



### Daniel 1:1-7

When I mention the Old Testament prophet, Daniel, what is the first thing that comes to mind?



You probably immediately think of Daniel in the lion's den. This is the quintessential Daniel story which proves the power and protection of God. Even the shortest, most condensed children's Bible contains this story. These kind of cartoon illustrations are about as helpful as the Noah's Ark ones with the smiling animals hanging over the side of the tiny little boat. Do you know what I couldn't find, though, was a cartoon of the fiery furnace. Smiling animals make for a good cartoon but it's difficult to make three men thrown into a blazing furnace into a cartoon. But then again, Veggie Tales did it!

Some of the more sophisticated in the room will probably think of Nebuchadnezzar's two dreams of Daniel's apocalyptic visions. Maybe you studied Daniel in depth and have all of your end times charts laid out perfectly on paper or in your mind. Daniel has lions, furnaces, prophecy and examples of great faith, but if had to summarize the entire book, I would use two words—Sovereignty and Surrender. God is sovereign over the details of every person, including the most powerful man on the planet in Daniel's day. In fact, one of the greatest statement of sovereignty in the entire Bible came from the mouth of the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar.

God is absolutely sovereign but we will see a host of characters that fit into one of three categories.

1. People who don't know the Lord or that he is sovereign over them.
2. People who do know that God is sovereign but they hate him for it.
3. People who know that God is sovereign and surrender to his perfect will.

We start by seeing that sovereignty serves as two book ends that frame the entire twelve chapters. These book ends give us a context for understanding the book of Daniel. But before we get to these bookends, let's read the opening verses.

*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 gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God. And he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his god. 3 Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility, 4 youths without blemish, of good appearance and skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king's palace, and to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans. 5 The king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate, and of the wine that he drank. They were to be educated for three years, and at the end of that time they were to stand before the king. 6 Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah of the tribe of Judah. 7 And the chief of the eunuchs gave them names: Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego.*

The verses we just read in Daniel chapter one tell us that Daniel was captured and carried away to Babylon, but we are not told why Daniel ended up in Babylon. The first "sovereign book end" is seen in Jeremiah 25 and gives us an historical and Biblical context for Daniel.



### **Bookend #1—Nebuchadnezzar, my servant**

*The word that came to Jeremiah concerning all the people of Judah, in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah (that was the first year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon), which Jeremiah the prophet spoke to all the people of Judah and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem: "For twenty-three years, from the thirteenth year of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, to this day, the word of the LORD has come to me, and I have spoken persistently to you, but you have not listened. You have neither listened nor inclined your ears to hear, although the LORD persistently sent to you all his servants the prophets, saying, 'Turn now, every one of you, from his evil way and evil deeds, and dwell upon the land that the LORD has given to you and your fathers from of old and forever. Do not go after other gods to serve and worship them, or provoke me to anger with the work of your hands. Then I will do you no harm.' Yet you have not*

*listened to me, declares the LORD, that you might provoke me to anger with the work of your hands to your own harm.*

First of all, notice the date of the writing—it was “the first year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon.” This is exactly how the book of Daniel begins. Jeremiah wrote these words just before the events in Daniel began. Second, Jeremiah’s words are a common prophetic warning—prophets warn the nation repeatedly, year after year with the same result—the people do not listen. *Yet you have not listened to me, declares the LORD.* But what comes next from Jeremiah is amazing.

*Therefore thus says the LORD of hosts: Because you have not obeyed my words, behold, I will send for all the tribes of the north, declares the LORD, and for Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants, and against all these surrounding nations.*

Nebuchadnezzar, who, as we learn from Daniel, besieged Jerusalem and took captives, is specifically called “my servant” by the LORD. These are not Jeremiah’s words but the word of the Lord as reported by Jeremiah. Why would the Lord refer to Nebuchadnezzar as “my servant”? The king was a pagan and the furthest thing from serving the Lord yet God called him “my servant.” Nebuchadnezzar may not have been a willing servant but he was unmistakably part of the sovereign plan of the Lord.

Jeremiah said that he had warned them for the past 23 years and they would not listen. It would seem that if they had listened that God may not have sent them into Babylonian captivity. However, the Lord had decided over 100 years prior to this that this was his specific plan.

For most of his life, King Hezekiah was a good king who followed the Lord and did not do evil but toward the end of his life he began to fall away from the Lord. If you are familiar with his great faith in the midst of annihilation from the powerful Assyria army, then this story later in Hezekiah’s life is sure to disappoint.

*At that time Merodach-baladan the son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent envoys with letters and a present to Hezekiah, for he heard that Hezekiah had been sick. 13 And Hezekiah welcomed them, and he showed them all his treasure house, the silver, the gold, the spices, the precious oil, his armory, all that was found in his storehouses. There was nothing in his house or in all his realm that Hezekiah did not show them.*

*14 Then Isaiah the prophet came to King Hezekiah, and said to him, “What did these men say? And from where did they come to you?” And Hezekiah said, “They have come from a far country, from Babylon.” 15 He said, “What have they seen in your house?” And Hezekiah answered, “They have seen all that is in my house; there is nothing in my storehouses that I did not show them.”*

*16 Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, “Hear the word of the LORD: 17 Behold, the days are coming, when all that is in your house, and that which your fathers have stored up till this day, shall be carried to Babylon. Nothing shall be left, says the LORD. 18 And some of your own sons, who shall be born to you, shall be taken away, and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.” (2 Kings 20:14-19)*

This may seem like a harsh punishment for one instance of great pride from Hezekiah but we need to remember that God is not fickle or capricious. If I am in a bad mood I very well may hand out a harsher form of discipline to my kids. “What do you mean you forgot to make your bed? You’re grounded for three years, mister!” On the other hand, if I am in a good mood, I may not discipline my kids at all. But God does not work this way. Remember from 2 Peter we learned that what may appear to be slowness in fulfilling God’s promise is not actually slowness from God’s perspective? In the same way, what appears to be too harsh or too lenient from our perspective is just God’s perfect plan working its way through lives and through history.

Moreover, when you see Hezekiah’s response to the Lord’s announcement that in a hundred years the nation of Judah would be carried off into exile, you begin to see why God was so harsh.

*19 Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, “The word of the LORD that you have spoken is good.” For he thought, “Why not, if there will be peace and security in my days?”*

In my opinion, this is one of the most shocking statements in all of the Old Testament. Hezekiah was operating from a place of pure selfishness. And this was after the Lord had delivered him from massacre at the hands of the Assyrian army. This was after the Lord miraculously extended his life an extra fifteen years. And after all of the Lord’s faithfulness he could have cared less what happened to his people as long as it did not affect him.

The most frightening thing about this story is that Hezekiah started his life strong but was not able to finish strong. This should give all of us pause. Many, many believers have walked away from the Lord later in life and did not finish strong. You may have heard about the sonic boom of a controversy that erupted in the ministry of Voice of the Martyrs in the last two months. I won’t go into all of the details except to say that the whole thing absolutely blindsided me. I had the utmost respect not only for the ministry but especially for the president, who is the one who had the moral failure. This seemed to be a great Christian man with great skills and a heart for the Lord. And in many ways, even his failure does not erase all that he was and all that he did. But I can tell you this. His moral failure appeared at the end of his life but it did not start at the end of his life. His failure at the end of his life had been brewing in his heart for many years. And so it is with us. Some of you may have doubts, nagging questions or even secret sins that right now are laying a foundation for your future failure. No one jumps into moral failure overnight. These things percolate in our hearts for years or even decades before they blow up in our face. So the question is—what are you doing right now to faithfully walk with the Lord till the end of your life? It might be 5 years from now or more than fifty but what you do today and tomorrow will set your course for the future.

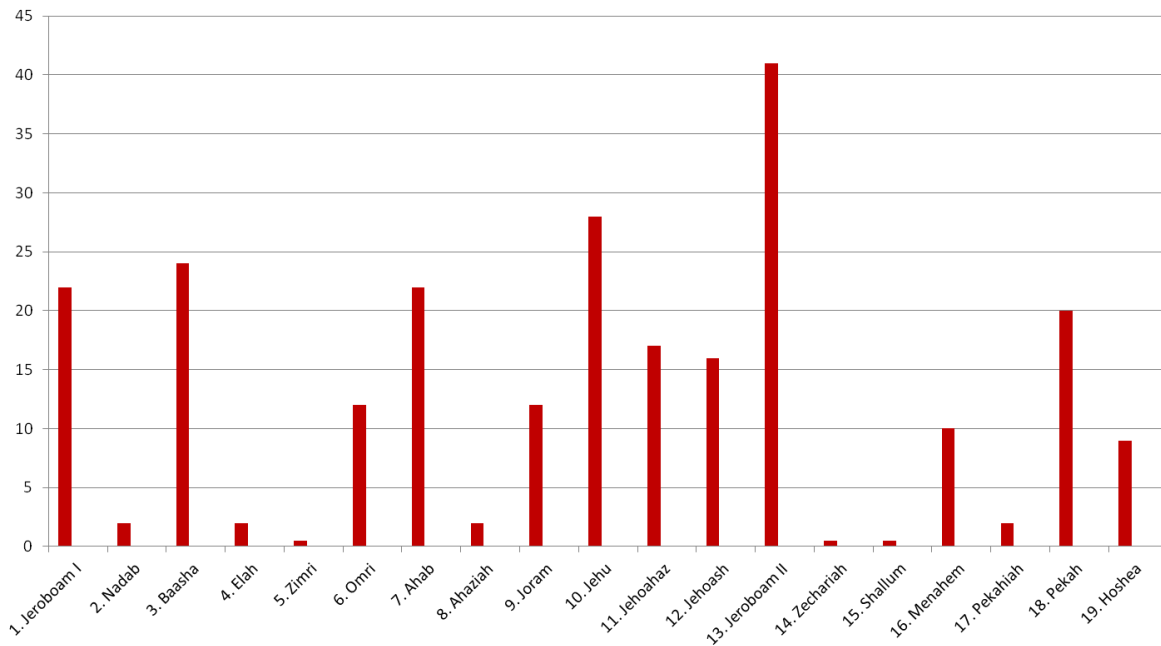
The other thing happening with the Hezekiah story was that not only did God predict that the nation of Judah would be carried off into captivity by Babylon almost 100 years before it happened, but when he announced it to Hezekiah, Babylon was the furthest thing from a military threat. Assyria, not Babylon was the world’s superpower at the time. Why do you think Hezekiah allowed the leaders from Babylon to see all of his weapons and supplies? He did this because Babylon was a minor player. Hezekiah was bragging to the men from Babylon because his

nation was so far superior to theirs' Assyria was the superpower but it was God's plan to increase Babylon's power and might until they surpassed the mighty Assyria.

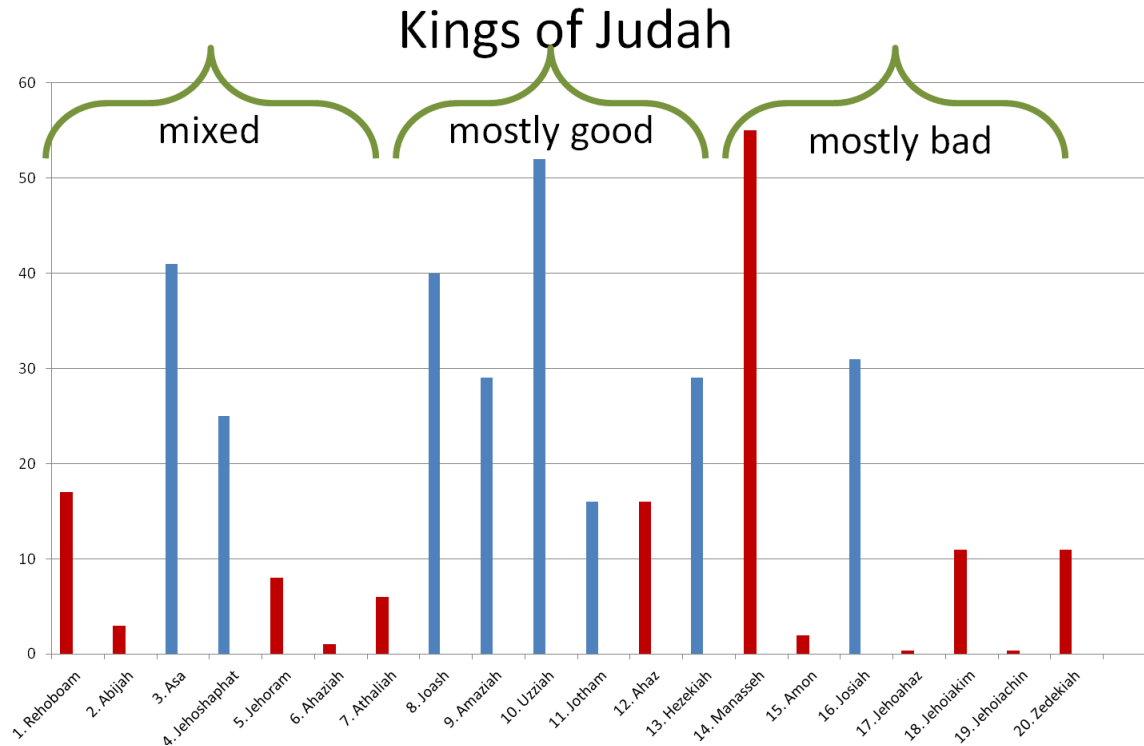
This is a small thing for the Lord who raises up nations and kings as he wills; who says to the pagan Nebuchadnezzar, "you are my servant." Nations rise and nations fall at the command of the Lord. Kings rise and kings fall by the will of the Lord. God will use faithful followers to accomplish his will and he will use evil pagans to do his will. This is God's sovereignty in action.

But there's another concurrent theme running alongside God's sovereignty and that is surrender. God will cannot be thwarted but that does not mean that God is unresponsive to the actions of people and nations. Yes, the rain falls on the just and the unjust but God is also a rewarder of those who surrender to his sovereign will and do good. The best example of this is the outcome of the nations of Israel and Judah. If you recall, Solomon's son Rehoboam was responsible for the division of the nation of Israel into two separate nations—Israel in the north and Judah to the south. This chart shows the nineteen kings of Israel over a period of 219 years. The good kings are in blue and the bad kings are in red. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to understand the evil history of this nation.

## Kings of Israel



Now here are the kings of Judah.



We see three basic patterns emerge. Early in their history there was a mixture of good and bad kings. In the middle period they had a streak of mostly good kings and the last third of their history were mostly bad kings. There are several more things to note.

- The nation of Judah lasted for 345 as opposed to Israel’s 219 years.
- The average length of the reign of good kings in Judah was 33 years compared to 11 years for the bad kings of Israel.

God was sovereign over both nations but only one nation surrendered to his sovereign will. There is a general principle throughout Scripture that God will prosper the nations who surrender to him. He often chooses to prosper the ungodly nations for his own purposes and he may not prosper every individual with the prosperous nation, but Biblical history demonstrates that godliness and prosperity go hand in hand.

But this principle is not an exact science because the longest reign of a king in Judah belonged to Manasseh who was also arguably the most evil king in either kingdom. Do you happen to know the name of Manasseh’s father? His name was Hezekiah. Do we blame Hezekiah for Manasseh’s great evil? If Hezekiah didn’t care about the future of his nation why should we believe that he cared about the future of his son? Scripture is clear that each child is responsible for his own sin but Scripture is also clear that the sins of the father are passed down to the next generations.

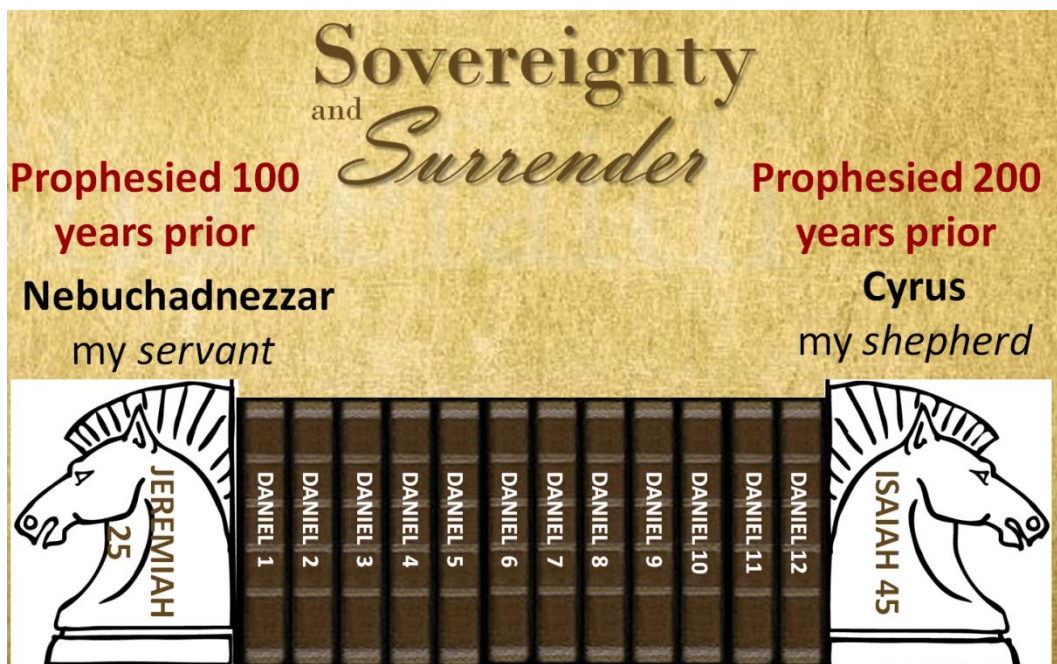
I told you earlier that the book of Daniel has two sovereign book ends holding it together and this far we have only seen one book end—Nebuchadnezzar, my servant. The Lord raised up Assyria to punish the northern kingdom of Israel and then just as easily the Lord raised up Babylon to

defeat Assyria and punish the southern kingdom of Judah. Nebuchadnezzar was the Lord's servant to carry out his will.

On the other end of Daniel we see our second sovereign bookend and for that we go to Isaiah. *Thus says the Lord...who says of Cyrus, "He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose"; saying of Jerusalem, "She shall be built," and of the temple, "Your foundation shall be laid" (Isaiah 44:24, 28).*<sup>1</sup>

Cyrus was the king of the Medes and the Persians whom God raised up to defeat the Babylonians. Cyrus then released the Jews from captivity and supplied them with everything they needed to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. But there are two hugely important things to note from this passage. First, Isaiah made this prophecy 200 years before it happened and second, similar to Nebuchadnezzar, the Lord called Cyrus "my shepherd."

These two prophecies serve as sovereign bookends for the book of Daniel. Unless you understand the Biblical history that undergirds the book, you will never fully understand the message of this wonderful Old Testament book.



God is sovereign over nations, kings, presidents, world events. So tell me—Are you worried about the decision handed down from the Supreme Court this week? We need to understand that president Barack Obama is the servant of the Lord. He is the Lord's shepherd just as certainly as Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus were, so do not be afraid. Do not allow worries and fears to overtake you. He doesn't appear to have surrendered himself to the Lord's sovereign will—and I am not just saying that because of my opinion on the healthcare issue—but the Lord will use him—for four more months or four more years. This doesn't mean we sit back and do nothing while God's sovereign will plays out. Daniel knew God's sovereign will and he surrendered to his sovereign will but he was most definitely not a passive participant.

But Obama is not the only servant of the Lord. The Lord looks down at our gathered body of believers this morning and calls us by name. There, s Brian, my servant. Over here is Lance, my shepherd. Karen is also my servant. Even if we don't yet know him, he will use us for his sovereign plan. The only question that remains is "Will we surrender to his will?"

Rich Maurer  
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<sup>1</sup> See also Isaiah 45:1—Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed.