

Pako Morning Service – 11/9/2016

Reading: Daniel 1:1-21; Message: “God’s favour upon his people”

Congregation, today I want to start a new series on Daniel and before we get into the text, let me just put this book in its historical setting. First, Daniel is the author of the book. He is mentioned in 9:2 and 10:2 and also mentioned by Christ in Matthew 24:15. The book was probably written after the capture of Babylon by Cyrus, king of Persia in 539 B.C.

Daniel was one of the exiles when the Babylonians captured Judah in 605 B.C. The purpose of the book is to assure the exiles that God is in control of history, and he is looking after his covenant people, even in exile. So that’s a very brief background to this book. Now to focus on our text.

Some years ago, I attended a Christian men’s conference in Sydney and I went because the speaker was going to give us some insights into the book of Daniel. Daniel isn’t an easy book, especially no the last seven chapters and any help was more than welcome. Well, I must say, it wasn’t the best experience I had.

During and at the end of this speaker’s presentation, his application for the 1500 plus men who were there was, “Dare to be a Daniel”. If he said it once during his presentation, he must have said it a hundred times and I went home from that conference with the refrain ringing in my ears, “Dare to be a Daniel”.

Well I don’t want you going home with that message today. For this book is not about us daring to be Daniels. It’s about God watching over his covenant people and remaining faithful to his promises, both in regards to punishment for disobedience and blessing for obedience, primarily for his glory and the benefit of his people.

In fact, this chapter and this book details God’s faithfulness in judgment. As v2 makes clear, the exile came upon Judah because God handed over their king Jehoiakim to the power of King Nebuchadnezzar. This was nothing more than what the covenant curses outlined for disobedience.

God would hand them over to his enemies. The northern tribes had already been swallowed up by the Assyrians and now the Babylonians were the new force and Judah, who failed to learn the lesson of the northern tribes are now experiencing God’s judgment with the Babylonians taking them into exile. Interestingly, many years before, King Hezekiah had received envoys and a gift from the then king of Babylon. In response, Hezekiah showed them everything that was of value in his storehouses and all of his treasures (2 Kgs 20:13).

For this action, the prophet Isaiah roundly condemned Hezekiah. For Hezekiah, at least to some extent, politics had replaced trust in the Lord. For all he was doing was showing that he had resources that could be useful in the Babylonian’s fight against the Assyrians at the time.

Indeed, according to 2 Kings 20:18ff, Hezekiah’s foolish spiritual alliance would result in some of his own offspring being taken off to become eunuchs in the palace of the Babylonian king. And we also read in v2 of our text that vessels from the house of God had now been taken and placed in the treasury of King Nebuchadnezzar’s god.

Of course, it also needs to be acknowledge, that the fate of Judah in exile was not in the hands of King Nebuchadnezzar, but by the Lord, the God of heaven (2:19). The one who had sent them into exile had also promised to be with them there, and ultimately to restore them from exile after a time of judgment.

Even though God’s people were faithless, God remained faithful to his promises and would not abandon his people. Just as the exile occurred under God’s sovereign hand, so also would their return to the Promised Land occur under his sovereign hand.

So what is the take home message today from this chapter? When I was at college, there was one thing I was taught that I have never forgotten and it has been key to my understanding of Scripture, particularly the OT, and may it also be to you.

The first rule of thumb when coming to these rather difficult passages is to ask oneself, “How has the Holy Spirit, who has caused this to be recorded in the way it has, make God the hero? How does God receive the glory?” I admit that Daniel and his three friends are main characters, but they are not the heroes. So let’s look a little closer at the text and see how God becomes the hero.

First, notice how God cares for Daniel and his three friends. I don't think these four young men outwardly resist the Babylonian system. They did not refuse to work for the Babylonians, perhaps because they recognized the hand of God in their situation as Daniel alludes to in Chapter 9:2 where he quotes Jeremiah.

They understood the word that the Lord gave through Jeremiah, that those whom he had sent to Babylon should labour there for the blessing of the place in which they found themselves (Jer 29:4–7).

Yet, these four young men inwardly resisted the assimilation process of the Babylonian empire in a number of specific ways. They resisted the total renaming program of the Babylonians.

They didn't refuse to answer to their Babylonian names, to be sure, Belteshazzar; Shadrach; Meshach; and Abednego", but Daniel and his friends did maintain their Jewish names (and identities) as well (1:11, 19; 2:17). The four young men also preserved biblical knowledge and perspectives in the midst of a thoroughly pagan educational system.

These four young men also resisted assimilation into the Babylonian system by resolving not to eat the food from the king's table nor to drink his wine. Note verse 8 in our text, "But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine he drank. Therefore, he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself."

Daniel even dared to challenge the official to see who looked better after ten days with the new diet he proposed when the Eunuch raised a legitimate objection that it would be his head on the chopping block if it didn't work.

Now please, this is not about becoming a vegetarian. Nor am I convinced that eating only vegetables helps us to depend on God more for our food. We know that everything we have and are given to eat comes from the Lord's hand and that is why we give God thanks for the food he provides.

Now we could be thinking to ourselves, well Daniel was exemplary here in the way he behaved. And to some extent that's true. But again, note v9. "And God gave Daniel favour and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs." All of what Daniel had done and said would have fallen flat if God had not given Daniel favour and compassion in the sight of the chief of eunuchs. In fact, we could go all the way back to King Solomon's prayer when he dedicated the temple in 1 Kgs 8:50.

On that occasion, Solomon prayed that when the people ended up in exile, as they surely would because of their sinfulness, then the Lord would cause their captors to show them compassion (1 Kings 8:50). This favour and compassion is exactly what the chief official showed Daniel and his friends.

What is more, the outcome of their dietary test was clearly not what ordinarily would have been expected. Normally people don't get fat on a simple diet of fruit and vegetables. This outcome too was a mark of God's faithfulness and care towards these young men, honouring their commitment to him.

At the end of the time set by the king to bring them in, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king's service. We read that 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. (Dan 1:17–20).

Now, please don't miss verse 17. God gave these four youth learning and skill in literature and wisdom and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams. It was God's favour upon them that enabled them to answer all of Nebuchadnezzar's questions, so that he found them ten times better than all of his other advisors (1:20).

God placed them in a unique position where they could be a blessing to their captors and build up the society in which they found themselves, while at the same time enabling them to remain true to him in the midst of extraordinary pressures. What a great encouragement to God's OT people who were about to return to the Promised Land. God was with them even in exile. What a great encouragement for them in the midst of their pain.

Congregation, if the Lord could keep these young men faithful to him in their situation, then he is surely able to keep us faithful to him in our trials and difficulties. No matter how overwhelming our situation may seem, God is able to keep us through it as well. God is at work, from beginning to end.

We sometimes speak about the “P” in T.U.L.I.P., perseverance of the saints thinking that it is all up to us to persevere. But let us never forget it is only because of God’s preservation of us that we can persevere. And here too, God remains faithful to his people.

Notice also v21, “Daniel was there until the first year of Cyrus”. The first year of Cyrus was the year in which the decree was issued that enabled the Jews to return home (cf 2 Chro 36:22–23), some seventy years after the time when Daniel and his friends were taken into exile.

So we are reminded then that God’s faithfulness proved sufficient for Daniel throughout the entire time of the exile. Babylonian kings came and went. Indeed, the Babylonians themselves were replaced as the ruling world power by the Medo-Persians in the person of Cyrus. Yet God sustained his faithful servant throughout the whole time.

In the same way, he is able to preserve us throughout the trials and tribulations that we face, no matter how intense they may be or how long they may last. When the devil and world does its worst, God’s faithfulness is enough.

There is one final note that we must not miss in all of this. The reality for most of us is that when we look at our lives, we find we are not like Daniel and his three friends. That’s why I didn’t like that speaker’s challenge twenty odd years ago and I don’t like it now.

I will not dare you to be a Daniel. If that were the case, then we might as well pack our bags and go home for we would be dismal failures. Thankfully there is better news, namely the good news of the gospel.

Just consider for a moment what favour and compassion God has shown to us in the person of His Son. God has not only shown his faithfulness to his promises, but has provided the perfect Saviour. What favour, what compassion, what grace we have received to deliver a faithless people like us. Our salvation rests not on our ability to remain undefiled by the world, but rather on the pure and undefiled offering that Jesus has provided in our place.

Jesus Christ came voluntarily into this world, with all of its pains and trials. He endured far greater temptations and sufferings than Daniel ever did, or then we ever will (Heb 4:15). Yet he remained entirely faithful and pure until the very end, without spot or blemish, and grants the perfection of his obedience to all those who trust in him by faith (1 Peter 1:19).

What is more, Jesus has already returned from his time of exile and now sits at the Father’s right hand in heaven. He has prepared our places there, and his presence there and the Holy Spirit living within us already guarantees that one day we will be with him there as his people.

It’s ultimately through Christ that we have been shown the greater favour and compassion. Remind yourself often of this gospel. Fix your eyes on Jesus Christ crucified, raised, ascended and exalted. He has not only pioneered the route home; he is the route home. Trust in him and ask him to work in you a true faithfulness.

After all, we are aliens and strangers in this world. This is not our homeland. Ask him to put you in places where you can be a blessing to your community. Be a breath of heavenly wisdom in your home, your school, and your workplace.

Don’t dare your friends to be a Daniel, don’t! Daniel has never saved anyone, not even himself! Rather, encourage them to focus on Christ and all he has done. For He alone is able to save and to do so completely. Amen.