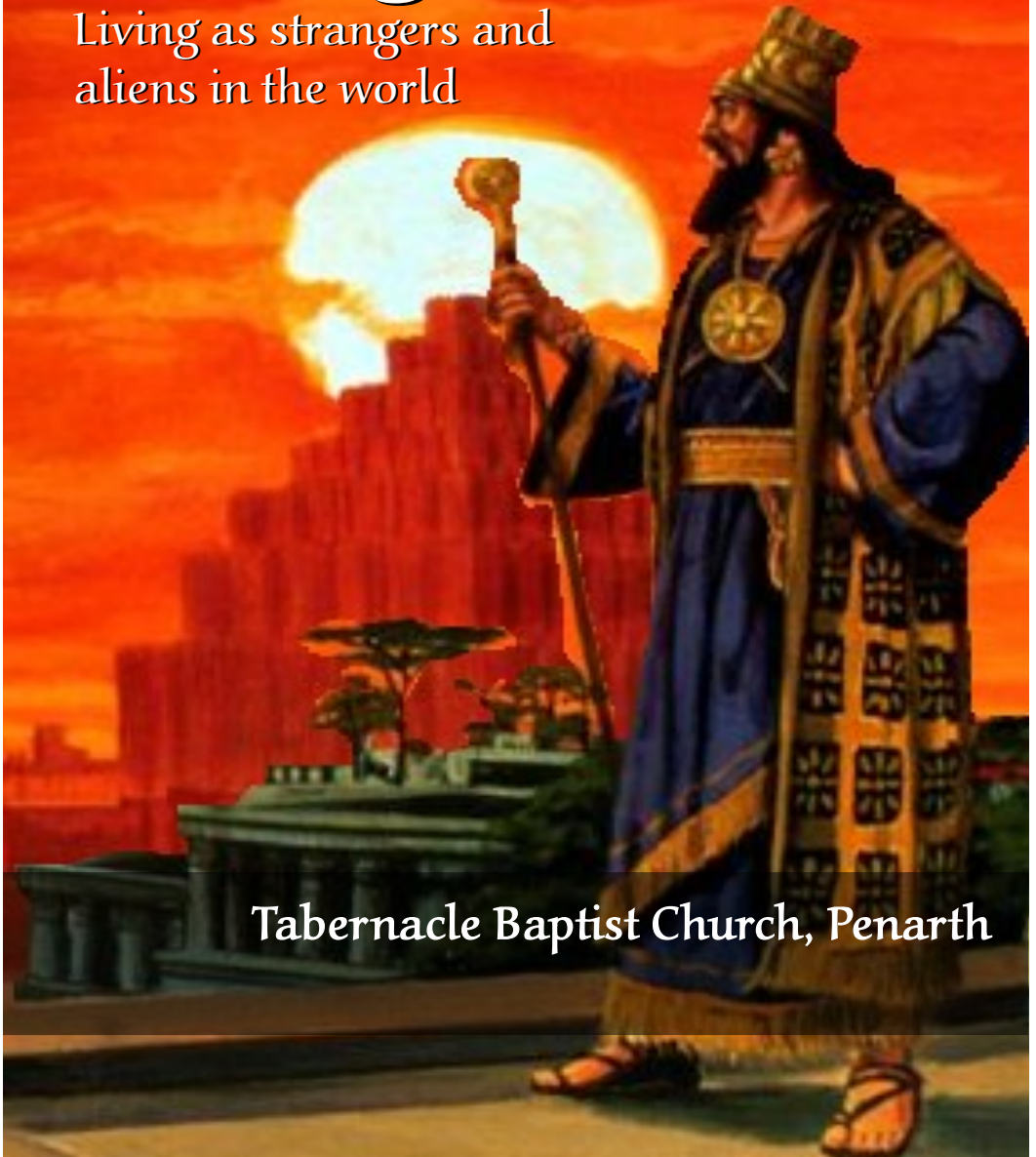


Songs in a Strange Land

Living as strangers and
aliens in the world

Tabernacle Baptist Church, Penarth



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Songs in a Strange Land

Studies in the Book of Daniel

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Introduction to Daniel

People often talk of the situation the Church finds itself in today being similar to that in the Book of Acts. They point out that the Church is in a missionary situation, needing to take the gospel message to a largely non-Christian society. Whilst this is true, it does miss a major point: Britain is not a non-Christian culture, but a *post-Christian* culture. In other words, Christian stories, festivals, buildings, traditions and practices are already in our society as part of the fabric of our culture, but nowadays they are mostly disregarded or considered irrelevant. It is not that people have not heard of Christians, the Church or the Gospel, but rather they have rejected them as unimportant to their lives. It is as if they have been inoculated against the Christian message: they have had a little dose of it and think they know all about it (maybe through school, maybe through their family), and now they are immunized from further impact! Many of these non-Christians will even readily identify themselves as Christians just because they believe in God.

Some commentators are pointing out that a better book to consider when thinking about the situation the Church finds itself in today the Book of Daniel. Here we read a story of a group of believers who find themselves in a foreign and hostile environment. Their own religion has ‘had its day’ and is now in a state of decline. They find themselves in a foreign place, surrounded by people who don’t share their beliefs or value system, but who show some interest when exposed to the story of our creator God. The key questions for Daniel and his friends are ‘how do we worship God in this strange new land?’ (Psalm 137), and ‘how do we maintain our spiritual integrity when the dominant culture we find ourselves in is trying to pull us in a different direction?’ (Daniel 3:4-5 and 6:10-12)

Daniel, a book in the Old Testament of the Bible, is listed with the Major Prophets by Christians and with “the Writings” (Ketuvim) by the Jews. It comprises a prologue describing how Daniel came to be in captivity in Babylon, six stories of the trials of Daniel and his companions while they served at the court of Babylon, and finally four visions of the end of the world.

The traditional view is that the book is eponymous and therefore most likely written between 540 and 530 B.C. This view is based on the internal scriptural evidence: The Book of Daniel identifies the Prophet

Daniel as its author (Daniel 9:2; 10:2) and Jesus also mentions Daniel (Matthew 24:15). The detailed and accurate prophecies contained in that book have motivated other critics to subscribe to the theory of a late date of composition for Daniel in the time of the Maccabees (167 - 164 BC). Many of these commentators hold that as the stories were written down much later than Daniel's life, they are probably fictional.

It should be noted that the Jews do not include the Book of Daniel amongst the writings of the prophets. Indeed, there was much debate amongst Jewish scholars as to whether Daniel should be included in the Bible at all. The Ketuvim was the last part of the Hebrew Bible to be canonized, and the Jewish Talmud records debates about the inclusion or exclusion of various books, such as Daniel, the Song of Songs and the Book of Esther. Many Jews and modern Christian scholars believe that Daniel is a form of Apocalyptic Literature rather than prophecy and that it was intended to encourage 2nd century Jews in the face of religious persecution by the Seleucids rather than describe end-time events.

Daniel contains the only certain Old Testament reference to bodily Resurrection, presents a form of the Son of Man tradition influential in the Gospel traditions about Jesus Christ, and was a primary source for the visions of the New Testament Book of Revelation.

Historical Framework

When King Solomon died in 931BC, his son Rehoboam foolishly provoked the leaders of the northern tribes of Israel, and they split off from the two southern tribes of Judah. The split was disastrous for the Jews, and in 722BC Israel was destroyed by the invading Assyrians. In 605BC Nebuchadnezzar came to Jerusalem in Judah to put down a rebellion against his authority, and whilst he was lenient, he took a few young men (including Daniel) as hostages to guarantee Judah's compliance. However, Judah never fully submitted to his authority, so in 597BC Nebuchadnezzar came with an army a second time. On this occasion his treatment was much harsher and more people were deported to Babylon including King Jehoiachin and the prophet Ezekiel. Finally, in 586 Nebuchadnezzar lost patience: the temple was destroyed, the city walls torn down and large numbers of people were either killed or deported to captivity in Babylon. (See 2 Kings chapter 24-25 for more details.)

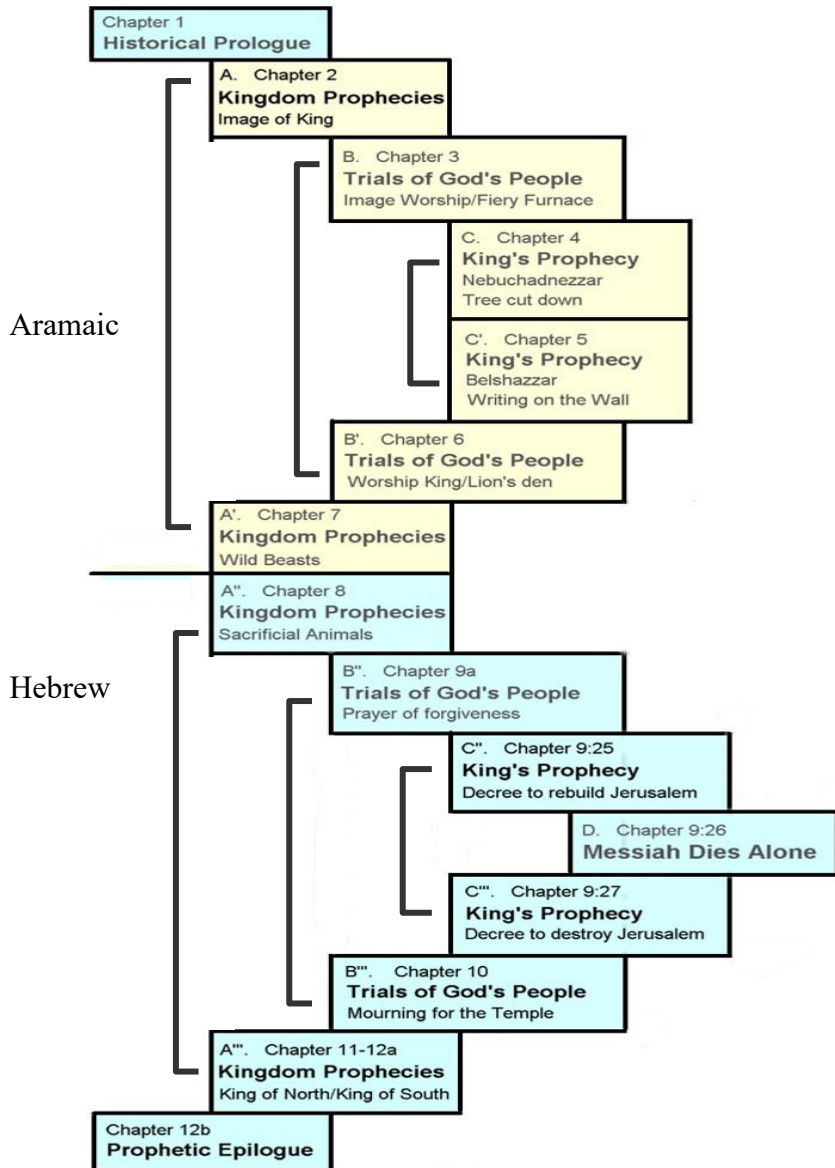
The people remained in captivity and under God's judgment for 70 years until 536BC when Babylon was defeated by the Persians. The ruler of the Persian Empire, Cyrus, allowed the Jews to return to Judah and rebuild the Temple and city walls.

Throughout the 70 year period of captivity Daniel served in Babylon, living well into old age. His ministry ensured that even whilst God's people were in exile, His voice was being heard. Daniel's ministry was primarily to the gentile nations, but was a constant encouragement to the Jews that they had not been forgotten. The main character of the Book of Daniel is not Nebuchadnezzar, or even Daniel himself, but rather it is the Sovereign God! In every circumstance and in every crisis we see that God is still in charge. The crushed people of Daniel's day were asking "where is God?" Daniel shows them that even at times of national catastrophe or personal danger and crisis God is still sovereign and working out his purposes and plans.

Structure and Form

Scholars have suggested that the book of Daniel was composed as a 'double chiasm.' Chiastic or concentric structure is a common feature of ancient Hebrew poetry and literature. In the original languages Daniel is not written in Hebrew alone. To emphasize the importance of the chiasmic structure, the first chiasm was written in Aramaic and the second in Hebrew. This structure of the book takes precedence over chronology and sometimes events are recorded out of sequence. For example, chapter 5 and 6, ought really to follow chapter 7 but events are moved around chronologically to fit into the chiastic structure. The following diagram explains the chiastic structure and shows the parallels between the historical narrative in the first half of the book and the prophetic writings of the second half:

Daniel -- Double Chiasm



These studies of Daniel will be divided into 2 parts: the first 7 sessions will look at the 'first chiasm' whilst part 2, will look at the apocalyptic and prophetic portions of Daniel .

Study 1: Cometh the hour, cometh the man (or woman!)

Daniel was torn from his home and his family when he was probably only twelve or thirteen years old. He was then taken 800 miles away to a foreign country to serve an enemy king. Once there he was put on a three year intensive training programme designed to turn him into a loyal bureaucrat. However, a crisis erupts on day one when the first meal is served! The first portion of food on the King's table was always offered as a sacrifice to the Babylonian gods (as a form of grace before the meal). In the same way the first portion of wine was poured out on the pagan altar. Furthermore, ceremonially unclean animals were slaughtered in ways not permitted in the Jewish Law, making the whole meal unacceptable to law abiding Jews. What is this young boy, far from home, to do?

Read Daniel Chapter 1 together, maybe by taking a few verses each to share the reading.

- Chapter 1 begins with Daniel at the very lowest place he could be: young, a slave, far from home in a foreign culture. The Babylonians use a series of tactics designed to remove his identity and indoctrinate him into Babylonian culture and lifestyles. (verses 4b to 7) How do these tactics parallel the pressures young people face today to adopt secular values and practices?
- What pressure are you under as a Christian to conform to the cultural values of society around us, and in what ways are they contrary to our faith? How should we respond?
- Why were the food regulations of the Law so important to Daniel and his companions? Would it really have mattered if they had taken a little Babylonian food? Was he making a big issue out of a minor problem? After all, the Law allows Jews to eat non-kosher food in extreme circumstances where their life is at risk.

“Pikuach nefesh” (saving of human life) is the principle in Jewish law that the saving of a human life is paramount, overriding virtually any other religious consideration. When the life of a specific human being is in danger, almost any commandment of the Law may be broken, with just three exceptions: profaning God’s name, murder and forbidden sexual relationships.

- As Christians, how can we determine today which activities we can engage in and which we shouldn’t? What do we do about modern situations or ethical dilemmas which the Bible does not have the scope to talk about? (i.e. medical research, genetically modified crops, the internet, cinema etc.)
- What combination of factors produced the godly ability and character of Daniel and his friends? (see particularly verses 17-20)
- What aspect of Daniel’s conduct or character in this chapter most impresses you? How can you cultivate the same qualities in your own life?

For Study on your own:

Other people in the Bible were also called to take a stand for what was right when they were pressured to take the easy way out. Their lives may be an example of how you can strengthen your own discipleship when under pressure to conform to the world: Joseph (Genesis 39-41), David 91 (Samuel 17), Esther (Esther 4), Peter and John (Acts 4:13-31).

Study 2: Nightmares (Daniel 2:1-30)

All of us have dreams, but some people remember their dreams more readily than others. However, very few of us end up having early morning meetings with important people because of a nightmare! In the second year of his reign, Nebuchadnezzar suffered a series of troubling dreams which prevented him from sleeping. He called in various court servants to try and help him: ‘magicians’ (Hebrew - hartummim) meaning those who could divine the future by using various ritual means, ‘enchanters’ (assapim) as those who communicated with the dead, ‘sorcerers’ (mekassepim) who practiced sorcery, cast spells and used incantations, and ‘astrologers’ (kasdim), the priestly caste who studied the heavens to determine the future. However, when they entered the royal court that morning they did not know the potential danger to their lives that was just around the corner!

Read Daniel 2:1-30

- What do we learn about the character of Nebuchadnezzar from verses 1-13? What sort of person does he appear to be? With his unreasonable requests and prima-donna attitude, does he remind you of any modern characters/celebrities?
- Do you believe that God has ever spoken to you in a dream? Do you expect it when you go to bed at night, or do you ever ask Him to speak to you in this way?
- What can we learn from Daniel’s response to this crisis? There seem to be many elements: sharing the need (vs.17), prayer (vs.18), spiritual gifting (vs.19), praise and thanksgiving (vs.20-23), grace and mercy (vs.24), witnessing (vs.28) and humility (vs.30).
- Whilst we learn something of Daniel’s character from what has been called ‘Daniel’s Psalm’ (vs.20-23) we also learn about God’s character. Why is this kind of praise or worship important when we face a crisis?
- When trouble comes along are you the kind of person who is able to still praise and seek God, or are you someone who stays away from church and withdraws from a worshipping attitude?

- Three aspects of Daniel's spiritual maturity stand out in this chapter: his wisdom in response to a crisis, his prayer in response to a problem and his praise in response to God's work in his life. Which of these marks of maturity are most well-developed in your life? Which is the weakest?
- Based on Daniel's example, what specific steps will you take to strengthen your weak area?

Study 3: Seeing the Future

At the back of most newspapers and magazines there is a section of horoscopes. They are generally banal and predictable, and always completely untrue! However, these miniature predictions are just the tip of an iceberg. Every year people spend thousands of pounds buying horoscope books, consulting mediums and psychics, calling astrology hotlines and consulting tarot cards. These are activities all strictly

forbidden by the scriptures, and are extremely spiritually dangerous. However, they betray a common human desire to know the future. The King of Babylon was no different, and so Daniel is drafted in to help interpret his dreams. Daniel 2 is one of the most accurately predictive chapters of the Bible. Although it was written around 600BC it accurately described the future rise and fall of four great empires. Whilst we look back and see the Book of Daniel as ancient history, we need to remember that for Daniel and King Nebuchadnezzar it was all still in the future. Daniel truly looked into the future through God's eyes!

Read Daniel 2:31-49

- Daniel had flattering news and disturbing news: Nebuchadnezzar is described as the head of gold, and the kingdoms that follow are all to be inferior. However, this flattery is the sugar coating that precedes the news that his kingdom will fall. Are you someone who comes straight out with the truth, or do you also sugar coat bad news? Which is more loving?
- Sometimes people think they are 'straight-talking' when everyone around them just thinks they are rude! Which do you prefer when people are talking to you?
- Some interpreters identify the four kingdoms which are to follow Nebuchadnezzar as the Medo-Persians (silver), the Greek (bronze) and Roman (iron). The mixture of clay and iron in the toes has been interpreted as the confederation of states which took over after the fall of the Roman Empire. Others have said that the four empires are Babylon, Media, Persia, Greece and the feet partly of iron and partly of moulded clay are the successor states to Alexander the Great. Does it matter what interpretation we put on passages like this? Is it important to us as 21st century Christians, or is it all an arcane waste of time? What about other obscure passages of scripture – how do we handle them?
- What does Daniel have to say about the nature of the Kingdom of God which will follow the fall of the other kingdoms? What light does it throw on Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom of God?
- In your opinion, was this prophesy about God's Kingdom

fulfilled with the coming of Jesus, or is Daniel talking about a Kingdom and a time still to come? Explain your answer!

- What does this chapter tell us about God's activity in the unfolding drama of human history? Does this portrait of God encourage you more to trust him with your life? In what ways?

For Study on your own:

This passage on Daniel's encounter with Nebuchadnezzar recalls to mind the story in Genesis of Joseph interpreting Pharaoh's dreams when the magicians and astrologers had failed. Does God still speak to us in dreams, and just as importantly, what authority can we use to determine if a dream is genuinely from God?

Study 4: Bow or Burn!

Most of us have never had to face death or physical persecution for our faith in Jesus Christ. But that doesn't mean the pressure is off. The increasingly secular culture in which we live has other ways of trying to cause us to compromise and push us away from whole-hearted obedience to Jesus. If you have ever revealed your faith convictions in a university lecture room, turned down an invitation to the wrong kind of entertainment whilst on a business trip or had to make a choice between a church commitment and a family commitment, you will have felt pressure to compromise in order to be accepted by others. For us refusal to compromise leads to social discomfort. In this case a principled stand led to a fiery furnace!

Read Daniel Chapter 3.

- Compare Nebuchadnezzar's words in Daniel 2:47 with his actions in 3:1. Having heard the word of God proclaimed through Daniel, and accepting that God is Almighty, why then would he build a huge gold statue of himself and order that it be worshipped?
- How are we to understand today people who hear the word of God, respond positively, but then go on living their own way of life? What can we say about people who respond to the Gospel message and make a commitment (maybe even going on to be baptised) but then live with an area of open sin or disobedience to God in their life?
- How should the Church respond in such circumstances? What is the balance between grace and discipline? Is it ultimately very loving to allow people to continue living in disobedience without calling them to repentance?
- What form(s) should Church discipline take in the modern church?
- What was the motivation of the court astrologers in reporting the disobedience of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (vs.8-12)? How can we be sure of our own motivation when dealing with sin in the Church? How do we avoid falling into sin ourselves when we seek to judge others? How do we keep faithful to the injunction of scripture to seek purity in the Church (e.g. 1 Corinthians 5:1-5) whilst also following Jesus teaching on being judgmental (e.g. John 8:7)
- Why didn't the three Jews just bow to the statue of Nebuchadnezzar and tell God that they didn't mean it? Are you ready to take a stand for God no matter what? What are the issues you feel we should be taking a stand on today?
- The soldiers who threw the three Jews into the furnace were killed, but the three Jews emerged untouched. God's deliverance of them was a great victory for all of the Jews in exile. If we have true faith in God, can we always count on him to save us from horrible ordeals? (c.f. Isaiah 43:2) How are we to understand those situations where Christians suffer horribly or are even martyred?

- What do you think of Nebuchadnezzar's commitment to the Lord (vs. 28-29)?

Study 5: The Lord Reigns!

Shakespeare's King Lear tells the story of a King who is brought to a place of total humility. First his dignity is stripped away by his unfaithful daughters and Lear is transformed from a powerful king to an impotent old man with only one loyal subject and the court jester to accompany him. In the middle of the play, Lear is driven mad by his grief at seeing the true nature of his daughters, and he ends up homeless and out on the moors raging at a storm. The story ends tragically with nearly all the main characters murdered or dying from grief. Not a happy night at the theatre!

Chapter 4 of Daniel tells the story of Nebuchadnezzar's fall, mostly from Nebuchadnezzar's perspective. However, the story has a more positive ending than that of King Lear. In his isolation and madness Nebuchadnezzar turn his eyes towards heaven (4:34) and his sanity and position are restored. Chapter 3 ended with the King acknowledging 'the God of Shadrach Meshach and Abednego', but not accepting the Lord as his own God. The consequence of his trials in chapter 4 are that Nebuchadnezzar sees God as 'the Lord most high' and 'the king of heaven.'

Read Daniel chapter 4

- In Verse 4, the king said he was contented and prosperous. When things are going well in your own life, does this make you more or less vulnerable to various problems?
- Thinking of yourself as a tree, have you ever been cut down to size? What were the circumstances? Do you think that God was involved? How did you feel afterward?
- What was the primary message of Nebuchadnezzar's dream? (see also Proverbs 16:18-19). What is its relevance to you and to the Church?
- Daniel was nervous about confronting the King. Have you ever delayed discussing something painful? Did you regret it later? What were the results? How did you feel? How do we deal with difficult or potentially divisive issues with both integrity and grace?
- After Daniel explains Nebuchadnezzar's dream, he tactfully offers the king some advice in Verse 27. Does this suggest that God's plans may not be set in concrete and may be partially contingent upon our actions?
- Why do you suppose that God allowed a year to pass before fulfilling the dream?
- After seven years, Nebuchadnezzar's sanity is restored and he testifies about the Supreme God. How does this testimony strike you: (a) sincerely penitent, (b) coaxed or coached by Daniel, (c) sanely rational, (d) miraculous turnabout? Have you ever doubted the sincerity of the testimony of someone who is a Christian? Do you have the right to judge other people's hearts in this way?
- How have you shown courage in declaring God's word to others, both the good and the bad news? Which do you shy away from? Why?

Study 6: Writing is on the wall

In the scriptures God often uses the most unlikely of people to do his work: murderers, adulterers, weak and physically small people, enemies of the state, doubters and hotheads. He once even spoke his word through a donkey! Additionally, He doesn't often seem to use large groups or committees to do his greatest works! Most often in the Bible he finds just one person who is totally committed to Him, and then he works powerfully through that person to accomplish his will. When we feel weak or ill equipped to do God's work, that is often the time that he is most able to use us. It is when our reliance is entirely on God, and not on our own strength that he can work miracles and speak powerfully.

Daniel must have felt very weak and insignificant when he was summonsed to speak with King Belshazzar (successor to King Nebuchadnezzar). The king had been on a drunken riot with his nobles, profaning the sacred vessels from the Temple and acting as a drunken lout. Into this setting Daniel must step to bring the Word of God to the terrified King!

Read Daniel chapter 5

- How do you think that God would have regarded using the gold goblets taken from the temple in Jerusalem for drinking wine at a drunken orgy at which other gods were praised? (Compare with 2

Samuel 6:6-7)

- The writing on the wall was only three words in Aramaic, a fairly common language of the time. Why do you suppose the king's wise men (or anyone else at the banquet) were unable to determine what they meant?
- What does Daniel's rejection of flattery and rewards (verse 17) say about the authenticity of the man and his message? How would you respond if you were in a similar situation? What do you think of evangelists and preachers (particularly on T.V.) who make florid appeals for money? Does it affect the integrity of their message? What about Pastors, who receive a stipend for preaching and ministering?
- What would you do if you were offered a position of power as a way to buy your vote or predetermine your thinking? How does this happen today, and as Christians what should be our response?
- What contemporary examples come to mind of people mocking God by demeaning sacred things as Belshazzar did with the temple goblets? What should be the response of the Church?
- Then and now, does it seem that God is quick or slow to judge such behaviour? (see Habakkuk 2:3)

Study 7: In the Lion's den

It would be an understatement to say that Daniel was not popular amongst his fellow satraps. Actually, they had many reasons to be envious. First is the natural instinct of human nature to envy other people their success. Daniel was honest, efficient and did a good job. Second, Daniel was a foreigner in their midst who did not belong (his customs were different, his accent was strange, he had different interests and goals, his skin colour was probably different). Strangeness breeds suspicion and suspicion breeds resentment, especially if the one concerned is in a more advantageous position than we are. But Daniel was not just a foreigner, he was a Jewish foreigner; anti-Semitism was just as strong then as it has been in all the centuries since. A third reason for envy is that Daniel's

religion with one Lord God was quite different and somehow more powerful and fulfilling than the local “religion” of worshipping various idols, materials (gold, silver, and bronze), totem poles, and gods. All this combined to ensure that Daniel was going to face problems when the new King (Darius) took over!

Read Daniel chapter 6

- How would the other satraps and administrators describe Daniel? Have you ever found that when you begin to excel, other people look for ways to hold you back and tear you down? As a Christian, how should you deal with those who would cheer at your downfall and even try to hasten it?
- Why did the king issue his decree? In what ways do modern politicians and leaders adapt their policies in the face of public opinion? What ways does it happen in your workplace, family, Church or even small group?

- How would you describe Daniel’s response to the danger? Are there times where a better strategy might be to close the windows, draw the curtains, and pray to God in secret? (see John 3:2)
- By continuing to pray openly three times a day, both believers and unbelievers witnessed Daniel’s consistency. From observing you, what can unbelievers determine about your life?
- If someone who knew my innermost thoughts were to rate my ethics, I would score:

At work	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
At home	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
At Church	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
With outsiders	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

- When the king discovered the implications of his decree, he was greatly distressed. Discuss his response in verses 13-16. In what situation do modern leaders find a conflict between law and personal opinion? What tends to happen when a modern politician in Britain starts suggesting that their policies are being influenced by their faith? How should the Church respond to support men and women of faith in politics?
- Because of the Persian custom of vindication (an eye for an eye), Daniel’s accusers received the same punishment that they demanded that Daniel receive. This is also a biblical position in the Old Testament: Deut 19:21, Isaiah 3:11, Jeremiah 21:14. How does this Old testament worldview square with the New testament one and our own cultural worldview in modern Britain?
- In your own life, have you ever experienced God in the midst of a “lion’s den” (of sceptics, critics, persecutors, etc.)? Has your lifeline ever been only God and God alone? Many people today wear a bracelet with the word FROG on it (standing for Fully Reliant On God). Are you? How can you help each other grow in this area?

