

Exegetical Big Idea: God's people are in exile. They must wrestle with the questions of the sovereignty of God in a distant land, as well as how God's people live faithfully in a hostile environment. Daniel chapter 1 shows the holy and everlasting nature of God's kingdom, and the need for God's people to live holy lives while in exile.

Homiletical Big Idea: **God's kingdom is a holy kingdom, and God's people are to be a holy people.**

Fallen Condition Focus: God's people today effectively live in exile. Our culture is hostile to Christianity, and our true home is in the New Heavens and the New Earth. The temptation to assimilate into this world is great, but holiness to the Lord leads to true life.

Intro:

Psalm 137

¹ By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.² There on the poplars we hung our harps, ³ for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" ⁴ How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land? ⁵ If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill.

These opening verses of Psalm 137 are a song about the sad reality of the people of God after the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem in 586 B.C. The people are sitting by the rivers, not the rivers of Israel, but the rivers of Babylon. They're being marched away from the Promised Land. The Hebrew exiles sit down to rest from the journey and they hang up their harps. But the cruel Babylonian captors mock them by demanding joyful songs about the glorious city that was just burned to the ground.

The response is a natural one: How can we sing? The Psalm is a vow never to forget Jerusalem, the place God promised to be with his people. But has God forgotten? The people are in exile. Does this mean God has failed? Does this mean God has abandoned them?

Now, the Israelites are there in exile because of their disobedience to the LORD. God has warned them over and over again, but in a way we're not entirely different from the Israelite exiles in the book of Daniel. We live in a world that is not our own. Under the sovereignty of God this world is under the dominion of the evil one. We, as God's people, are not in the Promised Land, which is the New Heavens and the New Earth.

We live in exile. Are the forces of this world winning against the LORD? Has God abandoned his people?

The book opens forcing us to ask these questions, but we soon see that God's kingdom is an eternal kingdom that cannot be assaulted.

But we are still in a foreign land. How are we to live?

Daniel opens by showing us that one of the aspects of God's everlasting kingdom is that his kingdom is a holy kingdom, and so God's people are to be a holy people.

God's kingdom is a holy kingdom, and God's people are to be a holy people.

Verses 1-2 – God’s kingdom is not of this world.

Daniel chapter 1 opens on a very sad reality for the people of Israel. Under king Jehoiakim, Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem and while he didn’t completely destroy it yet, we read that God deliver the king of Judah into the hands of the king of Babylon. Not only this, but God delivered some of the articles in the temple of God into the hands of the king of Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar carries these off, and instead of melting them down (they would have been made of gold or silver or bronze), he keeps them and puts them in the treasure house of his god in Babylonia.

There’s a three-fold picture of defeat here. Although not destroyed yet, Jerusalem has been breached and the city has surrendered. Not only that but the king of Judah has become a powerless king at the mercy of Nebuchadnezzar. And not only that, but Nebuchadnezzar has ransacked the temple! And he’s placed these things in the treasure house of his God.

Do you see what is happening here? By putting these temple articles in the temple of his Babylonian god, he’s claiming victory over the God of Israel.

How is it, that the God of all the universe who dwells with his people in Jerusalem in the temple has been overpowered and defiled by the gods of a foreign nation?

[A few years ago I decided I needed to build a fence around our yard so the kids would have a place to run and play. Before I could start this process, I needed to get rid of three trees that were in the way. So I rented a chainsaw and cut them down. Now I had cut them as close to the ground as I could, but I did have to leave a little stump in the ground. After a while it dried out and turned grey, but it wasn’t long before I noticed small green shoots springing up from the sides of the stump. I thought I had killed that thing, but it was still very much alive! Countless times I’ve pulled out the shoots, I’ve cut them with the trimmer, and still they persist. I thought I had killed that tree, but I was wrong.]

Nebuchadnezzar is under the impression that he had once and for all done away with the nation of Israel and Israel’s pesky God! What he does not realize of course is that God was sovereign over Nebuchadnezzar and used him for his purposes. God’s kingdom was never at risk of shrinking one bit.

God has not been defeated because God’s kingdom is not of this world. Because God’s kingdom is a heavenly kingdom, it cannot be touched. In fact, it is because God’s kingdom is a heavenly kingdom that he is sovereign not only over a small nation with borders but over all other kingdom of the world!

Verse 2 tells us that “The lord delivered [the king of Judah] into his hands...”

It’s not as if God had failed, or forgotten his promises. Just the opposite is true. In keeping with the promises of God, he has brought the Babylonians in to punish the Israelites. God had warned them long ago through Isaiah, and more recently through Jeremiah.

This is good news for the people of God. The city of God’s people is not part of this earth where a nation can attack and conquer it, but in the New Heaven’s and the New Earth. The dwelling place of our God is not in a temple made by hands that can be ransacked and looted, but that temple in Jerusalem was a shadow of the heavenly temple. The dwelling place of God *is* the people of God. Jesus will guard this temple. Nobody can rob from God’s kingdom, even if it seems that way. Jerusalem is sacked, but God’s kingdom is not touched. God orchestrates history always for his glory. Nebuchadnezzar, unknowingly, is a vessel for the LORD.

Praise God that his kingdom is different than all other kingdoms of the world. And it is different than any kingdom of the world because God's kingdom is a holy kingdom that cannot be touched by unholy hands. Praise God that evil cannot enter God's kingdom.

God's kingdom is a holy kingdom, and God's people are to be a holy people.

Verses 3-6 – God's people live in a land not their own.

Not only does Nebuchadnezzar take things from the temple of the Lord, but he also takes God's people. This of course was the custom of ancient kings. What you'd do is go in and deport the people of that land and scatter them so that they are not able to rise up and form an army and revolt against you. But Nebuchadnezzar has another brilliant plan. He's got two options really. Option 1 is to create enough military power all throughout his kingdom to police these unwilling exiles and make sure they stay obedient to their new master. But Nebuchadnezzar realizes he's got a second, and much cheaper option. Option 2, is to make them Babylonian.

Look at what he does in verses 3-5. He takes the best of the nobility, the smart and respected. He takes the young men, because he wants to capture future generations. He teaches them a new language, gives them new literature, gives them a new purpose in entering the king's service, and finally gives them new names. Nebuchadnezzar is trying to assimilate the Jews, and erase their identities.

He gives them a new language, a language that is different from the language of the Scriptures. He gives them new Babylonian literature, which is different than the wisdom and truth of their Scriptures. He gives them a new king to serve, rather than the LORD their God. And finally, he gives them new names to give them new identities. It's interesting to note that Daniel and his friends all have names that reflect the God of Israel. Their new names erase that.

Nebuchadnezzar wants to make them Babylonian, but more than that, he wants them to like it.

[Our middle child, who is almost 4, has decided that she does not like meat. It doesn't matter what kind, if you let her know that what is on her plate is meat she is adamantly opposed to it. Even meat that is not truly meat, like a hotdog or a MacDonald's burger she refuses to eat. Her mother and I try our best to get her to try it! Let's be honest, meat is tasty. We urge her and urge her to just try it, and she'll like it. But she's adamant that she will not eat it.]

Nebuchadnezzar wants them to taste the Babylonian life, because he wants them to like it. If he can get them to like it, then he can get them to become Babylonian. But Daniel realizes something. Longing for things other than the things of God is what got Israel into exile in the first place!

Daniel will have nothing of it. You can dress him in Babylonian clothes, teach him Babylonian language, give him a house in Babylonia, but he's still an Israelite.

The world offers the same thing as Nebuchadnezzar. It holds out the it's best luxuries and wants you to take and eat. Sin got us into this exile in the first place. Will we go further down into sin?

We are not citizens of this world church, our tastes and identity should not be found in this world. We are Christians. Christ's name is stamped on us. If you are a Christian then you do not belong here. We are in this world, but we do not belong here.

That's what holiness is. Being set apart for God.

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Verses 8-14 – God’s people must resolve daily to be holy.

Nebuchadnezzar’s plan is to assimilate the Israelites into Babylon, changing their identity. But then we get to verse 8. It starts with one of those small powerful words: “but”. But Daniel resolved. He resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine and asked the chief official for permission to not defile himself in this way. Now it’s unclear exactly what it was that Daniel saw that was inappropriate for him to partake in. It very well could have been that the Babylonians ate pork and other unclean animals, something of course Israelites could not do because of God’s dietary laws. In fact the whole point of the dietary laws was to set them apart from the nations around them. So it may have very well been that. We’re not told. Whatever it was it’s likely that generally speaking, Daniel understands the plan of Nebuchadnezzar and refuses to indulge in the luxury of Babylon. Whatever it is, if Daniel and his friends go through with this, they will be disobeying the LORD and defiling themselves.

Now it all likelihood, Daniel and his friends are not the only Israelites in this program. And yet we get the strong indication that Daniel and his friends are the only ones who refuse to defile themselves. Likely there are other Jews who did chose to eat the food and drink the wine offered them.

What’s the harm? They’re in exile after all. They’ve been ripped from their homes and families and stripped of all they have and know. And here is this king that is offering some comfort. Why not?

Because holiness matters in the daily small moments. Holiness matters in your thoughts, as well as your actions. Holiness matters when nobody else is around, as well as at church. I think there is a temptation to think that we will all be heroes when the big moments come where we need to stand for the faith and chose God over all else. I think there is a temptation to think we’ll all be brave martyrs for the Christian faith in the big moments. Certainly those may come! And my hope is that we will all chose Christ above all else! Those days came for Daniel and his friends. In a few chapters the three friends will be thrown into a furnace, and three chapters after that Daniel will be thrown into the lion’s den. But their fight for holiness doesn’t start there. It starts here. Holiness matters in the small moments.

[I like hockey. I don’t watch it anymore though. I used to watch it quite a bit when I was younger but not recently. I do day dream from time to time about what it would like to be the best player I the NHL. How cool would that be to just able to play in the massive arenas and score awesome goals and win Stanley Cups. Did you know the average age of NHL players is 27 years old. I’m 36. Many of you would consider me to be quite young. But it would be impossible for me to ever play in the NHL. Because to be able to have the skill to play in the NHL, you’ve basically got to start learning when you’re in diapers. Nothing I can do today, try as I may, would get me the skill fast enough to be at the NHL level.]

Your holiness matters today. It matters when you go home after church. It matters when you’re at work, or with your family. Yes, it matters in the big moments of standing up for the faith but there’s no guarantee that any of us will ever find ourselves in those moments. The work of God in the Christian’s life is to sanctify you *today*.

We ought to live holy lives that reflect that we are not of this world. Look at the guard’s response in verses 9-10. God had caused the guard to act favorably to Daniel and the guard agrees to do this. But from a human point of view, the guard is afraid! And rightly so. Not only would this be disobedient to the king, but if this doesn’t work and the king find’s out that the guard let it happen then it’s the guard

whose going to feel the sword. He literally says that he he's afraid the king will have his head because of Daniel.

Now in an act of grace, Daniel offers a ten-day test so the guard will be spared. If it doesn't work, then the guard can order them to eat the royal food. At that point it's on Daniel and his friends. There's a lot to be said here concerning that but I think what we're seeing here is that holiness makes no sense to the world.

Holiness makes no sense to the world because holiness is not of this world! Holiness has one source and one source alone. God himself. The Christian cannot resolve daily to be holy if we are not first made holy by the only holy God.

That happens through trusting in God. Daniel here displays trust in the faithfulness of God as he asks the guard to test them after 10 days. So it is with us. We must place our trust solely and fully in the faithfulness of God in the work of Christ Jesus.

Because of Christ's death on the cross, our sins are removed from us and placed onto Christ. Because of his resurrection, victory over sin and death is given to us in the hope of our future resurrection. And because of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the Christian, we have the daily empowerment to slay sin and strive for holiness.

We are empowered for holiness *today*. May we be resolved to holiness by the power of God in us through the washing of our sins by the blood of Christ.

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Verses 15-21 – God's people are the light of the goodness of holiness.

Well wouldn't you know it, the diet worked. The verses from here till the end of the chapter show us that God's people are a light of the goodness of the holiness of God.

At the end of the 10 days, verse 15 tells us, they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the others who ate the royal food. So the guard agreed to let them have their vegetables for the entire time of the program.

So we have to ask: Why did the diet work? Was it because it was healthier? Are we to understand that the king's food was of poorer quality than the vegetables that Daniel and his friends got? No of course not! That's exactly the opposite! Not to insult any vegetarians here, but the point of this story is *not* that vegetarian diets are better. The point here is that the king's food was far superior, and it was a surprise that the diet of veggies and water actually worked. On top of that, look at verse 17. During the ten day trial period, God gave them knowledge and understanding and Daniel could understand dreams. Show me a diet that can do that!

No, the point here is that God is showing the goodness of holiness through Daniel and his friends. This is a miracle.

It is far better to be set apart for the LORD, then for anyone or anything else.

At the end of the program, the men are presented before the king and they are found to be ten times better than all the other men in the program. God has taken these men, and he's given them wisdom

that is far superior to the wisdom of the world, and he's prepared them for service. From a human point of view they are prepared for service for king Nebuchadnezzar, but even more than that God has prepared them for service for the King of kings.

Christian, God doesn't want your abilities. God wants your holiness. God does not use people of ability, he uses people of character. God gives ability when it is needed, but what he wants is your holiness.

[We have a Starbucks very close to our house. And it just so happens that Alana and I are large consumers of coffee. Of course it would be ridiculously expensive to drink Starbucks all the time but we help keep that place in business. Starbucks is known for all the different flavors and toppings and all that you can get that is coffee related. You can get a double shot venti blond roast oat milk latte extra hot with 2 pumps hazelnut and whip cream on top. But you know what I order most of the time. Medium coffee with cream. I don't want all those things! I just want a good cup of coffee, which Starbucks is.]

God is not impressed with our ability, he's infinitely more concerned with our holiness. Want to know why? Because it's not ability that reflects God's glory, but holiness. The world looks at the ability of a person and the attention is drawn to that person, but the world looks at your holiness and the attention is drawn to the Lord.

What do people see when they look at your life? Do they see a person who is just like them in indulging in what the world has to offer, or do they see a person whose joy exceeds theirs because you are set apart for the LORD? Is their attention drawn to you, or are you simply a light that shines on the goodness of a holy God?

May we be a people who reflect the goodness of a holy God whose kingdom is an eternal and holy kingdom.

So here we are, a people in exile. At the start of this chapter, valuable articles from the temple of God are removed and defiled by being placed in an unholy environment in the treasure house of the god of Babylon. But by the end of this chapter, the truly valuable articles of God, his people, although removed from his presence and placed in an unholy environment, are yet *not* defiled for God has made them holy.

May God have mercy on us that we may be a holy people, whose hearts, minds, souls, and strengths, belong solely to God's holy Kingdom.

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