

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Faithful in Doubtland

Welcome to Doubtland

(Background; Daniel 1:1-7)

Study #1

Introduction: Loose associations...

Of things that “go together” I would list peaches/cream, sun/moon, thunder/lightning, mac/cheese, and hamburger/fries. If you think of one thing, you end up thinking of the other.

Mention the Old Testament prophet, Daniel, to me, and, because I was raised in a family that went to church and I heard Bible stories in Sunday School, certain images will pop into my mind.

(Now, my church experience moved me to embrace atheism early in life - feel free to ask me about it if you're interested.)

Daniel conjures up images of a giant golden statue, a rescue out of a fiery furnace, a deliverance from a lion's den, and some prophecies about the future.

Today, Jeff and I are beginning a new series of studies exploring the book of Daniel.

And, yes, we'll tell the stories, and we'll even ponder some of Daniel's prophetic visions.¹

¹ I've provided what I hope will be helpful background material in a document available in the lobby. Feel free to pick one up or email me for a copy.

But here at the beginning, I'm going to tell you that while the prophetic sections of the book are very important and true, the main purpose of Daniel's book is not to give us a detailed map of the future.

And, while Daniel and his friends did experience some amazing rescues, the book of Daniel wasn't written to give us guarantees of God's protection against danger and harm if we are faithful, or faithful enough, or “really” faithful.

In a few minutes, I'll return to this theme of the purpose of Daniel and why we're returning to it so soon after the last time we studied it (2016).

First, though, I want to set the stage by orienting to the historical setting of Daniel.

The crucial background to Daniel's life and the book he wrote involves a part of Israel's story that led to Daniel living through an unmitigated disaster. The following words describe an historical earthquake for the Jews.

From Jerusalem to Babylon (Daniel 1:1-2)

[1] In the third year² of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar³ king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it.⁴ [2] And the Lord handed Jehoiakim king of Judah over to him, along with some of the vessels of the house of God; and he brought them to the land of Shinar⁵, to the house of his god, and he brought the vessels into the treasury of his god.

² Daniel has been accused of an error here in that he called the time of the king's siege against Jerusalem an event of the third year, while Jeremiah, referring to the same event, reckons it as the fourth year. This is easily resolved. Daniel was using the Babylonian calendar, which reckoned the first year of a king's reign as the year of his ascension, to be followed by the “first” year of his reign. Jeremiah, giving the Jewish spin, considered the first year the first year of his reign. No surprise that Daniel would use Babylonian reckoning, having lived his whole adult life there.

³ Nebuchadnezzar = “Nabu (a chief Babylonian god) has protected my inheritance”

⁴ Parallel accounts of the siege are found in 2 Kings 24:1-2 and 2 Chron. 36:5-7.

⁵ Shinar, another name for Babylon, emphasizes a place hostile to God. Shinar is linked to Nimrod, an early rebel against God, and the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11).

The sacking of Jerusalem was devastating for the Jews, and here's how it all came about.

The Fall of the Nation of the Jews

The united Kingdom of God

When God birthed the nation of Israel after the Exodus from Egypt, it was a united nation. The Jews entered the Promised Land and lived as one people. But that unity didn't last all that long.

During the latter years of King Solomon's rule, he stopped following the Lord and began to worship other gods.

His apostasy led to the division of the united nation of Israel into a northern kingdom (*Israel*) and a southern kingdom (*Judah*).

The fall of the northern kingdom of Israel

The northern kingdom was always led by kings who served false gods. And, because of her constant spiritual rebellion, the one, true God sent the Assyrian army to attack and destroy Israel in 722 BC.

Things were only slightly better down south, in Judah.

The fall of the southern kingdom of Judah

In Judah, at least for a while, there were enough good kings (Jehoshaphat, Uzziah, Hezekiah, and others) to balance out the damage done by the bad kings (Rehoboam, Queen Athaliah, Ahaz, and others).

But there came a tipping point with the reign of King Manasseh.

Deep into Manasseh's fifty-year-long, idolatrous, wicked reign, God determined to punish the southern kingdom of Judah, as He had the northern kingdom of Israel.

His judgment came in the form of conquest by the Babylonian Empire, under the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar.⁶

Babylon, the Great

Size and grandeur

Babylon spread over much of what we refer to today as the Middle East, taking in present-day Jordan, Syria, Iraq, and some of Iran.

The Empire's capitol city - Babylon - was enormous and was filled with splendor. There were eight magnificent gates that led into the walled city.⁷

The walls were forty feet high and were ornately decorated with painted lions on blue ceramic backgrounds.

Within the city were the famed Hanging Gardens of Babylon, which Nebuchadnezzar had built for one of his wives.⁸

Literature and education

As well, the Babylonians were very advanced in matters of astronomy, math,⁹ education, and literature.¹⁰

⁶ At this time (around 600 BC), Judah was becoming weaker and weaker, culturally, politically, and militarily, while Babylon, which saw Judah as a tempting and an easy target, was ascending in all these ways.

⁷ See the Ishtar Gate (Wikipedia), built after the destruction of Jerusalem, and like Babylon's other majestic gates. It was approached by way of a 65-foot-wide street, paved with white limestone and red rocks cemented together.

⁸ These gardens are listed among the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

⁹ Art was highly developed in 6th century BC Babylon. Babylon's scholars took mathematics to new heights. Archaeologists have found multiplication and division tables that students used to practice their math assignments. Algebraic achievement by the Babylonians has led to comparisons with the Renaissance. Her scholars used a sexagesimal system of counting (in addition to the decimal system, based on multiples of 10), that has formed the basis for our 360-degree circle and 60-minute hour. They were masters of astronomy, both for purposes of astrology and science.

¹⁰ They had developed an elaborate system of writing, called cuneiform (*nuneus* "wedge" and *forma* "form" from the Latin), which made words from wedge-shaped figures impressed into clay.

Babylon had a very involved, but clearly mythical tale of creation,¹¹ a flood narrative with similarities to the Bible's record of Noah,¹² wisdom literature (like Proverbs), poetry (like Psalms and Job), and a very mature system of law.¹³

We are impressed with her many achievements. And in many ways, Babylon was the epitome of an advanced culture. But Babylonian culture had a very dark dark side.¹⁴

Babylon's dark side

The empire was famous for arrogance and pride. Violence was the national past time. She was supremely materialistic.

The worship of her gods and goddesses was immoral and violent. Demonic, occult practices dominated society.

And, as we will see in the weeks to come, the king who reigned over Babylon was fit for just such an empire. Nebuchadnezzar was a godless, arrogant, violent, impetuous king.

And this was the king (Nebuchadnezzar), and this was the nation (Babylon) that God allowed to destroy Judah, to unseat King Jehoiakim, to lay waste the city of Jerusalem, to destroy and to loot the temple, to take the riches of the temple into the house of a demon spirit, and to deport many Jews to live in Babylon.¹⁵

Daniel's book tells us that it was to Babylon that he and his friends were taken as captives.

As far as we know, these young men had done nothing wrong. They suffered for the wrongs of those who had come before them, something that isn't uncommon in our world, now or then.

¹¹ The Enuma Elish

¹² The Gilgamesh Epic, written over a thousand years after the writing of Genesis.

¹³ The Code of Hammurabi.

¹⁴ "Babylon" is the term the Bible uses in various places to describe something that is altogether wicked. "Babylon" is the anti-God state. See Revelation 18.

¹⁵ God is behind history - note 1:1-2. Daniel saw God behind everything that happened in history and in his story.

And we can be sure that when Daniel arrived in Babylon, he was thinking about his life back in Jerusalem.

Home, For the People of God

Daniel's Home

Daniel knew Jerusalem. It was all familiar. He knew Judah's land and climate and seasons. He knew her culture.

And Jerusalem had all the things that make a culture a culture - food, language, art, clothing, daily routines, government, architecture. That culture was the culture Daniel knew. He was comfortable in that culture. He loved that culture.

Babylon was flashier, wealthier, more intellectually stimulating, exotic and erotic and violent. It was different in every way.

Everything was familiar in Jerusalem. Nothing was familiar in Babylon. Daniel "fit" in Jerusalem. He didn't "fit", culturally, in Babylon.

And then, of course, there was God.

In Jerusalem, there was the temple where God was worshiped. There was the Levitical priesthood. There were the annual Jewish worship festivals, the Sabbath routines.

Now, make no mistake. Judah was not spiritually healthy in Daniel's day. In 600 BC, Jerusalem was not at the center of a revival.

But to be a God-fearing Jew was an acceptable, even a respectable thing in Jerusalem. If that was you, you fit right in. There was no overt antagonism to the ways of God in Jerusalem.

Then Daniel went to Babylon where none of that was true. His Jewish ways were foreign. Babylon was culture shock. It wasn't home.

He was a foreigner in Babylon. The term “foreigner” always has political overtones. In Daniel’s case, it also had spiritual meaning. He was a political foreigner and a spiritual foreigner.

When we, today, turn to the New Testament, we find the term used to describe followers of Jesus.

And here is where I want to spend a bit of time explaining why we are turning to Daniel, again, so soon after our last look. (2016)

Our Home and Our “home”

Our real home (see 2 Corinthians 5)

When the Apostle Paul wrote about “home” in 2 Corinthians 5, he admitted that Christians have two homes. We have an earthly home, and we have a heavenly home we haven’t yet seen.

Paul wrote that while we are in this earthly home (a physical body; a material world), we long to be HOME with the Lord. In Heaven.

We will be most at home when we are with God in heaven. We are currently not really, completely, at home.

The New Testament calls us ambassadors of heaven to earth (2 Corinthians 5:20), citizens of heaven living on earth (Philippians 3:20), and foreigners and strangers who don’t quite fit in here. (1 Peter 2:11)

There are times, though, when *here* - in a physical body, on earth, in the USA, in San Antonio - feels pretty homey.

When here is not homey

When life is sweet, relationships are working, and health is good, it can at least feel like we are back in the first Garden with God.

And if, in addition to all of that, our walk with the Lord is rich and unopposed and we’re even cheered on in our faith by the surrounding culture, it feels downright heavenly.

But, as we all know, we’re not in the Garden anymore and we’re certainly not in Heaven.

The writers of the New Testament all wrote a lot about trials and the general hardships of life. That’s part of living in every age, post-Eden.

They also wrote a good bit about sufferings and persecutions, which can be a direct result of following Jesus.

Many, many Christians alive today are reminded daily that they are neither in the Garden, nor in Heaven. Lots of our brothers and sisters around the world face severe opposition for their faith.

They are citizens of the country in which they live, and they are treated as foreigners in their home country because they follow Jesus.

That’s Daniel’s story.

He made his home in Babylon for decades. But for him, it was always “home-away-from-home.”

You and I are spending a few weeks learning from Daniel because our culture is seeming less and less homey, especially when it comes to our faith in Jesus.

When homey grows less homey

These are hard times

It isn’t news for me to report that these are hard times. The COVID-19 pandemic has made for hard times, worldwide.

The difficulties we have all faced over the past year have prompted Jeff and me to bring some problem-oriented series of messages.

In May/June of 2020, we spoke about “When Hard Times Hit”, looking at Bible characters who suffered in different ways. The focus of the study in Philippians was that life is to be “All About Jesus” - even in

tough times. And last fall, we spent a few weeks looking at the life of Jeremiah and the hardships that faithfulness to God brought to him.

But, if the pandemic were to disappear tomorrow, we who follow Jesus would still be facing changes in the American culture with respect to our faith that has brought some disruption already and that may well bring much greater disruption and hardship.

A study of Daniel is, increasingly, fitting

2016...

It was fitting for us to study Daniel back in 2016. In recent years, dramatic changes had happened in our culture concerning the posture of many Americans toward Christianity.

In bringing the messages in 2016, I leaned heavily on the findings of David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons who co-authored Barna Research Group's book, Good Faith (*Being a Christian when society thinks you're irrelevant and extreme*).

While bringing that series of messages on Daniel, I pointed out some of what Good Faith affirmed. Namely, that...
 ...there was a rising tide of apathy toward Christianity.
 ...there were fewer people who believed that our faith was doing anything positive for the common good.
 ...an increasing number of Americans believed that practicing evangelism, agreeing with the Bible's moral code, and donating money to religious groups were all extreme practices and should be stopped.

That was then. And if it was appropriate, because of cultural changes, to turn to Daniel a few years ago, I think that it's all the more appropriate to do so now, and for the same reasons.

2021...

The cultural trajectory away from friendliness toward our faith has continued, and with increasing speed.

The reading I have been doing reveals that greater percentages of our American adult population don't see either the Bible, Christian leaders, or churches as providing credible guidance for life.

More and more people look for fulfillment apart from God and Christ. Many of these are what are termed "legacy" Christians (de-converted is a word often used) who have some knowledge and experience of the faith, but for whom it is now noise that may be safely ignored.¹⁶

Large swaths of American culture have grown increasingly hostile to Christianity and to Christians and even to Christ, viewing our faith not only as *irrelevant* and *extreme*, but *toxic*.

Now, I would be remiss if I didn't admit that some of this rejection of our faith is due to the presence of some toxicity in us and in our churches.

Some Christ-followers are marked by selfishness, arrogance, meanness, and hypocrisy. And none of us are perfect.

There are churches where the leadership is marked by narcissism, where power is gained and kept by fear, churches that are secretive and defensive when there are problems and accusations. And we're not perfect here, either.

We have all read headlines about churches and other Christian institutions where there is misuse of money, sexual misbehavior, and the abuse of power.

But some of the turning away from Christianity is due to an increasing, culture-wide rejection of the truth claims of Jesus.

Some of it is due to choices made by people to walk away from Jesus. Some is due, honestly, to lead a life independent of God.

Here's one way to state the bottom line:

¹⁶ According to what I have read, 3 out of 4 US adults have some Christian background. 3 out of 5 of these are mostly inactive in their faith.

While we take our faith seriously, American culture is less inclined to take Christianity seriously.

People around us are dismissing our faith, while we embrace it. Those we love are abandoning Jesus, but we cling to Him and long for them to cling to Him, too.

This shift away from a Christian-friendly culture presents us with an enormous challenge. I believe Daniel points the way forward.

Becoming 2021 God-honoring foreigners, like Daniel

Daniel was a young man taken from his birthplace to a land of captivity, taken from Jerusalem to Babylon, taken from a place where God and His ways were revered to a land and to a people who did not know the Lord at all.

But he and his friends had so thoroughly embraced the culture of Jerusalem that even surrounded by an oppressive, Babylonian, God-denying culture, they thrived.

We can thrive, too, and our faith can thrive in 2021 and beyond. But we won't thrive because of policies we put in place, rules we make, strategy we map out, or laws we enact.

If we thrive it will be because, by God's grace, our lives and our church reflect the way and the spirit of Jesus.

As one person famously put it, culture eats policy - and strategy and rules and laws - for breakfast.¹⁷

When the culture of our church looks like the gatherings of disciples Jesus envisioned, the surrounding culture will sit up and take notice.

When we here are marked by a culture of empathy, grace, putting people first, truth, justice, service, and Christlikeness, we'll

bring a smile to God's face and hope to people who are disillusioned by life without God.¹⁸

We'll flourish when we are an *ekklesia* marked by service and love, when we don't retaliate when we're opposed, and when we are known for giving and for prayer, and for talking about Jesus - a lot.

Culture-making requires clarity and time and work and a refusal to do anything misaligned with the culture to which we aspire.

The reason for spending these weeks together considering Daniel is so that we would all see a man - and his friends - who were faithful to God and who maintained a positive presence for God while living in a land that doubted (Doubtland) the presence, the goodness, and the truth of their God.

The first two verses of the book told us that Jerusalem was sacked and looted.

We next read that King Nebuchadnezzar ordered his chief servant to bring choice young men to Babylon to serve in his court.

Daniel and Friends, in Babylon (Daniel 1:3-7)

Recruitment and Education (Daniel 1:3-4)

[3] Then the king told Ashpenaz, the chief of his officials, to bring in some of the sons of Israel, including some of the royal family and of the nobles¹⁹, [4] youths in whom was no impairment, who were good-looking, suitable for instruction in every kind of expertise, endowed with understanding and discerning knowledge, and who had ability to

¹⁸ These attributes are listed in a very helpful book I'll be referring to throughout this series, [A Church Called Tov](#), by Scot McKnight and Laura Barringer. I highly recommend it. The word "tov" is the Hebrew word for "good, beautiful, attractive, winsome". The authors are writing to describe a church that is all that.

¹⁹ We don't know from Scripture, nor does secular history tell us, how many were taken.

¹⁷ Attributed to Peter Drucker.

serve in the king's court; and he ordered Ashpenaz to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans.

These exiles were forced to make the five-hundred-mile journey from Jerusalem to Babylon. They were selected because the Babylonians believed that they would be assets to the king's court.

Among these young people were Daniel and his three friends, all of whom had the physical and personal and intellectual abilities Babylon was looking for.

Over the course of a three-year training regimen, they would learn to speak and read Babylonian. They would read the great literature of the Chaldeans and they would study Babylonian architecture, agriculture, law, and math.

They would learn all about astronomy and its dark cousin, astrology. By their graduation, they would have been certified experts in the occult and demonic practices of the Babylonians.

Their education would have exposed them to things that were directly contrary to their faith. They would have learned things that violated their biblically informed consciences and their moral scruples.²⁰

And yet, despite all this deep cultural immersion in Babylon and their removal from everything familiar, and their sufferings, they retained their spiritual vitality for the decades of their lives in Babylon.

In the season of cultural change in which we find ourselves, it will be helpful to see Daniel and his friends. They remained faithful despite Babylon's attempts to train faith out of them, to un-Jew them.

²⁰ As well, as servants in the king's court, there is almost no question that these youths would have been made eunuchs. While the Bible doesn't say this, there is no mention of Daniel's legacy in children AND it was common practice to make eunuchs out of those from foreign lands who served in the king's court AND the man in charge of Daniel's training was the chief of the eunuchs. Somehow, my Sunday School teachers neglected to tell me that Daniel suffered castration...

They also remained faithful to God despite Babylon's attempts to turn them into thorough-going Babylonians.

Cultural Immersion and Identity (Daniel 1:5-7)

When in Babylon... (v. 5)

[5] The king also allotted for them a daily ration from the king's choice food and from the wine which he drank, and ordered that they be educated for three years, at the end of which they were to enter the king's personal service.

So, Daniel and his friends were provided food they didn't know, likely food they didn't like, and definitely food they didn't want.

From a Babylonian perspective, it was great food. It was rich food and there was good wine, lavishly provided. The Babylonians thought that they were honoring these Jews. But it wasn't Jewish home-cooking. It wasn't comfort food for Daniel and his friends.

More to the point, it wasn't kosher food. That was a problem. We'll see next week how Daniel and his friends managed the food fight.

Beyond being offered Babylonian food, they were also given Babylonian names.

My name is... (vv. 6-7)

[6] Now among them from the sons of Judah were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. [7] Then the commander of the officials assigned new names to them; and to Daniel he assigned the name Belteshazzar, to Hananiah Shadrach, to Mishael Meshach, and to Azariah Abed-nego.

Daniel and his friends were descended from noble families, since, as we know, only the nobility was taken into this early exile.

And, judging from their behavior throughout the book, we can guess that they came from God-fearing families as well.²¹

Their Babylonian hosts changed their names. Why would they do that?

Changing their names was an attempt to obliterate any remaining vestige of Judaism and any connection to Judah. They are seeking to erase their Jewish identity.

- Daniel, whose Hebrew name means “*God is my Judge*” is now “Beltshazzar.” (“Bel’s prince”)
- Hananiah’s name (“*Yahweh has been gracious*”) is changed to “Shadrach”. (meaning unknown)
- Mishael’s name (“*Who is what God is?*”) is now “Meschach.” (meaning unknown)
- Azariah (“*Yahweh has helped*”) becomes “Abed-nego,” “The servant of Nego” (a Babylonian god).

Babylon did everything it could to force these young men to adopt new identities, new gods, and a new way of looking at the world.

But as we’ll see, nothing Babylon threw at them derailed them from their trust in the Lord. They remained faithful despite having lost the external trappings of home.

Babylon could touch their bodies, but not their souls. So, yes, you and I can learn a lot from these guys.

Conclusion:

Daniel and his friends spent decades working and serving in a culture that did not embrace the values they cherished.

The administrations in which they served were not kind, benevolent, nonprofits. Nebuchadnezzar did not put the growth and development of people before task. Babylon was brutal and callous and indifferent to the welfare of its own people.

Slavery was condoned, human life forfeited at the whim of the king, and power enforced at the end of a spear was everything.

But these four young men were God’s blessing to that place and to the people in that place.

That’s what God’s people have always been called to do in the places where they have been.

- Abraham was blessed so that he would be a blessing to the world. (Genesis 12:1-3)
- Jesus said that we are blessed when we are persecuted for His sake and that we are to shine like bright lights in dark places. (Matthew 5:10-16)
- Paul said that all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus would be persecuted. (2 Timothy 3:12)
- And today, Christ-followers in lots of places are living for Jesus while opposed.

Our time in Daniel today and in the weeks to come will be vital equipping for us to love and to serve and share Jesus, whether it is the popular thing to do, or not.

By God’s grace, may we, together, be such a sweet aroma of Jesus’ grace and love, that people who doubt that what we have to offer is good, helpful, or true, will believe.

²¹ The Jewish names of these four young men indicate that they came from godly stock, the endings of their names “*el*” (the name for God) and “*iah*” (“*Ya*” being shorthand for “*Yahweh*”) being dead giveaways.