

This morning, I am beginning a new sermon series through the Old Testament book of Daniel that will take us up until the summer. I've entitled the series "Faithfulness in exile," a title that may at first glance seem to be about something that happened a long time ago in a kingdom far, far away, but I believe you will find is very relevant to your life today. My hope for today is to set the historical scene of Daniel, and then we will dive into the book next week.

Let me start at the ground level. We believe that the Bible is God's Word delivered through human words. As Paul wrote:

**2 Timothy 3:16–17** - All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup> so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Every part of the Bible is useful, and that includes an Old Testament book like Daniel. The Bible includes an Old Testament and a New Testament. The Old Testament, or old covenant, consists of everything before the coming of Jesus, and the New Testament begins with the birth of Jesus and takes the story from there to the early church that was formed after Jesus' resurrection and ascension to heaven. But even though the Bible was written by 40 people over 1500 years on three continents in three different languages, it tells one united story – the divine drama of the creation, fall, and restoration of God's people. This story is told through many different genres: history, poetry, gospel, letter, apocalyptic literature. But it is all connected, and it all points to Jesus, the Savior of the world, in order to call people to repent, to turn from the sin and self-centeredness that has broken our relationship with God and damaged every other relationship in this world, and to trust in Jesus for salvation, and to align our lives with His will and His kingdom, that we might know God and have eternal life.

Now, when I preach, I'm trying not to just give you my thoughts and tell you entertaining stories. Instead, I try to do my best to explain what a passage meant in its original context and what it means for us today, in the hopes that you will know God better and become more like Jesus. And **context is critical** if you want to understand the Bible, because these words were not dropped out of the sky to 21<sup>st</sup> century America. They were written by a specific person to a specific people in a specific place. So when you read the Bible, you need to **read it in context**. Specifically, its historical, grammatical, and literary context, not to mention the context of the overall Biblical metanarrative. We also read it in the context of Christian community, and in the context of a life of Spirit-led, obedient discipleship.

With that in mind, let me begin by reading the first six verses of Daniel 1:

***Daniel 1:1–6** - In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. <sup>2</sup> And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia and put in the **treasure house of his god**. <sup>3</sup> Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king's service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility—<sup>4</sup> young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and **literature of the Babylonians**. <sup>5</sup> The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service. <sup>6</sup> Among those who were chosen were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. <sup>7</sup> The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Beltshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego.*

Daniel 1 sets the historical context for us – the book begins as a historical story, focusing on the exiled Israelites in Babylon, most notably four young men who we know as Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. For this morning, **I want to set the larger historical context of what is going on with this exile**, as it will help us understand Daniel and how it connects to our lives today.

The Israelites have lived in the land of Israel since God brought them out of slavery in Egypt and into the Promised Land. Along the way to the Promised Land, God made a covenant with Moses and the Israelites at Mt. Sinai. I will be your God, you will be my people. Here are the stipulations, the laws, of the covenant. Obey them, and these blessings will happen. Disobey them, and these curses will befall you. Some examples of the curses that are relevant to the exile include:

***Leviticus 26:31–33** - I will turn your cities into ruins and lay waste your sanctuaries, and I will take no delight in the pleasing aroma of your offerings. <sup>32</sup> I myself will lay waste the land, so that your enemies who live there will be appalled. <sup>33</sup> I will scatter you among the nations and will draw out my sword and pursue you. Your land will be laid waste, and your cities will lie in ruins.*

Every time they were in danger of bringing the curses of the covenant down upon themselves, God would raise up a prophet to warn them and to call them to repentance – men like Isaiah and Jeremiah.

After David and Solomon's reigns as king, Israel was divided through disputes over the kingship between the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah, about the year 930 BC. In about 733 BC, the northern kingdom was taken captive by Assyria. In 597 BC, Assyria was overthrown by Babylon, and soon Babylon set its sights on Judah, as we read in 2 Kings 24:

*2 Kings 24:1–4 - During Jehoiakim's reign, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon invaded the land, and Jehoiakim became his vassal for three years. But then he turned against Nebuchadnezzar and rebelled. <sup>2</sup> The LORD sent Babylonian, Aramean, Moabite and Ammonite raiders against him to destroy Judah, in accordance with the word of the LORD proclaimed by **his servants the prophets**. <sup>3</sup> Surely these things happened to Judah according to the LORD's command, in order to remove them from his presence because of the sins of Manasseh and all he had done, <sup>4</sup> including the shedding of innocent blood. For he had filled Jerusalem with innocent blood, and the LORD was not willing to forgive.*

Now, you may have noticed something in the way the writer of 2 Kings describes these tragic historical events. **This destruction of Jerusalem and exile of God's people is not random**. God is disciplining his people for their sins, and he is using two terrible and powerful empires, Assyria and Babylon, to do it.

### 1) God is sovereign, but his ways are not our ways

God is sovereign, but we need to understand what that phrase means or we are going to end up disillusioned or passive or something else that we were not meant to be. God's sovereignty means that He rules over all that happens. There is no power or authority greater than Him. It means that God has the power to prevent or override everything that happens.

**Isaiah 46:9–10** – “Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. <sup>10</sup> I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say, ‘My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.’”

**Job 42:2** - “I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted.”

He is sovereign over events, and animals, and nations, and humans. And if he does not prevent something from happening, it may mean that he has caused it to happen, or just that he allowed it to happen. Not that he approves of it or celebrates it, but he has allowed it. After all, God is not the author of sin or evil. **And this is not the same as determinism.** God is sovereign even over people that He has created to have free will. But if he allows something to happen, and he is good, then he must have a purpose for allowing it that is greater than we can comprehend. **God is sovereign, but His ways are not our ways.** Recognize that if God is not sovereign, if there anything outside the realm of his sovereignty, then we have no guarantee that his promises will come to pass.

God puts rulers in place, whether they be Babylon, Assyria, Donald Trump or Joe Biden. **Not because they are “God’s man,”** but because He is using them to fulfill some purpose that is greater than we can understand.

***Romans 13:1** - Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.*

God establishes the authorities, and as we see in the case of Assyria and Babylon, those authorities are not always godly. **God is sovereign, but His ways are not our ways.** And during the exile, not everyone recognized that. As the Israelites are taken off into exile, there are prophets telling the people that God will certainly free them and restore them very soon.

***Jeremiah 28:1-4** - In the fifth month of that same year, the fourth year, early in the reign of Zedekiah king of Judah, the prophet Hananiah son of Azzur, who was from Gibeon, said to me in the house of the LORD in the presence of the priests and all the people: <sup>2</sup> “This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: ‘I will break the **yoke of the king of Babylon.** <sup>3</sup> **Within two years** I will bring back to this place all the articles of the LORD’s house that Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon removed from here and took to Babylon. <sup>4</sup> I will also bring back to this place Jehoiachin son of Jehoiakim king of Judah and all the other exiles from Judah who went to Babylon,’ declares the LORD, ‘for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon.’ ”*

Hananiah tells them the “good news” – God will overthrow Babylon’s reign over Israel within two years, and will bring back everything Nebuchadnezzar stole from us. Praise God, right? Well Jeremiah has something to say about that:

**Jeremiah 28:5-17** - Then the prophet Jeremiah replied to the prophet Hananiah before the priests and all the people who were standing in the house of the LORD. <sup>6</sup> He said, "Amen! May the LORD do so! May the LORD fulfill the words you have prophesied by bringing the articles of the LORD's house and all the exiles back to this place from Babylon. <sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, listen to what I have to say in your hearing and in the **hearing of all the people**: <sup>8</sup> From early times the prophets who preceded you and me have prophesied war, disaster and plague against many countries and great kingdoms. <sup>9</sup> **But the prophet who prophesies peace will be recognized as one truly sent by the LORD only if his prediction comes true.**" <sup>10</sup> Then the prophet Hananiah took the yoke off the neck of the prophet Jeremiah and broke it, <sup>11</sup> and he said before all the people, "This is **what the LORD says**: 'In the same way I will break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon off the neck of all the nations within two years.' " At this, the prophet Jeremiah went on his way. <sup>12</sup> After the prophet Hananiah had broken the yoke off the neck of the prophet Jeremiah, the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah: <sup>13</sup> "Go and tell Hananiah, 'This is what the LORD says: You have broken a wooden yoke, but in its place you will **get a yoke of iron**. <sup>14</sup> This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: I will put an iron yoke on the necks of all these nations to make them serve Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and they will serve him. I will even give him control over the wild animals.' " <sup>15</sup> Then the prophet Jeremiah said to Hananiah the prophet, "Listen, Hananiah! The LORD has not sent you, yet you have persuaded this nation to **trust in lies**. <sup>16</sup> Therefore this is what the LORD says: 'I am about to remove you from the face of the earth. This very year you are going to die, because you have preached rebellion against the LORD.' " <sup>17</sup> In the seventh month of that same year, Hananiah the prophet died.

Ouch. Again – God is sovereign, but His ways are not our ways. **And those who presume that God's favor on Israel means that He will soon destroy Babylon and restore Israel are dead wrong**, because Israel is in exile not because Babylon is stronger than God, but because God has allowed the exile in order to discipline Israel for their sins. God does not take kindly to false prophets who give false messages in His name and deceive His people. Jeremiah follows up with a letter to the exiles with a true message from God:

**Jeremiah 29:1-14** - This is the text of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders among the exiles and to the priests, the prophets and all the other people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. <sup>2</sup> (This was after King Jehoiachin and the queen mother, the court officials and the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the skilled workers and the

artisans had gone into **exile from Jerusalem**.)<sup>3</sup> He entrusted the letter to Elasah son of Shaphan and to Gemariah son of Hilkiyah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to King Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon. It said: <sup>4</sup> This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: <sup>5</sup> “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. <sup>6</sup> Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too **may have sons and daughters**. Increase in number there; do not decrease. <sup>7</sup> Also, 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.” <sup>8</sup> Yes, this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: “Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. <sup>9</sup> They are prophesying lies to you in my name. **I have not sent them,**” declares the LORD. <sup>10</sup> This is what the LORD says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. <sup>11</sup> For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. <sup>12</sup> Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, **and I will listen to you**. <sup>13</sup> You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. <sup>14</sup> I will be found by you,” declares the LORD, “and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the LORD, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.”

**Now remember, we’re setting the stage for the book of Daniel.** Israel has been taken into exile by the Babylonians because God, in His sovereignty, has allowed it to happen in order to discipline Israel for their sins and rebellion. And even though there are prophets telling the people that God will surely rescue them within a couple of years, God gives a message through His prophet Jeremiah. And what do you hear in this word from God? **Settle down in Babylon.** You’re going to be there a while. All the prophets who told you that I’m going to rescue you? They are not from me. They are prophesying lies in my name. Settle down, and seek the peace and prosperity of Babylon while you are there. When 70 years are up, I will bring you back to Jerusalem. And then comes everyone’s favorite life verse:

<sup>11</sup> **For I know the plans I have for you,**” declares the LORD, “**plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.** <sup>12</sup> Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. <sup>13</sup> You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. <sup>14</sup> I will be found by you,” declares the LORD, “and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the

*nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the LORD, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.”*

Remember point 1? **God is sovereign, but his ways are not our ways**

God is sovereign, and despite the fact that they have been carried off into exile, God is still good. God assures them that He has plans to prosper them and to give them hope and a future. But His ways are not our ways.

We need to be careful how we interpret verses such as Jeremiah 29:11. This is how **Joyce Meyer** interprets this verse: “I prosper in everything I put my hand to. I have prosperity in all areas of my life—spiritually, financially, mentally, and socially.” That is a master class in how NOT to read the Bible; that is reading the Bible like a fortune cookie, taking verses out of context in order to make them say what we want them to say. Reading Jeremiah 29:11 and assuming it means that God is going to give you that promotion and restore the marriage and heal that disease. **That is “our way”** – we want a God who gives us prosperity in every area of our life. But His ways are not our ways, and God’s plans to prosper you and give you hope and a future might not look like rescuing you from Babylon in under two years and restoring everything you have lost. In the context of Jeremiah 29, what does God mean by saying He has plans to prosper and not to harm the Israelites, to give them hope and a future? It means that they will be in exile, under Babylonian captivity, for at least 70 years. It means that most of the people hearing this promise will probably die before they return to Israel. God’s way are most definitely NOT our way. But God is sovereign, and is up to something bigger than they can imagine, and those plans involve a future hope.

The same is true of Romans 8:28-29, the closest New Testament parallel to Jeremiah 29:11:

**Romans 8:28–29** - *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup> For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.*

Yes, God is always working for good, but that good is not synonymous with promotion and increase and favor and breakthrough and worldly prosperity, but with conforming you to the image of His Son. You know, Jesus, the one who suffered and died on the cross. That is the good He is talking about, making you

into a person of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

God is sovereign. But His ways are not your ways. Can you accept that? Can you trust that God? Elisabeth Elliot, who lost two husbands amidst many other inexplicable troubles, learned to trust God no matter what, and put it this way:

*God is God. If He is God, He is worthy of my worship and my service. I will find rest nowhere but in His will, and that will is infinitely, immeasurably, unspeakably beyond my largest notions of what He is up to.*

As Donald Miller put it in his book, *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years*:

*“Somehow we realize that great stories are told in conflict, but we are unwilling to embrace the potential greatness of the story we are actually in. We think God is unjust, rather than a master storyteller.”*

God is sovereign, but His ways are not our ways.

2) Prophesying peace and victory may make you popular, but it's a dangerous thing to do if the Lord has not given you that message.

The quickest way to build a church or a following is to preach messages of victory, prosperity, breakthrough, and blessing. There are so many teachers out there doing exactly that. Every year, self-styled prophets on the internet give their words for the year, and it is almost always about breakthrough, increase, favor, and so on. Next year make up a prophecy Bingo card with all the usual buzzwords and see what you hear. It's like Kenneth Copeland prophesying the end of Covid 19 soon after it began. I can just see God shaking his head in heaven. After all, who would listen to them if their message was as Jeremiah put it in 28:8-9:

*“From early times the prophets who preceded you and me have prophesied war, disaster and plague against many countries and great kingdoms. But the prophet who prophesies peace will be recognized as one truly sent by the Lord only if his prediction comes true.”*

Prophesying peace and victory and giving messages of puppy dogs and rainbows and everything going swimmingly for you may make you popular, may draw a crowd. But if that message is not from God but is designed to manipulate people, that is a dangerous thing to preach. God's ways are not our ways. Yes, God



promised the Israelite exiles prosperity, hope and a future, but that promise was not going to be fulfilled the way they thought it would. They were going to have to trust Him, seek Him, and love their Babylonian enemies for a very long time before their people could return to their homeland. Yes, God is sovereign, but He is up to something much bigger than we can imagine.

How many people have left the faith or are living as disillusioned Christians because some either well-meaning Christian teacher or false prophet took the path of Hananiah, proclaiming favor and increase and breakthrough and missing the reality that the path of Jesus was a path of suffering and sacrificial love and carrying a cross, and that no servant is greater than his or her master? Or that the joy comes in the midst of suffering and sorrow, not overflowing bank accounts and perfect health? We think people need to hear a message that if you are faithful to God, He will give you everything your heart desires. But what we really need to hear is that God is sovereign. God is good. And even when you don't understand what He is up to, just know that His ways are not your ways. Trust Him and stay faithful to Him.

So, to get back to Daniel. He and contemporaries are being carried off into exile, not because God is not sovereign or not powerful enough to protect them from the Babylonian army, but because God IS sovereign and has allowed Babylon to invade them in order to discipline them for their sinful rebellion. And although there are false prophets claiming that God will rescue them within two years, the true message, delivered through Jeremiah, is that they need to settle down in Babylon, because they will be there awhile. And that leads me to the third point, which will be the theme of Daniel that we will have to unpack:

### 3) Faithfulness in exile will involve a discerning balance of loyalty and subversion

<sup>4</sup> *This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: <sup>5</sup> "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. <sup>6</sup> Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. <sup>7</sup> Also, 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."*

Loyal subversion, or submissive subversion. This is going to be the message of Daniel. How do I seek the blessing of the land in which I find myself, while also

maintaining my allegiance to God alone? How do I love my neighbor while loving God first and maintaining my holiness, staying set apart? **You will find that when the Israelites were taken into exile, different people decided to take different approaches.** Some decided to revolt. Some decided to assimilate. But God's call on his people was to take a third way of submissive subversion. Seek the peace and prosperity of the city as loyal inhabitants, but maintain your primary loyalty to God, recognizing that Babylon is not your primary home.

And this is where the concept of exile takes on a relevance to us today, because the themes of exile and Babylon are themes throughout the Bible. Go back to the beginning. Adam and Eve sin against God and are exiled from the Garden of Eden. They are sent out into a world that no longer feels like their home. Abram leaves his home to set out after God. The people of God are enslaved in Egypt, and then in exile in Babylon. And we continue to be exiles, strangers, resident aliens, here on earth.

***1 Peter 1:1–2** - Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To God's elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, <sup>2</sup> who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood: Grace and peace be yours in abundance.*

Even today, we are exiles. This world is not our home.

***Philippians 3:18–21** - For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. <sup>19</sup> Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. <sup>20</sup> But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>21</sup> who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.*

And Babylon throughout the Bible is more than a nation, but becomes a symbol of arrogant attempts to rule the world without God through power and oppression. We first hear about Babylon in Genesis 10.

***Genesis 10:8-12** - Cush was the father of Nimrod, who grew to be a mighty warrior on the earth. <sup>9</sup> He was a mighty hunter before the LORD; that is why it is said, "Like Nimrod, a mighty hunter before the LORD." <sup>10</sup> The first centers of his kingdom were **Babylon**, Erech, Akkad and Calneh, in Shinar. <sup>11</sup> From that land he*

went to Assyria, where he built Nineveh, Rehoboth Ir, Calah <sup>12</sup> and Resen, which is between Nineveh and Calah; that is the great city.

They build the tower of Babel in an arrogant attempt to reach the heavens. And in Revelation, Babylon becomes the symbol for the Roman Empire and for every empire that sets itself up against God.

**Revelation 18:1–3** - *After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven. He had great authority, and the earth was illuminated by his splendor. <sup>2</sup> With a mighty voice he shouted: “ ‘Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!’ She has become a dwelling for demons and a haunt for every impure spirit, a haunt for every unclean bird, a haunt for every unclean and detestable animal. <sup>3</sup> For all the nations have drunk the maddening wine of her adulteries. The kings of the earth committed adultery with her, and the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive luxuries.”*

In this world, we are exiles in Babylon. If we trust in Jesus, then our citizenship is in heaven, and this world is not our home. When do we withdraw or revolt? When do we assimilate? We will need to know what it looks like to live in this world as faithful exiles, to live with a proper balance of loyalty and subversion, seeking the peace and prosperity of our culture while maintaining our allegiance to God alone? How are we to be faithful to God in a world that tries to mold us into its image, to adopt its value and beliefs?

God is sovereign, but His ways are not our ways. Beware of those who prophesy peace and victory – it may make them popular, but it is a dangerous message to preach if it is not from God. Let’s pray that God would help us discern how to live in this world as faithful exiles.