

“Serving God in Babylon and Birmingham”

Daniel 1:1–8

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One of the realities of me being present is the fact that I wouldn't be here if it weren't for the loss of your late and beloved pastor Harry Reeder. It was a treasure to meet Dr. Reeder in the early 2000's when he came to First Presbyterian in Jackson, Mississippi, which is where I was serving at the time with Legion Duncan, who I understand was here just maybe a few weeks ago serving with you. Dr. Reeder was there giving an address at our men's rally that the church did every year. I had the privilege of having dinner with him with a few of our other interns. Harry could tell a story like no one else and we hung on his every word for a couple of hours. I don't think he took a breath for over 2 hours and just told us story after story. Those of us who were interns at the time learned so many lessons and took away some Harry-isms. It's a real treasure to be here and I'm so thankful for the opportunity to open God's Word with you.

I don't think it would be a stretch to say the whole of PCA denomination is praying for you, Briarwood Presbyterian Church and loves you deeply. I was here for Harry's homegoing service, his celebration of life service, and I don't think the afterglow has faded from my own heart from that service. What an incredible, rich expression it was of a life well-lived, spent for the Lord Jesus Christ and this place completely packed out, couldn't get everybody in, eager to come and to reminisce, remember, pray, and give thanks for the life of Harry Reeder.

In fact, one of the reasons that I chose this particular text, Daniel 1, is that in many ways, when I think of Harry Reeder and who the Lord made him to be, even today as he rejoices in a worship service, believe it or not, even better than this one, I think of Daniel so often – a man with incredible courage, strong in the Lord, who never back down from a conflict or a challenge, but a man who navigated and negotiated righteousness in a strange and fallen world. That was Harry Reeder over and over in my own life and I saw it with the example that he lived in ministry here through Briarwood. I heard Harry speak on Daniel before and Harry loved Daniel, Joseph, Nehemiah and all of those Old Testament leaders as part of his character studies. I thought appropriate today that we would step into Daniel 1.

My hope and prayer in looking at Daniel 1:1-8 is to actually take a glimpse in some sense over the whole of the Book of Daniel. I want to look at the main themes of the Book of Daniel, and I think we can do that well from Daniel 1:1-8. I think it gives you vision as a church going through a season of transition and to keep your eye on what has been the main focus of this congregation for decades. I hope this will be a great encouragement to you. Let's look together at Daniel 1. This is God's Word.

Daniel 1:1-8 says [1] *In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. [2] And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God. And he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his god. [3] Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility, [4] youths without blemish, of good appearance and skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king's palace, and to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans. [5] The king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate, and of the wine that he drank. They were to be educated for three years, and at the end of that time*

*they were to stand before the king. [6] Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah of the tribe of Judah. [7] And the chief of the eunuchs gave them names: Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego.*

*[8] But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself.*

The grass withers and the flower falls but the Word of our God stands forever.

I spoke to some sad parents this week. The kind of parents that are sad this week are those that just kissed their baby goodbye, their 18 year old baby that is, and sent him or her off to college. They either watched those tail lights fade into the distance or they pulled out of the dorm parking light and tried to hide their tears as son or daughter was looking on. They realized that they have just left their pride and joy, their son or their daughter at college for the very first time and in that college is a foreign land. It is a completely different place than the place that they have grown up in the first 18 years of their life. As a parent, that is a wonderful and terrible feeling all at the same time. I've had the chance to experience it once and I have several quick on the heels.

As I have spoken with Christian parents over the years about this season and tried to even prepare my own life for when that moment would come, there was always several sentiments I would hear from parents. I would hear things like, "I hope they remember who it is that they are while they were at college. I hope they remember where it is that they come from, their lineage and God's providence in their life. I hope they remember the truth that they've been taught." As parents, we know that the proof will be in the pudding soon enough. We know that as those children go off to college, they will encounter temptations, trials and challenges like they never have before. They have more freedom than they've ever experienced before, enough freedom to make the really bad decisions, which scares us to death. We wonder if they will lay hold of the principles that are taught in the Word of God, which we had taught them and they heard in church. Will they walk in such a way as to really honor God with their character, in their life, in decision making? Will they remain committed to the purposes that God would have for their life, steadfast in faith, living sola deo gloria – for the glory of God alone?

The fact of the matter is that many of us feel right now, even in our homes, even in a place like Birmingham, Alabama, that we are increasingly living in a world that's a foreign land. We don't have to go to college for strange things to happen or to encounter new world views, to experience corruption. There's an increasing paganism in our day that you know all too well when you turn on the television and you can tell "we're not in Kansas anymore" and that we are marked even in our own day and time by a frontal attack on the Scriptures and on the church itself. We're seeing redefinition of the foundational institutions which our God has established, like marriage, gender, sexuality and even human personhood. Culturally speaking, we're really witnessing, aren't we, our world turned upside down where right is wrong and wrong is right and good is bad and bad is good.

Herbert Schlossberg, in his book Idols for Destruction years ago, said that when cultures change, especially over an incremental period of time and then as you see, cataclysmic shifts in culture and decay, it is beginning to be eroded in a place where Christianity was once known and loved and you enter into that post Christian or late modern era, which we are undoubtedly in as a country, it's easy for Christians who've grown up in earlier generations to actually feel some

resentment, anger, like you've been betrayed and robbed of what was a great legacy that was entrusted to you.

There's an impulse in those moments when now it's like you haven't moved, but everything around you has moved. You haven't changed, but everything around you is changing. There's an impulse in us to fight back, isn't it? Surely you notice that resentment and fighting back as par for the course in the public square today. What if our status as those who are increasingly exiles in this world, wasn't just a robbery from whoever the bad people are out there in your mind, but is actually a calling, which the Lord has given to you and to your generation? What if the Lord is intending through the exile status that so many of us feel in our own day and time to actually bear witness for the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the growth of God's kingdom in a dark age?

It's no mistake that you've been born when you've been born. It's no mistake that you live where you live in the time in which you live. He has a calling on each and every one of our lives. I believe this is what Daniel teaches us. When you think of Daniel, you think of those great stories, don't you? There is the shutting of the mouth of the lions when Daniel is in the lion's den, the presence of that angelic angel with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the fiery furnace. You think of that hand of God writing on the wall and the interpretations of all of the visions that God had granted insight to Daniel. In the latter half of the Book of Daniel, you think of those high flying, mysterious, apocalyptic visions that are given about the future, about the end times. When you combine all of the message of Daniel together, you know what you actually see? You see that Daniel is a guidebook for those who are following God in a strange land.

As we look at Daniel 1, we want to see the guidebook that the Lord gives to us about following Him in a strange land and I want you to see it under these summary statement in three quick principles. The summary statement is this; The book of Daniel teaches us that we are to be in the world, but we are not to be of the world and we are to labor for the good of the world and the glory of God. That's our mission and calling in life in a nutshell and what Daniel wants to impress upon us. The Lord has especially given us the book of Daniel to us in the time in which the Lord has placed us.

Let's get into these three principles/realities from Daniel 1:1-8. The first one is I want you to see the reality of exile. Secondly, is the battle that's in exile, the battle that we all experience in exile and thirdly, is the purpose for exile. Another way to say those three points is this; The people were taken out of Jerusalem and put in Babylon, and once they were in Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar tried to get the Jerusalem out of them as best as he could but God had the mission to bring all of Jerusalem to Babylon and to show His face and glory.

Let's look at the first reality of exile here where this is the people being taken out of Jerusalem. That's how some of us feel in this day and time. We feel besieged very much like Daniel 1:1 where it says Nebuchadnezzar came to Jerusalem and besieged it. He took it over. Some of you may be asking, 'who is this Nebuchadnezzar?' He is one of the world's greatest powers of all time and at this particular time, he was the king of the superpower of Babylon itself, a nation that would be the kind of New York City in terms of influence of the ancient world, both in its power, its authority, education, beauty and esthetics. The Hanging Gardens, one of the Seven Wonders of the World, was actually located in in Babylon. It was a wonderful, extravagant place full of temples and shrines to pagan gods. It had the glorious Euphrates River running in the middle of it, so it provided lush soil, plenty of produce and fruitfulness. It was defended like no other city in the ancient world with a large, thick wall and armaments. There was no way it seemed, that Babylon would ever fall in.

Amazingly, this city, by one commentator's standard, said that 'it was as strong as Rome in its heyday, but it was as beautiful as Paris in the springtime' and Nebuchadnezzar was its ruler in that heyday. He had just defeated Assyria, another great power of the time and now in 605 B.C, he comes knocking on the door of Jerusalem, or we might say knocking down the door of Jerusalem. He besieges Jerusalem, a war that will take place until 586 B.C. slowly but surely, breaking down Jerusalem to the point that the temple itself will be utterly destroyed – not one stone will be left upon another, and all of the people of Israel will be taken. It's the darkest time in the nation of Israel's history. They're asking questions about whether God is going to fulfill His promises – what has happened to the faithfulness of our God? That would have been the spirit on the ground, so to speak, for the people of Israel.

That is what is astonishing about Daniel 1:2. We ran right past it which was easy to miss. Right after we were told that Nebuchadnezzar is besieging Jerusalem this is what it says '*And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God. And he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his god.*' We thought, 'O, my blasphemy here they're taking the sacred things in the vessels of the temple of God in Jerusalem, and they're putting them in a pagan temple in Babylon.' This is the sign of utter defeat, isn't it? But at the beginning of verse 2 it reads 'and the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand.' God is right at the center of this. This didn't take God by surprise.

First of all, that should give us some comfort because we're wondering, 'where is God, what's happening in the midst of a crazy world, in the midst of a land gone mad? What is He up to?' Right here at the center of the text this is all done by the hand of God and it gives us comfort in knowing that Nebuchadnezzar may be the superpower on the earth, but God holds him in the palm of His hands. He turns king's hearts in a day like a river. God sits in the throne of heaven right now, and He does whatever it is He pleases, according to the psalmist. That's what we're told right here in Daniel 1:2.

It also gives us great concern because it says that He handed over one of Israel's kings to Nebuchadnezzar. So, what in the world is He doing? Why is He handing over a king of Judah to Nebuchadnezzar? Why would His holy things the vessels brought from the temple to be brought to Babylon? Why would He let His people be in exile, held in captive in a pagan land? It's because He's faithful. That's not the answer you were expecting, was it? Because the question you actually have in this text is, is God being faithful? Is He being true to His promises? I thought there would be a king on the throne of Israel forever – a son of David. It doesn't seem to be the case. Has God's promises failed? This is going to be one of the questions that the people of Israel are addressing. It's one of the things we read that the Prophet Jeremiah is writing about who is a contemporary of what's going on with Daniel.

How is it that God is really being faithful here? God is telling us something very important here. God is telling us that He is faithful when He responds to His people with loving discipline in their unfaithfulness. The story of King Jehoiakim is found in II Kings. You can also read the story of Hezekiah before him and you can see the litany of corruption that was true of the nation of Israel at the time in which we're speaking of right now as Daniel's history is unfolding. It was a time when the people of God had lost their way, usurped the truth of God and were not keeping the commandments of God. Despite repeated warnings, the people of God would not listen and would not return to their God. God had been patient, but the people once again had been stiff-necked and stubborn as it says in Exodus, doing things their way. God here

is acting in loving discipline to His people by allowing Nebuchadnezzar to come in and to destroy Jerusalem and take God's people into exile.

It might be that some of the decay that we are experiencing in our own nation, that some of the blame would be placed even at our own feet, our own lack of commitment to follow the Lord where it is that He would call us or maybe our own love for money, materialism and consumerism or our unwillingness to go to places where God has called us. One of the realities is that the Lord often brings us into exile as a part of His loving discipline, to restore His church, to awaken His people, and yes, to advance His kingdom. That really gets to where the heart of this text is going to drive us, and that is exile is really His core. The exile is an opportunity for the advancement of the mission that God has actually sent Daniel and his three friends on into the very heart of Babylon but they must be tested and tried.

They struggle in exile as we see what they experience here. Did you notice that as they are brought into Babylon, what begins to happen? Nebuchadnezzar has chosen the prominent. He's chosen the attractive, the smart, and those who have leadership potential. He's chosen the young. As he brings them into Babylon, he is now beginning to work a thoroughgoing discipleship program of taking these Israelites and turning them into Babylonians. That's his plan and it's a smart strategy. He removes them from their family of origin. That's a one of the great ways that the evil one often works, doesn't he? He teaches them the language in the literature of the Chaldeans. They know the Old Testament Hebrew Scriptures here and they're being trained in the paganism of their day. In Daniel 1:3-4 Nebuchadnezzar wants them to feed at his table. He wants them to know the delicacies of Babylon. He wants to wow them by all that Babylon has to offer. He knows that one way to get to their heart is through their belly.

He also renames them from their Hebrew names, giving them Babylonian names. Daniel 1:7 says *Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego*. Their Hebrew names actually reference the reality of who God is, His own truth. The name Daniel means God is my judge. The name Hananiah means the Lord is gracious. The name Mishael means who is like God and Azariah means God is our helper. These Babylonian names they are given mirror pagan deities in Babylon. You can imagine what a shaping influence that might have on them to be called by a completely different name. Nebuchadnezzar is doing all that he can to erase every trace of their Israelite heritage, rebrand their minds, hearts and souls.

This is part of how the world works, isn't it? It's very often in our reading, our literature, the pleasures of the world where we're wooed into the world sitting at seats of power. That's where we want to not lose those seats, not lose those privileges and we're willing to do well just about anything to keep them. We're willing to compromise. It's those glowing rectangles in your pocket. Those phones, where the world is getting right into our world, our lives, and changing us.

The wonder here in Daniel, though, is as we look at these men taken out of Israel, what is beautiful is the Israel can't be taken out of them. Did you catch that in Daniel 1:8? [8] *But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself*. What a beautiful statement that is. It's more than likely that these young men are no older than probably 14, 15 years of age. In asking some 14, 15, 16 year olds in church today, I wonder in a similar circumstance, would they resolve not to defile themselves? That was Daniel's resolution, his commitment. He wasn't going to be more interested in the palace and its power than he was with the commitments to the faith. He wasn't going to spend more time in the literature of the Chaldeans than the word of God. He was going to remain faithful. He wasn't going to imbibe

those delicacies. That's really the main focus here in Daniel 1. He would remain faithful to God's calling and standard. He wouldn't be answering to the name that the world gives him.

The world gives us so many names, doesn't it? The world tells us that we are what we earn, or that we are what positions we have or we are who we know and what circles we run in. These are identities. These are names that we inhabit. Daniel wasn't going to allow those status symbols, those names to define him. This calls us to this; if the world is going to do this kind of intentionality to try to reshape our minds and hearts, then we're going to need as a church to be faithful, to be even more committed in discipleship, and even more committed to the work of ministry. The point of all of this preparation and vigilance that you see for Nebuchadnezzar's side is to be able to somehow woo Daniel and these three friends into becoming the Babylonians and him taking over more of the world.

I want you to see that at the very core of this whole story is not the battle. It's not the reality of exile but it's the purpose of exile. What are we going to see throughout the book of Daniel? We will see that in this apparent defeat out of the people of Israel there will be a back door to victory. We're going to see in some sense, God is sending witness bearers into the very heart of Babylon in order to spread the power of His Kingdom, unbeknownst to Nebuchadnezzar for Nebuchadnezzar has actually invited, so to speak, the enemy within his gate. Little did he know that God handed Jehoiakim over to Nebuchadnezzar. God was the One who had actually captured the hearts of Daniel and Shadrach, Meshack and Abednego. It would be through these three and four that the Lord would actually reveal His power to Nebuchadnezzar and to all of Babylon when He shut the mouth of those lions, when the Angel of God showed up in the fiery furnace, when the handwriting showed up on the wall in the interpretation that no one could give to the dreams except Daniel.

What was the Lord doing? The Lord was bringing Jerusalem to Babylon. He was advancing His Kingdom right into the heart of darkness. Wouldn't it be Nebuchadnezzar himself who would be touched, so to speak, by the little finger of God about halfway through this book and he would lose his mind. Nebuchadnezzar would become like a beast of the field, the most powerful man in the world, eating grass alongside the beasts of the field. After seven periods of time, what would happen? God in His kindness would restore Nebuchadnezzar. He would bring him out of his weakness, out of his neediness, out of his desperation, after He had humbled him, He would restore unto him his mind and Nebuchadnezzar would give praise to God.

Part of the praise Nebuchadnezzar gives to God is found in Daniel 4:34 and 37 which says *[34] At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever, for His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His Kingdom endures from generation to generation. [37] Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to humble.*

We have some Nebuchadnezzar like rulers alive in the world today, men who are on ego trips who will do nothing and allow nothing to stand in the way of them and their own expansive sense of power and authority. That was Nebuchadnezzar and the Lord, with the very touch of His finger, humbled him and drew him even unto Himself. This is Vladimir Putin coming to know the Lord, I hope you do understand that. You probably become fearful looking at the world with all the things that could take place, don't you?

I want you to know that the Lord can do what seems impossible, that He holds all of men and nations, in the palm of His hand, and He will advance His Kingdom. This is what the Lord Jesus Christ actually came and did. He, more than anyone, shows us what it means to be out of

the world, but coming into the world, who left His Father in heaven to come to this strange land, fallen and broken land that it is. He came here to establish not a nation of the world for He told Pontious Pilate that's He isn't fighting because His Kingdom is not of this world. Jesus came from outside the world as a stranger into the world to build a kingdom that is not of this world. What did He do it? He did it for the good of the world in the glory of His Father who is in heaven. He did it for your salvation and for mine and for the glory of His Father He came to do the will of His Father on every level.

Jesus is coming back and when He returns it will be from and in glory on that white horse where the dead in Christ will rise first and meet Him in the air. We who remain will be caught up with Him and will enter into the new heavens and the new Earth. We will see Jesus. Alongside Him, we'll see other Americans, Israelites, Babylonians, Egyptians, Iranians, Russians – people from all the nations. We will see people from every kindred, tribe, tongue and nation and we will see that the New Jerusalem has come out of heaven, glorious and beautiful. It will have spread to all the people because an exiled Savior came to this strange land to redeem for His people a glorious treasured possession.

How can we not, as a people also who have been rescued by that kind of Savior, answer the call to be that kind of people. If we've been saved by a Savior who went on exile to save us, how will we not go into our exile in the mission of the Lord Jesus Christ until He comes to remake heaven and earth in all of its glory? If this is how Christ has served, let us be a people who are faithful in the world but are not of the world. Let us be a people who are laboring on the behalf of the good of the world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ as our torch, and let us do so for the glory of God that they might see our good works. Jesus says 'and glorify God who is in heaven.' Our prayer should be that this would be the work that the Lord would do, not just in Babylon, but He would do it right here in Birmingham, and He would show Himself faithful in every generation, and yes, even in ours, by His grace. Let's pray.

Prayer:

O Father in Heaven, would you do that? O Father in Heaven, would You come and spread that kind of revival even here? We know, O Lord, that we are a people in need of your grace. We know that we are a people who haven't laid hold of Your truths and Your commands, as You have called us to. We repent even now in Your presence and acknowledge it and ask that You would have mercy and that in Your patient love You would renew us by Your grace, and that You would send us out. I pray we would hear today, especially Your benediction, as a clarion call to the mission of our neighborhoods, to our schools, to our workplaces that we would see the curse pushed back in Birmingham and beyond by the power of Your grace and the spread of Your Kingdom. Lord, to send us now, by Your grace, out into this world, for it's good and for Your glory. We pray this in Your holy Name, Amen.