

The Sovereignty of God in Babylon (1)

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[0:00] Let's read now in the book of Daniel and chapter 1, page 737. I should maybe have asked Daniel Lockington to come and read us from Daniel chapter 1.

! Then Daniel could have read Daniel. Daniel chapter 1, page 737.

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 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.

Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both the royal family and of the nobility, 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. The king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate and 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. Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Asariah of the tribe of Judah. And the chief of the eunuchs gave them names.

Daniel he called Belshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Mishach, and Nazariah he called Abednego.

[1:49] 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. And God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs. 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're in worse condition than the youths who are of your own age, so you would endanger my head with the king? Then Daniel said to the steward whom the chief of the eunuchs had assigned over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Asariah, test your servants for 10 days. Let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then let our appearance and the appearance of the youths who eat the king's food to be observed by you, and deal with your servants according to what you see. So he listened to them in this matter and tested them for 10 days. At the end of 10 days it was seen that they were better in appearance and fatter and fleshier than all the youths who ate the king's food. So the steward took away their food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables. 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. 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. And the king spoke with them, and among all of them none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Asariah. Therefore they stood before the king. And in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king inquired of them, he found them 10 times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his kingdom.

Daniel was there until the first year of King Cyrus. Dare to be a Daniel, dare to stand alone, dare to have a purpose, and dare to make it known.

Now we've all heard this song, but the truth is that Daniel isn't the hero of the book of Daniel. Now, my professor, my Old Testament professor at the Free Church College, John L. Mackay, used to remind us that the hero of the Old Testament is God. Daniel's not the hero of Daniel, God is. And the theme of the book of Daniel is that God is sovereign over all things that, as one of my friends reminded me, heaven rules. We need to hear this message in our own day of powerful worldly leaders and uncertain times. Heaven rules, not the presidents and prime ministers of our world.

But let's get even more precise. I'm very wary of interpreting Old Testament books in a Christless way, as if they could be preached in a mosque or a Jewish synagogue. Jesus said of the Old Testament, these are the scriptures that testify about me. So, whereas Daniel has God as its hero, it has Jesus as its subject. Daniel serves as what we might call a type of Christ, pointing to what Jesus would be like and what Jesus would do. Now, the book of Daniel is the story of an exiled servant of God. He's a faithful believer in a foreign land. The incarnation of Jesus is the story of the ultimate servant of God who voluntarily exiled himself from the glory of heaven and lived by faith in a world foreign to him. The story of Jesus is that of faithfulness in the darkness. The book of Daniel is the story of faithfulness in the darkness. So, as we're studying this book together over the next few weeks, we need to remember these truths. God is the hero, heaven rules, and that Jesus is the ultimate subject.

[6:22] The theme of Daniel chapter 1 is faithfulness in the darkness. It introduces us into the situation Daniel found himself and how he stood faithfully for God.

I want us to consider this evening two things, darkness verses 1 through 7 and faithfulness verses 8 through 21. In 1 Peter, Christians are called exiles in the world. We are called in the darkness of the situations we find ourselves in in daily life to be faithful to God, even as Daniel was, and even as Jesus was. So, first of all then, darkness from verses 1 to 7. Darkness. Daniel lived in very dark days as far as the nation of Judah was concerned. We know from history that the events described in Daniel 1 took place in the 6th century BC. 400 years before this, Judah had enjoyed its finest days. These were the reigns of King David and King Solomon. These were times of light and joy, of victory and wealth. Same place, different times. No more light, just darkness. No more joy, just pain. No more victory, just defeat. No more wealth, just poverty. Everything was different, but not in a good way.

One thing remained the same, however, the God of Judah, his love for his people, his righteousness vindicated, and his sovereignty over all the nations.

Andrew Boner was a free church minister in the west end of Glasgow, Kelvin Grove, in the late 19th century. Those were the days when the streets of the west end were black with people walking to church on a Sunday, and every church was full to the brim. If he could walk among us today, he'd recognize some of Glasgow's old buildings. He'd recognize the edifice of the church he had built in Kelvin Grove on Darby Street, but that would be about it. He'd weep at how few people worship in any kind of church, and he'd be utterly shocked to know that his church in Kelvin Grove is now an apartment block.

He lived in days of spiritual darkness, and spiritual light, rather, but comparatively speaking, we in spiritual dark. From these verses, we learn of three levels of the darkness into which the book of Daniel begins. The darkness of defeat, exile, and judgment.

[9:21] We may be deferring to events that took place two and a half thousand years ago, but you know, in a way they sound eerily familiar. But behind it all, we must remember, the sovereign control of God is just as powerful today as it was then, and that today as then, heaven rules.

So first of all, there's the darkness of defeat, the darkness of defeat. For many years, Babylon had been the major power in the Middle East. They'd taken over from the Assyrians, famous for the defeat of their army before the gates of Jerusalem. Babylon was a different story. It was the most powerful empire the world had ever seen. It was led by a man called King Nebuchadnezzar. For some time, Babylon had been in control in Judah, and they'd placed a puppet king upon the throne of Judah called Jehoiakim.

But Jehoiakim was a faithless man, so in 586 BC, Nebuchadnezzar sent his army to besiege Jerusalem.

He captured the city. He burned its gates and its temple to the ground. Judah was utterly defeated. A hundred years before this, the Assyrian Empire had been defeated in Judah, and perhaps the people of Judah thought it would happen again, but it didn't. The Babylonian army swatted away Judah's opposition as we might swat a fly. Whatever pride Judah had had in itself was now gone. How would we feel if, as a nation, we were defeated so dreadfully? Whatever pride we had would be laid in the dust.

Furthermore, in the ancient Middle East, when one nation conquered another, at stake in the minds of the people was the power of their gods. The victorious nation would think that their god was more powerful than the god of the defeated nation. So in their defeat of Judah, the Babylonians thought that their gods had been victorious over the god of Judah, that they had defeated the Lord God

Almighty.

[11:48] And they rubbed the noses of the people of Judah in it by taking some of the vessels from the house of God, the temple in Jerusalem, and placed them in their treasury, the treasury of their god in Babylon.

To all intents, it would seem not just that the nation of Judah had been defeated, but that the Lord of Judah had been defeated. How would we feel if, as a church, the Lord God we worship was defeated?

What would it do to our faith? The darkness of defeat. Things couldn't get any worse. They were defeated, and they felt their god was defeated.

It happened in 586 BC. It's happened many times since, and it yet may happen again. In Psalm 89, verse 45, we read these haunting words concerning the complete defeat of Judah and Jehoiakim. These haunting words, his throne has been cast to the ground. But then secondly, there's the darkness of exile. Perhaps just when you thought things couldn't get any worse, they did.

[13:06] Because the Babylonians stole some of Judah's people. This was standard practice for the Babylonians. When they conquered a nation, they took the nation's finest people back to Babylon, where they trained them in the culture and the politics and the religion of Babylon.

It was a type of brainwashing. They did this in Judah. In verse 3, we read that the king, Nebuchadnezzar, his chief eunuch, commanded his chief eunuch to bring some of the people of Israel, Judah, both of the royal family and of the nobility, youths without blemish of good appearance and skillful and wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding, learning, and competent to stand in the king's palace and teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans, the upper class intelligentsia of Babylon.

So Judah's best and brightest are exiled to Babylon, where they are indoctrinated and brainwashed so that they no longer feel Jewish.

Imagine if our best and brightest, our ruling classes, were exiled. When we consider our present government, some of us might be quite content with them being exiled.

But what hope for the future of Judah if the best of its young people are stolen? The Babylonians had not merely defeated the army of Judah and defeated the God of Judah.

[14:40] They had succeeded in destroying the future of Judah. You know, we sing a psalm like Psalm 137, which speaks of the pain of these exiles.

How can we sing the song of the Lord in a foreign land? I do wonder if Andrew Boner was among us today. Would he think the church in Scotland is perhaps in exile?

There are parts of our city where there is no visible presence of the evangelical church. I recently took a friend of mine on a car journey round the southeast of our city.

It was a 20-mile car journey. The few churches we saw on that 20-mile car journey had all been sold off, were shutting down, or were not preaching the gospel in any way, shape, or form.

So we must ask, is the church in Scotland in exile? Then thirdly, the darkness of judgment. The darkness of judgment.

[15:48] Here's a dark time for the people of Judah. Those to whom God had committed himself in covenant promise, those who looked back with fondness to the days of David and Solomon, those who were the temple of God on the mount of Jerusalem.

They thought God would always be with them, but they were wrong. What made the darkness truly dark was that in the words of verse 2, it was the Lord who had given them into the hands of the Babylonians.

The God of Judah didn't protect his people. He judged his people by giving them into the hands of their enemies. To all intents and purposes, God's promise had failed, and rather than being on his people's side, was on the side of their enemies.

In the words of Psalm 88 and verse 7, God's wrath lies heavy upon me, and you overwhelm me with all your waves. Then in verse 14, Lord, why do you cast me away?

Why do you hide your face from me? A while ago, we talked about the crown of Judah being cast to the ground. Let me complete that verse from Psalm 89. You have renounced the covenant with your servant.

[17:01] You have defiled his crown in the dust. The defeat of Judah was not an unfortunate happenstance. It did not represent the enemies of God overpowering God.

It was the judgment of God. To some extent, I do wonder whether we see that in our nation today, because we see churches declining and closing.

It's tragic. But it does not represent the victory of secularism over our church. We must not see it that way. It represents the judgment of God upon our church for our unfaithfulness to him.

We need to get this into our heads. It says, heaven rules, and God is in sovereign control of all things. All things.

What is Jesus in all this? If, as I believe, Christ is in all the Scriptures, what is he in the darkness of the exiles in Babylon?

[18:07] There's a straight answer. What happened to Judah in Daniel chapter 1 happened to our Lord upon the cross. There, for those three hours of darkness, he appears to have been defeated and for evil to have won.

He was exiled from the favor and presence of God. He was judged by God, but not on account of his own unfaithfulness, on account of ours instead.

These verses are the story of the cross. Jesus being defeated, exiled, judged, on account not of his own sin, but on account of ours.

You see, even in the darkness of Calvary, there is the light of salvation. Our salvation from sin was bought at the highest cost. Not a cost paid by us, but the very God against whom we had sinned, exacted upon his Son.

For all we bemoan the state of the church in Scotland. Heaven rules, and God's in sovereign control of all things. And for all that we look outside at the movements and perturbations of the nations, let's remember that we as Christians shall suffer none of the horrors of Daniel chapter 1 because the Lord Jesus has suffered them all in our place on the cross.

[19:37] And because of that, as Paul says in Romans 8, nothing shall separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. So we have darkness, first of all.

But then, in verses 8 through 21, we have faithfulness. Faithfulness. In this chapter, we're introduced not to the context, not just to the context in which the book's written, but the main character after whom the book is named, Daniel.

He's forcibly taken from Jerusalem, and he's exiled to the land of Babylon. He's among those members of the Jewish nobility of whom it's written in verse 4, youths without blemish, of good appearance, skilful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding, learning, and competent to stand in the king's palace to teach them the literature and language of the upper class of Babylon.

And from verse 6, we learn the names of four of these young men, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Nazariah of the tribe of Judah. So here are men of royal blood, the tribe of Judah.

They are descendants of King David, and they are ancestors of the Lord Jesus Christ, who himself was of the tribe of Judah.

[21:06] When they arrived in Jerusalem as part of the brainwashing, they were given new names. Daniel was called Belteshazzar, and the others were given the names Shadrach, Mishach, and Abednego.

The name Daniel is a Hebrew word. It means God is my judge. And as we get to know this young man better, we're going to learn that in everything, Daniel had an eye not to the standards and approval of the world, but to the standards and approval of God.

His Babylonian name, Belteshazzar, means Bel protects his life. Bel was the name of a Babylonian God.

But ultimately, it was not a Babylonian God who protected Daniel through all those years of having to serve in a vicious king's court. It was not a Babylonian God who protected Daniel from a den of lions.

It was the Lord God of Judah who was his judge. The Babylonians gave these boys Babylonian names to try and strip them of their Jewish identity.

[22:14] But again, as we'll see, the boys knew fine who they were and they refused to renounce their Jewishness. This morning, we talked about the danger of compromise.

And that's one thing you cannot accuse Daniel and his friends of doing or being when they were exiled to Babylon. Even though they were enduring the darkness of defeat, exile, and judgment, they refused to compromise but they stood firm and fast in their faith in God.

They held firm to what they knew about the steadfast love of God. They refused to compromise even when their lives were at stake. They were faithful to God even when it seemed to all the world that their God had been faithless to them.

They didn't judge by appearances. They judged by reality so that if used to compromise, they stood firm. For that reason, it didn't take long for Daniel's faithfulness to God to rub up against the standards of Babylon.

Daniel and his companions were given meat from the king's own table to eat. The problem was that this meat had been dedicated to the gods of Babylon.

[23 : 34] It was, as the apostle Paul would call it in the New Testament, food sacrificed to idols. And Daniel was unwilling to eat what had been dedicated to false gods.

So he refused to eat the meat and the wine offered to him. As we read in verse 8, Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself. He refused to compromise even though it would cost him his life. Daniel was careful to be devoted to God in every single detail. Now, given the situation Daniel was in, perhaps we might have forgiven him for giving in to the pressure to conform.

After all, his life was at stake. What's wrong with eating just a wee bit of meat, drinking just a wee bit of wine? It's not a big deal. Might have forgiven him for committing such a small sin.

perhaps that's what I'd have done. Nebuchadnezzar was a changeable and vicious man. He could easily have taken offense at such a small thing and ordered these Jewish boys to be executed.

[24 : 39] Daniel's conscience, however, was so tender that even in the smallest of matters, he refused to compromise. Though it might cost him his life, he stood firm because his faithfulness to God meant more to him than life itself.

In verse 9, you'll notice that God gave Daniel favor in the sight of the king's servants. In any other situation, Daniel would have been executed, but God protected his faithful servant, Daniel.

Now, all this sounds very familiar to those who know the Old Testament. over a thousand years before all these events in Daniel chapter 1, another faithful servant of God was in exile in a foreign land.

Joseph had been sold as a slave and found himself in Egypt. In Genesis chapter 39, verse 4, we read that Joseph found favor in the eyes of Potiphar, the Egyptian general.

Later on in that chapter in Genesis 39, 21, we read, the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison.

[25 : 58] God showed Joseph favor in exile in Egypt. God showed Daniel favor in exile in Babylon. Two have bone in common just in that.

we recall how Joseph refused to sin against God when he was seduced by Potiphar's wife. We read that Daniel refused to sin against God by refusing to eat food sacrificed to idols in Babylon.

Both were faithful and God honored that faithfulness in that even though he was, God honored Joseph's faithfulness in that even though he was thrown into prison, there he rose to become, from there he became, he rose to become second in charge of all of Egypt and using that position, God saved his people from death.

God honored Daniel for his faithfulness in that he gained further favor from Nebuchadnezzar and later was able to interpret Nebuchadnezzar's dream and through Daniel, King Nebuchadnezzar would later, as we'll see later in our series, brought to see that the Lord God of Judah was the one true and living God.

So, Daniel and Joseph, good comparison. Daniel refused to eat the meat of Babylon. He confined himself to vegetables and water.

[27 : 30] But after ten days, Daniel and his friends would have healthier appearance than those who had eaten Nebuchadnezzar's meat. Now, some Christians see this as being a vindication of a vegetarian diet.

And there may be considerable merit to a vegetable-based diet. That's not the point of this text. It never was and it never will be. The point is that it was God who sustained Daniel and his friends through this self-imposed diet.

God honored Daniel for his faithfulness and made him and his friends healthier than the other young men of Babylon. Sorry.

As we go through the book of Daniel, there are many connections between Daniel and Joseph in their exile to foreign lands and their interpretation of dreams and their promotions and the way God rewarded them, but more than anything else, in their faithfulness to God.

However, both Daniel and Joseph are but shadows of the ultimately faithful servant of God, Jesus Christ, whose obedience and faithfulness to God led him to the cross on which he died as the substitute for our sins.

[28:52] But having been raised from the dead, God favored him. And in the words of Philippians 2, God highly exalted him and bestowed upon him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

So you see, both Joseph and Daniel are types of Christ, shadows of what Jesus would be, and both played their part in God's redemptive purpose which would ultimately be fulfilled in Jesus.

The book of Daniel is not the story of one man's faithfulness to God, but of God's faithfulness to the world. God is an expert at turning darkness into light.

He did it in Egypt with Joseph. He did it in Babylon with Daniel, and he's doing it in our world with Jesus. When we look at things this way, the best commentary on our studies in Daniel will turn out to be Psalm 87, which we'll sing later in our series.

Let me read you some words. Glorious things are spoken of you, city of my God. Among you who know me, I mention Rahab and Babylon.

[30:25] Babylon. Because of Jesus, of whom Daniel and Joseph were but shadows, enemies are turned into brothers and sisters in Christ, and the whole world falls down before God in worship and praise.

Perhaps Andrew Boner, you know, perhaps he would be discouraged if he could see Glasgow as it is today. Perhaps. But Boner knew only too well the ultimate message of the book of Daniel.

Heaven rules, and God is sovereign over all peoples and nations for his gospel and his glory.

God turns the darkness into light. He did it with Daniel in Babylon. He'll do it with us in Glasgow.

And all because ultimately, he did it with Jesus on the cross.

Let us pray. We worship and praise you for the book of Daniel. We worship and praise you for Christ, the subject of the book of Daniel, for all the types and shadows we see here.

[31:47] We thank you for the willingness of your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to voluntarily exile himself to this strange land and to endure the darkness of judgment on our behalf.

We thank you for his faithfulness and for the way in which, because of his faithfulness, you favored him and highly exalted him. You gave him a name above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, the glory of God the Father.

So we ask, O Lord, that you would help us to bow before you, the sovereign of the universe, our Lord and Father, in full confidence and assurance that heaven rules.