



August 3, 2014
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The Upside Down Kingdom: Upside Down Blessings Daniel 1

Our beloved Senior Pastor Mark Toone is on sabbatical this summer and for the month of August, the rest of the Pastoral Team felt particularly drawn to the book of Daniel. Not only because it has some awesome stories that our kids will love, but because the message of the book of Daniel is so relevant for our culture today. Daniel lived at a time when God's people thought that the whole God project had been destroyed and they were thrust into exile in a culture that was totally opposed to all of their beliefs. Despite Daniel living 2600 years ago, we live in a culture very much like his.

Daniel is a book of two halves: the first half is the story of Daniel and his three friends, and the second is a record of Daniel's visions; and our team is going to preach through that first half throughout August. So if you're an adult, grab your Bibles and turn to Daniel chapter 1. If you are under the age of 11, I want you to come down the front, because I need some help to tell this story...

We're calling this sermon series the Upside-Down Kingdom. And each week we hope you'll see that God's Kingdom—the place where God rules and reigns—is upside-down. It looks nothing like the kingdoms of this world (not even the wonderful United Kingdom). And today, I believe this passage tells us that God's kingdom comes through upside-down blessings.

I saw a blog post recently entitled 'One Thing Christians Should Stop Saying.'¹ In it, the author tries to persuade Christians that they need to stop saying things like: 'This new car is such a blessing;' or, 'Finally closed on the house. Feeling blessed.' At first I was really angry with him, but as I prepared for this message, I realized that there might be some truth to what he's saying. Today's passage talks about three gifts from God, and I want to take a look at each of these, and how it shows us that God's kingdom comes through upside-down blessings. But first, we need a bit of history...

Daniel is set in Babylon—the most magnificent city in the whole world. Today it is a set of ruins 50 miles south of Baghdad, but 2600 years ago, it was a masterpiece. It was a spectacular work of architecture including the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, one of the seven wonders of the world. It was the most beautiful place on earth. [Grab kids attention.] It was as beautiful as Gig Harbor on a beautiful sunny summer day playing with your friends in the water or on a boat. If anyone was ever "blessed," the people of Babylon were.

¹ <http://theaccidentalmissionary.wordpress.com/2014/02/20/the-one-things-christians-should-stop-saying/>
Sermon Notes



But for God's people, living there did not seem like a blessing. Everything about it was a reminder of what they had left behind. They believed they were God's people, blessed by Him and chosen to be a light to the world. And to be that light to the world, they had constructed the greatest system of temple worship in Jerusalem the world had ever seen. The only temple in the whole world without an image of God. It was a magnificent witness to the God of Israel.

And then, it all fell to pieces. Look at our passage, and I want you to notice who Daniel attributes the fall of Jerusalem to. [Read V. 1-2]. 'The LORD gave...' This is the first of our three gifts of God. And its kind of a surprising gift. The pagan King Neb came into Jerusalem, totally violated the temple area and absolutely nothing happened. Nothing. This was supposed to be *the* witness to God in the world. And yet Daniel says God *gave* it to King Neb. What!?

It would be a bit like this: [Grab kids attention] Can you imagine God giving our church building to a group of people who don't even believe in God. Why would God ever do that? How is that going to further God's kingdom? Think about all the incredible things we do with this building: upward Basketball, youth groups for hundreds of kids, Celebrate Recovery, Sunday morning worship services and Sunday school. Gone. How will that bring God's kingdom? That's how Daniel felt. And yet, Daniel says, God's blessing was not the temple, but rather the upside-down blessing of the temple's ruin.

As a result of King Neb's takeover of Jerusalem, he decides to take some of the most promising young men back to Babylon with him to train them up so they can serve him. Part of that training included the hardship of having to eat some of the king's food every day.

Last year, some wonderful people sent my wife and I to a hotel and they had arranged for all our food to be paid for. *And* they insisted that we didn't hold back. [Kids, can you imagine eating as much as you want of anything you want?] It was incredible! We had shrimp cocktail and steak and potatoes and blackberry cobbler and ice cream and coffee and ice cream and cheese and more ice cream! I was so full, I didn't eat for a whole day upon return. This is what was on offer

to Daniel and his three friends, and I don't know about you, but I'm not sure I would have done what they did...

Daniel felt that eating the king's food would defile him. Why? Daniel believed if he was passive and ate like everyone else, he would begin to believe that it was King Neb who was providing for him. But Daniel believed that God alone provided for him. And to remind himself of that on a daily basis, he approached the chief eunuch, Ashpenaz [remember, we call him Ash] to ask if he could just eat vegetables and water.

Now we come to our second gift of God. [Read V.8-9] Did you see it? God gave Daniel favor and compassion in Ash's eyes. Now it was Ash's job to make sure these students were healthy, and he thought eating the best food is the best way to be healthy. But God intervened, and turned Ash's heart towards Daniel. Ash saw Daniel as a real person, with real struggles trying to fit into this culture, and Ash wanted to help him.

Now if we were in Daniel's situation, I think we probably would have just passively participated in this culture of indulgence and excess and said: 'Aren't we so blessed! We get to share in the king's food. Man, God has really blessed us this time.' But to do so, would have deprived Ash of God's blessing. God wanted to bless this pagan with a gift of compassion. So Daniel says, God's blessing was not the food, but the upside-down blessing of a gift of compassion to a pagan.

We have one final gift of God to consider in this passage. Daniel and his buddies were being trained to serve the king. Part of that training was a three-year Babylonian education. Now, a Babylonian education was not like a degree from the UW, it was not in science or math or social studies. A Babylonian education was all about the Babylonian literature and language; and this literature was totally opposed to the beliefs of God's people. It would have been all about the Babylonian gods and magic. This was not something that any Jew would want to spend three years of their life learning about. It was totally anti-God!

And yet... we come to the third gift of God. [READ V. 17] God gave Daniel and his friends learning and skill in this anti-God literature and culture. So much so that they were 10 times better than all the magicians in the whole kingdom! Why would God do that?

Earlier this week, Pastor Megan said to me, this would be like God taking four American Christians, who was sold out for Jesus, and placing them in a training school for ISIS, now called the Islamic State, and God giving these men an understanding of the Qur'an, of the Hadith, and of Sharia Law that was 10 times better than anyone else. Such that these American Christians became trusted advisors of the leader, the Caliphate Ibrahim.

What a crazy thing for God to do!? I mean if these men were that intelligent, why didn't God send them to seminary and then let them plant churches and bring people to know Jesus? Yet this is what Daniel is claiming God did for him and his friends. Daniel could have been a great prophet in Jerusalem, with a vast knowledge of the Law, but instead he knew all about Babylonian gods and magic. Daniel says God's blessing was not to know all about Israel's God, but the upside-down blessing of knowing all about Babylonian gods and magic.

So, three upside-down blessings: the temple's ruin, compassion given to a pagan, and comprehensive knowledge of a pagan culture. And you might be thinking a couple of things.

First, why would God do that? And second, what difference does it make to me? Let me finish by answering these two questions.

Why would God act in this way? I mean wouldn't it have made more sense to make the temple bigger and better, and give compassion to His people, and give Daniel the ability to know God's Law and draw God's people closer to God? Well, the answer to this comes right back at the beginning of the Bible.

God looks and sees that the world he has created is a mess because humans have turned their back on him. So he decides to do something about it, and he does it through the family of a man named Abraham. God calls Abraham, and says to him 'I will bless you... so that you will be a blessing... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'² The reason God blesses his people—the descendants of Abraham—is so that they will be a blessing to others. God wants to bless all the families of the earth, and the way he has chosen to do that, is by blessing a chosen group of people, so that they might be a blessing to the world.

But... by the time Daniel lived, God's people weren't really blessing the world. They had shut themselves off from the world and believed instead that God was going to bless the world by them having a better system of temple worship. And so for God to fulfill his purposes of blessing the world, he had to do something radical. He had to destroy the temple, and send his people into the world, into Babylon.

And guess what happened? God used Daniel and his friends to fulfill his plans to bless the whole world. As a result of these four men, as we'll see this month, the most powerful king in the whole world came to believe in the God of Israel. And then, another king came to believe in the God of Israel, and... get this... this king sent a message to the whole world telling them how great the God of Israel was! God blesses his people, so they may be a blessing to the whole world.

And so we come to where I want to finish. Why does all this matter to us? Well... because the Church is God's people in and through Jesus Christ. And God has blessed us to be a blessing. But just like that blog post I talked about at the beginning that said we shouldn't say new cars or completing homes are blessings, I don't think we really recognize God's blessing. Because God's blessing is upside-down, just like the ones Daniel experienced. And how do I know? Because I'm living it.

The last several months have been difficult for us as a family. Because of our visa situation, we've been unable to return to England to visit our family there. We haven't been to England in almost 18 months. Our daughter has never met her great-grandparents. And although we have chosen this, we feel a bit like Daniel: exiled to a land not our own, thousands of miles away from our family. Combine that with the struggles of having a first child: sleepless nights, feelings of loneliness and isolation for the mother, feelings of helplessness and being lost for the father, and it gets worse.

This passage has really spoken to me in the last few weeks about the upside-down blessings of God. Being far away from family has resulted in a strengthening of our marriage as we have been forced to rely on each other; and in the breaking down of our individualism as we have

² Genesis 12:2-3

been forced to rely on our church community. Living in a culture not our own has forced us to examine our own cultural values and beliefs and consider what are God's values and beliefs.

The real blessings—not the house we live in, or the cars we drive, or the food we eat—the real blessings have been upside-down. And we know that we have been blessed in this way so we can bless others. Bless those who have no family by being their family. Bless those young families who are tired, isolated and helpless. Bless those people who are struggling with an American culture that isn't like it used to be. We have been truly blessed in an upside-down way, so that we can be a blessing.

And so this morning, may I be so bold as to say to you that you are not blessed because you live in Gig Harbor, in a beautiful house with a nice car and a great family? But rather, you are blessed because God loves you, has redeemed you in Jesus Christ, and has a plan for this world which he wants you to participate in: he wants to bless the whole world.

In this way, therefore, you are blessed when you, like us, are far away from your hometown. You are blessed when you, like Daniel, work for someone who does not share your values. You are blessed when you, like Daniel, spend three years learning about something totally anti-God. Because in those things, God is at work bringing his kingdom through upside-down blessings; God is at work blessing the whole world through you.

The question for you this morning is: will you take the time to look for God's true upside-down blessings, and then participate in his work of blessing others through you? Or will you passively participate in this culture of indulgence and excess, assuming all along that God has blessed you, and consuming more than you give back?

Or more simply, for our kids, how has God blessed you, even if it might not feel like it, and how can you use that blessing to bless someone else?

God's kingdom is an upside-down kingdom. And it comes through upside-down blessings. And it comes through the people of God allowing Him to use them to bless this world through their own upside-down blessings. I want to be a part of that. Don't you?

Benediction: 2 Cor. 1:3-4

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

Sermon Questions

- REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER: Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.

- PRAY TOGETHER: Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.

- DIG DEEPER

1. In the original language the same verb is used to describe what God does in verses 2, 9 and 17. The verb is 'to give.'
2. Why does God give these three things? Why does God bless his people? (Use Genesis 12 to help)
3. Where has God truly blessed you, and how is he calling you to bless others?