

## Life and Times in Babylon. Daniel 1. CCH Sermon. 1<sup>st</sup> April 2022.

v1.

- How was your last week?
  - I heard of a local teenager being rushed to hospital in an ambulance.
  - I sat with an elderly couple facing real anxiety over their health and circumstances
  - One of my neighbours stopped me to tell me his wife had died the day before.
  - Putin warned of a lightning fast response against any other nation who tries to intervene in Ukraine, saying that “We have all the tools no-one can boast of...we will use them if necessary”.
- In the **political** arena, and in the **personal** arena, it sometimes feels like life is out of control.
- Well for the next few weeks we are going to be studying the book of Daniel
  - It's not for the faint hearted.
  - There are real lions and real furnaces and rulers who will execute on a whim.
  - It's not just for the Sunday School.
  - It's also difficult to interpret in parts, and we're not just doing the easy stories (ch1-6) but also the difficult apocalyptic visions (ch7-12).
- But the overall message is very simple and very encouraging.
- if you want a 2-word phrase to sum it up, look at 4:26 **HEAVEN RULES p889**. Motto!
  - In other words there is a God in heaven who **is in control** over the events of this globe, both at the **macro** level in the **political** world of global superpowers.
  - And at the **micro** level, zoomed in to the **personal** lives of a bunch of teenagers.
    - So today let's look at those 2 levels in Daniel...
      - AS we look at this chapter in 2 parts.
      - Starting at the global political level. And the message today is...

### 1) GOD IS IN CONTROL TO DELIVER HIS PEOPLE

- In these first 2 verses we have History and Theology.
  - Let's look at the **History** first. v1.
- It's easy to miss the impact of verses like that.
  - ▲ But I think having seen the images on our screens of the smoke rising above Mariupol, we know are understanding with a bit more clarity what a siege is. Some of you have family in Ukraine right now, so this is not just theory.
  - The victims are not the people of Ukraine, but the people of Jerusalem, the people of God in the Old Testament, **605** years before Christ.
  - And the oppressors are not the Russians but the Babylonians, and this is the first year of their new King Nebuchadnezzar's rule.
  - We can read more of the history in 2 Kings. siege, and deportation. Soon after came encircling the city, more siege works, running the city dry of food, smashing through the city walls, burning and looting, deporting the people, and plundering the Temple.
  - No wonder the exiles carried off to the Rivers of Babylon in Psalm 137 couldn't even sing a song, but just sat down and wept.
- This is the political stage, the **history**, and it's devastating.
- But what is even more surprising is the **theology** in v2.
  - We've already seen it in our kids spot.
  - It's easy to miss. It was GOD that did it. v2
  - So actually we can extend our first heading...

**GOD IS IN CONTROL TO DELIVER HIS PEOPLE INTO DIFFICULTY**

- Well why would he do that?
  - Why would God make life harder rather than easier?
  - And this verse like some verses in the Bible seems to say that he doesn't just let bad things happen, but he brings them about.
- Well we need to be careful about tying an individual's suffering to their own sin.
  - Jesus met a man born blind and said that it was neither his fault or his parents' fault that he was born blind.
  - If you or your loved ones have suffered terribly, we must be very wary about any sense of blame.
- But there are times when suffering is a punishment, and that is certainly the case here.
  - God had warned his people in the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy that if they turned their back on him and went after other gods, they would face the consequences.
  - This isn't God flying off the handle and acting irrationally like we do.
  - He's expressing his settled implacable hostility to sin.
  - God has made us to live in his world in relationship with him, and when we spurn that relationship and like an adulterous wife go off after other lovers (whether that be the obvious gods of immorality, or the middle class gods of career, relationship, and family, and seek to find our life and meaning in them), he is angry.
- God is in control to deliver his people into difficulty.
  - In the New Testament also, the people of God face discipline for their sin.
  - And we need to have a right fear of God.
- But we mustn't give up hope.
  - God may be acting in judgement to discipline his people. It's sobering, but it's part of his loving correction.
  - But he may also have another more positive plan at the same time.
  - ~~○ Just pause on the final sentence of v2. The articles from the Temple now in Babylonian temple.~~
    - ~~▪ Well it's devastating, it's terrible for PR, and it looks like Yahweh is just one god among many.~~
  - ~~○ But not so fast. If we remember our Bible stories, God may be up to something.~~
    - ~~▪ Indeed if we look back to 1 Samuel 5, a chapter we looked at a few years ago, there was a time when the ark got captured and taken into Dagon's temple, a Philistine God, and the next morning the statue of Dagon was lying on his face the ark, and when they propped him up again, next time he fell over and lost his head and his arms.~~
  - God is revealing his power. And we are certainly going to see that in the book of Daniel. We're even going to see several court officials have their lives saved from a mad King because God brought these men into Babylon. So there's salvation as well as judgement. God is working out his purposes.

So can I suggest an application....

#### ➡ Don't see all difficulties as disasters.

- I don't want to minimise some of the excruciating suffering that some of our church have had to face in recent years. And again, I don't want to say that every cloud has to have a silver lining.

- **But I do want us to learn that God is in control.**
  - And he is working out his purposes. Even in Babylon.
  - And I do want us to look for how God may be at work in ways that we might never have thought of.
  - Even on the political stage the realms of powers and Putins.
- ▲ I've mentioned before the story of the Chinese church.
  - In 1949 after the victory of the Chinese Communist Armies, all foreign missionaries were expelled from China.
  - Why would God let that happen?
  - It was a disaster, how were the fledgling Chinese church going to cope.
  - Answer no problem at all. God raised up local leaders, taking the Christian faith from
  - According to Wikipedia, there are an estimated 100million protestant Christians in China today.
- And here in Babylon in the place of extreme suffering, God is at work.
  - Yes disciplining his people,
  - but also working in them and through them to be a witness to others.
  - God is building his kingdom.
- And our view shifts from the big **political** picture, to the smaller **personal** picture, as we follow the progress of 4 young Jewish boys, probably still in their teenage years or early 20s.
  - So let's move to point 2....

## **2) GOD IS IN CONTROL TO DELIVER HIS PEOPLE OUT OF DIFFICULTY**

Verses 3 to 21 share the same shape as the Lions Den and Fiery furnace rescue stories later in the book, so let's break this second part down into 4 scenes...

### **SCENE 1) PRESSURE**

v3-4

- King Nebuchadnezzar employed a technique that has been repeated in many wartime situations, what you might call reprogramming.
- He took the crème de la crème. Not the thick clots that rise to the top as was joked about my university, but the best young men, with status, looks, brains and presence.
- And what they were subjected to was King's College, Babylon
  - a cross between a 3-year university degree
  - a civil service training course
  - and a concentration camp
- So there was privilege (food from the royal table v5), but there was also privation/suffering (they were prisoners of war).
- It was clever. It meant that future leaders would be pumped full of Babylonian propaganda so that they would develop allegiance to the King if and when they returned home.
- And in verse 6 we meet our 4 young friends. Daniel, Hananiah, Mishaël and Azariah.
  - If you know anything about the Hebrew language which most of the OT is written in, you may spot that those names contain the word for God- EL= Elohim. and IAH- Yahweh.
    - In fact Daniel (and we've got one in our church) means God is my judge.
      - And he certainly lived that out, living before God as his judge and not fearing men. May God give us that **Daniel spirit!**
      - May God give us that **Jesus Spirit**, who "entrusted himself to him who judges justly" 1 Peter
  - But look at what happens in v7. Reprogramming. Even of their names.

- It's somewhat lost in translation but the new names contain Babylonian gods, Bel, Nabu, Aku.
- Can you imagine how that must have felt?
  - ~~Although we don't go in for the meanings of names as much as in those days, names still tell a lot about a person.~~
  - ~~Some of you will know our friend Adeem. His first name is Mohammed, because he was born a muslim but has since become a Christian. Sometimes when he meets new people, he goes by his name Mohammed, to pretend that he's still a muslim to see how they react. Mohammed suggests a loyalty to Allah.~~
- So being forced into having a new name must have been devastating.
  - It speaks of brainwashing, and a complete obliteration of these men's cultural and religious identity.
- Jumping from the early 7<sup>th</sup> century BC to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century AD, some of us know this pressure in a small way.
  - We may not have been brainwashed in a concentration camp, but we know the pressure to conform in a small way at school or at work.
    - LGBT ideologies which if you don't agree with in their totality you are the bad guys.
    - The peer pressure at the pub to have another drink.
    - Even in church circles, "you're not one of these churches that believes EVERYTHING the Bible says are you"?

#### Let's move to SCENE2)... PRIORITIES

- I love verse 8. Literally, *"Daniel set it upon his heart not to defile himself with the king's portion of food, or the wine that he drank"*.
- Now this is interesting. There's lots that Daniel has been OK with.
  - He hasn't refused being called by a new name (though that's hardly his choice).
  - He hasn't refused to learn the language and the literature of the Babylonians.
  - He hasn't refused to serve an oppressive enemy King.
- But he drew a line at the food.
  - Why was that?
  - Was it about wanting to avoid what we might call **kosher** food like pork.
    - but **wine** wasn't against God's food laws in the OT.
  - Maybe all the food and wine had been offered in a ritual to a **false God**.
  - Or maybe it was more that in the Ancient Near East, **table fellowship** (as we think about in communion) is so much more than eating together, it's about relational approval and acceptance. So Daniel didn't want to belong.
  - We don't exactly know.
- But we do know that there was a line in the sand that Daniel wouldn't cross.
- The chief official is kind, and v9 shows the hidden hand of God behind that kindness. It's one of 3 places in the chapter where we see God acting. Worth us remembering to look out for God's small mercies in tough times.
  - But he went as far as he could, *"Daniel, I want to help you, you know I do, but the boss will have my guts for garters if he sees you looking flaky and unable to do the work"*.
  - Some of you will have friends who are fasting for Ramadan at the moment, or those with Gluten free or dairy free diets will know that what you eat can affect your energy levels and work performance.
  - "It's gonna get messy Daniel, and heads are going to roll" says chief official Azariah.
  - But Daniel resolved not to defile himself.
- I wonder where your line in the sand is?
  - At work. Down the pub.
  - It's not always easy.

- Some things we can say yes to.
- But there comes a time when Christians will find that the world's values and Jesus' values collide.
  - I can bake that cake, but I'm not happy to put that slogan on it.
- I love this book by Rebecca McLaughlin "Secular Creed", it takes 5 slogans of today, "Black Lives Matter", "Love is Love" "Gay rights are civil Rights", Womens Rights are human Rights, "Transgender women are women", and it analyses what we can agree to and wholeheartedly approve AND where Christians need to draw the line.
- Fascinatingly the book of Daniel in the Jewish Bible isn't put with the history books like 1&2 Kings, even though it tells history. It isn't put with the prophets, like it is in our Bibles, even though we are going to see that it predicts the future.
- But it's put with wisdom literature. It's in the Hebrew Bible among the Writings which does include some history, but also includes psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes.
  - You see again and again this book teaches us wisdom.
  - It teaches us to be wise!
  - May God give us wisdom on where to draw the line in our situations.

### SCENE 3) PROTECTION

v11-16 there's a solution... vegetables.

- Now I don't want to get into the merits of vegetarianism and veganism and, I don't think that's the point here. If you are a vegetarian, great. There are Christian reasons for loving our planet that should get us all thinking about our meat intake.
  - But what's going on here is that Daniel is resolving to find a God honouring alternative to full Babylonianisation.
    - Maybe the vegetables were offcuts from the kitchens,
    - maybe the kitchen staff who got a lower pay band were happy to swap their dinner tray with Daniel and friends
  - The point is that He's taking a stand and trusting God for it.
  - I know this is not the fiery furnace yet. Eating vegetables doesn't look like a life defining moment. But sometimes tests in the small things come before the big tests.
  - ▲ When I married Emma I meant it when I said I would lay down my life for her. But on honeymoon, I said if there's a mosquito, it will get you before it gets me.
    - It's all very well to say you'll lay down your life for Jesus, but it may start with simply laying down some of your time to talk more to your kids, sacrificing your lunch break to read the Bible with a colleague or offering to look after your little one in creche so your spouse can hear the sermon.
- But the point is that God backs his servants in these displays of allegiance v15. PROTECTION.
- And in the final scene we get the resolution.

### SCENE 4) PROMOTION

- v17 we get the third GOD DID SOMETHING verse, although he's clearly been at work throughout the chapter.
- v17.
- And because God has honoured them, they are the top students, outperforming even those with local knowledge in their finals.
  - God is at work to deliver his people out of difficulty.
  - This is not a blanket promise that when you stand up for Jesus at work, you'll always get a pay rise, or that if you say no to the world they will always thank you.
  - But it is a promise that God is with us when we live for him, and it is through those moments of putting him first that his kingdom advances.
  - Daniel and friends are now going to be in the right place at the right time for God's next chapter.

- And he's the one who is giving them HIS wisdom to do the right thing.
- Simon spoke at the prayer meeting about a pastor friend of his in Russia who has taken a stand against the war in Ukraine. It's incredibly costly. His prayer letter says "Those who are against are obliged to remain silent or a fine, and then to prison. We are all afraid of what will happen next". But he also spoke about the peace that flooded over him when he took a stand for truth. And who knows how God will use him to advance his kingdom in that country.
  - Well the stand I have to take amongst my fellow clergy or the times I have to say something unpopular with my family are nothing compared to what this brother is going through. But it challenge us to faithfulness.

**I've been a bit sneaky. There's a final scene in v21. It's a PS.**

- It's easy to miss that as a little historical reference.
- But the first year of King Cyrus is 66 years after this happened.
- The teenager is now in his 80's
- Kings come and kings go, they strut their stuff, they flex their muscles.
  - They may swagger and threaten.
  - They may even take your life.
  - But they won't last. Ultimately.
  - And in Daniels' case he lived through several kingdoms, and he came to see that God's Kingdom is the one that lasts.
  - Here's a quote from Dale Ralph Davis.... *"So in verse 21 Babylon, the hairy chested macho brute of the world has dropped with a thud into the mausoleum of history, while fragile Daniel, servant of the most High God is still on his feet"*
  - HEAVEN RULES!
- That Russian pastor Simon mentioned signed off his letter
 

I believe that God will give us strength for all this!  
My God has conquered death. He will protect us.  
Christ is risen!  
In Christ!  
(And then his name)

So let me leave you with the application. **TRUST GOD ENOUGH TO LIVE DISTINCTIVELY.**

Recap.

Let's pray.