

# PRINCE OF DREAMS

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Pacific Press® Publishing Association  
Nampa, Idaho  
Oshawa, Ontario, Canada  
[www.pacificpress.com](http://www.pacificpress.com)

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# SUMMONED TO THE PARTY

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The afternoon air was sultry hot, not the sort of day for a party. The lizards knew it as they sat sunning themselves on the sill of the window. The bees knew it as they buzzed lazily from bloom to bloom in the large flowerboxes on the veranda. The scent of the blossoms perfumed the air, and on a day like this even Daniel felt drowsy.

He took another gulp of water from the cup sitting beside him and then shifted his knees under the short-legged, round table on which a scroll lay spread out before him. All afternoon he had been trying to memorize a prayer of Moses from Psalms, but he couldn't concentrate.

He could hear the royal orchestra across the courtyard and down an alley in the Great Hall of Lebanon. The horns and flutes were blaring cheap music, and silly laughter rose and fell along with the tinkling of the tambourines. Daniel could almost smell the heady scent of the wine that he knew was flowing there fast and free.

He was supposed to go to the parties at the palace, but he stayed away. They were celebrations in honor of the gods Baal and Ashtoreth. He wondered how a fat idol that sat on a shelf could represent anything but superstition and sheer stupidity. Besides, everybody knew that these idols were really a cheap excuse for holding perverted parties—parties at which people ate nasty things and behaved in disgusting ways that the Torah, God's law, said were an abomination. At the thought, Daniel cringed and covered his face with his hands. These gods of stone and gold and ivory were an insult to God and a slap in the face of every true-hearted citizen of Judah. Baal worship represented everything that was shameful and degrading and just plain wicked.

Daniel felt like arguing with the partygoers, but he bit his lower lip.

He'd been over and over the arguments so many times now, and he just didn't want to think about them anymore. Besides, he wanted to memorize this passage from Psalms. The scroll on the table was a copy he had made for himself two years back, a task every Hebrew boy was required to complete. Many of the passages were favorites of his. Priest Amaziah, an instructor in the temple classes, had told him again and again that memorization was a good way to store God's Word in the heart. "You never know when you'll be in a place where you won't have the Word of God to read," he'd reminded Daniel over and over again.

However, today Daniel was feeling lazy and tired of memorizing passages from the Psalms. He felt like doing something other than what he was supposed to be doing. His eyes kept wandering to another cloth-wrapped scroll that lay in a corner of the room. It was a copy of Prophet Jeremiah's latest message to Judah, and Daniel wanted to read the words for himself.

Everyone was out for the afternoon. His mother, Anah, and his two sisters, Leah and Cozbi, were in the south wing of the palace. They were helping prepare a wedding celebration for one of the king's daughters, who was marrying a local, well-to-do chieftain.

Daniel's father, Hashabiah, was managing the family shop in the upper quarter of the city near the temple mount. Hashabiah was a successful merchant. His business—buying and selling expensive clothing—was the envy of many merchants in Jerusalem. Most of the clothing in his shop was from Babylon and major Phoenician cities such as Tyre, but sometimes he imported fine linen garments from Egypt too.

Usually, Daniel studied in the morning and worked with his father in the afternoon, but today had been different. A shipment of garments had come in on a camel train the previous evening, and during the morning hours Daniel had helped his father restock the shop. Now his father wanted him to study.

Daniel glanced at the scroll in the corner again. Then he went and picked it up. Surely it wouldn't hurt to spend a little time reading it.

Daniel reverently took the vellum scroll out of its linen bag and rolled it open in front of him on the table. His amber eyes scanned the Hebrew words as he traced them with his finger. The prophet Jeremiah had brought the scroll for Daniel's father to read when he had come to their home the previous evening. The two men had talked long into the night

about how bad things were getting in Judah. Daniel had sat nearby and listened to their conversation, not saying much. At seventeen years of age, he was still thought to be just a boy, and in Judah, that wasn't an age when one should be speaking his mind much on spiritual things.

But even though Daniel had mostly listened, his mind had been going as fast as a speeding chariot. There were so many things he wanted to ask—and say. Though quiet by nature and respectful, he did have opinions about spiritual things. And he certainly had something to say about the behavior of King Jehoiakim. In his third year now as king of Judah, Jehoiakim had already bowed the knee first to Pharaoh Necho of Egypt and then to General Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon.

Daniel frowned. Having to serve these foreign rulers was a disgrace. If the people of Judah lived as they should and obeyed the Word of the Lord, no one would be ruling over them now except God, Creator of heaven and earth.

Daniel bent his head of chestnut-colored hair to the task of reading the scroll again. Suddenly there was a loud pounding on the door to the family apartment. “Open up in the name of the king!” a voice shouted.

Daniel stood to his feet. He was taller than most boys his age, and he had the look of a prince. His jaw jutted forward squarely, and his shoulders and back were as straight as a tree on the mountains of Lebanon.

When Daniel opened the door, he was not surprised to see the faces of the palace guards and of Jalon, their captain. Jalon liked Daniel, and he grinned sheepishly. “The king is calling for you,” he said and then looked around to see if there might be eavesdroppers. “He wants you at the celebration feast, and you know how angry he can be when he doesn't get what he wants.” Jalon rolled his eyes so only Daniel could see.

“I know all too well,” Daniel said. Then, looking longingly at the long sheet of vellum and thinking of the words written on its supple surface, he sighed. He knew the scroll would have to wait; he dared not defy a direct command of the king. Though related to the king, Daniel was not thought to be as important as others in the royal family, and he surely would not escape one of King Jehoiakim's famous whippings.

Scourging was sometimes used on people considered even more important than Daniel. Elnathan, chief advisor to the king, had been beaten publicly for daring to tell the king what he should and shouldn't say to

Pharaoh Necho of Egypt. Prophet Jeremiah had suffered even worse in the stocks and in the royal dungeon, and all to satisfy a king who was often drunk and out of control.

“Let me get my sandals,” Daniel said. He dreaded another confrontation with the king. He knew he wasn’t going to take part in the feast. No dancing for him, and certainly no wine, but if he went and stayed quiet, maybe the king would leave him alone. Maybe he wouldn’t make a fuss about Daniel not actually participating in the festivities. Maybe.

As Daniel closed the door to the apartment, he sent up a silent prayer that God would help him to know what he should say and do.