

Daniel 1

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[0 : 00] Friends, while you're standing, let me pray for us. Heavenly Father, would you open our hearts to hear your word this morning in Christ's name. Amen. Please be seated. Good morning, everybody. It's lovely to see you. If you are new to St. John's, my name is Aaron Roberts. I don't feel like I've been here in a while. It's really nice to see you. Really nice to see you.

So we're in Daniel chapter one. We're going to jump straight into it. I think people make two mistakes when interpreting a story like this, Daniel one. And I think the first mistake we make is we sort of treat it like a morality tale. You know, like be brave like Daniel and you'll ace your exams.

It's a bit like how sometimes the story of David and Goliath is treated. It can become be courageous like David and you'll defeat the Goliaths of your life. The Goliaths of financial problems, the Goliath of relationship issues, etc.

It's not really what's going on there, is it? In the story of David and Goliath, who are we supposed to identify with? David? No. In the story of David and Goliath, we are the soldiers on the sideline who face an impossible task, an enemy that we can't defeat.

And so God sends a Messiah to defeat this enemy for us. It's a story. David and Goliath, it's a gospel story. It's the same here in Daniel. It's not a simplistic morality tale.

[1 : 39] We certainly do have a lot to learn from Daniel, though. And we should emulate him. And we'll talk about that a bit. I'll talk about that a little bit. But there's a much more nuanced story here, which I want us to get into in the few minutes that we have.

I think the second mistake we make in interpreting it is that we take it too literalistically as well. And I don't think we're going to make that mistake. But some people have used it to say, this is God endorsing veganism, etc.

So let's get into it, though. Context really quickly is quite simple. You have one kingdom, Babylon, that invades and takes over another kingdom, Judah.

Judah and the Babylonian king strips Judah of all its best people, brings them to Babylon. The plan is to indoctrinate the best people, use them to make Babylon better, and at the same time weaken Judah.

I'm very, I mean, very clever politically. Politically, it's quite a smart move. All right, some details here now. I have two points to make. The first one is be devoted to God. And the second one is be dependent on God.

[2 : 42] The first point, be devoted to God, be dependent on God. Okay, first point, be devoted to God. So the question we should be asking ourselves is this. Is how did Daniel and his friends navigate being followers of God in a pagan world?

How do they navigate being followers of God in a pagan world? And it's a great question because it's probably all our situations. So I have a few observations to make here. Firstly, Daniel didn't retreat into a bubble, into a believer bubble here.

He went to the pagan universities. He studied hard. He took on a new name. These guys worked for the city, administering the city. They clearly wanted the best for the city.

They just kind of got stuck in. But they did draw a line somewhere. No food and drink from the king's table. Now, why is that?

And honestly, we don't really know. It wasn't because it violated Jewish food laws, it seemed. I mean, maybe. But wine wasn't... Wine wasn't...

[3 : 47] You could drink wine in the Jewish food laws. It doesn't seem to be there. Maybe the food was sacrificed to idols. And that was the problem. Don't know. Maybe for them it felt like eating the food from the king's table felt like it was...

You know, like communion. When we have communion, we have this covenant relationship with God. So we have this symbolic meal with each other in God. Maybe they feel like it was a bit like that. It was kind of like they're now in covenant with the king.

And that was the problem. Or maybe... And this is where I sort of lean here. Perhaps it was just a personal temptation for them. Maybe they were worried that they would be...

Like mollified by the luxury of it. And I do think luxury has a way of sort of spiritually neutering people.

And perhaps that was the problem. I think it's worth noting... There's more to say about this. But it's worth noting that there was no public stand here they made either.

[4 : 54] This was all just a quiet stand they made. And it was only them and the chief of the eunuchs who actually knew this was going on. So what's the takeaway here? For your own places of work and study and community, just get stuck in.

Do your best. There will be lines you don't cross. Perhaps they'll be big things. Perhaps they'll be quite small things. It could be things like...

I won't go to work functions with this particular person because I know shenanigans will happen. And you don't want to be involved in those kind of shenanigans. But you have to work out what these lines are.

But I do love how Daniel was quite thoughtful and purposeful in this. Verse 8 says, He resolved not to defile himself. That's wonderful.

He thought about it. I love his decisiveness. It wasn't a spur of the moment thing. He wasn't thinking about this stuff on the fly. And I think it's important for us to be decided Christians about things.

[5 : 59] Let's be decided about things when it comes to how we operate in the world. And again, he didn't grandstand... I want us just to think for one second here about how he made a stand.

Because I think this is important. He didn't stand on a plinth and just, you know, shout about it. There were no placards. He was very humble.

He came to the chief of the eunuchs. And he just sort of explained the situation to them. Just sort of explained it to them. He didn't embarrass the guy. He wasn't obnoxious.

He just sort of stood firmly but humbly. And I think in quite a Christ-like way. We could draw a parallel to politics here, which I like to do.

So David Brooks is this guy who writes for New York Times and The Atlantic and a few other publications. And he wrote an article recently about conservatism in America.

[7 : 01] And let me just read the first couple of lines from the article. He says, When I joined the conservative movement in the 1980s, there were two types of people. Those who cared earnestly about ideas and those who wanted to shock the left.

And he says, The reactionary fringe has won. And he goes on to talk about how in politics that you have conservatives who just want to...

You might know this phrase, Own the libs. Hear this phrase? We want to own the libs. And so they make all these videos and they're quite shock jockey and they interview people who are clearly quite unwell. And they go, See, see why these people are kind of...

They're just crazy. They're crazy. It's all very click-bait and terrible, I think. And in the article, he goes on to talk about how they're more anti-liberal than pro-thoughtful conservative. I think there's a parallel here for us.

When we make stands on things... And there may be times when we need to overturn some tables. But I think when we make stands on things...

[8 : 01] I think generally, Daniel is a good model here. In most situations, let's not be rage-aholics about it. Let's be thoughtful and humble.

And we certainly don't shame people either. Okay, so where are we in this sermon? Daniel and friends, they are a model for us. And I think you could summarize this first point by saying, you know, you can go to a very godless place and you can be taught ungodly things, say at a university.

And you can have the Bible as your compass and you can flourish. You can do that. But like I said at the start, the story is much more nuanced than just, let's be like Daniel.

Because Daniel was a needy man, just like us. He needed God's help. And he was dependent on him daily for all his needs, just like us. So let's go to the second point, which is much shorter. The second point is, let's be dependent on God.

And let's be dependent on a God who we believe to be sovereign. And there is this thread through this story, which I want to point out to you, which is quite easy to miss because it becomes, the story looks so much like Daniel is this great hero.

[9 : 21] But there's this thread running through it in verse 2, in verse 9, in verse 17. So let me just start with verse 1 though as a reminder, okay? In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem and besieged it.

So that's just the plain facts. Verse 1 is just history. History. Verse 2 is theology. Verse 2. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim, king of Judah, into his hand with some of the vessels of the house of God.

So who was behind the siege? It was God. Why did he allow this to happen? Because earlier he had told them, if you keep ruling with injustice and idolatry, you will go into exile.

So God allows this to happen, allows this judgment to happen on them because he wants them to repent and come to him and soften their hearts. Okay, so, the Lord gave.

That's what happened in verse 1 and 2. Verse 9. And God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs. So Daniel was humble and he was smart in his resistance, but ultimately, the story unfolded because of God.

[10 : 37] Verse 17. As for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill and all literature and wisdom and Daniel had understanding of all visions and dreams. So again, these are good-looking lads.

They are smart lads. They are, at this point, very well connected. But it's not a story of privilege. It's a story... None of their success would have happened without God.

God was always in control. And even when you think right back to the start of the story, the Babylonians swept into the city, they plundered it, they killed people, they, you know, raised houses, presumably.

It's important to know. Even when they were seemingly in Nebuchadnezzar's hands, they were never out of God's hands. You know, no matter what was going on, they were never out of God's hands.

Okay, finally now, I'm actually going to make one more point, and I think this is the most important point. When we ask the question, what is the Bible about?

[11 : 40] And I gave you two options. I says, I'm going to say, is it about me and what I do? Or is it about Jesus and what he has done? It's more the second, isn't it?

It's more about what, who Jesus is and what Jesus has done. So when we read stories like this, though, we ask ourselves, does this help understand Jesus?

And yes, it does. And this is not, as I'm preemptively saying this, it's going to sound like I'm trying to shoehorn Jesus in here.

But I'm not. And I hope you see that when I just explain, when I just point something out to you. I'm going to read verses one and two to you again. And in the third year of the reign of Jehovah, Jehovah, King of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, came to Jerusalem and besieged it.

And the Lord gave Jehovah, King of Judah, into his hand and 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.

[12 : 50] So the furnishings from the house of the one true God, the temple, the temple, were plundered, and put in some pagan temple. And remember, God gave.

God gave. God allowed that to happen. And God knew that was not a good look. And God knew that that would look like defeat.

And what does this tell us about God? It tells us our God is willing to be shamed. Our God is willing to be shamed if it brings people to himself. And this is, of course, how it points us to Christ, the Son of God, willing to be shamed so we can know him.

And I think this is the most important thing, I think, that jumps out of the story. Because I don't want you to sort of come to the end of this and, you know, sometimes these kind of sermons are a bit like, here's some hot tips on life.

And, or they can be a bit lectury. But I wanted to remind you right at the end here of how good our God is and what he was willing to do to bring people to himself.

[14 : 07] He was willing to be shamed. And this is where our story moves from, you know, good advice and good theology to doxology. We realise our God is worth our praise and with our life.

Our God is good. Amen. Amen. Thank you.