

DANIEL

LESSONS IN EXILE



CENTRAL
PENINSULA
CHURCH

Daniel 1:1-2, Psalm 137

INTRO: ON BABYLON AND EXILE



We step onto the scene of Daniel and events we are expected to know the background information to are immediately referenced. “In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it” (Dan. 1:1). The context would already be set in the mind of the original readers. We join the story as a people go into exile, and it’s a specific exile that happened at a specific time to a specific group of people.

The story is told in 2 Kings 24. It’s easy for us to take these statements and look at them as simply historical records, like referencing the War of 1812 or the Spanish-American war. It is important to remember that for the people of Daniel, this point in time conjures up a particular set of emotions and ideas. This was a very hopeless time for many of them. They would have remembered losing loved ones—children, parents, and lovers would have all been taken, killed, or pillaged during the siege. This was a brutal time to be alive.

It’s imperative to read the entire book of Daniel with this context in mind. The book is being written to people in exile by people in exile. These passages are not merely stories that are important to keep telling. In fact, in the traditional Hebrew organization of the scriptures, the Book of Daniel is lumped in the same section as the wisdom literature. Given its context, it would seem to fit better in the resistance literature category or wise words for exiles rather than just stories about exiles. The story doesn’t even present itself in chronological order. So as we travel through this book, we will look for what the author of Daniel was trying to communicate to the people in exile, who would have read this and held this dear to their heart. Why was the Book of Daniel put in the Hebrew Scriptures, but I and II Maccabees, also historical records, were not? What made Daniel different?

It seems that in setting the stage, the author is calling to mind the images of the siege and destruction of Jerusalem to remind the exiles what happened and begin to answer the question, “Where do we go from here?” These people are hopeless, and it seems that their God has lost. They are far from home, families are torn apart, the temple was plundered and is in ruins, and many thought YHWH abandoned them.

One of the first indicators toward the main ideas of Daniel appears in verse 2. The author argues



Detail of a lion found along the processional way from Ishtar Gate into the city of Babylon. The Ishtar Gate was constructed around 575 BC by King Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon, made of fired bricks and decorated with animals made in glazed bricks.

that it was YHWH who delivered them into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. The argument is pushing against the idea that all hope is lost. The author aims to point out to them that it was not because the Babylonian gods were so powerful that YHWH lost. It was not because God had abandoned them that they lost. Instead, as the prophets have long been telling them, God was dealing with the wickedness and the sin of the people of Jerusalem and used Nebuchadnezzar to accomplish his purposes, as we see in Isaiah 10. They lost their homes and were sent into exile due to their wickedness. This is the Day of the Lord come against his rebellious people.

Nebuchadnezzar further caused an affront to the people of God by removing the sacred vessels from the temple and relocating them. Where they end up is a significant location for the framing of the story. Some translations say the items were taken to Babylonia.

This is true, but they miss an important setting point given by the author. The items were taken to Shinar. The readers in exile would have recalled a foundational story to the Jewish people, which also occurred in the plains of Shinar—the story of the Tower of Babylon (Tower of Babel). The sacred things dedicated to God are taken back to the place where God scattered the people in their rebellion against him.

These sorts of events would likely be traumatic for the people of Israel. One of the ways we can get insight into the mind of how the people of God dealt with these tumultuous times is through the songs they sang and left for us in the Book of Psalms.

Books 4 and 5 of the Psalms (Ch. 90-150) are primarily Songs of the Exile. They would use the Psalms to draw near to God and call to memory who

he is and what he has done while they had no physical Temple in which to do this. One such song that addresses the particular events around the time of Daniel is Psalm 137. Be sure, as we study this book, to regularly incorporate the reading of Psalm 137 and many similar Psalms into your study of Daniel.

ADDITIONAL TEXTS TO READ:

2 Kings 24
Genesis 11
Isaiah 10:5-34
1 Peter 2:11-17

SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS

1. We all experienced a major change in our lives these past two years. What has been the biggest change for you?

2. What was it like not being able to worship God in community?

3. Are there times where you feel that as a Christian, there is a dissatisfaction with the world as it is? Why?

4. In Hebrews 4, we are told that the promised land we are looking forward to is being with Christ. How do we live differently knowing that our hope is in a future reality rather than our present reality?

5. What reasons do we have to do good in the world where we find ourselves?

Daniel 1

FINDING RESOLVE IN EXILE



This text sets up the primary plot tensions in the Book of Daniel. Last week, we explored the hopelessness that many of them would've felt, as well as some of the questions that might have come up in their hearts and minds after being sent into exile. This week, the author introduces the answer to the question posed last week. "Where do we go from here?" The way Daniel does this is by telling us stories. The book is full of stories but is organized in a way that helps the reader understand the message.

The first story we see is the story of four young men who were taken from Jerusalem and put into a special training program for royals. Something to notice is how involved the young men get in Babylonian Society. They seem to integrate into Babylonian Society in every way. They study Babylonian language, adopt Babylonian names and culture, read Babylonian literature, attend Babylonian schools. What would seem to some wildest of all, they take government jobs in Babylon. Throughout the biblical presentation, from the Tower of Babylon in Genesis to the book of Daniel, Babylon has been presented as this wicked nation that is far from God. Once these young men go into Babylon, they integrate into its society.

This should cause us to pause and think about how we engage with the world. It seems that the response from the people of God sent into exile was to immediately integrate into many ways and try to make an impact where they were. They didn't draw a line over everything that Babylon does that they shouldn't. They didn't isolate themselves into their community within Babylon.

What they did was take the advice of the Prophet Jeremiah. In chapter 29, Jeremiah instructs the people of Israel to:

- Build houses and live in them.
- Plant gardens and eat the produce
- Marry and have families
- Marry off our children
- Multiply
- Seek the welfare of the city in which you find yourselves
- Pray for the city



image by Chantal Garnier

They aren't called to just show up and hope for the time that they can go back to their homeland. They're told to set up shop, plant their lives, and seek the welfare of Babylon. They don't try to overthrow Babylonian rule and society; instead, their instructions are to be productive members of society and do what is best for the city in which they live. They're to live as if Babylon is the place that they are meant to be, and not just that, but also where their kids and families are meant to be.

The one line we see drawn through the story of the four men is consuming food that goes against Jewish law. The men don't expect Babylonians to follow Jewish law; rather, they only hold themselves to the standard God has set for them. They resolved not to defile themselves. They challenge the Babylonian leaders that they will be better off doing what is

commanded by their God rather than the Babylonian way.

It didn't take very long for it to be clear that following God was beneficial. In fact, these four men even had access to wisdom unknown to Babylon at the time. This makes sense as we are told in Proverbs 9:10 that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. While the world/Babylon may be able to ascertain certain parts of the wisdom of God, those who fear YHWH are ten times wiser.

Again, this passage also sets up the primary tension explored in the rest of the book. They are a hopeless people sent into a foreign land who aren't sure how to live in this new reality in which they find themselves. The first story presents us with the solution. They integrate themselves, take up jobs, work where they are, and become outstanding members of the community they find themselves

in. While they integrate, what distinguishes them is that they stay faithful to the law of God and refuse to defile themselves. They are integrated, yet quietly subversive, through their faithfulness to the law of God

**ADDITIONAL TEXTS
TO READ:**

Jeremiah 29:1-11
Proverbs 9:10-12

SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Common graces are good things that God gives to all people to enjoy, whether or not they believe in God or do what is right (Ex. Food, nature, etc.). What are some common graces that we find here?

2. Why does God give graces like those to people who do evil, just like he does those who do follow him?

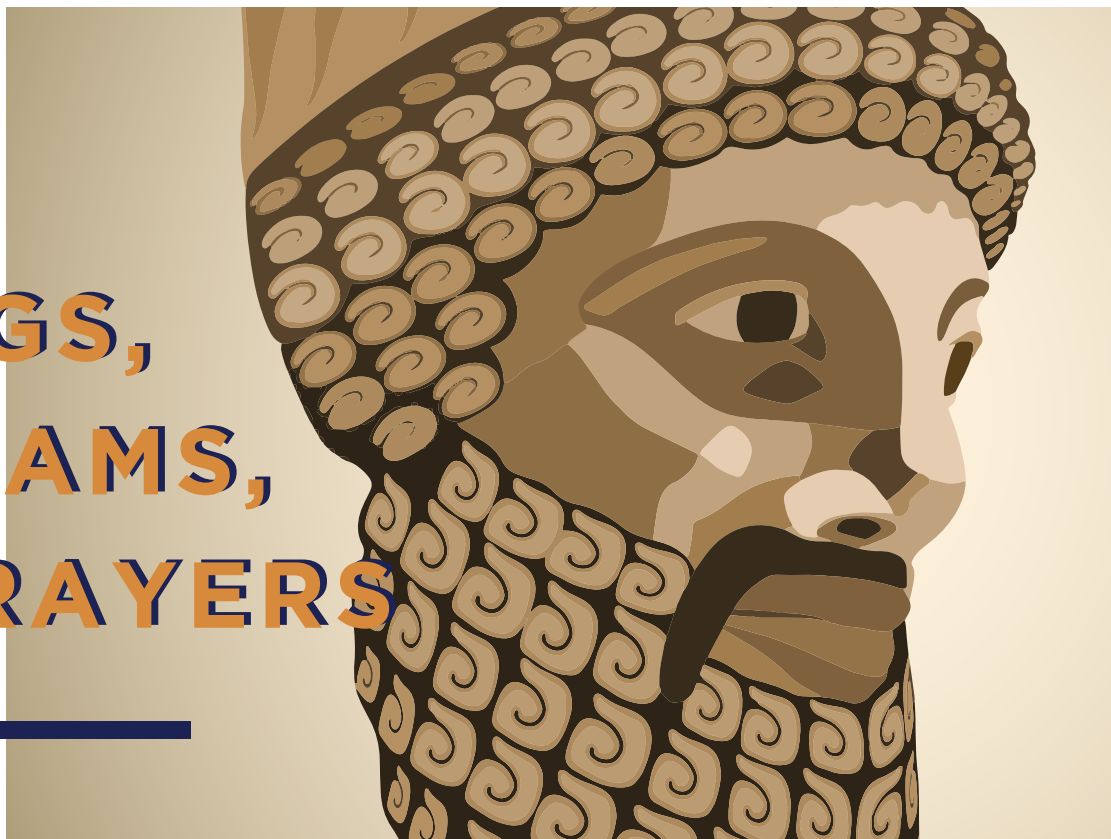
3. God desires all people to come to a knowledge of Him. How can we show His grace to those around us?

4. As the people of God who are placed in a very secular area and culture, how can God's present-day covenant community follow the example of the exiles to be a light where they are?

5. We listed all the ways that God commanded the Israelites to live in exile. How can you do that in your life?

Daniel 2

KINGS, DREAMS, & PRAYERS

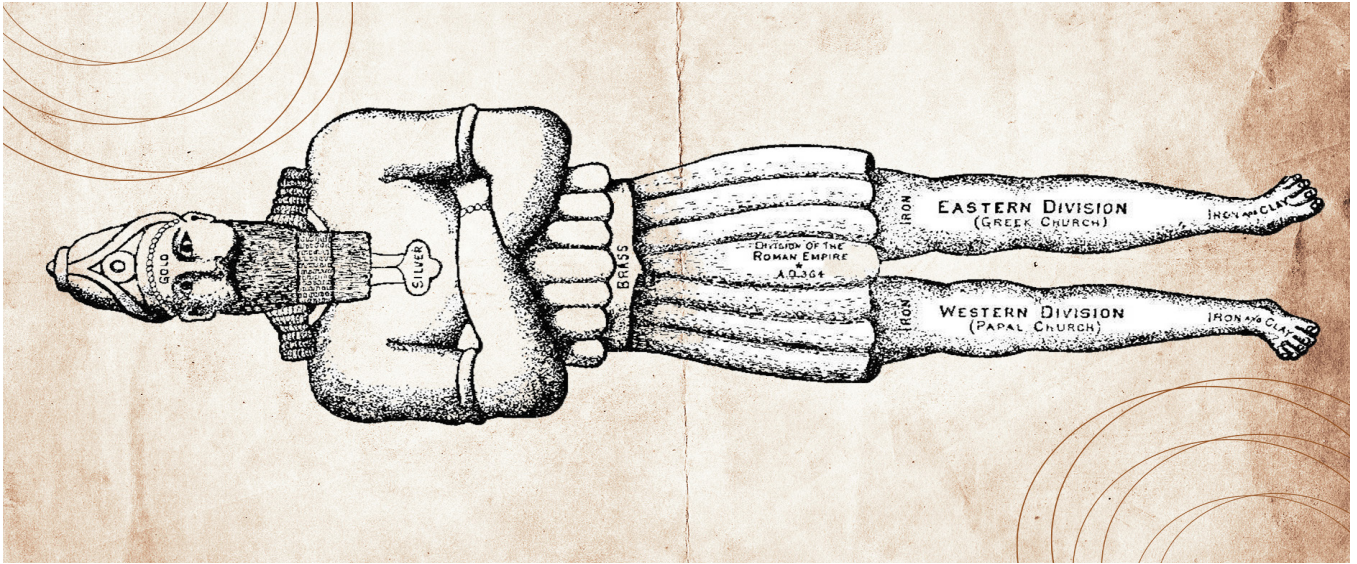


We are blessed to live in a time and place where the Bible is readily available in our language for free, and in English, in dozens of different styles. So many wonderful resources make the Bible accessible to many people. We may not know that the Bible originally didn't have chapter divisions when it was written and was originally written in at least three languages. This can cause us to miss certain things in the text that may have been more apparent to the initial readers of the original text.

We run into this issue with the passage of Daniel 2:4. The text should read something like "Then the Chaldeans said to the King in Aramaic:" This appears in many translations and indicates that a switch happens in the text. From that point until Chapter 7:28, the original language of the text switched from Hebrew to Aramaic. Aramaic is different from Hebrew as Spanish is from Portuguese or Hindi is from Urdu. They are distinct languages but are generally mutually intelligible. So we are left with the question, why the change?

Many scholars believe this change is because they are now speaking in the temple courts, and the language they would've spoken was Aramaic. This is may be true, but there are certain things unaccounted for, including that the king likely would have asked the question in Aramaic and why chapter 7 continues in Aramaic, even though it seems to simply be a personal vision Daniel received. Also, these chapters don't appear chronologically in the text, which would lead us to believe that the authors of the book want us to notice something about this section of scripture.

<i>Chapter 2: Nebuchadnezzar's Dream(Four Kingdoms replaced by the Kingdom of God)</i>	<i>Ch 7: Daniel's Dream(Four Kingdoms replaced by the coming of the son of Man)</i>
<i>Chapter 3:Refusal to worship an image of the King</i>	<i>Ch 6: Refusal to worship(through prayer) the King</i>
<i>Chapter 4: The Pride of Nebuchadnezzar</i>	<i>Chapter 5: The Pride of Belshazzar</i>



When we read Chapters 2-7, we should notice a few key things. First, at the end of each story (except chapter 5, which we will discuss later), YHWH is exalted. This should be a key indicator that this is likely the key point in the text. Second, each of the stories are paired in reverse order or mirrored. This is a common Jewish practice we also see in books like Esther and throughout many of the Psalms (called chiasm). The chart on page eight shows how this section is structured:

With this sort of structure, the stories or poems will often build to their climax in the middle, which we will further explore as we study the book.

So what we expect from Chapters 2 and 7 is a sort of grounding or anchoring for the story to set our direction and expectations. In chapter 2, we see King Nebuchadnezzar's dream of a statue made of four

different materials. Then a rock carved out "...not by human hands" destroys the statue and the pieces of the statue wither away. The rock that destroys the statute then grows into a mountain and is said to be a kingdom set up by the God of heaven. The book shows through a dream given to a foreign king that the resolution to the tension and anxiety the Israelites were feeling is God will one day send his kingdom and establish his rule and reign on his holy mountain. It is hope for the future. It is hope that the promises introduced in Genesis 3 and 12 will be fulfilled. God will not abandon his people.

ADDITIONAL TEXTS TO READ:

Joshua 1:5-9 (example of chiasm in the Bible)
Isaiah 9:1-7 emphasis on v. 7

SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS

1. What are some examples of stories that have a story within a story? (Usually, the narrator will appear at the beginning and/or end of the story) Why is the story told that way?

2. Do you know any stories of hope that people hold on to in difficult times?

3. Why do we as humans so often have narratives like that?

4. The ultimate story of the biblical story is about God making all things right again, but it's easy to feel that things aren't all right. What about the biblical message gives us hope for our futures?

FIERY FAITHFUL FRIENDS



Daniel 3-4:3

This week brings us to one of the most well-known stories in Daniel. Because of the familiarity of this story, we may assume we know what this story is all about. Let's take a step back and think about what we read in the chapter. If you read this chapter in isolation, what character does the narrator focus on? Who would be the foil or antagonist? It seems that in this chapter, King Nebuchadnezzar is center stage. The narrative revolves around what he has made, what he says, and what he does. In the end, it revolves around the lessons he learned. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego seem to play a secondary role in the narrative.

If the main character is Nebuchadnezzar, it reveals quite a bit about this story and how it functions in the narrative. As we mentioned before, the author is making a point through the story, which likely has something to do with the main character.

The first thing that we see in the narrative is that Nebuchadnezzar makes an image of gold. Interestingly, the author doesn't tell us what the image is of, but simply that an image was made. It's easy for us to fill in the details here and assume he made a statue that looks like him, but the lack of detail on the image is significant. The reader should recall in this narrative a story in the Genesis creation narrative, where we are told that God made images and his images are human beings.

This would likely call to memory what we are told in Exodus 20, The Ten Commandments, not to make images. Humans are not supposed to make images because God has already made images of himself; he created humans. We are supposed to be his image in this world. So when humans make images, whether of themselves or something else, we are putting ourselves in the place of God. Nebuchadnezzar is saying that he has the power to do what only God can do.

As we learned in chapter 1, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are determined not to defile themselves. What they're asked to do here is to worship images of a lesser deity (at least this is how Nebuchadnezzar seems to view himself), and they refuse. In a sense, this lesser god tries to punish these three men as a god would to those who disobey him. Nebuchadnezzar believes that he is the most powerful being in the world. So he threatens the three young men, to which they give a stunningly beautiful response. They argue that their God is stronger than Nebuchadnezzar and can deliver them from the fiery furnace. They are confident that even in their exile under this foreign king, their God is still ruler over all.



What follows is another incredible sentence where they say, "...but even if he doesn't" [save us], that doesn't change that YHWH is the most powerful God, and we are still going to serve the true God, not you and your lesser images. They know that there is a reality in which God can still be the strongest and most powerful being but allow them to be brutally murdered. Yet, they stand undeterred, and their allegiance is set. Even when many people in their situation would feel like God has abandoned them, they have a firm conviction that if God chooses, he can rescue them, and they will continue to be faithful if he doesn't.

Since the story revolves primarily around the character of Nebuchadnezzar, taking a moralistic view of the story or saying we should act like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego would deviate from the main point of the story.

Given what the young man said, it would also not align with the story to say we will be delivered from hardship. The main point is that there will be images set up in the exile, whether they are physical objects or ideals we pursue, and no matter how much power they have, ultimately God is still on his throne, and nothing can ever change who is really in control. In the end, even the king recognizes this to an extent, and Nebuchadnezzar praises God and tells the people of the power of the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

**ADDITIONAL TEXTS
TO READ:**

Genesis 1:27-28
Exodus 20 (the second
commandment)
Philippians 1:21

SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Images are representatives of something. This could be an idea of “The good life” or “The American Dream.” What sorts of “images” do we see our world promoting, and more specifically, what “images” do you see the people around you pursuing? What “images” do you find yourself pursuing?

2. Do you feel distant from God sometimes? Do you ever feel that the world is lost and without hope?

3. What is it that stirs up those feelings in us?

4. Why is it that Christians should have hope? What makes it hard for us to hold onto that hope sometimes?

5. In the end, the young men didn’t even smell like smoke. Their salvation was miraculous beyond anything a human could do. What does this tell us about the character and nature of God?

6. In our 21st-century Western reality, what does it look like to believe God is in control in even the direst situations?

A KING'S NIGHTMARE



Daniel 4:4-33

As we explored in week 3, beginning in chapter 2, we see three mirrored sets of stories in Daniel. This is the beginning of the central “pair” of stories. In this sort of ancient Hebraic poetic structure, we expect this central pair will point us to the main idea of chapters 2-7. This is found in verses 33-37, so we will take one week to look at the story leading up to those verses, and then we will spend a week just sitting with those key verses.

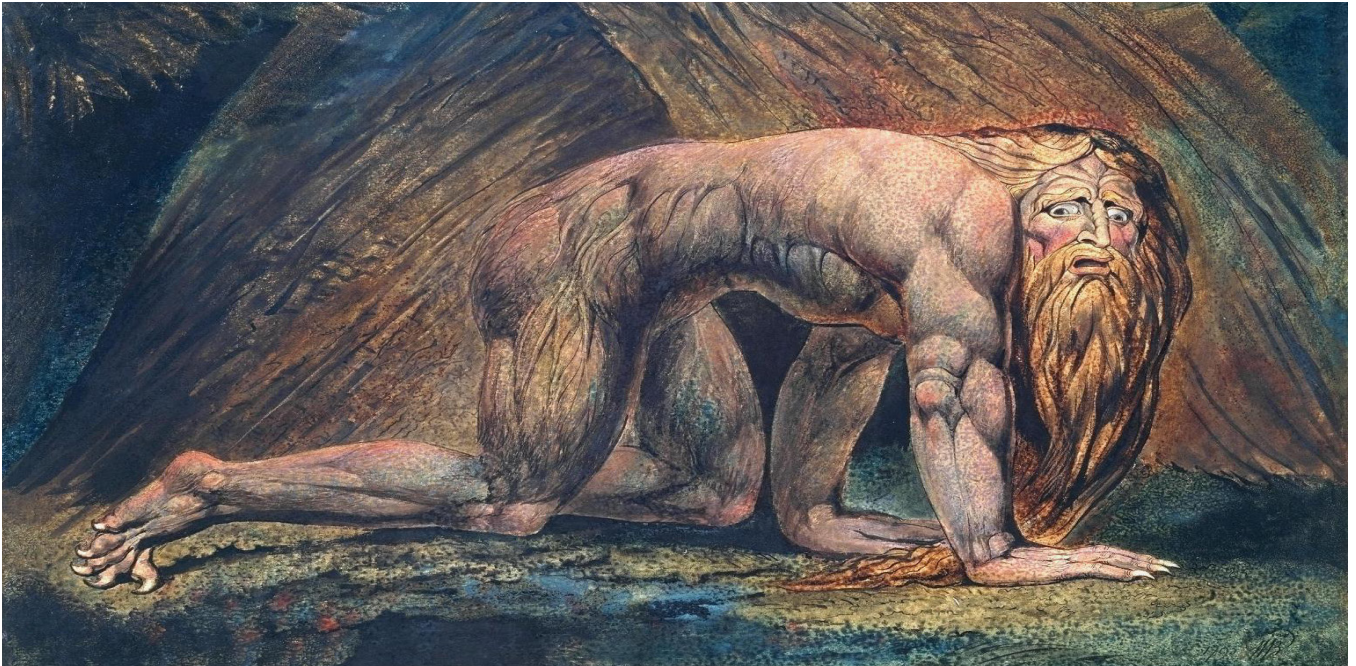
In chapters 4-5, both stories tell of a king full of pride. This week we look at Nebuchadnezzar. Interestingly, the story begins with Nebuchadnezzar talking in the first person, and much of the story is told from his perspective. Nebuchadnezzar has been the main character in each of the stories so far, and his first-person point of view makes it even stronger.

Nebuchadnezzar has another dream that no one but Daniel can interpret. Nebuchadnezzar says that Daniel has the “spirit of the holy gods” in him. Even after the many signs that Nebuchadnezzar has seen, he still doesn’t view YHWH as an authority figure. YHWH is just a god to him. He still believes that other gods may rival him. He seems to think of himself in the same way. In verse 30, he proclaims, “Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?” He is speaking of himself and his conquests how the prophets of YHWH speak of YHWH. He views himself as a deity.

So Daniel interprets his dream for him. Nebuchadnezzar is told God will make him like a beast of the field. In the context of the Bible, the significance of this statement is astounding. Remember in Genesis 1 and 2, where God created mankind in his images. They were given rule over the beasts of the field, and in Psalm 8, we see that they were given dominion over all of the works of the hands of God.

Nebuchadnezzar ruled over the whole known world at the time, and he says it is because of his power and his majesty. This is the height of folly. Nebuchadnezzar has no power except what has been given to him by YHWH, but he thinks he is greater than YHWH. So in return, he is made into a beast. The very thing that we were directly given rule over as images of God is what he becomes.

Lest we deceive ourselves, we also act like Nebuchadnezzar in many ways we don’t even realize. Our



natural bent is toward the self-glorifying abuse of power, not toward doing what is right. The sin of Nebuchadnezzar is not dissimilar to the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden. They were given rule and authority over all creation, and instead of glorifying God with their authority, they worshiped the creation rather than the creator. History shows that many of us would do the same thing if put in Nebuchadnezzar's place.

In the end, Nebuchadnezzar repents of his wickedness and declares the God of Israel the Most High God. He finally recognizes that there is one Lord of all, YHWH, and there is none like him. God spares him and restores him to his position and place of power. This seems to be the end of Nebuchadnezzar in the narrative, which is a beautiful story of God bringing his forgiveness even to the foreigner.

**ADDITIONAL TEXTS
TO READ:**

Romans 1:18-24
Genesis 1-2
Psalm 8

SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS

1. What is your primary sphere of influence? What decisions do you make that impact others?

2. In what ways is it easy to fall into the trap of using your position for your own personal gain at the expense of others?

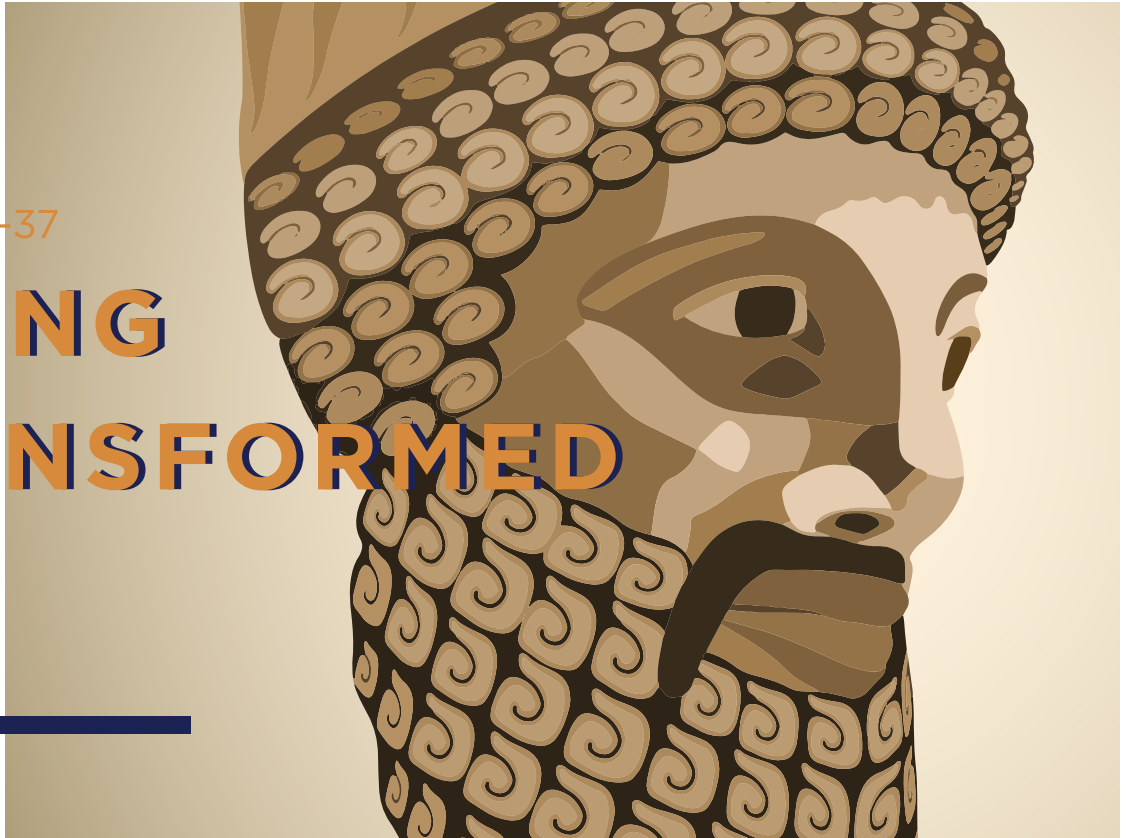
3. Are there ways that you have taken advantage of your position that has harmed others? Have you made it right with them?

4. As rulers of our own sphere, how can we rule with the knowledge that ultimately our authority should reflect God?

5. What can we actively do to bring life from these situations rather than leaning into self-exaltation?

Daniel 4:34-37

A KING TRANSFORMED



As we read the Bible, it is important to keep the author's thoughts together in the way they are presented to truly understand what is being communicated. Daniel has several stories side by side, each pointing us to the hope for the Jews in exile. Their hope is in the reality that God is in control, even in exile, the book ending with God promising deliverance to his people.

When we finally arrive at the key point of the text, it is important to sit and savor the beauty of the truth being communicated. We have come to the mountain top of the literary structure in Chapters 2-7, so we will pause and meditate on just a few verses. Think about what the exiles must have felt as they read this book. Think about the overwhelming weight of being taken from your land by a foreign army. Think about the terrors these people have witnessed. Slow down. Try to feel what they are feeling.

Then hear the words of the most powerful person in the world. The person who led the army against your people, against your family, against you. He defiled the temple. He murdered countless people. He thought he was at the top of the world. He says of YHWH:

*His dominion is an eternal dominion;
his kingdom endures from generation to generation.
All the peoples of the earth
are regarded as nothing.*

Oh, the hope that would be in that message! One can imagine their hearts leaping in their chest as they hear these words. Our oppressor is nothing. YHWH will reign forever! Hallelujah! Rejoice in his name! Praise be to our God!

*No one can hold back his hand
or say to him: "What have you done?"*

It is our God, YHWH, who has the final say. What he commands will be done. Even though it may seem that Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon has won, in the end, every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess that YHWH is above all.



“Everything he does is right and all his ways are just.”

This truth is where the exiles would find their assurance. They follow and believe in a God who always does right and is just. He is always sovereign. He will reign forever. No king or kingdom can ever rise up and oppose him. He will lay low all who rise up and fight against him.

Yet he is a God of mercy and compassion. In a phrase often repeated throughout scripture, Exodus 34 describes him as YHWH, YHWH, “...the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin ” (Exodus 34:6-7a). He will destroy all who oppose him but has his gentle and loving hands open to all who will turn to him, even wicked kings.

It’s very likely that most of us will never command the military might of Nebuchadnezzar or be responsible for the carnage left in his wake. If God can change the heart of Nebuchadnezzar, no one is outside of his reach. The blood of Christ is sufficient to pay for all of our sins and transgressions.

So rejoice in the Lord, who is our salvation. Praise him with a song that doesn’t end or in the words of the psalmist:

Psalm 100
Shout for joy to YHWH [Lord], all the earth.

Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs.

Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his;

we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name.

For the Lord is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.

ADDITIONAL TEXTS TO READ:

Psalm 145
Isaiah 45:23; 54:17
Philippians 2:10-11
Revelation 5:9-10

SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS

1. What led you to Christ? Share your story.

2. What comfort have you found in Christ?

3. Share a story of a time when God has been there for you in your life

4. What are your favorite songs of praise to the LORD?

5. What reminds you most of God's goodness

6. What reminds you most of God's mercy?

Daniel 5

WRITING ON THE WALL



John Martin, Belshazzar's Feast, c. 1821; half-size sketch held by the Yale Center for British Art

In week three of our study on Daniel, we observed that because of the way the stories are told in Daniel, the author is pointing the reader to a unified message rather than simply recording historical narrative. One example of this is in Chapter 5, the story of the death of King Belshazzar, and Chapter 7, which tells us of a dream Daniel had during the reign of Belshazzar, which are told out of chronological order. The author believes the message they're trying to communicate is more important than the order of events.

As we read through the Bible, we see several stories not being told in chronological order to make a point. One of the more poignant examples is Jesus' cleansing of the temple. In the Gospel of John, the story is told right at the beginning of the narrative, in its second chapter. This occurs at the end of Jesus' life in all the other gospels. This doesn't mean the stories aren't being truthful; rather, they are being told in such a way that points the reader to the main idea.

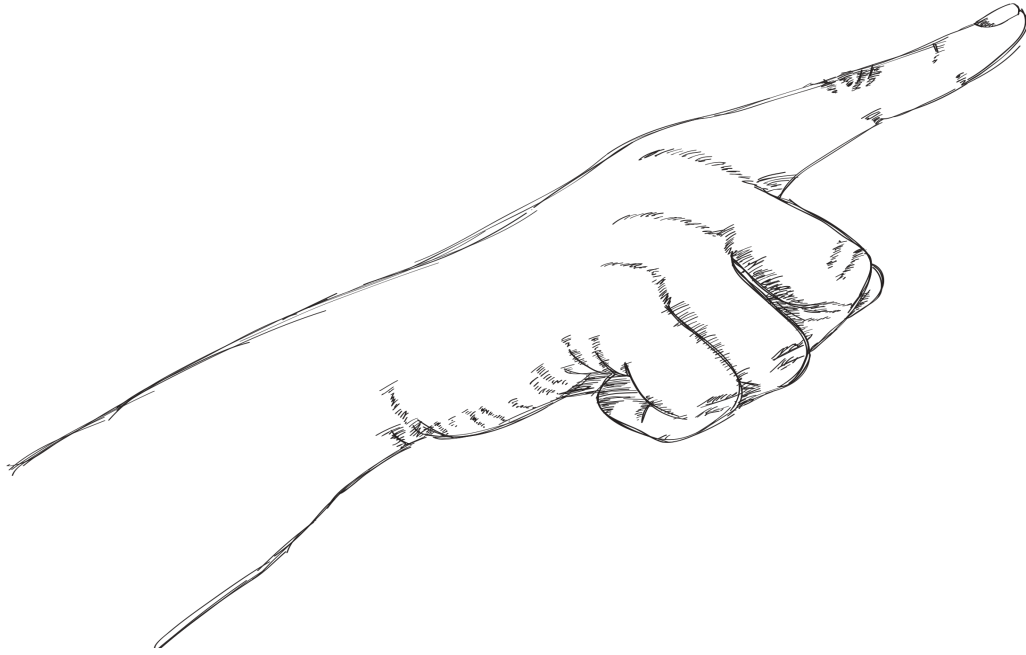
The author of Daniel pairs stories together throughout chapters 2-7 to communicate the ultimate point of the narrative. These pairs reach their climax in Chapter 4, which means we now begin our journey through the next set in each of the narrative pairs.

Chapter 5 is the second half of the pair that started in Chapter 4. These are the stories of the arrogance of Belshazzar and Nebuchadnezzar and how they each respond to God. Nebuchadnezzar is arrogant, and God humbles him. He repents declaring God the Most High. Belshazzar is arrogant and believes he can use the sacred plunder from the Jerusalem Temple to worship his gods. He takes his pride to his grave.

During the siege of Jerusalem, it was recorded that Nebuchadnezzar took the consecrated items Solomon made for the Temple and brought them back to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar stored them away in Shinar and left them there. The plunder and destruction of the temple was likely a power move to end the constant rebellion of the people in Jerusalem.

Belshazzar decided that instead of just leaving the plunder as his father did, he was going to use them for his own celebration in the worship of pagan deities. YHWH did not tolerate this blasphemy. As Belshazzar, his wives, and concubines drank out of the consecrated cups, a disembodied hand showed up and wrote on the wall.

Again, Daniel is called, but when offered gifts from the king, we see a different response from Daniel than



before. With Nebuchadnezzar, he accepts the gifts and promotion but here, before he even interprets the sign, he rejects the gifts offered by the king. When he begins to respond, he doesn't begin with, "Oh, King live forever." Daniel walks into the room and harshly reprimands the king, but he still interprets the writing. Belshazzar will be killed by an invasion that very night. This means that while Belshazzar was planning a party to show off his own greatness and to worship his gods, his city was surrounded by an overwhelming enemy army. That army tore through the city so quickly that it cost the king his life that very night.

In contrast to the consistent refrain of the stories of Nebuchadnezzar, his father, this story of Belshazzar doesn't end with the elevation of YHWH. And it is no surprise that we see the death of a king in Belshazzar's story. The message is clear; even these rulers have a choice before them—follow YHWH, or judgment

will come. This passage continues the idea that we saw in chapter 4, where even the most powerful humans ultimately are faced with the decision that we have all been faced with since the Garden of Eden story: Trust in what God has told us is the right way to live or try to define right and wrong on your own.

While many of us don't struggle with worshiping pagan deities with consecrated items, how often do we take the time and money that God has given us to worship something less than him? It is easy to sit back and think that we aren't guilty of this sort of sin and blasphemy.

At a fundamental level, the wrong actions of Belshazzar are something many of us struggle with. However, instead of using golden cups to worship pagan deities, we use wonderful blessings from the Lord for our own gain. Examples of this could be viewing our children not as individuals, who have their own hopes and desires, but as a smaller

version of ourselves in which we can relive our own hopes and dreams. It could be finding our worth and value in our status at work rather than in Christ. Or using our cell phones and social media to boost our ego and self-esteem rather than being salt and light in our communities. It could even look like us not stewarding and caring for our small patch of creation God has given us. Ultimately, Belshazzar represents every human who chooses their self-interests and desires over living our lives for the glory of God.

**ADDITIONAL TEXTS
TO READ:**

Matthew 5-7
Matthew 22:37
Micah 6:8

SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Idols can be viewed as any part of creation that we put before God. What are idols that you naturally lean toward?
2. Do your idols look the same now as they did when you were younger?
3. What leads us to find our joy and value in these things?
4. What can lead us to take our blessings and turn them into idols?
5. How can we be made aware of idols we don't even recognize that we have?
6. In what ways can you change your approach to life in order to combat the worship of these idols?

Daniel 6

THE LIONS DEN



Daniel's Answer to the King (1890; Manchester Art Gallery)

Daniel, after 70 years living under the reign and rule of Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian Empire, is working for a new king. Despite this, he is still doing the same thing—being faithful to God and excellent at his work. Try as they might, his fellow workers can find no fault in him.

What would it be like if Christians were known as people like Daniel? God's goodness would be on full display to the world through the diligent and faithful work of his people, unable to be accused of wrongdoing. This is a brilliant thing for Christians to strive for, but ultimately, it isn't the point of this chapter.

The story revolves around this new leader, Darius, and the other provincial rulers of Persia called satraps. The other satraps have a problem, and that problem is Daniel. Daniel, through his excellent work, is making them look bad. They have power, and they want more power, but they can never live up to Daniel's standard. Instead of growing and learning, they decide the easiest solution is to take Daniel out.

Unfortunately for the other satraps, Daniel has Darius' favor. So how do you get a man, who does no wrong, to fall out of favor with the boss? It just so happens that Daniel was an extremely religious man whose daily life is oriented around his beliefs. They decide that if they can get Darius to command some general command to all people under his authority that inadvertently condemns Daniel due to his religious devotion, they can get what they want. There was no better way to accomplish their goal than by suggesting to Darius an idea that also stroked his ego. So it is decreed by Darius and put into law that no one can pray to anyone except Darius for 30 days. Like Nebuchadnezzar in Chapter 3, Darius has lost sight of who he really is and how much power he has. He puts himself in the place of a deity by decreeing that prayers be given to him. Ironically, Darius wasn't even the highest ruler in his own kingdom. A careful reading of Daniel 5:31 shows us that the kingdom was received by Darius and Daniel 9:1 says Darius was made king over the realm. Historical records show that Cyrus the Great, who also is mentioned in Daniel (1:21;6:28), was the one who took over Belshazzar's Kingdom. So Darius was made a king over a portion of the empire, but Cyrus was king of kings, which makes sense of the problem that Darius runs into when his vain command turns sideways. He can enact and decree a law, but he has no power to undo it.

In order to remove Daniel's power, the satraps disregard Daniel's humanity and get him condemned to death. They are acting like animals or using the imagery of the rest of the book, beasts. So Daniel is thrown to the beasts and is faced with a certain demise.



The beasts do not consume Daniel. In fact, to recall the imagery from Chapter 1, the sacrificial lamb spends the night at peace with the lions. The lion and lamb lay together peacefully because God chooses to spare him.

The humans who acted like beasts didn't get their way. They are met with the fate that they intended for the person of God. They and their families meet their doom because of the satrap's animal-like behavior. They perpetrated evil, but God, whose plans would not be thwarted, worked all things for the good of Daniel, who loved him.

**ADDITIONAL TEXTS
TO READ:**

Isaiah 11:6
Genesis 50:20
Romans 8:28

SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever had a co-worker seem like they were trying to get you in trouble?
2. How do/did you respond when put in those sorts of situations?
3. What are some ways that someone has treated you as less than human?
4. Are there times where it is easy for you to forget the humanity of others? What are some examples?
5. What can we do to show others that they are valued and loved?

Daniel 7

DANIEL'S DREAM



Daniel's vision of the four beasts 1809 Luigi SABATELLI

This will be the last part of our journey in Daniel. We've come to the end of the Aramaic section of Daniel in chapter 7, which is the pair to Daniel 2. Remember in Daniel Chapter 2, Nebuchadnezzar has a dream that greatly troubled him, and he could not understand it. Daniel is given the answer to the meaning of the dream by God and interprets it for the king. The dream shows a giant statue of different materials representing four different kingdoms. At the end of the dream, we see a giant rock cut out by a hand that is not human (let the reader remember Daniel 5), which smashes the statue. The statue turns to dust while the rock grows into a huge mountain and fills the whole earth. The interpretation offered to the reader is that the rock is a "kingdom set up by God" that will endure forever. Chapter 7 is going to repeat this same point with different imagery.

As we approach this text, we need to keep in mind where this book is going and what point the author makes. The point of the book is to show that YHWH is the King over all earthly kingdoms even when his people are in exile. The book is directly appealing to the people of God to stay faithful while they wait to return to the promised land. These are people looking for hope, and this book aims to tell them where their hope lies.

This is important to keep in mind as we read because these passages have been used to spark speculation about the end times. We can't allow those speculations to cause us to miss what the author intends to communicate. Interpretation of any passage of scripture must follow after understanding the author's intended meaning. In chapter 7, we are seeing the completion of the pattern begun in chapter 2, elevating YHWH as the Most High God, greater than all, and having authority over all earthly powers and kingdoms.

This time, instead of the king having a dream and Daniel interpreting it, Daniel now has a dream that he doesn't understand and an angel interprets it. What Daniel sees are four beasts who rise from the sea. This begs the question, why beasts and why from the sea? Both terms are callbacks to Genesis Chapter 1.

Beasts are what God commands humans to rule over, but instead of ruling over the beasts and subduing creation, humans have become like beasts; just look at Daniel 4. When we treat other images of God (humans) as a thing to be used for our purposes, pleasures, or gain, we act like beasts and treat them as beasts. The beasts in this vision are likely talking about specific empires, such as the Medio-Persian, Grecian, and Roman Empires, but it can apply to any nation or people group who deal with other humans this way.



Daniel's Vision of the Four Beasts, engraving from Merian's Illustrated Bible, c. 1627.

These beasts all come from the sea. This image also comes from a careful reading of Genesis 1. In verse 2 of Genesis 1, we see the Spirit of God hovering over the waters, with the world being chaotic and empty. God then acts and brings order to the chaos and dry land for people to live on. Since then, in the imagination of ancient Jews, the sea has been a place of chaos and disorder. This is why it is so significant, in Revelation 21, that there is no sea. All the chaos will ultimately be set right by God.

So why so much imagery? Why not just tell us that Jesus is coming back and setting up his kingdom? In many ways, imagery draws us in and draws on our emotions in a way that mere diction fails.

Think back to the story of David and Bathsheeba. When confronting David's wickedness, a forthright statement accusing David would likely have drawn the ire of the king. Instead, the prophet Nathan tells David a

story of injustice and gets David invested and ready to bring the wrongdoer to justice, only to be shown that he is the villain. This took down the king's defenses and allowed him to see the truth. When dealing with people in extremely difficult circumstances, God doesn't just tell them that hope is coming; he tells them a story. He hooks them in and gives them the hope that they need to endure their trials and tribulations: The hope that the Son of Man will come, be lifted up, and bring the Kingdom of God to this earth.

ADDITIONAL TEXTS TO READ:

Genesis 1
Revelation 13, 21

SMALL GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Whether in movies, books, or any other media, what stories tell a story to make a point?
2. What movies or shows have you watched that draw you into responding emotionally? Why do we do that?
3. Do you know any stories people hold on to for hope in difficult circumstances?
4. Why are we so much more receptive to a story rather than a statement?
5. What is the ultimate hope we have as Christians?
6. How do we live differently with that story in our minds?

RESOURCES AND CREDITS

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Resources used for this study:

Chiasm in Daniel
Bruce Gore Historical context
Zondervan Daniel-Malachi
Goldingjay Commentary on Daniel
Hamilton Commentary on Daniel
NT Wright on Exile
Daniel Smith Christopher on Exile
Tim Mackie Series on Daniel
The Bible Project: Daniel