

Trusting God's Rule In Dark Times

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[0 : 00] Well, we are coming back to Daniel chapter 1, and I wonder where you think of as home for you.

They say home is where the heart is. So then where is home for us? Perhaps you feel that you've been spending too much time at home recently, but in fact the Bible tells us that we as Christians are living away from home.

Paul writes that our citizenship is in heaven, and yet we live here in the world. Peter calls us sojourners and exiles away from our true home.

And in that sense, we as Christians have much in common with Daniel, whom we meet in the opening pages of this book. In the opening lines here, we read first of God's king, then God's treasure, then God's people being taken away from their home into exile in the land of Babylon. And this had been coming for a long time. God's people had continually rebelled against him, pushed him away, and God had promised that if they did not turn back to him, he would send them away.

[1 : 20] And here it is happening. This is the start of an exile that was to last 70 years. But really the question at the heart of this book is, how could God's people stay true to God in exile?

Or as the psalmist puts it, how can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? That's a huge question for us too, isn't it? How do we live faithfully for God in even dark and compromised circumstances in this world?

And the answer we find here is that God's people can not only survive but thrive when we see that God is ruling over all of life, the good, the bad, and the ugly.

And we see how this truth shapes the way that Daniel and his friends live and work, even away from home in exile. Three times we read in this passage that God gave, or the Lord gave.

And each time we see in a different way how God is ruling in the lives of his people. Firstly, that God rules over the circumstances that they didn't ask for. Secondly, that God rules even in the choices that they would rather avoid.

[2 : 33] And finally, that God rules through the work that they would never have chosen. How then can we live faithfully for God as exiles in the world?

Well, firstly, then we need to know that God rules over the circumstances that we didn't ask for. What happens at the start of this book is just about the worst thing imaginable for God's people at this time.

Will you read with me again from verse 1? Here we read, 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 them in the treasure house of his God.

This is a nightmare on a national scale. At this point in history, Babylon was one of the most powerful empires in the world. And Judah was in a bad way.

[3 : 39] King Jehoiakim had led God's people in all kinds of sin and rebellion. And then he betrayed the king of Babylon. Babylon. So it's no real surprise to find Nebuchadnezzar and his armies soon turning up at the door to set things right.

But what is surprising is that Nebuchadnezzar goes back to Babylon, not only with the king, but also we read with some of the articles, the vessels, the treasure taken from the temple, the house of God, to the house of his God.

Now, when kings went to war in the ancient world, the battle wasn't simply a question of who has the stronger army, but who has the stronger God. And when Nebuchadnezzar takes this treasure

from the house of the true and living God and puts them in the house of his false God, it sent a clear message to these exiles.

Your God has lost. How can this be? The treasure of God in the trophy cabinet of an idol. For these exiles, their world is falling apart.

Is God truly dead and buried? We see in the first four words of verse two that the answer is no.

[5 : 02] Will you look with me there? And the Lord delivered. Or the Lord gave. We see that the Lord, far from having been defeated, is actually the one orchestrating this whole drama.

He gave his treasure to Babylon. He sent his people away into exile. It's an exile that he planned. And something that looked like defeat was, in fact, under his rule.

God was still on the throne, still holding everything together, even when the world seemed to be falling apart. Now, this is so important for us to grasp.

One of the hardest questions that we can ask ourselves is, how can God be in control when things seem to go so badly wrong in our world? Especially over the last few months.

Perhaps there have been times where you have found it hard to believe that God could still be ruling perfectly. I wonder if you felt sometimes as if the world is slipping through God's fingers.

[6 : 07] Perhaps if you're not a Christian here today, you wonder how God could even exist in a world where life can go so wrong. Here we find that even in the middle of the worst case scenario for God's people, God was still in control of the situation.

Behind the things that we see, he remains on the throne. He never has to compromise. He's never caught off guard.

His mind never wanders. He's never surprised. He is sovereign. The last time I preached from this passage was actually the first week of this year.

None of us knew what kind of world was around the corner in the months to come. The world that we live in now is barely recognizable from what it was at the beginning of this year.

But nine months later, with all that we've been through, God is still on the throne. He hasn't changed. Though our lives and our world have.

[7 : 14] He is ruling perfectly. But why does that even matter for our ordinary, everyday lives? Well, we see that trusting God's sovereignty gives strength to his people away from home.

We see some of the people are also taken away to Babylon in verse 3. The royal family, the nobility, youths without blemish, skillful in all wisdom, understanding, learning.

In short, these exiles are the future of God's people. And now they are enrolled as students in the school of Babylon. They were there to be educated for three years.

They're going to think like Babylonians. They're taught the literature and the language. They're going to live like Babylonians. They're there to eat and drink what the king eats and drinks. They're going to become Babylonians.

They're given new names. Names literally put on them. This would have been extremely traumatic, being stripped of their whole true identity to be replaced by a different false identity.

[8 : 18] The aim of this program was to rewrite their DNA as the people of God, to shift their thinking and living and identity away from God and into Babylon.

It's the beginning of a battle for their hearts and minds. Every day they would be confronted by two opposite and rival worldviews, God or Babylon, the world or the word.

It's a seriously compromising situation. And one that we know well if we belong to God today. Our hearts and minds are pulled in all kinds of different directions by the world that we live in.

How can I tell what is true? Who meets my daily needs? Who am I? Where do I belong? These are questions that we are confronted with.

And with so many answers that come from all different directions, it's so easy for the truth to be crowded out of our hearts, to lose sight of God's faithfulness, to forget our identity is rooted in Christ.

[9 : 23] In those times when we are tempted and drawn to think and live and become like the world all around us, it might cause us to think that God has lost his grip on this universe.

Where is his all-powerful rule when we feel so compromised and weak and vulnerable in every way? These are not the circumstances that any of us asks for.

But even in these most pressing of circumstances, God has not lost. We are not here by accident. God rules no less today than he did in the time of Daniel.

But his rule doesn't come in impressive packaging. We see this so clearly when God himself came into the world. When Jesus was born, his life was threatened by an evil king. He had to leave his home and grow up as a refugee in a foreign land. He lived as a man of sorrows, familiar with grief. He died a criminal's death, nailed to a cross.

[10 : 35] This is King Jesus. This is God with us. So did he really have it under control? Well, yes. Because it was in fact in Jesus that God won his great victory.

The cross didn't look like the power of God. Yet it was through Jesus' life and death that God rescued his people from our sin. This is how God chooses to show his power.

For as Paul says, the foolishness of God is wiser than men. And the weakness of God is stronger than men. God's rule in our world doesn't always seem obvious.

But God tells us in his word that for now, this is how he chooses to work. On the surface, in unimpressive ways. Ways that we barely sometimes understand.

But truly, the one who gave his son to die for our sins has not lost control of his world. We may still come to him with lots of questions.

[11 : 45] There may be still things that we don't understand why they have to be the way they are. But God's sovereignty gives us a safe place to stand when life seems out of control.

Because God rules even in these circumstances that you didn't ask for. The next we see here also that God rules in the choices that you would rather avoid.

We quickly find here that Daniel wasn't a fan of the phrase, let go and let God. This idea that if God is in control, then the way that I live doesn't really matter.

Well, in fact, here we see the opposite. That God's sovereignty over all of life should radically shape the way that we live. You look at me at verse 8.

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 in this way.

[12 : 44] Outwardly, another name had been put on him. But in himself, he put it on his heart not to be taken over by this new false identity.

And we see that God is with Daniel in exile when he was faced with tough choices about how to live in a hostile place. God gave him a way to stay faithful.

We read that when he asked the chief that he wouldn't defile himself, that God caused the official to show favor and sympathy to Daniel. God gave him favor and compassion in the eyes of his enemies.

But why, of all things, did Daniel decide not to eat and drink the food and wine? He kept studying the Babylonian books. He learned the language.

He even kept his new name. So why would he not touch the king's food and wine? Well, some people think it has to do with the dietary laws in the Old Testament.

[13 : 46] Things that ruled out meat like pork that might have been on the king's menu. But it wouldn't rule out every kind of food and drink that he might have had. Others think it has to do maybe with worship.

Maybe the meat from the king's table would have been sacrificed first to the false gods of Babylon. Perhaps then Daniel didn't want anything to do with the worship of idols.

And these reasons, they may have played into Daniel's thinking when he asks only to eat vegetables and drink water. What certainly didn't cross Daniel's mind was an idea that has since grown into what's called the Daniel Plan.

If you're unfamiliar with the Daniel Plan, the website says it is the groundbreaking healthy lifestyle program that could change your life inside and out.

The creators of this diet plan turned Daniel's decision to only eat vegetables into a faith-fueled health kick. Now, you too can be better in appearance simply by following Daniel's healthy eating plan.

[14 : 51] Now, I used to be a vegetarian for several years. You may or may not know that. There's nothing wrong with eating less meat. But did Daniel really go vegan for his health?

The answer is no. Daniel didn't eat vegetables because he wanted to be transformed inside and out. In fact, the opposite. Daniel turned down the king's food and wine because he wanted to stay who he was under immense pressure to compromise.

Eating from the king's table every day was designed to show the exiles that their lives depended on the good grace of King Nebuchadnezzar. So we might say it was designed to teach them, don't bite

the hand that feeds you.

But Daniel knew that wasn't true. His life rested on the good grace of God. It is God who gives life and breath and everything. So Daniel's decision shows that his trust was in God, not the king, to give him all that he would need.

This wasn't an easy choice to make. Nebuchadnezzar wasn't the kind of king that you would want to offend. He, the servant that Daniel speaks to, feared losing his head if he went to the king with this request.

[16:06] But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself. It's a decision that made Daniel's life obviously different from the pattern that was being set for him in Babylon.

And we face hard life choices also as God's people today. Not necessarily in what we eat and drink. But things like how do we deal with decisions where our love for God leads us to live differently and distinctively from the world around us.

You sometimes you think perhaps it would be easier just to kind of cut ourselves off from our culture altogether. Every worldly influence to kind of isolate ourselves from it.

But notice that Daniel didn't feel the need to do that. He kept learning the culture of Babylon. And yet he still knew where to draw the line. You know, I wonder if the greater draw for us as God's people today is to try blending in, camouflaging ourselves in our environment.

To avoid being too obviously different. But Christ calls us to live in a way that shows the world who we worship. You sometimes in very obvious ways taking an opportunity to talk with someone about Jesus, even if it is uncomfortable.

[17:26] Sometimes in less obvious ways, perhaps there are just habits and patterns in your life that need to be cut out. In order for the world to see clearly the God that you worship.

Or perhaps in the community or at work, reaching out to someone that you find difficult or who may be even hostile to your faith. To find a way to bless them.

There are so many choices we face during our days. How to live distinctive lives of love for God and for our neighbor. And perhaps even just to stick with Daniel's thinking here.

How do we show the world that it is God who gives us all that we need? We live in a culture that loves excess. Going after things. Spending on things that don't last on repeat.

And the world wants us to want that kind of life. We're bombarded with advertising that's designed to capture our hearts. With things that we're told we need to have the life that we really want.

[18:28] But if we buy into that pattern of life, what does that tell the world about who God is? Ultimately, that he doesn't satisfy. That he can't be trusted to provide all that we need for daily living.

But if we do trust God to give us all we need, we won't be always drawn after the next thing at the next thing. Even if those things are fine in themselves.

So how do we live distinctively in the way that we spend and buy things? This is only one example of a decision that we might face. Things we have to grapple with.

The big changes that we're living through right now. They actually provide us a great opportunity to prayerfully ask where in our own lives and in our community. Do we perhaps need to draw a line?

And live in a way that tells the world more clearly who it is that we worship. You're like Daniel, being faithful in many situations involves saying no to what the world offers.

[19:32] But that ultimately is how Jesus Christ calls us to follow him. If anyone would come after me, he says, deny yourself. Take up your cross and follow.

We are called to live lives of costly faithfulness. And if we follow Jesus in this way, our lives will be different and distinctive. That can be hard.

But God is with us. We see that God gave the way for Daniel to live faithfully and distinctively. Even in this dark and compromising situation. He opened up the way for Daniel's decision to live faithfully.

In ordinary ways. He even fixed the outcome. So that by the end of the test in verse 15, we find not only were Daniel and his friends not worse, but actually better in appearance than any of the others. God was there ruling over the hard choices that Daniel and his friends had to make. And so Daniel was not afraid to draw a line.

[20:37] To live differently and distinctively. Because he knew who he was serving. Not the king of Babylon. But the king of kings. If you are serving God who is forever on the throne, you do not need to fear taking tough choices for him.

We don't know the end result. But we can be confident that even though we don't know the outcome, we know the God who is with us. And that he is guarding our way as we walk with him. The Lord has said, I will never leave you nor forsake you. So we can confidently say, The Lord is my helper. I will not fear. What can man do to me?

God rules even in the choices that you would rather avoid. And finally then, we see that God rules even through the work that you would never have chosen.

Knowing God was in control meant Daniel could say no to compromise. But Daniel's trust in God's rule also meant he could say yes to the things that put him in a position to bless others in his exile.

[21 : 47] In verse 17, we read that as for these youths, God gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom. And Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams. Even though it was designed to replace their faith with fear, we see these guys actually excel in Babylon.

Because God gave them all that they needed to be a blessing to those whom they met. In verse 9, we read, The king spoke with them and among all of them, none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.

They were in a class of their own. Ten times better than any of the other guys in the whole kingdom. And so they were placed in the service of the king.

Now we might wonder, how could that kind of work have value to God? They were working for the enemy. Verse 17, we read though that for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill.

God blessed them in their work for the king. And that's a reminder to us this morning that however our work looks, however brutal or boring or backbreaking it may be, all work has value in God's economy when we are working to serve him.

[23 : 06] The reformer Martin Luther summed up this idea when he said that God milks the cows through the work of the milkmaid. Milking cows is not a fancy job.

It starts early, long hours, hard labor. But God works even through milkmaids to bless his world through the milking of cows.

When we build a wall between the sacred and the secular, what happens at church on a Sunday and what happens at work on a Monday, we're at risk of missing how God is working in his world through his church every single day.

Perhaps you wonder what your work is really worth. Do I make a difference doing what I am doing?

But we see that even here in exile, God placed Daniel and his friends just where they were.

He gave them their work and used them to bless the unlikeliest of people. And God has placed you where you are today.

[24 : 12] Perhaps it isn't clear to you why you're doing what you're doing. And yet God gives you all you need to serve him and bless others where you are working as you do what you do.

For a few years while I was studying, I worked back of house in a restaurant, basically doing all the really dirty jobs. It was a really gross job to have. But before I went to work, I used to read these verses from Paul's letter to the Colossians chapter 3.

Paul instructs the Christians in Colossae, Whatever you do, work heartily as for the Lord and not for men. You are serving the Lord Christ.

Now, Paul wrote that to slaves. But he's writing to encourage them. Remember who it is you're really working for. You are serving the Lord Christ.

And so work heartily as you're working for him. And you're working for the King of Kings. And that changed the way that I saw my work. Knowing that whatever I was asked to do that day, I was serving Christ.

[25 : 20] He had put me there. He'd set me to work. He was using my work to bless others, even if I couldn't see how. Knowing that God rules over even stressful and dull and difficult work gives us the strength to work heartily for him.

Even in exile, God gave Daniel and his friends all they needed to bless their captors. No doubt they had read Jeremiah's letter to the exiles.

He writes, And through their work, God placed these guys in the very heart of the kingdom of Babylon to live and work for him.

Even in what seemed like dire circumstances, God was sovereignly advancing his kingdom in the court of a foreign king through the faithful work of ordinary men.

Whatever we do, God gives us what we need to bless others and to bring his kingdom to bear on the lives of people that we work with. Our work is a witness to the goodness and faithfulness of the

one whom we serve and work for.

[26 : 40] So do you see your daily life, your work, your to-do list as part of God's plan for his kingdom here and now?

Because God rules even over the work that you wouldn't have chosen. You see, finally, for Daniel in verse 21, that life in Babylon wasn't just for the short term.

You see, Daniel was there until the first year of King Cyrus. That's about 70 years. In the end, Daniel outlived the exile. He didn't get to see every outcome of God's plan for him.

But he trusted that God was still ruling even when his people were far from home. And through all those years, God gave him everything he needed to stay true, even in that dark, dark place.

And as we live in a world that every day wants to press us into its own image, God's unfailing rule gives us great confidence to live and to work differently and distinctively for him, even in exile.

[27 : 48] For now, we are called to live in exile in this world. But God promises that we too will outlive this exile. The day is coming when Jesus will come again and our exile will be over.

God will live with us. We will be at home with him. And until that day, he calls us to live every day trusting in the never-ending rule of his everlasting king.

In the circumstances you didn't ask for. In the choices you'd rather avoid. In the work that you would never have chosen. Do you trust the one who is on the throne today?

Let's pray together. Our gracious heavenly father, we thank you that you rule.

We thank you that even in these difficult days that we are called to live in, still you are on the throne.

Father, we thank you that as we look at Jesus the king, we see the one who bore our suffering.

[28 : 58] The one who understands our life in this world because he has lived it. We thank you that he himself is on the throne. That we can trust our king wholly with our lives.

So, Father, we pray, give us strength as you did to Daniel so long ago. To live truly for you. In the choices that we have to make about living for you.

In our work that is often difficult. And particular in these days. Lord, that you would strengthen each of us and all of us together. That we might be a brighter and clearer witness for you in this world.

And we commit ourselves to you now in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.