

“Ten Times Better”

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

Texts: Daniel 1:17-21; 1 Peter 2:13-25

I think it fair to say that one reason why preachers often turn the great events of redemptive history into object lessons or timeless truths—and often times even these are obscured by illustrations, stories and multi-media presentations—is because neither they nor their congregations know the Bible well enough (or care to know the Bible well enough) to let the biblical story tell itself, and then trust God to apply his word to the hearts of those hearing it proclaimed. Because it is a difficult book, requiring a great deal of background, the Book of Daniel is far too often subject to such unfortunate moralizing treatment. This is a shame, because the story of four young Jewish boys, taken captive, forced to conform to foreign ways, and then finding themselves standing before the king of Babylon (the man who has done these evil things to them) and out-performing by ten times the king’s own best and brightest, is far more interesting than any illustration I might find, any story that I might tell, or any timeless truth we may attempt to identify. Their story is especially compelling when we know the biblical background which puts this account into perspective—the reason why I will spend some time developing that background. Yes, this is a wonderful story of faith under pressure and resistance in the face of temptation. But it is also a story of God working all things after the counsel of his will, while still caring for these four young men. God has chosen Daniel to reveal future chapters in the great story of redemption.

We are continuing our series on the Book of Daniel and we will be wrapping up our time in chapter 1. As I mentioned several weeks ago, the Book of Daniel can be quite challenging to understand—because of its apocalyptic visions and its direct ties to ancient near-eastern history—as well as a difficult book from which to preach (for the same reasons just mentioned). So we are slowly “easing” into our study of Daniel’s remarkable prophecy. In our first sermon we spent some time on the background to the book, we looked at its literary structure, and then we established that two themes run simultaneously through the course of this book—themes bound together in the person of Daniel, a prophet of YHWH, and the author of the book which bears his name.

The first theme is the sovereignty of God over the empires and rulers of the world—including the Babylonian empire and its king current Nebuchadnezzar. We have considered Daniel’s stress the upon the sovereignty of God in the opening chapter of his prophecy—god “gave” Israel’s king Jahaikim over to Nebuchadnezzar, along with many gold and silver vessels from the Jerusalem temple used in the worship of YHWH (v. 2). The very idea of Israel’s king being led in chains to Babylon, as well as Jewish gold and silver, which had been used in the Jerusalem temple for the worship of YHWH, now placed in the Babylonian treasury and dedicated to the “gods” worshiped by Nebuchadnezzar, was unthinkable to any Jew. The symbolism attached to these events is not to be missed by Daniel’s reader. Nebuchadnezzar thinks his kingdom is far greater than Judah, and his “gods” are vastly superior to YHWH. He will soon discover otherwise. Yet at the same time Daniel tells us that this tragic set of events occurred because God willed that they occur—the covenant curses meted out by YHWH upon disobedient Israel.

The second theme running throughout the Book of Daniel is God’s providential care of Daniel and his three friends (Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah), who together have been taken captive by Babylonian soldiers and then removed to the capital city (Babylon) where they would be made to serve in the royal

court. It is hard to imagine how frightening it would have been for these boys—likely between twelve and fourteen—to be kidnaped from their homes and families in Judah, taken to a strange place, where they would be forced to forget their past and learn to worship foreign “gods.” We see God’s sovereignty and care of Daniel throughout this saga, as Daniel reveals that God “gave” him favor in the sight of Nebuchadnezzar’s chief eunuch, Aspenaz (v. 9), the man responsible for the training (actually the “re-education”) of Daniel and his three friends, whose story unfolds in the first half of Daniel’s prophecy.

Taking capable Jewish youths captive—especially from royal and noble households—was part of Nebuchadnezzar’s larger plan to weaken Judah (a potential enemy) by taking the best and brightest of Jewish youth, especially future kings and nobles, and turning them into servants in Babylonian court. As these young men were made to serve their Babylonian masters, they were a living testimony of Nebuchadnezzar’s power. Jewish royals and nobles made to serve Babylonian royals and nobles—a humiliating demonstration of Babylon’s complete domination over Judah.

The tremendous pressure upon Daniel and his friends to comply with this Babylonian indoctrination was a matter of life or death. As we will see in the next chapter, the Babylonian king was a cruel and vicious tyrant, and yet in the providence of God, Daniel and his three friends astonished him by how well they had learned the Babylonian language, culture, and history. As recounted in our passage (vv.18-20), based upon their appearance and knowledge, these Jewish boys were now Babylonian servants, ready to dedicate the rest of their lives to serve their new masters. But appearances can be deceiving. YHWH’s favor towards these boys is revealed in verse 17, as once again we see his sovereign hand at work. *“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.”*

What makes their appearance before Nebuchadnezzar so remarkable is that throughout the first chapter we have already seen that Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, successfully resist their Babylonian captors at virtually every step in their reorientation, despite the tremendous pressure put upon them to conform to Babylonian ways and religion. Daniel identifies his new home as “Shinar,” which was the location of the wicked and rebellious city Babel, destroyed by YHWH (Genesis 11:1-9). We read of how these four Hebrew youths deliberately misspelled their new Babylonian names to keep from honoring false Babylonian “gods.” We also saw how Daniel and the others managed to avoid defiling themselves by not eating the food offered them from the king’s table—receiving instead vegetables and water.

It may indeed have been the case that as a Jew committed to the dietary laws of his people, Daniel wished to avoid the unclean foods of Babylon. But it is likely that Daniel also wished to avoid any symbolic actions which identified Nebuchadnezzar as his covenant lord—such as table fellowship with the king, the means of effecting a lasting bond between two parties in ancient near-eastern culture. Daniel could serve the king as a servant in the civil kingdom. Yet, Daniel refused to give the king and his “gods” the devotion and worship symbolized by eating from the king’s table. So when we read in verses 18-20 of the king’s acknowledgment of their superior wisdom and understanding, we know the only way this was possible is through the direct action of YHWH, “giving them” skill, wisdom, and learning, much greater than all the other captive youths serving with them in the Babylonian court. They resist and they prosper.

In order to understand why the closing verses of chapter 1 are so remarkable and surprising in light of the greater story of redemptive history, as well as to help us to gain important biblical background as to why specific things will unfold in the dreams and visions which follow, we need to do a bit more background. So, in the balance of our time, we will first consider YHWH’s covenant promises and threatened curses upon Israel, and then turn to other prophetic declarations regarding both Israel’s exile and eventual

release from their captivity in Babylon so as to return home to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and its temple. Finally, we will consider the closing verses of Daniel 1 and how these four young men (especially Daniel) will witness God's judgment fall upon Babylon.

First, we turn back the clock from the days of Daniel to about 1400 BC and the moment when the people of Israel were about to enter the promised land of Canaan after forty years of wandering in the wilderness of the Sinai. While still on the plains of Moab—to the east of Canaan, and shortly before his death—Moses leads what amounts to a covenant renewal ceremony, recounted in the Book of Deuteronomy. On this solemn occasion, as God's people were about to enter the long-desired land of promise, Moses reminds the people of the blessings promised them by YHWH *if* in the generations to come they remain obedient to their covenant with YHWH. Yet in Deuteronomy 28:46-48, Moses also reminds Israel of the covenant curses which will come upon them should the nation fall into sin by embracing the false “gods” of Israel's Canaanite neighbors. Moses told the assembled people,

“And the LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other, and there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone, which neither you nor your fathers have known. And among these nations you shall find no respite, and there shall be no resting place for the sole of your foot, but the LORD will give you there a trembling heart and failing eyes and a languishing soul. Your life shall hang in doubt before you. Night and day you shall be in dread and have no assurance of your life. In the morning you shall say, ‘If only it were evening!’ and at evening you shall say, ‘If only it were morning!’ because of the dread that your heart shall feel, and the sights that your eyes shall see. And the LORD will bring you back in ships to Egypt, a journey that I promised that you should never make again; and there you shall offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but there will be no buyer.”

We know from what follows in the Book of Joshua, and then from the Book of Judges, Israel entered the promised land with great zeal and fervor for YHWH. But as the next generation came and went, we learn the seeds of apostasy were already sown. In Judges 2:11–15, we find these sad words,

And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals. And they abandoned the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them. And they provoked the LORD to anger. They abandoned the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth. So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers, who plundered them. And he sold them into the hand of their surrounding enemies, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies. Whenever they marched out, the hand of the LORD was against them for harm, as the LORD had warned, and as the LORD had sworn to them. And they were in terrible distress.”

Throughout the Book of Judges we read that the people of Israel sway back and forth between short periods of revival (after some sort of national peril) and then of longer and deeper periods of idolatry and unbelief. The Israelites want a king so as to be like other nations, and so when they finally get a king (Saul, David, and then Solomon), establish a capital (Jerusalem), secure a large kingdom (from the Red Sea to the Euphrates), and then build YHWH a temple (which becomes the religious center of the country), the same cycles repeat themselves—increasing idolatry, then God warning the people through his prophets, calamity occurs, followed by a time of repentance, followed by ever-greater unbelief and idolatry. Eventually, Israel splits into two parts—a northern kingdom (Israel—defeated and exiled by the Assyrians in 722 BC) and a southern kingdom (Judah—the area surrounding Jerusalem).

As Israel's decline into idolatry continues, about 705 BC, the prophet Isaiah brought YHWH's word of warning to Hezekiah, then king of Judah, because Hezekiah was flirting with making an alliance with Babylon (against the Assyrians). Hezekiah even allowed Babylonian officials to tour the temple and see for themselves the great amounts of gold and silver Judah which possessed (cf. 2 Kings 20:12-19). In Isaiah 39:6-7, we read this amazing prophetic warning from YHWH to Judah, given well over one hundred years before the fall of Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar (in 587 BC).

“Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, ‘Hear the word of the LORD of hosts: Behold, the days are coming, when all that is in your house, and that which your fathers have stored up till this day, shall be carried to Babylon. Nothing shall be left, says the LORD. And some of your own sons, who will come from you, whom you will father, shall be taken away, and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.’”

Isaiah's prophecy is especially important in light of our previous studies of Ezra-Nehemiah, and now as part of the setting for the Book of Daniel. Repeatedly, God warned Israel of what would happen should the people embrace idolatry, but they keep heading over the cliff. So when we read that Daniel and his three companions are prisoners in Babylon and made to be servants of Nebuchadnezzar, Isaiah has told us this is because God's covenant curses will come down upon the nation of Israel. God's chosen people reject him and his law, turning instead to serve the idols of their Canaanite neighbors. Their king even sought to make alliance with pagan nations because he did not trust YHWH to protect his people. It is a consequence of the covenant curse that Daniel finds himself standing before Nebuchadnezzar.

At the same time Israel's prophets were warning of God's judgment, they were also foretelling of an end to this time of exile and shame, and that God would restore his people, his city and his temple, and their fortunes as a nation. This is a prominent theme in Isaiah 10, and in the prophecy of Ezekiel (a contemporary of Daniel), especially in chapters 14, 16 and 39 of his prophecy. But it will fall to Daniel, especially in chapter 9 (the climax of the four visions which make up the second half of Daniel), to reveal that Jerusalem will be restored because of YHWH's faithfulness to his word of promise, and this despite the rank unbelief of YHWH's people.¹

Although the young man Daniel suffered through the terrifying ordeal of being kidnaped and forced to serve in a pagan court of a tyrannical king, those who know Israel's history know that Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah are part of the believing remnant within Judah—those Jews who, despite the curse of YHWH upon their own nation, remain faithful to YHWH, and who are preserved and sustained by YHWH in the midst of exile. Yet, Daniel and several post-exilic prophets such as Malachi and Zechariah will be raised up by YHWH to reveal his purposes for his people upon their return to Judah and Jerusalem which will ultimately lead to the coming of the Messiah (Jesus).

So, when we read of these four youths standing before Nebuchadnezzar, there is far more to the story than merely four Jewish youths subversively resisting tremendous pressure to reject YHWH and embrace Babylonian gods—although we certainly do not want to downplay their faithful resistance. If the prior history of Israel has pointed ahead to Judah's defeat at the hands of the Babylonians and exile from the promised land, the prophets (such as Isaiah and Ezekiel) have also foretold of God eventually restoring his people, their nation and their temple. Out of the tragedy of captured Jewish youths being made to serve pagan kings (as foretold by Isaiah), it is YHWH who calls Daniel to be a prophet, and has chosen

¹ Steinmann, Daniel, 104-106.

him to be the one to interpret dreams and foretell the future course of men and empires (including the Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman). Daniel will foretell of Israel's restoration and the coming of a messianic age, as well as telescope the course of human history ahead to the end of time.

At the end of chapter 1, when read that YHWH gave "*them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom,*" along with the fact that "*Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams,*" we can now see that while these young men's standing firm in their faith is part of the story, it is certainly not the whole of the story. In verses 18-20, we are told what transpired after the young men had completed their three years of training to prepare them to serve in Nebuchadnezzar's court. "*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.*" There are several important things found here.

First, Daniel's recounting of his official entrance into the life of the Babylonian court is filled with echoes from the Joseph Story (Genesis 37-50). In addition to describing the court magicians using an Egyptian loan word, Daniel, like Joseph before him, has the God-given ability to interpret dreams which will soon be of great importance to Nebuchadnezzar, just as Joseph's ability was to the Pharaoh.² We will see this element of Daniel's future role in Babylonian government begin to unfold in the next chapter when Nebuchadnezzaer has a dream and Daniel interprets that dream. As YHWH enabled Joseph and then later Moses to expose the pagan magicians of the king's court to be frauds and/or demonic, so too Daniel and his three friends will repeatedly triumph over pagan fortune tellers and magicians.

Second, after training is completed, the young men were ushered into the presence of the king, who then examined them. Whatever the king asked of them—we are not told the specifics—the way these young men conducted themselves obviously impressed Nebuchadnezzar greatly. It was expected that Hebrew youths would be vastly inferior to their Babylonian counterparts, but instead these four Hebrews were found to be far better ("ten times" better—obvious hyperbole) than all the others the king examined. In fact, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, were vastly superior in wisdom and understanding to the court magicians and astrologers to whom the king looked for guidance. In this report we see yet another a subtle reminder of Daniel's resistance to his captors—the captives excel over their captors.³ Nebuchadnezzar might have taken the four boys captive by sheer force, but it is clear to the reader that YHWH is sovereign, even over the examination given Daniel and his friends, and the supernatural wisdom given to Daniel and his three companions protects them from the king's wrath and even serves as a foreshadowing of the life and ministry of Jesus, who is wisdom incarnate.

Finally, we must not let verse 21 slip by without recognizing the implications of the notice "*and Daniel was there until the first year of King Cyrus.*" Daniel was somewhere between twelve and fourteen when he was taken from his home and brought to Babylon (in 605 BC). When he composes the prophecy which bears his name (Cyrus became king of Persia in 538 BC) Daniel is now an old man looking back at his life. From what Daniel tells us in chapter 10:1 which recounts his fourth vision, this occurs in the third year of Cyrus' reign, 536 BC. Daniel was now past eighty and able to see in retrospect YHWH's

² Longman, Daniel, 55.

³ Steinmann, Daniel, 102.

faithfulness to him over the course of his long and illustrious life.⁴

Given his place in the royal court, there is the very real possibility that Daniel was instrumental in Cyrus issuing a decree to allow the Jews to return to their homeland along with the gold and silver vessels which had been taken from the temple. Even as Moses reminded the people of YHWH's threatened curse of being exiled from the land—which resulted in Daniel ending up in Babylon, perhaps Daniel knew of YHWH's promise to return the people from the land from which they would be exiled. In Deuteronomy 30:3–5, Moses reminds Israel, that even if the Israelites come under God's curse, God always keeps his promise. *“Then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you. If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there he will take you. And the LORD your God will bring you into the land that your fathers possessed, that you may possess it. And he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers.”*

No doubt, Daniel also knew the prophecy given through Jeremiah (since Daniel will refer to it in chapter 9) of a specific period of time that the Israelites would remain exiles in Babylon.⁵ In Jeremiah 25:11-13, Jeremiah foretold that *“this whole land [Judah] shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, declares the LORD, making the land an everlasting waste. I will bring upon that land all the words that I have uttered against it, everything written in this book, which Jeremiah prophesied against all the nations.”*

If we consider that Jeremiah was referring to the first exile (which included Daniel) in 605, then Daniel may have lived to witness the first Exodus from Babylon in the years 538-535, seventy years or so after he had been taken captive and Israel held in exile in Babylon. It is very likely that Daniel was at the very least a witness to Israel's exile and second Exodus—even if not part of the reason why Cyrus released the Jews from captivity. Little did Daniel know as he stood before Nebuchadnezzar to be examined by the king, that he would live to see Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom fall under the judgment of God and at the same time witness God keep his promise to bring his exiled people home to Jerusalem.

In all of this, Daniel is the very embodiment of Peter's exhortation in the second chapter of his letter to Christian exiles (which we read as our New Testament lesson). *“Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor. Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly.”*

This, Peter goes on to say to tell us, points us ahead to Jesus, who *“suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but*

⁴ Steinmann, Daniel, 102-103.

⁵ Baldwin, Daniel, 93.

continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”

There can be no doubt that throughout Daniel’s life in Babylon, from the time he stood before Nebuchadnezzar until seventy years later when he counsels Cyrus (the Persian king), Daniel epitomizes the instructions given by Peter to Christian exiles. The sovereign hand of God “gave” Daniel everything necessary for his survival and his flourishing, making him ten times better than all the others. While God preserves Daniel, he brings judgment upon Israel (exile) and then restoration (a second Exodus). He also crushes Nebuchadnezzar and his empire. And in all of this, God is preparing the way for the coming of the messianic shepherd and overseer of our souls, who will bear our sins on a Roman cross, and who is the supreme example of faithful suffering for all suffering exiles.