

Daniel 1:1-7

SI: Today I’m starting a sermon series on the book of Daniel that is going to take us into the fall. I’m excited because I’ve never preached through Daniel.

But I’m also nervous because it is a notoriously difficult book of the Bible.

One commentator calls it “an interpretative minefield.”

This same commentator says that if you think Daniel is easy, it will fool you and you’ll end up sounding like a kook or a nincompoop. (His exact words!)

That may surprise you because when you think of Daniel what immediately comes to mind are the stories of Daniel in the lions’ den, and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace.

If you grew up in the church, you heard those stories from the time you were a little child, and they weren’t hard to understand at all.

They’re about trusting God and God’s power to save his people.

And that’s true. The first half of Daniel, chapters 1-6, consists of six stories told about Daniel and his friends and what they experienced in Babylon, and most of those stories can be grasped even by Christian children.

But the second half of Daniel, chapters 7-12 consists of four visions that Daniel himself receives that have elements that are very hard to understand.

Great theological minds of the church have struggled with them.

And it gets even more complicated because the book is a unity, and there are ways that the seemingly simple stories interact with and help interpret the visions.

I hope I don’t get in over my head.

I hope I don’t sound like a kook or a nincompoop.

I’ve been reading two good commentaries and either one of them would be excellent for you to read a little bit at a time for your devotions.

If that interests you, email me this week and I’ll send you the information.

So, let’s start. Daniel 1:1

INTRO: Sometimes, things are not as they appear!

If I were to try to summarize the message of Daniel in one sentence it would be:

In spite of appearances, God is in control.

With our limited vision, things appear to be one way.

But God's word pulls back the curtain and shows us what is really happening in the world and in human history.

So let's look at these introductory verses of Daniel under these two headings:

What we can see.

What we cannot see.

I'll be more specific.

This passage shows that what we can see is the power of human governments to dominate the church.

If you watch Fox News or CNN or listen to NPR or Rush Limbaugh.

If you go to any number of news sites on the internet, and the thing that occupies the vision and concerns of people is the power of human governments and their impact, negative or positive, on the lives of people.

It's not just this passage, the whole book of Daniel is about human governments and the dominant role they play in life and history.

But Daniel particularly focuses on the way they appear to dominate the church.

The saying goes that there's nothing certain but death and taxes.

Well, taxes is shorthand for the power of human government, and it is an inevitable and inescapable part of life—even for believers.

We see it all the time.

And, this passage also shows something that we cannot see—

the hand of God directing those human governments to accomplish his saving purposes in the world.

So let's look at each.

MP#1 First, this passage shows the power of human governments to dominate the church

There were two superpowers in the Ancient Near East.

First, there was Egypt.

Egypt was an ancient civilization with many dynasties stretching back not just hundreds, but even thousands of years.

Egypt had wealth and learning and technology.

and it projected its influence throughout that part of the world.

The other regional superpower were a succession of empires in Mesopotamia, the area around the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, location of modern day Iraq.

The little nation of Israel was right between these two superpowers but for many generations there was a balance of power so the Israelites didn't face domination by either one of them. Then political winds started to change.

The book of Daniel begins during the ascendancy of the Chaldean Empire.

The Chaldeans are referred to as the neo-Babylonians by scholars because their capital was the ancient city of Babylon.

In the Bible sometimes they are called Chaldeans, sometimes Babylonians.

And their land called Babylonia or Shinar. So don't let that confuse you.

The event that changed everything for Israel and that ended the balance of powers and that sent shockwaves through the region was the Battle of Carchemish.

In that historic battle the Babylonian army crushed the Egyptians.

Defeated them so badly that Egypt never recovered its former power.

And with Egypt out of the way, the Babylonians started gobbling up all the little countries in the region, including the Kingdom of Judah.

During the third year of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it and King Jehoiakim surrendered.

The Babylonians imposed their dominance in two ways.

First, Nebuchad took some of the ceremonial vessels from the temple of the Lord

It would be like someone coming in our sanctuary and taking the cups and trays off our communion table, the baptismal font, or the pulpit, cross in back.

In other words, objects with special religious and symbolic meaning.

He took them to put in the temple and treasure house of his god in Babylon.

What that meant to everyone was that the god the Nebuchadnezzar was greater

than the god of Jehoiachin. Babylon beat Judah, so Babylon's gods are stronger

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel is the loser and the weak god.

Some historians think this treasure house in Babylon was actually like a museum

filled with objects from the temples of the gods of all the conquered nations. So the citizens of Babylon could visit and see all these objects, maybe with labels—here's the god of this nation we defeated, and this one, and this one, and here's the god of this puny little nation Judah who we beat without a fight. They called themselves the chosen people. Chuckle, chuckle.

The other thing the Babylonians took to show their dominance were the best and the brightest sons of the royal family and the nobility.

This was part of the Babylonian strategy of imperial control.

When you have an empire made up of many conquered nations, it's expensive and troublesome to control them by stationing troops.

So they would take the sons of the nobility to Babylon and train them as bureaucrats to manage the far flung regions and communicate in the many languages.

They were in a sense hostages. Their fathers back in the conquered country knew that their sons would be killed if they rebelled.

The Babylonians also used this intense training as a kind of brainwashing.

They wanted these young men to accept the superiority of Babylon and the futility of resisting it, and to reject their old national and religious identity.

They were trained in the language of Babylon, which involved a complicated writing system on clay tablets called cuneiform.

They were trained in the arts and customs of Babylon, including divination, predicting the future by reading the stars, interpreting dreams, livers of sheep, etc.

They were immersed in Babylonian thought and expected to find it preferable to their Jewish heritage.

After all Babylon was the most glorious city in the world and Jerusalem a ruin.

Their change of names was more significant than it might first appear.

We would resent being forced to change our names by a political power.

But it wouldn't have religious significance.

It did for them. All four of their Hebrew names refer to the God of Israel.

Daniel, God is my judge. Mishael, Who is like God? el means God

Hananiah, The Lord is gracious. Azariah, The Lord is a helper. ah, Yahweh.

The names they were given, Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego were all derived from the names of Babylonian gods—Bel, Marduk, and Nebo.

So these devout, God-fearing young Jewish men were referred to and made to introduce themselves by idolatrous names.

It was another way to eradicate their identity and their loyalty to their former way of thinking and their former religion, so they became thoroughly Babylonian.

Being selected for this training as a Babylonian bureaucrat was easier than being a slave in a field and being forced into physical labor, but there was a physical brutality inflicted on them that is not mentioned explicitly.

Do you know what it was?

These four young men were castrated. They were made eunuchs.

They were chosen by and served under who? Ashpenaz, the chief eunuch.

This was standard practice for captives who served in the Babylonian court.

It was thought to make them more compliant and less of a threat.

If you think I'm reading too much into this, it's made explicit in 2 Kings 20:18.

The prophet Isaiah warns the king of Judah:

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.

Does this change your understanding of their situation?

Not only were they taken from home and family, never to see Jerusalem again.

Not only were they indoctrinated and all their Jewish heritage stripped away, and surrounded every day by a system and outlook hostile to their beliefs.

But four young men who would have looked forward to love and marriage found themselves made incapable of marriage and having children.

This is just one historical example of the power of human governments to dominate the church and the lives of individual believers.

The Jewish people, the nation of Judah, that was the church at the time.

They were the people of God. They weren't perfect, but there were many true believers and it was among them that the plan of salvation was being worked out.

But to the Babylonian Empire, Judah was like a bug on the windshield.

The conquest of Jerusalem barely made the nightly news back in Babylon.

The gods and ideology and values of Babylon seemed clearly superior.

We've enjoyed in America many generations in which the church and the Christian faith is recognized and honored, but that may be changing.

We certainly know of Christians in other countries where the church is a despised and persecuted minority.

The book of Daniel starts out by acknowledging that this is something that is often seen in the world—human governments as the focus of power, able to dominate even the church.

But this passage also shows something else, something we cannot see.

MP#2 It shows us the hand of God directing those human governments to accomplish his saving purposes in the world

Look again at verses 1 and 2. There's something important that's easy to miss.

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.

Why was Nebuchadnezzar able to force King Jehoiakim to surrender Jerusalem?
Why was he able to take items from the temple for display in his museum?

Daniel says it was because the Lord gave them to him.
He did so to accomplish his saving purposes in the world.

We can't know exactly why God is doing what he's doing in particular situations.
North Korea used to have the most dynamic Christian community in all of Asia.
Why has God allowed his church there and the people of that nation to be crushed
by three generations of dictators? I have no idea. It doesn't make sense.

Remember, we can see human governments, but we can't see the hand of God.

So that means trying to figure out specifics is impossible.
But what this passage does give us is two big categories or frameworks for making
sense of what God is doing. So let me give them to you now.

First, God is faithful in salvation and in judgment.

There's a backstory to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians.

After generations of belief and blessing, the majority of the Jews had
turned their back on God and the faith of their fathers.

Jerusalem itself, rather than being the capital city that it once was,
where three times a year people from all over Israel would gather for worship,
instead it had become a city of violence and idolatry and injustice.

It was no different from any other pagan city.

The prophets warned the people and the kings for many years to repent and return
to the Lord or he would give the city to destruction, but nobody believed them.

So eventually, the day came and God used Babylon to carry out his judgment.
God is faithful in salvation but he is also faithful in judgment.

This is sometimes referred to as God's negative faithfulness.

His positive faithfulness is saving. His negative faithfulness is judging.
But even God's negative faithfulness has a positive note.

Because for those who survive, that judgment becomes a warning for them to
turn to God and be saved before the final judgment.

This is immensely important for developing a Christian mind.

All disasters, whether manmade or natural are sent by God as warnings and

foretastes of the final judgment so that those who are left will turn to him.

I read that in New York City, because of the pandemic lockdowns, 1/3 of small businesses have failed. 73,000 businesses.

I also read that the entire US economy shrank by 1/3 in the second quarter.

And I also read that 1/3 of church members who are not attending worship due to the pandemic have also stopped regularly participating in online worship.

That same article predicted that US church membership will decline by 1/3 as a result of this event.

Does that percentage, one third, ring any bells with you biblically?

Revelation 8, John has a vision of seven trumpets.

The first trumpet sounds and one third of the earth, trees and grass are burned up.

The second trumpet sounds and one third of sea turns to blood, one third of sea creature die, and one third of the ships on the sea sink.

The third trumpet sounds and one third of the waters turn bitter.

The fourth trumpet sounds and one third of the sun, moon, and stars turn dark.

One third is not a total loss, but it's a great loss. It's a loss that gets your attention.

That's what the vision of the trumpets means.

That God in his faithfulness gives warnings of the final judgment by sending partial judgments on the earth.

And he allows even the church, even his own people, to be caught up in them.

Like Daniel and his three friends.

Not because he hates us, not because he's forgotten his promise to deliver us.

But because he wants even us to remember that judgment is coming and that we must cling to Jesus Christ because he is the only hope of salvation.

God is faithful in salvation and judgment. His negative faithfulness.

That's one big category for believers as we try to make sense of the world.

Second, God is sovereign, but it's a humble sovereignty.

What do I mean, a humble sovereignty?

The Lord could have burned Nebuchadnezzar and his army to a crisp.

But instead, the Lord allowed his name and reputation to be trampled.

He allowed objects from his temple to be carted off and put in a museum dedicated to the victory of a lifeless idol.

And that's exactly how it looked to everyone in Babylon.

The god of Israel is not much of a god.

He went down in defeat with his people.

Why did the Lord do it? What did he allow himself to be trampled on?

To save his people. This was the only way he could awaken them to the spiritual danger they were in and prompt them to repent and return to him.

Is this ringing any bells?

This is a foreshadowing of the life, ministry, suffering and death of Jesus Christ. The Son of God was willing to suffer shame and to have his reputation trampled under foot to save his people.

He could have called twelve legions of angels and crushed those who opposed him.

But instead he took on himself the form of a slave, he allowed himself to be put on display on the cross as a humiliated failure, because only in this way could he deliver us from our sins.

This should be a great comfort to us in our sorrows and struggles as it must have been to Daniel and his friends.

They were thoughtful, faithful, biblically grounded young men.

They knew that God was behind everything that had happened, and that he had actually brought it to pass. The prophets had said this is what he would do.

But only they knew it. The rest of the world did not.

In Babylon everybody thought the Lord God of Israel was nothing compared to their gods and ideas and values.

They did not know he is the only God, the Maker of heaven and earth, and that all people will give an account before him one day.

This is one of the most remarkable things about our Christian faith.

We believe in an absolutely sovereign God who controls everything, but who hides himself behind the screen of manmade and natural events in the world.

The Bible records the few moments in history when God comes out from behind that screen and reveals himself. The book of Daniel is one place.

And the ultimate moment is in the life and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It's through Jesus Christ we know that the history of the world and our lives is unfolding according to his divine plan.