

The Book Of Daniel

*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.
(Daniel 1:20 ESV)*

*but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and he has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days.
(Daniel 2:28 ESV)*

*And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.
(Daniel 12:2–3 ESV)*

Faithful In A Foreign Land

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Daniel 1

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Introduction:

Good morning church! I'd like to invite you to open your Bibles this morning to Daniel 1; that's on page 737 in your pew Bibles. We are starting something new today – we're going to take about 12 weeks and work our way through the Old Testament Book of Daniel.

The story in Daniel begins at one of the lowest points in the biblical narrative.

You've heard me say before that Israel in the Old Testament occupied a very hazardous stretch of highway. Israel is basically a land bridge between Asia and Africa and therefore all the most powerful armies of the ancient world were always marching back and forth through Jewish territory. And Israel would often – foolishly – align with one super power against another.

Now of course, theologically speaking, we know that they were right where God wanted them. He wanted his people to grow up in a dangerous neighbourhood because he wanted them to learn to trust in him.

See, one of the things we tend to forget about God is that he is less interested in our happy than in our holy. He wants us to GROW and therefore he planted Israel in a geo-political hot-house. It was trust or die on that land bridge – and throughout their history Israel did a little bit of both. Sometimes they trusted God and he protected them, blessed them and grew them – and then sometimes they trusted in themselves – they did things their own way and they followed the example of their neighbours.

That's what was going on in the 7th century.

Their last good king had died in battle in 609 BC. With his death, the final restraint was removed and the nation as a whole descended into idolatry. And so God used the King of Babylon to put his people on a long and painful time-out.

That's basically what happened in this story.

Babylon invaded Israel to punish them for foolishly aligning with the Egyptians. They despoiled the temple and took a variety of young noble teenagers into exile as hostages against the future good behaviour of the nation.

That's where the Book of Daniel begins.

Daniel was part of the first wave of deportations to Babylon. There were 3 waves. We tend to think of just the last one – the big one – the one where the temple was destroyed and the MASS of people deported – but by that time, Daniel had already been in Babylon for 19 years.

And again - that was all part of God's plan.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. We pick up the story in Daniel 1 verse 1. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. ² 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.³ 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,⁴ 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.⁵ The king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate, and of the wine that he drank. They were to be educated for three years, and at the end of that time they were to stand before the king.⁶ Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah of the tribe of Judah.⁷ And the chief of the eunuchs gave them names: Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego.

⁸ But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself.⁹ And God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs,¹⁰ and the chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, "I fear my lord the king, who assigned your food and your drink; for why should he see that you were in worse condition than the youths who are of your own age? So you would endanger my head with the king."¹¹ Then Daniel said to the steward whom the chief of the eunuchs had assigned over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah,¹² "Test your servants for ten days; let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink.¹³ Then let our appearance and the appearance of the youths who eat the king's food be observed by you, and deal with your servants according to what you see."¹⁴ So he listened to them in this matter, and tested them for ten days.¹⁵ At the end of ten days it was seen that they were better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youths who ate the king's food.¹⁶ So the steward took away their food and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables.

¹⁷ As for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams.¹⁸ At the end of the time, when the king had commanded that they should be brought in, the chief of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar.¹⁹ And the king spoke with them, and among all of them none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Therefore they stood before the king.²⁰ 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.²¹ And Daniel was there until the first year of King Cyrus. (Daniel 1:1–21 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Now whenever we are reading the bible we are hoping to learn something about God, about us and about how God saves us through the person and work of Christ – that's what the Bible is about,

from start to finish. The Book of Daniel covers all those bases, but not necessarily in every chapter. In the first 6 chapters the focus is on what God is doing to purify, discipline and refine his people and it is trying to teach us what it looks like for God's people to be faithful in a hostile land. Then in the second half of the book the focus is on God's plan to save his people and set up an everlasting kingdom on the earth – there is a hint of that in the first half of the book – but most of that comes in the last six chapters. But today we are just going to look at what we find in chapter one.

In the first chapter the emphasis, as I said, is on who God is and how God's people need to conduct themselves in hostile territory. So let's wrestle with that. This story has a bunch of interesting things to say about God.

Who God Is:

The first thing I think we can see very clearly is that God knows how to break a downward spiral.

1. A God who knows to break a downward spiral

A moment ago I referred to Josiah – the last reforming King of Judah – but to tell you the truth, his story is a classic example of too little, too late. By the time he came along Israel had been falling hard and fast for a very long time.

A couple of weeks ago Pastor Levi mentioned that the highwater mark in the Old Testament story – in terms of the monarchy – was definitely the combined reigns of King David and Solomon. David defeated all the enemies of God's people and then Solomon set up a kingdom that for a while anyway, looked like heaven on earth. People started thinking that maybe Solomon was Jesus – maybe he was THE ONE that God had promised. But then in 1 Kings 11 we see Solomon take a sharp downward turn:

Now King Solomon loved many foreign women, along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women,² from the nations concerning which the LORD had said to the people of Israel, "You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you, for surely they will turn

away your heart after their gods.” Solomon clung to these in love. (1 Kings 11:1–2 ESV)

So this is like the absolute summit of a roller coaster ride. You know how they crank you up to the top of this huge hill and then you hang there for just a second before – and then WHOOSH – you race toward the bottom at Mach speed.

That’s what we’re seeing here.

Now there are a few little ups and bumps but in general the trajectory here is down, down, fast and hard.

Josiah’s revival did nothing to turn the tide.

Once Solomon had done what he had done – once he had essentially corrupted the Royal Family – the track was set. All these little princes were growing up now with two gods in the house. They worshipped daddy’s God a little bit and momma’s god a little bit - which of course was just a front for pagan demons. That’s what the bible says. So all the sudden Israel was polluted – morally, spiritually, ethically – every way and Israel found itself operating without the help and favour of the Lord.

That’s what was going on. Listen to what the Bible says was happening in Israel – and in the house of David even - just prior to Josiah’s mini revival:

he rebuilt the high places that Hezekiah his father had destroyed, and he erected altars for Baal and made an Asherah, as Ahab king of Israel had done, and worshiped all the host of heaven and served them.⁴ And he built altars in the house of the LORD, of which the LORD had said, “In Jerusalem will I put my name.”⁵ And he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the LORD.⁶ And he burned his son as an offering and used fortune-telling and omens and dealt with mediums and with necromancers. He did much evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger. (2 Kings 21:3–6 ESV)

Are you hearing that? Manasseh – Josiah’s grandfather – worshipped the Canaanite gods Baal and Asherah – those were fertility gods - the worship of whom involved ritual prostitution – IN THE

HOUSE OF THE LORD. In the temple. And, as if that wasn't bad enough, he was also practicing CHILD SACRIFICE and consulting witches and necromancers.

That's what was going on in Israel – in Judah – in the southern kingdom - in the 7th century. People were doing MUCH EVIL in the sight of the Lord and it provoked the Lord to anger.

No kidding.

That's why God ordained the exile.

The exile was literally God saying – ENOUGH IS ENOUGH.

You like playing footsie with pagan demons? Then I will bury you in the land of pagan demons. You can see them up close. You can share a room with them for the next 70 years and then we'll talk and we'll see which God you want to follow.

That's what the exile was.

It was hard parenting and apparently – God knows how to do that. He will do what needs to be done to arrest a downward spiral and to instil a holy disgust for sinful practices.

It's important for us to know that.

The second thing we want to notice here is that God is Sovereign over kings and nations.

2. A God who is Sovereign over kings and nations

Look again at verse 2:

And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God. (Daniel 1:1–2 ESV)

So God did that.

It wasn't just that Nebuchadnezzar had more soldiers and more resources behind him – God brought him there and used him to accomplish his Sovereign purpose.

The Bible says this kind of stuff again and again and again. In Isaiah 5:26 the prophet says that when the people of God are sinning and need a spanking or a time out:

“He will raise a signal for nations far away, and whistle for them from the ends of the earth; and behold, quickly, speedily they come!” (Isaiah 5:26 ESV)

Do you see that?

God will whistle and foreign kings and foreign armies will immediately assemble around Jerusalem.

That's what is happening here!

Now that doesn't make God responsible for all the evil that these nations do – they are like rabid dogs, the Bible says – but God yanks the chain this way and that way – lengthens the chain sometimes even - according to his Sovereign purposes.

That's complicated – I grant you – but we see it right here in this passage. God uses Babylon – and Nebuchadnezzar to put his people on time out and to affect a long and difficult season of refinement and purification. However hard it is to understand – that is something we see again and again and again in the Bible.

The third thing we ought to see here is that God rewards faithfulness and courage.

3. A God who rewards faithfulness and courage

Daniel and his friends take a stand – we'll talk about that in just a minute. It was a principled stand – there were risks associated with it – but they did what they did because they believed it would honour the Lord.

And so God blessed them.

The Tyndale Old Testament commentary says here:

“Even a small act of self-discipline, taken out of loyalty to principle, sets God’s servants in the line of his approval and blessing. In this way actions attest faith, and character is strengthened to face more difficult situations in the future.”¹

Do you see that?

Every act of loyal obedience – every act of faithfulness and courage – no matter how small – will be rewarded and blessed by God. He will give you more grace and help so that you will be able to face bigger and bigger challenges in the future.

That means obedience in one area – can give you grace for another. See, that’s how things work in the Divine economy – it can be so helpful for us to understand that.

And then fourthly and lastly, in terms of what we learn about God here, we see quite clearly that God knows how to play the long game.

4. A God who knows how to play the long game

Everything about this story indicates that God is always 2, 3, 4 – a thousand moves ahead. He is playing the long game and he is seeing the whole board. He sends Daniel and his friends into exile 19 years before everybody else. By the time the people as a whole arrive in Babylon in 586 BC Daniel has already risen to a position of prominence – which is exactly what we saw in the story of Joseph. God sent Joseph down early into Egypt so that he too could prepare the way and secure a position for the people of God in the land of Egypt.

Same thing here.

¹Joyce G. Baldwin, *Daniel: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 23 of Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 92-93.

Daniel and his friends were probably thinking – what in the world is going on?

They were nobles – they were on the fast-track – and now they were in the gutter – that’s what they thought. But God was thinking bigger, longer and wider – and that’s something that all God’s people need to understand. God is a personal God – he numbers the hairs on your head – but that same truth applies to every other person on the planet. So the plan is always bigger than you. Bigger than your immediate happiness. And wider than your two eyes can see.

Thanks be to God!

How To Be God’s People In A Hostile Land:

Alright, secondarily we want to mine this story in terms of what it teaches us about how to be God’s people in a hostile land. When we look at it through that lens, the most obvious thing that this story is saying is that:

1. God’s people need to know where to draw the line

That’s the central tension of the story. Daniel and his friends DRAW A LINE. We are not going to eat the King’s food and we are not going to drink the king’s wine!

We are drawing a line, they say.

Now, scholars today have a hard time figuring out why they drew the line where they did. It’s not as simple as saying that they wanted to eat kosher – the dietary laws in the Bible actually don’t say anything about wine, so why mention that?

And it’s not as simple as saying that maybe the food had been offered to idols. Of course it had! That was standard procedure and it applied to the vegetables as much as to meat. So there must have been something else going on here.

Some scholars say that this was just the place where these young men decided to demonstrate their ultimate loyalty and allegiance to Yahweh. They just needed to find a way to be distinctive because they were being exposed to all kinds of stuff that was definitely not Jewish. Tremper Longman says here:

“Daniel clearly would have been trained in the arts of divination through such means as interpreting unusual terrestrial and celestial phenomena, astrology, the examination of sheep livers, and so forth.”²

So Daniel was immersed in Babylonian astrology for crying out loud – he went full Harry Potter – and yet that wasn’t where he drew the line – he drew it over here – he said “no, I’m not going to eat from the King’s table. Just bring me some veggies and water.”

What’s the point?

The point is that in every generation God’s people have to figure out how to be in the world without being of the world. We have to figure out where to draw the lines.

Now if you draw the lines too narrowly then you risk sabotaging your outreach to the culture. Jesus criticised the Jews of his day for doing this. You won’t do this and you won’t do that – so you can’t have any contact with your Gentile neighbours – how in the world are you ever going to serve as a kingdom of priests? Right? But on the other hand – he also said that salt that loses its saltiness is good for nothing – thrown out into the streets and trampled under foot – so it’s pretty important that we figure this out – where are we going to draw the lines?

If I can offer a gross over-generalization – I would say that in our grandparents’ day Christians tended to draw the lines too narrowly. We were known as the people who don’t dance, drink or chew or go with girls who do – and we just looked odd and silly to our neighbours. We had all kinds of goofy rules. Christians don’t play cards. Why? Is there something evil about having fun and learning math? That was a stupid line – and there were all kinds of stupid lines. And it didn’t help us at all in reaching our neighbours.

² Tremper Longman III, *Daniel* in the NIV Application Commentary, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 49.

But here comes my next gross over-generalization. In this generation we don't have any lines. We just do whatever the culture is doing – and it's killing us. We have to have some lines! This whole sex and gender thing – is madness. It is literally killing kids and we need to say NO. Sorry, we can't go along with that. We're drawing a line here. Boys are boys. Girls and girls and sex is great between one man and one woman who are going to stay together and love each other forever.

Period.

That's a good line.

But good lines are hard to find – so like Daniel and his friends – we have to work together and we have to choose the right ones.

God help us – because this is really hard – but here we see that this is one of the things that God's people need to figure out when they are living in a hostile land.

The second thing we see here is that:

2. God's people need to be willing to put God's wisdom on display

As we mentioned, these young men took a risk because they wanted to obey the Lord – they wanted to communicate that their allegiance was ultimately to Yahweh and not to Babylon. So they put themselves out there. They took a stand. They were known as God's people – and God used that to display his grace and wisdom in them.

Look at verse 20:

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. (Daniel 1:20 ESV)

God blessed these men and caused them to flourish. And it wasn't that they were smarter – it was that they were FAVOURED – the text makes that very clear.

As for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom (Daniel 1:17 ESV)

God lifted them up SO THAT he could display his power, his mercy and his wisdom in their lives.

That's what it means to be God's people.

You courageously draw a line. You let yourself be known. You say to your friends and neighbours – come hell or high water, I'm doing it God's way. And then you let God SHOW HIMSELF WISE AND GOOD through your lives.

That's a lot of what it be a witness in a hostile and fallen world.

And then lastly here, it's kind of the flip side of something we said earlier, since God is playing the long game, then obviously God's people need to be patient and faithful over the long haul as well.

3. God's people need to be patient and faithful over the long haul

Look at the last verse of the chapter.

And Daniel was there until the first year of King Cyrus. (Daniel 1:21 ESV)

Well if you know your history you know that Cyrus was the King of Persia – not the King of Babylon. You see, in 539 BC Persia defeated Babylon and took over and expanded her Empire – and the point is that Daniel was still there! He was still working in the capital more than 60 years after the events we are reading about in Daniel chapter 1.

Daniel was still there – long after Babylon had fallen.

You see that?

Daniel played the long game too.

Babylon is JUST A MOMENT – friends.

Babylon is a FLEA in the wind.

But God is forever.

You see there is a difference between being on the right side of the mob – and the right side of history. History is long and history belongs to the Lord.

So, you want to be a person of influence? You want to be salt and light? You want to be faithful in a hostile world? Then draw wise lines – stand with the right people – keep your nerve, show your fruit and wait on God.

That is wisdom. That is witness. And this is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God, let's pray together.