

Hunger Games

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[0 : 00] I'd really like if you would turn back with me today to Daniel, page 883.

As I mentioned earlier, this is the start of a series on Daniel. Most preachers will preach through all the good stories in Daniel, Lions Den and everything else, fiery furnace.

Then they'll kind of, they'll, teleconfigure to look the other way and they'll close the book and they'll not go into the difficult bits of Daniel. I am going, hopefully, by God's grace and in his favour to do all the difficult bits as well.

Okay, so I really need prayer because there are some cracking difficult bits in Daniel. So, but when they're really difficult, I'll just skim over it and you'll need to look up commentaries yourselves.

So really the series will be a taster for you. Each chapter we look at will be a taster into the book of Daniel. It can't be any more than that. So please know that and please recognise that.

[1 : 03] I hope that you will be praying every Sunday morning as we have hoped for and looked for for half an hour about God and for God to be with us and to bless us and to do us good in our times together.

You know, time is so short, we don't have much time and the hour we have together is kind of all packed in and rushed and we really want to use it to God's glory. So we pray that God, you pray that God will take these little tasters and apply them to your lives and that will give you a hunger and thirst after righteousness and after God's glory.

So we want God to speak into our lives and I've entitled each of these sermons with a film title.

Okay, it's just my poor middle-aged way of trying to be relevant.

Okay, most of the films are probably ancient and I'm not really going to admit, I'm not going to refer to them, I'm not going to link them in in some kind of pseudo-important way but I just used film titles because I thought it might be a bit more memorable.

So today's Hunger Games, okay, I may be mentioning at the very end. And yes, so it took me ages so I hope you appreciate the fact that I did this and it might be more memorable.

[2 : 16] So what I want us to do though today is look at Daniel chapter 1 and try and really get to grips with this very important book in the Old Testament.

There's various commentaries that you can use if you want to look at it more deeply, I'm sure you'll have many others yourselves. These Bible Speaks today commentaries are very good, there's a one by Wallace, Ronald Wallace and this guy by Dale Ralph Davis who's a bit of a legend, he's pretty good and there's an older book by an English pastor called Stuart Oliot which is there to stand alone which I'm not going to argue against his truth, I'm just going to argue against his title in a minute later on and then there's Old Calvin, you know, the great heavy, you'll probably find a more modern one than that, that was my father's so it's an old one but it's good stuff.

So you'll have many opportunities to read about Daniel. But the first thing I want to say about Daniel and the book of Daniel and the story of Daniel's is that this is real, okay, so I want us to ground our thinking and ground our understanding and the reality of this story.

Don't have time to go into all the different opinions that people have about Daniel but we believe and firmly believe that what we have in Daniel is not myth, is not story but is fact, is history.

Verse 1, in the third year of the reign of Jehoiachem, king of Judah and Nebuchadnezzar, king of Daniel came to Jerusalem and besieged it. So it's termed historically, it's given a date, it's given a time, it's given its place in history and this happened if you'll know the history of Israel, it happened because well the nations or the 12 tribes of Israel by this stage were divided, okay, 10 and 2.

[4 : 01] So there was 10 tribes that became kind of in the northern kingdom, became known as Israel and they had already by this stage been conquered by Assyria.

So they'd been taken out of their land and taken over by the Assyrians and then there was two tribes left in the south and they were called Judah, Judah and Benjamin and they were longer remaining in and around Jerusalem.

But around 600 BC, a brief history, okay, don't fall asleep, around 600 BC they were also taken over and exiled into Babylon. So Babylon was the great, the great powerful world nation at this point, okay, and Nebuchadnezzar was the king of Babylon and he came to Jerusalem and he took the people of Judah into captivity with him and that's the background to the story of Daniel, you know that.

Daniel was from Judah and he was taken captive into Babylon, so it's history. But it's also his story, okay, it's God's story and that's very important.

Can I have the first, I've got one or two verses on the screens and I'll just ask the guys to do the first one, okay. This is God's story, so what's happening to Judah and to Israel is because God is involved.

[5 : 26] In Leviticus, Jesus, God speaks about the blessings and the judgments of the curses that come from either following him or rejecting him.

I will destroy your high places, cut down your incense layers and pile your dead bodies in the lifeless forms of our idols and I will abhor you. I will turn your cities into ruins and lay waste your sanctuaries and I will take no delight in the pleasing aroma of your offerings.

I myself will lay waste a land so that your enemies who live there will be appalled. And then in Isaiah 39, we also have another reference.

Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, hear the word of the Lord Almighty, the time will surely come when everything in your palace and all that your fathers have stored up until this day will be carried off to Babylon, nothing will be left, says the Lord.

So this is God's story. This is prophecy that was being fulfilled. They were being taken to Babylon as a fulfillment of God's judgment on them for becoming idolatrous.

[6 : 31] They were God's chosen people. They knew who God was. He'd taken them into the Promised Land. He'd promised them milk and honey and they were rejecting him and had become the greatest sin for them was that they'd become idolatrous again.

If you look through the Old Testament, the teaching of God to the people was always, there is only one God. And yet they abandoned that reality and because it was easier, they engaged in idolatry and so they lost their inheritance and they were taken as fulfilled prophecy into Babylon and into Assyria.

God's faithful sovereignty. Okay, God is faithful and he's faithful to his sovereign words and his sovereign realities.

And they simply hadn't realized. You know, it says something very significant. I'll say a little bit more about this in a minute that the temple was really destroyed. Everything was taken out of it.

Now, I think there's a third reference, Jeremiah 7.4, prophecy about them. Yeah, do not trust deceptive words and say, this is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.

[7 : 49] If you really change your ways and actions and deal with each other justly was what was more important. So they were just, they were trumpeting the fact that they lived in Jerusalem, that the temple of the Lord was theirs, that God was represented and dwelt in the temple.

And as long as they had the temple and they could do anything. It didn't matter how they lived, they could do anything as long as the temple was there and God was in his temple and they would be fine.

And yet what God is exposing is one, you were being idolatrous and two, it does matter that you recognize the God of the temple by living lives that were obedient to that God.

They were relying on cold outward religion. Religion number one, don't rely on cold outward religion.

Don't rely on just coming along to church or your parents being believers or reading the Bible now and again. Don't rely on singing God's words and saying, I am part of the church, the church, the church.

[9 : 00] But when you go from here, live in any old way and not dealing with your heart and me not dealing with my heart, remember that, it's an important application.

It's God's story. And in this story, God takes the hit. When it says that they carried off all the articles from the temple into the temple of Nebuchadnezzar's God in Babylonia, they put it in the treasure house of his God.

That was public humiliation. That was public humiliation for God. If there had been a media story there, there would have been a media frenzy that would be mocking God, in the same way as Stephen Fry was doing, mocking God.

Why is he supposed to be the sovereign universal only God? And here's Nebuchadnezzar taking his most prized possessions, he's raping his temple and he's bringing them into his own temple. This was a real blow to the name and to the honour of the living God, which God was taking as a hit.

[10:05] God was taking the shame in order to awaken up his people. Now that reminds you of the cross, doesn't it? He's got in the same way, knows you man.

Tonight we'll be looking a little bit at the incarnation, the humiliation of Jesus Christ. It takes the hit. It's counterintuitive, isn't it? That what everyone thought was just the end of Jesus, he nailed to a tree, becomes the greatest victory and a wake-up call to us.

The cross is a wake-up call. So you need to ask yourself and I need to ask myself what our opinion is of the cross today. It's a wake-up call to our opinion of ourselves and our need or not as we think of the living God.

Okay, this is real. Daniel, the Christian and the church. So we're going to look at it for a moment. Daniel, the Christian and the church.

So where's the link for us? Where's the link between this story that was recorded thousands of years ago in the Old Testament? Where's the link between what Daniel is doing and the culture and the life that he was living with 21st century Edinburgh today?

[11:17] Where's the link? And what's the link for the church? There was the New Testament, not superseded, all this kind of stuff. Well, can you remember, this is God's word. And remember, it was good enough for Jesus.

It was good enough for Jesus, good enough for us. But do remember, it is part of progressive revelation. So we must see it in the light of the whole Bible story and God's progressive, redemptive plan being unveiled.

But it's also a story of faith and a story about people. And this morning in St. Colombo's, we've got both these things. We've got faith and we've got people. So it's going to be relevant to some degree.

We also maybe have unbelievers and there's a great challenge within the story to those as well. So it's God's word. And also because it's relevant because the people in exile in Daniel look very much like what the New Testament church is today.

[12:22] The New Testament church is very much in exile. Okay, 1 Peter 2 verse 11, I think that is coming up on the screen as well. Yeah, dear friends, I urge you as aliens and strangers in this world to abstain from sinful desires which war against your soul.

It's using the same kind of language, aliens and strangers, exiles. And that is very much the reality of where the New Testament church is in the already here, here now, because we haven't yet reached heaven, the new heavens and the new earth.

In other words, there's no real New Testament validation for a kind of Christian nation idea that Christianity is bound by geographical borders and by nation states and that we can have a Christian nation.

The New Testament is always speaking about a spiritual kingdom that transcends national boundaries, that transcends race and colour and that is not politically strong and does not, our war is not against this world and against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers. It's a spiritual kingdom. And the dangers that Daniel and his men and his people faced are the same dangers that we face. We're in a world where we don't have much influence anymore.

[13:39] Daniel was moving from the royal family in Judah where he would have great influence over the nation and it was a God, it was a nation under God, the Old Testament people, a nation under a theocracy.

There are no theocracies today politically, but he was moving into a place where he would have little absolute influence. And also there was a great danger for Daniel and other believers to assimilate into the culture of the day.

And so as much to teach us about foundations, about having a living hope and about living with a redeemed community. So I want to say one or two things about that today. What about Daniel? Okay?

Daniel, let's look at Daniel for a few minutes. He was a smart lad, wasn't he? He was a smart character, probably only about 14 years old here when he's taken into captivity. From the nobility, as I said, he was handsome.

He was intelligent. It's kind of like a mixture of Brad Pitt and Prince William. Maybe showing my age there. I'm sure the younger people would have someone much more relevant than that.

[14:47] But he was, you know, he was handsome, he was strong, he was good looking. He was a kind of model young man and he was a leader and he was an example.

And Nebuchadnezzar had a great philosophy. You see, he was ruling over many different nations and he knew he couldn't rule them all by power and by strength.

So he wanted to assimilate the leaders of these peoples and make them so enamoured with the life in the palace and with the leadership power and responsibility and privileges they were given that they wouldn't want to go back to their own land.

Very clever, very clever policy. But Daniel wasn't afraid of that and he wasn't afraid of getting involved. He wasn't a separatist. He wasn't a zealot in the way politically that some of his descendants would become.

He allowed himself to be educated in the Babylonian system and in the Babylonian world.

[15:49] He was polite. You see that throughout the chapter and the dealings he had with different people. He was gracious and polite. He befriended Babylon and the peoples of Babylon in many ways.

And even within that he chose his battles to fight. We'll see a little bit more about that in a while. His name was changed and it was significant because his name had a God significance in his name.

It was El and Daniel was in his name. That was the representative of God. And he was given a name that was different to that and that reflected the pagan gods of Babylon, El Peshazzar.

And yet he didn't really, he chose which battles to fight. So he got involved. But this is the important thing really, isn't it, in this story.

He was really courageous. He was spiritually alert and he had spiritual background. Remember he was only 14. They grew up much younger in these days. But we shouldn't underestimate the importance and the significance of teaching and of expecting great things from our young people.

[16:58] We'll see a bit more about that maybe before, later. But as we go on and Daniel will recognize that Daniel had a really disciplined prayer life.

He prayed faithfully. He knew his God and he knew the word of his God. And he was close to God. He was founded, his life was founded on God.

And even at this early stage in captivity in Babylon, he would have been listening to some of the prophecies that were coming through Jeremiah. So in Jeremiah chapter 29, we've got a really significant prophecy that would have influenced him greatly.

This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel says to those, I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon, build houses and settle down, plant gardens and eat what they produce and marry and have sons and daughters.

Find wives for your sons and give your daughters a marriage so that they too may have sons and daughters. Remember there, do not dig, seek the peace and prosperity of the city which I've carried you into exile.

[18:00] Pray to the Lord for it, for if it prospers, so you too will prosper. Isn't that amazing? Isn't that remarkable that that is what God said about the captivity in Babylon and Daniel would have known about that.

He was courageous and he knew what Nebuchadnezzar was trying to do. He knew that he was, Nebuchadnezzar was seeking to assimilate him into the lifestyle of Babylon and he knew of his strategy so he chose not to eat the royal food and the wine.

This isn't to do with it being kosher or not. This isn't it to do with being, I don't think, although there's debate about this, being offered to idols, although it may well have been offered to idols which he wanted to keep away from.

It is simply that it was decadent and it would have kept him from having a sharp mind and a sharp spirit. It was a distraction.

It would have turned his head. You know what it's like if you've got a wedding and you have lots of really rich food and wine at the wedding, you kind of, you've bloated after it. You're not really that good and that sharp.

[19 : 15] When I went out a long, long time ago, I did a year out from doing business studies in Aberdeen and I got a job in Peterhead, centre of the university.

For the first two weeks, they didn't have accommodation for me so the company was a very rich company at the time and at that time I was very well paid. It was great and I was only a useless student placement.

They put me up in a hotel. So every morning I had a big fat fry up and every evening I go back from work at a massive big hotel meal, you know, just swimming in Greece.

But wonderful. But you know by the end of that two weeks, just felt like Mr. Blobby, useless for anything, not sharp and not good.

And you know it's the same kind of picture we have here. He knew it might well turn his head. And the more he was engaged in the eating and drinking of the palace, the more he would become assimilated.

[20 : 13] His guard would maybe go down, especially as he was drinking the wine and that was his line in the sand. That's what he said, I will go no further in my assimilation or in my involvement in this new world because he was sharp, because he was spiritually alert, because he knew that the kingdom of God was more than eating and drinking and so he vegetables.

So it's one up for the vegetarians. Okay, that's what he did. But at the same time as being courageous in this, he was also dependent. He was dependent on God.

There's a couple of lovely verses here, very kind of quiet verses in this chapter where we see that God is at work. In verse nine, we're told now God had caused the official to show favour and sympathy to Daniel.

And then in verse 17, we're told to these four young men, God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. So there's a kind of subplot here of God at work.

And that's because Daniel was dependent on him. So as he was dependent on God and as he prayed to God, God was answering his prayers in the people that he was interacting with and he was also blessing Daniel and the four guys, the other three guys.

[21 : 32] And that's tremendous. He was dependent on God and he was persevering with God. And there's a lovely, the last verses, you know, all the verses are significant, don't they? But the last verse is great because it says, and Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.

So that kind of jumps to the end of this 66 years later. Maybe King Nedser's gone, he's dead and buried and the new ruler tyrant is there, King Cyrus and Daniel's still there.

Daniel's been there all the time because he's dependent on God. But notice, and this is where I take a little bit of exception to dare to stand alone because that's what we sing, dare to be a Daniel, dare to stand alone.

But Daniel was dependent on other believers. This story is about Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. There's four of them. Okay, he's not on his own.

This is a small, believing community. And he wasn't alone. And it was the four of them that didn't eat the king's food and drink the king's wine.

[22 : 35] And so they stood together. Yeah, I'm sure Daniel was the leader, but they stood together and they all agreed to that. And I'm sure they all encouraged one another. And I'm sure when they smelled that great steak and when they were tempted to drink that beautiful red wine, it was by their encouragement of one another.

No, don't give in just now. Keep on going. Remember what we've pledged to do. God will bless us. It was that encouragement of one another. He didn't stand alone. He was part of community, small community, definitely.

But they learned together, they grew together, they prayed together, they obeyed together. And I don't think Daniel could have stood alone.

And I don't think we're meant to think that Daniel stood alone. So that's about that. What about us? Briefly in conclusion, what about us? We are part of the church in exile in the same way that the old, although we're not in exile because of judgment, but the picture is, in doubtless, the same.

We are in the world. We are not to be of the world. We are a people who are aliens and strangers in this world waiting for the new heavens and the new earth.

[23 : 50] We believe in the sovereignty of God. We believe God is in absolute control, as He was in Daniel's time. What do we learn? Well, it's good, isn't it, for us to be engaged as well.

The same way that Daniel was. We're wanting to focus a lot this year on mission and on sharing the gospel and on praying for people to become Christians in our sphere of influence.

And we can only do that if we're engaged with them. Of course we need God. Now, come to say a bit about that. But we need to be part of this world. We need to be engaged in it.

We need to be inculturated. We need not to be afraid of society. We can go to the highest places in society, like Daniel, or we can be in the lowest places.

We are to seek the prosperity of this beloved city, Edinburgh, in the same way that God asked Daniel and the exiles to be seeking the prosperity of Babylon.

[24 : 50] It's tough. There's great areas. We have to choose our battles. There's things that we have to accommodate. We're not yet in heaven.

But Christ wants you here. You have been brought to the kingdom as a person in Edinburgh for such a time as this. You're here for a reason.

And you're here in the communities of the gospel that you're in because He wants you to shine for Him here. We're not to be double exiles.

In other words, exiles because of our position in Christ and also exiles because we choose to be. We're not to become disengaged from this world and live in holy huddles.

How will people become Christians if they don't hear? And how will they hear if you don't know and I don't recognise that we've been sent?

[25 : 46] Go and make disciples, Jesus says. It's good to be engaged. And there's lots of things about that that you would need to and I would need to work through. But it must be uncompromising.

Okay. It's no good to be engaged if you assimilate into the world. If you become like the world and indistinct from the world.

Daniel drew a line in the sand. They knew who he was and who he served. And he knew his enemy.

And he knew his enemy's tactics. And he knew what Nebuchadnezzar was up to. And we must be uncompromising because the great temptation for Daniel and his guys was assimilation.

Just be like everyone else. That's the same temptation we have today. We have to recognise the vitality of having a living relationship with Jesus Christ.

[26 : 50] It's no good thinking just your contact with the church is all that matters. And your one hour here is your kind of religious fix for the week. It's not the church, the church, the church.

The church is an important place. But it's how you take the equipping and the worship that the church offers and apply that to the foundation of your own life, your personal walk.

And so I say today for myself and all of us, there's no shortcuts to what that kind of lifestyle, the lifestyle that Daniel had, which was without compromise.

He was regularly in contact with his God. He knew what God wanted from him. And he was listening to God in his life.

We all will go from here today as Christians and you're being asked to live for God's glory daily. You're sent out on mission daily. You're sent out to serve to be sought and like daily.

[27 : 49] And that is what makes us like Daniel and in the world which was engaged, was uncompromising. We need backbone.

And the last thing is that we're made in similar terms, we're made for dependence. Okay, Daniel, it wasn't alone. He was dependent on this relationship he had with God and on the brothers that he had around him, not many though they were.

We're also dependent. We're made for dependence. We're made for worship, for worship of the living God. We're made to be in relationship with God. And the more we're in personal relationship, the more we're praying to God, the more we will find God's soft interaction in our lives.

In the same way as he would with Daniel, God gave favour to the people who were around Daniel, God blessed Daniel and his companions. So the more that we are in contact with the living God through Jesus Christ and through repentance and faith, then the more we will find God will be influencing those around us, the impossible ones, the ones that we can't deal with in many ways. And he will also be blessing us in our lives. However unpromising the surroundings appear.

[29 : 10] Many ways our task is to give you confidence in the living God, to be in relationship with Him, to remind you of the significance of having confidence in a God who will work in your sphere of influence and bless your own life.

So we're made for dependence on God. God team works with us. He tagged teams with us. We're also made for dependence on community.

We're not meant, even though we're exiles and strangers, we're not meant to do it alone. He has brought us into family. How often have I said this?

Once you were not a people, now you are a people. You're the body of Christ with Christ's head. We have fellow Christians. We have family. We have the church. And I do want us to move away from the idea of the church as an institution.

It has to be at some levels, but we hate the concept. It's just a big-ish family together what we're trying to do. It's so easy to grumble, so easy to formalize, so easy to be distant from it.

[30 : 17] And yet he says we're made for one another. We're going to be a family in arms together so that we build each other up in the warfare in which we're engaged. So we pray for one another's friends, so we team up together so that when we're tempted to give up and we're tempted to eat the king's food and we're tempted to drink the king's wine, we've got one another to say, look, remember who you are, remember who you serve, remember I'm praying for you, remember we'll get through this together, think about your roots.

That's why I want us to share as much time as we can together. We share in prayer times on a Wednesday night to come together to build each other up so that our roots are firmly fixed beside the water as we saw on Wednesday night in Sam 1.

So we're made for God and we're made for each other. So where are our hearts today?

Where do they lie? Because remember Daniel and the redemptive historical line is all about a people who let their hearts become idolatrous, who moved away from the living God and who trusted in buildings in the temple and in the promise of God to be in that temple but didn't give a hoot about how they lived in obedience or disobedience.

So the question for us all today is always where are your roots? Where is our heart today? Where is our relationship? If you go out the door today and I'm amazed sometimes that there's no more people killed in that road because of the way taxis fly around that corner, particularly tourists, but if you went out of that place then you were knocked down and killed.

[32 : 11] Where would you go? What would you say to God? Where would your heart be? Your heart be right with God through Jesus Christ and through the cross where He took the shame and the blame on our behalf.

When you go to your lives tomorrow, will you be going into a simulation city? Will you be trying to be as like the world as you can in order that no one will dare ask me about my faith?

Will you try and get through the day as much as possible under the parapet? Or will we draw the line somewhere? Say, this is my place to stand up for Jesus.

It might not be a sin. I don't think eating the king's food and drinking his wine was sinful. It certainly doesn't say it was. That was where he drew the line because he knew it would bring assimilation. What about us? Do you know your own heart well enough to know where to draw the line? Do you know God well enough? Are you listening to the Holy Spirit so that He speaks through us? Will we go into this world and live out the hunger games for Christ's sake?

[33 : 23] Let's bow our heads and pray. Father God, we ask and pray that you would help us to know you better, that we would learn from Daniel who didn't have the privilege of a finished revelation, a Bible that was complete, who didn't have the glory and the mystery of God coming in the flesh and dying on a cross, but yet who trusted in the promises of a Savior and who trusted in a God who would forgive him through that seed that was promised.

Even though he may not have had much understanding. Lord God, in our privileges, in our knowledge as we look back, help us to be those who know you and know when to draw the line and know where to stand up and stand out for Jesus Christ because people have courage, boldness and strength.

May we come together in times like this to be renewed and refreshed and be encouraged with one another. Help us to remember our battles, not against the church or against each other or against our feelings and thoughts, however great and many they are, yet against the spiritual forces of darkness that seek to bring us down, the motivational forces that brought Nebuchadnezzar to be so

subtle in his policies of idolatry.

So Lord bless us and apply your truth to our hearts today. Jesus name, amen.