

## **“BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON.”**

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**First Christian Reformed Church**

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**Scripture Texts: Psalm 137:1-6; Daniel 1:1-3**

### **Prayer:**

Holy Father, as we come to study another one of the books in your Holy Book, grant us divine assistance and wisdom that this not be an exercise in gaining knowledge, but of gaining wisdom and making progress in holiness, and all of this for your glory and our benefit. Amen.

### **By the Waters of Babylon, Psalm 137.**

Change can be hard, big changes even harder. Changing homes or jobs, moving to a different state unsettling. Changing countries and cultures and languages is maybe the worst. A number of you have immigrated and you know firsthand the challenges that presents.

Take that a step farther, being forced to move against your will and being able to take only what you can carry on your back, being forced to live in hostile enemy territory, that's a challenge unimaginable to us, yet we see pictures of that every week on the news.

Because of the advances in modern communication we are forced to witness the brutality and savagery of wicked and evil men who indiscriminately and casually destroy and rape and pillage and kidnap with little regard for human life.

It is one thing to be forced to flee for your life, it is yet another to be carried off into captivity. In the first you have a measure of control over your destiny, in the later you are force marched with cruelty and torture and little regard for your personal needs or comforts or afflictions.

Psalm 137 is a heart wrenching lament sung by Jews forced into exile over 500 miles from Jerusalem. They are sitting on the banks of the Euphrates in the huge city of Babylon, the capital and center of the Babylonian empire. They are a conquered people now subjected to a pagan ruler, Nebuchadnezzar and an evil empire every bit as brutal as ISIS.

Their loyalty to Jerusalem (Zion) is significant, it was the earthly dwelling place of God in His holy temple. Remember the religion of the OT was much more strongly tied to a geographical location. The temple in Jerusalem was where the daily and special sacrifices were made, where the people made annual pilgrimages. Their religion was very rooted in a physical location.

So to be exiled from that was far more traumatic than it would be for us who's faith is spiritual, in our hearts.

The center of their whole national life and identity was in ruins the temple, the king's palace, the dwellings places of the Levites and priests. It would be like if an invading army destroyed our capital buildings and White House and monuments and places of government.

*Psalm 137* was written during the time of Israel's exile to Babylon. This Psalm is the sighs, prayers and laments of a person who has lost everything. He is destitute of all he holds dear, of every earthly and spiritual treasure. Each line breaths the pain and suffering, the torment and anguish of being captives, like refugees in a strange and alien land.

To add insult to injury, along with the physical torments, as prisoners of war, they were mocked and insulted and forced to play their instruments and sing for their captors. How do you sing in these circumstances?

Then there is the added fear of falling into the temptations of a godless land and defiling one's own faith. They were living in the shadows of great temples built to terrible gods.

Remember the news a while back of ISIS destroying the ancient ruins and relics in Palmyra, Syria. One of those ancient sites was the temple of Bel, also called the temple of Baal, a cruel god, to whom people sacrificed their children. A similar temple was in Babylon.

This is a land of tears, a land of weeping, a land of despairing of life. And it is a land of humility, repentance, confession, a land of a deserved punishment and chastisement. God is not unjust.

### **Daniel the Book.**

When we opened the pages of Revelation we couldn't help but feel like we were entering into a strange new world, a world very different from ours. *As we open the pages of Daniel* we are entering another strange and different world. Not just the world of the OT,

for we have some familiarity with the people of God who inhabited the land of Palestine. But we aren't in Palestine any more, we are in the strange world of exile by the waters of ancient Babylon.

Daniel is a rare book in the Bible in that it takes place during a judgment of God and is written in a place of exile. Called the Revelation of the OT it shares the distinction of being written in exile. Remember Revelation was written while John was in exile on the Island of Patmos.

**Babylon** straddled the Euphrates River and was one of the greatest cities of the ancient Middle East. Under the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II he built some of the most beautiful and impressive buildings, water canals, the famous hanging gardens of Nebuchadnezzar, considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

It is where the Tower of Babel was so it is one of the very oldest cities on earth. You can visit the ruins of this city about 60 miles SW of Baghdad in Iraq.

The Babylonian Empire covered much of the modern day Middle East, Iraq, Syria, Jordan and much of Turkey and northern Saudi Arabia.

*Let me give just a brief outline of the history that is relevant to the book of Daniel.*

**Daniel 1:1** In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it.

Our story begins in the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim, king of Judah. You may recall after King Solomon the nation of Israel was divided into two kingdoms, the northern kingdom called Israel and the southern kingdom called Judah. Each kingdom was ruled by 20 kings.

The northern kingdom had all bad kings, kings who did evil in the sight of the Lord. God brought judgment on that kingdom through the Assyrians who attacked and deported the people of Israel and scattered them throughout the Middle East. That happened in about 750 BC.

The southern kingdom had some good kings and some bad kings and had a slower decline but by around 605 BC the hand of God's judgment came upon them as well.

Assyria fell to the Chaldeans who's capital was Babylon. Nabopolassar was the king and his son Nebuchadnezzar was the general of the army. When his father died, he became king around 605 BC.

The judgment unfolded slowly, in *three stages*, in a series of three deportations (605, 597, 586) carried out by the Babylonians. The first came in 605 BC when Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem, ransacked the temple and took many riches and some captives with him, including Daniel and his three friends.

In 587-586 he finally subdued Judah, sacked Jerusalem, destroyed the temple and walls, and carried a much larger portion of the population back with him to Babylon.

After Nebuchadnezzar's death his sons and grandson were poor leaders and eventually an outsider was on the throne, Belshazzar who saw the handwriting on the wall (Daniel 5). Under his leadership what was left of Babylon fell to the Persians under Cyrus in 539. The Persians would rule for two centuries until Alexander the Great conquered the entire Mediterranean world to establish the Greek empire by 331 BC. He ordered Babylon be preserved and protected.

Under the Persians the Jews were allowed to return to Israel. The history of that is found in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah and the last three Minor Prophets. There you read of the rebuilding of the temple and the walls.

After the Greeks would come the Romans in the second century BC. The history and the prophecy of Daniel cover a time period of 605 to 165 BC.

Daniel was written in Babylon near the end of the seventy year exile by a man named Daniel. A man like Joseph before Pharaoh, a man especially gifted by God with courage, wisdom and integrity, faithful to God and His Word.

*Daniel is the tale of two cities*, to worldviews, to contrasting cultures. Babylon with all its contempt of God, and Jerusalem with all its contempt of what is pagan. This is the tale of the world's way of doing things and God's way of doing things.

Here it is Nebuchadnezzar's own words:

**Daniel 4:30** the king answered and said, "Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?"

Babylon summed up radical secular humanism.

**Daniel 1:2** The Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God. And he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his god.

On the face of it that seems like an incidental historical aside. Oh, and Nebuchadnezzar took some stuff from the temple of God and put it in the temple of his god.

This is actually a key statement to understanding the entire book of Daniel. Nebuchadnezzar was a powerful king and an arrogant man. He had heard the Jews boast their God was the Jehovah God, the almighty and supreme God. Well Nebuchadnezzar just showed he was greater than Jehovah God and all the other gods because he plundered their temples and forced the nations to bow to him and his gods. The heathen gods triumphed and Nebuchadnezzar was sovereign over all.

But Nebuchadnezzar didn't read the fine print, he doesn't know history and why things happen the way they do. He doesn't realize that God is the one who raised him up to come and conquer Judah as a just punishment for her sin and that it is God who delivers Jehoiakim into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar and that God is in fact absolutely sovereign over everything that happens.

Things are not always as they appear, appearances can be very deceiving.

When it most seems like God is defeated or God is dead or God is powerless against might enemies, that is when God is most strong and uses His enemies like pawns for His purposes.

Everything that happens in the first six chapters is meant to undeniably show God is in complete control all the time.

There is only one true and holy and living God who has created all things and sustains and guides all things. God is master. And when God is done with Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon they will not be able to stand.

If a hair can't fall from our heads without His will and permission, then what should we say of His interest in us and care for us? If God be for us who can be against us.

Daniel is written to show us how carefully and intimately God is involved and in control. God controls Nebuchadnezzar, God controls his decisions and actions, God gives him visions and dreams and then keeps all his interpreters from figuring them out.

God laughs at leaders and nations that think they are strong and powerful and unstoppable.

## **Implications and applications.**

Daniel is a survival manual for saints, for God's people living in an alien land, in a foreign culture, in a godless climate. It is a survival guide for when there are no immediate solutions, no approaching rescues.

It is a timely and relevant study, a great election year study. Is there a more relevant message for our secular and materialistic culture, for a culture that ignores God?

How do you remain faithful to a holy and true God while living in a pagan land with pagan gods? Can it be done in a way that maintains inner peace and joy?

How do you maintain courage, wisdom and grace in these kinds of times, when the days are evil and darkness has spread across the land?

How do the people of God remain the people of God? How do we live godly lives in ungodly times? When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?

How do we keep from being defeatist when the world seems to be winning?

Notice in the harshest of circumstances and in the hardest of times in Scripture there is no giving in to pessimism or fatalism.

Good and evil are never equal and opposite forces with the ultimate victory in the balance and always in question. It never is expressed that way in Scripture. Never.

This is a book about a man who didn't just live through a time like ours, he didn't just survive through it, he thrived and triumphed. He excelled without compromising, without bowing to pagan gods.

We live in a time where it will become increasingly dangerous to serve God. We need models of those who trust God at whatever cost.

We have a God who knows and rules the future. God has complete knowledge and comprehension of all of time, of all nations and of all kings. We have a God who is mighty to save and can and does deliver His people out of furnaces and lions dens.

We don't live in a closed universe as liberals and secular humanists and atheistic evolutionists would have us to believe. God is here and He is not silent.