

SERMON: 1. An introduction to Daniel - *A matter of history & a city of idols*



Today we begin a new sermon series on the Old Testament book of Daniel. Over the next few months (with a break for Pentecost) we will journey through this remarkable and remarkably relevant book. We will cover Daniel in the lion's den and much, much more! There will be Qs in the prayer update each week.

We're going to spend a few weeks digging into chapter 1 because there is a lot going on and it sets up the rest of the book!

There's what's going on...

...in terms of God's people.

...in terms of relationships - God's people with God, and each other and the neighbour nations and nations that have conquered them.

...geo-politically and the rise and fall of empires.

There's what's going on...

...in Babylon.

...on a personal level with Daniel and his friends.

...in the hearts and minds of powerful kings like Nebuchadnezzar.

...in the political, economic, social, technological and military realms.

...in the spiritual realm.

The book of Daniel examines the issues of: values, identity, worship, differing world views, loss, oppression and justice.

The book addresses the questions of...

...where is God in the midst of injustice?

...how can we live with integrity, generosity and kindness when life isn't fair?

...God's faithfulness and ours.

In the book of Daniel, there are also quite a few dreams and visions. We're going to spend some time considering them and if and how God speaks through dreams and visions today and how best to process these.

Helping us along with this series is Professor John Lennox and his book *Against the flow – the inspiration of Daniel in an age of relativism*. John is Emeritus Professor of Mathematics at the University of Oxford, where he is also Emeritus Fellow in Mathematics and Philosophy of Science. John was told early on in his academic career that there was no place for faith and faith in Jesus in the realm of academia. He begged to differ and has written and discussed and debated extensively on the subject of the relationship between God and science.

If you like good writing and discussion and debate, you can look up John Lennox online or on YouTube. He's had some fascinating conversations with Richard Dawkins, the late Christopher Hitchens and the like of Alex O'Connor (a.k.a. the Cosmic Sceptic).

With John Lennox and Daniel and reading their books, it's possible to go, "Wow! They are amazing!" However, if that's all we take away from their books and lives we would be missing their main point. Both Daniel and John take great pains to say there is one true hero and one alone who is the source of life and love and wisdom. As Daniel replies to the king in chapter 2 verse 27... **"No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about, ²⁸ but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries.**

Even the name Daniel points to God. In ancient Hebrew Daniel (דַּנְיֵאל) means God is my Judge. As heroic as Daniel is and as much as he gets right, he knows that he is not the central character or main hero. Daniel knows that the ultimate hero and Saviour and One worthy of glory and honour and praise is God.

Daniel's friends Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego know this too, that's why they are able to say to Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar who is having delusions of grandeur...**2:16 , "King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. ¹⁷ If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us^[c] from Your Majesty's hand. ¹⁸ But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."**

As I said to the children during Easter Holiday club...*the Bible is full of wee stories that tell the big story that God loves us and comes to rescue us in person as Jesus. The Bible is full of characters, some who get things really right and lots who get things really wrong. What the Bible (and life) show us is that we need the true, ultimate and perfect hero – Jesus.*

The book of Daniel is not just a manual on how to be a good and godly person like Daniel when times are tough. The book of Daniel points us to the greater Daniel, the greater friend, the greater Saviour, the One with us in the fire, the One who went through the ultimate fire for us, the Son of Man who gave his life as a ransom for many, the real and true King of Kings and Lord of Lords who actually rules and reigns over all for eternity. His name is Jesus!

This morning we're going to read verses 1 to 6 from chapter 1 and we're going to focus on verses 1 and 2 to help us get into the story. This is the word of God.

Daniel Chapter 1

1 In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim [yeh-ho-yaw-keem] king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. ² And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim [yeh-ho-yaw-keem] king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia^[a] and put in the treasure-house of his god.

³ Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king's service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility – ⁴ young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians.^[b] ⁵ The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service.

⁶ Among those who were chosen were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. ⁷ The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego.

Here's a picture of Jehoiakim [yeh-ho-yaw-keem] King of Judah and Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. The stone engraving is a portion of the so-called "Tower of Babel stele", depicting Nebuchadnezzar II on the right and featuring a depiction of Babylon's great multi-story ziggurat.



By Daniel's time, Israel has long been split into the 2 kingdoms. 320 years earlier there had been a massive fallout between the 10 northern tribes and the 2 southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin. King Solomon's son Rehoboam was the king. It was under his rule the kingdom split. The tribes of Judah and Benjamin stayed loyal to Rehoboam and were centred around Jerusalem. The 10 other northern tribes came out from Rehoboam's rule and ended up making their capital Samaria.

Judah was surrounded by enemies - tribal, national and superpower enemies! Babylon to the east, the Samaritans and the Medes to the North and faded superpower Egypt to the south.

In what or in whom would they trust? Would they turn to God and call on his name for help and renew their allegiance to Him or would they call on an enemy's help and pledge allegiance to powers that threatened them? Which superpower would be the best (or least worst) to ally with? What would you do? What would I do? What would we do? What *will* we do as a nation!? Go with the U.S.A.? Europe? Both? Neither? This is a live issue is it not!

And what does God do with people who don't want him?

What does God do with a nation that doesn't want him? What is the source of life and love to do with a nation that in thought, word, action and inaction repeatedly says "no" and "remove yourself"?

Does God respect their choices? Does God respect our choices?

Does God hand us over to our desires?

Does God give us what we want for a season to see what that's like?

Does God give us what we deserve? Does God graciously intervene?

What does God do with this dilemma, us, humanity and me??

The story of Daniel is one of the stories that makes up the bigger story in the Bible of how God addresses this dilemma.

Here's a map of the ancient Middle East and a very potted history that that might help!



Judah and king Josiah joined with the upcoming empire of Babylon to take on Egypt. This foolhardy venture backfired and Josiah was killed.

Egypt then set up a puppet ruler in Josiah's place – Jehoiakim [yeh-ho-yaw-keem]. Jehoiakim mentioned in Daniel chapter 1 verse 1 was not a great king.

Egypt treated Judah terribly until...Babylon defeated the Egyptians and took over Judah and Jerusalem.

In the year 605 B.C. Daniel was taken captive to Babylon.

Before superpower Babylon ruled the Middle East, superpower Assyria did. At its peak Assyria spanned parts of southeastern Turkey, northeastern Syria, and northwestern Iran. Assyria and its capital Nineveh was centred in northern Iraq. Deadly enemies Assyria sought to wipe out Judah.

Nineveh features in the book and story of Jonah where God sent the reluctant prophet Jonah to tell the city of Nineveh to repent or face divine judgement. The Assyrian Capital of Nineveh fell to the Babylonians in 612 BC, 7 years before Daniel was deported.

At its peak, under the rule of Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon spanned Iraq and parts of Syria, Turkey, Iran, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia.

Its capital was Babylon (50-60 miles south of modern-day Baghdad) and it sat on the Euphrates River. It was the largest city in the world until the rise of Rome.

Elsewhere around the world, to give some context, the country of Japan had recently been established, the Olympics were 170 years old and the temple of Artemis in Ephesus (one of the seven wonders of the world) had just been built. The events described in Daniel chapter 1 occurred a few years before Aesop is credited writing his fables and around the time Gautama Buddha was estimated/guesstimated being born.

Here's a painting by James Tissot called the *Flight of the Prisoners, the exile of the Jews to Babylon*. It's quite a thing even in picture form!



We can look on it from afar, like many of the wars and trouble occurring at the moment in the world. For Daniel and his friends and many from Jerusalem and Judah this was the lived reality. As it is for many in the world today.

Babylon as well as having a policy of conquer and subdue, had a policy of assimilation. The idea of assimilation was to take the so called 'best and the brightest' from conquered nations to Babylon and immerse them in all things Babylonian - gods, worship, world views, values and identity. The idea was that over time the captives would become captivated by all things Babylonian and in essence/at their core become Babylonian! Then they would be sent back to their land and people, and their Babylonian-ness would spread, and the rule and reign of Babylon would be extended. It's quite a sophisticated, longer term and less expensive way of commanding and conquering a people group. This idea of assimilation features heavily in Star Trek Next Generation with the almost unstoppable enemy the Borg whose catch phrase is, "resistance is futile".

Daniel and his friends were part of the group chosen for exile to be assimilated. The Babylonians like the Borg believed that “resistance is futile!”

Babylon was 500 miles away from Jerusalem.
900 miles if you wanted to avoid the desert.

The captives were forced to leave conquered Jerusalem.
Forced to leave their family and friends and home.
The brutality of the city being taken would have been fresh in their minds.
The trauma they endured and carried would have been acute.

The arrival at Babylon would have been incredibly challenging.
Leaving what is meant to be the ‘city of God’ to live in
Babylon!



And what a sight it would have been for Daniel and his friends and the others arriving. **Here's a picture** of Babylon commissioned by the National Geographic. The very first metropolis in the world! It was a spectacular city - 2500 acres. Can you see the Euphrates running through it?

Here's another picture.



According to 5th Century BC Greek historian Herodotus, the walls were 80 feet (24m) thick, 320 feet (97m) high, and 56 miles long. Even if that were half true what a sight and what a city! It would be unlike anything Daniel and the exiles have ever seen.

Every entrance was a spectacular gate dedicated to one of the Babylonian gods of which Marduk was the chief. There was the hi-rise Ziggurat called the Etemenanki which was a house for the chief gods and could be seen from miles around. The next tallest buildings were the Esagila which was the temple for Marduk (also known as Bel) and Nebuchadnezzar's palace. On the palace roof were the breath-taking gardens - the hanging gardens of...Babylon. One of the seven wonders of the world! Daniel and the captives would have been taking this all in as they were brought to Babylon.

Babylon was an incredible feat of architecture and design and technology. Grand, glorious and victorious Babylon compared to weak and defeated and insignificant Jerusalem and Judah.

What if the city and empire is the measure of the god that the city or people worships? That was how people thought. That thought must have been on Daniel and his friend's mind. The thought, *"My country being more powerful than yours must mean that God approves of us more than you"* or the thought, *"That I am well off and successful and blessed must mean god approves more of me than you"* is not just to be found in the ancient world, is it?

At the heart of the Babylonian religion, the chief god and gods was power. This is evident from the ancient Babylonian creation account which is called the Enuma Elish. This epic describes the Babylonian chief god Marduk fighting with goddess Ti'amat. Marduk defeats Ti'amat and breaks her body to make the heavens and the earth. Marduk also kills god Qingu and out of his blood humans emerge to serve the gods.

At the heart of the Babylonian creation account and religion is power. The same goes for so many of the ancient creation accounts and religions. Power comes first. Power is primary. Love is secondary, tertiary or even absent.

In the Babylonian religions and in almost all past and present religions the chief god is not loving in and of themselves. They needed something outside of themselves to love. They needed to create something else to love. This means that their essence wasn't love and at their core they weren't loving. Love came after.

Those that point to the big bang as the cause and source of life similarly put power (energy and matter) first. Love is secondary, tertiary and not at the heart of the universe. Love is a construct, not a reality. That makes it very difficult to make a case for life being about anything other than survival of the fittest.

But Genesis and the God of the Bible and Jesus himself in his life and death and resurrection says *no...ultimate reality, the fabric of the universe is held together by a dynamic, divine loving relationship. Ultimate reality is not just a case of energy, mater, materialism and power.* In this Christianity is unique. If God has existed in a loving Father, Son and Holy Spirit relationship from before time began, God didn't need to make anyone to love. God by his very nature was/is loving and sufficient. God didn't make humans to love. The God of the Bible made humans to *share* in His love and joy. This is well worth pondering!

For Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar it was all about power. Babylon has become synonymous with self-centred and self-aggrandising power. Here's what Bob Marley sings in his song *Babylon System*...

*Babylon system is the vampire, yeah! (vampire)
Suckin' the children day by day, yeah!
Me say de Babylon system is the vampire, falling empire,
Suckin' the blood of the sufferers, yeah!*

Nebuchadnezzar is an archetype of this. We see this confirmed in the bricks! Here's a photo of a Babylonian brick.



If your ancient Akkadian is any good, you'll see that the name Nebuchadnezzar is written here in cuneiform. Out of all the Babylonian bricks discovered by archaeologists, 9 out of 10 have Nebuchadnezzar's name printed on them! Nebuchadnezzar's name was everywhere! Every building, every home, every shop built by and built on the name of Nebuchadnezzar! Interesting it was a practice adopted by Saddam Hussain.

Fame, glory, honour and power!

As Daniel entered the city this is what he would have entered through one of these gates...



This is a reconstruction of the Ishtar Gate found in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin. Has anyone seen it in real life?

Ishtar was the Babylonian goddess of fertility, love and war, one of the high goddesses in the pantheon of gods.

On the original gate this inscription was found...*Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, the pious prince appointed by the will of Marduk, the highest priestly prince...who has learnt to embrace wisdom...pays reverence to their Majesty. The untiring Governor, who always has at heart the care of the cult of Esagila and Ezida and is constantly concerned with the well being of Babylon...the wise, the humble...the first born son of Nabopolassar, the King of Babylon, am I...*

I pulled down these gates and laid their foundations...and had them made of bricks with blue stone on which wonderful bulls and dragons were depicted. I covered their roofs by laying majestic cedars lengthwise over them. I fixed doors of cedar wood adorned with bronze at all the gate openings. I placed wild bulls and ferocious dragons in the gateways and thus adorned them with luxurious splendour so that Mankind might gaze on them in wonder.

There's a lot of I's and gaze on me with wonder with Nebuchadnezzar!



But here's what we are told right at the start of Daniel...**1 In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. 2 And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand**

Daniel from the off declares that God is in charge not Nebuchadnezzar.

I don't know how that declaration sits with you?

I wonder how that declaration sat with Daniel and the captives and God's conquered people?

Whatever the feelings going on, the declaration is made and seems to be cherished. It is a declaration that cuts through human claims of absolute power and sovereignty.

The declaration that **2 ...the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into Nebuchadnezzar's hand** also begs the question why?

Why did it need to be this way?

Why did God allow something like this to happen?

I thought God was the God of the Exodus who delivered his people from cruel Pharaohs?

What about God's promises to his people?

What about God's promise of deliverance and a king and kingdom from David and Solomon's line?

Surely what's happening undermines all of this!

Here's what John Lennox says....

The first things Daniel says about God in his book is that he is involved in human history: as statement of immense import, if it is true. Daniel is not content to inform us of what happened; he is much more interested in saying why it happened. He is interpreting history and interpreting it in a way that is very provocative for the contemporary mind to say the least. (p9-10)...

Judah had compromised with immorality, injustice and idolatry, and so it would be taken into captivity by the most idolatrous nation on earth.... But that does not mean that Daniel and his friends came to terms with it either immediately or easily. Is one thing to come to a sober estimate of turbulent and traumatic events after many years of reflection, it is quite another to have to live through them which is what Daniel and the others had to do.

At one level they could see the events as representing the judgement of God on the behaviour of the nation, and especially that of its leaders. But as thinking, feeling human beings, surely they would have had questions just as we would.

Why for example should they or we have to suffer for other people's actions? After all they were normal young people full of energy and ambition; already in their hearts they were determined to try to follow God. So why should they have to go through the pain of separation from families? There were and are no immediate easy answers to these questions but in the end Daniel and his friends came to understand that God is interested not only in global history but also in the personal history with those who are often innocently caught up in his tragic aftermath. (p15)

Daniel does not give a detailed philosophical explanation resolving [this tension] or the tension between God's sovereignty and human responsibility. (p20)

The person and the book of Daniel hold these tensions. As we will read in chapter 6 Daniel was saved from the lions in the den but the truth as we all well know is not everyone is. If we read Daniel and the Bible and conclude...*if I'm faithful God will/should spare me from lions too* we are holding onto something that God never promises and we will be will be deeply disappointed.

'Success' or prosperity does not mean God loves us more than others. Our suffering does not mean God loves us less than others. That's not how life or the God of the Bible works. The story of the cross tells a deeper and truer tale.

The God of love, before he suffered and died on the cross for his friends and his enemies said this to his followers, **"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."** (John 16:33) My hope and prayer as we begin this sermon series is that we will take heart in all the troubles and tensions because we have a renewed sense that God/Jesus is for us and with us in a now and always and forever way.

PRAY: In the troubles, in the tension, with all that's going on in the world and all that's going on in our worlds, we come to you, Lord Jesus. In all that we are trying to hold, help us to know you are holding us. In what we can makes sense of and all that we can't – come, Lord Jesus. In our world of Nebuchadnezzars and Nebuchadnezzar tendencies – come, Lord Jesus. Where idols need toppled in our nation and in our hearts – come, Lord Jesus. We pray particularly for those in the midst of it right now wondering where you are. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen