

Daniel: Seer Extraordinary

*A comprehensive and devotional
exposition of the book of Daniel*

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Introduction

The book of Daniel is to the Old Testament what the book of Revelation is to the New Testament. Both the prophet Daniel and the apostle John were seers who by their amazing God-given visions saw more of the future for God's people than any of the other biblical writers. Indeed, the sequel and completion of the book of Daniel is to be found in the Apocalypse of John. Daniel is the only Old Testament prophet who saw both the first and second comings of 'Messiah the Prince' (9:24-27; cf. 2:44-45; 7:13-14); the terrible persecution that will precede both (7:19-27; 8:23-25; 11:29-45; 12:1); and the blessings of salvation and of the resurrection to everlasting life that will attend each (9:24-27; 12:2-3). No prophet of the old dispensation has given a clearer view of the future glory, majesty and judicial dignity of Christ (2:44-45; 7:13,14,26,27).

It is not surprising, then, that the book of Daniel has been the subject of so much controversy. The prophet may have

been delivered from the mouths of lions, but his book is still being torn to pieces by the mouths of liberal critics. Conservative or evangelical readers have always held the view that the stories in chapters 1 and 3–6 tell of real events in which God’s supernatural power was demonstrated, and the prophecies of chapters 2 and 7–12 record real predictions disclosing God’s knowledge of the future. Liberal critics of the book of Daniel, however, maintain that its stories are simply parables meant to prop up the sagging faith of Jews in the intertestamental period, and that its prophecies are past historical events written to look like predictions of the future. Conservatives believe the book was written by Daniel himself in the sixth century BC. Liberals believe it was written by an unknown writer in the second century BC who used Daniel’s name as a pseudonym to gain authenticity.

Between these divergent views a great gulf is fixed. They are irreconcilable. The conservative view is rooted in the belief that God is a God of the supernatural, whereas the liberal view is opposed to the supernaturalism of Christianity. The book of Daniel, however, is either divinely true the whole way through or a forgery. There can be no middle ground between faith and unbelief. The God of heaven who predicted the destruction of the second temple in Jerusalem through Daniel (9:26), is the same God who predicted its destruction forty years beforehand through the Lord Jesus Christ (Matthew 24:1,2,15–20). That double prediction was fulfilled in AD 70.

Christopher Wordsworth (1807–1885), bishop of Lincoln, argues, ‘These things are written in capital letters on the pages of the world’s history. Every eye may read them. What, therefore, shall we say? Since these prophecies of Daniel—so numerous, so various, so circumstantial, so minute, and so marvellous—have been fulfilled, can it be supposed that

the *other* prophecies of Daniel, which have not as yet been fulfilled, will not, in due time, be fulfilled also? Surely they will. The past fulfilment of the many prophecies is a pledge of the future fulfilment of the few. “That man,” says St. Augustine, “is a fool, who does not believe the Prophets in the few prophecies which remain to be fulfilled, when he sees so many of their prophecies to have been fulfilled already.”¹

The Author and Date of Writing

The first six chapters of Daniel would lead the reader to believe that the historical events have been written by someone other than the prophet himself, for they are written in the third person. This feature of writing is common to many biblical authors such as Moses, Joshua and Job to name a few. It is a device used to focus attention on the activity of God in the narrative, rather than on the writer. It is significant, therefore, that in the second half of the book Daniel does speak in the first person to underline the fact that the God-given visions he received are being relayed firsthand. They have not been embellished in the process of transmission by another party (cf. 7:28; 8:1,15; 9:2; 10:2; 12:5–8).

Moreover, the book is a unity. The divine revelation in chapter 2 of four world empires being destroyed by the kingdom of Christ which ‘shall stand forever’ is developed more fully in chapters 7–12. So if Daniel is named as the one who received the revelations in chapters 7–12, it follows that he must be the writer of the entire book that bears his name. But even more important for conservative readers is the fact that our Lord Jesus Christ Himself describes Daniel as the prophet who received the revelations contained in this book (Matthew 24:15; Daniel 11:31; 12:11). In addition, the

reference in Hebrews 11:33–34 to those who by faith ‘stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire’ endorses the historicity of the events recorded in Daniel 3 and 6. Given all the above, then, the book of Daniel must have been written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit during the latter years of the prophet’s life, probably sometime between 539 and 530 BC (Daniel 6:1; 10:1).

The Historical Background and Setting

The book is written against the background of the events which led to the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, and the captivity of the two tribes of Judah in Babylon for seventy years. With the death of Solomon the ten tribes of the north (known as Ephraim) broke away from the two tribes in the south (known as Judah) and set up their capital in Samaria (931 BC). The northern kingdom had a succession of ungodly rulers who led the people deeper and deeper into idolatry and all manner of sin for two hundred and nine years. In 722 BC Samaria was destroyed by the Assyrians and the ten tribes of Israel were carried into captivity and eventually scattered all over the world without a trace.

The southern kingdom lasted for a further one hundred and thirty-six years with the help of a few godly kings who were instrumental under God in arresting Judah’s slide into apostasy. In spite of warnings of divine judgment from Isaiah, Jeremiah, Habakkuk and others, Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC, and the remaining populace taken captive. The Babylonian empire came into its own with a succession of major conquests, the first of which was the Assyrian kingdom when Nineveh fell to Babylon in 612 BC. The second was the conquest of Egypt at Carchemish in 605 BC. At this time Nebuchadnezzar

became the ruler of Babylonia and made Judah a vassal state. Three waves of deportation of Jews from Judah followed over 19 years. In 605 BC Daniel was among the first wave of deportees, followed by a second wave in 597 BC (2 Kings 24:10) and then a third mass deportation in 586 BC (Jeremiah 39; 40; 52) after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple.

This catastrophe shook Israel's faith in Jehovah their God to the core. Had God reneged on the covenant He had made with them; namely, 'I will set My tabernacle among you, and My soul shall not abhor you. I will walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people' (Leviticus 26:11-12)? Why, then, did He allow His city and His sanctuary to be destroyed? These are the questions that gnawed at their souls, and their captors enjoyed tormenting them about it. Hence their plaintiff cry in Psalm 137:1-4, 'By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept when we remembered Zion. We hung our harps upon the willows in the midst of it. For there those who carried us away captive required of us a song, and those who plundered us requested of us mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" How shall we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?' They felt forsaken and disinherited by the Lord. As long as they were in Babylon, they had nothing to sing about.

Its Style and Structure

The book of Daniel is known not so much for its biographical style of writing, but for its apocalyptic visions which are typical of the visions recorded by the apostle John in the book of Revelation (also known as the Apocalypse). Apocalyptic literature deals with visions or dreams from God which predict future events, especially end-time events, in terms

of symbols which are often bizarre and need interpretation. Chapters 2, 4 and 7 to 12 fit this category of writing.

As far as structure is concerned, the book is not only divided by its biographical and prophetic contents, but also by language. 'The book of Daniel is bilingual.'² It is unique in the Old Testament in that its contents have been written almost equally in Hebrew and Aramaic. From chapter 2:4b to chapter 7:28 it is written in Aramaic; the rest (chapters 1 to 2:4a and chapters 8 to 12) are written in Hebrew.

It is difficult to determine exactly why one part was written in Aramaic. Scholars have proposed many explanations. The simplest, it would seem, is that the Aramaic section was intended for a wider readership, because it was an international language and remained so for many centuries. It was written not just to comfort and reassure believers, but also to convert unbelievers in all nations. Daniel was inspired to do so because the God of Israel showed Himself in Babylon to be 'the God of gods, the Lord of kings' (2:47). The pagan world needed to know that a God who can convert a Nebuchadnezzar is a God who can convert anybody, Jew or Gentile (4:34-37).

Key Lessons from the Book

In 1561, just a few years before John Calvin died, he finished a course of sermons in Geneva on the book of Daniel which were printed in a book which he dedicated to the pious worshippers of God in France; namely, the scattered, brutally persecuted Huguenots. And in his Dedicatory Epistle, he says, 'In publishing the LECTURES which contain my INTERPRETATION OF THE PROPHECIES OF DANIEL, I have the very best occasion of showing you, beloved brethren, in this

mirror, how God proves the faith of His people in these days of various trials; and how with wonderful wisdom He has taken care to strengthen their minds by ancient examples, that they should never be weakened by the concussion of the severest storms and tempests; or at least, if they should totter at all, that they should never finally fall away. For although the servants of God are required to run in a course impeded by many obstacles, yet whoever diligently reads this Book will find in it whatever is needed by a voluntary and active runner to guide him from the starting-post to the goal.³ A prayerful meditation of this precious book will certainly raise a hearty 'Amen' to the Reformer's claim.

God is all-powerful and all-knowing

Here we see the people of God in a time of national calamity and personal affliction, when God seemed to have forgotten His own cause. What are they to do? Are they to wring their hands in despair? Are they to sit down and weep? No! They are to learn that God in His sovereignty has permitted these things to deliver them from their idolatry and show them that He is the living and true God who is in absolute control of human affairs. Phrases like 'the Lord gave' or 'has given' occur twenty times in the book. Indeed, this truth is stated as early as chapter 1:2, 'And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand.' It was not Nebuchadnezzar's doing at all. God rules supreme in heaven and earth, and He permitted His people to be defeated and carried into captivity. Hence it is called in Daniel 8:19 a time of 'indignation'. God was indignant with His people because they worshipped idols and turned away from His commandments. So He gave them up for a time.

This is what we are to see as we study the book of Daniel:

the universal sovereignty of God. God is still in control even when the forces of evil are doing their worst. In chapter 2:37 Daniel tells Nebuchadnezzar that ‘the God of heaven has given you a kingdom, power, strength and glory.’ But the God who gives is also the God who takes away: ‘You shall be driven from among men ... You shall be made to eat grass like an ox ... till you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men, and gives it to whom he will’ (4:25, ESV).

What an important lesson this is to learn! The first six chapters give us an incredible view of the omnipotence of God. He is the God who preserved Daniel’s three friends in the fiery furnace; who smote the king with insanity; who made a hand write on a wall; and who shut the mouths of the lions. It makes us sing:

Praise to the Lord, who o’er all things so wondrously reigneth,
Shelters thee under His wings, yea, so gently sustaineth:
Hast thou not seen?
All that is needful hath been
Granted in what He ordaineth.

(Joachim Neander, 1650–80)

Tr. Catherine Winkworth, 1827–78)

In addition, chapters 2 and 7–12 reveal the amazing omniscience of God. Nothing takes Him by surprise. He knows the end from the beginning, for He has decreed it. Thus in these chapters we have some of the most remarkable prophecies in the Bible. The mighty empire of Babylon seemed as if it would last forever, but God predicted that it would fall and be succeeded by the empire of the Medes and Persians, which in turn would be followed by the empires of Greece and Rome. It was a period that spanned over one thousand years, and it came to pass exactly as foretold by God

to Daniel. Although Daniel spent more than seventy years in a pagan environment, he was wonderfully sustained by the knowledge of God's omnipotence and omniscience.

So it has proved throughout the ages:

Pride of man and earthly glory,
Sword and crown betray his trust;
What with care and toil he buildeth,
Tower and temple, fall to dust.
But God's power,
Hour by hour,
Is my temple and my tower.

God's great goodness aye endureth,
Deep His wisdom, passing thought:
Splendour, light, and life attend Him,
Beauty springeth out of nought.
Evermore,
From His store
New-born worlds rise and adore.

(Robert Bridges, 1844–1930)

Based on *Joachim Neander, 1650–80*)

Christ's kingdom alone will stand forever

Is it not true that as we listen to the news and watch world events, it seems as if the church of Christ has no relevance whatever? It is almost as if it is utterly insignificant, and that the great and important things in the world are what the super-powers are doing and saying. But, here again, the book of Daniel has something very important to say. It tells us that these great powers so-called will never be permanent; that there is a kingdom made 'without hands' which is steadily

growing, and will ultimately overcome all other kingdoms, and 'stand forever' (2:44-45; 7:13-14).

Our Lord, looking into the future and speaking by His own infallible wisdom, predicted the same thing. He said, 'Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom' (Matthew 24:7). In other words, God will never allow one power to become supreme. They will rise against each other, and as surely as they rise, they will fall in time. The very greatest of earth's kingdoms (whether Babylon or Persia or Greece or Rome or Germany or Russia) are temporary in God's timetable. Only Christ's kingdom will stand forever. Not even the gates of hell or the powers of death shall withstand its advance (Matthew 16:18). On the last day it will be said, 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever' (Revelation 11:15, ESV). So the message of the book of Daniel is, 'It is better to trust in the LORD than to put confidence in princes' (Psalm 118:9).

The wisdom of the world is foolishness with God

When Daniel and his companions were taken to Babylon they were brought into the king's palace and taught 'the language [Aramaic, 2:4] and literature [learning] of the Chaldeans' (1:4). E.J. Young says, 'Aramaic was called Chaldean until the latter half of the nineteenth century.'⁴ At the time Babylon was the cultural centre of the ancient world where people studied languages, astronomy, astrology, architecture, mathematics and many other things. It had great temples and edifices like the famous Hanging Gardens of Babylon, and all kinds of knowledge, true and false, but it was without God! And so in the book of Daniel we see that when the real crises occurred the wise men of Babylon and the fortune-tellers were at a loss.

When men have to face death and judgment, all the wisdom of the world is futile.

The world cannot teach us how sin can be put away and peace with God established. As Paul says, ‘We speak ... not the wisdom of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery [the gospel], the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory’ (1 Corinthians 2:6–8). All the world’s supposed knowledge is worthless when it comes to spiritual and eternal realities.

Now that may seem a comparatively simple lesson, but it is because the church in the twentieth century did not heed this lesson that it is as weak as it is in so many parts of the world today. In the last two centuries great advances were made in learning and science. So much so, that many in the professing church began to feel that the world had discovered things that showed the Bible to be inaccurate and obsolete. As a result they stopped preaching on creation and on the supernatural. They began to rephrase their message in order to gain the ear of modern man.

But what folly that was, because although the politicians and scientists promised peace and prosperity, nothing has come of it. After two world wars and many fierce regional conflicts, we are not so sure of these things now. People are staggered at the immensity of the problems which face us like terrorism, drug and sex trafficking, abortion, mass migrations, environmental pollution, cyber and nuclear warfare, to name only a few. And as we continue into a new millennium, all that was supposed to have made the Bible

obsolete is now being seen by some to be the farce it really is. But if the church had kept this book of Daniel before her, she would never have been tempted to suppose that she needed to accommodate her message to the wisdom of the world. The humblest believer in the word of God has more real wisdom than the most learned unbeliever in the world. That is the truth! With the Bible in our hands and the Holy Spirit in our heart to help us understand it, we have the greatest and deepest source of wisdom and truth available. We have God's light and truth!

God's light on earth will never be put out

'God is light' (1 John 1:5) and His light has shone throughout the ages from the beginning. More often than not it has been preserved by just a few, a small remnant of faithful believers and prophets. As we look at the Old Testament we see how God kept His light shining through Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David and all the prophets who followed them.

Commenting on this fact, James Philip says, 'In Babylon the remnant was represented by Daniel and his three companions, and for all practical purposes, the light of God was preserved in this handful of men. They constituted Israel, and they constituted the light that was to shine in the surrounding darkness. They were the witness to the truth of God in this alien environment. God never leaves Himself without a witness, but He is never very concerned with numbers.'⁵

Let this be an encouragement to us in our day of declining church attendances, increasing liberal theology, and lower standards of morality among professing Christians. God has not left us to find our way in the dark by ourselves. To think only of the last five hundred years, He has graciously given

us faithful messengers like Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, Knox, Whitefield, Wesley, Spurgeon, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, among many others. Because of their biblical preaching, we can echo the words of Isaiah, ‘Unless the LORD of hosts had left to us a very small remnant, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been made like Gomorrah’ (1:9).

We must be willing to die for Christ, if necessary

Society in the twenty-first century is ever trying to run away from its own mortality. Fashion and cosmetic surgery urge us to look young forever; advocates of diets and exercise encourage us to stay lean and fit forever; annuity firms offer plans to enjoy life forever. It is all a strategy to repress the reality of our human mortality.

Moreover, it is a society which has nothing to die for! People no longer believe in anything with sufficient passion and confidence to make the ultimate sacrifice of self. In an age of religious pluralism all views are equally valid and acceptable. You can never say anyone is wrong and you can never be sure you are right. We have run out of things to die for and that is serious, because those who have nothing to die for really have nothing to live for.

Daniel and his friends were people passionately committed to God, and the early chapters of the book repeatedly invite the question: are we prepared to die for God? Indeed, the whole Bible insists that every believer in God has to be a potential martyr. We follow a crucified Lord who says, ‘If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me’ (Matthew 16:24). The stories of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego in a fiery furnace, and Daniel in a den of lions, are important because they

provide us with models of faithfulness to God, even to the point of death.

The association of these stories with childhood and with Sunday school has, unfortunately, muted the serious message of the book of Daniel. It is not a children's storybook. It is a book for adults. These are stories about ruthless tyrants, obeying God rather than man, religious persecution and martyrdom but for the deliverance of God. They have something to say to us which is difficult to accept: that we must be prepared to die for the faith (Acts 20:24). The call to suffer for righteousness' sake (Matthew 5:10–12) is sadly missing in much of contemporary Christianity. The whole drift of modern piety is in the opposite direction. Discipleship has become a quest for self-fulfilment, a search for health and wealth. We urgently need to live by the words of Jesus: 'Whoever desires to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for My sake will find it' (Matthew 16:25).

What made Daniel and his friends heroes of faith? Daniel's life is more fully covered than the other three, and when we look at his life we see that he was a *man of prayer*. When Nebuchadnezzar was about to execute the astrologers because they could not recall his dream or interpret it, Daniel prayed and God unveiled the mystery to him (2:17–19). When he was thrown into a den of lions it was because he would not abandon his custom of praying three times a day with his windows open towards Jerusalem. In chapter 9 we see him at prayer again, as he takes upon his heart the burden of the sins of the whole nation. It is one of the most moving prayers in the Bible. Daniel was what he was, because he was a man of prayer.

Something else that contributed to Daniel's unreserved and

unshakeable commitment to God was his devotion to *reading Scripture*. In chapter 9:2 we read that Daniel ‘perceived in the books’ (ESV) the number of years God’s people would be in captivity. He recalled the prophecies of Jeremiah 25:11–12 and 29:10 and knew ‘the Law of Moses’ (9:11,13). Daniel read his Bible. His life was built not on the shifting sands of current opinion, but on the immovable rock of God’s word. The Scriptures and prayer! That is what made Daniel a man ‘greatly beloved’ of God (9:23; 10:11,19), and that is what will make men and women of God out of us too; nothing more and nothing less.

James Philip sums it up well:

... the resources at his command were no different from ours, but are available for us all. You will search this book in vain for any special experiences that could account for Daniel’s faithfulness. What you will find is that he read his Bible and said his prayers. That was the secret. He had the Scriptures and the throne of grace, and so have we. This is God’s staple provision for faithfulness of life ... He read his Bible and said his prayers. What hope and encouragement for us all!⁶

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