

Resolving to Live for Jerusalem when in Babylon

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- [0 : 0 0] So we come now to our Bible reading and you'll find that in the Old Testament book of Daniel. Daniel chapter 1. Paul Brennan will be starting a new three-week series with us this week in this book of Old Testament prophecy.
- Daniel chapter 1. And we begin reading verse 1. Hear the word of the Lord. 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.
- Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility, youths without blemish, of good appearance and skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding, learning, and competent to stand in the king's palace and to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans.
- The king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate and of the wine that he drank. They were to be educated for three years.
- And at the end of that time, they were to stand before the king. Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, Azariah of the tribe of Judah.
- [2 : 0 2] And the chief of the eunuchs gave them names. Daniel he called Belshazzar. Hananiah he called Shadrach. Mishael he called Mishach.
- And Azariah he called Abednego. But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food or with the wine that he drank.
- Therefore, he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself. And God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs.
- And the chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, I fear my lord the king who assigned your food and your drink. For why should he see that you were in worse condition than the youths who are of your own age?
- So you would endanger my head with the king. Then Daniel said to the steward whom the chief of the eunuchs had assigned over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, Test your servants for ten days.
- [3 : 1 2] Let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then let our appearance and the appearance of the youths who eat the king's food be observed by you. And deal with your servants according to what you see.
- So he listened to them in this matter and tested them for ten days. At the end of ten days, it was seen that they were better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youths who ate the king's food.
- So the stewards took away their food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables. 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. 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.

[4 : 24] 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.

And Daniel was there until the first year of King Cyrus. Well, amen. And may God bless to us this, his word.

Well, please do turn up Daniel chapter 1, which we have just read together. It would be good to have that in front of you as we begin. Excuse me as I just wipe my eyes.

I've got excessive watering. The doctor assures me it's a normal side effect of Botox. So, excuse me. I'm joking. Some form of conjunctivitis, I think.

But if I have to dab my eyes, excuse me as we go through. So, Daniel chapter 1. Now, I hate to mention it, but it is useful for illustrative purposes.

[5 : 32] But we have at the start of 2019 the same issue still at the top of the national agenda. And it's Brexit. Well, to put it another way, sovereignty was the conversation topic of 2018.

And indeed 2017 and 2016 and most likely 2019 too. Who is sovereign? Who decides the laws of the land?

Is it Westminster or Holyrood or Brussels? It's the question that has electrified political life in this nation for several years now. Who is in charge and over what?

It's always going to be the biggest question. And rightly so because it affects every part of our lives, doesn't it? And whilst political sovereignty will always be up for grabs, ultimate sovereignty is settled.

That is the big message of the book of Daniel and of Daniel chapter 1. The big message is surely this. That God is sovereign. The God of the Bible.

[6 : 38] He is the one in charge. And the key implication, make sure you stand with him. That you side with him. Make sure your loyalty rests with him in 2019.

God is sovereign. It's all over this chapter. Three times we have this little phrase, the Lord gave or God gives. It's all over us.

Look at verse 2. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim, king of Judah, into his hand. And again, verse 9. And God gave Daniel favor.

And again in verse 17. As for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill in all literature. The writer wants you to know with certainty, he wants God's people to know that he, the Lord, is sovereign.

That he is ultimately in charge. That he can be ultimately trusted. Even in the midst of the terrifying events of exile.

[7 : 43] Of the Babylonian invasion. Even amongst all that, God is the one calling the shots. He is in charge. Which means, he is the one to side with.

Even when things don't look like they're going so well. Even when his people find themselves in Babylon. They're still to live for another city.

They are to live for Jerusalem. It is possible, it's necessary even, for God's people to live, to stand, to live for him when in exile, when they're a long way from home.

They are still to stand with him. And so the writer of Daniel is giving God's people then and today, real perspective here in Daniel chapter 1.

Real perspective on what is really going on in history, and for all eternity. So that they then and you today, can stand for him. We'll take this in three chunks, following those three phrases we pointed out.

[8 : 47] Those three God gave phrases. So first, looking at verses 1 and 2, we see that God is sovereign, even in the midst of ongoing battle. Now these two verses, they set the context for the rest of the story of Daniel.

And they are explosive verses. A huge amount is contained in just those two short verses. Major shifts in power. Significant battles won and lost.

Many lives turned completely upside down. The fortunes of nations and whole groups of people are contained in those few words. It's a bit like saying this.

It's a bit like saying, in the 10th year of the reign of King George VI, allied forces defeated the Third Reich, and victory in Europe was declared in May 1945.

Now in that brief sentence, so much is unsaid. And yet we know the magnitude of what has been communicated. Millions lost their lives. The Nazis defeated the Holocaust.

[9 : 54] All that comes flooding into our minds with that short sentence. And so when we read Daniel chapter 1, verse 1, we know there was so much left unsaid. In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem and besieged it.

This verse depicts the events of 605 BC. Nebuchadnezzar, fresh from his destruction of the Egyptian forces at Khashmash, he brings his Babylonian troops flooding into Jerusalem.

And they sweep in and take some of the finest people and possessions. And this group of people amongst whom Daniel and his pals are part of, they were the first wave of exiles to be removed from the land.

And eventually, about 20 years later, the temple itself would be destroyed in 586 BC. It was a terrible, vicious assault on Jerusalem, the city at the very heart of God's people and of their worship.

And the city responsible for its destruction is Babylon. And Babylon is the ultimate anti-God city. Notice how it's described in the middle of verse 2.

[11 : 17] He, Nebuchadnezzar, brings them to the land of Shinar. Now, that is the very place where, in Genesis chapter 11, the peoples of the world, in defiance of God, build their great tower.

Well, it looked great to them, but God had to come down and see it, didn't he? The Tower of Babel, Babylon. The great anti-God center of the world.

And it's Babylon. Babylon, ever since the beginning, man has been in conflict with the God who made them and with his people. And the city of man, Babylon, is always at war with the city of God, Jerusalem.

All the way through the Bible, that's the picture. Right there in Revelation, you have Babylon and Jerusalem. And Sinclair Ferguson says that Babylon and Jerusalem represent the two cities to which men and women belong.

They symbolize the two loyalties of which Scripture speaks. And as such, Babylon and Jerusalem are permanently opposed to one another.

[12 : 23] That is a fundamental lesson of the Christian life. Two sides. Two cities. Where do your loyalties lie?

Sort of great age-old battle. And yet another example of that age-old battle spills onto the pages of history here in Daniel chapter 1. And we saw it last term, didn't we, on Sunday evenings through the book of Esther.

There is an age-old conflict. One that has raised since the very beginning of time between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. Between the people of God and the people of Satan.

Between the city of Jerusalem and the city of Babylon. An age-old conflict. And as it later says in the book of Daniel, this is a war that will endure.

Chapter 9 says that to the end, there shall be war. So yes, there will be an end. But until that end, which isn't yet, there will be war for God's people.

[13 : 29] We must be realistic about that. It is not a comfortable reality, is it? Imagine how it was. For God's people then.

Terrifying. For young Daniel and his friends to be casted away to Babylon. Away from the place they knew so well. Away from their friends, their family, their parents.

They were in the midst of a conflict and they knew it. And we still are in the midst of a conflict. So are we, are you battle ready?

Are you battle ready? Are your children battle ready? The New Testament teaches the very same reality, doesn't it? The Apostle Paul in Ephesians tells the New Testament church to be prepared for battle.

Put on the battle. Put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. The battle looks different. There's no swords or spears, but it's a real warfare, a spiritual warfare.

[14 : 34] And God's people will, until the end, be living in the midst of ongoing battle. That's the reality of verse 1.

But alongside that, we have the reality of verse 2. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim, king of Judah, into his hands. This is the theological explanation behind the observable reality of verse 1.

Why, ultimately, was Jerusalem sacked and God's people sent into exile? Well, it's because the Lord gave.

He is ultimately sovereign. He is the one who directs history. But he's only doing what he said he would do. In giving Jerusalem up, he is being true to his word.

In Leviticus 26, God spelled out the blessings and the curses of the covenant. He threatened that if he met continued, persistent rebellion in his people Israel, then he would scatter them amongst the nations.

[15 : 43] That's what he said. And then, even more specifically than that, he warned through the prophet Isaiah that this is exactly what would happen if his people persisted in their disobedience. Listen to this from Isaiah 39.

Behold, says the Lord to his people Israel, 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, they shall be taken away.

And they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon. It's just what we have here in Daniel chapter 1, isn't it? God is being faithful to his word.

He has done just what he said he would do, even if that means being faithful in judgment, even if it means sending his own people into exile.

[16 : 46] The initiative does not rest with Nebuchadnezzar, does it? According to verse 2, it's the Lord. He's the one calling the shots. He's the one taking the initiative.

And Daniel got to grips with that reality. He knew that. And we must know it too. Even if things seem to be going wrong or are hard, even if we are suffering because of God's righteous judgment, we can trust God because he is the one who ultimately directs and steers history.

He is the sovereign. But it is a hidden sovereignty, isn't it? It's not a truth that is visible to this world.

The world could observe Daniel 1 verse 1. They couldn't see verse 2. It takes revelation from God to see that. And it makes it hard to believe at times, doesn't it?

But that's the very basis of faith. Living not by what we observe, what we can see, but rather living in light of what is true but unseen.

[17 : 53] It means living in light of verse 2, not verse 1. So we are to live by faith, even in the midst of this ongoing battle.

And that is exactly what Daniel does, as he's introduced to us in the next section. So the first thing we see is that God is sovereign, even in the midst of ongoing battle.

But secondly, verses 3 to 16, God is sovereign and his people must take a stand. We're introduced in this section to Nebuchadnezzar's plan for the indoctrination of the very best and brightest of Israelite society.

But then we zoom in on a small group of that Israelite elite, Daniel and his three friends. What will they do? Will they stand firm for Israel's God?

Or will they be swept along by the Babylonians who have captured them? In verses 3 to 5, we're introduced to Nebuchadnezzar's version of the Erasmus student exchange program, except this one is not voluntary.

[19 : 06] And the whole purpose is to indoctrinate the young Israelites and use them for his own purposes. And he's picked the very cream of the crop, hasn't he? Verse 3, it's the royal family, the nobility, the youths without blemish.

The best of the best. He sweeps in and takes the cream of the crop. And they're enrolled in the civil service fast track for these three years.

They're given the very best treatment, the best education, the best teachers, the best lecturers. They're to eat the same food as the king himself. They're to be educated in the literature and the language of the Chaldeans.

And at the end of all that, there's a final exam. They would stand in front of the king himself. And if they pleased him, then they'd enter his service. That's all pretty hard to resist, I think, for a young man, for Daniel and his friends, don't you think?

Far from home, no doubt flattered that they had been chosen. Many were left behind, but not them. They made the cut. Given the very best food, the best education, the security.

[20 : 21] Of a civil service job dangled in front of them. Nebuchadnezzar launches an all-out assault for the minds of these young Israelites.

And in the hope that where their minds lead, their hearts will follow. They'll become Babylonians, not just in their thinking, but in their hearts. And this, the University of Babylon, the elite civil service fast track, was the battleground for Daniel and his friends.

This was the arena for them where the battle was to be fought. The question is, will they stand for God and with his people even here, even here in Babylon?

Will they stand for the God of Israel? Daniel. And the question remains for us today, doesn't it? Particularly those who, like Daniel, are in the early days of the Christian life.

There is a battle raging. We've seen that. And it's a battle for minds and hearts. But the battle for us is not quite as blatant, is it, as it was for Daniel and his friends.

[21 : 31] They were physically removed and taken to a new city by a hostile occupying force. It was clear, wasn't it, for Daniel and his friends that something major was going on. They knew they were in exile.

But for us, it's perhaps not so obvious. But it's no less real. There is a real battle for the minds and hearts of every individual. And Satan will use whatever methods he can.

Whatever's most effective, he'll adopt. And it's never been easier or more subtle. The truths that we imbibe through our screens.

The TV shows we watch. The films we see. The social media we consume. All of that arrives from the very moment we wake up, doesn't it? And all that is coming in every day.

That is not, it is not worldview neutral. It comes with a slant. It comes with an agenda. And the control exercised by a very small cultural elite is pretty astonishing, isn't it?

[22 : 37] I never would have thought, even five years ago, the levels of support for transgender policies we see now. Where's that come from? How has that happened so quickly with so little resistance?

It's the air we breathe. It's the cultural air we live in. We do need to step back, don't we? And realize that the cultural air we breathe is of Babylon.

It's not Jerusalem. It's helpful, isn't it, to ask yourself as you tuck into a box set on Netflix, what untruths, what of Babylon might wriggle into my mind here as I watch this?

Next time you plonk your kids down in front of a Disney film, what are they learning? Usually, it's something incredibly unhelpful about following your own dreams and rejecting authority and being yourself.

Now, I'm not saying don't watch Disney, but use it. Use it to teach them something. Something about the lies of the literature and language of the Chaldeans.

[23 : 46] Use it. Unpick the untruths. You see, from the very earliest days, we are enrolled. Whether we realize that a lot, whether we like it or not, we're enrolled in the University of Babylon, being taught the literature and the language of the Chaldeans.

And we need to realize that we are, like Daniel, in the University of Babylon, from the moment we're born. Do you know it? Do you realize it? Daniel did.

He and his friends, they saw what was really going on. And the turning point is there in verse 8. Just look at that with me, verse 8. But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food or with the wine that he drunk.

Now, let's not get sidelined by the particular issue here, the food. Some say it's because it was offered to idols. But there's no suggestion that the vegetables wouldn't have been offered either.

The key thing is that Daniel was determined to draw a line. To make a stand. To make it clear that his allegiance was not primarily to the king of Babylon, but rather to another king.

[25 : 06] It's interesting to note just how often reference is made to the food as belonging to the king. The food is tied up with the king. Look at verse 5. The king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate.

The wine that he drunk. Look at verse 8. Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the king's food. Again in verse 10. And the chief of the eunuch said to Daniel, Fear my lord, the king, who assigned your food.

Verse 13. That our appearance and the appearance of those who eat the king's food be observed by you. Every time it goes on, every time we talk about the food, it's attached to the king.

By refusing to eat this food, by refusing to eat the king's food, Daniel is seeking to distance himself in some way from the king of Babylon.

It was his way of demonstrating that his heart was really with the God of Israel, not Babylon. As Dale Ralph Davis puts it, Daniel may well have thought to himself, There is a real danger here.

[26 : 14] I could get sucked up into all this and be neutered by it all. He recognized that if Babylon got hold of him fully, it was all over. He had to draw the line somewhere to preserve his distinctiveness, to make a stand so that he wouldn't be swept away and squeezed into Babylon's mold.

He took his opportunity early to nail his colors to the mast. He resolved to throw his lot in with the Lord to page his allegiance to the king of Israel, not the king of Babylon.

He had to make a line somewhere. And note, his allegiance to the God of Israel was public, not private. It was spoken, not silent.

Look at the second half of verse 8. He's resolved, but then he speaks. He goes to the chief eunuch and asks him to allow him not to defile himself. Daniel made his stand, and now he makes his request.

What would happen? Well, the sovereignty of the Lord is again at work, verse 9. And God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs.

[27 : 31] But even with that, the chief eunuch denies the request, verse 10. But he does so gently, doesn't he? I think the chief eunuch's more worried about what the king would think, given half a chance.

I think he would have granted the request. But his hands are tied. And so Daniel doesn't throw a hissy fit, does he? He doesn't go in a strop at this refusal.

No, he goes to the next person down the chain of command to see if he can facilitate the request. So look at verse 11. He speaks to the steward who has been assigned to Daniel by the chief eunuch.

And Daniel speaks winsomely, and he speaks reasonably. He suggests this 10-day trial on the proposed vegan diet. And then at the end of 10 days, compare and contrast.

Compare us, who've been on the vegetables, with those who've enjoyed the king's diet, and see the results for yourself. And the result there in verse 15, but it comes as no surprise, does it, to the careful reader, because we know that behind the scenes, even there in Babylon, God gives.

[28 : 41] He is at work directing. And Daniel's stand, his refusal to give way entirely to the Babylonian regime, his desire to pledge his allegiance to the God of Israel, is honored, isn't it?

And we must heed the lesson the writer intends us to heed. Yes, our God, he remains sovereign. Even here, in this post-Christian Western world we live in, but even though he's sovereign, we must be willing to make a stand, to pledge our allegiance to God, to resolve not to define ourselves, so that we don't get swept away by the Babylonian influences all around us.

And that is going to be different for each of us, isn't it? Each of us finds ourselves in a unique situation, a unique neighborhood, unique workplace, unique set of friends.

And the pressure there will be different. The pressure can form will be different for each of us, different for a school student compared to someone who's retired, different for a university student compared to the father of a young couple, a young family.

But regardless of the particular circumstances, resolve to stand for God and his ways. Be prepared to say, no, I will not do that.

[30 : 03] I will not go along with that. But do so graciously, wisely, as Daniel does. Daniel doesn't throw up his hands in horror.

He doesn't throw a strop. No, he's very reasonable, isn't he? He's winsome. He approaches the right people in the right way. And he does so at the earliest opportunity. I think it's likely that Daniel's resolution here comes pretty early on in his time in Babylon.

And his determination, his determination at this early stage paved the way for a lifetime of faithfulness for him, a lifetime of standing firm in Babylon, the very highest levels of government.

His stand in chapter 6, remember, he refused to stop praying on pain of death. The den of lions was awaiting. I think that stand in chapter 6 would not have happened if the stand in chapter 1 wasn't taken.

If he had dodged the stand in chapter 1, chapter 6, that wouldn't have been possible. So when an issue arises, and you know that you need to take a stand, do it.

[31 : 12] Don't dodge it. Do it. Don't wait. Don't think to yourself, I'll wait until I've got some more influence, or I'm a bit older, or a bit wiser, or a bit more powerful.

Don't do that. It won't be easier then. It'll be more difficult. Do it now. The first opportunity you have, do it today. Take that stand. Daniel took the opportunity early to take a stand, to be known as one who lives for the king of Jerusalem, not the king of Babylon.

So the first key thing to see, God is sovereign, even in the midst of ongoing battle. Second, God is sovereign, and his people must take a stand. And then thirdly, from verse 17 to the end, God is sovereign, and will honor those who honor him forever.

So following Daniel's determination to make a stand, he is honored. Verse 17 is a summary of what happened during the rest of their time at the University of Babylon.

God gifted Daniel and his friends with exceptional knowledge of the Babylonian language and literature. Daniel was given abilities to understand visions and dreams. And it's clear, isn't it, who's responsible for this?

[32 : 29] Verse 17, God gave. It was God who gave them these things. Now I'm sure Daniel and his friends worked hard. They applied themselves fully to the task, but God prospered their efforts.

And at the final test, before the king, they far outshine all their competitors, ten times better than their nearest rivals. God was at work, behind the scenes, prospering those who are willing to take a stand, furthering his purposes in a role.

And his purposes, they are far-reaching and eternal. And they are beyond the worlds and the kingdoms that we can see with our eyes. It's almost a throwaway line there at the end, isn't it?

Verse 21, but it's significant. Look at verse 21. And Daniel was there until the first year of King Cyrus. There's a lot of time hidden away in that verse.

The final exam before King Nebuchadnezzar, that's probably in around 602 BC. The first year of King Cyrus was over six decades later in 539.

[33 : 43] Six decades on. And by that point, the mighty Babylon empire is gone. Nebuchadnezzar is gone. Daniel has outlasted Nebuchadnezzar and his great empire.

Imagine Daniel arriving here in chapter one. Young Daniel, the massive Babylon, the great gates he would have come through. Mighty King Nebuchadnezzar, untouchable.

And yet by the end of chapter one, Nebuchadnezzar's history, the empire is dust. Daniel outlasted. It's a reminder, isn't it, that the servants of God, it's a reminder, as one preacher put it, the servants of God will simply out endure the kingdoms of this age.

The once mighty Babylon is reduced to the history books by verse 21, but Daniel, one man, a servant of the God most high, he still stands. And for everyone here today who by God's help stands firm for him, every one of you will outlast the kingdom of this world because you belong to an eternal, unshakable kingdom.

That is the reality of God's people, isn't it? An eternal, unshakable kingdom. And we need the perspective that Daniel chapter 1 gives us, don't we?

[35 : 03] Without this, without God's word, without his revelation to us about his plans and purposes, well, I think I would have given up a long time ago. I don't know about you, but we need the truth, don't we?

We need to see things from God's perspective, which is the true and eternal perspective. And only this, only knowing this will enable you and I, individually and as a church, to live for God, to live for the eternal Jerusalem.

Only knowing these things will help us stand and live for the eternal Jerusalem in this temporary and passing world of Babylon. We belong forever to the king of the universe, the lord of the ages, the maker of all things.

He is our God. He's the king of Jerusalem. The kings of Babylon, they always fade, they die, they go to dust. And so, in light of Daniel chapter 1, will you determine to live for him and to live for his eternal city?

And that will mean, at some point, taking a stand, refusing to be swept along by Babylon. Let's pray, shall we, before we end.

[36 : 33] Our Father God, we thank you for the great perspective your word brings and how we need it. Would you help us to live for the eternal Jerusalem, a city that will never end, in a kingdom that will never end.

And Lord, that's hard because we live in Babylon with its bright lights. It's all around us. It's the air we breathe and so we need your help.

Help us to live for the eternal city which we can't see. Help us to live by faith, which means walking in faith and not by sight.

So help us, Lord, to stand for you and to stand for your city, we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.