

“Bring Some of the People of Israel”

The First in a Series of Sermons on the Book of Daniel

Texts: Daniel 1:1-7; 1 Peter 1:1-12

We know that Daniel was young man of noble Hebrew descent living in Judah in 605 B.C. That was the year when, in the providence of God, King Nebuchadnezzar sent his armies to lay siege to Jerusalem—only to destroy the city and its temple eighteen years later in 587 BC. Along with a number of Jewish youths, Daniel was taken from his home and family in Judah, and exiled to Babylon, where he lived out the balance of his long life as a believer in YHWH in the capital city of a pagan empire. Although an exile far from home, Daniel rose to such prominence in the Babylonian royal court that eventually he became a confidant of Nebuchadnezzar himself. Little did Daniel know that the terrible day when he was taken captive and removed from his home and family was just the beginning of a amazing life—a life which, through a series of dreams and visions given him by God, led to the production of a book of the Bible which reveals some of the profound mysteries of God’s sovereign plan for human history, by taking us on a panoramic sweep from Israel’s patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) to the coming messianic age, all the way to the end of time and day of final judgment. The Book of Daniel is also the story of a faithful Jewish exile, in a pagan land, serving in a pagan royal court, all the while living his life in such an exemplary way that he may indeed have been used by God during the reign of the Persian king Cyrus (in the 530s) to help secure the freedom of those Jewish exiles who returned to Jerusalem (in a second Exodus) as recounted in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The Book of Daniel is not only an important guide to redemptive history, it is also the remarkable story of a faithful life lived in exile.

We begin this series on the Book of Daniel with a word of caution. One of the most capable commentators on the Book of Daniel warns us that this book has often defeated even the most skilled of expositors—a warning not to be taken lightly.¹ One reason why Daniel is difficult to interpret is that Daniel predicts the course of world empires—although still future to him, are ancient history for us. To interpret Daniel correctly one needs a fair bit of knowledge of ancient near-eastern history, which most moderns simply do not have. Covering this ground is hard to do in the context of the typical sermon—and frankly, a sermon should not be a mere history lesson. Yet as we saw in our series on Ezra-Nehemiah, the situation on the ground, so to speak, far too often gets left behind by those interpreters looking for “practical application,” and who instead focus upon things like Nehemiah’s leadership skills, while ignoring the historical circumstances behind the book, circumstances which are far more interesting and relevant than turning Nehemiah into an ancient motivational speaker or strategic business plan expert.

We did not do that in our study of Ezra-Nehemiah and we cannot do that with Daniel *if* we expect to understand the true meaning of his prophecy and get something truly useful from our time spent studying this book. So, any series on Daniel will be challenging because even though Daniel will offer a panoramic vision from Israel’s past to the end of time, much of his prophecy has to do with the great empires of the ancient near east (Babylonian, Persian, Greek, Roman) from 600 B.C. until the coming of Jesus and the dawn of his messianic mission (30 AD). So, we will proceed slowly at the beginning of our series, lay the necessary historical groundwork, but we will pick-up speed as we go along.

¹ Joyce G. Baldwin, *Daniel*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary, vol. 23 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1978), 20.

Another reason Daniel is difficult to interpret is because of the nature of the symbols, numbers, dreams, associated with the apocalyptic visions found in his prophecy. Far too many interpreters see the visionary sections in Daniel as springboards to all kinds of fanciful (albeit fascinating) end-times scenarios which supposedly foretell of a future seven-year tribulation period, in which a future antichrist makes a peace treaty with Israel before betraying the nation, leading to the final battle of Armageddon. While Daniel does speak of the time of the end (Christ's second coming), the bulk of the Book of Daniel is taken up with events contemporaneous to Daniel's own time and the centuries following, and which do speak primarily to the future of the nation of Israel and the messianic age (the ministry of Jesus). But Daniel's prophecy does not unfold in the manner so many of us learned from the prophecy pundits who first taught us this book. Therefore, it is important that with a book like this we do a fair bit of background and introduction, and that we ease in slowly, and not jump right in with the assumption that such background is boring, and that the book is relevant and only makes sense if we use it discuss to end times, not ancient history nor the history of God's people.

The fact is that Christianity is a religion tied to that so-called "ancient history"—even ancient history whose details we do not know, do not care to know, or have simply forgotten. It is God after all who chooses to tell the story of our redemption through the life and times of real people who lived long ago and who struggled within real world empires long since gone. If the Book of Daniel can be boiled down to a single message, it is that God is sovereign over all of history as seen in the fact that Jesus Christ conquers all his enemies and completely redeems his people at the end of time—where Daniel ultimately directs us. In fact, the same commentator who warns us of this book often defeating its interpreters, goes on to say "Daniel . . . is seen to stand at the intersection between the Testaments, and at the crossroads of history. It is part of the considerable literature that helps bridge the gap between the Old Testament and the New, and so provides a necessary preparation for an understanding of the ministry of Jesus."²

We know this to be true from our brief consideration of how Jesus used and understood the Book of Daniel in our two-part survey of the Olivet Discourse. Malachi (writing about 450 BC) was the last of Israel's prophets before the coming of the Messiah. Nehemiah gives us the last report of Israel's history (mid 400s BC) until the coming of Jesus, Israel's long-expected Messiah. But Daniel's prophecy (about 536 BC) does much to bridge the redemptive-historical gap between Israel's "Old Testament" history and the period which follows until the coming of the Messiah. Daniel's prophecy ties what has gone before to what will follow—a time of extended trial for Israel (Second Temple Judaism) leading to the messianic age, which points ahead to the culmination of human history, all of this directed by the sovereign God.

As we "ease" into Daniel's prophecy, we will use the balance of our time to look briefly at the date and authorship of Daniel, the structure of his prophecy, as well as Daniel's intriguing relationship to the Joseph Story from Genesis 37:1-50:26, before we draw some brief application.

The opening two verses connect the Book of Daniel to a particular time and place in world history. *"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."* The third year of the reign of Jehoiakim can be positively dated as 605 BC. Jehoiakim came to the throne of Judah in 609 BC, when Judah had become a vassal state of first Egypt and then Babylon. Still a crown-prince, Nebuchadnezzar's armies defeated the

² Baldwin, Daniel, 19.

Egyptian forces in Syria and then came south and laid siege to Jerusalem. Once king, Nebuchadnezzar would eventually sack and destroy the city of Jerusalem in 587. According to 2 Chronicles 36:6-7 and 2 Kings 24:1-7, Jehoiakim was taken in shackles to Babylon in 605, only to return to Judah three years later. We miss a major theme in Daniel if we overlook his statement in verse 2 that “the Lord gave” Jehoiakim over to Nebuchadnezzar, along with a number of vessels from the Jerusalem temple—perhaps as tribute paid to Judah’s new Babylonian suzerains, but certainly a declaration from the Babylonians, that their “god” was superior to YHWH. The vessels taken from the temple will figure prominently in Daniel’s account (in chapter 5) of Belshazzar’s act of sacrilege with these same temple vessels and God’s immediate judgment upon him.

As an aside, Jehoiakim eventually made his way back to Jerusalem, dying in 598. His son Jehoiachin replaced him for a time, and by refusing to pay tribute to Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians, set in motion an increasingly hostile relationship which eventually led to Nebuchadnezzar breaching the city’s walls and destroying both the city of Jerusalem and temple in 587, an event which took place while Daniel was already in Babylon as a young protégée in the royal court. While the Book of Daniel gives us a big picture map of redemptive history, it also recounts the life of an exile in a pagan land, striving to be faithful to God and his promises—a struggle much like we face as Christians in hostile and pagan land.

The internal evidence within the book points to a single author and a 6th century BC Babylonian origin. To a person, critical scholars reject a 6th century BC date for the Book of Daniel because chapter 11 predicts the rise of Antiochus Epiphanes in such detail that critics insist that the Book of Daniel must have been written shortly after the time of Antiochus, or contemporaneously with his desecration of the temple in 163 BC. Since a sermon is no place to spend time refuting a century or more of scholarly debate about dates and authorship, let me say that arguments put forth by critical scholars against the early dating of Daniel are surprisingly weak and not grounded in any real compelling historical evidence—only in the presupposition that no one can foretell the future with such accuracy, so Daniel had to be written after or while the temple was being desecrated during the Maccabean uprising of the 160’s BC. All of the major conservative commentaries and Old Testament “Introductions” do a great job refuting the critical view, and capably prove Daniel’s early date (sixth century BC), single authorship (Daniel), as well as Babylonian origins (from someone who was familiar with the Babylonian court).³

We know exactly when Daniel was taken captive and exiled (605), but we also know the approximate time of his death, at some point after 537 BC (according to Daniel 10:1—he lived until at least the “third year of Cyrus, king of Persia”) when the prophet would have been at least 80 years of age. The dating of Daniel’s prophecy is also important because each the chapters correspond to concrete dates and times, which we can identify by noting that the narratives and visions in the book correspond to the years of the current reigning king in Babylon from Nebuchadnezzar to the Persian king Cyrus (539), who reigned after Babylon fell to the Persians. [I’ve given you a chart—“Timeline of Daniel”—which lays this out].

From a literary standpoint, Daniel has a number of unique but important features which, if considered, will help us interpret the book correctly. The most obvious is that the Book of Daniel is divided into two halves. The first half, the first six chapters, contain narratives from the lives of Daniel and his three friends while in Babylon. One writer describes Daniel’s circumstances and perspective as follows:

³ Andrew E. Steinmann, *Daniel, Concordia Commentary* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2008), 3-19; Baldwin, *Daniel*, 39-52; R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1979), 1105-1134.

The first six chapters are deceptively simple stories of faith under pressure. Daniel and his three friends have been forced to leave their homeland, Israel, and settle in the Babylonian king's palace. They are compelled to learn foreign ways in preparation to serve the government, which has made a hostile incursion against Israel and looms dangerously over that country of their birth. Each chapter brings new challenges, and each time they rise to meet the crisis.⁴

It is one thing to be an exile, it is quite another to be made to serve that same government which will destroy your nation's capital (Jerusalem) and center of the nation's religion, history, and culture (the temple). Daniel's personal circumstances are quite difficult—yet he remains faithful to YHWH.

The second half of Daniel, chapters seven-twelve, contain four apocalyptic visions (one in chapter seven, one in chapter eight, one in chapter nine, and then a more complex vision in chapters 10-12). Daniel chapters 2-7 are written mostly in Aramaic (the royal language of the Babylonian court, similar to Hebrew, and the language likely spoken by Jesus). Yet these chapters have a Hebrew introduction (chapter 1). Chapters 8-12 are written in Hebrew with an Aramaic introduction (chapter 7). This fact points us in the direction of a carefully arranged and composed book with a very intricate and detailed interlocking chiastic structure for each of the two halves of the prophecy. [[I've included a chart which helps explain how this works and why it matters to us before we go through the text of Daniel]].

A chiasm is an ancient literary device in which an author uses an inverted parallel to draw a conclusion or make point of emphasis. In a chiasm, the key point comes in the middle of the chiasm, not at the end (A-B-C-B-A, not A-B > C). This simply means that in the Book of Daniel, the conclusion (or literary high point) does not come at the end of the book, but in two earlier points within the prophecy, each corresponding with the two interlocking chiasms. The first high point is God's judgment upon both pagan kings Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar in chapters (4-6 – "C and C'" on the chart), with the restoration of Jerusalem in chapter 9 – ("E" on the chart) the climax of the second chiasm.⁵ In the generations to follow, nothing would be more comforting to Jewish exiles and expatriates reading this prophecy than to realize from the first chiasm that YHWH foretells the destruction of the very same empire he used to bring covenant judgment upon Israel (i.e., Babylon), while in the second chiasm, we learn the future hinge of redemptive history will still turn upon Jerusalem—meaning the Jewish people must be back in the land and that the temple must be rebuilt after the exile.

While we must keep in mind that the overarching theme of Daniel's prophecy is God's sovereign control over all of human history—even during times of calamity and disaster for God's people, Israel—Daniel is himself an exile far from his home in Judah, struggling to remain faithful to YHWH in the midst of the court of a thoroughly pagan king who has conquered Daniel's people, sacked Jerusalem and the temple, leaving them in ruins. This too will provide us with important source of application as we go along.

In fact, as we consider the opening verses of Daniel, we must not lose sight of the fact that this prophecy was given by YHWH to a man who was essentially kidnaped from his home and family in his youth, and then taken to a foreign land to be forcibly trained as a servant in a foreign court. It is hard to imagine the level of horror Daniel must have felt when first taken captive. What would happen to him? His home and family? What would the future hold? Death? Slavery? There are times when we all have wondered

⁴ Tremper Longman III, Daniel: The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 19.

⁵ Steinmann, Daniel, 22.

about why bad things happen, as well as wondering about God’s greater purposes for our lives, especially while we are in the midst of difficult times. We think of the fiery trials Peter mentions as typical of life in exile (as we see in our New Testament lesson). No doubt, Daniel’s trial in the furnace (Daniel 3) is in Peter’s mind when writing these words to first century Christian exiles scattered throughout Asia Minor because they were believers in Jesus.

It is also vital that we notice an often overlooked but very important element in understanding the Book of Daniel, and Daniel’s own personal story—the strong connection between the Joseph Story (Genesis 37:1-50:26) and the events of Daniel’s life. Thankfully, Rev. Compton spent several summers going through the Joseph Story, so it is familiar to us. There is little doubt that Daniel identifies himself with Joseph, and throughout his prophecy implies that he is, in a manner, a new Joseph.

The comparisons between Daniel and Joseph are so strong as to be well beyond the bounds of coincidence. Consider the following. Both men are taken against their wills to foreign countries (compare Genesis 37:12-36 with the opening 7 verses of Daniel). Both Daniel and Joseph are given severe punishment because of their loyalty to YHWH, but God is with them both in their midst of their respective ordeals. YHWH even vindicates them before their tormentors (Genesis 39, Daniel 6). Both Joseph and Daniel become top advisors to pagan kings (Genesis 41:46; Daniel 1-6), both interpret dreams for two kings who play significant roles in Israel’s history (Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar—Genesis 41 and Daniel 2 and 4). Both men—even as believers in YHWH—are eventually called to high office while serving pagans (Genesis 41:39-45; Daniel 2:48, 5:29; 6:2-3). Both men are described by the pagans whom they serve as “having the ‘spirit’ of gods” in them (Genesis 41:38; Daniel 4:4-6).⁶

The level of detail in common between the two accounts is pretty amazing. Here’s a sample or two. In Daniel 1:20, 2:2, Daniel (who is in Babylon) uses the same Egyptian loanword for “magician” which Joseph uses in Genesis 41:8, 24. When that word is used in Scripture, it is always used in an Egyptian context, except by Daniel. There are other such instances, such as Daniel’s use of the verb “to interpret” and the noun “interpretation” which are also used the same way by Joseph in Genesis 40-41. The same holds true with the expression, one’s “spirit is troubled” (Genesis 41:8; Daniel 2:1, 3).⁷

This comparison—obvious once pointed out—means that Daniel’s prophecy is framed with the Joseph Story clearly in his mind. On one level, Daniel does this to remind the exiles and those coming after them that his own experience as an exile in Babylon is very much like that of Joseph’s exile in Egypt. God delivered Joseph while in the midst of great pressure to embrace pagan gods and practices, just as God delivered Daniel. Daniel’s point is to draw our attention to the fact that even as Joseph told his brothers in Genesis 50:20, “*as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today,*” so too God has used Daniel for important purposes not immediately apparent to the reader. In the case of Daniel, perhaps it was he who counseled the new Persian ruler of Babylon (king Cyrus) to issue a decree to release the Jewish exiles so that they might return to their ancient homeland in Judah and the area near Jerusalem (as recounted in

⁶ Steinmann, Daniel, 37-39; James M. Hamilton, With the Clouds of Heaven: New Studies in Biblical Theology 32 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014). See the table on 230-231.

⁷ Steinmann, Daniel, 38.

Ezra-Nehemiah).⁸ Is it an accident that Daniel is at the right hand of the very king (Cyrus) who allows Daniel's people to return home to Jerusalem, taking with them the vessels once looted from the temple back in the days of Nebuchadnezzar as recounted in the opening verses of Daniel? There are no "accidents" if God is sovereign over the affairs of people and nations.

Granted, nothing specific is said anywhere in the biblical text about Daniel's influence upon Cyrus's decision to allow the Jews to return to Jerusalem, but is it a mere coincidence that just as the Israelites escaped from Egypt and the Pharaoh in the Exodus—taking with them much of Egypt's gold and silver—so too when the exiles return to Jerusalem from Babylon in a new Exodus, they take the vessels and much gold and silver back with them for use in the temple? Is Daniel echoing the Joseph story to make the point that God will bring all of this about so as to move Israel forward into a new period in redemptive history, one which will eventually culminate in the coming of a Messiah, just as Israel's exodus from Egypt once culminated in the birth of the nation? I think it is hardly a coincidence, and I think it clear that not only does Daniel see himself and his own circumstances in the Joseph Story which he himself knew well, but Daniel's role in redemptive history is much the same as Joseph's. For Daniel, a new exodus is coming, one which will take the exiled Jews home to Jerusalem and which will eventually lead to the coming of a Messiah, Jesus.

In the coming weeks we will learn much more about Daniel and his three friends (Sadrach, Meshach, and Abednego), their assimilation into Babylonian culture, along with their rise to prominence in the Babylonian court. Yet, each of these men were believers in YHWH and remained faithful to God's word of promise, as YHWH's sovereign purpose for their lives begins to work itself out in day to day events.

What then, do we take with us from the opening verses of Daniel? The simple answer is that God is sovereign over all things—even disaster and calamity. As we will see throughout this book, Daniel's own circumstances reflect the struggles of a young believer in YHWH being suddenly taken from his home, no doubt with a profound sense of fear and uncertainty. This is part of Nebuchadnezzar's scheme to eliminate the next generation of potential leaders from among the Jews living in Judah. Such a plot was diabolical, but as students of Scripture know, this was also God's means of bringing the covenant curses upon unbelieving and idolatrous Israel (as spelled out in Leviticus 26). Daniel, the youth, is taken from his home, his family, and made to serve his captors. Nebuchadnezzar, the king, is trying to subdue his enemies, who happen to be Daniel's people, commanding his chief eunuch "*bring some of the people of Israel.*" The overarching theme of Daniel's prophecy is simply that in all of this, God is accomplishing his purposes simultaneously on the level of world affairs, and in the life of one young Jew, Daniel.

As for the larger picture, God will use Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians to bring judgment upon Judah, Jerusalem, and the temple, and yet raise up Daniel to be the one who will reveal that: 1). God will judge those nations (i.e., the Babylonians) who hate and attack his people because they serve him (YHWH). 2). God's judgment upon Israel will not be final—the exiles will return, and Jerusalem and the temple will play an important role in preparing the way of the coming of a Messiah, a descendant of David, who will rule over true Israel, and deal the fundamental human problem—sin. This Messiah will suffer and die, for us and in our place, but will be raised from the dead for our justification. Daniel foretells this, and Jesus himself interprets the Book of Daniel as pointing ahead to his messianic mission.

As for Daniel—the exiled youth far from home—he will remain faithful to YHWH. He will do so in such a

⁸ Hamilton, With the Clouds of Heaven, 231-232.

way as to resist the pagan influences and idolatry all around him, all the while using the gifts and talents God has given him for the well-being of the Babylonian people and Jewish exiles whom he is serving as a counselor in Nebuchadnezzar's government. Daniel resists the temptations of paganism, he also uses his skill and talent to thrive and succeed in the most difficult of conditions.

There is not a more important lesson for us to learn than the one we can learn from Daniel—how do we remain believers in Jesus Christ, in the midst of a pagan and godless age, all the while going about our lives in such an exemplary way, that we force to the pagans around us to acknowledge our God, who is sovereign over all things?—whether that be the kidnaping and exile of a Jewish youth, or the movement of armies of conquest by a pagan king such as Nebuchadnezzar, or even the day to day ups and downs and trials of our daily lives. Daniel reminds us that God is directing all of history to his appointed ends, and all the while he with us in the person of Jesus and through the indwelling of his Holy Spirit, assuring us that we are united to Jesus in his exile and Exodus (his death and resurrection), so that whatever befalls us is ultimately for our good and for God's glory, just as it was for Daniel, for Jesus, and as it will be for each one of us.