Westlake Church Lausanne

The Power of Cities, The Power of Idols
Daniel 1:1-2

As you look at the world, or at issues in your own life, what do you see? Do you see chaos, or order, or something in between? And as you look, is your faith in a good, all-powerful God rock steady – or does such an idea seem laughable in the face of events, or if not laughable, is your faith in such a God shaky?

Well, wherever you fall, the book of Daniel has something to say to us.

The Power of Cities
Look at verse 1: 'Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it.' So, two cities: Jerusalem and Babylon. And you might think nothing more of that than that Daniel is giving us the facts, the geographical context of what happens. Except that the story line of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, could be told as the tale of those two cities and all they represent.

You see, did you notice in v2 how he calls Babylon, 'the land of Shinar.' Now why call it that? Why not just call it by its usual name – Babylon, or its other name, Chaldea? Because Daniel has more in mind than simply where these events took place. And the first time Shinar gets mentioned in the Bible is Genesis chapter 11, and the Tower of Babel – and Daniel wants us to recall how this city of Babylon was first founded.

And God had told humanity to spread out and fill the earth, so what did they do? They grouped together, stayed where they were, and decided to build a tower to the heavens. Genesis 11:4, 'Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves."' And that's how Babylon began. That's the foundation it was built on: the foundation of human pride, and people in rebellion against God. And if the builders whistled a song as they built it would have been Frank Sinatra's 'I did it my way'! That's how Babylon began. That's what Daniel wants us to recall. That Babylon is about man wanting to make a name for himself and find meaning in life without God, of mankind replacing God with himself.

Now, in the media you'll often hear the names of capital cities used to refer to the competing ideologies of countries, don't you: Washington thinks this, Moscow says that. And throughout the Bible, Babylon keeps cropping up as this seat of a man-centred ideology, a world-view that seeks to do away with God; where making a name for yourself, and a hunger for personal glory, is the driving ambition.

The problem of course is that that hunger for significance can only ever be met in the commendation of our loving heavenly Father – the 'you are very good' spoken over us in Eden. But when we're alienated from him, and exiled from Eden, that need doesn't go away, we still want to hear those words, but now we have to look to others to speak them and so we try and fill that hunger with attempts to make our own name great, so that others might say, 'very good.' But ultimately, only our Father's voice can do it. It's what, as he makes his covenant with Abram, God promises Abram, Genesis 12:2, "I will bless you and make your name great." And that is the only way to *true* greatness, isn't it: greatness in God's eyes - when life is lived in humble covenant relationship with the only one who is truly great.

But as well as being a place built on turning our backs on God, in Daniel's day Babylon was also a city of science and culture and learning. But maybe as you've experienced, if you try and find ultimate meaning in life in those things alone, it leaves you empty, doesn't it? Not so long ago I was speaking to a post-doc student who had recently become a Christian, and he told me, 'I wanted to escape the narrow, stiffling religious confines of my parents' faith, and so I threw myself into my studies. And I thought by working hard and studying and being successful in research I'd find what I was looking for. But I discovered it was all dust. It just couldn't give me what I was really after.'

But if Babylon stands for life and the search for meaning apart from God, then Jerusalem represents the opposite. In the letter to the Hebrews, in that great Hall of Fame of Faith, the writer describes Abraham as one 'looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God' (Heb 11:10). So in the Bible, the earthly Jerusalem becomes a picture, a foretaste of the New Jerusalem, the heavenly city. And if Babylon was built to 'I did it my way', then the New Jerusalem is built on faith in God, and it begins, not with human pride and rebellion, but with deep humility, and faithful obedience, because in the heavenly city, it's not us who are the centre of attention, it's the Lamb upon his throne.

You see, the Kingdom of God is not built on making *your* or my name great, is it? It's built on the humility of Christ, who as Paul says in Philippians 2, made himself nothing, of no reputation, and took the form of a servant, but who has been given the name above every name, and exalted to the highest place. And in his kingdom, in his city, the way down is the way up, and the first shall be last and the last first; and the way of humility is the way to true greatness.

And in that New Jerusalem, you and I are given a new name. Now, in the Bible names often convey two things: identity and a God-given task or mission. And if you look for your identity, your significance, in making a name for *yourself*, by what you do, or who you are - if you live by the ethic of Babylon - it leaves you vulnerable. Because when life is going great, and people think you're great, you'll feel great, and pride will creep in. But when life isn't going great, and people criticise you, you won't feel great, you'll despair. And so making a name for yourself can never do it. You need your heavenly Father to name you. And when your significance, your identity, comes from knowing you are a citizen of the heavenly city, that your heavenly Father knows you and loves you and names you as his child, then your life is built on the rock solid foundation of Christ that endures the highs and lows of life.

So, there's Babylon, and there's Jerusalem. And as this book opens it seems Babylon has triumphed. Charles Dickins' begins his novel, 'A Tale of Two Cities' with that wonderful line, 'it was the best of times, it was the worst of times.' But for Daniel, as he is carted off into exile, it's just the worst of times.

You see, when God first called Abraham, he called him to move from the region of Babylon to the Promised Land, and what would become Jerusalem. But now Daniel is

forced to move in the other direction. And if you've ever experienced times when circumstances lead you places you don't want to go, then you know something of what Daniel's experiencing: times when God's kingdom and promises seem a thousand miles away.

The Power of Idols

Now, in Daniel's time Babylon was *the* city, not only in terms of learning and influence, but also in its size and glory. So as they entered the city, Daniel and his friends would likely never have seen anything like it before.

I have a friend who grew up in a close-knit, rural farming community with strong Christian links, and in that setting he was committed and zealous in his faith. But then he moved away to the city, to university, and now, away from what was familiar to him, his faith was rocked. And here is Daniel entering Babylon, a centre of culture and learning.

And as they entered what would have struck them would have been how idolatry permeated everything. There were gods everywhere. They would have entered through one of the magnificent city gates, each one dedicated to a god. Then, dominating the city skyline, was a Ziggurat, a great, multi-layered tower, at the top of which were rooms dedicated to these same gods. Gods who deified sex, and greed, and power, and wealth, and war. And adjacent to the Ziggurat was a vast temple complex for the god Marduk – whose name was considered so holy it was never pronounced.

And as these young Jewish men came through these gates and into the city, the question they would have been justified in asking was: had their God been defeated by these idols? Because that's how the Babylonians would have seen it. That's where they thought their military power lay. You see, within the city, the temple priests were *the* power – a power even the king had to acknowledge. Each year, at the Spring Festival, the king would be publically slapped around the face by the priests, until tears flowed. It was a very public way of showing where the real power lay.

Now you might hear all that and think this world Daniel was entering is far-removed from ours. And yet, it's not quite so alien is it? You see, whilst our western societies have moved away from Christianity, they have not moved away from worship, have they? It's not that we have replaced the God of the Bible with no god, it's that we have replaced him with other gods. Now, we may not build images of those gods but we worship them none the less. And by and large they are the same gods as Babylon worshipped, the gods of power and success and sex and wealth.

Someone has suggested that if you want to know what our own cultures idols are, simply ask, what are the tallest or grandest buildings in our cities? Babylon's skyline told you who and what her gods were, what about London's or New York's? It's the gods of money and entertainment. Or ask who the high-priests are to whom our politicians must bow? It's people like Oprah, the high-priestess, to whom people go to make confession and receive absolution from the goddess of fame and celebrity.

And if a nation's blasphemy laws traditionally tell you what her god is, in our day what has replaced blasphemy, what cannot be spoken against, and if you do you're told, 'you can't say that, that's hate speech'? Isn't it, among other things, the god of personal freedom?

So it is not that our societies have abandoned worship, we have simply changed what we worship, and what we bow down to, and what we think gives us meaning and significance. The problem is, what you look to for those things inevitably ends up controlling you. And they also end up controlling the culture that worships them.

But then look what Daniel tells us in v2: Nebuchadnezzar took 'some of the vessels of the house of God. And he brought them… to the house of his god, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his god.' So the treasures of God's temple in Jerusalem, which had been designed and made for God's glory, were put on public display, as trophies, as evidence that Nebuchadnezzar's god was greater and stronger than Israel's God.

Now why does Daniel open his book by highlighting that? Probably because it's an indictment of the depth to which Israel had fallen, that as a people they had lost sense of God's glory and worth. And losing the temple vessels to idols was just a symbol of that.

Now if that were true for Daniel's people, it is most certainly true for our own day, isn't it? In our day, God has lost his glory. In his book, Against the Flow, John Lennox, Professor of Maths at Oxford, argues that in putting these vessels in the treasury of his god, Nebuchadnezzar was putting them alongside all the other treasures he possessed, and that to him they simply represented one god among many. And so, Lennox argues, Nebuchadnezzar did what so often happens today. He takes something of absolute value and relativizes it. He takes things that were supposed to point people to the one true God, *the* absolute, and he brings them down to the level of every other god, and makes them of relative value.

When my brother and I were boys we used to go and stay with our grandmother. And one of the things we looked forward to was when she would take us to the sweet shop and we could do pick and mix – and you got your bag and you could pick some of these and some of those and some of the other. And you'd make your own selection.

And today people adopt a pick and mix spirituality: a little bit of this and a little bit of that. What you believe doesn't matter, we accept it all, everything is considered of equal value, because faith is a matter of feeling and not of fact. And you mustn't say that this faith is better than that; that I'm right and you're wrong. And in such a world, just like Babylon, the Christian God is just one among many.

So, just as with Nebuchadnezzar, religion and faith are relativized. But so too are values and truth. Which of course is crazy, because to say that there is no absolute truth is to make an absolute truth claim. And so the idea that truth, and the values that come with

truth, can be relativized, and you can have your truth and I can have mine, is a fallacy. We depend on absolute truths. You cannot relativize the amount of petrol in your car, or the amount of money in your bank. Just try it and see how you get on!

You see, we only really relativize those things we think are opinions, or feelings, not facts. But either Jesus did exist, or he did not. Either he did die on a Roman cross or he did not. Either he did rise from the dead or he did not. And if those things are true, and they are, the implications are huge. And that's why our modern societies fear absolutes – because absolutes bring implications.

But it's not just in the wider world that God has lost his glory. Maybe even within the church he has lost his glory. Maybe even within our own lives he has lost his glory. And we can relativize absolutes, and make good things god-things and worship idols. And God's vessels – our talents, gifts, and resources can sit in the temple of other gods and be used for things other than his glory.

But as we'll see, Daniel and his friends did not fear absolutes or their implications, they embraced them; and they didn't fall before idols, their faith endured. And it was here, in Babylon, at the epicentre of all that's opposed to God, that Daniel and his friends thrived, professionally and spiritually.

Last year saw the 100th anniversary of the First World War Battle of the Somme, that saw multiple tens of thousands of young men lose their lives. And in such trench warfare the soldiers had to learn to keep their heads down, or get mown down. And in a world that's antagonistic to faith and truth, the temptation to do the same can be huge – for us and for Daniel. But Daniel and his friends didn't keep their heads down. They didn't keep their faith private. Rather they lived out lives of public service in that city, as citizens of another city. They lived in Babylon as citizens of Jerusalem, even when it meant risk.

And the question is, how? What gave them the courage to live like that? And the reason that should matter to us is that if we were to categorise the materialistic, atheistic, individualistic or relativistic world-view of our western nations, they would sit squarely within the city walls of Babylon, wouldn't they. And just as in Daniel's day, when it looked as if Babylon had crushed Jerusalem, so today it can seem as if the 21st century idols of personal freedom and image and sex and power have defeated a Christian world-view. And yet, these young men swam against the flow. So how did they do it?

Where the Real Power Lies:
Look at v2: 'And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his [Nebuchadnezzar's] hand.'

So just think for a moment, how does Daniel see history? How does he view the events that led up to this exile, and his own situation? 'And the Lord gave…' It's so short you could miss. And the Lord gave. Daniel sees all this as God's doing. And this is not the

romantic musings of a teenager writing in their diary. This is Daniel, the statesman, writing after a lifetime of reflexion.

In fact, Daniel repeats the same phrase three times in this first chapter. And he does so at each of the key moments in the plot line. When he is led away into exile – v2, 'and the Lord gave'. When he goes to the Chief Eunuch over the issue of food – v9, 'And the Lord gave Daniel favour'. When he and his friends rise through the ranks of the Babylonian civil service, v17, 'God gave them learning and skill.' At every crunch moment: God gave, God gave, God gave.

It's Daniel's way of saying, it's God, not Nebuchadnezzar, who's in charge. It's God not these foreign powers who pull the strings in my life. It's God, not my circumstances, not even my abilities, that determine how things turn out. Now imagine the impact of that on the people for whom Daniel wrote this book – for other Jews caught up in exile, who themselves had to live out their faith under a hostile power. It's God who's in control. But it's not just a comfort for them. Think of your own life: that it's not your circumstances, it's not your abilities or lack of them, it's not your boss, it's not the sickness you face, that controls your fate. It's God.

And the reason Daniel could live as a citizen of Jerusalem in Babylon, was that he saw all of history as lying in the hands of a loving, Sovereign God. That despite all appearances, God was in command.

Sometimes it can feel as though your life is in freefall, can't it? When what once seemed certain is rocked, and everything's changed. Well, Daniel knew what that was like. But he also knew that God never changes. That what ever events might say, God is just as full of power and of love, he is just as faithful to his promises, as ever he was.

You see, there are two ways of seeing life in v1-2, aren't there. But if all you know is verse 1, and all you see is Nebuchadnezzar besieging Jerusalem, you will always think yourself at the mercy of events, and fear and anxiety will not be far away. But when you know verse 2, that whatever Nebuchadnezzar does, it's God who's in control, then a deep peace comes. As one writer puts it, sometimes it's only knowing that Jesus reigns that keeps your sanity intact.[1]

But how did Daniel know this was God's doing? Where did he get that faith from? Well, he tells us: Daniel 9:11, as he prays to God: 'All Israel has transgressed your law and turned aside, refusing to obey your voice. And the curse and oath that are written in the Law of Moses the servant of God have been poured out upon us, because we have sinned against him.' You see, Daniel could trust that God was in control because he knew God's word. He knew God's law and he knew God's prophets. But he also knew God's character, that God is always faithful to his word. And when you know that whatever you're facing, or whatever is happening in our societies, or our families, or our lives, that God is in command, then there's comfort, and the courage you need to

[1] Dale Ralph Davis 30.

face it, because you know that amidst all the turmoil and all the change, He's working out his purposes.

But if Daniel knew it from the law and prophets, you and I can add the Gospel. You see, it's knowing that God is working out his purposes to glorify his Son, that can free us from fear of the present, or of the future, whatever the risks. Listen to what Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 2: 'Though we had already suffered much and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict… so we speak, not to please man, but to please God.' (v1-2, 4). So what was it that gave Paul the courage to speak the truth in the face of opposition, just as Daniel had done before? It was a 'boldness in God' Paul says – a boldness that comes from knowing that, in Christ, God is working out everything for our good.

And Daniel knew that by allowing the temple vessels to be looted and placed in a pagan temple God was allowing his name to be shamed. And he did it because he wanted to bring his people back to repentance and back to him. And in Jesus, God takes the place of ultimate shame, the shame of the cross, to bring us back to him. And he takes the shame of our idol worship, the shame of our relativizing absolutes, and carries it on his shoulders. That just as in v1 'The Lord gave' – so in Jesus, because he so loved the world, God gave his only son that whoever believes in him might not perish but have eternal life. And Jesus, not Jehoiakim, is the true King of Israel, who gives his life to save us from eternal exile.

And when you know that God gave his Son for us, and that he now reigns as King, the One in ultimate control, we'll find the courage to embrace any shame we might experience for him, and we'll make him the centre of our lives and our worship, and find in him the significance and glory we seek.