

Daniel 1:1-2 - Clash of Kingdoms

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Turn with me this morning to the book of Daniel. We are starting a new series this morning entitled Lions and Fires and Prayers, Oh My, Why, which is an action-packed book, right?

The book of Daniel. There's a lot of exciting stuff that happens, but we're not just studying it because it was the best series title that I could come up with, although you might think that that indeed was the reasoning.

But before we begin reading in the book of Daniel, I want to just answer that question briefly. Why Daniel? Why now? Right now, why are we studying the book of Daniel?

To answer that, let me give a little bit of an extended introduction to Daniel. Of course, an entirely sufficient answer to that question is that it is God's Word, right?

[1 : 11] Which means it's always profitable for God's people in any context and always teaches us more of who God is and more of what it looks like to live in relationship with Him.

In particular, though, I'm struck increasingly in my own life and in the lives of others as I talk with them. It's hard to follow Christ in this world.

It's hard, isn't it? It's not simple. It's difficult. We struggle to figure it out. We have a lot of difficult decisions and it's difficult to know how to bring all of life under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

To do more than merely follow a list of rules, but actually to allow the reality of the good news of Jesus to impact every relationship and every decision and every parenting moment and every crisis moment.

And to do that in a nuanced way that honors God and loves neighbor and shines His light into a dark world. If you think that's simple, if you have a formula for that, we need to do lunch.

[2 : 21] Please, tell me about that. But whether you're thinking of the political landscape, the moral arena, whether you think of this in familial terms or economic terms, the questions are, how do I engage?

What battles do I fight? And then how do I engage graciously and redemptively as God would so that I don't merely get my way but bless others as God has called me to?

How do I do that? That's hard. That's difficult to figure out sometimes. And Daniel is not a how-to book with a simple list of rules, do these five things and you will always do this in every situation.

But it is very practical. It's not just dare to be a Daniel, although I remember every word to that song from childhood. But it teaches us things that we must know to live as God's people in the world that we live in.

And it does that in two particular ways in this book, by looking back and by looking forward. Most of the first half of the book takes us back to scenes where God's people find themselves in a similar context to where we are as God's people today.

[3 : 43] We're not the first ones to find it hard to follow God. We feel that way sometimes, but we're not. The Israelites, God's people, are taken into exile in Babylon.

A land where those who are in authority do not follow their God. Those all around them do not share their worldview and their priorities. God has placed His people there.

And so they're wondering, what does it look like to live in a pluralistic world with a singular devotion to God? That's easier said than done.

How do you live in a pluralistic world and be singularly devoted to God? They're wondering how they stay involved in a polluted world and yet remain undefiled at the same time.

They, like Christians around the world today, find some places and some times where people are actively hostile to them and to their God. In other situations, which can be just as dangerous in

many ways, sometimes more, where people function not actively in hostility, but just subtly contrary to God's priorities.

[4 : 57] For example, in Babylon, they are asked to compromise their single-hearted devotion to God. In Babylon, they are tempted to blend in, to get along or get ahead, and so lose their distinctiveness as God's people.

In Babylon, they're surrounded by a culture that praises human power and promises hope and one's own strength. You're beginning to think we've got a little bit in common with where God's people find themselves here in the book of Daniel?

So the book of Daniel looks back, looks back to something we may think is fairly familiar to us, to other unstable and uncertain times for God's people. The other thing the book does is look forward at one of the things God has been teaching me lately is that I don't think about heaven enough. I don't think about eternity and bring that perspective into my life. I easily lose the eternal perspective that is essential just to stay sane in a world that we live in, right?

But not just to stay sane in the midst of all the crazy things that happen, but to think Christianly about life in this world requires that eternal perspective.

[6 : 21] All the way through the book of Daniel, we get that. In particular, in the second half of Daniel, that's about Daniel's visions and dreams. Dreams about the future.

Visions God gives him about what is to come that are often confusing or difficult. But they're revelations that God gives to Daniel. Some of them have already occurred in human history. And some of them await their fulfillment eternally. But Daniel is clear all the way through that this perspective, this eternal outlook is crucial to living in Babylon.

It's thinking of heaven, not to the neglect of earth, but thinking about heaven and realizing that future reality transforms how I engage here and now, all of my present world.

We read of this perspective in the New Testament in places like Philippians 3, where we're told our citizenship is in heaven, where our Savior is, that we wait for His return.

[7 : 24] Our citizenship is in heaven, not ultimately in the USA. And so because of that, according to Hebrews, we are strangers and exiles here on earth.

This is how God's people have always lived. Not having yet received the things promised, but greeting them from afar and acknowledging their strangers and exiles. If people had been thinking of the land they'd gone out from, verse 15, they would have had opportunity to go back.

But as it is, they're looking forward to a better country, a heavenly one. And God's not ashamed to be called their God. He's prepared for them a city, a home. That's where they're at home.

They're strangers and exiles here. That's who we are. Strangers and exiles on earth. Like Daniel and his friends, exiles.

Exiles who need to know the realities of the King on the throne of heaven and the home that awaits them, not so that they could escape earth, but so that they could engage here on earth right where God had placed them by faith.

[8 : 31] Okay, so there will be lions and fires and prayers and dreams and visions and handwriting on the wall.

Kings, courts, wild beasts, all sorts of stuff in the book of Daniel. All of it is there to tell us the story of God's people so that we find ourselves walking in that same story and that we also learn about our eternal God so that we learn more of how to live where he has us today.

That's what the book of Daniel is doing. There's so much good stuff in Daniel. I can't wait to get there. But this morning, we're just going to jump in with the first two verses. I promise that we will take much larger chunks as we go.

We will not go two verses per week. But these two verses, although perhaps a little mundane at first, set the stage for the most significant theme of the entire book.

Daniel 1 at verse 1. Hear God's holy word. In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem and besieged it.

[9 : 42] 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.

Thus far, God's holy word. Will you pray with me? Father, this is the word of God. It is for the people of God who would seek to follow you.

Who would seek to honor you. Who would struggle to do that. And Father, we are faced with a difficult task. Not one that is unique and that your people have never faced.

And we're thankful for that. We're thankful that we can learn of you and learn from them as they sought to trust you in difficult times. So Father, as we enter this study, would you do more than I have planned for?

Would you do more than any of us expects? Would you change hearts? Because it's your word that we come to. That's really our hope. We're not here because we found the best preacher in town.

[10:58] We're not here because we think we'll hear something that will tell us how to fix ourselves. We're here because we need to hear from you. And so we ask that you would speak and that you would continue to do that.

Show us more of who you are. Show us Jesus this morning. We ask it in his name. Amen. At the beginning of his account, Daniel here takes us back to 605 B.C.

The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar marches on the Israelite capital city of Jerusalem. And unlike many who would come against God's people, Nebuchadnezzar defeats the people of God.

The complete destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation of God's people will happen in three waves between 605 and 586 B.C.

But first things first, before we even find out about God's people being taken away, about Daniel and others who go away as part of this exile, what does Nebuchadnezzar do?

[12:11] What's the first thing we find out? Nebuchadnezzar celebrates his victory and his apparent defeat of Israel and her God, doesn't he? Whose kingdom is more glorious?

Babylon or Israel? Whose gods are more powerful? The many gods of the Babylonians or the one God, Yahweh, of Israel? Well, that was always established in these days by who won the battle, right?

That's how you knew. That's how you knew whose God was real and whose God was powerful.

And so you see, after conquering them, Nebuchadnezzar spikes the ball, so to speak.

Verse 2, stealing vessels from the temple, from the house of God himself. Nebuchadnezzar walks in, before he even takes all the people away, into the house of God and takes the vessels used in his worship.

And he takes them back to use in the worship of his gods, who have shown themselves to be, he would proclaim, greater and mightier than the God of Israel.

[13:15] It's the clash of kingdoms that will shape much of the book of Daniel. And it opens with the apparent defeat and disgrace of Yahweh, the God of Israel.

We need to realize what an utter disaster this seems to be for God and for his people. The greatness and the promises of Yahweh seem to be failing.

It certainly looks like that to the nations around them, doesn't it? Many of these are nations who have cowered in fear just generations ago, as God has led his people into the promised land and conquered nations before them.

And they feared what would happen if the armies of Israel came against them. How do they feel now? Now that God and that nation was just a flash in the pan.

You know, they were strong for a little while, but ultimately that God doesn't hang around. Babylon is great. And they and other nations defame the name of Yahweh as his temple crumbles.

[14:24] They gloat and they laugh and they worship their great gods. But even more particularly than the other nations, imagine how the people of God would feel about Yahweh in a moment like this.

How do they feel about him and his promises? See if you can put yourselves in their shoes a little bit. Great promises that have shaped their nation and their people for generations, all the way back to Abraham.

What are some of those promises? Maybe the most obvious and painful one here is the land, right? This promised land that was going to be a place for us.

God promised it to us and now we're being taken away, removed from the place we always thought proved to us that our God cared for us. On top of that, we see Jehoiakim, Israel's king, is defeated here.

In the first verse, it's where Daniel starts. That's never a good thing to lose your king, is it? To have your king be defeated. But Jehoiakim is the Davidic monarch. He's the one who's on the throne of David, right?

[15 : 33] This is no simple throne. There's a promise about that throne, isn't there? That one in David's line will always reign on this throne. The southern kingdom, Judah, has been loyal to that promise.

They've stuck with the Davidic heir. For many years, they've been loyal. It's not seeming very promising now, is it? What throne is he ruling on?

God promised us we would be a great nation, that we would grow into many people with much influence. But now we're taken captive under the thumb of a nation with real power and prestige in the world.

And all of those things, the land and the king and the great nation, were going to happen. Why? Why? Because of what great promise? That they were his people.

The promise of a special relationship with Yahweh. That they as his chosen people would be protected and cared for. That he would bless them. He has always said.

[16 : 40] Now Babylon is coming in and he's pillaging Israel. Cruelly conquering God's people. Painfully afflicting God's people. Heinously abusing God's people.

Some of the details are unspeakable. What Babylon did when they conquered Israel. But if you're thinking it, Babylon was probably doing it and worse.

To God's people. I'm not sure discouraged is a fair word for how they would have felt. Gutted. Devastated.

Despondent. Defeated. Right? Apparently the people of God and Yahweh himself have been defeated.

Psalms 137 famously puts words and emotions to what God's people felt in Babylon. Having been taken away from the promised land into captivity.

[17 : 41] How did they feel? By the waters of Babylon. It says there we sat down and wept. When we remembered Zion. The promised land.

On the willows there we hung up our lyres. For there our captors required of us songs. And our tormentors mirth. They tormented us and told us we had to be happy while they did it.

They said sing us one of the songs of Zion. How did they feel when they heard that? How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?

We can't sing here. Weeping. We can't sing about God. Silenced. Crushed.

Joyless. Defeated. I want you to feel the weight of the apparent defeat here. First of all because it was true then.

[18 : 39] It's how God's people really experienced this. But also because many of us will feel many of these same things as God's people in our day.

Won't we? The kingdom of this world seems to be victorious many days. Doesn't it? Have you thought that or felt that lately? You may feel defeated and hopeless when you watch videos of Christians around the world being killed by those following another God.

You may feel it when no one else around you seems to be following Christ but everything seems to go better for them. You may feel it when crisis hits your family.

And from all you can tell God has abandoned his people. Evil is pillaging. And God's promises are rubbish. Because he has apparently been defeated.

He's obviously not strong enough to come through when it really matters. And you may have felt that. You may be feeling that today. In reality what's happening to the people of God in Daniel's day is actually a fulfillment of some of his promises.

[19 : 52] All the way back to Moses. God has promised them that abandoning him to worship idols will lead to their being taken from the promised land and scattered abroad. As recently as just a few decades before through Isaiah.

God has specifically promised that Babylon will come and take them away. Read Isaiah 39 sometime. It tells specifically this is going to happen. The same is true today of our struggles.

The book of Daniel and others promise ongoing difficulty for God's people. Even after the Messiah comes. They say it's still going to be hard. Whether a result of discipline.

Or of persecution. Or of general brokenness. The promise is there that it's going to be difficult for us too. And so in the midst of this apparent defeat.

Even in these first two verses of Daniel. We get a hint of God's ultimate victory. Is God asleep? What is going on? What's the explanation here?

[20 : 56] Has he quit caring? Has his world gone off script and he's lost total control of it? Is he indeed too weak to stop the might of evil Babylon?

Is that what's going on? Is that what I'm reading about? Is that what I'm experiencing if I'm God's people in this day? Look at verse 2. Not only did Nebuchadnezzar besiege and conquer. But the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into Nebuchadnezzar's hand. The Lord gave the king of Judah into Nebuchadnezzar's hand.

Now maybe that doesn't seem really hopeful to you. Maybe not really exciting. But there's a glimmer of hope even there in these first two verses. That God is on his throne.

That he hasn't lost control. Who is in control even when things seem out of control? Who's on the throne even when he appears to have been knocked off?

[22 : 00] The Lord gave. This happened at his direction. Not because he was overpowered. And maybe it is just a glimmer of hope here in a very, very dark day.

But it's a glimmer that grows through the book of Daniel as we see the power of God vindicated in one interaction after another. One scene after the next.

The power of God is vindicated until his ultimate victory is pronounced in the vision of chapter 7.

Now this is a little bit of a spoiler alert.

After having you so worked up on did Babylon actually defeat God. Daniel chapter 7 says that after human kingdoms fade. The ancient of days is seen in one of Daniel's visions.

God himself still on his throne. And there's one like a son of man. The promised one who's to come. He comes. And listen to what Daniel says in chapter 7 and verse 14. To him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom that all people's nations and languages, Babylon included by the way, that all people's languages and nations should serve him.

[23 : 14] His dominion is an everlasting dominion which shall not pass away and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. He's the ultimate victor, isn't he?

He's the true king. King. So here's what we learn about God from the outset of the book of Daniel. Kids, this is the part that you can write down in your bulletins.

If you didn't get one, you can borrow it from your parents if they haven't filled it all up yet. Writing notes. There's a part there where you can fill in next to an arrow something about God.

God uses apparent defeat to bring ultimate blessing to his people and honor to his name.

Isn't that amazing? God is so strong. He is so sovereign. He's so in control. He's so gracious.

[24 : 13] So good. That he is willing and able to endure the disgrace of the nations and the taunting of human kings who think they're stronger than God.

On his way to achieving his ultimate victory. God uses apparent defeat to bring ultimate blessing to his people and honor to his name.

Listen, the Israelites had shipwrecked themselves. How does this bless his people? They were dying having shipwrecked on the rocks of self-serving idolatry and immorality.

They had abandoned God who loved and cared for them. And he will stop at nothing to preserve for himself a people who know him and love him and share him with the world.

His name will be made great through this process. And the people who turn back to him in repentance and faith will be blessed through this discipline.

[25 : 21] That's largely what the exile is, right? They'll be blessed through the discipline and then after the exile. Because ultimately, nothing could be more blessed than knowing God.

Nothing they have could compare with having God. That's how it's a blessing. Even an Israelite dying in exile away from the promised land, they almost couldn't imagine anything worse.

Even that could be a blessing if they meet God there. Isn't it amazing what God will endure to win our hearts back to himself and to magnify his great name?

Maybe that's what's going on in some of the apparent defeat in our world and in our lives. Maybe he's working in ways that we don't understand for our blessing and for his glory.

Is that possible? It's very likely, actually. You see, this is not the first time that God has used apparent defeat to bring ultimate blessing to his people and honor to his name.

[26 : 34] Daniel's not the first time this has happened. When God's people were at war with the Philistines, you remember them because David was the one who got involved in that fight with Goliath, right?

But part of that story, even before David shows up, 1 Samuel 4 tells us that God's people had begun to lose their awe of his name, of him as their great God.

And so God defeated Israel before the Philistines. Isn't that a weird way to say it? Couldn't you just say the Philistines beat the Israelites? God defeated Israel before the Philistines.

He used the Philistines to teach his people something through defeat. And the Philistines, when they conquered God's people this one time in battle, they actually took the Ark of the Covenant, the thing that represented God's presence with his people, they took it away back to their towns and put it in the temple of their God, Dagon.

And God worked to show himself strong through this defeat. I love this scene in 1 Samuel 5. I wanted to read it to you. What happens is they took the Ark of God and they brought it into the house of Dagon and they set it up beside Dagon.

[27 : 46] They're going to taunt Israel's God as they worship their God. And when the people of Ashdod, the city that they have brought the Ark to, rose early the next day, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the Ark of the Lord.

He was bowing, as it were, to Israel's God. So they, of course, rushed back in and said, let us fix this up for you. Something weird happened last night. Put him back up. So they do.

And then what happens the next morning? When they rose early the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the Ark of the Lord and the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off on the threshold.

Only the trunk of Dagon was left to him. Isn't that a neat scene? It's not the only thing that happens. Every city they start moving the Ark around to, God brings plagues on the affliction on the people in that town so that finally what happens is the Philistines send the Ark of God back to the people of Israel with a goodwill offering to kind of make things right.

Hey, so sorry. We won't do that again. What happens? God's people are blessed. Through apparent defeat. But even more starkly, his name is honored, isn't it?

[28 : 59] A nation who thought, our God is great and we're going to prove it to you, realizes that Dagon is no match for Yahweh. Blessing for his people and honor for his name through apparent defeat.

So Daniel's not the first time God has done this. It's not the last time either, is it? 600 years after Daniel, the Son of God is mocked and disgraced and hung on a cross in a moment of apparent defeat.

A moment of apparent defeat that leads to God's greatest victory. To the greatest blessing of his people and the greatest honor of his name in that he would be so mighty and so gracious as to suffer painful defeat to bring ultimate victory.

Some of you are already thinking of the white witch gloating over Aslan like Nebuchadnezzar. As she sits there and stands above Aslan who's bound and shaved and muzzled, lying on the stone table, silent.

Seemingly helpless and apparently defeated in a chapter of the lion, the witch and the wardrobe called The Triumph of the Witch. And those evil creatures taunt Aslan and they gather around him and cry, He's only a great cat after all.

[30 : 34] And then the witch prepares her knife and savors the defeat of the king of Narnia this way, And now who has won? Fool, did you think that by all this you would save the human traitor?

Now I will kill you instead of him as our pact was and so the deep magic will be appeased. But when you are dead, what will prevent me from killing him as well?

And who will take him out of my hand then? Understand that you have given me Narnia forever. You have lost your own life and you have not saved his.

In that knowledge, despair and die. And the witch thinks she has triumphed. I don't really want to spoil the story.

It's a really good story. Well, you know, if you haven't read it or seen it yet, you should. So I'll just go ahead and tell you that Aslan does die, But that's not the end of the lion, the witch, and the wardrobe.

[31 : 40] In his moment of apparent defeat, Aslan, the true king, has rescued Edmund, the human traitor. And all of Narnia, the stone table shatters.

The great lion roars back to life. And he shares his victory with his people, bringing life everywhere, doesn't he? That's what happens when the true king shows up.

The true king is working, even when you can't see it, to bring ultimate victory from apparent defeat. We need to know that reality, don't we?

We need to know that hope that we have in him. The true home that we have to look forward to with him in order to live as strangers today in a world that seems hopeless sometimes.

Even when the power and promises of God seem defeated in our world and in our lives, We can remember our God is much more mighty, much more sovereign, much more gracious than he appears or we imagine in those moments.

[32 : 53] So we will follow the true king. The true king, remember, is the one who earns his greatest victory at the moment of his apparent defeat.

The darkest day for Jesus, the one that brings the most light to us. That's what we celebrate at this table this morning.

That he has died to bring many sons to glory. That he went to the cross so that many of us could be welcomed at this table with his father.

Sons of the true king. He has risen victorious over sin and death so that those still struggling against it can now come and celebrate today and have hope forever because of him.

Remember the words of institution of this supper. Paul writes them in 1 Corinthians 11. I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you. That the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread.

[34 : 06] And when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way also he took the cup after supper saying, This cup is the new covenant in my blood.

Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

That's what we do today. We gather not just as Southwood, not just as Presbyterians, but as all of those who find our hope in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus.

Please come and celebrate with us if that is you this morning. If you don't know him, we'd rather introduce you to him than something that represents him. We want you to meet Jesus.

We'd love to talk with you about him. Don't come to this table. Come and talk with us about Jesus. Pray with me. Father, we thank you for these elements even though they remind us of a day that was dark for your son.

[35 : 12] When your face was turned from him and he suffered death. We thank you though that he did that in our place to bring us life.

And so we celebrate with great joy that we sit with him at your table. Would you set these common elements aside to a sacred use in our hearts that we might rejoice in that more, that we might have hope more because of that.

We ask it in his name. Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.