

PONDER

We saw in Daniel 1:1-2 that this book is about the battle between human rulers and God. How do the kingdoms of men compare to the kingdom of God? Do you find this encouraging?

PRAYER IDEAS

Thank God for his power and justice.



15 Steps through the Bible

Exile

Throughout their history, God's people disobeyed the law and neglected their special relationship with God. They didn't love the Lord their God with all their heart, mind, soul and strength, and they didn't love their neighbours as themselves.

Even the kings forgot about God. The very people through whom God planned to bring blessing to the world were thinking, "We know better, God — we'll do things our way".

So God took them out of their Promised Land. He sent them away to the surrounding nations. (Some of the people returned after living in exile in Babylon for 70 years.)

While they were in exile, the people were in anguish, because it seemed that God's promises to Abraham were being undone. Many descendants were wiped out, and those who were left were banished from the Promised Land. Psalm 137 records their anguish:

Psalm 137:1-6

By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion.² On the willows there we hung up our lyres.³ For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"⁴ How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?⁵ If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill!⁶ Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth, if

I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy!

It was clear that the nation of Israel had followed the pattern set by Adam and Eve: they set themselves against God, and failed to be a blessing to the whole world.

More detail

Israel's exile in Babylon shows us:

Who God is

God is a judge. Sin matters to him and will not be endlessly tolerated. God is also just—he gives his people what they deserve.

2 KINGS 17:18-20

So the Lord was very angry with Israel and removed them from his presence. Only the tribe of Judah was left, 19 and even Judah did not keep the commands of the Lord their God. They followed the practices Israel had introduced. 20 Therefore the Lord rejected all the people of Israel; he afflicted them and gave them into the hands of plunderers, until he thrust them from his presence.

LAMENTATIONS 4:22

The punishment of your iniquity, O daughter of Zion, is accomplished; he will keep you in exile no longer; but your iniquity, O daughter of Edom, he will punish; he will uncover your sins.

What God does

He remains true to his word and calls his people to account.

2 KINGS 17:35-41

When the Lord made a covenant with the Israelites, he commanded them: "Do not worship any other gods or bow down to them, serve them or sacrifice to them."³⁶ But the Lord, who brought you up out of Egypt with mighty power and outstretched arm, is the one you must worship. To him you shall bow down and to him offer sacrifices.³⁷ You must always be careful to keep the decrees and ordinances, the laws and commands he wrote for you. Do not worship other gods.³⁸ Do not forget the covenant I have made with you, and do not worship other gods.³⁹ Rather, worship the Lord your God; it is he who will deliver you from the hand of all your enemies."⁴⁰ They would not listen, however, but persisted in their former practices.⁴¹ Even while these people were worshiping the Lord, they were serving their idols. To this day their children and grandchildren continue to do as their fathers did.

ROMANS 11:1-6

I ask then: Did God reject his people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin.² God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew. Don't you know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah—how he appealed to God against Israel:³ "Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me?"⁴ And what was God's answer to him? "I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal."⁵ So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace.⁶ And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.

How God works

God issues righteous judgement, but he allows a remnant to be preserved. Even when the situation looks drastic, God does not completely abandon his people.

JEREMIAH 29:10-14

This is what the Lord says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious 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 upon 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."

Humanity's rejection of God continues, and his wrath remains on such people. However, he calls out both a 'remnant' of Jews and many non-Jews as well.

The grace of God, ultimately shown to us in Jesus' sacrificial death and his resurrection, saves sinners.

QUESTIONS

NB: *Zion* refers to Jerusalem.

1. Why can't the Israelites sing in Babylon?
2. Read through the 'More detail' section. What's something that strikes you about what God reveals here?

4. Daniel resolves not to eat the king's food (v. 8). Why do you think he draws the line here?

POINTER

v.2: Shinar is where the Tower of Babel was built (Gen 11:1-9). The tower was a symbol of human arrogance pitted against God's sovereignty

PONDER

It's clear from the beginning that the book of Daniel deals with the struggle between kings and God. However, God is still in control, even when the situation seems grim. How does knowing this help you as you face your own situation?

PRAYER IDEAS

Thank God for always being in control, even when it seems like he isn't. Ask God to give you the same conviction and trust in him as Daniel. Ask God to help you to live in a way that pleases him, even when it means being different to the world around you.

Thursday

In Daniel 2:1-24 King Nebuchadnezzar demands that his wise men interpret a troubling dream that he has had.

To ensure that the wise men do not trick him, they must first tell Nebuchadnezzar what the dream was. And if they don't, he will kill them all...

- Read Dan 2:25-49

QUESTIONS

1. Have a go at drawing and labelling the image King Nebuchadnezzar saw in his dream (vv. 31-35).

2. What is the significance of each part of the image (vv. 36-45)?
3. What makes the fifth and final kingdom distinct from all the others (vv. 44-45)?

PONDER

God lets human kings rise and fall, but his own kingdom lasts forever. What are the implications for our leaders and governments? What is the implication for your life?

PRAYER IDEAS

Ask God to help you recognize human rulers and institutions for what they are.

Friday

Chapters 7-14 in the book of Daniel are different in style to the first six chapters. Historical narrative is replaced with an apocalyptic style not unlike the book of Revelation.

- Read Daniel 7:1-14

QUESTIONS

1. In 7:1-8 how is the fourth beast different from the first three?
2. Read 7:9-10. What is Daniel seeing now?
3. Read 7:11-12. What happens to the beasts from verses 1-8?
4. Read 7:13-14. What makes this "one like a son of man" different to the beasts (v. 13)? How is his authority and position different to theirs?

3. Did God abandon his people in exile? Why/why not?

PONDER

God says that it is he who sets up and deposes kings (Dan 2:21). The exile is a very vivid example of this. When are you in danger of forgetting about God's sovereign control? Why is God's sovereignty such a comforting truth?

PRAYER IDEAS

Praise God that he is in control of all things, even at times when we feel like everything is coming apart. Thank him for working out everything in conformity to his good purpose.

Further readings

Monday

The book of Lamentations is, at first glance, a catalogue of depression and doom.

Much of it is a lament over Israel's exile at the hands of the Babylonians. However, the deeper the gloom, the more brightly the light shines.

In understanding the horror of God's judgement, the wonder of his mercy is only more incredible.

And perhaps the reason that we do not appreciate God's love and mercy more is that we have forgotten how real and terrible is his wrath and judgement.

Lamentations comprises five poems—each of which is based (to some extent) on the 22 consonants of the Hebrew alphabet.

Within this highly-organized structure, emphasis falls on the third poem by way of its central location and its extended form. Poem 3 contains 66 verses (unlike the 22 verses of all the other poems).

Our reading today and tomorrow will focus on this centre-piece of the book of Lamentations.

- Read Lamentations 3:1-2

QUESTIONS

There's lots of gloom and despair in this book of lament. But this central passage of the book encourages the reader not to give up. Things are about to get better.

1. List all the graphic and physical images of how the author feels being under the wrath of God.
2. Do you think there's a difference between 'remembering' something (v. 19) and 'calling to mind' something (v. 21)? What sorts of things would have helped the author "call to mind" the faithfulness of God?
3. In what way is God's love reflected in the fact that "his mercies never come to an end" (v. 22)?

PONDER

When is it difficult to believe that God is faithful? What are some ways you can help yourself (and others) not lose sight of the truth that God's compassion never fails?

PRAYER IDEAS

Give thanks for those things in your life that have testified to God's faithfulness towards you.

Tuesday

Remember that this book of Lamentations is set in the time of Israel's exile away from the Promised Land resulting from their continued disobedience. And yet in the midst of their despair there is hope.

- Read Lamentations 3:25-45

QUESTIONS

1. Read the passage and list all the characteristics that are attributed to God.
2. In what ways are these truths about God a comfort to the author?
3. Re-read the passage and consider especially those aspects of God which are mentioned here and which are also revealed through Christ's death on the cross.

PONDER

What do you think it means to "wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord" (v. 26)? Have you done this? Are you doing it?

PRAYER IDEAS

Give thanks that "the Lord will not cast off forever"!

Wednesday

DANIEL

Daniel is a Prophet during Israel's Exile, living in Babylon with God's people. Daniel is an Israelite living a long way from home, facing pressure to abandon his convictions and conform. However, he knows God is faithful and powerful, so he keeps on trusting him—even when it means being different.

He is an example for us Christian battlers of how to keep trusting God when we're a long way from the home that God has prepared for us in heaven. But there's more to the book of Daniel. The kings of great empires are humbled before their creator.

Human kingdoms rise and fall while God's kingdom endures.

And we get a glimpse of God's king who will rule forever: the Son of Man.

- Read Daniel 1:1-21

QUESTIONS

1. Who is ultimately responsible for what happens in this chapter?
2. Why do you think Nebuchadnezzar takes the vessels of the house of God and puts them in the treasury of his own god? What might this represent in spiritual terms?
3. Why do you think Daniel and his friends would have had a problem with their education and treatment (vv. 3-5)?