

Stand in Faith

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Preacher: John Auger

[0 : 0 0] Good morning, everybody. Remember my name? Well done. Now, I'm not a very travelled man. I've lived and worked all my life within five miles of this church.

I was born in the General Lying-In Hospital, this side of Westminster Bridge, less than five miles away. It doesn't exist anymore as a hospital. I lived in Peckham, about a mile away for my first three years. Then I moved to the Denmark Hill Estate, a mile away from here, just about. I went to primary and junior school at Bessmer Grange on the Easter.

All the good people went there. Or some of them, anyway. I then went to secondary school at the Strand in Tulsa Hill, just across Brockwell Park.

Now, I know James went to Tulsa Hill School, and I was just down the road from him, a bit earlier than him. But, yes, they both don't exist anymore.

I never went to college until I retired. And then it was Spurgeon, so that's just up the road as well. Now, I became a Christian here, in this church, 59 years ago.

[1 : 2 7] Met Sylvia here, and married her in this church, 54 years ago. Our three boys were dedicated and baptized in this church. When we were married, we lived in Croxted Road, and then moved to Dulwich Village over 45 years ago.

And I worked mainly in Victoria, an eight-minute ride from Hearn Hill. So I haven't been around a lot. I have been on a plane twice in my life, once to Brussels to work, and once to Dublin on a break for a couple of days with Sylvia.

We have been on three cruises, but the nature of them is that you do not get to see much of the country to stop at. You get about two hours to get off and get back on again. So you will see that my experience of being in a strange land is not very great.

Certainly nothing like Daniel must have experienced. The Babylonians had replaced the Assyrians as a dominant power in the region with Nebuchadnezzar as their king.

It was he who defeated Judah and destroyed Jerusalem and the temple, taking a large section of the population back to Babylon, the exile. Daniel was probably already in Babylon at that time as he had been taken captive during a previous defeat by the Babylonians.

[2 : 5 3] Now Babylon was about 700 miles from Jerusalem. So Daniel was taken away from a city he knew to another country he did not know, another city he did not know.

The land had different people, different customs, a different language, a different religion, different food. There was no temple, no priests, and no sacrificial ritual.

Everything he knew and was familiar with was taken away. We don't know anything about Daniel's family, but it's probable that they were killed or left back in Jerusalem.

There's no mention that he's made in Daniel. We get some kind of idea of what this exile felt like for the Israelites. If we look at the first few verses of Psalm 79, probably written after the fall of Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar, written by those left behind rather than those who were exiled to Babylon.

Oh God, the nations have invaded your inheritance. They have defiled your holy temple. They have reduced Jerusalem to rubble. They have left the dead bodies of your servants as food for the birds of the sky, the flesh of your own people for the animals of the wild.

[4 : 09] They have poured out blood like water and like water all around Jerusalem and there's no one to bury the dead. We are objects of contempt to our neighbors, of scorn and derision to those around us.

From this, we can get a real feeling of the pain felt by the loss of Jerusalem and the temple, which was felt also by those who had been sent into exile. as it says in Psalm 137.4.

How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land? When we read Daniel, we find that is exactly what Daniel was saying you could do and what he did do.

We read Daniel 2.20. We read Daniel saying, Praise be to the name of God forever and ever.

Wisdom and power are his. He changed times and seasons. He sets up kings and deposes them. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning. He reveals deep and hidden things. He knows what lies in darkness and light and light dwells with him.

[5 : 18] I thank and praise you, O God of my fathers. If that's not a hymn of praise, I don't know what is a hymn of praise. So here was Daniel in Babylon away from the temple, away from his ritual, away from any priests singing a song of praise to his God.

Daniel was not defined for what he had. A great office which he did have and wealth which he did have or even who he was, a Jew in a foreign land.

but by his relationship with and faith in his God. And we can see this throughout this book. In chapter 1, Daniel refuses to defile himself by eating the royal food and wine.

In chapter 2, after praying to his God and his friends, he's enabled by the Lord to interpret Nebuchadnezzar's dream with the threat of death. He got it wrong now.

Ourselves in that position. Nebuchadnezzar says, look, I want you to interpret this dream. Daniel says, well, I can interpret this dream. But if you don't get it right, you're going to die.

[6 : 30] That's pressure we're not mostly put under these days or ever. But he prayed to his God and God interpreted a dream for him.

And he praised God for giving him the answer. Now, chapter 3 doesn't mention Daniel at all, but it's his three friends who were put in the fiery furnace and came out alive because of their faith and trust in their God.

And again, in chapter 4, Daniel interprets the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar with help from his God. And in chapter 5, Daniel interprets the writing of the wall that prophesied the downfall of Belshazzar.

And in chapter 6, we have the story most people know of Daniel, probably the only story they know of Daniel, which is him in the lion's den.

And he survived because my God sent his angel and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me because I was found innocent in his sight. Daniel trusted his God in the lion's den.

[7 : 38] And what I find astonishing is that the first word Daniel said to Nebuchadnezzar after leaving the lion's den were, O king, live forever. This was the king who sent him into the lion's den.

And he said, O king, live forever. That's something I would have thought saying straight after that. But he clearly had no hard feelings against the one who had put him in that lion's den.

But why was all this possible? How could Daniel keep his faith under such difficult circumstances? I think it can be summarized in what is the central theme of the book of Daniel, which is in Daniel 4, 17 and 5, 21.

The most high God is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth. This was central to Daniel's view of his God. He was the king above all kings, the lord above all lords.

He was and is sovereign. So the fact that Daniel was not in Jerusalem, that there was no temple he could worship in, there was no sacrifices, that the ritual he'd know was no longer available, this made no difference to Daniel because he knew that his God was sovereign over all the earth.

[8 : 56] Now currently at Spurgeons, I'm still studying at my age, it's possible, I'm studying Revelation. Now, not the easiest book in the Bible.

We know the letters to the seven churches, it's something we know, most people preach on those at the beginning of Revelation and then the new heaven, the new earth at the end, a lot of people preach on those. A bit in the middle, it's a bit more difficult and is subject to many interpretations which I won't go into now, that's another lot of messages.

But Revelation as a whole is a letter. If you read the beginning of Revelation you realise it's a letter written to seven churches. It's a letter meant to be read by those churches and it's meant to be read by us today as well, not something we should ignore.

And the central theme of Revelation is that God is sovereign. He is the Lord of history, he is the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, he was and is and is to come.

We see God in heaven on his throne, a sign of authority and kingship, and it's opposed to the throne of Satan which will be and is defeated.

[10 : 18] Now, I mentioned Revelation, though it doesn't quote directly from Daniel, it does sort of give echoes of Daniel in a number of occasions. Not least, there are suggestions from Daniel 7.

Revelation chapter 1, 7 says, look, he's coming with the clouds, and then I saw one like the son of man, the hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow.

And that reads like Daniel 7, 9, the hair of his head was white like wool. I looked, Daniel 7, 13, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven.

Revelation 11, 16 says, the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever.

God the Father, the Son, and the Spirit will reign forever and ever. And this was the God Daniel had faith in.

[11 : 18] Whatever condition Daniel found himself in, whether interpreting dreams or putting the lions' den, he knew that his God was in control. That is why he could remain faithful in a strange land.

When I first became a Christian, someone gave me a book by J.P. Phillips. I've even been Peggy Baker, some of you remember. And it was entitled Your God is Too Small.

Now, I can't remember what the book said, but I've always remembered the title. For Daniel, his God was not too small. He knew his God was in charge of this world and all that it is in it, including Babylon.

It is why he remained faithful in that strange land. If we look at chapter 7 a bit more, I don't wonder if anybody can tell me what's odd about the first verse of chapter 7.

Well, that's it because it mentions Belshazzar and he's dead.

[12 : 34] So, in fact, what we find out is that Daniel isn't in chronological order. It's written for a different purpose. Yes, Belshazzar had been killed at the end of chapter 5 and suddenly makes his appearance again.

beginning of chapter 7. So, clearly, we're not in time order. And the reason is that from chapter 7 onwards, the book goes in a different direction.

The first part of Daniel, we have stories, a narrative about Daniel's life and how his faith kept him through the times of troubles. chapter 7. In this and the following chapters, it changes from narrative to prophetic to the apocalyptic.

That means unveiling things previously unknown. So, now it is Daniel who has the dreams and visions, not the king. And it is Daniel, not the king. He was troubled by them and wondered what they meant.

In chapter 7, the visions of four beasts, which again echoed in Revelation, which emerge out of a churning sea. We have a lion with wings, a bear with three ribs, a leopard with wings and four heads, a nightmare creature with iron teeth and ten horns, more terrifying and destructive than the others.

[13 : 49] Now we can get down many rabbit holes trying to find out what these beasts are. But the interpretation given to Daniel was these were describing four kingdoms.

And through the ages, many commentators have used tons of papers and litres of ink in trying to interpret the visions of kingdoms which Daniel had. Were they Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans?

What were the ten horns? Napoleon, Nazis, Germany, European Union? Now I'm not going to go down any of those rabbit holes and attempt to try and join these commentators.

I don't think it will help us. Because what Daniel was saying here is that there are powers in this world which want to overcome the power of good, the power of good that is in God and Jesus.

And what Daniel is saying is that's not going to happen. Whatever powers there are in this world which are evil will not overcome the power of good in Jesus Christ and God.

[15 : 03] But there are a couple of passages here which are perhaps a bit more understandable for us and which point us to the key message of Daniel. The first passage follows the dream that Daniel had about the beast.

As I looked, thrones were set in place and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow. The hair of his head was white like ore. I kept looking until the beast was slain and his body destroyed and thrown into the blazing fire.

The beasts do not win. I can remember a reading about Desmond Tutu when he was talking and preaching quite often even when it was difficult for him to do so.

And what he used to say is he said, I've read at the end of the book we win. So that's what Daniel is pointing towards, the fact that the beasts don't win.

If you read Revelation, a lot of beasts in Revelation, they don't win. They are put into the fire reef, in the fire. Anyway, the other beasts had been stripped of their authority, so again, beasts had no authority but were allowed to live for a period of time.

[16 : 20] In my vision at night, I looked and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with clouds of heaven. He approached the ancient of days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory, and sovereign power.

All nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed. Following the interpretation of this vision, we read, then the sovereignty and power and greatness of all the kingdoms under heaven will be handed over to the holy people of the most high.

His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom and all rulers worship and obey him. Everyone will obey and worship the Lord of lords.

Now, clearly, the ancient of days mentioned here is Daniel's God, Yahweh. Yes, and from ancient of days I am he, Isaiah 43.

And again we look at Revelation as one sitting on throne whose hair was white as wool of thousands of thousands attending him of a beast that was slain of books being opened of judgment and looking forward towards the last days.

[17 : 37] Of course, Daniel also speaks of a son of man and this, no doubt, points to Jesus. Jesus himself quotes him Daniel when he says in Matthew, but I say to all of you, from now on you will see the son of man sitting in the right hand of the mighty one and coming on the clouds of heaven.

The key message in both these passages is that no matter how powerful, dominant, or evil kingdoms of earth may be, they all have a time limit set by God.

Now John prayed about these awful things going on in different countries, but there is a time limit set by God for those. And as I read from that sort of hymn, Daniel sang at the beginning of Daniel, he said, praise be the name of God forever and ever.

Wisdom and power, he changes times and seasons, he deposes kings and raises up others. People are in power on this earth because God is sovereign, not because of them.

and in the end kingdoms will come to nothing. In their place will come a kingdom that will last forever and will never be destroyed. Looking forward to the kingdom of God brought in by his son, Jesus Christ, by his death and by his resurrection.

[19 : 03] And by his death and resurrection he defeated once and for all the power of Satan, the power of sin, and the power of death. what does it all mean for us today though?

Now we're not likely to be in the same position as Daniel, possibly being tortured or killed for standing up for our faith. But we all have been in situations where we felt strange or scared or we're standing up for what we believe was difficult.

Now I can remember standing outside the headmasters as he was known then. Sorry, that's what he was called. office when the cane was still being used and in fact was used, or me.

Or taking a children's club at Bessamac Grange School, we used to take a club there, but there were older children outside with knives hanging around. You know, scary. It was very scary for me, I can tell you.

Or my first interview for a job and substitute interviews for motion. My first meeting with a government minister when I had to brief him. when I had a phone call to say that Sylvia had been involved in a road accident and been taken to hospital, being at the birth of our children.

[20 : 22] Sylvia being diagnosed with MS, all times when your faith was required and sometimes your faith perhaps might have been broken a bit.

but what Daniel says is that in all these situations our God is with us. Daniel's vision looked forward to the end of the age when justice will rule the earth and the everlasting kingdom of God will be the only kingdom.

Meanwhile, Jesus said to his disciples, you and me, I am with you always at the very end of the age. Jesus is with us whatever you do. Now most of us are not in a position where we can make a great difference to the world we live in.

But we can make a difference to those we live with, those we work with, and in those we meet. The other day, or perhaps a few months back now, I was walking back from the newsagents in Dully's village.

When I tripped over, I was reading the newspaper, which just proves men can't do two things at once. And I fell.

[21 : 38] Immediately, two people rushed to help me get up and offered to walk home with me. So, the kindness of strangers. I was at the barber's the other day, you might have noticed.

I was asked by the person who cut my hair if I was over 65. I thought, that's nice of you to say that. You know, little, acts of kindness. Therefore, this is what Paul said to Colossians, therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourself with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.

Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues, put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

John was praying about unity. That's how we get unity, by treating each other with kindness and humility, gentleness, and patience. It's not always easy, but if we do that, we'll be a united church.

The overall title for our talks on Daniel is Stand, Courage in the Book of Daniel. In this talk, we've been reminded it was Daniel's faith which enabled him to stand courageously.

[23 : 00] Faith works two ways, our faithfulness to God and his faithfulness to us. Exodus says, The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.

And the Psalms speak of God's faithfulness on many occasions. The Lord is good and his love endures forever. His faithfulness continues through all generations. God's faithfulness will never end.

We can be faithful to God in whatever circumstances we find ourselves because we know he will always remain faithful to us and allow us to stand firm.

And we know he's been faithful to us because he sent Jesus to die for us and to live in us if we believe in him. And Paul said to Corinthians, keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong.

May we be people who stand firm in our faith. Amen.