Hey, what’s up? It’s good to see all of you. Man it’s so good to be back with you. If this is your first time to be with us or if you’ve come over the last month, or if you have simply forgotten who I am my name is Aaron and I’m one of the pastors here.

I’ve been away this summer on something you all graciously give to me and my family every year—a study break, which is a time for me to get away and to recalibrate and to rest and just spend some time with them and really pursue the Lord personally, not just because I’m a pastor. And then to spend some time studying and seeking out direction for the direction of our church over the next year. So it was a really productive time. I was able to lay out teaching sermon series all the way through the other side of Easter of next year. I’m really looking forward to where God is leading us.

Can we just take a quick minute and express our love and appreciation for Jake, Matt, and Petie and just the amazing job they do teaching us. They did a great job. Those guys are the real deal. Love those guys. Love serving with them. It’s also really good to be back.

I want to say hello to our North campus. Could we just show them some love? They are tuning live streaming right now. Love you guys. I can’t wait to get over and see you again. I’m hearing so many great things about what God is doing over there. And I’m watching the developments of your permanent facility that is going to be opening up in January.

Speaking of which, our Downtown campus is going to be opening in January. If you are interested in being a part of that or if you’d like more information about it we’re having a meeting at the Downtown campus facility this Thursday, August 11, at 6:30. So write that down. We’d love to have you down there for that.

Today we’re beginning a brand new series of messages called KINGDOM OF MEN. And we’re going to be working our way through the Old Testament Book of Daniel over the course of the next several weeks together. So if you have a Bible or a device with a Bible on it go ahead and get to Daniel, chapter 1.

I want to kind of start with this question. Has there ever been a time in your life where you found yourself in a setting where you felt like an outsider or maybe you didn’t feel like you had a whole lot in common with the people around you. And because of that, maybe some anxiety began to rise up or maybe some fear and you weren’t exactly at your best. Your personality didn’t necessarily come through because of the fear and anxiety associated with the fact that you felt like an outsider.

There have been a lot of times in my life where I felt that way but one that really comes to mind is a few years ago I was vacationing with my family in Colorado. And for those of you who don’t know, Lindsay and I have four kids between the ages of four and almost 14. And so anytime we go to dinner it’s an ordeal. Usually we need to get to the restaurant early enough so that we can find a table to seat all six of us.
We’ve learned the routine. It was a little before five o’clock and we went out and found this restaurant in this small, little town in the mountains of Colorado. It wasn’t a very big restaurant but it didn’t matter. We got there early. We had a nice table. We sat down. As soon as we had ordered our food and handed the menus back to the waitress, I hear a bunch of motor cycles pull up outside.

Now, at first I was thinking, “Oh, it’s probably like a retirees’ group, a nice little motor cycle club. They like to enjoy the open road on the weekend, an innocent bunch. But, nope—it was the Hells Angels, alright? And if you don’t know who the Hells Angels are, they are a pretty notorious biker gang, pretty rowdy. You don’t want to mess with them.

So I’m sitting there with my wife and four kids and immediately I look across at my wife and I said, “It’s the Hells Angels. Eat your food as fast as you can and do not make eye contact. Don’t pick any fights. Don’t say anything, alright? We’re getting out of here as soon as we can.” As if the Hells Angels wanted to take my family out. I don’t know where my mind was.

My wife looked at me. And bless her heart this is literally what she said. She said, “What are the Hells Angels?” And they were coming in. There were about 60 of them, which pretty much filled the rest of the restaurant. It was our family surrounded by them. So I looked at her and I was like, “I don’t have time to explain it right now. I’ll explain it later.”

What she did next absolutely terrified me. She pulled out her phone and began to google Hells Angels and read aloud what she was learning on Wikipedia. I was like, “Shhh.” Thankfully nothing happened to us. They were all actually very nice. And we ended up leaving and I actually made a big deal out of nothing.

Have you ever been in a situation, maybe it wasn’t quite like that, but maybe you felt like you were in an environment or a setting where you looked around and you thought, “Well, I kind of feel like an outsider in this setting.” Maybe you moved to a new city, maybe you started a new school, or a new job. Maybe, honestly some of you would say, “I kind of feel that way right now. I don’t normally go to church. I came today for whatever reason.” Or, “Somebody invited me and I feel a little bit that way right now.”

Or maybe you got tickets to the Colts game and so you go and you sit in a section surrounded by drunken Bears fans because, honestly, you have to be drunk to be a Bears fan. I’ve waited all study break to break that one out. That was awesome. And if you’re a Bears fan, we love you. You just need to get a different team, right?

But maybe you’ve found yourself in that environment. And here’s the thing, whenever you feel like an outsider, whenever you feel that you don’t have that much in common with the people around you, you’re not yourself are you? You feel a little defensive. You feel anxiety ridden. Maybe you get angry.

And actually I think this is what the author of Hebrews was talking about when he penned these words in chapter 11, verse 13. He’s actually talking about a group of people who were known for their faith. They were actually heroes of the faith and it says that they were, “… strangers and exiles on earth.” They were outsiders. They felt like they didn’t necessarily belong. And the reason why the heroes of the faith felt that way is because God had invited them into being a part of His redemption plan upon the face of the earth.
I love that word *redemption*. If you’re not familiar with it, it basically just means to recover something that was lost, or to renovate something, or to restore something. And this is God’s desire for the world. The world is not the enemy. The world is the hostage of the enemy. And God’s desire isn’t to condemn the world or to destroy the world but to redeem it, to recover it, to restore it. So for those of us who have trusted our lives to Jesus, we’re running after Him, He invites us into that redemption plan and it’s not optional.

I don’t know if any of you have thought this before, “Well, I believe in God but it’s just a private thing between me and Him. The Big Guy upstairs knows where we stand.” That’s not in the Bible. Yes, there is a personal thing between you and God. But it was never meant to be private in the sense that Jesus has invited us on an adventure with Him to fit our personality and to fit the environment that we find ourselves in. Jesus has said, “Listen. I want you to be a part—I want you to be an agent of change to influence and impact God’s plan of redemption upon this world.”

So as followers of Jesus we have a unique perspective on the world. We believe a few things. We believe that this world is broken due to our sin, my sin. That’s why every time I turn on the news I see so much pain and heartbeat, division and death. We believe that God created everyone in His image and the truth of His word is intended for human beings to flourish under it. We believe that God sent His Son, Jesus, to live the life that we could never live, to die the death that we were supposed to die, so that we could inherit the life that we could never earn.

We believe that God called us to be His representatives upon and within this fallen world so that as many people as possible can get a clear picture of who Jesus is and what it is that He is offering to them. We believe that there is nobody who is outside of God’s grace. He can redeem anything and anyone anywhere, anytime through His Son, Jesus. And He is still actively at work in this world.

Yet when you begin to live that way, you’re going to be a stranger, and you’re going to be an exile in this world. And there are a couple of ways that you can deal with that. One way is to be filled with anxiety and to get defensive and maybe go on the attack. Another way is maybe to just blend in and there’s nothing distinctive about our lives because we’re afraid of what other people might do or say to us. But there is a third way. The third way is what we want to explore together in the coming weeks as we study this great, relevant book of the Bible called Daniel.

Here’s the question that the Book of Daniel seeks to resolve. And it’s a difficult question. That’s why we’re going to spend several weeks in it: how do I represent Jesus in a way that is distinct (and by distinct I mean set apart) and influential (meaning that by my actions and by my words things are actually going to change by God’s Spirit moving through me) without being divisive and extreme and without actually giving God a bad name? This is a really difficult thing. It’s a lot easier for me to read this question than to have answers to it. So that’s why we’re going to let the Book of Daniel be our guide. Check it out for yourself. Read the Book of Daniel. See what it is that God might be saying and communicating to you.

Now, when we talk about the Book of Daniel I don’t know what comes to your mind. I don’t know how many of you grew up in church or if you went to Sunday School. Even if you don’t know a whole lot about the Bible chances are that you’ve probably heard somewhere two of the primary stories in the Book of Daniel, what the Book of Daniel is usually known for. Unfortunately, that’s all we really know. We don’t necessarily know the context in which these stories went down.
One of them is Daniel in the lion’s den. Have you heard that story? It’s horrible. Daniel gets thrown into this den of lions because they wanted to kill him. These lions are going to eat him. And actually, these lions are starved so that way when something is thrown in, they’re most certainly going to devour it. But that doesn’t happen.

He’s in there for a whole night and the next morning when they open up the doorway to the den Daniel is just in there kickin’ it with the lions. I would just imagine he waited all night long for that door to open and he’s just positioned himself. He’s like stroking the lion. What’s up? This is Scar. I’ve named him. We’re cool.

And then there’s another story in the Book of Daniel that maybe you’re familiar with. It’s when Daniels three friends: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego get turned into human s’mores and thrown into this fiery furnace. It’s heated up so hot that the guys who throw them in, they die, but these guys don’t even get touched.

They’re really, really cool stories but the unfortunate thing about them is that we usually never understand the context in which these stories go down. They become kid’s stories that we learn in Sunday School but there is so much more to the Book of Daniel that we need—especially for this time period.

Now as we begin to read through this, for those of you who think that I’ve got some sort of agenda that I’m trying to communicate this sermon series was planned for last summer. Long before we fully knew who the presidential candidates were, long before we knew all of the stuff that is going down—just want you to know. This has been planned for twelve months and I believe that God’s providential timing is important. I think that you’re going to see that here in a minute.

Let’s begin in Daniel, chapter 1 starting in verse 1. It says, “During the third year of King Jehoiakim’s reign in Judah, King Nebuchadnezzar,” he’s a key player here, “of Babylon,” key place, “came to Jerusalem and besieged it.”

So what’s happening here is that God’s people are all in Jerusalem and they have trusted God’s way of redemption but they are just not continuing to remain in that way of redemption. They are like you and me. We have a tendency to drift from God. We have a tendency to break our commitments. They kept drifting off into less than what was God’s best for them. And God continues to lovingly and patiently warn them but it’s not working. So God drops this warning upon them.

It’s really important for you to understand that anytime that God warns us in the Scriptures it’s not the same kind of warning like if I were to warn you or if your boss were to warn you. My warnings are all wrapped up in my insecurities and fallenness as a man. So if I feel like you’re not paying attention to me, or if I feel like the message isn’t getting through, I might warn you but it may actually be for motives that are not very good. I may actually be manipulative. I may actually be passive/aggressive. God never is.

God’s warnings to us in the Scriptures are always for our benefit. It’s the same with the people in Jerusalem. God warns them and He says, “Listen, I love you too much to continue to let you drift. So I’m going to do something that might seem unthinkable to you. I’m going to allow a foreign adversary to get your attention. And that’s exactly what happens. It’s going to feel as if this foreign adversary is winning. And the foreign adversary is the Babylonian Empire, which, at the time, was the dominant superpower in the ancient Near East.
And what Babylon would do is that they would go in and conquer foreign nations, they would conquer their enemies but they wouldn’t obliterate them. They would actually harvest the best of the material and the human resources that that society had and they would absorb it into their own society to make them better, which is pretty much like the plot line of every alien movie that is known to man, right? The aliens are coming and they’re going to harvest the best of our resources and people for themselves. That’s the same thing that is happening here in Daniel 1.

King Nebuchadnezzar goes in and he ransacks Jerusalem and this is so surprising but God actually lets him do it. Look at what it says in verse 2, “The Lord,” and this is really an important word here, the Lord what? Gave him. Nobody took it from God, “God gave him victory over King Jehoiakim of Judah and permitted him to take some of the sacred objects from the Temple of God. So Nebuchadnezzar took them back to the land of Babylonia and placed them in the treasure-house of his god.” I want you to hear this really clearly. King Nebuchadnezzar did not take anything from God. God permitted him to have it. God was still in control.

It’s kind of like if you were to see me and my family out somewhere and you were to see one of my kids on my cell phone, because they have a tendency to be addicted to electronic devices, maybe like some of your kids. I’m working on it. If you were to see one of them playing on my phone and you were to come up to me what you would never hear me say is, “Yeah, my kids took my phone from me and they won’t give it back.” Those words are never coming out of my mouth. Even if it’s true that’s never coming out of my mouth. What I’m going to say is, “I’m permitting them to have it. It’s mine. I can get it back anytime I want but I’m permitting them to have it.”

The same thing is going on here. God permitted Nebuchadnezzar to take some of His stuff and some of His people to make His point but He is still in control. Look at verse 3, “Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, his chief of staff, to bring to the palace some of the young men of Judah’s royal family and other noble families, who had been brought to Babylon as captives.” So Jerusalem has been ransacked. They brought some people back to Babylon.

And it says in verse 4, “Select only strong, healthy, and good-looking young men,” so although it sounds like the candidates for The Bachelor that’s not what he’s talking about. He’s talking about something else. “... he said. ‘Make sure they are well versed in every branch of learning, are gifted with knowledge and good judgment, and are suited to serve in the royal palace. Train these young men in the language and literature of Babylon.’”

“So only take the best of the best. Guys who are really, really sharp cookies, alright? I want you to bring them in and I want you to indoctrinate them into the ways of Babylon. “

Verse 5: “The king assigned them a daily ration of food and wine from his own kitchens.” We’ll learn later that this diet would actually violate Daniel and his friends’ religious convictions. “They were to be trained for three years, and then they would enter the royal service. Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were four of the young men chosen, all from the tribe of Judah.” Daniel and his three friends are teenagers at the time. They are really, really young men. And Nebuchadnezzar brings them in and he says, “Okay, I want to indoctrinate you into Babylonian culture.”

Now Babylon was a literal city. It was the largest city at the time—150,000 to 200,000 people lived in Babylon. But it was also a metaphor. We actually hear about Babylon for the very first time in Genesis,
chapter 11 because the common sin of man is to be like God. We think we can be like God. So in Genesis 11 a bunch of people got together and they built this big tower of Babel all the way up—they thought they could reach the heights of God. God scattered them and confused the languages. That’s the very first time we hear about the word Babel or Babylon.

Then we hear it again in Revelation 18—it book ends the Bible. In Revelation 18 Babylon was used to describe an anti-God mindset. So Babylon, as we hear it throughout the study is a metaphor for a rebellious, pluralistic, antagonistic culture—anything that is anti God.

They take Daniel and his three friends and they say, “Listen. You’re going to go into this three-year program and we are going to indoctrinate you into this lifestyle. And at the end of it you’re going to be assigned a new role in the Babylonian Empire. And as a part of this program they were going to be given new names.

Look at what it says in verse 7, “The chief of staff renamed them with these Babylonian names: Daniel was called Belteshazzar. Hananiah was called Shadrach. Mishael was called Meshach. Azariah was called Abednego.” And we might look at that and we might say, “You know that’s one of those places in the Bible that you read and you skip right past it. You don’t think that it’s such a big deal. It’s like, “Okay, they got new names. Whatever.”

This was a big deal. This was an attempt to demoralize them. This was an attempt to forget about their homeland, and forget about their God. In fact did you know that the name Daniel means God is my judge? It’s a great name. They changed it to Belteshazzar. And Belteshazzar, Bel was the name of their demonic god. They kind of used it the way that we use Lord for God.

So Belteshazzar literally means Satan’s Prince. That was intentional. Can you just imagine how every morning—oh, oh, oh, Satan’s Prince? And Daniel had to respond to that name. Can you imagine how that would have gotten under his skin? Can you imagine how angry that would have made him?

Here’s the thing that I want you to see. Not one time do we see Daniel and his friends object, or fight, or get angry over the fact that their names had been changed to these awful names like Satan’s Prince. Now that doesn’t mean that they were just being passive. It means—and this would be really important for us to pick up on—it means that they were choosing their battles wisely.

They were like, “You know what? This isn’t worth going to the mat over because there’s actually something else that God wants to use us to actually contend for, so I’m going to save this one. Daniel was building up his chips. Daniel was really shrewd. Daniel understood that for him to influence this pagan kingdom he couldn’t go to battle over every single thing. So he doesn’t say a word about the name change even though you know that every time they called him Satan’s Prince he would have gritted his teeth.

But Daniel did object to something. And he did it with great wisdom. Look at what it says in verse 8, the king wanted him to eat all of this food and it was actually offensive to him. It may not have been very good for him. Look at what it says. It says, “But Daniel was determined,” so he’s standing for his convictions, “not to defile himself by eating the food and wine given to them by the king. He asked the chief of staff,” this is an interesting word, “for permission,” I don’t know if I would have done that, “for permission not to eat these unacceptable foods.
“Now God had given the chief of staff both respect and affection for Daniel,” which tells us that there had been some things going on that we don’t necessarily know about where Daniel had been earning his respect and affection by the way he was conducting himself as a stranger in a foreign land.

Verse 10, “But he responded,” This is the chief of staff saying this, “I am afraid of my lord the king,” he’s talking about Nebuchadnezzar, “who has ordered that you eat this food and wine. If you become pale and thin compared to the other youths your age, I am afraid the king will have me beheaded.” To which, if I was in Daniel’s sandals I would have said, “Thank you for the idea. I think I’ll make myself look sickly so that way you lose your head.” Luckily I’m not in the Bible. Daniel is, alright?

This is what Daniel says. Verse 12, “Please test us for ten days on a diet of vegetables and water,” Daniel said. “At the end of the ten days, see how we look compared to the other young men who are eating the king’s food. Then make your decision in light of what you see.” Daniel is putting the ball in his court.

Verse 14, “The attendant agreed to Daniel’s suggestion and tested them for ten days,” which I would say is highly risky for both Daniel and his friends and for the chief of staff. If at the end of the ten days they don’t look as healthy they’re going to face the repercussions and the chief of staff is going to lose his head.

Look at what happens. God is still in control. Verse 15, “At the end of the ten days, Daniel and his three friends looked healthier and better nourished than the young men who had been eating the food assigned by the king. So after that, the attendant fed them only vegetables instead of the food and wine provided for the others.” Translation—they changed things but not by force. They let God fight their battles.

Verse 17, “God gave these four young men,” this verse blows my mind. He gave these four young men “an unusual aptitude for understanding every aspect of literature and wisdom.” Literature and wisdom of what? An anti-God culture. And I wrote this out in my notes. Only a confident God would do that. Only a God who is in control would do that, “And God gave Daniel the special ability to interpret the meanings of visions and dreams.” We’re going to get into more of that in chapter 2.

So now God is beginning to tee things up for them to have some influence here. Let’s finish out the passage. Verse 18, “When the training period ordered by the king was completed, the chief of staff brought all the young men to King Nebuchadnezzar. The king talked with them, and no one impressed him as much as Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.” I thought this was kind of an interesting. Notice he used their original names. “So they entered the royal service. Whenever the king consulted them in any matter requiring wisdom and balanced judgment, he found them ten times more capable than any of the magicians and enchanters in his entire kingdom.”

This is incredible. Here you’ve got a guy, a king, King Nebuchadnezzar who does not believe in the same god that they believe in. He does not share the same values that they have. He does not share the same political views that they do. He does not see the world the same way that they see it but the way that they’ve been conducting themselves as outsiders and exiles in a foreign land impresses him so much that he says, “You guys have displayed a wisdom and a balanced judgment that reveals to me that you are 10 times more capable than anybody else in my entire cabinet.” And so he gives them a platform to have influence in his life and in Babylon. That’s amazing.
So I want to just point out three things that we can learn from Daniel and his three friends and then three brief words of application in our time today. So if you’re jotting down just a few notes or maybe you want to pull out your cell phone and take a snapshot of the screen so that way you can go back and review it later, I encourage you to do that.

Here’s the first thing that we learn from Daniel: Daniel understood that God is in control of who is in control. And the biblical word for this is the word sovereign. And I know that’s kind of a fancy Bible word but all that means is supreme, or absolute, or superior. In fact I like to think of it this way. Every time I see the word sovereign in the Scriptures it’s just shorthand for this: God’s got this. God’s got it, alright? So anytime you see sovereign in the Scripture you can say, “Okay, God’s got this.” Even when things seem out of control, even if it seems like He’s losing, even if it seems like the wheels have come off—God has got this. He is in control.

So every time I turn on the news and I’m watching something and all of a sudden it feels like the sky is falling in: God’s got this. Every time it feels like the economy just continues to go down, down, down: God’s got this. Every time the doctor calls and maybe there’s some bad news: God’s got this. He is in control even if it seems, from my limited perspective, as if He doesn’t.

Come on. Put yourself in Daniels sandals for just a minute. I mean have any of you been kidnapped from your home country, stolen away, put into a program to have your brain washed into something different, had your name changed to Satan’s Prince (I don’t think that’s happened to anybody) thrown into a den of lions, his friends thrown into a fiery furnace—Daniel did. And Daniel was able to stay poised under pressure in a foreign kingdom. So much so that the king of that nation said, “I see your wisdom and your balanced judgment and I think that you are 10 times more capable. And I want to hear from you.”

This reveals to you and it reveals to me that, while we may be concerned about the things that we see developing in our world and in our country, if we’re trusting in Jesus there is no room for despair. I’m not saying don’t be concerned. I’m not saying that you shouldn’t lay awake at night and just ponder it. I’m not saying that you shouldn’t think about the future and the kind of world that your kids are going to grow up in, but if despair is the word then that should be a big, giant, red flag that actually your hope in the sovereignty of God has begun to drift and maybe you haven’t even realized it.

The verse that captures this, which is also where we got the title for this series by the way, is Daniel, chapter 4, verse 32 where it says this, “God rules the kingdom of men and He gives it to whom He will.” Nobody takes it from Him. God permits them to have it and God is still in control. And actually, God has got this long range perspective that you and I don’t have and He’s at work right now. So as people who are running after Him we are called to balance this really, really complex line—and it is complex—of knowing when to speak up and stand for convictions and when to shut up and to trust that God is in control, to trust that He is in control recognizing that He rules the kingdom of men.

See, right now I don’t know a lot and I can’t read the future but I do know this: God is not worried about the presidential election in November. He’s just not. I am. You are, maybe. Neighbors are. God’s not. He’s not afraid of ISIS. He isn’t paralyzed over the economic conditions in Europe and other places around the world. It’s been said this way: God rules with His feet up.

I guarantee you this. This conversation is not happening in heaven right now between God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. They are not having a special, emergency meeting right now saying, “There is no way
that we can allow blank into the White House. Holy Spirit were you asleep? How did this happen? How did we get those two … What are You doing? If we allow blank to get into the oval office we’re through. Jesus, everything you did on the cross? It’s all for nothing if blank gets into the office.” That is not happening, alright? Now we need to be reminded of this that come November whoever gets into the office—it’s because God permits him/her to take that office and He is still in control.

Here’s the second thing we learn from Daniel: Daniel understood that God still loves Babylon even though Babylon does not love God. I think that’s why Daniel was able to stay poised under pressure and he was able to live this out in such a winsome way. See Babylon is this idea of a disregard, a disdain for God. But God’s got thick skin and I’m thankful that He does because my sin has been super offensive to God. I was an enemy of God because of my sin. And it’s His grace that covers me.

See, because of my sin, I was an enemy without any chance, without any hope whatsoever but God relentlessly pursued me with patience and persistence and every time I start to think maybe dark or evil thoughts about others around me—why don’t they acknowledge God? I’ve got to be reminded again that I am just as much in need of His grace than anybody else who I come into contact with. And it humbles me every single day to realize that I still don’t deserve His grace and He gives it to me and I need it just like the air that I breathe.

As uncomfortable as this is going to be—and some of you won’t want to play and some of you your emotions are right there—I just want you to think for a minute about that person, that political figure, that group of people, that ideology that just makes your blood boil. It’s going to take you a while to think about it, alright? Just think about it. Maybe the emotions are right under the surface and every time you think about it you’re like, “How could they think that way? How can they vote that way? How could they say that? How could they have that perspective?”

And when you feel threatened, angry, or fearful because of another person, or because of another group, or because of an ideology I want you to remember that God has not written them off and He still loves them and His grace can still cover them just like Nebuchadnezzar. And you know what? God might even use you to influence that person who just gets under your skin.

It’s real quiet in here. This always happens when I come back off of study break. I always dive into the deep end. And it’s like: why don’t I just start with a message on love. So anyway ...

Here’s the third thing: Daniel didn’t demand influence he fostered it. Daniel didn’t demand it. He didn’t stand up. He didn’t make a big scene. He didn’t get overly aggressive. Daniel was able to do this and this is something that, if we kind of live with him and study this book together it’s what I want us to see. Daniel was able to stand upon his convictions in such a way that it was compelling to the people who did not share those convictions.

That’s a lost art. I actually don’t see that very much today. I don’t see it in the political realm. Oftentimes I often don’t see it in the church world. I don’t see it out in the communities. Daniel was not overly aggressive but he was also not overly passive either. If you just think about all of the ways in which his world had changed, and never once—I tried to find it—never once in the book do we see Daniel panic.

Never once do we see him express bitterness. Never once do we see him take shots at, or show contempt for his captors. I’m sure he had his bad days. He was human just like all of us but he never gets obnoxious, he never gets divisive, in fact it was just the opposite. Nebuchadnezzar and his chief of staff
were watching and he had earned their affection and their respect even though they did not see the world as he saw it, which gave him a platform to have ongoing influence in their lives.

I would do well and chances are that you would do well to learn some lessons from Daniel and his friends during the time of Babylon because there is nothing new under the sun. And one of the things that we see a lot—it’s going on right now in our culture and on the news and everything—we see all kinds of debate going on.

There are debates everywhere. Everybody has an opinion. Very little persuading going on, have you noticed this? I don’t know how many news shows I’ve watched and the talking heads are going back and forth and never once have I seen the debaters rise up and at the very end they say, “You know what? You actually made a very valid point. I think you won me to your side. Let’s go to a commercial break.” I mean it just doesn’t happen, right?

Lots of debates very, very little persuading. We can take shots at people’s moral choices and political perspectives only to stiffen their resistance to the gospel message, which in the end is a miss and I believe that God will hold us accountable for that one day.

See, Daniel and his friends never treated their captors as enemies. They took Jesus’ words to heart long before Jesus would ever say them. In Luke, chapter 6, verse 27 Jesus would say these words. This is so, so hard. He said, “Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you.”

“Well, Jesus, I don’t want to do that. That’s really hard to do. Why would I do that?” Well, I don’t know maybe because God is actually at work to redeem this world and He wants to use you to do it, not to condemn the world.

Paul spells this out to this young pastor by the name of Timothy in 2 Timothy, chapter 2. He would say, “A servant of the Lord must not quarrel but must be kind to everyone,” man that’s so hard, “be able to teach, and be patient with difficult people.” How many of you know any difficult people right now? Any takers? So fascinating. There were a number of hands in all services that just didn’t go up. Liars.

Verse 25, “Gently instruct those who oppose the truth.” How do we do that? We do it gently, “Perhaps,” this is key “God will change those people’s hearts,” because He’s the only one who can do it anyway “and they will learn the truth. Then they will come to their senses and escape from the devil’s trap. For they have been held captive by him to do whatever he wants.” This is important. We talked about this before. The world is not the enemy. The world is the hostage of the enemy be careful who you shoot. See we can win the battle but lose the war.

So let me come back to this question that we started with. We’re going to live with this over the next few weeks: How do I represent Jesus in such a way that is distinct and influential without being divisive and extreme?

Three real quick words of application and this is not going to be easy to hear so buckle up, alright? You won’t want to hear this but you also need to eat your vegetables so eat your vegetables.

Here’s the first one: pray for our leaders. Civic leaders, political leaders, corporate leaders, teachers, police officers—pray for our leaders whether you like them and agree with them or not. Pray for them. Now, by pray for them I don’t mean, “Dear Lord, would you please send a meteor to knock out their
motorcade?” That’s not what I’m talking about, alright? I’m talking about the next time that you get worked up over a certain leader or a political figure or whatever, the best thing that you can do is to not rant at the TV screen or to get on social media but the best thing to do is to take it to the Lord who is in control of who is in control.

Now, here’s the thing—before you clap. I’m not saying this at you I’m actually really convicted by this. So actually could I just open up my life and share with you—I’ve said this before. If I step on your toes it’s because God has already cut off my foot. This summer, over the last six weeks or so, I was with my family we were out of state with my in-laws and I watched both political conventions and I was on the news like a drug addict.

I was sitting there ... I don’t know if you can relate to this. My wife and kids went to bed, the house is dark, but I’m still sitting in the lazy-boy watching the TV and I start talking to the TV. Any of you courageous to say that you are with me? Yeah. So, here’s the thing. I’m absolutely brilliant. Like everything that I was saying, all of the points that I was making, I mean I won. I won. It was amazing. So I’m sitting there talking to the screen, “Yeah, yeah, yeah what do you think about this? I’ve got you.”

Here’s the thing. After about three nights of that my heart and my mind started to go to some pretty dark places and actually some things that came out of my mouth—you would not be proud of your pastor. I was sitting there and like all of a sudden this despair and all of this bitterness, and all of this rage—I’d go to bed all worked up and I’d wake up the next morning and study the Book of Daniel. God, that is not fair, alright?

I’m sitting there studying this and all of a sudden I’m seeing these two different things going on inside of me. And this is what the Holy Spirit just kind of worked me over with and maybe some of you need to hear this as well. God was just simply saying this to me, “Hey, man. Every time you panic, every time you yell at the TV screen, every time you watch the news and worry, every time you despair, every time you get depressed and think that the sky is falling—you are essentially saying to Me that you don’t think that I’m in control of who is in control.”

And I was like, “No, no, no. That’s not what I’m saying.”

“No, that’s exactly what you are saying.”

This was the thing that God was doing in me. He was saying, “Hey, you don’t have any room to complain, criticize, attack, tear down any political leaders or whatever if you’re not praying that I would be at work in their heart and in their mind. Listen. If I can handle Nebuchadnezzar I can handle the political leaders today.”

“Well, God. I don’t want to pray for them. They are not very honorable people.”

“Well, have honor for the office even if the person filling that office isn’t very honorable.”

Here’s the second thing. This came after hours and hours of study. It was like manna from heaven. It’s like this theological truth: stop freaking out on people. It’s this realization that ... You know what? You know today, maybe the most spiritually and emotionally healthy thing you can do right now is to go home and just get off Facebook. Maybe like the best thing that you could do for your relationship with the Lord is to monitor your intake of the news. I don’t know about you but I’m never in a better mood
when I watch the news. And I can pretty much tell you what’s going to happen. Jesus even told us, “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart, I’ve overcome all of that trouble that you see.”

I’m not saying that you should shut yourself off to the outside world. Of course you shouldn’t do that. I’m not saying that you shouldn’t have convictions. Of course you should have convictions. Jesus has called us to be salt and light in this world. But if every time you watch the news and you’re on social media and you’re just freaking out on people—there’s nothing compelling about that. In fact, you’re actually stiffening people’s resistance to the gospel message.

I just keep coming back to this truth over and over again. Daniel’s testimony was so compelling to people who did not share his same convictions. And just ask yourself this, “Who am I really convincing anyway when I post or re-post something on Facebook in all caps?” And some of you are like, “Well, I’m posting this for my atheist uncle who really needs to hear this.” He unfriended you last year, alright? He’s not reading it anymore.

And what ends up happening is that Facebook is really smart—they have all of this algorithm stuff and they already know your perspective so they’ll put that in your news feed and it’s just segregating and dividing lines more and more and more. And when the outside world looks and says, “Well, what do Christians believe? That’s what Christians believe?” And then they misunderstand the gospel message because of these secondary things.

Here’s what we learn from Jesus. People who were nothing like Jesus liked Jesus because Jesus was gracious and Jesus was loving. It didn’t mean that He bent over. It didn’t mean that He capitulated on these things. It just means that Jesus had a long-range view of the fact that there is an enemy and it’s not these other people—they are hostages of the enemy. Nobody is compelled to follow Jesus when you freak out on them. Nobody.

See here’s the thing. My words, and actions, and behavior shapes the perceptions by which others understand what it means to be a Christian. So, I don’t know, get a Facebook accountability partner and when you’re tempted to post something run it by them first and say, “You have complete veto power. Should I post this or not?” Every time you get ready to maybe go off on something and you’re talking to somebody ask yourself, “Are my words, and my actions, and behavior representative of the gospel, are they representative of Jesus or have I fallen into despair?”

Here’s the last question and a word of application for all of us: Where have I put my trust? Now where have I put my trust really? Because actually my fears, and my insecurities, and my worries say more about where I put my trust than what I say.

So maybe today some of us—and I’m right there with you—some of us may say, “Man. You know what? I’ve fallen into this.” Listen, between now and November it’s just going to get worse. And so we better come to this resolution now to say, “Jesus, I’ve actually realized over the summer that I’ve drifted away from Your promises. I’ve actually drifted away from the truth that You are in control of who is temporarily in control and I need to re-center myself.”

You know what? None of us are strong enough to do that. That’s why we need the work of the Holy Spirit. That’s why we need the gathering of the saints. That’s why we need the teaching of the word. In fact it will rail against your emotions. It will rail against what you feel like doing. But just look at Daniel, chapter 1 again. This is not my opinion. It’s just in the Book of Daniel where Daniel and his three friends
had influence in such a way that people who did not acknowledge God, and who did not agree with their convictions were compelled by it.

And that same God ... Nebuchadnezzar is long gone, there are just new Nebuchadnezzars now and it’s the same God who will fight the battles for us and He is the only One who can change hearts. He can change the hardest of hearts, and He can penetrate the sharpest of intellects, and He can melt the most stubborn of wills. And maybe God might want to use you to influence those whom He loves.

Let me pray.

*Father, we come to You today and if there are some here who have actually succumbed to fear and despair, I get it. Me too. Me too. I’m right there with them. Father, I pray that we could lean upon the truth of Your word even when that truth doesn’t maybe feel true to us at the time. We’re going to take Your word for it that You’re in control.*

*And Father, some of us worry about what kind of world our kids are going to grow up in, and we worry what life is going to look like on the other side of November, and we wonder how much worse terrorism is going to get and we wonder about racial tensions and violence on our streets and just what exactly is going to happen. And it’s so easy in the midst of all of those very, very legitimate concerns to actually take our eyes off of You. Forgive us of that, God.*

*Help us to be poised under the pressure that we feel because You told us that in this world we would have trouble. You gave us a heads up but You said to be encouraged because You have overcome the world. God, may we begin to live that way recognizing that You are still at work and that lives are still changing one person, one heart at a time and may it begin with us.*

*So God, if there are some in this room who are outside of a living relationship with You, I pray today that they would be willing to give life with You a shot and to surrender their life, and to surrender their will, and to surrender their hopes, and their fears, and their worries, and anxieties to You. That You would take up residence within their heart.*

*God, I pray that You would renew us as a people so that we could be a part of Your redemption plan, Your recovery plan for this world that is broken. I can’t even think of a better time that I’m more excited to be alive because that means that our lives count and that what You are doing matters. So we give this to You right now. We ask this in Jesus’ name.*

*Hey, in just a spirit of contemplation and prayer we’re going to take communion together. This is just a meal where we take a piece of bread and juice that represent the broken body and blood of Jesus that He shed for us. This is the most important part of our time. This is not the time to start thinking about lunch or time to gather your things, or, “Hey let’s make a quick exit to beat the traffic.”*

*I get all of that but you’d be missing out on what actually, may quite possibly be the most transformational part of our service where the Spirit of God is in this place and He wants to do a work within you. It’s not just enough to get the content in your head. God wants to something in this range right here [the heart].*

*So, if you don’t feel comfortable taking the meal, if you’re not walking with Jesus feel free to let it pass.*
Nobody is going to say anything but just spend some time thinking. And here’s what I want you to do. I want you to articulate one good, right, true thing about what you’ve learned from Daniel 1 that is true about God and then what’s one thing that God wants you to do when you leave this place? Those two things, and just begin to walk with God and trust that He’ll begin to yield fruit. That He’ll begin to help you in the crazy, crazy world in which we live.

Ushers why don’t you come down.