

Daniel Series Part 1

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[0 : 0 0] I don't know how many of you may have spent time watching big darts tournaments on TV, possibly very few. Well, the promoters of these events do all in their power to build up the excitement and anticipation of the crowd until finally, as the match is about to begin, the cry rings out around the arena, let's play darts. And everybody suitably lubricated, of course, gets very excited at the beginning of the match. Now, I had to smile a couple of weeks ago when watching on BBC Alba, I believe it was, not that I have any linguistic abilities in that direction, but I was watching the build-up to the big final of the Shinty calendar, Newton Moore against Caneusea, a classic derby in that particular sport, and it was the Kamenach Cup final at the

Bach Park in Inverness. And just as the match was about to begin, the stadium announcer, quite incongruously to my ears, shouted out, let's play Shinty. It didn't seem to work for me, but perhaps others were suitably excited by those words declared in a broad Inverness accent.

Well, allow me a similarly incongruous hijacking of the language from the lakeside or the world of professional darts for the uninitiated as I introduce what will occupy our attention in the months ahead, along with other things as well, of course. Let's study Daniel. Let's study Daniel.

Daniel is one seriously exciting book. It seems to have a bit of everything. You have the memorable miracles from the lion's den to the fiery furnace. You have the mysterious visions that grip some with an almost obsessive fascination. You have, of course, the heroes of the faith like Daniel himself and his friends who stand before us as an example and as a challenge. Many of us as children would have sung the words of the chorus, dare to be a Daniel, dare to stand alone, dare to have a purpose clear, and dare to make it known. And even as we taught, we were inspired by these words and the example of Daniel and his courage and his heroism. We have, of course, the lessons on prayer and of rigorous, holy living that remain vividly and urgently contemporary. We have, running through the book, the drama of the perennial and continuing battle between Jerusalem and Babylon, between good and evil, between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. And in that battle as it is played out in the book of Daniel, the appearance of the little guy, the seeming underdog, far from home and surrounded by enemies, and yet who ends up on top. Emperors come and go, but Daniel remains. And why does that happen?

Why does the little guy come out on top? Well, this brings us to the heart of the matter. The little guy on God's side can defeat giants. And why is this so? Because his God, our God, is a great God. Because God is in control. Because God's kingdom is an eternal kingdom, and a relentlessly expanding kingdom that will never be destroyed. So let's study Daniel.

[3 : 5 1] And today, by way of introduction, I want us to identify the big message of the book. It's a simple message, but a crucial one. And it's a message that we need to grasp and embrace and cling to in the face of much that would suggest otherwise. And the message is this, God rules. God rules.

Our God rules. God rules over the universe. God rules over history. God rules over the nations. God rules when good stuff happens. But He also rules when bad stuff happens. God rules in Jerusalem, and God rules in Babylon. God rules in the temple, and He rules in the palace of Nebuchadnezzar.

And this message is powerfully declared by Daniel in the very first chapter of the book, where God's rule is acknowledged and recognized in a very particular way. It is acknowledged from the very beginning of the exile to the very end of the exile. Daniel is at pains to get across this reality that the rule of God. It is a reality that the rule of God extends from the very beginning to the very end. We find that in the first two verses of the chapter, and also in the final verse of the chapter. And these are the verses that will occupy our attention. We could maybe read them again before we continue. There in Daniel chapter 1 and verse 1, And then in the final verse,

A seemingly incidental and innocuous verse, but in the final verse we read, And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus, the end of exile.

And again, we discover, and as we dig a little deeper in this verse, we will discover how again the ringing message is that God continues to rule from beginning to end, and by implication at every point in between. His rule is permanent and absolute. Now, as we've read these verses, and particularly the final verse, it's maybe not immediately obvious where that big message of God's rule is found.

[6 : 37] So let's study these verses and hear the big message that God does indeed rule. And we'll begin, understandably and reasonably, at the beginning with the first two verses. We'll consider them, and then more briefly, the final verse that speaks of the end of exile. The first two, the beginning, and the last verse, the end.

Verses 1 and 2 present to us the beginning of the story of Daniel. Indeed, the beginning of the story of the exile of God's people in Babylon.

And we need to very briefly and very inadequately present some historical background. Following the golden era for the nation of Israel under David and Solomon, the nation was divided in 931 B.C. into the northern and the southern kingdom, the kingdom of Israel and the kingdom of Judah with its capital, Jerusalem. Jerusalem, some 200 years later, the northern kingdom, fatally weakened by apostasy, falls to the Assyrians. The southern kingdom of Judah survives for a further century or so until it, too, drifts far from God and by 605 B.C. finds itself threatened by the expanding power of the Babylonian empire. Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar had extended its borders and sphere of influence and control to the point of being the undisputed global superpower of its day. And in this expansion, the time came for Jerusalem and Judah, Jerusalem as its capital, to fall to Babylon. And this fall of

Jerusalem, this conquest of Jerusalem involved three distinct attacks on the part of Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar. There was a first siege in 605 B.C. This is the one that Daniel refers to here at the beginning of his book. There was a further one in 597. It was only then that Jehoiakim, who is mentioned here, was exiled to Babylon, though he later returned to Jerusalem. And then we have the final attack that involved the brutal and blood-curdling destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. But here in chapter 1 of Daniel, where we begin the story or where the story is presented to us, the reference is to that first siege in the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim, king of Judah. And what are we told of this siege and of this initial fall of Jerusalem? Well, what we are given in these two verses is a fascinating parallel description of what happened in that year, 605 B.C. The same event is described from two distinct but complementary perspectives. The first description, which we'll identify in a moment, addresses the matter of what happened. What is it that happened in that year to Jerusalem?

While the second perspective addresses or is concerned with why it happened. That question is also addressed in these first two verses. So, two distinct but complementary perspectives. Well, what are they?

[10:10] The first description we have at the very beginning. In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem and besieged it. This is what happened. What we are given here by Daniel are historical facts subject to independent verification. And indeed, they can be independently verified by parallel historical accounts of the time. And we can come to the conclusion that this presentation of the facts of what happened is an accurate presentation of the facts of what happened. These are historical facts. What happened in that year?

Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuchadnezzar, besieged Jerusalem. He secured a victory. And that victory, as what Daniel goes on to tell us, allowed him to enter the city, indeed enter the very heart of the city, and reach the very temple of God, and take away, as victory spoil, articles from the temple of God. This is what happened. And as we just pause for a moment on that detail that is given us, perhaps at first sight, seemingly unimportant detail about the temple and temple articles. What possible significance could there be to that? But it is, as we just pause for a moment, interesting to consider what Daniel deems as most significant in this fall of Jerusalem. And it is not the deportation of Daniel and his friends that occupies the central place in his description, but rather the seizing of the temple articles.

And we pose the question, why is this? I don't know what it's like in your home, but in our home, we have as a kind of rule, it's not a written rule, that things don't matter. People matter. So if somebody accidentally drops a plate and it's broken, if it's an accident, it really isn't a big deal. There's no need for some severe punishment if accidentally a thing is broken. There are things. But if a person is hurt, be it physically or emotionally, that is a matter of concern, because people matter and things don't matter. Why is it then here that it would appear that for Daniel, things are more important than people? Or at least that's the impression that we could be left with. Why is it so significant, this reference to the temple articles? Well, it's significant because what Nebuchadnezzar is doing goes beyond a simple military victory. What Nebuchadnezzar is doing as he enters the temple and seizes the temple articles, what Nebuchadnezzar is doing is declaring his authority over the God of Israel.

his sacrilegious trampling of the very temple of God, of that sacred place where God had chosen to dwell in a special way among his people, in that place where there was the holy place and the holy of holies and the ark of the covenant as he enters in violently to this place and seizes the temple articles. Nebuchadnezzar is spitting in the face of God, and he's declaring to all who care to listen, there's a new God in town. There's a new God in town. The God of Israel is defeated. He's vanquished.

He has proved himself impotent in the face of my power. And who is the new God in town? It's not even really the gods of Babylon. Yes, Nebuchadnezzar pays lip service to the gods of Babylon. He takes the articles back to the temple in Babylon. But the real new God in town is Nebuchadnezzar himself. You see, as we continue to read the account, it's very clear that as far as Nebuchadnezzar is concerned, he is the new God in town. He is the one who reigns supreme. He is the one who is sovereign. And he spits in the face of the God of Israel as he seizes these temple articles and takes them back to Babylon. And we know how subsequently Belshazzar mocked even further as he brought out the temple articles to form part of a drunken orgy that he was celebrating. But that's for another day.

[14:32] And so there is great significance in Daniel's reference to these temple articles. God has been dethroned. A man has taken his place. Jerusalem has been defeated and Babylon reigns supreme.

This is what happened. In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And of course, the battle between Jerusalem and Babylon continues to rage. Today in Scotland, we live in a generation where appearances would suggest that Babylon has the upper hand.

As Nebuchadnezzar trampled on the sacred grounds of the temple, so today as a nation, we trample on God's name. We desecrate his day. We kill infants created in his likeness and image in the very wombs of their mothers. Our legislators glory in their ability to cast aside God's word and God's ordinances and God's law. And just the latest current crusade involving the redefinition of marriage as designed by God. We're having a conversation, a consultation that in 2012 or 2013, our legislators might so, in such a mature and avant-garde way, redefine marriage. Who cares what God says? Who cares what the Bible says? There's a new God in town. There's a new God in town. And that new God is modern, civilized, tolerant, secular man. But back to Jerusalem. The first description describes what happened, but the second describes why it happened. And what is the second description? Well, there in verse 2, the first half of the verse in particular, we have the second description, a distinct but complementary description. And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim, king of Judah, into his hand.

This is quite a remarkable statement. The fall of Jerusalem, the sacking of the temple, the mocking of God by Nebuchadnezzar, the exile of Daniel and his friends is to be attributed ultimately not to the might of Nebuchadnezzar, but to the purposes of God. God delivered Jehoiakim into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. In what sense does this provide us an answer to the question, why? We've suggested that the first description is an answer to the question, what? What happened? How does this description provide an answer to the question, why? Why would God do such a thing? Why would He score such a seemingly monumental own goal? Well, the why is to be found in God's covenant faithfulness?

God is a faithful God, and God is true to His Word, and He is faithful in judgment. Yes, He is faithful in blessing, but He is faithful in judgment also. God had clearly, repeatedly, repeatedly, and specifically warned His people about the consequences of idolatry and apostasy, and they had stubbornly and rebelliously and repeatedly ignored those instructions and warnings.

[18 : 06] We could spend hours considering the multiple warnings that they had received, the multiple instructions, but let's limit ourselves to a couple of references. First of all, we had in the very law of Moses a clear establishing of the principle of the consequences of covenant disobedience.

We look in Leviticus in chapter 26, Leviticus chapter 26, and if we read from verse 14 just to identify what this section of the chapter is dealing with. Notice there in Leviticus chapter 26 in verse 14 we read, But if you will not listen to me and carry out all these commands, and if you reject my decrees and abhor my laws and fail to carry out all my commands and so violate my covenant, then I will do this to you.

And there follows the clear indication by God of what the consequences would be of covenant disobedience. And if we jump to verse 33, what does God say? I will scatter you among the nations and will draw out my sword and pursue you. Your land will be laid waste and your cities will lie in ruins.

And then in verse 39, those of you who are left will waste away in the lands of their enemies because of their sins, also because of their father's sins. They will waste away. Clear instruction.

This is what will happen if you reject me. This is what will happen if you rebel me. This is what will happen if you disobey me. But not only the clear principles, but specific prophetic warnings that are consistent with those principles. If we go to 2 Kings in chapter 20 and verse 14 to identify just one of the very specific warnings. There are others. Time only allows us to just notice a sample. 2 Kings chapter 20 and from verse 14. Then Isaiah, the prophet, went to King Hezekiah.

[20 : 07] Hezekiah was a king who reigned less than a century before these events. And he asked, what did those men say and where did they come from? And the king replies, from a distant land.

They came from Babylon. And the prophet asked, what did they see in your palace? They saw everything in my palace, Hezekiah said. There is nothing among my treasures that I did not show them.

Very proud about his ability to impress the delegates from Babylon. Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, hear the word of the Lord. 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. And some of your descendants, your own flesh and blood that will be born to you will be taken away and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon. Clear, detailed, specific prophetic warnings. And I think we can reasonably understand them to be prophetic words that were conditional on the people not responding as they might have done. Had there been genuine repentance, then there would have been no reason for these warnings to have been executed. But in summary, the covenant conditions were clear. The warnings were explicit, but the people and their leaders ignored them. And so verse 2 presents us the why of the events described from God's perspective.

And what can we draw from this? Well, I think we can draw from this a truth, a warning, and a challenge. First of all, we can draw truth. The truth is this, that God rules over the nations. God rules over the nations. He rules over the good ones and He rules over the bad ones. He as much ruled over Babylon as He did over Judah. God handed over Jehoiakim to Nebuchadnezzar. God orders the movements of kings and emperors and prime ministers. The heart of the king is in the hand of the Lord. He directs it like a watercourse, whatever He pleases. This is a truth that we can draw from these accounts, and very particularly from the second description of the events in 605 BC. God rules over the nations. But there is also here for us a warning. And the warning is this, that God is faithful. That's such a nice, warm thing to say, isn't it? God is faithful. But remember this, God is faithful in judgment. He is faithful in judgment.

He will discipline His own. In that judgment, there can be those we might describe as innocent victims, like Daniel. And yet, in that judgment, the purposes of God are purposes of restoration.

[23 : 06] They are purposes of sanctification. They are purposes of blessing. So, in the judgment that is painful and is burdensome for His people, yet in that faithful judgment, the ultimate goal of God is of restoration and of blessing for His people. There is a truth. There is a warning. There is also a challenge for us today. And the challenge is this, that we would ask the why question. You see, it is as true today in Libya or Syria or the Horn of Africa or Holyrood or the Parliament in London. It is as true today in these places as it was in Jerusalem in 605 BC, that behind the description of world events, that journalists and commentators can helpfully provide, there is another storyline. There is God working out His purposes. And we should not only be interested in the question, what is happening in Libya and Syria and in Holyrood and at Westminster, and we could multiply the example. But we should also be interested in the question, why? Why are these things happening? And while we may not always be able to discern the answer, we can be sure that the answer involves God furthering His perfect purposes and ultimately blessing His people and extending His kingdom. So in the very beginning of the story, the message rings out loud and clear, God rules. He rules in the affairs of the nation.

But Daniel also shares with us at the very beginning of his book, a fleeting glance at the end of the story.

And the end of the story declares as powerfully, if less explicitly, the big message that God rules. And the end of the story as it's provided for us in the first chapter is the final verse of the chapter, verse 21 of Daniel. And what do we read there in Daniel chapter 1 and verse 21? Well, we read as follows, and Daniel remained there, that is the palace of the king, until the first year of King Cyrus.

Now, as I've already hinted at before, this verse at first reading seems a very innocuous and inconsequential little verse, but let's briefly scratch a little under the surface. In the first place, we need to clarify that the verse does not describe the final year of Daniel's presence in the royal court. We only need to turn to Daniel chapter 10 and verse 1, and we read as follows, in the third year of Cyrus, king of Persia, a revelation was given to Daniel, and so it continues.

[26 : 05] So this is two years after the year that is referred to in verse 21. So here, Daniel is not saying that I remained in the palace or I remained in this position until that year. That is not the historical reference he is making. What then is the significance of the first year of Cyrus?

Well, let's read in 2 Chronicles in chapter 36 to answer that question and to discover what is the significance of the first year of King Cyrus. In 2 Chronicles chapter 36 and in verse 22, we read as follows, in the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, the same year that's referred to there in the final verse of Daniel chapter 1, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus, king of Persia, to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing, this is what Cyrus, king of Persia, says. The Persian Empire had by this point overtaken the Babylonian Empire and they reigned supreme. And what is it that Cyrus now says?

The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem and Judah. Any one of his people among you, may the Lord his God be with him and let him go up. You see, as verses 1 and 2 describe the beginning of the exile, so verse 21 described for us the end of exile. And what is the message of this verse that speaks of the first year of Cyrus? Well, the message is the same as the first two verses. It is this, that God rules. He ruled at the beginning and he rules at the end. He rules in the providential care and prospering of Daniel as he judges his people in exile. A lot of water has flowed under the bridges of the rivers of Babylon between verses 1 and 2 and verse 21. And we will spend many hours studying together the events of those 70 years or so that divide these two points. But in all these years there is one constant,

God's care of Daniel. Nebuchadnezzar came and went, but Daniel remained. Belshazzar came and went, but Daniel remained. Darius came and went, but Daniel remained. Babylon itself fell, but Daniel remained.

And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus. God rules in the providential care of this, his servant Daniel. Not just over the nations, not just at the macro level, but at the micro level of individuals like you and me, God reigns. But he rules also in the return of the exiles from Babylon, just as he had ruled in the sending of the exiles to Babylon. The exiles return according to promise, a return home that is ordered by means of bringing down one empire and raising up another, the raising up of Cyrus. Cyrus, my anointed one, as he has described on another occasion, an instrument in God's purposes. But in this verse also we are reminded that God rules in the vindication of his own name. And the vindication of his own name that was symbolically but powerfully illustrated by the return to Jerusalem of the very vessels that had been ransacked by Nebuchadnezzar.

[29 : 48] If you would turn with me just very briefly, this is the last reference that we're going to read other than the chapter itself, in Ezra chapter 1. Ezra chapter 1 and verse 1. We're making the point that God here in this verse, hidden behind the simple words, we have this message that God rules in the vindication of his own name as on that year or in that year the vessels ransacked by Nebuchadnezzar return to Jerusalem. There in Ezra chapter 1 and verse 1 to get the context. Notice the year.

In the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia. Let's just jump straight through from there to verse 7. Moreover, King Cyrus brought out the articles belonging to the temple of the Lord, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and had placed in the temple of his God.

And then let's just read the final verse. In all there were 5,004 articles of gold and of silver. Shezbazer brought all these along when the exiles came up from Babylon to Jerusalem. Sweet vindication.

So believer, take heart. God rules. Our God rules. Your God rules. And he will care for his own in the eye of the storm and in the heart of enemy territory. He rules in times of blessing and he rules in times of judgment.

He rules in times of plenty and he rules in times of want. He rules in times of gospel freedom and he rules in times of want. He rules in times of want. He rules in times of want. He rules in times of persecution. Civilizations will come and go. But our God remains and rules. Secular legislators will pontificate and win their petty victories. But in the end they will return to the dust from whence they came. But our God remains and our God rules. The enemies of God will huff and puff, but they will never blow the house of God down. But there is more. There is approaching.

[32 : 03] Assured as the sun rises following the long dark night, a day of sweet vindication. Just as surely as the temple vessels return to where they belong, so the day is coming when all will return to where it belongs. A day when the very messianic king prophesied in the visions of Daniel will return in visible glory to put all things right and to judge the living and the dead. Jesus is coming.

Just as prophesied by Daniel his first coming, so he will return. He is coming soon. And when he comes, all will acknowledge that which has always been so, that God rules, that our God rules. Let us pray.