

Still in control \* Daniel 1

May 2, 2021 \* Langford Community Church \* Graham Gladstone

This morning I'm excited to start into a new series with you on the book of Daniel – 'Far from Home' – the message of Daniel.

Now Daniel is a really neat book. I remember preparing for an ordination exam and it said I needed to know the book of Daniel – 'well' I thought 'I know Daniel well. I know the fiery furnace and the lion's den and the handwriting on the wall' but then when I really got into it, I realized how much more there is. I mean, the last two chapters are straight up apocalyptic – they're just like what you find in Revelation – so we're going to explore some really familiar stories in this series and some really far out stuff too.

And at the heart of it all, Daniel asks a very important question - how should the people of God act when they are far from home?

Daniel takes place during the Exile. Remember our HIFI-LOFI series from the fall – Daniel takes place during that time – ie., the Exile. The people of God had rejected God and so He allowed them to be carried off into Exile in Assyria and Babylon. Daniel was one of those people who got carried away and so his whole story is about how to live when you're far from home. How do you live in a culture that doesn't always align with the ways of God? Do you go with the flow and hope to fit in? Or do you stand for God, regardless of the consequences?

Those are questions that we are going to explore in the next little, but today we need to set the table and actually deal with this problem of the Exile. The Exile was a catastrophic event – you think COVID's been disruptive; try getting picked up and carried off to a foreign land for the next fifty years. The Exile I'm sure made a lot of people in Israel wonder - Has God lost control? Is He in charge any more or is this one just too big for Him?

I suspect that some people are wondering that today too, especially with COVID. Maybe you're wondering the same thing. Do trials like these mean that God's lost control? Is He still in charge, even when everything falls apart?

To answer that, let's go to the book of Daniel; Daniel 1, verse 1. Daniel is the first of the shorter prophets – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel – they take up a lot of space in your Bible – and then Daniel comes right after Ezekiel. So Daniel 1, verse 1.

NIV Daniel 1:1 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, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia and put in the treasure house of his god.

So right away – this is the Exile. The people of God broke their covenant with God and so God allowed a foreign nation to come in and carry them off into Exile.<sup>1</sup> This, by the way is exactly what God warned against when He established the covenant way back in Deuteronomy 29. He said 'if you go after other gods, I'm going to kick you out of the promised land.' So, Israel when after other gods, the real God did just that. He allowed Babylon to come in and take them captive.

And notice, God ALLOWED them to come in. Verse 2, the Lord delivered Jehoiakim and the rest of Judah into King Nebuchadnezzar's hand. What does that tell us about God's sovereignty? He's still in control. These things are unfolding according to His will.

To the people involved though, it probably seemed as though God was off on a coffee break. Some of them were sensitive to the reality that this was happening because they had turned their backs on God, but even so, I'm sure it was quite scary to think that this could ever happen.

Verse 3 – we going to meet a few of those people.

Once they were in Babylon,

3 Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring in 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.

So Nebuchadnezzar wants to co-opt the best and the brightest of Israel's youth to serve HIS administration and so he gathers up princes and rich kids of Israel and enrolls them in Babylonian prep school.

5 The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. (Just dripping with luxury and excess, possibly offered to idols). They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service.

So... that's not a bad gig if you can get it. I mean, you're an exile in a foreign land; a lot of other nations would have just put you to work building pyramids, but for whatever reason, Nebuchadnezzar preferred that the foreigners become part of his court.

Verse 6 is where things get personal -

6 Among these 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.

And so, with these new names, Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego enjoyed the king's wine and hospitality and melted into the general stew of Babylonian culture, never to be seen again. They went with the flow and drifted away from God.

But is that what happened? From a worldly perspective, it would make sense. They've been kidnapped from their homes. They've been given new names and new identities; they've essentially been forced into a re-education program. Some people in that situation would say 'well, God doesn't seem to care anymore; I'm not going to care either. I've been dealt a bad hand; I'm just going to live it up and enjoy all the luxuries I can get.'

Daniel and his friends though go in a different direction. Verse 8 -

8 But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way.

Now this is fascinating, because from an earthly point of view, it looks as though God has entirely abandoned His people in Exile. Daniel looks around – he sees people torn away from their homes, forced to march across the desert into a foreign land. And yet this person in Exile, Daniel, is still choosing to live for God, even when the world has crumbled around him. He had every reason to just throw up his hands and quit and yet he was convinced that God was good enough and gracious enough and sovereign enough to stick with, even when it appeared as though all hope was lost. Daniel put more stock in the God that he served than the food that he ate and so he went to the official in charge to see what he could do in this situation.

Now again, verse 9 is fascinating -

9 Now God had caused the official to show favor and sympathy to Daniel...

It may look like God has abandoned His people but that is in no way true. God is working behind the scenes here – giving Daniel favour in the eyes of the official –

But even so, the official doesn't want to risk his neck for these random exiles.

And so, level-headed Daniel came up with a test. He said to the guard – 'look, I don't want you to get in trouble because of me, but I don't want to dishonour my God because of this food – so tell you what – you give us only veggies for ten days – and then see how we look. If we are still healthy on this simple food, then we'll roll with it; otherwise, we'll do it your way.'

Brilliant, right? He's not asking the official to rewrite the rules for him; he's simply asking that they try a pilot project for less than two weeks – and if it works, good; if not, they'll play ball. But Daniel is convinced that God will come through. And that's exactly what He did.

14 So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days.

15 At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food.

God came through, keeping them healthy and fit. They were faithful to God and He was faithful to them. In fact, verse 17 –

17 To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds.

God blessed their faithfulness to Him. They stood with Him and He gave them wisdom and knowledge and understanding beyond their years.

18 At the end of the time set by the king to bring them in, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar.

19 The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king's service.

20 In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom.

Daniel and the boys knew that God was gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love; they knew that He would never fail them nor forsake them so they could be strong and courageous because the Lord their God was with them, even in Exile, and so, in response to who He is, they chose to stand for God.

They decided that God was worth standing up for and He honoured them by making them stand out, heads and shoulders above the other courtiers in Nebudchadnezzar's administration. God was with them. God was faithful to them. And God rewarded their faithfulness to Him.

Now let's stop and think about this in terms of our question from the beginning, because this is where the rubber hits the road for us.

Do trials mean that God is no longer in charge? Do pandemics and exiles and illnesses mean that God has been deposed?

No, they don't. God is sovereign, no matter what. When it all falls apart, God is still in control.

I mean, look back at the chapter. Verse 2 – this all happened according to God's plan. Verse 9, God gave Daniel favour in the eyes of the official. Verse 15, God nourished the boys beyond any food the king could provide. Verse 17, God gave knowledge and understanding to Daniel and the boys and verse 19 they entered the king's service at the head of the class.

There is no doubt that Daniel's world crumbled the day the Babylonians showed up. But there's also no doubt that God was still in control. In fact, God had already begun to rebuild, moving these young men into positions of authority in order to impact Babylon from the inside out.

And if you think about it, God has a habit of working this way. It all fell apart for Joseph when he went into slavery in Egypt, and yet God was already rebuilding, ultimately preserving Jesus' line through Joseph in Egypt. It all fell apart for David when his boss king Saul tried to kill him, and yet God was still in control, preparing David to become king himself. And look at Jesus on the Cross; it would appear that it all fell apart that day, and yet that was the day that He secured forgiveness for us all.

Trials don't mean that God's lost the reins; when it all falls apart, God is still in control.

Now, if that's true, then what do we do? God may be in control but we still have this difficult road to walk. How do we walk it, knowing that God is in control?

Let me give you two thoughts based on Daniel chapter 1 to close. When it all falls apart, God is still in control, so we can act with confidence and faithfulness.

1. When it all falls apart, God is still in control, so we can act with confidence.

There's no doubt about it, Daniel was in a tough spot. But he refused to allow his situation to erode his confidence in God. He didn't look at the situation and say – 'well, God must have met His match.' He looked at his God and said 'This situation is no match for God.' God can handle it.

And God can handle whatever you're going through right now. With COVID, I've heard some of you say 'the world I knew is gone.' The world you knew may be gone but the God you know is not. He is still powerful. He is still compassionate. He is still deeply committed to you and so you can act with confidence that this will work together for good in God's sovereign plan. This makes me think of 2 Timothy 1:6 – For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. (2Ti 1:7 NIV). God is in control, so you can act with confidence in whatever lies ahead.

1. When it all falls apart, God is still in control, so we can act with confidence.

2. When it all falls apart, God is still in control, so we can act with faithfulness.

I think that if Daniel thought that God was not in control, he would have had a harder time resisting the lavish food from the king's table. If God wasn't sovereign and able to take care of him, then Daniel would have had no motivation to turn down the food.

But God is sovereign. And God IS worthy of allegiance. And so Daniel could say – no, thanks – being faithful to God is more important to me than enjoying these culinary delights.

Now, look, there is nothing inherently wrong with culinary delights – I come from a line of excellent chefs – but the fact is that in Daniel's situation – because of food laws and idolatry – this food was counter to God's will. And so he said no thanks so he could stay faithful to God.

And we need to do the same thing. We need to say 'No thanks' to all the things that the world says is good and pleasurable when they run counter to God's will and character. We need to set our hearts on things above and not on earthly things<sup>ii</sup> because God has given us a brand new start. And know this - God is even more faithful to us than we are to Him!

When it all falls apart, God is still in control, so we can act with faithfulness.

We are not facing Exile, but we are certainly living far from home. While you're here, God is still in control. So keep on trusting and staying faithful to Him.

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<sup>i</sup> Which, by the way, is exactly what God warned against when He made His covenant with Israel back in Deuteronomy:

“25 And the answer will be: "It is because this people abandoned the covenant of the LORD, the God of their fathers, the covenant he made with them when he brought them out of Egypt.

26 They went off and worshiped other gods and bowed down to them, gods they did not know, gods he had not given them.

27 Therefore the LORD's anger burned against this land, so that he brought on it all the curses written in this book.

28 In furious anger and in great wrath *the LORD uprooted them from their land and thrust them into another land, as it is now.*”

<sup>ii</sup> Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. (Colossians 3:1-3).