

Whose Jurisdiction? Whose Table?

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Date: 12 October 2025

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[0 : 00] Thank you, Dan and Steve. Much appreciated. It's good to journey with you a little bit here this morning. Good to be with you in worship. My name is Keith Feist and I've actually worshiped here one other time. So back in 2021, I had a week off and two of my kids and I had reservations at a campground on the upper peninsula of Michigan to go camping for a few days.

And we kind of timed it so that we'd be coming through Appleton on our way up on Sunday morning and we worshiped with you then and it was a good morning and it's good to be back. Good to worship with you this morning.

So we're receiving God's word from the book of Daniel this morning, Daniel chapter one. And here we're going to read about how Daniel and his friends found themselves, not by choice, in a strange new place.

So Daniel one, starting at verse one. In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem and besieged it.

And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim, king of Judah, into his hand, along with some of the articles of the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his God in Babylonia and put in the treasure house of his God.

[1 : 29] Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king's service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility, young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace.

He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians. The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years.

And after that, they were to enter the king's service. Among those who were chosen were some from Judah, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.

The chief official gave them new names to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar, to Hananiah, Shadrach, to Mishael, Meshach, and to Azariah of Bendigo.

But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way.

[2 : 39] Now, God had caused the official to show favor and compassion to Daniel. But the official told Daniel, I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your food and drink.

Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of evil. Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, Please test your servants for ten days.

Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food and treat your servants in accordance with what you see.

So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days. At the end of the ten days, they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food.

So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead. To these four young men, God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning.

[3 : 47] And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds. At the end of the time set by the king to bring them into his service, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. And the king talked with them and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.

So they entered the king's service. In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom.

And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus. The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. So maybe you know the author Wendell Berry.

I've read a couple of his books. And the one I remember best is Jaber Crow. And maybe because Jaber, like my dad, was a barber.

Jaber Crow, also known as Jonah. His given name was Jonah. He was a small town barber. And most of the book is about his barbering days. But it also gets into his early life a little bit.

[5 : 00] So his parents both died when he was young. And he went to live with a great aunt and uncle. They were older people by this time already. And so actually when he was ten years old, his aunt and uncle passed away as well.

And his world completely changed for a second time. The book was written from Jaber's perspective. And here's how he describes that change.

Just listen for a moment. He writes, So far away from home.

It's as if I might have well have landed in another world completely. My first memory is of the long driveway sweeping up through the trees to the superintendent's house.

And then immediately I remember meeting face to face across the top of a large desk. The superintendent himself. The superintendent himself. Brother White Spade. One of the crossest of Christians.

[6 : 21] Who said in a big pretty voice. Ah, this must be Mr. Crow. Mr. Crow, since I believe you have not yet found your way to Nineveh. I will call you J.

And I saw him write in large curving strokes my name as it would be J. Crow. I remember waking up in my dormitory room the first several mornings for maybe a minute or two not knowing where I was and then knowing.

I would recognize the chest of drawers, the two chairs, the table, the two iron cots, the other boy still asleep. And I would be filled with a strange objectless fear.

As if in the twinkling of an eye I had been changed. Not just into another world but into another body. Trunken by fear I lay back and looked straight up at the ceiling.

He talks about feeling so far from home that he might as well have been in a completely different world. His name was changed. He says it felt like landing in another world, in another body.

[7 : 31] It left his head spinning. He said he experienced this strange objectless fear. And I wonder this morning, I wonder how that strikes you.

I wonder if there's some way in which you can relate to that experience yourself. Jaber Crow's story and all he went through, all the changes.

It's kind of extreme, but it's not unusual. People finding themselves in new places and finding themselves disoriented in new places.

It's not unusual. Perhaps it's literally finding yourself in a new place. A new home. A new town. A new country. A new school.

A new job, perhaps. And it might be kind of exciting. But at the same time, quite scary, too. Perhaps you found yourself in a new season of your life.

[8 : 29] You were taken care of and then you find yourself having to take care of others. You were young and now you're old. You were on top of things and now you're struggling to keep up. Maybe a move into the work world or out of the work world.

Maybe a move from the land of health into the land of illness. Maybe into marriage or back into singleness. Any of these is enough, really, to make our heads spin and to leave us disoriented and feeling like a foreigner.

And, of course, this world, the world we all inhabit and live in, is changing, too. And it seems to be changing faster than ever. And we can debate whether it's changing for the better or for the worse. But it's changing and we feel it. It's the same world, but sometimes it feels like a whole new place. A new reality that we find ourselves in.

The way we did things before doesn't always seem to work out the same way anymore. Technology is different and people are different and lifestyles are changing.

[9 : 38] And we're finding that things we so depended on aren't so dependable anymore. And things we didn't question are getting questioned. And it all can be very unsettling.

So it happens in all different ways, right? Suddenly we feel like foreigners. We feel like foreigners and it's disorienting. We're not sure what to do. Well, God here in the book of Daniel, he has something to say about all this.

Something to say to us. God speaks to us. He shepherds us through his word, through this book. And he helps us to know how to live as foreigners.

When we're not feeling at home in whatever place or season or reality we find ourselves in, we need not put life on hold. We need not retreat or lash out.

God here in the book of Daniel, he shows us another way. So Daniel and his friends, they found themselves in a whole new world, a new reality and not by choice.

[10:43] Home for them was Jerusalem. And they found themselves far, far away in Babylon. It was a tumultuous time in history. The northern kingdom, the northern ten tribes, well, that had been defeated and gone, was gone already.

And the southern kingdom at this point was fading. Jerusalem was the capital of the southern kingdom. And the king there, Jehoiakim, he had to resort to alliances with other nations just to stay in power.

And in the year 605 BC, he switched alliances. He switched from an alliance with Babylon to an alliance with Egypt. And that didn't sit too well with Babylon.

So King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came with his army and defeated Jerusalem. He besieged the city and then raided the city and reasserted his control over the region.

Now Jerusalem was not totally annihilated at this point. And it would go on to stand for another 20 years after this. The mass exile that we read about in other books of the Bible, that would happen 20 years after this yet.

[11:55] But this here at this point was kind of the beginning of the end. And as part of that raid, Nebuchadnezzar took Jerusalem's best and brightest young men.

The mass exile wouldn't come until later, but there was kind of a mini exile here at this point already in 605 BC. And that's when Daniel and his friends were taken.

It was all a part of Nebuchadnezzar's evil plan. He was a pretty smart guy, and he figured if he skimmed off the brightest and best from Jerusalem, then Jerusalem would flounder and it would get weaker.

And it wouldn't cause him so much headache and trouble. It wouldn't fight back. Plus, he'd have these bright young men to put to use in his own kingdom.

So that's how Daniel and his friends ended up as foreigners in Babylon and this whole new world.

And that's why they were put into an intensive training program there in Babylon.

[12:58] Nebuchadnezzar had big plans for these guys. He was going to train them up to do great things in his kingdom. So they'd come to learn all the best of Babylonian language and culture.

They'd be taught to see things the Babylonian way, to do things the Babylonian way, to think, talk, and act Babylonian. And as Babylon went in, the whole idea was that Jerusalem would drain out. These guys, they'd forget where they came from. They'd forget how they'd been raised. They'd forget their God. That was the idea. And in charge of all of this was Nebuchadnezzar's chief deputy, a guy named Ashpenaz.

And we're told that Ashpenaz, he even went as far as changing the guy's names. So the boy in the Wendell Berry book that we talked about, he got his name changed from Jonah to J or Jaber.

For Daniel and his friends, it went even further than that. They actually got renamed after Babylonian gods there in their new context. So Daniel became Belteshazzar. Belteshazzar means, Bel, protect him.

[14:11] Shadrach means, under the command of Aku, another Babylonian god. Meshach means, who is like Aku. Abednego means, servant of Nego. Daniel and his friends, it was disorienting.

They found themselves as strangers in a strange land a long ways from home. And whatever part of home they brought with them was being pushed out, taken away.

And besides that, the new place they found themselves in was pretty nice. It was pretty comfortable, what they had been given. It was nice for them in Babylon. If these guys, if you think about it, if these guys had been sitting in a dungeon, things would have been different.

It would have been maybe easier to stay true to themselves and true to their god. Because when you're sitting in a dungeon, your captors are clearly the enemy. It's really clear who the enemy is when you're sitting there and being tortured.

When you're sitting in a dungeon, you also think a lot about the people back home and your upbringing. And you do a lot of praying to your god.

[15 : 23] But Daniel and his friends, they weren't sitting in a dungeon. They were being treated pretty well. They were given a pretty comfortable life there in Babylon. And of course, when it's comfort you've got, then, well, it's easier to start liking the person giving it to you.

The enemy isn't so clear anymore. And you don't feel the need to pray quite so much. And you start assimilating. And when in Rome, do as the Romans do.

That's the easier way. So there Daniel and his friends are. And they've got their heads spinning.

And they've been marched 500 miles from home.

And everything they've known is gone. And they're strangers in a strange land. Plus, the new ways, the ways of this new land are pressing in on them hard.

And the pressure to assimilate is huge. So what do they do? And what do we do? When we find ourselves in a strange new reality.

[16 : 31] Well, part of the answer comes from knowing, wherever we are, knowing who's ultimately in control there. We talked about how God's shepherding us here through the book of Daniel.

Well, Daniel is a prophetic book. And God has a prophetic word to speak to us, into our reality today, too, through this book. And God's big prophetic word to us and to generations of believers is about who's in control.

Who's ultimately in charge. Who's sovereign. A pastor I know used an illustration to describe this.

He writes this. He says, there was a cheery sign besides the highway that led out of the small Midwestern town where I grew up. The purpose of the sign was ostensibly to thank visitors for coming and to encourage them to return soon.

But according to my high school carpool buddy, Brian, the sign also served a more important purpose. It marked the outer limits of our small town cops' jurisdiction.

[17 : 43] Brian, who always seemed to have the inside scoop on these sorts of things, he claimed that if you were driving on the north side of the sign, then all bets were off. The cops could and would nab you for going 56 in a 55.

But if you were on the south side of the sign, you were off limits and the cops couldn't touch you there. So every morning when we passed the sign going out of town, Brian would gleefully punch the gas and take his little red Chevy well past the speed limit.

And every afternoon, just before reentering what he believed to be the local cops' jurisdiction, he would tap on the brakes, bring the car back under the speed limit.

And his pastor went on to say that it's possible Brian didn't have his legal facts completely straight, but that this sort of thinking is a lot like what you had back in Daniel's day.

In Daniel's time, people thought very much in terms of jurisdiction. They believed there were many different gods, and each different god had a different jurisdiction.

[18 : 50] So you had the one that ruled the sun, and the one that ruled the rain, and the one that ruled in Jerusalem, and the one that ruled in Babylon.

Different jurisdictions, that's how they saw things. And, well, Daniel and his friends were in Babylon. And it seemed for all the world like Nebuchadnezzar and his gods had jurisdiction there and were running the show there.

The land of Israel was a long ways away, and it probably felt like the god of Israel was a long ways away, too, for them. They're in exile.

That's how it seemed. But Daniel and his friends, they knew better. Ultimately, they knew better.

They refused to settle for the way things appeared.

They refused to go along with the prevailing view of things. They knew better. And that made all the difference. Daniel knew, and he insisted, that even in Babylon, God is still God.

[19 : 55] He knew it. That the Lord, their God, he stands above all. He's over all. He's got jurisdiction. Even in Babylon. He's there. These guys, they've been hauled 500 miles from home.

They're in a whole new world. But they've got this assurance, this blessed assurance that even there, the same God is still in charge. Still meets them there.

He still claims them. He's at work in and around them there in Babylon, just as he was in Jerusalem. And Daniel 1 testifies to this.

It's filled with all these little clues, if you have eyes to see them, these little clues and testimonies to God's sovereignty. In verse 2, it says, And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim, king of Judah, into his hand.

The Lord delivered Jehoiakim. It's talking about Nebuchadnezzar defeating Jehoiakim. Except the Bible here kind of pulls back the curtain for us.

[20 : 57] And it tells us kind of what was really going on. And what was really going on is that it wasn't the big shot, Nebuchadnezzar, that the Lord was behind it. His people had turned on him, so the Lord used the pagan king to deal with his people.

Nebuchadnezzar seemed like a big shot, but really, he was more like a tweezers in God's hand. A tweezers that God used to pluck out a disobedient king from among his people.

God did it. God was behind it. And that's the message we see later, too, in verse 9. It's talking about Nebuchadnezzar's deputy, Ashpenaz. And it says this.

It says, Now God had caused the official to show favor and sympathy to Daniel. God had caused it to happen. It kind of looked, if you just quickly read through the story, it kind of looks like maybe Ashpenaz had a soft spot for Daniel and his friends.

Or had a soft moment. But scripture clarifies for us. Pulls back the curtain for us. It helps us to see what was really going on. God caused it. Same sort of thing in verse 17.

[22 : 07] It's talking about Daniel and his friends. And it says this. It says, To these four young men, God gave knowledge and understanding. God gave it. It looks on the surface very much like these guys are maybe just naturally smart and gifted.

But no. We're told that God did it. God gave them the smarts for such a time as this. He gave them just what he wanted them to have. He placed them just where he wanted them to be.

It wasn't easy. It wasn't easy. Their new reality. Not at all. But what was happening wasn't random. Got a sovereign at work writing their stories.

God was at work not just in Jerusalem, but in Babylon too. And the same is true now for us. Maybe you're in a new season now.

A new reality. A new place in your life. And maybe lots of things have changed for us. And things are difficult.

[23 : 13] And our heads are spinning. Well, God wants us to know that wherever we are. Wherever we are. He's sovereign there. He was there long before we got there.

He's there with us. He's the one in charge. Has the jurisdiction over that place. Working out his plan. Day by day. Sovereign.

And what that does, what knowing that does, is it enables us to stay true to him. And keep walking with him. And growing in him. And serving him. Even in that strange new place.

What we're tempted to do, right, in a place like that, is to shut down and withdraw, right? We're overwhelmed. We want to go back to the way things were.

So we withdraw. We back off. Or maybe we just kind of give in. We give in and take the path of least resistance. Go with the flow. Well, God seems to think we can do better.

[24 : 16] He wants us to be more intentional than that. He enables us to be better than that. Now, don't get me wrong. This is not simple.

How to do this is not simple. And there were things that Daniel compromised on. We're called, right, to be in the world, but not of the world. And that takes a lot of wisdom.

And we see Daniel sort of navigating this. Compromise isn't always a bad thing. It's not always simple to know the way forward. Daniel went ahead and learned the language.

He did work for a pagan king. He became well-versed in the culture. He became very street smart in the ways of Babylon. And there were other things that he did as well in service there in Babylon. But there were things he wouldn't compromise on. Daniel, all through his life, you see him. As you read through the book, you see him working this out, trying to discern this and prayerfully working through these things and being very intentional.

[25 : 21] It's not easy when you find yourself in a new place, in a new situation, to know what's best. It does take a lot of thought and effort. And staying true to the Lord and keeping serving him in a new place, it's not easy.

And it takes a lot of ingenuity and creativity. And it takes the Christian community discerning things together. It requires a whole lot of wisdom.

And what really helps all throughout is being very certain whose jurisdiction we're in. that God is sovereign over that place too, wherever you are.

That we're still his. That he's still the one writing our story, no matter what. What also helps is to keep eating at the table of our king.

Right? Daniel, he didn't want to eat at King Nebuchadnezzar's table because he'd already pledged allegiance to a different king. And that's what it comes down to here in Daniel chapter 1.

[26 : 24] He'd already pledged allegiance to a different king. He had a king. And in just a moment, we're going to come to the table of our king.

King Jesus. We're going to approach the Lord's table. God has each of us out in different places and different seasons of life, different realities.

And we find ourselves in all these different places. And things are changing and hard sometimes. But what a gift it is. That he keeps bringing us back to his table.

And keeps nourishing us. They're meeting us. They're nourishing us. Daniel and his friends, they refused to eat at Nebuchadnezzar's table and kept coming back to the Lord's table.

And we do too. And that makes all the difference. This here is where we're fed. This here is where we're reminded of who we are and whose we are.

[27 : 26] At this table, the table of King Jesus. It's where we're nourished. And where we're prepared to go out and serve our king. Even in strange new places.

Wherever we find ourselves, he's sovereign there. Everything in our lives and everything around us might change. We still belong to him.

And our world still belongs to him. Thanks be to God. Let's pray together. Lord, it's good to have you as our king and as Lord over all.

Thank you for your word to us this morning. And whatever new places or seasons of life we find ourselves in, Lord, meet us there. And help us live for you.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.