

Mockery and Faith

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[0 : 0 0] Well friends, it's lovely to see you this morning. My name is Graham, if you've not met. I'm the pastor here of the church and it's a real joy to get back into Daniel chapter five today.

So why don't we pray just as we get going this morning. But this is the one to whom I will look. He who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.

And so Father, we pray for that spirit today in each of our hearts as we come to your inspired holy word. Father, that you would raise our eyes as we've been singing at the start and set our minds on the fact that you are the God who is so far above the things of this earth.

And so Father, may we leave today with a bigger picture of who you are today because we have heard from you in your word. And we pray these things in Jesus's wonderful name.

Amen. So friends, as we get back into Daniel chapter five today, here's what I want you to do really simply for us to do is just take a couple of deep breaths. So apparently we take about 2,000 of those breaths a day.

[1 : 1 6] I don't know how people work that out, but apparently we take 2,000 breaths a day. Now, if the 2,000 times table is not your strong point, that works out at about 730,000 breaths that you and I take a year.

Now, that's a lot of breaths. And it'll be no bad thing for us to be aware of our breathing over the next 30 minutes or so, because this is what the Bible tells us.

It tells us that the very first one, the very last one, and every single breath that we take in between are given to us by the God who created us.

Now, the book of Daniel has been so good for our souls because it's helped anchor our hearts and our minds in the truth of God's sovereignty so that every single thing that happens in our world happens according to his plan and his purposes.

So that sovereignty of God, it extends all the way up to the mega narrative of history, and it extends all the way down to the micro narrative of our existence.

[2 : 3 1] And this is the words of J.I. Packer, who we started this series with. He said, to know that nothing happens in God's world apart from God's will may frighten the godless.

And this is what we're going to see. But it stabilizes the saints. And so two things flow from that truth about breath. Two things flow from it.

Number one is that breath is gift. This three-in-one God who we worship today, this holy God, Father, Son, and Spirit, out of his fullness, delighted to create life in all its beauty and in all its diversity.

And that means that we are dependent on our creator for absolutely everything. We breathe today not because we decided to get up. We breathe today because this God is gracious and he is good.

Breath is gift. And also breath is accountability. So one day we're going to have to stand before our maker and we're going to have to give an account to him of what we did with those breaths that he gave us.

[3 : 42] Now we all like to know, if you're a student here today, I've had many conversations with you guys over the last couple of weeks, we love to know the exam questions before they come up. Yeah? Maybe you were that annoying kid at school.

Is this going to be in the test? Well, here's the exam question right at the end. God gives us it before the end of time. He says, and you'll see this in the passage, Daniel says it to Belshazzar, really simply, did you honour me with the breath that I gave you?

And this is a passage that is going to throw us upon a bigger view of God than I think we often have. Do we understand that every breath that we have, everything that we have is from his wonderful, gracious and good hands?

That's precisely the message that we see a nobly need 80-year-old exile from Jerusalem called Daniel delivered to a young, hot-headed king who thinks that he owns the world.

This passage asks us to consider the question, who is the man? Right? As we see, these two men have a word off.

[4 : 55] Who is the man in this passage? Now, here's the context that gets us to the beating heart of this chapter. You won't necessarily get it from a plain reading of the text.

Here's the context. 20 years have passed in the narrative since the end of chapter 4, which you could argue was a huge high point of the book because you had, if you remember this from a few weeks ago, you had, this was the news at 10.

This was the news that was doing the rounds in Babylon. From the highest point, from the highest person, he was declaring, King Nebuchadnezzar, the guy at the top of the food chain, the top of the world, he was declaring at verse 3 that God's kingdom is an everlasting kingdom.

God's kingdom, not mine, his. And that is an astonishing admission in the book of Daniel. And you can understand that the first readers of this book, when they come up with, come up against chapter 4, they're thinking to themselves, is now the time?

Is now the time that God is going to show his glory to the world? Is now the time that revival in Babylon is going to kick off? But that is not how the next 20 years go.

[6 : 10] You ready for a wee potted history lesson here? You seem really keen. Let's dig in and dive. Okay. Nebuchadnezzar, this king, he dies in the year 526.

He's had a really long reign, 43 years by that time. He is succeeded by his son. And the story goes that his son is assassinated by his brother-in-law.

You keeping up? Before that brother-in-law's son takes over after his death. And then that son-in-law is taken out. And this man called Nabonides is placed on the throne.

And at some point, he goes away on royal business. Now whether he's pushed, whether he jumped, we're not sure, but he goes away in royal business. And his son, Belshazzar, takes his place as the de facto king.

And that's the guy that you meet in verse 1 of chapter 5 if you're wondering who he is. So a lot has happened in 20 years in terms of the throne. And that explains, if you notice that little detail in the text, why Belshazzar, he can only offer to whoever interprets this dream the title of being, did you notice it?

[7 : 25] Third in the kingdom. Because he is second and his dad is first. So again, this is just history, why this stands up to history. This is why he can say and only offer the third in the kingdom.

But here's the point of that history lesson. It's more than just that thought. This passing of time, this cloak and dagger thing that's going on at the top of the food chain for power in Babylon, what that means is that Nebuchadnezzar's confession in chapter 4, not only has it been massively diluted with the passing of time, but I imagine by the time that you hit chapter 5, it's been all but forgotten.

Who is the Lord? And Daniel is no longer a mover and shaker in Babylon. He is just consigned to the sides. And Belshazzar is intent on mocking any God who is not his.

Now those three things come together to make a royal triage of discouragement for God's people. So here's the question. Is all that stuff we thought about about breath up top, is it still true even when I can't see it?

Is it still true when I go to the office tomorrow and I go to that end of year's drinks party and it gets way out of hand and as I hear, and this is what's been so great about that sermon survey that we've run over the past number of weeks, we'll do it again at the end to hear about what some of us are facing, the work cultures that we're in.

[8 : 59] Is God still giving this breath thing when I hear people mocking his name, when I'm surrounded by gossip and slander, when people don't seem to care to hoots about the Lord?

When you have that family gathering, when people are just not interested in the slightest about your faith? When the 4th of July rolls around, our one, not the American one, and new people with new agendas are going to be elected to power?

Is it still true? I don't know if you saw the Scottish census results that were released this week, the one where apparently now 51.1% of people in our country tick the no religion box.

That is up from 36.7% in 2001. Is God still sovereign when all I see around me is this Belshazzar spirit that just wants to defy and mock God?

Is it still true? Friends, here's two things that Daniel chapter 5 teaches us. And if you're taking notes, these are our two points that we want to get across today.

[10 : 00] Here's the first one, and it's a warning from God to the world. It's that you're playing a dangerous game if you're mocking his purposes. You're playing a really dangerous game because at verse 1, do you see how Belshazzar effectively, he throws a massive drinking party, doesn't he?

There's been enough corporate nights out, uni football nights out to know what these things are like. Just notice who is there in the text. Again, notice who's there in the text.

A thousand of his lords, his wife, plural, his concubine, plural. And it's repeated twice there in the text, and so it's a great thing to notice when you're reading our Bibles when things are repeated.

It's not because the authors just ran out of things to say trying to fill words. It's repeated for emphasis. So do you see how it's repeated there twice? It's not just a lot of people, it's people who he has put around his life who are there to serve his pleasures and to satisfy his appetites.

He surrounded himself with yes people. He surrounded himself with people who are there to satisfy him, to sing about his glory. Notice what is there because at some point during this feast, he calls for the vessels of gold to be brought out.

[11 : 16] Now this is interesting because these are the instruments that were devoted to the worship of Yahweh that were taken from the temple in Jerusalem. And make no mistake, if you look at verse 22 in the text, and this backs it up, that Belshazzar knows exactly what he's doing when he calls on those vessels to be brought in so that they could be used for this drinking game.

He knows exactly what he's doing. He knows what the history books say about what happened to his, I guess his father-in-law down the line, Nebuchadnezzar, and yet he's thinking to himself, that could never happen to me.

Now one of the algorithms on my phone, do you not love those things? Because I watched a lot of footage of that sub that went down when they were going to visit the wreck of the Titanic.

Now my Facebook feed is just all Titanic stats. Here's one that I learned recently. Do you want one? That apparently on the Titanic there were only 14 proper lifeboats on that ship.

Coupled with a few emergency ones, a few collapsible ones, but that number is significant because it accounted for half of the people that were on board that ship. If you've seen that film and that was peak 90s, wasn't it?

[12 : 35] Rose mentions that fact. Only half of the people on this ship are going to survive because we've only got half the number of lifeboats that we should have had. And the call that they make when they're making that ship is that we prefer more space on deck than we would thinking about people's safety.

Why do we do that? It all boiled down to what they called that ship. What did they call it? The unsinkable ship. Nothing's going to take us out. We are sailing from what, Liverpool?

We're going to live in New York and we're going to do it ahead of time. And that epitomizes the defiant human spirit that thinks tomorrow is guaranteed.

Belshazzar drinks from these. Do you see how he toasts his gods of gold, iron, wood, and stone. Make no mistake that he is using the vessels of God to worship his God.

He is mocking the holiness of the living God. What he's doing is he toasts it. He toasts it. He is saying, I hold it. I own this God. And the God of the Bible will not be mocked, friends.

[13 : 43] And so if you're here today and that's your mindset, if you think you will get away with it because he can't see, know that he will have the last say on your life.

Nothing escapes the gaze of this all-knowing, all-seeing God. And it is little wonder that verse 5 roars in with that word you see it. immediately.

Immediately. Belshazzar sees the writing on the wall. In case you're wondering where that phrase that we use all the time comes from. And the sham and the folly of what's going on here is exposed.

The writer wants us to see straight through it. And he wants us to see straight through it. If you're struggling with this today, all the mockery that's going on, all the drinking games, all the success, all these things, the writer wants you to see straight through it as well.

As this young buck who thinks he's on top of the world, who's taken on the king of the universe, he turns to jelly. And this is meant to make us laugh, I think, as the reader. You know, my friend Andy is the chaplain of Hearts men's football team.

[15 : 06] I remember him telling me that when it comes to his work as he gets in amongst the guys, he tells me, see when the team is flying, see when they're banging in the goals, no one wants to talk about the big questions of life.

No one wants to think that this career might end one day. But he tells me, as soon as the team's form dips, and especially when a player gets a life-threatening injury, all of a sudden this confidence of this 25-year-old guy who thinks he owns the joint, all of a sudden he's scared that it's curtains for his career.

And Jesus tells that parable, doesn't he? Of the rich farmer who sets about building bigger barns so that he can have more stuff, so that his life could be at ease.

And he sits back in the deck chair, I imagine, in that parable, and that very night God says, you fool, that very night your life will be taken from you.

And the joke in this passage, I think, is that the only adult in the room is the queen. Now she's not his wife, the queen is the queen mother you can understand her to be.

[16 : 18] So the joke in the text is this guy who's flexing his muscles, this young guy who thinks he owns the world, is granny who has to come to the rescue. Right? Granny has to come and she has to bring some common sense in the room.

She's the only adult in the room. And she remembers this man, verse 11. And I think this is fascinating. Do you see in the text, I should have written it down, I ain't, verse 12.

She doesn't use his Babylonian name. Do you see in the text she uses his Jewish name? There is this man called Daniel. That tells you tons, doesn't it?

It tells you that Daniel has stuck rigidly to his God-given identity in Babylon. Even though tons of time has passed since that episode in chapter 4, Daniel is clinging to God's promises.

This is who I am. Now let me ask you, in your circles, friends, all of our circles, how are we known? Not in terms of just what we do, but how are we known in terms of who we are?

[17 : 22] You know, I've told this story before, but I love it because he popped up on my Facebook feed this week, reminded me of him. See, when I was in halls at university, there was four Daves in our year. And what people did was just give people nicknames to differentiate them, right?

So we had Disco Dave, we had Scary Dave, we had Hair Dave, and then we had my friend who people called Christian Dave. All sorts of other adjectives they could have picked to describe him, but they went for that one because they saw what his life was all about.

How are we known in our circles? These, this Queen Mum rather, she calls for Daniel. And in comes this, what comic scene this must have been, this near 80-year-old man man who's likely lost his physical edge, but boy, does he go toe-to-toe as he spars with this young man who thinks he owns the world.

And Daniel goes to task here. And he exemplifies what God's people, I think, are meant to take from this. And this is the second, I think, an invitation that God makes to his people, and it's this, that if you're trusting his promises, dear friends, we are playing the long game.

Daniel exemplifies for us what it means to trust God's sovereignty in the slow plod and often the mundane nature and the seeming silence of life.

[19 : 02] if tomorrow just feels like another day, and let me say with kids, it often does. You realise you're not that creative when you have to think of things to cook at night.

Each day feels the same often. And yet, Daniel's been teaching me this week that I want to take every step of my life playing the long game with God's promises, promises, that I can glorify him as I change nappies, as we do all of that gig.

I can glorify him. Because here's the question, right? What has Daniel been doing for the last 20 years? Chapter 6, if I can verse creep onto Archie's next week's chapter, he's not here so I'm going to do it, it gives us the answer.

Daniel, as his influence in Babylon, wanes. Daniel, as his physical body in Babylon withers. He's not been topping up his tan, he's not been saving on the side for retirement, that sweet, sweet thought.

This man has been getting down on his rickety knees and he's been praying three times a day, day after day after day. Here is a man who has been investing himself in the promises of God, getting scripted, into his system in the everyday nature of life because this confidence that he oozes here has not come out of nowhere.

[20 : 40] He's not all of a sudden just got his confidence thing to speak before the king. This is the result of a life of a man who has spent many, many, many years walking with his God, investing himself in the ordinary means of grace, or what I like to call holy habits.

Getting up each day, reading his Bible, praying, getting up the next day, reading his Bible and praying. And we were thinking as an elders team yesterday about how we can create that culture, continue to do it in this church here.

Let me ask you, friends, all of us, what are we doing to create those holy habits? What is our exposure to God's words like? Maybe some of us off the back of today, just resolutely determined to just even spend five, ten, fifty minutes each day just reading God's word, getting his promises for the long game into our system.

Daniel is a wonderful example here of what Paul in 2 Corinthians 4 talks about, about how the outer man is fading away but the inner man is being renewed day after day after day as he looks not to that which is seen but as he looks to that which is unseen.

Can I maybe just make a really specific application to those of us in the room? He's looking very much at his notes who are at the Daniel age and stage of life.

[22 : 16] You know, one of the comedy programs that was popular on British TV when I was growing up, I would ask for showing the hands in the air but let's not do that, okay, it was called One Foot in the Grave. The central character to One Foot in the Grave is this man called Victor Meldrew, right?

YouTube's your friend if you don't know what this is and he had this line all the time, I don't believe it and he's just moaning and he's grumping about the things of life and the reason that these shows connect with us, is it not true that we see ourselves in these shows?

I take it that's why observational comedy is a massive thing in our culture because people just look, they perceive and they make fun. Is it not generally speaking true, dear friends, that people in our culture getting older often makes them more cynical about life?

We didn't do that in my day. Cannot believe what we're doing in this day. And so often it's tied up with the fact that people are struggling to come to terms with the fact that their best days are not in front of them.

Their best days are behind them. If you are a seasoned saint here this morning, never lose sight of the fact that the promises of God tell you that your best days are ahead of you.

[23 : 40] They are ahead of you. show it to your neighbours and your family. Show it to those who live in your stairwell, who you live in your flat, in your home. Show it to us.

I need you to help me remember that the greatest days of our lives are not mid-twenties. It's when we be with the living God. I love Daniel.

I love him and this is why he's taught me so much this week. He is playing the long game with the promises of God. I think in our culture today, friends, we are conditioned to play the short game. Everything's instant.

Everything's now. Trying to explain to my kids that Gladiators is live TV. You can't just watch the next one. Everything's now. Everything's instant. And how quickly we tap out.

At the stage of life now where I love the verbs to describe the Christian life, ones that speak to me so much at this moment, patience and endurance and long-suffering.

[24 : 43] In other words, play the long game. Daniel has found and is living for a far greater treasure. I take it that's why he says, Belshazzar, just keep your stuff.

But before he interprets the dream, do you see how he explains the dream? You need to learn the lessons that Nebuchadnezzar, before you did Belshazzar, this God who gave him, and this God who took from him, is meant to help us realize, verse 21, that the Most High God rules.

And you are making that exact same mistake. Many, many, numbered. Tekel, Wade, Parsin, divided.

And it's interesting, isn't it, the reaction that he makes, Belshazzar, to this is really strange. It's not the one that we think he should make, maybe the one that we expect him to make, but it tells us all about this guy and how he thinks.

Instead of repenting, what does he want to do? Like some kind of corporate away gig. He just wants to shower him and stuff. He thinks, I imagine still, this stuff is going to save him.

[26 : 03] And then have a look at verse 30 as we begin to wind this up this morning. This is what history tells us. And again, remember, this is why we've always gone to the kind of historical accuracy of this book to help us understand.

This is not a fairy tale. This actually happened. Look at verse 30. Here's what history tells us. It tells us that the Medes and the Persians, and I love this.

If you ever look to take a city, go with this. The Medes and the Persians in history, they divert the Euphrates River. And why, if they divert it, what they do is they cause the water level to drop.

And they sneak in through the sewers of the city. And that's how they capture Babylon. Which means at this point, when he is toasting his success and his glory, it may well be the case that the Medes and the Persians are ready to pounce.

They're right underneath the city. Belshazzar is killed as they rout the place. And Darius the Medes, and notice the key words, the ESV I think captures it better than the NIV, but I think you roll with the punches and you see it still.

[27 : 12] Here's the key word. What did he do? He didn't win the kingdom. He received the kingdom. There's a lot of dynamite in that one verse. Let me just pick out just a couple of really quick ones.

Because he's received the kingdom, it means that there's a new superpower on the world stage. Remember we said chapter one, this is like a big game of risk, world domination. So there's a new superpower have just been crowned at this point.

Crucially, it's the one that God had said that he would use to make a way for his people to go back to their homeland. So this is a big moment in biblical history. It's one verse, massive moment.

And yet, we need to understand that Darius receives the kingdom. God gives him the kingdom. But kings and kingdoms will just come and go. We'll see this in the weeks to come.

Kings and kingdoms will just keep spinning round. And yet, with every single one, this Belshazzar spirit will live on. So we're right back to that original question.

[28 : 14] Is there all this stuff about breath? Is it true when I don't see it round about me? Is God still sovereign? Is he reigning on the throne on his purposes, ripening fast every hour?

In the words of William Cowper, even when all around I see, is the Belshazzar spirit alive and kicking? What do we do? How do we live? I take it that we are privileged to live this side of the cross.

And this calls us to consider and draw confidence from, friends, another king who received a kingdom. And you cannot help but contrast King Belshazzar with King Jesus in this episode, can you?

Belshazzar, he drinks from a cup raised to his own glory. But Jesus drank from a cup, one that symbolized our sin and rebellion against this God who gives us breath and he drank the dregs of that cup dry as he paid the price of our sin on the cross.

Completely contrasting kings and kingdoms. And God declared of Belshazzar, numbered, numbered, tried in one thing, but God the Father declares of his Son, because he went to the cross to accomplish the plan of salvation, hatched before the foundation of world to his Father's glory.

[29 : 42] God declared of Jesus, this is my Son with whom I am well pleased. Contrasting kings and kingdoms. And this King Jesus we need to understand.

Our King has received, as we were singing at the start and what a pick that song was, he has received an unshakable kingdom. kingdom. And this Christ, he loves us and he holds history and he holds our breaths in his hand.

And by faith in King Jesus, friends, we have received a kingdom that will never be toppled or shaken. And one day all of creation will need to answer to this king.

So what should we do? Let's just close with this thought. You know, our youngest daughter, she's going through a bit of a frozen spell at the moment.

I've kind of coined the phrase, I call her a fraudler. Okay? And I hear her the other morning on her baby monitor singing, let it go, let it go. I don't think she gets the rest of the song but those three words she has nailed.

[30 : 55] Let it go, let it go. Trying to branch her out into Frozen 2 because I'm getting a bit sick of the repetitive nature of it. If you've seen Frozen 2, one of the hit songs of that film that Anna sings is called The Next Right Thing.

The Next Right Thing. All she sees around her is darkness in that scene. She doesn't know what's up ahead but she's just doing the next right thing. And that's what Daniel 5 I think calls God's people to do.

When we see darkness around, when we don't know what's up ahead, God just calls us to trust him, to know his promises and do the next right thing.

What's that going to look like for you tomorrow in the office? What's that going to look like for you tomorrow as you look after your kids? What's that going to look like tomorrow when you meet up with your friends and family?

Doing the next right thing. Trusting him for the long haul, being obedient to his words. I take it this is what Eugene Peterson called a long obedience in the same direction.

[32 : 09] Just do the next right thing. Here's what we can know. When we do that, when we walk by faith with this vision of this glorious Christ in our minds and in our hearts, when we walk by faith rather than sight in our circumstances, friends, we are standing in a long and beautiful tradition.

And be so aware that as the clock ticks over mundanely, he is working out his purposes perfectly.

And let's close with this. This is Jen Wilkin who is doing some fantastic work in women's ministry heading it up in the States.

She writes this in her book In His Image. If you're looking for something just devotionally to mix it up, that's a book to get. She just writes this, the church must be a bastion of patience as the rest of the world chases the next new thing every eight seconds or less.

Eight seconds means that we have a less attention span than a goldfish if you're needing humbled this morning. we must be those who turn our eyes toward the long view.

[33 : 23] Amen. Amen.