

## Daniel 1:1-4 When everything seems to go wrong

### Introduction

On the day I was writing this sermon I was in the Ferry attending to some personal business and quite naturally and briefly I was engaged in a pleasant and general conversation with a complete stranger. Remarks about Christmas and New Year followed a similar path to many others I have had –and you too will have done the same- but then after I had sensed a hesitancy over the extent of this person’s enjoyment of the Christmas period they admitted that their festivities had been overshadowed by an unexpected tragedy in their family circle. It was a bolt out of the blue something that could not have reasonably been expected, but its consequences will remain with that family for some years to come. Undoubtedly the ‘why’ questions will come thick and fast, but the absence of credible answers is something they have no choice but to live with. I expressed my deepest sympathies to the person and their family, but apart from listen to the story there was nothing I or anyone else could have done in that situation. Life can be very much life that. A major medical study from John Hopkins University in the United States, reported in the British press on 1 January 2015 came to the conclusion that a majority of people who contracted cancer were unfortunate as their illness was caused primarily by random DNA mutations when tissue-specific stem cells divide. There are specific cancers where hereditary or environmental factors are significant contributory causes and also with some where lifestyle choices are contributory factors toward contraction of possible cancers, but many sufferers have simply been unfortunate. The events that took place in Jerusalem in 605BC must have come out of the blue likewise for Daniel and his family –and for other families of boys in his school. In social terms these were boys from prominent families who under ordinary circumstances could have looked forward to significant roles in their home country when they reached adulthood. However, it was not to be. In line with the policy of the super powers of that era children from privileged backgrounds of defeated enemies were taken back to the empire’s capital city to be trained as civil servants for the empire. When appropriately educated they could be given responsible roles in the government as they had no power base from which to challenge the ruling elite. There were no holidays to look forward to in the future or means of contact with families thousands of miles away, who must have presumed they were dead. It was a nightmare scenario for these teenage boys and their families. The fact that the book of Daniel was written at all is a reminder of the extraordinary courage of four named individuals who defied the socialisation process to which they were exposed to retain their faith in God, together with their ethnic and cultural identity. It is a series of inspirational stories of what ordinary people can accomplish who place their faith and trust in God.

### 1. What happened? (Daniel 1:1-2)

(a)The Brief account in Daniel 1 *In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it.<sup>2</sup> And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia and put in the treasure-house of his god (Daniel 1:1-2).* The brief summary with which Daniel chapter one begins indicates that Nebuchadnezzar the ruler of the major Middle-Eastern power of that day swept into Jerusalem in 605BC and basically helped himself to whatever he wished to take home as a prize. The account in Daniel one mentions only one thing that he took with him, articles of gold and silver and precious stones from the Temple in Jerusalem. Many of these items were

national treasures related to the worship of God and their theft was seen as sacrilegious to the Jewish people. However, the likelihood is that his victorious army helped themselves to whatever they wished, and in particular they were on the lookout for the sons of the ruling families to take to train as members of the Babylonian civil service. Any teenage boy in Jerusalem might have been vulnerable to seizure. The total number of captives will never be known but in both 605BC and then the repeated capture in 597BC it would probably have been in the low thousands of individuals, but such a number would have meant that many families in the city were affected by this tragedy.

(b) **The wider context of this event** (II Kings 23:31-24:7) (i) In the region Babylon and Egypt both wanted to be the regional power that controlled the territories known today as Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Jordan. The battle of Carchemish was fought between their two armies and was a decisive victory for the Babylonians. For reasons unknown the godly king of Judah Josiah tried with his tiny army to block the path of the Egyptians to Carchemish. It was military madness. He lost his life. His army was easily defeated and his country was a proxy regime for one or the other of the regional powers for the remaining years of its precarious existence, ended by the Babylonians in 587/6BC. After Carchemish the Babylonian army swept down to Egypt collecting trophies of war like the Nazis did across Europe during World War Two. Many museums, palaces and art galleries were emptied of their contents with only a limitation restoration of stolen properties once the war was over. Almost certainly the same happened in the Babylonian empire. We need to remember that when Cyrus the first Persian Emperor allowed subject peoples to return to their home countries, taking precious items linked to their heritage or their faith with them he was doing something unheard of before. In the minds of the major regional powers Judah was a minor power of very limited significance. (ii) In Judah II Kings 23:31-24:7: *Jehoahaz was twenty-three years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem for three months. His mother's name was Hamutal daughter of Jeremiah; she was from Libnah.<sup>32</sup> He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, just as his predecessors had done.<sup>33</sup> Pharaoh Necho put him in chains at Riblah in the land of Hamath so that he might not reign in Jerusalem, and he imposed on Judah a levy of a hundred talents of silver and a talent of gold.<sup>34</sup> Pharaoh Necho made Eliakim son of Josiah king in place of his father Josiah and changed Eliakim's name to Jehoiakim. But he took Jehoahaz and carried him off to Egypt, and there he died.<sup>35</sup> Jehoiakim paid Pharaoh Necho the silver and gold he demanded. In order to do so, he taxed the land and exacted the silver and gold from the people of the land according to their assessments.<sup>36</sup> Jehoiakim was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem for eleven years. His mother's name was Zebidah daughter of Pedaiiah; she was from Rumah.<sup>37</sup> And he did evil in the eyes of the Lord, just as his predecessors had done. During Jehoiakim's reign, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon invaded the land, and Jehoiakim became his vassal for three years. But then he turned against Nebuchadnezzar and rebelled.<sup>2</sup> The Lord sent Babylonian, Aramean, Moabite and Ammonite raiders against him to destroy Judah, in accordance with the word of the Lord proclaimed by his servants the prophets.<sup>3</sup> Surely these things happened to Judah according to the Lord's command, in order to remove them from his presence because of the sins of Manasseh and all he had done,<sup>4</sup> including the shedding of innocent blood. For he had filled Jerusalem with innocent blood, and the Lord was not willing to forgive.<sup>5</sup> As for the other events of Jehoiakim's reign, and all he did, are they not written in the book of the annals of the kings of Judah?<sup>6</sup> Jehoiakim rested with his ancestors. And Jehoiachin his son succeeded him as king.<sup>7</sup> The king of Egypt did not march out from his own country again, because the king of Babylon had taken all his territory, from the Wadi of Egypt to the River Euphrates. After Joash was killed his inexperienced son Jehoahaz took the throne but lasted only three months. He might have been in hereditary terms the eligible ruler but in practise he was completely inadequate for the role. However, in fairness the troubles the state was experiencing would have challenged even the most able of Kings. His attempts at keeping his country independent of Egyptian control failed miserably. He was taken as a prisoner by the Egyptians and possibly treated*

roughly as he didn't last too long before he died. His brother Eliakim was made king by the Egyptian overlords with a brief to impose a draconian tax regime, the proceeds of which went straight to the Egyptian treasury. To show they were in total control Eliakim's name ('God has established') was changed to Jehoiakim ('Yahweh has established'); the meaning of the name change was insignificant to the Egyptians. Forcing a foreign king to change his name at their request was a clear sign that he was totally dependent on them. Jehoiakim's rebellion of 601BC at a time when the Babylonians were otherwise occupied with troubles at home (II Kings 24:1-3), but the Babylonian authorities asked other vassal states to harass Judah which caused significant damage to an already weakened state. The death of King Josiah and his crushing defeat by the Egyptian army may as well have been the end of the state of Judah. Another two decades would pass before its final obliteration, but 'the writing was on the wall'. What happens in one country is affected by what happens elsewhere. The world global recession has had a significant impact on life in this country. Its extent and duration will be debated by experts for years to come, but everyone knows that no country can operate in isolation. The nature of the interdependency between countries changes over the centuries but its reality has to be recognised in every generation. No individual or country is an island. Everyone is dependent on others for both good and ill. However, it is not just what happened, but why it happened that we must turn to next.

## 2. Why did it happen? (Daniel 1:2a)

*And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God* (Daniel 1:2a) (i) The human visible cause The mythical neutral press reporter might declare that the proxy forces of neighbouring states damaged Judah at the bidding of their Babylonian masters; they would certainly have said that ultimately the military might of Babylon could not be resisted and therefore if Judah did not yield total obedience to her earthly master that she had no hope of surviving as a semi-independent state. This is of course true at the human level. (ii) The ultimate divine cause However, there is also an ultimate cause for what happened as Daniel 1:2a reminds us: *And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God.* This statement concurs with I Kings 24:2a: *The Lord sent Babylonian, Aramean, Moabite and Ammonite raiders against him to destroy Judah...* Human actors carried out their roles they enthusiastically wished to play, and for which they were absolutely responsible, but the biblical writer was inspired to record that behind the visible action of human beings on earth a divine hand was directing their actions. Human freedom and divine sovereignty are linked together. This story illustrates this point very well. These military campaigns were waged without a second thought of the preferences of the God of Israel. In the same way events happen on the stage of history in this generation for which human beings with no thought of God carry out; yet at the same time the will of God is done in mercy or in judgement in line with His ultimate purposes for the world. The inspired writers of Scripture received divine guidance to pass judgement on these events, so their verdict rests on solid ground. We must be more cautious in passing judgements in our day as we with our limited knowledge and fallibility inevitably are less than certain how many events in different parts of the world fit in with God's overall plan for humanity. What we can be assured of is that God is in control of His world. However, the price of creating humanity in the image of God and thus giving us a significant degree of freedom over our actions means that inevitably when human beings make wrong choices that the results can be quite disastrous sometimes for the lives of countless other people. I Kings 24:2b-4 continues with the statement of the ultimate divine cause of this judgement of the people of Judah...*in accordance with the word of the*

Lord proclaimed by His servants the prophets. <sup>3</sup> **Surely these things happened to Judah according to the Lord's command, in order to remove them from His presence because of the sins of Manasseh and all he had done,** <sup>4</sup> including the shedding of innocent blood. For he had filled Jerusalem with innocent blood, and **the Lord was not willing to forgive.** It was not as if Judah had not been warned about it. A century earlier in 712 or 711BC God had warned King Hezekiah that a future generation of Jewish people would face disaster at the hands of the newly ascendant Babylonian empire. The context of Isaiah's message was after Hezekiah had been rather impressed by a visit, together with a series of letters and a 'get-well' present from a leading Babylonian official. God through His servant Isaiah was reminding King Hezekiah that this emissary of the Iraqi state had political motives not pastoral ones for the visit! Isaiah 39:5-8 records these words: *Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, 'Hear the word of the Lord Almighty: <sup>6</sup> the time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your predecessors have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the Lord. <sup>7</sup> And some of your descendants, your own flesh and blood who will be born to you, will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.'* <sup>8</sup> *'The word of the Lord you have spoken is good,' Hezekiah replied. For he thought, 'There will be peace and security in my lifetime.* The nation of Judah had turned its back on God and there would be the inevitable consequences of that with respect to its national fortunes. This point had been made to the founding generation of the nation in the time of Moses. Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 spell out in great detail the consequences of both obedience and disobedience to the revealed will of God. The means whereby either blessing or judgement will come was not spelled out but that is not necessary because a principle was being established for each generation of His people. What was happening in Daniel's early years was probably little understood by him, but later as we read through this book he grasps clearly God's plans for his nation.

**How does this apply to us?** First of all the principle of divine sovereignty over and human responsibility for our actions is unchanged. Secondly, then and now there are many events that take place in the world which we will never understand why God has permitted them to take place. It is not necessary for us to know everything before we obey Him and trust Him with our lives. Our calling is to obey His revealed will for us and leave the rest with Him. At any particular moment in time it may appear that 'the wicked' are prospering and 'the righteous' are getting a raw deal out of life. Our judgement can be absolutely correct at that particular moment of time. However, God's timescale over which He operates is far longer than a single generation. Interpreting God's plans for humanity must accordingly be viewed in terms of the bigger picture rather than just this current time in my lifetime. Thirdly, my calling is to obey God's guidelines for my life as I understand His teaching in the Bible. My role model is Jesus not the standards set out by politicians in any particular generation. We may be quite out of step with the establishment in one generation and in step with another depending on the era in which we were born. Neither you nor I am responsible for the choices of other people when we stand before the Lord, but we are for our own decisions. We like Daniel may feel entirely powerless to change our society, but like him we can determine to do what pleases God in our personal lives. We must never underestimate the power of a good example. Other people will notice our attitudes, speech, work ethic and much more when they rub shoulders with us week by week. Words are sometimes necessary but our actions speak much louder than words. Remember God notices the choices His people make. Will you covenant to be God's man or God's woman who will put Him first in each area of your life? If you are here and yet to profess in the Lord Jesus, can I encourage you to take that step today. Remember that this group of teenagers could have had no expectation of making any impact whatsoever in the capital city of the Babylonian Empire. Yet their willingness to honour God and put Him first in their lives led to an influence far greater than they had ever imagined. God's plans for your life and mine may be quite different in some respects from

anything you or I imagined in our youth. The book of Daniel is a remarkable encouragement and a reminder that with God equipping and enabling me I can accomplish all the things He has asked me to do.

### 3. Who did it happen to? (Daniel 1:3-4)

<sup>3</sup>Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king's service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility – <sup>4</sup>young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians (Daniel 1:3-4). (a) **Coming to terms with their changed circumstances** The journey to Babylon as captives would have been bathed with silent tears. These dark and difficult weeks were a time of coming to terms with the fact that all Daniel and his fellow pupil's plans for their lives were over. Hopes of marriage and family to a lovely Jewish girl of whom their family approved and settling down near the prospective in-laws in their native city would not now happen. At an early stage they would have been told that their lives were not in danger if they did exactly what they were told and followed to the letter the instructions of their new masters. Outright rebellion would simply have brought them to an early grave. Undoubtedly some of these young men would have yielded, mentally, spiritually and physically becoming the kind of servant that their masters were demanding. Others would resist, determined to retain loyalty to their faith, families and country. How could they do this in a foreign land? For each young Jewish person this process was a test of their convictions. However, although we, praise God, are not likely to be prisoners of war for years on end with the resultant loss of our freedom, there are times in our lives when we have to come to terms with changed circumstances. A young person from a Christian home moving away to university – will they continue regular attendance at God's house in a local congregation? Will they read God's Word and pray in their daily devotions as they might have been brought up to practice? How will their faith relate to their studies? In some subjects it may have few implications, but any theological studies students and others on certain science courses will be challenged in no uncertain terms to give up their pious convictions and conform with 'more sensible' secular ones. There is no doubt that some students will write essays or submit other assignments as close as possible to the perceived views of the lecturer in the hope of better marks or an easier time on the course. They may or may not be successful in this course of action. However, each one before God has to make choices for themselves. In each new workplace or each new community to which we may move in our lives we have to come to terms with changed circumstances – will you covenant to put the Lord first in the choices you make? This has to be done intentionally or it won't happen at all! You and I have only a limited control over our life circumstances, so that is not an issue. However, we are responsible for how we react to those circumstances. As parents of children or grandparents do we talk through life circumstances with our children or grandchildren in age appropriate ways and explain how as a Christian we handle these things? It is part of Christian discipleship to model good choices and living out our profession of faith. If our faith is not seen to be relevant to our lives Monday to Saturday then it will seem less significant to them what happens on a Sunday as well. Are you tonight facing some changed circumstances at the start of this New Year? Think and pray carefully as a follower of Jesus how best you may glorify Him and live out your faith as you respond to the challenge in front of you. (b) **Coming to terms with the new authority figures in their lives** The conditioning they were all put through followed a well-established pattern as they joined several thousand other young men from other parts of the empire. First of all they were required to learn the

language and customs of Babylon. They were in every respect to think, speak and act as Babylonians. As part of the assimilation process each was given a new name whose meaning expressed loyalty to the Babylonian gods, in the way that their Jewish names had signified their loyalty to the God of Israel. Secondly, they had to follow a course of studies in the languages of the empire. Also, studies in the religion and its literature in the Babylonian empire, together with courses in maths, astronomy, possibly primitive medicine [Dale Ralph Davis, *The Message of Daniel*, p. 31]. Was it against their faith to learn new languages? No of course not! Jews lived in countries outside Israel and spoke other languages, but remained faithful to their faith. What about astronomy, maths and medicine? No problems in principle here either. What about learning about other faiths and studying their holy books? This question can seem harder to answer, but again the same answer must be given. Daniel and his friends had recognised that educational studies had merit in themselves and a free university education was a good thing, even if the circumstances were less than ideal. A few years ago at one of the series of discussions / debates organised by Christian and Muslim groups in Dundee University we had as the Christian speaker, a Syrian Christian academic who was an outstanding advocate of our faith. What is more his parents had deliberately sent him to Islamic schools and undergraduate studies in Islam so that he was extremely familiar with the faith of the majority community in his country. In the discussions that took place he could quote from memory an astonishing number of Islamic documents and passages in the Qu'ran in both presenting his case and in replying to Muslim contributions that week. One session in particular was so impressive as he extremely graciously rebutted the points raised by Muslims present almost entirely from their own scriptures. The topic in question lent itself to that approach. However, the point for raising this example is that like these young Jewish men this individual had been required to stand if not on his own at least in an extremely small minority through his years of education. I wonder how many people would come through as well as he had done? However, for each of us our life circumstances are different. But the grace of God is sufficient for each one of us in whatever situations God allows us to face. Paul's declaration in Philippians 4:13 *I can do everything through Him who gives me strength* can also be yours and mine today. For you it may be asking God for help to cope with a manager or authority figure at work; or someone else who crosses your path and with whom you struggle to have an appropriate relationship. There are many changed circumstances and life situations in which we need God's help as Daniel and his friends did more than 2,500 years ago. The encouraging thing to remember is that God hasn't changed and He will help you and me as we seek His help as they did all those years ago.

#### **4. The form of the book**

In very simple terms Daniel's chapters one to six illustrates their trust in God using six stories illustrating the ups and downs of life from 605BC to the Persian era when Cyrus came to the throne in 537BC (Daniel 10:1). Chapters seven to twelve are four revelations from God to Daniel during those years. The conclusion that comes from the book is this: In life there are times when everything seems to go wrong, but be encouraged even in the darkest moments God never leaves you and will sustain you through these times with the resources you need, for Jesus' sake, Amen.