

Daniel, the Triumph of God's Kingdom

Daniel 1:1-7

This morning we begin a brand-new series called Daniel: The Triumph of God's Kingdom. Daniel is an amazing book. This book has it all: history ... prophecy ... politics ... prayer ... lions ... statues ... wild animals ... a fiery furnace ... dreams and visions ... a king who thought he was a cow ... incredible adventure ... amazing escapes ... angels ... demons ... detailed information about ancient history ... and amazing prophecies about the end times.

Why study the book of Daniel? For at least three reasons:

1) Daniel's situation is becoming our own. For most of his life, Daniel lived as part of a believing minority in a majority pagan culture. From the time he was a teenager until he died around the age of 90, he served under a series of pagan kings. He lived and served surrounded by people who did not believe in the God of the Bible.

How should we live in a world where believers are outnumbered and often overwhelmed? How should we respond to the rising tide of abortion, euthanasia, and gay rights, the outright hatred of Christians, and the rising tide of persecution around the world? Where is God in the midst of a pagan culture? How do we proclaim Christ in a world that doesn't even believe in the concept of truth? Daniel provides a positive model for how to live for God when no one else shares your faith.

2) Daniel's prophecies may soon be fulfilled. This book is filled with dreams, visions, and prophecies. Some of them have been fulfilled in our past, others will be fulfilled when the Lord Jesus Christ comes again. I hope that our study of Daniel will encourage us to be ready for the coming of our Lord and the fullness of His Kingdom.

3) Daniel's God is our God too—and His Kingdom will triumph over all. This may be the most important lesson of the book of Daniel. God is on the throne of heaven. He is in control. He is the sovereign God over nations, families, and individuals. He is in charge of the past, the present, and the future. He rules in good times and bad times, in great victories and in shocking defeats. He is God when a child is born and he is God when death knocks at your door. Studying Daniel should increase our confidence in the powerful sovereignty of a holy, loving God who makes no mistakes.

Daniel should answer the question for us, "*Where is God in this world?*"

In his book *Night*, Elie Wiesel tells of that first night he came to the German concentration camp of Auschwitz and the sight of the chimneys of the crematorium, the fire, the smoke, the ash, but what must have been on his mind was the question that a man asked when the prisoners were made to watch the long death of a child. *Where is God now?*

That question has been asked by people down through the ages in times of crisis and catastrophe. I'm sure it was on the minds of the Jews when Jerusalem fell to the heathens, the temple was sacked and many of their best and brightest children were taken off to a foreign land.

That happened in the third year in the reign of Jehoiakim which was the year 605 B.C. That's how the Book of Daniel begins, verse 1, **"In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it."** Nebuchadnezzar was one of the mightiest kings of ancient times. He was proud, he was ambitious and in 605 he was building one of the greatest empires of the age. In the spring of that year he had defeated the mighty Egyptian army at the Battle of Carchemish. Then he turned on the kingdom of Judah who had been allied with Egypt and he captured Jerusalem. He robbed the temple of its treasures. He took captive many of Jerusalem's choicest young people and marched them off to the land of Shinar. He put the vessels of the temple in the treasury of his god and he put the young Jewish captives in an indoctrination program to learn the language and the ways of Babylon so that they could serve the state.

A 100 years earlier it happened to the northern kingdom, the kingdom of Israel when the empire of Assyria came down and crushed it and took it into captivity. That was the end of the northern kingdom of Israel. It vanished from history and its people were scattered. Now the southern kingdom was facing the same terrible fate. You can hardly appreciate the emotional trauma all of this was for the nation, but especially for these young Jewish captives, like Daniel.

They had been taken from their families and friends, from their homeland which later in the Book of Daniel is called The Beautiful Land. And it was a beautiful land. But they would never see it again.

They were brought captive to Babylon, the capital of the empire and the greatest city of that age. Everything about it displayed the power and glory of Nebuchadnezzar and his gods. Babylon was built on the Euphrates River in what is now Iraq. It was a vast metropolis surrounded by high double walls wide enough for two chariots to race side by side. The inner walls had eight gates, each named after a pagan god. Coming from the north, the captives would have probably entered through the Gate of Ishtar, the goddess of love and war. It was a massive tower covered with glazed blue bricks and decorated with brightly colored lions, dragons and bulls, each representing a god of Babylon.

Through the gate the captive entered the sacred procession way that led to the Temple of Marduk the chief god of the Babylonian pantheon. The street was lined with bright enamel walls, again depicting lions and gods. It was paved with limestone slabs, each inscribed with the name of their conqueror, Nebuchadnezzar. All around were magnificent buildings, palaces and temples. And towering above it, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. These young people had never seen anything like it. The sight of it all must have left them dazzled and despairing.

Everything around them seemed to be proof that the Jewish nation and their God was defeated. And this was only the beginning. It would get worse in Jerusalem in the years that followed. In 597 B.C. Babylonian forces invaded Jerusalem a second time. Nebuchadnezzar took King Jehoiachin, the son of Jehoiakim, captive along with the royalty and the middle class. This is when the prophet Ezekiel was taken into captivity to Babylon. The final death blow came in 586 B.C. Again Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem. King Zedekiah tried to escape

but was captured. His children were slaughtered before his eyes and then his eyes were blinded. The Babylonian army burned the temple and razed the city to the ground and deported the people of the land to Babylon. From all appearances it seemed that the Lord had been vanquished by the gods of Babylon.

It was not true of course. God had not been knocked off His throne; that is impossible. The Lord was, in fact, governing everything. That is the testimony of the book of Daniel: the Triumph of God's Kingdom.

Before we dig into chapter 1, let's answer a few questions about the book of Daniel.

(1) Who was Daniel?

Daniel lived about 400 years after King David and 600 years before Jesus. The book covers more than 70 years from 605 BC to about 530 BC. In the beginning Daniel is a probably a teenager, maybe 15 years old. When the book closes, he is about 90 years old. During his long life God allowed him to serve under a succession of Babylonian and Persian rulers. From being an exiled captive, he becomes a trusted prime minister and counselor to some of the mightiest rulers in world history. Although not called a prophet in the book, Jesus referred to him as such in Matthew 24:15. The prophet Ezekiel regarded Daniel as one of the great saints of the Old Testament (Ezekiel 14:12-20; 28:1-3).

(2) What kind of book is Daniel?

In our Bible Daniel is grouped with the Major Prophets along with Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. But in the Hebrew Scriptures Daniel is not grouped with the prophets, but rather it is placed in the writings (with also include Job, Psalms, and Proverbs). Daniel is not like other prophetic books. Daniel is not commissioned by God and sent to God's people with a message from the Lord like most prophets. Rather than being a spokesman for God, Daniel is a counselor and statesman to pagan rulers.

The Book of Daniel depicts events which occurred during the 70 years of Judah's captivity in Babylon. It records a number of very important prophecies concerning future events, some of which were fulfilled in Daniel's lifetime, others in the years up to and including the first coming of Jesus Christ. Still other prophecies (see chapter 12) are yet to be fulfilled when Christ comes once more, to establish the kingdom of God on the earth.

(3) What are some of the characteristics of the Book of Daniel?

The book of Daniel was written in two languages: Hebrew, the language then spoken by the Jews (1:1-2:4a; 8:1-12:13), and Aramaic, the language of the Babylonians (2:4b-7:28).

Chapters 1-6 are historical, dealing with people and events in Daniel's day. Writing in the third person, Daniel interprets the dreams of others which they are unable to understand.

Chapters 7-12 are more prophetic, dealing with events from Daniel's day to eternity. Here, Daniel writes in the first person, describing his own visions for which God provides the interpretation through an angelic interpreter.

The Book of Daniel interweaves history and prophecy indicating to us that prophecy goes hand-in-hand with godly living in the present.

(4) What do some critics of the Book of Daniel say about this book?

Many Bible critics are opposed to the Book of Daniel because they do not believe in the supernatural. The miracles of the Book of Daniel bring strong reaction from those who have determined that miracles don't happen. In particular, the critics find Daniel's prophecies too good to be true. Daniel prophesies about the events of the second century B.C. in such precise detail that the skeptics conclude from this that Daniel must not be prophecy, written before the events which are predicted, but rather history. They believe Daniel was not written by Daniel but by someone in the second century B.C. posing as Daniel and attempting to comfort the Jews at that time with invented stories and falsified evidences of God's sovereign preservation and protection of His people. They seek to point out supposed "errors" in Daniel, which they believe help to establish that the book is not really divine prophecy.

I won't go into all the evidence that refutes these views but will simply say that virtually all of the critics' arguments vaporize under the scrutiny of investigation and in the light of later and more complete information, such as that provided by language study and archeology.

(5) How does the rest of the Bible value the book of Daniel?

Jesus spoke highly of Daniel, calling him a prophet and indicating that His scheme of prophecy is the same as that laid out by Daniel (see Matthew chapter 24, especially verse 15). Every chapter of Daniel is referred to or quoted in the New Testament; every New Testament writer makes use of Daniel's prophecies. Daniel's book is the backbone of Old and New Testament prophecy and is a key to understanding New Testament prophecy, especially the Book of Revelation.

With all that in mind, let's read Daniel 1:1-7,

- 1 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 articles of the house of God, which he carried into the land of Shinar to the house of his god; and he brought the articles into the treasure house of his god.**
- 3 Then the king instructed Ashpenaz, the master of his eunuchs, to bring some of the children of Israel and some of the king's descendants and some of the nobles,**
- 4 young men in whom there was no blemish, but good-looking, gifted in all wisdom, possessing knowledge and quick to understand, who had ability to serve in the king's palace, and whom they might teach the language and literature of the Chaldeans.**
- 5 And the king appointed for them a daily provision of the king's delicacies and of the wine which he drank, and three years of training for them, so that at the end of that time they might serve before the king.**

6 Now from among those of the sons of Judah were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishaël, and Azariah.

7 To them the chief of the eunuchs gave names: he gave Daniel the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishaël, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abed-Nego.

As I thought about this passage I saw that it gives us an object lesson on how the world tries to seduce the Christian. Like Daniel, we live in a world system that wants us to conform to its ungodly ways. Ray Pritchard lists four ways from this text that the world tries to do that:

I. The World Seeks to Destroy Our Heritage

1 In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it.

As I said, this book begins with total humiliating defeat. Jerusalem falls to Nebuchadnezzar. Verse 3 tells us, **“Then the king instructed Ashpenaz, the master of his eunuchs, to bring some of the children of Israel and some of the king's descendants and some of the nobles.”**

Verse 7 tells us that Daniel and his friends were taken to Babylon in this first wave of deportees. Nebuchadnezzar separates them from all they have known. They are isolated from the rest of their countrymen. How will they worship God without a temple, without sacrifices, and while living among unbelievers?

Sometimes just a change of location is enough to cause some church people to defect. How many young adults go away to college in a different city, away from mom and dad, away from their church, and away from positive spiritual influences, and so many of them cannot stand when the world seeks to destroy that heritage of faith.

Verse 2 says that they are taken into the land of Shinar. That name for Babylon goes all the way back to Genesis, chapter 10, and to the story of the tower of Babel when the kingdom of men thought they would become greater than the kingdom of God.

You see what Daniel is doing here? He’s reminding you that this is not just a battle between the nation state of Judah and the nation state of Babylon. This is a battle between the city of God and the city of man, between Jerusalem as representatives of God’s people and Babylon, the land of Shinar, the land of the tower of Babel, the land of false gods. This very phrase reminds us that there is a spiritual battle which is going to be unfolded in the book of Daniel.

I was raised in a Christian home and went to church every week as a child and as a teenager. But I merely had an outward form of religion and did not really know Jesus personally as my Lord and Savior. When I went away from home to college, it was easy to just stop going to church altogether because I was isolated from my spiritual heritage.

The world often makes a frontal assault on the people of God by separating us from our heritage and removing us from our own past.

Secondly,

II. The World Seeks to Deconstruct our Faith

2 And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the articles of the house of God, which he carried into the land of Shinar to the house of his god; and he brought the articles into the treasure house of his god.

Nebuchadnezzar took various worship objects made from gold and silver from the temple in Jerusalem and brought them back to Babylon with him. He then placed them in the temple of the chief god of Babylon, called Bel or Marduk. Taking the worship objects was meant to show Israel's complete defeat. The message was clear: Our god is greater than your god. By looting the temple, he thought he had defeated the God of Israel.

From a worldly point of view it appeared that God was dead. How else to explain the looting of the dwelling place of the one true God?

But the truth is that there is more going on here than just a pagan boasting over the Lord God. Notice that verse 2 says it was the Lord Himself who gave Jerusalem, its king and its temple into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar. The nation of Judah is reaping the harvest of judgment from God for their unbelief and disobedience to Him.

The pagan king of Babylon was simply God's rod of discipline on His people. From the beginning God had warned Israel that if they rebelled against Him, if they were disobedient to His law, they would be judged and disciplined. Moses told them that in way back in Deuteronomy 28. Both Isaiah and Jeremiah warned the nation about Babylon. But the kings of Judah and the people of Jerusalem would not listen to their prophets. Finally God's patience ran out and judgment came.

During their period of spiritual decline, the Israelites had brought idols of other gods into their temple. They worshiped them and sacrificed to these false gods. Now God empowered a pagan king to take His treasures into a pagan temple. This is God's righteous judgment. The principle of the harvest is well established in the Bible: You reap what you sow. The Jews had desecrated their own temple through consorting with idols, now by God's judgment He allows the pagans to come in and do the same thing.

All was not lost, although the looting of the temple made it seem that the Lord had been defeated and the Babylonians had won the battle of the gods, it was all according to the decree of the Lord God Himself as He had predicted through His prophets. God was still in charge, He had not lost and He was not dead.

Can you trust God when all the evidence suggests He is dead? Will you be faithful even when your world falls apart? Is your God greater than your circumstances?

The third way the world tries to make us conform is:

III. The World Seeks to Reconstruct Our Values

3 Then the king instructed Ashpenaz, the master of his eunuchs, to bring some of the children of Israel and some of the king's descendants and some of the nobles,

4 young men in whom there was no blemish, but good-looking, gifted in all wisdom, possessing knowledge and quick to understand, who had ability to serve in the king's palace, and whom they might teach the language and literature of the Chaldeans.

5 And the king appointed for them a daily provision of the king's delicacies and of the wine which he drank, and three years of training for them, so that at the end of that time they might serve before the king.

Here we have Nebuchadnezzar's Operation: Assimilation. It begins with a selection process aimed at the cream of the crop of Jewish young men. The king assigns them to Ashpenaz, his right-hand man. For three years they will be immersed in Babylonian knowledge, culture, history, language, and religion. At the end of that time they would enter the king's service and be assured of high-level government positions.

This is very clever and also very seductive. Mind control always begins with the young. Hitler did it. The communists did it. Nebuchadnezzar gave Ashpenaz a three-step plan for re-educating these sharp young Jewish teenagers. Step one was to teach them the language and literature of the Chaldeans. They would learn science, math, astrology, commerce, history, and the religion of Babylon. Step two was to offer them free food from the King's Buffet. Even back then they knew that the way to a young man's heart is through his stomach. Step three involved changing their names (verses 6-7).

I am sure that Nebuchadnezzar thought he was doing these young men an incredible favor. It was the kind of break most guys would jump at. And of all the Jewish young men taken to Babylon, it appears like only four were able to resist the complete assimilation process.

This world will seek to conform us to its values. And Finally,

IV. The World Seeks to Undermine Our Identity

6 Now from among those of the sons of Judah were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.

7 To them the chief of the eunuchs gave names: he gave Daniel the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abed-Nego.

Although it isn't obvious from the English text, all these names had special meanings. The Hebrew names all contained references to the God of Israel. The new Babylonian names were dedicated to the gods of Babylon:

Daniel ("God is my Judge") became Belteshazzar ("Bel, protect the King").

Hananiah ("The Lord is gracious") became Shadrach ("Command of Aku", the Sumerian sun-god).

Mishael ("Who is like the Lord?") became Meshach ("Who is what Aku is?").

Azariah ("The Lord is my helper") became Abednego ("Servant of Nebo," another Babylonian god).

The original Hebrew names tell us that these four teenagers must have been raised in godly homes by parents who raised their children to serve the true God. By giving them new names Ashpenaz meant to obliterate their past. Nebuchadnezzar didn't want good Jews working for him, he wanted good Babylonians who happened to have a Jewish background. Note that he didn't overtly force them to change their religion. But the whole process just made it very easy to forget. They were being weaned away from their past little by little. Soon they might forget it altogether.

Here, then, is the Babylonian plan to transform these young men:

New Home -- ISOLATION

New Knowledge -- INDOCTRINATION

New Diet -- COMPROMISE

New Names -- IDENTIFICATION

Clearly, the goal was for these young men to think and act and speak like the pagans around them. And it might have worked but for one all-important fact: You can change the outside but you can't change the heart. Here is hope for all Christian parents who worry (and rightly so) about the negative influence of the world all around us. In the end our job is to plant the seed of God's truth and then trust God to bring in the harvest.

Daniel and his friends were able to overcome this attempted assimilation to the world of Babylon. Next week we will look at how they did it.

The book of Daniel opens with what appears to be a clear triumph of evil over good. Yet God allowed it to happen for His own higher purposes. I'm sure Nebuchadnezzar didn't know that and I'm sure the Jews had trouble believing it but it was true nonetheless. God Was Not Defeated!

I know it's easy to be overwhelmed in these days when the world presses in on all sides. Yet we have the words of Jesus in John 17:15-17, **"I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. 16 They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. 17 Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth."** God has willed that his children should live in the world and yet be preserved from destruction by the world. God is the One who gave Israel over to Babylon. God sometimes uses the world to knock out all of our props so that we will turn back to him.

God was not defeated. He was orchestrating all things to bring the Kingdom of His Son, Jesus Christ to this earth. If you're here and you've not believed in Him, we invite you to do that. Jesus Christ is God's eternal Son who became a man and died for sinners so that all who believe in Him would be saved and will reign with Him in His coming Kingdom. Through His death and resurrection Jesus Christ has triumphed over sin, death, and every evil thing. Turn from your sin, from your false gods, from your own self-righteousness. Look to Jesus, trust in Him.