporary reprieve in the execution order. Daniel shared the matter with his three friends and the four of them took their request to God in prayer. The calm with which Daniel approached the matter is seen in that he went to sleep at some time in the evening. While Daniel was asleep, God revealed both the king’s dream and the interpretation to Daniel. Daniel gave praise and glory to God and then asked for an audience with the king where he might reveal

the dream and its meaning. After Daniel revealed the dream and its interpretation, Nebuchadnezzar fell down before Daniel and declared his God to be the God above all gods. Daniel was immediately promoted to the office of vice regent over the entire kingdom.

Another example of Daniel's altruistic leadership is revealed in his immediate request on behalf of his friends. "Then the king made Daniel a great man, and gave him many great gifts, and made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon and chief of the governors over all the wise men of Babylon. Then Daniel requested of the king, and he set Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, over the affairs of the province of Babylon: but Daniel sat in the gate of the king" (Daniel 2.48-49). According to Flynn and Black (2011), an altruistic leader is one who cares for and elevates the needs and wants of others above self. Daniel could have accepted and enjoyed the promotion granted to him by the king, but Daniel was mindful of his three friends. Daniel genuinely cared for their advancement as well and immediately requested a place of service for them. According to Kanungo and Mendonca (1996), altruistic leadership includes mentoring, power sharing, and team building. Daniel was involved in all three with regard to his friends. Daniel mentored his three friends by example and personal influence. Daniel did not hesitate to share the blessings of God by asking for their advancement in the kingdom along with himself. Daniel was in essence building a leadership team by securing leadership positions for his friends as well. Altruistic leadership was fully functional and effective in the life and leadership of Daniel.

#### **Daniel 4, the King Humbled**

Chapter 4 opens with a public proclamation to all nations of the greatness of the "Most High God." The context and subsequent testimony leave no doubt that Nebuchadnezzar was referring here to the God of the Jews, as had been introduced to him by Daniel. This royal proclamation is recorded in the first three verses;

Nebuchadnezzar the king, unto all people, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth; Peace be multiplied unto you. I thought it good to shew the signs and wonders that the high God hath wrought toward me. How great are his signs! and how mighty are his wonders! his kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and his dominion is from generation to generation (Daniel 4.1-3).

This proclamation seems immediately to be at odds with the nature of the man as revealed in the events of the first three chapters. One might ask, where is the arrogant king who was the conqueror of nations? What happened to the despot who tried to burn alive Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego for defying his order to worship the image? In the place of that arrogant boastful dictator one finds a man humbled to his core. One finds here a man who had been changed, not from the outside, but from the inside. By his own testimony, Nebuchadnezzar tells of the mighty works of God, in particular, the signs and wonders God had manifested toward him. It was Nebuchadnezzar's personal meeting with God that changed him. We find here an Old Testament prototype of 2 Corinthians 5.17; Nebuchadnezzar was a new man because he had met God by faith.

Following the opening proclamation concerning the Most High God, Nebuchadnezzar recounted the events which brought him to a place of humility and godly self-awareness. Nebuchadnezzar said, "I saw a dream which made me afraid, and the thoughts upon my bed and the visions of my head troubled me" (Daniel 4.5). Nebuchadnezzar's concern over the dream moved him to call in all the wise men of Babylon so they might interpret the dream for him. Alas, the result was the same as recorded in chapter 1; the wise men of Babylon were powerless to interpret the message of God. Having established the failure of Babylon's best minds, God's man, Daniel, entered the scene to do what the others could not do. The event thus unfolded, no doubt, to demonstrate once again the power and sovereignty of the Most High God. Nebuchadnezzar said, "O Belteshazzar, master of the magicians, because I know that the spirit of the holy gods is in thee, and no secret troubleth thee, tell me the visions of my dream that I have seen, and the interpretation thereof" (Daniel 4.9). Nebuchadnezzar had faith that Daniel could interpret the dream.

Nebuchadnezzar recounted the dream to Daniel. The king saw a great tree that reached up to heaven. The birds and animals found shelter, food, and security under the shadow of the great tree. Then in a statement of amazement, Nebuchadnezzar described a "watchman" or an angel, a messenger, who appeared and commanded the tree to be cut down. The angel commanded,

Hew down the tree, and cut off his branches, shake off his leaves, and scatter his fruit: let the beasts get away from under it, and the fowls from his branches: Nevertheless leave the stump of his roots in the earth, even with a band of iron and brass, in the tender grass

of the field; and let it be wet with the dew of heaven, and let his portion be with the beasts in the grass of the earth: Let his heart be changed from man's, and let a beast's heart be given unto him; and let seven times pass over him (Daniel 4.13b-16).

There was an ominous tone to the message of the watchman. Nebuchadnezzar clearly understood that whoever or whatever the tree represented was headed for a perilous event.

God gave Daniel the interpretation of the dream. The message from God was stern and foreboding. Daniel was hesitant to give the meaning, but the king insisted, "Then Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar, was astonished for one hour, and his thoughts troubled him. The king spake, and said, Belteshazzar, let not the dream, or the interpretation thereof, trouble thee. Belteshazzar answered and said, My lord, the dream be to them that hate thee, and the interpretation thereof to thine enemies" (Daniel 4.19). Daniel's genuine concern for the king is yet another instance of his altruistic character as a servant and leader under the king's authority. Daniel did not allow his circumstances to hinder his desire for the king's advancement and success. Daniel interpreted the dream as a warning from God. God had seen Nebuchadnezzar's pride and judgment was on the way. The tree represented the king who would be removed from office for a season. The king would be struck with a mental malady that would cause him to live as an animal in the wild. After a period of seven seasons the king would be restored to the throne.

Daniel's concern for the welfare of the king is further seen in his recommendation. Daniel said, "Wherefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable unto thee, and break off thy sins by righteousness, and thine iniquities by shewing mercy to the poor; if it may be a lengthening of thy tranquility" (Daniel 4.27). Daniel recommended confession and repentance of sin. The evidence of genuine repentance would be seen in a changed lifestyle, acts of righteousness and mercy to the poor. Daniel's desire for the king's success is seen in his willingness to share the only source of forgiveness of sin and avoidance of judgment, the way of confession and repentance before The Most High God.

The text reveals Nebuchadnezzar's failure to repent. God gave Nebuchadnezzar an entire year to consider the dream as well as Daniel's worthy recommendation. Twelve months later the king was in his palace, boasting of his great accomplishments, when God struck him with the very judgment he had been warned of in the dream. Nebuchadnezzar was driven from his throne and for seven seasons lived as an animal. The preserving of Nebuchadnezzar's throne was, no doubt, orchestrated by Daniel. Daniel's altruistic nature is most clearly seen in that he did not

take advantage of the situation while the king was under the judgment of God. Daniel was a faithful steward of the king's affairs while making sure the king himself was cared for and prepared to return to the throne at the appropriate time. The result of God's judgment and Daniel's faithfulness are found at the end of the chapter, "Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise and extol and honour the King of heaven, all whose works are truth, and his ways judgment: and those that walk in pride he is able to abase" (Daniel 4.37). God's chastening, coupled with the altruistic ministry of Daniel, led to the salvation of a lost man who spent the rest of his days celebrating the true God whose works and judgments are true.

### **Conclusion**

According to Benner and Hill (1999), altruism is considered a helping behavior. These authors further postulate that the degree to which one desires to help is directly connected to altruistic motivation. In other words, a person will help others to the degree there is an inner motivation to alleviate the problem or suffering of others. For the child of God, the inner desire or motive to help others is generated by one's personal relationship with Christ. The greatest altruistic event the world has ever know was that of the Father giving His only begotten Son to die on the cross for the sin of a lost world. It was pure altruism that motivated Jesus to hang on the cross and die for sin that was not His. The Christian motive for altruistic behavior is found in Christ.

Daniel's motive to serve altruistically as a leader and follower was based on his personal relationship with God. To know the altruistic love of God in a personal way is to be inherently motivated to extend that love to others. Perhaps the lack of empathy or care for the lost among many professing Christians is actually an indication of a missing relationship with God? Perhaps the lack of concern for the pain and suffering of those in the local community reveals a lack of spiritual focus in the local church congregation? Biblical altruism is inextricably connected to a relationship with God. Daniel gave overwhelming evidence of his relationship and walk with God by his genuine care for the needs of others.

A New Testament correlation to Daniel's example is found in Paul's letter to the church at Rome. The apostle Paul said, "Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law" (Romans 13.8). The literal translation of "owe no man anything" could be better expressed as "let no debt remain outstanding." In other words, Paul was not condemning the practice or borrowing money, rather, he was pointing out that in the same

way a Christian is responsible to pay their financial debts, there is a debt of love that can never be paid in full. Concerning the Christian debt of love, there are two areas where the debt is to be paid. First, Christians have a responsibility to reciprocate the love of God. In other words, the redeemed have a duty to love God in return for His love that has been expressed to us. Christians reciprocate the love of God by obedience to His Word. Jesus said, "If ye love me, keep my commandments" (John 14.15). Secondly, the redeemed of Christ owe a debt of love to others. The apostle Paul said that if we love others we have fulfilled the whole law.

Altruism in the Christian life is an expression of the debt of love owed. To care for others more than self comes from walking in the power of the Holy Spirit. An altruistic approach will move one to share the Gospel with the lost. An altruistic approach will move Christians to disciple new believers in Christ. An altruistic approach will move the church to care about a lost world and use every means available to bring the light of truth to such utter spiritual darkness. Observing the altruistic demeanor of Daniel should move Christians of any generation to examine the motive of their own hearts. The debt of love can never be fully paid, however, the desire and effort to settle the debt should ever be made.

## References

- Benner, D., & Hill, P. (Eds.). (1999). In *Baker encyclopedia of psychology & counseling* (2nd ed.). Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books.
- Boice, J. (2003). *Daniel: an expositional commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books.
- Flynn, S., & Black, L. (2011). An Emergent Theory of Altruism and Self-Interest. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 89(4), 459-469.
- Guinot, J., Chiva, R., & Mallen, F. (2015). The effects of altruism and relationship conflict on organizational learning. *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 26(1), 112-185.
- Kanungo, R., & Mendonca, M. (1996). *Ethical Dimensions of Leadership*. Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage Publications.
- Nelson, W. (2013). *Daniel*. (W. W. Gasque, R. L. Hubbard Jr., & R. K. Johnston, Eds.). Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books.
- Paschall, F., & Hobbs, H. (Eds.). (1972). *The Teacher's Bible Commentary*. Nashville, TN.: Broadman and Holman Publications.
- Simmons, R. (1991). Altruism and Sociology. *Sociological Quarterly*, 32(1), 1-22.
- Smith, S., Bresnahan, M., & Smith, S. (2011). Application of the Altruistic Behavior Coding Scheme to Cross Cultural Contexts. *World Cultures eJournal*, 18(1).
- Smith, J. (1992). *The Major Prophets*. Joplin, MO.: College Press.
- Szmukler, G. & Appelbaum, P. (2008). Treatment pressures, leverage, coercion, and compulsion in mental health care. *Journal of Mental Health*, 17(3), 233-244.
- Walvoord, J., & Zuck, R. (1985). *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*. Colorado Springs, CO.: Victor Books.