

Faithfulness in a Foreign Court

Daniel 1

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Well, good morning. For those of you who don't know, my name is Tobias. I'm the associate pastor here at Christ the King. And if you've been with us over the last several weeks, then, you know, we've just finished a series on the Gospel of Matthew, chapters 5 through 7, and the Sermon on the Mount. And this morning, we're going to be starting a new series on the looking at the whole of the book of Daniel, even the second half and all its strangeness. Prepare yourself. This is not an easy book to understand. I mean, it's filled with riddles, and dreams, and visions of crumbling statues, growing horns, rampaging animals, and mysterious numbers. And on top of that, for any interested in the Bible's original languages, which we think of as Hebrew and Greek, nearly half of Daniel isn't written in either of those. Instead, it's written in Aramaic, so that adds a layer of difficulty. And then there are also endless scholarly debates about its authorship and dating.

Was it written in the sixth or the second century, or any time in between? And there are questions about the role of prophecy, and Daniel's use of apocalyptic language. I mean, what's apocalyptic language anyway? And in light of these difficulties, it's probably an understatement to say that Daniel isn't often the first choice for a sermon series. And I wouldn't be surprised if some of you are thinking, oh, Penny and Tobias. Fools rush in where angels fear to tread. So why are we taking up Daniel? Well, let me say first that here at CTK, we take seriously Paul's statement in 2 Timothy 3, 16 and 17. All scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

Friends, this means that we trust that even the more difficult parts of scripture, books like Daniel, have been purposefully given to us by our Heavenly Father, that we might grow and be equipped as his disciples. And friends, I think this alone should excite us and cause us to anticipate the Lord's blessing as we dive into this book. But let me say, too, that we think the book of Daniel is uniquely positioned to provide us with guidance for how to live as God's people today in the here and now. What do I mean by that? Well, think about this. The Apostle Paul tells us in Philippians 3:20, our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. The Apostle Peter gives us the flip side to that in 1 Peter 1:1, when he reminds us that as followers of Jesus, we are elect exiles.

Now, they're not saying here that our American citizenship, for example, is now obsolete or it doesn't matter. No. After all, Paul took advantage of his own Roman citizenship, didn't he? Instead, what they mean, on the one hand, is that we, all Christians, in fact, have a dual citizenship, our earthly one or ones, as the case may be, and our heavenly one. But they also mean that since it's our heavenly citizenship under King Jesus that provides us with ultimate security and demands our ultimate allegiance, we ought to see ourselves in the here and now as living as exiles until he returns in glory. And friends, this means that our present situation as Christians living in Roanoke, Virginia, in the United States of America, doesn't really resemble the Old Testament people of God living in the promised land. Instead, our present situation, as has been the case for all Christians since our Lord's ascension, is much more akin to Daniel and his friends living in exile in the land of Babylon.

So, how do we live as exiles in a foreign land? How do we, how can we, remain faithful to King Jesus and our heavenly citizenry in the midst of a hostile world? Well, the book of Daniel has much to teach us. So, I invite you to open your copy of God's Word to Daniel 1, if you haven't already. We'll be reading Daniel 1. Here's what it says:

“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 of 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 of 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 Azariah of the tribe of Judah. And the chief of the eunuchs gave them names: Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego.

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 were 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 Azariah, “Test your servants for ten 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 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 ten days. At the end of ten days it was seen that they were better in appearance and fatter in flesh 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 Azariah. Therefore they stood before the king. And in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his kingdom. And Daniel was there until the first year of King Cyrus.”

Friends, this is the Lord. Let's pray.

O gracious and mighty God, we thank you. We thank you that we can be here this morning, that you have provided us with this place, that you have brought us together, that we can freely worship you and study your word. And Lord, now we ask that you will give us eyes to

see and ears to hear. We pray by your Holy Spirit that you will enlighten us to grasp truth about who you are, what you've done, and what you call us to here living now as your people. O Father, bless our time. We ask, Lord, that you will push back distractions, help us to focus, and we ask that you will bless it. And Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be unto you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

“The world is too much with us. The world is too much with us.” With these teasing and provocative words, which are also its title, the English romantic poet of the early 19th century, William Wordsworth, opened one of my favorite poems. It's one I've recited in part or in full probably scores of times throughout my life, either at the beginning of a cross-country run back in college in a lame attempt to inspire my teammates to find joy in the pain, or more recently, as my wife and kids could tell you, probably with a not-so-subtle eye roll, when we as family have been out on a hike enjoying the Lord's handiwork. It's a poem that captures and expresses Wordsworth's lament over what he saw as the loss of any meaningful connection with the natural world around him in the wake of the Industrial Revolution and its pursuits of wealth and material possessions. And in it, he gives voice to a painful reality that he's out of step with the world and what it values. The shallow hustle and bustle of modern life are now a constant pressure. He feels disconnected with what's truly important in life, and it's as if the world he loves has been turned upside down. In a word, he's in exile.

And what I've always found striking in this poem is that as he finds himself out of step, and as he urges us to consider whether there's something more to life in this world he pursuits, he doesn't turn to God for support, as so many of the earlier generation had done, and which his own expressly Christian faith would suggest he'd do. Instead, he turns to nature for solace. In fact, he turns to the world of pagan religiosity, and as he closes the poem, we hear him shout, “Great God, I'd rather be a pagan, suckled in a creed outworn. So might I standing on this pleasant lee have glimpses that would leave me less forlorn, have sight of Proteus rising from the sea, or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.” To me, it's a beautiful and moving poem. And his closing cry suggests that in the midst of this topsy-turviness of the world around him, Wordsworth felt like anything that could provide comfort for his sense of abandonment, anything that could give him a sense of purpose, and that there were unseen supernatural forces at work directing the course of history, even if it meant turning to the ancient and silly beliefs of mythology. Anything would be better than to drudge through life thinking that our lives are nothing more than a cold, meaningless material existence without hope and without any lasting value.

And friends, as Christians, I think this poem raises important questions for us to consider. After all, the world is too much with us, and we are exiles in it. So how do we, what do we do when we feel out of step with the world around us? To whom or to what do we turn for truth and for sustaining power and to see us safely through the mess of it all? How do we live faithfully here and now as exiles in a foreign land? Well, in our passage this morning, Daniel and his three friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, have found themselves out of step with the world around them. They are quite literally living as exiles in a foreign land. And the pagan world of Babylon is indeed too much with them. So what happened? Well, in the late 7th and early 6th centuries BC, the nation of Babylon conducted a series of attacks on Jerusalem, which culminated in the destruction and final deportation of its inhabitants in 587 BC. Some of you, that might be a familiar date, 587-586 BC. And verses 1 through 7, our passage, in our passage this morning, they record what happened in the first of these attacks, which occurred in 605 BC under the leadership of that infamous Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar.

And we're told several things. We're told that the Judahite king, Jehoiakim, who was a wicked king, by the way, he was defeated. We're told that Nebuchadnezzar sacked the Jerusalem temple and took back some of the vessels and placed them in his own temple. We're told that the king's chief eunuch, a man called Ashpenaz, who was in charge of royal education, among other things, we're told that he obeyed his king's command and brought back from Jerusalem its select youth, who were really most likely teenagers between the ages of 13 to 18, and he brought them back so that they might be trained to serve the king, perhaps as political liaisons. We have to remember that Jerusalem had been conquered, yes, but it hadn't been destroyed at this point, and it still remained a basal king, a basal state of Babylon. And we're also told that these young men were given royal food and wine, and that they were renamed. So what are we to make of this opening account? How does it set the stage for what we encounter in the rest of this passage, and really what we're going to encounter in the rest of this book? Well, I want you to put yourself in Daniel's shoes for a moment and try to imagine what he was experiencing.

On the one hand, it must have been devastating. It must have been devastating. After all, a foreign king had actually conquered Jerusalem, God's city, beautiful in elevation, Mount Zion, the joy of all the earth, as the psalmist says. And he pillaged God's temple and set up its artifacts in his own temple, almost as if they were trophies to his own God's superiority. And he'd enslaved the cream of the crop of Judah's youth in the land of Shinar, of all places, that ancient seed of wickedness mentioned in the story of the Tower of Babel. And he was now subjecting them to Babylonian indoctrination and re-identification. It must have been absolutely devastating for these young men. And yet, on the other hand, I think it must have been enticing for them as well. After all, Daniel and his friends hadn't been killed. No, instead they'd been singled out as the cream of the crop, the best of the best, good-looking and smart. They were the whole package. That couldn't have been bad for their egos. And what's more, they'd been offered the king's choice food and wine, and they'd been privileged with the prospect of advancement as royal servants in the court of a superpowers king.

Friends, if these aren't worldly enticements, I don't know what are. And in light of all this, it's not hard for me to imagine that a whirlwind of desperate and conflicting questions was running through Daniel's head. Questions like, what's going to happen to me, and to my friends, and to my family? Will I ever see my home again? Have you, my God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and King David, the God who scattered the prideful pagans at Shinar, the God who conquered Pharaoh? Have you actually been defeated? What about your steadfast love and faithfulness? What about your covenant promises? Is the hope of restoration now just a pipe dream? How will I hold fast to your truth in the midst of this incessant pagan indoctrination? How will I keep grounded in who I am with the loss of my own name, Daniel? How will I remain faithful to you and to no other in the midst of these worldly enticements? You see, friends, Daniel's world had truly been turned upside down, and to all human appearances, there was no hope of it ever being turned right side up again. So how did he and his friends respond? How did they remain faithful to God, the God they served? And, spoiler alert, they did.

Well, there are two things in particular that I'd like us to reflect on in the time remaining that I think remain constant throughout the lives of these four young men, and that I think are of inestimable value to us as we seek to live faithfully as exiles in a fallen world. The first thing I'd like us to reflect on is Daniel and his friends' explicit and rather surprising response to the king's offer of food and wine, which is given in verses 8 through 16. Notice what we read in

verse 8. It says, “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.” Now, Daniel's response here, and really it's his three friends as well, since the account makes it clear that all of them will be involved, but their response here is surprising to me for a couple of reasons. First, it's surprising to me that here is where they're going to take their stand, with good food that was meant to nourish them. I mean, given everything that's taken place in their lives, is this really where you would have finally taken a stand? Just think about it for a moment. They'd been thrust into a program of Babylonian indoctrination, which meant they were studying pagan creation and flood myths, like the Enuma Elish or the Epic of Gilgamesh, and probably too they were studying omen literature and receiving training in how to read animal entrails, all things that comprise the treasury of Babylonian literature and wisdom, and all things that were reprehensible to Israelites.

And yet there's no hint that they objected to this. And what's more, they'd been stripped of their Israelite identities, having their Hebrew names, all of which, by the way, testified to their membership among the people of the one true God. They'd had them changed to Babylonian ones, which arguably, but it's not remotely certain, had meanings rooted in Babylonian gods. But here, too, there's no objection. There's no hint that they objected to this re-identification. And it's also surprising that they took their stand on the king's food, because it's not clear to me and to many how partaking of it would have defiled them. Never thought about that. You might be thinking that they were trying to remain faithful to the Levitical food laws, but these don't prohibit wine unless you took a Nazirite vow, and there's no hint that these four did that. Or you might be thinking that the king's food was sacrificed to idols, and they wanted to avoid this. And of course, in all likelihood, they would have been sacrificed to idols. But vegetables, which they requested, would have also been sacrificed to idols. So this doesn't really answer it either.

Instead, I think it's more likely that, for them, they felt that eating the king's royal food would be to enter into covenant relationship with him. An Old Testament scholar, Greg Goswell, puts it this way. He says, “to eat the king's food was tantamount to a pledge of unqualified loyalty. By means of this dietary regimen, the king was seeking to oppose a binding political commitment on his subjects. And so for these four, this was a bridge too far. They were in covenant relationship with Yahweh, and they would not budge.” But whatever their reasoning, what I think is important for us to see here is that in the midst of this topsy-turvy world they found themselves in, they resolved to live distinctively. They couldn't upend the whole of Babylonian wisdom and culture, or their re-education program. They couldn't thwart the Babylonians' attempts at re-identification and control what the Babylonians called them. No, they didn't seek to change the things they couldn't change. Think about that. They didn't do that.

Instead, they simply resolved to live distinctively as faithful servants of the one true God, listening to and obeying their consciences as opportunities presented themselves, and despite the cost. And friends, this took real courage. Nebuchadnezzar was no man to be trifled with, as the chief eunuch's reticence to comply with their request makes abundantly clear. So first they resolved. They resolved to live distinctively. But what else can we glean from this account? Well, the second thing I want us to reflect on is their perspective, both on what had happened to Judah and what was happening to them personally now that they were in Babylon. And it's pretty hard to miss. Three times in this account, Daniel tells us that God acted. Specifically, that He gave. In verse 2, he tells us that it was the Lord who gave Jehoiakim, king of Judah, into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar and allowed his own temple

vessels to be despoiled. Nebuchadnezzar foolishly thought this was by his own doing and by the superior power of his gods, but Daniel knew otherwise. In verse 9, he tells us that God gave him favor and compassion in the sight of Ashpenaz, the chief of the eunuchs, allowing the four of them to conduct a 10-day vegetable and water dietary trial, which miraculously issued in their superior fitness to all the other youths and which secured their ability to keep their resolution not to be defiled by the king's food. And in verse 17, Daniel tells us that God gave all four of them skill in literature and wisdom and that He gave Daniel the added skill of understanding dreams and visions, nicely setting us up for the rest of the book. And because of this, at the end of their three-year training, as they stood before the king, enduring his interrogation, they shined more brightly than all their peers. And to Nebuchadnezzar's astonishment, they were even 10 times brighter than all of his magicians and enchanters.

You see, Daniel and his friends' perspective was a heavenly one and it never wavered. They trusted that in all that had happened and in all that was still happening, God hadn't abandoned them and He hadn't been defeated. No, He was at work, steadfastly caring for and blessing those He loves and sovereignly moving to fulfill His redemptive purposes. And I have no doubt that it was this perspective, this unwavering trust in the ever-present, steadfast, and gracious activity of the one true God that enabled these four young men to live faithfully and even to thrive as exiles in a foreign land. And for Daniel in particular, to live out the remainder of his days there, outliving not only King Nebuchadnezzar, but even the mighty nation of Babylon itself, which was conquered by Cyrus and the Persians, giving Daniel at the end of his life a glimpse of the beginning of the Lord's promised restoration. That is glorious.

Friends, these two things, their resolution to live distinctively, faithful lives in the service of the Lord and their unwavering trust in His gracious, steadfast, and sovereign presence, despite all appearances to the contrary, are things we too ought to embrace here and now as followers of Jesus living in exile. The Apostle Peter in 1 Peter 1:15-16 said, "but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct since it is written you shall be holy for I am holy." And the Apostle Paul in Romans 8:28 says, "and we know that for those who love God all things work together for good for those who are called according to his purpose." Brothers and sisters, we like Daniel and his friends ought to hunger to live distinct lives of holiness in this topsy-turvy world trusting that he is purposefully at work for our good as those whom he has called and depending on his grace. But as we do this, we need to have the humility to recognize that there are often no easy answers. There are no one-size-fits-all answers for how we do this.

I don't think this is a call for us as Christians to grasp arms and boycott the latest purveyor of a sinful lifestyle or to pressure our brothers and sisters to join this or that political or ideological group or perhaps worst of all to retreat into a Christian ghetto. To do these things would be for us to expect this sinful world to be different than it is apart from the Lord's grace or for us to impose our consciences on others or for us to attempt to escape the world altogether. But friends, Jesus didn't ask his father to take us out of the world. He asked him to keep us from the evil one as he sends us into it. And he told us that at times this would mean we'd need to be as wise as serpents and innocent as doves. And friends, isn't that the way Daniel conducted himself? I mean, how could it be otherwise? Daniel thrived in the midst of a wicked and idolatrous regime for over 60 years.

Brothers and sisters, as we seek to live lives of faithfulness, as exiles in the midst of this broken world, may we learn and continue to learn as we go through this book. May we learn

from the example of Daniel and his friends. And so doing, may we be able to say confidently with the Apostle Paul, “we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day, for this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.” Let's pray.

Almighty God, we bow before you, and we thank you for your word. We thank you, Lord, for your work of grace in the lives of these four young men, working on their behalf, sustaining them with your powerful grace. Oh Father, we pray that we will learn from their example. And Father, we pray that you will sustain us, that we will find our rest in you, that our perspective will be shaped by what you are doing, that you are the living God, acting and working for your redemptive purposes, here and now, despite appearances at some times. Oh Father, we pray that that this will be true in our lives as a community. We pray all these things in the precious name of Jesus.