

DANIEL 1 CBC 11.10.2020

What really defines who you are and shapes your course through life? Many of us would have to admit that all too often the non-Christian world squeezes us into its mould. We find ourselves listening to its voice and imbibing its values.

One of the most powerful books of Scripture to help us live faithfully as God's people in an alien culture is the book of Daniel. It's famous for its adventure stories, but its real importance is for its teaching on the spiritual battle in which we're engaged.

The book is set in Babylon in 6th century BC. Daniel and his friends were taken there as teenage prisoners and Daniel at least spent the next 70yrs there. So his story speaks to every generation of our lives.

During his long life in Babylon, remarkably Daniel ran not one empire but two! He had great power in his hands, yet always he maintained publicly his faith in God. If we gain nothing else from these studies than learning how to be a public Christian, our time will have been well spent.

Read Daniel 1:1-21

INTRODUCTION: vv.1-2

Two good eyes will be useful as we study Daniel, because the entire book shows us history on a split screen. Screen one is the world as we see it; screen two is God's revelation of what's going on behind the scenes – what the events of history mean. Screen one approximates to secular history, and screen two to biblical theology. You'll see what I'm talking about if you look at vv.1-2.

v.1 is the first screen, and it shows a crisis for everything Israel stood for as God's chosen, covenant people. Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, besieged Jerusalem. The city that Israel called the joy of the whole world was defeated and looted. Many of Jerusalem's most promising people were taken captive to Babylon, including Daniel and his friends. And sacred items from the temple in Jerusalem were stolen and placed in the treasure-house of Nebuchadnezzar's god. And nothing happened! No thunderbolt from heaven! The God of Jerusalem appears to have been defeated.

Keep that in mind, because in many ways this sets the agenda for the whole book. Is there a future for the people of God, or even for God Himself? Verse 1 raises the question, "*Is God any good? Babylon seems more powerful.*"

But v.2 is the second screen: "It was the Lord who gave Jehoiakim into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar." God gave him what he thought he was taking! These two perspectives are woven together throughout the book (and the Bible): human beings are active in history: "Nebuchadnezzar came to Jerusalem and besieged it" (v.1). Yet God is also active in the same historical events: "And the Lord gave Jehoiakim into his hand." (v.2) Behind king N is a greater King, directing all things according to His purpose.

SO: v.1 establishes that N is very powerful; then v.2 says he did it all by God's enabling! A great way to begin the book. God rules the nations!

Now, if you're living in v.1, it's difficult to believe v.2. Why wasn't Daniel's faith in God shattered by what he saw happening? It was because he knew his Bible – that's how we keep our eyes on screen two. He knew God's warnings to His people through His Covenant through Moses, and through prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah: "*If you act like idolaters, I'll give you over to idolaters!*"

So when Jerusalem fell and he was taken prisoner, he saw God fulfilling His word. That's what stabilized him. Daniel knew there's nothing accidental in the life of God's children. He understood that though he'd fallen into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, he hadn't fallen out of the hands of God.

I hope you know that for yourself! Do not be afraid – you will never be removed from the hands of God. We need to know this as much as Daniel did, because we are living in the same world, and are involved in the same spiritual battle.

Babylon and Jerusalem STAND for something. They're not just the places people were taken to or taken from. The historical events of vv.1-2 are part of a larger pattern that goes back into distant history (Genesis 11:1-9) and will continue to the end of this age (Revelation 17 and 18). Babylon stands for humanity organizing its life in rebellion against God. And that always brings about a clash with the people of God symbolized by Jerusalem.

Babylon and Jerusalem represent the two cities to which men and women belong. They symbolize the two loyalties of which Scripture speaks in many different word pictures: two gates; two roads; two masters. The great question for all of us is: "Which of these two cities am I living for?"

1. LIVING IN BABYLON vv.3-7

Well, whichever city we're living FOR, we're certainly living IN Babylon: this world in rebellion against its Maker. That's the context in which Jesus is building His church. As we were reminded in 1Peter, we're exiles and strangers in this world.

And we see from Daniel 1 that life in Babylon is seductive! Nebuchadnezzar was clever. He knew that it's one thing to capture people's bodies, but if you want to make your victory total you have to capture their minds and hearts too. So he took the cream of his young Jewish prisoners and set about turning them into Babylonians.

He enrolled them in his university to do a three year MBA (Master of Babylonian Administration). No fees, no student loans – all paid for. And at the end of the course, a job in the Babylonian civil service with fast-track promotion. You see – life in Babylon isn't so bad after all! But it came at a cost.

- **APPEARANCE:** They had to be good looking (vv.4,10). What a pressure on young people!
- **CULTURE:** They had to study Babylonian language *and literature* (v.4). Behind a culture's literature is a world-view – the stories we tell normalize values. It needn't be highbrow – soap-opera works in the same way. The portrayal of "normal behaviour" has a powerful affect on us. After all, we don't like to be thought abnormal. And it's not simply a matter of bad language or distorted morals. The deeper issue is that life is viewed without God. We're in danger of being indoctrinated with this. It's what our young people get at university: the language and literature of the Babylonians in every form. But we don't need to go to university – it's everywhere. *The reason we make so little impact on this world is that the indoctrination is working.* The challenge of Babylonian culture posed more of a threat to the people of God than the brute force of the Babylonian armies.
- **IDENTITY:** Their whole identity was to be surrendered and replaced with another. That's the significance of the change of names (vv.6-7). Their Hebrew names all said to them in one way or another, "You are God's child." But they weren't allowed to keep these names, and the Babylonian names – related to Babylonian deities – all said, "You aren't really the Lord's, you are OURS." Our teenagers today are not the first to have a teenage identity crisis. That was the conflict in which Daniel found himself.

That's how Babylon seduces us. It offers us a taste of the good life, and says, "You can make it to the top – if you'll tone down those Christian views. Leave them behind. Conform to the corporate ethos. And then the world's your oyster!" And because the rewards are so attractive, many never notice the high cost of conformity. BUT DANIEL NOTICED –

2. LIVING FOR GOD vv.8-21

One of the perks of enrolment in Nebuchadnezzar's training programme was getting the best food (v.5). That would appeal to most students! BUT v.8: "*Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine ...*"

We don't know why Daniel felt so strongly about this particular issue, but it's clear that he felt he had to draw a line somewhere. He didn't make himself awkward or self-righteous – he simply took a step that reminded him of where his loyalties lay. He wasn't going to switch kings just because he's switched countries. He set down a marker: he'd live as a useful citizen in Babylon (because being godly isn't opposed to being useful), but his heart would always belong to God, and his values would come from a higher kingdom. This was his protection against a gradual drift. The issue for Daniel wasn't "Which city do I live IN?" but, "Which city do I live FOR?"

We all have to draw lines like that. They may need to be different lines at different times of our life, and different lines for different people. We have to prayerfully read God's word and decide these resolutions for ourselves. But we all need to ask, "If God is my King, how do I demonstrate that?" Have you ever made a commitment like that? And has it dimmed? Maybe God is putting His finger on some point in your life where you need to be distinctive. Daniel's future usefulness was built on this decision.

And God helped Daniel and his friends. We wouldn't expect a Babylonian official to care two hoots about the preferences of prisoners, but "*God gave them favour ...*" (vv.9, 14), and caused them to thrive on their lentil soup (v.15). And when graduation day came, Daniel and his friends were top of the class and were rewarded with the best jobs (vv.17-20).

The final verse of the chapter adds a nice note. "Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus" - another empire altogether! Verse 1 might suggest that the Babylonians had seen off God; but the final verse tells us with a wry smile that Daniel (and by implication, Daniel's God) lived to see off the Babylonians. That's always the way! This world's kingdoms rise and fall; God's people and kingdom go on. So which kingdom are you going to live for?

CONCLUSION:

So who is the hero of this story? God is! Daniel was faithful, but make no mistake: just like us, he was incredibly needy – an alien and exile for a lifetime. Yet God is totally the Master of this situation, guarding Daniel and bringing him to a position of usefulness. God is the One who begins the process (v.2) and who ends it (v.21).

Three times the Hebrew text tells us "God gave" (vv.2,9,17, obscured in our NIV but clear in the ESV). The God who gave His servants into captivity gave them all they needed to live for Him in captivity. Isn't that encouraging? They were devoted to God, **but the key to the story is that God was steadfastly devoted to them.**

And that's where our hope lies, because "God gave" is written over our lives too. "*God so loved the world that HE GAVE His only Son ...*" Daniel was torn from home and taken to Babylon against his will; but our Lord Jesus left the comfort of heaven willingly, to save us. He entered our Babylon and as a young man faced its pressures ("*All this can be yours, if only you'll leave God's ways behind*")

and worship me!” Mt 4:9). Yet He didn’t compromise, not even when tyrannical rulers threatened Him with death. He trusted God completely and surrendered to death on the cross for our sakes. And since God gave His Son for us all, He will certainly give us everything we need to live for Him in Babylon, till He takes us to our heavenly Jerusalem (Ro 8:32).

So do not be afraid. You have never been removed from the hands of God. *“No-one shall snatch them out of my hand”*, said Jesus (Jn10:28).

PRAYER: Father God, we’re Your people in Your world under Your rule. We’re always under pressure to conform to ways of those who deny you. But you helped Daniel to stand out; will you help us to do that too? Help us to honour You as we live by Your faithfulness. AMEN.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

- What are the dominant influences on your thoughts and attitudes? Audit your reading, watching, listening and surfing.
- How does our culture encourage us to do life without God?
- Where do you need to become a more public Christian?
- How can we help each other to pay attention to “the second screen”?