

2 Chronicles 36:15–21 (NIV)

¹⁵ The LORD, the God of their ancestors, sent word to them through his messengers again and again, because he had pity on his people and on his dwelling place. ¹⁶ But they mocked God's messengers, despised his words and scoffed at his prophets until the wrath of the LORD was aroused against his people and there was no remedy. ¹⁷ He brought up against them the king of the Babylonians, who killed their young men with the sword in the sanctuary, and did not spare young men or young women, the elderly or the infirm. God gave them all into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. ¹⁸ He carried to Babylon all the articles from the temple of God, both large and small, and the treasures of the LORD's temple and the treasures of the king and his officials. ¹⁹ They set fire to God's temple and broke down the wall of Jerusalem; they burned all the palaces and destroyed everything of value there.

²⁰ He carried into exile to Babylon the remnant, who escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and his successors until the kingdom of Persia came to power.

²¹ The land enjoyed its sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed in fulfillment of the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah.

Lamentations 1:1–3 (NIV)

How deserted lies the city, once so full of people!
How like a widow is she, who once was great among the nations!
She who was queen among the provinces has now become a slave.

² Bitterly she weeps at night, tears are on her cheeks.
Among all her lovers there is no one to comfort her.
All her friends have betrayed her; they have become her enemies.

³ After affliction and harsh labor, Judah has gone into exile.
She dwells among the nations; she finds no resting place.
All who pursue her have overtaken her in the midst of her distress.

Daniel 1:1–7 (NIV)

In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. ² 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.

³ 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—⁴ 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. ⁵ The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service.

⁶ Among those who were chosen were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. ⁷ The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego.

Jeremiah 29:10–14 (NIV)

¹⁰ This is what the LORD says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. ¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. ¹² Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile."

The true story

The failed kings of Israel, i.e., the bad shepherds, led a faithless people and their unwillingness to live up to the covenant they had made with God led to terrible consequences. In 722 BC the northern kingdom, Israel, was swept away by the Assyrians. And though Jerusalem was spared at the time, by 600BC the Babylonian empire was falling upon the city and the remnant of Israelites. Soon Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and thousands of others would go into exile, for the seeming death of Jerusalem had come.

Try to imagine losing everything . . . all of it. Your home, your family, your possessions, even your God. That about sums it up for the Israelite remnant who went off into exile to Babylon and elsewhere. A thousand miles from home, to a strange people and a strange land. No expectation of returning home. Would you really set about to make a new life? Would you go along with the ways of this new land to get along in your new life? How faithful would you be to your God -- who had thrown you into jail, as it were? These are the questions that faced all the exiles as they made their way to new lands.

One was named Daniel. He and some friends were sent to Babylon very early in the process of Judah's collapse. It is probably best to see their exile as an appeasement of Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king, for these young men were among Israel's best and brightest.

Daniel

Daniel had enjoyed his life of privilege. As part of Israel's ruling class, Daniel was well-educated and quite comfortable. He was smart, organized, strong-willed, and confident. He had everything going for him. He was young and on top of the world.

But when they came . . . they came for Daniel too.

As Jerusalem and the remaining Israelites slowly succumbed to the power of Babylon, demands were made of the king of Judah. Jerusalem's best and brightest were to be sent to Babylon to serve their king, Nebuchadnezzar. So Daniel and others began the thousand-mile journey.

The Book of Lamentations

Honestly. Did you even know that there is an Old Testament book called *Lamentations*? It is understatement to say that it is not read from the pulpit very often. Undoubtedly, it is because the book is aptly named.

A lamentation is a profound expression of grief and loss. It is a wailing. A lamentation is despairing. The book of Lamentations consists of five tightly-written laments for the loss of Jerusalem, the temple, and the ark of the covenant to the Babylonians in 587/586BC.

Though often not the case in the Bible, the chapter divisions in Lamentations make sense. Each chapter is a separate lament. The first four are tightly written acrostics, in which each line of the poem (in Hebrew) begins with successive letters of the alphabet. Though the laments as a whole express the community's grief and loss, the poems use different speakers to express individual weeping. Try reading the book as dramatized speech. For example, there is the voice of the poet who speaks for the community. There is a woman who is the personification of Jerusalem. She is "fair Zion" and has lost her husband.

You may be able to get close to the emotional core of these poems if you can reconnect with the deepest, most hurtful loss you have ever endured. These laments express the profound despair of a people who have lost everything: their homes, their land, many of their loved ones, their temple, even the stone tablets given to them by God. And their grief was surely made all the worse by their belief that all this had come upon them as punishment for their sins. Not only had they lost Jerusalem, they had lost their God. If we bring to mind the image of a woman wailing and throwing herself into the dust at the feet of her dead child we might begin to grasp the emotional honesty of these writings.

Daniel's mind sought to keep up with the changes that had swept over him and his heart struggled to deal with the pain of separation and loss. A comfort was the fact that three of his friends had also been turned over to Nebuchadnezzar: Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.

It begins

The journey had been hard. At times Daniel had feared he would never even reach Babylon. But he did. And he and his friends settled into their new lives, determined to make the best of it. What choice did they really have? There was no prospect of ever returning home; Babylon was one of the mightiest empires ever known. So, they would try to serve their new king well and stay true to their God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Daniel and his friends soon confronted the choices thrust upon them by this strange world called Babylon. It began with names, just names. Which seems like a small thing to us but would have been anything but small to these young Jews. Their proper Israelite names were taken from them. All four would now be known by Babylonian names: Daniel as Belteshazzar, his friends as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

The Book of Daniel

The book of Daniel is set during the time of the Jewish exile in Babylon, more than 500 years before Jesus. Daniel is in two very distinct sections. The first section, chapters 1-6, tells the story of Daniel and his friends. Living in exile, they are pressured to assimilate into the Babylonian culture and religion. All of the short stories that make up this section tell how God delivered his people from harm because they stayed true. These stories came together in their final form about 200 years before Jesus, when the Jews faced similar pressure from a Syrian despot. The stories have a common moral: stay true to Israel's God and you will be saved.

The second half of Daniel, chapters 7-12, tells a similar story about faithfulness and deliverance, but this time in apocalyptic language and imagery that is very similar to what we find in Revelation. The writing may seem very strange and bizarre to us, but it was quite popular during the period 200 years before and after Jesus.

As Daniel and his friends tried to deal with the affront of being given Babylonian names, they were quickly thrust into a much more significant crisis.

Being now in service to Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel and his friends were expected to eat the king's rations. This would be far better fare than the commoners of Babylon could ever contemplate eating. It was to make the four Jews strong and sharp and suitable for the king's service.

But of course, the problem presented by the king's food was clear. Such food, though delicious and nutritious, would often be conceived and prepared in violation of the Jewish food laws. Not only would pork be served, but also shrimp and other foods that were forbidden under the Law of Moses.

God had already softened the heart of the Babylonian official toward Daniel and his friends. So, when Daniel suggested they be allowed to live on vegetables and water for ten days and see how they did, the official agreed.

And, not surprisingly for those who know God, when the ten days were over Daniel and his friends were doing better than the young men who had been eating the King's food!

So, Daniel and his friends were allowed to stay on their special "kosher" diet and a crisis was passed. God had more gifts for Daniel and the others.

The giant statue

Nebuchadnezzar, mighty king of Babylon, decided to erect a giant golden statue of himself. I'm sure he would have enscribed on the pedestal the same sentiment as Ozymandias – "look on my works, ye mighty, and despair." Such a statue it was. Ninety feet high. Nine feet wide. Gleaming gold.

So taken with it was the king, that he ordered the whole kingdom to sing songs, to dance dances, to praise and worship this statue of the mighty, mighty Nebuchadnezzar. What a glorious day it was!

But then a few clouds rolled into the celebration, three clouds to be precise, named Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They would not sing nor dance. They would not worship the magnificent statue. So the king sent for them, these three strange Jews from Jerusalem who failed to appreciate all that the king had done for them.

When questioned about their failure to join in the joyous worship of the gold statue, the three simply refused. Even when the king made it clear he'd toss them into a giant, fiery furnace that burned as hot as the sun, they still refused. Their response was infuriating to the king: "If our God—the one we serve—is able to rescue us from the furnace of flaming fire and from your power, Your Majesty, then let him rescue us. But if he doesn't, know this for certain, Your Majesty: we will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you've set up." Never, never, never. Under no circumstances would they abandon their God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Just *no*.

The king was so enraged that in a murderous fury he ordered them bound up and tossed into the furnace. The fire was so hot it even consumed the soldiers who tossed the three friends into the fire.

But when the king looked into the fire, he didn't see the burning bodies of three bound men, but four men – unbound and walking around! Muttering that the fourth man looked like a god of some kind, Nebuchadnezzar ordered the door of the furnace opened so the three friends could walk. Not only were they unharmed, they didn't even smell of fire.

Then came the biggest surprise of all – the king praised the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. From this time, no one was even to be disrespectful of the God of the strange Jews.

Even if . . .

This story, as entertaining as it is, has a lot to say to us – some of it pretty obvious, some not. It is pretty easy to see that the story is about staying true to God even in the most difficult of circumstances. He won't abandon you; don't you abandon him. But there is something deeper and more challenging going on. When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are threatened with certain death, they admit that, though God is with them, they don't know whether they will live or die. But even if God doesn't rescue them, the answer is still no. Their faithfulness to God will not be swayed by circumstances, even by the prospect of death. John Goldingay writes:

The implicit question being asked of them is the Adversary's question about Job, does he only honor God because of the blessings God gives him? God may be trusted to protect us, but our honoring him is not conditional upon his preserving us from every blazing furnace, so that if he should not do so, we are free to abandon him and try some other god Death is preferable to apostasy. We regard no other god but God, no matter what happens. We obey God, not human beings (Acts 4:19–20; 5:29). Such a confession means that human potentates are defeated whether their victims escape the flames (as they will here) or whether they do not (as in 2 Maccabees 7). Their testing takes place in the flames themselves, if these are ever lit, though it has already taken place when the flames have been threatened.¹

When we are in tough times, it can be tempting to tie our faith in God to our getting the help that we desire. As long as we think our prayers are getting answered then we are ready to believe in God. But that isn't really what faithfulness is about. Being genuinely faithful transcends circumstances. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are

¹ Goldingay, J. E. (1998). *Daniel* (Vol. 30, p. 74). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

simply going to stay true to God, even if they are tossed into the furnace and are not rescued from death. So it was with all those living in exile. Would they stay true to God even in the darkest times of their lives.

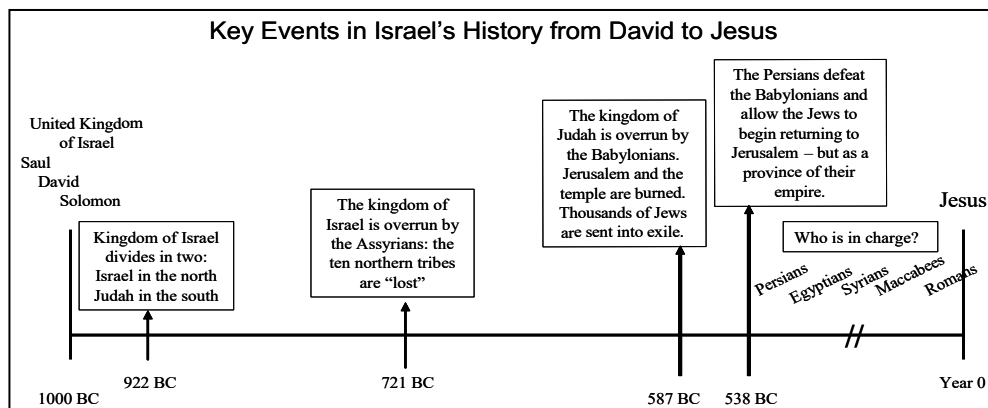
God never gives up – neither should we

After Daniel and his friends were sent to Babylon, the unrelenting pressure of the Babylonian empire fell ever harder on Jerusalem and the Jews nearly 600 years before Jesus, Nebuchadnezzar began to send increasing number of Jews into exile. A large wave left for Babylonia in 597BC, ten years before the final destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. Today's passage from the book of Jeremiah is part of a letter from Jeremiah (who is still in Jerusalem at the time of its writing) to Jews who had already been exiled.

The message from God that Jeremiah delivers in the letter is grounded in future hope, though not immediate. The Jews have been exiled to a distant land. They are to go ahead and build homes and raise their families. They are even to pray that Babylon prospers, for then they will prosper as well. This passage is grounded upon a faithful God who never gives up on promises made. And God promises the people a "future with hope" (v.11).

Now, we might think that God would simply reach out and accomplish all this. God shouldn't need help – "I know the plans I have for you" (v. 11). Yet, these very plans will be shaped and affected by the people. When they call upon God and pray to him . . . then God will hear them (v. 12). The people will find God, and God will find them, but they are to seek God with their heart (v. 13).

There is deep mystery here that speaks to the profound love that God has for us. You and I, weak and confused though we may be, influence the plans and the actions of God. It is true that our faith is a gift from God so that no one can boast about it (Ephesians 2:8-9), yet we are to search for God. We are to pray. We are to open the door. As Anthony Saldarini puts it in his commentary on Jeremiah, "None of that may be quite logical, but it is that peculiar biblical claim about human freedom and divine initiative, or, if you will, divine freedom and human will. . . . God's will and freedom do not run rampant over human words and deeds – good or bad – nor does human intentionality so control what happens that God is unable to effect the divine purposes. What 'happens' occurs within that tension. So we count on God to be God and we pray to God in order to bring that about."



Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *Paul's Letters to the Next Generation: 1 & Timothy and Titus.*

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *John's Gospel*

Meeting on-line at 12:00 noon Tuesday on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

Scott's Sunday Class

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

This week: We are on a journey through the biblical story, *God-Is*. Each week, we will follow the sermon at 9:30 and dig a little deeper into the Scriptures for that week.

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.