

Today we begin a new sermon series in the book of Daniel. So let's take a moment and find Daniel in our Bibles. The first thing you need to know is that Daniel is not about Daniel. Although a young man named Daniel is the human subject in the book, it is God who is the hero. That is important because the typical approach to this book actually obscures the book's purpose. In the first 6 chapters we are tempted to focus on Daniel as the heroic figure. There is no doubt that he is an impressive individual who offers much to emulate. But if we make the point of this book that God rewards those who are morally upright people then we have missed the bigger point. The other mistake is to turn the second half of Daniel into the subject of endless debates in eschatology. Our curiosity about the end times may lead us to miss the purpose of the book. And what is that?

This book of Daniel is about a conflict of kingdoms – the kingdom of man and the kingdom of God. The first four chapters happen during the reign of a Babylonian king named Nebuchadnezzar. Ch. 5 happens during the reign of Belshazzar. Ch. 6 during the reign of Darius the Mede. When the story ends, Cyrus the Persian is in power. This book was written to show that our gracious God is the supreme ruler of the universe who will rescue us from the slavery and degradation of sin through the coming of a Messiah. His kingdom is superior to all other kingdoms and when He comes the righteous will be vindicated, evil will be destroyed and the promises of God will be fulfilled because Jesus, the King, will reign. And here is the beauty of God's plan – all this happens not because we have earned it by our good deeds or deserve it because of our hard work. All this happens simply on the basis of God's amazing grace. God's grace doesn't wait to make an appearance until Jesus arrives on the scene in the gospels. God's grace is found in every book of the Bible. That is why we are calling this series, "Grace Dawning." This is the gospel according to Daniel.

In the first chapter we encounter God's grace in the repeated phrase, "God gives..." 2, 9, 17. Each occurrence gives us some important insight about our God who is supreme over all other gods.

I. God "gave" the king of Judah into the hands of the Babylonians. 1:1-2. The defeat, deportation and degradation of the people of God was divine judgment for their idolatrous ways. Dt. 28:63 says, "Just as the LORD was once happy with you and gave you good things and made you grow in number, so then the LORD will be happy to ruin and destroy you, and you will be removed from the land you are entering to take as your own." God always keeps His promises. He warned Israel, if you forsake me and worship other gods then I will send you into exile. Their captivity would last for seventy years (605-536 B.C.) so all the old guys would die off and a new generation could bring them back to the land.

Imagine how the exiles felt when the sacred objects from the temple in Jerusalem were brought and put on display in the temple of the Babylonian gods. We are tempted in hard times to question that if God is real then why doesn't He do something? Nebuchadnezzar's god seems to be in control but v. 2 says that "God gave Judah to Babylon." Even when we are under the chastening hand of God, He is still in control.

God uses the evil, proud schemes of fallen men to further His agenda. Fast forward 600 years and Jesus is hanging from a cross. By all appearances His kingdom dreams have been shattered and Satan has won. But we know the rest of the story - God gave. "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son."

II. God "gave" Daniel favor with his captors. vv. 3-16. The protagonist of the story is Daniel. Historians seem to be unanimous in their assertion that Daniel was a teenager. The Babylonians treated their conquered enemies differently than the Assyrians. Assyrians destroyed all the men. Babylonians would take the "blue chippers" and reeducate them and make them into Babylonians. Cynthia Ann Parker was captured and kidnapped by the Comanches at the age of 9. She was raised as a Comanche, married a Comanche and gave birth to three Comanche children, one of whom was Quanah Parker, the last free Comanche chief. At age 34 she was rescued by Texas Rangers but refused to assimilate into white society and constantly tried to escape back to her Comanche family. Eventually she stopped eating and died. That's the power of captivity.

Daniel was not alone in captivity. He had three godly friends who shared his convictions. The Babylonians taught these young men the Babylonian language and literature. They were given Babylonian names. They wore Babylonian clothes and studied economics, poetry, even astronomy and astrology. Daniel went along with the curriculum but when it came to eating the king's food, Daniel drew a line in the sand. He would not "defile" himself with the king's food. It is possible that this was food that had been offered to Babylonian gods. To eat this food was to acknowledge the existence and power of these false gods. This Daniel could not do. So he respectfully appealed to the officer in charge.

God caused the official to show favor or "hesed," the OT word for grace to Daniel (v. 9). Daniel's conviction does not excuse him from acting with tact and respect. Our culture that has lost a sense of civility. We just scream back and forth at each other. Daniel resolved privately, asked permission respectfully and offered a creative alternative.

III. God "gave" Daniel (and his three friends) wisdom for the moment...vv. 14-21. God not only gave them favor before their handlers but He also gave them, "knowledge and intelligence in every *branch of* literature and wisdom; Daniel even understood all *kinds of* visions and dreams" so that they entered the king's personal service. You have seen this theme earlier in the Bible. Moses, the child of the captive Hebrews, is raised in the palace of Pharaoh. Joseph, the Hebrew captive is elevated to Prime Minister of Egypt. You will see it again in Esther, as a young Jewess held captive in Persia becomes the queen of the kingdom. Don't miss the point of these stories: The hand of God is at work in the lives of his people. He used the circumstances in Esther's life as he uses the decisions and actions of all humans to providentially work out his divine plans and purposes. We can trust in the Lord's sovereign care over every aspect of our lives.

How then should we live as loyal citizens of the Kingdom of God?

Make up your mind as Daniel did...v. 8. Daniel feared God. The king says it's the best, Daniel says it's defiled. He could speak their language, read their literature, do their job but he would not bow his knee to another god. Daniel determined in advance that he would not compromise his loyalty to God. The story makes it clear that it wasn't just Daniel who made this decision but his three friends were equally committed to faithfulness.

In an out of control world Daniel commits to the God who is in control. Commitment eliminates options. You can make some decisions NOW so that you can stand up later. Daniel, the captive, is captivated by God - the only rightful ruler of this world. Daniel was not for sale at any price. He was a man of deep conviction. But to focus on Daniel is to miss the point. If the message of Daniel is to go on a Daniel diet, work real hard, be a good employee and it will go well with you then Daniel becomes a book of morality and not a record of God's grace.

This book is an important reminder that God will do everything necessary to protect the promise He made to Abraham; that Israel would be a great nation and from Abraham's seed would come one who would bless the world. Nothing will stand in the way of God's eternal plan. He continues to work out His plan for all people through His servant Israel even during the time of their chastening. God's grace will prevail.

The message of God's grace drives both despair and pride far from us. We are either blind by our self-love because of our good works or we are full of self-loathing because of our frequent sins. Both responses deny the truth of the gospel. "The Good News of Jesus comes for both the ones who are drunk on their love for themselves and also those drowning in their own shame." Despair dies when we know that our failures will not shut off the faucet of God's free-flowing grace. God is a far greater king than any human ruler. And JESUS IS A FAR GREATER SAVIOR THAN WE ARE SINNERS!

A word to you who have children. Can you imagine a foreign power invading America and taking away your teenage son to a foreign country where he is to enter a Madrassa and taught the Koran every day for three years? Let me ask you a question: would he emerge as a Muslim or as a Christian? Would he have been given the training to know that gospel is the only hope of the world? Would he have seen an example of a mom or dad who was fully committed to Jesus? If you're not sure then make up YOUR mind.

And just to drive my point home – this is not hypothetical! The majority of parents in this room will hand-deliver their teenager to a university where they will be "programmed" for four years. They will be taught evolution and environmentalism and tolerance and diversity and the only absolute will be the notion that Christianity is absolutely ridiculous. Will your child emerge as a Christian or an agnostic or atheist? You have only a few precious years to demonstrate your faith in a God who is sovereign over world events and sovereign over your family. (Family groups learning truth foundations).

Spoiler alert...v. 21. Daniel outlives four kings. Kingdoms rise and fall. Kings come and go but the one true King endures forever and His purpose will be accomplished.