Far From Home - Daniel

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[0:00] We read the story of Daniel, Daniel chapter 1, and you can find it on page 884 of the church Bible.

Page 884, the story of Daniel. 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. And these he carried off to the temple of his God in Babylonia and put in the treasure house of his God.
The king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king's service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility.
Young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand and qualified to serve in the king's palace.
[1:28] He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians. The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table.

They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service. Among those who were chosen were some from Judah.
Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. The chief official gave them new names. To Daniel, the name Belteshazzar.
To Hananiah, Shadrach. To Mishael, Mishach. And to Azariah, Abednego. 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.
Now God had caused the official to show favor and compassion to Daniel. But the officer told Daniel, I'm afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your food and drink.
[2:42] Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men of your age? The king would then have my head because of you. And Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, Please test your servants for ten days.

Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. And then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food. And treat your servants in accordance with what you see.
So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days. At the end of the ten days, they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food.
So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead. To these four young men, God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning.
And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds. At the end of the time, said by the king to bring them into his service, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar.
[4:01] The king talked with them. And he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.

So they entered the king's service. In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom.
And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus of Persia. Thanks be to God. Thanks, Malcolm, for reading.
If you could keep your Bibles open, that would be a great help. Page 884, if you're on a church Bible. And you can find an outline inside the notice sheet. Let's ask for God's help as we turn to his word.

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Let's pray. Our God reigns. Gracious God and loving Heavenly Father, we pray that you would help us hear you rightly this morning.
[5:11] That you will open your word to our hearts. And open our hearts to your word. For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, sometimes on the news you see a military parade, pictures or footage of a military parade, whether it's Russia or China or North Korea.

Various countries have these processions, don't they, of thousands of soldiers and tanks and warheads. This is a picture from the one that Russia had earlier on this year.
And it's a great showing of strength, the flexing of military muscles. Now, why do they do that? Maybe on one level it encourages those who are loyal to the regime to see that they are safe.
But clearly it's a message to potential enemies as well. Don't mess with us. We're not going anywhere. We're invincible. And a military parade can also be a signal by a government to its own people not to consider rebellion.
It's a scary thing if you're a citizen of a country where the military can show itself to be that powerful and might stand against you.
[6:23] Make sure you trust and obey the state because we're invincible and we're going nowhere. It's scary and it's designed to be. Now, let's keep that feeling as we join Daniel and his friends.

The year is 605 BC and there's a new tyrant in the region around where God's people are. God's people at that time didn't live as we live today, Christians all over the world, wherever we are.
God's people were a nation state around the city of Jerusalem. And in verse 1, we're told of the first time that Nebuchadnezzar, this emperor, besieged Jerusalem and he took away the king.
God's people. God's people were, in the end, were defeated by Nebuchadnezzar. He swept in three times, culminating in 587 BC when he took the people of God into exile and Jerusalem and the temple were razed to the ground.
It was a horrible thing. And if you'd been a believer in the God of the Bible at that time, it would have felt like the end. What does it say about your God, who you follow with the Bible, that in verse 2, Nebuchadnezzar can take the vessels, the precious vessels from the temple that you all gave to be used for your God and cart them off to Babylon to use them in the pagan temple of his pagan God.
[7:51] That is firm evidence that you're on the wrong side of history if you still follow the God of the Bible. And Nebuchadnezzar takes Daniel and his three friends to Babylon.

They're chosen because of noble birth and things that are liked about them. Effectively, in verse 4, that they are the brightest and the best of Israel. Young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well-informed, quick to understand, qualified to serve in the king's palace.
So just picture how that would have felt for Daniel and his friends. On the screen, we've got a reconstruction from Berlin today of the Ishtar Gate. It's one of the gates into the inner city around Babylon from that time.
And there's a graphic here of how it might have looked for Daniel and his friends as they arrived in this incredible city. That was one of a hundred gates around Babylon.
The Greek historian Herodotus says there were a hundred gates in the inner city. So it was a magnificent place, and it was a scary place to be taken to, where the message was, make sure you fit in around here and trust and obey the empire, because we're invincible and we're going nowhere.
[9:10] So Daniel and his friends were far from home. And it makes Daniel a really valuable book for us to read and reflect on today as Christians.

In the New Testament, in 1 Peter, Peter's first letter to churches, we get given an identity as followers of Jesus in chapter 2, verses 11 and 12.
He says, Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires which wage war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans, that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.
So Peter calls us, as those who trust in Jesus, foreigners and exiles wherever we live. In chapter 1, he called us aliens and strangers in 1 Peter.
Because for every Christian in every age, our lives are a tale of two cities. For Daniel and his friends, their two cities were Jerusalem, which they called home, and Babylon, where they'd been taken and they were living, surrounded by seemingly invincible paganism.
[10:26] For us, the Jerusalem that we long for is not the city in the Middle East. It's the new Jerusalem. It's the new creation. In Revelation, the last book of the Bible, when John is given a

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vision of the new heaven and the new earth, he talks about the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven as the city for God's people.

In Philippians chapter 3, we're told, our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a saviour, the Lord Jesus. That's where we belong. And our hearts are right to yearn to be back home, to be in this place where God promises there'll be no more death or mourning or crying or pain.
That's our home city. And the world we live in is Babylon. Glasgow, Scotland, the 21st century world is Babylon.
Lots of people around us don't know Jesus Christ. They're busy building their lives on other things, worshipping the gods of materialism, that all there is is what you can see, of relativism, whatever you choose to believe is true for you.
And it's a place where we can feel far from home. I wonder if you've had an experience of that, of feeling dislocated as a Christian. Maybe you're living in university halls, and you see the lifestyle of friends, neighbours, people in neighbouring rooms, and there are things that you just can't join in with.
[11:53] Or maybe you're working, and you're having a meeting in the office, or the school, or the hospital you work in, that relates to the values that you're meant to stand for as an institution.

And you realise that you just can't support what's being promoted. Well, 1 Peter 2 encourages us, when we feel that way, that that is normal Christian living.
We're citizens of the New Jerusalem. In Jerusalem, we're in exile right now, in Babylon. So what do we learn from Daniel about living in Babylon? Our first point this morning, Daniel is exposed to the strategies of Babylon.
That is that the king of Babylon, the emperor, has a clear strategy to pull Daniel and his friends away from the God of the Bible. And it's not to threaten them that he'll throw them in a fiery furnace, though that will come in the book.
And it's not to threaten them that he'll feed them to lions, though that's going to come later in the book. Not at this stage. At this stage, the strategy is two things. Full immersion in Babylonian culture to reprogram the way they think.
[13:07] And then to entice them with the very best that Babylon can offer. We see that happening in verse 4. So the king instructs Ashpenaz to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians.

And then in verse 6, the king assigns them... In verse 5, sorry, the king assigns them a daily amount of food and wine from his table.
And we're told at the end of verse 5, they were to be trained for three years. And after that, they were to enter the king's service. So our four friends, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, they're teenagers at this stage, looking at the dates.
And they're enrolled here as freshers in the University of Babylon, far from home. And while living there, they're eating the food of Babylon, drinking the drink of Babylon, learning the languages, learning all about the culture and beliefs, the pagan superstitions.
They would have been learning books in the scholarly language of Akkadian, the literature about astrology and mythology. In verse 8, they even get given new names to be called.
[14:22] It's full immersion in the culture. And all the while, there's this promise. As long as they play by the rules and do well, they'll be selected for senior office.

They'll be in the civil service fast stream. They'll be given offices as ministers in Nebuchadnezzar's cabinet of government. It's enticing. And it says to these boys, look, be thankful that you have a Bible heritage.
No one's taking that away from you. But now, it's time to look to the future. The world is changing. Babylon is prospering. Jerusalem is finished.
What good is your faith in the God of the Bible going to do you in the real world of an empire like no one has ever seen before? And the more Daniel and his friends join in with Babylonian prosperity and the Babylonian way of thinking, the more that the Lord, Yahweh, just looks a bit implausible.
Well, think of us today. And isn't the world's strategy with us very similar? We know that in Pakistan or in Niger, you might be beaten or killed for being a Christian or becoming a Christian.
[15:37] But in Scotland, for many of us, isn't the strategy of the world Daniel chapter one? Full immersion in a secular culture with the promise of rewards if we do well.

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Full immersion in our education system where our children spend 30 plus hours a week in classrooms where they're taught under the presumption, Jesus is not Lord.
Jesus is not alive. The universe is a closed system of cause and effect. And all religions, you can learn about them, but they're all equally untrue.
And then we hear Jesus making exclusive, absolute claims, and they seem less plausible. We're exposed to that in our media where we sometimes think to ourselves that when we're listening to or watching the news or reading the paper, that what we're encountering is objective news reporting. But the truth is that all the time, nobody's neutral. And the news and the media have a secular agenda that gets promoted, and it shapes how we think.
[16:51] And then we hear Jesus speaking with authority about what's right and wrong. And because his word transcends every culture, we think, can Christianity really be true?

It goes against the things I really feel are right and wrong because of what I hear in my culture every day. Just like Daniel and his friends, we're fully immersed in non-Christian culture.
And we can't avoid that. And alongside that, we're promised rewards that entice us if we just get on in the secular world. Modern life just seems to work lots of the time.
Yes, it falls apart if you get sick or someone you love dies. But if you forget about that, if you kind of ignore that, you can find a lot of pleasure most days from a life devoted to pleasing yourself.
You know, look after those you love because that will make you feel happy. Buy nice things. Live in a nice place. And do your bit for charity because that will make you feel good as well.
[17:55] So that if we start to feel that Jesus threatens that dream, we start to drift from Jesus. So let's be on our guard. Let's remember the strategy of Babylon to convert you isn't always to make you scared of persecution.

Often, it's just to immerse you in secular culture and entice you with the promise of rewards away from Jesus. So that's our first point.
Daniel is exposed to the strategies of Babylon. So how does he respond? Well, he gives us a great model. And it's our second point. Daniel guards his heart in Babylon.
It's tempting at this point to jump straight to verse 8 where Daniel takes a stand and look at what he doesn't do. But it's good to think first about what Daniel was willing to do in Babylon.
Because I think part of the application of Daniel chapter 1 to us is don't withdraw from the world, the secular world. Don't retreat. So we see Daniel and his friends willing to take the pagan education.
[19:02] I don't think that's wrong. Sorry, I don't think that's saying that it's wrong to seek a Christian education for us or our children where we can. But here, Daniel and his friends are willing to press on in the University of Babylon.

And they take the names that they're given in verse 7. That's not just about having names that are easier to pronounce, as some of our international students choose. Two of the original names end in El, part of the Old Testament name for God.
And two of their original names end in Yah, which is probably short for Yahweh. So these are profoundly faithful names that show that they are God's people. And instead, they get given pagan names after the gods of Bel and Nabu and Marduk, Babylonian pagan gods.
Now some of us might have drawn a line there and said, I won't be known by that. But they go with it. And there's significance here for us because the more you feel like a stranger here in Glasgow, the more you feel the temptation to withdraw from the world, to retreat into a Christian ghetto to try and close the shutters on the bad culture out there as we see it.
Whereas 1 Peter 2 tells us that we're to live good lives among the pagans. Just as Jesus said, to let your light shine that people would see it. So we're to remain in the world, not to withdraw.
[20:30] Just a few years after these events, God sends the prophet Jeremiah to his people around Babylon who says in chapter 29 that they're to build houses and settle down, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I've carried you in exile.

That's the kind of engagement we see being modeled by Daniel and his friends. So that when we think about our lives today, it's good to pray that people will come away from their secular jobs where it's appropriate for them and they're gifted and godly to lead churches, to be trained to be the church leaders of the future.
But we also should be praying for Christians to be raised up, to work in construction and engineering and education, to be scientists and politicians, to work in retail and hospitality, all walks of life in our culture, to be distinctive and godly in the world but not of the world.

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So don't withdraw. But then, we get to verse 8 and we see that Daniel, he resolves to draw a line to be distinctive, to show who he really belongs to.
Have a look with 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.
[22:02] Now the official says no because even he is very afraid of the king and he is Daniel, still very young, with all that power stacked against him and he takes a stand.

He stays gracious, he's winsome, he's flexible. He just suggests a test in verse 12. Why don't they give him and his friends nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink for 10 days and see at that point whether they look any different from those who are eating what the king provides.
He draws a line. So alongside hearing from Daniel 1 don't withdraw, we hear don't compromise in the world. We don't know why Daniel drew the line where he did.
Maybe that's part of the point. It doesn't seem to be a clear moral issue. There's nothing in the Old Testament law about not taking this meat and wine from the king's table.
It could be because taking from the king's table signified a level of allegiance and trust to the king. It might be that this was the last straw, the thing more than anything else that showed that they were owned by the king, that they trusted the king for life.
[23:23] And maybe that was the point where Daniel felt he had to say, look, I'll serve you, O king, I'll be under your authority, but you're not my lord. You're not my ultimate king. Maybe refusing the meat and wine was his chance to remind himself of that.

Let's notice that he and his friends, they don't make a big public show of this. It's a private thing. Only the man in charge of their food knows about it, but it guards their own hearts.
You draw a line to guard your own heart, to remind yourself who are you really trusting here? And Daniel is trusting the Lord to provide for him, not the king of Babylon.
And Daniel, as I said, doesn't tell us where we should draw the line in our lives. What it shows is that we should be drawing lines. I remember hearing an illustration of this once, of picturing yourself climbing in the Alps, the French Alps, in the winter, in the ice, and starting to slide, to slip, and knowing that if you don't do something, you'll just fall, plummet to your death on this ice wall, and you've got an axe with you.
What matters is that you put the axe in the wall of ice. It doesn't matter where, as long as it's secure. You just need to put it somewhere. And in a similar way, because we live our lives in Babylon, we have to draw lines somewhere to help guard our hearts.
[24:47] It's something to pray about, to ask God to teach you where to draw a line. It's the question to talk to each other about this week. I heard a sermon on Daniel 1 years ago. What I can remember about it is that the Wednesday afterwards, my friend Simon sat down with me and a couple of other guys and said, okay guys, are you drawing lines?

Where are we drawing lines? What a great question to ask one another to help us think this through. Some of us might be inclined to draw too many lines. We become culturally disengaged. But others of us are probably in a situation where our biggest danger is more the other way of assimilating too much, of consuming everything around us uncritically, naively, so that there's nothing really distinctive about our lives.
We've not really made room for God to act as we trust Him. And we have to be willing to draw a line somewhere. Often, it's not an issue of clear right and wrong.
It's just about knowing our own hearts. If you think about something like careerism around us, workaholism, where does working hard for God's glory and the job that God's given you become that you have turned your job into your God?
[26:07] I think of a guy who, he deliberately made a stand of committing to his growth group. in his work calendar. So it went in his work calendar and he told his secretary, if anyone rings me about meetings or about hospitality events, anything, on those evenings, just tell them I can't do it.

That was his line that he drew. Others of you will feel you couldn't draw a line like that because of the nature of your job. Maybe you work shifts and you can't always be at that group.
But for you, there might be a different way that you could draw a line to establish that you trust the Lord, that you have a different allegiance. You don't belong to Babylon.
It might be drawing a line by refusing something that people around you feel that you can't manage without. Maybe like removing yourself from social media or not having a smartphone if you find that could be unhelpful to have one.

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Or saying no to a particular form of entertainment or lifestyle just as a way of being distinctive of guarding your heart and reminding yourself I don't belong here.
[27:19] I belong to a different city. So let me ask could you look at your life this week and ask yourself that question? Am I drawing lines that are helping guard my heart?

And let's see what happens next to Daniel. So our third point more briefly is Daniel learns that there is a God in Babylon. Right through the chapter the theme is God reigns and God gives.
And what God teaches us here is that he provides for his people as they step out in faith for him. So he provides favor in verse 14 that the servant agrees to what Daniel proposes.
He lets them eat vegetables. He provides the good health of verse 15 that they are healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who eat the royal food.
That's God showing he's the real God in Babylon and he looks after you when you trust him. And then God gives them success. There's great irony really in verse 17 that now these are the men that Babylon needs.
[28:31] To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning and Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds. They've got supernatural prophetic insight because it comes from a completely different source to all the pagan gods and superstitions.

It's come from the living God and the king is amazed by Daniel and his friends. If you have a look at verse 20 in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom.
And finally God sustains Daniel. So verse 21 just shows us that. It says Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus. Now what that shows us is that the Babylonian empire is going to fall. It fell within about 70 years of that time as the Persian emperor Cyrus came and conquered it. But Daniel servant of God will outlive the empire that seems so frightening in this chapter because human empires rise and they fall and it's only the kingdom of God that endures forever.
So that whatever powers seem unshakable to us today whatever agendas in our society seem to have all the momentum the message here is trust God and don't be afraid.
[29:59] Don't be afraid. In Romans 8 we read that God he who did not spare his only son but gave him up for us all how will he not also along with him graciously give us all things?

And maybe when we read Daniel chapter 1 and we think about it we feel we've made a mess of this. We've not drawn lines. Or we've drawn lines and we've crossed them in our weakness and we feel defiled by the world.
Well let's remember that Jesus is the one who reigns and he was the one who is greater than Daniel for us. He engaged with the world in all its glory but all its mess and muck and he never compromised so that he could deal with our defilement and make us clean.
and now he is raised to God's right hand. He reigns here in Babylon today. So as his people we're aliens and strangers but we don't withdraw from the world we don't compromise with the world and we don't need to be afraid.
Let's pray together. For in scripture it says see I lay a stone in Zion a chosen and precious cornerstone and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.
[31:28] Father we thank you that the Lord Jesus Christ reigns not just in the heavens but here in our city in Glasgow today. Help us to be distinctive as we follow him in a world that doesn't know him that we would be in the world but not of the world and as a church as your people would you give each of us wisdom on where we should draw the lines that mean we guard our own hearts and live our lives here as strangers by faith and without fear.

For Jesus name's sake Amen. short 20 seconds of silence for you to reflect for yourself before God as to what you'd like to pray about. Father God Father God we thank you that you stand that you stand with us in all situations in life.
And I pray Lord for the places where we feel acutely what it means to be aliens and strangers in this world. Would you help us to know that you don't only go with us but you have given us your spirit to understand and know and experience your goodness your grace and your sustenance.
and for those of us this morning Lord where it's more of a challenge to know what it means to where it healthily draw lines again would you help us to know what it means to abide in your love and to choose to do the wise things that help us to experience more of that for ourselves but at the same time as a result of that showing the world a different way to live.

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So ask for your guidance and your discernment Lord as a gift to us as we seek to be these people in the world strangers who are known by a loving Father.
[33:43] I ask that in Jesus' name Amen. If you'd like to take a seat.

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