

The Winds of War

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[0 : 00] Well, if you turn to the beginning of the book of Daniel, and we'll begin by looking at some of these first verses.

You'll see there by the sheet that I've given you out by way of a guide that my working title, it may change, but my working title for this series is The Winds of War.

Some of you may remember the television series by that name. I looked it up. It was 1983. It didn't seem that long ago to me. It was a series made for television starring Robert Mitchum, a dramatization of the American Jewish novelist Herman Vaux's book, The Winds of War, and its sequel, War and Remembrance.

And that is a novel that weaves together, quite masterfully, the great story of the seismic shifts and movements in politics and power on the world stage in the years running up and into the beginning of the Second World War, with, at the same time, the story of one extended family, that of Pug Henry, who is a U.S. Navy captain.

And how their world was caught up and shaped by and explained by the great currents of history and the winds of the gathering storms of war right across the planet.

[1 : 32] A quite brilliant book. I read it a second time not very many years ago. And it seamlessly weaves these two stories together, showing how utterly interconnected they are.

And that is what we have here in this book of Daniel. It's a book that weaves together for us, in fact, at least three levels of story, different perspectives, which we must grasp if we're going to understand what's going on.

We get a window, first of all, into the world of human history, with all its perplexities, all its sometimes inexpressible terrors, its forces and powers that are at large in the world.

World of rulers, of nations, of empires, of wars. And then we get a window also into an individual world.

Those individual people who are caught up in the midst of those great currents. Not this time a Navy captain and world figures like Churchill and Roosevelt and Stalin, but Daniel and his friends.

[2 : 44] And world figures like the emperor Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar and Darius and all their various cronies and henchmen.

And most important of all, we get a window into another world. A world altogether behind the scenes of history. The whole arena of the heavenly realms.

And the book of Daniel lifts the veil for us into that heavenly realm. Helping us to see what is going on above the earthly stage.

And in fact, it's there that we find explanation. It's there that we find meaning. It's there that we find both comfort and great challenge. As we're forced to view our own little private world.

And even the apparently huge and fearful world stage. The world of history that we live in. View all of that from the perspective of the heavenly watchers.

[3 : 50] The heavenly messengers. And the court of the most high God. The God of heaven himself. And the great story is a story of war.

Of great war. When we come to Daniel chapter 10. And the great revelation that Daniel sees from the angel. It is called precisely that. It concerned a great conflict.

Behind the scenes. Behind the veil of world history. From the very beginning. And right to the very end. Is the story of great cosmic conflict.

Of war. And it's that. And it's the winds of that conflict in heaven. Blowing on the earth. That explains human history in its entirety.

From the beginning. Right to the very end. And that's exactly the language that we'll find. When we come to Daniel chapter 7. Daniel says. I saw the winds of heaven blowing on the great sea.

[4 : 54] The sea representing the earth. And that's what causes from the sea. From the earth. To rise up against heaven. The great beasts. That defy God.

The tyrannies of human history. And their evil empires. And their pernicious and poisonous cultures. That's what the book of Daniel is about. And that's what makes it so relevant.

For our own day. And for every day. In history. Just because. It's a book that shows how. The issues of the eternal heavenly kingdom. Is played out. On earth.

In the real lives of men and women of faith. And in all the battles. And the struggles. Of the world that they face. And. How the great issues of heaven.

Confront those men. Who set themselves up. As the great men. Of this world. In opposition. To the people of God. And in opposition. To the God of heaven himself.

[5 : 54] And we're going to see. All of this. Panning out. As we. Study this book together. But tonight. By way of introduction. I want to show you. How these emphases.

That I've mentioned. These three perspectives. Come clear to us. Just by looking. At this book. As a whole. These things. Come to us. Just from a study.

Of the book. Setting. And the book's. Structure. And the book's. Subject. And as we're discovering. On Thursday nights. Those of us who are.

At release the word. Learning how to read the book. As a whole. As a big picture. As essential. If we're going to understand. Anything about it. In the detail. So first of all.

Then Daniel gives us. A window. Into human history. It's a story. That paints vividly. For us. Human history. As being explained. By. The rebellion.

[6 : 49] Of human beings. And that's true. On the widest scale. Of the world. In general. And it's also true. On the narrower. Scale. Of God's own.

Chosen people. And that is something. That is plain. And clear for us. Just by examining. The setting. Of this book. And we read that. In the first two verses.

Of chapter one. These two verses. Catapult us. Into the real world. Of the sixth century. B.C. And the whole. Geopolitics. Of world empire.

Babylon. Is the world. Superpower. It's fierce. Strong. Proud. Resplendent. Resplendent. In culture. And in wealth. And in learning. And in sheer. Magnificence. Relics. Still. To this day. Yet it was. Unfettered.

[7 : 45] In imperialistic. Conquest. Ruthless. And ferocious. In overpowering. The entire. Ancient world. And subjugating. Its peoples. Assyria.

Had once been. The great empire. That towered. Over. The whole of the Middle East. And it was. Crushed. Utterly. Under the might. Of Babylon. Egypt. With all its.

Splendor. And history. Going back. Millennia. Was swept aside. In the all conquering. Advance. Of this. Fearsome. Empire. In the year 605.

In the year 605. In the year 605. BC. At the battle of Carchemish. Nebuchadnezzar's enemies. Armies. Finished off. The remnants. Of Egypt. And of Assyria.

And Babylon. Thereafter. Reigned absolutely supreme. In the whole of the Middle East. The whole of the known world. and if you look back to 2nd Kings chapter 24 or 2nd Chronicles chapter 36 you will read how the little nation of Judah God's people was utterly engulfed by Nebuchadnezzar's empire its king became a vassal of Babylon and the Babylonian court had free reign over the nation's affairs including removing some of the top echelons of society and the court for assimilation to a new identity as Babylonians and that of course is what Daniel chapter 1 is all about a little later Jerusalem tried to rebel and was put down and sacked and more captives taken to further weaken it that's 597 BC and then finally 10 years later in 587 BC was the final total destruction of Jerusalem and the mass deportation of captives to Babylon and all that history all that momentous movement in world affairs all that calamity for the people of God and the land of Judah is contained just in these two little rather bland matter of fact verses at the beginning of Daniel chapter 1 but we need to see the significance of it we need to see just how catastrophic how calamitous it was for the people of God just consider this rather similar little statement at Munich in September 1938

[10 : 18] Britain and France agreed to the annexation of the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia to Germany six months later in March 1939 Hitler's armies occupied the whole of Czechoslovakia on the 1st of September that year he marched on Poland bland measured historical but for those who remember including all of those who were celebrating or remembering world holocaust day on Friday in those few words are hidden terrors unimaginable the ignition of a worldwide conflict that

raged across the globe for half a decade the near conquest of the whole of Europe and more by one of the most wicked and utterly evil and powerful regimes the world has ever seen that's the kind of thing that these first two verses speak of in Daniel chapter 1 that's the setting of the book of Daniel that's the world it's all about it's a world of human conquest and power it's a malevolent world a terrifying world a world of brutality of subjugation of wars of military might of powerful rulers of tyrants and of their vanquished enemies and their slaves you see it's a window into the real world of human history with no tinted spectacles no varnish to tart up its brutal reality it's a world a world adrift it's a world in turmoil and above all it is a world that shakes its fist against the God of heaven it's a world that mocks him and taunts him and scorns the people of the God of heaven it's a world where all the appearances seem to suggest that God has been subjugated and destroyed and banished from his world doesn't that sound familiar?

but all through the book of Daniel that's the world of history that we see in the real history of chapter 1 to 6 the harsh reality on the ground of the flesh and blood opposition that there is to God and to his people and in the visionary dreams that portray exactly the same things on a grand scale in the second half of the book as the beasts of humanity rise up out of the sea in chapter 7 boastful speaking great things blasphemous speaking against the most high God brutal making war with the saints of God and prevailing over them and typified above all as we'll see in chapter 8 by the king of the earth who does his own will who exalts himself above every God who speaks astonishing things against the God of gods the God of heaven that's our world

Daniel is a window on the ebb and flow of human history and it is a history of a relentless tumultuous time of war winds of war war of man against man but as we'll see behind it all the great war the war that has raged from the very beginning the war of God against man or rather man's rebellion and fighting against the God of heaven and what we see in the book of Daniel is God's people caught up in the midst of it all God's people are not exempt from the tides of human history they're right in the midst sometimes it seems to them and to us absolutely inexplicable but that's the world that we see in these first two verses of the book of Daniel God's people are marginalized they're exiled

God's worship is extinct the temple is destroyed God's own belongings the vessels from his temple are bowing down before the altars of the gods of Babylon even the public leaders of God's people his Old Testament church are puppets in the hands of an utterly pagan culture isn't that the kind of world that you recognize of course it is it's the real world it's the story of human history not just in the 6th century BC but in every century before and every century since it's the kind of world we live in today it's full of the kind of things that we read in our newspapers the things that we see on our television screens you see the Bible is not a book about fantasy it's not a book about a pretend world or a world as we'd like it to be it's not a refuge and a retreat into unreality for the weak and the gullible never the Bible faces the real world head on with all its horror and all its evil it doesn't hide these things it doesn't try to pretend it away rather it faces it squarely and it tells us as God's people we need to be realistic about the world we live in there's no room for naivety for fantasy in the Christian church

God's people will not be exempt from the harsh realities of a world that is defined by its rebellion against God from the horrors and the oppressions of the kind of empires that this world of humanity throws up whether they be ideological or cultural or economic or military or whatever this is the world that man has made says God and this is the world that God's people must occupy right to the end and we must understand that that's the first thing to grasp about this book of Daniel it is supreme realism it's about world history and God's people need to understand that but that's not all that this book opens up for our view secondly Daniel gives us a window into heavenly history it lets us see behind the scenes of the brutal reality of human history into a whole realm that is greater by far and which in fact lies behind and explains the whole of human history and it shows us glimpses of how that story the story of God's redemption impacts on the real world of human history and indeed overcomes the rebellion of man that lies at the very heart of human history shows us glimpses of this both on the grand scale of geopolitics and in the stories of individual men who are confronted with the realities of this unseen world and the unseen

[18:12] God of history either bowing the knee to him or opposing him you see the book of Daniel takes us behind the scenes of history and tells us that there is a history behind all the history that we see just as there is a story behind the story on the surface of the book of Daniel and the clue again is in verse 2 of chapter 1 despite the explanation of the exile in terms of world history and the

rise of the Babylonian empire there is more behind all this lies the Lord the covenant God of Israel the God of history he is the one who is in control he is the one who we are told is delivering his own people into the hands of this pagan empire and that of course is the added shock and horror of God's people in exile they knew that it was God who was behind it they knew that he had done it after countless warnings from the prophets about their sin and rebellion after centuries of their refusal to repent and obey him and be true to his covenant and so as Daniel recognized all the curses of God's covenant from way back in the book of

Moses every one of them had been rained down upon them and terrible it was read Deuteronomy chapter 28 and 29 and Daniel knew it we read it in chapter 9 we have rebelled against him we have not obeyed his voice we have transgressed his laws and turned aside and therefore God's curse has been poured out upon us very sobering you see God won't be mocked he will be true to his covenant even if we will not and he will be just in punishing his own people for their sin and for their rebellion God's people are not immune from the consequences of a world that's rebelled against its maker but neither are they immune from their own rebellion and disobedience against his commands indeed a privileged people have great great responsibility and that's just as true by the way for

God's New Testament people as Edward was telling us last Sunday evening from Hebrews chapter 12 God will not be mocked and the exile is a powerful witness to God's determination to chasten his people painful and awful as that may be in order that his people will not be lost and his purpose will not be thwarted and if the God of heaven will not be mocked neither will he be thwarted either by the pretensions of the evil empires of this world or by the sins of his own chosen people there's a bigger story behind what we see in the unfolding of human history on earth with all its upheavals and its empires and the powers that be and Daniel gives us a window into that into the great heavenly story as it unfolds and it shows us that God is on the throne and that he the ancient of days towers above human history it tells us that

God will triumph and that God does triumph in the great unfolding drama of his great redemption it tells us the God of heaven is the Lord of history and he is marching on through history and he's controlling every turn the great movements of empires and the minutest details of every creature great and small God's hand is the hand that is on the tiller of world events then and now and always and he is marching onwards to total and utter victorious conquest and he is taking his people with him the saints of the most high God and all this is clear just from chapter one and the three times that we read this word that's there in verse one and verse nine and verse seventeen behind everything it was

God who gave his people into captivity it was God who gave wisdom and favor to Daniel and his friends it was God who gave to him the ability to interpret dreams but it's also something that's evident in the whole structure of the book as you read Daniel for the first time it seems that the book splits nicely into two parts chapters one to six which are all stories and then chapters seven to twelve which are all of these visions and that's true of course but if you look at the footnote on chapter two verse four in the church bibles and probably in your own bible too it will tell you that chapters two through to the very end of chapter seven are written in a different language chapter one and chapters eight to twelve are written in Hebrew but these chapters right in the middle are written in Aramaic the language structure of the book itself points us to the very heart of the reality that behind all history is a great unseen power of the

[24 : 10] God of heaven who's in control of all of this and both chapters two and chapter seven at the beginning and the end of that section lays out a vision of the whole of world history in human terms Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the great image with the head and the shoulders and the middle and the feet representing four kingdoms then in chapter seven Daniel's dream again speaking about four kingdoms four empires that will rise but in chapter two every one of these is shattered at last by the rock that's not hewn by human hands the rock of heaven it smashes them and it becomes the empire that lasts forever and what's the end of the matter we're told in chapter two verse forty four the god of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed and it shall break to pieces all these kingdoms and it shall stand forever chapter seven we have the same thing but even more wonderfully these empires will make war upon the saints and will prevail but only until the great time of judgment comes and

God will set up his everlasting kingdom through the triumph of one like a son of man who rises on the clouds of heaven approaches the throne of God and receives the glory and the dominion and all

the world and receives a kingdom that will be an everlasting kingdom and shares that kingdom with the saints of the most high God and you see that's the great story that lies behind the whole of the book of Daniel that's the great story that lies behind the whole of the history of humanity the march of the glory of the kingdom of God which will last forever accomplished for his saints through the triumph of the son of man in between these two chapters we see glimpses of how that great story breaks in to the story of human history on earth in a personal way and personal lives the story of Daniel and his friends chapters three and chapter six those well known stories of the great deliverance of Daniel and his friends from the fiery furnace and from the lion's den they will not bow to the idols of this world because they have seen the truth about the unseen world the God of glory in the middle in chapters four and five we see two pagan kings is confronted by the truth of the unseen world and the God of heaven the one Nebuchadnezzar is humbled he bows down and God lifts him the other Belshazzar refuses to bow his knee and God sweeps him away and in chapters eight to eleven we see just the same things the triumph of the great story of God breaking into world history on a cosmic scale visions in strange writings that speak about the days to come after Daniel's time but in the same way it's God's power it's God's hand behind everything and controlling everything and directing all things even down to the very exact times that God has purposed for these empires to hold sway before they are swept aside and his kingdom is established forever and so the very structure of the book the very way it's put together points with absolute clarity to this wonderful message that despite the awful reality of world history despite everything that we see around us despite the apparent triumph of evil God is on the throne he's in control the God of heaven the most high rules over the kingdoms of men and sets over it whom he will that's the recurring theme in the book of

Daniel just think what that would have meant to the faithful servants of God long after Daniel's day back in the land after the restoration but still oppressed still persecuted still waiting for God to fulfill all his promises under the desperate days of Antiochus Epiphanes who swept countless thousands of the people of God to their death and set up in the very temple of God a symbol of Zeus look up says Daniel and see yes the world is brutal yes evil empires arise and will continue to but God is on the throne he is in control for the sake of his saints look how it was with Daniel he refused to bow the knee to these pagan gods look how he told us it was going to be that

[29 : 46] God's kingdom would be built in times of war right till the end just think what encouragement that would be to them think of the early Christians under Nero's persecution think of the martyrs all the way down the history of the church the time of the reformation here in Scotland in the killing times of the covenants men like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his confessing churches under the Nazis in the 1930s Alexander Solzhenitsyn and others like him in the gulags of the Soviet empire today in parts of the world where brothers and sisters in Christ are being martyred now at a rate never before known in the history of Christianity in days which seem as though the powers of this world are rampant and God's people are marginalized and his temple is destroyed and all his things bow down to the gods of this world when the leaders of

God's church have become puppets of the powers and forces of the day capitulating to the new morality bowing down to the dazzling images of pagan culture all around what do God's people do in days like these and aren't these our day the book of Daniel says look up and see that there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries and who tells what is to be and that it is he who has set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed and that the son of man has triumphed and that he has been given all dominion forever that though these powers will make war with the saints of God until the very end and often times will prevail on earth only until the time declared by the ancient of days when the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdom of the whole of heaven shall be given to the saints of the most high

God and that says Daniel is the end of the matter and friends don't you need to see that don't you need to know that when you look at the world and you fear and you tremble and it all seems so perplexing it all seems so desperate when you sense and feel the oppression of evil and wickedness in the world you find yourself wondering where is God is there a God or when you feel the raging of the sense of sin and rebellion at times in your own heart and you wonder will I ever be free from this terrible struggle and the answer is God is on the throne God is on the throne of history and of eternity his purpose cannot be thwarted and will not ever be thwarted by the powers of evil or the schemes of man or even by the sins of the saints his church you and me you see you need to know that every battle for the kingdom of

God every battle for the gospel in any place at any time in every human heart is part of that one great cosmic battle the war in the heavenlies that has been going on from the very beginning and which will rage until the very end and that's what explains your Christian life today with all its struggles that's what explains our church life today with all the struggles that we go through together we're caught up in God's great purpose of redemption his everlasting kingdom which is being built as Daniel said in times of trouble right till the end and we need to see that our battles are not because God is dead but because he is on the throne and because he is marching to an eternal kingdom because he is triumphant that brings us just to this last point very briefly about the subject of the book that gives us a window into personal history into the resolute response of faith of a true man of

God in the midst of hostility and rebellion in the world that scorns and hates and opposes all things to do with the God of heaven of course ultimately the subject of the book is not Daniel but the God of Daniel but the book bears his name and it begins in chapter one and ends in chapter twelve focusing clearly on this man he's held up as a man of faith and of wisdom God gave him wisdom in chapter one and learning and great understanding and at the end of the book in chapter twelve we are being exhorted as God's people to be wise to understand the message so that we will shine like the brightness of the stars above and Daniel is held up for it as the man of wisdom that we're to look to in chapter one we're told that Daniel stood before the king and he did and he stood like a colossus for more than eighty years as the emperors came and went because the reality was he stood before another king he stood before the

[36 : 04] God of heaven he was God's man and in the very last book in the very last chapter in the last verse in Daniel 12 verse 13 we're told that Daniel will stand in his allotted place at the end of the days in the everlasting kingdom of God he stood in life and he will stand forever what was his secret chapter 11 verse 32 tells us that the people who know their God shall stand firm and take action the old version says stand firm and do exploits and that was Daniel he was a man who knew his God he saw the unseen world behind the visible world of history he listened to the voice of God he understood that the most high God is the true God the only God the one to be feared and at the very outset of his life he purposed in his heart never to bow the knee to any other

God but to stand as a rock of truth on this God and that's what he did there's no great mystery about Daniel it's very simple he was a man of scripture he studied the books and he was a man of prayer not to be trite not to say a regular quiet time and a prayer life is the key to a holy life no Daniel wrestled with God's word he lived in it he got through to the great sense of it he made it his whole life and breath he served and knew a great God he served and understood a great gospel he was gripped by the gospel of God's eternal kingdom he was given in every part of his life to the gospel of God's great kingdom in the midst of a pagan hostile alien culture from the age of about 14 chapter 1 to well into his 80s friends we can certainly recognize the world of the book of Daniel its real human history it's our world but have we grasped like Daniel the reality of the world behind that world of the God of heaven and of the kingdom that is everlasting and do we know anything about the example of Daniel the truth of a life that counts for God in the midst of a hostile and alien world that's the challenge of the book of Daniel for us and it's a very real challenge it's often said that it's a book about how to practice faith in a pagan world and of course it is that but it's much more than that because Daniel tells us that the story of every fruitful follower of the one true God is part of a much bigger story the story the story of

God's unfolding kingdom which will be forever and it tells us that the personal stand of such individuals may play a crucial role in the onward march of God's purposes God is working his purpose out yes he is utterly sovereign but let me tell you this in every age he does it through men and women who take a stand like Daniel's men who will stand unmoved for the God of heaven though all the world opposes and rages and bays for their death Daniel the age of fourteen in chapter one couldn't possibly have known could he what his stand for

God that he purposed in his heart to take would accomplish and nor do you even if you're only fourteen or twenty four or forty four or whatever it is neither do you or I know what God can do and will do through your stand but I do know this it's people like Daniel who know their God as Daniel did who have a grip of the greatness of the story of God's everlasting kingdom and have a sense of the vision of the world behind the world that we see where God is on the throne of time and eternity it's people who understand that who know their God who will be strong and do exploits and

[41 : 51] God knows we need people like that in this country today let's pray heavenly father we thank you for the testimony of Daniel and of the book that he has recorded for us we thank you that here was a man who stood on the truth of God and for the truth of God and under the mighty hand of God and was unmovable and unshakable and we praise you that this one man could influence the destiny of empires and peoples of kings and commoners and that his words should be comfort and challenge to your people for centuries and even millennia help us we pray to know our

God the God of Daniel that we in our day a day of hatred for you a day when your worship it seems has been corrupted and finished a day when the public leaders of those who are outwardly your people have become the vassals of the empires of this world help us we pray to be those who in our day are strong and do exploits for the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ and his kingdom because we ask it in his name Amen