

Longing for Home

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Preacher: Archie Winnington-Ingram

[0 : 00] Morning. Let me add my welcome to that of ours. My name's Archie. I'm the pastor in training here. And it's my job this morning to take what we've just read, to help us understand it, and to work out how we might apply it to our lives today.

It'd be very helpful, therefore, if you kept that passage open. Like Anne said, it's on page 891 of the Pew Bibles. So do get that open in front of you if you can. To get us to the heart of that passage in front of you, I want to talk a little bit about hobbits.

Hobbits, if you know nothing about Lord of the Rings, hobbits love the Shire. That's the Shire. Hobbits are a group of people. They live there in the Shire. That's their home. And it's a very homely sort of place, like a fantasy version of a quaint countryside village.

Frodo is really the main hobbit character. And he has the job of taking this powerful evil ring on an adventure, taking it into the heart of enemy territory to destroy it in a volcano.

I guess most of us know that story. But for Frodo, when he's on that great adventure, he continues to love the Shire. And there are lots of times where he and his buddy, his buddy Sam, they're just longing for home, longing for the Shire.

[1 : 24] Here's Sam in one of those conversations. Do you remember the Shire, Mr. Frodo? It'll be spring soon and the orchards will be in blossom and the birds will be nesting in the hazel thicket.

And they'll be sowing the summer barley in the lower fields and eating the first strawberries with cream. Do you remember the taste of strawberries? I think it's a familiar sort of theme for us in stories, that longing for home.

And like all good storylines, it kind of tugs on our heartstrings somewhere, doesn't it? I wonder what you think of when I say that longing for home. Where does your mind go to?

I'm aware there are plenty of people in the room who are actually not in their country of home at the moment. Maybe your mind goes back to Argentina or to America or wherever it is.

I guess for a lot of us, it'll bring back memories of a childhood home. Perhaps it's just a particular place. It might not be a place at all. It might be a group of people where you really feel at home.

[2 : 30] Wonderfully, recently I've heard some people say how this church, the people here, have become like a home to them. And we get the idea. And think about then, especially when you're away from home.

Maybe especially when things aren't going so well, when life is tough. There's that longing for home, isn't there? Maybe that storyline is a particularly painful one for you.

Maybe you don't really feel at home anywhere. Maybe you don't have anywhere that you can call home. But if that's you, I'd imagine you still have that longing, don't you?

I read one writer writing about this longing for home. They said sometimes they're sitting in their house, the place that they probably most naturally call home, and yet they can't help but say to themselves, I just want to go home.

And I think that's because that longing for home goes much deeper than a particular place. Like all good stories, it tugs on our heartstrings somewhere.

[3 : 30] But like the best stories, it's really a shadow of the great storyline of the universe. See, for the Christian in the room, there's an important eternal perspective here.

In fact, I think the Bible would tell us that that longing for home, it really points to a truly existential longing, and one that in Ecclesiastes chapter 3, God would tell us he has put in our hearts, eternity in our hearts.

New Testament adds another layer to that idea. In Philippians, Paul describes the Christian as a citizen of heaven. Not only is eternity in our hearts, not only is it something that we long for, but if you're a Christian in the room this morning, then that new world to come really is where we belong.

It really is home. There's no wonder we have a longing for it. And if you're here this morning and you're not a Christian, maybe you understand that longing for home.

Maybe you even feel it yourself. Even if you can't quite put a finger on it, you know that we were made for more than what we experience in this world and in this life. Well, you need to know this morning that the Christian faith has the most wonderful answer to that longing.

[4 : 44] And that's where we're going to go in Daniel chapter 6. For Daniel, he's in Babylon. For the first readers of this book, there are people who actually have returned home, but they're still under the control of foreign empires.

They're back in Jerusalem, but in a sense, they are still exiles. This book reminds them that God is powerful to rescue them, that he has done it before.

And for us, it's going to remind us too that God has made a way for our longing for home to be eternally fulfilled. He's made a way for us to go home. This is God's plan through God's man.

So why don't I pray for us to that end before we get stuck into the text. Let me pray. Heavenly Father, I pray that Jesus would be with us by his spirit this morning, that I could say till he returns or calls me home, here in his power I stand.

And Lord, I pray that he would speak powerfully through me for his glory. Amen. So you remember Daniel and his pals, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in chapter 1.

[6 : 00] They're part of the generation of people who have been displaced by the Babylonian war machine. They've been uprooted from Jerusalem. That's their home. And they've been taken to Babylon, where now they are exiles.

And we've returned throughout this series to Jeremiah, the prophet, his advice to exiles. He said this, seek the peace and prosperity of the city into which I have carried you into exile.

But God also promised through Jeremiah that they wouldn't be exiles forever. That they would, in fact, get to go home back to Jerusalem. And it's not just a vague promise of rescue.

In Jeremiah chapter 29, verse 10, God says this, That is, to Jerusalem.

That's a properly specific promise, isn't it? And those 70 years, when we come to Daniel chapter 6, are more or less up. Daniel is now an older man.

[7 : 02] And he's got to be thinking, he knows this promise. How on earth is God going to do that? How's he going to get us home? Well, if you come to Daniel with me, we'll see how God works out his plan through his man to get them home.

I've said before that these stories, especially in the first half of Daniel's, of the book of Daniel, how they're like Sunday school classics. Anne said, this is a familiar story. It's a familiar story.

It doesn't get much more classic than this, does it? We've even titled the series, there it is, Living for God in a Lion's Den World. It's a famous story. And I suppose when it's told in Sunday school, it's usually told as a sort of moral tale.

Be more like Daniel. It's a story to encourage prayer, to encourage faithfulness, even when times are hard. And it definitely does do that. That's definitely in this story. We'll tackle it.

But the big thing, and you might be thinking, given my intro, what on earth does this story have to do with a longing for home, with God making a way for his people to go home? Well, let me try and convince you.

[8 : 05] Come to the end of chapter 6 with me. Verse 28. Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian.

Bear with me. Let me put some key facts together for us here. At the end of chapter 5 last week, Daniel had warned the king of Babylon, Belshazzar, that his kingdom would be given to the Medes and Persians.

That's exactly what happened. Darius the Mede took over in Babylon. And the Medes were like the junior partners in this alliance with Persia. So Darius is now in charge in Babylon.

But really, Cyrus the Persian is the king. He's the boss. And if you've got an unbelievable memory, you'll remember that we've seen Cyrus already in this book.

We had a preview of him at the end of chapter 1, where we were told that Daniel would remain in Babylon until the first year of King Cyrus. And for those in Daniel's day who knew their scriptures really well, I'm kind of assuming that for Daniel, God had promised through Jeremiah that the exile would last 70 years.

[9 : 16] But incredibly, he promised through Isaiah, check this out, God says, Cyrus, he is my shepherd and I will accomplish all that I please.

He will say of Jerusalem, let it be rebuilt. And of the temple, let its foundations be laid. This is decades before the Persian Empire even exists.

A promise from God that it would be through a man named Cyrus that God's people would return to Jerusalem, that the temple would be rebuilt. When Darius takes over in Babylon, Daniel knows that Cyrus is the king in the background.

He's got to be thinking, he knows this passage in Isaiah, he's got to be thinking home is on the horizon. But how is God going to do it? We'll come back to Daniel chapter 6.

And first of all, we get this trap, right? The trap, we meet these satraps, 120 satraps in verse 1. We've come across satraps before in this book. They're like Babylonian government officials.

[10:18] And this was the Persian imperial tactic, right? They kept the locals in power. It's a very similar civil service to what was there in the Babylonian Empire before the Persians took over.

And again, Daniel's got to be thinking, nothing's really changed. 70 years are almost up. How are we going to get home? And then it gets worse because Daniel is promoted in verse 2 and 3.

See at the end of verse 3, the king even planned to set him over the whole kingdom. And it gets worse because the satraps really don't like that. It's simple envy, I think.

It's just envy at the start of verse 4. At this, at the prospect of Daniel's promotion, they tried to find grounds for charges against him. But they have a problem.

And it's a remarkable problem, really. They can't find him doing anything wrong. No corruption. He's totally trustworthy. He's not negligent.

[11:17] This is a man who's been involved in politics, walking the halls of power for 60-odd years. And there's not a whiff of foul play, total integrity. Isn't that exactly what we would want from our leaders today?

And what that means for the satraps in verse 5. They will never find any basis for charges against this man, Daniel, unless it has something to do with the law of his God.

There is one way to get Daniel, and we share it with him if you're a Christian here this morning. He loves his God. The only way that they're going to be able to trap him is here, as he loves his God.

And as Christians, we're called to precisely that same sort of integrity, to being utterly above reproach, so that if people would want to accuse us, this is the only place where they might be able to find a way to do that.

And so they lay a trap. They come up with a plan. It's in verses 6 to 9. They give Darius the chance to become God for 30 days. That anyone who prays to any God or human being during the next 30 days except to you, your majesty, shall be thrown into the lion's den.

[12:29] That's a tempting prospect for Darius. Darius, and not simply because he's a king who would love to be a god, but because as the new ruler of this city, it's going to be an excellent way for him to test the loyalty of his new subjects.

Happy enough for them to have their other loyalties, but he wants to make sure that their primary loyalty is to him. And it strikes me that we live in a culture today that isn't dissimilar to that.

We talked about this a bit a few weeks ago in chapter 3, but we live in a society where it's totally fine to have secondary loyalties. It could be to a football team or a political party or ideology.

It could be being a Christian. Being a Christian is totally fine, so long as our primary loyalty remains with the fundamental values of our society, the dominant culture, whatever that is.

And I want to acknowledge that for a long time that has been pretty straightforward for Christians here. The fundamental values of society weren't dissimilar to ours.

[13:34] I guess in many ways they're still not, but as those values shift, and as I think they're becoming less compatible with Christianity, well, that could make life very awkward.

It strikes me that there are all sorts of ways that that's true for us in Scotland today. It might be a good one to talk about your next growth groups, in fact. Like I say, we did talk about this a lot a few weeks ago, so I don't want to labor it this morning.

Maybe go and listen to that sermon online if you want to chat about it at your growth groups. But notice that for Daniel, this is only going to heighten his sense of unrest in Babylon.

He wants to go home. He wants to return to Jerusalem. But with this kind of opposition, especially an opposition that takes issue with that loyalty to Jerusalem when it's his primary loyalty, how on earth is that ever going to happen?

How are they going to let him go home? How is God going to come through on his promises? We'll see next how Daniel responds to this trap. Verse 10.

[14:37] As soon as he hears about the decree, he went up to his upstairs room where all the windows were open towards Jerusalem. Three times a day, he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before.

Notice first the direction of prayer here. He prays towards Jerusalem. That was customary. It was what faithful Jews did. It's not commanded in Scripture that they had to do it that way, but it was a picture of their desire for the restoration of God's people.

They pray towards Jerusalem because they want to go home. They were praying and trusting that God would make a way for that to happen. But this is a choice. Daniel didn't need to do this.

Like I say, it wasn't commanded by Scripture. Instead, it's a personal line in the sand for Daniel.

Daniel, he goes upstairs with all the windows open.

I imagine he could have prayed downstairs. He could have prayed with the windows shut so that no one would see him. He prays three times a day. That's not commanded in Scripture.

[15:46] He could have prayed just once. He could have prayed so early in the morning or so late at night that no one would have seen him. He gets down on his knees. He could have prayed sitting down or standing up or lying in his bed.

But just in case they can't hear that he's praying, he makes sure that they can see that he's in a posture of prayer. Daniel didn't need to do this. In chapter three, we talked about lines in the sand. If you remember Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, they refused to bow down to the golden statue. They had to do that because God's law is very clear.

You are to have no other gods before me. You're not to make an image to worship. It would have been fragrantly disobedient to God's law to bow. They have to draw a line in the sand and they don't bow.

But notice the story is slightly different here. Darius's decree doesn't ask Daniel to break God's law. Darius's decree says that he can't pray for 30 days.

[16:49] He's not forcing Daniel to pray to him. He's just asking him not to pray to his God. But of course, Daniel could have prayed in his head. He could have prayed in secret behind closed doors.

He could have prayed at night when everyone else was asleep. I guess he even could have taken a month off prayer, couldn't he? Prayer isn't exactly commanded in Daniel's scripture like that.

Instead, Daniel chooses to do this because he knows that it is for his good. And he does it publicly because he knows that it will be for the good of those who witness it too.

But ultimately, Daniel does this for the glory of the God whom he loves. And it's true today that there might be times where we are commanded to draw lines in the sand.

Where the culture is asking us to bow down and worship things that we know are contrary to the gospel. We've talked about that a few weeks ago. But it's also true that it can be good to draw personal lines in the sand like this.

[17:56] Lines in the sand that we draw specifically to say just boldly, this is my primary allegiance. For our own sake. For the sake of our witness.

But ultimately, for the glory of the God whom we love. For you, that might mean saying no to certain things on a Sunday in order to prioritize coming to church with your church family.

It might mean even now getting your calendar out and marking the monthly prayer meetings. Pizza room prayer. By the way, that is tonight. And drawing a line in the sand that protects that meeting.

It might mean committing to starting your day with some time in God's word and prayer. Committing to doing that maybe even if you're on a holiday or on a work trip with people who aren't Christians.

The key thing to see here is that the lines in the sand that I'm talking about are not things that we must do. These aren't commands in scripture.

[18:57] But these are commitments and habits that it is good to choose to do. And if we choose to do them now, when let's be honest, the pressure is not likely to be massive.

It's very often just pure laziness, isn't it? Or fear of mockery. But if we can build those habits now, then when things get really hard, we are much more likely, just like Daniel, to do as we had done previously.

See, that's how Daniel does it. He does it at the end of verse 10 because it's what he's always done. He's praying as he had done previously.

Graham made the point last week that Daniel has developed here a holy habit. He's now an older man. And all those years, this has been his practice.

And so he chooses to draw a personal line in the sand to continue the habit, whatever the cost. And that cost is unbelievably high for Daniel, isn't it? It's your quiet time or die.

[19 : 57] And there might be low-level pressure to avoid holy habits for us now. But if we do not build them now, then when prayer becomes a capital offense, which, by the way, I'm hardly expecting, but then neither was Daniel.

If we've built it as a true habit, then even then we might stand by that line in the sand. That's how Daniel responds to the trap. How does Darius respond?

In verse 12, the satraps come to Darius. Didn't you make a law banning prayer? I did, he replies, and it cannot be repealed.

And this was a quirk of the law of the Medes and the Persians. We saw it back in verse 8 as well. They couldn't overturn their own laws. And that leaves Darius in this ridiculous position.

In verse 14, when the king heard this, that is the accusation against Daniel, he was greatly distressed. He was determined to rescue Daniel.

[20 : 58] I think we're supposed to think that Darius really likes Daniel. At the very least, they've got a good working relationship. But I suspect more than that, they seem to have become friends, given Darius' response here.

And the law of the Medes and the Persians, it leaves Darius in this ridiculous position. In verse 15, remember, your majesty, that according to the law of the Medes and Persians, no decree or edict that the king issues can be changed.

In other words, you are too powerful to do what you want. He's strikingly impotent, isn't he, Darius, despite being the king? And it looks like the satraps are trapping Daniel, and they are.

But really, they trap Darius, don't they? They trap him into murdering his friend. And Darius obviously isn't happy about it. He can't eat. He can't sleep.

But Darius is utterly impotent. I think it's hilarious that he's been invited by the satraps to be God for a month. And he's really not up to the job. Darius has nothing on God, on Daniel's God.

[22 : 02] He desperately wants to rescue Daniel, but he can't. And so he has to appeal in verse 16 to Daniel's God. May he rescue you. And in verse 20, he comes the next day after the lion's den thing.

And his question is, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to rescue you from the lions? Because I can't do it. I'm impotent. This is Darius's response in that impotence.

But notice the power of the God who rescues. When Daniel comes out of the lion's den, it's not because the lions weren't hungry that he survives, but because God rescued him.

It's because in verse 21, God sent his angel to keep their mouths shut. And God did that for Daniel because still in verse 24, he was found innocent in his sight.

Notice that doesn't say that God rescues Daniel because Daniel was perfect. It doesn't even say that Daniel was innocent, actually, but that he was found innocent.

[23 : 11] This is a bit of an aside. But how could God find him to be innocent like that? I mean, Daniel, he's clearly a very, very good guy. That's how he's presented throughout the book.

But he is also a human being, which means that he wasn't immune from the condition of sin that we all share. He wasn't perfect. We're not supposed to think of Daniel as perfect.

How can he be found innocent before God then? Well, verse 23 gives us another angle on the same rescue. And this time he's rescued. Why? Because he trusted in his God.

See, it's not Daniel's own innocence that saves him. It is the God who he trusts. God who has mercy on him and therefore finds him.

To be innocent. It's legal language. Like a law court, he's found innocent. But Daniel in the lion's den, God's power to rescue Daniel in that way, it's incredible, isn't it?

[24 : 11] In and of itself, it is incredible. But it's here to remind the readers, the big picture here, that God is powerful to rescue, to bring them home. And we know from history, the history books, secular history, and you can also read about it in the Bible in Ezra chapter 1, right at the end of the second book of Chronicles 2.

We know from history that that sending them home is going to come from an edict from Cyrus, a decree from the king. But God needs to make a way for that to happen.

Because even if the impotent Darius and his boss Cyrus, even if those men wanted to send God's people home, at the moment they wouldn't be able to.

And never mind how disruptive it would be moving all these people around an empire. But there's no way that the satraps that Darius has appointed are going to buy it.

They were part of the administration whose policy it had been to displace the people in the first place. They were part of Nebuchadnezzar's policy of uprooting people, moving people around. That's how he controlled his empire.

[25 : 21] And the satraps that we read about here were the same people who executed that policy for him. And yet it's precisely through the satraps that God gets to work in rescuing his people.

Here's how. Firstly, by sending Daniel to the lion's den, the satraps ensured that Darius' new administration learned very quickly what it took decades for Neb to learn.

In verse 16 and verse 20, there's that hopeful appeal to Daniel's God. But then in verse 26, and this is very like what Nebuchadnezzar says. Darius says, That's a phenomenal statement of God's sovereignty and power.

And I think importantly, it's a sentiment that is going to be very useful as this new empire, as Darius and Cyrus decide what to do with all these people and decide their religious policy going forward. Secondly, and I think more importantly than that, the satraps' actions make a way for Daniel's influence to grow. He's there in the new administration for the crucial moment where those religious policies are going to be drawn, when laws are going to be written about sending people home.

[26 : 43] Why do you think God had Daniel in Babylon? Why do you think he was so gifted by God?

And why did he need 60 odd years of training in imperial bureaucracy and how it works? Why did he have to be right at the heart of the Babylonian civil service, but not actually a Babylonian himself?

Why did he need to be right at the heart of the spirit of God? He needed to know the inner workings of that system whilst not being primarily loyal to it. God wanted to execute his plan through his man. And the actions of the satraps only see that influence grow because God needs to give Daniel, he wants to give Daniel freedom in this new administration. And so he needs to get rid of those satraps somehow.

I'm told that this is Hugo King, one of the kids here at church. I'm told that this is his favorite part of the story in verse 24. At the king's command, the men who had falsely accused Daniel were brought in and thrown into the lion's den, along with their wives and children.

[27 : 51] The king has been made to hate the satraps so much that he's forced to feed them to his lions. And remember, the lions, they were hungry. It's not that Daniel was not eaten by them because they weren't hungry.

Clearly they were hungry. The satraps and their families are eaten before they even hit the floor. And so as the chapter closes, who is in exactly the right place at exactly the right time?

As Cyrus and Darius are trying to work out what to do with all these displaced people, well, who's there in verse 28 prospering as they have those discussions?

It's Daniel, the only man left in the kingdom with any power. And so when they decide to send people home all over the empire, this becomes their policy from India to the Mediterranean.

Who do you think wrote that law? It was God's plan through God's man. Now, I'm not really one of those Lord of the Rings super fans, and I just know someone's probably going to tell me that I've got it all wrong with Frodo.

[28 : 58] But Frodo, in my head, he takes the ring. He heads into the dark of a mountain. It looks surely as though he's going to die. But in that place, he wins a victory over the enemy. Evil is destroyed and he gets to go home.

It's the plan for rescue. They get to go back to the shire. And we said that's a familiar storyline, the longing for home, the journey home. I think that Daniel, this book, was written to give God's people confidence that he was going to carry out his plan to rescue them.

Certainly that was true for Daniel, but for the first readers of this book, those who had returned from exile, they're back in the land. They're still under the thumb of various worldly empires at different points through history.

And as they read this book, asking how are we going to survive this exile, God is promising that he would rescue them. He's reminding them that he has the power to do that, and he's giving them confidence that he would carry out that plan of rescue.

And it gives us confidence today that God will carry out his plan of rescue for us in Jesus. It strikes me that there are very many comparisons to be made between Daniel and Jesus in this chapter.

[30 : 11] I've kind of been trying to avoid them in my prep, if I'm honest with you, because I don't like jumping to Jesus for no reason, but they really are unavoidable here. A faithful man, noted for his prayer, was sent to death not because he was guilty, but because of the jealousy of those who wanted to humiliate him.

He was condemned by the plotting of his enemies, using not their own law, but the law of the big scary empire. He was then thrown into a room made of stone, a place designed to be his tomb. A stone was rolled over the entrance of that tomb and sealed. And then came the morning, and the stone was rolled away, and miraculously he could not be bound by death.

The whole thing displays God's glory. Even the pagans give God glory for it, the empire. And then his enemies are judged.

And through it all, he's making a way for his people to go home. If you're here this morning and you share that longing for home, it might be a hard-to-put-your-finger-on existential longing.

[31 : 28] It might be, actually, that you find life as an exile really quite hard. Maybe you've got to the point where your life is really challenging.

Maybe your body is packing in and you're tired all the time. Maybe you're simply fed up of waging war against sin and flesh and evil. Maybe you look at a world that is full of incomprehensible injustice, and you can't wait for Jesus to return and sort it all out for his perfect righteous reign.

Can I encourage you to keep praying, Lord Jesus, come, and keep dreaming of home. Some people say that if you're too heavenly-minded, you'll be of no earthly good.

That is nonsense. Here's how C.S. Lewis put it. If you read history, you will find that those Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next.

So would we do that? Would we look to Jesus? Look to Jesus. Look to Jesus who has invited you to dwell with him forever. Look to him.

[32 : 39] Look to Jesus who took your sin upon his shoulders and stepped into that tomb for you. Look to him. Look to Jesus who could not be held by that tomb.

Look to him. Look to Jesus who promises that he will return in judgment as he calls curtains on this world. Look to him. Look to Jesus who is the only way home to a new and much better world than this one.

Would we look to him this morning? In a short while, we're going to sing together. It's a wonderful song that reminds us as we declare together that it is because Jesus lives, because he walked out of that tomb, that we can know that even when we fight that final war with pain, he holds the future because he lives.

Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for your wonderful picture of rescue that we've read about here in Daniel chapter 6.

Lord, we thank you that you made a way to bring your exiles home. Lord, I pray that you would give each of us confidence that you continue to do that sort of work today.

[34 : 05] Lord, I pray that you would help each of us to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, that you would help us to be heavenly minded, that we might be of some earthly good.

In Jesus' name. Amen.