

A Superpower Strikes

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[0 : 00] The villagers are standing by their city gates, they're waiting, their eyes are watching, and then messengers begin arriving. They come from the north, from the fields of war, from the battlefield of a place called Carchemish. They run gasping to the gates of this village. Exhausted, they fall. Dust fills their mouths and terror sort of gleams from their eyes. Words spew hurriedly from their mouths, and they say, Great Egypt is destroyed. The chariots of Babylon were too much. Egypt is no more. And then the men rest a little while. They then resume their run toward the courts of Egypt. When they arrive there, they will be strangled as the bearers of calamity. The villagers watch, and they watch them run on to their fate, and then they wait. Then more fugitives follow, and their words strike fear into their hearers. The Babylonians wiped out our generals. They tore out their eyes on the battlefield. They led them away like cattle with yokes on their necks. Our charioteers had their tongues cut out. Their ears were sliced away from the sides of their heads. Then they were led into slavery. And then the villagers still wait.

[1 : 19] Their eyes sort of strain northward, wondering what will come next. And finally they see them. The lone straggler. He wanders bewildered through the little village gates. He has one remaining arm hanging by his side. He's the man that has been set free by the Babylonians to report the battle properly. And his story is grim as he relates it. You saw us when we marched north. We had incredible power. Everyone thought that nothing could match the power of Egypt. But the young Nebuchadnezzar was waiting for us. His army was ten to our one. His trap was invincible. He cut us down like wheat at harvest. This man is incredible. He is no ordinary man. You've never seen raw cunning and ability like his. You've never seen power like his.

[2 : 15] We had no choice. Our generals were like babies compared to him. So you'd better watch out. He is heading your way now. Soon he will be heading up your creek beds. Your little village won't stand a chance. Little men and little kingdoms do not stand a chance anymore. There is no one to match. Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Now friends this is the Nebuchadnezzar. Who is mentioned so many times in the Old Testament. He is the one who marched on Jerusalem three times in the 15 years after Carchemish. He is the one God used to punish his disobedient children. The nation of Israel. He is the one who carted off prisoner after prisoner after prisoner on each visit. He is the one who in 586 BC marched on Jerusalem. He was the one who was determined to end its rebellion. And he succeeded. He besieged Jerusalem. He ransacked it. Demolished its walls. Destroyed its temple.

[3 : 13] Caused the Ark of the Covenant to disappear from all history. And he burnt the city and raised it to the ground. This is Nebuchadnezzar. The young general. The soon to be king.

The Jerusalem destroyer. He is this great king who carted off the Israelites to Babylon at the behest of God. And as many Jews marched off to Babylon behind his victorious chariots.

They couldn't help thinking that their God was finished with. You see Babylon had battled the Jews and won. Marduk, the God of the Babylonians, had challenged Yahweh, the God of the Jews.

And apparently won. For many who trudged off through the sand, down the valleys of the great rivers, this was the ominous feeling that they felt. That Yahweh perhaps lay dead on the battlefield.

A defeated God. As Israel was now a has-been in a world of superpowers, so in many ways Yahweh the Lord was a has-been in this new world of super-gods.

[4 : 20] And as if to rub salt into the wounds of these people, Nebuchadnezzar had taken the sacred vessels from the temple in Jerusalem and put them on display in the temple of his God in Babylon.

Forever a symbol to everyone who walked in there of the powerlessness, the death and the apparent defeat of Yahweh. Forever a sign that the people of Yahweh were no more the special people of a special God.

Friends, that's the background to these chapters that we are going to look at in the coming weeks. The book of Daniel. And the very first few verses of Daniel sum up this background.

They are grim verses when you read them. They are markedly despondent. They are verses that pose enormous questions. They are verses that pose the sorts of questions that hung over every Jew in Babylon for these 70 years that would follow.

Questions like, where is the Lord? Who is our God in this new world of super-gods? Can our God survive these heady days?

[5 : 31] Is he appropriate for our new existence? It is those questions that hang ominously over this chapter of the Bible. However, let me tell you that these verses are not totally grim.

They are also verses that provide some subtle hints as to where our writer is heading and how he's going to answer these questions. So I want you to follow in your Bibles with me. You can either use the outline that's there or the Bibles in front of you and I don't have the page number, but you can find it.

I want you to look at verse 2 with me. You see, it supplies us with a first subtle hint as to what is going on here. Look at it with me. And I'm reading from the NRSV at this point. The Lord let Jehoiakim, king of Judah, fall into his power.

I wonder if you can see what this verse is saying. It is saying God is not absent. God has actually been active. In fact, Israel being down in Babylon and their king Jehoiakim is there at the hand of God.

It is he, God, who let Jehoiakim fall into Nebuchadnezzar's power. The second hint is given in verse 2 as well. Look at it. The Lord had also let some of the vessels of the house of God fall into Nebuchadnezzar's hand.

[6 : 47] And then I wonder if you have a look at either the NIV or the NRSV version. The NIV has a little footnote under the word Babylonia. Can you see it there? I know you can't because it's printed out.

But let me tell you, that word for Babylonia, elsewhere in the Bible, is this phrase, the plain of Shinar. I want you to scratch your brains.

Those of you who are sharp biblically might be able to remember where else the phrase, the plain of Shinar, has occurred in the Bible. Think.

Think carefully. I'll give you a clue. It's in the first book of the Bible. It's the Tower of Babel was set up on the plain of Shinar. You see, God's people, and in fact, if I can just put it this way, when you last heard of the plain of Shinar, what happened?

Well, some people built this huge tower up to God, didn't they? They built this tower and God came down, he judged them and he sent them all through the world and he confused their languages.

[7:57] See, by mentioning the plain of Shinar here, what our writer is saying is, there has been something like that happen here.

Nebuchadnezzar has raised his hand against God. He's done it from the plain of Shinar. What will God do this time? Now, what else have we got there?

We've got these vessels of the temple of Jerusalem in the temple of the gods of Babylon. The question is, of course, what is God going to do about this? How will he deal with this situation?

What will he do? Will he take on the gods of Nebuchadnezzar? Does the real God have a chance against the super gods? And so we have, in these few verses, heaps of questions being posed.

These first few verses set the agenda for this chapter and they announce a contest. The conflict is on. The greatest of human kings pitted against the seemingly defeated God and his kingdom.

[9:02] The gods of the nations pitted against the God of this puny, defeated nation of Israel. The contest is on. The conflict is set. And into this setting, Daniel and his friends march.

So let's see what happens to them. And what Nebuchadnezzar does is very cunning. He decides to use them in his battle against God. The plan is put into motion in verses 3 and 4.

Stage 1 is let's choose noble, young, intelligent, good-looking, teachable young men. Let's take the cream of the crop from Israel.

Stage 2. Let's throw these men into the best sort of ancient university education that you can get for three years. As verse 4 tells us, they are to be taught the language and literature of their captors.

Stage 3. Curse in verse 3. The young men are to be granted privileges reserved for a chosen few. They are to be given the special honour of being assigned a daily portion of the king's food and wine.

[10:06] And after these things are done, then they will enter into the king's service. Stage 4 occurs in verses 6 and 7. Nebuchadnezzar does some renaming of his captors.

Now, have a look at the names there in verses 6 and 7. Notice they're Jewish names. Do you notice how they all end with the letters EL or IAH?

EL is the sort of everyday word for God in Hebrew and IAH is an abbreviation of the word Yahweh. So, each of these men have a name that incorporates the name of their God.

And what Nebuchadnezzar does is rename them with names incorporating the names of Babylonian gods. And so, the big question for us is this. In three years' time, after this education, after these name changes, after all of these events happen, how will these young men fare?

How will they stand? Will they still be Jews at the end of the day? Will their allegiance still be to the true and living God? How will they stand? With those questions in our mind, we enter the next stage of the story.

[11:18] Look at verse 8. We're told that at some point, Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself. In other words, he decided to say a no. And he played out his decision.

He asked for permission not to defile himself in this way. You see, Daniel has accepted deportation, re-education, name change, but he will not bend on a third issue.

Now, it's a radical thing to do. In doing so, he chooses to turn down the graciousness of his benefactor. He opposes the great Nebuchadnezzar, the king of kings, the conqueror of the known world, the destroyer of Israel.

Now, I need to tell you that in my mind, what Daniel does here is a little strange. You see, after all, if I were choosing to say no to four of those things, I would not choose the food and wine.

And my guess is you wouldn't either. You might think name change, not on. You might choose one of the others. But I don't think many of us would choose the food and wine one.

[12:23] After all, what can be wrong with food and drink? Well, there are a whole host of options and the commentators spend lots of time on it. Let me tell you what I think it is. You see, the only place in Daniel where these words are used is in Daniel chapter 11, verse 26, where we are told of a group of men who eat the king's royal food.

Then we're told that they do the unthinkable. While sitting and eating his food, they plot lies and treachery against the hand that feeds them.

In the ancient world, you see, eating someone's food established a relationship. Eating with them or eating their food established a relationship. And when you accepted it, you committed yourself to that relationship.

It meant having an obligation to your benefactor. We have a similar sense in our own world, not as highly developed as this. But if one business person asks another out, particularly if it's a salesperson, is my guess, asks another person out for lunch.

And, you know, the bill comes round at the end and it's been a very nice lunch, very expensive, and they say, it's okay, I'll look after it. And then the same person rings a week later asking for something or wanting to sell something.

[13:39] There is a sense of obligation, isn't there? There is a sense that you owe something. Some relationship has been established. In other words, in the famous words of Paul Keating, there is no such thing as a free lunch.

You see, that is what I think is happening here. I'm saying that Daniel turned down the meals, not because of anything in them themselves, but because they represented a relationship with this king.

It committed him to this king and he thought the day might come when he may have to fulfil his obligation to the king, established by this. So the food and the drink defiles Daniel in the sense that it challenges him and his freedom to be God's person.

And Daniel will have nothing of it at this point. He wants to be free. He's not going to be the lackey of this king. By eating vegetables, he is showing that he and his friends are a distinct and special group.

They are not like everyone else who will just eat the man's food and drink and do what he says. They're going to be God's people first, no matter what. So the scene's been set.

[14:44] Daniel has pronounced an ultimatum. Let's look at what happens. And the key verse is verse 9. Can you see it there? Can you see what happens there? This is the second time in these verses that God, in chapter 1, that God has acted.

He does it again. He acts by causing the official to show favour and sympathy to Daniel. Daniel has stepped out. He's prepared to take a risk that God will undergird his efforts and sure enough, God does.

A test ensues. And in verse 14, we're told that at the end of 10 days, Daniel and his friends surpassed their fellow students in health and appearance. The NRSV says, they were fatter than everyone else.

These young men have triumphed, you see, over assimilation. They have remained God's men rather than becoming four pawns of an ancient monarch. But let me draw your attention to verse 17.

Do you remember where we started in verses 1 and 2? Verses 1 and 2 talked about God's activity in delivering God's people into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. Verse 9 talked about God's activity in helping out Daniel that he got favour.

[15:52] Verse 17 gives us a third reference to God's activity. God acts to give these four young men knowledge and understanding of all kinds of wisdom and literature. Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds.

In other words, they triumph over assimilation, but not through their own efforts, but through God. Through God's mercy and God's action, these young men have won out.

It is very important to understand that this is the real point of the chapter. You see, God's reputation has been on the line here. These young men represent that God and it is Him who gives them success.

He gives them physical health, fatness, intellectual rigour, intelligence, which is very important in Babylon. He acts again for the third time in this chapter to preserve his people.

Friends, the hero may be Daniel, but the power to do it is God's. We come to the end of the chapter now. In the first few verses, we found some subtle hints and questions.

[17:00] So too in the last few verses. First, we are informed about the vanquishing of the Chaldeans. Look at verses 18 to 20. No Babylonian can equal Daniel and his friends.

Can you hear what the writer is saying? He's saying the tables have been turned from where they were in the first few verses. In the first few verses, outward victory had gone clearly to the gods of the Babylonians.

The symbol of that victory was that Israel was in exile, the vessels of the temple and pagan temple, rather than the temple of Jerusalem. But as we readers of the Bible know, the outward is not where reality is found, is it?

We know that outward defeat is not always a sign of being out of the race altogether. Paul makes this clear in 1 Corinthians 4, verses 7 to 18. As readers of the Bible, we have heard the three references to God throughout the chapter, and we realise that the questions that were in the earlier verses have been answered.

God has survived, and God is active in this pagan land. What about the other subtle hints we saw? What happened to the conflict between the human kingdoms and the kingdom of God?

[18:10] Well, verse 21 shows us. You see, verse 21 tells us of the events of 539 BC. For in 539 BC, a totally different king marched onto the scene.

Cyrus. King of the Medes and the Persians conquered the Babylonian kingdom and sent it the way of all kingdoms, all human kingdoms. But Daniel survived.

Daniel, the representative of God and of God's kingdom in this foreign world, had not only outmaneuvered the representative of the pagan gods, he'd outlasted and outfoxed the kingdom.

He lived to see its fall. Daniel and his God survived the seemingly unconquerable. Alright, can you see what the chapter is about?

God is doing what he did at Babel. Not in the same way. There's no shattering of languages here. There's no dispersion of the nations throughout the world. In Daniel 1, all we have is the lonely figure of Daniel and his mates conquering the kingdoms of men by the kingdom of God and their fidelity to it.

[19 : 26] All we see is Daniel here in this foreign court. God's appointed means for showing up the weaknesses of the kingdoms of men. Daniel, who trusts that God will be active despite appearances to the contrary.

Daniel, who trusts in God despite the fact that God is only active invisibly. You see, the three references to God, they're not stated to Daniel.

They're stated to us so that we can know. Now what I want to do just in the closing moments is to reflect for a moment on the central thrust of this chapter. You see, I think Daniel has so much to say to us today.

For as Christians today, we are faced with a world out there set against God and set against His purposes. Now, my perception is that modern Christians, contemporary Christians can and do take a number of different attitudes to the world and I might get you to try and identify yourself in the three that will follow.

So here's number one. This view says the world is totally opposed to Christ. The people who take this view tend to therefore say that the way ahead is to separate ourselves out of the world.

[20 : 44] So what they do is they withdraw. They radically reject the culture of those who aren't Christians. They reject non-Christian education. They place their children in particular schools that will allow no influence of the outside world that are supposedly protected from non-Christian influences.

Some will only listen to Christian radio stations, whatever it is. It is. In some parts of the world they totally withdraw from society and don't even allow anything contemporary into their society, anything modern, anything that reeks of the world.

That's the view of monasticism and the ghetto. Christians have done it throughout history. This view says that God can only operate in religious contexts.

It tends to say that God is only marginally operative if at all in any other area. But that's not the view you see here in Daniel and elsewhere in the Old Testament. You see the Jews like Daniel held firmly to a belief that this is God's world.

Genesis 1, the first page of Scripture says this. This is God's world. It is His creation. There is nothing wrong with being in a context set against God in a world that is His.

[21 : 55] There is nothing wrong in one sense with a pagan education like the one in Babylon. There is nothing wrong with serving a Gentile king.

You see the world is God's world. It is a place given by God for us to live in, to serve God in and to enjoy. It is God's world. All of it.

The second attitude is very different. The second attitude is to take a very accommodating view of the world. It means accepting secular culture unquestioningly. Accepting its presuppositions and often its conclusions.

This is the way of what's been called humanistic liberalism and the marks of those who hold such a view and maybe there are some of you here are clear. They go along with what the world says. They think that, you know, human discourse is really where God reveals Himself to humanity.

So if humans decide the Bible's outdated, it's outdated. It's no longer okay. If it's no longer okay in our society to talk about God as male, then we'll talk about God in non-sexist language.

[23 : 02] If enlightened people consider that certain sexual practices are legitimate, then perhaps we Christians ought to as well. God must in fact because God is revealing His will through secular discourse.

This is not the way of God's people. It is not the way of Daniel. Daniel knows the benefits of this world but he also knows its dangers and he also suspects the world.

He knows that there are times when he is going to have to say no to this world. He knows how far to go. Like others in the Bible he knows that the presuppositions and conclusions of the world need to be recognised and avoided where they oppose God and His ways.

There is a third way. You find it in the Bible time and time again in places like Isaiah, in Daniel, in John's Gospel and you can find it in the thoughts of great Christians throughout history and this third view sees Christians as a called people.

Called to be agents of change. Agents of God in the conversion of the world to God. For these people the way ahead is not to withdraw from the world but it is to, nor is it to identify with the world.

[24 : 18] Rather it is to participate in the world and even confront the world. To throw yourself into this role in the hope that God will be at work to transform and recreate.

So this is Daniel's word to our age. He says, live vigorously. Carry your trust in God into the very heartland of your oppressors.

Beat them at their own games of wisdom and understanding. Glorify God by being faithful to Him. And above all, remember whose world this is. Remember that this world does not belong to the Nebuchadnezzar of this world.

They will go their way. Remember, it is God's world. It is God's creation. It will present you with many challenges and you are going to say, and you can rightly say yes to many of them.

But there are going to be some no's that you have to say and when you do you are going to have to shout loudly and clearly. You are going to have to say no to all the things that could destroy even the tiniest bit of your identity as God's person.

[25 : 30] You are going to have to maintain your allegiance to Him. Maintain your sharp identity. Be uncompromised, unencumbered and be ramrod straight in the face of all who would buy you out for themselves.

Friends, let me tell you just a little story. When I first preached this sermon in the 80s, I had a friend who was an architect and he'd been working in this, remember the days of the 80s particularly when unemployment got high?

He worked for this architecture firm that had a few dodgy practices. He was firmly Christian. His boss asked him to go along with some of the practices that the company had.

He said, I'm Christian, I cannot. It is wrong. Ten years later this man was still unemployed.

He had a family of five children. He said, no. Friends, all of us at some point in our lives are going to have to say no and make a stand and not be defiled because of our allegiance to a greater Lord, the Lord Jesus Christ.

[26 : 51] And let me tell you that for some of us it will cost. There are people dying this very day because they have done this. There are people being tortured this very day because their allegiance to Christ is greater than their allegiance to anyone else.

We are somewhat shielded from this in our day, but not completely and I think in the days to come it will get worse and worse. That is, it will become more difficult in our country as well.

There are signs of this already. But can you see what Daniel's saying to us? He's saying, dare to be a Daniel. Dare to take on the Babylonians on their own ground.

Dare to take them even on even though their presuppositions are different from yours. and as you do be aware of Daniel 1. You may not see God at work but often he will be.

It is possible that Daniel 1 says it is possible to operate as a person controlled by the kingdom of God in a world dominated by petty human kingdoms.

[28:00] But it depends upon God on his being operative. So put your trust in him and decide for him and with him.

Let's pray. Father, please help us for we too live in a world set against you.

We know we can't retreat from it because you want us in it. You want us in it to bear the name of your son to live the lives that will glorify your son.

So, Father, please give us great discernment that we might know which things are okay and also which things we must say no to. Father, help us to make decisions that will maintain our sharp identity as your people in your world.

Please help us to speak the word of your son into this world. Please help us, we pray, for we pray in the name of your son and for his glory.

[29:14] Amen.