

Daniel 1:1–7

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Preacher: David Helm

[0 : 00] Daniel chapter one, verses one through seven.

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Daniel chapter two, verses two. Daniel chapter two, verses two.

Daniel chapter two, verses two. My title for this opening message in the series comes from the first four words that lie quietly at the outset of verse two, and the Lord gave.

[2 : 02] I want to talk about that this morning, and the Lord gave. You know, the book of Daniel begins by telling a catastrophic tale of the king of Israel's defeat, the objects of their worship desecrated, their youth and promising future deported.

In one sense, you could say this book opens with the promises of God, lying in a state of ruin, promises that he made first to Abraham and then Isaac and Jacob, and then later to David that he would have a king on the throne forever, back to our call to worship this morning. And at this point, Jehoiakim, king of Judah and his kingship over Israel, a kingship that ran through Israel's history for the better part of four centuries and more, seems to have come to an end.

The promises of God done. The vessels of worship, the objects that signified God's presence in their midst, gone, melted down now.

The people who were to be given the next generation of faith to be brought to the ends of the earth, many of the most promising in their midst, now dismissed.

I mean, when you look at it, it's really a failure of epic proportions. Which I think has led to two long-held conclusions about how Christian communities read the book of Daniel.

[4 : 08] Daniel. These two stubborn convictions, the implications of which I intend to challenge this fall in these series of sermons.

Simply put, the conclusions drawn from the waters of these opening verses are first that something very bad has happened to God's place. I mean, that's self-evident Jerusalem has been taken down. Babylon was in a sense then viewed by readers as a very bad place to be forced to live. The second conclusion that colors or throws a lens just on our reading of the book is not only that something very bad has happened to God's place, which it has, but something very bad has happened to God's people.

In other words, this is a bad time to be counted among God's people. Am I preaching yet to anyone who feels that kind of two-fold conclusion when you begin to look at this book?

We're hearing about Babylon, which we believe should be under God's judgment, and we're hearing about exile, which means that God's people are now put away.

[5 : 23] We begin to put on these lenses, don't we, as we read this book, and I believe with devastating consequences for the Christian church today and our sense of mission.

On one hand, these lenses through which we have learned to read Daniel have led many Christians over many years to retreat, to retreat from the world, to pull back, to stay out of contact, to shelter themselves in bubbles of like-minded believers, to use this book simply as a big club on the Babylon's of our time, that God is sovereign and coming judgment is there, or simply this notion that the only thing that can be done anymore at that time or in ours is just to endure the onslaught of evil and wait things out until Christ returns, this pessimistic lens.

On the other hand, other Christians decidedly shake off that despair of Daniel's opening and they're willing, in one sense, decidedly committed to great exertion, to great effort.

In this country, I must say largely political effort to give themselves to, in a sense, remade, our job is to remake Babylon in the image of our own Christian understanding.

I don't think I need to tell you that both of these ideas are in the foment of the waters of our time, and I think both need to be thought through carefully, challenged, particularly by thoughtful congregations that will be willing to do the hard work of understanding our central mission in ways that safeguard the inevitable differences that will arise on matters that we run into as we do life together.

[7 : 32] So you might ask, and I hope you do ask, what is the biblical basis, Pastor Helm, for thinking that we ought to read Daniel in any other way? Well, for that you've got to look at a couple of letters letters that Jeremiah, who was a contemporary of Daniel, decided to send to those who were in Babylon.

Now, if you've got a whole thing of the scriptures before you, you can look at Jeremiah 29. Jeremiah was a contemporary who was even challenging the way people felt about going into Babylon or what it was like to be a person in exile.

And in chapter 29, he actually sends a letter to these people about whom we're going to read. Now, let me just take part of it. Jeremiah 29 verse 1, these are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders of the exiles and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.

He sent some mail to interpret their times. Down in verse 4, he says, Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I've sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. Look at what he says. Build houses and live in them. Plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters. Take wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage that they may bear sons and daughters. Multiply there and do not decrease, but seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile and pray to the Lord on its behalf. For in its welfare, you will find your welfare. In other words, what he says is if you're going to be in Babylon, be at home in Babylon. Be at home in Babylon. Don't be at home with Babylon, but go about your life.

[9 : 36] No more hand wringing. Be a church with a sense of confidence in your step. You're going to be all right. We're going to be all right.

There's another word that he sent also, which fascinates me, this interpretive lens through which I think is a corrective on our series, and it's from Jeremiah 24. So just flip back a couple more there. After Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, had taken into exile from Jerusalem, Jeconiah, the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, together with the officials of Judah, the craftsmen, the metal workers, that he brought them to Babylon, the Lord showed me a vision. Yeah, I bet he did. You need a vision to reorient people's perspective on their situation. Jeremiah himself needed a vision to believe anything decent might be going on in their hour of distress. But notice the vision, two baskets of figs placed before the temple of the Lord. One basket had very good figs, like first ripe figs, but the other basket had very bad figs. But the other basket had very bad figs, so bad they couldn't be eaten. And the Lord said to me, what do you see, Jeremiah? I said, figs. Well, that's my kind of student right there.

The good figs, he says, are very good. The bad figs are very bad, so bad they cannot be eaten. Then the word of the Lord came to me, thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, like these good figs, so I will regard as good the exiles from Judah. I will set my eye on them for good.

I will build them up and not tear them down. This is a complete inversion in the prophetic discourse concerning the way we view the exile. He says, by the way, all of you that now find yourself waking up in Babylon, God's with you. In fact, he wasn't with the ones who had to go back into Jerusalem and got hauled off into Egypt and other places. Now, those two truths land like bombshells in my mind that upset the common conventional thinking on the opening of Daniel. The common coin of the book is that Babylon is a place in which God's people are to thrive and get on with their lives.

And that exile itself does not necessarily mean that you just have to endure things and wait until he comes, but that God is good and his presence never left you. Now, when you see that they got that kind of mail, you have to begin to read Daniel a little differently.

Exile can be good. Babylon can be productive. Which means that we should be a people, let me just put it the way we would do it, we would be comfortable in our own skin.

[13 : 00] In a nutshell, we'd be at home in Babylon. I can be at home as a child of God anywhere. I'm at home anywhere in one sense because this is not my home.

We need to recapture in the coming weeks together a doctrine called the providence of God, which is different than the sovereignty of God. The providence of God. Listen to what our own Westminster Confession of Faith says. God, the creator of all things, doth uphold, direct, dispose,

and govern all creatures, actions, and things from the greatest even to the least by his most wise and holy providence according to his infallible foreknowledge and the free and immutable counsel of his own will to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy. And the Lord gave then means that whatever God gives is for our own good and his glory. And that's what gets you out of bed in the morning.

And that's true even when what he gives doesn't look good. Three things in the text. What did the Lord give? Well, and the Lord gave the promises of God over to defeat.

There's no other way to read that opening line. In the third year, the reign of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim, king of Judah, into his hand. This king was on the back end of 22 kings who had ruled Israel and Judah, as I mentioned, over some four centuries, all under the idea that David's promise was going to extend into some spiritual enterprise in which God had a king in the world, over the world, drawing people back into relationship to God. But that city has fallen. It has been sacked. And with it, the promises of God suddenly seem to be in ruins. And if you want to think about what it was like to walk up on Babylon in that day and still claim that your God existed, you were walking up on a city that was massive.

[15:43] As you would have approached it, you would have approached a city with an outer double walls that had a circumference equal to 27 kilometers in ring. So wide were her walls, that is of Babylon, that chariots could be seen passing one another on the top of the parapets.

So impenetrable, her stone, that it was buttressed by defense towers all the way around. So narrow was the entrance and exit that only eight gates were in the 27 kilometers every three kilometers or so. This was God in their world.

And yet all the while, what you're reading here is the hidden significance of those opening lines of this epic story are these, And the Lord gave that king of his own people into the hands of that world. Babylon, not Israel, was the center of the world order.

Indeed, get this straight, Israel was never at the center of the world's order. Like the church today, it always stands parallel to the world's order. We are in it, we are not of it. Babylon is it.

And the Assyrian empire had grown fat. The Persians had not yet risen on the world stage. The eventual emergence of Greece and Rome were yet long past the horizon. Babylon ruled the world in all of its raw and ungodly splendor.

[17:33] And what I want to tell you this morning is, is good to know that earthly kingdoms come and go. Even our own. Good to know.

It's good to know. It's good to know that earthly kingdoms do not continue. And yet the kingdom of God will continue to grow.

Come on, I was just in Hong Kong ministering with men. Who are watching the expansion of God's kingdom in parallel societies that you think would be extinguishing the flame of the rule of Christ.

And you know, Daniel himself, Daniel himself was going to live through three global transitions.

That's the advantage of being young, I guess, when they haul you off.

Some of you are going to see three, perhaps global transitions as the kings who rule today remake the world order over the next five, ten years. And you're going to be in the first two, ten years.

[18:51] And you're going to be in the first two, ten years. And you're going to be in the first two, ten years. And you're going to need to know that these kingdoms come and go. And you're going to be comfortable in your own skin.

And you're going to walk upright with confidence because you serve the living God. But don't mistake that truth as though I'm wearing a mask.

in rose-colored glasses up here and can't see the world in which we live. I see it. I only got one eye, but I could see it. You're dealing with a lot.

The burdens grow greater. And the story adds to it. Not only were the promises of God lying in defeat, but the objects of his presence were now also given over to desecration.

Look at 2B. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim, king of Judah, into his hand, here it is, 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.

[20:02] These vessels from Solomon's temple, objects of gold, beauty, tables, shovels, bronze, grating, mercy seats, cherubim, all in somebody else's hands.

God gave. These things can't be measured in financial terms, even if you're at the business school. These objects represented something far greater than anything money could buy.

What did these objects represent? They were instruments in service of Israel's worship. Her altar, her mercy seat, her sacrifice, God's presence.

That's the real problem when you lose those dustpans, and those tables, and those censers, and those ringlets from the Holy of Holies. When those are gone, then the presence of God is gone.

It's not just that the promises of God are in ruins, but the presence of God, we no longer know where to go to even see him. Feel like that at any moment, almost every morning.

[21 : 28] Where is he? He seems to have been taken away. The significance of that horrifying desecration is that God is now no longer to be found.

And get it straight again, and the Lord gave those objects over. I know it's starting to read like lemony snicket, and I'm challenging my own thesis, but it gets even worse.

Not only are the promises of God defeated in its kingship, the presence of God departed in their objects of worship, but the greatest of them all, the Lord gave, the Lord gave over some of his own people to this deportation into Babylon.

Look at verses three through seven. I won't read it all, but it certainly carries all the way through. We even learned this week the names of these characters that we're gonna learn from in the coming weeks.

But the king commanded to bring some of the people, verse three, both of the royal family and the nobility, used without blemish, of good appearance, skillful in all wisdom, endowed with all knowledge, understanding and learning, competent to stand in the king's palace.

[22 : 51] These people could get hired anywhere, anytime, for any role in any governmental work. They could run the world. They were to be educated for three years, stand before the king, meaning they were to serve.

And God gave those young people over. It's not hard to imagine what Daniel and his friends were feeling on their long walk to Babylon.

Where are you taking me, Lord? Where are we going? What are we doing?

How do we navigate all the things the people of God feel today? The intellectual capital of a country, now carried off by an occupied state.

Babylon grabbing hold of Israel's furthering interest to build their own society, intentionally ready to assimilate these and others into their ways and wisdom, stripped of their names, given new ones, enrolled in the great world university, the University of Babylon.

[24 : 15] Oh, wouldn't that be a good shirt? I kind of like that idea, actually. They were given a world-class education. And believe me, it was world-class.

So what do we see? I'm getting ready to shut it down. The Lord gave his promises over to defeat. The Lord gave his presence over to desecration.

The Lord gave his people over deportation. And yet, I will contend that what the Lord gives is for our good and his glory, because these three things are not the end of the story, and they are not all that the Lord would give.

Remember, the Lord also gave them Jeremiah's letters. The Lord gave them Isaiah's promises. The Lord gave us comfort, comfort, oh my people.

And eventually, the Lord would give us Jesus. Jesus. Jesus. You might not have ever read the Bible, but I bet you've heard this one.

[25 : 29] For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whosoever believeth in him would not perish, but have everlasting life.

And he did not, he did not, he did not, he did not send him into the world to condemn the world, but that through him the world might be saved.

And the Lord gave his son, and he gave him to fulfill what looked like a ruinous state and reclaim the promises of God.

All the promises of God, yes, in Jesus. The presence of God here in Jesus. The people of God now gathered around the name of Jesus.

My sweet Jesus. The promise of a king and an eternal kingdom, not of this world, is intact.

[26 : 41] The presence of God can be found today by giving your life to him, and he will grant you his spirit, and he will stand not just in our midst, but he will take up a dwelling within you.

The people of God then would live on mission. They would have a bounce in their step. They would be confident of the future, come hell or high water.

Three reversals then to what the Lord gave, and it's all sitting right there in the elements of the communion table. That's what he gave.

To sustain you and strengthen you. May these four words then today, as we open this series, provide you comfort. And the Lord gave.

And the Lord gave. Yeah, he gave me a rough run, but he gave me a son. And the Lord gave.

Yeah, I often wake up in the middle of the night and wonder what happened to his presence, but I have his spirit.

[27 : 48] And the Lord gave. Is there anyone that will walk alongside me, but here are his people. And let me tell you what you're going to see in just a minute. It's the most unusual, striking, and powerful thing, I think happening on the south side of Chicago.

Not because we're great or even large, but you're going to see, you're going to see people with disparate, viscerally held views on how we ought to run this country sharing that meal.

You're going to see ethnic distinctions that from our own life experiences would unwind any other room, wait patiently in love for one another.

You're going to see, you're going to see all that the Lord does as he grows a church family, a church family that decides to love because the one thing we have which is strong enough to hold us is what he's given to us in his son.

I'm going to pray and I'm thinking of Gloria Gaither, but I'm going to pray and we'll see what goes down in light of that as we go to the table. Heavenly Father, as we start our fall together in earnest in this book of Daniel, we thank you for it and we pray that we would learn from it and most importantly that we would give our lives to you as we seek to understand it and live well with one another.

[29 : 39] We thank you that you have a kingdom and that we can be part of it. And we thank you that Jesus is enough in whose name we sing.