

**Day 1 – Daniel 1:1-7 ‘A strange world’**

In late August 2021, approximately 16,000 people were resettled in the UK after fleeing Afghanistan. Whilst they were not forcibly taken – as the Jewish people were in Daniel chapter 1 – it was still, in many ways, a decision forced upon them. Their lives were in danger: and, however thankful many must be to be living somewhere safe, that is weighed against the trauma of leaving their homeland, their culture, and most of their extended family and friends behind, perhaps never to see them again.

Over the coming months and years, these refugees will have to learn to live in an unfamiliar culture, and, as such, will face the critical decisions that all those in exile must face: what parts of their identity must be kept, and what must be adapted or even discarded. This is the dilemma of exile.

The theme of exile is a crucial one in the bible. It defines much of the story of God’s people, from Abraham onwards: in Egypt and in Babylon in the Old Testament; and then, in the New, a story of spiritual survival surrounded by a hostile host culture – first Jewish, then Roman.

It is, increasingly, our story, too. For several generations our own culture in the UK has been moving away from the unquestioning acceptance of Christian truth as the bedrock of our culture, a process which is accelerating at present. Many of us now feel ourselves to be strangers in a strange land: a minority swimming against the tide – albeit one which remains as spiritually hungry as ever, and is now able to hear the story of our faith with fresh ears. So it’s not all doom and gloom: our good news is a genuine surprise to large parts of our nation, which brings enormous opportunities alongside considerable challenges.

But it is this cultural backdrop which makes the Old Testament Book of Daniel such an encouragement and an inspiration. The world Daniel inhabits as a person of faith looks rather more like ours than it did 100 years ago. There is so much gold for us to mine from its pages, and I hope over the next few weeks we will do just that. It is a story of courage, of integrity, of surprising flourishing – as well as containing some of the best loved stories of the bible: the dreams, the fiery furnace, the writing on the wall and the lions’ den.

Above all, Daniel is a book about *identity*. Whose are we? And if we are God’s (and God’s above all), how do we live out our faith in our culture. What do we hold onto as non-negotiable, and where can we adapt? How do we seek the prosperity of our city, our nation, *and* also worship and serve a Higher Power first and foremost?

As we delve deep into Daniel in this season, may God continue to make us strong in our identity: as his children, followers of Jesus above all, who ‘is the same yesterday, today and forever.’ And may we be equipped to live out our faith with fresh courage, integrity and inspiration.

**Day 2 – Daniel 1:6-16 ‘Drawing the line’**

Soon after I started office work in 1996, I was asked to work on a project for a large client in the gambling industry. Our team had lots of clients, and gambling research was only a small part of our turnover. I approached my director (quickly but quietly) and indicated that I had an issue of conscience with gambling, but would be very happy to work in every other client sector.

My boss reluctantly accepted my decision, though I did get hauled into the Managing Director’s office a couple of days later and was given a telling off for my trouble. But I worked there very happily (in the same team) for 12 years, with lots of clients in lots of sectors, and the issue never came up again.

On matters of faith and conscience, where do you draw the line? That is the million-dollar question, and one which many of us have to face in our work, as well as in other parts of our lives. It’s a multi-layered challenge: first, we have to know what we think about various things to start with – not always easy! Second, we have to face possible conflict with family, friends and colleagues. Third, we may also be worried that it puts our job or reputation at risk.

Daniel and his friends faced these exact same questions 2,500 years ago. They had been resettled in Babylon and forced to adapt to a totally different culture. They had a deep faith, and resolved to stay faithful to the one, true God. However, they also had to live and thrive in this culture – where should they draw the lines?

It’s fascinating to see that Daniel and his friends were happy to absorb Babylonian language, media culture and even names (v4,v6). But their ‘red line’ was food (v8). This may seem odd to our ears, but food laws were – and are – an incredibly important part of Jewish faith, and eating the wrong thing would have made Daniel unclean before God in a way that the other things didn’t. So they chose to make a stand on this issue.

But what I love, and find inspiring, is the wise and gracious way they took this stand. They talked to the right person privately rather than stand on a soapbox. They were polite. And they asked for a trial period to prove that they could do the job just as well regardless.

And God honoured their faithfulness. Their health flourished, and the official could therefore afford to turn a blind eye. It strikes me that this is a model for us, too. Our ethical challenges may be different. But we can still be wise and gracious – and above all, we look to our great God, who honours our gentle, loving obedience. Where do you need wisdom today? And how can God help you to act upon it?

**Day 3 – Daniel 1:17-21 ‘Real wisdom’**

‘Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?’ These words of T.S. Eliot written almost a century ago are probably more true now than ever. Apparently the amount of information created and stored on the web doubles every two years: vast amounts of data about anything and everything. Information has become the idol of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, ironically obscuring our path towards knowledge, and pushing us even further from real wisdom, which seems more precious – and also more scarce – than ever.

But what is wisdom? *Wisdom is what makes life really work.* Someone once defined it in biblical terms as ‘godliness in everyday clothing.’ It’s about spiritual, emotional and relational health, the capacity to make wise choices, and to live with good, just and life-affirming purpose. It cuts through the noise of information and sharpens the tools of knowledge. In short, it’s how we were designed to live, and to flourish as human beings.

Today’s passage tells us that Daniel and his friends abounded in this kind of wisdom – ‘in every matter,’ and ten times better than the king’s other advisers, who are described as ‘magicians and enchanters’ (v20).

This last description is instructive because it makes the root of wisdom clear. If wisdom is rooted in the character of God, then it’s vital to know *who this God is*. Much religious practice of that day – including here in Babylon – assumed that the gods (probably plural) were essentially unknowable in any meaningful sense: they were capricious and unpredictable, and could only be sought through a series of bizarre rituals for, essentially, ‘yes or no’ answers.

The one, true God, on the other hand, worshipped by Daniel and his friends, is nothing like that. Our God can be *known*: this is a God who, from the beginning, speaks. This God communicated his will for human beings in detail through the giving of the law and the instructions of the prophets – all of which was available to Daniel. And this God is not capricious or unpredictable, but *constant in character* – full of mercy, loving-kindness and near to all who call on him. This God doesn’t need to be bribed or cajoled, but can be approached, loved and worshipped.

It’s no surprise, then, that Daniel and his friends gain a reputation for great wisdom. You just have to look in the right place! For us, too, despite the increasing pressure for us to abandon the wisdom of biblical truth, we can take great comfort and inspiration from knowing that we have the same access to real, divine wisdom – even greater, perhaps, than Daniel, because God’s Holy Spirit now writes this wisdom on our hearts.

*Our God still speaks, and still desires our flourishing.* Let’s recapture that joyful confidence in God’s wisdom to make life work, and may God grant us grace to find all the wisdom we need for our lives today.

**Day 4 – Daniel 2:1-13 ‘The power of dreams’**

Nearly all of us dream. It's part of the brain's way of processing and ordering our experiences, though it often leads to some strange combinations, and some even stranger recurrent dreams. For some years in my 20s and 30s I dreamt regularly of being attacked by killer cats – yes, really. If recurrent dreams are meant to provide insights into our basic psyche then I would probably be a psychologist's nightmare. I really don't want to know what that signifies!

God also speaks through dreams, too. The prophet Joel – the passage we often read at Pentecost, quoted by Peter in his famous sermon – promises that in the age of the Spirit 'your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions.' (Joel 2:28) Stories abound of how many thousands of people have recently come to faith in countries with no access to bibles or missionaries simply through dreams. Jesus appears to them directly, and they awake with a profound assurance of God's love. Never under-estimate the power of a God-given dream.

And in our passage today, the world's most powerful human being, Nebuchadnezzar – military genius, cruel tyrant, unstoppable force – encounters the one foe he fears: a vivid and disturbing dream. In a culture which assumed that 'the gods' only communicated through mysterious things, this was a big deal, and potentially signified either triumph or disaster – no wonder he was terrified and unable to sleep (v1).

And in typical fashion he tries to bully his way to wisdom, saying in effect to his Magi (name sound familiar?): 'Tell me what it means or I'll kill you.' Not sure that kind of pep talk ever really works... about as effective as a sign I keep in my room, which always makes me chuckle: 'Floggings will continue until morale improves.'

But what is clear is that this dream is a pathway to divine revelation (v11) – and even today we too need to be open to the possibility that God *might* use a dream to speak to us. Most of the time he doesn't need to, we have bibles and pastors and lots of other ways to meet with God – so we need to beware overdoing this line of thought, or being 'hyperlert'.

But let's rejoice with those who have come to Christ through them, and let's pray that God continues to use dreams in cultures which oppose the gospel in other ways, to draw many more to the glorious awareness of his love and grace. If God can speak to Nebuchadnezzar in this way, he can speak to anyone.

**Day 5 – Daniel 2:14-23 ‘When we need it’**

‘Give us today our daily bread.’ A well-known line – indeed the central line – of the world’s most famous prayer, and one many of us pray every day. And of course it does have a literal meaning, especially for many around the world, for whom daily physical sustenance is not a given.

But there is a broader meaning, too. Bread in this case means ‘everything we need for the day.’ And there are days when this request takes on extra importance. An unforeseen crisis, an extremely heavy workload, a big event which we’ve dreaded for ages.

Today’s passage takes the promise of daily bread to its extreme! What Daniel and his friends need is a miracle to save their lives. The king will execute them the following day, along with hundreds of their fellow officials, unless they receive divine revelation concerning both the content and the meaning of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream.

And so they ‘plead for mercy from the God of heaven’ (v18). And God is wonderfully gracious: a vision is given and Daniel receives the answer he needs, saving not just his life but the lives of many others.

In the midst of this extraordinary act of God, let’s not miss: (a) the practical steps Daniel took to ‘create the space’ which allowed God to work – verses 14-16. This required both tact and courage: God’s supernatural work complemented Daniel’s natural activity; (b) the power of community. Daniel shared with his friends and they sought this miraculous ‘daily bread’ together; and (c) the importance of gratitude – how easy it is for us to forget to thank God for the ‘daily bread’ we receive! Perhaps Daniel’s wonderful prayer in verses 20-23 can be ours this day.

What ‘daily bread’ do you need today? And when you have received it, don’t forget to thank our loving God, too. ‘Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever!’

**Day 6 – Daniel 2:24-28 ‘But I know someone who can...’**

‘I know a man who can.’ You may remember the famous advert for the AA – and with apologies for the non-inclusive language, it was very much of its time! A child has buried the car at the beach, a truck carrying a giraffe is stuck at a low bridge... can you fix it? ‘No, but I know a man who can.’ (He’s a nice man, a very nice man, I like him, he’s a very nice man – but I’m getting carried away!)

When we face an insoluble problem, what we really need is ‘someone who can’. Whether it’s cars, boilers, computers – or spiritual troubles – we need to know where to look for the answer.

King Nebuchadnezzar has his own breakdown to repair – a disturbing dream – and he has put the lives of his advisors at stake to find out. And now that Daniel has the answer, he is shown in to the throne room to face the king directly (verses 24-25). Not surprisingly for a king, Nebuchadnezzar gets right to it, no chit-chat: ‘Are you able to tell me?’ (v26).

‘No.’

‘...but I know someone who can.’

It’s hard to overstate the courage required to start with the word ‘no’, especially when your life depends on it. But Daniel is here to do more than just fix the king’s problem: he wants to point Nebuchadnezzar to someone greater, the ultimate problem-fixer – Almighty God. In doing so, he takes no credit for himself, but instead gives all the glory to God – something which is repeated by the king himself at the end of the conversation, as we’ll see in a couple of days’ time.

We may not face the sort of life-threatening challenge Daniel does – but there is here a wonderful model for attractive witness to our family, friends, neighbours and colleagues. We may not have all the answers – but we know Someone who does. We may not be able to solve their crises – but we know Someone who can. We may not be able to fill the gap in their lives – but we know Someone who can. We may not be the answer to their prayers – but we know Someone who is.

When Jesus comes, he doesn’t say ‘this is the way’ – he says ‘*I am* the way.’ The path to life is found not in knowledge or expertise, but in a relationship. When anyone faces challenges, the best thing we can do is to point beyond ourselves, to the One who is greater. Because we know Someone Who Can.

**Day 7 – Daniel 2:29-45 ‘The rock cut without hands’**

Human empires come and go. For a while they might seem invincible – but eventually they always decline, and their place is taken by another. There is only one kingdom that lasts forever – the kingdom of God. A kingdom not reliant on a territory or an army, but on the presence and power of the Almighty. This kingdom may often appear weak and insignificant, but in the end it is the one which prevails, and eventually, ‘the kingdom of the world [will] become the kingdom of our God and of His Christ.’

Nebuchadnezzar’s dream tells the story of the kingdom, in visual form. A great statue is pictured, made of different parts, and Daniel reveals that these parts represent human empires. Whilst there is some uncertainty as to which are described, it is most likely the Babylonian, Medean, Persian and Greek empires, in that order. Alexander the Great is probably the ‘iron’ kingdom which smashes the others to pieces (v40), but which then divides into a number of competing dynasties (vv41-43). At that point, something dramatic happens: a ‘rock cut without hands’ smashes the statue (v34), fills the whole earth (v35) and lasts forever (v44).

The Greek Empire remained the dominant force in the world until it was conquered by the Romans, a process which took over a century, but which culminated in the Battle of Actium in 31BC – just three decades before Jesus was born and a new world order came into being.

Jesus is the rock cut without hands, the decisive intervention of God in our world (v44) whose kingdom prevails over all the others and now fills the earth. When he was born, he was laid on a stone feeding trough (sorry to disappoint your images of a wooden manger!); he won the salvation of the world on the rocky outcrop of Mount Moriah; and, ultimately, a large stone was rolled away to declare the victory of God on Easter Day.

Daniel didn’t know any of that, of course. But we do – and now we can read this amazing passage with wonder and joy in our hearts. The dream was true – as was the interpretation. Thank God for the ‘rock cut without hands’, who defeated our enemies, won our life and salvation, and now welcomes all into the family of the one, true everlasting kingdom. Amen!

**Day 8 – Daniel 2:44-49 ‘The God of gods’**

Humans are spiritual beings. We are all made to worship – and since the dawn of civilisation, every generation of human beings in every culture across the globe has done so. Even now, those who apparently reject God, faith, or organised religion simply direct their worship towards something else. The question is not *if* we worship but *who* (or what) we worship.

It is now customary in the West to characterise faith as a minority pursuit, but in fact this is a myth – we’ve simply directed much of our faith and adoration elsewhere. We all live by faith, to some extent – what matters is where we direct our faith. When life gets hard, where do you go? What pulls you through? Who or what can you rely on? Who holds the ultimate authority? Who desires the best for us, and enables us to flourish as human beings?

This is when the direction of our worship really matters. Nebuchadnezzar may have been the world’s most powerful human being, but when he encountered something beyond his power, the source of his faith (essentially himself and his power) was left brutally exposed. Suddenly he was looking for answers, he was open to the idea that he needed something – or someone – more than he had in his life at present.

And in the God of Daniel – the Lord Almighty of heaven and earth – he found such a One. When Daniel miraculously revealed both the dream and the interpretation (and was careful to make clear who provided the inspiration – v28) Nebuchadnezzar was confronted with a greater reality, and was moved to a new kind of worship: ‘Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries.’ (v47)

It took many years for this spiritual awakening to produce genuine and deep change, as chapters 3 and 4 make clear, but Nebuchadnezzar’s journey towards the God of gods begins here. The Lord had captured his attention, if not yet his heart.

We too are called to be Daniels today – perhaps not at the level (or with the danger) Daniel faced, but simply to point a confused culture towards the one true source of worship, the One who alone can satisfy our deepest needs and longings. Our great God is more than able to do the rest, and to Him alone is all the glory.



**Day 9 – Daniel 3:1-12 ‘Following the crowd’**

Humans are social beings (as well as spiritual ones!). We are made to relate, and we also have a deep desire to ‘find our place’ in the community. We all know what peer pressure feels like – that subtle power to conform to a particular set of expectations, or ‘approved’ beliefs or behaviours.

Daniel chapter 3 is all about control (on the part of King Nebuchadnezzar) and courage (on the part of Daniel’s friends Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego). At the heart of both themes is the question of *conformity*. The king demands conformity to cement his power; the friends refuse because they worship Someone even greater.

I love the narrative of this chapter, because the endless repetition of the job titles (vv2,3) and the musical instruments (vv5,7,10) uses language to weave a narrative of conformity. The underlying message is: ‘everyone is falling into line, whether they like it or not – so should you!’

But Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego don’t fall into line. Not because they like rebelling for the sake of it, but because *only one Being deserves their worship and adoration*: the Lord God Almighty. Indeed, the astrologers testify to it in their denunciation to the king: ‘They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold.’ (v12)

As orthodox Christian faith finds itself under increasing attack in our culture, we too face greater pressure to ‘swim with the tide’ than for many decades. Let’s acknowledge that not to do so is hard – we are social beings who like to fit in, to ‘find our place’. For some, choosing not to is agonising, and it’s right to recognise the courage required. We can also note the significance of the three friends choosing to stay faithful to the Lord *together* – it’s one reason why we need each other more than ever. Faith was never designed to be a solitary occupation.

This is a story for our times, and let’s take heart from its message over these three days. Today, may we be inspired by the simple reminder that in the end we are God’s, and *our calling is to live for the Audience of One*. May God grant us grace to do that in all of our lives, and to support each other in prayer and friendship as we journey on ‘the road less travelled’ together.

**Day 10 – Daniel 3:13-18 ‘But if not....’**

‘But even if he does not...’ – one of the greatest lines in the bible, I think. Certainly one of the bravest and most awe-inspiring. The lives of Daniel’s three friends are on the line, and from the king’s point of view it rests on one decision: will they bow down to his golden statue or not?

However, this is not the key decision as Daniel’s friends see it. The one decision that matters is: will they be faithful to their Lord? They serve Someone Greater, and they are prepared to trust their lives into this Someone’s hands.

Which means that the decision is already made, only the consequence of that decision remains: either God will save them miraculously, or they will die but be rewarded with eternal glory for their faithfulness. Whichever it proves to be, they will not be coerced into idolatry by the king.

We know the ending of the story, but let’s not skip to that point yet – tomorrow comes soon enough! Very few of us will face such a life-or-death decision in our lives. But we will face daily or weekly small decisions where we have to decide whom we serve. And the point is that God always blesses our faithfulness. Not always as we expect, but always in some way or another. Or to put it another way: *God always repays.*

So let’s seize faith to live with the same mindset as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Those who are faithful do not need to defend their position – God will do that for us. Hallelujah!

**Day 11 – Daniel 3:19-30 ‘Divine deliverance’**

*‘When you walk through the fire you will not be harmed, the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.’*

Famous prophetic words from Isaiah 43 – and it’s quite possible that the prophet was referring to this very story. It may well be that the courage of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego was already well-known enough for this to sit alongside the iconic Crossing of the Red Sea in Isaiah’s prophecy.

Either way, the story of the three friends’ miraculous deliverance reaches its climax today. The furnace is brought into play – with fatal consequences for the guards – but ultimately God does indeed rescue his servants and demonstrates (again) to King Nebuchadnezzar that He is the one in charge – the ‘God of Gods and the Lord of kings,’ as the king put it at the end of chapter 2.

Crucially, this time the king sees for himself an angelic being (v25) which clearly persuades him that God is actively involved in this saga. Nevertheless, he still has some way to go to understand what this God might be saying to him directly – the decree of verse 29 still relies rather too much on coercive violence! But it is another step in the right direction.

The image of the fire has long been used as a metaphor for a situation in which God reveals his work in a person’s life. As fire refines metal, so crises or challenges refine us. We never like the heat being turned up, but so often God blesses us in unexpected ways through the time of trial, and we develop an intimacy with him that maybe we didn’t think possible in normal circumstances.

In saying this, we should never trivialise the pain of a crisis – but we can cling with hope to the One who walks with us through it. Take a moment to pray for all who walk through crises today – whether that’s you, or others. The God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego is our God, too.

**Day 12 – Daniel 4:1-18 ‘Who’s the boss?’**

It usually takes most of us a while to really learn a lesson. That’s human nature – there’s a stubborn streak in most of us, and patterns take time to be unlearned or re-formed.

It’s true for ordinary human beings, but no less true for the great and powerful. Probably more true, in fact. It was certainly the case for King Nebuchadnezzar. Chapters 2-4 of Daniel describe a life-changing journey for the world’s most powerful man at the time, and we can see a progression in Nebuchadnezzar’s understanding, albeit a slow one.

In chapter 2, the king is confronted with a terrifying dream, and experiences a miraculous revelation given by one of his Jewish advisors. It causes him to wonder, but his ego is undiminished: indeed, having been told that his was the golden head of the statue (2:38), he goes right ahead and constructs a golden statue (3:1), even demanding that his people worship it!

And so he encounters Operation Revelation Part 2, where God meets with him again in the form of the miraculous rescue of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego; and this time he actually sees an angelic vision (3:25). His heart is moved a little closer to the Lord: he now praises the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, which is something he didn’t do at the end of chapter 2. But he remains a human who sees power in terms of coercion and prestige: threatening disaster on all who do not worship the same God (3:29) and glorying in his own prosperity (4:4).

And so God meets with him a third time, through another vivid dream. It is noteworthy that while the dream appears obscure, the punchline is direct and its meaning quite clear even *before* Daniel is brought in to explain it: the messenger in the vision declares that God is the Lord of all and even the leaders of nations are in his hands (v17).

So it’s possible that Nebuchadnezzar already knew the meaning of the dream, but was desperately hoping it was aimed at someone else! Perhaps that might be a prod for some of us as we read today: has God been speaking to you about something, maybe a word you’re reluctant to hear, or a change you’re reluctant to make?

Either way, there’s a simple lesson in chapter 4 for all of us: there is only one true God – the Lord God Almighty – and this God has the whole world in His hands. For Nebuchadnezzar this caused a great downfall, followed by a marvellous restoration, as we’ll see over the next couple of days.

But for us, may it be an encouragement. Wherever we see corrupt human leadership we know that it doesn’t last forever. Kingdoms fall, leaders are replaced, and there is one Kingdom that ultimately prevails. Let’s pray with confidence to our great God today, and for the nations that desperately need better leaders, that the Lord might intervene, for His glory and for the sake of those who suffer.

**Day 13 – Daniel 4:19-32 ‘Cut down?’**

By a strange coincidence, the day before I wrote this reflection a large part of one of our biggest trees fell down in the churchyard. I watched it happen from my study window shortly before writing this reflection. There was a large cracking noise followed by the sobering sound of falling timber – and suddenly a bigger gap in the sky than we had a few seconds previously.

Thankfully no-one was nearby, and the clear up operation is well under way – but it provides a timely example of just what is involved in the felling of a big and glorious tree. Today’s passage continues the story of Nebuchadnezzar’s second vivid dream, which Daniel is once again called to explain. And, as Daniel makes clear, Nebuchadnezzar is himself the mighty tree he has dreamed of. A tree that is about to be cut down....

But there is a second chance offered. Daniel advises the king that a change of ways – or rather a change of heart – may yet save him from the dream coming true. And perhaps Nebuchadnezzar did change – briefly. But a year later, old patterns re-emerged (or had never altered), and the great king was humbled, just as the dream had foretold.

Whilst we might naturally perceive little in this story which affects us directly, there is a universal truth here. Pride comes before a fall, as the old saying goes – and if this story teaches us anything, it reminds to beware believing our own hype. We humans are good at giving ourselves too much credit for our successes, and too little responsibility for our failures. Humility is one the greatest and most prized of all virtues: perhaps not in the eyes of much of society, but certainly in the eyes of the One whose opinion really matters.

There is also the offer of a second chance. Whilst Nebuchadnezzar did ultimately fall victim to his own hubris, our gracious God gave him time to amend his ways. How much more can we rest on the promises of Christ, the great giver of second, and third, and fourth, and multiple chances: ‘The time has come: the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!’

May the Lord draw us back to this good news today, to the true freedom effected by life-giving repentance and faith. And may we, too, walk in the dusty glory and wonder of humility.

**Day 14 – Daniel 4:28-37 ‘The Humble King’**

Until the first century AD, the phrase ‘humble king’ was an oxymoron. Kings and other rulers were meant to be proud and glorious, manifestly greater beings than the people they ruled. The idea of a king being humble was ridiculous – Nebuchadnezzar may have been a tyrant but he conformed to the pattern expected of him.

So what happened in Daniel chapter 4 is truly extraordinary. Not just that the world’s most powerful ruler had such a downfall – but that he learned his lesson in the process.

Historical evidence doesn’t shed light conclusively as to when and how this actually happened, so this is one episode we have to take on trust. Its veracity is most probably located in its unlikelihood. This sort of thing was so far outside the realms of what would be expected that it’s improbable anyone would think to make it up – and even more improbable that a conquered people would dare to write it down and circulate it unless it was sanctioned. Truth, in this case, is stranger than fiction.

And so, unlikely as it sounds, perhaps the great Nebuchadnezzar really did undergo a spiritual transformation. Having suffered a prolonged season quite literally in the wilderness, he ‘raised his eyes towards heaven,’ and now praises, honours and glorifies the Most High (v34).

Indeed, lest we miss it first time, he makes it clear that this change is not just a self-preserving response to a crisis which is soon forgotten when success returns, but a permanent change – the most remarkable sentence of all is found in the final verse (37): ‘Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the king of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just.’ The greatest earthly king now bows his heart before Someone even greater.

And whilst we may marvel at this remarkable transformation – and may it give us hope to keep praying for those we care for who seem hardened to God’s love – King Nebuchadnezzar is also, in his way, a prophetic sign, paving the way for a new understanding of what true leadership is.

600 years later another king entered this world, and another tree took centre stage, one on which this king was lifted up – not to be worshipped, but to be mocked and insulted. The placard which hailed him as king was designed to be ironic but spoke a greater truth than those standing nearby realised. This king had taught that the only path to greatness was humble service, and just 24 hours previously had washed his friends’ feet, the task assigned to the lowliest slave in the household. Shortly after his death his followers began to live in the same way, and the idea of humility before the Most High took root as a defining quality of real leadership – one we are fortunate to see modelled in our current queen.

The old Nebuchadnezzar of chapters 2 and 3 would have had no idea what this kind of king was about: but perhaps the Nebuchadnezzar of chapter 4 would have understood, after all. Today, we worship this King – the King of kings – who comes to us gentle and lowly, and who alone can grant us rest.

**Day 15 – Daniel 5:1-4 ‘Short term memory’**

Chapter 5 is another of the iconic stories of the bible – it’s amazing how many such stories you can find in the first six chapters of the little book of Daniel! This particular story still retains a place in our culture via the phrase: ‘The writing on the wall’. It’s used to describe a moment when the outcome of a situation becomes inevitable – usually a bad moment or downfall, and the connection to this story will become clear in the next couple of days.

But today we begin our brief tour of this story by being introduced to a grandson who is certainly not a patch on his illustrious grandfather. King Belshazzar suffered the fate of many heirs who succeed great rulers: they pale by comparison. Nebuchadnezzar died in 562BC, to be succeeded by Labashi-Marduk. Belshazzar then helped engineer a coup in 556BC which placed his elderly father Nabonidus on the throne for the next 17 years, and though he never actually became king, effectively ruled in his stead for much of his father’s reign, acting as Regent of Babylon for more than 10 years during this time.

So Belshazzar is a cunning political operator, and by no means weak or ungifted. He was a royal ‘insider’ and attempted to maintain the legacy that Nebuchadnezzar had left him, with a certain degree of success.

However, he failed in one crucial regard – he forgot the one vital lesson that Nebuchadnezzar had learned: ‘the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth, and gives them to anyone he wishes.’ Nebuchadnezzar had learned this lesson the hard way, as we’ve seen over the last few days; but he had also learned this lesson very publicly and deeply. No-one connected with the court could have failed to perceive it.

But in the 20 or so years that elapsed since the death of the great king, this lesson was forgotten. The sure sign of this is made clear in verse 2 of chapter 5: when hosting a party, Belshazzar uses the sacred vessels from the Temple in Jerusalem. Not even King Nebuchadnezzar in his pomp had dared to carry out such an act of sacrilege, and it betrays an astonishing arrogance that leads fairly rapidly to Belshazzar’s downfall.

Whilst Belshazzar ends up as a tragic-comic figure in the story, there is a valuable reminder of how easy it is to forget God’s ways, the lessons He has taught us along the way. As the wonderful old hymn goes: ‘Tell me the old, old story, for I forget so soon: the early dew of morning has passed away at noon.’

Perhaps take a moment today to ‘remember your first love’, to remind yourself of all that God has shown you along the way – that we might continue to walk in humble joy, and stay close to our Lord.

**Day 16 – Daniel 5:1-13 ‘Call for Daniel’**

In Autumn 2021 Alise and I were gripped by the TV drama ‘Manhunt’. It tells the true story of the hunt for a serial criminal in South London, who evaded capture for 17 years. His crimes are not for the faint-hearted, but the series re-told fairly faithfully (sufficiently so, I am told, that it is required viewing for the current police training course for new officers!) how he was eventually captured and brought to justice.

The week after the series ended, a documentary also told the story of the investigation, including interviews with some of the officers involved. One of the most poignant reflections was how little media coverage the case received for many years. It was observed that because the offences were entirely against elderly people, mostly living alone, they simply didn’t have ‘news appeal’. Both Senior Investigating Officers connected with the enquiry made the point that if these offences had been committed against the young, the news would have been saturated with coverage right from the start, and he would probably have been caught much more quickly.

We live in a society which idolises youth. Most cultures in history have honoured older generations as being those with wisdom and life experience, but this has been eroded in our modern culture. However, today’s iconic story reminds us of the true value of a ‘wise old saint’.

Daniel is, by this stage, a very old man: at least 80 years old, which in the sixth century BC is an extremely unusual age to live to. He has served for decades at the Babylonian court, but it is probably reasonable to assume that he has been ‘out in the cold’ for a long time, if Belshazzar – who has ruled in all but name for 17 years – is unaware of his gifts.

However his mother remembers the past more clearly, and urges her son to call for Daniel. It is particularly noteworthy that it is Daniel’s *spiritual insight* which is remembered (v11). He is not just another astrologer, he is revered as having something deeper to share.

God can still use all of us. We are never too old, never ‘on the scrapheap’. Indeed our age and experience might just be the thing that is most needed. It was a police officer on the verge of retirement who was called in to help with the Manhunt enquiry which eventually captured the culprit. Not a younger officer with new ideas, but an older one with deeper insight.

Whatever stage of life you find yourself in, take encouragement from today’s story. You still have gifts to offer, wisdom to share, people to bless. And may God grant us all opportunities to do so. Amen!



**Day 17 – Daniel 5:13-31 ‘Numbered, weighed, divided’**

And so today we finally get to the original ‘writing on the wall’. Graffiti is a polarising subject – it’s been around for thousands of years, and much of it is dismissed as vandalism. But not all of it: Banksy’s designs are now so celebrated that a new piece of his work which was painted over in Lowestoft in the summer of 2021 became the subject of a criminal investigation: not for the graffiti itself but for whoever wished to restore the original white wall!

Some graffiti is also recognised to have enduring value. In the Reichstag in Berlin the messages scrawled on the walls by Russian soldiers taking the city in April 1945 have been preserved and put on permanent display as a powerful reminder of our past, and especially of the horrors which are made possible by the abuse of power.

We see a similar backdrop to our famous graffiti today. Belshazzar, after a lifetime spent pursuing political ambition, has overstepped the mark one last time by committing an act of gross blasphemy. While he parties, suddenly a mysterious hand writes a message on the wall: ‘Mene, mene, tekel, parsin.’ (‘Numbered, numbered, weighed, divided.’) None of his regular advisers can interpret it for him – though one wonders if one or two had an inkling, but were afraid to deliver bad news? – so Daniel is called and interprets it for him, wise and courageous as ever.

The message is uncompromising: the ruler’s days are *numbered*, he has been *weighed* on the divine scales and found wanting, and so his kingdom will be *divided* and given to others.

Belshazzar tries to make amends by showering Daniel with promotions and privileges: but it is too late, the judgement has already fallen. His life ends and his kingdom is conquered.

Stories about the great and powerful often seem remote to us – their world is not ours. However, it does remind us of two things: first, no human power or organisation lasts for ever. However invincible they may seem, eventually they are all held to account. There are many nations today who suffer from poor or even wicked leadership, including those who deliberately and systematically oppress God’s people. Belshazzar’s feast reminds us that these leaders will one day be held to account, one side of the grave or the other. Let’s pray for all who suffer in those circumstances, that God might grant them hope, courage, protection, and the peace ‘that passes understanding’.

Second, and appropriately for party conference season in our nation, this story reminds us to pray for our leaders: for wise decisions, integrity and compassionate hearts – and perhaps, above all, for that sense that they are themselves accountable to Someone Greater, the ‘Most High God [who] is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth.’

**Day 18 – Daniel 6:1-9 ‘The power of integrity’**

I’ve always been a huge fan of Scott Adams’ ‘Dilbert’ cartoons and books. As someone who worked in an office for 12 years before getting ordained, I appreciated the culture he was describing, with all its foibles. The world Dilbert satirised was hilariously (and perhaps disturbingly) close to the one I inhabited – and, I must confess, loved. I still have a Dilbert book on my shelf titled: ‘How to make a fortune by stealing office supplies’, which contains such caustic gems as: “‘Smart casual” dress code – manages to be neither smart nor casual without diminishing the effects of either.’

Dilbert is particularly hard on managers. His starting point is extremely perceptive: ‘Everyone gets promoted to the level of their incompetence.’ In other words, you run out of steam on the corporate ladder when you get promoted to a level where the job is too big or too hard for you. This explains why (in Dilbert’s view) most people in senior managerial positions are not up to the job and the rest of us are stuck with them.

At this point you may be nodding your head vigorously, or shaking it sadly – probably depending on whether you are (or were) a senior manager! And underneath Scott Adams’ reflections is a very realistic – you might say biblical – view of human nature: its ego and ambition, jealousies and resentments, all played out in air-conditioned offices with carpet tiles on the floor.

This is the world of the satraps (the ‘middle managers’?) in Daniel chapter 6. These are the Dilberts of the day – climbing the greasy pole, taking their perks where they can, justifying their ‘grey areas’ on the basis that they are just cogs in a big machine.

But not everyone has to live in the swamp. As people of faith, we are called to something better. We can choose to be different. Even into his 80s Daniel retained a vision for a life lived with integrity. And his boss – the king – rewarded him for it; which only made him more unpopular with those who were ‘shown up’ by the quality of his life.

This is the preface to the iconic story of the lion’s den, and it reminds us that integrity is a polarising quality: just as light attracts moths and repels cockroaches, so a life of courageous integrity will make us both popular and unpopular. There is something in human nature that resents goodness, and secretly rejoices when good people fail. Perhaps we may even feel that too sometimes – and this story encourages me to take a good look at myself regularly to see if I am sometimes a little more like the satraps than I care to admit.

But it is also an encouragement to all of us to pray for the grace and courage to keep choosing integrity. A truly authentic life will always be noticed, which is both an inspiration and a challenge. Perhaps too we can pray especially for those called to live like Daniel in ‘worldly’ cultures, shining light into dark corners, renewing decaying organisations and bringing the ‘aroma of Christ’ into their everyday life and work.

**Day 19 – Daniel 6:10-16 ‘The cost of integrity’**

Today Daniel’s story comes full circle. We began in chapter 1 more than 60 years earlier with a young Daniel and his friends quietly taking their stand to live a life in accordance with their faith. Now Daniel has to make the same kind of stand, albeit with two major differences.

First, he didn’t choose this one, it was forced upon him. The jealous satraps had cooked up a scheme to get him in trouble, using his very integrity against him. Aware that Daniel was likely to put God first, they cynically thought of a way to make that an act against the king.

Second, this stand had to be faced in the public glare. In chapter 1, Daniel could take the royal official aside and gain private permission for a trial period to test their creative solution to honour both God and their human bosses. Since the trial worked, the king may never have known what Daniel and his friends were doing.

Here, there is no place to hide. The king’s susceptibility to vanity has led him to pass a law which means that, for Daniel to choose to worship God as he always did, would inevitably land him in trouble. He cannot find a creative solution to avoid this, he must take his stand and accept the fallout.

We all know the end of this story – but before we get there, let’s marvel at Daniel’s courage in choosing to do what he did. It’s not just his life which is under threat, it’s his reputation: 60 years’ faithful service for several rulers, the whisper of scandal, ‘no smoke without fire’. You know the kind of thing. But, after a life lived for The Audience of One, he’s not going to take the easy option now.

There’s a sideline here too: we can observe the drawbacks of an overly legalistic culture, where the law quite literally becomes an idol. Hundreds of years later, St Paul observed that ‘the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.’ There’s nothing wrong with good laws, and we are fortunate to live in a largely law-abiding country. But life is first and foremost about relationships: rules make good servants but lousy masters. Or to put it another way, too much law can be almost as bad as too little.

We too need to beware seeing ‘laws’ as the answer for everything. Bad or unnecessary laws can produce misery as much as good laws can prevent it. In fact laws are usually only needed when relationships break down – healthy relationships are unlikely to need policing or regulating. Ultimately we are called to a life led by grace and by God’s Spirit. It is interesting to contrast Daniel’s consistent gratitude to God (v10) with the seething resentment of the satraps.

This is not an argument for being rebels for rebels’ sake! But it is a call to live a life that goes beyond enforced compliance to rules towards the life-giving power of gratitude, worship and loving service. We may never be called to pay the cost that Daniel did, but we can be inspired by his example.

**Day 20 – Daniel 6:16-28 ‘The triumph of integrity’**

And so we get to the big moment! This is one of those handful of biblical stories still well known today, and part of our culture: we use the phrase ‘lion’s den’ to describe any threatening situation where we are at the mercy of a hostile crowd – even at the football, where Millwall FC’s ground is called the Den (and then the New Den) because their nickname is The Lions. Lions don’t live in dens in the wild: the phrase comes only from this story in Daniel!

And we know how it ends. Daniel trusts in God and is miraculously rescued, while his accusers suffer the same punishment, with dreadful consequences. And quite naturally we dwell on the intervention of God to save his faithful servant: it’s certainly what King Darius dwells on, as he issues a proclamation much like that of King Nebuchadnezzar before him (verses 25-27).

But today let’s also note the vindication of Daniel’s integrity. It’s not easy to swim against the tide, and occasionally it is very costly. And we must admit that not everyone escapes unjust accusation or persecution when it comes – even today there are more than 50 countries around the world where it is illegal either to be a Christian or to own a bible, and sadly there are still martyrs and many others in prison around the world.

Nevertheless, those who seek to put God first will *always* be vindicated – certainly in the world to come, if not always in this life. Psalm 37 is precious to many in this situation, and I commend it to you if you are not familiar with it. Some of it may feel uncomfortable to read, but these verses in the middle could have been written for Daniel: ‘The Lord makes firm the steps of the one who delights in him; though he may stumble he will not fall, for the Lord upholds him with his hand. I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken.’ (Psalm 37:23-25)

This psalm was one that was special to me when, many years ago, I was unjustly accused at work because of a stand I took for my faith. The cost I paid was nothing like Daniel’s, but I got a glimpse of what it must have felt like. Today, we can be thankful that we are still able to worship the Lord in freedom and safety here in the UK.

But let’s not take it for granted, either. The sands of our culture are shifting: let’s pray for our nation, and also for all who are paying the price for their integrity around the world, that they too may know the vindication that was given to Daniel, and have strength in their trial.

**Day 21: Interlude – Jeremiah 29:4-14**

As the first half of Daniel ends, let's take a moment to reflect on his extraordinary life, and the fundamental lesson it teaches us: how to live well as a minority faith in a majority culture. Daniel's world is increasingly ours, and it is one of the reasons I find his story so inspiring.

He faces challenges that most of us face, or have faced: where to draw the line when others around you have different standards, and how to do so graciously; how to live with integrity; and how to bring the light and love of our faith powerfully into another culture. His is a story of wisdom, courage and, above all, of consistency: Daniel is authentically true to his identity as a child of God when he is young (chs 1-2), middle-aged (ch4) and old (chs 5-6).

But today let's reflect on where his inspiration might have come from – and to do that we turn to the words of Jeremiah, which form our reading for today. Jeremiah is the longest (by number of words) and probably the hardest book in the bible. He toiled as a voice in the wilderness for many years, warning an unreceptive people and ultimately seeing the very disaster strike which he had prophesied.

And yet, once the worst had happened, he also gives this amazing vision of how a newly exiled people might survive and even thrive: far from shunning their new culture, they should accept it. Not that they should change their beliefs, but they should live positively. Ultimately, Jeremiah counsels: 'Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.' (v7)

Daniel would almost certainly have known this prophecy, and I like to think that it was Jeremiah's vision which carried him through a lifetime of faithful and fruitful service.

This vision is ours, too. For all that we live in increasingly dark times, we have the same calling: to be salt and light in our culture, to carry the fragrance of Christ wherever we go. May that vision inspire us: and may God grant us grace to bear fruit as Daniel did. Amen.

**Day 22 – Daniel 7:1-10 ‘The Ancient of Days’**

It’s a game of two halves, as someone once said. And when it comes to the Book of Daniel, it is *definitely* a game of two halves. The first half is one of the best loved parts of the bible, crammed full of ripping yarns: Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, the fiery furnace, Belshazzar’s feast, the lions’ den. Each story reminds us that God is in control, but also has much to teach us about how to live wisely and courageously in a different culture, and still remain true to our faith and to ourselves.

I hope the last few weeks have been helpful in that regard. But now the challenge begins! If the first half of Daniel is a relatively easy read and pretty well known, then the second half is probably one of the hardest sections of all Scripture. Parts of it make the Book of Revelation look like light reading.

Most people avoid chapters 7-12 – but to my mind that’s a very good reason for persevering and taking a look. I must confess I was tempted to bring the series to a close yesterday and move on to something new – but if we believe that ‘all Scripture is God-breathed’ then let’s be bold and take a look at something which will certainly stretch us.

The second half of the book uses a form which is known as ‘Apocalyptic’ writing – the same form you find in the Book of Revelation. It relies heavily on colourful imagery and symbolism, and is prophetic in outlook, dealing mostly with things which are to come (from the point of view of the writer).

There is also a lot of debate as to the authorship of this second part of the book. I’ll talk a bit more about this on Thursday, but the bottom line is that these chapters still have much to teach us: there is gold here, if we’re able to live with the beasts, the horns and the ‘times’!

And chapter 7 begins with another disturbing dream – not unlike chapter 2 and chapter 4, only this time it is Daniel himself who receives it. He describes it as more than a dream, in fact: it’s a vision, and we get the interpretation of it later in the chapter if you want to read ahead. The four beasts are certainly unsettling, but it’s verses 9 and 10 which provide the real context.

As we’ll see, these are visions of human powers and kingdoms, which may seem ‘terrifying’ at the time. However, they must all bow before One who is greater, described as ‘the Ancient of Days’ (v9). This ultimate ruler was here long before, and will be here long after – and if the courts of human rulers might appear impressive, they’ve got nothing on this King! ‘A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him, thousands upon thousands attended him, ten thousand times ten thousand (100 million) stood before him.’ (v10)

It is before this ruler that ‘the court is seated and the books are opened.’ We live in confusing times, where human power seems to be taking centre stage again. But this passage reminds us of what anchors us: there is a Greater One who has seen it all before, and to whom we can offer all our fears and worries. And may *this* God be our rock, our fortress and our shield today.

*We have an anchor that keeps the soul steadfast and sure while the billows roll,  
fastened to the rock which cannot move, grounded firm and deep in the Saviour’s love!*

**Day 23 – Daniel 7:9-14 ‘One like a Son of Man’**

Today’s passage is a remarkably important one on the story of Scripture. Tucked away in what appears to be a remote corner of an apocalyptic vision towards the end of the Old Testament are a few verses which come to play a huge influence in the course of human history. Today we meet Jesus, but perhaps not where we expected to find him.

This passage takes us into the throne room of heaven: a majestic, glorious sight, almost overwhelming for Daniel to behold. And he sees two central figures – yesterday we marvelled at the Ancient of Days, seated on a throne of fire, an awesome vision of Almighty God. Now a second figure appears: ‘one like a son of man’ (13).

So this is a human being – but as the text unfolds we come to realise that this is no ordinary human being. First, he arrives ‘on the clouds of heaven’ – pretty cool divine transport. Second, he approaches the Ancient of Days – this is extraordinary: in Jewish thought nobody can just approach Almighty God like this, unless.... The suspicion that this is more than just a mortal being is confirmed when we see the description of v14: this being ‘was given all authority, glory and sovereign power’. This is none other than the Divine Son, the King of kings, worshipped by the whole world and whose ‘kingdom will never be destroyed’ (v14).

Daniel never gets a clear idea of who this ‘son of man’ is: the interpretation of the dream later mentions only the victory of the Most High (vv22,25,27). I imagine he desperately wanted to know, as any of us who might have received such a vision would. But, thanks to the continuing story of Scripture, we *know* who it is!

Jesus uses the name ‘Son of Man’ to describe himself 69 times in the gospels, and, whilst it is an Aramaic phrase for a human being, most scholars agree that the inspiration for this unusual name is right here in Daniel 7. Jesus is quite deliberately pointing people towards this passage, which tells us who this Son of Man really is. The Son of Man is also the Son of God.

This remarkable truth is attested by what happens to Jesus on the last occasion he uses the name, and which costs him his life: when questioned about his identity by the authorities after his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, he quotes this very passage: ‘You will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.’ (Matthew 26:64, Mark 14:62) The authorities understood clearly what Jesus was implying: Jesus was claiming divine status – and they executed him for blasphemy. Not that this was the end of the story!

So today, Daniel met Jesus in his dream – though he could not have known it at the time. And whilst we rightly worship a human Saviour, who comes to us gentle and lowly, today reminds us of Jesus’ eternal identity, and the Jesus we too will one day meet. St. John’s encounter with his friend – now glorified – in Revelation 1:12-16 echoes the imagery of the Ancient of Days we see here. Jesus gave up his eternal glory for a season to come to this earth, for our sake: but he remains the one with all authority, glory and sovereign power, worthy of global worship, whose kingdom will never pass away, nor be destroyed. Hallelujah!

**Day 24 – Daniel 7:15-28 ‘Possessing the kingdom’**

And so the fun begins! Today we get the interpretation of Daniel’s troubling dream, and if it sounds vaguely familiar, then you only have to turn back to Nebuchadnezzar’s dream in chapter 2 to get echoes of what we see here. There are four kingdoms again, and most scholars agree it’s the same four kingdoms we saw earlier: the Babylonians (here depicted as a lion v4), then the Medes (a bear v5), followed by the Persians (a leopard v6).

Then comes the terrifying fourth beast, which is ‘very powerful’ (v7) and which is the one Daniel really wants to know about in our passage. This is the Greek Empire, and in particular the devastating impact of its ‘iron teeth and bronze claws’ (v19) is thought to describe the reign of Alexander the Great. After his early death, the kingdom divides, but ruling over part of it – including Israel – is a powerful royal dynasty (the Seleucids), and the ten horns (v20,v24) are the rulers of that dynasty from the late 4<sup>th</sup>-century BC down to the early 2<sup>nd</sup>-century BC.

Then a particularly nasty ‘little horn’ appears: the notorious Antiochus Epiphanes (ruled 167-164AD) who desecrates the temple and triggers the Maccabean revolt in Israel. This ruler did away with his rivals for the throne – referenced by ‘subdue three kings’ in v24 – and his attitude to the Jewish people is described by his ‘boastful’ speech (v20) and especially by his ‘waging war against the holy people’ (v21) and ‘speaking against the Most High and oppressing his holy people’ in v25.

But he gets his come-uppance in the end: ‘the Ancient of Days came and pronounced judgement in favour of the holy people of the Most High’ (v22) and ‘his power [is] taken away and completely destroyed for ever’ (v26).

Most amazing of all, ‘the Holy people of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it for ever – yes, for ever and ever.’ (v18)

Daniel of course did not know how any of this had been fulfilled, and many have questioned whether this is prophecy ‘after the fact’ – I’ll say more on that tomorrow.

But there is one inescapable truth here: God wins. And more importantly, God’s people share in this victory. Life here can be a rocky road, and God’s people frequently face oppression and suffering. But it’s not the end of the story. What Daniel dreamed is our eternal reality: the kingdom of the Most High is *our* kingdom, and, thanks to Jesus Christ, we *do* receive and possess it forever – yes, forever!



**Day 25 – Daniel 8:1-27 ‘Beyond understanding’**

As I get older, my observation is that life gets more complex but faith gets more simple. I wonder if that accords with your experience, too? In some ways I mourn the loss of ‘black and white’ certainties enjoyed by the young. Seeing shades of grey can sometimes feel, well, just like that: grey.

And yet, while I become ever more conscious of just how much lies beyond my understanding, I find at the same time ever more drawn back to the absolute heart of those simple biblical truths on which I have surrendered my life: Jesus loves me, this I know, for the bible tells me so; little ones to him belong: we are weak but He is strong. It’s not a bad platform on which to build a life, is it?

I often quote Jesus’ famous words when taking a baptism ceremony, but increasingly I appreciate the profound wisdom they embody: ‘Whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.’ Faith is not child-*ish*, but it is child-*like*.

As we come to the last few chapters of Daniel, we might as well admit that the full truth of these chapters will always lie beyond our understanding. Most scholars agree that they refer primarily to the crisis in 2<sup>nd</sup> century Israel when the wicked Seleucid king Antiochus Epiphanes oppressed the Jewish people and desecrated the temple – this is what is being referred to here in v11-13 when it speaks of ‘the sanctuary being thrown down... the rebellion that causes desolation.’

And yet there are also hints that lie beyond this immediate crisis: to Jesus, and also to the end of time. Much biblical prophecy is like looking at a mountain range from a valley: we can see the first peak clearly, but we know there are higher peaks beyond which we can’t see from our standpoint.

There is also a huge amount of picture language which we should beware of reading as a puzzle or ‘code’ to unlock. The lengths of time mentioned don’t fit any historical timeline, but it’s unlikely they were meant to. They are mostly symbolic numbers, not real ones: the only exception being the one clearly referenced elsewhere in the book of Jeremiah, that the exile would last 70 years (compare Daniel 9:2 with Jeremiah 29:10). We know that it was in 538BC, the 70<sup>th</sup> year of the exile, that Cyrus first allowed Jews to return home to Israel – albeit even this was only a partial return, and it took many decades for the Jewish community to rebuild even a semblance of their historic home.

So we can expect to be baffled by these chapters! But in the midst of the head-scratching, there are some very simple but profound realities on which to anchor our thoughts and our faith. Today, the one thing we know we *can* take away from Daniel chapter 8 is that what happens here on earth is fully known in heaven. Human wickedness is not veiled. We cannot always understand how God works his purposes out, but we can trust in God’s ultimate authority, and that one day there will always be a reckoning, and divine justice and mercy will triumph.

Let’s take encouragement to pray for the hard situations in the world, to ask for God’s intervention. They may be ‘beyond understanding’ (v27), but they are not beyond the power or love of God. And likewise, may we draw strength from knowing that, however complex life is, our great God is sovereign, and we are safe in his loving arms.

**Day 26 – Daniel 9:1-11a ‘Full confession’**

Daniel’s prayer is perhaps the only part of the second half of the book that is better known and relatively accessible to us today. The timing of the prayer is important: the first year of Darius – who you may recall took over the kingdom after Belshazzar in 5:31 – is approximately 539BC, just a year or two shy of the completion of the start point of the 70 years’ exile. So if God was going to allow his people to return in line with Jeremiah’s prophecy, it would have to be soon.

So Daniel dedicates himself to prayer, asking God to open the way for them to do so. And much of his prayer takes the form of confession. Daniel himself played no part in the causes of Israel’s downfall, but he identifies himself with the collective guilt of the nation as a whole.

This particular idea is somewhat controversial, and something about which Christians hold differing views today. Can a new generation repent for the sins of previous generations? In fact, this question is very relevant in light of the fierce debates about statues commemorating slave owners happening in our current season. Unwittingly, those who argue for and against their removal or retention are debating a modern version of this ancient question. Daniel 9 does not give the whole answer: see Ezekiel 18:20 for an alternative viewpoint – also written after Israel’s exile! So this is probably one question where there is latitude to differ.

But what we can notice here is the comprehensive nature of Daniel’s repentance. The three words for sin in the Old Testament refer to rebellion, falling short (or missing the mark) and crossing boundaries – and all three ideas are used here: ‘rebelled’ (v5,v9), ‘not kept the laws’ (v10), ‘transgressed’ (v11). For good measure Daniel also throws in a failure to listen (v6) and being unfaithful (v7).

The glorious news of the gospel is that we are forgiven and set free from the penalty of our sin! Our guilt is washed away, our shame is covered. Daniel knows that he prays to the God ‘who keeps his covenant of love’ (v4) and is ‘merciful and forgiving’ (v9), and this is the God to whom we pray as well.

But sometimes there’s no harm in offering a ‘full confession’ to God, in taking time to name the specific ways we fall short, rather than a quick ‘sorry’: *not* to wallow, and that is important to stress, but rather to point us all the more fully to the enormity of God’s wonderful forgiveness, love and grace. As John Newton (author of amazing Grace) was known to say frequently: ‘I am a great sinner... and Christ is a great Saviour!’ Amen.

**Day 27 – Daniel 9:11b-19 ‘For your sake, Lord’**

The second half of Daniel’s searingly honest prayer gets to the heart of the matter. In the first half, as we saw yesterday, Daniel openly confesses the wrongdoing of the nation – in all kinds of ways – and declares that God’s judgement was indeed just and right. The people deserved what had happened to them.

What comes next is, in a sense, more awkward. Despite the very clear and catastrophic judgement that God’s people have suffered, it hasn’t prompted them – *even now* – to change their ways: ‘we have not sought the favour of the Lord our God by turning from our sins and giving attention to your truth.’ (v13)

At first sight this seems practically unbelievable – how could the calamity of the exile, and the realisation that all those prophetic warnings had come true, not engender a dramatic change of direction? And yet, it has the unmistakable ring of truth: we humans are very good at forgetting the lessons of the past, of repeating the mistakes of our ancestors. Even the best resolutions can be lost in the mists of time: and if we’re honest, we can probably think of times when this has been true for us, too.

So, if the past judgement was right and the present situation is barely better, to what does Daniel appeal? *Not to his people’s sake, but the Lord’s*. God’s own glory is at stake, and not just his people’s. Daniel knows that God can quite rightly prolong the exile: but he appeals not only to God’s incredible mercy (v9) but to his glory, his ‘sake’: his people are ‘an object of scorn’ (v16) and everyone can ‘see the desolation of the city that bears your Name.’ (v18)

It may seem a cheeky prayer to us today: but it remains true that the disgrace of God’s people often reflects on God himself – which brings the credibility and authority of the beautiful news we share into question. In the end, our hope is always founded on *God’s* righteousness, not ours. God does not answer our prayers because we are so good or so deserving but because he loves us and his great heart inclines to mercy. So we, too, can pray about all that is on our hearts today with the same confidence as Daniel: ‘Lord, listen! Lord, forgive! Lord, hear and act!’

And may this glorious God graciously hear and respond to our prayers. Amen.

**Day 28 – Daniel 9:20-27 ‘Answered prayer’**

Today’s passage is both very simple and very complicated! The complicated part is what we read from verse 24 onwards. Gabriel appears in the narrative for the second time: we first saw him speak to Daniel in chapter 8, and now he is again deputised to answer Daniel’s prayer with a prophetic vision.

The vision is bewildering: what are the ‘sevens’? And why are 70 ‘sevens’ further split into 7, then another 62, and then a final one? Who is the Anointed One? Or is it just *an* anointed one? Is ‘the end’ (v26) really the end, since the wicked ruler who appears in the middle of the final ‘seven’ faces apparent judgement before the ‘seven’ has ended? And so on.... and so on!

As we’ve observed before, we get ourselves tied up in knots if we try and read this like a code. The word translated ‘seven’ here can mean ‘week’, and whilst some commentators try and turn this into years, that doesn’t fit any historical timeline either – the period of 70 ‘sevens’ ends too late for the Maccabean uprising in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC and too early for Jesus. Indeed, Jesus uses some of the language of this passage in his own prophetic vision of history (compare Daniel 9:26b with Mark 13:7), which both reinforces their importance but also cautions against an over-literal reading: ‘you may hear of wars,’ Jesus says, ‘but don’t worry, it doesn’t mean the end is about to come.’

So what is the purpose of this type of passage? First we should value the prophetic imagination: when talking about huge, earth-changing stuff, vivid picture language helps us to take it on board without obsessing about the details.

Second, let’s go back to where we started and remind ourselves that, if we strip away the vivid imagery, the truths shared here are very simple, but profoundly encouraging: (1) whatever chaos there is in the world, God is still in control; (2) even if the wicked prosper for a season, they do eventually get their come-uppance, and divine justice is served.

And most wonderfully for Daniel, and perhaps too for us today: (3) *God answers prayer*. In fact Daniel gets the answer ‘as soon as you began to pray’ (v13). There is a mystery as to why we pray more about some things than others, and ‘how much prayer is enough’ – but the bigger picture is that God does hear and does answer. Perhaps the delay in Daniel receiving the answer is more for Daniel’s sake than anything.

But may Daniel’s experience warm our hearts, too – we can keep praying, even about big things, and trust that our gracious God does hear, and will answer. How might that inspire you today?

**Day 29 – Daniel 10:1-11:1 ‘Awe and peace’**

The last three chapters of Daniel are really one extended vision: effectively a conversation between Daniel and an angelic being. The vision was shattering for Daniel – as he admits, ‘I mourned for three weeks. I ate no choice food... and I used no lotions at all until the three weeks were over.’ (verses 2-3)

It was similarly overwhelming for those who were close by when Daniel received the vision, even though they did not see it themselves (v7). Daniel gains a glimpse into heavenly realities, things which humans are rarely allowed to see, and its impact on Daniel is huge.

As followers of Jesus we hold two powerful realities together – and we see both realities here. On the one hand we worship an awesome God. This God is the creator of the universe, the supreme power above all things, perfect in holiness and justice. His dwelling is majestic and glorious: just seeing one heavenly being was enough for Daniel to fall face first on the ground (v9), and we know from other visions that there are tens of thousands of such beings in the heavenly realms.

And yet this God also draws close to us. Just as the angelic being here touches Daniel’s lips (v16) and speaks words of comfort (v18), so this great God draws close to all of us. We can know him as a loving parent, a close friend, an encourager who walks with us every step of the way.

To truly know God is to carry both of these realities with us each day – just as Daniel does. The God to whom Jesus calls us to pray is ‘Our Father in heaven’ – perfectly capturing both the intimacy and the majesty. This God – our God – is both great and near. It is healthy to experience times of awe, just as Daniel does. But we also need the words of comfort too, as the Lord touches us and whispers: ‘Peace! Be strong now; be strong.’

May God be both great *and* close to you today – and may this reality give us strength, as it did for Daniel.

**Day 30 – Daniel 10:1-11:1 (ii) ‘Angels?’**

Today is a brief interlude, if you will, to pick up a subject that interests – and probably baffles – many of us: angels. Our culture is increasingly fascinated with them, though the line between myth and reality is pretty blurred. A study in 1990 found that 1 in 10 pop songs of the previous 30 years referred to angels – though usually as a description of a pretty human being!

Angels, however, are *not* human. They are heavenly beings created to serve God’s purposes and do God’s will. Humans are ‘a little lower’ than angels (Psalm 8:5), and the appearance of angels in the human realm is usually awe-inspiring: Daniel’s response here of terrified awe is not unusual.

Angels play a surprisingly large part in the bible. They appear almost 200 times, split fairly evenly between the Old and New Testaments (103 OT/93 NT). They appear in more than half of the books of the bible (34) from Genesis to Revelation; and crucially they are referenced numerous times by Jesus himself.

So we can be sure that angels are real, and important. But *angels never appear in their own right, their job is to point to God*. As bible.org puts it: ‘Every reference to angels is incidental to some other topic. They are not treated in themselves. God’s revelation never aims at informing us regarding the nature of angels. When they are mentioned, it is always in order to inform us further about God, what he does, and how he does it.’

This is why the New Testament word for angel can also be translated ‘messenger’. They are supreme examples of humility: their job is always to serve and glorify God.

How often do we interact with them here? That is a moot point. Certainly some people receive angelic visions. Some also believe that Christians have guardian angels – though that idea rests largely on just one text in Acts 12:15, which interprets the ‘messenger’ arriving from Peter as being divine not human. It’s definitely possible, but one to treat cautiously. What we do know is that the author of Hebrews encourages hospitality to strangers, ‘for by doing so some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.’ (Hebrews 13:2)

Ultimately, our wonderful access to God is through Jesus, not angels. We have ‘every spiritual blessing’ in Christ (Ephesians 1:3), and Christ is all we need to enjoy a rich relationship with the living Lord. That said, the bible suggests that some of us may occasionally receive a heavenly messenger, to achieve some good divine purpose. So let’s keep an open mind, and give thanks that God is work in the world in many different ways – and has the means at his disposal to do so.

**Day 31 – Daniel 11:2-35 ‘The way of the world’**

Today’s long passage is full of detail, and takes several minutes to read – and yet it could also be summarised very effectively by the simple title we’ve given for today: ‘the way of the world’. It is a vision which characterizes much of the narrative of history: struggles for power and control, wealth and prestige, to dominate rather than serve, to compete rather than co-operate.

Whilst scholars might debate its dating, that somewhat misses the primary point: in many ways, this could have been written at any time in the last 2,500 years. The story of international relations is not much different today: we still value, and battle for, the same things described here: power, control, wealth.

Yet history also tells us that human power is always temporary. Empires come and go; rulers flourish for a while and then die or are defeated. Even the greatest empire in history at the point when this prophecy was fulfilled – that of Alexander the Great, who is referred to in v3 – lasted just a few years, and Alexander’s empire was broken into four separate dynasties after his early death (v4). This pattern repeats throughout the chapter: power prevails, but ‘only for a time’ (v24). As human beings we are all tempted to seek those things which don’t satisfy and rarely last.

The kingdom of God and God’s people rarely get a mention in this chapter, but it’s hard not to think back to chapter 2 (or any of the early chapters of Daniel) and draw a significant comparison with what we see here. In the midst of these temporary human power struggles there is another kingdom, ‘cut without hands’, which lasts forever, and which never ultimately passes away, ruled by a King who ‘sovereign over all the kingdoms of the earth’ (4:17,25,32).

This kingdom also runs on completely different lines. When the true King of this kingdom appears he rejects power and chooses humility, he rejects wealth and chooses poverty and dependence on God, he rejects control and chooses to liberate and serve others. His kingdom appears weak and insubstantial: like a bit of yeast or a pearl hidden in a field, or even a mustard seed, the ‘smallest of all seeds’. Yet this seed grows to become the ‘biggest of all plants’ – big enough to draw followers from across the world: those who find in this alternative kingdom the key to salvation, to life and to human flourishing.

It turns out that the repetitive narratives of human history are not the only show in town. Time after time, human rulers are weighed and found wanting. There is only one true King – and this is the king we worship today. May this king direct our paths this week, fill us with his love, and keep us safe in the shadow of his wings.

**Day 32 – Daniel 11:36 – 12:4 ‘The time of the end?’**

As we look up at the mountain peaks of future history, this is definitely a moment when it becomes hard to separate one peak from another. As we have reflected in previous inspirations, much of this latter part of Daniel refers to events of the 2<sup>nd</sup>-century BC, when Antiochus Epiphanes ruled Israel and was then courageously overthrown by the Maccabean Revolt.

However, this final section of the prophecy appears to extend its gaze well beyond this particular set of events. There are numerous echoes of Jesus’ own prophetic vision recorded in Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21, which is commonly taken to refer to the Jewish rebellion of the late 60s AD that led to the catastrophic destruction of the temple in AD70: compare Daniel 12:1 with Matthew 24:21, Mark 13:19 and Luke 21:23b. Indeed Jesus repurposes Daniel’s vision of the ‘abomination that causes desolation’ – which originally referred to Antiochus’ setting up of an idol in the temple – towards a new calamity that would befall Israel (Matthew 24:15).

But, as with Jesus’ prophecy, what Daniel sees here ‘spills over’ into something much bigger, which appears to talk about the very end of time. Somehow the smaller scale judgements and reckonings fuse together into a bigger vision of the final reckoning of all things, or what we might call the Day of Judgement.

It is fascinating to note that today’s passage, which is almost never read in any church or by most Christians, is not only referred to directly by Jesus but also referenced in lots of much better known passages in the new Testament: v1 ‘written in the book’ – compare Revelation 20:12; v2 awakening to eternal life – compare 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18; v3 shining like stars – compare Philippians 2:15; v4 ‘seal up the scroll’ – compare Revelation 22:10 (only as this is the very last chapter of the bible, this time John is told not to seal it up ‘because the time is near’!).

Nevertheless, the heavenly being who gave Daniel this vision also admitted that, despite its importance, it won’t prevent others from looking for insight into these eternal realities in all kinds of other places: ‘Many will go here and there to increase knowledge.’ (v4)

‘Twas ever thus – and so it remains. Interest in the ‘end of all things’ is a human preoccupation: and yet here, more than 2,000 years ago, we get amazing insights, which boil down to a few ageless and profound truths: humans will always lust for power... but God is in control... and those who are God’s will rise to eternal life with him – even shining like the stars. We may not fathom much else, but surely this is what we need to know!

This reflection is being written just after Bible Sunday, and today’s passage reminds us that there is so much biblical gold to mine that we are hardly aware of – may the timeless wisdom of scripture continue to inspire us, and may we live today, like Daniel, trusting in the eternal and ultimate victory of our Lord.



**Day 33 – Daniel 12:5-13 ‘Go your way’**

And so we get to the last few verses of this extraordinary book. Daniel has lived a long and remarkable life: serving at least three (and possibly five) rulers, witnessing to his faith with great integrity and authority, and then receiving similarly astonishing visions. Whilst his identity remains unknown outside of scripture, we have so much to learn from this great saint about living faithfully and fruitfully in a changing culture, and in keeping our inner life fed through prayer and worship.

And as Daniel’s final vision concludes, a character in the vision asks the one question most of us would ask: ‘how long will it be before these astonishing things are fulfilled?’ (v6) The answer is designed to discourage that question: ‘a time, times and half a time.’ (v7) Given that we have identified at least three connection points to later events, it is tempting to wonder if (unbeknownst to Daniel) the ‘half a time’ refers to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, the ‘time’ to the first century AD and the ‘times’ to the end of time – but that is speculative: the main thrust of the answer is that it is not given for us to know when these things will take place, only to be aware that they will at some point.

So how do we live in the now? The final advice given to Daniel is ours, too: ‘Go your way.’ In fact, it is sufficiently important to receive this advice that Daniel hears it twice (v9,v13). What does it mean?

*Go:* don’t hide away wondering what it all means, get on with the business of living and loving and serving the Lord.

*Your:* which in Daniel’s case means ‘God’s’, since that is the way he had so clearly aligned himself with. God is still in control and will continue to lead us on.

*Way:* Daniel knew the path he was destined to follow, he had walked it for 80+ years. And many years later, the true king he had seen in a vision – the Son of Man – came among us, declaring ‘I am the Way.’ Those who came to put their trust in him were called ‘Followers of the Way.’

We too are called to ‘go our way’ – the way of life, the way of the cross, the way of Christ. There are – and will be – many things we do not understand, but this we know: the Most High is sovereign over all the earth, and those who faithfully walk in his way will be blessed (v12), ‘purified, made spotless and refined’ (v10) and ‘will rise to receive [our] allotted inheritance’ (v13). Hallelujah!