

FLOURISHING IN A FOREIGN LAND



Daniel 1:1-21
 First Message
 Bernard Bell
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SERIES: ONE KING TO RULE THEM ALL

Good morning. After a year of preaching to a camera, it is so good to look out and see real people and real faces. But the cameras are still here; they're part of our new normal.

Twelve days ago Sue and I returned from 18 days in Turkey. It was our first international travel in nearly three years, and my first time on a plane in nearly two years. We returned just three days before the six-month window of remaining validity on my passport. So now it is time to apply for a new passport. I still have a British passport but for over thirty years have been a card-carrying resident alien here. So I am a citizen of one country and a resident of another country. I will apply for a new British passport, which sadly will no longer have "European Union" on the cover. Again the question arises: is it time to become a US citizen? Is it time to harmonize my citizenship and my residency? This would require taking the Naturalization Oath of Allegiance to the United States of America, which begins,

"I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty, of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen."

Many of you have taken this oath. You have come here from other countries, and taken US citizenship. Forswearing or renouncing an existing allegiance and swearing a new allegiance is a serious matter.

Sometimes we feel caught between competing loyalties. Which sports team to support? Or perhaps, loyalty to our employer versus loyalty to our sense of ethics or decency or propriety. Peer pressure generates competing loyalties. Politics is about managing competing loyalties.

Today we begin a new series in the Book of Daniel, in which competing loyalties are a major theme. Over the next seven weeks we'll cover the first seven chapters, one chapter per week. We'll then finish the book next year. Today we'll look at chapter 1 which introduces the book, and most of the key characters of the first six chapters. I hope that you have brought your Bibles with you today. I will read all of chapter 1 because it and chapter 12 are the only chapters remotely short enough to read as part of the sermon. The other chapters are very long, so for all these other weeks, I ask that you please read the chapter beforehand—and then bring your Bible here.

I. Exile (1:1-2)

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 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. (Dan 1:1-2 NIV)

"Nebuchadnezzar came to Jerusalem and besieged it." How much history is packed into this short statement! Under his father Nabopolassar, Babylon had become the dominant power in Mesopotamia by capturing Nineveh in 612 BC, thus ending the

Assyrian Empire. Babylon then turned its attention westwards to Egypt. The little territory of Judah found itself caught between these two competing empires, Babylon in the east and Egypt in the west.

In the e-news I asked you to read the last three chapters of 2 Kings in preparation for this morning. You would have read of King Josiah leading the people in a covenant renewal, followed by the celebration of Passover. Josiah was the last good and godly king of Judah. But he foolishly and needlessly meddled in the conflict between Babylon and Egypt, and was killed by the Egyptian Pharaoh. Thereafter Egypt and Babylon took turns installing puppet kings in Jerusalem, kings that were to be loyal to their overlord. But these kings repeatedly switched allegiance between Babylon and Egypt; they were trying to play the field. So Nebuchadnezzar came and besieged Jerusalem, again and again. First he took away the golden vessels from the temple—the vessels made by Solomon 350 years earlier for use in the worship of the Lord. Next time he took away many of the leading people. Later he took away yet more people, and all of the bronze items from the temple. He burnt the temple and the palace and the city, and destroyed the walls. By now there wasn't much left of Jerusalem.

Nebuchadnezzar thought that he was acting with agency, that he was victorious because he was the great king of the greatest empire and because his god, Marduk of Babylon, was stronger than Israel's God. But he didn't have agency. It was the Lord who delivered everything into his hands. Babylon's depredations were divine judgment upon God's people. Three weeks ago Sharon preached her first full sermon here, on the Book of Habakkuk. Thank you, Sharon, for drawing the parallel between the tension that Habakkuk felt, at about the same time that Daniel was being taken into captivity in Babylon, and our tension today. That prophet understood that God's judgment upon his people was merited, but he was disturbed that the instrument the Lord was using was the wicked and godless Babylonians.

Through all this turmoil the leadership in Jerusalem was hurtling headlong towards disaster. The final kings switched their loyalties back and forth between Egypt and Babylon, but never gave their allegiance to the Lord, the one who had brought his people up out of Egypt into the land of promise. Instead these kings all did evil in the eyes of the Lord. The faithful prophet Jeremiah repeatedly warned them. But the false prophets gave reassurances that within just two years the Lord would bring back everything that Nebuchadnezzar had taken to Babylon: the temple vessels, the king, the exiles. Not so, said Jeremiah. You're going to be in Babylon a long time. So settle there, build houses, plant gardens, marry, have children, have grandchildren. He proclaimed the word of the Lord:

"Seek the peace and prosperity (*shalom*) of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers (*shalom*), you too will prosper (*shalom*)... I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper (*shalom*) you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future." (Jer 29:7, 11)

Notice the four-fold use of *shalom* in these two well-known verses. NIV translates it as “prosperity.” We could also translate it as “well-being” or “flourishing.” Pursue and pray for the flourishing of Babylon! In its flourishing will be your flourishing! The Lord’s plans for the future shalom of his people run through the shalom of Babylon! How can this be?

These first two verses have moved us, the readers, from Jerusalem to Babylon, along with the temple vessels. Nebuchadnezzar has placed these vessels in the temple of his god in Babylonia (NIV). But the word used here is Shinar. This word is evocative because it was used in Genesis 11. Humanity gathered together and settled in Shinar, where they built the Tower of Babel. Shinar is where humanity lived in autonomy from God.

Shinar was the precursor to the call of Abraham. The Lord called Abraham out of the land of Shinar. But now his descendants are back in Shinar. All that God promised to and through Abraham seems to have come to an end: a numerous people, living in the land of promise, with God’s presence in their midst. Now it has all gone: the temple and its divine presence, the palace and its king, the city and its walls, the land and its people. There is no more *shalom*. A diminished, displaced, landless people is back in Shinar.

Psalm 137 voices the trauma of these exiles in Babylon:

**By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion...
How can we sing the songs of the Lord
while in a foreign land? (Ps 137:1,4)**

The pathos of this psalm is conveyed in *Va, pensiero*, the mournful Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves in Verdi’s opera *Nabucco* (Nebuchadnezzar): *O, mia patria, si bella e perduta!* “Oh, my homeland, so lovely and so lost!”

The Book of Daniel is written for this traumatized, displaced people trying to flourish in Babylon and its successor empires. The first six chapters are about four such displaced people trying to flourish in the court of the Babylonian king. Daniel is written for a diaspora community trying to be loyal to God while living in a world that pays God no attention. It is thus quite relevant for us today.

2. New Recruits (1:3-7)

Attention now turns to the king in Babylon:

Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king’s service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility—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. The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king’s table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king’s service. (1:3-5)

A growing empire requires an expanded imperial bureaucracy in service to the king. Nebuchadnezzar enrolled the best young men from Jerusalem: impressive in every way, the cream of the crop. Today they would be admitted to Stanford or Harvard. They were to be taught the language and literature of the Babylonians. They were to be re-educated, indoctrinated into Babylonian culture. They were to dine on the rich food and wine from the king’s table. They were to be absorbed into his magnificent royal court. At the end of three

years enculturation they would enter the king’s imperial service as loyal subjects and servants of the Great King. They would be assimilated.

Among these impressive Israelite youth were four who will feature prominently in the first six chapters:

Among those who were chosen were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego. (1:6-7)

We’re told their names: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. They each bore God’s name: these Hebrew names each contain the syllable “iah” for Yahweh, or “el” for God. But these names were stripped from them, and they were given new names, names built around Babylonian deities.

Names are important. Many of you have taken on new names after moving to this country. Growing up in Thailand, my family had Thai names, chosen by my father with careful attention to meaning. Mine was Suwat. All the Thai people knew us by these names.

Names and naming are significant in Scripture. Renaming indicates a new identity. Pharaoh renamed Joseph to Zaphenath-Paneah when he elevated him to leadership of all Egypt (Gen 41:41-45). The Lord renamed Abram to Abraham, Sarai to Sarah, and Jacob to Israel to indicate their new role in his purposes.

The renaming of these four youths is part of their new identity, their assimilation. They now belong to Babylon and its king. Or do they?

3. Resistance (1:8-16)

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 God had caused the official to show favor and compassion to Daniel, but the official told Daniel, “I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you.” (1:8-10)

In response to this redefinition of identity, Daniel pushed back. He resolved to not defile himself with the king’s food and wine, and sought permission from the chief official to refrain. It was an act of resistance. For the second time we read that God gave: God gave Daniel favor and compassion with Ashpenaz. The word translated “favor” is *hesed*, implying loyalty and faithful commitment.

There’s a web of competing loyalties here. We the readers are assured of the Lord’s loyalty and commitment to Daniel in his difficult position. Daniel is drawing a line on his loyalty to the king. By refusing the royal food he is resisting the king’s effort to fully assimilate him into his realm. And poor Ashpenaz is caught between a God-given loyalty to Daniel and loyalty to his boss. He has compassion towards Daniel, but fears that the king will have his head. So Daniel goes not over him, but under him:

Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, “Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants

in accordance with what you see.” So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days.

At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food. So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead. (1:11-16)

Daniel proposed to the guard a test: let us eat only vegetables and drink only water for ten days, then evaluate us. Compare us with all the other young men who eat and drink from the king’s table. After the ten days they did look healthier and sleeker than the others, so the guard made the arrangement permanent.

So what is the deal with the food and drink that we keep reading about in this chapter? Is it that vegetables and water are intrinsically a better diet. This is the basis for *The Daniel Plan* from Rick Warren’s Saddleback Church, which has been heavily marketed with a large portfolio of products. Now I’m sure we would all be healthier eating less rich food and more vegetables. But I don’t think it is the diet itself that Daniel was resisting. He was resisting the source of the food and wine: the king’s table, his hospitality and munificence. He was resisting the king who had assigned the food. Daniel and his friends were showing that their ultimate loyalty was not to the king. They would not eat and drink in solidarity with him. Perhaps there’s also the idea that instead they would eat a simple diet in solidarity with their own people who were poor and wretched exiles. Again, if you read through the last three chapters of 2 Kings you may have noticed the final two verses. Israel’s Primary History (Genesis–Kings) ends with Jehoiachin and all the other conquered kings in Babylon dining regularly at the king’s table (2 Kgs 25:29-30).

But Daniel and his friends were not there. Instead, they flourished on their vegetable diet and the Lord honored them.

4. God’s Gift of Wisdom (1:17)

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. (1:17)

For the third time we read that God gave. He had given King Jehoiakim and the temple vessels into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar. He had given Daniel loyal love and compassion in the presence of Ashpenaz. Now God gave the youths knowledge and understanding. So their skill didn’t come from their education in Babylonian language and literature but was the gift of God. Specific attention is drawn to Daniel’s ability to understand visions and dreams. This skill will be called upon in the very next chapter when Nebuchadnezzar has a dream.

5. Evaluation (1:18-20)

At the end of the time set by the king to bring them into his service, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king’s service. 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. (1:18-20)

At the end of the three years Ashpenaz presented the four young men to the king for evaluation. They were top of the class and so entered the king’s service. Indeed, when it came to wisdom and

understanding they were ten times better than all the others in the king’s employ, all the magicians and enchanters. This does not mean that Daniel and his friends were themselves magicians and enchanters. Those men had to use their magic arts to try to interpret the signs, omens, visions and dreams that populate this book. Daniel and friends did not need the magic arts because they were gifted with wisdom and understanding directly from God. In coming chapters the magicians will find their magic arts inadequate, but God will supply Daniel with the necessary wisdom and understanding.

Daniel was not a prophet, though we tend to think of him as a prophet, and the one reference to him in the NT calls him a prophet. In our English Bibles the Book of Daniel is the last of the Major Prophets. But in the Hebrew Bible Daniel is not among the Prophets. It is among the Writings, just before Ezra–Nehemiah and Chronicles. This is a section covering exilic and post-exilic Israel after everything had fallen apart.

So if Daniel is not a prophet, what was he? He was a man of wisdom and understanding, abilities given him by God. With these gifts he will be able to interpret Nebuchadnezzar’s dreams and the writing on the wall during Belshazzar’s feast. With these gifts he will also be able to navigate the difficult path through competing loyalties: in service to the king of Babylon but giving ultimate loyalty to the Lord God. In the second half of the book Daniel himself sees visions and dreams. And, while not a prophet himself, he studies the prophets. He reads those who said, “Thus says the LORD.”

The chapter ends with a brief historical note.

6. Conclusion (1:21)

And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus. (1:21)

Daniel remained in Babylon, in the imperial service, until the first year of Cyrus the Persian, who conquered Babylon in 539. Cyrus allowed Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple, and he sent the temple vessels back with them. This is considered to be the end of the seventy years of exile. So Daniel was in Babylon throughout the entire exile. He himself did not return to Jerusalem, but stayed in Babylon.

Only a few returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. Two generations later Ezra returned to restore the centrality of Torah, followed by Nehemiah who set about rebuilding Jerusalem and its walls. These past two Sundays Jerry and Tim have drawn our attention to these two men and their rebuilding in their two-part series, “Return, Rebuild, Rejoice.” Thank you for drawing the parallels between then and now as we emerge from the pandemic and seek to rebuild.

Despite the rebuilding, Jerusalem remained a minor backwater in a succession of mighty empires: the Persian Empire, Alexander the Great’s Greek Empire, the Ptolemaic Empire of Egypt and the Seleucid Empire of Syria that contested one another with Judah again caught in the middle, and finally the vast Roman Empire. These great empires will feature in the visions of the second half of the book.

Most Jews did not go home to the Land. They remained in the Diaspora, spreading further and further afield. By the time of Jesus there were far more Diaspora Jews living outside the Land than Palestinian Jews living in the Land. To a greater or lesser extent they were all longing for home, and figuring out how to be loyal to the Lord in a foreign land. They were trying to sing the Lord’s song in a

foreign land. And they were reading the Book of Daniel, which gave them hope and assured them that there was a future.

7. Home for the Homeless

The Lord promised through his prophets that he would bring his people home. He has done so not by bringing the Diaspora Jews home to the Land, but by gathering Jews and Gentiles together into Christ. Home is not a land with people, a city with walls, a palace with a king, a temple with divine presence. It is a person in whom all these motifs of land, city, palace and temple are fulfilled. Our Lord Jesus Christ is our home in whom we have our identity. “In Christ” we are home. In him we belong; we belong to God and we belong to one another. Rather than being gathered into one place we are scattered throughout the world. We are all facing the challenge of living in the world while remaining loyal to King Jesus.

Paul wrote to the Philippians: “conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” (1:27). The verb “conduct yourselves” is literally “to live as a citizen.” Later he states that “our citizenship is in heaven” (3:20). This was language the Philippians could understand. Philippi was a Roman colony. Legally it was a piece of Rome on foreign soil. It was an outpost of Rome, to extend the influence of Rome into Macedonia. The goal of a colony is not to return to the homeland but to extend the homeland into new territory. As citizens of heaven we are to extend the influence of heaven onto earth. We often get this backwards: “Heaven’s not my home, I’m just a-passing through.” We’re eager to leave this world and get to our true home, heaven. The Biblical view is the other way round: heaven is coming to earth. There is a reason God made the earth. He cares for it and wants to restore it. His ultimate goal is to unite heaven and earth together.

Two weeks ago in Turkey Sue and I saw a reconstruction of a boat from 600 BC, around the time Daniel was taken to Babylon. Such a boat was used by Greeks from Foça, near what is now Izmir, Turkey, to sail across the Mediterranean to establish the colony of Marseille. This voyage was recreated in 2009, taking 54 days. The ancient Greeks and Phoenicians, both sea-faring peoples, established lots of colonies throughout the Mediterranean. They were extending their influence throughout the world.

In Christ God has established a beachhead on earth. He has planted a colony, the church. If we are in Christ, our ultimate loyalty is to him. Him we confess as Lord. But we live out our lives on earth in settings that are more or less hostile to him. The country of our citizenship and the country of our residence are not the same. God desires that we flourish in these settings, and fills us with his Spirit that we might extend heaven onto earth. In each of the settings in which we find ourselves God wants us to act for the good of the environment, for mutual flourishing, for the common good.

In his first letter, Peter writes to “God’s elect, exiles scattered throughout” five provinces of Anatolia.

Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. (1 Pet 2:11-12)

We are all resident aliens. Our true citizenship is in heaven not in

any earthly kingdom. But we are resident on earth. We are immersed in society in many different ways: in education, business, caring professions. We are to seek the common good of our society so that both we and society flourish. This can be challenging. We all have to work out how to navigate competing loyalties.

It is especially challenging for those in societies where Christians are persecuted. Each week in the e-news we include a country from the Open Doors Watch List of the fifty countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian. I encourage you to pray for these people.

How do we maintain our loyalty to our true king while living in diaspora, while being resident in a foreign land? We do so by regularly meeting together to worship our Lord. We gather to sing to God and to our Lord Jesus Christ, to hear the Scriptures, to pray, and to be in community. We come before the face of God. We remind ourselves who God is, what he has done in Christ, what he is doing through his Spirit, and in light of this, who we are in relation to God, to one another, and to the world.

And we do so by regularly taking communion together. The Lord has given us two symbols of our participation in him: baptism and communion. Baptism is a one-time act whereby we transfer our allegiance to Christ. We say, “I follow you. You are my Lord.” I liken this to an oath of citizenship. Communion is an oft-repeated act whereby we regularly confess our allegiance to Christ. I liken this to a pledge of allegiance. Throughout the week many things have competed for our allegiance. Regularly we regroup, we regather. Together we confess our allegiance to Christ and we eat and drink at his table. We eat and we drink heavenly food and we are nourished.

We remember our founding narrative: that’s what the Jews do at Passover, what Josiah did in 2 Kings 23. After renewing the covenant they celebrated Passover and they told the story of God delivering them from bondage in Egypt. We tell the story of our Lord Jesus Christ, who though he was in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage, but became like one of us, entered into our story. Taking on human likeness, even a servant, he became obedient to death, even death on the cross. He died there in our place, for us. God vindicated his obedience in resurrection, and invites all to now come and confess this Jesus Christ as Lord, for he has given him the name that is above every other name.

We gather in communion: communion with God in Christ through his Spirit, and communion with one another as we partake as one body.

We eat and we drink, proclaiming the Lord’s death until he come again on that day when our country of citizenship and our country of residency shall be the same, when heaven and earth shall be joined together as one, and *shalom* shall be universal.

To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. (Jude 24-25)

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