

In Whose Hand Are We?

Scripture Text: Daniel 1:1-7

Introduction

Last week, we read a passage about the cost of being a disciple of Jesus Christ. What does it cost to be His disciple? We found that Jesus sets a high standard for His disciples that not all people are prepared to commit to follow. For instance, it was not the great crowds who often followed Jesus who were His disciples. It is the individuals who remain with Jesus through the good times and the bad times, who love Him more than anyone else, who sacrifice their desires and their very lives for Him, and who renounce their worldly possessions for Him. These people are Jesus' true disciples (Luke 14:25-33). A lot of people will follow Christ, for a while. A lot of people will be a part of His church, for a while. But when something tragic happens, or it becomes inconvenient for them, or it becomes *too costly* for them, then you will see who are the committed ones. This reflects what we find in the book of Daniel. The book of Daniel consists of two main sections. The first six chapters tell us how God supernaturally intervened in the lives of Daniel and his friends and how they remained faithful during a very difficult time. The rest of the book contains visions of future judgment and deliverance by the Messiah that are even echoed in the New Testament. For now, I would like for us to explore the issue of being faithful to God in difficult times.

We hear people say that things in the world are getting worse. We hear people say God's judgement is upon us. They may be right. Judah was once a major influence in the world. God's people once lived in relative peace and prosperity. Things were good. But something happened and they lost that privilege. They eventually found themselves relegated to lesser importance and controlled by other worldly powers. They eventually found themselves in the minority. Does any of that sound familiar? The church is seeing something like that today. Christians are becoming a minority. The influence of the church is waning. The time of the moral majority is gone. Like Daniel, though, this is not our home. We are aliens and foreigners in a strange land. The church has forgotten that, I think. Somehow, we have come to believe that this world is our home. But in truth, popularity, majority, and influence can cloud our perspective. In fact, the church suffers from a disease of popularity. An important lesson the book of Daniel can teach us is how to live as faithful followers of Christ in a world that is hostile to our faith.

God is Sovereign, All The Time!

Do you sometimes wonder why bad things happen, why evil prevails, or what God is going to do about the mess in the world? I am sure many Jewish people thought the same things during the time of Daniel. As bad as things are in the world now, none of us have experienced what Daniel and his people did. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon exerted control on the region and the Jewish kings had promised to be loyal to him. When the king again defied Babylonian authority, though, Nebuchadnezzar was determined to put an end to the rebellious nation. He successfully captured Jerusalem in 586 BC and destroyed the city and the temple. Daniel probably lived through the

reigns of the last five kings of Judah, the fall of the nation, and the destruction of Jerusalem. Daniel was exiled to Babylon in 605 BC, probably as a teenager, and was one of several young men chosen to serve in Nebuchadnezzar's court. When Persia conquered Babylon in 539 BC, Daniel found himself in exile under another foreign king. He remained faithful to God in these hostile environments and most likely remained in exile until his death. One of the things the book of Daniel causes us to consider is whether we really believe God is in control. Think about the following verses.

Daniel 1:1-2 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.*

When things go awry, when evil seems to prevail, when good people suffer, or when your world just seems to fall apart, do you believe that God is still in control? Do you still believe that God is sovereign? From the interpretation of dreams, to the familiar stories of the fiery furnace, the lions' den, and the handwriting on the wall, to the prophetic visions of the future, the recurrent theme throughout the book of Daniel is God's sovereignty over human affairs. In fact, in this passage we see that God "gave" Judah to Nebuchadnezzar. Sure, Nebuchadnezzar and his army came with all their might and defeated Judah, but according to scripture, it was God who made it happen. Daniel wrote, "The Lord gave" the king of Judah into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar. In fact, you will find that there are *three times* in chapter one where "God gave" something. God gave the king of Judah into Nebuchadnezzar's hand (v. 2). God gave Daniel favor and compassion (v. 9). God gave Daniel and his friends learning and skill (v. 17). The point we should not miss in all of this is that God was sovereign in these affairs. God is not absent from our lives or a mere spectator to history, but He is directly involved in human events. He is steering the course of human history to fulfill His plan.

And just what had happened? God's people suffered a great loss. God allowed a pagan king to destroy His city. God allowed this same king to destroy His temple and to steal His temple possessions for pagan worship. As if that were not enough, God allowed this pagan king to exile His own chosen people into the land of Shinar. This is the same place where the people long ago turned away from God and decided to build a tower to heaven (Genesis 11:1-9). God was not pleased with that, therefore, He dispersed the people in the land of Shinar. This is the place where Daniel and the other Jewish people were exiled. Nebuchadnezzar had taken the best from Judah, but he did so with God's permission. Things may seem to be out of control, but they are not. It is just a matter of who is in control. Are we in control? Are we in the hands of our leaders or other people? Are we in God's hand, in His control? The message of Daniel is that God is powerful and He is in control of the world. He is not absent from our lives or a mere spectator to history, but He is directly involved in human events. He is steering the course of history to fulfill His saving plan. Questions the book of Daniel seems to answer are where is God? Why do His people suffer? Why are we persecuted? Why does evil seem to prevail? To those issues, we now turn to the next point.

Sin Brings Suffering

So, I think we see that something terrible had happened to Daniel and his nation. We also see that though these things happened, God was in control and had actually allowed it to happen. Maybe the question is this: Why did God allow this to happen to His nation, His city, and His chosen people? To find that answer, we need to look at the events that led up to this situation. We can find the answer to that question later in the book of Daniel when Daniel prays the following prayer.

Daniel 9:9–12 ⁹ *To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against him* ¹⁰ *and have not obeyed the voice of the Lord our God by walking in his laws, which he set before us by his servants the prophets.* ¹¹ *All Israel has transgressed your law and turned aside, refusing to obey your voice. And the curse and oath that are written in the Law of Moses the servant of God have been poured out upon us, because we have sinned against him.* ¹² *He has confirmed his words, which he spoke against us and against our rulers who ruled us, by bringing upon us a great calamity. For under the whole heaven there has not been done anything like what has been done against Jerusalem.*

Basically, Israel had turned away from God. Daniel said they had rebelled against God. That is essentially what sin is: *rebellion to God*. For this, God punished them. It was not like God had not warned them that this was going to happen. They refused to heed His warnings, through the Law of Moses and through the words of many prophets. They continued to rebel against God, so He left them to their own devices. God used Nebuchadnezzar as His instrument to punish His people for their sin and unfaithfulness. God was in control of the defeat of His own city and the exile of His own people. God chose to use a wicked nation in order to punish His people. Many talk about how bad things are today. Many complain about our government and our leaders. Many argue vigorously about why we should vote for this person or that person. Let me say this, unless Jesus Christ of Nazareth is running for office, every single person we elect is fallen and the lesser of some evil. I promise you, though, we have not yet seen bad times like Daniel saw, but how do we know that God has not given us into the hands of “ungodly leaders”? Like Judah before us, has God judged us for being unfaithful to Him? Are we reaping the sin of this generation and those before us? Either way, prayer, repentance and fasting are more needed now than political arguments.

The Faithful Suffer With The Unfaithful

Have you ever heard the saying, “Change is good”? It is something my employer has promoted for some time. It is supposed to make us feel good about changing something we are accustomed to doing. We do not always respond positively about change in our lives, unless we *think* we are in control of that change. Not being able to pay the bills because of a change in your finances can bring anxiety. A change in relationships because of some loss or misunderstanding can hurt. A change for the worse in one’s health can be devastating. A change in the political climate, in how our government leads us, or misleads us, can cause anger, anxiety and social unrest. Change does not

always seem good. Sometimes, “bad” change happens to even the faithful. Think about the changes Daniel and his faithful friends experienced. Their home had been destroyed. They were now in a foreign land and living among pagans who did not serve the one true God. Even their identities were changed. Look at the following verses.

Daniel 1:6–7 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.

I have often wondered why most people refer to the Hebrew boys as Daniel (his Jewish name), but refer to the other three Hebrew boys as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (their Babylonian names). I am sure Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah would not prefer that! Names were important and meaningful to the people of Daniel’s day. They usually meant something special. Daniel’s name signifies “God is my judge”. Hananiah meant “Yahweh is gracious”. Mishael meant “Who is what God is?”, meaning there is no god like the God of Israel. Azariah meant “Yahweh has helped” or “will help.” Each name contained a reference to the one, true God. This would have been something that made these young men proud. It would have reminded them that though things were bad, they were still part of the people of God and part of the large family of God. But even their “godly” names were changed. Their new Babylonian names each involved a reference to a pagan god that they did serve. Thus, they had lost their land, their families, their heritage, and now their identity. This may have reminded them they were a defeated people in a foreign land, and among pagans who served strange and false gods.

How would you feel to experience those things? How would you feel to have your identity changed like they had? Even the faithful suffer with the unfaithful. Does this mean that God is not in control? Does it mean God does not care? Not at all! Faithfulness does not guarantee an easy, pain-free life. Job is proof of that. In fact, many of God’s faithful people in both the Old and New Testament suffered, and some suffered greatly. Does this mean that being faithful to God is useless? Only if you think being faithful is a means to a prosperous life *here*. If your goal is to have riches, do well, suffer little, and prosper much *in this life*, then serving Jesus Christ is not the means to accomplish that. God has much bigger plans for His children. Our world is fallen and as such, there will be much suffering until Jesus comes back. While this may be our Father’s world, it is not His children’s home. We are sojourners in a strange land waiting for our eternal home to come, just as the writer of the book of Hebrews wrote.

Hebrews 13:14–15 ¹⁴ For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. ¹⁵ Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.

Continue to have faith in God’s plan. Do not be discouraged by evil and suffering in the world. Do not be discouraged by the change in the political winds or the progressive movement of this secular world. No earthly kingdom will last! Only God’s kingdom will stand forever. There is a better day coming and an eternal home awaiting us.

How Will You Respond to Being in Exile?

In closing, put yourself in Daniel's shoes. How would you have responded to his situation? Daniel and his friends could not have controlled their situation, their exile, their pagan education, and the changing of their names. They could, however, control how they *responded* to these terrible circumstances. They could control who they worshipped in this situation. They could choose to remain faithful to God, regardless of the circumstances or the consequences they faced. They could choose to be faithful to the one true God while those around them worshiped their pagan gods. How will we handle being in exile? How will you handle losing your job, your freedom, your prosperity, your possessions, your family and your friends? What if tomorrow your freedom and security are taken away? Do these things mean more to you than your relationship with Jesus Christ? What things in your life are so important that if they change we would be utterly devastated and possibly lose faith in God? Nations come and go. Governments come and go. Religions come and go. But Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8). Jesus is still in control and His church will prevail. The church will stand at the grave of the other religions of this world. The church will stand at the grave of the nations of this world. Yes, the church will even stand at the grave of the United States of America. Where is your allegiance today? Thanks be to God. Amen!