

Kings and Prophets 16-09-15a

This is the 15th of September, 2016. This is the birthday of the best man I know, my father. He is 86 today, but looking at him you wouldn't swear he's a day over 85.

Now he's a force of nature. Anyway, happy birthday dad. We're continuing our study of kings and prophets tonight.

We have come to that moment in history when Nebuchadnezzar has invaded the southern kingdom of Judah, interrupting the unbroken succession of Davidic descendants sitting on the throne in Jerusalem. It has not happened in 400 years. For 400 years David had a son on the throne.

God promised him that he would always have a son on the throne, but like all of the promises of God, there are parameters and conditions, and after those four centuries those conditions had been broken to such an extent that God suspends fulfillment. He has not abrogated that promise. He has not canceled it, but it is suspended.

The fulfillment is suspended, and this will begin in 605 B.C. with the vassalage of the last of David's descendants. This begins the times of the Gentiles, and there will never again be an unfettered and sovereign king on the throne, all the way down to the time of Christ, all the way down to the time of our present day. So this is a significant point in the history of the nation of Israel.

It is a significant point in the Old Testament, and it is a significant point prophetically, as we will see. Well, let's take a moment to dedicate our time of study and fellowship to the glory of the Lord Jesus, and then we'll begin. Father, we're so grateful for this time to set aside the busy schedule and the press of requirements that pretty much defines our lives to find refreshment, encouragement, and a restoration of our objectivity and our focus on priority by coming to the oasis of Your Word and drinking from the living water that we find there.

We thank You for this portion that is before us tonight, looking at this time in the history of Your people Israel. We pray that as we look at it, that the Holy Spirit will minister to each heart, give us insight and understanding. We live in a time so far removed from these events, and yet the challenges that face us are much the same as those that have ever faced, those who are seeking to claim righteousness by faith, to live a life that is pleasing in Your sight, and who are motivated by hope of one day standing in Your presence and seeing to a greater and greater degree the unfolding of Your plan, Your purpose, and Your glory.

So we pray that You'll bless us as we spend this time in Your Word, and we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. We have looked at the prophets in their context as we've gone through both the history of the northern and southern kingdoms.

And as we now come to this closing section of both 2 Chronicles and 2 Kings, which sort of

makes sense since we've run out of Kings to chronicle, we next find ourselves picking up the thread of the story in one of the more well-known books of the Old Testament for a variety of reasons, and this is the book of Daniel. So you can turn to Daniel chapter 1. We're going to gloss over for the moment the unhappy details of the sacking and destruction of Jerusalem, the carrying off. We may revisit that briefly when we pick up the narrative section, but we turn to the book of Daniel, and I want to read you.

I've got this nifty Bible. It's one of the latest releases from Nelson, and it was placed into my hands by the publisher emeritus of Nelson himself. So it's kind of a nice thing.

It's got color pictures for those of us who are tired of the bleak black and white page. But they do have sort of a helpful summary introduction here, and I just want to read it to you. In 626 B.C., Nabopolassar became king of Babylon and altered the course of ancient history.

He quickly overthrew the domination of longstanding rival Assyria, and by the time of his death in 605 B.C., he had eliminated the Assyrian Empire and swallowed it into what became known as the Neo-Babylonian or Chaldean Empire. This course of events had significant implications for Judah, the surviving remnant of the nation of Israel. Judah had been largely under Assyrian domination from about 670 B.C., but now found itself serving a new master.

In the same year as Nabopolassar's death, King Jehoiakim of Judah became a vassal of Nebuchadnezzar, the son of Nabopolassar. We saw this last time in 2 Kings 24. Nebuchadnezzar brought his father's empire to even greater heights, eventually deporting many Jews to Babylon.

Daniel lived in the midst of all these momentous events. What direct impact he had on the community of exiles cannot be known, but he was a force for good as far as the Babylonians were concerned. Daniel was a close confidant of Nebuchadnezzar throughout the Babylonian king's reign from 605 to 562 B.C. That's over 40 years.

Later Daniel served, with equal distinction, Cyrus, the enlightened Persian ruler who conquered Babylon. One of the first policies Cyrus implemented after subduing Babylon was to allow the Jews to return to their homeland and rebuild their way of life. It is more than likely that Daniel had some influence on Cyrus' decision.

The book of Daniel is a testimony to how God works out His purposes through His servants, even in the courts of pagan rulers. And I would just amend that last statement to say that this time in the history of Israel, the Southern Kingdom specifically, is a depiction of what faithful believers do when they are included in a larger group, such as a nation, that experiences God's judgment. How do you act? What are your priorities? To what extent do you continue to try to observe the tenets and the mandates of your faith? To what extent are you flexible? To what extent do you go with the flow? We've already seen that Jeremiah had delivered the message that this invasion, this conquest, was of the Lord and that those who were heeding the word of the Lord should not resist it.

Tough pill to swallow when you have been independent and you are suddenly forced to be dependent, when you have been able to do and think and decide for yourself and now you have that done for you by others. It's always hard. In our modern life, we face that as we get older.

The Lord Jesus told the Apostle Peter before He left this earth, before Jesus left, that right now He dressed Himself and went where He wanted, but in His later life somebody else would dress Him and take Him where He might not want to go. So we all see in various aspects of our lives, sometimes our employment takes us in directions that we would not choose for ourselves. We are constrained.

We are encouraged, if not mandated, to conform to policies, priorities, the pursuit of goals, and even the reflection of values that are not our own, and ever more so as you see the day approaching, as moral values of our society change and they are reflected in all sorts of ways. You can think of some, I'm sure. We have decisions to make.

So this is a wonderful opportunity for us to see God's guidance, God's blessing, how faithful believers that God included in His Word handled these kinds of transition times. It's one thing to grow up in a structure and it is for you as it was for your parents, as it was for their parents. There was a time in the history of this country, you can think of the days from say the 1600s through the late 1800s, the horse-powered days, the largely agricultural times where there was before the Industrial Revolution, generation after generation we grew up.

Those of you that watch the costume dramas that the BBC puts out, for centuries in England, the gentry and the aristocracy lived generation to generation in a largely unchanged way. And if you watch that, what's the one with the big house? Downton Abbey. If you watch that, they cover a period of radical change moving into the 20th century.

And this is a similar time. But the advantage to us here is it's not just a matter of good gracious, we now have a telephone. This is, spiritually speaking, when a culture that is, God is a foreign concept.

The God of creation, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is virtually unknown. And you are engulfed and assimilated into such a culture. How do you act? What do you do? And we are facing that now.

We haven't been captured and carried off to Babylon. Babylon has come and asserted itself right on top of us. We've been taken without a shot.

We've been captured and carried off culturally and in the climate of social interaction. And for some of us, it almost seemed to happen when we weren't looking. You know, we were busy raising kids, making a living, trying to function faithfully and diligently in our life.

And we got to looking around and you can't even communicate with generations that have come up. There's so little common ground. The paradigm shift has been radical.

As so many other things that have happened in our day that are sort of a hockey stick, this cultural change and modes of communication change. This is why people over 30 are virtually helpless in the social media world. It works and has a language and a rhythm and a body language, if you will, that doesn't use bodies.

And those of us who use our body for body language can't figure out what's going on in social media. It moves so quickly. It's the, you know, those of us of an earlier ilk can think of when MTV first came out and they started having these super fast paced videos where there's, you know, 47 cuts a minute and you can just barely digest what you see before it changes.

And television and because of that conversations and even literature and writing has become this quick flash. Everything is what we used to do in the margin of a book. You know, you'd draw a little stick figures and move them slightly each successive page and then flip it and you could make the move and you had your own animation.

Well, so much of life is like that. Now, if you're not watching the flip of the cards, you miss it. And so this is pertinent and helpful to us because it is God's word, the light that shines to illuminate our path and light the way for our feet on a very similar situation.

So in Daniel chapter one, it picks up right where we left off last time. In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim, King of Judah. You remember that Necho killed Josiah and so Israel put Jehoahaz on the throne.

Necho didn't like that. So he hauled him off and put Jehoiakim on the throne. Remember that that's where we are.

It's the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim. He's the older brother of the one that got hauled off to Egypt. Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it.

And the Lord gave Jehoiakim, King of Judah into his hand. Notice any observer looking around at the movement of the big puzzle pieces would say, well, this is just politics and geopolitics. This is the geomilitary political situation.

It's Assyria's fall, Babylon's rise, it's Nabopolassar. This was more or less inevitable in the course of world events that this small nation would get rolled up kind of like one of the, that tectonic plate. They've had some more earthquakes over near the Middle East and that little postage stamp plate, it's like the smallest of all the plates on the planet sits right under the Middle East.

And part of the rift runs under the Mount of Olives. But they just had a whole rash of fresh movement over there and earthquakes associated with it. But it's emblematic almost of Israel's position between the huge powers like Egypt, those that are further down in Africa, those that are up in Asia, Asia minor and on around into the area of Babylon.

So God gave, the Lord gave Jehoiakim, King of Judah into his hand. For us, everything is within God's purview. It is either caused by him or allowed by him.

He is aware, he is engaged and he is involved in things large and small. God doesn't get busy and fail to notice when you lose your job or when you flunk a test or when you are given more requirements than you can handle or when you are unfairly treated by people or by events. God is not unaware, he is not unrighteous to forget your testing, your work of faith, your labor of love.

And these pressures are carefully orchestrated. They are monitored, they are regulated. Nothing happens to us that isn't for purposes of instruction.

As far as we're concerned, we are the center and the focus of that moment. God, because he is God, has the ability to do that for all of us simultaneously. But as far as we're concerned, all of heaven and all of God's attention is on me and what's happening to me objectively.

I'm not, this doesn't give me hubris, it doesn't, you know, the Eagles, one of their last songs was, this is not the center of the universe. You know, we are not the center of the universe. I know the guy who is the center of the universe, but he's no longer in the Plano area.

He's in Southern Oklahoma. The whole thing shifted. The actual geographic center of the universe has now moved.

But we, for purposes of understanding how God is operating in our lives, don't think that you're lost in the swarm, that it's a sea of faces and you can sort of blend together. You can hide. Hey, you in the back.

I saw a sign going down central for a hospital or somebody, and they say at our hospital, you're not, hey, you in the back. You know, they're saying they pay personal attention. Banks have often said, you're a name, not a number to us and so forth, but you actually are a number to them and they're lying.

But with God, as far as we're concerned, all of his attention, all of his power, all of his resources are focused on us. And it's just a God thing that he can do that for all of us simultaneously. So this is very significant.

God delivered Jehoiakim into the hand of a foreign king. Now, where does this come from? Keep your finger here and turn back to Deuteronomy 28. We're not going to read any of this.

I just want you to see it. Deuteronomy 28, now it shall come to pass. If you diligently obey the voice of the Lord, your God, to observe carefully all of his commandments, which I command you today, that the Lord, your God will set you high above all nations of the earth.

And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you because you obey the voice of the Lord, your God, right? And detail to follow. Look at verse 15 of that same chapter. But it shall come to pass, if you do not obey the voice of the Lord, your God, to observe carefully all his commandments and his statutes, which I command you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you.

Details thereafter. You remember this from Zephaniah, right? You remember this from Jeremiah, who is the active and living prophet at this time, still alive, still prophesizing, prophesizing in 605. So you remember this.

This is why it says in Daniel chapter one, that God gave Jehoiakim and by extension, the entire city and the southern kingdom into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar. God did it. It is important for us to discern why it is that we are in situations that are challenging and that are negative.

We want to be sure we have a clear understanding of what our role is. Are we caught up in things beyond our control and that are happening as a test for the mature and the faithful and those who can produce righteousness by faith and bear fruit in that situation? Or are we being disobedient? And this is something that God is using to get our attention. There are several reasons for suffering.

Those are the two most common. And sadly, when it comes to the sheer numbers of believers, it is more often God getting our attention and demonstrating that we do not have the wherewithal in our own strength and with our own wisdom to cope with circumstances. It is designed to drive us toward our Heavenly Father.

Not the case here in chapter one, however, for the subjects that are soon to be introduced. Some of the articles of the house of God which he carried into the land of Shinar, into the house of his God. Now his God, Nebuchadnezzar's God, is Bel or Marduk.

This is the Babylonian main deity. He is the Jupiter of Babylon. He is the Zeus, if you will.

He is the kingpin God. He brought the articles into the treasure house of his God. Then the king instructed Ashpenaz, the master of his kingdom, and Eunuchs to bring some of the children of Israel and some of the king's descendants and some of the nobles, young men in whom there was no blemish, good-looking, gifted in all wisdom, possessing knowledge, and quick to understand, who had ability to serve in the king's palace, and whom they might teach the language and literature of the Chaldeans.

Notice that God is going to use individuals. Nebuchadnezzar thinks that through his proxy, Ashpenaz, he is making the selection. But who are those who are going to be the gifted and the wise and who are going to stand out as flexible and capable and skillful? Who is going to stand out? Those who have been availing themselves of the bacchanalia and the orgies and the wine-bibbing parties and the dissolution and dissipation of the final days in Jerusalem? Those who have been a part of the problem, are they going to stand out? Are they going to be the ones that are selected by Nebuchadnezzar to be trained and to be brought up and to make a difference on behalf of their people to stand out? God puts it in the heart of a pagan king to select for those who have been diligent, who are wise and skillful, who have already been faithful and have not participated in these corrupt and dissipated practices in Jerusalem.

So those who have taken advantage of their nobility and their relationship with the evil kings in

the latter days are going to be drying out. They're going to be suffering hangovers. They're going to be out of shape and unfit and unpracticed.

But that minority, those that have been faithful all the way to the end and have been compliant and didn't get themselves killed when Nebuchadnezzar took the city the first time, God has put it in the heart of the captors, the conquerors, to find those individuals and take them for a special program. These individuals did not blend. They didn't fade into the crowd.

They're not one of a number of nobles who are all essentially the same. They stand out. They're different.

Now how did Ashpenaz accomplish this selection? It doesn't tell us. But you imagine that Daniel and Hananiah and Mishael and Azariah were among a group of minority faithful nobles and princes that were known for that, had that reputation. Did they conduct an inquisition? Did they do an investigation? Did they put pressure on some of the people? Well, you look like a sloppy ne'er-do-well.

Who's on your hate list? Who isn't sloppy and ne'er-do-well like you? Well, there's this conservative group over here that never does come to the parties. Some kind of way Ashpenaz finds these individuals, puts them in a special caravan, and brings them straight to the capital, and they are selected. They rise to the top of a bad situation.

Point of application, just because the culture around us, just because the peer group is saying and doing and being certain things, if we are faithful to our divine commission, to our heavenly calling, to our ultimate destination, God will work in invisible and mysterious and unforeseen ways to bless us. I'm not saying in every case we are going to survive and prosper and be taken to the king's palace and fed the king's food, but God notices. God is aware.

This is one case where you can really see His omniscience at work. There's not the tiniest detail. There's not a single individual that escapes His notice and is marked by the marking angel.

God, as it were, sends the inkhorn angel through to find these individuals, and there is a heavenly mark, and God works in heavenly ways to produce earthly results that are in keeping with His own purpose. Don't underestimate God's plan and purpose and provision for you if you are faithful. If you set God as a priority, He will never suffer the righteous to be moved.

You are not going to end up with the short end of the stick or the fuzzy bare end of the lollipop holder if you do what you're supposed to do. People will counsel and argue against it. If you let your Christianity show, you're never going to advance.

In this environment, you can't succeed. You can't be promoted. You're never going to get anywhere if you don't suppress that Christianity and blend.

There is flexibility when it comes to implementing the instructions and orders of those that are legitimately assigning those things, but when it comes to moral compromise, when it comes to

spiritual abdication and denial of your identity as a child of God and a part of the body of the Lord Jesus Christ, don't let that happen. If Jesus said, if you deny Me before men, you're going to be denied before My Father, and you're not going to be in this group that has blessing and opportunity and function and service and meaningful presence in the plan and purpose of God. You're just not.

But it takes a quality. It takes a decision that stretches over time, and that decision and that quality is faith, believing that what God says He will do, that it is better to please God and alienate men than the other way around. And this is a decision that you have to make now in this country and in this culture all the time.

It's not a prospect that might happen sometime in the future. It's now. And you know this.

You analyze your life. You look at your individual circumstances. You know this to be true.

You have a peer group. You have people with whom you rub elbows, and you know what happens if you start sort of standing out as an actual Bible-believing creationist Christian. You'll get called out.

You'll get marked out. You'll get scorned. You'll get mocked.

You'll get set aside. You're not going to be invited to some things, and you're not going to be a part of some things, and you won't be included in the little gossip clutches and so on. Well, so be it.

Think about the eternal consequences. That's what's happening here in chapter one. These young men, this is an example.

This isn't a promise that it's going to happen in every case, but this is the kind of thing that God does. This may not happen for us until the future kingdom, and so much the better. Would you rather be a select individual trained and groomed for service and function and a long productive life in Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom or in the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ or the kingdom of God the Father? Which one would you rather have? This is a paradigm.

This is an example of what God intends for the faithful in those greater kingdoms that are to come, and it is a reminder that God is in control even when Nebuchadnezzar thinks he's in control, even when Ashpenaz thinks he's calling the shots. This is of God. Don't buy the lie that your life and your fate and your future are determined by people.

They're not. Your life and your fate and your future are squarely and securely in the hands of our Heavenly Father. Don't let the devil tell you otherwise.

Don't let people make you think otherwise. We are not subject to the laws of this cosmos. We are in Christ, and remembering Deuteronomy 28, if you are obedient, if you are doing what you're supposed to, you have a divine level of intervention in your life that is special and is not

subject to scientific inquiry or secularized human analysis.

God in heaven is directing the course of decisions and events that impact you and impinge on your life. God is in control. God is in charge.

Right? It is not what human eyes can see. It is what the human heart presents before God. It's either obedience or not.

So the king instructs Ashpenaz. He brings these guys in. He selects them on the basis of some objective qualities that are good in anybody, and especially in a believer.

And they ought to be prominent and they ought to be visible in us if we are faithful. We can't say, well, what's the point of working? You know, I'm a Christian and I'm discriminated against. I'll never get ahead in this secular world, so why bother? These guys stood out in a degenerate culture so bad that God judged it and took it out.

They're good looking. They're gifted in wisdom, possessing knowledge, quick to understand. They have cultivated their minds while others were cultivating pleasure.

They have cultivated their appearance while others were busy looking sloppy. Right? And God selects for that. Whom they might teach, apt to learn.

Your regular participation and attendance in Bible class, your regular review and reflection on what we see in God's word improves your mental apparatus. If you're old, it keeps it sharp. If you're young, it helps develop it and improve it.

There is no better exercise for your mind than exercising it on divine truth. It makes human knowledge trivial to understand and to retain and to process. If you're able to process spiritual truth, the things of this life are cake.

It's easy. And the king, here in verse 5, appointed for them a daily provision of the king's delicacies. The word delicacies is not in the Hebrew here.

This is just the king's food. I think they're kind of canting the account here. This is a duplicated word.

It's patbag, patbag. P-A-T-H-B-A-G. Patbag, patbag.

And it's a Persian word and it just means portion of food. Doesn't have anything to do with its quality or it's dainty or it's been prepared by some great sous chef or something. It's just from the king's table.

They're eating what the king eats. Now, that in itself has implications. This is the food of the king.

The king in Babylon and in many other ancient Near Eastern civilizations is both a civil ruler and

a religious leader. He's kind of the pope and the king rolled up into one. His food is not just food from the kitchen, not even the royal kitchen.

This food has religious uses. It has been dedicated. It has been blessed.

It has been sanctified by being laid before Bel or Marduk. This is food that has been presented in the king's name before an idol. And the king is viewed as the god's representative on earth.

And so the food that you prepare for Bel or Marduk or Nabu or any of the other Babylonian gods, you present it to him and say, do you like this food? And in their imagination, this mythical god says, oh yes, give it to my proxy Nebuchadnezzar. Give it to my proxy, the princes and the nobles of the land. They'll eat it for me because I approve of it.

This is the same thing Paul talks about in the New Testament, food offered to idols. It has had a religious presentation, a religious sanctification. We do this today.

Is there any of us that doesn't ask God's blessing on the food? Do we not come before God with this food and thank him as its source and ask him to bless it to our nourishment and the functioning of our bodies and so on? There is a religious connection with food. Paul talks about it. He says all food is good if it's taken with prayer and thanksgiving, prayer and thanksgiving associated with food.

He uses the example of the Lord's table when they come together for a meal. And he says, you think about the Lord blessing the cup, blessing the bread, right? So it's significant. And anybody, especially in the ancient world, reading this account, as soon as they say they are given to eat from the king's table, this is religion food as well as sustenance.

So delicacies doesn't really get it. This is the king's paganly sanctified food, if you will, and the wine which he drank. Now, the wine in Babylon is not like wine in Israel.

In Israel, wine was routinely cut with water, diluted. Anywhere from the wine being one part in four to one part in 10. The wine was used more as a disinfectant and something to keep the water from growing little critters in it, you know, to preserve it while it was being stored and to give it a little bit of a flavor.

You know, we've got, so you can look at any cooler case now and see that there are these flavored waters that are mostly water, but they've got a little bit of fruit flavoring or whatever. Well, this is how wine was used in Israel, generally speaking, unless you were a wine bibber and you wanted it full strength, you know, give me the 75 proof, you know, give me the whatever. So when they get to Babylon, they don't cut the wine there.

The king's wine is full strength and it's a very powerful intoxicant. Think Belshazzar at the other end of this story, right? So both the food and the wine, I've seen accounts where they say, well, it was defiling in the view of the four individuals here because it was prepared by Gentiles. All of their food's prepared by Gentiles.

All of it, if that were going to render it unclean, even the pulse or whatever it is they're going to get is still prepared by the same Gentiles that are preparing other food. The difference is it has not been a part of a religious ceremony. The Babylonians did not present cereal grains and vegetables to their gods.

These were animal sacrifices. So the reason that Daniel is going to specify it later on becomes clear. They're on a three-year program, three years of training.

And at the end of that time, they will serve before the king. From among the sons of Judah were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. To them, the chief of the eunuchs gave names.

We'll talk about these names when we come back from our break, but just be aware that this is an attempt to subtract out of their former religious and spiritual connections. When you change someone's name, it can either be toward that, Abram becomes Abraham, Sarai becomes Sarah, Jacob becomes Yisrael, Prince of God, or it can be the other direction. And this is an attempt by the Babylonians to sort of say, well, that was your old life.

This is your new life. Kind of like the children of white people that got captured by Indians and integrated into the tribe. They'd give them a, you know, you are now, you know, Buffalo falls in water or something instead of Jedediah Smith.

So this is what they're trying to do. Let's pause here and take our break. When we come back, we're going to see these individuals in a not unlike position to what we are today in our ever digressing culture.

How do they parse that situation? How do they know where to take their stand and how do they do it effectively? We'll do that when we come back.