

Faithful on the Frontline

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Preacher: Graeme Shanks

[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, everyone. It is lovely to see you here today. It is always exciting when we begin a new preaching series as a church, and this morning really is no exception to that.

I'm really excited to get into Daniel together. Particularly, can I encourage you, if you're in the habit of taking notes during sermons, I always find that a really good way to not just concentrate during, but remember afterwards some of the things that we've been learning.

Can I encourage you, this might be a really good series, and this is going to take us up to the beginning of the summer, to begin that habit. Do it in your iPhone if you want, in the wee notes section, or scribble them on your Bible and your notepad.

God is going to teach us so much through this book together, and I'm really excited to get into it. But let me try and anchor us in the book of Daniel, and maybe try and help us see what I think is going to be the cash out when it comes to the application of this book for us as a local church.

Now, here is one of my favourite comedians from Glasgow called Kevin Bridges. Kevin Bridges has performed at venues all over the world. Now, admittedly, his language is a bit spicy, but if you're willing to get beyond that, some of his material is genuinely really funny, and it appeals to my Glaswegian sense of humour as well.

[1 : 1 5] But I was watching one of his sets recently, little clips on YouTube, and this is the line he came out with, and see what you make of this. He said, earthquakes, tsunamis, Donald Trump, Brexit, Kim Jong-un, Vladimir Putin, ISIS, global warming, a refugee crisis, sexual harassment.

I think if you believe in God, you've got to acknowledge that the guy's in over his head is getting a bit much for God. And here was his line, God has lost the dressing room.

Now, I've got a lot of time for honesty like that, not because I particularly agree with what he's saying, but it's what you find when you come to the God of the Bible, is that the God of the Bible is big enough to handle our questions in life and our frustrations about life.

And not only is he big enough to handle them, but he gives us in his word a better story for which to understand our lives and the world in which we live. But every time I hear a line like that from Kevin Bridges, from my friends, from my family, there's always a little tiny voice in my mind that says, what if they're right?

I mean, is there anyone at the steering wheel of the world? Is history, is it heading anywhere? And if it is heading anywhere, where is it heading? And who gets to decide that?

[2 : 4 4] Where does power really lie in this world? Does it lie in the places that we can see with our eyes and the people that we can see up the front and the positions of power?

Or does it lie somewhere else? Let me tell you what the book of Daniel is going to do for us. The guys I love watching every time during the Winter Olympics comes around are the cross-country skiers.

I think because I've got the greatest admiration for fitness levels like that. But it seems to me, I'm no cross-country skiing expert, but it seems to me that the key to keep these guys moving forward are the two poles which they hold in their hands.

Right? See it on the screen? The two poles which they hold in their hands. That's what gives them the momentum. That's what keeps them moving forward. Here's what the book of Daniel does. It gives us two poles to grab onto and use so that we keep moving forward in the Christian life.

Ready for these? Here's the first one. It's really simply God's sovereignty. Now that might be a new word for you. Let me just break it down what it means. It means that this God is in total control of all things big and little in life.

[4 : 02] Nothing escapes his gaze. Nothing goes down without his say-so. You see what God tells us in the pages of his word as he speaks to us and makes himself known is that he's not just some kind of Magnus Carlsen in the sky.

That name means nothing to you. He's a grand chess player who's known as being a couple of moves ahead of every single one of his opponents. I think he was the first one ever to beat the supercomputer. Now actually the Lord is the eternal one who as we sang in that song is outside of time.

All of time is in his hands. He is the one who knows the end from the beginning. He is the one as we come in here today who our view of whatever it is is way too small.

God's sovereignty. That is the first pole that this book of Daniel gives us. And the second one really simply is that history is going somewhere. And it's going somewhere according to the purposes of this wonderfully good triune God, the Father, the Son and the Spirit who has purposes and plans to bless the world for the good of his people and for the glory of his name all throughout this planet.

The plan that we thought about last week with Trev in Ephesians 1 verse 10 and that's a great verse to go home and memorize if you want. Every time I freak out about the state of the world this is the verse I come back to.

[5 : 34] God's plan from since the foundation before the foundation of the world to unite all things in heaven and on earth in his Son Jesus Christ. And regardless of what's going on in the world right now, regardless of what's going on in your life today, that plan is bang on track.

And Daniel gives us both of these poles, God's sovereignty and the fact that history is heading somewhere according to his good purposes. And he says, grab hold of them, love them, know them, and live confidently and courageously for Christ in your world with them.

Now have a look at verse one as we step inside this book this morning. The context of this book is that God's people are having their own has our God lost the dressing room kind of moment in history.

Verse one, do you see it, of Daniel? It begins not with an introduction. It begins with a destruction. Do you see it? Think of this like a big game of risk appealing to a certain generation in the room.

What was the strapline to that game? Does anyone remember the strapline to that game? What was it? It was world domination. That's why I loved playing that with my mates growing up.

[6 : 56] Stroked my ego for like an hour. I could think I owned the world. World domination. That was the strapline to that game. And what's going on here is that Babylon have become have become the new top dog on the world stage at this point in history.

King Nebuchadnezzar leads them in defeating the combined army of the Egyptians and the Assyrians at the Battle of Carchemish which happens around 605 BC.

Now I tell you that not just so that you can impress your friends next time that speciality round comes up in a pub quiz. Although go for it if it does. I tell you that so that we can appreciate that this is world history that we're talking about here.

This is not make-believe. This is not Narnia. This is not Mordor. This is real history featuring real people and real superpowers.

And Babylon what they do is they flex their muscles on the world stage as they go for the world domination. What they do is they capture and they conquer quite brutally Judah and Jerusalem as you see them on the map there.

[8 : 08] And that event among other places and this is just so we can understand what's going on in our Bibles is so graphically captured for us in a book of the Bible called Lamentations.

If you ever wondered what that book is there for that's what it's doing. Describing what that destruction was like. The emotion. The raw pain of it. What happens is Babylon they begin to take God's people back in stages to Babylon.

Daniel's one of the first waves that go in 605 BC. And this is where you get Psalms like Psalm 137. Now that was made famous by Boney M.

Again, a certain generation you'll know that song. By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and we wept as we remembered Zion. The irony of Boney M.

is that's really upbeat and cheerful isn't it? And we all sing it like that but it's anything other than that in Psalm 137. Here's the big heartfelt cry in that Psalm. Do you see it right at the end?

[9 : 09] And get this question in your mind. As God's people are disillusioned in history as they're being taunted by their enemies in a foreign land. Watch the question. How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?

When we're away from home surrounded by people who are mocking God how are we supposed to sing the song of him who is great? And how are we supposed to live our lives when we can't see?

When we don't know? How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? See that's the question that the book of Daniel seeks to answer. And this is where I think we connect with this book as well.

That the Bible tells Christians that although we're living at different times we too are in exile. We are sojourners. We are strangers Peter calls us in 1 Peter.

We are those and those are words describing a way of being in the world that knows that we are journeying through the world that we don't get our identity from the world but actually we are heading to our heavenly homeland.

[10 : 17] So we too are people who are away from home. And we too should be asking ourselves how can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?

How can we sing this song as exiles? How can we give praise to God? How can we make sense of this world? And as we get into this book I just want us to see chapter 1 has got two big things to say to us when it comes to how do we sing that song.

And here's the first one we can sing it by being privy to the Lord's purposes. Because see if you were looking at things purely at Google street level here it looks like the Lord's been defeated.

I mean to conquer a nation in this day is to conquer their God which is why you might have noticed when Nebuchadnezzar he goes in there verse 2 to Babylon he takes the vessels from the temple of Yahweh and he takes them all the way home and he places them in the house of his God.

In other words he gives glory to his God that he has conquered Yahweh. So looking at this from a Google street level it looks like God has been defeated. But the Lord is not just above all this.

[11 : 30] The truth is that the Lord is actually behind all this. And it's illustrated by the three times repeated phrase of chapter 1 that you get there.

The Lord gave. And there's a little indication a little subtle one there of his sovereignty the Lord gave. I just want you to see these three things.

Here's the first one at verse 2 the Lord gave. Because whilst it might look like Judah are the unfortunate victims in a game of international politics in actual fact the exile was Judah experiencing God's promised judgment for breaking covenant with him.

The Lord had chosen them to be his special possession. The Lord had bestowed on them all the mighty acts, had delivered them from the hands of their captives prophets.

And he'd given them every chance to repent and come back to him but their consistent headstrong dismissal of the Lord's word to them through the prophets and their failure to obey the Lord and his law meant that this land that was meant to be a beacon of righteousness and holiness and truth a light to the nations actually this land is full of injustice and idolatry.

[12 : 54] And God is holy God will not be mocked. And again just thinking of the bigger Bible story just like God at the beginning of the Bible story in his holiness he cast out Adam and Eve from the garden because of their sin and God would not be God he would be compromising in his holiness if he did not do that just like he did then so too Israel are cast out of the land and sent to Babylon because Babylon are the instrument that he uses to carry out his judgment on their sin.

But what's wonderfully surprising is that God says to that generation through Jeremiah that not only will their time in Babylon come to an end after 70 years after which God will bring them back to their homeland but God actually tells his people that he wants them to be and you see it on the screen a blessing to Babylon while they're there and that is hugely surprising given everything that we know about Babylon what the city represents in the Bible story God wants his people to be a blessing even in exile do you see what he's saying I don't want you as my people to dig your heels in and be difficult I don't want you to come out and be separate but equally I don't want you just to blend in and be like everyone else I want you to be a blessing to the world by being distinct and that

God giving language here's a second one it crops up at verse 9 to see God blesses Daniel's witness Daniel sees the opportunities around him to be a witness as he does his job faithfully as he seeks to love the people around him as he seeks God in prayer for them God honors those who honor him and then the God giving language comes up again at verse 17 and this time it's personal God gave these four young men who will be central to this story the exact gifts that they needed in order to be a blessing in and to Babylon and that changes how we understand tomorrow and the things that we'll go to tomorrow and how God has orchestrated all of this for his glory and for our good you know and Alex and I when we get a night off one of the programs we love to watch is

Death and Paradise on BBC One it used to be cool guys honestly I know that's my life Death and Paradise on BBC One if you're really into Death and Paradise on BBC One you know there's a spin-off called Beyond Paradise and that's when you know you're really really cool you're watching that as well but Chris Marshall is the detective on that show and he's kind of this goofy detective but he's savvy and sharp and he's got this one line in the show that always sticks with me he says this he says coincidences I don't believe in them and neither does the Lord as we come to see him here he is sovereign and get this over when you are and where you are and who you are and the people around about you are there because God wanted them to be there and you are rubbing up against them in their lives because God wanted that relationship to exist

God has placed us in places and he's given us the exact gifts that we need in those places to be a witness to him he's made us good at things he's made us aware of things and he's placed us where we are to be a blessing during our time of exile changes just think about it we're going to think about it after the service who are those people in your life who are those people that God wants us to be a blessing to as we are conspicuous for Christ in our world where is your front line right now who is on your front line right now your family your uni course mates your workplace your sports teams who is on your front line right now and what does it mean for you to be faithful on your front line right now so you've got to be privy to the Lord's purposes and secondly we want to be savvy to the world world's tactics and just track with me as we go through this really quickly and see see

[17 : 38] Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon he's got a really clear foreign policy sum it up in one word and it's the word assimilation assimilation so the best way to control your empire remember the the grand sweeping nature of it the best way to control your empire is to take the best and the brightest from the nation you've just conquered take them out of their homeland settle them in Babylon and train them to think and to act just like a Babylonian so when the other people in the land look at the best and the brightest they think well if they've kind of sold their souls to Babylon then that's the way that we're going to go as well right kind of works assimilation and it's exactly what he's trying to do in verses four to five and look with it at it if you've got it there and just see really quickly the four distraction tactics and of course standing behind all of this is a spiritual enemy who would love nothing more than for God's people to tap out when it comes to trusting and living for the

Lord and of course I want you to think about in your life right now as we think about these four distractions what is the one that the evil one is dangling right in front of you right now what could be live what could be causing you to take your eye off of the ball even subtly here they are really quickly the first one is isolation do you see how they try and take them away from their Jewish community they take them away from the encouragement that's there from the stories that are there from the prayers that are there from the reminders of God's word that are there and I think they take them away from the songs that are there as well so we are as God's people we're a declarative people aren't we take them away from all of this and instead they're taken away from this community and they're placed in the king's palace it's isolation I just say that's why church is so important as I go on in the Christian life I realize that I need this church

I need you I need you more not less because I need and Keita was great at just anchoring in this right at the beginning Sunday is a day when we press stop and we encourage one another with God's promises and his character and don't underestimate the spiritual battle that goes on just to get here on a Sunday you know we had Trev and Val our friend stayed with us last week and we asked Val we said is it just us who find Sunday morning really difficult whether there's a morning Alex and I will have a disagreement and when the kids will kick off you can guarantee it will be Sunday morning and she said after a lifetime of ministry absolutely not it's as if the devil goes to bed early on a Saturday night so that he can get up early in the Sunday morning and so all the seeds of discord and unrest in your life to stop you from getting here so just don't underestimate the battle of getting here on a Sunday and don't underestimate the power it is when we gather together and the influence we can have on each other's life isolation the second one is indoctrination verse 4 do you see how these guys are educated and for three years in the literature and the language of the

Chaldeans so the idea here is really you expose them to the best of human thinking that sow doubts in the minds of God's people about the need for and existence of God and if you do it enough and take them away from their community they'll begin to just think that it is true you go for the mind because the mind is the gateway to the heart now let me just say in case just to kind of jump ahead of a question that might be in your minds here there's nothing wrong in fact there's everything right I would say with asking questions hear me right on that this is not what that's saying but the best place to do it is in a community that you know loves you and will seek to walk alongside you as you ask those questions and speak truth in love into your life in other words the best place to explore these questions is not without but within a community that loves the Lord indoctrination really quickly temptation verse 5 do you see how the king offers the good life to Daniel and his friends that the best delicacies and luxuries and again the thinking is just to seduce

Daniel away from the hard life by dangling the good life in front of him temptation and then lastly just a way of time it's identification and I think this is the one that's going to challenge most of us this morning verse 7 I'm sorry I'm rattling through this here verse 7 do you see how these guys are given Babylonian names now I never thought anything of this before until I studied it this week but there's a reason that we're told about their names now their original names do you see the L and the A in their names they show us that these guys have been named after the Lord Daniel Mishael El the God Almighty and do you see how Bel and Nabu are the names that they're kind of given they're in those names there they're trying to rename them after Babylonian gods and here's the point we want you to forget who you are forget the identity that God has so graciously stamped all over your life to forget that God has been faithful all the way through history and again it's what the evil one does helps you forget who you are did God really say nothing's changed since

[23 : 31] Genesis 3 did he really say that you can be forgiven did he really say that you have been adopted did he really say there is a hope and a future for you in Jesus Christ did God really say and you can say because of God's word and because of what Jesus has done in our lives yes he did but it's identification isn't it and what Daniel does is he takes being both privy to the Lord's purposes and being savvy to the world's tactics and what he does is he stands strong and let me just pick out one word and it comes at verse 8 and it's the word resolved and it captures it here his response and you might miss it in the text but Daniel is likely an older teenager at this point in his life and it's lovely isn't it at this junction in his life he's not putting off making a call away he stands with the Lord till he's older he's not waiting to the next opportunity he's taking the first one that comes his way and choosing to nail his colors to the mast now I think there's lots of application you can make there let me just make one and it's a wonderful thing for us to be praying for our young people because this isn't Daniel making a spur of the moment decision here to be courageous for the Lord what's going on here we need to understand is that this is something that's been sown into his life from a young age and it's something that he's picked up and he's seen in others as he gets acquainted with the promises and the character of

God as he's surrounded by a community who are captivated by the Lord's beauty and who are choosing to forsake the pleasures of the world and choosing instead to serve the Lord in joy and holiness the Bible story perhaps it's Daniel might have seen it under the influence of King Josiah who was kind of the last king to really be good in the land of Judah but let me just make this point specific application some of you might be right now at that junction in your life guys who are graduating this morning we prayed for you others who will listen to this afterwards you're about to hit the next season of your life can I just say from personal experience both in times where I have got this badly wrong and other times I think I actually look back and I think thank you Lord for helping me be brave there that Jesus is worth so much more than the siren calls of the world he really really is and I left university thinking the times of temptation and making mistakes were behind me

I got to the world and I realised it's just as hard I take it will always be hard at whatever junction in life we are at but particularly if this is you right now you're at the junction can I just encourage you to resolve early to follow the Lord and the first opportunity that comes your way let me just say it will be the easiest opportunity that comes your way it will only get harder but be greatly strengthened today that truly there is none like Jesus with arms wide open to embrace us when we get it wrong but with with barrels load of strength to fortify us by his spirit to make us get it right now whatever is happening in Daniel's life here the food that he's presented with is the first opportunity that he gets to nail his colours to the mast now you can kind of speculate as to why he's doing what he's doing we're not entirely told in the text but two things seem to be clear number one is that Daniel recognises that to do something would be to compromise on his loyalty to God and the second one is that the Lord is worth it and so with courtesy and with clarity he resolves to choose to follow the

Lord and it's amazing isn't it that the Lord honours him his feet might have been in Babylon but his heart was in Jerusalem he's courageous for Christ and I think Jesus is the ultimate example of what this looks like to live with compassion and yet with clarity and he is the one we need to understand he is the perfect covenant keeper who has taken the covenant curses that we deserve on himself on the cross Jesus is the one who has put his hand on your life and in my life and has taken us out of the world to live for him again we thought about it this last week didn't we we so often underestimate the privilege that it is to be a Christian and Jesus came to and he lived in this world and he forsook the pleasures of this world because of the all surpassing joy of knowing his father the creator of this world and so we look to him for grace as our savior and we look to him for our example as our king now our time is gone but let me just tell you really quickly as we close and I think this is how this is the aftertaste that would have been in the original readers as they finished this chapter have a look at verse 21 as we close and can I tell you about the book that was massive when I was at uni a 2003 New

York Times bestseller that sold millions of copies all around the world still getting sold today called the Da Vinci Code I remember being at university when it first came out the plot line people would run up to tell me was all about exposing the cracks and the cover-ups that were supposedly at the heart of Christianity and this book was going to blow a hole in the side of the Christian faith remember precisely one friend telling me exactly that but I read an article in the BBC News a few weeks ago and I wonder if some of you read this as well about how in 2017 an Oxfam bookshop in Swansea put a notice in their window telling people to stop donating that book because they had so many copies and that sign having seen it it sparks an idea in the mind of a local artist his name was David Shrigley and what he did is he set about collecting as many copies of this book as he could and the

[30 : 07] Oxfam bookshop put them in touch with the recycling centre which is where all the unwanted books go and so he phones the recycling centre and he says do you have any copies of the Da Vinci Code and to quote them in the article they responded by saying we have an unlimited number come and help yourself so he says I'll take the lot and he goes off to the recycling centre he brings them all home and he gets them and he pulps them and he uses the pulp to make a bit of his art and I just love that because these books that were supposed to take down the Lord take down the God of the universe expose the cracks in the Christian faith are now pulp and I'm verse 21 says do you see it that Daniel was in the king's palace until the first year of King Cyrus so he's a young man in chapter 1 and what this is doing is it's fast forwarding us to when he's an old man later in the book Cyrus is the first king of Persia who will end up defeating the

Babylonians who will become the next superpower on the world stage and here's the point that Daniel in all his youth in all his unimpressive mundane looking life he outlasts the Babylonian empire and right off the bat the writer of this book is letting us know that that is where this book is heading and that truth is so precious for us as believers is it not that the Lord will outlast governments as harsh as they are that the Lord will outlast laws as strange as we think they are that the Lord will outlast the scoffers as loud as they are that the Lord will outlast every anti-God movement that crops up in this world and when it's a competition between the two the sovereign Lord will always remain and the risen and returning Lord

Jesus will inherit an everlasting kingdom and dominion given to him one that will never end and so don't doubt this morning that you're on the right side of history if your trust is in this God maybe even this morning is a morning where you come to put your faith in the beauty in the work in the person of Jesus Christ let me just finish with this from J.I.

Parker and this is a great quote he says this to know that nothing happens in God's world apart from God's will may frighten the godless but it stabilizes the saints but let me just close in prayer let's close our eyes and pray and let's just pray God's word back to him and this is what Paul prays in Ephesians chapter one would be true of the church in Ephesus he says I do not cease to give thanks for you remembering you in my prayers that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ the father of glory may give you the spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him having the eyes of your hearts enlightened that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you and so father it's just our simple prayer this morning and it's one we make in the powerful name of Jesus as we know the love that you've showered upon us by your spirit in him Lord it's our prayer that you would lift our eyes to the hope to which you've called us and

Lord as your spirit moves amongst us and Lord as your word continues to resonate in our minds and our hearts may we leave today with our greater vision of your grandeur and splendor and grace and we pray these things in Jesus's worthy name Amen Amen